

Broken Angel:

A Zombie Love Story



Loely Sue Burkhart

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By Joely Sue Burkhart

I dreamed of the broken doll again.

Standing on a bridge curtained with willows and blooming vines, I saw her in the crystal water flowing beneath the stone arch. At first, she looked perfect: lovely porcelain face, large sparkling eyes, and flowing silken ribbons of gold framing her angelic features. Beautiful as she rose from the gurgling stream, she floated up to the bridge like dandelion fluff. She smiled with that Cupid's bow mouth, but when she walked toward me, her gait was stiff and jerky like a mindless robot.

Dread rolled through me, a drowning darkness of cold waters. I couldn't breathe. My head pounded and my heart struggled to beat. Ice encased my hands and feet, inching up my arms and legs. I wanted to run before she came any closer, but I was frozen immobile.

Dead leaves rained down. Brittle flowers crumpled to dust. Ice covered me. My face was stiff and cold, my eyes wide open and staring. Just like that horrible, perfect doll marching toward me with grim joviality.

There was something horrible about her face, something so terrifying that I couldn't remember. I didn't want to remember. I didn't want to look.

Peaches and cream complexion, once smooth and symmetrical, now drooped. The eye on the right sat lower on her face, her mouth tugging down into a grimace. A dark slash cut across her forehead, another down her cheek. She stumbled forward, clutching a heavy gold watch, links of chain woven between her wooden fingers.

I stared, frozen like a dumb animal, as that face broke open. Porcelain cracked away to reveal...

My face.

Screaming, I jerked awake. I clawed at the blankets, flailing toward the edge of our king-sized bed.

My husband reached for me, mumbling, "What's wrong?"

Relieved, I sank back onto the pillows and rolled into his embrace. Even woken from sleep, his voice echoed with command. He was a man used to leadership, wealthy enough to purchase the best doctors and provide exclusive, expensive care for me. He loved me. I remembered that much.

A wave of nausea flooded my stomach, burning up my throat. I really didn't want to see any more doctors. Perhaps one...the one who...

My head hurt. Yes, he'd taken care of my head. After the accident. The bridge. Pain exploded. Why couldn't I remember his face? His name? He saved me. Images fluttered through my mind like loose papers, blowing leaves, gone in an instant.

Pillowing my face on Robert's chest, I tried to calm my thoughts. "I was dreaming. Oh, it was horrible. That doll, her broken face..."

Shuddering, I couldn't tell him the worst of the nightmare. *She was me. I was her. What does that mean?*

"That same old nightmare again? Go back to sleep, dear."

His dismissive attitude stung. Rather, it would have hurt if I could feel anything. I was suddenly aware that I was fully awake, yet I was still numb to my surroundings. His bare chest was beneath my cheek, but I felt no heat from him. I smelled nothing from his skin. Hadn't he always smelled of cologne, even at night? His chest hairs should tickle, yet I felt nothing but the rise and fall of his chest. Panic gnawed in the pit of my stomach, twisting me into knots.

He made a sound of pain and took my hand in his, lifting my fingers away from his skin where I'd gouged my nails into him. "That hurts, Angelina. What's wrong?"

I couldn't speak for the dread choking me. I was still the doll, but I was awake. He rolled up onto his forearm and smiled down at me. Didn't terror flash in my eyes, dark with the screams of nightmares? Or was it the blank stare of the doll? Which was worse?

He kissed me, murmuring against my mouth. I felt the pressure of his lips, but not the heat or wetness, nor the scratch of his mustache. I clutched him harder, pushing him over onto his back and climbing onto him. Nothing. No heat, no sweaty glide of flesh on flesh. Yet he threw his head back and groaned deep in his throat, his hips arching up beneath me.

He was inside me, and I couldn't feel it. His hands gripped my hips, pulling me into a rocking rhythm that my body knew but didn't feel. No stirring fire burned in me. Nothing but this spreading blackness of fear. I plunged harder, faster, desperation driving me to feel something, anything.

He drew me down and whispered, "Are you ready? I'm coming, oh, my love..."

Nothing. I couldn't even cry. He shuddered and made a masculine purr of satisfaction as he rolled to his side and tucked me down beside him. "I like these nightmares of yours."

I lay there, strangled with betrayal. How could he be so blind and oblivious? Didn't he see? Couldn't he feel the coldness in my unresponsive body?

This reality was worse than the doll's nightmare.

The next afternoon, I found myself walking down a dirty street in Cheapside, the darkest slum of the Upper City. Certainly a place no woman of my standing would ever visit, never alone and dressed in the fine shimmering materials that drew every beggar's greedy eye. None dared lay a hand on me, though. They averted their gazes, turning and hurrying away even when I called after them.

Why was I here? Why did they know me? Perhaps they recognized my face. After all, I was the Upper Governor's wife. The uncanny silence was shrill even on my dead nerves, grating like metal on metal.

They're afraid. Of me.

I touched my face to assure myself that my features weren't shattered like the doll. My cheek felt strange, my flesh firm, unyielding, cold, like porcelain. Shivering although I didn't feel the damp that cloaked the soiled sky, I quickened my step. Aimless yet determined, I hurried toward the unknown destination that called me.

The dreams had been happening more often, no matter what shots and potions the doctors forced me to take. I couldn't deny the image any longer. I had to find that bridge. Maybe if I

stood there beneath the willows and smelled the flowers trailing in the mirrored water, the dream would cease haunting me.

Whether hours or minutes passed, days or weeks, I honestly had no sense of time. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't cold nor tired, merely possessed. Yes, possessed. Anger filled me. I didn't understand why, but oh, joy, I felt something, and so I kindled that fragile flame.

A passing woman gasped, her mouth and eyes rounded with horror. Her little boy stared at me, his whisper carrying on the breeze. "What's wrong with her, Ma? Why does she walk like that?"

"Shhh." The woman hurried her child away, glancing back over her shoulder worriedly.

I began walking again, paying attention to my body. My steps lurched, awkward and uneven, my body uncoordinated. Crazy laughter exploded out of my throat. "I'm a doll, a walking talking doll."

My voice sounded strange and my body felt disconnected from my mind. I could barely see, whether it was night or my vision failing as my body shut down, but at last I recognized something familiar. A tree-lined brook curved ahead, stone arching over the tinkling waters.

I stumbled down the path, struggling to make my numb body work. My loud breathing wheezed in my ears. This was the end, then. I'd die on this bridge. Maybe the doll would come and take my place. Or was she here already? Is that why I couldn't feel anything?

Stone pressed against my face. I'd fallen. Damp, hard, unforgiving, stone and flesh were indistinguishable.

"Angel!"

The voice tugged at my darkest memories. Not Robert, but familiar, the way this bridge was imprinted into my mind. He knelt beside me, metal flashing, clinking, and something pressed to my neck. A flood of fire shot into my vein, startling a moan out of my mouth.

"I know, I know. Forgive me, Angel. It's my fault you feel so badly. I couldn't think of any other way to reach you, though."

I tried to sit up and see his face, but my body still wasn't mine to command. Molten lava crept through my veins, melting my bones and boiling blood. Pain seared me, but I didn't cry out again. It was a blessing to feel, even pain, so I endured. I didn't want to forget a single sensation.

Especially his hand against my face, his thumb smoothing the silent tears from my cheeks. "Do you remember anything at all?"

"Bridge." Pain sliced my throat like shards of glass. "Doll."

"This bridge is the only place I thought you might remember. What doll?"

At last, I could see his face. Wild and unkempt, dark hair hung down his forehead. His face was heavily lined and grooved, his eyes dark but burning like coals.

Every cell in my body recognized him. So I dared to tell him the horror of the dream that I'd not mentioned to my husband. "I'm the doll. She's broken. Somebody cracked her head open, and I'm inside."

Sorrow lined his face even more, his hands shaking as he drew me to his chest. His arms locked about me. Sensation exploded, so painful and overwhelming I couldn't separate scent from feeling, hearing from sight. He enveloped me, swallowing me up and holding me safe, yet I still couldn't remember his name or how I knew him.

"I had to replace your drugs with a placebo so you'd experience the memories. I couldn't think of any other way to break through, Angel. I'm sorry, so sorry."

"I'm broken, my face, and the water..."

A shudder wracked his body. His hands smoothed my hair and his fingers trembled. “What else do you remember?”

I closed my eyes. “You. I remember you.” I inhaled deeply, sandalwood spice, and touched the thick hair hanging across his forehead. My heart steadied, beating in time with his, and I suddenly remembered everything.

I’d been married to Robert for only a few months when I met the eccentric, brilliant doctor at a fund raiser. My husband had promised millions to research, but even I knew he made billions on the sales of those drugs to the aristocracy, since he had part ownership in all the major drug and research facilities. The newest research proved to be especially earth-shattering: reanimation. Restoring life to dead cells, reversing damage, healing cancer—altruistic promises on everyone’s lips.

At a price. Always at a price. And this price had been set so extravagantly high that only the extremely wealthy in Upper City would ever benefit from the miraculous cures. Robert had seen to that personally, lining his pockets on other people’s misery and hopelessness. He loved nothing like he loved his money, not even me, his treasured trophy wife of only the highest beauty and purist Upper blood. He’d joked to his cronies that my blood didn’t run aristocratic blue, but gold to match my hair...and his money.

His cronies never knew my dreadful secret. My blood had indeed hoarded something very rare but malicious, discovered only after I’d miscarried our first child. Of course, Robert had insisted that I consult with his brilliant doctor. I was the first human experiment, a stunning success story that would never be told. The Upper Governor’s wife could never be less than perfect. He’d lose status, no matter how many billions he possessed.

With my health returned—and Robert’s progeny assured—I’d betrayed my husband by falling in love with my doctor.

This bridge had been our meeting place. Oh, I remembered his kisses, his touch, the horrible burden of guilt.

“Kade.”

He laughed and cried, pressing frantic kisses to my eyes, cheeks, and mouth, clutching me close. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Awful certainty filled my stomach with lead. I pulled away and forced my stiff limbs to straighten so I could look down over the stone railing to the swirling waters below. I remembered floating in that stream. The moon had been a bare sliver in the sky and the scent of lilac had been strong in the spring air the night I died. “You did.”

I was not surprised when the Most Honored Upper Governor Robert Vandom Witherspoon III came to this tiny bridge in a forgotten park deep in the dingy slums. He would always come for what was his, of course, even to Cheapside. What was his, no one else could have.

Vigor pulsed in my veins, power and vitality restored by Dr. Kade’s miraculous drug. I could feel. Oh, yes, indeed. Burning hatred ate at the corners of my mind like rats in the alleys I’d wandered until I found my way home.

To this bridge.

“Come with me, dear.” Robert was carefully polite but firm. “It’s time to go back.”

He wasn’t surprised to find Kade with me. He even inclined his head slightly, the most civility the Upper Governor should give a lowly doctor, even a brilliant researcher who’d made him a billionaire a million times over.

Even a doctor who’d returned me to life, not once but twice.

“I remember.”

He flinched and shot an accusatory look at Kade over my shoulder. “That’s good. Maybe the nightmares will cease.”

“Is that all you have to say to me?” My skin blazed, hot and tight instead of frozen and numb. Even though Robert stood a dozen feet away, I could hear his heart beating, skipping faster and faster. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and I smelled the bitter sharpness of fear radiating from him.

“It’s time to go home.” He reached into his pocket and glanced absent-mindedly at the fancy gold watch. How I hated that damned thing. How I hated him. “I have a very important meeting that I was forced to reschedule because I had to come fetch you. You belong with me, Angelina.”

“No, I belong *to* you. Isn’t that what you mean?”

“Angel...”

“No.” I rounded on Kade. Surprised by my fury, he drew back, lifting a hand to calm me. “Stay out of this.” I turned back to my husband. “Are you going to kill me again?”

His guilty gaze flickered wildly between me and Kade. “What has he been telling you?”

Kade’s forehead creased. “What do you mean?”

“He killed me. He paid someone to murder me. I remember!”

“Never!” Robert took a step closer, emboldened by Kade’s confusion. My husband had always suspected Kade of cajoling me into leaving him, but he really knew nothing at all about the day I’d left my wealthy, powerful husband and swore never to come back. “This is ridiculous. You’re sick and confused. Let’s go home and take your medicine. You know how you get when you miss a shot.”

“I turn into a zombie. Unfortunately, I’m not much better when I do get those shots, because then I become the perfect doll you march out to show to your business partners. I’m not your doll anymore, Robert.”

“Those shots saved your life at great expense. I’ve spent a fortune on your health, Angelina. Dr. Kade healed your blood condition. He even healed you after the accident. You’ve cost me quite enough and now I must insist—”

I smiled and my husband paled. I sauntered toward him, swaying with each step like the well-bred doll he’d married, dressed in the beautiful clothes and jewels of Upper. “It was no accident, Robert.”

He recoiled, cowering against the stone railing.

“You followed me after I left you. You’d had me followed for months and knew exactly whom I met and where. It was nothing for you to have one of your friends delay Dr. Kade at the facility. Then you slipped one of the street thugs a few coins and ordered him to attack me. You’d rather see me dead than free. Isn’t that right?”

“No, no, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I never would have suspected you except for one little thing.” I slipped my hand into his coat pocket and retrieved his watch. “Your murdering thief took a shine to your antique watch. I saw him with it. I even grabbed it as he bludgeoned me to death. I’m surprised you were able to get all of my blood out of the engraving.”

“You... you left him? For me?” Kade touched my shoulder, his voice trembling with rising anger as he glared at my husband. “Then you had her killed?”

“She’s obviously delusional. You need to adjust her medication again, Doctor.”

Kade stepped closer to me, a subtle allegiance that warmed my heart and brought tears to my eyes. All through our affair, he’d been reluctant to push me into a decision. He’d sworn to never

ask me to give up my life in Upper to be a doctor's wife. I'd done so willingly, even though it had ultimately cost me my life.

"I found her in the water. Her skull had been cracked open, her face beaten until she was practically unrecognizable. I dragged her to the bridge and tried to revive her, but she was gone." His voice cracked with grief. "You begged me to save her, even when I cautioned you it'd been too long. I couldn't guarantee she'd ever recover or live normally again. All that time, you wept and wrung your hands, blubbering it had all been a mistake, and I felt sorry for you. You killed her!"

Eyes wide and frantic, Robert jumped back and whipped out a gun. "Angelina, come with me. I have what you want, Dr. Kade. I know all your secrets, yes? You'll do nothing, absolutely nothing."

Gathering all my strength, I launched at Robert. His arm jerked toward me, his eyes rolling in his sweaty face. I was already dead, so what did it matter if he shot me? Would I roam the city with a bullet hole in me and that macabre doll smile plastered to my shattered face?

Kade slammed into me just as the gun fired. He fell to the stone walkway, his face slack with shock. Red bloomed on his shirt, his chest a fountain of blood. Clenching my hands into fists, I screamed with rage, agony, love. Such senseless love. It didn't matter if Robert shot me, so why had Kade stopped the bullet himself?

I couldn't save him. I didn't know how.

I clamped my mouth shut to silence the feral moans coming out of my throat. Slowly, I turned to my husband. His gaze darted left and right, seeking escape, but I had my quarry in sight. Murderous fury gave me even more strength. When he turned to run, I jumped on him. My fingers slid into his flesh effortlessly. I rode him to the ground, not numb this time but viciously alive.

"You've taken everything away from me that I ever cared about. You took away my love. You took away my life, turning me into a mindless, shattered doll. Never again, Robert. I will never be your doll again!"

I grabbed a handful of hair on either side of his ear and slammed his face down into the stone. I banged his head repeatedly, shattering him like he'd shattered me. Until his skull fell apart in my hands, a mass of gray brains and bits of bone splattered with blood.

Crawling aside, I retched bitter acid onto the stones. My heart pounded, my pulse a jackhammer in my head. Why was I still alive? I could feel the breeze in my hair even while my hands oozed brains and sticky blood. I could smell the stench of Robert's bodily fluids, yet lilacs also perfumed the air.

I don't deserve to live.

Standing, I gripped the stone railing of the bridge and looked down into the dark waters. No moon tonight. I'd let the waters close over my head and suck me away. Terror rattled inside my mind, though. Would I rise and walk again? Like the doll, drooling water from my mouth and useless lungs, my skin pasty white and stone-cold dead...

What would become of my body that didn't seem to know its life was over?

Hands closed about my shoulders. A scream of terror built in my throat. I stiffened, until I recognized Kade's spicy scent that soothed the panic ravaging my mind. "I thought you were dead."

"I was." He slipped his arms around me and drew me back against the shelter of his chest. His heart beat steady against my back. "Rather, I would have died nearly a decade ago from an inoperable brain tumor. I used proof of my experiments to gain Robert's initial investment, but

then he threatened to expose me to his Upper peers if I didn't give him a considerable ownership in my research facilities. I would have lost everything without his funding, so I went along with him. Then I met you. You were never my first human trial, Angel."

"Of course." I let out a harsh laugh but tears spilled from my eyes. "I always wondered how he'd come to own such a large percentage of your research."

Silently, he waited for it all to add up in my head. I'd fallen in love with someone who was technically dead. Without my consent, he'd given me the same drugs. Yet without him...

"I killed Robert." Guilt choked me and I whirled in his arms to bury my face against his chest. "I'm a monster, Kade."

"How can you be a monster when you're my Angel?" He tilted my face up to his and smiled with such love that even my drug-enhanced heart skipped a beat. "You're a little out of control right now because of withdrawal symptoms and the mini-death your body went through again. Some of your cells died because you didn't get my drugs, but those cells are regenerating even as we speak. You're alive, Angel, and Robert deserved to die. He had you killed, remember? He shot me, too. It's over, and we're together. That's all that matters."

"What will happen to us?"

"As long as we take regular shots, our lives will continue as normal. The people down here know what he did to you. They still talk about the broken angel found in the water, so perfect and beautiful she could only come from Upper City. Robert failed to eliminate his hired killer before the man bragged of his newfound wealth at every bar in Cheapside."

The grim slash of Kade's mouth and the dangerous gleam of his narrowed eyes told me he'd eliminated the man who'd beaten me to death. I couldn't find it in myself to be sorry or to accuse him of murder, not when my hands were covered with my husband's blood.

"They'll find Robert's body and the aristocracy will roar at the injustice, but nobody will ever think to question his beautiful Upper wife. We can continue our lives as we wish." Leaning down, Kade brushed his lips tenderly against mine, his breath sweet on my face. "But if you don't want to go on living like this, then we'll sit right here on this bridge and wait for the drugs to wear off. Our cells will die, our hearts will cease beating, and we'll be as dead as Robert. We'll go together, Angel, I promise. I won't leave your side until our last breath."

The night was alive with the music of crickets. A nightingale sang in the willow trailing over the water.

Alive. We're alive.

I pulled gently out of his arms and forced myself back to Robert's body. Bending down, I searched for the gold watch he'd worn so proudly. *They don't make watches like this any longer*, he'd bragged to his business acquaintances. Then he'd looked over at me and winked, as though to say they don't make women like me, either.

Not unless you have a few million to spare for the drugs that can remake genetics and regenerate life.

He clutched the watch in his hand, exactly like they'd found it on my dead body when they pulled me from the water. I tore it free of his grasp and returned to Kade's side. Gold glinted in the starlight as I tossed the watch over the railing. It sank into the water with a gentle plop to gleam faintly in the darkness.

"Let's go home."

"They'll never accept me in Upper City, even though my bank account rivals our deceased Governor's."

The Upper aristocrats had barely claimed me because my great-grandmother had a cousin who'd made his living in Cheapside. If they'd found out about my illness, they would have reviled me no matter how rich and powerful my husband. "I don't care."

"As long as you don't mind living in Cheapside, we'll give away shots to anybody who wants them."

A faint throb outlined the cracks in my skull and the web of knitted fractures across my cheekbones. Turning to Kade, I smiled. "As long as you don't mind a porcelain doll with a broken face."

He took my bloody hand in his. "I love my broken Angel."

Joely Sue Burkhart
Dare to look beneath the mask

Joely always has her nose buried in a book, especially one with mythology, fairy tales, and romance. She, her husband, and their three monsters live in Missouri. By day, she's a computer programmer with a Masters of Science degree in Mathematics. When night falls, she bespells the monsters so she can write. Visit her website, <http://JoelySueBurkhart.com>, for blog updates, upcoming releases, and free reads.

GOLDEN, August 29, 2011, historical erotica (BDSM) from Carina Press

LADY DOCTOR WYRE, A Jane Austen Space Opera, March 29, 2011, SF erotic romance (BDSM) from Samhain Publishing

The Connaghers, erotic contemporary romance (BDSM) from Samhain Publishing

DEAR SIR, I'M YOURS, June 2009

HURT ME SO GOOD, October 2010

YOURS TO TAKE, May 2012

MINE TO BREAK, tbd

The Maya Bloodgates, paranormal romance from Carina Press

THE BLOODGATE GUARDIAN, June 14, 2010

THE BLOODGATE WARRIOR, tbd

Blood & Shadows, erotic romantic fantasy (BDSM), coming January 2012
(formerly published by Drollerie Press)

THE ROSE OF SHANHASSON

THE ROAD TO SHANHASSON

RETURN TO SHANHASSON

SURVIVE MY FIRE

THE FIRE WITHIN

Mythomorphoses, post-apocalyptic science fiction romance, coming 2012
(formerly published by Drollerie Press)

BEAUTIFUL DEATH