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Excerpted from *Broken Angel* by **Sigmund Brouwer**.

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BROKEN VNGEL

A NOVEL

SIGMUND
BROUWER



WATERBROOK
PRESS

We had agreed—the woman I loved and I—that as soon as you were born, we would perform an act of mercy and decency and wrap you in a towel to drown you in a nearby sink of water.

But in the motel room that was our home, the woman I loved died while giving birth. You were a tiny bundle of silent and alert vulnerability and all that remained to remind me of the woman.

I was nearly blind with tears in that lonely motel room. With the selfishness typical of my entire life to that point, I delayed the mercy and decency we had promised you. I used the towel not to wrap and drown you, but to clean and dry you.

As I lifted your twisted hands and gently wiped the terrible hunch in the center of your back—where your arms connected to a ridge of bone that pushed against your translucent skin—I heard God speak to me for the first time in my life.

He did not speak in the loud and terrible way as claimed by the preachers of Appalachia where I fled with you. Instead God spoke in the way I believe he most often speaks to humans—through the heart, when circumstances have stripped away our obstinate self-focus.

Holding you in your first moments outside the womb, I was overwhelmed by protective love. Even in the circumstances that you face now, believe that my love has only strengthened since then.

I do not regret the price I paid for my love for you. But I do regret what it has cost you, all your life. And I have never stopped regretting all that I've kept hidden from you.

My confession begins with how I deceived you the day after your sixth birthday. You may still believe that we went to the surgeon to help the dove, the one you named Angel.

It was a lie. If only that were the worst of my sins...

PROLOGUE

In the afternoon of the day after Caitlyn's sixth birthday, the waiting room had been quiet, without the coughing or groaning found among those down the hall waiting for a general physician. The physician, an Appalachian like them, had determined their ailments were ones to be treated by a sharp scalpel, and he'd sent them here to see the Outside surgeon, who spent a week every month inside the Great Fence.

Standing beside Papa, Caitlyn felt self-conscious among these strangers. She held a small wooden box with her white dove inside, lifting the lid occasionally to whisper encouragement to it, glad to find its black eyes still bright and attentive.

She'd found Angel below a window and had given her care for a week already. Papa had promised Caitlyn that a surgeon might fix the dove's broken wing, and she had prayed all the way from the collective that God would allow it.

To ease her nervousness, she used her tongue to wiggle a loose tooth back and forth. She had already lost four and was proud that she had learned not to cry at the quick pain that came when Papa helped her pull them loose. She wore the red shoes she'd been given for her birthday but couldn't fool herself into believing they made her look pretty for these people. She held Papa's hand for comfort and kept her back pressed against the wall. She wore a loose jacket but still felt as if all these strangers knew that her back was not like the backs of other girls.

Once, before they'd settled at the collective, she and Papa were at a church gathering in a small town along an abandoned railroad, deep in one of Appalachia's hundreds of valleys. Children had been playing around the adults, who stood in a tight group to discuss the weather and the morning's

sermon. Caitlyn had made friends with another girl who was tiny like her. They wandered among the boys, who were rough and tumble and pushed Caitlyn to the ground. Her new friend helped her up and patted Caitlyn on the back. A question was asked, and Caitlyn began to shed her coat, innocently. Papa ran toward them, shouting.

He arrived soon enough to prevent other adults from seeing, but three of the children had already glimpsed Caitlyn's mutated arms—terribly thin and long, dark with shaggy and coarsened hair. They screamed in horror, and Caitlyn never made the mistake of playing with other children again. Not because Papa warned her against it, but because she finally understood she was different. She didn't like being different. It made Papa sad.



When Caitlyn's name was called, Papa stood and took her by the hand to a small private room where the surgeon waited.

The surgeon had his back to them when they entered. He turned, holding a clipboard. He wore a mask but had pulled it down so his entire face showed. He had short brown hair and dark brown eyes.

Caitlyn sensed the same thing in the man as she did in Papa. She couldn't put it into words, of course, not even in her thoughts, but she understood the aura of sadness and kindness about the surgeon. Others often recoiled from her, but he knelt and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Hello," he said, looking directly in her eyes.

"Hello," Caitlyn said. She felt safe with this man, like she did with Papa. "Papa said you might be able to fix Angel and help her fly again. I call her Angel because she is so white."

She opened the box. The surgeon studied the white dove with great seriousness. He asked permission to lift the dove out of the box. Caitlyn liked that. Other grownups would not have been that nice.

"I've never seen such a beautiful bird," the surgeon said.

Caitlyn shook her head. "Me neither."

"I'm told you are not a physician interested in politics," Papa said to the surgeon. "That is the only reason we are here. We have a little angel who needs help."

"I'm from Outside." The surgeon still looked into Caitlyn's eyes. Smiling, but still with sadness. "What happens in Appalachia is not my business."

"We need to trust you," Papa said. "I can't even tell you why or how important that is."

The surgeon set the dove back into Caitlyn's box. He consulted his clipboard. "Jordan, right? This need is why you wouldn't let the general physician prepare the x-rays?"

"Feel my daughter's back," Papa said. "Between her shoulder blades."

Caitlyn stepped away instinctively, but Papa told her it would be all right. He helped her remove the loose coat. Caitlyn stared at the floor and shivered as the surgeon's soft, gentle hands ran along her coarse skin. Why did she have to be such a burden for Papa?

"Very atypical," the surgeon said. "Not only her back. But her fingers. Her hands. Her thin arms. I'd like to do a medical history. Maybe there is some hormone treatment to—"

"She needs your help," Papa said. "A simple operation on her back. Help. Not questions."

The surgeon raised a questioning eyebrow.

"In my other life," Papa said, "I had considerable medical background, but I'm not a surgeon."

"Your other life?"

"My daughter would not have been able to cope, Outside. That's why we are here."

Caitlyn wanted to pull on Papa's hand. He and the surgeon had forgotten about the box. Although Papa had taught her to be polite and not interrupt

adults, she couldn't help herself and held the box toward her father. "Papa, don't we want to help her fly again?"

Papa smiled and kissed her forehead. "Yes, my love. Sometimes adults talk about things that aren't interesting to a little girl. Forgive Papa."

Caitlyn studied the doctor's face. Papa said he could help them, and she was terrified he would refuse. It was such a beautiful bird. She loved it. She wanted it to fly.

"After the x-rays," the surgeon finally said, "we'll need blood samples."

"Just x-rays," Papa said. "Samples become part of medical files. The x-rays, I can take with me."

The surgeon was quiet for another long moment. He looked at Caitlyn again, and his sad smile surfaced.

"X-rays that you can keep, then," the surgeon said. "If possible, surgery later today. Whatever you are trying to hide is on your conscience. I want to help the girl."

"Thank you," Papa said.

Caitlyn wiped away tears. The surgeon had agreed to try to help her beautiful broken bird and she was happy.

The surgeon nodded at Caitlyn, as if he understood the reason for her tears. "X-rays first."

Papa held Caitlyn's hand while she stood in front of a strange machine. She was forced to wear a heavy gown. Papa wore one too. The machine made a chunking noise. She was asked to stand sideways. Another chunking noise.

"This will help?" Caitlyn tried not to move the box in her hands.

"Yes. This takes a picture of bones to see what is wrong. Hold the box still, my love."

After, they waited in the small room until the surgeon returned with black and white sheets. He held the sheets against a board of light on the wall.

"Amazing," the surgeon said. "This bone structure. The formations are like—"

“No questions, please,” Papa said. “For the sake of the girl. Once surgery is complete, she will be free.”

The surgeon studied the x-rays. Caitlyn was fine with the silence. When they were away from others, she and Papa often sat together, content, saying nothing.

“No,” the surgeon finally said. “Too dangerous.”

“You said what happens in Appalachia is not your business.”

“I don’t care that you’re illegal. The surgery is too dangerous.”

The surgeon put his finger on one of the sheets. “Here. You can see the growths. That means extra blood vessels and the nerves at the spine too. If I go in there now, at the base, there’s a very good chance that she will be paralyzed.”

Papa was silent for so long that Caitlyn wondered if he was feeling ill. When he had a cold or a fever, she liked to tend to him. To fuss over him and bring him water to drink. It was so little compared to all he did for her, but it seemed to make him happy.

“You can’t fix my broken bird?” Caitlyn asked.

“Outside, there are facilities for specialized surgery.” The surgeon spoke past her. “I can make a recommendation. With the right people and equipment, it should be possible to make a complete removal. You know that Bar Elohim grants mercy visas for medical visits to Outside.”

“No. It would destroy her.”

“But these are spinal specialists. They wouldn’t paralyze her.”

“It would destroy her life,” Papa said. “She cannot return Outside.”

The surgeon froze and stared at Papa. “Return? You’ve considered escape?”

“That was another statement of trust. What can you do to help?”

“Will these grow as she matures?” the surgeon asked, tapping the sheet again. “I ask because you seem to know more than you want to say. For someone with a medical background.”

“In Appalachia, it’s wisest to say little,” Papa answered.

“There will be future growth?”

“Yes.” Papa spoke so quietly that Caitlyn could barely hear him. This tore her heart.

“When you are confident that the growth has stopped,” the surgeon said, “come back to me. I will cut them off away from the base, far enough from the spine that we don’t risk paralysis. What remains won’t be too difficult to hide with the right clothing.”

“The growth will continue until after puberty. Something needs to be done now.”

“Surgery every time there’s another few inches of growth?” the surgeon snapped. “Is that what you want to do to her?”

“No.” Papa looked at his shoes.

Caitlyn fought tears again. “We have to wait to fix the bird?”

“Yes,” Papa said. “I promise, even though it can’t fly, we’ll take very, very good care of it.”

DAY ONE

I am not a man that women look at twice.

Yet she did, the woman I loved. Caitlyn. The name I would give to you in honor of her memory.

She was a dark-haired beauty. She saw beyond my shy conversations and saw something in my eyes perhaps, a loneliness of soul that touched her. At first, our eyes held contact longer than necessary. On my later visits we exchanged smiles, our first tentative conversations. A touch of fingertip to fingertip.

Our love grew until we pledged to seek a life beyond the prison that held her. She was six months pregnant when we escaped, became man and wife, pledging together to be parted by nothing short of death.

Our pledge lasted until the end of her pregnancy, when you were thrust into this world among the echoes of your mother's death. You did not kill her, Caitlyn. By taking her away from any medical help, I was responsible.

And although I knew then that someday I would have to pay the price for my love for you, it has arrived far, far too soon...

With late sun spreading an orange glow, wind carried the chorus of baying bloodhounds to Jordan and Caitlyn. They had climbed to the top of the mountain and reached the barren and stunted scrub pines, which grew at awkward angles from crevices in the rock.

Jordan consulted his vidpod and assured himself that the GPS coordinates were correct. He glanced around.

Below, on one side, was the valley where the bounty hunters followed their dogs. The trail that Jordan and Caitlyn had taken up the mountain from that valley was a snake of betrayal, with the bloodhounds roaming free, picking up their scent on bushes and across the long grasses.

Jordan had seen Appalachian bear hunts and knew this would be the same, the noise of hounds galvanizing the killing lust of the Rottweilers straining against leashes, waiting for the bounty hunters to release them once the prey had been sighted. To the Rottweilers, there was no difference between bear or human. Nor, probably, any difference for the bounty hunters.

The other side of the pinnacle was a drop of hundreds of feet where a waterfall fed an ancient rift of stone that widened into a valley, with the occasional bounce of sunlight off curves of the stream far below and a panoramic view of other mountaintops.

They were trapped.

Jordan put his arms around Caitlyn, as if protecting her from the noise of the hounds. He was a tall man in his fifties, thin and muscled from years of repetitive labor. The wind plucked at his untrimmed, graying hair.

“Papa,” Caitlyn said, leaning into his chest, the wind rocking them slightly. *Papa*. One gentle word.

It had been three days since they had fled the collective, with bounty

hunters in pursuit. Jordan had taken them half the length of Appalachia and was exhausted. He knew he could contain the exhaustion enough to hide it from Caitlyn and hold it off long enough to do what was needed. His sorrow, however, was so overwhelming that he didn't know if he could trust his voice.

He stepped back and took her face in his hands, desperate for time to stop. Through the years, it had been too dangerous for the luxury of photographs. Jordan's scrapbook of Caitlyn's childhood was a series of different moments committed to memory, moments where he was far too aware that it would all be taken from him someday.

This day.

Without her cloak, lying on the ground beside them, Caitlyn's slenderness was striking. To Jordan, the beauty in her face gave her a dignity that far outweighed her lack of size. The pupils in her eyes were eerily large, her fingers like long claws. He had learned to love those fingers and hands, the unnaturally thin delicacy of her legs and arms and torso. He'd long stopped noticing the coarse hair on the hunch centered between her shoulders.

Caitlyn smiled back at Jordan. A small, hesitant smile that betrayed the fear she tried to hide from him.

"This is my fault, Papa," she said. "I am so sorry for what I've done to us. Whatever it is, I didn't mean to do it. Tell them that. You don't need to be punished. You've done enough, never leaving someone like me."

Her words almost broke the last of his strength and composure. But Jordan knew what she meant. She wondered if she had inadvertently broken a law. If she had triggered something that the Elders needed to punish. Had she been seen without her coat or said something that was reported?

"No," Jordan told Caitlyn. "You did nothing wrong."

He wanted to hold her again. But it would be a comfort of deception and shame. His shame. He should tell her that they were paying for his sins, not hers.

Hiding during the day, traveling the dangerous paths through the valleys

at night, he'd been snatching moments to write the letter that would explain. Because she would despise him later, he wanted his final memories of her to be untainted by the horror of comprehension that would come with truth.

It was not the time to confess his sins. It was time instead to send her into the abyss.

Jordan could not hope for a sacrificial ram to appear, but he understood what it must have been like for Abraham to climb Moriah to the place of sacrifice with a trembling mixture of faith and hope and sadness that was a far heavier burden than any physical weight. In her trust, Caitlyn, like Isaac, had been totally unaware of the purpose of their climb. Isaac's ignorance could have only deepened Abraham's sorrow, as Caitlyn's did for Jordan's.

Yet Abraham wouldn't have seen in Isaac's eyes what Jordan saw now in his daughter's.

The wind and the height, as it always did, awakened an instinct in Caitlyn. On other days like this, all through her childhood, Jordan had taken Caitlyn to places where they could be alone and quiet, often at the edge of a cliff to give them a view, with Jordan hiding from Caitlyn how badly he was trying to suck the marrow out of each second together.

That sweet poignancy of those picnics had always intensified as he observed little Caitlyn marvel at the hawks soaring below them, their shadows flashing across the tops of the pines of the valley. Caitlyn had watched with unknowing longing, the way God's touch makes human souls instinctively yearn for a place unseen.

Despite the baying of hounds, a constant reminder of the danger, Jordan hoped that this same longing had returned to her.

In the last few months, triggered by puberty occurring far later than in most girls, changes had rapidly forced themselves on Caitlyn's body. She'd become voraciously hungry, especially for milk and meats. The hunch between her shoulders had grown like a cancer, spreading down her back in slow ripples, shiny and swollen until near bursting. The coarse hair draping

her shoulders and upper back and arms became thicker than straw, and the outer layers of what had once been hair became dull with a sheath of dead, flaky skin. Her fear at a first menstrual cycle Jordan had been able to explain. As for the growing bulge, he did little except assure her that it was what her body was meant to do. Anything more would have meant revealing the horror that he was too cowardly to expose, except by letter.

Jordan wore a hip pack. He unbuckled it and squatted as he reached inside. When he stood again, he offered Caitlyn a piece of clothing.

“You need to wear this.”

She frowned. To her, it was obviously far too small. Jordan knew better.

“A microfabric,” he said. “It will stretch.”

She ran the shiny, smooth black material across her face. “Microfabric?”

All her life, her clothing had been rough cotton. She’d never seen material like this. “From Outside,” Jordan explained, although this answer alone would raise a dozen more questions. Before she could ask, Jordan spoke again.

“You’ll need to shed all your other clothing. Step into it, and pull it up your body.”

He faced the other way to give her privacy, although her thin body had few curves to suggest womanhood. Perhaps the microfabric wasn’t needed, but he wasn’t going to send her into the abyss naked, like an animal.

“Papa,” she said, “at the back. I can’t reach.”

He turned to her.

The microfabric emphasized her sleekness. It was sleeveless and would not restrict her arms. She spun to show him her back. The shiny black suit was open in a long slit, and the monstrous bulge of her back protruded partway through.

Jordan was satisfied with the tailoring. The suit was worth the money and risk of getting it smuggled into Appalachia. “Leave me your blouse,” Jordan said. “Put the rest of your clothes back on. The cloak too.”

He didn’t have to tell her why she needed the cloak. To hide what set her apart.

“Remember everything I’ve taught you about Outside.” He’d always let her believe they would be escaping together.

He took a shoelace from his pocket that he’d kept in preparation and tied it through a buttonhole of the blouse.

“Papa, what is happening?”

Through the years, he’d suffered her anguish at any reminder that she was so different. How much easier it would have been to show her a cocoon discarded by a butterfly, explaining the purpose of her hideous hump and what joy could be ahead of her. But it would have led to the other questions that he had never wanted to answer. So again and continuously, he’d been a coward. Not explaining.

He placed the vidpod in her hands. “Unregistered. Use it for navigation. I have one too.”

“Unregistered!” All Appalachians knew the sentence was five years in the factory for anyone caught in possession of an unregistered vidpod.

“That’s not important.” Jordan uncoiled a rope from the hip pack. Thin, nylon, lightweight. “Below us is a stream. Follow it upstream to a cave behind a waterfall. Inside, you’ll find instructions. Hurry out of the valley. Travel tonight. I don’t know how long I can delay them.”

She blinked hard. “No, Papa!”

“You have to make it Outside.” Jordan spoke as he tied one end of the rope to the trunk of a stunted tree.

“Nobody makes it Outside. Please, don’t leave me.”

“There is a man named Brij. Among the Clan. He’s waiting for you.”

“The Clan!”

“Caitlyn, you’ve been taught not to fear the legends.”

“I can’t go without you.”

“We can’t both make it.” Jordan threw the loose end of the rope over the edge of the cliff. He had full confidence she could climb down with ease. She was light boned. Muscle and sinew. Unnaturally so, and unnaturally strong.

“This will get you to a ledge below. You’ll find more rope to help you climb down.”

“Not without you.” She wept.

“Listen to the hounds,” he said. “We don’t have much time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier this was your plan?”

He tested the rope again, looked over the edge and swallowed back the feeling of vertigo. He knew Caitlyn didn’t share that fear. “I can only ask that you trust me.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“You have no choice,” he said, shaking off the spinning sensation. “You can’t be taken, dead or alive. You must not fall into their hands.”

“Who are they?” She reached for him. “Tell me what this means! Papa, I’m afraid.”

He stepped back. It hurt, not to reach for her. “Trust me, Caitlyn.”

“Papa!” He’d never rejected her before. But if he held her now, he would lose his resolve and keep her in his arms until the dogs arrived.

“Caitlyn. I love you as big and forever as the sky.” That had been their game.

“Caitlyn, how much does Papa love you?”

“As big and forever as the sky, Papa.”

He squatted and reached into the hip pack again. The letter. His confession. He walked around her again and slid it between the microfabric and her body.

“Take the rope,” he said. He spoke in such a way that she wouldn’t fight him any longer. “Now.”

He helped her over the edge of the cliff.

“Papa,” she cried. “Papa!”

He steeled himself to ignore her, acutely aware at how little her delicate body weighed. He waited until her weight was no longer on the rope, then untied it and eased it down the cliff.

“Papa!” Wind brought her plaintive cry up to him. Then she was gone.

Jordan leaned forward and whispered it again. “I love you as big and forever as the sky.”

Then he took the lace that he’d tied to her blouse. He began to walk quickly, dragging the blouse behind him. The longer he could keep the hounds pursuing her scent, the better the chances that Caitlyn would make it Outside.

At best, he’d stay ahead of the hounds another half hour. Long enough to make it difficult, if not impossible, to backtrack and discover where Caitlyn had escaped.

The dark of night would be a mercy of sorts. He’d hear the hounds, but in the final moments, they’d only be a frenzy of shadows, throwing themselves upon him.

Then, finally, his guilt and grief would end.