



*For Jean Le Borgne,  
who was there.*

# Chapter 1

It was a miserable day for flying. To be up in that weather at the controls of a single engine lightplane, either you had to love flying or have some very important business somewhere. That day both “either” and “or” were operative.

Don’t mind me. Fliers have been complaining about weather ever since Icarus sent out history’s first MAYDAY shortly after takeoff from Crete. The weather having caused unforeseen structural difficulties – both wings dropped off – and with no ditching procedures in those days, he never lived to tell the guys back home what had happened. His old man Daedalus had that particular job, thereby starting the tradition that no matter how good the weather is for everyone else, it’s lousy for the pilot.

The sun’s heat wasn’t exactly my problem that day. What was falling was rain like out of the Old Testament, not hot wax and feathers out of Greek mythology. The met service at Nice Airport had warned of a *très actif* cold front moving west to east across central and southern France. And by golly, so it was. And I was out in it.

I didn’t have to know the heights of the anvil-shaped thunderclouds to assume there was no point trying to get over them without oxygen and a second engine, neither of which I happened to have along. On the other hand, the cloud bases were so low that the peaks of the Massif Central were dug deep in them.

Flying down the convenient valley between Lyons and Saint-Etienne dodging around apartment houses, I watched nearby lightning bolts stab the dark, wet hills, sucking the electrical charge out of the ground like some ravenous vampire. My ADF needle, trying to hold onto the Saint-Etienne beacon, would point nervously toward the lightning then back to the beacon, then swing around again to indicate the next flash.

Passing Roanne I headed toward Moulins avoiding the St. Yan zone where training flights are usually in progress. This route would also avoid Autan, which the charts showed deep in crosshatching and labeled D for *dangereux*. I doubt that any country in the world not actually at war is as visibly military as France, making it the responsibility of every lightplane pilot to mind his navigation and not accidentally destroy the *force de frappe*.

I slogged on. A Helio Courier, the type of plane I was flying, isn’t one of the fastest aircraft aloft. Its virtues lie at the other end of the scale. It’s one of the slowest. When necessary, like when landing and taking off on a short, rough field. Or when used for aerial photography. Or for following a car along a winding road.

The mountains past, the storms were more isolated. I could see the white box containing the Moulins beacon sitting by the river in a shaft of sunlight. I aimed directly over it, watching the TO-FROM indicator change from TO to FROM with hardly a flicker of the needle. Life has its minor satisfactions, too. The trick is to take advantage

of them.

Passing Moulins, I proceeded northwest toward what was shown on my chart as a green, hilly area, labeled the Forest of Othe. Later, the hills in sight, I put aside the chart and took out a piece of writing paper with a crudely sketched map. The drawing, done in pencil, had reached me the day before, in Nice, where I'd just finished an assignment tracking down the papa of all bill-evaders-cum-credit-card-spree-flingers.

Badly drawn as the map was, I could still make out a small lake or pond, a stretch of high tension line, and, in the center of the sheet, a shaded rectangle labeled "chateau." Radiating out like spokes from the chateau were lines indicating alleys that had been cut through the forest to facilitate hunting.

The Forest of Othe, situated on high ground, was predictably sitting under a monster thunderstorm. According to my penciled map the chateau was just under the part of the stormcloud where the rain was falling. No sense trying to go in there. I'd just wait until the storm center moved on—a matter of about ten or fifteen minutes at most.

Throttling back, as the airspeed fell and the angle of attack increased, the huge leading edge slats of the Helio came hesitantly forward. Go on, I told them, and to convince them I meant business whirled the overhead coffee-grinder-type handles to lower the flaps, then ground out some trim. The Helio settled into its new attitude like an old, dependable rodeo pony.

One thing that intrigued me about the drawing I was studying was that it showed no road leading to the lodge. Whoever had done the sketch could have purposely left it out because, after all, I was arriving by plane, not car. On the other hand, there was no mistaking the place I was to land. On the map, a big arrow indicated the landing spot, which was small and round like a helicopter pad. I hoped it was somewhat larger.

The storm moved on, and I drew nearer. In the middle of the forest a building came into view. Yes, that was the lodge all right. No road – the map was drawn correctly. The electric wires and telephone line came down one of the spoke-like hunting alleys, but there was no paved road. Either folks flew in or used jeeps or horses. I wouldn't be doing any sightseeing on the motorcycle I carried aft in the fuselage. Whoever the owner was here, he liked quiet and privacy.

Since no Rolls could be parked down below, I looked for some sign of a gold-plated chopper, but all I saw was a very ordinary-looking Bell 206 Jet Ranger off on one side. Except for a red-and-white striped air sock and smoke coming out of some of the chimneys, the place looked as dark and cheerless as a Transylvanian cemetery.

To warn the inhabitants in advance so they'd get the ice and whiskey ready, I made a low, slow, 360-degree turn over the lodge, then headed downwind. The field was long enough for the Helio, but tall trees surrounding it necessitated a steep descent with full flaps. I was hoping the field would be smooth enough, because the afternoon was too dark to examine it for stones and bumps from the air. To lose your tailwheel or bend your prop as you arrive on an assignment echoes dully of lack of professionalism.

Touching down I could feel the strip had been prepared more for vertical landing than for fixed wing aircraft, though it was okay for planes designed for working in the bush, such as the Helio. As I swung around on the crosswind gear and searched the borders of the field for signs of human life, I saw that my buzzing had brought results.

Near the wind sock a man with raised arms was beckoning me. Standing next to him was a plump woman wearing a brown raincoat over a long blue dress. Thinking that she looked familiar, I taxied toward them in the seemingly drunken manner used by pilots who can't see over the noses of their aircraft when on the ground.

"Chet!" cried the plump woman as I got out of the plane. "Hi, Chet."

"Good grief. Terry." I couldn't believe my eyes. A second later I was nearly bowled over as she threw herself into my arms. Terry Jones. I hadn't seen her for at least ten years. The last time was on a boat somewhere between Los Angeles and Catalina Island.

"What are you doing here, for chrissake? Are you the mysterious T. Rolland who wrote to me?"

"My maiden and professional name. Come inside, Chet. It's going to rain."

I looked up. Sure enough there was another storm about to arrive on us. "Hang on. I'll just tie down the plane."

Working fast I drove some spikes at angles into the earth and soon had the wings attached to them by means of nylon cables. The first large drops were falling as I finished.

"Give your bags to Aristophanes," Terry told me. I started to hand my suitcase to the dark, muscular individual who'd helped me park, then hesitated. With his thick, arching brows, his unfriendly face covered with a stubble of beard, and his eyes like pools of mud, I didn't feel I could trust him with my bags as far as the edge of the field.

"Hurry," she urged me. "Ari's the helicopter pilot." Opening a large umbrella, she started toward the house.

I figured in that case I'd carry my own bag, because even if he looks like a bear, a chopper pilot is no lackey. Closing and locking the Helio doors I started after the retreating figure in blue. The way led along a path through the forest toward what seemed to be the back door of the chateau, earlier hidden by the trees.

Through the door was the pantry and a large kitchen. "Forgive the informality," Terry said. "Otherwise we'd have to go all the way around to the front. Ari, the cook, and I are here alone at the moment. Everyone else has left, so we keep the other doors locked."

She paused in the middle of the kitchen, where I was happy to see preparations in progress for a meal. Skewered pigeons wrapped in strips of lard lay on a table near the blazing hearth. Mountains of fresh lettuce and vegetables, recently pulled from the earth, waited to be washed and prepared. I'd seen a kitchen garden from the air, bordered with glass vegetable frames. And now here was the confirmation of that fact. As always, this linkage between aerial and earthly perceptions boggled my flier's mind.

“I’ll show you to your room,” Terry told me. “There’s no central heating, but I’ve given you one of the smaller rooms with both an electric radiator and a wood fireplace, so you’ll be warm enough. Have a wash and then come back down. I’ll get the drinks.”

Whatever the craft’s many virtues, the noise level of my Helio is about twenty decibels above the pain threshold. So it felt good listening to the normal human sounds that feet made climbing carpeted stairs, the crackle of the wood fire in my bedroom, the patter of the rain on the windowpanes as I washed up in the bathroom. Even the sight of the lightning flashing across the treetops and the sound of rolling booms of thunder seemed soothing now.

Feeling refreshed, I joined Terry downstairs in the winter living room which was a comfortable lounge-cum-gaming room with a pool table as well as chess and card tables. At the end of the room, near the large fireplace, were deep leather armchairs. The walls at that end were lined with books. I took a look at some of the titles. Instead of the leatherbound sets of Hugo, Dumas, and Proust you might have expected, it looked like a Book-of-the-Month-Club rummage sale. Best sellers from the past several years were there, as well as an atlas collection, almanacs, crime thrillers in various translations, and a pile of dog-eared U.S. comic books.

“This place lacks nothing to make it an ideal weekend hideout,” I told Terry as she handed me a Scotch on the rocks.

*“A votre santé,”* she smiled, raising her glass.

*“A la votre.”*

We drank, then sat down in the armchairs whose leather upholstery had been warmed by the fire. It was good Scotch, probably Chivas. As it went through me I could feel myself beginning to unwind agreeably. You’re looking good,” I said to Terry. “You haven’t changed at all.”

She threw back her head and laughed at the obvious lie. No woman looks the same between thirty-five and forty-five, and she knows it. Besides, the way her long dyed-black hair was piled on top of her head showed she was making no effort to look modern, chic, or young. It reminded me of the years I’d spent in Los Angeles where the styles and the seasons show little or no evolution.

All the same, my compliment pleased her. In the light from the fire Terry’s plump cheeks glowed. “Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing over here?”

“What are you doing over here?” I said obediently.

“Don’t you remember what you once told me?”

“Go ahead.”

“That day on the deep sea fishing boat, when you all were fishing and I was sitting down in the cabin because I couldn’t stand seeing them put the live bait on the hooks. Don’t you remember? I think what you said changed my entire life. Two weeks later I started divorce proceedings against John.”

“Jesus. What did I say? I can’t even recall.”

“You came down into the cabin and saw me sitting there looking fat and miserable...”

“I remember. And covered with jewelry and makeup...”

“And you said, ‘What the hell are you doing on this boat? You should be a madame in a whorehouse, not a passenger on a stinking fishing boat.’”

“I never said that,” I protested, laughing. “I *never* would have said it. I was just a kid then. It was before Vietnam.”

“Word for word. I recall it perfectly because it changed my life.”

“You should have kicked me in the teeth.”

“Not at all. In fact I realized that you were absolutely right. The thing I’d always wanted to do deep down was run a bordello. You remember the parties I used to give?”

“Rumored to be the best in Hollywood.”

“Well, you see? It’s the same thing. Only with the other you can make money.”

“Okay,” I said, looking around. “So where’s Fifi? Cubicle six?”

“Not so fast.” She laughed, getting up and crossing the room toward the bar. I watched her corseted waddle. In a way Terry really hadn’t changed. Seeing her again, I began to remember the little things about her that I’d forgotten: the narrow lips, the hard, beady eyes like the eyes of hawks. I must have sensed even way back then that she was more a shrewd business-woman than a Hollywood matron.

As Terry leaned over to pour me another drink from the crystal decanter, I could smell her heavy perfume. Diamond earrings glistened on her earlobes. I was suddenly very curious why she’d sent for me.

“Later, later,” she said. “We have the whole evening to talk business. First, I want to tell you about me, and then hear what you’ve been up to for the past ten years.” She settled back down into her chair. “So, after I divorced John on grounds of mental cruelty...”

”You bitch!”

“I took the alimony money....”

“You really *are* a bitch.” I laughed.

“Not at all,” she replied with mock indignity. “I can only receive alimony as long as I don’t remarry. You can imagine what a sacrifice *that is*.” She laughed, choking a little on her drink. I reached over and patted her lightly on her soft back.

“So,” she continued, “unable to stand the painful memories of my former married life, I decided to move to France, and in no time at all had met all the right people and had started my discreet establishment in Paris.”

“And now you’ve got yourself a chain of discreet establishments?” I asked, indicating the chateau around us with a wave of the hand.

“A chain?” she mused thoughtfully. “No, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea, would it? Like McDonald’s or Wimpy’s. I could sell the concessions.”

“This isn’t Wimpy’s,” I remarked.

“No, it’s not. Actually it’s owned by a Greek, but he’s put me in charge. It’s an interesting idea, but I’m not sure I’m going to keep the job. It’s all right when there’s action, but most of the year it’s pretty quiet. It’s not public-oriented. I mean, you don’t exactly get customers off the street.”

“I’m sure you don’t in Paris either.”

“No, of course not. Even there it’s on a higher level than a common whorehouse. You need an introduction and a high credit rating to get past the bouncers at the front door. The girls are trained to handle any request put to them from British members of Parliament to Arab sheiks. Still, here it’s even more demanding as far as I’m concerned. But I’ll tell you about that later. Now I want to hear about Brian and Alice Tschetter.”

“Alice?” The name surprised me. Alice and I had been divorced for several years and most of my friends knew this. Then there had been my second wife, Jeanne. She was partly of French origin and her name had been pronounced in the French way, sounding like John except with a soft “j.”

“Jeanne died four months ago,” I told Terry.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. She must have been very young. Was it an accident?”

“Not really. It was an accident of fate, perhaps, if you want to call it that.”

I reached over and poured myself another drink from the decanter on the table in front of me. I knew that Terry was curious to know what had happened to my wife. It was only a morbid curiosity, but I was going to satisfy it. Scotch works in strange and miraculous ways, loosening tongues and emotions. I’d never spoken of Jeanne’s death to anyone before. This seemed an opportunity to get some things off my chest.

“When I last saw you, on that fishing boat off Catalina, I guess I’d been married to Alice for about a year. You never really knew her, but she was the kind of gal who liked nice things—meaning expensive things. I’d just graduated from college where I’d majored in journalism. Alice and I had been expecting immediate success, but my first job was on a small newspaper outside of Los Angeles. The pay was minimal, and Alice wasn’t prepared to wait for me to work my way up to the big time.

“For her sake, to earn money, I got a job crop dusting. I used to do that back home in Ohio while I was earning money to go to college. It wasn’t hard finding work, because I knew how to fly helicopters as well as fixed wing. It paid well but not well enough for Alice. About that time things were hotting up in Vietnam. A buddy of mine talked me into signing up with an outfit he flew for called Air America.”

“I’ve heard of them,” said Terry.

“Most people have today, but at that time nobody had. Even Alice didn’t know I was working for the CIA, but the money was good and she didn’t ask questions.

“Well,” I continued, “during those years Alice lived in Hong Kong while I was stationed in Saigon, and we visited each other whenever we could. Then one day I got a chance to go to Hong Kong for three days and walked into our apartment without any prior notice to my wife. She was in bed with one of my buddies. I was so disgusted I

didn't even bother to break his neck. I just turned around and walked out. By the way, when you get a divorce over there, the husband isn't automatically the loser."

"Remind me never to get a divorce in Hong Kong," remarked Terry dryly.

"That was in 1969. By 1970 I'd about had it with the war. I was starting to think the Americans had no business being there at all. This idea wasn't very popular with my buddies, and when I came home to the States on leave my family didn't want to hear about it either. My family are patriots from way back.

"In 1970 I met Jeanne. Her father, a French diplomat, had just died and she was on her way to France after having spent most of her life in the Middle East. On her way she was making some stops, one of which was in Saigon where an aunt was living.

"I guess I fell in love with her at first sight. It seemed to be mutual. I think it happened so fast because both of us had just had big losses in our lives – I'd lost my wife, so to speak, and she'd lost her father. A few months later we settled in California and were married.

"The following couple of years were pretty good. I bought the Helio and did freelance aerial photography. Photography had always been a sort of hobby before. But Jeanne couldn't adjust to life in Los Angeles, and I have to admit it wasn't easy for me either. The years in Vietnam had changed me. People in L.A. seemed so wrapped up in their personal lives and problems. Then Jeanne got word that a Paris apartment formerly owned by her father but tied up in litigation after his death, was available to her. We decided to ship the Helio to France and try living in Paris."

I paused and took a sip of Scotch. I was getting to the hard part, the part I'd never told anyone. I don't know why I was going to tell it now, to Terry. Maybe it was because of the attention she was giving to the tale. She appeared to be listening to every word, and her intense interest seemed to draw the story out of me.

"So we moved to Paris, took over the apartment, and settled down. Jeanne found a part-time job with a boutique ... and we should have been very happy because we liked living in Paris. Only, shortly after we moved there a change seemed to come over Jeanne. She became withdrawn and moody." Pausing, I took another drink from my glass. The pain of that time was returning, as real now as it had been then.

"I suspected she had a lover. She was vague about where she went and what she did. About twice a week she'd tell me she was going to visit a girlfriend. I believed her, but one day when she was supposed to be with her friend I saw her in a cafe with a man."

I heard Terry murmur sympathetically.

"That evening when Jeanne came home I couldn't bring myself to say anything to her. She seemed very sad, and I thought that maybe her romance, if that's what it was, was breaking up. I thought I'd just wait a while."

Terry, seeing that my glass was empty, got up and started to pour me more Scotch, but I stopped her. "I did enough drinking four months ago," I told her. "I don't want to get into it again."

She didn't insist. Setting the decanter on the table, she knelt down and started poking at the fire with large tongs.

"So one evening I was deep in m'cups at Harry's Bar, when I met this chap. I was drunkenly telling him me tale of woe and what-ho, and it turns out he's a private eye, a *veritable* dick. He says he's taken pity on me and if I want he'll follow my wife and see where she really goes. I told him I didn't want to know where she was going. I didn't want to *know* she was cheating on me. I told him that maybe it would disappear if I didn't think about it.

"Well, to make a long story short, he said he'd just see if he could learn something, because maybe it wasn't at all what I thought and I was just miserable for nothing. I told him that if he found out anything bad not to tell me. Of course, this was a lie because deep down I knew whatever he learned I'd tear out of him if necessary. It was just a way of not doing my own dirty work. But after walking in on Alice that way...

"And did he learn something?"

"Learn something? God, yes." Without thinking, automatically, I reached over and poured myself a shot. "He even showed me a photograph he'd taken. Only it wasn't the kind you'd expect, taken through a hotel transom. It was Jeanne ... my wife..."

I could feel the maudlin tears coming to my eyes and took another drink of Scotch, hoping to drive them back into their ducts. "It was Jeanne walking out the front door of the American Hospital. So I said dumbly, 'You mean she's screwing a doctor?' and he said – and I'll never forget his voice and his words – 'No, I think she's a patient. You'd better check.'

"I grabbed a cab and shot home, but Jeanne wasn't there. I remembered she'd said she'd be out late, but by three in the morning I was scared. I think I knew then that I'd never see her again. I called the American Hospital but couldn't get any information out of them. They told me to call back after nine o'clock.

"I thought I'd never live until nine, but as it turned out I didn't have to wait that long. About five thirty the phone call I'd been dreading came. The police had found Jeanne in her car, dead from an overdose of barbiturates. They wanted me to come down to the morgue and identify the body."

"That must have been awful for you," said Terry softly.

"It was. It was. They pulled back the sheet and it was my wife. It was Jeanne. But I couldn't believe it. I touched her lips with my fingers. They were cold, so cold those lips."

"But why had she done it?"

"There was a note in her handbag addressed to me. You see, she was dying."

"Of what?"

"Leukemia. The autopsy confirmed it. Jeanne knew she had maybe six months, a year to live. Her note said she was worried about, the great expense of the treatments and the suffering she would have to undergo. Her father had died of the same disease."

“And so the detective who’d helped you discover all this is now your business partner.”

I was grateful to Terry for changing the subject. “Yes. He felt sorry for me and offered me a job working with him since he had too much business to handle all himself. I needed a change from the life I’d been leading and jumped at the chance, though I hadn’t been doing badly by then with the aerial photography.”

“Do you have any photographs of your wife?” Terry asked.

“Just one very bad one. Ironically for me, she had a thing about being photographed. It dated back to her childhood in the Middle East, where for a while she had some very orthodox old woman taking care of her. She instilled in Jeanne a deep fear of graven images and they used to hide their faces when even a tourist with a camera came by.”

“But you must have a photo,” Terry insisted oddly. “Even a snapshot that you carry in your wallet.” In the firelight her beady eyes glinted. She reached forward to pour me another drink, but I put my hand over my glass.

“There’s a picture of her in my suitcase,” I admitted, thinking it must seem strange to someone like Terry that a man would carry a picture of his wife around with him months after her death.

“May I see it?”

It was a peculiar request. “If you want. But it isn’t a very good shot. She was turning her head, so it’s blurry. But it’s all I have.

“I’d like to see it, but there’s no hurry.”

Dinner, as the locals say, was *magnifique*. For a French chef of that class to be hanging around out there in the sticks, he must have been getting a good exchange for his services.

Terry and I ate at a small table by the fire in the game room, the main dining room being too large to heat up just for us. We started with a hot, thick vegetable soup tasting of garlic with gobs of fresh cream melting in it. Then we savored fresh trout *meunière* followed by the pigeons, a selection of very good local cheeses, and for desert slices of apple tart which some French mom would have been proud to take credit for. All this was hosed down, as the French say, with white and red wines of such caliber that it raised visions of a labyrinthine wine cellar.

After dinner, but before the cognac, I took a turn outside to see that no bears were playing see-saw on the prop. Also, I wanted to get an idea of the weather. Although the lodge was on a slight rise of ground, the forest around spoiled the view, but I could see enough stars to suspect that the front had passed over.

When I returned to the house Terry called to me from upstairs that she was telephoning and would rejoin me in a few minutes by the fire. That reminded me I ought to call Richards, my partner, and tell him I’d arrived and ask if he had anything for me.

“Has she told you what she wants?” Richards asked, shouting over the poor connec-

tion. In the background I could hear the TV going, shots being fired.

“Not yet. What do you know?”

“Something about missing persons. She wasn’t very clear. She’d seen the article they did on you and your plane in the *Trib*. She sent me that map which I presume was adequate since you got there okay. What’s it like at Othe?”

“Sort of a French suburb of Athens. Did she send the retainer?”

“A telex arrived just before we closed the office this evening. Two thousand dollars have been deposited in our Barclays account.”

“Well, I guess that’s that. We’re just about to have a cognac and I’ll find out what this is all about. Oh, by the way, the gal who runs this place turns out to be an old friend of mine. Did she tell you?”

“No.”

“I used to know her years ago in L.A. Listen, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Keep in touch. And take care. Don’t fly high. Or fast.”

I had to laugh. “Where did you learn that?” High and fast is actually the *safest* way for a pilot to fly. “*Ciao.*”

Returning to the fire I saw Terry sitting there looking thoughtfully into the flames. Her expression was troubled.

I poured us a couple of cognacs and brought them over. She took hers absently and started swirling the glass in jerky motions. She had short, plump fingers with pointed, crimson nails. Looking at her profile against the fire I realized she was wearing false eyelashes. They seemed to make her eyes smaller instead of larger.

Then suddenly Terry’s mood passed and she turned toward me like an actress, all graciousness. “It was that phone call,” she apologized. “I must tell you, Chet, I’m in very deep trouble and that call didn’t help things any. I wish people would just...” She broke off wistfully, then gave a little laugh. “Well, I guess people are only human, aren’t they? You can’t blame them for that.”

As this wasn’t one of the deeper observations on the Human Condition I’d ever heard, I let it pass without comment. We could spend the whole evening without getting down to the reason that had brought me here. “What trouble are you in?” I asked her. “And why did you call in a private detective?”

“Well, Chet, here’s the story.” With a sigh Terry settled back in her chair, crossing her plump legs under the long blue skirt. “You see this place? It used to belong to some Frenchman, but about two years ago he died and it was bought by a Greek. A shipping tycoon.”

“Naturally.”

“Naturally. Anyway, this Greek, Koundiotes, is very well connected with the jet set and at some point it was suggested to him that what was needed was a discreet place in the countryside where married people, of both sexes, could come for rest and relaxation far from the cares and responsibilities of married life. It eventually sorted itself out as a

place where the wives of well-known dignitaries and rich businessmen came to screw around with various wealthy Greeks and Arabs.”

“Sounds wild.”

“Well, I guess it was a change for them from their stuffy husbands and narrow social existence. Most of the women are between thirty and forty-five and quite elegant. Some are personally ambitious in business, and they make good contacts for themselves. The men may not be prince charmings...”

“Princes charming.”

“Princes charming,” she nodded, “but they’re an intelligent bunch on the whole, good senses of humor usually, and give the women fantastic gifts, mainly gold and diamonds.” She touched her earlobes absently.

“And how did you get to be queen bee?”

“No special talent. Being in the right place at the right time. And I suppose it helped to look the part.” Nodding toward me she raised her glass in a mock toast to my perceptions. “You were the first to see in me the makings of a professional madame.”

“Then what went wrong?” I asked her. “I presume I’m here because something went very wrong in this ideal setup.”

“Yes. It’s terrible. Two of my girls are missing.”

“Two girls?”

“Well, I call them ‘girls’, but actually they’re not girls at all. One is the wife of a French minister, the other the young wife of a very rich German businessman. That was him on the phone just now, hence my recent anxiety. Chet, you’ve got to find them and bring them back. Otherwise I’m in deep trouble.”

“Fine, but first I want to know what happened. You don’t just lose women like that from a place like this.”

“Not every day,” she admitted, laughing. “And I must say there’s no one to blame but myself. It’s partly got to do with my love for the game, Monopoly. Ever play it?”

“Monopoly? Sure.”

“Then you know how it goes. Well, I keep two boards here for rainy days, though most of my guests prefer other pastimes. But even screwing can need a little spicing up, which is part of my job. So the other day I got the idea to combine the two—monopoly and sex. It was a difficult day because I had seven men here and only four women, and it was raining non-stop.

“So I combined the two boards, one French and one American, into a single track and all the men sat down to play. The point was that instead of buying hotels, they could trade four houses in on one woman. That woman was then their property and they could ... um ... honor her. And then, whoever landed on their property could, if they had the rent money, rent the lady for twenty minutes.

“So you can imagine the excitement of the game. To begin with, since we had to combine the banks and play with both French money and U.S. money, just to get them to

agree on the relative parities of the franc and the dollar involved incredible negotiations. It was like a meeting of OPEC and the IMF rolled into one. The Arabs behaved terribly. And then, you know, by the time in the game that houses and hotels were being bought we had the problem that some players hadn't gotten a set of colors yet, so they couldn't purchase houses. And others didn't have enough money left to pay the rent when and if they did land on someone else's property."

"It must have been pure panic."

"International cartels were formed. There was enormous pressure on each man to succeed economically and go off to the next room with his prize. Since they'd all had these women at one time or another, or could have had, it was clearly more the achieving than what was achieved."

"Just like real life."

"That's *right*. Real life from the pages of fiction. At one moment we nearly had a duel over a lady on Park Place. A Kuwaiti who owned Park Place had gone broke and needed to borrow from The Bank. Under the rules he should have divested himself of Madame, who was a knockout, but absolutely refused to do so.

"The situation became very tense. When eventually a sheik from a nearby Emirate landed on Park Place he said not only did he have the right to visit the lady but to do it for ten cents on the dollar since the property was mortgaged."

"They must have thought she was the community chest."

Terry groaned. "Anyway, at this, the Kuwaiti, with everyone shouting, tore up the rule book and threw it in the fire. A moment later both men had grabbed epees from the wall. It would have ended in bloodshed if the sight of them waving their weapons hadn't been so ridiculous that everyone burst out laughing.

"Well, by the time the game ended everyone was pretty exhausted mentally and physically. Most of the Arabs were leaving for home that evening before dark, and their helicopter was taking them to Paris to catch the plane. They offered to give a ride to two of the female guests who lived in Paris."

"And those two disappeared?"

"No, the other two. They'd only just arrived and were to have stayed on about one more week. With half the guests leaving, the others decided to accept the Greek's invitation to go to a party on his island. He owns a small island somewhere between Corfu and Athens. I can show you later on the map.

"In any case, the ladies were to go just for two nights and then return. Only now it's been nearly a week and no word from anyone. Ari, who took them away in the helicopter, returned here yesterday but refuses to tell me anything. I've tried calling the island, but I can't get through to anyone."

Terry reached over and put her hand on mine. "Frankly, my friend, I'm worried. Neither of the women was in what you'd call a good mental state. The French minister's wife was – I suspect – taking some sort of drug, and the German girl has already at-

tempted suicide three or four times. Chet, you've got to find them and bring them back or I'm in deep trouble with a lot of people."

"Do you think they're on that island?"

"Io Sirena? They were on it, I think, but may have left it by now. I just don't know. I'll give you a thousand dollar bonus for each woman if you find them and bring them back."

"I can try. Do you know whether I can land on the island?"

"I'm sure of it. I was there once and they have a sort of landing place, but it certainly isn't for jets."

"I don't have a jet."

"No. And one more thing. You'll have a passenger."

"Who?"

"The German girl's husband. He's very upset. Tomorrow he's flying to Nice from Germany. I told him you'd meet him tomorrow night at the Negresco Hotel. Your rooms have already been reserved. The next day you can fly to Greece."

We'd come to the one part of the business that I didn't like. The idea of flying to Greece with an angry and perhaps vindictive husband didn't grab me at all.

"Look, Terry," I said, "I'd rather you told this guy not to bother. If his wife is on the island I'll find her and bring her back. I like traveling light, as the saying goes."

Terry's lips tightened into a thin line. My words had obviously not pleased her. "He's agreeing to pay half your fee and the bonus for finding his wife," she told me. "You have to take him. That's his condition."

I'd come too far to back out of the job now. Anyway, it would only take a day to fly to Greece and then I'd be rid of my passenger.

"You're on," I said to Terry and was relieved to see her mouth relax into a smile. "I'll have to get hold of some maps. I don't think they sell them at Nice Airport, but I should find some at Cannes."

"I have them already." Terry went out and to my surprise came back a moment later with three, large 1:1,000,000 Operational Navigation Charts and a couple of Jeppesen airways charts.

"Hey, you know something about flying?"

"Nothing at all. Your partner in Paris sent these to me. They're your own."

I looked at them more closely. Sure enough, they were mine. I could tell from a few pencil scribbles. "These go all the way to the Middle East," I told Terry.

"I have a terrible hunch you may need them. Will your plane go that far?"

"Not in one hop. But it'll get there if necessary." The prospect of flying to the Middle East didn't bother me. For the moment the area was relatively calm. There was a U.N.-enforced truce between Israel and the Arab countries, and the civil strife that was soon to engulf Lebanon hadn't yet exploded.

Terry squeezed my hand. "I can't tell you how much this means to me, Chet. And

you know, it has to be done as quickly as possible. You have one week – perhaps even less.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She got to her feet. “I’m sorry I have no partner to offer you for tonight, but I suppose you’ll be wanting some sleep.”

I kissed her forehead and went up to my room. No need telling her that since Jeanne died I couldn’t get it on for any other woman. Unpacking my bag I came across the photograph of my wife. The face was just a blur, but I didn’t need to see her face to remember just how she looked. I carried her photograph in the same way some primitive nomadic tribes carry a totem. Where they put the totem down, that is their home.

As I set the picture on the night table, I noticed something was wrong. The picture was turned upside down in the frame as if someone had taken it out and put it back incorrectly. Who could have done that? Terry? She’d shown a strange interest in seeing a photo of my wife. But why? Odd.

I put the photograph back in my bag. Five minutes later I was asleep.

## Chapter 2

The next day I flew back toward the southeast in the wake of the cold front. The sky had opened up, the visibility was excellent. When I asked Paris Information for the barometric pressure, it was several millibars higher than the day before.

The wind was the strong northwesterly which often flows after a depression crossing France. By the time I’d reached the Rhone Valley the mistral was in full swing. I climbed to 9500 feet to avoid the turbulence and crossed the lower Alps riding the standing wave, which is like an up-down elevator and just as smooth.

“*Vous êtes de retour?*” (You’re back?) asked Nice Tower as I landed. I guessed they didn’t get many U.S.-registered Helios.

“Miss me?”

The controller gave his transmitter button two quick hits, which is code for all choked emotional replies, and told me to change to 121.7.

Taxiing to Parking Lima – Lima being the pilots’ alphabet for the letter L which stands for light or *léger* aircraft – I parked and went on foot back to the air terminal. Ever since some Palestinian commandos fired bazookas at an El Al plane at Orly Airport a while back, security at French airports had been strict. Pilots of private aircraft can no longer go out on the tarmac at Nice without special passes. I recall thinking it was strange how a conflict so far away could change everyone’s life in at least some small way. Little did I then know *how* strange.

Entering the terminal I saw my name written in chalk on a board set up just inside

the door. The hostess at the Chamber of Commerce counter handed me a message from my passenger suggesting that if I got to Nice early enough we should leave for Greece after lunch. According to the time written on the note, he'd left it for me a half hour before. It also said that the German would be lunching in the airport dining room and suggested I join him.

I was ready to leave if he was. We were joining the game a little late and had some fast jumping to do to catch up with the other players. Nice Airport was square GO; the first toss of the dice would send us soaring out over Mediterranean Avenue, but where we'd land was anybody's guess.

Out toward Corsica and Italy I could see the cold front that had just gone through, a massive cloud buildup. The met office confirmed that it might be wiser to let the bad weather move on eastwards or we'd be overtaking it before reaching Greece. Tomorrow, he told me, the weather should be pretty good along our entire route.

Now to meet my passenger. Giving my name to the headwaiter at the elegant airport restaurant, I followed him past the immaculate tables with their white tablecloths and napkins folded like teepees to a spot by the glass wall overlooking the runway. A man of middle age, flabby, balding, got to his feet as I approached, and shook my hand.

"Mr. Tschetter?"

"That's right."

"I'm Kurt Mueller."

"Glad to meet you."

"Please, sit down. I've already ordered because I wasn't sure you would be joining me. *Bitte*."

As I sat down another waiter arrived to ask whether I wanted an *apéritif*. I decided to wait and see whether I'd be flying that afternoon, so he put the menu card in my hand.

"I have ordered the *moules marinières* to start and then the *steak au poivre*," Mueller told me.

Mussels and pepper steak being two of my favorites, I ordered the same.

"Wine?"

"Not just now. I'll let you know." The worst part about flying in France is keeping sober at mealtime. French food *has* to be taken with wine.

As I handed back the menu card I saw the German looking excitedly out the window. "Look. A jumbo. I think he's taking off now."

A Boeing 747 – only recently introduced at the expanding Nice airport – was taxiing by, looking incredibly large from where we were sitting. As it went past I took the opportunity to study the man opposite me. Mueller looked to be in his early fifties with the pale blue eyes and weak face I associate with a nation of people who, in their pure state, have a knack for getting older and shrewder but no wiser. His hair, which had seemed blond from a distance, was mostly white.

He watched the 747 take off, excited as a kid. "*Herrlich*," he said, turning back to

me. "Tell me, Mr. Tschetter—"

"Chet."

"Tell me, Chet, do you speak German?"

I shook my head, but it wasn't really true. Our family being partly of German descent, my father had insisted I study German in school. Two weeks of skiing in Austria with Jeanne the year before had brought a lot of it back. Then why did I shake my head? Maybe there was something about my passenger that I didn't completely trust. Call it professional discretion.

An enormous tureen of steaming mussels had arrived and we filled our plates, pouring on plenty of juice which smelled heavenly of onion and white wine. As the *steak au poivre* would probably have a red wine sauce, I figured even if I didn't touch a glass of *pinard* during the meal, I'd still fail a balloon test by dessert time.

"So, Chet, do you think we can leave this afternoon for Greece?"

Looking thirstily at the bottle of red on the table between us, I explained the weather situation to him, hoping he'd opt for staying overnight in Nice. No such luck. "I think we could get at least to Italy, couldn't we?" he asked.

I had to admit there was a strong likelihood that we could. From where we were sitting, the view was good and I could make out the outline of Corsica which now seemed cloud-free. Even if we couldn't get over the Apennines, we could sleep that night in Rome or Naples.

"Then I think we should leave this afternoon," said Mueller, filling my wine glass. "And I'm sure one glass won't hurt."

His argument was persuasive. I took a sip of the wine, running it around my mouth. His argument was very persuasive. I swallowed, closing my eyes blissfully. His argument had convinced me. "Okay," I told him, consulting my watch. "Take-off time 1430 hours. If you take away that glass."

Signaling the headwaiter, the German asked him to remove my glass. The Frenchman was stunned. "Is there something wrong with the wine?" he asked in alarm. "I will have another bottle brought immediately."

"No, no. On the contrary. My friend here finds it too good," Mueller laughed. The waiter stared at us as if we were madmen. "He is a pilot," explained the German. "He is afraid of drinking too much of your wonderful wine and then he can't fly."

The Frenchman's expression changed from horror to incredulity. "Wine is not Scotch!" But being the perfect waiter he argued no more, plucking up my glass as if glad to get its precious contents away from these stupid and unappreciative foreigners.

"He doesn't know it hurts me even more than it hurts him," I said, looking regretfully after his retreating back.

During lunch, as if by mutual consent, both Mueller and I avoided talking about the object of our trip. Terry had said that Mueller's wife was young. If so, it was easy to jump to conclusions about why she'd run off. In a way I was just as glad Mueller was

coming along to do his own dirty work, because after seeing him I wasn't sure I'd ever have been able to convince her to return without actually tying her up and bringing her back by force.

"My business, Chet," the German replied to one of my questions, "is hand tools. You know, pliers, wrenches, and so forth. In fact, I will bring some samples along with me if you don't mind. I never travel without samples. You never know who you will meet."

"No problem," I told him. "Is all your baggage here at the airport?"

"All except the samples. They are at our agency here in Nice. I will have them brought to the airport by one of my associates. Are there any formalities for taking our luggage on board?"

"Nothing in particular. We'll put your bags aboard while I'm having the plane fueled and then return to the terminal for passport control."

"And the flight plan?"

"I'll file that when we're finished eating. While I'm doing that you could call your associate to bring the samples. In fact, if you want to give him a ring now to save time, there's a phone just over there. Tell him to meet us in front of Departures in a half hour."

*"Jawohl, Kapitan!"*

I was glad he didn't give me a straight-arm salute before going off to telephone. His reaction reminded me that a lot of Germans are happiest and most efficient when being ordered around. Waiting for him to return, I had visions of training him to do little jobs like tying the plane down and overseeing the refueling, thus cutting our tarmac time in half.

Lunch finished, I posted Mueller in front of Departures and went to the Control Block to get the latest met and file the flight plan. Except for some muck left behind the front, some patches of stratus and so forth, Corsica was clear. It was raining in Rome and Naples, but the forecast indicated there would be clearing later in the afternoon.

To be on the safe side I filed through to Naples, naming Rome/Urbe as alternate. En route I'd get more weather information and decide where to land for the night. Back then I didn't like landing at Naples Airport where the controllers' English sounded like pure *Italiano*. The airport itself was a dingy affair and a sort of random labyrinth when it came to landing and departure formalities for light aircraft. Rome/Urbe was likewise sexless, but smaller and close to the center of town. This was helpful in case a general strike was going on, which was often the case.

Everything went smoothly. Mueller's man arrived on time with the case of hand-tool samples. A mechanic I knew from one of the hangars down at Parking Lima, returning from lunch, happened to notice us outside Departures and gave Mueller's luggage a lift to the plane in his car, thus saving us the trouble of carrying everything by hand through the security inspection.

The only unusual event that occurred was that while we were being gone over with metal detectors a bell went off loudly. A half dozen armed guards jumped toward one of

the curtained booths out of which came my passenger looking very red-faced. The object being examined by the guards was a small monkey wrench, which had been found in Mueller's pocket. They wanted to know why he was carrying it. To bash the first officer over the head? Or so it would feel cold, hard, and gunlike pressed into the back of the captain's neck? Or perhaps it was hollow and contained drugs. They turned it every which way and hefted it and shook it.

"It's all right," I told them. "He's my passenger. I'll vouch for him."

Eyeing me suspiciously, they handed me the wrench. It was embarrassing, and I was annoyed at Mueller, who should have known better. I had the feeling he'd done it on purpose, like a little kid trying to get attention.

"November four three eight niner, after the Caravelle on final you may line up and hold."

"Roger."

The wind had fallen considerably. When takeoff clearance came I pushed in the throttle and a moment later we were airborne in a right-hand turnout over the sparkling blue Mediterranean. Mueller, wearing a bright yellow life jacket, and with wads of cotton batting in his ears to protect him from the engine noise – I'd decided against giving him earphones – was straining to look back at the shore we were leaving. It was a great sight, the city of Nice, and the Alps with their snowy peaks.

"*Herrlich*," shouted Mueller over the engines roar. "Beautiful."

I always prefer passengers who appreciate the many joys of flying in light aircraft, and I liked it that Mueller was into them, too. But even so, try as I might, it didn't warm me up any to the man. Our trip had hardly begun, but I was already looking forward to the time our paths would part.

We climbed to 7500 feet in the smooth, cloudless air and a few minutes later were straight and level, heading toward Bastia. With the engine noise filling our heads, and our stomachs working away on the meal we'd just eaten, conversation was nil. It gave me a chance to think over what had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

I was on a quest to find two women, one the wife of the man sitting next to me, the other the wife of a French minister. At breakfast that morning Terry had given me a dossier on the French woman, including some photographs. She was an elegant, attractive gal of forty-two or -three with dark blond hair. The photos had obviously been taken on the grounds of the lodge with a telephoto lens and without the knowledge of the subject. It made me think what an opportunity it would be for blackmailers at a place like that. I wondered what other pictures my friend might have in her files.

It was a shoddy suspicion, but in fact the whole assignment seemed a little shoddy to me. If these two women didn't want to come home, that was their own business. The argument for them to return – that Terry Rolland would be in trouble if they didn't – was hardly likely to persuade them. On the other hand, there was always the possibility the

women were being held somewhere against their wills. White slavery is still alive and functioning in the world.

Another thing intrigued me in this affair. The woman whose photographs I'd been given that morning ... there was something in her face that made me want to help her if I could. There was beauty and intelligence in her eyes, and something feminine and vulnerable. Terry said she took drugs, but it was hard to believe. The face in those photographs didn't reflect any such degradation.

Passing Elba we started catching up with the bad weather covering the Italian mainland. I filed an instrument flight plan for Naples, and a few hours later we were holding over Sorrento at 5000 feet in a gray, murky drizzle. To pass the time we listened to the control tower giving hell to another light aircraft whose pilot was having his own problems with the local accent.

Twenty minutes later, on the ground, I ran into that other pilot, whom I recognized as Drucker, a good-looking, fortyish French Jew. I'd met him a year or so earlier when he used to fly co-pilot on some millionaire's twin Beech and I recalled him telling me at the time they'd been in Tel Aviv forty-eight hours after the Six Day War. He never said why, and I didn't ask. About six months ago he'd turned up in Paris in his own French Jodel Musketeer aircraft and now here he was in Naples with a passenger, a really tarty blond, heavily made up, and about as well groomed as a sheaf of wheat.

Although Drucker shook hands with me, he showed no inclination to introduce me to his passenger or engage in conversation. Whenever I happened to catch a glimpse of him during the next half hour he kept his eyes averted. I was amused, wondering what he was up to. The lady in question was certainly not his wife, if only because he was unmarried and, I'd always suspected, slightly gay. That his passenger might be headed – most voluntarily – for some Middle East white slave market was the best answer I could come up with, given the circumstance.

The hotel we stayed at would have offered a good view of Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples if it hadn't been such lousy weather. Wanting to talk to Richards in Paris, I placed the call when we arrived at the hotel. Thanks to the Italian telephone system the call didn't go through for nearly five hours. I ended up ordering a room service dinner and spending the evening in my room. When I finally got through to my associate, he told me I sounded like I was speaking from the bottom of a well.

I briefed him on what was happening and told him I'd be leaving for the private island of Io Sirena the next day. Hearing this my partner swore he was going to learn to fly so that *he* could get paid to visit Greek islands, too.

“What's new at the office?” I asked, to settle him down.

“Nothing. Except we had a robbery.”

“No kidding. Paris is going to hell, *n'est-ce pas?* What did they take?”

“Just some petty cash. I think they were looking for a photograph. The files were a mess.”

“What letter?”

“The J’s and the T’s.”

Jeanne’s initials. Somehow I’d been half expecting him to say that, but when he did it took my breath away. “Listen, Rich, remember those photos you took of Jeanne on the hospital steps?”

“Yes.” His voice was low. He didn’t like to think about that.

“Remember what you did with them?”

“Didn’t I give them to you? I think I remember you tearing them up.”

“Yes, but the negatives.”

“I destroyed those myself.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. The miserable way it turned out, I didn’t want to keep any file. Why do you ask? Do you think someone is after photos of your wife?”

“I don’t know, but it’s possible. Remember a few months ago my apartment was burglarized? It was right after the *Trib* article and we thought there might be some connection. Nothing was taken, but photographs were scattered everywhere. Now I’m wondering whether there might be some connection with this case.”

“You know more about it than I do. What do you think?”

“I think there’s something funny about this assignment. I’m going to keep my eyes open. I’ll try and keep in touch with you, but it may become difficult for a while. If you don’t hear from me for a couple of days, don’t worry. And another thing. You have a key to my apartment. Do me a favor and check on it tomorrow. Give your telephone number to the *concierge* and tell her to call you if anything comes up.”

“Will do.”

I put the phone slowly back on the hook. No, this was no ordinary assignment. I was beginning to think I hadn’t been chosen for it by chance alone, that Jeanne had been mixed up in something before her death. But what? Prostitution? Drugs? No. Impossible. She wasn’t that sort of person. Even in an abnormal state of mind brought on by her illness she’d never have gotten involved in crime.

Whatever the answer, I had to know it. Suddenly I felt more than a professional urge to get to the bottom of things, find those missing women and question them. Maybe they’d known Jeanne. Maybe they could tell me something about the circumstances surrounding her death. Jeanne wasn’t the kind of person to commit suicide. She’d have wanted to live her life until the end, no matter what. And if it wasn’t suicide, then it was murder. Whichever it was, I intended to find out.

The next morning Mueller seemed in surprisingly good spirits for a man who anticipated a few hours hence coming face to face with his errant wife. Overshadowing that drama in his mind seemed to be the fact that we were going to land, if all went well, on a private island belonging to a Greek shipping tycoon. To the German businessman the

adventure smelled of money.

“How do you know?” I asked him. “With the supertanker business in the doldrums your Greek might be in receivership by now.” I didn’t make the more obvious observation that said Greek might that very moment be balling Mueller’s young wife.

I filed a flight plan for Io Sirena via Kerkira, Corfu, where we’d go through Greek customs formalities. Since there was no air control facility on the private island, the procedure was to contact Athenai Control when vertical the island, to close the flight plan. Our flight broke precedent in that as far as Naples knew, nothing but helicopters and seaplanes had ever flown to the island. I tried to sound convincing as I assured the Neapolitan controllers that a Helio could land anywhere a helicopter could. In any case, with no information on the length of the field, they finally had to agree that if the worst came to the worst I could always turn around and return to Corfu.

“You will land, you will land,” said the German, dismissing all doubts with a wave of his pink hand.

“Have you been there before?”

“No, but you will land. There is no problem.”

Pilots, who are by profession expected to be the most precise and realistic people in the world, are by instinct ready to believe anything they want to believe. Harried by poor weather, unsure of his position, low on fuel, the pilot will look down and be ready to swear that the airfield he sees below is Gooseneck Hollow, even though the map shows Gooseneck Hollow north of a little lake, not south of one. Or, seized with vertigo while inside a cloud, he’ll decide to obey his senses rather than his instruments, correct for an attitude that the aircraft isn’t actually in, and spiral unceremoniously into the earth.

It’s only training, experience and willpower – not common sense – that make the pilot believe his maps and instruments. Deep down we remain trusting dupes. Thus, preparing to take off from Naples, I was really happy to hear my passenger say we’d be able to land without difficulty on Io Sirena, even though I knew his opinion didn’t amount to a hill of beans.

It was while pre-fighting the Helio that I had my first surprise of the day. One of the checks involves draining a little fuel from the reservoirs to look for any water that may have gotten into the gasoline. In all my thousands of hours of flying I’d found water only once. That was in a rented plane where the previous user had refueled without properly closing one of the caps so that rain had gotten in. The second time I ever found water in the fuel was that morning in Naples.

This time the cap was on good so the rain of that night shouldn’t have mattered. “Look at this,” I said to Mueller, holding up the transparent cup I used to catch the gasoline. “You see those bubbles around the bottom? Know what that is?”

The German shook his head.

“That is water.”

He stared at me uncomprehendingly.

“The problem is, this particular Helio doesn’t run on water. Know what happens when a little of that gets fed into the engine?”

He hazarded a guess. “The engine stops?”

“That’s right. The engine stops. And it usually stops at the worst possible moment, shortly after takeoff. In our case it could have occurred when we were heading out over the sea toward the Sorrento VOR.”

“How did it get in there?” asked Mueller.

“A good question. I don’t know the answer.”

All the same, there had to be a rational explanation for the presence of the water. Possibly there had been some in the reservoir of the fuel truck at Nice, though this seemed highly unlikely. Just as unlikely was that rain had found some way to get inside. Short of someone having come along and actually emptied a cup of water into the fuel tank, there seemed no way to explain it. But for the moment, the danger past, the occurrence seemed peculiar to me, but not sinister.

All the same I wasn’t sorry to get out of Naples Airport. Besides the usual inconveniences, the Italian lira had been devalued the day before and we and several other private aircraft had to wait at the fuel pumps for nearly two hours since the new price of fuel was unknown to the pump operators. The other pilots and I tried to convince them that the price didn’t matter since we weren’t paying with cash but with fuel carnets. Then we learned that our credit cards weren’t acceptable anymore and ended up standing on line in the air terminal to change money. It was after eleven before I was able to top up and fly away.

One thing I’d noted during the hassle at Naples was that the Jodel belonging to Drucker wasn’t around anymore. Somehow he had fueled up early that morning and had left for Rhodes – I saw the fuel receipt on the pump man’s clipboard. The guy must have pulled, to say the least. I wondered why he was going to Rhodes. It wasn’t likely he was taking that gal for a holiday there. More likely that was the range of his plane. After refueling they’d probably head toward Cyprus, the jumping off place for the Middle Eastern countries.

Secretive son of a gun. Wonder what he’s into. I found myself grinning.

Leaving the Naples control zone at 1000 feet we headed for the Sorrento beacon, and soon we were climbing to 7500 feet over the Apennines. The weather was good, warmer than the day before. Because of our late start, cumulus clouds were already forming over the mountains, caused by the sunlight warming the mountain slopes. As we flew through the thermal currents formed by this warm, rising air, the Helio bounced around. It was a good day for sailplanes, which exploit this kind of weather, but I noticed my passenger looking slightly green.

The Apennines past, I descended to 2000 feet, hoping it would distract Mueller to look at the countryside below. Actually, southern Italy was one of the poorest areas I’d

ever flown over in Europe. I didn't even like to speculate on what life must have been like for the farmers living there. The land is honeycombed by stone walls. Each minuscule, wall-enclosed field has in it at least one partially submerged boulder taking up a large part of the surface area. Often a tree or other vegetation protrudes from the boulder like hairs on a wart.

"Why, *um Gottes willen*, do they enclose each field with stone walls?" shouted my passenger above the engine noise.

"When they cleared the land to farm the stones were too heavy to carry away. *There's* a good business for you. Import stones into Germany."

The German shook his head. "Decayed," he said. "You have seen the villages here built out of this stone? *Pilze*. Villages looking like fungus growing on the hills. Marble, that is something else."

With no market for their vast collection of decaying stones, the plight of the southern Italian peasant seemed insoluble as seen from the air. The countryside held little hope for needy pilots either. Looking down I wondered where, if the engine stopped, I'd land. This question is an exercise pilots often put to themselves. And it was rare that one couldn't come up with an answer. But here, even with a STOL – a Short Takeoff and Landing aircraft – I was unable to see a field large enough.

Passing Brindisi we started encountering light rain. It would be about forty-five minutes over water to Corfu, so my passenger and I struggled into the life vests. The rain didn't extend far south, and to our right we could see the boot of Italy shining in the sunlight. On our left the coast of Albania was half hidden in clouds and murk. Even in an emergency one would think twice before attempting to land on those politically forbidding shores.

I've never particularly enjoyed over-flying water in a single engine aircraft. If the one and only engine stops, the plane will go down. I've tried analyzing it but have never been able to convince myself that my apprehension has anything to do with a fear of death or dying. Dying would mean the wait in icy water until loss of consciousness, or days adrift in a life raft waiting to die. *A priori*, neither prospect really disturbs me.

Only one thing makes me very, very apprehensive: the thought of being over water and hearing the engine run rough. Just that. And I know just what my first reaction would be. I'd say "Shit."

And then, not worrying about my own death, I'd watch my aircraft start to die: the rough-running engine, the gauges beginning to falter, the floating instrument panel seized with vibrations. Emergency procedures take over: switch on the fuel booster pump, change fuel tanks, full throttle, carburetor heat. Select the best gliding speed. There aren't many things you can do to save a small aircraft. One of these has to show results. When the oil pressure drops, it's as if the heart's stopping. Send out a MAY-DAY. Prepare to ditch.

What would I be thinking as the plane glided down? I'd be asking myself where the

hell am I going to find another Helio? There can't be that many used Helios in Europe. Hell, when I think of all the work I put into this plane, getting the instrument panel together, installing jump seats, designing the paint job – and the paperwork that would await me, the FAA accident report, insurance claim, etc. etc., I knew I'd be swearing like a son-of-a-gun all the way down.

If a guy completely loses his fear of death – and I think that what I didn't lose one day over the Mekong Delta I lost the day Jeanne lay on that table in the morgue – he becomes a kind of monster, a danger to his passengers. So it's a good thing at least to be apprehensive about your aircraft, to be constantly scanning the gauges, rehearsing the emergency procedures, studying the waves below for a way to ditch which won't flip the plane onto its back or bring it crunching headlong into an onrushing wall of wet.

I was glad to be feeling even these faint twinges of apprehension. For a long time, ever since Jeanne's death, I'd been living in a kind of emotionless void. Fear, anger, joy, desire, all the emotions you take for granted – they'd been absent. Her going ahead of me into death had taken all the mystery and danger out of it, as if a jungle track had suddenly been transformed into a superhighway. I sometimes wanted to drive onto it and press the accelerator to the floor. Nothing stopped me. It just wasn't the direction I was going.

I could thank Richards for that. If he hadn't offered me his friendship and a partnership at the right moment, I don't know where I might have ended up.

Islands ahead. I glanced at the chart. They'd be the two islands on the northwest end of Corfu. Minutes later I could see Corfu itself.

When you do a lot of flying to a lot of different places you sort of become a connoisseur of what is really beautiful as seen from the air. As islands go, Corfu has my vote. In any weather she's beautiful—with dark storms striking fire from her mountains or sizzling in the sunlight of a summer afternoon. She's like a marble Venus who's kept her secrets down through the ages, arriving in our time as lovely and inscrutable as ever.

Reaching the coast I contacted Kerkira Tower and gave them a position report. They told me to report final. Our conversation didn't awaken the German, who wasn't wearing earphones, but I thought he might enjoy seeing Corfu, so I gave a slight yank and push on the control wheel which brought him up tight against his seat belt.

“*Was ist ... Wo sind ... ?*” he spluttered, looking around wildly.

“Corfu,” I said. “Down there.”

Mueller peered out and remained without moving a long moment. “*Wunderschoen.*” He sighed at last. “Then we have entered Greece?”

We'd entered something, call it Greece, call it a time machine. No wonder the ancients spent so much time philosophizing about Beauty. They were immersed in it. Beauty was their environment, their culture, their GNP. Arriving over Greek waters we'd flown into a sort of lull in the weather, the air was calm and the visibility good. The droning engine, which had deadened most of our other senses, made us almost

literally all eyes.

We landed, went through the Kerkira customs formalities, and took off again. Now, on our left, blue mists veiled the barren peaks and deserted coves of the mainland. As far as the eye could see the world seemed desolate and eternal. You had the feeling that if you changed course and flew off into that pastel wilderness you'd be greeted upon landing by helmeted warriors and women in flowing robes.

"The government plans to make this area completely industrial," shouted the German enthusiastically. "Shipyards, steel plants, cement factories."

"That figures." I'd learned a long time ago in Los Angeles that nothing good lasts. But I sometimes wondered where the rich exploiters and promoters would eventually go for R & R. In a few years all the world's beaches would be black and sticky with tar, the cities would be jungles and the jungles cities.

Passing Preveza we began watching for Io Sirena, which Terry had circled in pencil on the chart. The air was bumpy. We'd entered a strong, northerly airflow which had become turbulent while crossing the mainland mountains. Arriving over the island, I spotted the airstrip down below. On a small island any airstrip, no matter how small, looks huge. This one actually was very short, a STOL strip, but plenty long enough for the Helio.

With the landing place in sight, I tried to raise Athenai Control to close my flight plan, but couldn't owing to my low altitude. After a second attempt I was thumbing through the DOD Supplement for Preveza Tower's frequency, when an American voice came through the earphones.

"Three eight niner, this is Navion eight six Charlie. Want me to relay your message to Athenai Control?"

"Affirmative, eight six Charlie." I gave him my message about reaching Io Sirena and heard him contact Athens and repeat it.

"Athens says okay," the Navion pilot told me a moment later.

"Thanks a lot."

He hit his transmission button twice in rapid succession.

The short exchange with my compatriot left me feeling great. One of the bonuses of flying is that airmen understand the need and value of communication. This basic truth struck me as a student pilot during my first contact with a tower. It told me that someone out there was listening and wanting to understand you, and then wanting very much to communicate back to you. On the ground, face to face, how many people make the effort?

I reduced power and began the descent, the Helio bouncing around enough to bring an alarmed expression to Mueller's face. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him glance over to see the pilot's reaction to the turbulence. I yawned mightily and blinked my eyes as if fighting drowsiness, a deception I've never known to fail. "Looks nice down there," I called. Visibly at ease, Mueller began to take interest in our arrival.

Whoever owned this piece of real estate was no amateur in the big Monopoly Game of Life. This was not Ventnor Avenue. It probably, even surpassed Marvin Gardens. Unlike most of the smaller Greek islands, which are rocky and scrubby, Io Sirena had lush greenery, a result probably of man's efforts as much as nature's. On the lee side of the island was a dock large enough to handle a yacht or a seaplane, though from what I could see, besides a few dingies, nothing below looked flyable or floatable.

I was beginning to wonder what our welcome would be. As far as I knew, no one was aware we were coming, and it seemed to me owners of island airstrips probably didn't appreciate unannounced visits from strange aircraft.

"Unannounced" might not be the right word. To persons living next to landing strips the sound of an aircraft going through various power changes constitutes a kind of warning that company's about to drop in. Therefore I had no illusions our arrival would go unnoticed. If anyone wasn't in the mood for visitors he could fire a red flare, warning us away. It isn't awfully polite, but it's done.

"See anyone below?" I shouted to Mueller, whose nose was pressed against the side window.

"Negative."

I had to smile. He'd said it so seriously.

The airstrip below was situated on a corner of land allowing both ends of the runway to face the sea. In this way planes coming in or out of the short strip would never have to gain or lose altitude sharply as when having to clear high trees on approach. Since even Greek millionaires can't have it all ways, this put the strip out of line with the prevailing northerly wind, which that day presented us with a crosswind component on touchdown of about fifteen knots. It was a good day for Helio Couriers to be wearing their nattiest crosswind landing gear. A moment later Mueller's eyes were looking very round as he found himself rolling sideways along the center line.

Bringing the plane to a stop, I glanced around and saw a little sign saying PARKING LIMA. Again I had to smile. I could almost picture the Greek sneaking out at night on some French airfield to chop down their Parking Lima sign and carry it home like a trophy to his island. For more than business reasons I hoped we'd find him at home.

## Chapter 3

As they say in France, there weren't *trente-six* ways to get off the airfield – only one path presented itself, so we followed that. Bearing left, we suddenly walked out of the trees and got our first view of the island. And stopped in our tracks. There are things better seen from the ground than from the air, especially manmade ones. This was no exception. At the end of a windswept expanse of laval rock and scrub grass, on a low cliff over the sea, stood ... an edifice.

It looked, this house, like something that had, like the island itself, been thrust out of some hot recess of the primal sea to arrive in a kind of violent perfection in a most fitting and natural setting; the house on the island, the island on the sea. There to cool and become habitable.

Even Mueller was speechless. He couldn't get it together enough to grunt either a *herrlich* or a *wunderbar*.

"Shall we see if Zeus is home?" I said, after a moment of silence.

How do you know the age of a seashell washed up on the beach? Rough and smooth, whole and fragmented, mother-of-pearl and accretions, the seashell lies in our palm, a hieroglyph. So it was with this house; expanses of glass through which the blue sea and white cumulus clouds seemed to drift, the ancient Hellenistic columns, the white, gleaming, freshly quarried marble. Greek god or sea spider? What lived in this shell?

The path leading to the house was lined with Doric columns. I noticed that two of these, opposite each other, wore electronic sensing devices. As we passed dutifully between them, the figure of a woman appeared on the marble terrace up ahead. While obviously aware of our approach, she didn't look at us. Wearing a long, pale dress which fluttered in the wind, she stood looking out over the sea. As we came nearer I saw her touch the blond hair twined around her head as if afraid the breeze would muss it. We were hardly ten feet away when finally she turned and gave us a soft, welcoming smile.

"Please come in," she said. "You are very welcome. I am Mrs. Koundiotes." Without waiting for us to introduce ourselves, she turned and started walking into a garden that seemed to be part of the house.

"Were you expecting us?" I asked.

"I think my husband received a telex."

She had a rich, sensuous voice and an accent that could have been Greek or Slavic. Her skin was very pale but with a translucent pinkness that indicated health, not illness. She looked more like a vestal virgin than the wife of a Greek shipping tycoon.

It wasn't clear at what precise moment we entered the house. Following Mrs. Koundiotes we sometimes found ourselves in gardens with roofs over them and sometimes passed through rooms of upholstered furniture open to the sky. Walls of marble, and glass separated the spaces, but it was hard to tell whether they were internal or external walls. Fountains were everywhere.

"As we are about to eat lunch, perhaps you would care to wash up now."

It was a good idea. Surrounded with all this beauty and luxury I was beginning to think I wasn't exactly groomed for the occasion. She then showed each of us to a different room. Going through the door I found a large bathroom giving on to a small, walled garden. The room was built entirely of rose-colored marble with a large sunken marble tub in the center. As I was looking into the tub it started filling rapidly with water. I stuck in a finger. Perfect bath temperature. A hint? I smelled my armpits. Yes, maybe a

hint. Or just perfect cordiality.

Glancing around I made sure there were towels available – there were, about a dozen bath size – then stripped and jumped in. Large bars of olive green soap, looking hand-made and feeling full of real olive oil, filled the soap dishes. Probably it was a bath *à deux* or even *à trois*. In any case, there was enough room for a small child to do some practice swimming. The water – I tasted it because I was curious – had a faintly brackish taste. Most likely de-salinated sea water. The island probably had no fresh water of its own.

As I was drying off there was a knock on the door. “Do you have everything you need?” It was my hostess’ voice.

“I think so.”

“Good. We’ll be having cocktails on the terrace. When you’re done, just ring that little bell near the door and someone will come to show you the way.”

By the time I reached the terrace a few minutes later, my friend Mueller, looking a little flushed, was being served a second whiskey and soda. From his quickness I figured he hadn’t taken a bath, either because none had been offered or because, like many Germans, he bathed as seldom as possible. Or maybe he’d passed the armpit test.

As I approached the group sitting there, a short, plump Greek-looking individual rose to his feet and came to shake my hand. “Mr. Tschetter, I am Koundiotes. Welcome, welcome. Only a short while ago I received telexes saying to expect you and Mr. Mueller.”

“*Telexes?*” I repeated in surprise.

“One from Othe, where you passed a night, or rather from near Othe, and one from Naples Airport. The latter included a query about landing conditions here, but I’m afraid I have never seen a Helio Courier and didn’t know how to advise them. I hope you had no trouble.”

“None at all. You have a fine strip.”

“Please. What will you drink? You can have anything that comes in bottles.”

“What have you got that’s soft?”

“No, no. No soft drinks. You will not be flying anymore today. You are our guests. In fact, your arrival here has been observed by one member of my family who has taken a sudden overwhelming interest in airplanes and aviators. You will meet her later. She has begged me – *commanded* me – to offer you all our hospitality.”

I had to laugh at the exaggerations. “In that case, a Scotch on the rocks would look good.”

Before he could turn to tell him, the impeccable servant behind the bar was already pouring the drink. Seeing this, Koundiotes hesitated, looking slightly abashed. “Sometimes I wonder whether I’m needed here at all,” he confided, chuckling.

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes the four of us engaged in light chit-chat. The Greek seemed to be learning about wrenches and pliers from his German guest, and I

was filling in our gorgeous hostess on what it was like to fly a light aircraft. Given the circumstances of our visit, it was unreal, to say the least. Did Koundiotes know why we were here – that we were seeking two women and hoped to find at least one in his house? If so, he showed no sign of it, talking and chatting amiably as if we were friends dropping by for a meal.

Shortly before lunch was served, a young man and woman joined us. Without rising, our host introduced them. “I’d like you to meet my son, Orestes, and my daughter, Orena. They are of my first wife.” He turned to his daughter who had flung herself down on the arm of his chair. Leaning on his shoulder she looked around at the rest of us with hostile eyes. “How is your mother feeling? Will she join us at the table?” he asked her.

“No.”

“She is not feeling or she will not join us?”

“Oh, *Papa*,” said the girl without taking her eyes off us. Only once did I see her glance in the direction of her father’s new wife, who was about her age, nineteen. As for Orestes, he hardly took his eyes off his stepmother, who fastened her own gaze at the tip of her husband’s shoe. I had the feeling it was interesting around here at bedtime.

Another figure appeared in the doorway, and I saw the German turn sharply, apparently expecting to see his wife. But it was only the servant announcing lunch. As we started toward the dining room, I thought I’d ask Orestes whether there were any other guests on the island.

“Oh, yes. There’s Libby and her daughter and a few others. But mostly they prefer to eat in their own rooms or pavilions. If people live long enough together on an island they begin to get sick of looking at each other.”

“Is one guest a young German woman called Mrs. Mueller?”

“Heidi? Yeah, she’s here. She caught the flu in France. She’s up now but still eats in her room.”

“Mr. Mueller is her husband. He’s come to take her home.”

“No kidding. Did anyone tell Heidi he’s here?” He called to his father. “Dad, does Heidi know her husband’s here?”

Koundiotes paused. “So that is the purpose of your visit. I was wondering but didn’t want to ask. No, I think she doesn’t know, but I’ll send her word right now.”

“No, no,” said Mueller. “After lunch will be fine. Don’t bother.”

Probably assuming Mueller had his reasons for not wanting his wife to join us, he let himself be persuaded. But before we sat down, the Greek led us out onto another small terrace off the dining room to show us that view. I took the opportunity to ask Orestes about the other woman on my list. “And Heidi’s friend, Louise. Is she still here?”

“She left a few days ago in Juliette Tango.”

“Any idea where to?”

He shook his head. “You’d better ask the pilot.”

“Wouldn’t your father know?”

“Probably not. He doesn’t try to keep track of people.”

Having done pretty well with the son, I thought I’d try to get a little information out of the daughter and made an effort to sit next to her at the table. But as soon as she saw me closing in she tossed her head and went around the table to sit near her brother.

“You mustn’t mind my daughter,” Koundiotes said. “She’s at that age where she’s not interested in men, only in business.”

“Oh, *Papa*,” cried the girl. And to show that he was wrong, she walked around the table and plunked herself down in the chair next to mine. “Pliz be my guest,” she grimaced through clenched teeth, then burst out giggling.

“I guess it’s not easy to be the daughter of a man like your father,” I commented amiably to put her at ease.

Shaking her head, she wrinkled her nose and looked carefully over the table. Suddenly her face brightened. “Pass the olives, pliz,” she demanded breathlessly.

With lunch there was a choice of wine or champagne or both. I’m one of those people who prefer red wine with everything, so I drank red through the fish course as well as with the steak. Nobody seemed to notice. Or else they were being polite, which is also possible, hospitality being a way of life in Greece.

During the meal I heard a chopper, so I wasn’t surprised when after lunch Ari appeared to accompany me to the plane to get Mueller’s and my gear. I tried to talk to him but he seemed to understand about as much English as I did Greek.

The room I was given turned out to be attached to the pink bathroom, so it was like history repeating itself, only this time no water came up in the tub when I made a precautionary fly-by. I guessed my armpits weren’t sending out the right signals. After all the wine I’d drunk I felt like taking a pee and wondered whether seeing me coming the toilet would flush itself in sheer anticipation. But nothing untoward happened, and I relieved myself and went in to take a nap, which was apparently what everyone else was doing.

I’d been dozing about an hour when a movement awakened me. Opening my eyes I found Orena curled up on the bed beside me. “Good God. How long have you been here?”

She glanced at the large man’s watch on her wrist. “About ten minutes. Papa says he’d like to see you.”

“Now?”

She stretched lazily, looking at her watch again. “No, you’ve got about six hours. He never gets downstairs before nine or nine thirty. He works in his office. And then he’s got that new mistress.”

“I thought it was his wife.”

“His *wife*? Of course not. My mother is his wife. You can’t have two.”

“She introduced herself as Mrs. Koundiotes.”

“She deludes herself. Anyway, she’s too young for him. She’s just a year older than

me. She'd be okay for Orestes except for her pelvis."

"What's wrong with her pelvis?"

"Papa says it's not the kind you need for bearing children. He says you'd have to dismantle the pelvis to get the baby out."

"I'm sure her pelvis has other virtues."

"I'm *sure*," said Orena and laughed a little wildly.

It seemed like a good moment to bring this charming *tête-à-tête* to an end. Even if I could have gotten it on for her – which I suspected eventually I might – I wasn't sure I wanted to deflower the daughter of our cordial host. I'm not exactly Sir Galahad the Chaste, but you have to draw the line somewhere. Naked between the sheets – silk ones – with my clothes across the room, I figured I'd have to persuade her to leave rather than show her to the door.

"Why don't you go pour me a Scotch," I said. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

She seemed not to hear. Instead, she clambered across my supine form and reached for the photo of Jeanne on the night table. For a long moment she examined the photo.

"She was my wife," I told her.

"Divorced?"

"Not exactly."

She put the picture back on the table and withdrew with painful digs of the elbows back to her side of the bed. "Small world."

"Why?" I grunted, protecting my groin with both hands.

"She was here the other day."

Her words sent heat coursing through me. I tried to speak but had to force the words out. "But ... she's dead."

Orena looked at me in amazement. A flush spread over her face. "Ulp, sorry," she said. "I'll go pour your drink." Bouncing up from the bed she started toward the door.

"But you said you saw her here."

She turned and looked at me curiously, resentfully. "Not if she's dead, I didn't. It must have been someone else."

I knew she was terribly embarrassed by her *faux pas*, but I had to ask her to come back and look at the photograph again. "It looks like the person who was here," she told me, "but the picture's very blurred. I was mistaken."

"Are you sure?"

"If you say she's dead..."

"But if I said she wasn't. Could that be the woman you saw?"

"Maybe, but I only saw her a second. She was in Juliette Tango when it picked up this French woman who was a guest here last week. She only got out for a few minutes to stretch her legs and go to the bathroom."

"Did you notice anything special about her?"

"Like what?"

“I don’t know. Anything. What was she wearing?”

“A skirt. A sweater. I don’t really remember. She wore a cap.”

“Then you couldn’t see if she had bobbed hair like in this picture.”

“No.”

“Then what makes you think there’s a resemblance?”

Orena looked again at the photograph. “The smile. That beautiful smile. At one point her dress blew way up because the chopper blades were still turning. Ali hadn’t...”

“Ali?”

“One of our pilots.”

“His name is Ali? Not Ari or Aristophanes?”

She laughed. “He’s not even Greek. I don’t know what he is, but I guess he could be Muslim with a name like that.”

“How long has he worked for your father?”

“A year or two. He comes and goes with Juliette Tango, the helicopter. Does various jobs. He arrived back here today after the... after the...”

“After the what?”

“Have you heard what happened at Othe?”

“No, what?”

“I think you should ask Papa. I really shouldn’t say anything.”

“I was at Othe yesterday morning.”

“Was everything normal?”

“I suppose so. Would I have noticed if it wasn’t?”

She laughed, getting up and crossing to the door. “Oh, I think so,” she said. “You’d have noticed something. I’ll get that Scotch ready.” And she disappeared.

When I got to the bar a few minutes later I found Orena had left the Scotch bottle, ice, and soda on a tray for me, but wasn’t there herself. More than a drink, I wanted very much to talk to that young lady again. When she didn’t turn up in ten minutes, I decided to take a walk before dark.

It took me a few minutes to find the way out of the house, but soon I was climbing down a stone stairway cut into the side of the cliff. Below was a small beach and a house. Arriving at the beach I heard an English woman’s voice inside the house calling, “Anna, is that a man? Ask him what he wants.”

A girl’s head appeared above the porch railing, then a long, slender body about fourteen years old.

“I’m a man,” I told her candidly.

“What do you want?” she asked huskily, smiling.

“Nothing.”

The girl turned. “He doesn’t want anything,” she shouted into the house.

“What’s that?” came the voice from inside.

“He doesn’t want *anything*,” repeated Anna, louder.

“Nonsense. Everybody wants something. Why shouldn’t he?”

“Well then come ask him yourself.”

“I’ll do just that, thank you.”

“Mother will be right out,” she told me. Laying her cheek against a wooden support, she watched me dreamily.

A moment later a woman came out the front door. She was of medium height with brown hair parted on the side, a large bosom, and thin legs. She peered at me nearsightedly across the twenty or so feet separating us.

“I’m Brian Tschetter, a guest here,” I told her, to allay any fears. “Just out for a stroll.”

“Ah, I see. Tell me, is there anything two poor shipwrecked women can do for you?”

I came a few steps nearer. I’d liked her immensely on first sight. “Are you shipwrecked?”

“Do you see that stone out there?” She pointed to a jagged hunk of rock sticking out of the water a few hundred feet offshore.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s the one. Do you see something sticking out of the water just left of it?”

It took me a few seconds to identify a stick protruding from the sea. “Yes, but on the right.”

“That’s correct. Well, that’s the mast.”

“Did it happen during a storm?”

“Broad daylight, calm seas. My husband was steering, though the boat didn’t belong to us, thank heaven. To two of his clients. Serves them right for letting him have a go, says I. It could only happen to English people. They have such poor luck these days.”

“Are you and your husband English?”

“He’s white Rhodesian. The worst. Next to black Rhodesians, of course. Anna and I have taken up French residence. Now, what will you have to drink? We only have cognac.”

By this time I was seated on their porch. “Cognac will be fine.”

“With ice and water?”

“Is that the way you drink it?”

“It’s the only sensible way. We have no affectations around here.”

Recalling I’d drunk red wine with the fish, I figured I could take ice in my cognac if that was the local custom. “Fine with me.”

“Anna dear, please bring the cognac and the glasses and the ice and the canned water.”

The girl slithered off the railing and disappeared into the house, casting a lingering look back at me. “Does she know Orena?” I asked.

“They’re thick as thieves, those two. Spend the entire day making up their faces and changing clothes. But tell me, Mr. Tschetter...”

“Chet,” I interjected.

“Chet. What brings you to Io Sirena?”

“My airplane.”

“Was that you I saw today just before lunch? I said to Anna, “*That’s* what we need to get us off this effing island.”

“Are you stuck here or something?”

“Marooned is the word. We’ve been marooned here for over a fortnight already. We’ve almost put down roots.”

“But what about the helicopter? Can’t you fly out in that?”

She gave a thin, high shriek. “A helicopter! Me in a helicopter? Not very likely. I wouldn’t go up in one of those for all the tea in Fortnam and Mason’s.”

“What about taking a boat?”

“Never again. Do you see that rock? And mind you, it was a perfectly clear day with hardly a breeze. No.” She sighed. “Anna and I are going to cling to this island ... thank you, dear, now fetch the opener like a good little *pou* ... until we can cling no longer.”

“If you want, I’d be happy to fly you and Anna out.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Tschetter, but nothing, nothing in the world, would get me up in an airplane. I’d have to be drugged.”

“I think we should drug her,” said Anna, taking the opener from her pocket and holding it up in front of her mother’s face. “I’m tired of this place.”

“Mind your tongue, Anna. We’ll be here until your dear father devises some way to remove us which doesn’t involve flying or taking a boat. Or swimming, for that matter.”

“She’s slightly dotty,” confided the girl, tapping her forehead meaningfully.

“Anna, don’t you have homework to do?”

“Of course not. There’s no school here.”

“Then go look at the chicken.”

“The chicken’s fine. I just looked at it.

“Mr. Tschetter ... ”

“Call me Chet, I reminded her.

“And I’m Libby. Tell me, Chet, have you come here on holiday?”

“Not exactly. And you? What do you do with yourself all day?”

“Visit the digs.”

“The digs? Archaeological digs?”

“That’s the kind.”

“Do you ... dig?”

“Not a chance. I supervise while the others work. They’ve found quite a few pieces. It’s really most interesting.”

“Do you catalogue what they find?”

“Heavens no. I’m no archaeo-thing-a-ma-bob. I can just manage to count them if they line them up in a short row. On the other hand, I’m quite useful keeping them from getting broken once they’re out.”

“Since coming here, have you seen much of our host? Enough to form an opinion?”

“You mean Mr. Koundiotes. Top class. Really top class. He couldn’t have been kinder to Anna and me. Is he here now?”

“Yes.”

“I think he comes rarely to Io Sirena. His wife lives here and his daughter, but his son and he come and go. He has two *demoiselles* who accompany him in shifts, and then there are always guests. Anna keeps me informed on what goes on at the house. She’s a perfect spy.”

“Then maybe she can help me.” I turned to the girl who was sitting with her feet drawn up beside her, her prematurely mature legs very visible. “Last week a helicopter arrived to pick up a Frenchwoman guest called Louise. Did you see it arrive?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see a woman get out of it?”

“You mean Jeanne?”

I could feel the blood leave my face. I stared at the girl. My voice came out hardly a whisper. “Was her name Jeanne?”

“That’s what Louise called her.”

“You heard it? The name Jeanne?”

“There was a terrible wind from the propeller. The woman who got out was wanting a loo. Louise called Jeanne, Jeanne, go behind the bushes.” I think they were in a hurry because it was going to be night soon and they had to get to Athens. Is something wrong?”

I’d risen from my chair and turned my back so that they wouldn’t see my face. Jeanne was alive? That scene in the morgue – could it have been faked? Perhaps she hadn’t been dead. But why had she done it? Why?

Hardly pausing to bid Libby and Anna goodbye, I started up the cliffside steps toward the house. My brain was on fire. Jeanne, alive. She had been here on this very island. But what was the reason behind all this secrecy? Why her faked death? Obviously she was involved in something dangerous, perhaps something illicit. Drugs? I couldn’t believe it. She must be the victim of some gang.

Good Lord, I thought, could they have tricked her into white slavery? Anna said Jeanne and Louise were leaving for Athens, but had they then gone farther East? Terry had given me charts all the way to the Middle East. Had she suspected something like this? Had she sent me to find Louise and Heidi before it was too late, before they disappeared into some eastern brothel? If Ali was mixed up in this, then I wouldn’t be able to get anything out of him. But perhaps Heidi could tell me something. I had to find her

and talk to her.

Entering the bar I saw Mueller on one of the stools conversing with Orena. Putting on as natural an air as I could manage, I joined them. “Hey,” I said to Orena, “you ran out on me.”

Still unable to look me in the eye, she mumbled some excuse. I turned to Mueller. “Have you seen your wife?”

“I have the word of Mr. Koundiotes that my wife will see me tomorrow afternoon,” replied the German. “Tonight she will be making up her alibi and tomorrow morning she will be washing her hair. Fortunately I am very much in love with Heidi or I assure you I wouldn’t come here on my knees to bring her home with me.”

“On your knees?”

“My wife must be treated with great care. At the least excuse she will gulp down sleeping pills or throw herself across a train track. She is an emotional child, full of whims.”

“Then tomorrow you’ll be wanting me to fly you both to Athens to catch a plane back to, Germany.”

“We will see. We will see. I have a little business to do in the Middle East. Possibly you will allow my wife and me to accompany you to Beirut since your own business seems to be taking you there.”

“That’s news to me.”

“Oh.” The German smiled. “I forgot to mention it. I had a call a short while ago from Mrs. Rolland. She has learned that the lady you are seeking is in Beirut.”

I could feel my face drain of blood again. Did he mean Jeanne? “The lady I’m seeking?” I asked him carefully.

“Louise.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” Thoughts of my wife being alive had erased everything else from my mind, even the job I was being paid to do. The thought that Louise had gone to Beirut, and Jeanne probably with her, wasn’t reassuring. White slave traffickers are often Lebanese; women encounter them on the left bank in Paris. This had sometimes happened to Jeanne, and she’d told me about it. I wished I could talk to Terry Roland myself and learn whether my fears were justified.

“Where was Terry Rolland calling from?” I asked. “Othe?”

“Ah, no. I forgot to mention that to you also. Othe burned down last night.

*“Burned down!”*

“That’s what I meant before,” Orena said.

“Mrs. Rolland said something about an explosion. Vandals, I suppose.”

“Vandals? With explosives?”

“Possibly they were terrorists,” shrugged the German. “There was a great deal of explosive used. The cook was killed, but Mrs. Rolland happened to be outside at the time and wasn’t touched.”

“Christ.”

This assignment, which had started off as something out of the ordinary – not just a simple divorce or default of payment case – was developing into something even stranger. I was beginning to realize that I hadn’t been picked for this job just because Terry had happened to see an article about me and my plane in the *Trib*. She’d picked me because Jeanne was involved in some way. But on which side? Was Jeanne the victim or, just as awful, the perpetrator?

Because otherwise, why choose me? Not just because I had a plane and could land on Io Sirena. Any other detective could have hired a helicopter or even taken a boat. If Terry’d been in a hurry, as she said, to get the matter settled, then maybe it was more convenient this way. But still it didn’t make sense.

Dark-haired Orena, dressed this evening in flowing black silk pants and shirt, her throat shimmering with natural pearls, had been listening to our conversation. “Papa learned about the explosion last night,” she told us with a toss of her head.

“How?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. Apparently embarrassed by her lack of information, she turned and started sliding ashtrays around on the slick surface of the bar.

The golden atomic clock on the wall had just flashed 2100 hours when Koundiotes entered the room. Dressed in dark trousers and a striped silk smoking jacket, he looked brisk, happy, and elegant, a man in control of his destiny. Just behind him came his son, taller and handsomer, but walking with a slouch like an accountant, his face sallow and sunken with the problems of youth.

The five of us were joined for dinner by Koundiotes’ wife, the mother of Orena and Orestes. She was a short, broad woman of about forty with a round, flat face. Unable or unwilling to speak English, she said only a minimum in Greek, giving cursory orders to her children and servants and never changing her stern, fierce expression.

Koundiotes, a model of courtesy and attention, scolded the children and servants for any imagined oversight or carelessness toward her. For this reason the dinner was a strain on everyone, and I for one breathed a sigh of relief when, dessert over, Mrs. Koundiotes stood up and took her leave.

Telling Orena and Orestes to accompany their German guest to the bar, Koundiotes drew me aside to a small, denlike room where, by pulling closed the drapes, he blotted out the black rectangle of night.

“You have heard about Othe?” he asked me, pouring us each a cognac.

“Mueller told me. Apparently Terry Rolland told him. I’m awfully sorry.”

Koundiotes shrugged. “Obviously it represents a loss, more for France than for myself. France has lost an architectural treasure and one of her best cooks. I was insured. On the other hand, I never knew what to do with the place. I bought it – how do you say? – on impulse. A French friend had died and his widow was wanting to sell the house very quickly for whatever price. I bought it partly out of desire to help, partly

because it is ... was ... a beautiful house. I thought I should own some property in France in case the political situation in my country ever got out of hand. So I bought it. In fact, my wife wanted very much that I buy it. But we had only been there two or three times. As soon as we owned it she lost interest in going there.”

“How did you meet Terry Rolland?” I asked him.

“*Meet?* That isn’t quite the word. One doesn’t ‘meet’ help. She answered an ad I’d placed in a newspaper. It isn’t easy finding servants who will stay in a place like Othe. Both she and the cook received generous salaries.”

“Would you refer to Terry as a ‘servant’?” I looked at him in surprise.

“Well, then, call her a housekeeper if you wish. She still polishes the silver and changes the sheets.”

My surprise turned to amazement. “Is that her job?”

“What did you think?”

“Well, she ... she wasn’t, uh, *dressed* like a house-keeper.”

“Then I suppose she had found some of my wife’s clothes. My wife left some things at the house because we would go there in the Bell with the children, and there wasn’t much luggage room. In any case, what difference does it make now? No more clothes. No more house. At least someone was able to use them. I’m just glad she got out alive.”

I sipped my cognac. Whatever Libby’s opinion, it still tasted better without ice.

“This Frenchwoman, Louise, and Heidi,” I said, “they were at Othe, too, weren’t they?”

“Possibly. But you know, we have so many guests that I really don’t keep track. My wife sees to that sort of thing. Yes, I think Louise and Heidi were at Othe. Yes, they must have been, because Ali picked them up and brought them here.”

“But are they friends of yours?”

“I really haven’t the slightest idea. Friends of friends of friends. I have no time to make friends of my own, so I welcome those who come for any reason. Without them an island can be a lonely place. Does it matter?”

“No, certainly not. And Jeanne?” I tried to keep any trace of emotion out of my voice as I mentioned the name.

“Who?”

“Jeanne. I think she’s a friend of Louise and Heidi.”

He shook his head. “Perhaps she has been here. As I say, I’m seldom here myself and so many come and go.” He smiled suddenly. “Have you met this funny woman called Libby and her daughter?”

“Yes. I met them on the beach.”

“A most extraordinary person. Fate brought her to my shores. I think she will live on Io Sirena forever. She refuses to set foot in either a helicopter or boat.” He laughed delightedly. “There’s room for them here, of course, but what will she do with herself, poor woman, for the next thirty or forty years? And this is no place for a young girl. She should be in school.”

“The daughter suggested I drug her mother and fly her out.”

Koundiotes nodded. “That’s one solution. Perhaps just Dramamine. She’s very nervous. Any calmant would probably work. Though I must say, I like having her here. I’m hoping she will join us in a little fun.”

“Fun?”

“Yes. Tomorrow we are having a sort of hunt. It depends upon the weather as to which it will be, inside or outside.”

“A hunt? Does the island have game?”

“The best kind. Haven’t you noticed? The island is full of women.”

“You go after them with guns?”

He laughed delightedly. “Not with guns, no. We have other things that shoot, no? No?”

“I’ve never tried for range,” I warned him.

Throwing back his head, he chuckled. “It will really be a very tame affair,” he promised me. “We Greeks enjoy ourselves when there is only a minimum of physical exertion. The quarry must be willing to be caught, for we are not monsters. The hunt is mostly in the head and the imagination, not in the legs.”

“Then where’s the game found?”

“That I will tell each one tomorrow. There must be no mixups. To each his own. I have my own. You saw her last night. What do you think?”

“Beautiful.”

“Yes, very special. Tomorrow is my birthday. That is why I am here now on Io Sirena. Then after the hunt my wife will join us at supper.”

“I may be gone by that time.”

The Greek looked genuinely disappointed. “Are you flying away? No, no. Stay on here a while. Stay another month. I will be going off the day after tomorrow and then no men will be left on the island. That Englishwoman would certainly welcome your presence. As for my daughter, Orena, the moment she saw you land she ran to me begging me to offer you all our hospitality.”

“I’m not on Io Sirena to amuse the ladies,” I reminded him.

“No, you have brought that German to see his wife. That is a very odd situation. I do not even know who this girl is. I’ve only seen her for a few minutes. She has been ill and remains in her room.”

“Her husband thinks she’s here having an affair. The result of a Monopoly game on a rainy afternoon.”

“A Monopoly game?”

“Doesn’t that mean anything to you? I thought you were one of the players.”

“Me? I haven’t played Monopoly since the children were small.”

“There wasn’t a game last week at Othe?”

“Perhaps. I have not been at Othe for at least two months. Who has been telling you

these things? Anyway, this German can eliminate me from his list of her possible lovers. And I think he need not worry that it is my son. Then it leaves only some cooks and servants. They are of a very low class, and I think really not, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure Mueller doesn’t suspect you or your family or staff. But maybe someone else was on the island, or still is. If he came in your helicopter, Ali might know.”

“Plural. Helicopters. We are a two-copter family.”

“I’ve only seen one.”

“They come and go on their various duties. The callsign on mine is Bravo Romeo. The one my wife uses is Juliette Tango. When I need one I whistle and it comes flying to me.”

“Not bad.”

“Bravo Romeo is having an overhaul and inspection, unless it is already done. Juliette Tango is here, I believe. I think I heard her arrive during lunch.”

“You don’t keep very close tabs on their whereabouts?”

“Mr. Tschetter, when you have a four-member family with only two helicopters it is impossible to keep track. My wife and daughter may wish to go shopping in Rome. My son might have an amorous rendezvous on Crete. I only insist that when I need transportation one airworthy helicopter and one healthy, sober pilot be available. It is not much to ask, no?”

“No,” I agreed sympathetically. “It’s not much to ask at all.”

It was after midnight when I returned to my room. I was hoping the bathtub would do its act. I’m not a bathing fetishist, but I suspected that if I were to accept Koundiotes’ invitation and remain another month on Io Sirena, I’d become one.

As I entered my room I could see from the company sitting there that all ablutions were postponed.

“Good evening.” The accent was pure German.

She was young and blond, willowy and distraught. The ravages of flu still showed in her beautiful but puffy face. “Good evening,” I replied. “You’re Heidi, I presume.”

She ignored my words, searching my face with her eyes, restless, seeming about to rise, then settling deeper into her chair. “You’re the pilot of the plane that landed here today?”

“That’s affirmative.”

“I want you to fly me to Athens tonight. I’ll pay you.”

“Tonight? With the amount of booze I’ve drunk this evening?”

“I’ll take the chance.”

“*You* will, but what about me? Besides,” I lied, “my plane isn’t equipped for night flying. I’m not even sure I’d be able to find it down there on the strip.”

“I have a flashlight.”

“Fine. Maybe you have runway lights, too. Anyway, what’s so important it can’t

wait until morning?”

She didn't answer, just looked at me with an expression of disappointment and frustration.

“Besides,” I said, “you promised Koundiotes you'd see your husband tomorrow afternoon. I know he's looking forward to it.”

Her face reddened slightly and I thought for a moment tears were coming. “He would have to come here,” she said. “I don't want to see him. He doesn't understand.”

Talking of her husband, her face took on a sort of glow. If it had been any other man but Mueller, I'd have said she loved him. Well, who can tell. Maybe lovely young things do sometimes get daughter-father complexes about fat old men like Mueller. “He thinks you're having an affair here.”

“I guessed that,” she replied softly. “But it's not true. It's not.” This time the tears really did fill her eyes. Somehow she controlled them. “Please, take me away so that I don't have to see him. It would only complicate things.”

“You really love him.”

She didn't reply. She didn't have to. The tears spilled over, writing “love” all the way down her face.

If I hadn't been drinking, if it hadn't been nearly one in the morning, if I'd had any idea about Greek night-flying regulations, and if I hadn't wanted to learn a few things from this young woman myself, I probably would have gone straight to the Helio and flown her to Athens. If I'd known then what I was to learn later, I'd have done it anyhow, drinks, hour, rules be damned.

“Do you know someone called Jeanne?” I asked suddenly, watching her face. I'm sure my words had an impact, but she rolled with it smoothly.

“Jeanne who?” she asked lightly, not looking at my face.

“Jeanne Tschetter.”

Her eyes worked their way slowly away from the floor, up my trousers and at last met mine. Her expression was absolutely bland. “No.”

“I'm her husband.”

“Is that right? Well, it seems like the world is full of husbands looking for their wives.”

“I didn't say I was looking for her. I asked if you knew her.”

“And I said no. And it's no.” She got up out of the chair and smiled amicably at me. “Well, Mr. Tschetter, is that a date?”

“Is what a date?”

“You'll fly me to Athens in the morning? Early?”

“I didn't say that. As far as I know both of us have appointments on Io Sirena tomorrow afternoon. If there's a seat available when I fly out of here, you can have it. You can go all the way to Beirut with me if you want, provided your husband comes along. How would you like to visit Beirut? I hear your friend is there.”

“What friend?” she asked breathlessly.

“Louise.”

She was silent. I watched her face but she wasn't giving anything away. After a moment she seemed to pull herself together. “Well, Mr. Tschetter, thank you very much for your help. I'm sorry I bothered you.” She started toward the door.

“Heidi,” I said, following her, “talk to your husband tomorrow. Don't go off and do something rash that you'll regret. I have a feeling you're getting into something that's way over your head. If you love him, go home with him before it's too late.”

She paused with one hand on the doorknob and looked at me, a long, sad look. Then, without a word, she went out. I was never to see her alive again.

## Chapter 4

I don't often have anxiety dreams, but that night when I finally got to sleep I dreamed I was flying in instrument conditions, inside cloud, unable to see anything but blinding white through the windscreen. I looked at my instruments, but it was as if I'd suddenly turned terribly nearsighted. I wasn't able to read them. Gradually I could feel the plane start to go out of control and descend in a slow but unstoppable spin while I strained my eyes to see.

I awoke to find sunlight streaming in on my face through the window. I'd forgotten to draw the drapes the night before. Stumbling across the room to shut them, I looked at my watch. Nine o'clock. Out the window the sky was only partly clear. What looked like bad weather was moving in from the west. Damn. I went back, threw myself face down on the pillow, and fell asleep again.

A couple of hours later I was awakened by the sound of giggling. Instinctively flipping the covers over my bare bottom, I opened my eyes to see Orena and Anna approaching the bed, struggling under the weight of a huge silver breakfast tray. There was just time to jerk my legs out of the way before they set it down, rattling and sloshing, on the bed. While Anna hurried back to shut the door, Orena covered the spilled coffee with linen napkins. I winced, bleary-eyed, as one of them whipped open the drapes.

“To what do I owe this honor?” I asked them as they returned to the bed to perch happily. “It can't be Father's Day.”

“You've overslept,” said Anna. “Please sit up.”

I did, to make them happy, but without a crane or a jack there was no way of sliding my legs under the tray. So I crossed them as comfortably as possible and poured myself a cup of coffee while Orena added the milk and sugar.

“*Petit déjeuner anglais*,” said Anna, lifting the cover off a steaming plate of eggs and bacon.

“I see you speak French.”

“Mother and I have lived most of my life in France, she told me. “We’re French subjects.”

“What language was Louise speaking when she told Jeanne to go behind the bushes?”

“French, I think. Yes. French.”

“Anna and I have decided...” said Orena suddenly, then broke off.

“Decided what?”

“That she was your wife,” said Anna.

“Thanks for the information. Then you think she’s not dead?”

“How could she be?” said Orena, buttering a piece of toast for me.

“It’s good to know. Any other ideas on the subject?”

The girls hesitated, exchanging a glance. Orena didn’t have the courage, so Anna said it. “We think Louise and her are spies.”

“I see. And on whom are they spying, pray tell?”

“We don’t know.”

“Have you noticed anything that might have given you this idea? Can you think of anything odd you’ve seen going on around here lately?”

“Ali’s odd,” said Anna.

“How so?”

“For one thing, Orena’s dad never knows where he is. She says he’s always complaining that Ali’s off somewhere with the helicopter and he never has it when he wants it.”

“I thought he just had to whistle and it comes.”

Orena laughed bitterly. “Not since Ali took over.”

“Then why doesn’t your father fire him?”

“He says Ali’s a good mechanic. It isn’t easy finding a pilot who’s also a mechanic. When you live on an island and cross water a lot, it’s very important.”

“What else does Ali do?”

The girls looked at each other with guilty expressions. “We can’t tell you. You’d say something.”

“I promise not to.”

“You won’t tell Orena’s father?”

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

They exchanged another look. Finally Orena shrugged and looked down. Anna crept up to whisper in my ear. “When her father is away Ali sometimes stays overnight with Mrs. Koundiotes.”

Having said this, Anna moved back next to her friend. Both girls sat looking at me, waiting for me to say something, make some kind of comment. I could see the pain in Orena’s eyes. She wanted me to help her understand the terrible things that were going on in her family between her father and mother and these strangers who came and went.

But what could I tell her? Only experience in life can help a person understand such things, and even then not always.

“Well, girls,” I said carefully, “I’d say that this is their affair, your mother’s and Ali’s. It sure is none of my business. Now tell me more about these spies. Orena, do you think your father knows spies are around?”

“My father never notices anything,” replied Orena with an exaggerated pout. “He and Orestes are only concerned with business. Spies could carry off the whole island and they wouldn’t notice until their helicopters landed in the water.” She smiled at Anna who laughed loudly at this joke.

“And Heidi?” I asked, not wanting them to get sidetracked again. “Where do you think she fits in?”

“Heidi?” Orena gazed off thoughtfully. “Let me see.” By her sudden loquaciousness the girl was making a brave effort to erase the awkward mood of a moment ago. I felt terribly guilty making her conceal her pain under a layer of libertine crap. “Heidi? I don’t think she’s much of a spy. Spies don’t come down with flu and get left behind. Anyway, she doesn’t talk to us. Anna and I think she should go home with her husband and give up spying.”

“She may decide to do just that. What do you girls think of her husband?”

Both Anna and Orena doubled over with gasps of disgust.

“Awful.”

“Horrible.”

“She seems very much in love with him,” I said.

“It’s not possible,” said Anna flatly. “He’s at least forty years older than Heidi and so horrible and fat. But if she does love him, it must be because he’s a spy, too.”

“Think they’re in a plot together?”

“It’s possible,” the girl replied with her most sophisticated air. “I wouldn’t put anything past them.”

Having finished breakfast I was feeling a great need to stretch my legs. Recalling seeing a robe hanging in the bathroom, I asked Orena to get it for me. Both girls obediently closed their eyes as I got out of bed and put it on.

“Do you want to take a bath?” asked Orena.

“Do you think the tub is willing?”

The girls suppressed giggles. “Go into the bathroom,” Orena told me. I did as she said. “Look into the bath,” she called.

Water was swirling into the tub. I could hear giggling from the next room. Probably there was a button or something they pressed to make the water rise. Mine not to question how. Closing the bathroom door, I tossed the bathrobe at the wall hook and jumped in.

By the time I’d finished shaving, dressed and left the house, the sky was a solid layer of dark, fast-moving stratocumulus. Although a brisk wind whipped across the island, it

wasn't particularly cold. Io Sirena, lying just on the eastern limit of the European weather system and not quite into the more clement Greek one, had a climate which was a combination of the two.

I'd already seen most of the south side of the island, so now made my way along a dirt track toward the north. The wind, which was coming from that direction, grew stronger as I advanced. I was glad I'd worn a nylon windbreaker over my sweater. After several minutes of walking I found myself on the opposite coast. Not far below, the blue-green water seethed in waves and eddies against the island, crashing on the rocks, the spray flinging high.

I continued northwest along the coast. From the air I'd noticed some sort of small building over that way. Moments later I reached it. It stood just in the lee of the island's tip, in a small cove. In contrast to the main house, this building was just four white-washed walls and a roof. A small sign on the door indicated that it was the de-salination plant. I tried the door but it was locked.

Wandering inland I came across the "digs." Unless another excavation site existed on the island, Libby had been exaggerating. Obviously no one had done any work here in some time. The walls of the excavations were crumbled and smoothed by wind and rain. In fact, this whole part of the island felt uninhabited and abandoned.

Making my way forward into the wind, I returned to the de-salination plant. Approaching it, I heard voices coming from inside. There was only one window on that side. It was shuttered, but putting my ear against the wood I could just make out two voices, one male, one female. They were arguing about something, but I couldn't make out their words.

In any case, it wouldn't be difficult learning who they were. There was only a single window and door in the whole building. All I had to do was wait for them to come through one of them. I was about to sit down on a convenient rock, when something small and deadly smacked into the whitewashed masonry next to my eye. Almost simultaneously I heard the crack of a rifle not far away.

Diving to the ground I rolled, jumped to my feet, and started running for cover. Rifle bullets were snapping past me as I went. With no trees nearby, the only place to seek shelter was down in the digs. Seconds later I threw myself into the first hole. Since it wasn't very deep and as I didn't relish the idea of my tail getting shot off, I started crawling on my stomach like a rat in a labyrinth, trying to find some way to get out of the immediate area while staying as protected as possible.

By this time the firing had stopped. Unable to find a way out of the digs on the far side, I raised my head quickly to look back and see if I could make out who'd been shooting. To my surprise, I did catch a glimpse of a figure dressed in dark, bulky clothing disappearing behind some rocks on the hill above.

But why shoot at me? Was it to keep me from seeing who was inside the building? Or had someone actually tried to kill me? Or both?

First things first. Returning to the plant I found a place where I could sit out of sight and still keep an eye on anyone coming or going. But although I was there a half hour, nobody appeared. Probably they'd left after the shooting started. Having a feeling I wasn't going to learn any more even if I spent the day there, I headed back toward the relative safety of the house.

I was almost there when I changed my mind and went down to the Helio. I kept my gun hidden in a special place under the instrument panel and wanted to check that it was still there. Also, since I planned to leave that afternoon – as soon as Mueller had said whatever he had to say to his wife – I wanted to check over the aircraft. The water I'd found in the fuel during our stopover at Naples might not have been an accident after all.

In fact, I was beginning not to like the way things were developing. I'm no hero and wasn't getting combat duty pay either. If someone was trying to scare me off, I was perfectly ready to abandon the field, leave Io Sirena, and return directly to Paris. Except for one thing. One person. Jeanne. I had to find her. And to find her I had to stay and let things happen any way they would.

The Helio's door was locked, and there were no signs the lock had been tampered with. The gun was in its place. I looked around the small cabin. Unlike in airliners, no cleaning crew had been through to vacuum and straighten up. It had a messy, abandoned look. I decided to straighten it up and as I was doing so was surprised to find Mueller's sample case was missing. That was funny. I was almost sure I'd left it inside. But perhaps Ali had taken it up to the house.

Having folded the charts and straightened up the cabin, I opened the baggage compartment door. Screwed onto a rack behind the Honda was my tool kit. I took out a screwdriver to open up the inspection panels and got to work. A small airplane is a simple thing, simple to operate and simple to sabotage. When you take off over water from a STOL strip there aren't *trente-six* places to land if something fails or comes apart.

It took me over an hour to check out the part of the plane that wasn't engine. I'd just taken out the ladder to start on the rest, when who should come along but Ali. He saw what I was doing and came over.

"Hi, Ali," I said. "Been out for some rifle practice?"

If he understood, he made no sign. "Mechanic," he grunted, pointing from his eye to the engine. I climbed down and up he went.

For the next few minutes he went over the engine as gently as a doctor checking for a fracture, looking at the wires, the connections, the mounting. He un-screwed the battery caps, then went away and came back a moment later with a plastic bottle. He must have known what was on my mind because he shook a little of the water into his hand and licked it up, then shook some into my palm. It tasted like water all right, not gin or sulfuric acid. I hoped it was distilled, but on that island it would almost have to be by definition. And anyway, I was too polite to ask.

Finished with the battery, he checked the oil. My Helio is a big oil gulper, and I

usually carry along a few cans of the stuff, one of which I now passed up to him after personally twisting open the top to make sure the seal was unbroken. At this, Ali's reproachful eyes met mine, and I felt like a cad. After adding the two liters, he examined the dipstick, grunted, replaced the oil cap, and backed down the ladder.

"Okay," he said gruffly, waving at the plane. "You inspect." Motioning for me to climb up the ladder and see that he'd done no harm, he turned his back and walked away toward the Jet Ranger.

It was hard to believe that Ali would have sabotaged my plane right over my nose, so to speak, but I climbed up and gave a look. At least there were no loose wires lying around. I'd check it again before takeoff. Ali's apparent kindness did get to me. If he wasn't the one taking shots at me and putting water in the fuel, he might be a nice guy after all. If he was putting in some overtime to help out lonely Mrs. Koundiotes, that might be to his credit, too.

Closing the engine cowling, I locked the cabin door. "Thanks, Ali," I called, starting up the path toward the house. Ali, attaching some hardware underneath the chopper, gave a short wave of his hand without turning his head.

As I walked, back up toward the house there were a lot of unanswered questions on my mind. For instance, what was the story on the two I'd heard arguing in the desalination plant? Next, who took the shots at me and why? Was I getting too close to finding out something I wasn't supposed to know? And how come Ali was being so nice to me all of a sudden, when I could almost bet he was the one doing the shooting?

To start with question one, who could the female voice have belonged to? I'd already met four or five females since arriving at the island. The only one I suspected was mixed up in something clandestine was Heidi. Heidi was supposed to see her husband that afternoon, but perhaps they'd already met in the plant.

But then why the secrecy? If it wasn't Mueller she was speaking to, then maybe it was Ali. In that case, Mueller could have been out in the rocks taking pot shots. Only that didn't make sense either. Why would Mueller want to kill me when he needed me to fly him off the island? Unless, of course, he was only trying to frighten me for some reason. In which case, where would he have gotten the rifle? He hadn't had one in the plane. Unless it had been inside the so-called sample case. Yes, that was possible, but I still couldn't see the motive.

The trouble with situations like this, I was thinking as I poured myself a drink at the bar, is that if you think hard enough and long enough you'll soon begin to suspect everybody. Even Anna and her mother, Libby, could be involved. Even Koundiotes and Orena. When secret hanky-panky is involved, even sweet old grandmas fall under suspicion.

There seemed to be nothing to do about it but wait and see and try to remain alive in the meantime. For starters, the sooner I was off this island, the better I'd like it. And the first thing I wanted to ask Mueller next time I saw him was where I could contact Terry

for instructions regarding Louise's whereabouts in the Middle East. Now that Othe was destroyed, I had no way of contacting my client.

I was pondering this problem when Mueller came into the room. He looked the picture of relaxation and good humor, wearing a tan suit, not the dark, bulky clothing worn by the person who'd taken shots at me earlier. But then one wouldn't expect him to arrive dressed like a commando.

"Good morning, Mr. Tschetter," he said. "Or should I say good afternoon?"

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly one thirty. "Been sleeping late?" I asked him.

"No, I was out for a walk. It is a beautiful island, *nicht?*"

"Talk to your wife yet?"

"Not yet. Mr. Koundiotes says something has been arranged for this afternoon. Some sort of game. Or hunt. He says I will find her then. Has he given you a map?"

"A map? No."

"I think he will. This is going to be something like an Easter egg hunt, I believe. I have a map, you will have yours."

"Koundiotes must have had a short, tough childhood."

"That's possible. Now he's having it a second time, better." The German looked at his watch. "I don't know where everyone is. The island is small and full of people, but you seldom see anyone until suddenly they appear."

"I was wondering," said I, "whether you still intend leaving with me this afternoon."

He looked at me in surprise. "That is still the plan, no?"

"What about your wife?"

"Heidi? Either she will accompany us to the Middle East or I will send her home to Germany from Athens. Obviously she cannot stay on here indefinitely. Koundiotes is a generous host, but one cannot take advantage too long of anyone's hospitality."

"You said yesterday that Terry Rolland told you Louise was in Beirut. Did she give you any more information than that? Like how I'm to find her there?"

"Yes. I have some addresses."

"Could I have them? Just in case you decide not to come?"

"If I so decide, of course you can have them. But I will come with you. I have made up my mind."

"And what about Mrs. Rolland herself. Did she tell you how I was to contact her in the future for further instructions?"

"Yes, yes, all that is settled."

"Would you mind telling me?"

"When the time comes. In the meantime I can tell you that you will have the thousand dollars from me for finding my wife. Mrs. Rolland says there will be two thousand more for you if you find Louise. That should be a good incentive, *nicht?*"

I had to force myself not to go over, take him by the throat, and shake him like a rat. Sure, money might have been what had brought me into this affair, but it wasn't money

making me take this kind of shit from Terry and Mueller. From now on I was in it for one reason only – to find my wife. The trouble was, I couldn't let them know this. I had to pretend to play their game, otherwise it could blow everything. Somehow I'd have to keep my cool around this son-of-a-bitch. If Jeanne hadn't been involved, I'd have told him what he could do with his lousy money right then and there.

I was trying hard not to glare at the German when Koundiotes entered. "Ah, there you are. I understand from Orena that you both have had a late breakfast. Then are you ready to start? Mr. Tschetter, here is your map. I'm sure a navigator such as yourself will have no difficulty. Each map shows the way to a small pavilion. Mr. Tschetter will be going to Venus, Mr. Mueller to Hermes, and I will be going to ... ah ... Diana." He looked from one of us to the other. "Is it clear?"

Everything was clear except *why*, but we both nodded. "Good. I'm sure there is no chance for confusion. As I say, the hunt is in the mind, not in the legs. We are not eighteen anymore."

I was about to point out that I wasn't seventy-five either, but who knows, maybe the day would arrive. Maybe in a decade and a half, when I reached the magic half-century mark, I'd start chasing Dianas in the woods, too. I was tempted to tell Koundiotes about the shooting that morning, but was pretty sure he wasn't responsible for that and didn't want to mention it in front of the German. If Mueller was the gunman in question, he knew about it already; if not, there seemed no need to tell him just yet.

The map Koundiotes handed me was delicately drawn in brown ink. The paths, the trees, the shape of the island itself had been done with great care and even a loving familiarity. Some gal had done it, that was for sure. Orena? The blond but bogus Mrs. Koundiotes? It was too perverse to imagine that the real Mrs. K had done the drawing. Under the circumstances I wouldn't have blamed her for mapping the participants into quicksand or onto crumbling promontories above the sea.

"Unfortunately," said Koundiotes, as we were about to go our separate ways, "it is a very small island, so I suggest you walk slowly and let your imaginations do the wandering. Anticipation in these things is one of the most enjoyable parts of the adventure. You will notice that the paths indicated to you on the maps are not the shortest distance between here and the pavilions."

What he said was true. The route drawn on my map was circuitous. I noticed that it would lead me back up in the direction of the digs before bringing me around to a point that was central but nearer the south coast, not far from where I'd descended to the beach the evening before. There, a few simple pen lines indicated a small circular-shaped pavilion surrounded by pillars and labeled "Venus."

I didn't need to spend much time deciding that I wasn't going to play by the rules. I'd head east, not north, after leaving the house and approach the pavilion like a commando instead of a Casanova. And I'd be armed.

"Then are you ready?" asked Koundiotes. "Ready, Mr. Mueller?"

“I’m ready,” said Mueller.

“I think you already know whom you will find,” laughed the Greek.

“Yes, I think so.”

“And I, too. I do not like surprises. The only one who does not know what to expect is Mr. Tschetter.”

“I’m ready for anything,” I told him.

“You will improvise?”

“If necessary.”

“That’s why I like Americans.” Koundiotes smiled. “Always prepared.”

“We do our best.”

I waited until the others were out of sight, then set off in the direction I’d decided on. I figured I’d go down past the airstrip to get my gun and see what my friend Ali was up to, then work my way around the island on that side.

The Helio, when I got to it, looked the same as when I’d left it earlier. Juliette Tango was there, but Ali was nowhere to be seen. Taking out my gun, I put it into my shoulder holster, ready for action.

Had the Helio been sabotaged while I was away? I put my hand on the prop. If only airplanes could talk. Well, I thought, in a way they can. They can shudder when their magnetos start to go, cough when they’re being deprived of fuel, chatter and shiver when their carburetor freezes, and scream when their revs get too high. They can purr like a pussycat when all’s going well, but most eloquent and thought-provoking of all is the silence they provide when, in the middle of the air, their engine quits.

I ran my finger along the prop’s leading edges, checking for nicks. And yet, I thought, with all these kinds of speech the airplane wouldn’t be telling you anything your eyes couldn’t read. You can check the state of the mags during the run-up by watching the rev counter. The fuel can be monitored on the fuel quantity and pressure gauges. A freezing carburetor can be anticipated on the outside air thermometer and confirmed by the manifold pressure gauge. All the same, the ears have it. They’re the early warning system. Unlike eyes, you don’t have to point them at something to get the message. Awake or asleep, they stand guard for assaults coming from all directions.

Leaving the airstrip I started following the coast around toward the north, sticking to the high ground above the beach. Even so, on an island with relatively few trees it was hard not making a target of myself. As I walked, my eyes were scanning and my all-azimuth ears were processing sounds. A *homo sapiens* is not an inconsequential piece of equipment. Of course, Humpty Dumpty was not an inconsequential egg.

After walking several minutes I could see the pavilion slightly ahead and above me. The drawing indicated that the pillars went all the way around the small, circular building, but didn’t show where the front entrance might be. I figured the entrance would be on the southeast side, away from the prevailing wind. As this was the side from which I was now approaching, I stayed below the brow of the hill until I’d passed the pavilion,

then scrambled up the volcanic rocks to arrive from what I hoped was the rear.

I could have saved myself the trouble. Inside the circle of pillars the house was made almost entirely of glass. Drapes there were, but none had been drawn shut. Figuring that anyone living in that house wouldn't throw stones, much less shoot bullets, I walked right on up. Maybe some beautiful creature awaited me after all.

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Tschetter. What a pleasant surprise."

As the familiar English accent reached my ears I had to chuckle. Koundiotes, that son-of-a-gun. What *did* he have on his mind?

She moved through the glass room surrounded by Doric columns like some sort of buxomy pigeon in a cage. "Come right in, out of the wind. Whatever are you doing wandering about on such a day?"

"I think I'm playing hide-and-seek," I told her. I was glad to note as I came through the automatic sliding glass door that inside the "walls" it was warmer than I'd expected it to be. I looked around for the source of heat.

"It's coming from the floor," Libby told me. "Please sit down. I'm sorry there isn't a chair to offer you."

"The bed's fine. I'm good at improvising."

"I'm sure you are," she remarked archly.

As a matter of fact, the only item of furniture in the entire room was an enormous round bed. It was hard keeping a straight face when I thought of Koundiotes, who at that very moment was probably rolling on the floor slapping his thighs thinking of my predicament.

"Some tea? I'll put the kettle on."

"A tea kettle? Here?" At this point nothing would have surprised me.

"There are cups and a little machine here in this cupboard. I haven't yet figured out how it works. It may want a shilling."

"I'll have a look."

The cupboard in question turned out to be a neatly stocked bar containing a small ice compartment as well as a spigot for boiling water which you could obtain by pressing a button to heat the water and then operating the tap. In about two minutes I was sitting on the bed stirring my tea like a middle-aged dowager, while Libby, who didn't fly even as a passenger, was curled up around a tall cognac and water. She probably had as much reason to get drunk as I did to stay sober.

"What do you suppose the other guests are doing today?" Libby inquired.

"I suppose Mueller's finally seeing his wife. They're in some neighboring pavilion."

"Good for them. It's just the sort of afternoon for a nice poke. Of course, I'm too old for that sort of thing myself, but it makes me happy to know others are enjoying themselves."

I watched her face. It wasn't a come-on, nor fishing for compliments. It might even have been a warning. I'm sure your husband isn't of the same opinion.

“Jack? Jack doesn’t go in for that sort of thing. Really not. Let me see. When was the last time? Anna is now fourteen, so that makes...”

“Hey, c’mon,” I interrupted her. I didn’t want to hear.

“That makes fourteen years nine months ago. That’s Jack.”

“But that’s not you.”

“No,” she conceded carefully. “For me it’s been slightly more recent. But not for at least two years. Two years ago, when I turned forty, I decided enough was enough. I’d reached the age where they really couldn’t expect you to do it anymore. It’s probably the only advantage of old age, that you can put that sort of thing behind you.”

The cognac was rapidly removing the English starch from Libby’s flesh and bone. As she spoke, the movements of her arms became more sweeping. The muscles of her face relaxed and the flesh became slightly puffy. Her mouth lost its elasticity and became a carmine smear. There were still no vibrations, not even soggy ones. I knew she wouldn’t suddenly launch herself at me. Her drinking didn’t help her lose her strict sexual inhibitions. On the contrary, it encouraged her to enforce them with utter abandon.

“What don’t you like about sex?” I asked her.

“Everything. Especially those dreadful cocks. Awful looking things.” She shuddered. “Saw one once. Never again.”

“How could you avoid it?”

“Quite easy, that. Cover them up with the bedclothes. Keep the room dark. Purple they are, with horrid veins. One look put me right off.”

I figured if the conversation continued like this much longer I’d never be able to look in a mirror again, much less get it on for anyone. It seemed like a good idea to change the subject. “Have you and Anna decided whether you’re flying out of here with me this afternoon?”

“That’s very kind of you, Chet, but we really can’t. Nothing would make me set foot in an airplane. Not just yours, I want you to know. I have a complete horror of flying. And that’s odd, isn’t it, because I used to be an air hostess.”

“No kidding.”

“Absolutely. Had no fear of anything in those days. Nothing bothered me. The worst storms, the turbulence, I couldn’t have cared less. Never gave it a thought.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, there was this one run we used to make which everyone hated. You had to stay awake and on your feet for about twelve hours. One day it was my turn to make that flight and I had a terrible cold. A friend of mine, some poor, shy girl – also a stewardess – was always trying to do nice things for me. She said she’d go in my place. I let her.” Libby paused and took another sip of her drink. “On that flight a wing fell off the plane. They were all lost. Every one of them.”

“And you never flew again.”

“No, I kept flying. For about a month. But everything was changed. I was always up in the cockpit making sure everything was all right, driving the crew around the twist. It lasted about a month, then I had to stop. I was simply too terrified. That was nearly twenty years ago, and I’ve never set foot inside an aircraft since.”

“I don’t think I’d advise you to.”

“On the other hand,” continued Libby, “Anna’s all packed and ready.”

“She wants to go?”

“No keeping her. She’s even packed my suitcase. She says that the main thing is to get off this island. Once in Athens, she says, we can return to France by train. Is that right?”

“Probably. I’d have to look at a map, but it sounds okay.”

“How far is it from here to Athens?”

“In my plane? I guess about an hour.”

“I’d never survive. And even if I did, you wouldn’t. I’d drive you mad screaming the whole way. I have a terrible scream. Listen.”

Putting up her head and taking a deep breath Libby opened her mouth and let go a long, high even scream that was so piercing, so irritating, that I begged her to stop. It went on and on. I wanted to strangle her. No urgency, no emotion, no terror in that scream. It was a scream devised less to call for help than to drive people crazy.

“Please,” I begged, holding my ears.

At last she stopped. “You see what I mean? Do you think you could fly for an hour with that going on?”

“I wouldn’t even get off the ground.”

“I’ll tell Anna to unpack the bags.”

Some other time I’d have broken Koundiotes’ head for fixing me up on a cloudy afternoon with a nutty broad like Libby. Today she fit the bill. During the last few months, thinking Jeanne dead, I’d been like a dead man sexually. And now that I suspected – no, *knew* that my wife was alive – as far as Brian Tschetter was concerned there was only one woman walking on the same planet with him.

Libby was just pouring me a second cup of tea when through the glass wall I caught sight of a figure running toward the house. I pointed her out to Libby.

“Good gracious. It’s Anna. What a naughty child. Her father’s told her a thousand times that running’s bad for the heart.”

“I think something’s happened.”

“Why, is she crying? I’m sorry, I haven’t my glasses.”

Crying, shrieking, whatever you wanted to call it, as she got nearer it was clear the child was in a half-demented state. “C’mon,” I said to Libby.

As we ran outside Anna saw us and stopped, her hand pressed to her heart, gulping for air. “Mummy!” she wailed. “Mummy.”

“I’m coming, darling,” cried Libby. “I’m coming.”

Side by side we ran, half tripping on the rough, rocky ground. I held back to let Libby reach her daughter first. After nearly colliding, Libby grabbed Anna by the shoulders and shook her. “Now, Anna, get control of yourself. Tell me what’s happened.”

“It’s Heidi,” wailed the girl. “She’s fallen on the beach.”

“On the beach? What beach? Where?”

“By our house!” shrieked the child. “She’s dead.”

“Fallen dead on the beach. Anna, are you making this up? If you are, you know what your father...”

“No, no. She fell from the top of the ... of the ... *falaise*.”

“Cliff?” translated her mother.

“Yes, the cliff.”

The three of us had already started to run. “Have you told anyone else?” panted Libby.

“Everyone knows,” said Anna.

“Is someone with her?”

“They’re all there.”

We slowed to a fast walk. “Then it didn’t just happen.”

“Ten minutes ago,” swore the girl, crossing her heart. “I found her. She wasn’t dead yet. She talked to me.”

Libby and I exchanged a glance. Anna must have seen Heidi die. A rotten piece of luck for the kid. “Now, Anna,” said Libby after a moment, “I want you to organize yourself and tell me exactly what happened.”

Calmed by her mother’s presence and aware she now had our undivided attention, Anna began her story. She’d been playing inside the house with her dolls when she saw an arm waving to her on the beach. She went outside, walked a short way, and saw the arm belonged to a young woman who was lying on the sand. It was Heidi. She wasn’t wearing any clothes and at first Anna thought she was sunbathing, except there was no sun. Anna came nearer to hear what she wanted to say.

“What did she say?” I prompted, seeing Anna hesitating.

“Something about her husband.”

“Can you remember?”

“Heidi said, ‘It wasn’t my husband. Tell Ali...’ And then she stopped.”

“Tell Ali what?”

“She died,” replied Anna. The two streams of tears which had stopped while she told her story suddenly poured down her cheeks. Throwing her arms around Libby, she buried her face in her neck. “I want to leave this island,” she wept.

“Now, Anna, try and pull yourself together. You’ve had a bad scare but it’s over now.”

“If it happened to you you’d be worse than I am,” shouted the child angrily. “You’d be screaming like anything.” She stamped her foot at her mother. “I want to go away

from here. Now.”

“We’re going. Chet has said he’ll fly us to Athens.”

The tears stopped and Anna’s face brightened. She looked at me shyly. “In your airplane?”

“Yes.”

She turned distrustingly toward her mother. “You promise to come, too?”

“I wouldn’t leave my little *pou*.”

“I’m not so sure.” Anna sighed darkly. “Anyway, I’ve packed for both of us. My dolls are packed, too.”

“Aren’t you a little old to be playing with dolls?” I kidded her.

She gave me a black look, put her thumb in her mouth, and pressed close to her mother’s side.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized.

Reaching the cliff we started down the stairs to the beach. It was clear that Anna had been right: everyone seemed to know about Heidi’s fall. From a distance I could make out several figures, Koundiotes and his young mistress – they must have been pulled out of the sack for the occasion – Orestes and Orena, Ali and a plump figure swathed in dark woolen shawls, Mrs. Koundiotes. Everybody seemed to be talking at once except for Mueller, who was standing to one side. Curious to hear what he had to say, I walked over to him.

“She wasn’t my wife,” Mueller said as soon as he saw me. “We both realized it had been a mistake as soon as we saw each other. She became very disturbed and rushed out of the pavilion. I don’t know whether she accidentally fell off the cliff or threw herself.”

“If it wasn’t your wife, who was it?”

“Someone called Heidi Mahler, not Mueller.”

“Kind of funny Terry would send you all the way here for the wrong person.”

He shrugged. “A case of mistaken identity.”

“I wonder.”

“You can look at her papers. The name is almost the same. I don’t know who she was, but I think she lied about her identity to Mrs. Rolland. My wife has been missing for six months. It has been in the German newspapers. This girl must have known this and used her name.”

It sounded reasonable – except for one thing. Heidi had really thought she was going to see her husband that afternoon. Her real husband. The filmy negligee she’d put on for the occasion was still caught on some bushes on the edge of the cliff. Instead of her husband, she’d gotten Mueller. But why had she wanted Anna to tell Ali? What did he have to do with Heidi except that he’d brought her to the island?

I looked around for Ali. He was nearby talking with Mrs. K. Or rather, he was listening while she talked. She looked mad as hell about something and Ali was getting the full brunt of her displeasure. As she was speaking Greek, I couldn’t understand her. But

Orestes could help me.

“Orestes,” I said to the young man standing sadly near the sheet-covered figure.

“What’s your mother saying?”

He listened a moment, then replied, “She’s telling him it’s his fault what happened.”

“Why would she say that?”

Orestes shrugged. “Maybe because Ali brought her to the island.”

“But I brought Mueller and nobody thinks Heidi’s death was my fault.”

Sighing deeply, Orestes shook his head. “I don’t know. She isn’t always rational.”

“What do you think happened to Heidi?”

“I think she killed herself.”

“For what reason?”

“She was just a silly woman. Or maybe she’d been on Io Sirena too long. You can go batty here. Look at my mother.”

“What about her?”

“The loneliness went to her brain. She’s become a ham radio operator. How’d you like your mama to be a ham radio operator?”

“I don’t know. How did she get into that?”

“Ali brought in the equipment and set it up for her. They spend half their time in the radio shack.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s called the de-salination plant, but actually the fresh water distillery is now on this side of the island.”

I was about to ask him some more questions, but he was called away by his father for a family huddle.

I didn’t like any of this. I glanced at my watch. It was getting late but there was still time to get off the island and reach Athens that afternoon. It was up to Libby and Anna whether they wanted to come along, but I was going to take Mueller with me. I didn’t know what part he’d played in knocking Heidi off the board, but I needed him if I was going to stay in the game myself. At this point he was the only person who could lead me to Jeanne – and I wasn’t going to leave him behind.

Little as I liked Mueller, two others seemed to like him even less. Dark, angry looks were being sent his way by Mrs. K and Ali. I had the feeling if I didn’t get Mueller off the island in the next half hour, those looks would kill.

After about ten minutes of heated discussion, the Greek family Koundiotes seemed to come to a decision. Leaving the group, Mr. Koundiotes signaled Mueller and me to join him.

“I apologize deeply for what has happened,” he told US. “We are obliged to make certain rather fast decisions. First of all, we have decided not to mention this young woman’s death to the authorities. No one here seems to know who she is or the exact circumstances of her death. You can’t imagine what we will have in the way of publicity

if this ever reaches the journalists. So we have decided simply to bury her in a deep grave here on Io Sirena, although there is some disagreement as my wife thinks the body should be buried at sea. In any case, this is a small matter if handled correctly.

“Now, I understand Bravo Romeo has arrived from its revision. I shall return to Athens with my son and daughter in that. You need not hurry. My wife suggests that you and Mr. Mueller pass the night here and leave tomorrow. My wife has certain things to attend to in the house before she can get away. But tomorrow she will join me in Athens. Ali will fly her there in Juliette Tango.”

“That sounds fine with me,” I said. Mueller also nodded.

“Good. Then it’s settled. I need not tell you, gentlemen, that I rely on you to say nothing at all about what happened here today.” He looked from one of us to the other. If he had any worries about our keeping our mouths shut, they were unnecessary to say the least.

During, the last few minutes an idea had been forming in my mind. I’d been looking at the beach. It was about twice as long as the landing strip and oriented even more into the wind. When Koundiotes left us I walked a little ways up it. The sand near the edge of the surf was relatively hard and as far as I could see, except for a few pieces of driftwood which I tossed farther up on the sand, there’d be no problem landing.

I walked back. “Mueller,” I said, “could you be down here with your bags ready to go in fifteen minutes without anyone seeing you?”

“They will see me.”

“Make sure they don’t.”

“I can be here,” he said.

I went over to Libby. She was talking with her daughter, annoyed that Anna was still making a fuss about what had happened. Such displays of emotion were apparently reserved for herself.

“Libby, Anna, I’ll be taking off in fifteen minutes. Are you coming with me or not?”

“Yes,” said Anna. She looked blackly at her mother. “Yes, we’re going. Do you want to end like Heidi?”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait until tomorrow morning?” asked Libby. “God might take me quietly in the night.”

“The Koundioteses think we’re staying over. Don’t let anyone know any different. I’m just afraid I won’t have a viable airplane by tomorrow morning if we stay here. Or a live German.”

Libby was visibly distressed. “All right, then. But you’ll have to wait while I get the cognac bottle. I’ll need *something*.”

I explained what I wanted them to do. By now the others were leaving the beach, climbing back up toward the house. Ali was carrying Heidi’s body, which was wrapped in the sheet. I told Anna and Libby to be ready at the far end of the beach. Mueller would be there, too. I told them I wouldn’t turn off the engine so that they should ap-

proach the plane very carefully from the side or rear, careful not to walk into the prop which would be turning, even if they couldn't see it.

"If it weren't for this child..." Libby paused. "Well, it's decided. We'll be waiting at the far end in fifteen minutes, and we won't walk into the propeller."

"Great. See you then, I hope."

As the two women went toward their house, I headed back up the cliff. There was no time to lose. Koundiotes and his kids had gone up in a hurry to pack and I guessed they'd be taking to the air very shortly. I wanted to be down at the Helio at the same time without letting Ali or Mrs. K see me.

Back at the house I threw my things into my bag, concealed it in my nylon wind-breaker, and started toward the door. Voices in the hall stopped me. As they grew fainter I peered out. It was Ali and Mrs. Koundiotes.

I was almost positive, seeing Mrs. K in these clothes, that she'd been the one shooting at me earlier that afternoon. In which case the voices I'd heard coming from the desalination plant, or radio shack, had been those of Heidi and Ali. Their argument could have concerned her meeting with the German. At that time, apparently, neither knew Mueller wasn't her husband. Now Ali was getting hell from Mrs. K about Heidi's death, but I didn't know why. Either the young woman had killed herself or Mueller had thrown her over the cliff. Either way, Mrs. K felt it had been Ali's fault. Obviously they and Heidi had been involved in something together.

If this was the case, then I was allied with Mueller on the other side of the fence. Most likely they considered me just a hired pilot. Well, I hadn't exactly been given a chance to choose sides, and now it was too late to try and change things. Ali and Mrs. K would never trust me enough to tell me where to find Jeanne, even if they knew. I had no choice but to stick with Mueller – and hope I found my wife and Louise before he did.

The coast clear, I started to make my way out through the series of glass rooms and gardens that made up this incredible house. Under other circumstances it would have been a great place to spend some time. With certain obvious exceptions, the company was good, the food first-rate, and the view fantastic. One little thing did bother me. The rather cavalier way they disposed of guests who'd overstayed their lifespans. And since around here you didn't know from hour to hour when or where the grim reaper would strike, you started getting kind of nostalgic feelings for mainland institutions like policemen and doctors.

"Oh, Mr. Tschetter, are you leaving, too?"

I froze in my tracks, bent my mouth into a smile, and turned to see Orena standing behind me. She had what looked like a pile of freshly ironed blouses in her hands.

"No, no," I said. "I'm not flying until tomorrow. Just wanted to check out the plane."

"Will you be going to Athens? Anna said you might fly her and her mother there."

“Could be, could be. Nothing really definite as yet.”

“Well, I’ll say goodbye down on the strip. Daddy says we’re taking off in five minutes, so I really have to rush. Anna has our Athens address, so please look us up.”

She hurried off. When I got down to the strip, Koundiotes, his girlfriend, and Orestes were already there ready to go. A man I hadn’t seen before, their other pilot, was pre-flighting one of the Jet Rangers.

“Have you seen Orena?” Koundiotes asked me. “I want to get going.”

“She’ll be here in a minute.”

“She’d better be.” Koundiotes watched me open the Helio’s luggage door and put in my bag. “What’s that?” he asked, seeing the motorcycle.

“A Honda.”

“Very practical. I wish we could have something like that in the Bell. But then what do you do with the luggage and passengers when you land at the airport?”

“You ride the Honda and the passengers walk to town carrying their bags.”

Koundiotes laughed. “The way business is going, we may all be walking and carrying our own bags soon.”

My job in the short time remaining was to open the light, compact rear jump seats I’d had installed for passengers when the Honda was on board, and readjust the position of the bike. Libby had been briefed to bring along the least amount of stuff possible owing to the space and weight problems. Even so, it would be cramped for them, and the front tire of the bike would practically be acting as an armrest between their two seats. The problem wasn’t so much one of moving the Honda as securing it again, and now a shout from Orestes, who had caught sight of his sister arriving and had run to help her with her bags, forced me to abandon the effort.

“Hang onto your plane,” Orestes yelled as they ran past. The rotors were already turning and the two ran bent low to avoid the deadly blades. I needed no urging to get into my aircraft. It was what I’d been waiting for. Now was the time to get my own engine turning without the noise tipping off my friend Ali. The noise of the chopper would mask the Helio’s.

## Chapter 5

All clear? With its usual great roar, the engine sprang to life. It seemed to me that anyone within a half mile ought to hear that crack of thunder and I quickly reduced to 1000 rpm for the warmup. If Ali had heard he’d be down here in no time. Or if he decided to send his regards by rifle bullet, I’d be getting the message even faster.

Ordinarily an aircraft ought to turn at least two minutes before takeoff to give the oil a chance to warm up. I figured I’d let her warm as long as the Jet Ranger was there making its noise – in any case, the chopper blocked any forward progress – and take off

right after they did. The terrific wind from the rotor caused the Helio to strain at its brakes. I wished it would get the hell on its way, but at least my oil was warming and I could do the vital actions.

Prop, magnetos, carb heat, everything was looking good. All the control surfaces moved – if any cables had been tampered with I could only hope they'd hold together for another hour or so. If any tires were destined to blow, I prayed it not be today. It wasn't exactly the way I liked to start a flight, not to mention one most of which would take place above water, but I already considered myself lucky to have two wings, a tail, and a turning prop at this stage of the game.

At last the chopper, rose. Seeing it go up, then pause, tilt forward and start away, I felt a strange feeling grab me. I remembered what it had been like flying choppers those years in Vietnam. I was so fascinated watching it, so snowed with sentimentality, that for a moment I forgot what I was supposed to be doing. Then I remembered. Christ, I had to get out of there, and quick. I prayed I'd find my passengers on the beach.

With the same burst of throttle that swung the Helio around on its crosswind gear at the bottom of the runway, I was already on my way. In only a few feet the lightly loaded aircraft took to the air.

There was no reason to climb and every reason not to. For one thing, climbing would bring me right up in front of the house. For another, the beach on which I intended to land was just a few hundred yards ahead. In fact, it was so close that I nearly overshot it and at the last second had to sideslip in. During the whole operation I don't think I passed the airspeed of thirty miles per hour.

The wet sand by the water's edge was firm. I didn't even touch the brakes just swung the plane 180 degrees around using rudder and with a fresh burst of throttle headed back to where my three passengers waited looking a little like castaways on the beach. Less welcome a sight was that of two persons standing up above on the house terrace. Even before I'd brought the plane to a stop they'd disappeared. I knew they were going to try and stop us. I didn't know how.

In that split second when Ali and Mrs. K vanished from sight I decided I wasn't going to take along Libby and Anna. Too dangerous. As they weren't mixed up in anything, they had nothing to fear by staying on at Io Sirena a little longer. Eventually they'd arrange to get back to France through some means or other.

My warning about the prop had had its effect. As I swung the Helio around and set the brakes, the three remained at a respectful distance. When I climbed out I saw Anna start to dash forward, but Libby caught her. Together they advanced, Anna tugging in one direction, her mother trying to restrain her in the other.

Before they reached the plane, I'd opened the luggage door for Mueller. "You're not going," I shouted to the two women.

"We are, too," screamed Anna. Breaking away from her mother she ran toward the plane. I was afraid if I tried to block her she'd attempt to evade me and run into the

idling prop. A thousand rpm might not get an aircraft like that airborne, but it was more than enough to chop a little girl into mincemeat.

In a flash Anna had climbed into the Helio and jumped over the seat into the back. “Anna!” I shouted. “This is going to be a dangerous flight. You and your mother could get killed.”

“I’m not afraid of airplanes,” she screamed back.

“It’s not that. Some people are trying to kill me. They may shoot down the plane.”

“Nonsense. Don’t talk such nonsense.”

“You saw what happened to Heidi.”

“That’s why I want to leave this island,” she screamed. As I tried to reach in and pull her out, she climbed over the back of the jump seat and crouched down on the far side of the Honda.

“Pull her out by the foot,” Libby was yelling. “Let me in there. I’ll get her.”

As Libby climbed past me into the aircraft I motioned for Mueller to go around to the other side and get into the front passenger seat. As he opened the door something flashed under his arm and whammed into the instrument panel.

“They’re shooting,” he said, jumping in and slamming the door.

I couldn’t wait any longer. For better or worse the two gals were coming along. Grabbing the bags still on the sand, I flung them into the luggage compartment and slammed the door. Then I jumped into my seat, released the handbrake and pushed in the throttle. In back of me the two women were a tangle of arms and legs.

“Take seats,” I yelled over my shoulder. “Fasten your seat belts.”

We were airborne before the words were out of my mouth.

There are days you wish you were at the controls of a jet instead of a piston engine aircraft. This was one of them. I wanted to put as much distance as quickly as possible between me and the source of the bullet that had entered the cockpit like a mad bee to bury itself in my fan marker indicator. I could live without fan markers, but I was wondering whether and where other bullets might have hit the aircraft.

Turning off the auxiliary fuel pump I watched the fuel pressure needle. It trembled, as was its wont, but stayed in the green. Oil pressure okay. At least for the moment we were in flying shape.

I turned to look back at my passengers. However strong her anger with Anna had been, Libby wasn’t worrying about that now. Bolt upright in her seat, her hands gripping the upholstery, she sat with eyes tightly shut. Her complexion was a pale green. I’d never seen anything like it.

Anna was still half in and half out of the luggage compartment, one long leg straddling the back of her seat. As I’d turned left immediately after takeoff and then right, she hadn’t been able to release herself from the force of gravity long enough to get into her seat. So that she wouldn’t suddenly have the opposite problem and go crashing up into the fuselage ceiling, I straightened the wings very carefully.

“Climb into your seat and fasten your belt. Put on your lifejackets.” I was glad to see that this time Anna did what she was told. “And check your mother’s seat belt, too.”

“It’s not fastened,” said Anna, closing it. “I think she’s going to be ill.”

Luckily I had some sick bags aboard. They’d been there a long time, and I hoped they didn’t leak. I passed a few back to Anna, who put them in her mother’s lap. “Sick bags,” she shouted in her ear.

A terrible, thin cry made the hair at the back of my neck stand on end. Turning, I saw that while Libby’s expression and bearing hadn’t changed, her mouth had parted slightly to emit that awful, most irritating of all screams I’d ever heard.

“Can’t you shut her up?” I asked Anna when the scream persisted.

“*You* try,” said the girl in disgust.

The scream had gotten to Mueller, too. Since getting into the plane he’d checked himself over carefully for bullet holes, but had found only a rip in the sleeve of his jacket where the bullet had passed on its way to my marker indicator. After this experience, his nerves weren’t all that good either. Leaning back over his seat he took hold of one of Libby’s arms and shook it in a useless effort to get her attention. “Get control, dear lady!” he shouted. “Get control.”

His words had no effect. The scream continued, and for once I was glad the Helio was a noisy aircraft, though it didn’t have the range of sound needed to mask the pitch of Libby’s scream. At least I was wearing earphones; the others weren’t. It seemed ironic that out of a whole nation of men and women renowned for their grit, their stiff upper lips, their dogged acceptance of danger and physical discomfort, I had to have along the one glaring exception.

My sole object after takeoff was to get as far away from the island as fast as possible. Since an aircraft goes faster when it’s not climbing, for the first few minutes I had everything – throttle, prop, and mixture – pushed to the wall, flat out while we practically skimmed the waves. As soon as I felt we were out of artillery range, I began to climb.

There wasn’t that far to climb. At 2000 feet there was, solid cloud cover. In most European countries, such as Greece, flying inside cloud when not on an instrument flight plan is forbidden. In emergencies sometimes the pilot has no choice. But now that we were away from Io Sirena our situation was less critical. I figured I’d try raising Athenai Control and see if it was feasible filing an instrument flight plan.

Because even if a pilot elects to go up into cloud there are a few things he’d like to know first—like what kind of clouds they are and who else is flying inside them and where. Between Araxos and Kos the minimum en route altitude over the mountains was above 10,000 feet. I didn’t have an idea of the thickness of the cloud layer above me, but it looked very wet and thick. Without weather information I had no assurance that thunderstorms weren’t imbedded in it, especially in the mountain regions. Weighing alternatives, and with Io Sirena disappearing behind us, it seemed a lot safer to stay out of the cloud for the time being.

We were pretty low but it was possible I might raise Athenai Control from here. If not, I'd try Preveza Airfield on 119.7. I pressed the transmitter button. "Athenai Control this is Helio Courier November four three eight niner. Good afternoon."

To my joy the reply was loud, clear, and immediate. "November four three eight niner, Athenai Control. Change to Athenai Information on 129.45."

I jotted down the new frequency and turned the dials on the VHF. I transmitted my callsign and this time a woman controller replied and asked me for my message.

"Three eight niner, off Io Sirena on a flight to Athens via Araxos, maintaining 2000 feet following the coast."

"Roger, three eight niner. Have you consulted the NOTAMs for the Araxos area?"

Shit, I thought to myself. What now? "Negative," I replied, shrinking in my seat like a whipped dog. "Three eight niner, hold ten nautical miles west of Araxos at 1500 feet until further clearance."

Shit shit shit. What a damn nuisance. A good thing the lady couldn't hear or see me. Managing to control myself, I pressed the transmitter button and asked with a calm voice, "Roger, Athens. Could you tell me at what time to expect further clearance?"

"It won't be long. Report reaching the holding point."

"Roger."

Bloody hell. I practically tore the chart out of Mueller's hand – he was acting as my map rack for lack of space. It wouldn't mean much of a detour, but it was a miserable waste of time given the circumstances, given particularly Libby. Besides that, I didn't like the idea of making circles over the bloody sea ten miles out from terra firma.

I was sorry now I'd raised Athens. Lady controllers are always bad luck for me. Still, they had nice voices. This one had spoken good English with a husky Greek accent. Something else remained in my mind from our brief conversation. A strange sort of background noise each time she transmitted. A sort of tic tic tic. Well, let's hope it was her equipment that was faulty, not mine. All I needed now was to develop radio trouble. In fact, maybe it was a Greek tic, because I'd also heard it when Athenai Control was talking on frequency 128.20.

The airways chart showed no intersection ten miles west of Araxos, so I drew one in. To reach it necessitated a change of course. My passengers weren't aware of the instructions given me by Athens, because I was receiving through the headset, not the loud-speaker. I started to tell them, but one look toward the rear made me change my mind. Libby, still green, was sitting with her eyes resolutely shut, the sick bag in her hand ready for emergency use. Anna was sound asleep, slumped down in her seat. I couldn't tell whether she'd unfastened her seat belt, but I hoped not. That left the German.

"Slight change in the route," I told him.

"What is happening?"

"Athens wants us to hold west of Araxos."

"Hold? You mean make circles?"

“That’s right.”

“What for? Why?”

“Something in the NOTAMS, the Notice to Airmen. There must be some military maneuvers or practice firing. Or maybe the King of Schlitz is visiting Araxos and they’ve got the sky cordoned off.”

“How long must we hold?”

“A good question. Probably not long. Hang on. I’ll ask again.”

My instruments showed we’d arrived at the intersection and the altimeter read 1500 feet. Reducing power I began a slow 360 degree turn. “Athenai Information this is three eight niner.

“Go ahead, three eight niner.” The tic tic ticking sound was still there. Wiggling the squelch button while she talked didn’t help.

“Three eight niner holding ten miles west of Araxos. Any more information on when to expect further clearance?”

“Very soon now, three eight niner. I’ll let you know.”

“Roger.”

When the transmission ended, I noticed a strange thing. The ticking noise was still in my ears. What the hell was wrong with this stupid radio? No. Wait. And then the truth dawned. That tic *was* a fault in the radio equipment, but not control tower or airplane radio equipment. That ticking was interference caused by a faulty connection in a rotorcraft radio. I hadn’t been talking with Athens. I’d been talking with someone in a helicopter! And that chopper was now awfully near, awfully near. While I like a dumb nut was changing course and flying in circles, Ali and Mrs. K were catching up in the Bell.

Had caught up. As I cut short my turn, literally wrenching the Helio’s nose around toward the east, like a great, black fluttering bird of doom the helicopter was above us. More maneuverable than this slow-flying boat of mine, there was no wriggling away. Worse, there was no possibility now of climbing into those clouds which suddenly seemed so very, very safe. Even with full power the terrific wind from above caused by the rotating airfoils forced me downwards towards the water. Christ. I had to get to the coast.

I glanced at Mueller. His sample case was open on his lap. With calm precision he was fitting together the various pieces of a rifle. I can’t say I wasn’t glad at that moment to see my suspicions about him confirmed. Killers, when they’re on your side, are a whole different ballgame. The only thing worrying me was that the window on Mueller’s side of the airplane wasn’t the kind that opened. He wouldn’t be able to use the rifle while in the Helio, but if ever we made it to terra firma it might come in very handy.

Screams from the rear told me things weren’t going too well back there. I turned to see Anna in her mother’s lap, the two of them clinging together in the buffeted plane as

if the world was coming to an end. And maybe it was, for this aircraft and its passengers. It was too late now regretting having brought them along. But I regretted it.

And then I forgot my passengers. Fly the plane. The first rule. Whatever else is going on, the first rule is fly the plane. And fly it I did. Every foot, every yard nearer to the coast I could bring the Helio was closer to what was at best a doubtful security.

The next rule, send out a MAYDAY message. Frequency 121.5. There was every chance in the world I'd be heard. Turning to the distress frequency, I was about to transmit when a hand gripped my wrist.

*"Um Gottes willen,"* said the German. "Look."

I looked upwards and forward in the direction he was pointing. It was the first time I'd actually caught sight of the Jet Ranger which had momentarily gotten itself off our back, so to speak, and had risen a few hundred feet ahead of us. But that wasn't what Mueller was pointing at. He'd seen something, a body, detach itself from the side of the helicopter, pushed through a window. As I looked up the body began to fall, spinning through the air, growing larger and larger as it rushed toward us.

My God, it's going to hit the prop. I jammed my right foot forward on the rudder pedal, nearly broke the control column off at the roots yanking the wheel to the right. With only inches to spare, the body of a young woman flashed past. I could see her dead, staring eyes, the pale, bruised flesh. Oh, Heidi, I thought, that sea is such a cold, cold tomb for you.

As I righted the plane, I was shaking like a leaf. Do pilots ever get scared out of their wits? Indeed, they do. The strange, the deadly, and the unexpected can terrorize the calmest pilots. Things can happen in flight for which no emergency procedures have ever been written out or practiced. Or imagined.

A moment later a shock hitting the side of the aircraft in the vicinity of the tail had both Mueller and the female passengers jumping around. Something was going on outside. Were they shooting at the plane?

"Can you see anything out your side?" I shouted to Mueller.

"They have lowered something on a cable. A kind of large hook."

I remembered Ali working under the chopper. That bastard. A hook? Were they going to ... ? But there was no time to speculate. Once again the hook hit the plane. And this time they had it. I could feel the tail of the plane start to rise. We were caught. Caught like a fucking fish. Could we get away? I had on full power but wasn't going anywhere. Held back by the hook, the airspeed was dropping off in spite of the spinning prop. The controls were turning to mush in my hands. The rudder pedals kicked at my feet as the rudder flapped uselessly from side to side. And the land was so near, so near, yet so damned far.

As the tail rose higher there was a commotion in the back. The Honda had broken loose and was sliding forward onto Libby and Anna. The girl was screaming terribly as the full weight of the machine bore down on her. There was nothing I could do. The

plane was completely on its nose. I had closed the throttle. Things were happening too fast, I hadn't even gotten off a MAYDAY, though I didn't know what good it would do now.

And then it happened. The Helio flipped onto its back. With a sickening crunch the Honda and all the rest of the luggage was on top of us. Anna, torn from her mother's arms, was lying above me on the roof of the plane, screaming into my ear. Then there was a terrific whap against the plane. I didn't know it then but they had released the cable holding the hook.

My one thought was to get the aircraft rightside up again. What I needed now was some airspeed, but I dreaded hearing the sound – if any – the engine would make when I pushed in the throttle.

Fly the fucker, fly the fucker. With the engine coughing and choking and more airspeed coming from our inverted fall than from any source of power, I put the stick hard to the left and gave enough rudder to roll it out. Instantly everything that had been on the roof crashed down on us.

Complete chaos. Blood was everywhere. I didn't have time to check whose it was. Something awful had happened to my sight. I couldn't see through the windscreen. I rubbed my eyes frantically before realizing what it was. The windscreen was covered with oil. Oh, God. At the same time the engine, which had been deprived of fuel when the plane went over, was still coughing. I switched on the electric pump and primed the throttle, but still the coughing continued.

“Mueller,” I yelled, “put away that rifle and get this fucking bike off my head!” As the pressure lifted from my skull the screams from Anna intensified. They'd have to work it out for themselves.

My eyes were on the gauges as I hit the transmitter button. “MAYDAY, MAYDAY...” I couldn't hear my voice. My hand shot to my ear. The headset was gone. I felt around. Shit, where was it?

Who cared? Fly the plane, fly the plane. But the oil, the life blood of an engine, was all over the fucking place. For some reason it had come out when the plane was on its back. Why didn't matter. How much was left? Enough to get us to shore?

I looked at the gauges. The oil temperature needle was rising. It was already way past its usual position, moving up through 100 degrees toward the red zone. As the temperature rose, the pressure was beginning to drop. At any moment the engine would seize up, stop, and the airplane would come down. We'd have to ditch in the sea.

The land was only another mile or two ahead of us. If the shore was forest, road, or beach, landing there would be safer than ditching. I prayed it wouldn't be rocky cliffs. Turning my head, I began to shout ditching instructions at my passengers. Anna, her head covered in blood, seemed unconscious in her seat. “Buckle her in,” I shouted to Libby who now seemed shocked out of her earlier state of shock and quickly did as she was told. “Take off your shoes, protect your heads with your arms.” I knew it would be

beyond her to locate the inflatable dinghy and extract it from the mess in the luggage compartment.

Anyway, it was stupid, useless. What did I know about ditching a plane with a fixed landing gear? Books carefully avoid the subject, and it's not a thing you ever practice. A pilot can spend his life speculating on what to do and what will happen in such a situation, but it's mostly hangar talk and hot air. Whatever happened, I was pretty sure I'd get out all right, and Mueller, because we were sitting next to doors. But what about the two trapped in the back seat if the plane went right under, or flipped onto its back?

The engine was running smoother but the oil temperature needle was at 110 degrees and moving into the red, the oil pressure needle descending into the same color. Once again I tried to find my headset. It had to be in the plane somewhere. In fact, I'd just seen it. Where? I turned again. Yes, there it was, behind Anna, hooked onto the handlebar of the Honda, the same handlebar which I later learned had partially torn off the girl's ear.

"Mueller," I shouted, "can you reach back and get me that headset?"

Mueller lurched but remained seated. He looked at me in surprise.

"You'll have to unbuckle your seat belt," I yelled. He'd forgotten he had it on.

Mueller nodded, undid the belt, then made a lunge into the back for the headset, grabbed it and passed it to me. It was covered with blood, the headband was bent double, and the transmitter plug torn off. The second headset was probably floating around somewhere in the extreme rear of the luggage compartment. Shit.

Rule one in a desperate emergency situation: Fly the fucking plane. Rule two: Get off a fucking MAYDAY message. So much for rule two. Rule three: Climb if possible. Well, it would have been so nice to climb, but I was ready to settle for just maintaining the 400 feet above the water we already had. I didn't have enough oil left to grease the revs I was already getting.

When ditching at sea, says one famous book on aviation, try to land upwind and downswell. Fine. Like hitting a moving target with a pea shooter on the first try. More to the point, you have a choice of ditching downswell at a higher speed because of the wind pushing you, or of touching down slower, with the wind in your face, smack against an arriving wave.

The prevailing hangar wisdom offers a compromise. Ditch at right angles to the swells, at stalling speed, and plunk 'er in feet first. Fine again, except with almost no depth perception above the flat water, pilots of planes that stall might stall a little early and go in nose first.

The last piece of free advice is to try and perform emergency landings and ditchings while your engine is still functioning, as before running completely out of gas or oil. Fair enough. But in real life things are never so simple. For instance, what's the procedure when you're over water at 400 – oops, 300 – feet with a half mile to go to land, with a mangled headset, an unconscious girlie, and an engine that's about to seize up?

Do you fly down with your still-functioning engine and try to zero in neatly on the backside of a swell? Or do you sit staring from the oil gauges to the land, bite your fingernails off, and not pray but *beg* God to have mercy on one more failing sparrow.

“It’s okay’?” asked the German, smiling hopefully.

With the engine sounding smoother he dared to hope. Yet it probably didn’t tally with the rest of his impressions – the ashen pilot chewing the ends of his fingers down to the nubs. So much for reassuring the passengers. I couldn’t have yawned to save my life.

By this time I’d stopped studying the water and had turned my attention to the shore, or as much as I could see of it through the veil of gray oil and the side windows. If we made it that far there was, I could see now, a beach, one of those extremely finite Greek beaches nestled in a cove between sea and volcanic rock. Enough room to put down a Helio? Sure. Beggars aren’t choosers.

The engine was still functioning as we reached the shoreline and there, I’m ashamed to say, came the moment separating the sheep from the real bastards, putting me in the latter category. *Try and make your emergency landing with the engine still functioning.* This good advice was echoing in my brain as I shut down the engine, turned off the switches, and started to glide. With both gauges in the red, my only thought was to save my engine from oil starvation. Fuck the passengers, I said to myself. Long live the Helio.

Then I landed the plane on the beach.

The silence was deafening. I turned in my seat. Three pairs of eyes looked at me. I didn’t even want to know the emotions behind those looks. Hate for getting them into this trouble? Love for saving them? I didn’t want to hear.

“Let’s get Anna to a doctor,” I said gruffly.

Like old people we climbed painfully out of the Helio. Anna half fell into my arms. Besides the damage to her ear, which she didn’t know about, her left arm seemed to be broken.

While the chart I’d been using didn’t show things as insignificant as this beach, it did indicate a road a short distance inland. With nobody about, we decided to head for the road and flag down a passing car. A footpath leading away from the beach showed us the way.

“I must say,” said Libby suddenly in her loud, clear voice, “we do look a sight. But at least were in one piece.”

“I’m not,” objected the limp bundle in my arms.

“No, my *pou*, you’re not. But you will be. We’ll have you stitched up in no time. And you know how you love wearing plaster casts. Just be glad your father wasn’t along or we’d be carrying him, too.”

I was glad to hear Libby in such good spirits but was so ashamed for having suggested she fly to Athens in the Helio that I couldn’t look at her. She must have guessed

what was going on in my mind, because she said, “Chet, I really must thank you. Thanks to you I’ve gotten over my fear of flying.”

“You have?” I could hardly believe my ears. “You mean you’d go up in an airplane again after today?”

“Absolutely never. Never never. If ever I had a doubt, it’s gone now. If ever again someone says, ‘Libby, girl, let’s take an airplane,’ I’ll say, ‘An airplane? What’s that?’”

I grinned at her. It’s not a bad thing if you can escape your greatest fear in life by simply avoiding it. If you’re afraid of flying, don’t fly. If you’re afraid of sex, don’t screw.

“What are *you* afraid of, Chet? There must be something.”

“There is,” I admitted.

“What’s that?”

“I’m afraid of the paperwork and the investigation the Greek government will lay on me when they learn how Anna was injured in my plane.”

“But then why should they ever find out? We could say she fell and hurt herself playing. Children are always doing that. She could have fallen out of a tree. But what about your plane? It’s back there on the beach. Someone’s bound to see it.”

“As long as it isn’t a Greek official, I’m okay. Mueller and I could be out of here early tomorrow morning.”

“I thought the horrid thing couldn’t fly.”

“I want to see why we lost the oil. Someone may have tampered with the oil cap and when the plane went over most of it came out. If that’s the case I can put some more oil in and fly out of here.”

“You mean you still want to fly after what just happened?”

“Not right this minute. But I think maybe by tomorrow...”

“You’re quite mad. Completely around the twist. But all right. Anna, if anyone asks, you say you fell out of a tree.

“I’m not going to tell that to Brigitte.”

“Just say it for the present, please, if anyone asks. When you see your friend Brigitte back in France you can tell her anything you like. She won’t believe it anyway. Who could possibly believe you broke your arm in an airplane that turned upside down in a storm?”

I glanced at Libby. Yes, it was possible she didn’t know why the Helio had turned over. Sitting in the back she wouldn’t have seen the chopper even if she’d dared open her eyes. She really could think we were caught in a storm. I was just as glad she didn’t know the truth. It was better for all concerned.

Even at some distance from the road we could see that transportation wouldn’t be a problem. Cars were traveling along it in both directions.

“What I want to know,” Libby said, “is which way is Athens?”

“You won’t be in Athens tonight,” I told her. “We’re on Peloponnesus. Athens is on

the mainland, quite a ways from here.”

“Chet, don’t tell me we’re on another effing island,” said Libby aghast.

“Technically, ever since they dug the Corinthian Canal, this is an island. But there’s a trestle over the canal for trains. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if this track we’re coming to would take you right to Athens.”

“Then why don’t we hitch a ride in a train instead of a car?”

“The nearest hospital would be here, in Patras.” In the fading light I showed Libby the ONC where a yellow blot indicated the city. “It’s about twenty-five miles from here. Anna could be in a hospital inside an hour.”

“We’re going to Patras,” came a little voice from the child in my arms.

“Of course, my *pou*. Now just let’s find us a nice car to stop that isn’t filled with dope addicts or rapists.”

The first motorist to see us screeched to a stop. A large Mercedes full of German tourists, there was just room for the two women. Mueller told them in German that we’d found the two in this condition on the beach. Even so, they looked at us rather strangely. It was only later that I realized we looked little better than Libby and Anna, smeared with blood and oil and me staggering from fatigue.

Whatever they thought, no sooner had our female friends climbed in than the driver fired up his diesel and pulled away in the direction of Patras. We stood a moment watching the car disappear up the road. I’d never taken Libby’s address, didn’t even know her last name.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” This said, we turned and made our way painfully down the embankment in the direction of the sea. I felt about ninety years old by then and would have liked nothing better than to crawl into a cave and sleep for twenty-four hours.

But we had work to do. First of all, we had to hide our weapons. Any police patrol happening upon the Helio would search it for contraband first thing. If they found the guns we’d be a long time explaining.

“What I don’t understand,” I remarked to Mueller, “is why Ali didn’t stick around and finish us off. If he hadn’t released the hook cable they’d have been towing us along backwards and upside down. They could have dumped us right in the water.”

“Perhaps they saw those helicopters.”

“Which helicopters?”

“There were three not too far away. Perhaps our friends thought they would see what was happening.”

So some other aircraft had been in the vicinity. I’d been too busy to notice. Now, safe on the ground, I was glad I hadn’t gotten off a distress message. We’d have had the entire Greek military down our necks. It wouldn’t have been easy convincing anyone we’d suffered all that damage in a storm. Mentioning the parts played by Mrs. Koundiotes and Ali would have blown the whole thing sky high, compromising

Koundiotes and his kids, not to mention the possible repercussions on my search for Jeanne.

One thing was clear: For better or worse Jeanne was on the side of Ali and Mrs. K in this affair. The young woman whose lifeless body was floating right that minute somewhere in the Ionian Sea had most likely been killed by my companion, not by them. But if those two were the *good* guys in this business, and in my book Jeanne *had* to be on the side of the angels, God help us heavies!

Reaching the plane we had another surprise in a day already pretty crowded with surprises. More German tourists. It seems we'd landed near a trailer park. Fortunately it was off-season, for the whole camp had turned out to see the Helio, all twenty inhabitants. I let Mueller handle them in their native language.

"What happened?" cried the fattest of the group.

"Bad weather," sighed Mueller, shaking his head.

"And that?" The fat one was pointing at the terrible gashes on the fuselage near the tail where the hook had grabbed hold.

"Lightning," improvised Mueller adroitly.

"My God, lightning," breathed the man. He looked to me for confirmation.

I shrugged, meaning either that I didn't understand German or that there weren't *trente-six* things up there that could do that kind of damage to an aircraft.

"*Blitz*," repeated the German. "*Und es ging von unten hoch.*"

That did it. I couldn't help bursting out laughing. To explain the marks on the plane the German had decided that the lightning must have come up from beneath.

Once having started laughing my tired brain wouldn't let it go. I sat on the ground by one of the front wheels and yoked until my face was streaming. The Germans, after whispering to Mueller that we should come to their camp for dinner, drifted off, throwing glances back over their shoulders. The last comment that drifted back to me, that both my front wheels were broken – apparently they'd never seen crosswind landing gears before – convulsed me again.

Finally only Mueller and I were left. When I finished laughing he was standing a short distance off looking at me. Our eyes met.

"*Also, Sie sprechen Deutsch*," he said.

"*Ja*," I admitted.

"Interesting," he commented.

At least now we were alone and could get things done. I gave Mueller the job of hiding our guns and ammo in some place safe from inquisitive authorities. The fact I had a gun didn't surprise him, given the work I'd been hired for. And I avoided the awkward subject of Mueller's own arsenal.

My curiosity was now about to be satisfied regarding the great oil disaster. I opened the cowl and looked inside. Cowl and engine were covered with oil. As I suspected, the oil cap had come open, no doubt the work of Ali. Luckily the dipstick at-

tached to the cap had kept it from getting lost. In the back of the plane I found some battered two-liter cans of oil. I poured these in, screwed on the cap, and three eight niner was back in the flying business.

When Mueller returned gunless from his mission I sent him off again to borrow a pail and sponge and, if possible, a couple of flashlights from his compatriots. It would be his job cleaning up the blood. I'd get at the oil with some rags and a little gasoline which I drained from the fuel tanks. Rags were not difficult to find; what might be in short supply after today was Mueller's shirts.

My assistant returned with what was needed, including a small butane lantern which I hooked on the upper tip of the prop. After emptying the aircraft of Honda and everything else, we went at it. Soon the water in Mueller's bucket was pale red. It was a depressing sight, but I consoled myself, thinking that by now Anna was patched up and probably sleeping peacefully in a hospital bed. I hoped Libby had found some cognac, ice, and company.

Having cleaned the engine, the cowling, and the windscreen as best I could, I went back to look at the damage to the fuselage and tail. An earlier cursory examination had indicated the damage wouldn't interfere with flying. A closer inspection seemed to bear this out. There was some bent metal, but when I gave it a severe shaking nothing seemed about to fall apart or come off. All the controls worked smoothly.

The Honda was difficult to start, but after that seemed to run okay. As for the rest of our gear there was nothing much that wasn't broken, bloody, or torn. Mueller's suitcase had sprung open, but most of his clothes only needed dry cleaning. My own belongings had fared little better, and I found the photograph of Jeanne, its frame smashed, the picture badly soiled. Carefully I put it into my jacket pocket. I was sure she was alive. Sure of it.

Later that evening, eating by the campfire with our German hosts, I reached out and dropped the damaged photograph, unnoticed, into the clean flames.

## Chapter 6

That night I slept in the Helio, curled up not too comfortably on the front seats. Mueller slept in the car of one of the Germans. I bet either one of us could have slept easily that night lying naked in the sure

Awakening the next morning I lay for a long time with my eyes closed trying to guess where I was. In France? No, I seemed to remember leaving France at some point. Italy? No, it was too quiet. Greece? Yes, I was on Io Sirena. When I opened my eyes the drapes across the wall would be full of sunlight. I'd press the button by my bed and in the next room hot water would swirl into the tub. Maybe I'd find Orena lying in bed next to me.

I opened my eyes. Shit. Surrounded by Helio Courier. I ached in every muscle and bruise. Sitting up I looked out. The sea was calm, the wind had died during the night. It was the dawn of what would probably be a beautiful day.

About time. The sea was a luminous, shimmering gray-pink. As the sun rose it would turn to Ionian blue. I climbed out of the Helio and took a deep breath of sea, beach, and forest. The world smelled good, unlike one Brian Tschetter who smelled of sweat, oil, and gasoline by a modest count. Grabbing what most resembled a towel, I headed for the sea, found it carpeted solidly with sea urchins and paused. Turning, I slunk like an uninvited bear to the campsite, stripped down, and had a cold dunk under a water tap I'd spotted the evening before.

Washed and shaved I felt like a new pilot. Hopefully Mueller would sleep a while longer. I don't like people hanging around looking over my shoulder when I'm loading and pre-flighting the plane. It's a job that takes at least a minimum of concentration. Every interruption puts that little train in the head momentarily off the rails and you're apt to overlook something.

This morning I had one or two other things on my mind as well. Like was the aircraft really going to fly? When I started the engine, if start it did, what would those oil gauge needles be saying? If the inverted flight had loused up my battery I could still get the plane started off the battery in one of the Germans' cars. Their presence had been a real stroke of luck.

As for the damage to tail and fuselage, I'd have that attended to upon reaching Athens. For the rest of the trip Mueller would ride shotgun in the jump seat behind me, which was next to a window that opened. Being able to shoot and kill might not be two of the more ordinary talents, but talents they were. At this point I wasn't going to argue about moral considerations.

It wasn't clear whether Ali and Mrs. K thought they'd gotten rid of us or not. In fact, I wouldn't have been surprised to see them appear above us at any moment, checking on whether we'd made it to land. But I didn't think they'd try to get at us here with Araxos Airport only a few miles away and so much chance of being spotted from the ground.

In fact, with no protective clouds in the sky today, the ground was our only security. Although in Greek skies aircraft are supposed to follow the airways, for the rest of the way to Athens I planned to follow the coast. Just the thought of flying over land made me feel optimistic about the future.

By the time the plane and I were ready to go there was still no sign of Mueller. Probably snoring like a buzz saw in that car. I figured that at the first crack of the engine I'd see him come running.

Feeling good, I climbed up into my tight little universe. The windscreen was clean of oil and a patch over the fan marker indicator gave a tidy look to the instrument panel. I wondered whether my insurance covered that bullet hole. I vaguely recalled that damage sustained in wars wasn't reimbursed, or loss of the aircraft through confiscation by

some government. Obviously, policy writers aren't dummies born yesterday. And now that I was thinking about insurance, it was pretty certain my policy didn't extend to the Middle East. I'd have to call Richards and ask him to attend to that. At the same time I'd ask my partner to get me information on the explosion at Othe.

Flicking on the master switch I was happy to see the instrument panel spring to life. The fuel gauges showed plenty of fuel for the short hop. Switching on the fuel pump, I primed the throttle. All clear? No krauts running into the prop? No. One plus two magnetos. The prop turned slowly, once, twice, three times. Then with a great shudder and roar the engine caught.

My eyes were on the oil pressure needle. Slowly it rose out of the red, through the yellow, and into the green. Fuel pressure? I switched off the pump. The needle quivered but stayed resolutely in the green. Everything looked good except that the battery seemed to be charging more than usual. Possibly that would settle down later.

Just then I caught sight of Mueller running toward the plane. He obviously feared I was leaving without him. I made "calm yourself" motions with my hands and he signaled—bang bang—that he'd go get the guns from where he'd hidden them. His only trouble was getting rid of his new acquaintances who had followed him in their pajamas. Now they were waving at me, rubbing their stomachs and raising invisible coffee cups to their lips.

It was a pretty wild pantomime for that hour in the morning, albeit their hospitality was genuinely touching. But nothing under the sun would have persuaded me to stop that purring engine outside of an untimely visit from the Greek Shore Patrol or other such body of functionaries.

At last Mueller convinced them to return to their campsite, probably hinting that the reason he wanted to be alone in the woods was for the purpose of a morning crap. About thirty seconds after the last visitor had disappeared, he reemerged from the trees, his rifle case in one hand and bulges under his shirt indicating hand guns. It made me wonder how many weapons we were actually carrying.

I reduced the throttle to lessen the prop blast as he climbed in, motioning for him to sit behind me. He nodded and climbed into the back. I showed him how to open and shut the window and he looked pleased. Even before buckling himself into his seat he'd already reassembled his rifle.

I'll admit I was getting to feel respect for Mueller, at times even a kind of fondness. There was a certain naivete about the guy, running around with his guns as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Furthermore, he hadn't complained when the going got rough. To get back into that plane after what had happened yesterday required nerves of steel. He was a real professional, even though his profession was the devil's own.

"Everything looks okay to me," I shouted over my shoulder.

"Let's go."

Swinging the Helio around I taxied up the short beach to get as much takeoff roll as

possible. I was glad I was the pilot and not the passenger. Mueller, poor bastard, was having to take everything on trust. He didn't know whether the oil pressure was really looking good or only so-so. Still, I knew from long experience that most passengers decide that if the pilot isn't afraid to go, then they won't be afraid. The idea that pilots are always unafraid, always know what they're doing, and make the correct decisions at all times, is one that kills a lot more passengers than pilots.

I pushed in the throttle. We were airborne before using a third of the beach.

So far so good. Everything was in the green and the controls felt normal. Wanting to avoid Araxos Airport a few miles eastward along the coast, I followed the road and railway tracks we'd crossed on foot the evening before. Useful things, roads and railways, even for airplane pilots.

In a few minutes, Araxos behind us, the road reached the coast again and I started my climb. Had I been more relaxed about the condition of the Helio I'd have headed due east toward Corinth, but I didn't want to overfly those desolate, unpeopled mountains lying along the way. In case of emergencies a coast offers more possibilities. Not only are beaches and fields often available, but so are ground transportation, communications, and towns.

I glanced over my shoulder to see how Mueller was doing. He was staring out of his window as if expecting to see an entire Luftwaffe squadron appear over the horizon.

"They could come from the other side, too," I reminded him. "Or from above or below or behind."

My words had the immediate effect of turning the German into a kind of whirling dervish. For the next several minutes the plane was jolted by the bouncing around of two hundred pounds of *Fleisch*.

We passed south of Patras, between the coastal city and the 6,319-foot mountain towering above it. Anna and Libby were probably still asleep down there. Perhaps later in the day they'd board a train like the one I saw moving along the track now, 4000 feet below, looking about as large as a caterpillar on a twig.

Having rounded the mountain, there was nothing more to do than follow the almost straight coast down to Corinth. There would begin the long, exacting approach to Athens Airport. No need to climb any higher now; we'd have to be at or below 1500 feet over Corinth. Reaching into my flight case I pulled out the approach plate and set the radio on the real Athens frequency, not to be confused with bogus frequencies used by certain Jet Ranger helicopters.

Since Athenai Control would have no way of knowing the truth—I hoped—I'd simply tell them I'd taken off from Io Sirena that morning instead of from a beach near Patras. They could sort it out any way they wished. In a country where no flight is allowed without a previously filed flight plan, I might find myself with some explaining to do. On the other hand, guests of a VIP like Koundiotes probably suffered little inconvenience in this regard.

All this while my battery was still charging heavily and I had the suspicion it was probably boiling for its own mysterious reasons. If I hadn't wanted to monitor the gauges I'd have turned off the master switch and let the instrument panel take a nap. But I contented myself with just keeping off the navcoms, transponder, etc. It would be a sad day when I couldn't find my way down a coastline without electronic aids.

Five minutes before reaching Corinth I switched on one radio and raised Athens. They told me to report over Corinth at 1500 feet. I was happy to note no ticking in the background while the controller spoke. But at the same time I was aware that if any other interested party was listening they would know where, in exactly five minutes, I was to be found, and at what altitude.

"Mueller," I yelled back, "keep a sharp lookout. Tell me if you see anything resembling a helicopter."

"*Jawohl, Kapitan,*" shouted my passenger. The Helio lurched as he raised his feet and clicked his heels.

In any case, I said to myself, ol' Athens will never know if I'm really where I say I am. At which I hooked a neat left, heading due east. I'd make a wide circle around Corinth, in the meantime giving Athens false position reports knowing I was too far away for them to see me on radar. This isn't really the way one is supposed to do things, but it seemed the most logical and least lethal under the circumstances.

Besides the terrible guilt pangs I naturally felt at feeding false information to Air Traffic Control, the thing I liked even less about this maneuver was that we'd miss overflying the canal. I'd wanted to show the goddamn thing to Mueller. I'm not sure whether this incredibly deep ditch is one of the manmade wonders of the world, but viewed from above it's one of the most fascinating sights available to folks in light aircraft.

"Helicopter *am Steuerbord,*" I heard Mueller shout. A high scream left my throat. "Where, where?"

"There. Over there."

I had to duck my head and raise my right wing to see in the direction he was pointing, but couldn't sight the chopper. "How far is it?" But I knew he wouldn't be able to judge. "How near?" I asked stupidly.

"Not near."

Wanting to believe him I relaxed a little, even though I knew my passenger, inexperienced in these things, had no way of judging the distance. "Near" and "far" were relative concepts. What might not seem near at all to Mueller might seem like no distance at all to a Jet Ranger.

Try as I might I wasn't able to catch sight of the chopper myself, but trusted Mueller, and Ali, that it was there. The best thing would be to fly around the mountain up ahead and come out on the coast as near to Athens as possible without penetrating any of the military and other restricted zones shown on the chart.

“Are they any closer?”

“I don’t think so.”

Maybe they hadn’t seen us. Contacting Athenai Control I reported my position as Corinth. Hopefully Ali would hear the transmission and buzz off in that direction.

“Roger, three eight niner,” replied Athens. “Report point Zulu at 1000 feet.”

.While flying around the mountain I lost altitude and a few minutes later arrived on the coast west of Athens at 500 feet. Without bothering to look at the approach chart I reported that I was at point Zulu at the assigned altitude. It was a moment later that I realized I really *was* at point Zulu. Shit. Now we were just below the normal approach to Athens and there was no way of getting off it without heading into military zones on one side or flying further out over the water on the other.

“Can you see the helicopter?” I shouted to Mueller.

“*Nein.*”

I hoped he was telling me he didn’t see the chopper, not that he saw *nine* of them coming after us. In any case, at the heading we were now flying Mueller would have needed X-ray eyes to look back in the direction the Bell would be if it were after us. Unlike cars, most airplanes don’t have rear windows.

Not wanting to waste precious seconds turning the plane around for a look, I flew flat out toward Athens. We were as ready for them as we could be. Mueller was moving from one side of the plane to the other, straining to see in all directions. My own head felt like it was on a swivel. Even Vietnam had never been like this.

But would they dare attack? For chrissake, we were on approach to Athens International. The airport itself might still be several miles away, but other planes could be around here following the same VFR procedures.

Only I was telling myself this purely to raise my hopes. No other planes were in the vicinity; I’d have seen them or heard them talking with Athens. And if I could know this by monitoring the Athens frequency, so could the Jet Ranger.

And then I heard it, the tic tic of the rotor. “They’re coming,” I shouted back to Mueller. I heard a sharp click as the German readied his weapon, felt and heard the rush of air in the cockpit as he slid open his window. “Mueller, try and tell me which side they’re coming from.”

I’d always known the Helio was a heavy old bulk to fly, but until now this had seemed an endearing Dumbo-esque quality rather than a fatal one.

“Under us!” shouted Mueller suddenly. “*Backbord.*”

Port side. They probably planned to shoot upwards into the fuel tank. To do so they figured they’d be better off coming around to the pilot’s side than the passenger side where they assumed Mueller would be waiting for them. Or maybe they planned to shoot the pilot. That was another way of bringing down an aircraft.

Fuck ‘em. I pressed the transmitter button. “Athens, this is three eight niner.”

“Go ahead.”

“Sir, position Salamis. We’re being bothered by a helicopter making dangerous maneuvers around our aircraft.”

“Can you give me the type and registration number.”

“Standby.”

If overhearing that transmission had given Ali and Mrs. K food for thought, it hadn’t scared them off. The roar now was enormous. What was keeping Mueller? I could feel the aircraft rocking as he moved about. It had occurred to him, too, that they wouldn’t expect to find him on this side and he was doing his best to keep low until the moment came to get off his shot, yet still keep an eye out for the movements of the attacking chopper.

“Mueller,” I shouted, “get them! Get them before they fire.”

Just then I caught sight of the Bell rising up on our lower lefthand side like some sort of huge, deadly insect. One of the windows was open and a rifle barrel protruded.

Suddenly there was a terrific roar behind my head. The Helio jolted. In the same split second something slammed into my wing. I could see a thin trail of vapor like a pale feather where the fuel was draining out. Bastards.

“Got them,” shouted the German.

I looked back. The chopper had disappeared. “Are they down?”

“No, but they won’t come back. I hit one.”

“Which one?”

“The one who was shooting.”

This time I felt it would do my nerves endless good to have a look around. Turning the plane I caught sight of the Jet Ranger heading back in the direction of Corinth. Bravo, Mueller.

“Three eight niner, Athens.” The sudden voice in my ears made me jump.

“Three eight niner.”

“Are you able to get the type and registration number of the helicopter?”

“Negative, sir. They’ve moved off now.”

“Do you want to declare a near miss?”

“Negative, sir.”

There was a pause. Now was their turn to curse silently. I could picture three or four uniformed men gathered around the traffic controller. But they were there and I was here. For the moment there was nothing they could do. They’d look at each other and shrug.

“Nevertheless, three eight niner, you will be asked to make a report after landing. What is your present position?”

I looked at the chart, then to the view outside on the left. “Just passing point Kosmas, sir, at ... uh ... 1000 feet.” Saying this, I began to climb.

“Do you have the airport in sight?”

Gaining altitude, I looked forward. There it was in the distance. Athens. A rolling

sea of white buildings joining the flat, blue waters. I knew where the airport was located, south of the city on the sea. A silver, cigar-shaped airliner was just taking off.

“Affirmative,” I replied.

“Three eight niner, orbit at 1000 feet until further clearance.”

“Roger, sir, but I’m low on fuel.” In fact, the fuel quantity gauge on the left was understandably getting lower, though the right-handed reservoir was okay for another half hour or so. The situation wasn’t critical, but I longed to be over land.

“Are you declaring an emergency?”

“Negative.” Not exactly. Not yet. An emergency could mean more paperwork, more questions. I didn’t want to get to land *that* badly.

“Standby, three eight niner.”

I stood by making a slow 360 degree turn over the water and heard him warn the departing airliner that he had a small aircraft orbiting at 1000 feet five miles west of the airfield. The pilot replied that he was passing through 2500 feet.

“All right, three eight niner, you may proceed. Report left-hand downwind for runway one five.”

“Roger.”

It was a long last five miles. There was relief in my voice as I reported downwind.

“Cleared to land, the wind is calm.”

I glanced at the wind sock. If a fifteen knot tail wind on landing was “calm,” what might one expect on a day when the wind in Athens was “light to moderate?”

I taxied the plane to where I was directed. The question now was what to do with our armaments. Mueller was a living, breathing weapons cache. To have the Helio repaired I’d have to give the keys to the mechanics and, considering that conversation I’d had with Athens, was pretty sure the plane would be searched by the authorities the minute Mueller and I left the airport. So the best idea would be to take the guns with us, but later, after we’d cleared customs. Getting them back on board would be another problem in the event we had to undergo a metal detector test as at Nice Airport.

“We’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it,” I told the German. “For the moment, we’ll lock everything in the plane until I’ve been to Control and filed the report.”

Mueller looked worried. “You don’t intend to tell them the truth, I hope.”

“Of course not. But I’ll have to put down something. I’ll just say some sort of unidentified helicopter was buzzing us for fun and games.”

“Don’t give the registration number. If they locate the helicopter they will know someone has been shot in it.”

“What reg number?” I asked innocently. “Never even got a look at what type of chopper it was.”

The fun-and-games report took nearly two hours. By the time all the written and oral questions had been answered you could have wiped me off the floor.

“You see, Mr. Tschetter,” a military type with an unpronounceable name told me, “we know there are helicopters operating illegally here in Greece. They are flown by a group of international outlaws from the Middle East. It is very hard to find them and even harder to catch them when we do. Two of our own helicopters have been destroyed in battle with them.” His words weren’t reassuring. As long as it was just old Ali buzzing around trying to kill us, it wasn’t so bad. But the idea that the Greek skies were full of killer choppers didn’t bode well for my future longevity.

“Is it the Palestine Liberation Organization?” I asked.

“Either that or some extremist splinter group of the PLO,” said the officer. “They seem to be well financed and must have refueling spots throughout Greece. So far we have located only one of these fuel depots.”

“Would you call them terrorists?”

“We have had some terrorist activity here in Athens as you have probably read in the newspapers. But recently there has been a certain calm. I think that the PLO is becoming genuinely interested in peace, although some Palestinian groups are still quite militant. But you must understand that these nuances are not the question. It is not possible for Greece to allow her airspace and air traffic to be violated for any reason. Especially now with the Cyprus situation. You understand?”

“Yes, I do.”

“So that is why this episode with the helicopter interests us. You have really no idea at all of their intentions?”

“None.”

I knew he didn’t believe me, but I also knew he knew he wasn’t going to learn anything from me either.

“Well, then, Mr. Tschetter, that will be all for now. I hope you enjoy your stay in Athens. Is it a pleasure visit?”

“Pleasure?” The word had an ironic ring to it. “Er, yes. Pleasure. Tourism.”

He held out his arm and we shook hands. Looking me straight in the eye he said, “Then please have a pleasant stay.”

“Thank you.”

I was glad to get out of there and back to the tarmac where Mueller was waiting near the Helio.

“Mueller,” I said, “I want to get the plane fixed now, but God knows how I’ll explain a bullet hole in the fuel tank.”

“Give the mechanic a large tip and say nothing.”

It sounded like a good idea. We’d changed some money in Kerkira, but not much. I handed Mueller 500 francs. “While I’m talking to the mechanic would you please go and change this into drachmas? Also let me know if there are any customs formalities.”

“*Jawohl, Kapitan.*”

“And stop saying ‘*Jawohl, Kapitan.*’”

“Yessir!” shouted Mueller with a snappy salute, turning on his heel and striding off toward the air terminal.

Well, I thought with a shrug. If it makes him happy....

Explaining the hook marks to the chief mechanic wasn't easy. I told him I'd run afoul of a wire fence while making a short field landing. Whether he believed me or not, I figured he'd never come up with anything more feasible. When he noticed the blood marks that Mueller had overlooked, I told him that one of the passengers had gotten hurt during the landing. “The Honda broke loose and fell on her.”

He nodded sympathetically. “I'll have the interior cleaned up for you,” he promised, conjuring in my mind the vision of a detail of mop-wielding scrubwomen advancing on the Helio.

That brought us to the question of the fuel leak. “I'm not sure how that happened,” I told him. “Maybe it was pierced by one of the fence posts.” As he looked up to inspect the wing, I put my hand around the drachmas in my pocket. Holding my breath I watched him put his finger in the hole and feel around.

He turned and looked me in the eye. Now was the moment I should transfer the bills from my pocket to his, but something stopped me. I had the feeling that this man was incorruptible. If he wasn't, I still didn't want to tempt him into the trouble it would cause him if he accepted my “tip” and later the truth were revealed. “I don't think this was made by a fence post,” he said. “This is a bullet hole.”

“A bullet hole?” I repeated stupidly, withdrawing my hand empty from my pocket.

“Someone on the ground, a hunter probably, must have shot at your plane as you were taking off. Crazy people. This isn't the first time I've seen this sort of thing.”

“No kidding!” I exclaimed. “My gosh, he could have killed us.”

“It's been known to happen. In any case, I think it best that you don't mention this to anyone. The government is very nervous about guns and air traffic. You will spend a week answering questions and writing reports. I'll just say on your bill it was a leaking fuel tank.”

“Thanks a lot.” I was thinking it was strange how the money in my pocket had turned from a bribe into a tip.

“When do you need the plane back?”

I looked at my watch. It was already after twelve. “Same time tomorrow at the latest. Possible?”

“No,” he replied, “but I'll have it ready. Of course in such a short time we can only do a cosmetic job on the fuselage and tail. By the way, where did you make that landing on the fence?”

“Io Sirena.”

He looked at me in surprise. “Then I don't think you'll have any trouble with the authorities.”

“No, I don't think I will.”

“And tell Mr. Koundiotes next time to remove that fence.” The chief mechanic’s eyes were laughing in a serious face.

“I’ll tell him you said so,” I replied, trying not to grin.

As Mueller hadn’t turned up yet I went into the terminal to find him. He’d cleared customs but as he had no boarding pass or pilot’s license, he hadn’t been allowed to return outside to the plane. Having already cleared customs myself, I went out, got our baggage, and carried it into the terminal via the Flight Briefing Office.

“Come on, Mueller,” I said, rejoining my passenger. “Let’s get thee to a hotel. You look like the plague has taken you.”

Taking our bags and weaponry we headed toward the taxi stand.

The short stay on Io Sirena had turned both Mueller and myself on to the pleasures of Hellenic luxury. This didn’t sort well with what I was beginning to suspect was our actual financial status in life. Mueller had metamorphosed from a rich German industrialist into a hired gun. I’d known this from the moment I saw him open that “sample case” and start fitting together his rifle. Most likely he was on an expense account which he’d not want to spend on fancy hotels now that his cover was blown.

As for me, I’d stopped earning my pay the moment I realized that what I’d been hired to do – find Louise – had become my own personal quest. I wasn’t planning on finding her so that Mueller could bump her off like he had Heidi. I wanted to see her for one selfish reason: to find Jeanne. And I didn’t want Mueller even to suspect this was the case.

In the past twenty-four hours events had been happening too fast for me to sit down and think things through. But one idea was growing in my mind; while I might be using Mueller to lead me to Jeanne, Mueller was using me for the same reason. I had a feeling he’d been hired to find my wife but, not knowing what she looked like, he was counting on my recognizing her for him. Whomever he and Terry were working for knew that my wife could be found either with Louise or Heidi. She hadn’t been with Heidi. That left Louise.

Under the circumstances, it didn’t seem that either Mueller or I would want or even *deserve* the Athens Hilton. I asked the taxi driver to take us to any medium-priced hotel, and we ended up at a really neat place with a view of the Acropolis. But while I’d been hoping to keep an eye on Mueller during our stopover in Athens, he had plans of his own. Promising to telephone me that evening regarding our departure the next day, he kept the cab and disappeared down the street.

The first thing I wanted to do was call my partner in Paris. Because of the time difference I figured I could reach him at the office before he left for lunch. I was in luck.

“Athens!” he cried when he heard where I was. “I hope you’re having better weather than we are.”

“I’ve stopped noticing when I’m not flying,” I told him. “It gets too depressing. Listen, I just wanted to mention that you shouldn’t count on getting any more money

from our client. The house in Othe was blown up and I don't know where she is. She might even have left France."

"The bank called today to say another grand had arrived. They wanted to know whether I wanted the dollars put into the francs account."

"Her sending the money surprises me, but I'm glad because it means she still trusts me and that's important. I think our client Terry Rolland is working for some sort of Middle East group. This guy traveling with me seems to be their hired gun. He knocks them off when I find them."

"Wow. Maybe you'd better stop finding them."

"I'd like nothing better, except for one thing."

"What could that be?"

"Jeanne. She's alive." I heard a whistle at the other end of the line. "I think they hired me to lead them to her. They don't seem to know what she looks like. This would explain the burglaries of my apartment and the office. They were looking for a photograph but didn't find one. They probably think that if Mueller sticks with me, when I see her I'll recognize her. And he'll be there to kill her."

There was another whistle. "You think Jeanne's alive? But you told me you saw her body. And the doctor told you that..."

"It all could have been staged to make me believe she was dead. She's apparently involved up to her eyeballs in some PLO hanky-panky and had to drop out of sight."

"Wow. Listen, Chet, I don't know what to say. Do you think you can handle this without getting yourself shot up?"

"It hasn't been easy so far." I laughed. "Wait'll you read the report I write – if and when I ever get back to Paris alive."

"What are your plans now?"

"Had some problems with the Helio and have to stick around Athens until it's fixed. The oil pressure's okay now, but that bullet hole in the fuel tank has got to go."

"Bullet hole. You *do* move in fast company. It's a far cry from tracking down bill dodgers."

"I may never be the same. In any case, Mueller told me that Louise, the next gal on the list, is in Beirut. If he knows that much, he probably knows where to find her there, but he's being scarce on information probably to keep me from ditching him. I don't think he suspects I know Jeanne's alive, but he knows I'd dump him if I knew where to locate Louise for whom I've been promised a two-grand bonus."

"Thanks for having told your partner."

"Oh, damn. It just slipped out."

"Well, let's try and keep it from the IRS."

"Don't worry. I'm sure they don't intend paying it. It's really an incentive they're offering me to take their shit while I lead them to Jeanne."

"Gotcha. And so what happens when you do finally lead them to their prey?"

“I play it by ear.”

“Well, *mon ami*, I hope you have good ears, otherwise that wifey of yours won’t be pretending under the next white sheet. Couldn’t you just go home and wait, let her finish doing her thing and come home to hubby?”

His words silenced me a moment. If I’d thought this possible – just go back and wait until Jeanne returned to me – I’d have been in Paris sitting by the telephone that minute. But I knew she didn’t plan to come back. I knew that if she’d done that to me, pretended to be dead and leave me like that, it was because she figured she was lost to me anyway. I wanted to find her before it came true, and bring her back.

“You could be right,” I replied lightly. “In any case, I’m here now, so I might as well see it through. Soon as the Helio’s ready, Sauerkraut and I leave for Beirut. By the way, will you call up our insurance guy and tell him I’ll be in the Middle East for about – well, to be on the safe side, say a week. If a month is the same price, say a month.”

“You think you might like it there?”

“Never can tell. Jeanne and I could have a second honeymoon.”

“I wish you luck. In fact, Chet, I wish you lots of luck. Take care. Those PLO chaps are kind of crazy.”

“Maybe, but they leave a trail of security police around the world. I’ve never run into so much official prop wash in my life. You spend half your time here lying to people wearing uniforms. Sad thing is, you know you ain’t foolin’ ‘em.”

My room service lunch had arrived while I was talking with Richards and when I hung up I dug in. One thing I like about Greek food is that it always tastes like the cook had prepared it with the idea in his head that he might be asked to eat it himself. Fancy or not, you always feel there’s a flesh and blood human being back there in the kitchen instead of a computer standing over a microwave oven.

After lunch I had a short nap to finish what I’d started the night before in the Helio. At about five thirty I got up, dressed and took a taxi to the Acropolis. It’s a good policy to check out the Parthenon whenever in Athens. Like many other ancient monuments, this one is being eaten away faster by the chemicals in the air than it took them to build it. One day you might come to town and find it gone.

It was late by the time I got there, but there was just time enough before they closed to watch a fantastic sunset through the ancient columns. The sublime mood engendered by this spectacle was slightly marred by the sight of Mueller running about taking photographs of the edifice with a microfilm camera. It was strange seeing him behaving like a tourist, but maybe he had a family back home to show the pictures to.

Just after the sun set, the marble summit of the Acropolis turned into a pink space platform, took off on a journey into time, returned, burned out. I looked around. The tourists were gone. The gates were being closed. One of the last to leave, I arrived at the taxi zone just in time to see Mueller getting into a cab. He wasn’t alone. A woman was with him. I only got a glimpse of her, but it looked from the back like Terry

Rolland.

Jumping into another cab I told the driver to follow them. He didn't understand English, but sensed the urgency and accelerated. The resulting confusion in the departing traffic created a bottleneck of cursing, screaming drivers, while Mueller drove off with never a backward glance.

My driver was looking at me reproachfully, so I told him the name of my hotel. Off we went at high speed through the city; apparently he thought the state of urgency was still with us.

The ride gave me time to reflect. Terry's presence in Athens, if it had indeed been Terry I'd seen, confirmed my theory that whatever was going on, she and Mueller were in it together. I was glad she and I hadn't bumped into each other at the Acropolis. She'd have had a hard time explaining her presence in Athens and I didn't want to make things awkward for her. If she and Mueller decided to go off to Beirut without me, I could be pretty sure I'd never see Jeanne again.

Before leaving Nice Airport I'd bought a bottle of tax-free Scotch. Back at the hotel I cracked the cap for the first time. I was about to call room service for a sandwich when the telephone rang. It was Mueller.

"I have spoken to Mrs. Rolland," he told me. "She wishes us to hurry to Beirut to find Louise. She says the woman must be located within three days if you are to get your bonus."

"Three days? That isn't much time considering the Helio won't be ready until tomorrow afternoon. Even if all goes smoothly we won't be in Beirut until tomorrow night."

"Then we must take an airliner."

That was fine with me except we'd have to leave our arsenal behind. Mueller would probably be able to get more guns and ammo in Beirut, but I'd be out of luck.

"I'll think it over," I replied. "Depending on what time the flights leave, it might be just as quick and a whole lot simpler taking the Helio, especially in view of what we're carrying."

"You told me it might be impossible to bring them aboard even your aircraft."

"I've got a plan. Tomorrow morning I'll go and look in on how the work is coming along. If I can get to the hangar without passing through security or customs, I'll make a second run through with the bags and put them right in the plane. In the meantime, I'll check what flights are going to Beirut tomorrow in case it doesn't work."

There was a moment of silence as Mueller thought it over. Or perhaps he was discussing it with Terry; I could tell he'd covered the telephone receiver with his hand. "All right," he said. "I will pick you up at ten tomorrow morning."

As I hung up I had to smile. Mueller must be wondering why I'd never asked him about the rifle in his "sample case." It was my guess that he didn't really care what I thought, that the only thing that concerned him was doing his job and getting paid. He

must figure that my reasons for not rocking the boat were the same as his – professionalism and greed.

I called the airlines office. The morning flight to Beirut was booked solid by some women’s club. There was space on the afternoon flight, but if the Helio was ready early enough we’d arrive in Beirut at almost the same hour.

The next morning Mueller picked me up at my hotel in a taxi. He had his suitcase and rifle case with him. “I will watch you,” he told me. “If they let you go through, I will follow and put the bags right into the aircraft.”

Reaching the air terminal, we started across the large hall, Mueller a few steps behind me. The Flight Briefing and Met offices were located in the basement. To get down there was a giant elevator capable of accommodating fifty or more persons as it was principally used for stops at intermediate floors for departing passengers going to their aircraft.

Entering the empty elevator, Mueller and I walked to the far end where the row of operating buttons was located. There was an exit door on that end, too. As I pressed the bottom button there was a loud noise behind us. Turning, I saw a crowd of about fifty or sixty women holding boarding passes and wearing name cards heading into the elevator. Pressed face to face against this mass of humanity, the door shut and we started to descend.

Suddenly I froze. I could feel the blood draining out of my face. Good God. Not three feet away from me was Jeanne. She saw me at the same moment and our eyes met. I’ll never forget the look of utter despair and anguish on her face as she saw me.

Christ, how she’d changed. So thin and pale. What nightmare was she living? Though the women had all been talking and chattering as they’d entered the car, as we started down the only noise was the blood pounding in my head.

I dropped my gaze quickly to let her know I wouldn’t give her away. At the same time I shot a glance at Mueller. Had he noticed anything? If so, his expression didn’t show it.

The elevator came to a halt, the door opened, and the mass of humanity facing us began to surge forward. Even before I turned I knew what had happened. I’d pressed the bottom button for the officials’ level, but no one had thought to press the button for the Departure level. As a result the whole crowd, all holding up their boarding cards, left the elevator on the wrong floor. Looking for the way to their aircraft they quickly dispersed in every direction down the labyrinth of corridors.

At any other time the situation would have seemed incredibly funny. Nearly pulling Mueller by the arm I herded him into the Flight Briefing room followed by three or four women. “What’s your destination?” I asked one of them.

“*Pardon?*”

“*Quelle est votre fucking destination?*” I growled.

“Beirut.”

More women were coming through the door, to the consternation of the controllers. I led them back out to the elevator, looking around in vain for Jeanne. I had to find her and keep her from taking that plane. Chance had brought us together this time. If I lost her now it would be Mueller who brought us together the next time. And by then it might be too late.

The elevator door closed behind the women. It would be impossible for me to go to their plane without a boarding pass. The only way to reach the tarmac was as per my original plan, through the crew exit.

Returning to Control I told the man behind the desk that I wanted to get to my aircraft, which was being repaired. He looked at me in an unhurried fashion with that now familiar suspicious expression and asked to see my pilot license, which I showed him. He said I could go and I looked around for Mueller, but he wasn't to be seen. A terrible fear seized me. Had he guessed that it was Jeanne?

Like a man in a nightmare I started toward the door, nearly bumping into Mueller who was returning from the men's room. I told him to follow me and a moment later we were out of the building on the tarmac.

"Mueller," I told him, "go put our stuff in the Helio and wait for me there. Don't talk to anyone. Pretend you don't speak English. I'll be right back."

The aircraft being boarded by the group of women was standing not far off. I waited until Mueller was out of sight inside the hangar before heading in that direction. They were collecting boarding passes at the bottom of the ramp. I didn't know how I'd get to Jeanne if she was already inside.

Three or four men and women, two with walkie-talkies, stood at the foot of the stairs leading up to the plane. I knew it would be useless, but I had to try. Putting on what I hoped looked like a normal human expression of concern instead of the desperation I felt, I approached them. "Awfully sorry," I said, "my wife just got on board but she forgot something. Could I just hop aboard and hand it to her?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said a hostess, "but unless you have a boarding pass you can't go up. If you want, I'll give it to her for you."

"No, really, I have to..." I started to protest, but saw it was no use.

"If you'll give me your wife's name, I'll be happy to give her whatever it is."

"No, no, thank you."

I didn't know what to do, but I couldn't leave. Already they were looking at me suspiciously. One of the men with a walkie-talkie came a few steps nearer. "How did you get out here?" he asked.

I could have taken him by the front of the shirt and smashed his nose into his face. Jeanne was on that plane and this miserable son-of-a-bitch, this dumb, stupid jerk, was asking me how I got out there on their precious goddamn tarmac.

Somehow I managed to control myself. Too much was at stake. We both knew it. We both knew what would happen if this look on my face translated itself into action, or

even a threat of action. Men with rifles were everywhere. All that was needed was one movement, one shout.

“I’m a pilot,” I told him. “My plane is being repaired in the hangar over there.”

“Then I advise you to go back to your aircraft. You’re not allowed out here.” We stepped back to let the ramp move away from the airliner. I looked up and saw the door was shut. It was no use. “Jim, escort this gentleman back to his aircraft.”

“Right. Come with me, sir.” He led me away, as if I were a little child or a prize ass.

I was so angry, so desperately frustrated, I was afraid I’d lose control. Back at the Helio I glared at Mueller, this bastard who was gunning for my wife.

“It is okay,” he said. “I have put the luggage on board.”

So Mueller’s guns were aboard. Great. Just great. And now it was my job to fly him to Beirut to kill Jeanne. No fear. I’d kill him before he ever set eyes on my wife.

The chief mechanic came over. “How does it look?” he asked.

I found myself examining the Helio. He showed me where they had painted over the hook marks. “Fine,” I said automatically without seeing anything. “Great. Looks great.”

“We worked late last night and got the fuel tank repaired. The plane is ready to go.”

“It is?” I could hardly believe my ears. I couldn’t help glancing over at the airliner. It would fly at three times my speed, but I’d be in Beirut by evening.

“I want to show you something.” I followed the mechanic around to a workbench by the wall. “Recognize that?”

“My battery?”

He showed me what looked like indentations in the black plastic.

“Finger marks,” he said. “When you arrived yesterday the battery was smoking. Soft as butter. We could have removed it with a spoon.”

“It was overcharging,” I admitted. “I forgot to tell you.”

“We found that the regulator had been pushed to the limit.”

It must have been Ali fiddling around. “The plane was last serviced at an airclub in Calabria,” I told him. “I don’t think the guy knew what he was doing.”

“Well, I’ve installed a new battery to save you time, but of course you don’t have to take it if you don’t want to.”

“No, that’s fine. Thanks. Everything else looking good?”

“I went over it thoroughly myself. It seems in good shape. You had a couple of drops of water in the petrol though.”

“It was out in the rain with the fuel cap open,” I mumbled. The mechanic was looking at me strangely. Nobody should arrive in the middle of a voyage with such a list of troubles. Afraid to hear any more, I asked for the bill.

“I’ll get it.”

All I wanted to do now was get the hell to Beirut. Waiting for the mechanic to return I looked around the hangar. Surprise. A familiar airplane parked next to mine.

Drucker's Jodel. The cowling was off and a pan beneath the engine was half full of evil looking black oil. What the hell? I'd last seen him in Naples with that harpy-type lady. Is this as far as they'd gotten? When the mechanic returned I asked him about the plane..

."It came in late yesterday," he told me. "This fellow's a little worse off than you were. We're having to send for a new engine. In any case, this one was way overdue for an overhaul. I'd guess it has twice the number of hours on it that it should have. He probably doesn't keep a very accurate log of his flights."

Knowing Drucker that wouldn't surprise me. He probably didn't keep any log at all.

The bill he handed me was surprisingly reasonable, about a third of what it would have been in France. I paid it and gave the man a well-earned tip. Leaving the hangar with Mueller I saw the airliner taxiing away. In a couple of hours Jeanne would be in Beirut. I promised myself that nothing, but nothing, would stop me from being there myself later that afternoon.

"Listen, Mueller," I said, "you stay right here ready for takeoff in a half hour. Don't get lost. I'm going to get the met and file the flight plan right now."

"Yessir!"

The Flight Briefing room in Athens Airport is a roomy, comfortable place. After ascertaining that the en route weather would be good and checking the NOTAMs clipped to the board, I spread out my charts, and fell to studying the route. There would be one long hop over Rhodes to Cyprus. Nicosia Airport, captured by the Turks during the recent military action, was closed. International flights now used Larnaca Airport, which my out-of-date Operational Navigation Chart showed as abandoned. After refueling there, we'd take off for Beirut.

As I worked I was aware that someone had sat down in the chair next to mine. I turned. It was Drucker. How great seeing his familiar face. "Hey, Drucker, *comment ça va?*"

"*Mal.*" He looked very grim. Having seen the state of his Jodel, I could understand why. "*Ça va très mal,*" he repeated, shaking his head.

"A little engine trouble?"

"*Ah, oui,* you could call it that. And you? Where are you flying now?"

"Beirut."

His face lit up like a lightbulb. "*Sans blague?* Beirut? Are you leaving just now for *le Liban?*"

"In a half hour or so. Want a lift?"

"You have room for one more person?"

"For two. But I can't say much for my safety record so far this trip."

He gripped my arm. "Can you take just one person? It is not me. A lady. Yesterday I had an urgent message to fly this lady from Athens to Beirut. I arrived last night, but you saw my aircraft. It is finished. I will give you my advance. One thousand dollars."

Remembering the lady I'd seen him with in Naples, no offer would have been tempt-

ing. “Why don’t you send her there on an airliner? There’s one this afternoon.”

“No question of that. I’ve been trying to rent a plane but no one will let me take a hired plane to Beirut.”

“Tell them you’re going to Crete.”

“I told them this, but they didn’t believe me.” And Drucker actually blushed.

It was true that the credibility gap did seem to widen proportionally the farther east one got. I wondered what happened at the international date line.

“I’m desperate,” said Drucker.

What could I say? A few minutes ago I’d been feeling desperate myself, so I knew what he was going through. Besides that, pilots are supposed to help fellow pilots.

“Where is she?”

“We are to meet upstairs in a half hour. I told her I would find a plane somehow. So you will take her?”

“All right.” I could picture Drucker jumping up and down with pleasure. “Tell her to be ready for immediate takeoff. Bring her out to my plane. I have another passenger, a German. He’ll be waiting there, too. Are you sure her travel documents are in order? I don’t want to have any trouble.”

“Her passport will be the best that money can buy,” Drucker assured me.

I had to laugh. It felt good having an honest exchange with another scoundrel.

I told myself I ought to have my head examined for agreeing to take on another passenger, especially a female one, after what had happened on our previous flights. But as I walked back to the terminal to get my bag from the locker I was feeling strangely optimistic. The anger and frustration I’d felt that morning were almost gone. I’d get to Beirut and somehow I’d find Jeanne.

As for the passenger, I was sure this wasn’t the only risk she’d run in her life. There must be a good reason she was flying with Drucker instead of taking an airliner. He’d assured me she wasn’t carrying drugs or gold. If she was running guns, well, she could join our rifle club. As long as it wasn’t a ten-ton cannon and was small enough to fit into her personal luggage, I was hardly the one to register a complaint.

## Chapter 7

A few minutes later I was back at the Helio. Without me and the flight plan, Mueller hadn’t been able to clear police and customs. There was no sign of Drucker or the other passenger. I got Mueller processed through the formalities and together we pushed the Helio out of the hangar. After refueling but with still no sign of the Frenchman, I went back into the Flight Briefing office, hoping to find him. Drucker was there.

“She just arrived,” he told me. “She’s in the ladies’ room.”

“Did you tell her about the change in plans?”

“Yes.”

“She agreed to go with me?”

“*Elle s’en fout.*”

“Then let’s get her.”

We walked into the hall. Drucker went to the ladies’ room door, and knocked three times. We waited a moment, then the door opened and a woman stepped out. It was Jeanne.

She was as stunned as I. We stood staring at each other. “Have you already met?” Drucker asked in surprise.

Jeanne turned to him. “You didn’t tell me it was this person,” she said. She looked at me. “I should have guessed, but I didn’t see the plane outside.”

“It was in the hangar,” I apologized. “I didn’t know it was you either. I thought you’d left for Beirut in that airliner.”

“I thought *you* had,” said Jeanne.

“So,” said Drucker nervously, “what are we doing? Are you going with him or not?”

I told Drucker to take a walk for a minute. “Listen, darling,” I said when the Frenchman had moved away, “don’t go to Beirut. I’ll change the flight plan and we’ll head back to France right now. By tonight everything will be over. We’ll be out of here.”

She looked at me and smiled sadly. “Do you think it’s as simple as that?”

“I know it is.”

“You’re not surprised to find me alive?”

“I’ve known for a couple of days. I was on Io Sirena. Terry Rolland hired me to find Louise and Heidi. But it was really to find you. I’m traveling with a German called Mueller. I think he’s looking for you to kill you, but he doesn’t know what you look like. I think he’s already killed Heidi.”

“Heidi’s dead?”

“Yes.”

“That poor kid. What a shame. I thought she’d be safer staying on the island.”

“Since leaving Io Sirena we’ve had our share of getting shot at. Ali and Mrs. Koundiotes have been gunning for Mueller and me. Yesterday we shot down their Jet Ranger.”

“Good God. Was it you? That’s the reason Drucker was called in.”

“But who are they? Why are they shooting at us?”

“It’s not surprising if you’re both working for the other side.”

“The other side of *what*? For chrissake, what’s this thing you’re involved in? Jeanne, darling, I’ve just found you again. I don’t want to lose you a second time. Come back to France with me before it’s too late.”

She looked at me in surprise. “No, Chet. I’m going to Beirut.”

“And what about Mueller? If I bump him from the Helio he’ll guess who you are.

He'll take the afternoon plane to Beirut and be there when we arrive. He's set on killing you, I'm sure of it. Tell me at least why?"

"Let's hope he doesn't guess who I am." Reaching into her bag she brought out a pair of dark glasses. With her hair now grown long and the glasses, she didn't look at all like the smiling girl in the photograph.

I knew when I was beaten. There was no way I was going to persuade her, at least not now. I'd have to play along for the time being and watch for my chance.

"When you meet Mueller," I warned her, "don't smile."

"There's little possibility of that," she said, smiling.

I called Drucker over to tell him it was okay. He looked grateful and handed me a bulky envelope. "I deducted my own expenses," he told me.

The envelope contained eight hundred dollars in fifties. "Do you need any cash?" I asked Jeanne. It was like old times, as if she was on her way to do some shopping.

"Not really," she said with a small look of amusement.

Removing the bills from the envelope, I stuck the wad in my back pocket. "Let's go."

During the passport formalities I learned my wife was traveling under the name Carol Benson. She had no problem going through the security check; no bells went off as she walked through the metal detector, a search of her handbag turned up no gun. It puzzled me that she was traveling without luggage, but when we got to the Helio, Drucker was there with her bags, having carried them through the crew exit. Amusing. After loading them into the luggage compartment he disappeared toward the hangar to brood over his Jodel.

Mueller, who'd been waiting in the Helio, climbed down. I introduced him to Miss Benson. Although Mueller looked at her very hard, I saw no lightbulb of recognition flash on above his head. Worried I'd accidentally call her Jeanne, I suggested she sit in the rear.

"Fine," she agreed immediately.

No doubt Jeanne preferred sitting behind, rather than in front of, the man hired to kill her.

As we taxied toward the runway I was still debating with myself whether, once airborne, I should just head back toward France. One slight problem with this plan was that it would involve having to kill Mueller immediately after takeoff. Furthermore, I knew that wherever we landed, Jeanne would find a way to get to Beirut. She was that kind of woman. It was better that I went along and kept an eye on her. The main thing was that we were together. If and when the time came, I could take care of Mueller.

During the engine run-up I was glad to see everything in the green. The new battery was right down the middle. I couldn't help wondering how it grabbed Jeanne to be back in the Helio. We'd spent a lot of hours in this aircraft in California and France. She'd never been interested herself in learning to fly, but I'd made her learn the basics in case

something should ever happen to me – a heart attack or such – while we were up.

The engine sounded fine as we climbed to cruising altitude. I was glad to know we'd disabled the Jet Ranger and hoped no other chopper lurked along the route gunning for us. Our main insurance now was that we had Jeanne on board. They wouldn't want to harm her. I thought to myself I'd like to see Ali's face when Drucker told him he'd turned Jeanne over to me.

"Everything all right, Miss Benson?" I shouted over my shoulder. Instead of replying she put her hand forward and held up her thumb. I managed to hide my amusement. In our halcyon days, because of the Helio's noise, Jeanne and I often used hand signals to communicate. Or would write things down. On long trips my kneeboard writing pad, supposedly there for noting down air traffic clearances and weather reports, would gradually be covered over with brief messages and drawings, some decent, some wildly vulgar.

In spite of the delicate situation we were in and the further dangers awaiting us at journey's end, it was a beautiful day. Having left Athens to stew in her own haze, the visibility was unlimited, the sea sparkling. The islands of the Cyclades lay on the surface of the Aegean like meringue puffs on an azure pudding.

How I wanted to hold Jeanne in my arms. It seemed impossible that Mueller wouldn't sense the vibrations passing between us. Perhaps for now the Helio's own vibrations masked ours, but what about when we landed on Cyprus? Mueller was no ninny. One of the qualities they paid him for was a sixth sense.

To be on the safe side I decided to pretend to Mueller that I found our fellow traveler attractive and seductive, thus disguising our former relationship in a new one. In fact, instead of flying on to Beirut this afternoon from Cyprus, why not fake some trouble with the Helio that would make an overnight stay in Cyprus necessary? It would give me time to talk to Jeanne and try and convince her to return to France with me. Perhaps we could spend the night together. Even if Mueller found out, he wouldn't necessarily suspect that Miss Benson was more than a casual affair.

Taking a pencil I drew an hourglass caricature of a woman on my kneeboard. I tapped Mueller's arm. He looked and nodded, then turned back to gaze out the window. As he did so, a chill went through me. Unconsciously his hand had gone to his side to ascertain that his gun was in its shoulder holster.

That did it. No chance I'd be taking off from Nicosia with Mueller. I'd talk to Jeanne tonight. If I couldn't persuade her to come home with me, I'd find a way to bring her back by force.

In the last minute my perception of the day had changed from one of optimism to an ache in my gut. I recalled telling Richards on the phone that I planned to play it by ear. Well, the ears had it, but the music wasn't sweet.

For the moment there were only two things I could do. Try and warn Jeanne that Mueller was probably on to her. And two, not let Mueller suspect that I was on to him.

It might only provoke him into hasty action. He wouldn't try anything as long as we were in the Helio, and if he killed her on an island like Cyprus, he'd have to kill me, too, or he'd never get away with it. If we didn't alarm him he'd probably be happy to wait until he got to Beirut where he'd have contacts and a means of escaping after the act.

So for the moment there was a kind of stalemate. As long as everyone stayed calm and didn't blow his – or her – cool we might all survive to lead long, productive lives. Suddenly Mueller turned toward me, stabbing his fat finger at the map. "Mykonos," he shouted, then pointed at an island up ahead.

From this height one could see two features clearly, the small whitewashed harbor town and a black line on a pale smudge which seemed to take up about a quarter of the island: the airfield. I held up my thumb to tell Mueller he'd picked a winner.

"Very delicious lobsters!" he shouted. "I was here with my family two years ago."

His words got to me. It was already well into lunchtime. How great if we could forget everything for a few hours, call a truce, fly down and have a nice lobster meal like three friends. Only one problem; with no customs available on Mykonos we'd have to notify the police of our arrival. Then we'd have to make another stop in Rhodes and go through the whole official Greek rigmarole over again.

Well, I thought, so much for the joys of unfettered flight. Leaving fantasy land I returned to my ruminations about Mueller. How might he have guessed about Jeanne? Then it struck me. Of course. He could have recognized Drucker. An adventurer, a mercenary the same as Mueller, they might have run into each other before. Or if not, Drucker's name and photograph were probably in the files of every sub rosa organization from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. Seeing him with Jeanne could have put the idea in Mueller's head.

Whether right or not, it was time to prepare the way for our overnight stay on Cyprus. Pretending to adjust the navcoms, I unobtrusively turned off the master switch. Every instrument on the panel immediately dropped dead. Mueller noticed nothing. Tapping him on the arm I pointed at the gauges. His eyes grew round and he looked at me.

"Must be something with the electric circuits," I shrugged. "Nothing serious. Probably a loose connection."

We flew on a ways while Mueller regarded the instrument panel thoughtfully. "No radio?" he asked after a few minutes.

"No radio. No nav. Nothing."

"The engine. Will it stop?"

I shook my head. "Magnetos."

He seemed to relax at this. A few minutes later I turned the master switch back on and the alternator off. A red light came on, indicating that the alternator wasn't working. Nudging Mueller I pointed out the light. "Just lost our alternator," I told him cheerfully. He turned pale. "Nothing serious," I assured him. "I'll have it fixed on Cyprus." Lean-

ing back, I pointed out the warning light to Jeanne. If she made a comment I was glad I couldn't hear it.

I turned the switches back on as we approached Rhodes and gave a position report before heading out over the empty sea in the direction of Cyprus. Another couple of hours and if all went well I'd never see Mueller again. He'd learn about it tomorrow morning, when he'd awaken to find Jeanne and me gone.

Cyprus is a fritter-shaped island. My own guess on its origins is that billions of years ago it was dropped from a ladle into the boiling hot sea. Judging from the irregularities of its coastline and the relief, I'd hazard the opinion that it was a corn or apple fritter. As the planet cooled, the fritter got older and harder and dustier until it became the island of Cyprus as we know it today.

"Larnaca Tower, this is three eight niner. I have your airfield in sight." And so I did, except it looked more like a construction site than an international airfield.

Warning me about work-in-progress on the field, the Tower cleared us to downwind. Ten minutes later we were on the ground taxiing past bulldozers and laborers on our way to the parking area.

"End of the line, folks," I told my passengers. "Departure time tomorrow morning."

There was a moan from both Mueller and Jeanne. "How long will it take to have it fixed?" asked the German.

"Depends on what's wrong."

Jeanne, climbing down, looked at me suspiciously. "We don't need the alternator to fly," she told me. "And anyway, it's only intermittent. Each time it goes back on the battery charges again."

I felt really proud of her. My lessons had paid off. "You're right," I told her. "If it was daytime I'd take the chance. But it's getting late. We wouldn't reach Beirut until after dark. We'd be needing lights and nav equipment and the radios for night flying. All this would draw heavily on the battery. With the alternator malfunctioning it would be too risky, especially heading into a war zone."

There was nothing they could do but accept the situation. While going through the formalities I had a chance to speak alone for a moment with Jeanne. I warned her that Mueller might be on to her true identity. "Jeanne," I said, "as long as we're stuck here for the night, why not at least enjoy it. I'll get out the Honda and we'll ditch Mueller and have some fun. How about it?"

Jeanne looked at me and I could read in her eyes and the lines in her face the strain she was under. I wasn't making things easier for her by keeping her here overnight. I hadn't even taken into account what this delay might be costing her. And now I was asking her to forget everything and laugh it up with me. But there was the chance, the barest chance, that she'd welcome the opportunity to relax for a while and damn the rest.

"All right, Chet," she said softly. "But will Mueller buy it?"

"He'll have to." The German was coming toward us. "Herr Mueller," I greeted him

gaily, "Miss Benson has agreed to go riding with me on the Honda. Why don't you go ahead and have a good night's sleep and we'll meet you here at ten tomorrow morning."

Now it was Mueller's turn to study my face carefully. "And if tomorrow I come here and you have already left?"

"A good question. I could ask you the same thing."

I looked blandly at him. It was pure bluff on my part, but it seemed to work. Obviously he wasn't absolutely sure it was Jeanne.

"All right," he agreed. "At ten o'clock. Will they repair your plane?"

"They have no facilities here for that. As long as we fly during daylight hours we'll make it all right."

I went to unload and fuel up the Honda. When I arrived in front of the terminal a few minutes later, Jeanne was there with her bags. As the Honda couldn't accommodate her suitcase, she left it in an airport locker and rejoined me, her flight bag slung over her shoulder.

As usual, Jeanne had certain difficulties climbing aboard the Honda because she always wore skirts, not pants. Holding the bike steady I felt the familiar sensations, so long missed, of Jeanne arranging herself on the seat behind me, pulling up her feet, covering her knees with her skirt. Her hands held to my waist. "Okay," she said, just like I'd heard her say it a hundred times before.

It was a balmy evening and I was seized with a terrific desire to get away from civilization, to get lost with her, to find ourselves in the middle of nature. I wanted to drive away until we found an untraveled country road with no noise except the birds and bees. We'd leave the Honda and walk far from the road and lie down in the grass. I'd take her in my arms and never move again.

"Where are we going?" asked Jeanne after we'd traveled a few minutes.

"I don't know."

"I've got some phone calls to make. I was supposed to be in Beirut by now."

"Forget the phone calls. Forget Beirut."

"Chet..." Her voice sounded like a threat was to follow. I braced myself. But when she spoke next there was no threat. "Please, Chet," she said with an exhaustion that I'd never heard before. "Please."

Stopping the Honda I turned and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Will the local Hilton be all right?" She nodded, half smiling, trying not to cry. "Then let's see what Larnaca has to offer." Turning the bike in the direction of the coast, we were soon in the town.

Where armies have passed and governments have changed and new rulers installed by force, the hotel trade is bound to suffer. What saved Larnaca was that it had been a simple place to begin with. We were the only guests in the best hotel in town which was nothing to write home about even before the Greco-Turkish war. Halfway across the

island in Nicosia, according to the waiter who served us dinner, we'd have had the entire Hilton to ourselves.

During dinner I had a hard time getting Jeanne to look at me. She must have known that if our eyes met she'd read in mine things she didn't want to see. At least for the immediate present I could tell she didn't want me to reopen any claim on her.

The meal seemed to last a thousand years, but at last we were alone together in our room. Without pausing, Jeanne went into the bathroom and turned on the bath. Coming out she still didn't look at me. I hadn't felt more awkward and ill at ease since I was a teenager, before ever making love to a woman.

She removed her jacket, then her shoes. Since I couldn't just stand there staring at her, I took off my windbreaker and hung it in the closet. She pulled her woolen sweater off over her head. Beneath it she wore a beige-colored silk shirt. The silk clung to her breasts and I could make out the outline of her bra.

"Jeanne?"

"What?" Her voice was low, almost inaudible.

I went over and took her in my arms. At my touch she seemed to stiffen. I tried to kiss her mouth but she turned her head away. I took her by the hair and gently forced her face toward me. As she tried to resist I kissed her cheeks, her eyes, her hair, her lips, pressing her body against mine.

Suddenly her resistance was gone. Her body seemed to fuse with mine, burning, hungry. "Chet." Embracing, kissing wildly, we fell upon the bed. By the time we returned to our senses the bathtub, too, had overflowed.

We lay naked in the darkness, my arm around her, her head on my shoulder. With my other hand I got reacquainted with my wife's body, the curve of her breasts and nipples, the swell of her thighs, the soft dark mound of Venus which I'd visited again after so long with so much accumulated love and desire. Unable to get near enough I squeezed her and hugged her and ran my fingers over her hair and face, yelping as she bit them playfully.

"You never were the sort of guy who rolls over and falls asleep," she remarked dryly.

"How would you know about those jokers?" I asked, biting her nipple.

She laughed. "From books."

Jeanne, Jeanne, if only she'd come back with me. We could leave tomorrow in the Helio. No one could stop us. We'd leave at the crack of dawn, before Mueller was even awake. But I didn't have the courage to ask her, afraid that if I proposed it outright she'd give me an outright rejection. Somehow I'd have to work up to the subject gradually.

"What did you think this morning when you saw me in the elevator at Athens?"

Jeanne chuckled. "You were the last person in the world I expected to see. I was on my way to Control looking for Drucker. When I saw you I panicked."

"You'd have panicked more if you knew who was standing next to me bristling with

guns.”

“I’m glad I didn’t. I didn’t know you’d gotten involved. Anyway, I think you’re wrong. I don’t think Mueller suspects who I am.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing he wouldn’t have let us out of his sight a minute.”

“Have you looked out through the keyhole lately?”

“Maybe.” Jeanne laughed. “Second of all, how could he imagine you’d carry it off so coolly, learning I was alive one minute and taking off with both of us for Beirut in the next.”

“You could be right. If I’d first learned you were alive just then I couldn’t have done it. Wouldn’t have. In fact, now that I think of it, Mueller doesn’t even know I suspect him of gunning for you. So as far as he’s concerned there’d really have been no reason for me not to introduce you as my wife.”

“Except insofar as I’m traveling incognito and might have asked you not to.”

“Jeanne,” I said, “come back with me. Now. Tomorrow. I don’t know what you’re involved in and I don’t care. I just don’t want to lose you again. It could be forever the next time. I wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

We lay in silence. A minute passed, then two. I realized Jeanne didn’t intend to reply. A sick feeling of anger and dread started to fill me. Finally she spoke. “Chet, I have to make a couple of phone calls. They’re kind of private. Would you mind?”

I got up without a word and went into the bathroom. The water in the tub was still warm. I drained some out and got in. Not wanting to intrude on Jeanne’s goddamn privacy I took my time. Too bad the hotel didn’t supply the guests with plastic ducks. I could have used one to pass the time.

Some minutes later, while drying myself, my eye fell on Jeanne’s overnight bag. I unzipped it and looked inside. Most of the space was filled with yards of pale pink nylon gauze. I pulled it out and held it up, recognizing the nightgown I’d given her for her birthday a year ago. I buried my face in the filmy material. It smelled of Jeanne, the familiar perfume of my wife who never used perfume. My beard stubble caught at the delicate fabric. I could hear her complaining, Hey, ouch.

There was no gun, just a flowered plastic envelope containing the only two cosmetics Jeanne ever used, lipstick and nail polish. The lashes around her green eyes were too dark and thick to need mascara.

How old was she now? How well I knew. Just two months ago, thinking her dead, I’d celebrated her thirtieth birthday. I’d celebrated it alone with a whiskey bottle in a London hotel where I’d been on a job. She was five years younger than I, But she wasn’t looking good. She wasn’t looking good at all. I had to get her home and feed her up and get her to take some rest.

Hearing no noise on the other side of the door, I opened it and looked into the bedroom. Jeanne wasn’t there.

I dressed as fast as I could and headed down to the lobby. The place was empty except for a man behind the reception desk. I asked him if he'd seen my wife go out. He shook his head and pointed across the lobby. I turned. Jeanne was waving at me from a telephone booth.

"*J'arrive,*" she called, and the glass door shut. I sat down in one of the armchairs to wait and a few minutes later she joined me. "Didn't you see my note?"

I admitted I hadn't looked for a note. "I'd have come looking for you anyway," I told her.

"You don't trust me," she pouted.

"No way."

Jeanne laughed. Just then the phone in the booth rang. Giving my hand a quick squeeze, she hurried to answer it.

When Jeanne returned after her telephone call she seemed tense. We went back up to the room and got into bed, but this time she pushed me away when I tried to hold her. Even so I could tell her heart was beating faster than usual. Not inclined to talk, she asked me to turn out the light.

"Not just yet. I want to show you something. Taking out a photograph of Louise, I showed it to her.

"Do you know this woman?"

"Yes."

"I was hired to find her and Mueller was probably hired to kill her. And to kill you."

"It won't be easy finding Louise."

"He seems to know where she is. At least he knows she's in Beirut, which is why he and I were going there."

"I doubt she's in Beirut. Anyway, her job is done. If she's gone to Beirut it's for her own personal reasons, because she likes it there."

"She'll like it a lot less when Mueller arrives. I'd like to know how we can reach her and warn her."

"I'll find her and tell her," said Jeanne.

"He'll kill you both. Two birds with one ball."

"What difference?" Jeanne sighed. "My job will be over soon anyway."

I could hardly believe my ears. "Jeanne," I said, "I'll make a deal with you. I'll come and help you finish up whatever you're doing in Beirut, adopt any cause you're involved in. Or I won't interfere at all if you don't want me to. Just let me stay near to protect you. But you have to promise that when it's over you'll come home. Back to France."

Turning on my side I put my arms around her and tried to draw her close. But her body didn't yield. Her expression was like stone.

"Okay," I said. "No deals. Just promise me that whatever happens in the next few days we're going to spend the rest of our lives together."

I waited for her reply. One minute went by. Then two. I lay back on my pillow. "Lights out?" I said, switching them off. In the darkness I heard her head turn, felt the kiss on my naked shoulder. When I awoke the next morning, Jeanne had disappeared.

## Chapter 8

My first thought was to get to the airport. I glanced at my watch. Seven thirty. After a nearly sleepless night I'd dozed off at about four o'clock.

The Honda was missing from the hotel garage. "At what time did Madame take it?" I asked the attendant. He shrugged. He'd come on at six o'clock and had seen no Honda then.

That meant that Jeanne had left between four and six o'clock. Dammit. In this day and age even an hour's head start was a lot of getaway.

Arriving by taxi at the airport I spotted the Honda parked outside. Without pausing I went straight to Control. There was a large ledger on the counter where pilots sign in and out. I spun it around toward me. Who had departed this morning? Under today's date three movements of aircraft were noted. And there it was, just as I'd feared. Type: Bell 206, Callsign: Juliette Tango, Provenance: Rhodes, Destination: Beirut.

"This Bell 206," I asked the controller, "how many were on board?"

"Two persons."

"Was one a woman?"

"Yes. That lady you arrived with yesterday." He was looking at me curiously.

"Ah, very good," I said. "Yes, Miss Benson. Very good."

I filed the flight plan for Beirut, then went out to get the Honda. Mueller was standing next to it. My shock at seeing him suddenly turned into joy. It was only through him that I'd be able to track down Jeanne and Louise quickly.

"Mueller," I said, "Jea... Miss Benson has decided not to come with us. We're flying on alone."

Mueller looked surprised. "She is staying here? In Cyprus?"

"That's right. She doesn't like lightplane travel. She's going on by airliner."

"I see," said Mueller thoughtfully.

"Ready to go? I'll just grab a cup of coffee in the snack bar and be with you in a minute."

The fuel truck arrived at the Helio the same time we did. I loaded the Honda aboard and a few minutes later we were airborne. As we climbed out I glanced at my passenger. Mueller looked pensive. I hadn't been able to deduce anything from his reaction to the fact that Jeanne was remaining behind, so I thought I'd try and draw him out.

"Find a good hotel last night?" I shouted over the engine's roar.

"I didn't sleep in a hotel."

“Where then?”

“In the passenger lounge at the airport.”

“You did?” I tried to make my voice sound casual.

“You may be interested to know, Mr. Tschetter, that your wife left Larnaca early this morning with our friend Ali.”

“My wife?” I repeated dimly.

“Your wife Jeanne, alias Carol Benson.”

“Ah?”

We had reached 9500 feet and for the next few seconds I busied myself trimming out the plane while I thought things over. The cards hadn't exactly been laid on the table, but in spite of this we'd all had a look at each other's hand. It seemed a good time to speak frankly.

“How come you didn't try to stop her?” I asked Mueller.

“She didn't go through the passenger lounge. I only saw her as she was boarding.” He omitted to mention that his guns were safely locked up inside the Helio. “But if I had any doubts about her identity, they were then erased. Plus your little error in names this morning.”

Okay. So what now? Did I return to Cyprus, ditch Mueller, and go on alone to Beirut? To stop him from tracking her down, however, I'd have to kill him or get him arrested. But if I were to turn him in for running guns I'd end up getting involved myself and might just as well kiss Jeanne goodbye. The best thing to do would be to stick with him, not let him out of sight. It wouldn't be easy, though, because Mueller no longer needed me. He knew what Jeanne looked like.

“November three eight niner, Larnaca.”

The crackling voice in the earphones made me start. “Go ahead.”

“Position?”

“Ten miles out.”

“Beirut reports an aircraft missing in its FIR. They received a MAYDAY message but were unable to make radar contact. Are you ready to copy?”

“Affirmative. Go ahead.”

“Beirut estimates the aircraft went down at longitude 34°50, latitude 34°10. Type of aircraft is a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter. Intentions ditching at sea. As you are flying the same route, kindly keep a lookout for the missing aircraft and its occupants. Report any sightings on this frequency or 121.5. In the meantime, remain on this frequency and report leaving my FIR.”

“Roger. I'll keep a lookout.” It was incredible with my heart thumping like a jackhammer that my voice could come out so calmly. “Will you let me know if and when the aircraft is located?”

“Of course, three eight niner. I'll keep you advised.”

I turned toward Mueller. He was looking ahead impassively. Without earphones he

hadn't heard the message. In any case, no use asking him to help search. He'd be all too happy if Jeanne was lost at sea.

My intense concern over Jeanne's plight suddenly translated itself into pure loathing for this sack of *Kartofeln* sitting next to me. I wouldn't even give the bastard the satisfaction of hearing what had happened. I swore to myself that if I learned between here and Beirut that Jeanne was dead, I'd dump Mueller out of the Helio, consequences be damned.

Still, without my passenger's help, I'd be able to survey less of the sea. A person sitting in the right-hand seat would see better in that direction than I could. Then an idea came to me. I'd tell Mueller an airplane had gone down, not a helicopter. I'd tell him Larnaca had requested we join the search. It would be ironic if Mueller himself were to save Jeanne's life.

"Mr. Tschetter," the German said when I'd told him the news, "from the time we arrive in Beirut until the end of my life I will never, never again set foot in a small aircraft. Tell me when I am to start looking."

"Thanks, Mueller." Somehow I couldn't help feeling a twinge of sympathy for the man.

Handed over to Beirut Control I requested a lower flight level but they refused. I told them I wanted to help in the air/sea rescue operation. They replied "affirmative" and told me to squawk a transponder code for radar identification. Once identified, they told me I could descend to an altitude not below 1500 feet.

I had about three hours of fuel I could devote to the search before having to head for land. I knew the delay wouldn't sit well with Mueller, but there wasn't much he could do about it. You can't bump off your only pilot unless life has lost all its meaning for you.

At 1500 feet I had a good view of the water for about three miles on each side. To minimize the effects of drift, I began my first leg into the wind for ten miles, then made a crosswind leg of five miles, which was nearly double my estimated effective visibility, then flew the following leg on the reciprocal compass heading of the first.

I doubted many other aircraft were out searching. Even under the best of circumstances the sea is a big place and there are never enough aircraft available for the purpose. It didn't seem likely Beirut was going to mount a large rescue operation for a private aircraft when they lived in a constant state of war readiness. Most likely they had one or two aircraft at most in the effort, but I didn't catch sight of any.

An hour passed. Then two. Mueller, swearing occasional Teutonic oaths and gnashing his teeth, kept his eyes glued to the surface of the sea. Suddenly he stiffened and pressed his face against the window. I tipped my right wing downward to help him see. "What is it?" I shouted.

He relaxed back. "Nothing. I thought I saw ... No. Nothing."

I didn't want to take his word for it. Turning hard I circled the spot. There was

nothing floating on the water that I could see. Then I realized what he'd seen. The shadow of the Helio racing along on the surface. Checking the compass heading and the time, I continued with the search.

The earphones crackled. It was Beirut asking me to squawk ident. I pressed the translucent green button on the transponder and watched it flicker as it was interrogated by the radar.

"Three eight niner, climb to and maintain five thousand feet on heading one five zero."

"Roger," I replied. "Have they located the missing aircraft?"

"The search is terminated. Report level at five thousand."

"Roger. Three eight niner."

I was too pissed off by Beirut to think of informing Mueller that the search was terminated, but he noticed the sea swells growing smaller as we climbed. Turning to look at me questioningly he saw my face set in anger. "What is happening? Have they located the missing aircraft?"

"Yeah," I told him. "They found it. No survivors. It was the Jet Ranger, the helicopter my wife was in."

"*Um Gottes willen*," said Mueller, not so astonished that he didn't study my face carefully. I knew he'd seen that my wrath and frustration were genuine and that this would help him swallow the lie. If he believed Jeanne was dead it would simplify matters tremendously.

"I am very sorry for you," he told me. "Truly I am." His chest rose and fell as he sighed deeply. "*Naja*," he said with a philosophical wag of his head.

I reported level at five and was vectored in the rest of the way, number two for landing behind a Boeing 747. With all my worries, the sight of the enormous airliner descending in the opposite direction so close on our left impressed me and I pointed it out to Mueller, knowing he'd appreciate it, too. Jeanne, my darling, I prayed inside. I hope you're alive because this goddamn life has its wonders and its moments.

The first thing I did once on the ground was head for Control to ask about the missing helicopter.

"I don't know," the flight briefing officer on duty admitted. "The search was suddenly cancelled. Perhaps the helicopter was found. It's now a military matter, not a civil one. I have no information. None at all. I'm terribly sorry."

Whether I believed him or not, there was no point in trying to get any more information out of him. I'd told Mueller to wait with the Helio and now I headed back to get him. Unloading the Honda I hid my gun in the saddlebags, then requested that the bike be brought around to the front of the airport for me. Mueller would have to take his own chances bringing his guns through customs.

I couldn't help noticing there were a lot of armed soldiers walking around on the airfield. They weren't neat looking like the French sharpshooters patrolling the terraces

at Nice Airport, but loose-limbed young men with olive complexions and flashing white teeth. They carried their bulky automatic weapons with studied carelessness.

There was no difficulty getting through the formalities and a short while later Mueller and I found ourselves outside in front of the terminal.

“Well, Mueller,” I said, “this looks like the end of the road for us.”

“What are your plans?”

I lowered my eyes. “First I have to see about Jeanne, arrange to have her body shipped home. And I also have to find Louise. It’s what I’ve been paid to do.”

“That will not be necessary,” said Mueller. “I have spoken to Mrs. Rolland and she says you may consider your duties are at an end.”

“I’ll have to hear it from her,” I told Mueller. “Until I receive orders to the contrary, I’m still working for her. And there’s that bonus. I didn’t come all the way here just to turn back empty-handed.”

The German glared at me. “You are a hard man, Mr. Tschetter. Your lovely wife is dead and you think only of business. My advice to you is to forget about this whole affair and go back to France. It will be much healthier for you.”

“Mueller, old boy, is that a threat?”

“You can consider it so. Until now it was only Ali trying to kill you. Now...” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. His meaning was clear enough.

We parted without shaking hands.

As Mueller walked along the line of taxis to the head of the row, I started up the Honda and was ready to pull out at the same time as his cab. The road between the airport and city was clean and well-kept, with modern, industrial buildings along the way.

Just before entering the city I saw a forest of strange-looking pines consisting mainly of tall trunks holding up flat, green parasol branches. At the foot of these natural pillars lived a people whose main occupation in life, besides washing and hanging up clothes, seemed to be bearing children and arms. I guessed it was an encampment of Palestinian refugees.

Entering the city, Mueller’s taxi pulled up in front of a hotel on Hambra Street, a pleasant, crowded boulevard lined with shops and cafes. Probably the most famous part of Beirut, in a few weeks the world would see it on their television screens a mass of charred rubble. This street, this city, this country, would be destroyed in a civil war between the two religious factions making up this young, vital, but ethnically torn land.

The hotel Mueller had chosen was a far cry from the usual tourist ones. Given the state of my “wardrobe,” I was the last to care. I waited until my former passenger had checked in and entered the elevator, then walked across the small lobby. Mueller’s car stopped on the sixth floor. I asked for a room on the sixth and after a brief, curious glance, was given one. From the sounds I heard as I walked in, I realized my room shared a wall with Mueller. A thin wall. As my neighbor flushed the toilet the pipes

throughout the entire floor were set banging for nearly a minute.

I don't mind living simply, but the strings of lint covering the wine-colored, .05 mm pile carpet, and the fact that every fixture in the bathroom leaked, gave this place a particularly depressing air. However, I had the feeling I wouldn't be there long enough to let the surroundings get me down.

In the meantime I examined the layout. While the bathroom and three walls of the bedroom were windowless, one wall gave onto a small terrace which looked onto a narrow, central court. The patch of sky above was blue, the ground below covered with discarded litter as if the court was intended as a nearly inexhaustible garbage can.

Looking down I was surprised to see a face just below me, grinning up. The face belonged to a man who was painting the wall directly beneath me. He was a thin man with an evil grin and large white teeth. After greeting me in Arabic, he remained gazing upwards, his brush dripping paint, until I withdrew my head.

I wandered back into the room, prepared to stay there as long as Mueller remained in his. A few feet, away, on the other side of the wall, his telephone rang. I had little trouble hearing as the connection was bad and he had to shout. He was arranging to meet someone somewhere in a half hour.

Fine. Taking out my gun I checked it and put it back into my shoulder holster. I was just reaching for the doorknob when I heard a key softly turning in my lock. Stepping quietly to one side, I drew my gun. But no one entered. I put my ear to the door. Footsteps going down the hall. Unbolting the door I tried the knob, but although it turned it didn't open. There was no keyhole on my side of the door. Apparently someone had locked it from the other side.

Picking up the phone I listened for the voice of the operator. There were lots of clicks and creaking noises – the same sounds you get on French phones – but no voice. I signaled impatiently with the receiver buttons. Nothing. After a minute the phone went completely dead.

Just then I heard Mueller's door open and close and the key turn in his lock. He was going out. There was no time to lose. Heading for the terrace I looked over the railing and right into the face of the Arab painter who was looking up as if he'd decided to pass the day waiting for another glimpse of me. I waved some of the Lebanese money I'd exchanged at the airport.

*"Je veux descendre,"* I told him, hoping he spoke French.

Whether he did or not, he understood what I was waving and took action so promptly that I wondered whether he had a brother who locked doors and cut phone wires for a living. In a second he'd pulled the scaffolding up to where I could step onto it, then lowered us at dizzying speed down to the trash level.

*"Par ici."* He grinned as I handed him the bills. Going through the door he indicated, I found myself in the hotel's goods delivery entrance where I'd chained my bike a while earlier. I unchained it and climbed aboard. Rounding the corner a moment later I

was just in time to see Mueller driving off in the back seat of an elderly Mercedes Benz.

The traffic was pretty hectic but affected the Mercedes more than my bike. It took several minutes to work our way out of the center and through the “misery belt” of Palestinian settlements which circled the city. Signs along the way indicated we were on the road leading from Beirut to Damascus, Syria. Not knowing how far Mueller eventually planned to go, I was glad I’d taken the time to refuel the Honda at Larnaca with some 100 octane aviation gas.

Without him seeing me, I got close enough to Mueller’s car to ascertain that the two young men sitting in front were Muslim types wearing khaki shirts. I had the feeling that any resemblance to army personnel was purely intentional rather than official.

Even so, the getup wasn’t exactly a teenage fad. You didn’t have to be in Beirut five minutes to know something was hanging in the air. You could cut it with a knife. Armed Fedayeen in paramilitary clothing were walking openly in the streets. The tension was high. It would take just one spark to set off an explosion which would blow this place sky high. Little did I realize how soon that spark was destined to come.

The air was warm, the temperature up in the seventies, the sky now overcast. It was starting to get dark. As we left the city the traffic became frenetic. Cars passed each other whenever their speed permitted, even on a curve or hill. It was the responsibility of the oncoming vehicles to melt out of the way.

We were some distance out of town in some hills when I noticed the Merc’s brake lights flash on. I slowed down and a moment later saw the car turn off the road. I let it get well ahead before making the turn myself. It was a dirt road and the driver of the car turned on his lights in order to see the bumps and ruts. I kept my lights off.

A few minutes later I could make out the shape of a large barn or building up ahead. Mueller’s car stopped in front and I could hear the doors slam as the men got out. I’d already turned off my engine and now pushed the Honda behind a tree, taking a flashlight out of the saddle bag. It was very quiet, and as I made my way forward through the dry brush I hoped no one would hear my footsteps.

As I got nearer there was enough light to make out the shapes of two guards standing near the door where Mueller and the others had entered. Circling the building, I saw another door at the back. Only one man was guarding it. Despite the gathering darkness I could see the submachine gun slung from a strap over his shoulder.

I wanted very much to get into the building, but the risk of being seen was too great. Any noise would give the alarm. As for the guards, it was possible that while they were trained in shooting and in hand-to-hand combat, discipline wasn’t one of their fortes. Maybe if I waited a while the guard in back would get lonely and go off to visit his friends around at the front, or wander off to take a leak.

From where I stood I could see both entrances. As far as I knew no one had moved in from behind to block my way back to the Honda. It was a good enough place to wait, so I sat down and leaned my back against a tree.

It wasn't long before the guard at the rear left his post for whatever reason and walked around the building toward the front. It was dark enough now for me to risk a run across the open ground. Even if someone saw me and opened fire, I'd probably be able to seek cover in the woods and get away under protection of darkness.

But no one saw me and a moment later, gun in hand, I was through the door and inside a dingy, foul-smelling hallway. At the far end of the hall, light from beneath a door gave a faint illumination. I could hear voices. Mueller was surely down there. I started forward, but had not taken three steps when the door at the end of the hall opened sending a shaft of light in my direction.

Fortunately for me, the person who'd opened the door didn't come through it immediately. Standing with his back to me, he was still talking to someone in the room. I had about two seconds to disappear. Turning, I saw a door and without hesitating opened it and went through.

Even before switching on my flashlight, the room I'd entered communicated its horror to my ears and nostrils. The scrambling of rats and the rustling of cockroaches, the smell of human excrement and sweat, of damp, moldy walls, of vermin and dead flesh. I had to force my unwilling hand to switch on the flashlight.

My eyes, my gun barrel, swept the room with the beam of light. I was prepared to see armed men, dead men, anybody and anything but what I saw. For what I saw was such a nightmare that nothing could have prepared me for that.

She was lying on a table a few feet away. I hadn't even known it was a woman, but when my flashlight beam went over her I could hear her groan and begin to plead, "No, no."

"Jeanne?" I whispered, shining the light toward the floor, so as not to alarm her, so as not to see what she'd become. "Jeanne darling?"

"No," repeated the broken voice. "*Allez-vous-en.*"

Whoever it was, I had to reassure her, so great was her fear. "*Je suis un ami,*" I said. "I've come to take you away from here." I stood over her looking down. Her face was a mass of bruises, one eye nearly swollen shut. She could open the other just enough to see me dimly. Even so badly disfigured, and with her hair cut off, I was sure it wasn't my wife.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Jeanne's husband, Chet."

She began to sob. "Thank God. Thank God. Listen." But for a moment she couldn't speak. I went and locked the door, then returned to her side.

"Are you Louise?"

"Yes."

Her hand clung to my sleeve. Her other hand, badly mutilated, lay by her side. She was naked and horribly bruised. Burns, probably made by cigarettes, covered her body. Whatever information someone had wanted to get from her, they'd not had an easy time

making her talk.

Although Louise was shivering uncontrollably from fear and cold, I hesitated to cover her with my jacket for fear of causing her more pain by touching her wounds. Flashing my light about the room I saw a pile of clothes in one corner that looked as if they might belong to her. I was about to go and see when there were footsteps in the hall outside.

Someone was trying the door. Turning off my flashlight I warned Louise not to make a sound.

I could hear the voices of two men. The one who spoke first had a Middle Eastern accent. "She has locked the door from the inside."

"Break it down." It was Mueller's voice. I removed the safety from my gun.

"Must you question her more?" asked the Muslim. "Absolutely?" He didn't sound happy.

"That's what I'm here for."

"But she is already unconscious. Anyway, she has told everything."

"Break down the door."

There was a half-hearted bumping against the door, then more footsteps, a voice speaking Arabic. For a moment there followed an animated discussion in that language. Finally the first voice resumed in English. "My friend says she is already dead."

"Then how did she lock the door?"

"She did not. He has locked it himself from the outside when he saw she was dead. Only he has since lost the key."

"Then break it down. I will not leave here until I see the body," said Mueller sternly.

There were more footsteps. "Kurt, come. You can do that in the morning. We have enough information. I want to finish briefing you."

It was Terry Rolland's voice. The "housekeeper" from Othe had come a long way. Given Mueller's professional interest in Louise's death, I didn't expect him to give in to her urging, but apparently Terry's words did the trick and I heard them walking away back down the hall.

Waiting in the darkness, I strained my ears to hear. A door closed at the far end of the hall, then footsteps came rapidly back our way. "Don't make a sound," I whispered to Louise.

There was a light knock on the door. "Madame, madame." It was the Muslim again. Again the door was tried. "Madame, I will not hurt you. Let me in."

At the sound of his voice Louise made a stifled scream and pulled on my sleeve so hard she nearly put me off-balance. "Louise, shh," I tried to calm her.

"Madame, don't be afraid. I will not hurt you. If you are able to escape tonight through the window there will be no guards to stop you. Madame?" When there was no reply the man paused a moment, then I could hear his footsteps disappear down the hall. We were alone.

I switched on the flash. “Did you hear that?” I asked Louise. She didn’t reply. Her grip on my sleeve had relaxed. Was she unconscious? Then I saw her lips move. “Listen...” she said.

“Not now. I’ve got to get you out of here.”

“I can’t. I can’t move. You must listen. Everything depends...”

Her strength seemed to go and she lapsed into silence. I bent over her. “Tell me,” I said.

She sighed deeply, then began to speak. “You must warn Jeanne and the others. Tell them that I was tortured until I told them what they wanted to know.” She paused again and I could tell she was fighting tears, trying not to break down completely. “Tell Jeanne, tell Ali, that they know.”

“Know what?”

“About Baalbek. About the meeting. They know everything.”

“What meeting?”

“The Middle East summit. Tomorrow afternoon at Baalbek. In the military settlement there.”

“Are they planning to stop it from taking place?”

“No. They are planning not to stop it. They are going to let it happen according to plan. And then they are going to ... I don’t know. Perhaps destroy them all, all the leaders, Egyptian, Israeli, Syrian, all, all. Or kidnap them. You must warn Jeanne.”

“Where is she?”

“There is a camp between Beirut and Baalbek, in the hills. If she is not there, then Ali will be. They forced me to tell them where it is. But they cannot go in there. It would cause a great fight and the Christian city of Zahle is nearby. The fight would bring in the Falangists and set off a civil war. But anyway, they do not need to start trouble. On the contrary, they desire no trouble. They want the meeting to take place.”

Whatever “they” had in mind was of secondary concern to me. My first interest was protecting the lives of Louise and my wife. Mueller wasn’t into politics either, I didn’t think. I was the only obstacle between him and his paycheck, not the Falangists.

“Where’s the camp?”

“Do you have a map?”

I felt in my pocket for the map I’d picked up in the lobby of the hotel. It was a touristic map with few details. Putting my arm around Louise I helped her to a sitting position, but she was unable to see the map through her injured eyes.

“The camp,” she told me, “is north of Zahle, in the hills.” I located Zahle on the map. It was on the Baalbek road, not very far from where we were now. “Just before you reach Zahle, at the milestone three kilometers from the city, you will see an electricity tower. There is a road there leading into the hills. After a mile on this road you will be stopped. Then you must tell them the password.”

“What is it?”

“It depends what day it is tomorrow.”

“Sunday, April 13.”

“Oh, my God,” she moaned. “Tomorrow is the day. You must hurry and warn them. Don’t stop for anything.”

“Tell me the password.”

“The password is Heliopolis. Heliopolis. The ancient name for the city of Baalbek. It is also the code name for the rendezvous in Baalbek of all the Middle East leaders. Go. Go now and warn them.”

“First I’m taking you to a hospital.”

“But that is impossible. They are everywhere. With me you will never get out of here alive.”

“Your guardian angel said if you escaped out the window he’d see to it that nobody would be around to stop you.”

“Guardian angel.” Louise’s voice sounded incredulous. “No, he is going to kill me himself. He doesn’t want the others to learn that after they had finished torturing me, he returned and raped me.” She began to sob. “Did you hear him?” she wept. “He thinks I will trust him anyway.”

“Louise,” I whispered, “don’t. I’ll get you out of here.”

Investigating the window, I found that there were external shutters and they were locked. If Louise’s rapist wanted to kill her here, or let her attempt to escape and then kill her outside, he’d have to remember to open the shutters. I decided that if he hadn’t done so by the time I’d gotten Louise into her clothes, I’d get us out the way I’d come in.

“Do you have a car?”

“A motorcycle.”

“Then I cannot go. I don’t have the strength.”

“I’ll get you to a hospital,” I assured her. “I won’t leave you like this. First of all, you have to get dressed. I’ll help you.”

The idea of this small, everyday task didn’t frighten her as much as the idea of escape. Once dressed I hoped she’d have more courage. I helped her into her blouse, supporting her in a sitting position while reaching around her with both arms to do the buttons down the front. I could feel her heart beating very fast. She wasn’t going to die, not if I took her out of there before Mueller and Co. got to her.

It took me a moment to find her skirt which had fallen down behind some boxes. The skirt was long, reaching down to her feet. “I was at the Casino in Maameltain playing roulette,” she told me. “They forced my car off the road as I drove back to the city.”

“What part do you have in this affair?” I asked her, letting her rest a moment from the exertions of putting on the skirt.

“I have known Jeanne for many years. My husband is an important man in the French government. Officially he could not know about the Middle East summit. No governments outside the states involved were to know so as to avoid political pressures

on the participants. However, certain information was necessary, and Jeanne was told to reach my husband secretly and unofficially through me. I was then asked by him to deliver certain verbal and written messages on his behalf, which I did.”

“Your own husband asked you to come? He let you get involved in this danger?”

She hung her head. “He did not know I would return to Beirut. In fact I should not have come back after once being here. My assignment finished, I was to return directly to France. But I love to gamble and I had wanted for so long to visit the famous Casino of Beirut. So I sent him a cable saying I would stay on a few more days. And *voila*. In spite of all my efforts to remain anonymous and hidden, early this morning they found me.”

Now that Louise was dressed I wanted to get out of there, but she begged me to let her rest some more. “I will tell you about Jeanne,” she said.

I knew she was more terrified to escape than to stay in the room with me there and I hoped her courage would come back soon. All the same, I wanted to hear what she’d tell me about my wife.

“First of all, I suppose you know about her life before she met you.”

“Not all that much. She’d lived in the Middle East.”

“Jeanne was born in Egypt. In Cairo. Her French father, first a businessman, later held different high level diplomatic posts. Jeanne lived her first twenty-five years in different Middle Eastern countries. She knew everyone. That is how she has been able to arrange this summit.”

“Jeanne? Jeanne arranged it?”

“Of course. Do you know who her brother is? Did she ever tell you?”

“No. I didn’t even know she had a brother.”

“A half brother. He is the real head of the PLO, not that chap you read about in the newspapers and see interviewed on television. No, Jeanne’s brother is the real power behind the Palestinians.”

“What’s his name?”

“He has many names and no name. You will never hear one spoken. You will never see his photograph in the press. Like Jeanne, he has never allowed his photograph to be taken.”

“Then maybe that’s who Mueller’s really after.”

“Mueller?”

“A guy you don’t ever want to meet. He happens to be down the hall.”

“So it was because of her contacts, particularly because of her half brother who has always been very fond of her, that Jeanne’s role came about. It has been clear for some time that all the Middle East powers have been anxious for peace. But the American Secretary of State had made such a muddle that another stalemate had been created. A new way was needed. Jeanne, whom everyone knew and trusted, and who has great influence on her half brother, was the medium through which they were all able to agree

on a secret summit away from the super-powers, away from the international press and politics. The person responsible for delivering the Israelis to the summit was my husband. Do you recall those five gunboats which disappeared mysteriously from a Marseilles dock a few years ago and arrived shortly after in Tel Aviv?"

"Your husband?"

"My husband."

"But tell me. Why did Jeanne have to pretend to me that she was dead? Why did she stage that scene at the morgue?"

"*Ah, ça,*" said Louise. "I don't think it was only a matter of security. It was a personal decision of Jeanne's. I never understood. You will have to ask her yourself."

As she finished speaking a sound at the window caught our attention. I switched off the flashlight and helped Louise move to a corner of the room where someone looking in wouldn't see her. Taking a tight grip on a metal bar I'd found in a trash heap in another corner, I took a position to one side of the window. As we waited breathlessly, the shutter outside opened with a squeak.

"Madame?" whispered a voice. "Madame, are you there?" As I watched, a hand came through a broken pane and slowly turned the inside bolt. The window swung open, letting in the fresh night air. I couldn't help taking a deep breath. "Madame, where are you?"

I found a coin in my pocket and tossed it to the other side of the room. Hearing the noise, the young man leaped lightly down from the window sill. He paused a moment, straining to see in that direction. In the dim light from outside I saw the reflection of a knife blade in his hand. Raising the bar I lowered it with all my force on the back of his skull. Down he went. I leaned over him and saw his eyes were closed. He was out.

"Come, Louise," I said, starting for the window. But she wasn't with me. I stopped and looked back. She was kneeling over the unconscious man, the knife in her hand. "Louise, don't!" I whispered frantically, but it was too late. Holding the knife like a dagger, she brought it down sharply on the exposed throat. A geyser of dark blood shot into the air, followed by a horrible gurgling sound. Getting to her feet Louise wiped at the blood on her face.

"*J'arrive,*" she said quietly.

I climbed out first, pulling the traumatized woman after me. "Wait here," I told her. "I'll just take a look around."

I started toward the corner of the building but hadn't gone more than three steps when the dark figure of a man rounded it in my direction. He saw me at the same time. As he hesitated in surprise, I threw myself forward. We went down in a tangle of punching arms and knees.

My main object was to keep him from making any noise and giving the alarm. Choking him was one method, but he broke my grip and started to struggle to his feet. I wasn't going to let him get away and managed to catch hold of one leg and drag him

back down. Crawling up his struggling body, I pinned him down with my thighs and a series of blows, most of which he managed to fend off.

He was younger than I, wiry and supple as a reed. He had armed friends a few yards away. I didn't have time to spare. I pulled out my gun and held it to his head. "Lie still or I shoot." I felt his body freeze.

I got to my feet and dragged him up by the hair, my gun at his head. "Come with me," I said. Pushing him ahead of me, with Louise following, we headed into the woods. In a few minutes I had located the Honda. Keeping my pistol aimed at the Arab, I got the machine started.

"Get on." Louise hesitated, her long skirt not ideal for the job at hand. She started to seat herself sidesaddle, but I stopped her. "Bunch up your skirt and straddle the seat," I told her. In her weakened condition the chances were better she'd stay on that way.

She did as she was told. "Okay," I said to the Arab. "Start moving." With him running ahead of us we followed the dirt road back the way I'd come. Just before reaching the main road I stopped the Honda. The only way to keep the boy from giving the alarm was either to make him run ahead of us all the way to Beirut or tie him up here. The first idea being more tempting but less feasible than the second, I tore some strips of cloth from the hem of Louise's skirt and bound him hand and foot.

A few minutes later we were on the road heading back to the city. As we began to enter it I stopped and consulted the map. It showed a hospital near by, *Hôpital Hotel-Dieu*. I hoped it was as European as its name sounded. In any case, for better or worse, that's where Louise was going.

It was nearly midnight by the time I'd left the Frenchwoman at the modern, well-equipped hospital and turned the Honda back up the Beirut-Baalbek road. It took me less than an hour to reach Zahle. Three kilometers earlier I'd passed the electricity transformer mentioned by Louise and had seen the road leading from there into the hills. But I'd also seen a car parked just off the road and could guess it belonged to my old friend Kurt Mueller.

I hadn't even slowed down, just gone right past without reducing speed. I'd get back to the turn-off again, but coming from the other direction. It wasn't one of the more impressive strategies ever devised, but there weren't many safeguards available to me besides a basic foxiness and the normal anonymity of the motorcycle rider under cover of darkness.

Unfortunately for me, the overcast had broken and the moon was shining through. Even from a distance the transformer was unmistakable in the moonlight. Approaching it I slowed down imperceptibly. Anyway, I hoped it was imperceptible in case anyone had their eyes on me.

All was just fine, except I'd underestimated one thing. Mueller's sixth sense. As I slowed further, preparing to make a wide right-hand turn off the road, that car I'd seen earlier – *shit* – it was right behind me. As I tried to turn there was a blare of horn nearly

under my right elbow. I glanced back and a glare of headlights half blinded me. Throwing my weight to the other side, I give the Honda gas and shot ahead, the Mercedes right after me, forcing me into the opposite lane.

Headlights were coming, the Merc and its blaring horn behind, on one side trees and on the other an irrigation ditch all along the road. Fly the plane, I was shouting to myself. Fly the plane.

It amounted to that. Twisting the accelerator I felt the bike leap ahead. As it left the road it took to the air. I recall thinking: The Merc is no chopper. It can't follow me. But Hondas don't fly either, and I prayed desperately that wherever we landed it would be on something flat and firm. In the split second it took to sail across the ditch and land on the other side, I was giving myself flier's advice: Whatever the fucking machine does wrong, correct for it.

The field hadn't been plowed yet or I'd have been up to my hubs in earth. As it was, I landed on rough but firm dirt and took off across the field. At any moment I expected a rifle bullet to plow into my head.

But when I got to the far limit of the field and still had all my faculties and the use of my limbs, I slowed down and looked back. Where the hell had they gone? Then I noticed cars stopping some distance away on the road. Cautiously I motored back, found a track bridging the irrigation canal, and regained the main road.

Approaching the small crowd of motorists on the roadside, I had to smile. The Merc had tried to fly after me and had landed in the ditch. It probably hadn't even gotten airborne. So much for Sunday pilots. As I passed the wreck I could see the German standing beside it looking dazed. Beeping my horn I waved at him before accelerating and flashing past. A moment later I'd turned left up the road leading to the camp.

The road was rough but no problem for the bike. After going about a kilometer I stopped and hid the Honda behind some bushes, continuing on foot. A few minutes later I came up to a wooden barrier in the road.

Five or six muffled shapes suddenly materialized around me. Each shape was armed with a machine gun and all were speaking excitedly in Arabic. I raised my hands to assure them I meant no harm. One of the men stepped forward. "*Passe-parole*," he said.

"Heliopolis."

There was more excited talking, then the man nodded. "Okay," he said. "*Suive-moi*." I fell into step behind him with three guards, their weapons at the ready, bringing up the rear.

It was a late hour to come calling. The camp had turned in. Even Fedayeen sleep sometimes, I told myself. Ali must sleep. The only people who didn't seem to get much shut-eye these days were Mueller and Tschetter, poor bastards. Following the guard up the steps of a low wooden bungalow, I couldn't help yawning.

"You wait," said the guard, closing the door behind me. In the room was a bare desk

and two chairs. I sat down in a chair. During the half hour I waited, I dozed off for a few seconds now and then.

The abrupt opening of the bungalow door and the switching on of an electric light snapped me back to wakefulness. Ali was standing in front of me. He didn't look happy seeing me there. "Who told you the password?" he demanded immediately.

I couldn't blame him for being surprised and angry having me turn up on his doorstep in the middle of the night. The quicker I put him at ease concerning my presence, the quicker I'd be able to see Jeanne if she was here.

"Louise told me the password."

He looked surprised, then suspicious. "Where have you seen her? She is not in Lebanon.

"She's in Beirut. She came back a few days ago and was caught by Mueller's friends. They tortured her until she told them about the meeting tomorrow – today – in Baalbek."

It was a lot of bad news to receive all at once from an outsider like me. For a long moment Ali didn't speak. He glared at me while sorting out the implications of what he'd just heard. "What meeting?" he said finally, deciding to give away nothing.

"The Middle East summit."

"What do you know?" he demanded.

"Louise overheard them. She thinks they plan to let the meeting take place, then kill all the leaders. Or maybe they plan to hold them hostage until their demands about a Middle East settlement are met."

"Why have you come here?"

"To warn you. To have you call off the summit meeting. To warn Jeanne about Mueller. Is she here?"

"That is no business of yours. She is no longer your wife. Her life is dedicated to the cause of the Palestinian people."

"Look, Ali," I said, feeling my temper rise. "I've gone through a hell of a lot to get this information to you. Louise was nearly tortured to death trying to keep your secrets from your enemies. But now they know about the meeting and you've been warned. If you don't believe me, then let me talk to my wife."

Instead of answering me, Ali turned to one of the guards and said a few words in Arabic. Approaching, the guard frisked me, finding my gun. He handed it shamefacedly to Ali who shouted at him, apparently for having failed to search me earlier.

"Is Jeanne here?" I repeated irritably. "Is she in the camp?"

"No."

"Tell me where to find her."

"You will not find her. You are not going anywhere."

"Then at least assure me that you'll do something to stop the disaster from happening at Baalbek."

“I will do nothing. The summit will take place as planned.”

I stared at him in complete exasperation. “Then you don’t believe me? You don’t believe they’re going to blow the thing sky high?”

“No, they will not.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I intend to do it myself.”

I looked at him incredulously. Was that their plan? Or was it just Ali’s private idea. “Does Jeanne know about this?” I asked him.

“That is none of your affair.”

Engulfed by a blinding anger, I launched myself across the desk at him. My movement caught both Ali and the guards by surprise, and before anyone could get off a shot Ali and I were rolling around on the floor, too close together for anyone to risk firing. I’d forgotten everything, the place, the time, everything in my desire to get even with this bastard whose crazy plans had taken Jeanne from me.

“Where is she?” I heard myself shouting as I pounded him with my fists.

But if he answered, I didn’t hear it. Something heavy came down on the side of my head, plunging me first into light, then into darkness.

## Chapter 9

Looking back, I guess it was the only way I could have gotten any sleep that night. When I awoke I was in a different room, no desk, no chairs. I was lying on the floor in semi-darkness, the only light sunlight streaming in through chinks in the plank walls.

Trying to move, I found my feet were bound together and my hands tied behind me. Head throbbing, my mind dragged itself out of unconsciousness like a shipwrecked man crawling out of the sea. When it was halfway up the beach I realized I wasn’t alone. Someone was kneeling next to me.

“Chet, are you awake?”

“Jeanne?”

“I just learned you were here.” Her voice was low and urgent. “I don’t know how you found this place, but I haven’t time to talk now. You’ll be safe here until I get back. I’ve brought a woman to look after you.”

Her lips touched my forehead. “Jeanne...” But she was gone.

*Goddamn* it! Half out of my mind I wriggled and strained at the ropes. No use. They were tied fast. Then the sound of water drops falling into a basin and suddenly, from behind, a cool towel was laid on my brow. Struggling around into a seated position I saw an old woman crouched next to me. “Help me,” I begged her. “*Aidez-moi.*”

She made clucking sounds. “*Calme-toi,*” she said.

Calm down? That was the last thing I could think of doing. “Listen,” I said to her in

French, "I've got to get out of here. You've got to help me. It's a matter of life and death."

"Madame has said you must stay here."

"Madame is full of shit. Lady, get a knife, quick. Cut these ropes."

Although she made no move to help me I could see she was troubled about refusing me. An Arab woman her age would find it hard to take the orders of a woman over those of a man. But it was more than that. She looked worried, too. What about? Surely she didn't know about the Baalbek summit so there was no point trying to exploit that problem in my favor. So I tried the only other card available.

"Madame Jeanne is in danger," I told her. "Big danger. They're going to kill her."

"*Je n'en sais rien.*" She turned her face away.

"It's Ali," I insisted. "Ali is crazy. Ali. *Fou. Tu comprends?*" I wished I could tap my head to show her my meaning more graphically.

She sighed, nodded, shrugged. "He is *fou*," she admitted.

"Jeanne is my wife. Ali's going to kill her. Jeanne does not know this. I must warn her."

She flinched perceptibly at my words, but said nothing.

"Yes, he's going to kill everybody. Explosives. Boom. Do you understand?"

"Explosives," she repeated slowly as if this word had meaning for her.

"He's going to blow everybody up. Boom." I wasn't sure if I was making it up or not. He'd said as much the evening before, but he might have been speaking metaphorically. On the other hand there was Othe. It must have been Ali who blew that up. "Explosives, dynamite, TNT."

It was a wild attempt to alarm her, and when I saw my words were getting to her, I pressed harder. "Haven't you seen the explosives?"

She nodded very slightly. "Oui."

"Then you know! You know my wife Jeanne is in danger. Ali is crazy. He's going to blow everyone up."

She turned and looked hard into my face. I had the feeling she was trying to determine whether or not to trust me.

"Jeanne is my wife," I repeated softly. "You must help me save her."

I was sure I was touching some raw nerves. Things were going on around her of which she didn't approve. It was obvious she didn't like Ali but did like Jeanne. For a long moment she looked at me without a word.

"You are her husband?" she asked.

"Yes." My voice was desperate, pleading.

"This morning many boxes of explosives were moved in this camp. I saw them. My son saw them."

Jesus. Then my assumption was right. The bastard really was going to do it. "Listen, Ali is preparing to blow everything up. He's crazy. My wife is in danger."

“I have always feared trouble from this crazy man,” said the old woman. “I have warned Jeanne, but she doesn’t listen. She is always rushing, as if time is short. But time is long.”

“Not now it isn’t,” I told her. “If I don’t get out of here right now there won’t be any time left.”

“I can get you out. Wait here.”

Wait! The word nearly made me laugh aloud. If I hadn’t been tied hand and foot I’d have been long gone already. But my relief was enormous. At least there was hope.

She was gone about five minutes, returning with a large bundle. Pulling a knife out of the pack she began to saw at the cords around my wrists. “What day is this?” I asked her.

“Sunday.”

A moment later my hands were free. Taking the knife I started on my ankles. My watch said it was after one o’clock. The meeting at Baalbek was scheduled to take place in the next few hours. There might still be time to do something if I could just get out of here.

“Where has Jeanne gone?” I asked her.

“She has not yet gone. Her car is still here. Ali is not in the camp. I do not know where he is.”

If Jeanne was still in the camp there might be time to warn her that Mueller could be waiting for her down on the road. Whether or not she was aware of Ali’s plans to blow up the Baalbek summit didn’t matter as long as she wasn’t along when he tried. What mattered now was that I seemed to be the only person who did know and who wanted to prevent that disaster from happening. If I could get out of here and reach the military settlement where Louise had said the meeting would take place, perhaps I could warn them in time.

The old woman had brought me some khaki clothes to wear, including a military cap. The pants were too small, but the shirt fit. I put it on and the cap. With the sunburn and stubble I’d accumulated I looked as much like a Palestinian commando as I ever would.

Now the only problem was getting out of there.

“You will walk out of the camp with me,” said the crone. “I know the way.”

“There must be a guard outside the door.”

“Only one. Most of the camp has gone to the rally at Tal al Zaatar. The others are at lunch. You must immobilize only this one.”

“How?” I was open for any suggestion.

“I will ask him to come inside,” she said. “Then you hit him with this.”

From her shawl she produced a length of the ubiquitous iron bar. I was beginning to feel the scrap metal business would be a flourishing one in Lebanon. Before I’d gotten my head together for the job at hand, she was knocking at the door, calling softly in Arabic to the guard outside.

A few seconds later a key turned in the lock. I stepped back as the door opened and the woman, gesturing excitedly, motioned him inside. He came in with his submachine gun at the ready. Raising the iron bar, I brought it down on his skull. His falling body hadn't even touched the floor before the old woman had deftly removed his weapon.

"Take it. Put the strap on your shoulder. Come."

We stepped through the door into the sunlight. I followed her as she walked across the camp, neither fast nor slow. As she'd said, there weren't many persons about. Nobody seemed to take any notice of us. It was a small encampment from what I could see, military in aspect, not a refugee camp. The only clothes I saw drying on the lines were khaki and blue denim.

"Her car is gone," my companion whispered.

Shit. If Jeanne drove out of here now it was damn likely Mueller would be onto her when she reached the main road, if by now he'd gotten another car. I prayed the Honda would still be where I'd left it. Had I suspected the welcome I'd be getting from Ali on my arrival here I'd have done a better job of concealing it.

As we entered the woods and made our way through the brush parallel to the dirt road, the old woman turned to me. "If anyone sees us now," she whispered, "pretend we are lovers." Cackling quietly, she lifted her black, full length shawl over her head. I had to admit it would be difficult to tell her age in a clinch, but I hoped Arab credulity wouldn't be put to the test.

Thank God, the Honda was right where I'd left it. I'd have hung onto the disguise for what it was worth, particularly the submachine gun, but the old lady had such a grip on that that I had to let her take it. Then my motorcycle helmet replaced the cap. As I was going to wear my windbreaker there was no need for the shirt either. Giving her back the clothes, I was thinking Mueller would have his old familiar target after all.

A few minutes later I was easing the bike onto the main road near the transformer. No sign of the German. A glance down the road showed me the rear end of the Merc protruding from the ditch, a guard squatting next to it. Perhaps because it was lunchtime the road was deserted. It was a warm, humid day with some clouds and a threat of thunderstorms in the air. As I swung onto the road and picked up speed, the wind felt fresh on my face.

A few miles along the road I passed the military airfield of Rayak. It was the nearest airfield to Baalbek, and if any of the participants in the summit were arriving by plane, this might be the place they'd land. From here they could reach Baalbek by road or helicopter.

Driving past I could see some French Mirages parked on the tarmac and a couple of Fouga trainers. For a moment I played with the thought of going there instead of continuing to Baalbek. I could ask to speak with the camp commander and give him my information. But what if even he wasn't in on the plan? Perhaps the heads of state weren't coming through here. Tel Aviv was a short hop by chopper and so was Dam-

ascus. The Arab chiefs might first be landing in Damascus instead of Rayak.

No, I decided, it wasn't worth the risk. I might end up being interrogated by some flunky and never even get to see the camp commander. Time was getting too short to mess around.

While thinking all this over I'd unconsciously slowed down. Now, from behind, came the sound of frantic honking. I turned to see a Renault 404 packed with Lebanese trying to get by. But the cacophony wasn't caused by just one horn. Behind the Renault was another car also wanting to pass. With traffic coming from the opposite direction, they wanted me to squeeze to the side of the road.

Not wanting to get squeezed into a ditch, but agreeable to letting them by, I accelerated until the opposing traffic had gone past, then moved as far to the right as possible. As the heavily loaded Renault started to pass, the car behind it, a Volkswagen, started to overtake it on the outside. Both drivers were honking as if their speed depended on their decibel count.

I turned to see who was in such a hurry in a VW. Good God. Mueller. What was he doing behind me? Was he late to the party? Thank God at least for that.

After passing me the two cars fought for position, with the VW pulling ahead. Either Mueller hadn't seen me, masked as I'd been by the other car, or he had more important business down the road. In any case, his lead wasn't going to last long. The Lebanese in the Renault had no intention of being outdistanced by a foreigner. Now that their car had managed to accelerate, they advanced on Mueller like a juggernaut.

I too had reasons for not wanting Mueller to get ahead. Jeanne was probably not far up the road, a fact he could have learned from the guy guarding the Merc. In which case he'd know my whereabouts, too. As the 404 started to overtake him, I started to pass the Renault on the outside. It was a pretty breathless moment given the oncoming traffic, but I pulled ahead of the Lebanese a whisker length ahead of an oncoming car.

The three vehicles were now zipping down the road at top speed, this time with the Honda in the lead and pulling away. I wasn't sure what Mueller's big hurry was all about, but it didn't take long to find out. Up ahead was another car. It was going at moderate speed and I signaled my intention of overtaking it. Drawing nearer, I saw through the rear window that the driver was alone, that it was a woman – Jeanne.

Signaling wildly to keep the Lebanese behind me from barging into me as I caught up to Jeanne's slower car, I drew level with her window. At the same moment the car behind, too impatient to wait, began to pass, honking like mad. Jeanne turned her head in alarm at the noise, recognizing me with a start of surprise.

"Mueller," I shouted, "he's behind you." Her eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, to the road ahead. She pressed down on the accelerator.

With her new thrust of speed, the Renault on the outside was unable to get ahead. I felt like a sandwich filling, Jeanne on one side of me, the Lebanese on the other. Up ahead a car was coming in the opposite direction. The choice had to be made now –

either I pulled ahead of Jeanne or dropped behind. If she didn't manage to stay ahead of the German he'd overtake her and shoot her through the window or run her car off the road. Ahead of her I could do nothing to prevent this. By staying behind I might be able to block him. It would mean the end of my bike and maybe a couple of lives, but Jeanne would get away.

The choice was ridiculously easy. As I dropped back, the Renault managed to pull ahead of Jeanne.

We went on like this for a few more miles, past a dingy, moldy barracks where old men and ragged children looked with unchanging expressions at the passing vehicles. Palestinians? Probably Bedouins. Mueller, still back a ways, was gaining slowly. At all costs I had to stay between his car and Jeanne's.

I didn't know Jeanne's intentions but figured under the circumstances she'd head for the military camp. Up ahead on the right were some buildings on a hill that looked as if they might be part of it. Then I saw a sign saying BAALBEK.

Suddenly Jeanne clutched her head. She glanced back. I saw what had happened. She'd overshot the entrance to the camp. Now it was too late. If she stopped and tried to turn around, Mueller would catch up.

It was time to think for her. On my left I could see the towering ruins of the Baalbek temples. Accelerating, I shot past Jeanne and signaled for her to follow me. We had to get where there were other people, foreigners, tourists. A moment later I screeched to a dusty stop at the entrance to the ruins. With Jeanne right behind me, I ran toward the ticket window.

"Two," I told the man, pushing some money at him.

A crowd of guides surrounded us. "You," I said to one, pulling him after us.

The entrance to the Baalbek complex was a long, dark tunnel leading out onto a stone meadow of pillars, walls and steps. For a moment we paused, almost blinded by the sunlit stone. But where were the goddamn tourists? There weren't any. It was still lunchtime.

Taking Jeanne's hand, I started to run across the great court, up the steps of the long vanished Temple of Jupiter. Mueller and his high powered rifle couldn't be far behind. The guide followed after us, running and puffing with the exertion. I stopped to let him catch up. "Exit," I said to him. "Where's the exit? *La sortie?*"

Puzzled, he pointed back toward where we'd entered. The entrance was also the only exit. The whole area of ruined temples was surrounded by a high enclosure. And we were inside it.

It seemed unlikely that Mueller hadn't seen or guessed where we'd gone. If I'd had any doubts about that, a glance toward the entrance removed them. The German was there, blinking like a groundhog in the sunlight at the end of the tunnel, clutching his rifle case.

Except for our guide, nobody else was in sight but a couple of tourists, too few to

deter Mueller. By approaching them we'd only put their lives in danger, too. The guides were out of sight at the other end of the tunnel. Then I noticed another figure, Terry Rolland. With a nod at Mueller she took a position at the tunnel mouth. I didn't have to think hard to guess what she was carrying in her large handbag.

We started to run again, the guide still behind us. "Do you see those six pillars?" he shouted. "They are the only ones left standing from the Temple of Jupiter. Twenty meters high ... entablature ... nearly six meters high."

I looked back. Mueller was walking up the temple steps. He didn't seem to be in a hurry. Jeanne tugged at my arm. "This is the place," she was saying. "The Temple of Jupiter. I was supposed to meet Ali here at two thirty." She looked at her watch. "It's almost that now." She glanced around as if expecting her friend to pop up from behind a stone.

"Listen, Jeanne," I said. "About your friend Ali."

"What about him?"

"Only that he plans to blow up the Baalbek summit."

She stopped dead in her tracks. "How do you know about the summit?"

"Louise. They made her talk. How do you think I found you?"

"I don't know. Where's Louise?"

"I left her in a hospital in Beirut. Terry Rolland and her goons tortured her until she told about the meeting at Baalbek. They're planning some sort of coup, but Ali says he's going to beat them to it, blow up the whole thing."

"Nonsense. Why would he do that? After all our work."

"Maybe blowing up Othe gave him an appetite for that kind of thing. Anyway, I heard him say it with my own ears, just before one of his boys knocked me unconscious. Your former nanny helped me escape. By the way, the code name is Heliopolis."

She looked stunned. Obviously this news was highly disturbing to her. "Why would Ali tell you the truth?" she said at last. "He must have been trying to confuse you."

I was losing patience. "C'mon, Jeanne, try and believe me. Too much is at stake. What time is the meeting?"

She looked at her watch. "The participants begin arriving at three o'clock at intervals of ten minutes. Some of them must already be on their way."

"We've got to keep them from landing. We've got to get out of here and warn the military. Do you have a gun?"

"I left it in the car."

As if this realization had taken away her last strength, Jeanne sank down on the bottom of a flight of stone steps. I saw how tired she was, her eyes circled with shadows. Two creases I'd never seen before had etched themselves on either side of her mouth.

I turned to the guide. "Stay here with Madame," I told him. "Don't leave her for a moment. Tell her about the ruins."

The guide nodded. As I climbed the stairs, which led up onto one wall of the ruined temple, I heard him beginning to tell Jeanne the history of Baalbek from pre-Roman times onward.

I'd lost sight of Mueller and that was bad. I had to find him before he found Jeanne. I had the feeling he'd ducked around the right-hand side of the temple base and with any luck I'd be able to look down on him from the top of the wall. With the luck on his side he'd be able to pick me off with ease from any one of a number of available crannies.

And then I spotted him – about ten feet below me. He'd just fitted together his rifle and was hesitating over which way to go. I didn't wait for the decision. Jumping from the upper ledge, I landed on top of him, sending both of us sprawling. His rifle went clattering across the stones.

For a second we were both stunned, but as I grappled for him he tore himself away with surprising agility and started crawling toward his rifle. I threw myself after him, flattening him just before his groping fingers closed on it. As we struggled, I realized he wasn't the tub of lard I'd judged him to be. A lot of muscle was hidden under that flab.

If I let him get that rifle, Jeanne and I could kiss the world goodbye. So could at least one Middle Eastern monarch, a couple of presidents, and a smattering of prime ministers. Mueller, too, had plenty at stake.

I tried to hang onto the mass of fighting flab, but a blow to the side of my head momentarily stunned me. With a heave and a lurch Mueller crossed the space between us and the rifle. His fingers were closing on it as I grabbed a loose stone and, flinging myself forward, brought it down with all my force on his fat hand. He released the weapon with a yell and I grabbed it.

Staggering to my feet, I pointed the rifle at his head. "Mueller," I shouted, "put your hands in the air, put them against that wall. Mueller ..."

Suddenly I realized why I was shouting. Because a terrible noise was everywhere, a terrible wind and chaos. Something was rising from the fields below, rising up over the ruins like a great bird of death.

I grabbed the rifle and started running back around the temple, looking for Jeanne, for the stairs where I'd left her. She'd said she had a rendezvous with Ali. Only instead of coming by road, he'd come with the Jet Ranger.

I found the steps, but Jeanne was no longer there. Racing up them, three at a time, I arrived on the top of the wall. At the other end of it, in the air, hovered the helicopter. Jeanne was running toward it along the wall. I pointed the rifle at the figure in the front seat and fired. Jeanne was almost to it when suddenly it bounded up perhaps twenty feet into the air. A window on the side opened and someone returned my fire. I saw Jeanne go down, but didn't know if she'd been hit or had ducked.

Diving for protection behind some stones I took aim. The helicopter was moving off fast. Good. I didn't want to bring it down on the temples, but I had to bring it down.

Marksmanship isn't my game, but I know where to hit a chopper. Right in the rotor.

Only with the caliber I was using I aimed for the small rotor in the rear. My second shot ripped it to pieces. Suddenly rudderless, the Bell started to gyrate. I shot again.

It was the fuselage I hit this time, but not just the fuselage. My bullet ripped through the side of the chopper and connected with the massive quantity of explosives Ali had stored aboard. The explosion was immediate and incredibly violent. Bursting with a mighty whoomp, a million bits of helicopter and human flesh rained down upon the fields, the road, the military camp.

Even at this distance the percussion nearly knocked me headlong on top of Jeanne. We clutched each other, looking back at the empty air where seconds earlier had been a helicopter.

“Jeanne, are you all right?”

“Yes. What time is it?”

“Five to three.”

“Thank God,” she said. “They’ve already taken off from Tel Aviv. They’ll be en route from Amman and Damascus. They’ll be warned to turn around. Oh, Chet. All that work, months of work, for nothing.”

It didn’t worry me. Something else did. “Why were you running for the helicopter?” I asked her. “Did you want to go with him? Or try to stop him?”

She looked at me in surprise. “I don’t think I really know. We’d worked together for so long. I was going to see what he was up to and play it by ear.”

I grabbed her and hugged her to me. No other answer could have rung so true. Both of us had forgotten about Mueller. Now suddenly he appeared in front of us. Next to him was Terry Rolland. Mueller was pointing a pistol at Jeanne’s head.

“Come on, Mueller,” I said. “You’re not going to kill her now. The party’s over.”

“He was hired to do a job,” said Terry. “He won’t be paid unless he does it.”

Mueller removed the safety catch on the gun. I couldn’t believe he was going to kill Jeanne now that everything was finished. Making no sudden move I rose to my feet, pushing Jeanne behind me. “Listen, Mueller, how about if I pay you *not* to kill her.”

“How much?”

I told Jeanne to reach in my back pocket. She did, bringing out a dirty handkerchief. “No, the other pocket.” This time her hand came forth with a wad of bills, the money Drucker had paid me to fly her to Beirut. “Eight hundred dollars,” I told Mueller. “It’s not Monopoly money. Take it and let her live.”

He looked disdainfully at the bills. “Eight hundred dollars is nothing.”

“It’s better than life in prison or a firing squad. Look behind you.”

The German turned to see a half dozen or so soldiers coming into the compound.

“I think you’re right,” he said, taking the money and slipping his gun behind a rock.

“Then it’s a deal? You’ll let her live?”

“It’s a deal.”

“You, too, Terry”

“I’m no killer, Chet. You know that.”

“Then let’s all get out of here,” I said. “Where’s our guide? We could use some guidance at this point in time.”

We found the poor bastard crouching down behind some rocks. Dusting him off, we set his needle back to the beginning. Pre-Roman times. As the lecture started, Mueller, pleased as punch, took out his microfilm camera and started photographing the ruins.

“Amazing,” he said, looking at the Temple of Bacchus. “I must come back here some day with my family.”

It was a happy group of “tourists” that made their way out of the compound, past the noses of the Lebanese soldiers.

## Chapter 10

Back in Beirut a few hours later, Jeanne and I stopped by the hospital to see Louise. Having just come out of a drug-induced sleep, she was beginning to remember things and get nervous. We were able to assure her that everything was all right. It was what she’d been waiting to hear. Meanwhile her husband had been notified and was arriving that evening from Paris.

As Jeanne was feeling very tired, we decided to stay overnight in the hospital ourselves so that she could be examined by a doctor. We were told, however, that several emergency cases had been brought in, more were expected, and that no beds would be available except for these.

In the near distance we’d heard a lot of gunfire and asked what was happening. They told us that a busload of Palestinians returning from a rally in a refugee camp called Tal al Zaatar had entered a Christian sector of Beirut and had opened fire on a church. In retaliation several persons in the bus had been killed or wounded by the Falangists.

It wasn’t our war. We took a room in a hotel by the seafront and went to bed early. Sporadic firing continued throughout the night. We didn’t know it then – no one did – but it was the beginning of a civil war that within a year would turn this city into a burnt-out shell.

The next day we were stopped by three roadblocks on the way to the airport. I’d wanted Jeanne to fly back to France in an airliner but found all the flights were booked by tourists wanting to flee the country. I was told not to wait, to get my aircraft away from Beirut Airport as soon as possible.

So Jeanne came with me in the Helio. That night we lay in each others’ arms in a hotel in Athens.

There were so many questions to ask her. She explained how she’d gotten involved, or reinvolved, in the problems of the Middle East. Until her father’s death she’d lived her whole life there. It was while on her way back to Europe that she’d met me. Our

marriage had given her the opportunity of blotting out all the past, of beginning a new life far from the pressures of living in countries always at war or on the brink of war.

Only it hadn't worked. Shortly after we'd moved to Paris the past caught up with her. "Would you believe I'm the half sister of one of the PLO leaders?" She laughed ruefully. "My father ..." But she didn't tell me the story.

Jeanne was still feeling tired so we spent another day in Athens hoping her strength would return. It had been exhausting, she told me, working for Palestinians with their adolescent love of guns and helicopters, terror and intrigue. Ali was a case in point. He'd met Mrs. Koundiotes, had become her lover on her lonely Greek island, and had radicalized her. Unknown to her husband she began supporting the Palestinian cause with money and everything else at her disposal, including her husband's helicopters and their house in Othe, which she'd had him buy purely as a center of intrigue, then had ordered destroyed when it became infiltrated by the enemy.

"Ali blames you for her death," Jeanne told me.

"Then Mueller did kill her?"

"Yes. It changed something in Ali. Thinking back, I suppose it was at that moment he decided to blow up the whole thing. He wasn't normal when he picked me up in Cyprus. He pretended to ditch at sea because he wanted to keep the helicopter and never go back to Io Sirena. We heard you join the search, but we never knew what happened after that."

"I think Beirut never took the distress signal seriously. They couldn't have been very upset thinking Ali lost at sea. Besides, they have other problems these days."

Although we'd never been in Athens together before, except for our bizarre encounter at the airport a few days earlier, unsurprisingly neither Jeanne nor I felt like doing any sightseeing. We spent the days in our room or lying by the hotel swimming pool. Once or twice I considered looking up Koundiotes and giving him my condolences and an explanation of what had happened. But probably he'd been able to piece things together for himself by that time.

I had an idea of the part my wife and Louise had played in the Baalbek drama, but I still wasn't clear about Heidi.

"Poor Heidi." Jeanne sighed. "She never did know what was going on. I think Ali got carried away by his role and told her some stories to have her come along. Then she came down with the flu so it was a good reason to leave her behind. Heidi's husband was a businessman who neglected her. She loved him and hoped to do something to get his attention."

"She almost succeeded," I said. "But the way it turned out, he'll probably never even know what happened to her."

"People disappear all the time." Jeanne shrugged.

Which brought us to the question I'd wanted to ask from the beginning but didn't dare. "Jeanne?"

“What?”

I hesitated. I dreaded hearing the answer – whatever it was. My heart beating, I forced myself to ask. “Why did you disappear? Why did you let me believe you were dead?”

She didn’t reply. I watched her face, but she wasn’t looking at me. Suddenly I realized that it didn’t matter. Nothing in the past mattered. We had the future ahead of us and that was all that was important. “Never mind,” I told her. “Tomorrow we’ll be back home, and everything will be like before. Only better, because now I have this fantastic job.”

But still she didn’t look at me or say anything.

After that Jeanne seemed to fall into a kind of mood. I could have kicked myself for saying anything. We ate dinner in silence. That night in bed when I took her in my arms she was listless and unresponsive.

We left the next day for Bari and the following one for Nice. But the closer I brought her toward home, the farther from me she seemed to drift in spirit. After crossing Italy, storms obliged us to spend the night in Bastia on the island of Corsica. It was there she told me the truth.

What the bogus Doctor Kentnor had told me that day in the “morgue” had been correct. It was the real Dr. Kentnor at the American Hospital who had told Jeanne that she had leukemia, the same disease that had killed her father. The malady was nearly always fatal, the treatment brutal and terribly expensive. As we had no medical insurance, she knew that for her to go into the hospital would put me in debt for the rest of my life. And for what? To reprieve her for a few months from the early death she knew awaited her.

“If the Baalbek thing hadn’t come up just then, she admitted to me, “I don’t know what I’d have done. I hoped that by the time it was over the choices open to me would be clearer. Or narrower.”

I told her that the minute we got to Paris she’d go into the hospital. Or I’d take her for treatment to the United States. She was younger than her father. Perhaps she could be cured. She’d have the best treatment available. She’d fight it and win.

But Jeanne refused. She didn’t want to end her days having radiation treatment and chemical therapy. She didn’t want to spend her last few months in a hospital fighting a losing battle.

We flew to Nice where we found a little house up in the mountains overlooking the sea. She refused all medication with the exception of blood transfusions. Her life would be so short. With my help she wanted to live it to the very end.

In that way we passed the summer. I had stopped working to be with her and although Richards offered to lend me money, I didn’t accept. I didn’t want Jeanne to die on borrowed money.

In September I sold the Helio without telling her. There was no regret. Somewhere

along the line I had stopped loving the plane. I knew that when she died I'd never want to fly again.

My wife lived through the autumn and most of the winter. It was in a hospital room in Nice, with the Mardi Gras carnival filling the streets outside, when, holding my hand, Jeanne left me for the last time.