

**Evan Cressoine**  
**"The Book Phoenix"**

It was on the pier of Crescent Beach State Park. The grass whipped around us in green and yellow tufts, its spindly blades tickling my ankle when I'd get too close. The sun shone over the water, painting a silver line across the waves, raining golden rays around the docked boats. My dad, his hand rougher than it used to be, walked by my side. We stopped right where the wooden pier met sand and sat down. I squinted my eyes but wore no sunglasses lest the scene be dimmed. If I'd have known what my father was about to tell me, maybe I would have worn them, because how much darker could the world have gotten then?

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My father read stories to me every night since I was just a slip of the girl I am now. Our apartment was small: one room—an attic really so the ceiling hung low and angled itself into a point at the center. My bed was small with a wrought iron frame and sat just below our one circular window. The moonlight was the only light he had to read by, but I loved everything about it.

As I grew, I read my own bedtime stories as well as morning stories, midday stories, early evening stories. I found myself in books the way most people found themselves at birth: alive and breathing for the first time. Every time my father saw me with a book in my hand, he'd praise his own decision for naming me right.

"Phoenix," he'd say. "You light up with a book in your hand, ready to explore new worlds. You are who you were meant to be."

Dad owned the bookshop that we lived above and tended to it from dawn till dusk. I helped out whenever I could: slumped behind the checkout counter, reading until some townspeople plopped a hefty stack of hardbacks in front of me. On the days Dad stationed himself at the counter and kept his books, I'd roam the aisles and take a few novels aside for myself, though I was supposed to be shelving them. Children would spot me between the tall wooden fixtures and ask for certain stories. I'd guide them right where they needed to be. Once, a boy was looking for "The Little Prince" and the only copy we had was upstairs on our bedside table. I journeyed up the skinny spiral staircase and returned with the book in hand. We sold it to him. That's just how we were: booksellers, story-sharers through and through.

In the evenings, Dad and I sat around the fireplace which usually went unlit until the doors were locked. He'd drink his coffee from a mug as dark as black tar and I'd have mine creamier with the sweet scent of vanilla clouding up to my nostrils.

"I was thinking we should host a new event," I said. I was about sixteen then and started to help my dad keep the books. I wanted to watch the store grow.

He took a long sip from his mug. "What is it?"

"We should put on reading events for local authors. It could get us more business and—"

"I do like your thinking Nix," he started, his voice like the rumble of train tracks. "but I don't want to be so business minded. We should do it for the simple joy of stories." He was never concerned with how much money the store was making, never wanted it to be about that.

To my father, living and working for money was as pointless as living and working for nothing at all. I was the one who kept track of the sales. I wanted to keep us afloat so that we had nothing to fret over but our stories.

When I went to college, I moved out of the attic and into a dorm. My father kept the shop running and I hired an accountant to keep track of all the affairs my dad didn't want to deal with. I worked at the university library and drove back to Cape Elizabeth every weekend to work at the bookshop. Every other weekend, I'd lug a suitcase with me full of books I'd bought

and donate them to the store. I'd be so anxious to get back home that my father teased me, saying I'd be famous if they had cameras in the traffic lights.

When I told him I started writing my own stories, he shone almost as bright as the sun on a quiet morning at the beach. He was so pleased that when we sat together at the fireplace that evening, he placed a gentle hand on my knee.

"I've thought about finally getting some local writers to come to the store," he smiled. "I want you to be the first one."

My heart fluttered in my chest. "Dad," I laughed. "I haven't really written a full piece yet. I'm not even published!"

"But you love it, don't you?" His smile widened. My eyes flickered up to his hair which had grown thinner and grayer since I'd last seen him.

"I do," I said. "It feels like what I was born to do."

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Walking back into the store from the park, my father hugged me with one strong arm around my shoulders. I didn't look up at first, but when I did, I felt my cheeks stained with tears. He sighed.

"You're going to be okay," he asserted. "You're a Phoenix! You rise from the ashes."

I just folded forward and hugged him tight, burying my face in the crook of his neck. "I love you, Dad."

Every morning toward the end, my father would wake me, rumbling around in the pantry to take his pills. I'd watch him shuffle down the stairs and sit behind the counter, waiting as fewer people came in to scan our shelves, wondering if he had begun to lose that longing he had: the longing for life and for sharing stories. I had yet to give the shop's first local writer's talk. I had yet to be published. Instead, beneath my bed in the attic laid three unfinished manuscripts and dozens of rejected stories.

That summer was quieter than usual. Dad had always hated the summers. He loved the sunlight and the way more school children would wander in looking for novels, but he hated the space. He hated how endless it seemed and longed for the cozy winter weather. I'd try to cheer him up on slow afternoons by taking him for a walk around our ocean town. If it was Sunday, the church bells would ring and he'd hum along. Back at the bookstore, I'd let him go rest while I manned the front. It wasn't easy to see him like that: weak and weary and nearing the end, but spending time in the store reminded me that in some way, he'd always be here.

When my father passed away, I displayed his ashes in a vase and placed it high upon a shelf in the bookstore. I even made a plaque so that no one could ever forget him, but it still didn't feel like enough. Since his funeral, I had become a different person. It was as if someone had crept inside my heart and rearranged its chambers. It didn't beat the same. Even my soul felt like a lost treasure that had been buried deep beneath a pile of grief. I didn't read for months until one day the sun was shining bright like it was that day at the docks. I could feel my dad's hand in mine, and for whatever reason I can't really explain, I dug behind the counter and found "The Little Prince". I didn't know if it was the same copy we had given that little boy years earlier or if my father had secretly replaced it, knowing it was my favorite, but I tucked it under my arm and headed back to Crescent Beach State Park.

The breeze was light against my skin. I sat at the end of the pier, watching the boats until I gathered the courage to flip the page. Maybe it was just being in that place that I had often visited with him or that my mind worked tirelessly to remind me of his smile, but I felt him there. I could almost feel myself light up with that book in my hands, just as Dad always said I did: a Phoenix.

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Now, the bookstore remains. Authors have walked in and out of its front doors sharing

their wisdom and reading their stories to each new customer that finds solace among these shelves. I tend to it dawn til dusk and live in the attic above it just as I was born to. Now, in the window sits a display of my very own novel where my very father remains alive and immortalized, "The Man who Raised a Phoenix".