

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, 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.

“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,” 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.”