

Chapter Eight

She stood before him looking down at her feet.

“Daddy’s.” she said of the badly worn and scuffed brown Wellington work boots. “Figured I’d better wear sumthin’ besides skin.” And she laughed brightly.

Her faded blue coverall legs were tucked into the tops of the boots cowboy style and Doc laughed as she stomped her feet one at a time. “They be a bit too big...,” she said, “...so I got two pair of socks on.”

The faded tan coat she wore, which hung to her mid-thighs was patched at the elbows and tattered at the cuffs and a small label on the breast pocket said, “Carhart.” Doc reached out and straightened her collar before saying, “Daddy’s?” And she shook her head yes, her flashing blue eyes smiling as she looked at him.

“Well, I guess we are ready.” said Doc. “You should be warm enough.”



They had spent the better part of the morning following the plan they had devised so that she could ride in the front cockpit. So they lashed Doc’s duffel bag to the inner struts of the Jenny on the left side and then tied her small suitcase to the inner struts on the right side. The gas can and cook box just fit between her legs in the front cockpit. There was no control stick in the front, only an empty socket and the front throttle had been long been disconnected preventing a passenger from accidentally taking control of the engine.

Frances was unusually quiet but obviously happy smiling at Doc often as they ensured all their gear was safely secured. Doc hummed a nameless tune – he always did whenever he busied himself with something – as he readied the Jenny for take-off. Frances was constantly a few steps behind the still limping Doc as he swung the propeller through to clear oil from the cylinders.

“Just watch for now...” he said, “As we go along, I’ll

start teaching you the things you need to know.” And she shook her head that she understood. “But hear this...,” Doc said, his voice firm and strong, “...until you learn more about airplanes, you stay the *hell* away from this propeller at all times. *I mean it.*”

The smile disappeared from her face and she took on a serious look and she shook her head that she understood.

“Good girl.” said Doc. “And say..., he asked, “...what do you like to be called best? Just ‘Frances,’ or do you have a nick name of any kind?”

She looked at him, rolled her eyes slightly upwards as if searching some distant place for an answer, and she said, “Naw, sir. I like ‘Frances’ fine. Ain’t nobody ever called me anythin’ but.” Then she laughed a small chuckle, “Cept when mama gets really mad. But I won’t tell you what she yells then. It’s nasty.”

“Speaking of which...” said Doc, “...what’d she say about your leaving?”

“Nuthin’ much. She kissed me and gave me a hundred dollars for a bus ticket back if I get homesick.” Then Frances patted her pocket.

“Is that your purse?” asked Doc.

Frances shook her that it was.

“You sure you are ready for this? I’m not sure I am.”

Frances’s face immediately fell into a frown.

“Oh, don’t worry.” said Doc quickly. “I’m not changing my mind.”

“I’ll do everything you tell me, I promise I will.” said Frances, her voice low and pleading.

“I believe you.” said Doc. “But this is an entirely new thing for me. I’ve never had a partner before.”

“A partner?”

“You know what I mean.” said Doc. “I’ve always traveled alone, by myself. It’s gonna take some getting used to watching out for you.”

Then something Doc had seen in her earlier, a sort of ancient wisdom, something hard for him to put his finger on, spoke up, and she said, “How ‘bout we just

watch out fer each other?” and she smiled feeling a little as if she shouldn't have said anything, and she put the embarrassed school girl's hand over her mouth, her eyes registering her own mild surprise.

Doc had to laugh at her quaintness when she did that, finding it endearing, and without saying it, he felt warmed by what he had just heard, and he said, “Maybe company's good.”

“Yes, sir, you bet!” she said. Her bright smile had returned. “Yes, sir!”

“You ready?”

Her smile widened and seemed to cover her face and she said, “I'm ready, Doc!” and she put a hand on the forward cockpit rim and pulled herself onto the wing walk. As she did, she looked back at Doc standing on the ground and she asked, “We gonna fly through some clouds today?”

Doc laughed at that and he said, “Maybe one or two...” and he paused before saying under his breath, “...if nobody's looking.”

And Frances settled herself into her little space up front and she tightened her scarf.

Down the field, looking out the window with only her frowning face showing between the parted flour sack curtains on the back door, stood Bertie watching as the airplane's propeller slowly begin to turn, and as powder gray smoke roiled from the Jenny's exhaust pipes, she pulled a dish towel from her apron pocket and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. And she disappeared from the window.

“Got your seat belt on!?” yelled Doc as he eased the throttle forward.

In the front cockpit, Frances turned her head looking back at Doc and shook her head yes several times as she tightened her grip on the cockpit's rims. As the engine's thunder filled the airplane's hollow airframe becoming the rapid rolling beat of a deep bass drum, lightheadedness overtook her and she was at once, excited, afraid and happy.

Ohio lay ahead.

Chapter Nine

The ant had wandered across most of southern Ohio the night before they left. It would take several stops for fuel before they circled the small crossroads hamlet near Watkins, Ohio.



In the last flickering light of the fire the previous evening, Frances watched the insect intently as the ant did what all ants do: criss-crossing the map in the frenzied hurry of all ants, scurrying back and forth, without reason or rhyme, then changing direction on a whim, darting across the colorful lines, the circles and the curious hieroglyphic aeronautical symbols of the sectional chart. Amused at the level of concentration Frances exhibited engrossed in the ant's movements, Doc sipped the last remaining bit of his coffee.

"What you reckon they in a hurry for?" she looked up and asked. "Aints never seem to just walk anywhere slow. They always be seeming to run everywhere." And she laughed at herself. And Doc chuckled at her wonder, and he thought to himself that just watching Frances find the new worlds that she would be soon experiencing, might make better stories than anything else he might discover in the days ahead.

"I dunno." said Doc. "I know a lot of people that *always* seem to be in hurry for no good reason."

"I've heard that bugs don't live very long. Maybe that's why they be in a hurry." she said.

"Could be." said Doc. "I used to think that I'd live forever, always putting off things that needed to be done."

"My daddy died too soon." said Frances without looking up at Doc.

"Everybody dies too soon." said Doc wistfully.

"Didja ever wonder..." she said.

“What? asked Doc. “Wonder what?”

“Well, some nights, I wonder how long I’ll live.”

For a second Doc with his cup to his lips said nothing. Then he said, “I don’t think anyone knows that. But I do think that there are different kinds of being alive.”

Frances stopped watching the ant, and she rolled to one side and propped her head on her hand and she said, “There is only one kind of being alive. Ain’t there?”

“I used to think so.” said Doc. “Until my wife died.”

“You was married!?” said Frances.

“More than once.” said Doc.

Frances just looked at him, then she reached out with a fingertip, and she prodded the ant which was wandering back-and-forth near Watkins. “How many times?” she finally said.

“Twice.” said Doc. “It was my second wife, Joan, that died.” And he went silent for a brief few seconds, then he said, “But she’s still very much alive.”

Doc could see the bewilderment in Frances’s face, and he quickly said, “In here.” And he touched his hand to his chest. “That’s what I meant.”

Frances’s face lit up and she said, “Then my daddy is still alive, too?”

And Doc said, smiling, “In here...,” touching his chest again, “...you bet he is.”

And Frances said nothing. But it was obvious as she looked away into the distance that she was mulling his words before she looked back at Doc. As her eyes met his, slowly, a smile formed on her face, and she nodded once. Doc smiled warmly in return, a confirmation that she understood.

Then Doc said something else that once again caused consternation to color Frances’s face.

“I think there is alive even when people are dead, and dead when people are alive.”

Frances’s brow furrowed slightly and she lightly bit her lip.

“Think about it.” said Doc, “When you love people or

they make a great impression on you, and they pass on, they never really die in your heart. But there are plenty of people who are alive, but they are dead in their hearts, or they live so meaningless lives that they never come alive in anyone else's heart, so they are just, well, alive but dead."

Frances sat bolt upright at that and said, "You right, Doc. You right!" And she smiled at the thought of her daddy being alive in her heart.

Doc smiled and looked into France's face and then he looked at the map and the ant, and he asked Frances, "Where we going tomorrow?" And Frances put her finger on the map next to the ant which scurried away. "There?"

Doc leaned closely into the map and looked where her finger rested. "M-m-m... Watkins. Never been there before. Good as anywhere, I suppose." Frances pulled her hand away from the map and raised her hand to her mouth yawning.

"Me, too." said Doc. "We better get some sleep. Gonna be a big day tomorrow."



Before that conversation that night, the pair had arranged a simple set of hand signals that they could use to communicate with as they flew. As it was, a shout between them over the engine and wind noise in flight would, at best, come off as unintelligible.

So, soon after crossing over the muddy Ohio river, Doc, with an idea, began looking for a small town with an airstrip and the possibility of finding a drugstore and a hardware store. He saw on his sectional map that Edy, a small rural town just beyond the river had a short airstrip, possibly a crop duster's operation. He reached forward and tapped Frances on the shoulder and pointed down and she shook her head understanding that they would soon land. With that, Doc eased the knob of his throttle back, and as the engine went to idle with its intermittent popping backfires, the air around the airplane warmed during its descent. He was hoping

to find the parts needed to make Gosport tubes.

Frances was fascinated by every detail as they flew. She watched the clouds rise above the airplane during its descent to the ground, she pointed out the cows and horses grazing below. She traced the needles on the gauges in front of her with her finger. She hummed a tune to coincide with the constant thrum of the flying wires that braced the wings. In turn, Doc had to remind himself to keep his flying foremost in his thoughts as he tended to lose himself in his absorption with her many reactions.

At the sight of something new, she would excitedly turn to look at Doc behind her and point as she mouthed the words to match her new find; perhaps it was a pond, or a house, maybe even a highway. In her twenty-four years, she had never seen the earth from above. She had never seen a forest except from within. She had no knowledge of the expanse of hundreds of green trees to be farmed for their timber and what that unfurling carpet of nature might look like.

She had never seen the swirls and eddies of a large body of water. Crossing the brown swath of the Ohio River, she watched, for the first time, as the stacks of tug boats trailed charcoal gray plumes of diesel exhaust as they pushed their coal barges south leaving a bubbling white froth in their roiling wakes.

She had never flown across the tops of clouds crowded so close together that they appeared as a blanket of cotton tufts spread across the patchwork quilt of fields below. She had never seen the cloud's shadows beneath her darken the landscape as the wind pushed them. She watched intently as the shadows like fat serpents slithered across the roofs of homes and buildings. She had never looked below herself at a grey ribbon of concrete highway with its stitched yellow lines while the cars and trucks flowed within it in opposite directions. Doc delighted in seeing her reactions to these things.

She kept Doc entertained as she seemed to want to

look everywhere at once, constantly pointing at this-and-that and laughing; and her face now a smile, now a look of astonishment, now a look of surprise, and always looking back at Doc as she discovered the delights which were reflected in the brightness of her face and her wide blue eyes.

Now, the airstrip at Edy was center in her vision beyond the nose of the Jenny. Doc leaned and peered side-to-side to keep the airplane flying straight ahead. Doc had no need to be concerned with glide speeds or the altitude that the instruments showed. His actions were that of muscle memory and second sense made of thousands of hours of bonding with the ancient airplane and together, soon, both wheels thudded on the dirt strip and as Doc made shallow turns, fishtailing side-to-side until the airplane stopped just outside a one room shed with a sign over the door.

The sign read, "Edy, Ohio, Population 4,002 and Twenty-Two Dogs." Frances read that and laughed as she loosened her head scarf. She unbuckled her seat belt and stood on her seat up front.

Doc looked up at her and he smiled, saying, "You doin' okay?"

"I ain't never been better!" she said brightly, "Yor knee aching?"

"Some. But no mind, we'll see if we can get some gas and a ride into town. I'm looking for something. And maybe some chow."

"Is that somethin' you eat?"

"What? Chow?" She nodded yes.

Doc threw his head back and laughed while running his fingers through his hair and massaging his scalp working out the itch of his leather flying helmet.

"Well, I forgot. You've probably never been in the military?"

"No, sir, I ain't."

"'Chow' is food. As in 'chow down.'"

Hers was a look of perplexity.

"Never mind. 'Chow' is food, another word for it."

She shook her head, and mouthed a silent, "Oh."
"Com'on. Let's see if there's anybody about."

Off to the side and behind the small building with the sign was a rusty roofed hangar and within its open maw sat a red and white low wing crop duster. Doc heard a banging at the back of the hangar.

Chapter Ten

With Frances in trail, Doc walked over to the hangar and stood just outside peering into the darkness trying to see the source of the metal-on-metal clanging. It was rhythmic and steady. Forceful and angry.

Doc, raising his voice to just below a yell, said, "Is anybody home?" And the noise persisted steadily. With no response, Doc turned to Frances and said, "Stay here." And she nodded that she would. Doc took a hesitant step into the dim light of the hangar, and he could see, at a long workbench against the back wall, the bulk of a tall figure bent over the bench with a ball peen hammer in his hand dealing blow after blow to a piece of metal fixed in a vise. But suddenly the man turned and looked back over his shoulder at Doc. And the man smiled an acknowledgement of Doc's presence.

He placed the hammer on the bench and reached to his ears removing wads of cotton from each. "Oh, hey! Sorry." said the man, as he put the cotton balls in his pocket while turning towards Doc.

"We just landed. Thought maybe we might get some gas and ask a few questions." said Doc stepping closer to the man.

The man advanced towards Doc with an extended hand. "Well, it's good to have a little company." he said. The second he saw the man's pinched face, his high brow and brown hair, a small bell began to toll in the back of Doc's mind. He'd seen this man somewhere before.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you land. I was trying to straighten that damn tail wheel spring. Tough booger." Doc laughed and said, "That's okay."

"Rutherford Tubbs." The man introduced himself with a strong biting grip on Doc's fingers. And Doc introduced himself and asked if there might be a drug store nearby. Rutherford said, "Sure is. Got one

downtown.” and he laughed heartily. Doc got the joke immediately, and he laughed as well. “My partner and I are looking for a few things and maybe somewhere to get a bite.”

Rutherford said that Edy had all that. In fact, he said, if Doc and the girl, whose presence Rutherford acknowledged with a shake of the head, didn’t mind riding in a broken down old Buick, which he called his “courtesy car,” he’d give them a ride in because he was getting hungry, too.

About that time, Rutherford had looked beyond Doc’s shoulder and saw the Jenny. “I’ll be damned.” said Rutherford. “I haven’t ever seen one those up close, ever.” And he began walking towards the old airplane as Doc and Frances followed.

Doing what all pilots do, he walked right to the Jenny and stood looking into the rear cockpit. After a brief look at the instrument panel and the cockpit’s spartan interior and controls, he said, “I’ll bet this thing is a blast to fly, huh?” And he proceeded to begin a slow walk around the airplane examining the wings, the undercarriage, the flying wires, the wheels, as Doc and Frances stood next to one another watching him.

As Rutherford examined the Jenny, Frances looked into Doc’s face and she smiled brightly, and she whispered, “*Partner?*” Doc grunted a short laugh, winked at her and showed no other response.

“What year?” yelled Rutherford from the far side of the airplane.

“1916!” answered Doc.

“Wow!” said Rutherford in a hushed way. “I wasn’t even born yet.” And he chuckled.

“Nobody was.” said Doc, and Frances laughed while putting her hand over her mouth. Doc looked at her and he smiled broadly.

Rutherford laughed.

“Where you all headed?” asked Rutherford.

“Well, for now, here.” said Doc. Then he explained that the pair were headed west to barnstorm for the

summer and that he was a writer.

Rutherford had progressed completely around the airplane by then and he said, "Thought about doing that once." Then he said, "But the farmers 'round here keep me pretty busy most of the year." And the small bell in Doc's head rang louder and for the moment, and he wasn't sure why yet. Then a name suddenly worked its way up through his thoughts: "*Grover.*"

Doc studied the man closer. The old cowboy boots were there. The crows' feet at the corners of his eyes were there. And the birthmark! At the left side of his eye just at his hairline, there was *the* birthmark. Not a small discolored spot, but a mark the size of a small strawberry. The only thing missing was the pistol. And Doc thought again, "*Grover.*" And Doc laughed out loud. "You don't remember me, do you?" said Doc.

Rutherford stared intently at Doc with an obvious search of his memory beginning. He looked closely at Doc. And he said, "No. Can't say as I do."

"Florida?" asked Doc.

"Never been there."

"M-m-m." said Doc, sensing something amiss, and he continued, "Mebbe I'm mistaken."

"Oh. That's all right." said Rutherford, "People mistake me for someone they know all the time. How about that ride?"

"Yeah, sure." said Doc and he introduced Frances to Rutherford.

"Pretty lady." said Rutherford. "Your partner?"

"Daughter, actually." said Doc which caused Frances to snap her head in his direction. But with wide eyes, she said nothing.

"Let me run over to the office and grab the car keys." said Rutherford and he stepped off in the direction of the small building.

Frances was still looking at Doc agape.

Doc looked at her and whispered, "A little white lie, to keep you out of trouble."

Frances's eye's narrowed sweetly and she smiled and

said nothing else as Rutherford stepped out of the building with the car keys in his hand. She liked the idea of the lie.

“You guys hop in.” And he pointed to a dusty blue Buick with a crumpled driver’s side door. “She’s ugly as sin, but she gets me there.” And Doc laughed and said, “I’ve ridden in worse.”

The narrow main street of Edy came into view quickly. The tallest structure on the street was a two story brick building with bars on the lower windows and three white columns supporting a street side portico. It was vacant, and Doc thought it an old bank. The rest of the buildings along the short street gave the appearance that the town had fallen on hard times with a number of its storefronts boarded up and “For Rent” and “For Sale” signs posted in many of the empty storefront windows.

But the little town wasn’t completely dead. The feed and hardware store seemed busy with a line of Ford and Chevy pick-ups parked at angles along the broken concrete sidewalk. Down the street, a flickering sign of mostly broken neon tubes, marked Lee’s Restaurant and Bar and indicated it was open. And the oval sign of the Rexall Drug Store hung above a set of double glass doors as patrons stood on the sidewalk having animated conversations while others sidestepped them to gain entrance. A few young boys riding bicycles, their faces flush, playing cards flapping at their spokes, trailed by a lone whip-tailed, liver-colored mutt, passed in the opposite direction on the sidewalk emitting fits of joyful high-pitched laughter as they pedaled.

“Are you going to eat at that Lee’s place?” asked Doc of Rutherford.

“That’s the place. The only place. Food’s not too bad. The pies are homemade.”

“Could we meet you there in a few minutes? I want to jump in the drug store first.”

“Sure.” said Rutherford as he pulled to the side of the street and stopped. “I’ll wait to order.”

“No. That’s okay.” said Doc. “Don’t do that. We’ll just

be a minute. We'll catch up."

Rutherford nodded okay and Doc opened the door and Frances followed him to the sidewalk.

Rutherford then slowly accelerated down the street.

"Yor knee hurting again?" asked Frances as they walked to the door.

"A little but that's not why we're going in. Com'on. I'll show you."

"Doc?" she said in a low voice, and he turned and looked at her. "I liked yor white lie."

"It'll make things easier." said Doc.



In about ten minutes, Doc and Frances slid into the booth across from Rutherford who was salting his mashed potatoes.

"The Blue Plate's meatloaf and mashed potatoes." said Rutherford. And he laughed, "Every other day, every other week for ten years. Want me to quote the rest of the menu?"

Doc laughed and said, "No. That's okay. I'll have that, too."

Doc then looked at Frances and asked if that was all right with her and she shook her head yes. Then Doc answered, Nancy, the skinny as a rail, blond, pony-tailed, teenage waitress with a bad case of acne that had silently arrived at the tableside with her order pad in hand while removing her pencil from its perch above her ear, saying, "Hep ya'll?" in a high voice.

"The Blue Plate's good for both of us." said Doc.

"S'at all?" said Nancy chomping on her gum in between blowing small bubbles that popped as she made clacking sounds. "What you guys want to drink?"

It was coffee for Doc and ice water for Frances, and as Nancy in the pink striped uniform with the tiny frilly apron sashayed towards the kitchen doing her best to look alluring, Doc looked at Rutherford and asked, "Think that hardware store we passed might sell some small cheap tin funnels."

Rutherford pulled his fork from his mouth, and he

said, "Probably so. They have a lot of old timey stuff down there."

"Great." said Doc. "And I'm sure they have rubber fuel line."

"You bet." said Rutherford. "I get that there all the time."

"Fantastic!" said Doc. "We might be in business."

"What you trying to do?" asked Rutherford, "If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all..." said Doc as Nancy slid his plate in front of him, "...I'm making a couple of Gosports so we..." and he looked at Frances, "...can talk back and forth in the Jenny."

Rutherford laughed and he said, "You need an intercom." And he smiled slyly, "I've got one for sale."

"Thanks." said Doc, "But this will work fine, I think."

"Well, I've got some tape and some small copper tubing you can have if you need it."

"That's downright magnanimous of you!" said Doc.

And Frances set her water glass on the table and asked Doc quietly, "What's a Gasport?"

"*Gosport!*" said Doc. "You'll see. It's so we can talk back and forth in the air."

Frances's face lit up and she said, "That'd sure be nice, huh?"

Doc reached beside him, and he pulled two cheap home stethoscopes from the Rexall bag and he held them up for Rutherford to see.

Rutherford took a swath from his lemon pie and he looked at the stethoscopes for a second before a light bulb flashed in his head and he said, "Smart."

Doc smiled.

Chapter Eleven

After rummaging through the dusty corners and bins of forgotten pieces of hardware and ancient household odds-and-ends at Hazard's Feed and Seed, some utensils he found dating back so many years as to be called, "heirlooms," Doc finally found and placed two small tin funnels on the scratched and hazed glass counter next to the cash register.

"Glory be!" Miss Holly, the squat, round-faced cashier said, "I had no idea we even had those anymore."

"Took a little digging," said Doc as he pushed a crinkled twenty dollar bill across the counter towards her.

She laughed dryly and said, "You know, mister, I don't know what to charge you for them." Shuffling up from the bare wooden aisles - aisles lit by the light of the single bare light bulbs hanging from the high tin ceiling overhead - appeared Bill Hazard. A lean, gangly appearing elderly man, the owner of the store, he came to stand behind Miss Holly and hearing what she said, while looking across the tops of his wire-rimmed glasses that sat perched delicately on the very tip of his nose, he asked Doc, "How about a buck a piece?"

Doc, never one to pass up a chance at some slight-handed sarcasm said, "Sounds pretty pricey to me." And he grinned.

Mister Hazard was about as quick. "Okay, then, make it a buck fifty." and he pushed his glasses up his nose with the tip of a finger and he stared at Doc who was still grinning. "That's better." said Doc and he reached to shake Mister Hazard's hand.

"Anything else we can get you before we retire to the Bahamas on the sale we just made?" asked Mister Hazard with a straight face.

Holly took the twenty, smoothed it on the counter's edge and pulled the handle down on the old cash register opening the drawer with the ding of a bell. Another bell jangled above the door as the pair made their exit. Under her arm, Frances carried the cheap \$25 sleeping bag she had found in the sparse sporting goods section.



Frances stood close to Doc as he pulled his case knife from his pocket and opened it. Then he cut the bell from each stethoscope and to those he connected a length of black fuel line and a funnel attached with electrical tape. Rutherford went back to banging on his tail wheel spring.

"Here. Put these in your ears like this." And Doc slipped an earpiece in each of his ears. Frances followed suit.

"You gonna listen to my heart?" she asked.

Doc smiled at that thinking, "*I already have.*"

Then he handed her his funnel and he took hers. And he said, "Close your eyes." At first, Frances wanted to say, "Why?" But she did not and she closed her eyes. Then Doc whispered into her funnel, "You ready to go flying again?" And Frances's eyes opened widely and she nodded and said in a full voice into his funnel, "Yes, sir!" So loudly that Doc had to immediately snatch his stethoscope away from his ears.

"Guess I asked for that, huh?" he said.

Frances laughed and said, "Let's do it again."

"Nope. The only way we are really going to tell if it's going to work or not is in the air."

Frances asked, "Where we goin' next?"

"Well, we'll have about two hours of fuel on board and the can is full, so as far as that gets us, I guess."

Then he scratched his chin and said, "But I tell you what. If Mister Tubbs there will let us, why don't we overnight here and light out first thing after breakfast."

"Not a problem for me." said Tubbs. "There's a roach motel down the road."

“You mind if we build a small fire and sleep next to my airplane?”

“Still not a problem.” said Tubbs.

“Good. Then we’ll just bunk out here.”



“Ever slept in a sleeping bag before?” asked Doc of Frances. She had just returned from gathering dry twigs and a few dead branches from the tree line down the runway.

Dumping her armload on the ground, she shook her head no. “Is they a trick to it or sumptin?”

Doc laughed at that and said, “No. But at first, once you get in and zip it up, it will feel a bit confining, like a cocoon.”

Frances laughed at that and said, “When I get up in the mornin,’ will I be a butterfly.”

“I hope not.” said Doc. “But maybe that would a good nickname for you. A call sign.”

Frances immediately fell into one of her far-a-way spells and looked off into the distance for a few seconds, and then she turned and looked at Doc for another few seconds before she said, “You know...that’d be a purty nickname wouldn’t it?”

“It fits, I think...” said Doc, “...yeah, I can see that. ‘Butterfly’ it is.”

And Frances smiled; then she quietly went about getting a small fire started.



To the west, the sky had taken on a purple hue and the top edge of the sun was just slipping below the ridge line.

Frances was laying on her side partially zipped up in her sleeping bag and with a small stick, she was indolently writing then erasing with her hand and rewriting again the word, ‘butterfly’ in the sand. Doc was propped against his duffel bag, his portable writing desk in his lap - an old piece of thin plywood, actually - and he was alternately taking small sips of his coffee and the occasional drag from a cigarette as he wrote what he

could in the waning light.

“What you writing about?”

Doc, not much appreciating the interruption, looked up and glared briefly at her and said, a bit curtly, “Today.”

“Am I in it?”

“Yes.” Then he set the desk down and looked menacingly at her, more a hard stare, really.

“Frances...?”

She looked at him and stopped scratching in the sand.

“We need to have a little understanding. Okay?”

Frances, worried she had done something wrong, fought with her zipper for a second and tried to sit up. Watching her wriggle and struggle made Doc laugh and it calmed him.

“Relax.” he said. “All I want to ask you is when you see me writing, could you please wait until I set the desk down before...”

“Oh, Doc, I’m sorry...”

“No. Don’t apologize.”

Her hand was now over her mouth and Doc had come to recognize embarrassment in her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I made you stop yor writing.”

“No. You didn’t.”

She slowly lowered her hand from her mouth.

“Let me explain better.” said Doc.

She had freed herself from the bag’s entrapment and was now sitting up with the bag gathered around her waist.

Doc extended a leg and with the toe of his boot, he pushed some loose embers around causing the fire to flare, and he said, “Writers, at least, I do, go far-a-way in their minds when they write. It’s like I visit a whole other special place where the words and the stories live. Sometimes, when I write, for just for a little while, I am completely in that place, at peace and very happy. And very far away. Do you know what I mean?”

Frances looked at Doc, at first seeming bewildered. But a light in her eyes brightened and she said, "I have to do that when I read anythin'. I have to really study it."

Doc chuckled. Then he said, "I couldn't have said it better myself. That's what I'm doing when I write. I'm studying the words." And he let it go at that.

"And you don't want nobody interruptin' you, huh?"

Doc laughed and he said, "You got it!"

"Well, you can count on me. I ain't letting nobody mess with you when you is writing. Me, too."

"Me, too, what?"

"I ain't either."

"I *won't* either." said Doc.

"You won't either?" and she looked puzzled.

And Doc said, "Never mind."



The morning dawned gray and foggy.

Doc could not see the end of the airstrip at Edy. So, rather than rush, Doc and Frances settled back in over plastic bowls of instant oatmeal and instant coffee.

"Sure wished I had me a biscuit to go with this oatmeal." Frances said.

"Better get used to the bare necessities." answered Doc.

"Doc?"

"Yes."

"What's a 'call sign'?"

"Well, it's a sort of nickname that pilots give to each other. It started back many years ago in the military."

She mulled that a minute. The she said, "But I'm not a pilot."

"That's okay. You're flying with me now and that sort of makes you a co-pilot."

Frances swirled her spoon around the bowl a few times, emptying it, putting the last spoonful in her mouth, and she set the bowl aside before she said, "I hate to sound so stupid, which I is not, but does a co-pilot fly, too?"

"Yep. When the pilot needs a rest or a flight is a very

long one.”

“Could I learn?”

“What? To fly?”

She shook her head yes.

“Certainly.”

“But would I need a driver’s license?”

“To fly? No.” said Doc. Then he said, “You don’t need a license to fly. You only need to know how.”

“Would you teach me?”

“Why not?” And Doc hesitated before continuing. “I can teach you some things as we go along, providing the Gosport works like we need it to.”

With that, Frances stood erect and kicked a little dirt with her bare toe and said brightly, “Imagine! Me flying, too!”

“Whoa!” said Doc, “Flying is a lot more than just moving a stick and pushing some pedals.”

Her face dropped a bit before she asked, “What else you need to know?”

“There’s things like learning why an airplane flies in the first place and learning how to navigate and meteorology.”

He could see the word ‘meteorology’ hit a brick wall in Frances’s mind.

“‘Meteorology’ is another word for weather...” said Doc with a dry chuckle, “...what to expect when you fly in certain kinds of weather.”

“I already know how to navigate.” said Frances with a serious tone. Then she smiled brightly, obviously proud of an oncoming witty response, “*By ant!*” And a big smile came across her face.

Doc pointed to the corner of his mouth and licked it. Frances looked at him with a question in her eyes. He did it again. “Oh!” she said as she wiped her palm across the corner of her mouth and wiped away a kernel of oatmeal before licking her palm clean. Doc just threw his head back and laughed and she joined in.

“Com’on...” he said as he rose to his feet, “...we’ll start with some basics.”

Frances sat down and was going to pull her boots on before running to catch up with Doc as he walked towards the Jenny. But she liked the cool morning feel of the dirt against her bare feet, and she set the boots aside. Then she jumped to her feet and ran after Doc.

“Doc?”

He stopped and turned to look at her.

“What’s yor call sign?”

“ It’s just “Doc.””

She had caught up with him, and she stopped next to him saying, “Doc?” And her face went blank.

He laughed and said, “That’s right. ‘Doc.’ That’s what I used to be, a sort of emergency doctor. I used to be a paramedic. My friends called me that because I was pretty good at it. It’s not my real name, just a nickname. Like I said, a sort of call sign.”

“Those guys came when daddy died.”

“Paramedics?”

“Yeah. But they couldn’t do nuthin’. He was already dead.”

“Heart attack?”

“Yes, sir. Right there in that field where yor airplane crashed.”

Doc took another few steps towards the Jenny and stood by the wing.

“Why you not doctoring anymore?” she asked.

“Let’s just say I got tired of it. I got tired of people for a while. It was a long time ago. Let’s talk about flying there, Butterfly.”

Frances beamed at the sound of the word.

Chapter Twelve

The weather never improved that day, so the pair decided to stay at Edy until the skies were flyable. Doc started the day catching up on his writing and Frances wandered the airport until Doc closed his journal.

Doc decided to take a very simplistic approach to teaching her to fly and stuck with basic things. He began by putting her into the back cockpit and letting her move the controls as he explained what functions the controls performed. Frances was full of questions about how this worked and what does that do.

He stood on the wing walk as she sat in the pilot's seat with her feet on the rudder bar and her right hand on the control stick. He had to laugh when he realized she was barefooted, and he thought "*Why not?*" He allowed her to poise her left hand on the throttle knob. Her face was bright, and her attention and attitude was as joyous and as intent as that of a child on Christmas morning pulling the bow loose from a gaily decorated present.

Telling her to look around at the various control surfaces as they moved, her head swiveling as he used his hand to illustrate the airplane's movements, he slowly and patiently explained to her that the wings would bank when the control stick was moved left or right causing the airplane to turn in that direction, that the nose would point left or right when the rudder bar was pushed in either direction, and the nose would rise or fall when you pushed the control stick forward or pulled it back.

He made no attempt to teach her what the instruments indicated; not yet, anyway. That would come, in time, and that would be best illustrated when the airplane was actually in flight. If the improvised Gosport tubes worked, and they could communicate as he hoped, that would make instructing her in the air an

easy affair.

After an hour of talking her through what the controls did, he walked her around the airplane, again using his hands as an imaginary airplane and reminding her of what she had learned in the cockpit, he showed her how the ailerons, the rudder and the elevator were rigged. Occasionally copying his movements, she would use her own hand to mimic the airplane, and as she understood a thing, he could see her eyes light up. And she would smile a bright smile at him. Doc had the increasing feeling that it would not take long before he might trust her with the controls in the air.

As noon drew near, he asked Rutherford if he might have an old broom or a dowel of some kind he might part with, and could he borrow a saw? Rutherford pointed at a corner of his hanger where a well-worn straw broom leaned among other broken and used-up tools. He waved off an offer of payment by Doc. Then Doc thanked him and cut a two-and-a-half foot section off the broom's handle, and he handed that to Frances.

She took it from him and looked at him as if he had just handed her a magic wand. "What's this fer?"

"That's your co-pilot's stick."

"Mine!?"

He explained to her then that in the front cockpit, there was an empty socket where the control stick for that cockpit had been. The front stick had been removed so that riders could not interfere with the airplane's operation. But all she had to do was to insert her broom handle in the socket and put her feet on the front rudder bar and she could fly the airplane, too.

"Can't fly an airplane without one, Butterfly. Don't lose it."

"Oh! I won't. *I won't*. I promise!" The sound of the word 'butterfly' warmed and thrilled her.

"Good. Now, let's find some chow."

"Yes, sir. I'm hongry, too."



It was late in the day and purple darkness was

falling across the grass of the small airfield. Far down the runway, Rutherford sat atop a red, antique tractor pulling a wide mowing deck down the runway and the sweet, earthy smell of freshly mowed grass filled the air. Overhead, the stars had begun to show as pinholes of blinking light.

And, later, on opposite sides of a dwindling fire, Doc was nestled in his sleeping bag, drowsy, his eyes heavy and with sleep closing in, he laid his book and flashlight by his side and rolled over. Meanwhile, Frances lay on her back, her head cradled in her hands, wide awake in her sleeping bag, reliving the morning's lessons of flight and staring into the increasingly dark cobalt night sky as she drew imaginary lines from star-to-star and quietly chuckling to herself when she found the dippers.

Across the last glowing red embers of the fire, she suddenly asked, "You know'd that man, don't you?"

"Who?" said Doc, shaken awake by her voice and, being so, he was a bit irritated.

"That Mister Tubbs."

"First, of all, it's "You *know* that man..." Doc said curtly and then he stopped mid-sentence reminding himself that her misuse of language was part of her charm and what she knew, and he should ignore the writer in himself and not correct her. But it was hard to overlook.

"Yep. I'm pretty sure I do." he replied. "Did."

"His airplane is more different than yours." said Frances. "It's only got one wing."

"It's a Pawnee. Piper makes them."

"Cain't ride but one person, huh?"

Doc laughed, sat halfway up and propped his head on one hand to face her, his annoyance fading. "Frances, it wasn't built to take but one person, the pilot. It's an ag airplane."

"Oh." said Frances as if she understood. Doc knew she didn't. And he said, "Do you know what an 'ag' airplane is?" Frances sat up in her bag and adopted her

all attention pose, her chin cupped in her hands, her elbows resting on her knees, her eyes locked on his, and she shook her head no.

“It’s a crop duster. In front of the pilot is a big tank that holds chemicals that the airplane sprays to kill insects or fungus on crops. They fly very low across the big crop fields out here. Don’t see many where I’m from. There’s a lot of corn and wheat around here, so I guess that’s how he’s making money.”

“Can yor airplane do that?”

“Nope. It was built just to train pilots.”

“Like yor gonna teach me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” And Doc waited a few seconds for effect before he said, “But only if you let me get some sleep.” And he rolled on to his back and pulled his sleeping bag up over his face, and said a muffled “Good night.”



The sun was barely pink in the eastern sky when Doc pulled the bag down from his face roused by the smell of coffee. He rolled to his side to look for Frances, but her bag was empty and rumped. About a foot away from his face sat his tin cup, the coffee’s steam rising from it. The small fire was now a few licks of soft yellow flames. The jar of instant coffee with a plastic spoon resting on its top and the empty water pan sat at the edge of the small fire.

The heat from the fire felt good on his face. He unzipped his bag, sat up and looked around. From Tubb’s hangar across the way, he heard a soft clunk. He lifted the cup to his face and looked deep into the hangar trying to adjust his eyes to the faint morning light. Standing on the wing walk of the Pawnee was Frances bent over and looking into the airplane’s open cockpit.

Doc whistled at her sharply and waved at her to come back. She rose straight and looked at him for a second before jumping down from the wing and running back to the fire.

"I was jest lookin'." she said, slightly out-of-breath.

"Rule one." said Doc emphatically. "Stay clear of other people's airplanes unless they tell you otherwise."

Frances registered some injury in her gaze and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Her hand immediately went over her mouth in her embarrassment.

Doc waved his hand saying, "It's all right. Don't worry about it. Just consider it part of your flying education. You didn't know." And he took a sip from his cup and said, "The coffee's good. Thanks!"

She smiled that eyes half-closed soft smile that she did whenever he thanked her for anything before she said, "Yor welcome."

Then she said, "You never did tell me how you know'd that man, Mister Tubbs."

"This again, huh?" said Doc hoping to avoid the subject.

She waited patiently for an answer.

"Okay. I knew him down in Florida many years ago. I only met him briefly a few times, but I remember him well. He should be dead."

Frances's eyes opened wide at that.

"I can't believe he's still flying."

Just then, the Buick, trailing a brown dust cloud, turned off of the airport boundary road and Rutherford pulled up behind the small airport office building and parked.

"I'll tell you about all this later. Just don't say anything, okay?"

Frances put her finger to her lip and winked at him.

Rutherford slammed the door on the old Buick and walked quick step over to Doc who was sitting cross legged smoking a cigarette and sipping his coffee. Frances pretended to be busy repacking her small suitcase turning her back on the pair.

Rutherford silently sat down on the ground in front of Doc and picked up a dry twig, and he dragged it across the ground in front of himself scratching a thin line in the dirt in contemplation, obviously needing to

say something. For a few more seconds, he said nothing. Then he said, "I *do* remember you." And he looked at Doc to study his response.

Doc smiled, chuckled, and replied, "Didn't think I was crazy."

Rutherford laughed dryly. Then after a short pause, he said, "Can you do me a favor? A big one?"

"I think I know what you are going to say." said Doc.

"It's a good life here. No one has ever challenged me. I think I'm safe. The F.A.A. doesn't seem to know I exist."

"Did you ever get your ticket back?"

"No. And that's the thing of it. I wouldn't be here if I had. I'd probably still be in Florida. I started my life over here, and dusting was the only thing I knew."

"It wasn't really your fault, you know. You didn't do it on purpose. It was an accident."

"That's what I tried to tell 'em. But you know the feds."

"All too well."

"Well...?" asked Rutherford.

"Will I tell anybody?" asked Doc.

Rutherford shook his head yes and waited silently for the answer.

"Why would I piss on your parade?" said Doc. "Besides, after that day, I am amazed to see that you are still alive. The last I heard, you were in the hospital, near death."

"It was a long haul, but I guess I'm hard to kill."

"I guess you are." said Doc.

Rutherford abruptly lowered his head in relief and didn't need to say anything else. He simply got to his feet and looked down at Doc and extended his hand.

Doc shook his hand firmly and earnestly.

Then Rutherford said, "Thanks! If ever I can do anything for..."

"Forget it. You gave me a broom. Remember?"

And the pair laughed softly together.

And Rutherford said, "I was afraid to refuse you."

Only Doc laughed at that.

And Rutherford said, "Thanks! I won't forget it."

Doc nodded his head as if to say, "*No problem.*"

As Rutherford walked away towards his hangar, Doc raised his voice and said, "Might need a little gas this morning though."

Rutherford stopped walking and turned to look at Doc saying, "It's on the house. Help yourself."



"It was the tailwind that did it."

Frances looked at Doc with a questioning stare.

"Okay, let me explain that."

Frances nodded okay.

"Always try to take off into the wind as it's blowing toward you, if there is any wind at all."

The look of puzzlement was still there.

"It helps the airplane get off the ground faster. If it's blowing from behind you, it keeps you on the ground longer and you need more runway to take-off."

Her raised eyes registered understanding.

"If you take off into the wind, that's called "upwind." With the wind at your back, that's "downwind."

She shook her head that she heard him. But he knew that she still didn't understand why. So he told her to pretend that she was riding in a car with the window down and she had her hand out the window shaped like an airfoil and pointed up; and he showed her that the wind coming at her would push her hand up and it created "lift," and if her hand was pointed down, the wind would push her down trying to keep her on the ground and that was called "drag." He knew the explanation wasn't exactly technical, but it would do for her, for now.

Then he looked over at Edy's windsock, a bright orange fabric cone barely extended and fluttering only slightly in the nearly still morning air, and he asked her which way she would take off this morning?

She pointed west.

"Good!" he said. "Very good."

Then he said, "Grover," u-h-h, Mister Tubbs, was spraying dry fertilizer that morning. He was working out of a big field and there was no wind, so he could take off in any direction he wanted. To save time, he took off in the direction of the field on the other side of a tree line, the field where he would release the fertilizer."

Frances tried to picture what he was saying, but she found it hard and asked, "How'd he do it?"

"Do what?"

"Spray the fertilize?"

"Remember I told you about the tank in front of the pilot?" She nodded yes. "Well, the fertilizer is put in the tank. The tank is called a 'hopper.'" And in the cockpit there's a handle the pilot pulls when he wants to open the hopper and drop the fertilizer. Understand?"

She nodded that she did.

"And it's heavy stuff. A full hopper will add about 700 pounds weight to the airplane."

"You have to take off into the wind so you get off quicker, huh?"

"Right!" Doc laughed. And he shook his head yes, saying, "Good." Then he said, "The problem that day was that there was no wind until later in the morning as the sun got higher in the sky and he wasn't paying attention."

Frances's eyes widened some.

"He made about seven take-offs that morning, all in the direction of the field he was spraying and during the last take-off, a very fast tail wind suddenly started blowing from behind him. It caught him off-guard and he was committed to the take-off. He had no choice. He had to try to clear the trees."

"How'd you know all this?"

"I was one of his loaders. It was my first day. There were three of us grabbing 75 pound sacks of fertilizer off of a half-ton truck and loading him as he sat in the cockpit with the engine running. It was a dirty, dusty, nasty job. But I needed the money to pay for an airplane I wanted to buy."

“The Jenny?”

“Yep.” But then, he shook his head side-to-side and he said, “But I didn’t get paid that day. Nobody did.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t clear the trees or the guy on the tractor on the other side of the tree line.”

And with that, Doc went silent, looking away to the distant horizon, and Frances could tell that it was time to stop asking questions, hopeful that the rest of the story would come out another time. And it would.

Chapter Thirteen

The girl's hair was the deepest shade of henna that Doc had ever seen. Frances saw her and immediately turned sideways, so as not to embarrass anyone if she was overheard.

"That girl's got some red hair." said Frances a little excitedly.

"Lucille Ball had nothing on her." whispered Doc.



They had circled Watkins late that morning – made a few low passes – just to see who might turn out. The gosport tubes had worked just fine, and the system was that when Doc wanted to talk to Frances, he would tap her on the shoulder up front, and if she wanted to talk to him, she would point to her ears. Then each would don their stethoscopes, "the gosports," and speak back and forth through the tin funnels. Matter of fact, where Doc was concerned, the gosports worked a little too well. Frances was a long way from ever being blasé about flight, and she had endless questions; chattered at Doc like a magpie, excited about everything around her and full of questions about what the gauges on her instrument panel in her cockpit meant; her banter was nearly without interruption the entire one hour and twenty minute flight from Edy.

But he salved himself by constantly reminding himself that she would do more to enliven his stories than anything that might have happened to him so far. Her joy in every discovery she made was infectious, and he quickly settled into the acceptance that she was, in reality, a writer's gift. He kept a small steno pad clipped to his kneeboard, a kind of writing desk that rested on his thigh secured by a strap around his leg, and he scribbled notes as they flew.



Before take-off, he had allowed her to put her broomstick handle in the receiver socket up front, and he allowed her to lightly rest her feet on the rudder bar.

A part of his pre-flight talk with her was his stern instructions, "Lightly hold the control stick and follow my movements. Do the same with your feet. Just rest your toes on the rudder bar. That way you can feel the control movements when I make the maneuvers from the back. But, for now I own the airplane."

"Shore, I knew that you own the airplane. It's yours, ain't it?"

Doc laughed. "What I mean when I say that 'I own the airplane,' is that I'm in command, and I, and only I operate the controls."

"Oh!" smiled Frances as she lowered her head feeling foolish. "I was pretty dumb to say that, huh?"

Doc snarled. "Don't ever let me hear you say that you are dumb...or stupid...or slow...again." And he raised his voice, "Because you are not!"

Frances looked up into his eyes and smiled sweetly.

"And if I ever hear anybody say..." and his voice trailed off and he shut up realizing how cosseted he was becoming towards her. A second passed before he said, "Well, anyway, you aren't."

"One day, when you are ready, I'll let you fly and then it will be your airplane when I say it is. Savvy?"

"Yes, sir!" she said, proudly remembering what 'savvy' meant; and as she stood on the wing walk ready to put her leg into the cockpit, she came to attention, and she saluted him with her left hand looking a little like a comic French soldier saluting with her palm turned outward. And her soft blue eyes twinkled. And the tiniest smile appeared at the upturned corners of her mouth. And Doc's memory took a snap shot of the picture of her there as he looked up into her beaming, freckled face.



A small pack of locals had seen the Jenny circuit Watkins and had driven out to the field on the outskirts

of town to see if they could find where it went down. Doc operated the Jenny's throttle causing the engine to backfire and sputter, which all Jenny's normally do anyway. But, it was fun helping the good local folks think that the airplane might crash, and a few would always come running to see the sight. It got the ball rolling.

In one pick-up, they arrived, pulling off of the blacktop highway and rolling to a stop at the side of the road near the fence line as Doc and Frances walked around the Jenny stretching their legs. Doc had his sign folded, and he carried it under his arm. The ball of string he would use to attach the sign to the field wire fence along the road bulged in his pants pocket.

A man who looked to be in his seventies, his trousers pulled high over a plentiful stomach, his belt cinched well above his navel and wearing a plaid shirt underneath his blue suspenders stood next to a woman who appeared to be somewhat older - her plain gray dress gently billowing in the breeze - she appeared to be his wife - sullen faced and dark eyes squinting beneath her hand that shielded against the sun's glare; the couple was flanked by three young, gloomy looking, thin boys; all teenagers who had emptied the truck bed and now stood warily shoulder-to-shoulder and silent, unsmiling, at the fence.

With Frances in trail, Doc stepped to the fence and he asked, "Anybody know who owns this field?" In these moments, Doc always turned on the charm. "Think they'd mind if we gave a few airplane rides out of the field?" And he smiled. Broadly. The small group of onlookers cast knowing glances at one another before the older man with a week's worth of gray beard stubble and the high pants, spoke up. "Twiddle does." he said in a clipped manner. Then he said, "We thought you'd crashed."

"Nope!" said Doc in a high, cheerful voice, and he forced a well-practiced smile, then he said, "We thought we'd come see if anyone here wanted to spend a few

minutes in the brilliant, cool sky and see their house from the air.” He was laying it on. From behind him, less than a foot away, he heard the smallest of chortles, more of a snort, really. And he looked, and sure enough, Frances, trying to be invisible, had her hand over her mouth, and her mirth filled eyes got her a hard stare from Doc. Her shoulders shook slightly. Keeping a straight face on Frances was going to take some effort.

He turned back to the grim little group, and continued, “Ten dollars. That’s all a ten minute ride in a plane of the Golden Age of Aviation costs! One of the safest aer-o-planes ever made!” He always said ‘aer-o-plane’ to the locals thinking it sounded more old timey. “Who’s first?”

In the hanging silence that followed, Doc asked, “Who is Twiddle? He live nearby?”

Just then, another pick-up truck slowly rolled up and pulled over, its tires crunching the gravel along the roads shoulder.

It was an old, 1954, Dodge pick-up truck, its rusty fenders seemingly held in place by great, dull-silver colored patches of Bondo. The truck eased up to the fence. The driver’s door opened and a man in faded dungarees and scuffed cowboy boots stepped out. He appeared to be in his fifties with a chiseled, square face and pronounced jaws that seemed permanently clinched behind a pointed chin. A dusty, rust-colored, sweat stained and worn baseball cap did little to hide his curly red hair. In the truck on the passenger’s side, Doc could just make out the very top of someone’s head. Someone small.

“You folks okay?” asked the Dodge’s driver addressing Doc and Frances as he approached the fence. He grasped the top wire with both weathered and leathery, swollen hands, appearing, obviously a working man, perhaps a farmer. Before Doc could answer, the man looked alongside himself at the group of five and he nodded, acknowledging their presence, somewhat coolly. The fat man with the suspenders dipped his head and

quietly said, "Twiddle." And he said no more. The woman stared at Twiddle. "Mrs. Farland." said Twiddle and he nodded again. She curtly nodded in return.

Doc, seeing the obvious friction, approached Twiddle and extended his hand, "Yeah, sure, we're fine. Thanks."

"I own this land." said Twiddle as he took Doc's hand across the fence. And he smiled warmly. And he pointed at the Jenny. "Haven't seen one of those in many years." said Twiddle. "Never flew one though. I'm Twiddle, by the way."

Doc said, "I take it you're a pilot."

"Used to be." said Twiddle. And he cast his eyes down before saying again, "Used to be." Then he asked, "You folks have trouble?"

"No, sir." replied Doc. "We're just doing a little barnstorming across the Midwest for the summer."

"Really!" exclaimed Twiddle.

"Hope you don't mind that we landed in your field." said Doc.

"You going to sell rides?"

"If you let us." answered Doc.

"How long you planning on doing that?"

"Well..., a day or two, if no one complains."

Twiddle looked down the fence and a slightly menacing look came across his face as he glared at Mister Farland. "I don't think anyone around here is gonna complain. Isn't that so, Farland?" Farland shook his head no, and he shoved his hands in his pockets. Then he turned and walked towards his truck, and the entire family, in turn - Mrs. Farland and the three boys - one-by-one, peeled away from the fence and followed Farland back to their truck in a single file line.

Doc watched that, and Frances, too. And the pair looked at one another and she very slightly shrugged her shoulders in question. Doc nearly imperceptively shook his head no and he turned to Twiddle saying, "Do you fly now?"

Twiddle watched the Farlands' for a second or two longer before he answered Doc. "Not since I retired and

took up dairy farming. I'm sorry about that."

"About not flying?"

"No. That bunch." he said crooking his arm and pointing his thumb over his shoulder. "The old man is always in everybody's business and looking to make trouble. But he knows better than to cross me." Then Twiddle stopped talking for a brief second, and he looked back at his truck, then back at Doc. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No problem." said Doc. Then Doc said, "I've got my own apology to make. I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm Doc." And he turned to Frances and he held out his hand which Frances took, and Doc said, "And I almost forgot to introduce, Frances..." And Frances looked at Doc, not Twiddle, waiting to see how he would introduce her this time, and Doc said, "...my co-pilot." The words nearly made Frances light-headed and she squeezed Doc's hand lightly, and he released his grip. "We're partners." he added. And he beamed a brief smile.

Twiddle smiled. "Nice to meet you both." Then Twiddle paused before saying, "I've got get *my* partner out of the truck. "And by the way, you can fly out of here all you want, if you do me a favor." With that, Twiddle turned and went to his truck.



Doc and Frances watched as at the truck, Twiddle reached into the bed and extracted a folding wheel chair, and he shook it open before wheeling it around to the passenger side. At the passenger door, he opened it, leaned in and reappeared with a small girl cradled across his arms. One of her arms hung limp at her side and her light blue flowered dress flowed over his hands. He gently set her in the chair and bent to place her feet on the chair's foot rests just so. The dress all but hid the lower half of her calves but the braces showed atop her white Mary Jane patent shoes. Her hair hung down across her shoulders in finely braided pigtails and was copper-red, deeply henna.

Frances drew in a deep breath and said, "That girl's got some red hair." said Frances a little excitedly in a whisper.

"Lucille Ball had nothing on her." whispered Doc in return.

Twiddle walked down the fence line pushing the girl in the wheel chair to an open gate some 20 yards away and Doc and Frances followed along on the other side of the fence. At the gate, Twiddle carefully pushed the chair across the bumpy cattle grate where he met Doc and Frances.

"Folks, I'd like you to meet my best friend and *my* partner, my daughter Clarice."

The girl, Clarice, immediately raised her right arm and her open hand and with some difficulty she waved it blindly in search another hand to shake. Her head was laid over and seemingly pressed to her left shoulder as if some large hand was pushing it down and would not let her straighten it. Frances was quick to size things up and took the girls hand, and she knelt, and she said, "Hi, Clarice! I'm Frances. But my call sign is "Butterfly. So you can call me that, too."

Twiddle walked to France's side and placed a hand on her shoulder and said quietly, "Frances, if you look into her face closely, she is smiling. That means she heard you. Did she squeeze your hand?"

"Yes, sir." And Frances bent further to see under Clarice's little pink sunglasses. Frances caught only the gaze of a partially open eye but could see the large smile on Clarice's face.

"That means she heard you."

"Did she squeeze it twice?"

Frances shook her head yes.

"That means she's happy."

Frances looked at Twiddle, then at Doc and the rims of her eyes were full to the brim. A single tear gathered at the corner of her eye.

"She only talks to me in whispers." said Twiddle.
"She has always wanted to fly like I did. I told her that

one day she would. When I saw the Jenny and you in my field, I hoped..."

"Oh, Doc..." pleaded Frances in a high voice.

"We'll make it happen." said Doc resolutely as he stiffened his back, and he looked at Twiddle, "Don't you worry about *that*."

Twiddle reached over and laid a hand on Doc's shoulder, and he smiled, "Tomorrow?"

"If the creeks don't rise." said Doc.

Frances would not let go of Clarice's hand.

As Frances remained on her knee still holding Clarice's hand, Twiddle stepped to one side and motioned to Doc to follow.

"You guy's staying with your airplane here tonight?" asked Twiddle.

"If it's no bother. You mind if we build a small fire to heat supper?"

"No problem." said Twiddle. "By the way, those trees down there? Pull the dead stuff off for your fire. If you need more wood, just let me know. And, by the way, call me Gene."

Doc reached to shake Gene's hand again, and he said, "Thanks. 'Gene' it is."

Gene leaned closer and said, "You interested in a little homemade sipping whiskey?"

Doc smiled and said, "Just a little."

"Tonight, then." said Gene, "I'll come back after the wife gets Clarice in bed. It won't be late."

"Tonight, then." said Doc.

Chapter Fourteen

As dark began to set in, Frances busied herself gathering what dead wood she could find among the trees, and she made several trips back and forth with armloads of kindling and small dead limbs depositing them on the ground where the fire for the evening would be made. As she did, she thought to herself that her life had changed overnight. She was at the same time happy, excited, homesick and afraid.

She ran the pictures of things she'd seen in the week since leaving the mountains of her home through her mind as the flickering images of a kaleidoscope. Gathering the small bunches of dry twigs in her hands, she suddenly was stricken by a dread. It occurred to her that a summer was short, three months or so, and some day, she knew not when exactly, her time with Doc would end. What then? What would she do? She had no camera, no way to capture and see again what was unfolding in front of her eyes. No way to relive the sights and the sensations.

All of that was underscored by the nagging thought that she was getting further and further away from home. But Doc had assured her that when the summer did end, he would get her home, if that was what she wished.

She hoped the thing that she might take away was the learned skill of flight. Flying! Could she really become a pilot, she wondered? If, by the end of the summer, she could fly on her own? And, for a moment, the dread, the possible promises, the end of summer, it all overtook her and she just sat down and stared into space, lost in a mixture of emotions. And it overwhelmed her.

Doc was sitting beneath the wing of the Jenny eating a peanut butter cracker as he watched her, and he saw her settle to the ground, and he noticed the familiar far-

a-way stare she cast. Momentarily, he wondered if she was okay. But, soon, she stood, gathered her firewood and herself and began slowly walking back.

Along the way back to the airplane, she snuffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve determining to not let on what she was feeling. She promised herself that she would take the summer, what was left of it, one day, one event at a time, and she forced a smile as she approached Doc who looked up at her and said, "Maybe that guy Gene will bring some more wood out with him when he comes." She held the smile, dropped the wood on the ground and then asked Doc for a match.

Doc leaned back and fished in his pocket for the small box of matches and finding it, pulled it out and gave it to her. She took the box, and she constructed a tiny pyramid of dry twigs over a discarded and crumpled candy bar wrapper, and she asked, "Doc, do you really think I can learn to fly?"

Doc looked at her blankly for a long second, and he said, "Anyone can."

"I mean really fly. Go places like you do. Maybe on my own someday."

Doc smiled broadly and said, "Butterfly, my lady, I never knew anyone who couldn't if they really wanted to."

She struck a match on the side of the box and held it to the wrapper; and as the paper curled and crackled, it began to flare, and she leaned in and gently puffed a breath on it and the kindling above caught and began to smoke. As the smoke began swirling upwards in gray wisps above the burgeoning first flickers of yellow and orange, she shook her head that she had heard him but remained silent.

Then after a long pause, as she added a few larger pieces of wood to the fire, she asked, "But ain't there a lot more to learn than just moving the stick and pedals?"

"I told you there was. Yes. Things like learning navigation and weather and all that."

Her face became pinched, her brow furrowed some.

“But it’s nothing you can’t learn if you really want.”

Her brow smoothed and her face relaxed.

“It’s just a matter of two things.”

Frances sat back and crossed her legs adopting her chin cupped in her hands, elbows on her knees, leaning forward posture that meant she was rapt.

Doc continued. “Listen. The first rule is that you’ve got to believe you can. You’ve got to use your imagination and begin to see yourself as a pilot and believe it will happen.” He paused for a split second and he said, “You know how I got my first airplane? One I could not afford.”

She shook her head no.

“Well, I cut pictures of the one I wanted out of magazines; *exact* pictures of the kind of airplane I wanted. Even the color I wanted, which was easy, because most of them were that color anyway. Yellow. It was a Piper Cub, a J-3. Then I stuck those pictures everywhere in my house. On the refrigerator door, on the mirror in my bathroom, on closet doors. I even had a few pasted in my car.”

Frances found that funny and she laughed, and as usual, she covered her mouth with a hand.

“What’d you do then?” she asked lowering her hand.

“I looked at them, studied them everyday. And as clearly as my imagination would let me, I imagined myself flying that airplane. It became a total obsession.”

“A what?” she said.

“An ‘obsession,’” said Doc. “An ‘obsession.’ It was all I thought about all day long. I read everything I could about every aspect, every small detail of the airplane. I even had a picture of one glued to the rearview mirror in my car.”

She laughed again. But Doc could see an understanding in her eyes. She nodded vigorously that she had heard him.

“Then there’s rule number two. But you have to follow the two rules together.”

Not allowing a reaction from Frances, Doc quickly added, "Rule two is you've just got to decide that nothing will stop you. You will do whatever it takes to get there."

Frances reached to her side and pulled one of the bigger limbs towards her and gently placed it atop the now hot blaze. She still had said nothing.

"Listen..." said Doc, "...it's how doctors become doctors, it's how lawyers become lawyers, it's how anybody achieves anything. It's so simple. And it can be so hard. I went hungry some days trying to save enough money. I didn't date anybody for over a year because I didn't want to spend money on some girl. At one point I was working three jobs."

Frances had stood and was brushing the dry grass from her behind. She still had said nothing as she stopped that and began to scratch her head as she looked at Doc in obvious deep contemplation.

Doc wasn't really sure he had gotten his message across, so he just waited on her reaction, one he did not expect.

"Doc?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You really think...?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do. Is there anything else?" And Doc laughed.

She shook her head no, but immediately said,

"Doc?"

"How'd you learn to write and tell them stories?"

Doc laughed boisterously at that.

"Boy, that was a quick change of subject."

And his eyes sparkled with the fire's light as he said, "I just decided I could. Then I found teachers."

A look of question came across her face, and she asked, "In school?"

"No. In books. I decided that the best teachers I could find were the writers who wrote the books that I liked. So I set out to find books that I enjoyed. Some of those are in my bag over there if you want to read them."

She looked at him and cocked her head slightly and she said, "How'd them other writers teach you to write?"

"I didn't read so much to be entertained. I studied how they structured their thoughts, how they built their stories, how they described things, how they used commas, dashes, everything. I read the one's I was comfortable with over and over and over, slowly. I kept notes about how they used words and paragraphs and phrases, everything. I let them teach me what they knew."

At first, a question crossed Frances's face until she understood what he said, and she said, "Oh!"

Then Doc's curiosity got the best of him.

"Butterfly."

"Sir?"

"Why all the questions? First flying, then writing. I'm just curious."

"Oh, nuthin' really. I jest wondered." But that was a lie. A plan was jelling in her mind.

"But..." she said, "If I decided to read them books, would you help me if I don't understand sumpthin'?"

"You bet your pink panties I will." said Doc almost matter-of-factly before Frances, a bit shocked, loosed a peal of laughter. And Doc realizing what he'd said laughed along.

Doc splashed some water in his tin cup and set it next to the fire and was scrounging around in his cook box for something to heat for supper, and he asked her, "Beef or chicken stew tonight?"

Ever preoccupied with questions, she answered, "Doc..?"

"Beef or chicken?" said Doc persistently, knowing that if he didn't force an answer, he might not eat, and he laughed.

"Don't matter to me." she said.

"Doc...?"

"Glad that's settled." said Doc sardonically. "What?"

"What you reckon's wrong with that poor girl, Clarice?"

“Not sure.” he answered. “I’ve been pondering that myself.”

“She sure seems in a bad state.” said Frances.

“Yup.” said Doc, not really meaning to be flip. “Maybe we’ll find out tonight if Mister Twiddle shows up.”

“She made me sad.”

“I know she did.” said Doc. “But try to remember that there is a reason for everything. Even if we can’t see it.”

And Doc heard the rapid thumping of tires as Gene’s truck rumbled across the bars of the cattle grate.

“Maybe we’ll find out tonight.” he said again.



After Gene had left to take Clarice home that afternoon, Doc and Frances untied their loads from the Jenny’s braces and began to set up their sparse camp.

Frances took a drink from her water bottle, and as she set it on the ground, she asked, “Doc, you never did finish telling me the story about Mister Grover back there.”

“The story’s kinda long.”

The look on France’s face said, okay.

Doc lit a Camel, took a deep draw, and the smoke slowly began to curl away from his lips before he said, “He accidentally killed a fellow.”

Frances sat straight up as if an electric shock had run through her and she said, “Really? Naw. *Really?*”

“Yes, ma’am. Right in front of me.”

Frances leaned forward, her eyes wide.

“I had just been hired to work dusting citrus trees down in Florida that year. The outfit that hired me was just a two plane outfit using Pawnees like the one you saw at Edy. It was owned by Grover and a guy named, Harold.”

Doc paused for a moment and looked into the distance before continuing. He was trying to put the affair in order in his mind.

“I hadn’t been working for them long. They hired me

on as a pilot, but I only got to do little flying for them. I was going to quit and look somewhere else, but Harold asked me to help them out on a big fertilizing operation near Palatka for a few days.

Anyway, long story short, we had worked loading Grover all morning. He'd land empty, and we would lift heavy paper bags of dry fertilizer from a flat bed truck on to the wing where someone else would cut them open and dump them into the hopper. Grover didn't want to shut the engine down because he was afraid his battery was low and he might not get his engine started again, so we loaded him while the airplane was running. We started very early in the morning and it was cool and there was no wind.

We were working out of a very large pasture, so he could take off in any direction he wanted. The field that he was fertilizing was on the other side of a tree line. The tree line was only about 20 yards thick and it was mostly tall pines. All he had to do was to get airborne, hop over the tree line and drop down and make his runs low across the field he was fertilizing. The first eight or nine loads went that way, but then the wind started gradually increasing with the heat of the day."

"How big was the field 'ta other side?" asked Frances.

"Bout sixty or seventy acres. He'd make a pass, pull up into a hammerhead..." Doc used his hands to demonstrate the sharp pull-up and then the dive back down in reverse to illustrate the hammerhead maneuver to Frances. "...and he'd do that seven or eight passes to empty his load, then he'd hop back over the tree line and land so we could fill him up again."

"Would you show me that when we fly again?" and Frances flew the maneuver with her hand above her head.

Doc laughed and said, "Yep. It's easy to do. I'll fly you through it. No problem."

Frances clapped her hands softly, and she leaned further in to hear what came next.

“Anyway. The wind was starting to occasionally gust to maybe seven or eight knots.”

A question came across France’s face. “Knots?”

“Yeah.” said Doc. “About eight miles and hour. Not too strong.”

“*I know!*” Frances interjected excitedly. “I bet he couldn’t get off the ground.”

“It was taking him longer to get in the air and clear the tree line at the end. The accident happened a little later. See, he was getting too used to doing the same thing over and over, taking off with a tailwind, and he wasn’t paying attention like he should have when it happened.”

“Did he hit the trees?”

“Yeah. But not like you think.”

Frances’s eyes had widened.

“On the last load, just as he throttled up to take-off, the winds picked up to over 20 knots steady for just a minute. Like I said, fertilizer is heavy and he didn’t realize he wasn’t getting lift until it was too late to abort the take-off. We thought he would just brush the tree tops, but at the last second, he decided to try to roll the airplane up on its side and knife edge his way through a small opening in the tree line. But he clipped a tree with a wing.”

Frances gasped.

Doc had his hand held up on its side to illustrate what Grover had done and suddenly he rolled his hand over and over. “When he hit the tree, the Pawnee cart wheeled and went end over end into the field on the other side just as a farm hand drove a tractor by underneath him.”

Frances’s face tightened and she put both hands to her face as if she had just watched a scene in a frightening movie.

“We all took off running for the crash site. After fighting our way through the trees, we found the farm hand sprawled on the ground and the tractor still running, making circles around him. His head was gone.

One guy ran to jump on the tractor to stop it. I ran for the ball of junk that was a smoldering airplane. But I couldn't find Grover. To this day, he doesn't know it was me that eventually found him.

When I found the Pawnee's cockpit empty – there was just a boot and his wrist watch, stopped at 11:18, in what was left of the cockpit – I started looking around for him. I found a blood trail and followed it.

He had somehow gotten out of the wreckage and crawled into the trees and palmetto scrubs and hid himself under a clump of palmettos. Back then, he always kept a pistol tucked in his waistband. When I found him, he was sitting propped up against the trunk of a small palm, and he had the gun pointed at me as I approached him. See, Grover was a helicopter pilot in the war and when the accident happened, I guess the shock of it took him back to the war. He must have thought that I was V.C.”

“What's a 'V.C.?'” asked Frances.

“Not 'what'...who?” said Doc. “Viet Cong, the enemy. He thought I was gonna kill him or capture him.”

“Jesus!” said Frances quietly. “Jesus.”

“I saw him just as he pulled the trigger. But all I heard was a “click.” Shit. I shouldn't even be here. The gun was his old service model .45 semi-automatic pistol and it misfired. I screamed at him and that kind of brought him out of his daze for a second. It gave me enough time to snatch the gun away. He was totally incoherent and thought he had been shot down over the jungle.”

Doc lit another Camel and leaned back on his hands. He took a long deep drag and let the smoke slowly swirl away in wisps from his lips. For a second, he seemed lost in the memory.

“What happened then?” said a wide eyed Frances.

Her question brought him back, and he said, “A truck full of guys from the farm pulled up behind me. He was covered in blood and I could see the jagged white ends of his femur, u-m-m, his upper leg, sticking out of

his jeans and his left hand was mangled. He had a large gash across his chin. I found out later that both his legs had been broken. I'll never understand how he crawled the thirty yards into the scrub as fast as he did. It must have been pure survival instinct."

Frances shook her head that she agreed.

"When they got him loaded on the truck and headed for the hospital, and mind you, this was long before I became a paramedic, and had gotten used to seeing such things, all I wanted to do was to get back home to Virginia. So, I got in my car and drove straight back to the Northern Neck. I felt useless that I couldn't do more for him there. But I think he was the reason that I did become a medic. I wasn't going to feel helpless again."

Frances's face softened, and her look became that of concern.

Doc laughed a small constrained laugh and he said, "Anyway, I found out later that he was hospitalized for several months and that he had been charged with involuntary manslaughter and to top it off the the feds took his pilot's license away. The way he acted at Edy..." and Doc stopped to think for a second, "...well...it made me think that he's flying illegal now. In fact, I'm sure of it."

Doc crushed his cigarette out in the dirt and threw the butt off to one side. Frances got up and ran over to the spent cigarette and picked it up and placed it in a small pile of trash intended to be burned later. She said nothing but gave Doc a squint-eyed glare and stamped her foot at him. That made Doc laugh and he said, "Okay. Okay. I get the message." which got him a low "harrumph" from her.

"Did he go to jail?" she asked.

"I really don't know. Probably not. It was purely an accident. I was never called to witness or anything. I lost track of the whole thing once I got back home."

Frances returned to her seat on the ground and drew circles in the dirt with her finger as she thought. And then, after a few minutes had passed. she said, "Is

he in trouble now?”

“I don’t know. If he’s dusting without a license, he might be.”

The last thing Doc said caused Frances’s eyes to open wide, and she said, with mild alarm, “Thought you said you don’t *need* no license to fly.”

“Did I?”

She shook her head yes.

“No, I don’t think I did. What I said, if I remember correctly, is that anyone can fly if they know how.”

“Oh.” said Frances and she lightly bit her lip.

“What’s wrong?” asked Doc.

“Does that mean I have to take a test to fly?” she said and her face got that pinched look again.

“No.” and then Doc quickly said, “Well...yes.”

Frances looked at him with an obvious air of confusion.

“Listen. Here’s the deal.” he said. “As long as you are up in the air with me, I can let you fly the airplane all I want.”

She smiled.

“But!...” he continued, “...if you are ever going to want to take passengers up, you are going to need a license. And that means that someday you will need to get tested by the F.A.A. and pass that test. Until then, you can fly solo, by yourself, if your flight instructor, which is me, says you can.”

A frown grew on her face and she pursed her lips at that.

“But, listen, that is a ways off yet, and who knows, you might decide at some point that flying is not for you.”

She shook her head repeatedly no at that and said, “I’m gonna learn to fly.”

“I have no doubt you will.” said Doc.



“Doc?”

Doc smiled, feeling a bit exasperated at yet another question, and he thought to himself, “*She’s teaching me*”

patience.” and he smiled a forbearing smile.

“Yes, um.”

“If I was wanting to start learning from reading one of them books, which one should I start with?”

“It’s “those”...” he said curtly, before stopping himself.

“Well, what kind of stories do you like?” he continued.

Frances lowered her head and absent-mindedly drew a small circle in the dirt with a finger, then she answered, “I like animals.” And as she raised her head and looked at Doc, she said, “I like love stories, too,”

“What about a story about a boy who loves an animal?”

“That’d be all right.” she answered.

“Well, one of the books in my bag fits the bill, and I’ve learned just about everything I know about writing from the lady who wrote it.”

“Which’uns that?”

“I’ll show you. Get my bag, okay?”

Frances rose to her feet and went over to the Jenny and pulled Doc’s writing satchel from under his seat and quickly returned to the fire.

Doc took the bag from her and thanked her before reaching into the bag. He withdrew one book, leaned forward, and he handed the book to her.

She took it from him and momentarily studied the worn and feathered cover before slowly flipping through its yellowed pages.

“It’s about a deer, ain’t it?”

“No. It’s about a boy who loves a deer. A yearling deer.”

“Sure is got a lot of words in it, don’t it?”

“It does. And the lady who wrote it won a big prize for writing it.”

Frances studied Doc’s face closely before she spoke. “Will I learn to write like you if I read it?”

“It’s how I learned to write.” said Doc. “I can nearly quote the book verbatim...” and he stopped himself and

said "...word-for-word." And he laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Oh, nothing." said Doc.

Chapter Fifteen

The light from Gene's truck swept across the pair, causing both Doc and Frances to shield their eyes.

"I'm sorry guys!" said Gene as he got out of the truck and closed the door, the door making a hollow steel sound as it shut. "I didn't mean to blind you."

Doc raised a hand and said, "No problem."

"Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not a thing in the world. I was just telling war stories."

Frances raised an eyebrow, not having heard any stories about a war.

"Ha!" laughed Gene. "Got a few of those myself."

In the dim glow of the fire as Gene stood near, Doc could see that Gene held a large Mason jar of something at his side. "What 'cha got there? As if I didn't know." said Doc. And he laughed.

"Little home made hooch." said Gene. "Like a sip or two?"

"I could be forced." said Doc.

"How 'bout you, Frances?" said Gene looking at Frances who was laying stretched out across her sleeping bag, her head propped one hand.

She waved a hand no at him. "I'm just fine." she said. "You get Clarice to bed?"

"Yes, ma'am. The wife's with her now. Will be, all night. We never leave her alone."

Frances didn't quite know what to make of what he said and thought it best just to say nothing. But she desperately wanted to know more about Clarice.

"You got something to drink from?" Gene asked Doc.

"Got my tin coffee cup here." said Doc.

"Sure you don't want a touch, young lady?" he asked again.

Frances waved him off saying, "Don't want none,

thanks. I'll just make me some coffee."

Doc held his cup forth and Gene unscrewed the lid on the jar, and he splashed a small amount in Doc's cup. "Try that on for size." said Gene, and he took a small sip from the jar for himself. In a second, he said, "B-r-r-r." as the liquid blazed its way down his throat.

Doc laughed, rolled his eyes, and he said, "Here's to you." and he took a small drink from his cup, and he said, "Woof!" and he blew air from his flapping lips. "That's *stout!*, that is." said Doc. "Sure that ain't paint thinner?"

Gene took a seat on the ground and said, "Nope. It's a few years old though. It's purer and cleaner than anything you'll find anywhere."

"Made it yourself, huh?"

"Yeah. I just make small batches and put it up for myself and few friends when they come over."

"Well, I'm not a big drinker, so don't be offended if I go easy on this stuff. Might have to fly tomorrow."

"I haven't flown in years, not since I left Delta. First chair there."

Doc looked at Frances who he knew didn't understand what 'first chair' meant, and he said, "He was an airline pilot, a captain."

"Oh!" said Frances and she sat up and crossed her legs, her face lit by the fire.

"Mind if I smoke?" said Gene.

"By all means." said Doc. "Want one of mine? Camels."

"No thanks. Got my own." And Gene took his pack from his shirt pocket and shook a cigarette out, placed it between his lips and then took a glowing twig from the fire and lit it.

"If you flew for Delta, how you get here?" Doc asked.

"My wife. The place was her dad's. We've got over a thousand acres of dairy and beef cows."

Doc whistled. "Damn. How many head?"

"Well, we milk about a hundred, more or less, and the rest are market cows for beef, about sixty at any

given time.”

“Wait.” said Doc. “How’d you get from a cockpit to this?”

“My father-in-law died.”

A look of question came across Doc’s face.

“He made my wife promise to keep the place in the family and keep it going. She was a stew for Delta when he died, and we came out here from the hub at Atlanta and took the place over. That was about nine years ago.”

“That must have been culture shock?”

“Some. But we had good help and experienced hands who worked the place, so we adjusted and here we are. It’s not a bad life really. I miss flying though.”

“I guess.” said Doc.

“We don’t have an airport around here, and I’ve dickered with putting in a small grass strip and buying maybe a 180 or another four place taildragger. But something, farm wise, always seems to interrupt. I sure was glad to see you land. Got me to thinking again.”

“Glad we could help.” said Doc and he laughed and crushed his cigarette out and threw the butt in the fire. “See.” he said looking at Frances. “Good boy! I’m a good huh, huh?”

Frances smiled and said, “Uh-huh.” and tried to feign seriousness, but she laughed in spite of herself. Still, she wagged a finger at him and they smiled at one another.

Gene asked Doc where he was from, and he paid little attention to Frances, who, in spite of her curiosity, decided that maybe Gene would talk more about Clarice on his own. Doc told Gene about how he had barnstormed the Midwest every summer and told him that he was just getting started for the year. He also told Gene how the stories he wrote, the ones that the magazines picked up, helped pay for his expenses.

Then Doc asked Gene to tell him more about his time with Delta and what running the farm and dairy was like for an ex-airline pilot. And for some time that night, two pilots did what pilots do, and the

conversation turned almost exclusively to flying and airplanes.

Doc immediately liked Gene. And it seemed the same for Gene regarding Doc. Perhaps it was because they both were pilots. But as Gene talked about himself that night, Doc sensed a decency and honesty in Gene that he was drawn to. He wanted to know about Gene and pressed his questions.

Then Doc surprised Frances when he said, “Gene, if you don’t mind my being a little nosey, bearing in mind I write stories about the people I meet, I hope you’ll excuse me when I ask you something personal.”

Gene, at ease with Doc, and plying himself some what with the clear high octane liquor, said comfortably, “Shoot.”

“Well, Clarice. You said that you never leave her alone. You mind if I ask about her?”

“Normally, yes. I would mind.” said Gene. “It *is* personal. And sometimes hard to talk about.”

“Oh. Sorry.” said Doc.

“Don’t be.” said Gene. “She’s the real reason I came back out here tonight. And, oh!, before I forget. I brought a few pieces of fire wood out. I almost forgot. It’s in the back of the truck anytime you want to grab some.”

Doc said, “Thanks.” And he poked at the coals causing the small fire to flare saying, “We’ll grab some pretty quick.”

Then Gene said, “That’s what I wanted to ask you. About Clarice that is.”

Doc smiled and he said, “Shoot.” Gene returned the smile, and tipped his jar to his lips and took a sip. “Get’s smoother after a few sips.” he said, and he shivered a bit as it went down.

Gene held the jar out to Doc gesturing if Doc wanted a refill. Doc held his cup out, and Gene poured another dash into Doc’s cup. Doc thanked him.

“See. Here’s the situation. She was born with an extreme form of spina bifida. But there’s a lot more going on, and the doctors’ are not giving her much

longer. With the braces, she can walk some, but she's nearly blind. She's eight now. She *can* talk, but she talks in whispers and mostly to me. She's our only child and was born a year after we took over the farm."

Doc said nothing, but shook his head indicating that he wasn't missing a word. Across the fire, he could see the light shining on Frances's face. She had sat up and assumed her all in attention posture. She did not know what spina bifida was, only what she saw in a young girl sitting in a wheel chair, bent and pitiful.

"That's gotta be tough," said Doc. "Both for you and your wife. Not to mention Clarice."

"Clarice takes it better than we do," said Gene. "She's been that way since day one. So, in an odd way, it's all normal for her."

"I can see that," said Doc.

Maybe it was the liquor, but Gene said, "Ann and I live day-to-day and hold our breath." And he took in a sharp, quick, halting gulp of air as if on the verge of tears. But then he held his closed fist to his mouth and cleared his throat into it and said, "But we're making it. We've got to. For her."

Frances said, "A-w-w-w..." in a soft voice. Then she swallowed hard and caught herself before she lapsed back into an absorbed silence.

Doc took a short swig from his cup and shuddered slightly before asking, trying to brighten things up, "So..." he said, as cheerfully as he could, "What can an old barnstormer and the future winner of a Pulitzer Prize and his lovely daughter do for you?" And a broad smile came across his face.

Gene looked at Doc for a long second and he asked, "Do you think there is anyway she could get a ride in your airplane?"

Frances exploded to her feet and said, "Yes, *sir!* You betcha!" and then she looked at a squinting, glowering Doc before she immediately clasped both hands over her mouth and slowly sat back down.

Doc laughed at that and Gene joined in. Then Doc

said, "Girl, don't you think we oughta strategize this a bit." Then it suddenly dawned on Doc that Frances might have no idea in the world what the word 'strategize' meant and he said, "I mean, let's talk about this a little, don't you think?"

She slowly lowered her hands from her face and vigorously shaking her head, she said, meekly and softly, "Yes, sir." And she added, "Sorry."

Doc smiled and said, "Don't worry about it."

Then Doc looked at Gene and asked, "What's your wife...Ann...was it, going to say about it?"

Gene took a drag from his cigarette and flipped the butt in the fire, took another small sip from his jar, and he said, "I wanted to talk with you first."

Chapter Sixteen

“I mean, I wouldn’t want her showing up with a gun to shoot one of us, or both of us, for that matter, if she doesn’t approve.”

Doc watched as Gene’s jaws seem to tense slowly and repeatedly as if he was clenching his teeth deep in thought.

Gene laughed. Then he said, “Guess I’ll need to head that off. Huh?”

Doc shook his head several times.

Then Gene said, “I’ve already run it by the doctors in the event something or somebody made it possible. Ann has about as many hours in the air as I do, and I know it’s not the flying that might concern her. It’s how Clarice would handle it, emotionally, that is. Physically, as long as we stay low and don’t keep her up too long, I think she’ll be fine. The docs agreed to that as well.”

The protector in Frances could not keep quiet. Her brow furrowed and she asked quietly, “You reckon she’d be scared?”

“No...” answered Gene, “...she’s been curious about what it would be like to fly for a long time. Every night that I spend with her, I tell her long stories about the time that I flew. She seems to love it. I get a lot of good hand squeezing that way.” And Gene laughed a small warm laugh as he thought of it. And Frances nodded she was satisfied with the answer.

Doc had lifted his cap and was scratching his head and he asked, “When you think you want to do this?”

“Soon as I get Ann’s okay. Tomorrow, maybe?”

“If the weather holds.” said Doc. And everyone was silent for a minute, before Doc said, “If we take everything out of the front cockpit, she can sit on your lap, and we can use the gosports so you can talk to her.”

“You have gosports in that thing? Seriously?” said Gene, his eyes widening.

“Yep. And they work fine, too. Com'on, I'll show you.”

And Doc grabbed his flashlight and the two wobbled slightly side-by-side in the the direction of the Jenny; as the two dark forms stood at the side of the airplane's silhouette in the purple dusky light of the disappearing evening sun, Frances watched and shook her head at the sight of the two mildly inebriated pilots enjoying each other's company and talking about the thing they loved.

At the airplane, Doc reached in and picked up the rear stethoscope and plugged it in his ears. Off in the distance, Frances heard the pair laughing as Doc handed Gene the other set and they talked back and forth in the dark.

From the darkness, Frances heard Gene say, “Outstanding!” and she giggled.

Soon, the pair returned to the fire and sat across from one another and each took another swig of the shine.

“Maybe you could do us a favor?” asked Doc.

“Just ask.”

He continued. “Well, let's plan on taking her up anytime you think she's ready tomorrow. That's up to you and Ann, I guess. We'll be here, hopefully giving a few rides. But is there any chance, you could give one of us a ride to a store somewhere so we could resupply and fill our gas can?”

“I'll do better than that.” said Gene, as he picked up his half empty jar, and he took another sip, but not before motioning it in Doc's direction to see if Doc wanted more. Doc waved him off saying, “Better not. It's too good.”

Gene took a sip, worked his jaws thinking and said, “Let me take you in. There's an old country store nearby. But, please let me treat you to your food and gas, okay?”

Then he thought a minute and said, “Hell, tonight, I'm gonna make a few calls and make sure some riders show up.” And he laughed with a hint of mischief in his voice and conspiratorially, he said, “I want you to scare

the crap out of Farland, the old turd you met this morning.”

Frances hand immediately flew to her mouth and mirth showed in eyes. Doc grinned and said, “How ‘bout if I just give him a normal ride. That usually does it for most non-flyers.”

“Roger.” said Gene, and he rose to his feet taking one stumbling step backwards in the dark. “Th-think I’ll quit, too.” he said, with a bit of a hiccup and a small slurred but polite belch. “Gotta drive home, you know.”

“You be okay?” asked Doc.

“Super. Everything’s copasetic.” Gene assured Doc.

“Okay, then. In the morning...”

“Early. I’ll be back around nine, maybe a little later.” said Gene.



As it was a Saturday morning and the skies had dawned clear and blue, Doc decided that rather than sit around waiting on things to happen, he would load up Frances and they would make few low circuits around Watkins to see what they might shake loose in the way of riders.

“Why don’t you go tie up the sign on the fence over there?” said Doc, as he swirled his spoon inside his bowl of instant oatmeal then he licked the residue from the back of the spoon. For breakfast, Frances had snacked on a few packs of Nabs and a cup of instant coffee, which she still had no love for. As an answer, her face brightened and her eyes widened, and she silently leaned over and ran her hand along the inside of Doc’s kit bag searching for the ball of string.

“There ‘tis!” she said brightly as she rose to her feet and headed for the fence. “When you get through with that, we’ll go for a ride.” said Doc, which caused her to stop and shake her head and softly say, “Yes, sir!,” in a high voice. And she broke out in a trot for the fence. It took her two minutes and she was right back at Doc’s side as he checked the Jenny’s oil. She followed his every move as he pre-flighted the airplane, making

mental notes as to the order and look of things. Every turnbuckle he paused to look at, every hinge he inspected, every time he moved a control surface, she said what he had done to herself, repeating the routine over and over. She was like that in the cockpit during flight. When he moved the stick left or right, or depressed the rudder bar, she said to herself, "*Stick left, wing down, turn.*" or "*Rudder right, nose right.*"

Later on the ground, as time allowed her mind to still, or as she fell asleep, she reviewed her mental notes and in her imagination, she flew again each maneuver and action she could remember. As she did, she coupled the action-reaction of each maneuver with an outside three dimensional picture of not only what the airplane did but what control surface or combination of surfaces looked like when they moved. In a very short time, a matter of a week since they left West Virginia, she was becoming the airplane itself.

Doc had watched her do this much as an athlete might practice in his mind, a certain thing repeatedly, until it became second nature. It wasn't something he had taught or told her to do. There had been times, brief periods during hops that he had said to her, "It's yours. Let's fly a course of such-and such." And he never removed his hands and feet from the controls, but lightly followed her movements as she read the numbers out loud that showed on the compass and moved the controls on her own to a desired heading. He instinctively knew she had a natural gift for flight, in spite of her own reservations.

"Doc...?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You still think I can be a pilot?"

"I think you already are."

"Aw. No. *Really?*"

At least three times a day, the same question came. But Doc was patient with her and indulged her insecurity knowing that as time passed, the question would disappear. The test would be landings.



The Jenny clattered and popped several times around the small town of Watkins, and the reaction below was always the same as it would be anywhere else. The same as it was at Elroy and Eden and other small towns on a bright, sunny Saturday summer morning.

People stopped on the sidewalks below and looked upward shielding their eyes from the sun, kids on bicycles ceased pedaling, slid to a stop and pointed into the air and yammered among themselves in excited high-pitched voices, heads popped out of car windows at the intersections to see what made the noise above; it was always the same, everywhere. Doc fed on it and he always anticipated the landings back at the field and the wait to see the results.

This morning, the dour Farlands' were already at the fence when the Jenny settled in on final to land and then hushed across the grass stubble on its return to the field. Doc taxied in close to the fence and swung the Jenny around as her prop slowly clacked to a stop. Frances was first out on the wing walk, and she jumped off the wing and ran to the fence saying, "Ya'll come to ride!?" Her enthusiasm bubbled over. Yet, not a smile crossed a wan face of any of the clan. "Mebbe." said Farland.

Standing next to him, his pinch-faced wife wearing the same colorless gray skirt stood at the fence line, and alongside her, stood her three expressionless and gaunt teenage boys, each with his hands shoved deeply in his thread worn and faded blue overall pockets.

Doc walked up behind Frances and laid a hand gently on her shoulder, and he said, "Mornin', folks!"

"Where's Twiddle?" asked the old man, Farland.

"I dunno. Haven't seen him yet this morning. Why?" responded Doc.

"He said he'd be here."

Doc looked at his wristwatch and said, "Well, he told me last night that he'd probably be out here around

nine, maybe a little later.” Then he added, “It’s a bit early yet.”

“M-m-m.” said the old man. “Said he’d buy us an airplane ride.’

“Oh. That so?”

“Yeah. He said, he’d buy us all a ride. Didn’t ask us if we wanted one. Just told us to come get a ride. Ain’t right, you know?”

“What ain’t right?” Doc said, a bit mockingly.

“Just ‘cause you rent a house from a man you work fer, he thinks he can...”

“Uh-huh. Okay. I get it.” Doc interrupted and said as he fought the tiniest urge to laugh, but he lost the fight and a smile broke out on his face. He cleared his throat to stifle the laugh. Frances turned away but her shoulders shook slightly as she successfully stymied an out loud laugh herself.

“Well, I wouldn’t force anybody to ride in *my* airplane.” said Doc. “But it’s a lovely experience if you’ve never flown.”

“Ain’t none of us ever flown. Ever.”

“This seems like a grand morning to see what it’s like.” said Doc. “Why, I’ll even fly over your house, so you can see your property.”

“Twiddle’s property.” said Farland a touch indignantly.

“Huh?”

“It’s Twiddle’s place. We just swap work for rent.”

“Oh. I see.” said Doc. At a bit of a loss for a response, Doc searched for a reply and the best he had was, “It’s nice and cool up there.”

“Ain’t hot.” said Farland glumly.

“Guess you are right...” Doc said, “Not yet anyway.”

Frances, trying desperately not to burst out laughing at what Gene was foisting on the Farlands had to walk back towards the airplane and stop listening to the conversation. Doc hoped that Gene would soon show up as he tried placating the Farlands. “Any of you boys like to ride first?”

Suddenly, the Farland boys all became extremely animated. One blinked. One pursed his lips. And one developed a sudden but intermittent facial tick which made him look like he had a Mexican jumping bean lodged between his gums and cheek. But they all shook their heads no.

“Naw! Really?!” said Doc incredulously. “Why not?”

The boys all looked at one another.

Frances couldn't stand it and had returned and stood just behind Doc.

Finally, the boy in the middle, the one with the large ears that seemed that they might begin to flap at any second and cause him to levitate, said, “Daddy said you can't breathe up there if you go too high.” Then the boy leaned forward and he looked along the fence at the old man who shook his head once approvingly and stuck his lower lip out. The old woman was busy looking down and smoothing her dress, attempting to look uninvolved.

Frances poked her head around Doc and said, “You sure can! ‘Sides, we don't go that high anyways.” And she came out from behind Doc, and she stepped directly in front of the boy and got very close to his face, and suddenly, Frances, the Tomboy from West Virginia, became Butterfly the Alluring Aviatrix, and in her sultriest possible voice, low and husky, said, “I can't believe anybody as strong as you might be *afraid*. I fly all the time. Ain't nuthin' to it.”

Suddenly, the oldest brother, the one on the end, the one with the long, pointed chin and narrow eyes said, “I'll go! I'll go.”

In that moment, Gene Twiddle, his wife Ann and daughter, Clarice, pulled off the road and Gene drove his truck slowly across the cattle grate and parked behind Doc who turned and waved. Frances waved excitedly at Gene and went to the truck.

As Frances approached the passenger side of the truck, Ann Twiddle opened her door and stepped to the ground leaving Clarice sitting on the seat next to her dad. Ann, a very attractive brunette, extended her hand

towards Frances. "You must be Frances!" said Ann. Frances took her hand and shook it vigorously and she said, "Yes, um. It shore is nice to meet you." Frances, a bit mindful of her coveralls and boots looked down at herself and then back at Ann and she said, "You must think I look a pure-dee mess."

Ann with her chestnut-colored hair and warm brown eyes wearing tan slacks and a white blouse with epaulettes, pulled Frances a inch closer and said, almost in a whisper, "No ma'am. You ought to see me when I'm working with the milk cows. Looks like you're a working gal like I am." And she smiled broadly at Frances.

Frances beamed at that and immediately fell in love with Ann. "Can I say "Hey" to Clarice."

"Oh, you bet."

And Ann stepped aside so Frances could lean into the truck. Not wanting to scare Clarice, Frances leaned across the seat, and she quietly said "*Hey, Clarice!*" And she laid her hand on Clarice's saying "I sure am glad to see you again." A crooked smile began to form on Clarice's face. Before Frances left the cab, she gently pulled Clarice's dress, which had blown up in the breeze, back over her knees and brace tops. Then Frances straightened up and turned to Ann and leaned in to her ear and whispered, "Is you gonna let her fly?"

Ann took a half step back and said, "I think it will be the best thing in the world for her."

A smile as big as the outdoors spread across Frances's face, and she ran around to the driver's side of the truck, and she leaned in and kissed Gene on the cheek. Doc had said nothing so far but he was furiously writing in his mind every small action of Frances and desperately wanted to get his journal and make notes. Watching the exuberance flow from Frances was a kind of magic show. It further struck him, that as they had gotten further into the past week, Frances had seemed to lose some of her disposition to getting lost in her own thoughts. Ann had walked over to Doc by then, and

interrupting his thoughts, she said, “You have got to be Doc?”

Taken aback for a moment by Ann’s good looks, Doc slowly raised his hand to meet hers and he said, “And you’ve got be Ann?”

“I don’t think Gene slept at all last night.” she said immediately.

Doc smiled at that and said, “Oh, really. Why is that?”

“Well, first, he was bit tipsy when he got home. So he started drinking coffee. And all he could talk about was meeting another pilot, one with an antique airplane. And before you know it, the sun was up and cows had to be fed.”

Doc looked over at Gene who was listening in and Gene grinned.

“You know, I used to fly, too.” said Ann.

Doc shook his head yes.

“Fifteen years with Delta.”

