

# WINGS by Axel Forrester

# 1919

Lillie

## Chapter One

Horta, Island of Faial, The Azores

Strong gusts of wind rattled the window, an invisible force, a demon throwing his weight around. I got out of bed and laid my fingers on the glass, feeling the pulse of it. Looking down, I saw a figure emerging from the morning mists. He was at the front gate, panting heavily, hands on his knees, his chest expanding and shrinking as he took in great gulps of air. I raised the sash and stuck my head out, gazing down at him. *Marco*. He called up to me, cupping his mouth against the wind.

“Venha rápido! Há um monstro na baía! Com grandes asas!”

Some villagers were lumbering up the hill behind him, their voices sharpened with fear. They had seen it too, this thing in the bay. No one could agree on what it was.

Marta came to the front door.

“Pare de gritar, Marco! It’s early. Stop yelling!”

My older brother, Frank, was watching from his open window, chin resting on folded arms as he surveyed the scene. Father came out and spoke to Marco. I could see him on the flagstones.

“Slow down. What’s the matter? Tell me. What did you see?”

“–o passaro...grande...grande!” Marco cried; his nut-brown arms spread wide.

“–a big bird...well, all right...there are lots of big birds on the bay. Was it a pelican?”

Marco shook his head violently.

“No! Grande! e´ como o onibus!”

“As big as a bus?”

Marco shook his head and put up three fingers.

“–tres onibus!”

“Three buses? Where did you see it?”

“O Porto! Come, Mr. Daniels!” He was pulling hard on father’s arm, desperate for him to follow.

“All right. Just let me get my coat.”

At these words, my brother disappeared from the window and I knew he was going to go with father. I quickly pulled on some clothes, knowing Frank was doing the same, and ran down the stairs after him. My hair was loose, uncombed and tangled. If Mother saw me, she’d never let me go, but I got out the door before she did. I wasn’t going to miss this.

When we joined our father at the front door, the crowd started up their chatter again, like the noisy Cagarro birds that gathered at the cliffs. Father was wearing his black coat and Derby hat. He nodded to Frank and I, giving us his silent permission to come, then he followed Marco, walking down the hill toward the port. We followed him, and behind us were the villagers, trailing like the wake of a boat.

My father, Arnold Daniels, was the U.S. Consulate of the Azores, and wherever he went, villagers in Horta usually came along, just to see what he might do. The wind was getting stronger, the pressure rising. Some of the old men took their hats off to prevent them from blowing away. Everyone was squawking, trying to talk over the wind. *What was this*

*thing in the bay? A monster? A shipwreck? A giant Squid? The carcass of a whale? Or some new creature the world has never seen?* Whatever it was, everyone wanted to see it for themselves.

When we came to the street leading to the bay, everyone crowded together like cattle when they were being loaded on a ship. We turned the corner, and everyone stopped talking at once. There in the bay, and bobbing up and down on the water was the great beast. It was just as Marco had said. Three buses long. Everyone held very still. No one had ever seen such a thing. Then they turned their heads towards my father, like sunflowers to the sun, to see what he made of it.

“It’s one of the seaplanes!” he cried, as he clapped Marco on the back. “Well spotted! I read about this in the newspaper. It’s one of the airplanes making the first transatlantic flight. Look at the size of it!” He raised both arms. I’d never seen him so excited. “All the way from Newfoundland! It’s come across the Atlantic Ocean!”

“What’s it doing here?” Frank shouted; his face clouded in confusion.

“It’s part of a convoy. Wasn’t supposed to land here,” father yelled back, “but it’s our good fortune that it did. Come on, let’s have a closer look!”

Frank’s eyes were fixed on that plane as if nothing could tear them away. This was a much bigger version of those bi-planes in father’s *Flight* magazines. Father passed them on to Frank who collected them, lovingly, carefully, on his bookshelf. He never let me touch them, but he didn’t know that I crept into his room at night while he was asleep and took them, one at a time, to read on my own. I spent many a happy gazing at airplanes by moonlight and copying the schematics in my sketchbook. In my imagination I was flying over the island, seeing it from the air, and then climbing higher, to see the whole world.

The voices of the villagers mingled as we approached the pier in a tight group, straining to understand what it was we were seeing. It started to rain, but that didn’t stop us

from coming closer. This thing that could understandably be mistaken for a creature, was as long as a blue whale. Men crawled all over it, attending to the rigging, flaps, and pulleys. Though it was large, it seemed delicate, like a giant butterfly moving up and down on the swells of the bay, just balancing on the top of the water.

The seaplane began to move. A motor was buzzing in the wind, propelling it forward to the cruiser docked at the pier, the *USS Columbia*. When it was tethered to the colossal metal ship, the crew of the seaplane began a long climb up the side ladder to the top. The top of the ship was as high as a church spire. The wind tore at their clothing as they slowly made their way above the waves. The men on the ship were jammed around the rails, watching the steady progress of the flight crew. Once they reached the deck everyone on board waved their hats, whooping and hollering, and those of us on the pier joined in.

There was the sound of more motors. I turned my head to see three boats that dashed across the bay toward the *Columbia*. One had a small brass band on deck, serenading the pilots of the plane with a lively beat and brass horns. The number of villagers on the dock grew and soon the cheering of the large crowd could be heard even over the wind.

“I must go back home and get my camera. This is a historic day!” my father cried. “Frank, you come with me and carry the tripod. Lillie, you stay here and keep an eye on the seaplane.”

There was no argument from me. I wanted to keep looking at this seaplane. My eyes never left it, as if it might vanish like a dream if I looked away. It pulled at the line like an anxious dog. I wished I could draw it, but I’d left my pencils and sketchbook at home. I remembered drawings I’d been working on lately, of some bird bones. My eyes tracked the wings of the plane. They looked similar to the bones of birds, though the scale was much bigger. This plane had long graceful bones of wood and a canvas skin. I held out my own hand, level with the seaplane, and flexed, watching the skin stretch over my knuckles as I

made a fist. I might be just a girl of twelve, a head shorter than Frank, and two years younger, but there was strength in me too. Even small birds could be very strong. The starlings, robins and grey wagtails we had here flew all the way from Europe, across the Atlantic, to our tiny island.

This flying machine had flown across the Atlantic Ocean like a migrating bird and landed on this tiny speck of an island made from volcanoes. Faial was small, but father always said the town of Horta was special. It was *international*, because here we had connections to the larger world. People spoke Portuguese, English, German and Italian. The port had ships coming in from all over the world, selling and trading. We had international newspapers, telegraphy, and radio. Father said someday people would fly here and now it's happened!

When father finally came back with Frank and the camera, the rain had stopped and the sun was emerging from the clouds. They set the tripod up next to the seaplane at the dock and took pictures from every possible angle. It took ages. Everyone else on the dock got bored and left, not all that interested in this 'historic moment' for the Azores.

After he finally finished taking photographs of the seaplane, father packed up his camera and we started walking home. Frank, carrying the tripod was quiet. He was thinking hard about all of this, I could tell. I don't know quite what came over me, but suddenly I blurted out what I knew was the truth about my brother.

"He wants to be a pilot!" I cried, both proud and amazed. A laugh came out of me. "Like those men in the seaplane!"

My father stopped walking and so did we. Frank's glare at me was murderous. And that's how I knew I was right. He wanted this badly. It was his *dream*.

“Is this true, Frank?” Father asked. Frank rubbed his left palm on his trousers, lowered his eyes and nodded. Father resumed walking and we followed. “It’s a dangerous profession, son. Many brave men have died doing this.”

Frank stepped ahead of our father and turned around, blocking his path.

“It’ll be less dangerous in a few years. Improvements are being made all the time.”

Father was quiet for a few moments before he spoke again.

“You’ve been reading the magazines.”

“It’s only a matter of time. We’ve seen it! Today! The first transatlantic flight, Dad! The future has arrived. This is just the beginning of airplanes. They will change everything and I’m going to be a part of that.”

“Calm down, Frank. Of course, it’s exciting, but...there’s more to talk about. For now, don’t mention this to your mother. We’ll discuss it... later... when you’re older.”

“I want to be a pilot too!” As soon as I said it, I knew it was true. But Frank wasn’t having it.

“You’re just saying that ‘cause I said it!” he yelled. His fists were clenched and the cord in his neck was standing out in anger, his hair falling down over his eyes.

“I am not!” I yelled back. Frank and I fought like wild animals, but we were close too. Closer to each other than we were to our parents. Frank was as much a part of me as my own shadow.

Father spun Frank around and raised a finger.

“Stop this arguing at once!” he barked, glancing around furtively. “This is not the time or place to have this discussion!”

“But Dad, I could really do it! You know I could. Lillie can’t, but I could!”

“I can do anything you can do!” I shouted, a bit too shrilly.

“No, Lil, you can’t!” Frank snarled at me. “Do you see any women pilots? Anywhere? I know you steal my magazines. Did you see any women pilots in them? Huh?”

“Enough!” Father shouted. He took a deep breath and started walking. Frank adjusted the tripod on his shoulder and we put our heads down, following.

“Damn it, Lillie!” Frank whispered to me. “Why’d you have to open your big mouth? Now you’ve ruined everything. I was going to tell Dad, in my own time. But now...”

The pain of my mistake pulsed in my chest. I knew he was right. I lacked self-control at times.

“I didn’t know he’d take it like this. I thought he’d be pleased that we were interested in the future.”

“Shut up. Just shut up. Don’t talk to me.”

This hurt worse than anything. Frank being mad at me. Not talking to me. I was dizzy with fear that I’d ruined his plans, his dreams, and maybe even the trust he had in me.

Soon the noise of the crowded market swirled around us. There were donkeys braying, men shouting, carts and wagons being loaded and unloaded. I could smell oranges and lemons, tea and spices. Men were bent over with sacks of flour, rice, and beans on their backs. There were a few automobiles parked on the side of the road and people were boarding the one bus that went from one end of the island to the other, once a day.

Outside Pete’s Bar, there was a group of men dressed in Portuguese Naval uniforms, singing together and laughing. The *mocas* were hanging on their arms, wrapped in colorful shawls. When they saw us, they stopped talking and nodded to my father, making room for us to pass on the street. My father led us through the crowd and we kept walking to the corner of Rua Cônsul Daniels, the road named after my grandfather, who was also a Consulate. As we turned and walked up the hill, father pointed out a new building under construction on our left.

The place was swarming with workers and there were the sounds of hammering, drilling, and shouting.

“That’s going to be the new Western Union Telegraph Company,” Father said in a quiet voice. It was a hopeful sign that he was still speaking to us.

“*Another* telegraph company?” Frank asked in surprise.

“This one will be American. We don’t want the Germans having total control of our telegraphy hub, do we? The Italians are building one too.”

Frank turned toward me and the corners of his lips lifted just a little in something like a smile. More telegraph companies meant more ships and airplanes were coming too. More pilots would be needed. As we tramped up the hill, I could feel him forgiving me, ever so slightly, and acknowledging for the first time, our shared dream.

When Frank and I went through the front door, father followed us inside and set down the camera. Frank leaned the tripod against the wall. Marta took our coats with her strong hands, feeling the wetness and hanging them in the kitchen to dry. When she came back to the hall, her eyes met those of my father, and they were wide with warning. Her fingers were knotted together. Something was up. Most likely my mother was in one of her moods.

Father read the signs of Marta’s distress too and turned to Frank and me. He spoke in a low voice.

“Not a word about these new ambitions to your mother, understand? Not to anyone!”

We nodded. Our lips were sealed, though of course we would be telling Marco. He was our brown brother. We always told each other everything. Marco could be trusted to keep our secret.

Why did I tell father, when I’d never even said this thing out loud before? There was the immediate danger that he would tell mother and I knew she would forbid it. She would be horrified. She hated new things. She didn’t even like the radio—was afraid of it, in fact. The



receiver in our reception room was bad enough. The crackling and whistling, the sudden loud voices. She wouldn't touch it. That was father's job, or Frank's. When it was tuned in to some music, she calmed down a bit, and nodded in some uneasy acceptance, but she often muttered that someday the radio would explode and kill us all.

The radio room in the attic, where father had installed a transmitter, was even more dangerous, to our Mother's way of thinking. Father taught Frank Morse Code up there and she didn't like that one bit, but father had insisted it was a good thing to teach Frank. It was legal to send and receive messages again, now that the war was over. It was a "boys only" activity. I was not permitted up in the attic.

"Why don't you both go to my study and work on that assignment I gave you," Father said. "You have some reading to do. Your books are on my desk."

Frank and I nodded with a sigh. There was no escaping homework when your father was also your head master.

"Marta, could you bring me some tea?" Father asked.

She dipped her head and told him mother was already waiting for him in the reception room. She turned and went to the kitchen. I heard the floorboards squeak as father walked down the hall to the reception room. When he opened the door, I could smell the smoke in the fireplace. The room was so cold in that part of the house that it needed a fire even in May. Mother would be sitting in her wingback chair with a shawl draped over her shoulders. I knew she'd look up momentarily from her sewing as he walked in. I heard her say "Well? What was down there in the bay? A monster?" The door closed. Almost.

My feet were moving rapidly across the hall. I tiptoed as I made my way to listen at the door. Frank was right behind me, whispering frantically, "Aren't you in enough trouble?"

"Shhhhhh! Go study if you want," I hissed back at him, "but I'm staying."

The voices of my parents were coming clearly through the opening at the door, which was slightly ajar. We were frozen into our positions, crouched down on the floor like two mice.

“It was a seaplane! Part of a convoy making the first transatlantic voyage! It was supposed to land on Delgado, but the weather must have caused them to land here. I suspect they’ll go on to meet the other planes tomorrow. Then on to Lisbon.”

“Well. Did you get your photographs then?”

“Yes. I think there will be some excellent ones when I get them developed. Frank helped me. He was, uh, extremely interested in the seaplane.” Father chuckled as if this was humorous.

We both held out breath. What was father doing? Testing the waters?

“I hope you aren’t encouraging such an interest.” Her voice was as sharp as a sword.

“Well...you’re right, of course. Much too dangerous.”

“Where are the children?”

“In the study, working on an assignment.”

I heard my father move to the fireplace and stoke the fire. Then he sat down in his leather chair, settled into it and my nose picked up the scent of tobacco as he filled his pipe and lit it.

“There’s something we need to discuss,” Mother said.

“What’s that?”

There was a beat of silence and I imagined by mother gathering her thoughts.

“Do you remember how old you were when your father sent you to school in London?”

There was the sound of my father puffing on his pipe. Then he spoke.

“I was ten. We’ve been through this. We’re not sending Frank away. I’m tutoring him. And Lillie too. They’ll both be prepared to take exams for university, if they wish it, when the time comes.”

“I fear you’re distracting them from learning what they’ll be expected to know.” My eyes grew wider in shock as I stared into Frank’s eyes. I’d never heard my mother criticize my father like this. “Have you ever considered the possibility that perhaps you aren’t as objective an instructor as another teacher might be?”

My hand went over my mouth as I stared at Frank.

“Our children have an incredibly rich environment here,” he said, his voice irritated with her.

“That isn’t the point. You should not be preparing them for life on this island, you should be preparing them to *leave* this island.” My mother paused for effect and it must have landed the way she intended. The silence felt loud to me. I could see Frank was just as shocked as I was. “I ask you. What good is it to their future to know about airplanes, or the plants and geology of a little island in the Atlantic?”

I could hear Marta coming from the kitchen with tea for father. We both scooted behind the table in the hall so she wouldn’t see us and watched as she went into the room.

“Just put that on the table, Marta,” Mother said.

Marta set the tray down and left, shutting the door. After she was back in the kitchen we crawled back to our positions. This time Frank reached up, turned the doorknob ever so slowly so you couldn’t even hear a click as the door open just a crack.

“Why are you so set on them leaving?” Father asked.

“If you hadn’t left this island to come to Boston, we would never have met. If you hadn’t been sent to study in London before that, you would not have qualified to fill the post of Consulate. Don’t you see? It’s important for both Frank and Lillie to gain the education

and the skills that will allow them to have a decent life. They are limited here on a tiny island. Frank will need a profession. There are no decent positions for him here. They will both need to meet someone suitable for marriage. Lillie is a very long way from entering any kind of society.”

“But surely you can teach her.”

Mother let out a weary breath. I was still trying to recover from the “a long way from entering any kind of society” comment. I was bewildered. *What society was she talking about?*

“I can’t teach her about a society she’s never *seen*. We live on an island! You seem perfectly content to let our children run around the island like savages. They think they’re locals! I swear, Arnold, you are planting the seeds of rebellion. Mark my words, if you leave it too long, Frank and Lillie will find themselves unable to live in the larger world from which we came and not able to live here either!”

The strong smell of tobacco told us father was smoking hard, no doubt turning these comments over in his mind as we were. Was this island a kind of *prison* to her?

“What’s happened to you, Kate?” Father said, softly. Sadly.

Silence filled the room. Mother took a deep breath and let it out, then spoke in measured tones.

“I’m only looking after my children’s future. You’re not giving them wings, Arnold. You’re tying them down to this one tiny place.”

“You mean like I’ve done to you?”

There was another agonizing moment of suspense, then the voice of my mother, shaking with anger.

“*I* made the rather unconventional choice of coming to live in a place that was about as far away from civilization as it is possible to be! No one can say I’m not adventurous! I’ve

made this the kind of home you've built your reputation on and used for your benefit with the social skills you so casually disregard!"

"Kate." Father's voice was low. "I'm sorry. I recognize the choice you made and the importance of what you do—for me, for the children, for the office which I serve. I've taken it for granted too often."

"The *point* I'm making is that I had a choice. You had a choice. We must give our children a choice. It is only possible with the right education. It's the worst form of cruelty to lead them to believe they can stay here. What would they do? Who would they marry? One of the villagers?"

The silence was thick again and even I knew there was something terrifyingly important about this discussion, though there were things I didn't understand, mysteries I didn't yet know how to solve. The future seemed dismal when Mother put it this way. Though it was true that young people here couldn't find work on the island. The young men left when they turned 18. Most joined the Portuguese Navy. The young women left too, so they could find work as maids in Portugal.

Frank and I loved our island home, and were happy to learn everything Father taught us about the geology here, the volcanoes, the plant life, the sea, the animals, birds and fish. Though he gave us far too much homework, he was a good teacher. But he wasn't our only instructor. There was Marco. He taught us Portuguese. We taught him English. He showed us how to tell what weather was coming, how to read the language of the clouds. It never occurred to us that growing up here would be any kind of problem for our future.

"I think we should send Frank to a preparatory school in London as soon as possible. We should begin the application process immediately."

*Send Frank away?* Frank's eyes were as wide as mine now. We held our breath.

"Lillie doesn't need schooling, but she needs to spend time in society in Boston."

*What? Me? In Boston?* My mind was reeling.

Frank's elbow hit me in the ribs and he pulled away. I followed, crawling on hands and knees along the rug in the hall. When we got to the door, Frank pulled it open and we ran down the front path, fists pumping. We ran and ran until we almost knocked Marco over as he stood on the street. We stopped in front of him and gasped for breath.

"Hey! What's going on? Who's chasing you?" Marco stared behind us and seeing no one, he put his hands on his hips, waiting for us to recover and explain.

Frank shook his head.

"Not here. Let's go to the woods."

Marco and I followed.

Once we were under the canopy of trees, hidden from prying eyes, we sat down on the fallen leaves in a tight circle—legs crossed, knees touching. He was one year older than me, one year younger than Frank. He was a little taller than me and as skinny as Frank too.

"It's our parents. They want to send Frank away!" I moaned.

"Lillie, I swear to God, if you don't shut your trap..." Frank was fuming.

I put both hands over my mouth. He was right. I'd done it again.

"What's she talking about?" Marco asked, always the voice of reason, the voice of calm. "Why would they do that?"

Frank ran his hand through his hair, which was so long these days, it often fell over his eyes.

"They wanted to educate me in London. Now that Lillie told Dad I want to be a pilot, they want to ship me off sooner."

"A pilot? You?" Marco smirked.

“Why not?” Frank narrowed his eyes at Marco and I wondered now if Marco harbored such plans of his own. After all, most young men on the island joined the navy. He could do it if he wanted to.

“Your father. He would not like the idea.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t going to tell him about it *now*! I was going to wait until later. Let him get used to the idea. But blabbermouth here, thought today was a good time to mention it.”

“I told you I was sorry.”

“Then she really screwed up the whole idea by telling him SHE wanted to be a pilot too!”

“Holy Mother of God!” Marco crossed himself and closed his eyes.

“Why couldn’t a girl be a pilot?” It made me mad that even Marco thought it impossible.

“The thing is, my parents want to send me off to school in LONDON soon. It could happen in a few months or a year from now!”

Now Marco was stunned into a thoughtful silence.

“This London place,” he finally said. “How far away is it? Is it near Russia?”

Frank covered his eyes with his hands and let out a long moan.

“We have to show him the globe again,” I muttered. “He doesn’t know where London is.”

Frank let out another long sigh.

“It takes days to get there. On boats. On trains. And once I’m there, I won’t be back for... for years. Like four years. Maybe more if they want me to stay and study law or medicine.”

“But you want to be a pilot,” Marco said, softly, reasonably.

“They won’t allow that.” Frank caught my eye. “Any more than they’d allow Lillie.”

“And you can’t exactly run away. You’re on an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.” Marco looked a little sad, but I wasn’t falling for it.

“You don’t want him to go any more than I do.” I said.

Marco glanced over at me and put a finger to his lips.

“Blabbermouth,” he said. It rolled off his tongue easily. The first time he’d said such a word in English. Marco was the smartest of us.

The three of us sat there without an answer to the problem. Finally, Frank stood up and dusted the dirt off his trousers.

“Maybe they’ll change their mind,” offered Marco, standing up too. I followed as Frank started back toward the house.

“See you later,” Frank said. “I have to think about this.”

As the two of us walked into the house, I desperately wanted to take back what I’d said that day. Yet, it was true that by listening at the door we discovered our mother was steering Dad toward the idea of sending Frank away to London, no matter what his hopes about the future might be. We heard them, still talking in the reception room. Frank turned to go into father’s study. We had work to do.

I sat down in the chair across from him, at our father’s desk as he switched on the light. The books were illuminated. The lessons were waiting for us. I pulled open the drawer of the desk to look for a pencil and saw the scissors there, glimmering in the lamplight. I grabbed them and shut the drawer again. Then I sat back in the chair and watched my brother’s face.

As if he could feel me doing it, he looked up from the book and our eyes met. I put the scissors on the seat of the chair beside me and started to finger comb my long blond hair, pulling it to one side, dividing it into three strands and braiding it. There was a piece of string



on the desk. My fingers were flying and soon it was done. I tied off the braid with the string. Just like my mother taught me. Now, I was presentable.

“Lillie—”

I stood up.

“Don’t talk. Just come with me. Please?”

I went out of the study and heard his footsteps behind me as I walked down the hall. Before he could say anything, I pulled the door open and we were standing in front of our parents. They both looked up, unsmiling, at the intrusion.

“What is it, Lillie?” My father’s voice was gentle and I almost regretted what I was about to do.

“We heard what you said,” I told them. My mother’s face, so like Frank’s, was now twisted in anger. She leaned forward in her chair. “About sending Frank away to school in London.”

“You were listening at the door?” she asked, raising her voice in anger.

I ignored her and lifted the scissors, opening them with my fingers so they were poised to cut my braid off.

“If you send Frank away, I’ll cut off my hair.” The scissors were now in front of the braid next to my face.

“Lillie!” Mother shrieked, her hands to her mouth, as if I was threatening to kill myself. “Put those scissors down at once!”

Father jumped up, his hands outstretched to me.

“No, Lillie! This is not the way!”

My eyes went back and forth between Mother and Father. I’d never seen them so alarmed, angry, and afraid. I felt a strange power in my body. In this act.

“You can’t send him away! You can’t! I’ll die if you do. Don’t you understand?”

“*You* don’t understand, you wretched girl!” Mother said. “You’re only a child!”

“Lillie, put the scissors down.” Father was trying to keep calm, treating me like a wild animal. “We can talk this over, but not until you put the scissors down.”

“No! You don’t care about us! You don’t really know us or what WE want to do with our lives! Promise you won’t send Frank away! Promise!” I was screaming now. Hot tears were running down my face. I felt Frank’s strong arms around my waist. He was pulling me away. My feet were lifted off the ground, and in that moment, I cut it off. My braid. Mother screamed so loudly, as if I’d stabbed her in the heart. But the deed was done. My long blonde hair was gone.