
BILLIE SWIFT
TAKES FLIGHT
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Billie Swift Takes Flight

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To Felicity and Penny

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CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't as though Billie Swift liked getting in trouble. If anything, she tried not to be in trouble. At the same time, being good didn't mean she stayed out of trouble. And being bad didn't mean she got into trouble. Some of the worst things Billie had ever done had gone unpunished. Like the time at the wishing well when she wished her brother would disappear forever. Equally, when Billie was the most honest, she was often punished. Like the time Mrs Ganderlilly asked if Billie liked her new hat. None of it made much sense to her.

This time, Billie knew that what she was doing was technically being naughty. She had put Susan, her favourite hen, in the basket of her brother's bicycle after she had come home from school and taken Susan with her to go plane spotting. She had done this for several complicated reasons.

Firstly, she didn't want to be home when her mother arrived back because she hadn't peeled the carrots. She hadn't peeled the carrots because she hadn't picked the carrots. She wasn't certain which of the rows of green plants in the back garden were the carrots that needed to be picked. She knew she must have been told but she hadn't been listening. She was worried she'd pick the wrong thing. That would be wasting food. You could go to prison for wasting food.

The whole situation was too much, so she had picked up Susan who had been perched on the stone bench and taken her up the hill behind the church. The hill was part of the manor house's estate, but away from the posh gardens and orchard. No one came up here. They were scared of the old gamekeeper who patrolled the grounds. Playground stories spread fast about him firing his shot gun at boys scrumping apples, and kidnapping and eating evacuees. Billie didn't voice her scepticism. It was her own place. She could relax, prop the bicycle against a tree and look down the hill towards the airfield to watch the planes land. There was always a rush of them arriving just before it got dark. They never flew at night. Only the Nazis flew at night.

Even before the war, the skies had been busy at White Waltham. The planes had circled the airfield enjoying the views of the rolling English countryside.

‘Like flies round a corpse,’ Mrs Swift would say, while shutting the windows to block out their engines.

When Billie was small, she had been scared of the noise. But knowing what made the terrible sound took away her fear. Her brother had told her a few of the names and, after she spilt cocoa on her father’s reference books, he had let her keep his aircraft recognition guides in her bedroom. Billie would stare as hard as she could at the planes, mouthing their names over and over again. Soon, she knew more planes than anyone. This was a trick she used with people too, to less success. In church, she had focused on Mrs Hoggard’s hat two rows in front, whispering the words ‘Hoggard, Hoggard, Hoggard,’ loudly under her breath. Mrs Hoggard and her children had avoided her ever since.

This year there were new planes for Billie to learn to recognise. Large bombers as well as the smaller fighters turned low over the tiny cottage where Billie lived. When she didn’t know their official names, she nicknamed them things like Bumblebee, Spectacles, Crane and Growler. After school she would often go to the bookshop at Maidenhead train station and thumb through the air magazines until she was chucked out by the staff.

Billie could tell the difference between many types of plane while sitting in the cupboard under the stairs.

The cupboard was her family's version of the Anderson shelter. They had never bothered with getting a proper one, since they were expensive and air raids were few and far between in White Waltham. However, after a bomb had left a thirty-foot crater nearby, Billie's mother had upgraded from blankets under the kitchen table to the more sturdy (and more spidery) cupboard. Billie rather liked it and had taken to sitting in there with a candle and a book whenever her mother was looking for her.

Billie's mother wouldn't be looking for her yet. She was still on shift as an ambulance driver. Billie would be able to see Dr Bundock's car giving her mother a lift back from the hospital from her hillside vantage point. Once she had gone back, Billie would also return and claim that an escaped chicken had distracted her from doing the carrots.

What Billie hadn't factored into her plan was the sound of an engine cutting out. She hadn't even registered it properly; she was still looking down at the airfield, watching a Fairchild plane taxi into one of the hangars. The wind picked up. Susan fussed in her basket, clucking as she hunkered down.

The trees were clinging to their dry tatty leaves. They rustled noisily, masking the sound of a pilot somewhere

in the distance trying to restart an engine. An engine of a plane that was coming closer and closer to Billie's lookout point.

Suddenly, it felt like a cricket ball was spinning past her ear. There was a lack of noise, a heaviness that made Billie's stomach drop. Something was far too close and far too large. It didn't even make a proper whoosh overhead, nor did it whistle like a bomb. It passed so quickly it felt unreal.

Susan and Billie both clucked in shock.

Billie had often wondered what it would feel like to have a bomb drop on top of her and, for a split second, that was what she thought was happening. After all, there was no growl of an engine or fumes of exhaust. A branch from the tree she had propped the bicycle against cracked down next to her, the twigs whipping the back of her head. She thought she glimpsed the bullet shape of a bomb falling from above as she staggered to regain her balance, her feet sliding in the mulch. Only, bombs weren't so massive and they didn't have wings.

It was a Spitfire! Billie rubbed her head where the branch had hit her, watching the plane intently. It was out of control, coming in too low and too steep, clipping the tops of the trees on the hill. It wobbled as

it descended, blown about by invisible gusts of wind. Its nose was up, as though it was trying to land, but it was nowhere near the airfield. It came in short, making an ill-advised dive for the field, just yards from Billie's lookout.

For a moment, Billie thought it was OK; all the wheels touched the ground as it tried to lose speed. Had it been on a smooth grass airfield it might have made it, but Billie knew that field. It was an ankle twister, full of flint rocks and rabbit holes. It sloped unevenly down towards the airfield. The Spitfire bounced a few times, as though it was trying to take off again. Each time, gravel and stones scraped and pinged against the fuselage. Then its nose tilted down. Billie gasped as she saw the plane tip up, like a gymnast doing a headstand. She thought for a moment that it was going to stay balanced on its nose but then it toppled forwards, landing upside down with a crunch. The only noise was the faint sound of its spinning wheels in the wind.



CHAPTER TWO

Billie stood staring in total shock. Over at the airfield, the Fairchild had made it inside the hangar. The roads were empty. The upturned Spitfire was silent. Susan had busied herself pecking at the ground next to the fallen bicycle. Billie didn't notice her hen. She was waiting for the pilot to come out of the plane. Hurry up. She wondered if he was all right. Perhaps he was hurt. What should she do?

She knew better than to go up to the plane. Things with engines could catch fire. She'd been instructed repeatedly at school that in an emergency her duty was to get adult help but the truth was, Billie would have preferred to catch fire than to ask strangers for help. She didn't know why. The thought of running up the hill to pound on the door of the manor house made

Billie shudder. She pictured knocking on the door, the butler's sneering face, her trying to explain, him telling her off for trespassing, or telling her mother where she'd been. She could ask at Burycourt farm which was on the other side of the road from the church. She didn't know the names of the land girls who worked there. Her mother called them ne'er-do-wells. She couldn't go to the farm with Susan anyway, they might think she'd stolen her from them. Or the vicarage! Just beyond the upturned plane was the red brick vicarage. The plane must have made a loud enough crunch as it flipped for them to notice… if the vicar was in.

She hesitated and thought she would have to go down herself.

BOOM!

The explosion wasn't the plane. She recognised it at once as a shotgun. She regularly heard the sound of pheasant hunts but those were always somewhere in the distance. This was so close that she actually jumped and slid in the mud.

'Who's there? You're trespassing!'

The man's voice was a growl and seemed to come from every direction. Billie scrabbled to her feet, her hands clutching the mud, and attempted to rescue the bicycle from underneath the fallen branch that had

knocked it over. It was too heavy. Susan had made a beeline for the brambles. Billie abandoned the bicycle as the sound of crunching footsteps and the clinking of a gun being reloaded grew closer. She snatched at Susan, cutting her arm and tearing a hole in her sock as she plucked up the bird and pulled herself away.

She was in a panic. It felt as though she were running through treacle. Her stumbles felt so slow, her feet slipping on the leaves as Susan was trying to kick against her. Words of warning about the demon gamekeeper and his bloodthirsty wolf echoed through her mind. Low-lying branches whipped her as she barrelled through them. She reached the dry-stone wall of the church graveyard and dived for it, doing a sort of awkward cartwheel and landing on her side in the long, wet grass by the forgotten graves. She let go of Susan, who immediately scuttled off to shelter under a large yew tree. Billie pressed herself up against the wall to hide. She couldn't hear anything except her own loud gasps. Once she was able to breathe through her nose, she realised that it was nearly dark. Her mother would be home soon.

Trembling, she peeked her head over the wall. There was no one there, just the dark wood she'd run through. She daren't risk fetching the bicycle. As she chased

Susan around the yew tree she thought again of the Spitfire, but reasoned that the gamekeeper must have seen it. That's why he had been there, to look at the plane. He'd probably found the bicycle too.

Billie's plan to return home claiming to have had to catch an escaped hen turned out to be the truth by the time she got there. Her mother was saying goodbye to Dr Bundock as she walked up to the gate.

Mrs Swift took one hard look at her bedraggled daughter and sighed. 'I've told you a thousand times; I want you home before it starts getting dark.'

Billie tried to explain. 'Susan kept running away.'

'Put her back with the others and come inside…'

The others hens eyed Billie suspiciously when she returned with a rather roughed up Susan.

'She's alright,' Billie told them as they scuttled over to check she was one of them. For a horrid moment Billie thought they might fight, as they sometimes did when one had been out of the coop for too long. Fortunately, Susan scampered up the ramp and with a bit of coaxing by Billie, the others followed. She lowered the wooden latch and went back to the house.

Mrs Swift watched her daughter take off her filthy shoes and dump them unceremoniously by the back door.

‘And since when have twigs been a fashion item?’ She walked over and plucked them out of Billie’s hair. As she did, she touched her face. ‘Your cheeks are freezing, child. What have you been doing?’

Billie couldn’t begin. It was too much to blurt out all at once. The woods. The plane. The pilot. The gun. The bicycle. Susan. The carrots. It all rushed to the front of her mouth and evaporated. Nothing could explain it all; nothing could make reason from her actions. Or inactions.

Mrs Swift didn’t seem to notice her daughter’s frustrated expression and carried on without pausing. ‘Of course, a thoughtful daughter might have said, “Sod those chickens. I’ll tidy the place up before my mother gets home.” ’

‘Sorry.’

‘If this year is anything like last, we are going to need more firewood. Perhaps you could go and get some kindling while you’re out playing zoo keeper,’ Billie’s mother continued. ‘Where did you find your escapee this time?’

Billie faltered for a moment. Her mother wouldn’t believe Susan would have gone as far as Waltham Place. It was easier to be vague.

‘Not far,’ Billie lied.

‘Next time, don’t go chasing after her. If she gets run over it is her own fault. I don’t want to lose both my children to this awful war.’

Billie’s mother looked tired. The jar with the tea was out of the cupboard and no trace of lipstick remained on her lips. The decision to stay at home had been made. Billie knew telling her about the gamekeeper or the plane crash would make her go out, and that would make her furious. Besides, she’d tell Billie off for not explaining right away and losing Michael’s bicycle. The longer Billie left it, the more impossible it was to tell.

The clock on the wall was fast, but it already said six thirty. Billie hurriedly climbed up, kneeling on the sink to reach the blackout curtain. It didn’t budge unless you got it right at the top.

‘Careful!’ Billie’s mother said, as she switched on the lights.

That was the last word she said that evening. They went through their routine. Billie’s mum sat quietly reading the paper. Billie’s father wouldn’t be home until the weekend. Until then it was just the two of them, beans on toast, and the Home Service on the wireless.

Billie worried her mother could hear the thoughts in her mind. They were much louder than the

radio burbling in the living room. Billie couldn't stop wondering if the pilot was injured. Had the gamekeeper found him? Was he dead? Could Billie have helped him in time?

Now it seemed obvious what she should have done. She should have put her hands up and called to the gamekeeper that there had been an accident. Together they could have run down the hill and helped the pilot. Anything was better than what Billie had actually done: run away. She'd fled like a miserable coward.

Billie didn't sleep well that night. There was no air raid warning, no thunderstorms keeping her awake or Nazi planes flying over. Just the buzzing in her ears. The impossible silence of the falling Spitfire and her own indecision. She kept telling herself that the gamekeeper would have spotted the crashed plane. But she couldn't be sure. If that pilot was dead, she had as good as killed him.

'That is the second time you've murdered someone, Billie Swift,' she murmured to herself. And she didn't much like it.