

The Last Summer

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Winters always made Doc restless.

The cold air in the hangar hurt. It made his joints ache. His thin leather flight jacket became as cold as the air around it, and the jacket's thin silk lining did nothing to help.

Since he returned from last summer's flying, he had done all the necessary work to keep the old girl flying and there was little to do but small maintenance chores, keep the hangar swept and wait for spring. As he serviced the Jenny's engine, oil flowed slowly like thick syrup from the can into the Jenny's crankcase and that made Doc even more irritable and impatient. So, to calm himself, he decided to go sit in front of the heater and think.

In the corner of the hangar sat an electric heater creating a small radius of bare warmth. Sitting in front of it in the old vinyl recliner that Doc had rescued from the airport dumpster, psychologically somehow, the heater at least made him *feel* warmer. He sat staring at the glowing red coils of the heater, and his mind drifted, floating away to last summer's barnstorming. He leaned over to pick up a tattered and well-read copy of *Flying* magazine to idly flip through the pages as he remembered.

With a jolt that startled Doc, Oscar, the hangar cat and his constant companion, jumped without warning into Doc's lap. His daydreaming suddenly interrupted, and with his adrenalin settling, Doc ran his weathered hand across Oscar's sleek back, and he felt the deep sawing of the cat's purr and he smiled. Oscar, feeling the heat from Doc's lap, circled once, laid down, and tightly transformed himself into a sleek and shiny black ball, and the cat closed his eyes.

Doc continued to slowly pass his hand along the

cat's back, occasionally pausing to rub a silky ear between his thumb and forefinger which only caused Oscar to deepen his rumbling purr.

Doc looked at his hand as he smoothed the cat's coat and seeing that his skin appeared as crepe paper stretched across the veins and ligaments and his knuckles, Doc threw the magazine back onto the floor in dismay, and he pushed his head back into the recliner, and then he slowly turned and looked to one side to study the Jenny sitting still and quiet a few feet away.

From nose to tail, he looked along the taut linen covered surface of the ancient bi-plane, and he studied the glossy mustard color of *its* skin. He chuckled to himself thinking it ironic that an airplane introduced over 100 years ago should age better than he had. Now and then, his eye would stop here and there at a small crackled spot in the fabric, a little damage that might need a patch. But he wasn't ready to start dopping and patching the weak spots yet, and he figured that, soon, the weather would be warmer and that would be the time to tend to any dings.

Now and then, the heater fan motor would squeal softly and Doc looked back at it and was again transfixed by the red glow of the heater's spring-like coils.

In his imagination, he began to gradually see the images of campfires past. Sitting next to the nighttime fires he built to heat his meals and coffee during the barnstorming season was one his favorite places in the world to be; and would be the only place, if he discounted his time in the sky, which was the other place. The place where he had spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours climbing in and out of the summer's lazy, cottony, cumulus clouds, his goggles covered with a thin film of rocker grease, his hands on the stick and the throttle of the Jenny.

The Jenny had a fuel range of a hundred miles or so to the tank-full, and many a day while searching for the next place to land, a place where he could hang out his

banner that advertised ten dollar rides in the sky, he would be forced to land early and find gas given his propensity to lose track of time playing in and around the clouds and therefore losing track of his fuel consumption.

Barnstorming was dead. Doc knew that. But this coming summer, he would hang his sign out anyway.



Doc had a love affair with barnstorming. Many summers ago, he first took a bright yellow Piper Cub into the Midwest states, hopping field-to-field near the smaller towns and settlements where mostly beef cattle were fattened, and corn, thousands upon thousands of green waving acres of it, grew.

He would begin there by finding the right field, and the odd farmer who would agree to let him hang his sign from fence post-to-post; and who let him use that empty field as a makeshift airport from which to give rides in the Cub to anyone willing to put forth the five dollars for a ten minute ride; a ride in and around the cotton white clouds above Iowa, Ohio and Nebraska.

Since his early days as young pilot, he could think of no finer way to use an airplane than to aimlessly wander from small town to rural hamlet, to meet the people there, to write their stories and to camp under his wing nights. The flying magazines, now and then, bought and published his human interest pieces; short stories about his adventures day-by-day. Each year, by selling his stories, his saving account grew larger until finally, he found the old Jenny.

The Jenny was "two holer" - a two seat airplane - the pilot flying from the rear cockpit, the passenger or co-pilot riding up front.

Built long ago to train fledgling pilots, its chief appeal to Doc was that it was an open cockpit, bi-wing airplane and it exuded aviation romance.

For Doc, the very sight of the Jenny bouncing across a grassy field - its engine clacking at idle - immediately conjured images of the classic swash-buckling pilot of

the Twenties and the Thirties.

Once the airplane taxied to a stop, its wings still rocking gently, a dashing figure with a white silk scarf fluttering in trail from the sheep skin collar of his leather flight jacket, his brown, leather skull helmet pulled tightly over his head, the chin straps dangling loosely, his tan Jodhpur pants and calf-high black flying boots would emerge to the wing step; he would stand there momentarily his chin held high, surveying loftily far around the field, appearing a noble figure like a cavalry officer preparing to dismount a fiery steed; and then he would drop resolutely to the ground landing confidently on both feet at once; he would bow to the small crowd and with a flourish, remove his helmet exposing a head of slicked back and shining black hair and underneath the thinnest pencil slash of a mustache, a smile would expose a mouthful of the whitest teeth gleaming. And as the first words of his pitch, he would say, high pitched, brightly and expectantly, "Howdy, neighbors! Who's going to be the first to fly with me today!?"

A scene from an old movie.

Doc sometimes had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud when he remembered that that was the vision he held of himself in the early days. It amused him that, in many ways, he still saw himself as that dashing pilot. That is, until he looked at the creases of age on his face as he shaved in the mornings.

He spent two winters rebuilding the Jenny and restoring it to its heady days when it trained the war bound pilots. Then he sold the Cub and bought the scarf, the Jodhpur pants and the boots. And he followed his dreams and his plans: write in the winter, barnstorm in the summer.

For many summers then, as soon as the weather allowed, it was leave his home in Virginia and fly west. Follow his nose. He now rarely used maps. He knew where the riders had been before, where the pretty girls were after church on Sunday; where the kids on bicycles

pedaled furiously ahead of trails of dust along dirt roads to find where the Jenny had set down after Doc had circled low over the small town; the town with a population of less than a thousand souls and its central courthouse and the groomed emerald green lawn mowed in angled patterns where the old timers sat on park benches painted white as they told war stories under the watchful eye of a long-dead bronze hero standing atop his marble base looking gallantly east.

Doc was chasing again the reluctant fat man who had to be helped into the front cockpit by manhandling a gelatinous behind with a heaving push to pile him into the front seat; he was wanting to see again the freckled blond teenager with pigtails wearing the flowered print dress demure shyly as he sold rides like a carnival barker; he needed to make his instant coffee in his blue splatter ware cup after heating the water in a battered aluminum pan; he needed to feel again the warmth of his sleeping bag warding off a late evening chill as he fell asleep reading Steinbeck by the circular pattern of pale yellow light from his flashlight.

He knew that barnstorming was dead, save the odd air show in parts of the country, but those air shows weren't really barnstorming. Barnstorming, what it was, was what he did.

It was circling a small town low as many times as it took to draw the barbershop customer out of the barber's chair and onto the sidewalk to look skyward still wearing the barber's apron; it was causing the two old ladies leaving the finery shoppe to look up and point into the air; it was seeing the Sheriff's deputy pull up next to the fence along the road and ask if you had a breakdown and you waving a hand, saying "No. But thanks for asking!"; it was occasionally being told to get that damn contraption out of my field by an irate land owner; other times it was being invited to the bounty of a home cooked supper provided by a farmer who let you use his field, and while his wife laid golden fried chicken and mounds of creamy mashed potatoes and the world's

finest gravy in front of you, listening intently and patiently to the farmer as he regaled you with his memories of being a waist gunner on a B-17 over Germany many years ago.

He needed to land a little too hard in a bumpy field of dry dirt clods and break something and have to wait for two days as the part came in from Omaha and try not to fall in love with the brunette at the diner just down the road, knowing it would be easy, and it would forever change your life. It was turning down the one night stand offered now and then by a cocktail waitress's not-so-subtle innuendo as you drank a beer at the juke joint not far from where the Jenny was parked. It was telling tall tales about the places you'd been and maybe bragging a little overly about your fame as a writer and the feeling bad about it after someone had bought you a beer thinking they might impress someone notorious.

Barnstorming was never being bored. Ever. Even on those days when it was as hot as blazes and the air so still and humid that you could cut it with a knife, and no one flew or ventured away from their air conditioner. So all you did all day long was doze in the shade of a nearby tree or under the wing of the Jenny. It was lugging a full, five gallon gas can, your shoulder muscles burning from the weight, two miles down to the Sunoco station and back to refuel the Jenny. It was living on cheese Nabs, a pack of salted peanuts and a Coca-Cola because the can of beef stew in your cook box wasn't there like you thought it was. You had eaten it near Muncie somewhere and had forgotten to replace it. And the last thing the convenience store down the road sold was Dinty Moore.

All these things weren't dead to Doc.

But his age was catching up with him. Nevertheless, he decided that the sign had to be hung from the fence posts again. Maybe the arthritis in his knees or his failing vision would keep him grounded before long, and while he could still see well enough to fly, to avoid other

airplanes and to land, he was going back.

And spring was just around the corner. And summer skies would follow. He would fly the skies and write the stories of his adventures one more time. This time would be different though.

He knew it might be the last summer.

Chapter Two

When Doc opened the storefront's door, his arrival was announced by the soft, crystal tinkling of the small silver bell attached by an ornately curved spring at the top of the door. Inside the door, the sunlight shone brightly through the large window that fronted the street, and that painted in dark reverse shadows letters that read, "Layman's Auto Parts"; the words lay slanted across the cracked and curled linoleum tiles of the dusty floor; the tiles laid long ago in the post war years in a black-and-white, checkerboard pattern. The building had long ago served as a parts house. But cheap rent made it perfect for something else.

The room was was empty, save an antique wood-framed, glass showcase serving as a counter at the back of the room, the shelves within it sparsely laden. From a door leading to the rear of the building came Fred's booming voice.

"I'm here! Hang on!"

Doc answered, "It's just me."

"Hang on! I'm in the john."

Doc smiled and to pass the time, he bent over the showcase to study Fred's scattered collection of pocket knives. Displayed below on small patches of black velvet, as if that somehow lent to their value, was an assortment of small folding knives, some with faux carved bone handles, others with yellow plastic grips, and a few expensive Bucks with serrated blades. As the minutes passed, Doc raised his head to look at the few shelves that lined the front room walls. Among Fred's collection of estate sale curios displayed there were plaster five inch high Lincoln and Kennedy busts, hand-painted in Japan, and past election buttons of all parties and mostly lesser known candidates. Fred fancied himself a collector of what might someday be priceless knick-knacks and none of what Doc saw was for sale. In reality, Fred's real business was being a sign painter.

In another minute, the toilet in the back flushed with a faint but deep rumble and Fred quickly appeared through the curtain of colored glass beads that separated the storefront from the sign shop in the rear. The smell of paint thinner and bathroom fumes followed him in.

The first thing you always noticed about Fred was his nose, sharp and pointed, like the bow of a rowboat leading his way. The second thing you noticed about Fred were the shocks of curly red hair that sprouted in bunches along the edges of the paint-stained skull cap he wore to keep the spray out of his hair. When he turned his head, you might catch sight of the barest hint of a small pony tail tied in place at the base of his neck with a rubber band.

Doc figured it was a hold-over from Fred's hippy days. He had heard many a tale from Fred about the several days he had spent at Woodstock in '69. And you could always count on picking up the faintest hint of burnt marijuana mixed with the aromas of the paints and solvents emanating from the shop.

"Hey, Doc!" said Fred as the happy beam of a smile parted the red and silver full beard he wore. "What can I do ya for?"

"Need a new sign. Actually two."

"Going back again?"

"Yeah, Got to." answered Doc. "One more time."

"When you leaving?"

"Soon as you can fix me up."

"Want me to look in on Oscar again?"

"That'd be great, if it's no bother."

"None a'tall, my friend. Do I get another ride in the Jen?"

"Any time, my man, any time."

Fred's brilliant blue eyes widened and he said, "How about before you go this time. I'm itching for an airplane ride."

"You got it."

"Rog. Now, what you want on them signs."

Doc reached in his pocket and withdrew a folded scrap of yellow legal pad paper, and he handed it to Fred.

Fred carefully unfolded the paper and smoothed it out on the counter. Doc could see Fred's lips moving slowly as he read the words.

Fred broke out in a great guffaw!

"Help wanted?!" Fred said incredulously as he looked up at Doc.

"I knew that's how you'd react." said Doc with the barest hint of a smile, "And, yes..."

"You're serious?"

Doc shook his head yes.

"Help wanted?" said Fred with a bit of a twinkle in his eye. "Lemme see now..." he continued, "...what kind of help would an aging barnstormer need?"

"I'm serious. And shut-up."

Fred couldn't help himself. He kept goading. They had been friends too long to let this go. He scratched his chin thoughtfully, rubbing his fingers deep into his full beard, "What kind of help would you need?" He paused as Doc stood quietly glaring. "I got it!"

Doc kept staring.

"You need a cook?"

Doc stayed quiet letting Fred have his fun.

"A butler?" and Fred threw his back laughing.

"A wingwalker, a skydiver and a hooker." said Doc, and he forced a grin. Then he said, "You sell rope ladders in this dump?"

"The hooker, I get, but a wingwalker?"

"Yep."

Fred kept slowly scratching at his beard. "You looking for a partner?"

"Nope."

"Wait." said Fred, "A rope ladder?"

Doc nodded yes.

"What you gonna do with a rope ladder?"

"I'm gonna hang a wing walker and skydiver from it. I was kidding about the hooker."

"Shit, man. I woulda thought you were serious about that part."

Doc laughed.

"I'd make a good wing walker." said Fred.

Doc could not help it, but his gaze immediately shifted down and his vision rested on the ample girth that resided in the middle of Fred's six foot, two inch frame. "You?" And Doc snorted.

"Yeah!" shot back Fred. "But maybe I'd need to lose some weight?"

"Maybe?"

"But seriously, man, I thought you were a solo act?"

"Normally. But I'm gonna try some new things this year, if I find the right people along the way."

"Oh!" said Fred. "But how you gonna..."

"Carry 'em?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not and I haven't figured that part out yet. But it'll come to me, I guess."

Fred had stopped scratching his beard and had both hands on the glass counter now studying the paper again. "What color you want these?"

"Same as last year. White with red circus letters."

"So, let me get this right..." Fred said while shaking his head slightly up and down and not looking directly at Doc, "...you're gonna head west again and put this "Help Wanted" sign on the fence along with the rides sign and you're going to find some people to do wing walking or jumping from your plane?"

"If I'm lucky."

"And what about the rope ladder?" asked Fred as he fixed his gaze on Doc's face.

"Oh! That's for the runner."

"What?"

"The runner."

"Whadda ya mean, 'the runner.'"

"*The runner!*" said Doc a little louder.

Fred could say nothing.

"Think about it." said Doc.

“I’m sort of afraid to.”

“Picture this. I find somebody to train. We’re flying low above a little town. He, or she, climbs down the rope and gets to the end and starts to run like they are gonna just step off the rope and leave the ladder. People are going nuts in anticipation watching this. But he, or she, doesn’t get off. He climbs back up, gets back in the airplane and we land and await the adoring crowds who want to pay their fifteen bucks to ride.”

“It was ten last year. And you’re going to jail, you *know* that?”

Chapter Three

Oscar knew. He always seemed to know. They say that cats can take or leave humans. But when it came to Doc's leaving, Oscar had the same practiced routine. And he was never happy to see Doc go.

Doc was a meticulous packer, as much because the Jenny had little room for his gear, as for any other reason. He would start a few weeks before leaving laying out his gear in a particular pattern on the hangar floor next to the Jenny. The sleeping bag, his clothes, what few of them he took, his journal, his pens and pencils in a special small wooden box given to him one year by an admiring nine year old, freckled faced boy who said, "I'm gonna fly like you, one day." And there was his small first-aid kit, his medications, his toiletry kit, and, of course, books. There were books by Richard Bach, Bill Bryson, Marjorie Kennan Rawlings and James Herriot, all constant companions that came out at night at his campfires or under the shade of an elm tree when things weren't busy or the visitors few. And, naturally, a flash light with a few spare batteries. That all went into a surplus canvas duffel bag with a water proof liner.

He took his time and followed a hand-scrawled check list written on the frayed legal pads that he constantly had nearby. The packing routine might take days, and to Doc, the exercise was as much a pleasure as the leaving itself. It was an immersion in delight often accompanied by music from a tape deck playing softly in the corner of the hangar. And Oscar's reaction to Doc's obsessive checking and rechecking his kit was telling.

As Doc tried to concentrate, Oscar would begin to purr and weave in and around Doc's legs for attention, occasionally nipping gently at a pant leg, always taking care to just pull a little and never biting skin. For that, Doc would idly pat Oscar's head and resume his fidgeting with a piece of gear. That not being enough to gain Doc's complete attention, Oscar would sit on a piece of kit staring up at Doc switching his tail like a

brush, back-and-forth slowly, meditatively, until pushed aside. Doc knew the routine and waited for the next act.

With Doc shuffling to-and-from from his big red Snap-On tool chest at the back wall of the hangar, carefully selecting just the tools he would carry along, Oscar, not getting the full measure of attention he required, would lay down directly in Doc's path. Doc would baby-talk Oscar on each pass to mollify him. Oscar would reach out with a paw and slap at Doc's boot as he passed. It was always a quick strike, sometimes resulting in an audible "pop" against the leather. Now and then, that might make Doc stop and placate Oscar with another pat on the head which could result in a playful swipe at a hand.

Doc had retrieved Oscar from the airport dumpster eight years ago. He was never sure how a kitten the size of child's shoe had gotten into the dumpster, or even how long he had been in there. Doc had no desire to keep a pet but made the mistake of feeding and watering the abandoned cat. So, time passed, and Doc began to see the cat as the airport mascot and a good luck charm.

Whenever Doc flew his Super Cub off to tow the odd advertising banner, or took his Cessna 180 out to fly jumpers at the local drop zone, he could always count on seeing Oscar's dark form sitting in the foot high grass awaiting his return. Early on, it was if Oscar was tuned into the sound of the engine of Doc's returning airplane. But the last four years, the cat was actually sitting by the runway as Doc departed *and* he was there when Doc returned. As the cat's habit developed, if, for any reason, Oscar wasn't sitting near the runway when Doc was ready to depart, it gave Doc an uneasy feeling for which he would scold himself for being silly.



The analogy wasn't lost on Doc, the writer. The summer lay ahead like a blank sheet of paper.

Oscar was now in the capable care of Fred who would feed him and keep him safe over the course of the

months ahead.

Fred stood by the hangar door leaning against its wooden frame nervously flicking away a gray worm of ash from his cigarette and watching as Doc taxied forth pulled ahead by the clattering, sometimes popping rattle of the Jenny's engine.

Doc's mind was clear and he felt good, excited to get airborne and pointed towards the mountains in the west. He looked to his right as he approached the runway's threshold, and he saw the black form of Oscar's head watching from within the tall grass off to the side of the runway's center point. That made him smile. It was a good omen. Doc lined up the airplane on the runway and eased the throttle forward steadily and the noise in the cabin intensified to a low thunder as he began his take-off roll bumping along the runway's uneven and sometimes pockmarked grass surface.

The Jenny became a flying machine at about the time Oscar's head disappeared from Doc's peripheral vision. The tension wires on the wings thrummed mildly as they should as Doc completed his climbing turn west and put the early morning sun at his back.



Once level and cruising at his top speed of 65 miles an hour, Doc relaxed to the degree that you can flying a Jenny. Flying an antique biplane is a constant state of throttle and flight control vigilance during most maneuvers, left and right, but straight ahead and level, a pilot can push back in the seat some, relax a little and occasionally look out or below, and for a few minutes, at least, to see what lies beyond the sparse instrument panel or down below over the cockpit's rim. Staying on guard for other airplanes in the air around him - he saw none - Doc's thoughts about the summer being a blank sheet of paper returned to him.

Looking out across the patchwork quilt of Virginia's late spring farmland, a checkerboard of emerald green late winter wheat fields and the many rows of freshly plowed brown loam ready for seed corn, he thought

about what lay ahead in his Midwestern adventures this year and he finalized a few plans as he flew.

This year, he thought, he was going focus more on writing the stories of the people he met and less on hawking airplane rides. In the past, the emphasis had always been more on the flying. He chuckled to himself when he thought about the "Help Wanted" sign that he'd had Fred make up for him.

He shook his head feeling a little foolish for dreaming up such plans. Using parachutists, wingwalkers, even throwing overboard and cutting drifting rolls of paper towels with a wing was something you did to create a show to draw a crowd. He had decided that he didn't want that this year. Yes, he thought, he would still circle low over the settlements and crossroad towns to call attention to his presence. And he'd still hang his sign advertising rides on the fence wires. But this year was going to be devoted more to listening and getting to know those who came to ride or to watch. The magazines he wrote for wanted personal interest stories and he was going to write them.

But the decision had deeper intentions than just providing stories that sold. It was about coming away from the summer a part of the people who he would meet. It would be about recording the loves, the triumphs, the pain, the difficulties and the dreams.

He felt good about that decision and it gave him a greater sense of purpose and he smiled broadly. And with that, he nudged the throttle forward a bit speeding up the engine, and he continued westward.



He could see the dark cloud shadows moving across the ground at an increasing pace, much faster now than they had been just twenty minutes ago after leaving his fuel stop at Bluefield. It did not bode well, and he cursed himself for not having called Flight Service to get a weather briefing before he took off. He thought to himself that, once in a while, he took the business of flying as the old timers might have, by relying on

guesswork, a little too seriously. He could have, at least, used a little modern technology to see what might be ahead, and he worried that this time, he might get bitten because he had not.

The bright sunlight casting long reaching golden rays from under the nearly straight edge of the low deck of dark clouds that lined the entire width of the far horizon meant he was bucking a fast moving cold front. The turbulence and the jostling the Jenny was beginning to endure were other signs that there might be difficulties ahead. The air swirling around him was growing significantly cooler. So much so, he rubbed his hands quickly up and down the length of his upper legs to create a little warmth. Spring time over the mountains could be unpredictable. He leaned slightly forward, ducking close behind the small windscreen to escape the full brunt of the ever colder wind.

An hour later, the constant buffeting of the turbulence, and a head wind that slowed his speed over the ground to less than that of the cars and trucks on the roads below him, had Doc considering a landing to let the front move past, and the sky was beginning to darken.

Leaning from side-to-side to extend his head over the cockpit's rim to look beyond the Jenny's nose to see what the terrain offered in the way of a spot to land was difficult now with stinging raindrops pelting his face. But ahead and some to the left was a long stretch of pasture; long enough it appeared he would not only be able to land but to get airborne again. And the wind on the ground, evidenced by the moving cloud shadows, looked like a front quartering headwind. He played a landing there through his mind as he pulled the throttle back to idle to descend low enough to make a circuit around the field.

He saw no cows or other livestock to worry him and the field looked fresh mown and a good bet. At the far end of the field sat a small white clapboard house with several smaller outbuildings, storage or smokehouses,

he supposed. It was, after all, West Virginia, and many there still cured their own meats.

As he circled low over the house, a blond haired boy dressed in faded blue denim overhauls stood behind the house with his hands slid underneath the coverall's suspenders just watching the airplane. Doc, for some reason, noticed the boy was not wearing shoes and he thought to himself that it was too cold for that. But, again, it was West Virginia.

Satisfied the field would be a suitable spot to land, Doc added enough throttle to line up and touch down a few feet just beyond the field's fence near the dirt road bordering the property. The engine's speed quickened to that of a fast sewing machine and occasional backfiring pops could be heard as the propeller slowly wind-milled ahead of the airplane's oil streaked nose. As the ground grew nearer, Doc switched his head from side-to-side quickly in order to see as far ahead as possible and keep a straight approach to the grass beyond.

He intended to make a full stall landing, so that each of the machine's two main landing gear and its tail skid at the rear would drop onto the field simultaneously. But holding a slight crabbing angle against the headwind was difficult, and he knew it would be sheer luck that he would put both wheels and the skid on the ground at the same time. But it was either this or fly away somewhere else to land. His shoulders ached from the constant attention to the flight controls the turbulence demanded and he was cold and hungry, so this was it he decided.

He hushed low across the road and the fence and began a landing flare, his feet working the rudder bar back and forth to keep the nose straight. Holding a slight wing down attitude to compensate for the crosswind blowing from his right, he felt good about the landing as he brought the control stick fully back between his legs and the main gear slowly eased onto the grass followed by the thump of the tail skid at the rear of the fuselage. He blew a little breath of air from

his cheeks in relief that all that was left now was to roll out and taxi to a stop until he noticed the ridge in the grass.



He fervently wished for a mild hop across the rut as he silently mouthed, "*Oh, crap!*" But the ridge was a burrow opening of some sort, and the right main gear found it.

The sound of twisting metal and finally a hard clank was next and the Jenny went from level wings to a sickening off angle slant and came to a stop pointing in the opposite direction. Doc was unaware that his right knee had slammed hard into the bottom edge of the instrument panel brace until the painful impulse ascended up his leg which was nearly simultaneous with realizing the fact that he was now pointed in the wrong direction. It took Doc a millisecond to realize the engine was still loping clickity-clack and at idle and was still running. Small miracles don't register quickly sometimes, and it took a few seconds more to realize the prop had not struck the ground.

He quickly reached forward and turned the switch shutting the magnetos off, and the engine ceased running, and the propeller juttered slightly to a stop. Doc could see as it stopped, there was no damage to either of its tips and he leaned his head back against the padded headrest in relief. With the airplane completely stopped and the engine off, Doc slowly became aware of the silence around him punctuated only occasionally by a bird whistle far off in the trees at the edge of the field.

It was only then that he was aware of the boy standing next to the cockpit, out of breath with piercing blues eyes.

Chapter Four

Doc blew out another long breath of relief and looked at the boy who said nothing. Until...

"Hey, mister! Ya'll all-rite?" asked the boy who wasn't a boy at all. She was a girl but at the same time, a young, beautiful woman.

Her flaxen hair hung in sparse loose springy coils around her slightly oval face and mixed between the curls, long flowing strands of her hair rested in sprays that lay across the denim shoulder straps of her overalls. Occasionally, the breeze would gently lift her golden hair away from her shoulders. Under the overalls, she wore a white tee shirt. Beneath her eyes, dusted faintly upon her high cheeks, was the barest hint of liver-colored freckles no bigger than the head of a straight pin. She had both hands resting on the cockpit rim looking into Doc's surprised face who, for the moment, was dealing quietly with first, the shock of the ground-looped landing, and then the appearance of one of the most alluring young women he had ever seen. He pushed his head back into the padded leather of the headrest and laughed at the irony of it.

"My knee has felt better." was all he could think to say.

Doc looked quickly down at his right knee and laid his hand upon his knee cap which immediately turned to fire and he pulled his hand back. He expected to see blood, but there was none. In spite of the pain, he was magnetized by the girl's eyes, as brilliant blue as any he'd ever seen.

"Did ya break it?"

"I'm not sure." he said as she rose on her bare splayed toes to look further into the cockpit. "I don't see no blood 'er nuthin'." said the girl with the sweetest twist of an Appalachian drawl in her voice.

She had so surprised Doc that he had forgotten that there might be the outside chance of fire from a broken fuel line or an oil leak and he quickly unbuckled his chin strap, and he pushed his leather skull helmet and goggles back off of his head with one hand, and with the other hand he loosened his seat belt and harness and pushed himself upwards in his seat grimacing in pain. "Give me yor hands." she said, "I'll hep ya out."

With a hand on each cockpit rim to pull himself up, Doc struggled out of the cockpit and on to the wing walk and stood momentarily before easing himself gingerly backwards to the ground. She placed both her hands on his lower back to steady him as he lowered himself off of the wing and set his good foot on the ground. Still holding to the cockpit rim, he then gingerly tried to put weight on the other foot. That evoked a moan and a grimace, and he stood still there for a minute. She had moved to his side and stood next to him as a brace with one arm around his waist as he once again tentatively tried put weight on his leg. With both feet on the ground, he rested his arm on her shoulder. There was the vague scent of hay and perspiration about her, but it was not in slightest way offensive.

"Can ye do it?"

"Let's just stand here a minute and let me take it slowly." he said; then glancing sideways at her, he asked, "What's your name?"

"They named me, "Franceses.""

Not, "I'm Franceses." Or just, "Franceses." But "They named me, Franceses." And Doc thought the answer was odd.

"What's yor name, mister?"

"They call me, "Doc." And the girl laughed quietly before catching herself.

"That's funny?" said Doc.

As a school girl might, she put a hand over her mouth in embarrassment, then she pulled it away from her lips some and said, "It's funny. 'Cause yor're a doctor and yor aching, so you can patch yorself up." And

she clamped her hand over her mouth again, but her squinting eyes still laughed as her shoulders shook slightly.

“Not that kind of doc.” said Doc. “Can you help me look around my airplane?”

She cleared her throat softly and nodded yes with a shake of her head, and Doc, using Frances as a crutch, hobbled labouredly around the wing to the engine.

Looking slowly with difficulty, he bent down to see under the left wing; the wing and left wheel appeared undamaged to him; there was no obvious slack in the flying wires. It was obvious that the propeller had not struck the ground and Doc sighed aloud in relief. Had the propeller struck the ground, it would have surely meant an engine rebuild and that would have ended the summer right there.

Then he saw the upturned axle and cocked right wheel. Still resting in the open maw of the gopher’s burrow that had caused the trouble, the landing gear was pointed outward and it was obvious that the axle shaft and wheel had taken the brunt of the ground loop. As best he could, still hanging on to Frances, he bent to more closely examine the wheel. All of the wheel spokes and rim were intact and straight and appeared undamaged, and Doc thought to himself, if he was lucky, all he had gotten out of it was a bent axle shaft and a busted knee, and the pain of it wasn’t getting any better. He said as calmly as he could, “Frances, dear, I’ve got to sit down now.”

“I’ll run go get mama.” she said, as she helped him ease to the ground. And then she started to run in the direction of the little house.

“No, wait. Please!” said Doc. “Just let me rest here for a minute.”

Frances took another halting step further, but she turned back in his direction.

“There’s a water bottle in the back. Could you get it for me, please?”

Without a word, Frances walked around the airplane

and at the back cockpit, she placed her hands on the rim, rose up on her toes and looked in.

"It should be on the floor, next to my seat, if it didn't get thrown forward." said Doc.

"Don't see nuthin' mister!"

"Look forward."

"Oh, wait! There 'tis!"

"Keep your feet close to the fuselage when you climb up."

"What's the 'fuselage?'"

"Don't step out on the wing. Just stay on the black walkway next to the body." said Doc.

Frances had never touched an airplane or ridden in one, and the Jenny seemed an inert magical beast to her. Holding to the cockpit rim, she put her left foot on the wing walk and gingerly pulled herself upright standing at the front of the rear cockpit, and she stared in for a moment.

As she reached down to retrieve the water bottle, she paused to look at the instrument panel. The sight of the machine's instruments, the altimeter, the turn-and-bank indicator, the compass, the oil pressure gauge, the magneto switch, the tachometer and the wires running up and down the length of the floor beneath the seat all seemed very mysterious and caused her to forget for a minute why she was there.

She reached in and ran a finger across the small glass face of the eight day clock and watched as its second hand jerked second-to-second and she could understand that it said, "4:19 p.m." The rest, with their unmoving, white tipped pointers, red and yellow slashes, and their recognizable yet unfamiliar numbers told her nothing and she narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips in annoyed question of their meanings.

As the smells of gas and burnt oil and acrylic lacquer, all normal airplane smells, washed over her, she became afraid she might break something, and she quickly reached into the cockpit and retrieved the water bottle and ran back around to where Doc was sitting

rubbing his knee.

She handed the water bottle to him and asked, "Is you feeling ary better?" And she quickly sat in the grass cross-legged facing Doc a few away from him. For the briefest moment, as she sat with her chin cupped in her hands, her elbows resting on her knees, in rapt attention awaiting an answer, the look of her struck Doc dumb and he could not speak. But something brought him back to her question, and he answered it.

"Some..." said Doc, "...I think it's just bruised."

And Doc, feeling his pulse quicken, thought to himself, *"This is not fair. I am too old."*

"I kin go get you some ice if you like." said Frances.

"I think I just need some aspirin." said Doc. "Maybe you could help me get that out of the plane, too?"

From the direction of the house then, both Doc and Frances turned their heads as a far-a-way female voice yelled loudly, "Ar he alright, Frances?!"

And standing far in front of the house was an older buxom woman in a flowered print dress that flapped and billowed in the breeze as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"That's my mama." said Frances to Doc, before she yelled, "Yes, ma'am! He's jest banged up a little!"

With that, France's mother ceased walking towards the airplane and yelled, "Ya'll need anything?"

Frances looked to Doc and asked, "You want we should call a doctor?"

Doc answered, "I think, for now, if I could just get a few aspirin from my airplane and think things through for a few minutes..."

And Frances rose to her feet and said, "Tell me where they are and I'll git 'em." Then she yelled to her mother, "We is all-rite for now!" Doc told her then where to look in his duffel bag. In a few minutes, she handed Doc the bottle of aspirin. In the meantime, her mother who had stood waiting for an answer with her hands on her hips turned and began walking back towards the house and she raised a hand in the air as if to say,

"Whatever suits you."

Frances again took up her position sitting in front of Doc and watched him take the aspirin. When he took another swallow of water to wash the pills down, he screwed the cap back on the water bottle and sat quietly rubbing his knee and looking over at the crippled airplane.

Frances was full of questions, but sensed that Doc needed time to sort out his predicament and just studied his face for the moment. After a few minutes, he asked her if she knew anyone that might know something about welding.

"Yes, sir! I do."

"You mean you know something about welding, or that you know someone who does?"

Frances grinned widely and said, "I does."

Doc, not wanting to seem exasperated and still feeling the pain in his knee, forced a smile and said, "You 'does,' what?"

"Oh!...said Frances, "...I do. I mean I know a little about it." And she smiled coquettishly.

"I fix everythin' 'round here."

Doc smiled at her surprised at what she had said, and he said, "I suppose that you're going to tell me that you've got an acetylene torch rig, too?"

"Yes, sir!" said Frances brightly, and she slid her hands under the bib of her overalls and she beamed rocking back and forth on her bare feet.

Doc looked away, shook his head and said, "Well, I guess I couldn't have picked a better place to crash, huh?"

"No, sir! I s'pose you cudn't have." And Frances laughed and Doc watched as her eyes took on a far off look as if some thought had pulled her away.

"My daddy taught me how'ta weld before he died." she said. "He taught me how to fix a lot of things." And Frances said that somewhat wistfully as she looked back over her shoulder at the house.

"You think you could help me jack that wing up and

heat that axle so I could straighten it?"

"Got a jack, too!" said Frances. "But how you gonna do anything with that hurt leg?"

"Maybe if I could get your help getting my things out of the plane, I could just rest out here tonight and we could see how I feel in the morning? What you think?"

"You could come sleep in the house, on the couch, if you wanna."

"I better not." said Doc. "I haven't seen any yet, but I know cows are partial to nibbling on airplanes and..."

"Ain't got none." Frances said, "Sides, you owe me."

"What!" said Doc in surprise softly.

"Well...I got you that water and them aspirins there and my price is that you tell me what all them dials in that airplane do?" And Frances threw her head back and laughed before leveling her eyes at Doc and giving him a mock glare.

"You got steep prices, Frances." And they both laughed together.

"You be okay here for a few?" asked Frances. "I'm gonna go tell mama to set another place. It'd be good to have some company. Besides..." And Frances stopped herself.

"Besides what?" asked Doc.

"Oh, nuthin."

"Come on..." said Doc, "...besides what?"

Frances studied Doc's face, the lines of his brow, the squared edges of his jaws, the crow's feet at the edges of his eyes, the silver stubble of his day old unshaven beard, his mildly protruding Adam's apple and his soft brown eyes, even the small tufts of dishwater blond hair at his temple that were fluttering with the breeze before she answered.

"I asked for ye. That's 'besides what?'"

Doc had no words for a few seconds. "What?"

"I asked for ye. I din't pray for you 'actly. But I wished for you."

"You wished..." said Doc, "...for me?"

"Well, not you exactly. But somebody."

"I don't understand." Doc said. "What do you mean?"

Frances wanted to change the subject and did so quickly. "Where were you flying to?"

Doc laughed. "Here, for now, I guess." Then he told her that he was heading west to barnstorm for the summer. With that, Frances jumped to her feet and slapped her side with her right hand. "Damn! You mean it?! That's what you do?" Then she spun around once quickly as if she would break out in a jig and faced him again, her eyes wide with the look of astonishment. "Naw!" she said. "You lying to me!" Doc sat blank faced watching her excitement. "Really!? Really!?" she exclaimed. "I seen that once in a movie!"

"Well, we're still around, I guess. I've been doing it for many summers now."

Frances stood mouth agape with both her hands on her hips and she turned around again like an excited puppy might. "S'at all you do?"

The Doc told her he was also a writer and he wrote about people and his adventures. Frances slapped a hip again and dropped to the grass cross legged and just stared at Doc.

"Is that so unusual?" said Doc.

"Well, I ain't never met nobody that's done *that!*"

"What about you?" asked Doc. "What's a pretty girl like you do out here in the hills?"

Frances's cheeks flushed some, and she dropped her head and stared into her lap for a moment before saying, "I'm trying to figure that out." And she raised her head and looked directly into Doc's eyes. "I shorely wish't I knew, I do." And she absent-mindedly snatched a tall shaft of grass and twirled it between her hands.

Doc asked her what she did on the farm. "I mostly help mama out since daddy died." And she looked far off in the distance before saying, "But she don't need me anymore since Cappy came along."

"Who's Cappy?"

"Aw, he's a guy from Pickens she met at church. I think they gonna git married. I don't much like him. But

he treats her good.”

“You hungry?” said Frances. “Why don’t you stay with us ‘til we get yor wheel straight?”

Doc rubbed his knee and thought it might be easier to just sit out the next few days here, get the axel straightened and let the knee heal some. He raised his pant leg up past his knee and looked at the bluish knot just below his knee cap. As he eased the cuff back over the bruised area, he said, “What’s your mother gonna say about that?”

Frances assured Doc that he’d be welcome especially since he was hurt and his airplane was banged up and she said, “I hope you like collards and biscuits.”

Doc said, “M-m-m. My favorites.” Doc hated collards. And he forced a small smile.

“Besides...” said Frances, “...you still gotta tell me about all them dials.”

The sky was growing darker and the air was becoming decidedly cooler, and Frances began rubbing her upper arms before she crossed her arms over her chest and shivered. Doc looked around at the darkening sky and saw that the front had passed, the sky was clear and the first stars were faintly becoming visible in the purple dusk. The black silhouette of a bat raced overhead and switched its direction in the snap of a finger chasing an insect.

“Com’on...” said Frances, “...I’ll hep you get up and we kin go in.”

Doc asked her to grab a few things from the airplane and Doc, still needing some help to walk, leaned on Frances and hobbled towards the edge of the field and the small house. A wisp of grey evening smoke curled and rose upward from its chimney in the now still and chilly night air.

Frances had become so engrossed in Doc telling her that he was a barnstormer that she had completely forgotten that she had not asked her mother if letting Doc stay the night was all right. She crossed the fingers of her right hand hoping.

Chapter Five

The smell of coffee roused Doc early the next morning. He had spent the night on what amounted to a love seat, not quite a couch, just enough room for two people to sit. He had slept curled up in a ball all night, lying on his left side to avoid putting pressure on his right knee. Yawning and grimacing at the still very painful stiffness in his knee, he pushed himself upright and sat up on the edge of the tiny couch looking around the small living room which was at the same time the kitchen and the dining room. Behind him, on the other side of a central wall there was a bedroom and a small bathroom which was entered through a central door in the dividing wall in the two room house.

Doc attempted to stand and put his full weight on his injured leg. He had slept in his pants and a tee shirt under a ragged comforter; the comforter was now laying shawl like across his shoulders to ward off a chill. In a small wood stove sitting along an outer wall, the dying embers of the night's fire produced little heat, and Doc shivered and grunted as he extended both legs to their full length. He stood still there for a moment and slid his right foot forward, then his left. The knee hurt but was working and Doc knew it might take a day or two to be able to work the Jenny's rudder bar, so he could fly. He sighed. The summer had only just begun. Was this some sort of omen? He shrugged his shoulders and sighed again. The axel still had to be straightened.

A slow creak at the back door caught his attention and he looked as Frances slowly pushed her head through. The morning sun cast a beam across the wooden floor and she quietly said, "Hi!"

Doc gathered his comforter tightly around himself and she said, "I din't know if you be up yet."

"How's the knee?" she said.

"I'll live." said Doc.

"You want some coffee? I done had some."

"If it's no trouble."

"None a'tall." And Frances went to the dish drainer and picked up a small cup and rinsed it out before tipping the percolator and pouring the cup full. "You want some milk or sugar for this?"

"Little of both." said Doc.

"I done drug that welding cart out there."

"Really!" said Doc brightly. "The sun's barely up."

"I don't sleep much."

"You should have waited on me. I could've helped you." said Doc.

And the irony of that caused Frances to laugh and in her way she immediately clamped her hand to her mouth and looked at Doc to see if he might be angry. "I'm sorry." she said, in a muffled voice behind her hand. The blue eyes above her fingers sparkled with her mirth.

Doc looked down at his knee and said, "Well, I guess it is kinda funny. I wouldn't have been much help, huh?"

Frances shook her head no and stirred in a spoonful of sugar and a short dribble of evaporated milk from the can. Then she handed the cup to Doc saying, "Is you hurtin' very much this mornin'?"

"I think I'll live."

"You done said that already. Is you hurtin'?"

"Sorry. I'm not the most talkative creature in the mornings. Yeah, it hurts like the devil. But I think it's just a bad bruise. Nothing seems broken."

"Mama's like that. She barely opens her mouth before noon. She done lit out already with Cappy this mornin'. You want some more aspirin? Maybe if we put somethin' hot on it."

"Let's fix the axel first. Do they work somewhere?"

"At the chair factory where I used to work."

"You made chairs?"

"Yep. Well, I put 'em together anyways."

"Do you work anywhere now?"

"No, sir. I keep the house up now. I jest couldn't

stand being cooped up in that noisy place, and the dust..." Then she went silent for a moment.

"Anyway..." Frances went on, "I wanted out of there. I want out of here. There's nuthin' in these hills for me now."

Doc didn't quite know how to respond to what she had just said, and he decided to leave well enough alone. He needed to focus now on getting the Jenny back in the air and getting on with the summer. But if Doc wasn't anything, he wasn't unsympathetic. "You said that like something bad has happened to you."

Frances turned away and stared out the window for a minute. Then she shoved her hands in the pockets of her overalls and said over her shoulder, "You wanna come show me what you need welded?"

"Sure,..." said Doc, "...do I have a minute to visit the bathroom and swallow this last bit of coffee?" He was very hungry, but he figured that he better take the help while he could, so any breakfast had to wait.



Outside the back door of the little house sat an old wooden push cart and in it were a few tools, some pliers, a ball peen hammer, a bottle jack and some short lengths of scrap pine lumber.

"Thought we might need some of this." said Frances as she grasped the handles and began pushing the cart in the direction of the Jenny. Pushing the cart slowly so Doc could keep up, Frances said, "What we gonna weld?"

"Nothing I hope." said Doc. "It's heat that I need, I think. If we can get the gear high enough off of the ground, I'm hoping to get the wheel off, heat up the axel and bend it straight."

Doc shuffled along behind Frances attempting to walk putting his full weight on his left leg and not the right, but he couldn't help but let out a muffled groan or two as he limped along. Frances heard him and stopped and set the cart down. "You hurtin' ain't you?" she said.

" 'Fraid so." said Doc.

"Well, you stay here for a minute. I'll push the cart over first, then I'll come back and get you."

Doc smiled, and he said, Thanks! You're angel."

Frances smiled sweetly at that and continued to push the cart to the plane.

She set the cart next to the airplane and ran back to Doc who was not doing a very good job of trying to balance on one leg while waiting. She rushed up to him and lifted up his right arm and pulled it over shoulder as she wrapped her left arm around his waist. And they began walking to the airplane together.

Sometimes, Doc could be his own worst enemy, and in an effort to make small talk, he said, "You never did answer my question. I asked you if something bad has happened to you." The second he said that, he winced wishing he had kept his mouth closed.

"I know. I is trying to ignore that."

"I understand."

"No, you don't. Nobody does, even mama. I miss him sumpthin' terrible. That's the 'bad' thing."

"Your daddy?"

"How'd you know?"

"Just a wild guess." said Doc just a touch sardonically. "It's been pretty obvious that you miss him very much. I saw the look in your eye yesterday."

"You did?"

"A little. But it's always that way." said Doc. "I missed mine, too, when he died. But I don't think as much as you. We weren't that close."

"We was." There was a tear forming at the corner of her eye when Doc looked at her. It slowly left her eye and began moving along the edge of her cheek. Then another followed. Then she snuffed up her nose and wiped her eye with the palm of her hand.

"It was three months ago, Mister Doc. And now, mama, done took up..."

"People have to move along, Frances." Doc interrupted.

"So does I." she said softly and she sniffed her tears

back again. "T'ain't nothing here no more."

"So, that's what you meant when you said you wished for somebody?"

They had arrived at the airplane and Frances stopped and just held to Doc for a minute.

"Somebody to do what?" asked Doc.

Frances loosened her grip on his arm and said, "You set for a bit. Tell me what to do."

"Deal." said Doc. "But let me move closer and we'll do it together."

"To do what?" again asked Doc.

"Nuthin'." said Frances, "Just nuthin'."



The axel glowed cherry red as Frances expertly held the tip of the torch's blue flame at just the right distance from the axle surface to get the maximum heat. The spanner nut holding the wheel on came off easily and the spoked wheel seemed to have no damage, and Doc was very pleased about that. With Frances continuing to apply the heat, the metal softened, and Doc pulled back carefully on the tire iron he had inserted into the hollow shaft of the axle and the axel slowly came true. Doc studied the reformed shaft from every angle. "I think we got it, girl!"

"You can cut it off now." said Doc as Frances, wearing a smile, spun the oxygen and acetylene valves closed and the torch extinguished with a sharp "wap!"

She had thought to throw a small can of bearing grease in the cart with the tools, and after the shaft had cooled, Doc greased it and put the wheel back on, spun the wheel to check for wobble. He deemed the small amount of wobble he saw as safe. Then he tightened the nut, reinserted the cotter pin and announced the landing gear fixed. The pair grinned at one another and shook hands.

The Jenny now sat with her wings level, her axel repaired, clear of any obstacle, and she nearly appeared to smile in the late morning sun. But Doc still wasn't

smiling. He knew he could not fly just yet. The knee was too painful.

While the pair waited for the axel shaft to cool, Doc had kept his promise.

Frances had helped him to stand, and together they stood at the rear cockpit peering in as Doc pointed to the 'dials' as she had called them.

"This one tells me how high I am." he said pointing at the altimeter. Frances replied, "M-m-m."

"And this one, it tells me how fast I go."

"How fast do you go?" asked Frances.

"Not very." said Doc. "Maybe 75 if the wind is behind me."

And Frances said, "H-m-m-p-f! My old truck goes faster than that."

"Yeah, but your old truck isn't over 100 years old is it?" And Doc laughed. And Frances followed suit.

"Naw!..." she said, "It cain't be that old? Really?"

"Almost as old as I am." said Doc deadpan.

"You is not! You cain't be more than 60, are you?"

"Are you what?" said Doc. "Over 60? That's my business, young lady."

And Doc looked at Frances who was leaning as far into the cockpit as she could get to have a better view of the instrument panel. Her face was just inches from his. The smell of her was a mix of the spice in her shampoo and earthy perspiration and the sensuality of it caused Doc to look away feeling guilty in his arousal.

For all her hill country and tomboyish demeanor, there was at the same time an innocence and the air of an ancient wisdom about her. And Doc thought there was a thing amiss about her. He quickly batted the thought away, but it would lodge in his consciousness.

"How old are you?" asked Doc turning to face her directly. That got him a blazing glare, and he lowered his eyes and said "Sorry." But the glare quickly melted away and became a wry smile.

"And that one over there, the little one in the corner is my oil pressure gauge."

"I know all about oil pressure. You got to have that, huh?" she said.

"Yep. It certainly helps." said Doc with a low chuckle.

"I ain't never been up in an airplane."

"Really!" said Doc. "You got five dollars? I'll give you a ride." And he laughed in spite of another hard glare, a faux one, and Frances laughed. "I don't know if I want to ride with you, anyways. You're dangerous."

"It was a gopher's fault." And Frances laughed. "I know *that*," she said.

"Will you take me flyin'?" she asked.

Doc took a short step back from the intoxication he was feeling and said, "Soon as I can."

"I'm a little afraid."

"New things make people a little afraid sometimes." said Doc. Then Doc said, "I'm so hungry, I could eat a snake."

Frances laughed and said, "Me, too. You want some ham and eggs?"

"Infinitely more than I want to faint from malnourishment."

"We cain't have that."



The pair had their breakfast for lunch, and Doc decided that he needed to take some aspirin and lay down for a while. He slept most of the afternoon under the wing of the Jenny. Frances went about the business of feeding chickens, getting supper ready and cleaning the small house.

Occasionally she would go the window and stand for long moments and look wistfully at the old yellow airplane and the dark form stretched out in the shade of its wing in the middle of the field. She had so many questions about the man who had dropped into her world. And there was one question in particular that she did not quite know how to ask. Maybe she didn't want to hear the answer.



It was late afternoon and the sun was starting to settle in the western sky. She walked quietly up to the Jenny and lightly thumped on the wing's taut fabric like knocking softly on a door. Then she bent to look under the wing. Doc rolled to his side and pushed his sleeping bag aside and said, "Oh. Hey, there." She extended her hand underneath the wing, the one holding a mug of coffee, and she said, "Thought maybe you might like this."

Doc reached for the mug and said, "You *are* an angel!"

"Naw!" she said. "I like some in the afternoon, too. Thought maybe you would."

Doc thanked her for the coffee and propped on one elbow, he sipped at the coffee slowly as he surveyed the landscape surrounding the field more closely than he had before. The field lay in a shallow valley and far off in the distance, the rolling hills had a bluish, smoky haze gathered about them that lay interwoven like layers of gauze across the tops of the thick forest of tall pines nestled on the hill sides. The landscape was just coming into the full bloom of late spring.

Spotted across the low hills were sprays of white mountain laurel and the speckled umbrellas of newly bloomed dogwood trees. Within the wood line beyond the field, the spirited conversations of robins and jays were in progress across the branches; discussions filled with laughing squeaks, punctuated by bright, high songs and interrupted by the sharp, grating cries of mocking birds.

"You lived here all your life?" asked Doc.

Frances had taken up her usual cross legged seat in the grass a few feet away from him, and with her elbows resting on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands, staring into his face, she said, rather glumly, "Ain't never been anywhere else."

"I take it that you've never navigated by ant?"

Frances cocked her head and looked at Doc with a question on her face. "What'd you mean?"

Doc laughed and said, "Never mind. Maybe I'll tell

you later. It's a thing that an old friend taught me once."

Then Doc said, "It looks like I'll need to hang around here another day or two if it's all right with you and your mom."

Frances's face lit up noticeably and she said, "Oh! She don't care, I reckon, and me, I'm happy to have the company. I'd never met nobody like you 'afore."

"Not sure just how to take that." said Doc as he smiled.

"I din't mean nuthin' by it. It's jest yor different than anybody round here."

Doc simply responded, "M-m-m..."

Then he said, "Think I could build a small fire and stay out here tonight?" asked Doc.

"You don't like that little old sofa, huh?"

"It's not that so much as it is that I'm really partial to having a fire and sleeping under the stars."

"Could I come out and sit by the fire with you?"

"I'd like that. Maybe tonight I'll teach you about how the ant travels."

Frances laughed freely and said, "Mostly I finds 'em in my house." Then, after a second's distant look up into the hills, she said, "I din't know they went anywhere else."

"Oh, they do. They're like guides."

Frances got the quizzical look about her again. And Doc laughed and said, "I'll tell you tonight."

"I'll gather you up some wood and bring it out, if you want?"

"That'd be great!" said Doc. "Room service."

"Room service?" said Frances.

"I take it that you never stayed in a hotel?"

"No sir. I ain't never been far out of this county."

"And you never heard of it on television?"

"We had one once. But we couldn't get nothing on it but squiggly lines. Daddy sold it. We got a radio to listen to the Opry though. Mama loves that. I don't care."

Doc laughed, then he fell silent and looked at Frances as she diverted her eyes and seemed to study

something far-a-way. The way she seemed to fade away occasionally brought back the thought in the back of Doc's mind and it grew larger in his thinking until he thought that maybe there might be a touch of autism in Frances – the thing that was amiss.

“Frances?”

And she turned to look at him.

“Did you go to school?” He immediately regretted the question but could not retrieve it.

She said nothing for a moment as she studied his face. Then, “Yes, sir, I sure did.” And her head dropped and she picked a grassy nit from her pant leg a bit nervously. Then she said, “But I din’t like it much.” And she raised her gaze and looked back at Doc. “So mama and daddy taught me here.”

“You didn’t like school or studying?”

“I just couldn’t fix my mind on nuthin’ there.” She rose to her feet then and she said, “But the state done give me a certificate that said my folks taught me the things I needed to learn. I ain’t stupid.”

“I hope you didn’t think...” said Doc before Frances interrupted, “I know you *didn’t*. Some folks say I’m a bit slow, and I know that.” As she stood, she shoved her hands in her pockets resolutely and she said, “I kin read or write as good as ary body else.”

“I have no doubt.” said Doc.

“I’m gonna go get you some wood for that fire now. What you gonna do for supper? We’d be glad to have you again tonight. I killed a chicken to fry, and I’ll make gravy to go with the biscuits.”

“Can’t turn that down.” said Doc, and he leaned back and braced by his arms behind him, he stared at the empty coffee mug. Frances noticed that and asked, “You wont some more?”

Doc leaned forward and waved a hand signaling no and said, “No thanks, I’m good. You sure you don’t mind feeding me again...?”

“Don’t you worry ‘bout it. I’ll be back in jest a bit with wood. You doin’ okay?”

Doc said he was and Frances turned to head back in the direction of the house. Doc studied her as she walked. In a few steps she stopped and turned back in his direction and stopped. "You really gonna take me flying?" she said.

"Soon as the knee lets me. Might take a few days." said Doc. "But it'll be my pleasure."

Then she smiled, turned her head away towards the hills with a soft distant look in her half-closed eyes for a second, and then she slowly turned to face Doc.

"Doc?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm glad you crashed here." And she smiled.

Doc returned the smile and silently shook his head up and down a few times. Seeing that, she made and held eye contact with Doc for a few seconds before shaking her head as he had, and then she smiled brightly, hiked her shoulders up some and then she turned quickly and resumed her walk back to the house with a bit of a skip in her step.

As he watched her walk away, Doc thought to himself, "*So am I. So am I.*"

Chapter Six

That night, after supper, Doc pushed slightly back from the table, tipped his mason jar towards the tin plate ceiling and the oil lamp that hung low over the table, and he drank the remainder of his iced tea in a single swallow.

Cappy, a squat little man, with flush cheeks and a ruddy neck had eaten silently, head down, throughout the entire meal. Bertie, Frances's mother, had done most of the talking, mostly about the people she hated at the chair factory. Only occasionally would Cappy raise his head and nod once or twice, in agreement. Frances said little except to quietly offer Doc another piece of chicken or a ladle of gravy. In the background, the radio played the high screeching strains of a bluegrass fiddle accompanied by the aching heartbreak of a jilted lover's lament, sung sickly-sweet, the twangy words nearly unintelligible, and the music seemed to dominate the meal.

"You wont that?" asked Cappy looking at Doc as he pointed a bent fork with uneven tines at the remaining drumstick on the platter. Even before Doc could answer, the chicken leg found its way to Cappy's plate, then in between his fingers, and he tore at the meat with his incisors, of which there were only three.

Bertie laughed saying that it was good to have another hungry man at the table again. Frances kept her head down and Doc saw her throat tighten momentarily. Then composing herself imperceptibly, she sipped at her tea and held the glass at her lips glaring unseen at Bertie who was rubbing Cappy's inner thigh under the table.

Knowing how much Frances missed her father, Doc desperately wanted to reach out and touch Frances's arm to sooth her but dared not, and he forced his gaze to wander the room. But he *was* able to make a flicker

of eye contact with Frances and she returned a faint smile.

It seemed to Doc that now that Cappy and Bertie were courting, if that was what it could be called, Frances might be the fifth wheel, but in his brief time around the trio, he had not once seen any mistreatment or resentment of her. Frances kept her distance from the pair and seemed to be content to busy herself with a book or small sewing jobs.

"Frances, that was wonderful chicken." said Doc brightly.

Bertie shifted her gaze away from Cappy and said, "I taught her good." Frances nodded that she had, and she looked down into her lap for a second before pushing her chair from the table, the chair's leg scraping noisily on the wooden floor. As she stood, she looked at Doc, and she asked, "You done with that?" pointing at his empty plate.

Doc nodded that he was and ran a paper napkin across his lips. "Yes, ma'am! You could make money with that fried chicken and gravy."

"I wish't." said Frances and she smiled at him.

"If she warn't so picky, she could be making that for a husband by now." said Bertie.

"Oh, shush, mama!" snapped Frances nearly in a whisper. "You know how I feel about all that."

And Bertie just shook her head and looked back at Cappy who shrugged his shoulders, and then he took his last swath of mashed potatoes with the side of his fork and put the fork in his mouth up to the hilt. He left it there for a few seconds then tightly pressed his lips against the fork as he withdrew it, slowly making sure to completely clean the fork. Finished, he let the fork settle to the plate with a "clink" and leaned back in his chair seemingly satisfied. Then he belched. And Bertie laughed. And Frances shook her head in resignation. Doc just smiled.

"Well, if it's all right with you folks, I think I'll say "good night" and go build a fire out by my airplane and

read for a while.”

Bertie asked, “Is yor knee better?”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s getting there. I might be able to leave tomorrow, I think.”

Frances stood staring at Doc for the briefest second and fearing that someone might see her, she turned towards the sink and the stack of dirty dishes there. She felt a mild burning at the base of her throat and felt herself begin to get angry at her lack of courage. She would ask him soon.

Doc looked at Frances and said, “You coming out with me?”

For a second, Frances would not turn and look at him and she shut the faucet off staring into the sink.

Then she said, “If’n you don’t mind the company.”

“I could think of none better.”

Frances raised her head and smiled at the wall, and still not looking at Doc, she said, “I’ll wander out there after I get these cleaned up.”

“You want some help?” asked Doc.

“Naw, sir.” she said. “Thanks. You go on. I’ll be out in a while.

Doc pulled his flashlight out of his pants pocket, clicked it on and looked into the beam to see that it was working and then he said, “Well, good night, folks. If I’m gone before you get back tomorrow, I want you to know I really appreciate the help, and of course, the food.”

Bertie said, “Don’t be no stranger.” And Cappy belched before waving with a half-raised hand.

And Doc opened the door and stepped into the cool night air and let the flashlight’s beam fall on the ground ahead of him.



In the front cockpit, Frances had a hand gripping each of the cockpit rims as the nose of the Jenny slowly rose into the air and began its steady ascent above the horizon. The hammering of the airplane’s wheels against the hard ground during the Jenny’s take-off run had

been replaced by the steady clatter of the engine pulling the airplane up into the early morning sky.

In the rear cockpit, Doc felt the normal shaking of the control stick in his hand, and he berated himself for letting her talk him into taking her up with him on the first flight since the axel was repaired. His knee was still sore but flexible and with no crosswind to contend with operating the rudder bar tolerable.

But soon, his argument with himself faded as he thought back to the pre-flight he had completed before they took off. It was, after all, he reasoned, more thorough than any he had ever done, specifically because she would be on board. In a minute his experience, the thousands of hours he had flown the Jenny, had completely taken over and his subconscious was at the helm, on alert for any possible problems. Even so, he circled high over and stayed close to the field in case he needed to land quickly.



In the early pink light of sunrise, she had appeared just as he had opened his eyes that morning, a red bandana worn on her head as a scarf. She held a mug of coffee in each hand and wore a happy smile on her face, her flashing blue eyes reflecting a bit of sparkle of the rising sun. Doc gathered his sleeping bag around himself, laughing, and he asked her to turn around so he could pull his trousers on.

Frances turned and stood looking back at the house as Doc wriggled out the bag and grabbed his pants. "I would say that you're eager this morning, huh?" and he chuckled turning back around as he buckled his belt before telling her he was dressed and taking one of the mugs from her.

"I hope its hot enough and fixed right." said Frances.

Doc said thanks and he took the mug she handed him and he raised it to his mouth blowing air across the steam as he did. The mug stayed at Doc's lips for a few seconds and then he swallowed deeply and said, "Perfect. Couldn't have done it better myself."

"I'm sure it be better than the mud you fixed last night out here."

He gulped quickly, squinted, and feigning irritation, he asked, "Are you insulting my instant coffee?"

"Yes, sir. That stuff's turrible."

Doc laughed.

"You sure that you're ready to go for a ride?" As Doc lowered his mug, he looked steadily at her.

"I ain't never been readier."

"Okay, have a seat and let me run a wet rag over my face and we'll head up after I give the bird a good once over."

She nodded and sat slowly in the grass studying the Jenny over the rim of her coffee mug. The sun was coming up behind the airplane and the dew glistened on its wings. After pouring some water from his jug and wetting a wash cloth, Doc wiped down his face and neck.

Then Doc walked slowly around the Jenny, occasionally setting his mug in the grass in order to better inspect a turnbuckle or thump a rib for soundness. It took a solid twenty minutes of quiet consideration and examination before he walked back to where Frances was sitting and announced he felt ready to fly.



Doc watched as she swiveled her head first to the north then to the south as they climbed, gently banking over the field and the small house below. Looking overboard, she fixed her eyes on the house, and daring to thrust an arm out of the cockpit, with the wind buffeting her hand, she pointed over the side jabbing her finger downward; then she looked back at Doc and threw her head back giggling. Doc eased the throttle back slightly to lessen the engine noise. "Look-e-e!" she yelled and Doc shook his head, his eyes smiling behind the glass lenses of his goggles.

Then she turned her head forward and reached up with both hands under her chin to tighten the knot of

her bandana. Every few minutes, she would seem to rise up in her seat as she sought to see below or have a better view of the sky and the world around her. Now and then, she would extend a hand outside beyond the cockpit's rim and forming the hand into a curved airfoil, she would fly the hand up and down in the rushing air beyond. Every few minutes, she would twist herself sideways in her seat, look back, and she would lock eyes with Doc then smile broadly before turning her attention back to the clouds out beyond the wings or the hills passing underneath.

After some time, Doc felt comfortable easing away from the immediate vicinity of the field and decided to circle out over the hills as he climbed higher. The scattered morning mounds of patchy cotton cumulus clouds were building into bulbous towers, and Doc flew up next to a large cloud and let the Jenny's wingtip just disappear a few feet into its misty wall.

Frances watched as if hypnotized and then looked back at Doc, her mouth open and her eyes wide. And she threw her head back, and she laughed, her shoulders shaking. He responded by raising a finger and mouthing the word, "Wait!" in an exaggerated fashion. She shook her head that she understood.

Then Doc gently rolled the airplane up on its side and flew into the cloud. Frances took a firm grip on cockpit rim. And the Jenny disappeared into the gray mist and the inner darkness of the cloud for five seconds.

In that short exhilarating time, Frances felt a small electric charge of adrenalin shoot through her as the world around her went pewter grey, and the sky and the land and everything around her except the instrument panel ahead disappeared and a damp chill quickly fell upon her. In the cloud, there was no up or down or sideways before the light of the blue sky beyond began to fill the cockpit once more as they exited the cloud. And with the return of brilliant sunlight, all was right again.

When Frances looked back at Doc, her mouth was closed tightly with the breath she was holding, then releasing it, she exploded into a smile and her laughing head was shaking up and down and she was bouncing in her seat like a giddy child having just ridden down the first steep track of a roller coaster.

Doc looked at his watch and reached forward to tap Frances on the shoulder. As she turned to look back at him, he slowly pulled the throttle back and the Jenny's wind-milling engine, now at idle, made small popping backfires as Frances shook her head "no" not wanting to land. Doc pointed at his watch and then shrugged his shoulders in apology. Frances nodded in return noting that she understood.



"You won't be afraid?" he asked at the fire last night.

"Nope..." she answered, "...nuthin' much scares me."

Frances scrunched up her lips and crinkled her nose and looked into the cup, saying, "Yech-k-k! That stuff's horrible. How you drink that?"

"Practice." said Doc. "Lots of practice."

Then he said, "Grows hair on my chest." And he laughed.

Frances looked deeply into the cup one last time and she said, "Better you than me."

And they laughed together for a few seconds. Frances set her cup aside and put her arms to her sides, put her palms flat on the grass behind her with her extended legs out in front of her, she crossed her feet over one another and looked up.

Doc looked long and hard at her, the flames of the fire causing her eyes to sparkle; her chin was illuminated by the fire's light as she peered upward into the starlit sky.

"You can see 'em better out here than anywhere because there's not much other light." said Doc. "You know their names?"

"There ain't that many names in the world!" said Frances and that caused Doc to laugh before he said,

"No. What I meant was, can you name any of the constellations?"

"Oh! You mean the ones that look like animals and such?"



As the Jenny's wooden propeller clacked to a stop, Jenny stared straight ahead causing Doc to think, just for a second, that something was wrong. She had her head bowed; he could not see her face. With the engine stopped, the only sounds to be heard were the birds in the wood line. Then after long seconds, she unbuckled her seat belt and slowly turned to face Doc who had just reached forward and laid a hand on her shoulder.

Tears ran the length of her flushed cheeks.

Doc asked, "What's wrong. I thought you'd be happy. Are you okay?"

She cleared her voice and wiped at her face with the bandana which she had just pulled slowly away from her head before she said slowly, "Doc, that was the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me." And her shoulders shook as if she was about to cry more before she took a deep halting breath. Then she smiled and rose up in her seat and perched on her knees to look back at Doc sitting behind her.

After removing his helmet, he ran his fingers through his hair and lightly scratched his head. The free moving air felt good against his scalp. He laid his leather helmet and goggles just behind the small windscreen and then he said, "The first time affects a lot of folks that way." Then he said, "But I don't think that I've had too many break out crying like that." And he quickly added, "But I'm glad you thought it was so wonderful."

Still on her knees in the front seat, looking intently at Doc, she said, "All my life, I looked up at them clouds but I'd never been in one. I'd always thought the angels lived in them. I thought daddy might be in one."

"Maybe we just picked the wrong cloud this time." said Doc and he smiled warmly.

"I sure would like to look in some more." answered

Frances.

“You’d have to learn to fly.” said Doc.

Hearing that, Frances reared straight up and in a strong voice asked, “Would you teach me?” Her raised eye brows and facial expression took on a soft, pleading look and she said, “*Please.*”

Chapter Seven

“But I’ll be leaving soon.”



“Sure, I can name some of ‘em. They show ‘em in The Farmers Almanac every year.”

Doc was lying on his side, stretched out, his head propped on one hand watching an ant attempting to climb up the side of his tin coffee cup, and he reached out and flicked the insect away. “Come back tomorrow and help me plot a flight plan, little feller.” he said, and he followed that with a low chuckle of self amusement. “Can you find the North Star?” asked Doc.

“No, sir, but I know which-a-way north is.” she said.

“Well, that’s a step in the right direction.”

“Are you leavin’ tomorrow?” asked Frances as she shifted her gaze from the night sky to Doc.

“Might. If the knee works good when I take you up in the morning. I figure if I left about noon or so, I might make it to Ohio before dark.”

Frances fell sullen and quiet before lifting her eyes back to the sky.

“You gonna write about me and mama?” she said without looking at Doc. “T’ain’t much to say, huh?”

“I’m gonna try to write about every soul I meet this year.” said Doc. “Some more than others.” Then he said, “I suspect you and your mom will be chapter one.”

“Really?” and she looked back at him as he took the last sip left in his cup.

“Really!” And he laughed. “It’s not every day I find a gopher hole and a pretty girl in a field in the middle of nowhere, is it?” Then he said, “And the answer to your question is, that I think there’s a *lot* to say about you.”

“Naw!” she said incredulously. “Pretty?”

“Yeah...” and Doc, before he realized it, should have dropped it there, but he didn’t, “...I think there’s a lot more to you than meets the eye.”

Frances turned her head and stared him for a few

seconds, and then she said, "Like what?"

"Well, I think, and it's just a guess, mind you, that you desperately want to get out of here. Go someplace else."

"I wouldn't know where to go," she answered. "The furthest I ever been from here was over to Charleston to visit a cousin. I didn't much like it there. It was dirty."

"The world's bigger than Charleston." said Doc.

Doc was quickly realizing that he was getting ready to do something he shouldn't do and he wanted to quickly change the subject. Frances beat him to it.

"Where'd you learn to fly and write and all them things?"

Doc breathed a short sigh of relief.

"I learned to fly many years ago because someone needed a pilot to fly skydivers."

And Frances sat upright quickly, saying, "Skydivers! Really!?"

"Yeah, I was a skydiver then and I worked for guy who paid me to teach people how to jump. He came around the corner one day and said he needed another pilot and said he'd pay me to learn to fly. So I took him up on it and that was that. Here I am 56 years later and still flying."

Frances laughed a little at what he said before she said, "You jumped with parachutes?"

"Yes, ma'am, for many, many years until my legs wouldn't take it anymore."

Frances sat shaking her head back-and-forth before saying, "Boy!" And for the next few minutes, her questions were ceaseless about how Doc learned to skydive and what it was like and if he was ever afraid and on and on it went until Doc yawned happy, that the subject had changed.

"I saw people do that on the T.V. when it was workin'."

"Do what?" asked Doc. "Flying or jumping?"

"The parachute people. I wondered what it must be like to do that." And just then she had one of her far-a-

way spells and lost herself back in the stars overhead for a few long minutes. Doc watched her and waited for her to come back.

"Can you breathe when you fall through the air like that?"

Doc laughed at the question, one he had heard at least a hundred times in his life.

"Sure you can. It's just like when you fly an airplane, except you are flying straight down very fast."

"I cain't wait until tomorrow." said Frances. "I'm gonna fly, huh?"

"If the knee works and the creeks don't rise." said Doc.

Frances thought the creek remark was funny and she laughed loudly before instantly covering her mouth in the way she did when she was embarrassed.



"But I'll be leaving soon." said Doc as he smoothed his hair back.

He reached up and took Frances's hand to help her get down off of the wing walk. Her touch was light in his hand as she jumped down.

Her cheeks were flushed as she looked at him. She stood staring directly into Doc's eyes. A single tear remained as a small drop on her chin. She wiped at it with the crook of her elbow, and she held a hand out towards Doc who reached and took her hand. She grasped his hand tightly before she said, "Mister Doc...and she sniffed..."you cain't leave me here after that.

"What do you mean?" asked Doc slowly pulling back his hand.

"That." and she turned and pointed to the Jenny, "And that." And she pointed skyward. "Now, I have to go."

Doc was slightly taken aback and said nothing.

"I've waited forever to find a way out of here. And you come along with your airplane and your sky and your flying and yourself..."

"Frances, I just happened in here by accident. And I'm not trying to be funny."

Tears gathered in the rims of her eyes and she said, "I don't believe in no accidents. I'd be praying for a way out these hills for a long time. There ain't nuthin' for me here since daddy died. Mama's got Cappy now. She don't need me no more."

"But, Frances, are you asking..."

"Now you got me wanting to learn what you do. To fly like that. I ain't never felt like that in my life. You just cain't run off and leave me here. I'll die. I'll surely die."

Doc reached out and took her hand again, and he said, "Frances, you don't know what you are asking. I don't even know how old you..."

"I'm twenty-four and I got a driver's license to prove it. You want..."

"No. I believe you. But what would your mother say?"

"She's got Cappy. She never did really love pa anyways. I think she'd be happier if I wasn't around anyway. She be trying to get me married off for a long time, and I don't want that."

"But, Frances, I'm an old man, I'd..."

"I don't want no lover. I just want to be yor friend. I'd be a help. Look what we did together fixing that axel and all. I'm smart. I know things."

"Frances, you'll get homesick. I'm going to be wandering all over the place. You'll never know where you'll be one day to the next. And what if something happens? What if I get hurt again or crash again, or worse yet, you get hurt?"

Frances used her bandana to wipe her eyes and she was silent for a moment, then she said to Doc, "Have you ever let any of things stop you before?"

She stumped Doc and after a few seconds, he laughed, saying, "Well, kiddo, you got me there don't you?"

And Frances sniffed before she smiled, her blue eyes and freckles capturing his heart. He was going to give in,

he knew he was.

"Tell you what. Let me rest the knee and take some time to think things over. Maybe we could talk about it some more after supper at the fire?"

"You gonna make some more of that turrible coffee?"

"I have a feeling you better get used to it."

And she smiled.

"But I'm not saying that I'm taking you with me yet."

"I know." she said before she smiled again.

"*Damn.*" Doc thought to himself.



The morning clouds rolled in low and moving in several directions at once. Mixed among the grayness were the racing ghostly white clouds and the chilled air that said cold front. It had rained during the night enough that Doc had slept fitfully worried that the Jenny wasn't tied down and gusty winds, if they got more severe, could damage her, all the while trying to find the best position lying in his sleeping bag to keep his injured knee from aching. He wasn't in the best of moods as he watched Frances walking out from the house carrying a small, tan suitcase.



After supper, Frances had pushed the wooden cart full of twigs and some firewood she had gathered out to the fire Doc had built. She was hoping she had made her case.

Doc had asked for some time to himself to think things through, and so he opened a can of chicken stew, built a small fire and ate by himself.

At the house, Frances had barely touched her collards and cornbread and nervously sat looking out the window watching the small orange and yellow flames that flickered near the airplane as Doc ate his supper.

Cappy had arrived with a small portable black-and-white television set and a roll of copper wire to use as an antenna. He was barely able to get Charleston on the set. But as Matt Dillon and Kitty talked of cattle rustlers, town drunks and gamblers, Bertie and Cappy sat next to

each other on the small couch drinking Budwiesers and occasionally sniggering between themselves nearly unaware that Frances had gotten up from the table and was pacing.

But as dark fell, Bertie said in a somewhat agitated voice, "You goin' out and sit with him again?" which Frances took as an attempt to get rid of her. "Yes'um, pretty soon." And she conjured an excuse for her delay, saying, "In a little while. He's writing now."

"H-m-m." said Frances's mama. "Getting dark. Cain't write much in the dark."

"Reckon you cain't." said Frances. "Think I'll go on out and visit some."

Cappy smiled from behind the shining bottom of his upturned can and Bertie raised her can to her lips while waving the other hand.



Doc closed his journal when he heard the rattle of the cart coming close, and he picked up his coffee cup and set it closer to the dwindling fire. As he stoked the fire with a dry branch, Frances appeared, her face dimly illuminated by the rising flames. "Brung you some wood." she said.

"Was waiting on you." he said. "Got something to show you."

Frances lowered the cart to the ground. And she pushed her hands in the pockets of her coveralls and walked to him and looked down. "Look here." he said and he pushed a neatly folded colorful piece of paper at her feet.

"What's that?"

"Unfold it and you'll see."

Frances didn't sit, she squatted, and she picked the paper up. "What is it?"

"A map. A very big map. You know how to read maps?"

"I've seen a few. We got some in the truck. They give 'em away down at the gas station."

"This one's different. Go ahead. Open it."

Frances picked the map up and began to unfold it and unfold it and unfold it.

"Gosh, damn. This thing's big!"

Doc laughed and said, "Told you it was different, huh?"

Frances looked at him and smiled and she held the map, all forty-eight inches by forty-eight inches of it high above her head and tilted it towards the light of the fire. "I ain't never seen nuthin' like this before." she said. "What kind of map is it?"

"It's an aeronautical map, girl."

She looked at him blankly still holding the map high off of the ground.

"Grab some of that wood over there and let's build the fire up, get some light. I want to show you something." said Doc.

In a few minutes, the fire was much higher and brighter and Doc said, "You remember that I said that I'd tell you how to travel by ant?"

She looked at him, sensing what lay ahead, and she had to tell herself not to get her hopes up so she lightly bit her lip. "Uh-huh!" and she tried not to smile, but she did.

Doc had gotten on to his side and picked up a twig, and he said, "Come down here. Look close."

Frances got to her knees and she leaned forward on her forearms and she tilted her head and looked at Doc and her eyes shone brightly in the light of the fire.

Doc pointed his stick at a line on the map and he said, "See that line in red? That's the Ohio-West Virginia border." And Frances shook her head before pushing the hair out of her eyes. And for the next few minutes, Doc aimed the stick at the map's circles and dotted lines and its many symbols explaining as he went what they meant.

Frances was lost and confused in the meanings and Doc knew that. But soon he said something that caused Frances's heart to jump.

"I don't expect you to learn all that now."

She smiled brightly and said, "You mean..."

"Yes...he said, "I'm only going to teach you how to travel by ant tonight."

"But I thought..."

"Stop thinking. Watch."

Her smile disappeared, her lips turning to a thin line across her face.

"You got an ant on you, by any chance."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I don't think so." and she looked down at herself. And when she looked up, Doc was wearing a very large smile, and he patted her on her back and said, "Never mind. Let's pretend."

"Why?" And Frances looked at Doc quizzically.

"Why, what?" asked Doc.

"Why do I need to know this?"

Doc laughed and said, "Because we need to know where we're going."

"You mean!"

"Yeah, and I'll probably regret it. But, yeah."

Frances jumped to her feet. "You mean it!? You really mean it!?"

Doc looked up into her face smiling, quiet for a few seconds, and then he said, "Yeah, I do. But there are a few tiny things we need to talk about first."

Frances slowly settled back to the ground, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes alight with her happiness. "What?" she said in a muffled voice through her fingers.

"Well..." said Doc, "...and no glaring this time. I'm serious. I'm *not* about to load you in my airplane and take off to god-knows-where, especially across state lines, if I don't really, and I mean *really*, know how old you are."

Frances didn't hesitate. She reached into her pocket and produced a laminated card, a West Virginia state driver's license, and handing it to him, she said, "I was hoping you'd axe."

"Ask." said Doc.

She raised her eyebrows.

"It's 'ask' not 'axe.' he said, "I'm a writer and I can only hear the English language butchered so much. It's 'a-s-k', Please."

"I'm sorry." she said looking a bit injured.

"It's okay." he answered. "I'm a little peculiar that way."

He took the license in his hand and held it up to the light and studied it for a second or two before he said, "Twenty-four? I guess that's not arresting age." And they laughed together. And he handed the license back to her.

"Now. What about your mother? And what are you going to do for money? I keep some as usual, but I didn't figure on this."

"I done told her a long time ago I was leaving."

"She doesn't mind?" asked Doc.

"She doesn't care."

"Ouch." said Doc.

"It's okay, I knows. I was jest waiting on daddy to go on. He needed me. Before he died, he told me to go see the world when he left. He made me promise."

"But you didn't know I would crash here."

"When I looked up and seen you flying around, I said a little prayer, and then you come down and got stuck here and you needed me, too."

"That was an accident."

"Naw, sir. I don't believe in 'em."

Doc reached for his coffee cup and took a sip discovering that it was cold as ice and bitter. And he spit it out quickly making Frances laugh and she said, "Told you that stuff was turrible."

"Think you can do better?" said Doc.

"I knows I can. You'll see."

"Okay, now what about money?"

"Got four hundred sixty two dollars and fifty cents in this pocket here." And she pulled a small, red, zippered vinyl purse from her other pocket and gently placed it on the laid out map."

"Better put that back in your pocket."

"Daddy gave it to me and told me where to bury it 'til I needed it. Some of it I got making them chairs."

"I haven't quite figured how I'm going to get us and our stuff into the Jenny yet. Maybe we'll just have to strap some of it to the wings. We'll work on that tomorrow, I guess."

Frances had sat down cross legged next to him and said, "Thank you, Mister, Doc. I certainly do."

Doc looked into her eyes and the happiness marked by her raised cheeks, and he took her extended hand and they shook hands.

"Now, listen." said Doc, "I'm willing to keep you with me as long as you want *and* as long as there's no trouble. You understand that?"

Frances eagerly shook her head that she did.

"And you have to understand that I'm not just flitting around selling airplane rides this time. I need to write as often as I can and that's something I need peace and quiet to do. Savvy?"

"*Savvy?*" she asked.

"It means, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's 'Doc.' Just 'Doc.' Okay?"

"Yes, sir, Doc." And she cupped her hand across her mouth and giggled. That made Doc laugh.

"I might put you to work helping me with riders, talking to them, making them feel at ease, helping them get in the airplane, helping 'em out and all that. You willing to do that?"

She shook her head empathically yes.

"You got a heavy coat of some kind?" he asked. "It can get cold up in the airplane, and some nights out here, it gets really chilly."

"I got my daddy's old Carhart. It's real warm."

"You got a sleeping bag?"

"I kin bring a blanket."

"That'll do for a start, I suppose. But we'll find you a sleeping bag along the way."

"Doc?"

“Yeah.”

“Where we going first?”

“Don’t know.” said Doc matter-of-factly. “But the ant does.”

In that very second, he looked over at Frances and there was an ant on the sleeve of her tee shirt. Doc reached over and gingerly picked it off and placed it on the map. Just over the Ohio line.

“Watch him.” said Doc. Wherever he stops first, is where we’re headed.

Frances laughed loudly and said, “How does he know where we’re a-going?”

Doc scratched his chin for a second or two, “He doesn’t. But real barnstormers just follow the ant.”

“We gonna be barnstormers?” asked Frances.

“I already am.” said Doc smiling. “And it looks like you’re gonna be, too.”