TWENTY GOLD FALCONS
Also by Amy Gordon

Magic by Heart
Return to Gill Park
The Secret Life of a Boarding School Brat
The Gorillas of Gill Park
The Shadow Collector’s Apprentice
For Tim
I suddenly had that hold-your-breath feeling I’d had as a little kid. Mom, my uncle Tony, and I stood in the little hallway in the east wing of the Ingle Building waiting in front of the brass doors for an elevator. I hadn’t been there for more than a year, but I had always loved that moment when the doors to elevator number one opened.

Bing, and a second later there was Rosie, the elevator operator, just as I remembered her, roly-poly and cheerful, a bundle of pink knitting in her lap. The little space she was in glowed with the light of a gently swaying crystal chandelier that hung from the center of the ceiling.

“Oh, my dollings,” Rosie said, turning to us immediately. She put her knitting down and stood and wrapped her arms around Mom. “Tony told me— I’m so sorry about your loss, Allegra; so young to lose your husband, so sad. But you’re doing the right thing, moving back home to Gloria!”

My mom and my uncle Tony had been born and raised in Gloria, but I had grown up on a farm way upstate and had only been to Gloria maybe four times in my life. This is not my home, I wanted to say, tears springing into my eyes.
Rosie turned and hugged me, too. “My word, Aiden, I think you’ve grown a foot since the last time I saw you. How old are you now?”
“Twelve,” I mumbled.
“Marvelous age!” Rosie exclaimed. Then she pointed to my head. “That cap you’re wearing, dolling, brings to mind the good old days, it does.”
I touched the old, “newsie” style wool hat that Pops had always worn. Mom sighed. “Herb pulled that hat out of our attic one day and wore it all the time, and now Aiden practically wears it to bed.” Mom didn’t like me wearing it because it was so old and ratty and came down over my eyes.
“Well, I think it suits you, dolling,” said Rosie with a quick smile. “And where can I take you folks today?”
“Rooftop, please,” said Uncle Tony. “We’re here to see the view.”
“Rooftop it is,” said Rosie. She pressed one of the million brass buttons that took up a good part of the wall next to the doors and then sat back down and took up her knitting again. “That cap does brings to mind your great-grandpa, Fortunato Balboni, Aiden. You never knew him, I expect, but he was a fine old gent. Such a hard worker, he was, arranging all the musical events here in the old days. But he knew how to have a good time, too. He and Mr. Ingle—good friends they became, you know—the two of ‘em would dream up such fun things for all the kids growing up here to do. There was a little gang of ‘em at the time—my own two, and the Ingle children, and various others—and Mr. Balboni and Mr. Ingle would set ‘em treasure hunts all over the building!” Rosie’s face glowed with the memory. “I can still see those children racing all over the place chasing after clues.”
“Oh yes,” said Mom. “And one time wasn’t the treasure gold coins—what were they called? Gold Falcons?”

Rosie nodded. “Not worth much after the Depression, but lovely gold coins they were. That was the hunt the children went on for days and days—it was very elaborate, let me tell you. But Mr. Ingle died unexpectedly before the treasure was ever found, and everyone forgot about the hunt, and the clues got lost. To this day, there are Gold Falcons in this building that have never been found!”

“Now that Aiden’s living here in Gloria, she can find the lost gold of the Ingle Building,” Tony joked. “Remember, Allie, how we used to look for it?”

“Might be more difficult these days,” said Rosie. “We’ve got a manager now who doesn’t like to have kids running about the place.” She lowered her voice. “I don’t know why Mrs. Ingle put Grip in charge, Tony, I really don’t. You know what he’s like.”

She and Tony were good friends because Tony sang at the Opera House in the Ingle Building. She might have said more, but we had reached the top. “Well, here we are, folks, we have reached our destination!”

As we came out onto the rooftop, Tony led us over to the railing. He handed a pair of binoculars to Mom and spread his arms wide. “There it is, Allegra and Aiden, the glorious city of Gloria! Welcome home!”

“Yes, there it is. It’s all still here,” said Mom. “I can even see cousin Mitch’s tree house. Come look, Aiden. Remember going to the tree house?”

“What do you think, Aiden?” Tony asked. “Do you think you’re going to like it here?”

“It’ll be great,” I said flatly, but as I looked out at all
the streets and buildings, with only the patch of green park in the middle, all I could think about was how much I missed the cow pastures and the barn, my favorite maple tree, and the stone wall where my best friend, Blake, and I kept feathers in a secret place.

I turned my back on the view and looked up at the pink granite mountain peak that rose up from the top of the middle rectangle that formed the Ingle Building. Plunked on that peak was a huge, gold falcon, its wings outstretched as if it were about to take off.

“There are two real falcons living up at the top of this building, you know,” said Tony. “Lord and Lady Peregrine.”

“What?” I turned to look at him, amazed.

“Sure,” he said. “Falcons in the wild live on high cliffs, which is why, when they become city dwellers, they take to bridges and high buildings. These two are famous. The pair of them live way up there with Mrs. Ingle. Eighty-seven stories high or something like that. Hey, look—someone’s up there on the balcony now. Yep, there’s the old dame herself,” he said, taking the binoculars.

Mom stood still, looking up at the balcony for a long time. “Sad,” she said finally.

“Why sad?” I asked.

“Mr. Ingle died when she was still quite a young woman, and then later she fought with her children and they moved away and never returned, and now—well, she’s old and all alone.”

I suddenly felt panicky. Mom and I had been fighting a lot lately.

But just as I was turning away, Tony cried out, “There’s one of the falcons!”

He handed me the binoculars. The falcon had dark
patches around its eyes and black-and-white speckled markings. Watching it swoop and soar made something in me feel less cramped and tight. Following it, I caught Mrs. Ingle in my focus. Her arms were outstretched, and, I thought, maybe because Mom had suggested it, she did look sad.

“Let’s go back down,” I said.

“Grand view, isn’t it, dollings?” asked Rosie as we stepped back into her elevator.

“It sure is,” said Tony and Mom, but I didn’t say anything. The elevator stopped and in waltzed Marisa Fielding, the most horrible of the horrible girls in the seventh grade class at my new school.

She took one look at me and said, “Oh, you! You’re that new farmer girl. What are you doing here?”

“We’re just—” I stammered.

“I’m here because I take a master ballet class with Madame Petrovna,” said Marisa, her turned-up nose turned up even more than usual. Her hair was scraped back into a tight little bun at the back.

“Are you and Aiden classmates?” Mom asked Marisa, trying to be friendly.

“You could call it that,” said Marisa. “I’m frankly just trying to get through this year. I’m applying to a ballet school in Paris, and if I get accepted, believe me, that’s where I’m going.”

The elevator reached the lobby, and Marisa marched out without saying good-bye.

Four little girls in ballet tutus were waiting for the elevator.

“Dollings!” Rosie held out her arms.

“Gammy!” The little girls rushed into her arms.
“My great-grandbaby ballerinas on their way to their lesson!” Rosie cooed.

“My,” said Mom as we walked away, “that Marisa is quite a character!”

I sighed. Mom didn’t know half of it.
It was Friday, the end of my third week at the East Park Day School. The day was almost over. I raised my hand to go to the bathroom so I could get out of that classroom for ten minutes.

“Go ahead, Farmer Girl,” said Mr. Jenkins. When Mr. Jenkins first heard my name, he said he’d never heard of a girl named Aiden before. Then, when he found out I had lived on a dairy farm and that my last name was Farmer, he started calling me “Farmer Girl.” That was typical of his sense of humor.

I went into one of the bathroom stalls and sat there for awhile. I’d never set foot inside a private school before, and every now and then I needed a time-out. The reason I was even going to this school was because Mom had been able to get a job teaching music in the Lower School and I could go for free.

“Amazing educational opportunity, Aiden,” both Mom and Tony had said.

Well, maybe, but so far it was only amazingly terrible. For one thing, I had to wear a uniform, a blue plaid skirt, a white blouse, and a blue blazer, and, for another, all the kids
were so cityish and cool. And worst of all, I was the only new kid in the seventh grade.

I heard giggling now as the door to the bathroom opened.

“Can you believe the stuff that comes out of Adam’s mouth? He’s been a nerd since the day before he was born. But everyone in this school is just too dull for words.”

That was Marisa.

“Do you think I’m dull?” I recognized Asha, the girl who was always hanging around Marisa.

“Oh, you’re all right,” said Marisa in a bored tone of voice. “But you know what? My dance teacher, Madame Petrovna—her studio’s in the Ingle Building?” Almost everything Marisa said ended in a question mark. “She says she knows about these gold coins that are lost in the Ingle Building somewhere? They’re not really worth a whole lot, but she has a friend who needs gold for something? She can’t walk around much anymore because she’s old and lame, but she says if I help her find them she’ll get me into a ballet school in Paris?”

“That sounds soo exciting,” said Asha. “Can I help, too?”

“Well, I don’t know how Madame Petrovna would feel about that, but, oh my gosh, look, someone’s in here.” Marisa’s voice dropped to a whisper.

There was silence, and then Asha said in a hushed voice, “I think it’s that Farmer Girl. She’s wearing those clunky boots.”

“Think she’s wearing the dumb hat, too? I ran into her at the Ingle Building, and she was even wearing it there!”

Did they think I couldn’t hear them? Or did they want me to hear them?

“Hey, Asha, let’s—”
“Yeah!”

There was more giggling and then the sound of the bathroom door opening and then closing. I came out of the stall wondering what they’d been in such a hurry to do. When I tried to open the bathroom door to the hallway, I found out. I rested my forehead against the door for a minute. First they said mean things about me; then they locked me in the bathroom.

I felt sorry for myself for about five minutes, and then I looked around to see if there was some way of escaping. Sure enough, there was a little window high up on one of the walls. I dragged the trash can over and was about to use it as a stepladder when the door opened.

Mr. Jenkins was standing there, holding a set of keys.

“So sorry about that, Farmer Girl,” he said. “I saw the smug way those girls came back to the classroom and, when you didn’t return, I figured out what happened. You’re not the first who’s had that trick played on them, believe me! But don’t worry, there will be consequences.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Jenkins,” I said. “It’s not a big deal.” I didn’t want kids getting into trouble on my account.

Another older man was standing beside Mr. Jenkins. He was wearing a blue work shirt, the kind that Pops had always worn. He had white hair and shaggy, white eyebrows and a nice, crinkly face. He winked as if to show me he was on my side. I couldn’t help smiling back. But as I walked into the classroom, everyone was staring at me and smirking. I felt like crawling into a hole.

Mr. Jenkins stood in front of the class. “Ladies and gentlemen, let it be known that for once and for all, we are taking the lock off the bathroom door, and that will be the end of this silly behavior.” He glared at the kids, and Marisa,
who sat near me, looked as if she had no idea what he was
talking about. “And now, as you can see, Mr. Schwartz is
here to wind the clock. I know he’s a familiar face around
here, so let’s just let him get on with his work, and we’ll get
on with ours.”

Mr. Schwartz winked again and waved at the kids and
went to the back of the classroom where an old grandfa-
ther clock stood in the corner. The school had been a private
house a long time ago and had actually belonged to James
Ingle, the guy who built the Ingle Building. There were lots
of house things in it like the clock and paintings on the walls.
Sometimes the whole place felt too fancy for a school, but I
liked the clock. It reminded me of home because we had a
clock almost exactly like it in our living room, only ours was
pretter.

While Mr. Schwartz opened up the glass door that cov-
ered the dial, Mr. Jenkins took off his blazer and carefully
hung it on the back of his chair. I’d never had a teacher who
looked so . . . ironed. His straight, black hair was perfectly
combed, and his wire-rimmed glasses sat neatly on the end
of his nose. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “it’s time
for current events. There is an interesting item in the news
today about Gold Falcons.”

Marisa’s desk was near mine, and I could see her sud-
denly sit up straight. I have to admit, I sat up straighter, too.

“Remember, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Jenkins went on,
“we have been studying the gold rush of California when all
sorts of gold coins were minted. Gold Falcons were among
the most beautiful coins ever made in this country.” He held
up a photograph from the newspaper for us to see. “See,
here’s one—regard the bird with outspread wings engraved
on one side and the lovely head of Liberty on the other. Back then, my friends, these coins were worth five dollars each.” He let that sink in, and then he went on, “Ever heard of something called the Depression?”

Adam waved his hand furiously in the air.

“Of course you have, Adam,” said Mr. Jenkins without calling on him. “Well, it was hard times for people at the end of the 1920s—people were losing money, banks were failing, the stock market was in trouble, and people who had any gold at all began to hoard it because they thought gold was a safer bet than paper money. They believed its value wouldn’t change no matter what was going on.”

“What does hoard mean?” Marisa asked.

“It means you don’t spend it. You keep it to yourself,” said Adam. “It’s the sort of thing you would do.”

The look Marisa gave Adam made me shudder, but Adam just grinned at her.

“Yes, that’s right, Adam,” said Mr. Jenkins. “Well, a law was made that you could no longer use the gold coins to buy things. You were supposed to turn any gold you had back to the U.S. Treasury where it was melted down into gold bars. You weren’t even supposed to have gold in your possession, although an exception was made for people who collected rare coins as long as they were not worth more than one hundred dollars.”

“That would be twenty Gold Falcons,” said Adam.

Mr. Jenkins slapped his knee. “Right you are, my friend, Twenty Gold Falcons! But now, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, as of today, Gold Falcons are legal again and—” he paused, “they’re worth—well, let’s just say they’re worth a small fortune.”
He was quiet a moment as he waited for this to sink in. Now every pair of eyes was on Mr. Jenkins. Even Mr. Schwartz stopped what he was doing and turned around to stare at him.

“Marisa says—” Asha started to say.

“Shh,” said Marisa, glaring at Asha. “Don’t you dare say anything.”

“So, friends, Romans, and countrymen, here’s the challenge question of the day,” said Mr. Jenkins. “What would you do if you found a collection of Gold Falcons? How would you spend that money?”

“I’d buy a football team,” said Chad.

“An entertainment center,” said Quentin.

“You already have one,” said Adam.

“A better one,” said Quentin.

I could feel my stomach begin to churn. I didn’t want Mr. Jenkins to call on me.

“I’d put a bowling alley in my house,” said Zeke.

“I’d put an Olympic-sized swimming pool in my house,” said Brittany.

“What about you, Marisa?” asked Mr. Jenkins.

“I’m—I’m not at liberty to say,” said Marisa haughtily.

“But Marisa,” Asha said. Marisa turned and gave her the Look.

“I’d use it to pay for my Harvard education,” said Adam.

Everyone turned on him and said, “Boooo.”

“Shush,” said Mr. Jenkins. “He has a right to his own opinion. And what about you, Farmer Girl?”

I took a deep breath. “I’d keep my farm,” I said. “Spiff it up. Fix the roof of the barn.” Shut up, shut up, I said to myself. These kids don’t care. But the words kept coming anyway. “Buy a new tractor. Buy more cows.”
“That’s a good one,” said Mr. Jenkins, and I couldn’t tell if he meant that’s a good one, that’s wonderful or that’s a good one, what a joke, ha ha, and then someone, I think it was Chad, said, “Moooo,” and everyone else started mooing and laughing.

I put my head down on my desk and closed my eyes.