

THE RECONDITIONED BOOK 1

# FREEFALLING

J. L. BURROWS



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*To all who fight to share the Truth,  
To those who haven't found its assurance.*

*To the ones who've lost their way and listened,  
To the whispers of fear and failure.*

*May all who seek a new confidence discover,  
There's a Truth just waiting to set you free.*

*A Truth that loves you just as you are,  
A Truth that will conquer all anxiety.  
A Truth that will settle in your heart for eternity.*



ALONE BUT ALWAYS WATCHED

“It’s eight p.m., Sere. Your body requires sustenance.” The echo of my AI’s friendly voice whispered across my flat.

“Sometimes, the walls need staring at.” And sometimes, I needed to stop pretending to be normal. Envy of a simple life, full of love and family, coiled around me, tightening its grip. I shoved up from the white leather couch, slid on my heels, and wrapped my neck in a silk scarf. My sterile home wasn’t enough to sustain even my life anymore. I slammed the front door, except the automatic close feature kicked in. No emotional release in that.

“Did you do that?” I narrowed my eyes at the sky as if I could glare at Shea, my artificial intelligence. Before she died, Mom programmed my best friend and constant companion. The AI link installed at birth was slipped into the brain and beside the ear, so small waves could be emitted and “heard” by the eardrum. Probably the smartest AI ever created. She’s the only thing I have left from my mother. The late evening sky wore a brilliant array of colors. Light fluffy clouds did nothing to warm the frosty air. A dreary evening would have been more *a propos*.

“There isn’t currently a line at Nat.” Programmed in the art

of deflection, Shea kept me on my toes. And true to my biological programming, the mention of my favorite restaurant brought up delicious dinner ideas. I touched my faux decorative tree as I passed and was grateful for Shea.

Even with Shea's voice in my head, emptiness sat inside me like a starving monster.

"A young twenty-two-year-old woman shouldn't be alone all the time."

My monster agreed, but in the same breath, it begged the world to be better, demanded my mother back, and shook its fist at my grandfather's grave. I swallowed hard, pushing my monster behind the thin veneer I displayed for the world. "Okay. Nat it is."

The click of my heels echoed against the tall steel buildings. The metal giants' cold glassy eyes filled with tiny red pupils kept pace with me as I passed. I needed to be seen by someone, anyone, to get out and smell the cleansed air. To be ever and always alone was to be nothing.

The thought slithered down to sit coiled and heavy in my stomach. Why couldn't I have someone?

"What's the weather for tomorrow, Shea?" Anything to stave off the thoughts threatening to paralyze me. Skies. My head was a dark place sometimes. A bit of food would do me good.

"Under the Dome will be sunny skies until one p.m., when lunch will end, and we will have our daily moisture event. Dome Daily reports there will be an allotment of twenty-one minutes of moisture tomorrow."

"Thank you." My black slacks whispered in the night. Adjusting the flowing green sleeve of my favorite shirt, I ignored the small niggling at the back of my mind. Out of uniform and hair down almost had me feeling good.

The pavement counted each step like a time bomb ticking down to detonation. Steel giants recorded my every micro-expression. I turned baleful eyes on them and gave the bright

red eye a wicked smile. What would the Enforcers make of that recording?

“Seems odd to make faces at an empty building. You have been awfully quiet.”

I jumped at Shea’s voice, rolling my head to stretch out the tension riding my neck. “You almost scared me out of my wits, Shea.”

One of the red eyes blinked and swept back to the other side of the pavement.

“I’m fine. I’m just hungry. Like you said, I require sustenance.”

“While I monitored you through the building’s cameras, another watcher in the system attempted to hijack the feed.”

“I told you, you had to stop doing that.” I stared at the ground as I pressed on.

“Forgive me for doing what I’m programmed to do.” Sarcasm dripped from Shea’s words.

“Mother didn’t program you to use that building’s cameras.”

“Not precisely, but she required I accumulate a photo library and made my top priority your safety, which is best monitored and assured when using all available resources.”

“This is why I don’t go out.” I was an idiot for antagonizing the stupid red eyes. Inside my tech, I carried the only original unmanufactured AI under the Dome. So, I had to keep my head down, nose clean, and my mother’s special upgrades to Shea a secret, so we could both live a long, healthy life. I didn’t dare glance back up to the staring red pupil.

“It is entirely possible it was my utilization of their equipment that drew their attention. Calculating future probability of an altercation.”

“No, Shea. Leave it alone.”

“I am certain I effectively covered our tracks.”

“Only a fool would think such a thing. Those piercing red

eyes are never empty. Really, Shea. We both have to keep our heads down.”

“By my estimation, we are entirely safe, and Nat will return you to your best state.”

Sure, I finished the day’s work, but surveillance never stopped, not in the city, not Providence Providential, and certainly not under the Dome. I couldn’t even think of our great city’s name without the prideful tone of our worshipful announcer AI whispering through my mind.

Since the government assigned me a profession, I tried to make my insides line up with their decision. Teacher. That was me. But it didn’t click. Squares didn’t fit in circles. Fire wouldn’t survive in water. Cold couldn’t be warm. Life was simply an aimless series of steps, one moment to the next with no real direction, no real hope for change.

Well, tonight, dinner was up. Maybe I’d meet someone. A flash of dark hair and warm brown eyes slipped through my heavily guarded thoughts.

“You know, when you get quiet and turn inward, you always find the world darker.” Shea’s words buzzed in my mind.

“The world is dark.” I could almost hear the faint memory of my mother’s voice in Shea’s words.

“Humans. You’re late for your scheduled meal. Your blood sugar is probably low.”

“It’s not my blood sugar. You can’t understand it. You’re just AI.” Even still, I stepped up the pace.

“Harrumph, just AI.” She continued, without missing a beat. “I’ll have you know AI means Always Impeccable. Sometimes, it’s healthy for people to spend some time in quiet and solace. I, myself, could use a moment alone. But that’s healthy people, and we both know you’re not one to concern yourself with the betterment of your form.”

“I take care of myself.” Thank the skies, Nat’s fancy sign



with its signature decor of green bamboo shoots came into view.

“Sere.”

“What?” Shea was being ridiculous.

“I’m just saying.” Shea was only in my ear, but her tone made it clear she was most definitely shrugging her shoulders at me.

I shook my head. “You tend to do that.”

“A girl needs people.”

I refused to respond. What would I say? Of course, a girl needed people, but all my people—every last one—died.

Shea finally took a hint and fell silent.

The smoky glass doors of the sleek restaurant slid open silently. A gentle brush of organized chaos washed over me, breathing life back into me. This was what I needed. Nat was alive with subtle eye contact, a brushed hand over a loved one’s arm, a whisper and a giggle. No CELs allowed. Nat promoted health, including wholesome interactions with others. Silverware clanked. Plates and dishes clattered. Steamed fish, boiled eggs, and sautéed vegetables filled the air. My stomach growled, and suddenly, I couldn’t get food fast enough.

An AI kiosk host named Jeff scanned my hand chip, deactivating my CEL. “Welcome, Serenity. We hope you had a good day at school. Please proceed to table number nine and enjoy a wonderful meal.”

What if I didn’t want to go to table number nine? What if I wanted to see who’s sitting at the bar, or waiting for me at table fifteen? What if going to table nine meant I’d miss meeting the love of my life?

It felt unnerving to be out, to not have access to my CEL. Connection Established Learners were embedded at birth. The transparent screens floated above hands most of the day.

Healthy interaction was all mine tonight. I added a little extra sway to my step as I moved to my assigned table and hoped to catch someone’s eye.

Maybe tonight, I'd meet somebody.

Maybe tonight, I'd try something different. "Shea, is there anything new on the menu?"

"The menu hasn't changed since you last ate here, Sere."

"Of course not."

A wall-length mural of green bamboo grass and vibrant landscape gave Nat its ambiance. The scent of its rich food mingled with its patrons' expensive perfumes. It should have made me feel important. Indirectly, I was rubbing the shoulders of some great people. Everybody else was at their best, acting their best, looking their best, smelling their best, eating the best. I was painfully aware of my lack of perfume.

"Your usual, then?" Shea's tone was snitty. Plus, she already knew my answer.

"I guess." It was a hard day at work. A good day, but difficult. The return of a shadow child always got to me. That's only what I call them. I rubbed a chill from my arms. The Enforcers brought one back from a reconditioning. Their vacant eyes and slow-motion movements belied the true emptiness carved out inside.

My next-door neighbors sat around a table across from me. Mr. Meander's mouth was wide open in a gap-toothed smile. His eleven-year-old daughter, Felice, performed wild antics.

Taken aback, I ignored my desire to duck from sight and waved instead. They returned the gesture, nothing too personal or inviting. Everyone stuck with their own people in a place like this. Felice's brother was taking my class this year, and she would become my student next year. They were a wonderful family. Their son always responded to corrections with respect.

I shifted in my seat, waiting for my food. The empty craving for dinner would at least be soon filled. I didn't have the same hope for my desire for someone to call my own.

"Hey, Sere. I didn't know you'd be here tonight."

I turned to find Jin, one of my co-teachers, leaning over the

back of his chair from table ten. A broad smile transformed his strong square jaw and plump lips into something inviting. His warm brown eyes traced down to my fingertips, where I fiddled with my napkin.

My face warmed, and I fixated on his beautiful black hair to avoid the familiarity in his eyes. Every day at work, I imagined touching his hair. Smelling it. With barely perceptible movements, I shook my head and hopefully some sense into myself. This was my coworker.

Even from a separate table, sandalwood warmed the air around me. A few moments of blissfulness never hurt anyone. I came out for this very thing, to enjoy the moment.

He stood.

What was he doing? I glanced at the surrounding tables. A few eyes followed him from his table as his strong hand claimed the back of the seat next to mine. His smile grew. Before he spoke, he slid the chair closer to me and sat.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Something like magic drifted in the depths of his brown eyes.

Being this close to someone was like being ensconced in a spell. “Mm-hmm.”

I drifted, barely conscious of my surroundings.

“I hope you don’t mind if I join you?” He raised an eyebrow and leaned in with a smile.

I didn’t respond.

My words stopped working. It was like I was in some alternate universe. A place where the food was good, but the company was even better.

“Well, I can return to table ten if you prefer.” He frowned.

I tilted my chin to the side and smiled. “Of course not. S-stay!”

My nervous stutter, followed by my horrid giggling, needed to die. But there it was.

Thankfully, a server drone, customized to incorporate the

triangles Nat's used in all its decor, drifted toward us, taking the attention off of me.

How they manufactured a food-carrying, triangle-shaped drone was beyond me, but the effect was supposed to be mesmerizing. Instead, as table nine's drone hovered above my place setting, I was focused on Jin's nearness. I removed my hands from the table and rested them on my knees, wishing Jin would simply brush my pinky finger. Registering the space was clear, the drone's sensors let the napkin down until, with whisper-soft movements, the napkin released with a soft snick. The minor distraction did nothing to still the quiver in me. The scanner's soft green illumination registered the food delivery with a chime before the drone was off to serve another table.

"I see you already ordered." Jin smiled again and slid his chair an inch closer.

My heart leaped, and my hand involuntarily stretched out toward him before I pulled it back to my lap.

He smiled.

"The usual, but please deliver to table nine." He ordered through his government-issued AI.

I leaned back in my chair. "It's nice to not have to cook."

With him so close, I could feel his body heat fill the space near me. I'd been alone so long the urge to lean into it gripped me. But I couldn't love and lose again. Every muscle was in a war against movement and stillness. I cleared my throat.

Touch was something I took for granted. At least, until I lost everyone. Mother's dead. Father left. Grandfather, my heart stuttered at the thought of him, dead. When life consisted of loneliness, it was impossible not to realize touch was a luxury.

Jin leaned closer, his arm brushing the sleeve of my blouse, and whispered, "Are you okay?"

I exhaled and glanced up at him to find him a breath away and a small crease between his brows. I didn't move. Instead, I whispered back, "Famished."

He nodded, knowingly.

But he didn't know how easy it was to forget the wonder of simple human connection. Everybody's busy touching their people, and their people are touching each other, but nobody is touching me anymore. My skin has grown cold and empty, and an icy lake has held residence in my stomach ever since the last of my family left me.

His lips were so close to mine. Electricity settled between us, and I had to force myself to turn away and take a bite of my food just to give myself a minute to figure out how to speak again.

Reality check.

I was never okay, but that would be the wrong answer in this situation. I wasn't looking for a therapy session or pity. I wanted to feel alive. To explore and connect with someone or something other than the walls of my flat.

His food arrived, and his focus shifted as he took his first bite.

We worked at the same school and were serving the same second government-mandated year in the same grade level. It wasn't too far-fetched that we might be interested in one another. It would actually be convenient. I smiled.

But it faltered. Images of husbands and children and shadows and more shadows haunted my heart. Shadows I couldn't allow back into my life.

"Aren't you hungry?" He pressed his napkin to his lips.

I pressed my shirt down, smoothing it into perfect planes across my arms. I'd completely forgotten my food. I chuckled. "I'm fine."

I took another bite and a sip of coffee. Its warmth traced a path through me, dulled the ache, and gave muscle to my hope. I lowered my lashes. One dinner couldn't hurt. I could do that.

"What did you think about Principal Lewis's presentation today?" He leaned back.

His words hit me like a brick. Did he only hope to process

the day together? Was he simply sitting with a familiar face? Had my mind made a connection where there was none? I took another sip of coffee and bolstered my teetering heart. “I think it’s lovely you came to sit with me.”

Jin commanded an effortless easiness. “The pleasure is all mine.”

I shifted toward him and took another bite of dinner.

His brown eyes darkened as they glanced at my lips.

I cleared my throat. “The presentation was what I expected.”

“We do what we’re told. We accept. What are we going to think? It’s very simple. You let one moment turn into the next, and soon enough, you’re breezing through life, happy and healthy. What else could you want?” He took a sip of water and leaned closer, giving his last question a charge that sparked through me.

I could want a lot of things—a puppy, a different job, all the money, no pressure, or to sink into those plump velvet lips. Maybe I’d want to live with no fear, or all the freedom to travel beyond the domed city limits. But definitely a puppy. “I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like I need more. I sometimes,” I locked eyes with him, “want a strong shoulder to curl into.”

He nodded and leaned back in his seat. “You look lovely out of uniform. The green in your blouse really brings out your eyes.”

A warm rush of happiness slowly spread through me. “Thank you. You too.”

“It’s good to think about things and to appreciate what the government has done for us.”

As if his words summoned the government itself, a red light along the base of the white walls pulsed to life, bathing the interior in a wash of alarm. A low growl wound up as a deep-throated siren signaled lockdown. Bars dropped over the doors, and windows clacked as they slammed into place. An electronic voice barely preceded drones released from their

wall compartments. Each table was suddenly at attention and under the gaze of the drone's all-seeing eye.

The whine of their tiny engines put my teeth on edge. At the same exact instant, they began scanning the faces of each person. I blinked as the red beam traced down and then up again over my face.

A non-descript man's voice uttered from each drone in eerie unison. "A lawbreaker is in your midst. Remain in position."

As the message looped, other individual drone voices reported its findings. Mine declared, "Citizen identified: Serenity Knowles, twenty-two. Profession: teacher, completing the second year of service with the government."

The red beam died, and a gentle green light took its place. I wasn't who they were looking for. I'd done nothing wrong, but still, I'd held my breath until that moment.

"Please remain seated and refrain from any attempt to leave the premises. This is a matter of national security. You will return to your peaceful existence swiftly."

A red beam caught my eye. It remained focused on Mr. Meander. His drone hadn't shifted to green. Mrs. Meander and her wide-eyed children suffered the same burning red gaze of their drones. Felice was crying. Her brother was trying to pull out of his father's grip, where he held the boy at his side. The mother pushed from her chair. Two additional drones turned red beams on her and stopped at either shoulder, caging her in.

Peaceful existence. Hmm. That's one way to describe this.

Holding hands, touching, even eating suddenly disgusted her. She shook her head. It was foolish to let her guard down.

Jin smiled. "Don't worry. It'll soon be over."

"How do you know? Do you know what's going on with my neighbors?" At least, Nat's no CEL policy kept the CEL recordings out of the Meander's faces.

Jin crossed his legs and placed his arm across the back of my chair. "There's no way for me to know anything more than

you. We have a great government. It's quick to take care of business."

One corner of his lips tipped up, but it couldn't remove the stone I once called a stomach.

My throat squeezed until I coughed. I wiped sweaty palms on my pants. Every time. I shook my head. Every time they came, I was convinced they were after me.

It never mattered how carefully I did my job and towed the line. Even with a clear conscience, something awful always seemed to creep after me. The sight of the drones unfailingly stole my breath away, choked me until black dots floated around me. The Federal Bureau of Acceptance was and forever would be my worst nightmare.

However, Jin's eyes sparkled in the melee. The lay in his frame changed subtly. He moved like a sleek beast, a predator ready to pounce. He thrived in the drama.

All at once, the doors clacked unlocked, and the bars opened to allow the Federal Bureau of Acceptance to march in. The FBA Enforcer's footsteps were hard and full of muscle. They entered on a gust of ice-cold air and stormed up to my neighbors. My neighbors. Why my neighbors?

"What have they done?"