



**SIGMUND
BROUWER**

A NOVEL

**FLIGHT
OF
SHADOWS**

Praise for
Flight of Shadows

“*Flight of Shadows* is as haunting as it is intense. Brouwer keeps the pages turning in this deftly written sequel that engages the intellect and paints a frightening picture of a near-future world where the boundaries of morality are tested...and broken.”

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Praise for
Sigmund Brouwer

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“In a genre-bending tale, Sigmund Brouwer takes us from emotional depths to soaring heights. *Broken Angel* is full of memorable characters, challenging ideas, and fast-paced scenarios. This story works on a number of levels.”

—ERIC WILSON, author of *A Shred of Truth* and *Field of Blood*

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**WATERBROOK
PRESS**

FLIGHT OF SHADOWS
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-4000-7033-6
ISBN 978-0-307-44636-7 (electronic)

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brouwer, Sigmund, 1959–

Flight of shadows : a novel / Sigmund Brouwer.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Sequel to: Broken angel.

Summary: In a future world where the fundamentalist government distorts true Christianity, a winged girl named Caitlyn escapes to the Outside but soon finds herself on the run again from an organization seeking her body's genetic information.

ISBN 978-1-4000-7033-6—ISBN 978-0-307-44636-7 (electronic)

[1. Science fiction. 2. Christian life—Fiction. 3. Genetic engineering—Fiction. 4. Survival—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B79984Fk 2010

[Fic]—dc22

2009048011

Printed in the United States of America
2010—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Other novels by Sigmund Brouwer

Broken Angel
Fuse of Armageddon
The Last Sacrifice
The Last Disciple
The Weeping Chamber
Out of the Shadows
Crown of Thorns
The Lies of Saints
The Leper
Wings of Dawn
Blood Ties
Double Helix
Evening Star
Silver Moon
Sun Dance
Thunder Voice
Degrees of Guilt

Caitlyn,

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, like a kitten in a sack dropped into a river.

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.

God 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 God 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 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 kept hidden from you.

PROLOGUE

Outside, wind and rain and darkness. On the main floor, rattling of the big windows that took the brunt of the storm.

But below, in the hidden rooms, where there was usually hushed silence, Jessica Charmaine approached a glass wall to a sound that she dreaded. Groaning.

Charmaine had learned that her hybrids on the other side of the glass had a wide range of sounds, and it wasn't difficult to read emotions into those sounds.

Sometimes, for example, she would enter and hear soft mewling. She would know in an instant that one had rolled away from the other. And that each would grope and roll until they were united again. She would help them back together and watch their faces contort in joy at the touch of the other.

Other times, their sounds expressed curiosity. Fear. Puzzlement. Sorrow. Frustration. She was convinced that they were trying to speak.

She knew why they were incapable of it.

Charmaine had two doctorates. The first was in genetic science, and the second, by necessity for this long-term experiment, was as an uncertified surgeon. She prided herself on her medical skills and her specialized knowledge. As required, using the equipment behind her in this large, partitioned room, she'd long ago mapped out the genomes for these creatures. She still spent hours and hours puzzling over their gene sequences; if she could unlock the mystery, no longer would this experiment need to remain hidden from the world. In her studies, she'd learned early by comparing the genetic mutations of the hybrids to *Homo sapiens*, that the FOXP2 gene of the hybrids had been altered by three specific amino acid differences.

She could have written a fascinating paper on this, definitively answering a long-disputed theory on why humans could speak and chimpanzees could not. The paper—and the existence and characteristics of her hybrids—would establish her reputation as a world-class scientist at the top of her game.

The irony, of course, was that the same existence and characteristics demanded the secrecy that would doom her as a scientist to perpetual obscurity. Unless she cracked the mysteries behind the genetic code of the hybrids

and their near miraculous powers. To say the payoff would be enormous gave no idea of what was at stake. Without doubt, it would be the physics equivalent of generating an antigravity device.

She'd been close once. Oh, so very close. Decades earlier, as a co-director in the Genesis Project. But as the experiments neared the brink of final discovery, a scientist named Jordan Brown had unleashed a near-perfect storm of destruction upon the project. Along with the total deletion of irreplaceable computer data and all backups, he'd triggered a laboratory explosion and an official loss of all the cataloged embryos. Even so, Charmaine might have had a chance of rebuilding her research, but funding for the crippled project had been swept away by much larger events: the Water Wars that forced government focus on survival, not experiments.

All would have been lost, except for three embryos not listed in the official report. Two of the three embryos belonged to these hybrids, serialized embryos she'd managed to rescue just before the explosion and over the years had secretly nurtured to maturity. For these two hybrids, she'd sacrificed her personal life in search of her holy grail, and her ambitions had slowly evolved. Charmaine had accepted this evolution so completely that she took a different satisfaction from her long hours with the hybrids. When she first spoke to them, it had been merely experimental, trying to learn whether they had the required motor and mental skills for speech. Now it was different, reflective of her emotional commitment to them. Always the detached observer, Charmaine guessed that part of her bond to them was maternal, a subconscious reaction to her deliberate choice to put career—and this long-term experiment—ahead of anything else in her life. It could even be said that her affair had been dictated by the hybrids. She was single and attractive, but with her need for secrecy, she had limited her suitors in a practical way to serve her quest. Except for Jordan Brown, who had been a fugitive since the lab explosion, the man she'd chosen for a prolonged affair was the one and only other person who had knowledge of the hybrids.

Because of her maternal bond, when entering the glass cage, she would often lean over them, utter soothing words, or help each find the other if they had separated. They were adolescents, still growing. She knew they loved her. This gave her joy. Not enough perhaps to make up for the irony that such an incredible scientific achievement had to be hidden so carefully until someday

she learned their secret. But enough that she did not resent all the time they needed from her. Their world had become her world.

Tonight, the groaning told her that for the next many days and nights, there would be no joy. This sound from their partition was a unique tone for them, like unarticulated words of resigned anguish. It told her that one or the other was feeling pressure again from unrestrained muscular growth.

One of the many alterations in their genetic makeup had left the hybrids without the ability to produce myostatins—molecules that fit into receptors on the membranes of muscle cells and blocked growth. Even without their deformities, their skeletal structures were incapable of withstanding strain exerted when their muscle growth bloomed past a certain point. Without the operations to pare those muscles back, they would have died years earlier.

She sighed. Yet once more, the looming collapse of their ribs would make the next weeks sheer hell for the hybrids.

The partition was lit softly and well padded on the floor, separated from the remainder of this laboratory by the glass wall that allowed her to observe them at any and all hours. Charmaine's side was equipped so that she could perform surgery in one area and indulge in her pursuit of genetic knowledge in the other.

Their side was almost like a nursery for babies. The difference was the lack of simple toys. The hybrids were blind and had only grotesquely shortened legs and stumps for arms, born with stubs of fingers and toes at the end of their appendages. Their faces seemed to have smudged features, as if they constantly rubbed their faces against the glass.

She did not find their appearance hideous. At least not anymore.

As she touched a hand to the glass, their groaning stopped briefly.

She didn't know if they could hear her, or feel the movement of air through the circular holes at the top of the glass wall, or perhaps smell her skin. But she'd never been able to catch them unaware of her watching them. This awareness would be reflected by a stillness when she was nearby. Even when separated and mewling, each would pause in its search for the other, turning their deformed faces in her direction with the instinctive searching of visual cortexes that had never developed.

Charmaine sighed again as the groaning resumed, a sound that pierced her with sadness.

This cycle had hit both hybrids at the same time.

Charmaine hated it. One would have to suffer while the other received the operation that provided relief. There was no other way. They were too valuable to risk simultaneous operations; doing it separately meant if one died, the other would still be alive.

At her renewed sigh, despite their obvious pain, both hybrids wiggled their arms stumps in her direction. Waving, like small children. It didn't surprise her anymore. Too much of their genetic makeup belonged to *Homo sapiens*. This, too, pierced her with sadness, that they had the instinct to love her.

Now, however, for the first time in years, to help her endure this sadness, she had a renewed strength and sense of purpose.

Much as Jordan Brown had tried to stop it, the Genesis Project was on the verge of total resurrection. All these years later, she had just learned of his single mistake—in the aftermath of the long-ago lab explosion, he had not destroyed the third embryo. Charmaine now knew that the last embryo, like her hybrids, had survived to maturity and, unlike the hybrids, carried the genetic material that could unlock everything.

This embryo no longer had a serialized catalog number. But a name, given by Jordan Brown.

Caitlyn.

Tuesday night

Although the claustrophobia of the city oppressed her, Caitlyn felt most like a caged bird when she pushed her cart down the perfumed corridors of the Pavilion luxury hotel, her longing for the Appalachian hills of a childhood of innocent trust exacerbated by the endless walls gilded with artificial light.

It had been weeks since she escaped Appalachia, and sustained by anger, she'd learned that she had to blend in to survive. But she couldn't escape her longings. Finished cleaning one room, she'd hurry the short, shadowed distance of the corridor to the next, hoping the drapes would be wide apart so that when she stepped inside, she would immediately be able to look through the floor-to-ceiling glass at the far end of the suite to see the sky above the city and ignore, if only for a moment, the invariable crumpled bed linens, lipstick-stained cigarette butts, partially full wine glasses, and the other detritus of sybaritic living that marked the Influentials who moved through this building.

If the curtains were closed and the room was in darkness, Caitlyn would ignore the light switch and instead fling the drapes apart to give herself the rush of freedom that came with sudden brightness. For Caitlyn, the openness of the sky was a balm, allowing her to imagine she was above the clutter and noise and greediness of the city. Even then, there was cruelty in the transparency of her prison, for this brief joy also brought the need to feel the winds that had given her shivers of pleasure when, as a girl in Appalachia, before she'd understood what she would become, she and her father would perch on a rocky ledge to overlook a valley and hawks on the updrafts.

Despite the sheets of glass that blocked the wind from her, she would pause frequently from sorting wet towels or from wiping stains and hair off porcelain to look out again and let the view brighten her soul, letting her mind drift to those memories, wishing she could step out through the glass and into the void, wishing that wind was pushing against her face again. Like the first time she'd discovered the reason for her instinctive yearning for height.

When her drudgery in the soiled carelessness of the rich was too much and her yearning became too great to endure, she would flee to the flat roof of the hotel to stand on the hot, sticky graveled tar among the hissing vents. She would renew her cold anger by thinking about her papa—Jordan—and how he had betrayed and hurt her.

To draw on hope for strength and determination, she would turn her mind to Billy and Theo, her only friends, from Appalachia, who had escaped Outside when she did. They'd planned, the three of them, to escape to the west, through the lawless lands that bordered the city-states to reach wild, desolate territories largely unpeopled after the Wars. But she wasn't ready yet. She would tell herself that Billy and Theo would wait and that she could go another day without visiting the surgeon it had been arranged for her to meet Outside. Day by day, she would push aside those plans because it was easier simply to exist, and she would take what pleasure she could in this caged existence by closing her eyes to the wind and dreaming of flight.

Of soaring.

Again.



Standing on pebbled rooftop tar, she almost didn't hear the faint crunching of gravel behind her, but she heard the voice.

"I know things about you. But all I will tell you about me is my name. Everett. So you can shout my name as you beg for mercy."

Caitlyn whirled at the closeness of the voice. It was dusk now, and she was standing near the edge of the roof, forty stories above the city. She had been soaking in the glowing filaments of orange and red among the streaked clouds to the western horizon, letting her unfocused gaze take her thoughts beyond the silhouettes of the other tall buildings of the city. Occasional currents of slight wind had swirled upward from the sun-heated city concrete, and she'd tingled each time at the sense of moving air.

"It was I who arranged for you to work the penthouse floors," he said. "You fascinate me. I know things about you, but I want to know more."

He was only a few steps away. There was just enough light to see a smile on his face, as if he'd deliberately engineered her startled response. A half-empty bottle of red wine held low in one hand. A glass of it in the other.

One glass. Just for him. He paused and took a casual drink before speaking again.

“At the end of every day, you come here before leaving. And you come up here during the day. Sneaking away from your work. Often. What is it? For me, it would be the enjoyable sensation of knowing I’m above all of them.”

Everett lifted his bottle and pointed beyond the city wall. “Illegals and Industrials. Living in shanties and soovies, among the discards of their previous generation. Serving me and those like me. Even with a work permit, you’re just an Invisible. Not above them in any sense except when you stand up here. Is that why you come here, to pretend your life is more than cleaning up after us?”

She hadn’t known his name, but his voice was as polished as she’d imagined, for she had seen him many times, most often accompanied by a beautiful woman as he passed her and her cleaning cart in the hallway, never the same woman twice. Caitlyn found it mesmerizing: his polished appearance and the easy way he bore the accretions of wealth, the discreet jewelry, the sheen of his clothing, the thick silvering hair ruffled by design, the rimless glasses, the sheer handsomeness of a face that had lost no confidence even as the first wrinkles began to tug at the sides of his eyes.

He was a separate species from her. A prince unaware of the silent servant girl. Or so she’d believed until now.

As he stared at her, she could not find her voice.

“No answer?” Everett asked.

Something inside her began to recoil at the secretive charm at the edges of his smile. He was standing between her and the rooftop door back into the hotel.

“I know things about you,” he said, “because I watch you all the time.”

Another smile. Control and pleasure. He gestured at a shiny black globe on a pole at the edge of the roof. “I have an arrangement with security. Surveillance cameras. Everywhere. Right now, recording the two of us. Something I’ll watch again and again when I have finished with you.”

When I have finished with you.

As Everett sipped at his wine and watched over the edge of his glass for her reaction, there was a narrowing of his eyes, obvious even in the last light of dusk, perhaps to see if she understood the implied threat.

“Where do you live?” he said. “Where do you go after you leave this

roof and walk out the front lobby? What's your name? What do you dream of? I want to know everything about you. I want to possess you."

A broader smile. "What will I find when we unwrap the loose clothing that you wear like a cloak? I think that's what I want to know most. All those hours watching you on camera as you clean rooms, wondering what you hide."

Everett savored another sip of wine. "We have all night, you know."

Caitlyn stepped sideways, to go around him. He stepped sideways too, chuckling.

"You don't understand," he said. "The door is locked. There is no way back into the building without the key in my pocket. I have the leisure to indulge in my desires. Here. Now."

"Security," she said, pointing to the surveillance cameras. "Someone will know."

"You truly don't understand. That's part of what will make this satisfying. Especially after all these weeks of watching you, waiting for this. I own those cameras. After, there will be many, many more who will enjoy watching what I do to you."

Everett shook his head. "Don't you realize how special you are? For those of us with jaded tastes, the prospect of degradation with someone as freakish as you must be shared."

Freakish. Her recoil must have been obvious.

"When you work," he said, "there are times your clothing clings tight to your back. It must be hideous, what you so carefully hide. Most women are plastic perfection. To unveil you will be extraordinary. . ."

More wine before he continued. "In a way, I'm a director. From hours and hours of surveillance film in various places of the hotel, I've put together a montage of your life as a maid. Your innocence and unawareness is so mundane that it cannot help but build an appetite for how it will end. I've had practice, of course. You're not the first. But I think you'll be the most delightful. None of the others in my films have been freaks."

His turn to take a step. Toward her. "It will be nicer if you don't fight. Try to find enjoyment in this. Think of yourself as a star, about to debut."

She backed away. Until the abutment of the roof's edge pressed against her. With a forty-story drop to the streets that she hated.

“Don’t spoil this,” he said. “Don’t jump. If you are compliant enough, this won’t end the way it did with the others. I’ll let you live. You’re special enough, and I have a suite in the hotel to keep you in. Who knows? Perhaps you will learn to look forward to nights on the rooftop with me.”

She couldn’t jump. Not with him so close.

Everett was on her with a swiftness that made her gasp, dropping the wine bottle and glass, showering her with shards. Then wrenching her away from the edge, pulling at her cloak, fumbling at the horrible hunch on her back.

Caitlyn hated the Outside. She hated the danger it seemed to hold for her. She hated that every morning she had to find a way to force herself to walk along the streets, ever watchful that someone might step out from the crowd. She hated the sensation of being pursued, although she told herself again and again that Mason Lee, the bounty hunter who had forced her out of Appalachia, was well behind her, left for dead. She hated that every morning as she dressed, she needed to strap a small, sharp knife inside a sheath at the back of a belt around her waist.

Her premonition had been correct, however. A hunter had shown up with the unexpectedness she’d dreaded. But not the hunter she’d expected. Still, there was only one way to respond.

Pinned by his arms, she was still able to reach behind and pull the knife from its sheath.

He was grunting in unnatural passion, lost in his hunger, arms pinning her, hands pulling at the terrible hunch on her back. His fingers found the skintight black microfabric and began to spread open the gap at the back. Pressed against him, with the wine on his hot breath washing over her, all she could manage was a small upward thrust with the knife.

Everett screamed, fell backward.

It was dark now. It took him several moments to realize what had happened. She watched him reach down with his hands and feel the hilt of the knife.

He struggled to sit up.

“You freak,” he said.

His calmness was unnerving. He pulled out a cell from one pocket and snapped it open, eyes on her as he spoke. “Send someone up. She had a knife.”

Pause. “I know because it’s in me.”

Another pause. “Of course I know the bleeding will be worse if I pull

it out. Get someone here quickly. Take care of me first. Then her. Like the others. Make her disappear.”

He snapped the phone shut. In the darkness, she imagined she could feel his glare. “Freak. It didn’t have to be this way.”

More fumbling at his pocket. “You can’t see this, but it’s the key to the door.”

Sudden movement of his arm. A small tinkling sound farther away. He’d thrown it into the dark.

“No escape now,” Everett said with a harsh laugh interrupted by a groan. When it passed, he said, “You’ve probably got enough time to beg me not to have you killed. At least let me enjoy that.”

Caitlyn adjusted her cloak so that it covered her body again, hanging from where it was secured around her neck. She reached beneath the cloak and pulled an outer layer of microfabric downward, rolling it until it reached her waist so that the hunch of her back was now exposed. The inner layer was skintight, and with the breeze, it felt like her upper body was naked beneath the cloak. Then she moved to him and squatted.

“Back off,” he said. “Don’t make it worse on yourself. Freak.”

She reached for him. He tried to push her arms away, but she was far, far stronger than she looked.

“I want my knife back,” she said. And pulled it loose.

Then she whirled away. To the edge of the roof.

Freak.

She let the gusting wind calm her. The door behind her opened. Shouts. Two men. Maybe three. She didn’t look back.

She spread her wings beneath the cloak. Pushed off the ledge into the open sky.

And flew.