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*A Flight of Golden Wings*

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London W1T 6DW  
*allisonandbusby.com*

First published in 2007.  
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2016.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-1808-5

Typeset in 10.55/15.55 pt Sabon by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced  
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# *Chapter One*

September 1938

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was the kind of day Ruth Aspinall's brother had loved. The pain of loss gripped her as it always did when she thought about Robert. He'd had such a zest for life, not knowing the meaning of caution or fear in his search for any new experience, the more dangerous the better. Six months ago his racing car had overturned and he had been killed instantly.

Ruth sighed. What a waste of a young life, and how she missed her big brother. Her parents were inconsolable at losing their adored son – the son who should have taken over as head of the Aspinall family law firm when they'd gone. Now they only had a daughter left. Oh, Ruth knew she had always come second in their affections, but she didn't mind. They loved her in their own way, and she them, but Robert had been their pride and joy.

The grief pervading their home had been too much for Ruth. Even with twenty rooms in the house she hadn't been

able to escape it, so she had driven to Yorkshire. Here, in the tranquillity of the Dales, she had finally been able to allow her own grief to surface, and after six days she had found a measure of comfort.

A movement in the air caught Ruth's attention and she shaded her eyes. There was a large bird soaring above her. Some bird of prey, she guessed, but didn't know what it was. It was so beautiful though. She watched in fascination as it dived and swooped, revelling in the freedom. Then it became motionless, hovering on the wind.

Her brother had learnt to fly, and she smiled, remembering his excitement. 'Was that how you felt, Robert?' she called. 'Did you love the freedom as much as that bird does?' She could almost hear her brother's voice telling her how wonderful it was, and urging her to try it.

She continued to watch as the bird climbed and disappeared from sight, wishing she could be up there with it. The longing almost made her cry out as she turned and ran to her car. She would learn to fly.

The drive back to London took three days. She had taken it slowly for a reason: Ruth was not in the habit of making hasty decisions, and she wanted time to be sure this was what she really wanted. Her emotions had been at a very high pitch and she wanted to be sure that learning to fly wasn't just a reaction to losing her brother – a desire to emulate him in some way. That wouldn't be right; her character was more cautious, and she had often tried to instil that trait into Robert as he had set out on one dangerous adventure after another. But he had only laughed at her in his teasing way.

By the time Ruth reached London there was not the slightest doubt in her mind. It was now a burning ambition, and there was only one person to see. Simon Trent was a friend of the family and had been her brother's instructor. He was highly regarded as a pilot. She would see him before returning to her home in Virginia Water.

It was another beautiful day as Ruth drove through the gates of Heston Airfield and stopped outside the office of the flying school. She got out of her car and gazed around in surprise. The place was alive with activity. She had often come here with her brother, but it had never been this busy. A loud shout caught her attention and she couldn't help smiling. A young man had just tumbled out of a plane, waving his arms around excitedly. He had obviously just flown solo for the first time. Ruth felt the buzz and excitement around the place and her smile broadened. Oh yes, she was going to do this.

'Hello, Ruth,' a quiet voice behind her said.

She spun around, still smiling. 'Simon! I wasn't sure if I'd be able to see you. It's so busy I thought you'd be in the air with a pupil.'

'I've got an hour before my next appointment.'

'Oh, good. I've come at the right time then.' Another plane was preparing for take-off and one more was waiting its turn. 'Why are you so busy?'

'The government is encouraging young men to learn to fly.' Simon sighed deeply. 'There's a war coming, Ruth, and we're going to need all the pilots we can get.'

She had heard the speculation, of course, but Simon sounded so sure. 'It might not happen . . .'

‘No, it might not, but we have to be prepared. What’s going on in Germany is worrying, to say the least.’ He studied Ruth intently, his bright blue eyes curious. ‘How are you, and what brings you here today?’

‘I’ve just come back from Yorkshire after a few days on my own. I needed to get away and try to come to terms with Robert’s death.’

‘And it looks as if you’ve made your peace with the tragedy.’

‘I’ve finally accepted it. The quiet and solitude helped enormously. Now I feel I can get on with my life. That’s what Robert would have wanted. He always said that every moment of life was precious and should be lived to the full. I do wonder if he had a premonition that he would die young.’ Ruth sighed. The sadness was still with her and always would be, but at last the pain was easing.

‘He had a reckless streak, Ruth.’ Simon’s expression was thoughtful as he studied her. ‘So what are you going to do now? You’re an intelligent girl and could get yourself a good job.’

‘I’ve broached the subject several times, but Father says it isn’t necessary. The Aspinall law firm is very successful and I don’t need to earn a living.’ Ruth grimaced. ‘I’ve always gone along with him for a quiet life, but Robert’s death has shaken me up. I’m twenty and tired of wasting my life. It’s time to make changes. The first thing I’m going to do is learn to fly.’

‘And what do your parents think of that?’ Simon asked gently, not showing any surprise.

‘I honestly don’t think they’ll mind. You’ve been flying

for many years without mishap, Simon, and my parents trusted you with Robert. I'm sure they'll do the same with me.' She smiled wryly at the man in front of her. He was around five foot ten and she only had to tilt her head slightly to meet his eyes – eyes that didn't miss a thing, assessing everything and everyone in his quiet way. But under the quietness there was an aura of strength. At twenty-eight he was a most attractive man, but she had always regarded him as one of the family; more like a cousin. However, if he did ever decide to marry, Ruth had no doubt that he would make a wonderful husband for some lucky girl.

'Robert turned out to be an excellent pilot and was a lot more careful in the air than on the ground.' Simon shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned. 'We had some almighty rows at first, but I eventually managed to instil some caution into him.'

'And my parents know that.' Ruth's expression saddened. 'This has been very distressing for them. When they had a son they were overjoyed and wanted another. They waited eight years before I came along. A daughter was not what they had hoped for, and to their disappointment they never had any more children. They've always loved me and I've never minded that Robert was their favourite . . . But to get back to flying.' Ruth gave a chuckle. 'They'll think I've gone crazy, but it wasn't flying that killed Robert. My parents respect and trust you, Simon, so I don't think they'll complain too much if they know you are to be my instructor.'

Simon lit a cigarette, smoking it in silence as he weighed up the situation. He was halfway through the cigarette and still hadn't spoken.

Ruth became anxious. Was he going to turn her down? She didn't want anyone else to teach her. 'Teach me to fly,' she pleaded, her golden brown eyes gleaming with excitement. 'I really want to do this.'

He blew smoke into the air and regarded her thoughtfully. Then he tossed the cigarette end down and ground it out with the toe of his shoe. 'Well, you're wearing slacks, so come with me.'

Excitement welled up in Ruth and she hurried after Simon as he made for a plane. She knew it was an Avro Cadet, the same as her brother had flown. She almost cried out with joy. He hadn't said no.

He hoisted her up and then climbed in himself, making sure her harness was securely fastened.

'That's tight,' she muttered, trying to control her nerves. She had thought they would just make a booking now. She hadn't expected him to dump her in a plane straight away, but she knew him well enough to guess what he was doing. He was going to see if she was really serious about this. Well, she would show him that she was!

Simon was busy taxiing the aircraft and merely ignored her remark, but she was sure she saw his mouth twitch in amusement. Under that quiet exterior there was a wicked sense of humour, and her insides clenched when she wondered what the hell she had let herself in for.

As they left the ground, Ruth gasped, and much to her shame, closed her eyes tight. Simon's deep chuckle made her open them wide. She was glad he was in the instructor's seat and couldn't see her face. 'Well, I've never been in a plane before! Robert wanted to take me up, but I refused.'



‘He was a good pilot, Ruth. In fact, he was one of the best pupils I’ve ever had.’

‘He was good at everything he did.’ The familiar pain of loss welled up in her. Robert had always been urging her to try flying, enthusiastically trying to convince her that it was a truly wonderful feeling to soar in the air as free as a bird.

Ruth’s mouth set in a determined line. She was going to be a good pilot as well.

Apprehension drained from her as she watched the ease with which Simon handled the plane. She began to look around her. What she saw took her breath away. There were a few small clouds, which looked like puffs of cotton wool, and the ground was laid out below them in a patchwork of many shades of green, with patches of gold from the ripe corn.

‘Oh, it’s beautiful!’ she whispered in awe.

‘Nothing better on a day like this,’ Simon agreed. ‘Now, let’s see if you’re really serious about learning to fly, shall we? And if you’ve got the stomach for it.’

The little plane banked, slipped sideways and then dropped, making her gasp. When she was sure they were going to hit the ground, Simon climbed again.

The next few minutes were incredible as Simon put the plane through a series of manoeuvres. My God, she thought, he’s doing part of his air show routine! She had watched him perform many times, wondering what it must feel like to be tossed about like that. Now she knew.

She experienced an overwhelming sense of exhilaration as they spun around in the air. If Simon was endeavouring to make her change her mind, then he hadn’t succeeded. In

fact he had done just the opposite. She tipped her head back and laughed with glee.

Much too soon for her they were landing. She would have to get back up there as soon as possible.

Simon taxied back to the office, jumped out and helped Ruth down. She was glad of the help as her legs were shaking rather, but she was determined not to let him see it. It was only excitement, not fear.

‘Nice show, Simon,’ another pilot called as he walked past with a pupil.

Simon just raised his hand in greeting.

Ruth stood with her hands on her hips waiting for Simon to turn his attention back to her. When he did she tilted her head to one side. ‘Were you trying to frighten me, Simon?’

‘Hmm. I don’t think I succeeded, did I?’

‘Ah, you guessed that, did you?’ she teased.

‘I knew it the moment you shouted at me to do that again.’ He was laughing and shaking his head.

Her eyes opened wide. ‘I never did!’

‘I assure you that’s exactly what you did.’ He was obviously amused, but his expression showed only respect.

‘I don’t remember shouting out.’ She’d known she had loved every minute of the flight, but was quite unaware that she had acted in such an unrestrained manner. It wasn’t like her at all. ‘I loved it. You’re going to have to teach me, Simon.’

He nodded and urged her towards the hut they used as an office. ‘The first thing we’ll have to do is curb all the excitement once you’re in the air. A good pilot is a safe pilot, one who remains focussed, calm and in control whatever the situation.’

‘I understand.’ She watched him flick through the appointment book, feeling more light-hearted than she’d done for some time. She was going to learn to fly. That was a start. The next thing would be to find some kind of a job. She’d had enough of wasting her life, and now she wanted to do something useful and fulfilling. Robert’s death had been a brutal wake-up call.

That evening Ruth watched her parents with affection as they read the papers after dinner. It was a lovely evening and the doors were wide open, allowing the soothing sound of birds and the perfume of roses to filter into the sitting room. They had been so pleased to see her and she had felt relieved to find them looking more composed than when she left. Terrible as the tragedy had been, it had happened, and nothing could bring Robert back. It was time they all got on with their lives, as her brother would have expected of them. Nothing was going to be the same again, and that fact had to be accepted.

Ruth gazed out at the garden, drinking in the beauty. It was only early September so there was still a profusion of colour. Her mother loved gardening and Ruth knew it had given her some solace as she’d tried to cope with the loss of her much-loved son. Her thoughts drifted back to her flight with Simon and a smile touched her mouth. She had her first lesson in two days’ time and couldn’t wait. Simon had drilled into her just how much work it was going to be to gain her private pilot licence. He had insisted that she would have to learn how to maintain the aircraft – which would entail getting her hands dirty, he told her dryly. Navigation

was another requisite. It was no good messing about in the air if you didn't know where you were going.

Ruth's chuckle at the memory of Simon's lecture had her parents glancing up.

'What's amusing you, my dear?' her father asked, a smile lighting up his tired face.

'I called in to see Simon on my way home—'

'Oh, how is he? Why didn't you bring him home?' Her mother's affection for Simon showed. 'We haven't seen him for weeks.'

'He was busy with pupils. The airfield was a hive of activity, but I managed to catch him when he had an hour to spare. He said the government was encouraging men to learn to fly.'

Her father nodded, his eyes troubled once again. 'The feeling is that there could be a war and we had better be prepared. Pilots will be needed. Poor devils, these young men don't know what they might be letting themselves in for.'

'Do you really think we'll go to war with Germany again, Father? Surely Hitler won't take the risk?'

'Who knows?' Her father shrugged. 'He's a fanatic, and fanatics are notoriously unpredictable.'

A deep sigh came from her mother. 'If it does come I hope Simon keeps out of it.'

'He won't be able to, my dear, and I doubt he would want to.' George Aspinall laid aside his newspaper and turned to his daughter. 'Let's hope it's all talk, shall we?'

Ruth was relieved the subject had been closed. Now was the time to talk seriously to them about her future. 'I'm

sure you're right, Father. It's the immediate future I've been thinking about. I want to find a job.'

'You can help me with my charity work,' her mother suggested. 'We're always grateful for willing hands.'

'Thank you, Mother, but I want to earn my own living. I've relied on you and Father for far too long.'

'You know you don't have to worry about that, Ruth.'

'But I do. Couldn't you find me something to do in your offices? I don't care what it is.' Ruth's eyes gleamed as she teased, 'Don't you need a tea girl, or a filing clerk?'

A look of horror crossed her father's face. 'I'm not having my daughter running around at everyone's beck and call! Why don't you go back to university and study law?'

Ruth grimaced and stifled a sigh of exasperation. This subject had come up before, but quite honestly she had no interest in law, as she'd quickly discovered during her time at university. 'I don't want to go back to school. I'll ask Simon if I can work at the flying school while he's teaching me to fly.'

There was a stunned silence as her parents studied their daughter in horror.

'Pardon?' her father growled. 'Did I hear you correctly?'

Ruth cursed herself for dropping that news so carelessly. It wasn't what she had planned at all, but she had spoken without thinking. 'I've asked Simon to teach me to fly and he's agreed.' She leant forward, her expression pleading for understanding. 'I'm wasting my life, and I just can't go on like this.'

'But what use will flying be to you, darling?' Alice Aspinall looked thoroughly confused.

‘I don’t know, but it’s something I really want to do.’

Her father cleared his throat, the first one to recover.

‘You say Simon’s going to be your instructor?’

She nodded. ‘I start in two days’ time.’

George looked steadily at his wife. ‘Simon’s a good pilot, my dear – one of the best. Ruth won’t come to any harm with him. We ought to give her our blessing in this endeavour.’

‘Of course, you’re right, my dear.’ Alice straightened her shoulders. ‘We always gave Robert full rein to follow his dreams, and we shouldn’t stop our daughter doing the same.’

Ruth leapt to her feet with joy, rushing over to hug them both. She had always known they were kind, loving people, but this showed what immense, unselfish courage they had.

‘Oh, thank you!’ she said gratefully. ‘I promise I’ll be careful. I’ll be the safest pilot there is in the air.’