

When We Have Wings

CLAIRE CORBETT



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FOR SAM AND SOPHIE WITH ALL MY LOVE

ALIS VOLABITIS PROPRIIS

YOU WILL FLY WITH YOUR OWN WINGS



When We Have Wings

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PART

1





John Wilkins (one of the founders of the Royal Society and Lord Bishop of Chester) outlined the four ways that a man might fly:

- 1) with the help of angels;
- 2) with the help of fowls;
- 3) with wings fastened to his body; and
- 4) in a 'flying chariot', meaning presumably a device or vehicle powered by something other than human muscular effort.

Wilkins judged the first three rather improbable, and in this he was largely correct. Birds and angels are strangely unwilling to assist humans in flying, whilst attempts to fasten wings to humans are notoriously dangerous.

—PAT SHIPMAN, *Taking Wing: Archaeopteryx and the evolution of bird flight*

Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks?
Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom? . . . Doth the eagle mount
up at thy command?

—JOB xxxix



1

FLIGHT

Peri circles above the bay, head down, hunting, wind shrilling in her feathers.

‘Luisa! . . . *Luisa!*’

Don’t call out again. Cold acid drips into her stomach, eating at her. Hugo twists his head around, restless, as if feeling her fear swelling like a wave way out to sea, gathering power, rolling in. Peri wraps an arm around him, though he’s already held tight to her chest in his baby sling.

Salt Grass Bay will be deserted, Luisa had said. Meet me there. Please. Tell no-one.

There are others, Luisa had said.

Luisa had sounded worried and angry and so, because Luisa is her friend, her sister, who in the months since they met has told Peri true and important things about their lives, she will meet Luisa at Salt Grass Bay. But Luisa’s call, her insistence on secrecy, makes Peri uneasy.

Peri had stepped out that morning carrying Hugo as she did every morning, lying to Hugo’s mother and father though she didn’t say a word. No reason to think she wasn’t taking Hugo to the park. She barely speaks to them, to either of them, anymore.

One more circuit of the bay. Lower. It’s not deserted. Below Peri a big grey shape, beached seal, rolls back and forth in the low waves.



Not a seal.

Peri lands heavily, staggering onto the sand. Blood drains from her face, her head, she's blacking out, gently, rolling to her side, don't crush Hugo. An eye blink later she's up again, walking towards what she tells herself is a pile of kelp, what she tries to see as a drowned log, but what she knows is her worst fear made real in the morning light: surf breaking against a woman's body, her wings so sodden the slack-tide waves can't push her further up the sand or drag her down into the sea. She knows those soft grey wings. Luisa.

She falls to her knees by Luisa's head, arching her own wings up and away from the water. Can't get her feathers wet. No time to dry them, not now.

Blood has leaked from Luisa's mouth. Peri tastes bile. Leaning over, she retches past Hugo into the sea.

What happened? Luisa fell—no, she was *wrenched*—from the sky. She's a good flier, this was no accident. Look at her! My sister, older, street-smart Luisa, broken in the surf of Salt Grass Bay. Her skin so, so white, her hair soaking, heavy as seaweed.

Peri kneels there in the cold sea, dizzy and sick, one arm still around Hugo, her other hand touching Luisa's cheek, Luisa's skin exactly as cold as the water of the bay. Peri rinses her mouth, spitting out salt and vomit.

Luisa's chalky skin is becoming mottled blue and red. *How long since you died? Why? Why? Who would do this? What did she want to tell me? Is that why she's dead?*

Peri strokes Luisa's hair back from her cheek, closes her friend's eyes. A moment. She struggles to her feet. The sun is growing stronger as it rises. In an hour or two the beach will be a blast furnace: burning sand, glass water.

The wave of fear that was building out to sea is rushing in now, rearing high above her, breaking cold and heavy, smashing the breath right out of her, holding her under.

If Luisa knows something—*knew* something—that got her killed, then what about me? Oh Luisa, what have you dragged me into? They

knew you were coming here so they must know *I* was coming here. If they think I know whatever it is that you found out, I'm dead too. I *don't* know, but that won't help. Bad enough I've seen you here.

Peri scans the horizon, but beach and sky are empty. Fly away, *now*. Fly away home. Where is that, now? Where will I be safe? She looks down at Luisa. She isn't wearing her baby sling. Not surprising. Whoever Luisa was frightened of knew about her implant; they'd have made sure baby Amy wasn't with Luisa when she fell.

Push Luisa out to sea, cover her with sand, give her some sort of burial, don't abandon her here, just another piece of trash tangled in seaweed, like the dying jellyfish clotted along the tideline. It's impossible. She's too heavy and there's no time. And she must be found, not hidden.

Peri's throat burns from the bile she's vomited, closing up so it's hard to swallow. She starts her run along the sand, gulping air. It takes all her strength to run fast enough to get off the ground. No time to climb the cliff to launch from a higher point. Someone could be waiting, if they knew Luisa was meeting me here. *Tell no-one*. I didn't understand why that was so important. *There are others*. What does that mean?

Peri's flying now, Luisa's body falling away from her, shrinking into the sea.

I'm sorry. Luisa. My only friend, my only sister. I don't even dare tell anyone you're here. You got away from those fanatics who kept you, your childhood like a prison sentence in that compound; you escaped to the City, like me. Now look at you.

Luisa would not bother about Peri's body for a minute if it put her own life in danger. What *would* Luisa do? Peri flies higher, banks, turning for home. Not home. Peter's house is not home; it never was. She'll run. No, she'll *fly*.

Where can I go? Peri's thoughts fly, faster than her wings, racing so fast as she tries to work out what to do next that she almost misses the cliff-top landing platform at the Chesshyre house, stumbles against the rock wall, beating wings to recover herself, her feathers rattling like something dying, dry leaves in an autumn wind. Gasping for breath,

trying to soothe Hugo. Calm. Breathe. Can't fly safely like this. Can't fly at all. She looks behind her: dark spots, other fliers, one or two high overhead, a few in the distance. Are they coming closer? Heart pounding from flight and fear.

A drumming of paws inside the house. A golden missile hurtles to the door. *Frisk*. He rears up and scratches at the doorframe.

Peri slides open the door, listens. The stream in the living room runs loud, the only sound beside Frisk's breathing and Hugo's snuffling. The house is still, the quiet so familiar to Peri. Peter and Avis are not there; knowing them, they could return in a few minutes, a few hours, a few days.

She and Hugo are not safe here. She could have been followed. Should she wait for Peter and Avis to come back? No. Even with them she's still not safe because she can tell them nothing. They don't know about Luisa, they'll be angry with her for lying to them. And anyway, how can they protect her when she has no idea who's killed Luisa or why? Will they even want to protect her? No, they'd dismiss her instantly and she'd be vulnerable and alone. They could betray her by accident if she doesn't tell them what has happened. They might betray her on purpose if she does.

Peri changes Hugo, puts him down in his cot. She hesitates, looking down at him. That breadth across his temples, so beautiful. She leans down, kisses his cheek. He breathes into her mouth, that pure baby breath smelling only of water. Peri straightens. Avis wouldn't hesitate to betray her. She's about to send her own child away, after all, for his safety—so often bad things are done to us for our own good, aren't they, Hugo?—so she doesn't need Peri anymore. And these rich fliers stick together. No-one to turn to. No-one can help.

Peri runs to her room, Frisk galloping with her, tripping her. She kicks him aside. *Get out of the way*. She has to think clearly. What does she need?

Undaunted, Frisk bounds onto her bed while she ransacks the room. Her waistband, the only pack she can carry, has to hold her AquaPad, the water-cloth she carries when she flies, energy strips, a

flashlight smaller than her finger. Frisk snatches a pillow up in his jaws, growls, worries at it like it's a rabbit. Peri almost smiles.

With essentials packed, Peri pulls on her skims. These near-weightless flying clothes are indispensable for a long flight; they'll keep her warm and cut drag. The material fluoresces yellow, good for a beginner, outlining her against the sky for her own safety. She really needs camouflage now, but she has no choice. Ruinously expensive, these skims are the only set she has.

Hugo's fussing. She never leaves him alone. Frisk disappears into the nursery; Hugo falls silent.

Peri looks around the room, twisting the thin silver ring she always wears. This room is smaller than Avis's walkin wardrobe but it has double doors opening onto the green courtyard where she used to play with Hugo. The room is, by far, the most beautiful space she's ever lived in, and though it's not *home*—has there ever been such a place?—the loss of it will hurt, like shedding a layer of her own skin. Its narrow length is lit up by paintings and photographs Peter's grown bored with, her bedroom just a storeroom for things he's put aside. She glances up at the photograph of blue dye patterning white beach and green sea by one of Peter's favourite artists, a flier called Andy Silver. No taking *that* with her.

In the central well of the house, Peri looks up to the high gallery where Peter and Avis's rooms are, rooms forbidden to her, the nanny who lives downstairs with Hugo. No stairs, no way up there unless you can fly, those rooms are forbidden to Hugo too. He'll never see them, not now they've given up on him. There must be something they can do for him, all their money and smarts, but no, they just froze as soon as they saw Hugo's test results. I don't understand; I'm the one with no money, no education, I'm not even his mother and I'll fight for him harder than they will.

Avis was the first to recover, the first to decide that the sooner they did something, the happier he'd be. Other families had done the same thing, she said. It's not safe for him here, Avis yelled at Peter. Peri had lain in bed, blood thudding in her ears, as she listened to Avis screaming

at Peter in the kitchen the evening after the test results came through. Of course Peri hadn't seen the report. Though she looked after Hugo every waking minute she had no right to know. She tried not to breathe as she strained every nerve to hear. What was wrong with him?

Don't you care? yelled Avis. Would you just look at that drop into the fucking *void* outside the front door? Wake up, Peter! *You* designed this house, it's built *only* for fliers, there's a hundred ways for your son to break his neck. There's nowhere for him to play, nowhere for him to explore, he'll be *walking* in a few weeks, Peter. He'll have to be guarded every second. For years. And we'll have to trust his safety, every waking moment, to that . . . to that *bloody girl*. We can't do it. He needs to be with a non-flier family. Just for a few years, Peter. Just till we can fix him. Till we can make sure he'll be *safe*.

Peri leaps into the air now, powering herself up a few wingbeats to reach the landing, and runs to Avis and Peter's vast sunlit bathroom. She's not supposed to have seen this room. Peri shivers; her own body betrays her, no matter how much she tells herself not to think of the things Peter has done. There's no point thinking about those things ever again, not now she has her wings. Well, Peter certainly never worried about *her* safety. He'd risked her life, many times.

Maybe Hugo will be safe if you send him away, Avis. But he won't be yours anymore. Is he yours, even now, if you can think of doing this? She had wanted to run into the kitchen, to plead *Listen to me*. I know about this. You won't get back the same child you sent away.

But *I'm* here, Hugo. If your mother sends you away, I'll go to Little Angels, maybe they'll send me to the new family, I could still look after you.

The bathroom is larger than Peri remembered, the shower alone the size of her bedroom. There's no bath; instead there's a sunken pool, ringed with stone benches under the water. Moss, green as seaweed, grows springy around the pool; it's soft and tough, soaking up water and steam and all that's spilt: soap, safety dust, perfume, sprays and lotions. It glows the brightest colour in that pale room, except for the bottles of Avis's wing dusts and glitter, which crowd around the sinks in every

shade of blue, green and rose. Stalling, afraid of what she has to do, Peri bends over to read the labels on the bottles. The dusts shine back at her, each with its exotic name.

Peri squats on her heels. What she needs has to be here. Opening the cabinet underneath the sinks, she's relieved to find the medications lined up: pressure packs of Aileronac, blue squares of Opteryxin, stacks and stacks of the purple Zefiryn gels. Peri shakes her head. Zefiryn's so expensive; there's enough stored here to pay her wages for several years. Is Avis stockpiling the stuff? Grabbing enough for a few months, Peri hunts until she finds bottles of anaesthetic spray and new skin.

Breathing hard, Peri stands up, slipping the precious drugs into her waistband. She folds down the top of her shorts, rolling the flesh of her buttock between her fingers. There, that's it, that splinter smaller than a grain of rice driven deep beneath the skin. An arrow of rage pierces her.

They put a tracking device in me and *I didn't even know*. How stupid I was. No idea till Luisa warned me. Her family did the same thing to her. Peter and especially Avis didn't trust me. No way to pretend any different—I'm less than a dog to them. I'm *branded*. *Chipped*. And according to Luisa the device does more than just track; if I fly too far or anytime Peter or Avis feel like it, they can pluck me out of the sky like I've been shot. Poor Luisa. Should've heeded your own warning. Obviously you weren't trying to run away, not yet, or you would've done what I'm about to do. *Bastards*.

Ah, it's good, anger, stops me freezing in fear. How dare they do what they did to me? How *can* they send Hugo away? *Bastards*.

Before she realises what she's doing, Peri swings around, a wing extended, sweeping Avis's dusts to the floor. Bottles shatter, brilliant colours spray, puddle, drip. Geranium Lake and Cinnabar Green melt into Sky Blue Deep and Cobalt Violet, the moss floor glinting with glitter and glass. Peri smiles, imagining Avis's fury. One mess I won't clean up.

Luisa had told Peri where the Flight Check device was likely to be hidden and sure enough, when she got back to her room that day she'd felt around and there it was, the treacherous little thing, buried in

her. How they must have laughed, Peter and Avis, putting that in me without me knowing. Whatever she does now serves them right.

When had it been implanted? They'd had a few chances. When she'd had the first operation for her wings? Or earlier?

A soft thud from the living room below. Peri freezes, listens for the rustle of feathers. An intruder? Has someone followed her? Oh god, if they find me up here, what will they do? Cut off my wings, throw me into the sea. Luisa's dark hair, floating like weed. Peter couldn't be back yet, could he? Fliers so hard to keep track of, then they're on you in a rush of wings.

Peri runs to the landing. Frisk looks up at her from the pile of cushions he's knocked over.

'Go on, Frisk, you great stupid thing.'

Peri jumps down to the living room, darts into Peter's workroom overlooking the ocean. One more thing. She scatters slicks across the huge table, flings open drawers and spills their contents. A flash of red, buried in a bottom drawer. She pulls it out, turns the solid rose, her gift, in her hands. *You bastard*. Of course you've hidden it. Luisa had almost laughed at her, she'd almost cried for her, when Peri had shown it to her. *Ah, no, no, no*, she'd said. This is the oldest story, my dear. Don't you know yet what he is, what he has done?

Peri finds what she's looking for, almost slicing her finger off as she grabs it, the blade Peter uses for cutting drafting slicks to size. Her hand shakes. She pulls down her shorts and twists around, spraying her skin with the anaesthetic. A hard spot to reach; she's going to carve herself up more than she needs to. Skin, fat, muscle part like rotten silk. A gasp escapes her as the pain burns. The spray has limited strength but makes the pain seem far away.

Hugo wails, the thin sound tugging at her.

Hot blood runs down Peri's leg. She pokes around in her flesh, like digging for a deep splinter. There. She levers the sliver out, flicks it away. Pastes over the cut with antiseptic new skin.

She flings the dripping knife onto the table, feeling bleak satisfaction when her blood splashes over the soaring design for Peter's newest

tower and runs from her leg onto the polished floor. How he'll hate this defilement of his workspace. Let him find the mess in the morning. Least of his worries by then.

For a moment her eyes wander over the drawings, posters and displays on the walls of the workroom as if she's never seen them before. That blue ice cliff on the wall to her left, the church; how impressed she'd been, when she first came to the house, to discover that Peter had designed that. The church had been her homing beacon from RaRA-land, the only landmark she'd known to look for when she first came to the City.

Her first day in the City. She'd had a temporary permit—thank you, Mama'lena—and a determination never to leave, never to be pushed back out into the wilds. Peri rubs the taut skin over her left upper bicep. There, under her skin, is another implant, one she checks compulsively, ten, twenty times a day. Her City permanent residency. Wherever she goes she could be scanned and the permit would confirm she's legal in the City. When she got that, she'd been euphoric for weeks. Can't deport me now.

Hugo's crying. Hurt flares deep in her muscle as Peri runs to the nursery.

He's hungry, he's past sucking on his hands, he's red-faced, bawling. She picks him up, feels his heart, the little life beating against her, calming as she holds him chest to chest, settles him to nurse. He sucks at her breast, staring up into her eyes. Fly, fly, fly. I have to leave you but how can I? *No matter how much Avis hates me, no matter how much Peter ignores me now, I've never thought of leaving you, never.*

She stares at Hugo's beautiful things, the exquisite model earth dangling over his cot. You're going to lose all this too, Hugo.

Can't leave you here alone. Especially not now. Someone might come looking for me, find you instead. One-handed, her other supporting Hugo, she fishes out her slick. Ring Peter, beg him to come home right away.

No answer. *Leave a message.* She hesitates.

Last time she'd left a message it'd been three days.

Call terminated.

She looks at the blank screen. Oh god, didn't even think of it. Drops it to the floor. Have to leave it behind. It could be used to track her. Nothing easier.

Luisa's body, rolling in the low waves.

Frisk pads into the nursery, leaps onto the bench next to Peri, shoves his head under her hand. She strokes his nose, willing Hugo to finish nursing. Hurry, Hugo. *Please*. She looks at the wall clock; every second counts. She looks into Frisk's amber eyes. *I'll miss you.*

Hugo pulls away, smiles. 'Pah,' he says, his eyes widening at the little explosive sounds he makes. 'Pah-pah-pah.' *I'll miss you too.* No. I can't leave you here alone, alone in the house and alone in the world when they farm you out to another family. The only solution is that I stay with you and *I can't*.

I can't do this.

Her head fills up with static. The world around her judders to a halt—no, *she's* the one frozen, while the unthinkable stares back at her, unblinking, from the abyss.

I have to take you with me. Keep you safe. Keep you loved. No-one else will do it.

The world spins again, fast, faster, she's moving like the wind, if she stops everything will stop, she won't have the courage to save even herself, let alone Hugo, she'll freeze, sit here. A sitting duck.

She puts Hugo down on his floor mat, rummages through the nursery. A few more things to pack: absorbent squares for Hugo, a hundred no thicker than her palm; warm clothes for him—his cloud-suit and . . . what else?

What else do you need, little man?

You need me.

That's all, really.

I am everything you need.

She picks up Hugo, wipes his cheeks and puts him in the sling. Where can we go? Nowhere safe in the City. She rubs her upper arm,

feels for the implant. That micro-seal of acceptance is priceless, many spent their whole lives seeking it.

But now, for Hugo's sake—well, she might as well dig it out too and throw it on the floor, token of her exile, but she does not.

This is it. After this, no return, no forgiveness. The moment I throw away every single thing I've ever wanted, ever struggled for, this life, the City.

Peri locks Frisk in the house, where he whines and scratches in a seeming agony of grief and apprehension. She walks to the edge of the cliff outside the front door.

'Sorry, little man.' She strokes Hugo's cheek and then, with one step over the edge, Peri lets herself fall.

