

The Real *Moi*

Ariel in France

(A young adult novel)

by Nina Galen



CHAPTER 1

I wasn't born with wings. My folks said they named me Ariel because they liked the name. It was on a set of books they got for a wedding present — *The History of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant. My mother had wanted a boy, so I guess I was lucky they didn't name me Will.

When I was ten my mother and father got divorced. The books with my name on them stayed with my mother. She also got custody of me, and child support.

From the beginning my name seemed wrong. There was nothing airy or fay about me, like the sprite named Ariel in Shakespeare's 'Tempest'. I was a fat baby and a pudgy little kid who grew into a tubby teen. Ariel? I was afraid to fly in airliners, afraid of heights, terrified of roller coasters.

My dad was an English professor at a university in Los Angeles. Like him, all I ever wanted to do was read. I loved reading about moon voyages and trips in balloons. Adventure was fine as long as my own feet didn't have to leave the ground.

"Go right ahead," my mother told me once when I got the chance to go horseback riding with a group of kids from school. "Just don't fall off and break your neck. I don't want to spend my life nursing a cripple."

Well, who would? Certainly not me. So instead of going riding, I stayed home and daydreamed about it. In my imagination I caught Peter Geller's galloping horse by the bridle and saved Peter's life. In my imagination he invited me to the senior prom. It was the only invitation I got.

"People like us, with good imaginations, don't take risks," daddy told me. "People who do dangerous things do them because they don't have the imagination to picture the worst-case consequences of their actions, like broken legs and necks. Most people who seem brave really just lack imagination."

"So it's having an imagination that makes people cowards?"

"That's what Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane seemed to think."

"Then not having a good imagination would help me save Peter's life if his horse got away?"

"Well, you'd still have to ride alongside and grab the horse's bridle."

"And then Peter would invite me to the prom?"

My father nodded. "If he was a gentleman he would. But if you broke your neck saving him, he wouldn't."

When I was seventeen, my father, Ethan Witemayer, got his sabbatical. A sabbatical is a free year off that college professors get every seven years. They use it to write books and travel and do research. Some probably use it to get a suntan.

My father planned to work on a huge research project he'd begun on his last sabbatical when I was ten. At that time he was still married to my mother and spent his entire year off working in the university library and hardly ever coming up for air.

"I don't believe he's at that library every evening," my mother would sometimes say. As it turned out she was right, and that's why they got a divorce.

In the years after the divorce, daddy took two trips to France to work on his project. I wanted to go with him both times, but he wouldn't let me.

"I'll take you when you're old enough to look after yourself," he told me, "and when you know enough French to help me with my book." So every summer I studied French in summer school, to be ready when the call came.

Dad's project was a book about American writers who had lived in France. My father was of European ancestry and read and wrote French and German. He spoke French well, though with a terrible accent. His plan for his sabbatical was to take his manuscript and notes, and his girlfriend Tara Alani, to France. There he would work on his book.

All at tax payer's expense, as my mother would say, because dad was able to write off his trips on his income taxes.

One day the phone rang. It was the call I'd been waiting for. "I'll be needing some help on the book," dad told me. "Do you want to come to France with us this summer?"

I could hardly believe my ears. "Do you want me to come?"

"Would I have asked you?"

It wasn't a firm, resounding yes, but I wasn't going to quibble. "Yes," I told him, jumping up and down. "I want to go with you. I want to I want to I want to!"

"You'll need a passport and your mother's permission."

"I'll get them."

"And please tell her I'd like her to waive the child support payments while you're with me. They'll be ending in a few months anyway, when you turn eighteen, so she shouldn't object, I hope."

I told him I'd tell mom, but couldn't promise anything.

In the six years since my parents got divorced, my mother hadn't taken a job. Most of the time she sat home watching TV and writing short stories. She sent the stories to dozens of magazines, but they always came back in the SASE's — her self-addressed stamped envelopes.

I was worried mom would be jealous of my going to France with daddy and not let me go. He'd never taken her there, even though going to France had been her life's dream.

So what I was counting on to sway her in my favor was her boyfriend, Marty Stone. Marty wasn't the kind of guy that turned *me* on — he wasn't even better-looking than daddy — but he was nice enough and I hoped he and mom would get married. I felt

they might like me to disappear out of their lives for a few months so they could get to know one another better and not have to worry about making noise at night when he stayed over.

Expecting a lot of objections, I popped my question to mom. We were eating boiled wieners and potato salad and watching the evening news on TV.

“Do you mind if I go to France with dad and Tara for the summer?” I asked her during a commercial break.

“No,” she said, and reached for the mustard. “We’ll have to get you a passport.”

“I was planning to work this summer anyway, and this really *is* work because dad wants me to help him with his project. And you and Marty can be alone.”

“It sounds perfect for everyone.”

“He’s found us a house in southern France for the summer, and then he’ll go to Paris in the fall. I plan to take a lot of books along and study hard and get the jump on college. Please, mom, let me. Please?”

“We’ll go to Sears tomorrow and buy you a suitcase. Your father can pay for it.”

“Which reminds me. Dad wants you to waive my child support payments while I’m in France with him.”

“Tell your father he can take his child support payments and *shove* them.”

I hesitated. “Does that mean you will or won’t waive them?”

“I don’t know,” mom sighed. “Now be quiet. I want to watch the news.”

Dad’s decision to take me to France came in time for me to tell the other kids before June graduation. Since neither of my folks ever took me anywhere, usually *I* was the envious one, listening to their summer plans. This time *they* were green. I was so excited that in three weeks I lost about fifteen pounds just by forgetting to eat.

The first person I told, of course, was Sylvia. Sylvia Fox was my best friend in high school, even though the only things we really had in common was that both of us studied a lot of French and were unpopular in school. Sylvia never called me on the phone; I always had to call her. So I think I was even more unpopular than she was.

I’d met Sylvia — she pronounced her name ‘Seelvee’ — in French class. Sylvia was petite and wore her dark hair piled up on top of her head. She prided herself on her French accent and wore clothes that she said were of French design. I admired her for daring to be different. Except in the matter of drugs, *I* always tried to conform, to dress like everyone else, to talk like everyone else. But whatever I wore, I felt awkward wearing it, and whenever I opened my mouth, dumb things came out.

Sylvia used a long holder when she smoked cigarettes. She wore heavy makeup to hide the large pores in her skin, and lots of mascara to accentuate her eyes. Mom wouldn’t let me invite her to the house, even when I promised she wouldn’t smoke. Mom felt Sylvia slept with guys and would be a bad influence on me, so I couldn’t really blame her for not letting me invite her over.

"The reason you aren't popular," Sylvia told me, "is because you like books more than people. You look down on people."

"I do not," I said indignantly. "You're my best friend. I don't look down on *you*."

"Yes you do. Your mother does, and you have the values of your parents."

"No I don't," I objected, but something told me she could be right. "Anyway, even if I did, how could I find my own values?"

Sylvia planned to major in psychology in college and minor in French, so I should have anticipated her answer. "Finding your own values would take maybe five years of psychotherapy," she said, "or one year of living in France."

"And then would I be popular?"

"Not necessarily," she smiled, lighting a cigarette, "but after a year in France I don't think being unpopular would bother you any more."

The day I told Sylvia I actually was going to France, for a summer anyway, she nearly swallowed her cigarette holder. "What will you do there?" she cried.

"Help my dad write his book."

"What a waste! If I had a chance to go to France I wouldn't sit around writing books."

"What would you do?"

"I'd *live*," Sylvia said. "I'd be the real *moi*."

"What's the real you?"

"Who knows?" Sylvia cried. "That's why people go to France — to find out who they really are."

"But I'll only have a summer. That's not enough time to find the real *moi*, if there really is one besides this one."

"I'm sure there is," laughed Sylvia. "You'd have to hurry to find it in one summer, but under that bookish exterior has to beat a human heart."

"I want the real *moi* to be an adventurer," I told her with growing enthusiasm. "I want the real me to be daring and courageous and utterly without imagination."

"Are you taking the pill?"

Her question surprised me. "The pill? You know I don't take the pill."

"I mean taking it to France."

I told her I was taking a passport but hadn't thought about the other.

"Well, think about it. You'll certainly have an affair while you're there. You can't go to France and not sleep with a Frenchman. There'd be no point in even going. And until you sleep with a man you'll never know who the real *toi* is."

It sounded reasonable, but I didn't have a prescription for birth control pills, or even a doctor.

"You can see my doctor," she told me, and wrote his name on a piece of paper.

"You know, Ariel, you're looking very good. Stay thin like that and you'll have more Frenchmen than you can shake a *baguette* at. Remember, in France you'll be an exotic

americaine. Men will go crazy for you.”

“For the *real* me or *this* me?”

“*La vraie toi*,” said Sylvia. “After a few months in France you should have a whole new persona.”

“I’d like that,” I told her. “But I really don’t think it will happen.”

“Just *let* it happen, and it will.”

That night I thought over what my friend had said. France really *would* be an opportunity to dust some of the cobwebs out of my head before college. The thought of being the same bookish, unpopular me for four more years, or the rest of my life, was depressing. But with only a summer to do it in, I’d really have to work fast.

CHAPTER 2

Daddy had learned that the dollar was low against the French franc. This meant that when we bought French currency, we wouldn’t be getting much of it for our money so whatever we bought in France would be extra expensive.

“You should buy whatever you’ll need before we leave the United States,” his girlfriend Tara told me. “Clothes, toothpaste, shampoo, everything you think you’ll need for the summer.”

“But remember,” dad said, “the dollar could go *up* at any moment. Next week it could *soar* against the franc.”

“So what should I do?” I asked, trying to keep the impatience out of my voice. “Buy stuff to take or not?”

He shrugged. “I’m an English professor, not an economist. Do what you wish.” Then he went off to the library to xerox some books to bring along.

My father was a tall man, six feet four inches, with long, freckled arms, a tall head, and blondish-grey hair. At forty-five people always took him for over fifty. He had a lot of nervous energy so he never sat still for long, even in the library, and he never looked anyone in the eye.

Tara was twenty-three, a foot shorter than dad, and had black hair that she wore pulled tightly back from her face with a fake flower clip in back. She had half-Hawaiian blood and was an art student when she met my father.

“Would you object to your father marrying a Hawaiian girl?” she asked me as we were getting into the taxi for the ride to L.A. International to get our plane.

“Not at all,” I said. “Are you guys getting married?”

“I’m hoping this trip will be our honeymoon,” she told me, moving over on the seat to give me room.

I really hoped for Tara’s sake that dad was serious about her. Tara wasn’t the reason my folks had split up. He’d had someone else before her, the lady he was seeing

when mom found out he was cheating on her. When he met Tara, who was nineteen or twenty at the time, he dropped the other woman for her.

Tara knew dad had been unfaithful to my mother and to the other woman, so I guess she knew what she'd be getting into if she married him. Like dad always said, people who trusted people and then got hurt, usually were asking for it.

Not trusting people was a big thing with my dad. He sometimes told the story about the man who asked his little son to climb a rickety ladder. The boy didn't want to, but the father assured him that if he fell off, he'd catch him. So the boy climbed up, but when the ladder broke his father didn't make a move to catch him and he fell to the floor.

"Why didn't you catch me?" the boy wailed.

"I just wanted you to know that you should never trust anyone, not even your own father."

I thought the story made a lot of sense.

"Did my father ever tell you the story about the little boy and the ladder?" I asked Tara quickly, just before daddy got into the cab.

"Where the child falls off and the father doesn't catch him? Yes. What about it?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted to make sure you knew."

Our flight over the pole to Paris was two hours late getting off the ground. Every seat on the plane was taken, so there was no room to stretch out. Daddy and I, who had long legs, felt especially cramped. Worse than that, even though we were in a no smoking section nearly everybody around us smoked. I never slept a wink the entire night, though daddy snored away, Tara asleep against his shoulder.

At Charles de Gaulle Airport we had to run like crazy to make our connecting flight to Nice, carrying our hand baggage. On that plane every single passenger except us chain-smoked, nearly sending daddy into cardiac arrest. Just one whiff of tobacco in an enclosed place would stress him out.

The sky over Paris had been rainy and overcast, but our arrival in Nice, on the French Riviera, was like Dorothy waking up in a technicolor Oz. From the right side of the plane you could see the wide, blue, sparkling Mediterranean Sea. A palm-lined boulevard ran along the shore. If I hadn't been so utterly wiped out, I'd have felt wildly excited.

Daddy had arranged in advance to buy a used car, so after going through customs Tara and I waited with the luggage while he went out to the parking lot at Nice Airport to find it.

"The car is a Renault Fourgonette, not a Rolls," he informed us upon his return, pushing the luggage cart through the glass exit doors as we followed sleepily.

When we got to the parking lot I couldn't believe my eyes. The car he'd bought through a classified advertisement in the campus newspaper was a small white truck, squarish and roundish, sort of like a big Chicklet.

"I thought it was going to be a sports car," I said, utterly disappointed. "I didn't know the French even *made* ugly cars like this." So much for my new persona. People were going to think we sold fish.

I opened the rear door, which looked like you could get a large chest of drawers through it, and helped daddy put in the bags.

"Do you want to drive?" he asked.

"Why? Is there something wrong with the car besides its appearance?"

My father didn't think that was very funny. "I'll take that as a 'yes,' he told me. "So you drive and I'll navigate. It's about an hour to Ste. Alice."

Luckily, daddy had long ago insisted I learn to drive with a stick shift. Even so, neither of us had ever seen one like this before. There was no operator's manual, but together we figured out how to push, pull and twist the shift handle for the various gears.

Finally we were ready to go. I put the shift stick in what I hoped was first gear, released the hand brake and stepped on the shaky little gas pedal. The car left the curb as if shot from a rocket.

"Look what you're doing!" daddy yelled.

It was a perfect time to use some French slang I'd learned from my teacher. "*Cloue ton bec*," I yelled back. Nail your beak!

I don't know which was harder, driving the car in the wild, impatient French traffic, or trying to follow dad's directions. We'd been told to head for the autoroute a Peage and take the direction Toulon/Marseilles. But following dad's hysterical commands I steered us twice around the Nice Airport parking lot, then onto the Autoroute in the direction Menton/Ventimiglia — the Italian border!

It took a while, but finally we got going in the right direction. Driving on the French autoroute felt like being in one of those movies where the good guys are forced to run barefoot along a strip of hot coals while savages swing at them with clubs. Every time I'd try to pass a car, another would come screaming up behind, lights flashing, horn blaring, and force me careening back into the right lane. Then, as he passed, the driver would look over at me, point to his head, roll his eyes, suck in his cheeks, and twist his finger into his skull.

"*They're* the crazy ones," dad would say. "They think everybody should drive ninety miles an hour."

I was so tired and giggly by this time that even sixty miles an hour — one hundred kilometers — with my foot to the floor, was as much as I could handle. So I was glad when we finally got off at our exit.

Suddenly all around us was the quiet country-side. What a relief! A few miles further on we came to a lake nestled in low hills. There were no houses anywhere.

"I wonder if people can swim here," I said. "It looks utterly deserted."

Little did I then imagine the role this gleaming lake was to play in my life.

After crossing a long bridge, the road meandered upward. At the top of a rise we

found a large valley spread out before us. Ancient villages topped the hills; old stone farmhouses nestled among the trees on terraced hillsides. Turning left we entered a road descending into the valley.

“Bear right at the fork,” said my father after we’d gone a few miles. But I went left by mistake and daddy really got on my case. “Don’t you know right from left?” he yelled. “What did they teach you in school? Hopscotch?”

“Why don’t *you* drive?” I shouted. “I’m tired.”

“You should finish what you begin,” he told me angrily, as Tara tried to calm us both.

I’d forgotten what tempers my father and I had because we hadn’t lived together for a long time. Poor Tara. She hadn’t known what she was getting into with the two of us. But perhaps neither had we.

About a mile further, something in the sky caught my eye, something shining in the sunlight. It looked like an airplane but it also looked like a large, white bird turning lazily in the air. My eyes on the sky, I ran the right wheels of the car onto the dirt shoulder.

“That’s it!” yelled daddy. “Stop right here. I’m driving.”

I wasn’t sorry to turn the wheel over to him. Stepping outside to go around to the passenger side, I took a moment to stretch and breath in some fresh, clean air. I’d never tasted air like this before. It was warm and soft and had its own special scent of trees and flowers and sea and mountains — the scent of southern France.

Just then the glider — for that’s what I decided it must be — turned, then started to descend. It was going to land!

“There must be an airfield over there,” I told daddy excitedly, getting back in the car. “Could we go by it? We might be in time to see the glider land.”

“I thought you hated flying,” said my father, thrusting the gear shift forward and grinding the gears.

“Fine. Forget it,” I snapped. “I’ll come back when I’m alone.”

Daddy handed me the map. He tapped his finger on one name on it. “Ste. Alice,” he said. He tapped another spot. “We’re *here*, by this airfield. We’re going *there*. You’re the navigator. Navigate!”

I struggled to keep my temper in check, more for Tara’s sake than mine. “Go straight ahead,” I directed him.

As the car lurched forward I looked off to the left where the glider was just disappearing behind some trees. I’ll be back, I promised silently. I’ll be back.

CHAPTER 3

The first time we saw the village of Ste. Alice it was from the floor of another wide valley into which we'd descended. Far off the cluster of stone buildings gleamed pinkish yellow in a beam of sunlight that shone through a row of grey-white clouds.

"*Voila*," said my father, sounding as proud as if he'd discovered America.

Tara leaned forward in her seat to see the village on the hill. Was she thinking that she'd followed my father to the end of the earth? Or was she deciding how she'd paint the scene in watercolors?

"Our house isn't *in* the village, of course," dad reminded us. "Monsieur Talbot will take us there."

We crossed the valley and drove up into the narrow village streets where the ancient buildings came straight down to the cobblestones. A car was coming in the opposite direction so dad squeezed us over to let it pass.

The driver of the other car was a pleasant-looking woman with a smile fixed on her face. Sitting next to her, a sullen, dark-haired girl sucked her thumb. The girl looked about fifteen or sixteen so I figured she'd cut her thumb and her mother was driving her to a doctor.

When the lady's car was right alongside us, daddy asked through the window, "*Pardonnez-moi, Madame. Ou est le bureau de poste?*"

The lady turned and looked at my father with an amazed expression. "Why," she cried in a strong, rather high voice and an English accent, "you're American, *aren't* you?"

"Yes, we are."

Hearing daddy speak English, the girl in the front seat looked over at us with interest, took her finger out of her mouth and hid her hand under her arm.

"If you drive straight on," the lady said in lilting tones, "about fifty meters from here you'll see the post office on your left. But it's closed now, you know. For lunch."

Our faces fell. "Until what time?" daddy asked.

"Until three. They'll open again at three." She paused. "Why, you look disappointed. Is something the matter?"

"We've rented a house and were supposed to get the key from a Monsieur Talbot," my father explained. "We've just arrived from Los Angeles."

"Just arrived from Los Angeles!" exclaimed the woman. "Well, I'm sure Monsieur Talbot has gone home for lunch, but Anna and I know where he lives, so if you'll wait a moment we'll go quickly to his house and bring him back with the key. May I ask which house it is you've taken?"

"It belongs to an American couple, the Bernsteins."

“Oh, I know the house,” cried the lady. “Aren’t you the brave ones though!”

“The brave ones?” Daddy glanced at me with a worried expression. “Is there something wrong with the house?”

“Oh, heavens no. You’ll be quite comfortable there and we’re the closest of neighbors. Now don’t go away. Monsieur Talbot will be with you in three minutes. He’ll see you to the house and Anna and I will stop by later to make sure you’re settled in.”

As it turned out, the post office was on the right, not the left as the lady had told us.

“She must have studied hopscotch too,” I couldn’t resist remarking to daddy.

M. Talbot arrived a few minutes later, fussing and apologizing. He’d waited for us all morning — *toute la matinee!* — and then had gone home for lunch. Then Madame Crouch and Anna had come by ... but we knew the rest.

We followed M. Talbot’s car, that looked like a blue sardine can, out of the village and into the countryside.

“The house is five kilometers from Ste. Alice,” my father told Tara and me. “That’s three miles.”

“I know,” I said. “So does Tara. We learned the metric system while playing hopscotch.”

“I think that’s enough about hopscotch,” daddy said ominously.

After a few minutes the car in front made a sudden left turn into a very narrow one-lane road. It had blind curves in it but M. Talbot didn’t bother slowing down. He just blew his horn. Daddy, chuckling maniacally, stayed right on his tail. “Ah, French drivers,” he cried. “Ah, *la belle France!*”

We passed a little house and I noticed that the name on the mailbox was Crouch. So this is where Anna and her mother lived. If we were “the closest of neighbors,” our house shouldn’t be far.

Then the pavement ended and we were speeding along a narrow dirt road skirting fields of grapevines and orchards of olive trees. Moments later we entered a low forest of scrub oak and pine and the road grew much worse. M. Talbot kept up his speed, bouncing along over the rocks and ridges, but daddy slowed down. “This isn’t a road,” he said grimly. “It’s a deer track.”

“Maybe this is what Mrs. Crouch meant by our being ‘brave.’”

“Let’s hope that’s all she meant,” said daddy.

This part of the road seemed to last forever. One thin telephone wire strung along the tops of wooden poles was the only indication we hadn’t completely left civilization.

Finally we rounded a very sharp, bumpy turn which bounced us out of the woods into an area that was partially cultivated with olive trees. M. Talbot’s car shot forward past a mailbox nailed to a tree, alongside a stretch of forest, then stopped at what seemed to be a house perched on the edge of a cliff. It looked very small, just a wall with a window in it and a tile roof with a chimney.

We got out of the car, nearly bowled over by the sudden warm scent of the pine forest, and followed M. Talbot around the side of the house. There we could see that the house had been built into the hill and was actually three stories high on the other side. A huge wisteria vine covered the front. The view was of a neighboring hill.

“If that hill wasn’t there the view would be better,” Daddy remarked.

“That hill is a game preserve,” M. Talbot told us. “For *les sangliers*.”

I made a mental note to ask daddy what a *sanglier* was, hopeful it didn’t have fangs or claws.

M. Talbot looked through all his pockets and finally produced a key — “*Voilà!*” — which he fitted into the front door lock. A moment later we stepped through into a different world.

The living room floors were earth-colored tiles, the plastered walls painted white. Dark, heavy beams ran across the cathedral ceiling and an enormous fireplace made of old brick stood at the far end of the room. It was like stepping into some past century.

Tara was smiling, dad frowning. He wanted to see where he would work; she probably couldn’t wait to set out her paints.

M. Talbot then took us on a tour of the house. My bedroom was on a mezzanine above the living room, reachable by means of an open oak staircase. I had the best view in the house and my own bathroom! Daddy and Tara’s room was below, on the garden level. An alcove off theirs had an oak roll top desk and some bookshelves. That was where daddy would work.

“Not bad,” he muttered. “A little damp down here, but not bad.”

Across from dad and Tara’s room was a large eat-in kitchen. It wasn’t as modern as kitchens in the USA — there was no microwave and the fridge and stove were small — but Tara seemed satisfied.

“There’s propane gas for heating and cooking,” daddy told us after consulting with M. Talbot. “It’s in a one-ton tank outside. We have municipal water that comes through a private canalization. Everything is hooked up. All we have to do is turn things on.”

After showing us the fuse box, M. Talbot shook hands all around and headed for his car, looking glad to get away. When he was gone, the three of us stood in the middle of the living room, our bags on the floor around us.

“Shall we unpack now or go down to the village and find something to eat?” dad asked.

“Eat!” cried Tara and I.

A moment later the three of us were bumping back along the road. As we passed Mrs. Crouch’s house we saw her and Anna in their driveway and stopped. “*Rebonjour,*” daddy said.

“How did you find the house?” she asked with enormous interest on her face.

“It’s fine,” daddy told her. “A little isolated.”

“Oh, you’ll get used to *that*,” she assured us. “Now, where are you three off to?”

“To eat.”

“Eat? Ah, but you know the restaurants will have stopped serving at this hour, and the stores don’t open again until three.”

We looked at our watches. It was only two thirty and we were starved.

“I’d feed you,” she said, “but my kitchen is full of plumbers and masons.”

“They taste awful,” added Anna.

“You’ve already been too kind,” daddy told Mrs. Crouch. “But here,” he said, getting out of the car, “let’s introduce ourselves.”

We told her our names and Mrs. Crouch told us to call her Libby and to call Anna Anna.

“How old are you, Ariel?” Libby asked me.

“Almost eighteen.”

“Well, Anna’s almost eighteen too. In August. Perhaps you two can play together.”

“Play. Why not?” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. But it was hard to believe someone exactly my age — my birthday was in August too — still sucked her thumb! How could I “play” with a girl like that? Obviously, living in France hadn’t done anything for *her* persona.

With our minute hands now pointing at ten to three, we drove the rest of the way to the village, left the car, and walked around the cobblestone streets. From ground to sky stretched giant trunks of trees that daddy called *platanes*.

When the *epicerie* opened we bought as many staples as we could think of, such as cheese and sausage, coffee, tea, sugar and cooking oil. It wasn’t hard adjusting to kilos and grams because a pound was almost equal to half a kilo. Then we bought a *ficelle*, a string bag to carry our groceries home in.

The *boulangerie* had opened too, and there we bought bread — *baguettes* — and a loaf of *pain de mie* to slice for toast.

At the *boucherie* we bought pork chops and, something daddy particularly liked to eat when in France: lamb’s liver. He had the butcher slice the tiny liver paper-thin and told Tara how it had to be sizzled quickly in a frying pan with butter, salt, pepper and a generous squeeze of lemon. Dad’s recipe sent us drooling back to the *epicerie* for the missing ingredients — and paper napkins.

When we got home with our bundles, Tara and I set the patio table. The long *baguettes* were crispy and delicious. Soon flakes of golden crust littered the table and the grey stones beneath.

So began our lives together. The lunch helped Tara and me get our second winds and we spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking, airing the sheets and blankets on the clothes line and making the beds. There was a faint smell of mildew in some of the bedding. It made me sneeze and we laughed and joked about the “new French perfume, *Eau de Mildew*,” which we told daddy we’d sprinkled on the sheets.

When everything was done it was time to eat again, so Tina and I prepared lamb’s

livers on toast while daddy snoozed. Somehow neither of us expected him to do any of this “women’s work.”

“Tomorrow I want to look over the property,” dad said after supper. “The house is on seven hectares, about fifteen acres. There’s supposed to be a cherry orchard. Given how inaccessible this place is, I guess I’ll have to buy a moped for you girls.”

“*Formidable!*” I cried, but Tara said she’d rather learn to handle the gear shift on the car. The trucklet, as we’d named it, was perfect for her needs — plenty of room for a mini art studio.

By now our second and third winds had been used up, so “bone weary” we went to bed. I’d never felt a bed as comfortable as mine. The mattress sank in, soft as a marsh-mallow. Bravo Bernsteins for not buying something rock-hard! Stretching out my arms and legs I let the *Eau de Mildew* tickle my nose, thinking how I’d never felt so tired. Then I was asleep.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning the sound of something banging at my window awakened me. Slowly my mind came into focus. France! We’d arrived! A shutter!

I got up, went to the window, turned the latch and pulled it open. A surge of wind and sunlight rushed over me. Leaning out I pushed the banging shutter open, securing it with a small iron bracket to the stone wall. Wow! What a gorgeous day!

A moment later I’d splashed water on my face, dressed in jeans and a shirt, and was heading downstairs and outside.

I’d never felt such a wind before. It was fresh and clear and fierce, as if a sky-dam had burst and all the wind came pouring across the earth. The forest sounded like a huge bellows breathing in and out, and the cypress tree on the lawn was bent nearly double.

No sign of daddy or Tara. The wind, picking a direction, pushed me through an olive tree orchard onto a dirt road along a low cliff. Not knowing where it would lead, I started down it.

No car could ever use such a road. In places it was broken away on the cliff side, in others too rocky. A tractor had left tread marks in the hard yellow clay, but it might have been months or years ago.

After about a quarter mile I came to a steel chain stretched across the road, supported on either side by low posts. The middle of the chain nearly touched the ground. Figuring it wasn’t a serious attempt to keep out trespassers, I stepped over it. Still, aware I was on private property, I braced my back against the wind and advanced more cautiously.

After fifty yards or so I saw a house, a much larger house than ours, surrounded by beautiful landscaping. A young man with dark hair was sitting at a table outside, eating

breakfast. The morning light was so sharp and the air so luminous, he seemed closer than he really was. As I watched, he got up and said something through a window to a person inside the house.

Should I go on, I wondered? Or go back? Or wait and watch?

The fellow turned back toward the table. If he raised his eyes he'd see me. Would he shout that I was trespassing?

Time to go, my cowardly persona advised. But my curiosity had been aroused and as I struggled back "upstream" I determined to find out who these neighbors were, and as quickly as possible.

By the time I got back, daddy and Tara were up. I had the feeling they'd been arguing and Tara had been crying. After breakfast daddy got out a land office map which showed dozens of tiny, numbered parcels that made up the Bernstein's property. Taking the map, he and I set off in the wind to see what we could discover about our borrowed territory.

The land itself was incredibly beautiful. Low stone walls followed the gentle contours of the earth, each giving way to the next like stairs for families of footloose giants. Along the walls grew silvery-green olive trees covered with tiny yellow blooms. Some branches already had minuscule green olives poking through halos of yellow petals. We were examining these when a shout caught our attention.

"Yoo hoo."

A car had stopped near the mailbox. Libby and Anna! I ran across the field as they got out of their car and walked toward us.

"How do you like this wind?" Libby asked after we'd made our greetings. "It's called the mistral. Have you seen your cherry orchard yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, it's right over there," she said, pointing toward a group of large trees.

I went to see. Sure enough, cherries! Zillions of them. I picked one and tasted it. It was crisp and sweet.

"Ripe!" I cried. "Daddy, come taste."

Then all of us were picking cherries, cramming them in our mouths and spitting the seeds onto the ground. Between mouthfuls Libby explained that the orchard had different kinds of cherries and they'd get ripe at different times.

"These are the eating cherries. The farmers preserve them in syrup. In a few weeks the *grellots* will be ripe. They're preserved in *eau de vie* — that's a sort of alcohol the locals make. *Grellots* are also used to make cherry jam."

"Cherry jam!" I cried. "Tara and I will make some."

Libby knew the Bernstein's property well because she'd once thought of buying it herself. "But it needed too much work," she sighed. "The Bernsteins brought in town water for nearly two kilometers underground, brought in electricity for a kilometer, and the telephone for three. All that work and they seldom come."

Daddy explained that Mr. Bernstein had given up teaching college and was busy making big Hollywood bucks, and that Mrs. Bernstein had been taken ill that spring. That's why we'd been able to rent the place for the summer.

"I'm sorry to hear about Mrs. Bernstein," said Libby. "They bought the house from Monsieur and Madame Laugier who live just over there in the hamlet of Rocquebrune. Perhaps you noticed the turnoff."

"I was too busy watching the road," daddy told her.

"Dreadful, isn't it?" Libby chuckled. "Especially that last bit. Monsieur Laugier used to tend it all the time, making sure the rains didn't carry it away. But after he sold his two properties, he retired."

"The other he sold wouldn't be that big house down the road from us," I wanted to know. "The one with the landscaping?"

"Yes. They're your nearest neighbors. But they never come this way. They've built themselves a jolly nice road on the other side."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, that's a long story, my girl," said Libby, rolling her eyes. "I'll tell you some other time."

"It's *quite* a story," said Anna, and rolled her eyes more wickedly even than her mother.

Libby turned to her daughter. "Why don't you go sit in the car, my pet?" she said.

"I don't want to," said Anna petulantly, putting her thumb into her mouth.

"Anna had an operation recently," Libby explained. "The doctor told her to remain quiet for a few weeks."

"A few weeks were up a *month* ago," Anna reminded her mother.

"What kind of operation?" I asked.

"Anna had her appendix removed, didn't you, my girl. Half the children in her school had them removed. It was quite an epidemic."

"An appendicitis epidemic?" I couldn't believe she was serious. "There's no such thing."

"Oh, there is," said Libby. "You can ask the principal, Monsieur Roquin. It struck right before exams. Five girls in Anna's class had their appendixes removed."

Was Libby kidding us? She seemed so serious. "Five girls in one class?" I repeated incredulously. I looked at daddy for a solution.

"Mass hysteria," he commented drily.

Libby stared at him with her mouth open, then nodded vehemently. "Absolutely," she said. "Mass hysteria, *wasn't* it, Anna? Mass hysteria is the word."

And then the subject was dropped.

After guiding us around more of the property and pointing out the piles of stones — "cairns" daddy called them — that marked some of its boundaries, Libby suggested

we follow her to the hamlet of Rocquebrune to meet our farmer neighbors, the Laugiers. Daddy begged off, saying he needed to work, but I was eager to meet real French people and practice my French. So Libby and Anna took me with them.

We started back the same way I'd come with daddy and Tara, but then, just before leaving the dirt road, Libby made a sharp turn down a narrow paved lane toward a cluster of houses below. Olive trees and grapevines lined the way. Everything looked extremely neat and well tended.

"They've had their *berges* plowed," Libby told me. "Those terraces with the stone retaining walls are called *berges*."

"*Les berges*," Anna corrected crossly, making *berges* one syllable and not pronouncing the s.

"*Les berges*," I repeated, and Anna nodded approvingly.

Libby parked the car on a square of grass and we continued on foot around to the front of the hamlet. After passing a chicken coop full of hens, we arrived on a wide patio.

"Yoo hoo," called Libby. "*Il y a quelqu'un?*"

"Ooo," came the reply from within.

As we waited for the owner of the voice to appear, two skinny cats, blinking in the sunlight, shot out the open front doorway. Following them was a tiny old lady dressed in black.

"M-m-madame C-crouch," she beamed, putting up her bony, whiskered face for Anna to kiss, but with her eyes on me.

Libby introduced her as Marie. "Marie, Ariel is going to live with her father and mother at the Bernstein's house for the entire summer."

Faced at last with a real French person, my high school French deserted me. I stood speechless as the old lady took my hand in her rough, gnarled ones and grinned up into my face with large, very even, terribly dirty false teeth. "*P-p-p-par exemple!*" she exclaimed.

Then a second lady, also dressed in black, appeared in the doorway. Madame Laugier was as small as Marie and looked almost as old. She came forward, wiping her hands on her apron before shaking mine, then invited us into her house. The tiny room we entered, containing carved wooden sideboards and a TV, was almost entirely filled by a table covered with yellow and white checkered oilcloth around which were set six straight-backed chairs.

"*Asseyez-vous, mademoiselle*," said Madame Laugier graciously.

I started to pull back a chair, finding it much heavier than it looked. Suddenly it lurched in my hand and got instantly lighter as something leapt off it and raced out the kitchen door. Another cat.

Madame Laugier offered us flavored syrups to which she added refrigerated water that she kept in an empty wine bottle. I chose raspberry and Anna took something called

anisettes, which she let me taste. It tasted like licorice.

"Anisette has the taste of pastisse without the alcohol," said Libby. "Pastisse," she explained, "is the favorite drink in Provence." Then she added in her careful, terrible-sounding French that there was "many a local gentleman who'd fried his brains — sautéed his *cerveaux* — having one pastisse too many."

At this, Madame Laugier and Marie nodded vehemently. I didn't know then that Libby was referring obliquely to Madame Laugier's husband, an alcoholic, who even as we spoke was off making a drunken nuisance of himself in the public square in Ste. Alice.

Then Madame Laugier remembered something she'd wanted to tell Libby. "Madame Pinchot's *petit ami* has bought some sheep," she said with a meaningful look.

"Has *bought some sheep*?" frowned Libby, trying to imagine what the woman could mean. "Ariel, Madame Laugier is referring to the people who own that house down the road from you." Her brows still knitted, she turned back to the old woman. "Has bought some sheep you say, Madame Laugier?"

"*P-p-p-par exemple!*" cried Marie, as if learning about the sheep for the first time too. "*De-de-des moutons! P-p-par exemple, eh?*" She grinned at me with her huge teeth. "*Eh?*" I smiled back, liking her enormously, teeth and all. The woman was no fool, just curious to death about strange creatures like us.

"And how many sheep would that be?" asked Libby.

"Fifty, sixty," shrugged Madame Laugier. "*Un troupeau.*"

"A flock! And *where* did he buy this flock?"

"Not from around here," said the old peasant sternly. "No shepherd in this canton would be likely to sell him sheep. I suppose they came from *la-bas*." Then she mentioned a part of France that Libby told me was over the mountains, about a hundred kilometers to the west.

"But of course," Libby said, "no one around *here* would sell a perfectly good flock of sheep to a beginner — an *amateur* — *would* they, Madame Laugier."

"Ah," said Madame Laugier, looking at the ceiling and rocking from side to side. "*Ah, ca, alors!*"

"*A-a-ah, c-ca!*" repeated Marie, enjoying herself immensely.

Libby caught the non-sequitur and pursued it mercilessly. "What are you implying, Madame Laugier? It *was* a perfectly good herd of sheep, wasn't it?"

Chuckling, Libby looked aside at me, as if saying, "Look how clever I am at questioning wily old French peasants, and how much they enjoy the attention."

"Perhaps one or two of the sheep had the *la maladie*," admitted the old lady finally.

"Had *the illness*," cried Libby. "Had *the illness*? And, pray tell, what might that illness be?"

"They cough," whispered Madame Laugier. "And their noses run."

“Do they now?” cried Libby. “Their noses run, do they? That sounds contagious to me, running noses and coughing.”

“More contagious than appendicitis,” I couldn’t help adding. Libby rewarded me with her low, coarse-sounding laugh and a conspiratorial glance. “Yes,” she said, patting Anna’s arm. “Exactly. So now tell me, Madame Laugier, what you’re saying is that Madame Pinchot’s *petit ami* — her young man — bought himself a flock of sick sheep from someone in the next canton.”

Madame Laugier wore an unconvincing look of sadness and resignation, while Marie, her teeth flashing and clicking, squeaked with delight and pride; their friend, Madame Crouch, had caught on.

A few minutes later, when we’d taken our leave, I asked Libby if Madame Pinchot and the young man with the sheep were married.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” she said. “She brought him down from Paris only this winter. Madame Pinchot is from Lausanne. It must be very dull in Lausanne, so she goes to Paris to find her *petits amis*.”

“How old do you think he is?”

“Simon? Too old for you, I’d say. Simon must be twenty-nine or thirty.”

“That’s not too old,” I told her. “How old is Madame Pinchot?”

Libby reflected a moment. “Fifty? Fifty-one?”

“Then she’s obviously not his *girlfriend*,” I noted happily.

Anna gave me a knowing wink. “This is France” she told me. “Frenchmen like older women. Right mummy?”

“Right, my *pou*,” said Libby kissing her daughter’s forehead. “And a good thing it is for mummy, too.”

CHAPTER 5

The first days after our arrival in Ste. Alice, daddy, Tara and I explored the village and surrounding countryside. “It isn’t the part of France that Van Gogh painted,” Tara told me, “but it’ll do.” Since our arrival she’d already done a sketch of our house, and watercolors of the sun rising over the hills.

We spent one day driving to Nice for daddy’s books which had arrived as unaccompanied baggage.

“Starting Monday you’ll be working with me mornings from eight to twelve,” he told me, “so plan your time accordingly.”

“Aye, aye, *mon capitaine*,” I saluted.

The next day my father and I drove to Rayol, the village above the airfield, where he bought me a used moped — a bright orange Mobylette. Wheels! I had wheels! And a helmet.

"I want you home for dinner," he said. "Where do you plan to go?"

I told him I'd brought a book and would sit under a tree somewhere and read it. "Maybe at the airfield."

"What book?"

"Emerson's *Essays*."

"Fine. And don't ride this thing without wearing your helmet. Your mother doesn't want to spend the rest of her life nursing a vegetable."

I thanked him for sharing that with me.

After clipping the Emerson onto the rear rack, I carefully descended the winding road from the village. No one seemed to be at the airfield, so after passing two large hangars I continued along a dusty, tire-rutted road to the bottom of the field where a red and white van and some cars were parked.

Even down there I could find absolutely no action. Two or three gliders rested sideways on their wing tips. Then I noticed someone sitting inside one plexiglas cockpit. Suddenly in back of me came a crack and a roar. Jumping aside, I saw a blue airplane taxi past me onto the field, a cable snaking along behind.

"Allez, allez, mademoiselle. Attachez le cable. Prenez l'aile!"

Someone by the van was waving a huge clipboard in my direction. Was he talking to me? "*Moi?*" I shouted, pointing at myself.

"Oui, oui, toi, toi."

Fine, but I had no idea what he wanted me to do. Then a tall fellow arrived running, grabbed the cable and attached it to the glider's nose, jerking it once or twice to test it was firmly attached. Running to the glider's wing tip, he bent down and lifted it.

The plane's engine roared. It moved ahead, slowly at first, swirling up the dust with its propeller. The cable between the two aircraft wriggled and grew taut.

Then the glider moved forward too. Faster and faster it went until the fellow holding the wing could run no faster and let the wing tip be snatched from his hand. An instant later the glider was airborne, bumping and rocking like a balloon at the end of a string. Then the plane was airborne.

Holding my breath I watched the two aircraft rise higher and higher, then swing in a slow, wide turn to pass in front of the village on top of the hill. I was watching so intently that I didn't see the boy standing in front of me until he spoke.

"Are you here for a lesson?" he asked in French, brushing his dark, wavy hair away from his blue eyes.

My mouth almost dropped open. I'd grown up in Hollywood and knew what gorgeous guys look like. This guy was *gorgeous*.

"Oh, no," I assured him, trying not to stare at his high cheekbones, chiseled lips and thick, black eyelashes.

"Un baptême?"

"Comment?"

“Are you English?” he asked me then, in a self-conscious attempt at speaking English.

“*Americaine.*”

“Oh.” He pondered a moment, then said slowly and carefully in English, “You like a baptism?”

I burst out laughing at the unexpected question. “No,” I told him. “Not today.”

“A baptism of *air*,” he explained quickly, returning to French. “Do you want your first flight in a glider?”

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation. “Will you take me?”

“I can’t,” he said, looking really sorry. “I’m a tow pilot — *un pilote remorqueur*. I have to work now. If you go to the office and sign up, they’ll find someone to take you.”

The only problem was, I didn’t have enough money on me. “Maybe another day.”

“My name is Marc,” he told me then, shaking my hand. “I’m nineteen. I was the youngest professional pilot in France.”

“Really?” I was impressed by his achievement, if not by his modesty.

“Yes, really,” he assured me earnestly. “I’m building up my flight hours to get a job with an airline.”

“I’m almost eighteen and my name is Ariel.”

“Ariel,” he repeated, caressing my name with his French accent. “What a beautiful name. It suits you.”

Did he mean I was as beautiful as my name? No one had ever said anything so wonderful to me. Almost trembling, I stood next to him, watching the glider circling in the air. The thought of actually going up in one terrified me, but that wasn’t why I felt so shivery.

What made me shiver was the way he stood so close that his arm just barely touched mine. Not accidentally brushing against it, but really kind of *pressing* my arm. Sylvia had been right about one thing: being different and exotic — an American in France — sure helped with guys!

When the tow plane landed, Marc flashed me a smile before running over to the plane. The pilot got out and Marc climbed in. He adjusted his shoulder harness, waved once, then pulled the cockpit canopy shut and restarted the engine.

A few minutes later I watched him take off ahead of a sleek, white glider. Surely no one had ever towed a glider more expertly. I watched until he’d passed over the village, then got on my Mobylette and headed back toward Ste. Alice where Daddy and Tara were expecting me for lunch.

Lunch? I laughed to myself, gunning the moped up the hill. Who could *eat*? I was in *love*!

CHAPTER 6

I literally counted the hours until the next day when I could return to the airfield and Marc. When the moment finally arrived, I got out the Mobylette and kicked the pedal. Nothing. I made some adjustments and kicked again. Nothing. Not even a growl. Kick, kick, kick. Nothing. Damn! I went inside, found dad working at his desk, and told him my problem, at least the part of it that didn't include the name Marc.

He looked at his watch. "I can take it back to the garage later this afternoon. They should fix it at no charge since we bought it there."

"Fine," I said. But it wasn't fine. My hopes of seeing Marc that day were zilch.

I'd never felt so restless, so itchy to see someone. What to do? Read? I tried, but found myself reading the same paragraph over and over again. My mind kept going back to Marc. I hadn't told Tara about him — not yet — because I wasn't used to confiding in her, but I needed to tell someone. So I passed the next hour writing a long letter to Sylvia, ending by telling her I was glad she'd told me to take along *la pilule* — the pill — since it might come in very handy after all.

Tara was out in the garden sketching an olive tree. Seeing me mooning around she suggested I walk down and visit "the lady from Paris and her *petit ami*," whom I'd told her about earlier.

"Why, Tara! You're speaking French. Do you know what a *petit ami* is?"

"A boyfriend," she said, blushing.

"But Madame Pinchot is fifty-something and he's only twenty-nine or thirty," so how can he be her *petit ami*?" I was pretending to tease Tara, but I really wanted her opinion in the matter.

"I don't think that's our business."

"Then I'll *make* it our business," I told her, and we giggled like secret conspirators.

This time there was no mistral wind pushing me toward our neighbor's house. Just plain old curiosity shoved me down the road. As I walked I recalled what Libby had told me the day before, how two years earlier the huge old farmhouse and fifteen hectares of land had been sold to Madame Pinchot by the Laugiers.

When she first arrived in Ste. Alice, Libby had told me, Madame Pinchot was living with a "fierce, dark-haired chap called Marius Beauchamp." They hired the most expensive local contractor to do the heavy masonry, brought in a firm that designed golf courses to do the landscaping, and had a road built from the house all the way down the hill.

At some point Madame Pinchot's friend began borrowing money from all the farmers and villagers, promising to give them double their money back in a year.

“Naturally none of the locals could resist an offer like that,” Libby told me, “although I warned them, didn’t I Anna? Didn’t I warn the Laugiers and the mayor that that Beauchamp chap was a bad piece of work? ‘He’s a thief,’ says I. ‘He’ll not give you back a penny.’ *Didn’t* I tell them that?”

“Mummy did,” Anna nodded.

“But none of them would listen, would they, my girl? They wouldn’t listen. And so they all lost millions of francs. I’m speaking in *old* francs, of course, from before the currency revaluation. *Old* millions of francs.”

“So what happened to Marius Beauchamp?” I asked.

“Oh, well, he went before a magistrate, he did. I hear he even spent a few days in jail. But they let him out. They always do let them out so that they can go straight off and take someone else’s money, don’t they, Anna? Haven’t we seen that done before.”

“Yes,” said Anna obligingly.

Then Madame Pinchot returned to Paris and some months later reappeared with Simon, who had given up his job as a driving instructor to become a shepherd.

“He couldn’t have been a particularly *happy* driving instructor or he wouldn’t have tossed it all away and gone off with Madame Pinchot, *would* he have.” Libby always asked questions that were impossible to answer except the way she wanted you to, so Anna and I both shook our heads no.

But now, approaching the house from the back, I saw no sign of sheep or shepherds. Perhaps he’d taken his flock somewhere to graze. Then I noticed, off below near some sheds, the young man I’d seen a few days earlier. He was leaning on a fence looking at me. “*Vous cherchez quelqu’un?*” he called.

I was embarrassed to be caught sort of sneaking up on their house. There was nothing to do but try and act natural.

“My father and I are your neighbors,” I told him carefully in French. “I’d heard about your beautiful house and wanted to take a look.”

“Oh, you’re the American girl,” he said, coming nearer and shaking hands. “I heard Americans were renting the Bernstein house. I’m Simon Thauray.”

Simon Thauray wasn’t very tall, about five eleven, but elegantly dressed for someone living in the countryside. His hands were smooth, not like those of Madame Laugier and Marie.

“Are you the shepherd?” I asked a little dubiously.

“I hope to be. I’m waiting for my sheep.”

“Waiting for them? Have they gone someplace?”

He laughed. “No. I bought a herd two weeks ago, about a hundred kilometers from here. They were supposed to be delivered by now, but they haven’t arrived.”

“Did you see them before you bought them?”

“Of course I saw them.”

“And they looked all right?”

“*Naturellement*. What do you mean?”

“I mean, they didn’t look...*sick* or anything?”

“*Bien sur que non!* Why would I buy sick sheep?”

“I don’t know,” I said, wishing I hadn’t asked. Madame Laugier had probably been wrong, or was kidding Libby and me. Anyway, how could she have known the sheep were sick if they hadn’t even arrived yet?

“Now that you’re here,” Simon said, “why don’t you let me show you the house, if that’s what you came to see.”

The thought of going into the house and finding Madame Pinchot was too awful. “Oh, no,” I said. “I only wanted to see it from the outside. Now I have.”

He shrugged. “As you wish.”

We stood awkwardly a moment. I was thinking that if Marc was killed in an airplane accident tomorrow, Simon would be my second choice as *petit ami*.

I was about to say goodbye when he seemed to remember something. “Oh,” he said, “I’d like to ask you a favor.”

“Yes?”

“The local shepherds usually take their flocks up to the mountains in the summer because there’s more grass up there. I plan to keep mine here the whole year. I was wondering if your father would let me graze them on your property. You have a lot of grass and the sheep would keep it trimmed.”

“That’s a great idea,” I told him. “I’m sure my father would approve.”

I was about to add something when I saw the face of a woman at one of the windows. Madame Pinchot? Was she frowning at me? Maybe she didn’t approve of my talking to her boyfriend.

Anyway, I didn’t want to find out. Shaking Simon’s hand quickly, I started back up the road, waving goodbye as I went.

“*A bientot*,” he called after me, obviously puzzled by my sudden departure.

“*A bientot*.”

Then I turned my face back the way I’d come and didn’t look behind me until I was safely at our door.

CHAPTER 7

As it turned out, it was nearly a week before I returned to the airfield. First came weather — two days of storms, then three of fierce mistral. The garage called to tell us the Mobylette was ready, but daddy didn’t want me riding it until the weather improved. I almost couldn’t stand not seeing Marc this long, and only hoped he was missing me as much.

The arrival of daddy’s books at Nice Airport meant less free time for me. I began

helping him by annotating monographs written in French and English, typing up his notes, and working on footnotes and a bibliography.

Besides daddy and Tara, the only people I saw that week were Libby and Anna.

The one girl my age I know here, I wrote to Sylvia, is Anna Crouch, an English girl. Anna sucks her thumb and plays with dolls, so you can imagine she's not the person to discuss personas with. You think I have my parents' values, well Anna is completely under her mother's domination. Libby admits — brags! — she kept Anna out of school half the time because she was too lazy or busy to drive her there. I think they let her graduate simply because she got to be old enough. She isn't going to college and doesn't have any plans to work. I wonder what she'll do in life. Stay home with mother?

One afternoon, worried that the cherries would rot on the trees in such bad weather, Libby and Anna came over to pick some. They brought along Madame Laugier and Marie who asked permission to pick each “*un petit panier*” — a little basket — of cherries for themselves. Generously, they stayed to pick sackfuls more for us.

“They love picking things,” sighed Libby when the two tiny women had left on foot for their hamlet. “In the spring it's *genet* — those yellow flowers we call broom — and then what, Anna?”

“Mushrooms,” said Anna. “And wild asparagus.”

“Yes, they find them in the woods right around here. And then there's the lavender and the roses for the *parfumeries* in Grasse.”

I was impressed. “Is this where French perfume comes from?”

“Oh, yes. The ordinary stuff anyway. Right from here. And in the fall they're still picking — olives and heaven knows what.”

“Don't forget the *tisane*,” said Anna.

“Yes, the *tisane* for infusions. They pick whole treefuls of the nasty stuff, in spite of the bees. They say drinking it helps them sleep, but I think it's the exhaustion from picking it that knocks them out. And when they aren't picking something they're working in their vegetable gardens or pruning the *oliviers* or crocheting crib blankets and cushion covers from patterns given them by exporters. I'm sure they're paid only a pittance for their crochet work. Exploited, that's what they are, poor souls. But they love it.”

“Picking the cherries seemed to make them happy,” I said.

“Oh, picking always does. Even if it only means finding poor Monsieur Laugier boozed out in the village square and picking him up off the ground.”

I felt Libby exaggerated sometimes, but her English accent and way of speaking kept me smiling whenever I was with her.

The small house in which Anna lived with her mother, until recently had been an abandoned farmhouse. Libby was having it restored and modernized, hiring the workers herself instead of using a contractor.

“Mother *loves* doing up houses,” Anna explained to me later that afternoon when

we were drinking lemonade in their garden. “When this one is finished she’ll sell it and buy another.”

“Oh, yes, Ariel, I do so love fixing up old bits of ruins. It’s the smell of fresh plaster,” Libby sighed happily. “Sweeter than the smell of greasepaint to an actor.”

“Mummy gets the workers to work for free,” Anna confided.

“Oh, Anna. Not for *free*.”

“Monsieur Bernadac, the electrician?”

“Oh, well, Monsieur Bernadac was in love with mummy.”

“They’re *all* in love with you,” pouted Anna.

“Don’t be silly, Anna,” Libby scolded. “You’ll give Ariel the wrong idea.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “Oh! It’s five o’clock. Time for mummy’s first drink.”

Libby went into the house and returned a few minutes later carrying a glass that tinkled with ice cubes.

The fact that Libby never mentioned her husband had made me curious, so I decided to ask.

“I was married to a man called Harry,” Libby told me, her eyes starting to shine from the alcohol. “Harry was Anna’s father. Oh, Ariel, I did so love Harry. He was the only man I ever loved who didn’t wear a uniform.”

“A uniform?”

“Mummy loves uniforms,” Anna told me in a low aside.

“I do,” sighed Libby. “Don’t you love Lou-lou in his gendarme’s uniform, my *pou*?”

“No. And you shouldn’t be introducing him to all the foreign ladies in Ste. Alice. I happen to know it bothers him.”

“Nonsense. He’s never complained to me. But oh, Ariel,” she wailed, “I did love Anna’s father. The reason I loved him so much, of course, was that he didn’t even know I existed.” She laughed her low, coarse laugh. “And now,” she said dramatically, “*Harry* doesn’t exist.”

“Did he die?”

“Oh, no. We were divorced. Donkey’s years ago. When Anna was a baby.”

“Where is he now?”

“In South Africa. Or at least he was the last time he sent us a check. That’s where we lived when we met and were married.”

“South Africa?” I was astonished. “Didn’t that used to be a terrible place?”

“Terrible,” Libby agreed, taking a long sip of her drink. “You can’t imagine the half.”

“They had apartheid, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” she said. “That was the only good thing about it.”

“The *good* thing?” I exclaimed. “I thought apartheid was *bad*. It’s racial discrimination.”

“Absolutely,” Libby nodded with shining eyes. “Racial discrimination. That’s apartheid in a nutshell.” Closing her eyes and smiling happily at her memories, Libby took another long sip from her glass.

The next evening Tara and I decided to make a cherry pie. Daddy loved it. He said he wanted cherry pie every night during cherry season. “And enough jam to last us a year.”

“With or without pits?” I asked him.

“Without, of course.”

“Good,” I said. “Pitting them will be *your* job.”

But Tara scolded me for saying that, and even apologized to daddy on my behalf. I wondered if anyone was ever going to drag Tara kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.

Later I asked daddy what he’d do if he met someone who didn’t like black people.

“I know a lot of people who don’t,” he told me, opening his *Herald Tribune*.

“*Friends* of yours?”

“Of course not. How could I be friends with bigots?”

“Well,” I said, “what if you really liked someone, and *then* found out he or she was prejudiced? What would you do then?”

“That’s easy,” he shrugged. “I’d stop being friends with him or her.” He looked at me over his reading glasses. “Why? Have you met someone like that?”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly. “It was just a hypothetical question.”

That night the wind died down and I went to sleep with my bedroom windows open. Around midnight a sound awakened me. Something was moving about in the tall grass — something big.

I got up and went quietly to the window. Below, standing in the moonlight, were two largish animals and three smaller ones. The small ones had pale stripes down their backs and sides and looked like pigs. I was careful not to make a sound, but suddenly they took fright and raced off faster than I could see them go.

The next morning I told daddy what I’d seen. He hit his head with the palm of his hand. “*That’s* what *sangliers* are,” he cried. “Wild boar. And in our garden! Christ, we really *do* live at the end of nowhere.”

His words surprised me. I’d been thinking just before falling asleep that night that we were living right in the center of the universe.

CHAPTER 8

On Saturday morning Tara drove me to pick up the repaired Mobylette. I’d persuaded daddy to give me an advance on my allowance and was going to the airfield for a

glider baptism.

“What are you doing today?” I asked Tara.

“Paint, I suppose. Your father wants to work, so I may take a little walk.”

I was sorry Tara led such a boring life with daddy and me. “You should meet our new neighbor,” I told her. “Why don’t you walk down there and see if his sheep arrived. Tell him daddy says it’s okay about their eating our grass.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Only don’t let Madame Pinchot see you. She’d be jealous.”

“Of me?” Tara laughed. “I’m no threat to her.”

I rolled my eyes. “You haven’t seen Simon. He’s really cute. If I were her I’d be jealous even of his sheep.”

Tara laughed again and kissed my forehead. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I love your dad and I’m faithful to him.”

“I hope so,” I told her. “Daddy would probably bean Simon with a dictionary if he suspected anything.”

But Tara shook her head. “No,” she smiled. “Your father would never do anything to hurt a book.”

Because it was Saturday there were lots of people at the airfield when I arrived. About a dozen gliders rested in rows at the bottom of the field, and three tow planes were parked nearby.

Marc was there, talking to some people in front of a large hangar. When he was free he came over.

“*Bonjour*,” he said, shaking my hand. “Have you come to fly?”

“I’ve come for a baptism,” I told him. “Why isn’t anyone flying? It’s a beautiful day.”

“Too early,” he said, looking up at the cloudless sky. “There aren’t any *thermiques* yet.”

I asked him what *thermiques* were and he explained that they were warm, rising air currents that lifted the gliders and caused cumulus clouds to form. “But you don’t need thermals for a baptism,” he said. “You just float down.”

He told me to go to the office to sign up, then had a better idea. “Baptisms are too expensive,” he said. I’ll see if one of the pilots will take you, then all you’ll have to pay is the glider and tow time.”

Suddenly the thought of going for a glider ride frightened me. I felt I really didn’t want to go unless Marc was the pilot. “Can’t *you* take me up?” I pleaded.

“I’m flying the Rallye,” he said, indicating the tow plane. Then he saw a fellow arriving in his car. “There’s Gerard. “I’ll see if he’ll take you.”

“No, I ... “ But before I could stop him, Marc walked over and started talking to Gerard. When Marc pointed over at me, Gerard’s face lit up. Then he smiled sort of

bashfully at the ground and nodded. Oh, damn, I thought. Complications!

Marc introduced us. Gerard Le Blanc was in the navy and came up from the base on Saturdays to fly gliders. He wasn't very tall — only two or three inches taller than me — with sandy-blond hair and blue eyes. He looked younger than Marc, but later I learned he was four years older.

"Gerard will take you," Marc told me, "but he wants to do it now because he's signed up on the Fauconnet for the day."

I wasn't thrilled with the plan, but it would save some money.

I rode my bike and Gerard drove Marc down to the *piste*. That was what they called the dusty, pebbly part of the airfield where the planes and gliders took off and landed.

"We'll take the K-13," Gerard told me, indicating a large, tandem-seat glider that no one was using.

While Marc warmed up the Rallye, Gerard put on his parachute and showed me how to put on mine. There were straps that came up between the legs and straps that buckled across the chest. Gerard pointed to them and I had the impression he was too shy to buckle them for me.

It wasn't easy climbing into the glider with such a heavy load on my back, but Gerard boosted my parachute to make it feel lighter. Once in the canvas seat, my legs straight out in front of me, I was so low it felt like sitting on the ground. There was a control stick between my legs, and pedals at my feet. Then Gerard showed me how to buckle the seat belt and shoulder harness, all the straps of which met at a round buckle just above my waist.

"In case you want to bail out, turn that *truc* and they all come loose at once."

"Bail out! I'm not going to bail out."

"One never knows," he laughed. "If I tell you to jump, you better jump."

It was a macho kind of thing for a wimp like Gerard to say. He wasn't even a professional pilot like Marc, just a sailor. I wondered if *I* could ever learn to fly. "I don't see any women pilots here," I told him.

"Oh, yes. We even have a woman instructor, Chantal Meunier. I'll introduce you later." Then, with an easy motion, he swung over into the back seat and pulled shut the plexiglas bubble.

My fear and excitement grew as I heard Marc rev his Rallye's engine and watched him taxi it into position ahead of our glider. Someone ran to grab the end of the cable, then ran toward us.

"Soaring is a team sport," Gerard said. "*Un sport d'équipe*. Everyone helps each other."

His hair blowing in the propeller blast, the boy stood in front of our glider. "*Tire*," he called to Gerard. "Then he stuck the ring on the end of the cable into the nose of our glider and pulled hard on the rope."

“*Essaye!*” The rope snapped free. They were testing to make sure the release mechanism worked properly. The boy reinserted the mental loop and after a strenuous tug turned and ran to the end of our wing where he knelt, his eyes on us.

“Hold up your thumb,” Gerard said. I did so and the boy outside rose to his feet, lifting the wing tip.

The plane’s engine roared. With the terrible sound of grating gravel in our ears, we started moving forward over the ground. Faster and faster we went as the pedals sprang to life beneath my feet, the stick between my legs. Then the boy at our wing tip dropped back, breathless, and a second later we were airborne behind the plane, off in a rush of wind and dust and flying grass blades.

“*Ca va?*” Gerard asked.

“Oh, yes,” I replied. “Oh, it’s incredible.” Yes, it was incredible, but terrifying too. The glider creaked, the stick and pedals made their unfamiliar sounds and motions as Gerard worked the dual controls behind me, the wind sighed alarmingly over the white surfaces of our airship. It was all so *fragile*, I was thinking, like rushing through the air in a winged eggshell!

And it was breathtakingly beautiful. As we rose our view expanded to take in the countryside and hills. The air was incredibly clear so that the ancient village of Rayol, at our right wing tip, stood out from the green hills with an almost frightening intensity.

Fascinated, I gazed down on the tile roofs and the old walls, at the narrow streets, the cathedral tower and public plazas. If only we could stop and take all of it in.

But the blue plane towed us slowly away from the village, toward the mountains. Higher and higher we climbed, the plane at the other end of the cable rising and struggling against the bumpy air currents. And then I saw, far off to our right, the Alps. Another turn, and on our left sparkled the blue Mediterranean.

“*Formidable!*” I laughed. “*Formidable!*” But inside me was an emptiness. I was wishing Marc was with me, not Gerard.

“Where do you live?” Gerard asked.

Where? I looked down. There was Ste. Alice, there the road, and — I followed it with my eyes — there...yes! Our house. I could even see the white chicklet parked behind it. “There,” I cried, pointing. That very isolated house with the lawn and the white car.”

Suddenly there was a loud snap. I saw the tow plane, tail up, dive out of sight. My eyesight blurred and my body went through a wild series of gravity changes. Our glider had tipped on its side in a turn, taking the world and my stomach with it. The stick and pedals worked furiously.

For the next few minutes I tried to control my terror as Gerard looked for some lift — a thermal to keep the glider up. But after a hopeful start, the climb indicator needle on the instrument panel pointed toward one meter per second of descent. The morning sun, Gerard explained, hadn’t yet warmed the earth, so the earth hadn’t warmed the air resting

on it, to make it rise.

Because he couldn't make the glider soar, I decided Gerard was an inferior pilot. He might know something about boats, but obviously nothing about soaring. "Does Marc ever give flying lessons?" I asked, conscious that my question would pain him.

"I don't think he has an instructor's license."

"Do you have one?"

"No. When we get back, speak to Goudron. Monsieur Goudron is our chief pilot and *chef du centre*."

"*Le grand fromage*."

"He thinks so," said Gerard. "Only in France we'd call him *le gros legume* — the big vegetable — not the big cheese. *Le grand fromage* sounds funny," he added, chuckling.

The big vegetable? That sounded even funnier. I'd have to remember that.

Slowly we sailed back across the air, drifting downward. My only regret was that I was sharing this experience with Gerard, not Marc. I knew I'd be less afraid if Marc were at the controls, especially at the last moment when the air brakes came out and the groaning, straining glider seemed forced against its will out of the air.

There was a soft landing as our "egg" touched down, then we were rolling noisily over the ground. For a second the glider paused, balancing level, then tipped over gently, its wing tip touching the ground with a hollow booming sound.

You couldn't complain about the service. Hardly had we climbed out of the glider when a tractor appeared. Gerard attached the cable and held the wings level as we walked the glider back to the start of the runway. I was afraid he was going to ask me for a date, so I babbled non-stop.

Marc was on the piste in his Rallye, about to tow one of the gliders. Reducing the throttle and pulling back the plexiglas canopy he shouted, "How did you like it?"

I waved, grinning and nodding. But I wasn't really sure I'd liked it. In fact, I'd been frightened most of the time. All I knew was that this summer, with Marc for my inspiration and *le gros legume* as my instructor, I was going to master the art of soaring.

CHAPTER 9

The rest of the day I stayed on the airfield, attaching cables and running with wings. Marc didn't think much of the glider Gerard had signed up for. "The Fauconnet's a piece of *merde*," he told me. "Slow and unstable. But what do you expect from a glider built from a kit?"

"You wouldn't fly it?"

"If I fly a glider," he told me, "it's *plastique haute-perfo*."

I liked thinking about Marc and me soaring over the mountaintops in a high-

performance fiberglass glider. There was no place at all in my dreams for Gerard and his stupid Fauconnet.

“Why do you fly that awful glider? I asked him as he was buckling on his parachute.

He shrugged. “No problem. The Fauconnet’s a good glider, and since no one else wants to fly it, I can keep it all day.”

“Marc only flies high-performance gliders,” I told him.

“Bravo Marc,” he shrugged.

I ran with Gerard’s wing before lunch. The next time I saw the Fauconnet was when it reappeared in the early evening sky, like a small star, slowly descending.

Finally that afternoon I met the famous Monsieur Goudron. The head of the gliding center and its chief pilot, Marc told me, was retired from the air force. He was a short, stocky man with a bristly black moustache and a thick head of hair tinged with grey.

Goudron looked me straight in the eye as he shook my hand. I told him I wanted to take soaring lessons, to which he muttered an utterly incomprehensible reply before striding off.

“What did he say?” I asked a boy standing nearby.

“He said for you to show up here Monday morning at eight and he’ll see if he has time to give you a lesson.”

“But I can’t come at eight.”

The boy shrugged.

I ran after Goudron to tell him I had to help my father in the mornings, but it didn’t help. He muttered the same thing as before, only louder and more vehemently, then turned his attention to someone else.

Dammit, I said to myself, where does he get off talking to someone like that? I wouldn’t take lessons from that jerk if he was the last instructor on earth.

Just then I noticed a young woman standing in the hangar shouting out orders to others lifting a glider onto a dolly. She looked to be in her late twenties and was probably Chantal, the woman instructor I’d heard about. I introduced myself and asked if I could take afternoon lessons with her since Goudron could only take me mornings.

“It’s fine with me,” she replied in French, “but you’ll have to check it out with Goudron.”

Chantal, angular and masculine-looking, wasn’t the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Maybe gliding really was a man’s sport and not really a sport for women. I asked Chantal her opinion of that.

“I have three small children,” she replied meaningfully.

“*Three children!* Wow!” And she taught gliding. Chantal was gutsy. Maybe I should learn to be more like her.

“By the way,” she said, “you’ll have to come to our party next Saturday evening.

We live up there.” She pointed to a big stone house situated on the hill just below the village of Rayol. “Bring your bathing suit. We have a rainwater cistern we use as a pool. Nothing fancy.”

“Is there some special occasion?”

She laughed. “My husband’s a 747 pilot with Air France. He’s based in Paris, so it’s always a special occasion when he gets down here, but this time it’s his fortieth birthday. In France we always have a big party for a man’s fortieth.”

I told Chantal I’d love to come to the party. “I’ll bring a cherry pie.”

Meeting Chantal was really lucky. For one thing, she was a gliding instructor. I still hadn’t gotten daddy to agree to pay for soaring lessons, but if Chantal and I got to be good friends, maybe she’d give me lessons for free, or at a reduced rate.

But more than lessons, I really wanted a female friend to talk to. She was a lot older than me, but life would be perfect if Chantal was my girlfriend and Marc my boyfriend. I’d ask Marc to take me to her party.

I had no chance to talk to Marc that afternoon and decided to stay and have dinner in the air club canteen where I knew he ate. Later, as I was helping push the Fauconnet into the hangar, I noticed Gerard looking at me. Darn. What if he asked me out before Marc had a chance to?

Then suddenly I remembered I had the Mobylette. Daddy wouldn’t want me driving it home after dark. If I wanted to stay for dinner I’d have to leave the bike at the airfield and have someone drive me home. And guess who that “someone” would be!

But when I asked him, Marc shook his head. “I don’t have a car,” he told me. “Gerard has one. Ask him to drive you.”

“But I don’t *want* Gerard to drive me home,” I said. “I want *you* to. Maybe you could borrow a car from one of the guys.”

“I’ll see,” he replied. Then, before I could stop him, Marc walked over to Gerard and asked if he could borrow his car.

It was so embarrassing. Gerard looked from Marc to me, then reached in his pocket, took out his car keys, and handed them to Marc. I felt terrible, but triumphant too. I was getting what I wanted — Marc was driving me home, not Gerard.

A moment later I was on the phone begging daddy to let me stay at the airfield for dinner. Daddy insisted on speaking to Marc.

“I want my daughter home by ten thirty,” he told him, “and please see to it that the Mobylette is locked up where it won’t get stolen.”

“Don’t worry about the bike,” Marc told my father. “And I’ll take good care of your daughter.” *Je m’occuperai bien d’elle*. So saying, Marc gave me a slow, crooked smile out of the corner of his mouth, and a wink from his beautiful eyes. I grinned back a little uncomfortably, hoping my father hadn’t caught the *double entendre*, but feeling sure he had.

Canteen meals were served at three long tables. This being Saturday evening, the

tables were fully occupied. Sundays were when the club members from Nice came to fly their private gliders. Most of them arrived late Saturday and stayed over.

Les Nicois were older and had more money than the guys who flew during the rest of the week. Mostly married with kids, they were the club officers — the president, secretary and treasurer. *Les Nicois* owned their own gliders, were considered very snobbish and rude, and generally shunned by the weekday and Saturday pilots.

Dinner at the canteen was better than I'd expected. For only a few dollars we had a fixed menu of salad, pork chops, fresh string beans, steamed potatoes, and caramel custard for dessert. Wine and beer were served too. Some regulars, like Marc, had their own bottle of wine with their name written on it. Marc offered some wine to me and I let him pour a few drops into my glass.

After dinner I overheard Gerard talking to Marc. Apparently there'd been a misunderstanding. Gerard had intended leaving for his base right after dinner — a two-hour drive — and had thought Marc was just running me home and would return his car right away. Marc had thought Gerard was staying overnight in one of the club guest rooms and wouldn't mind if he brought the car back late.

"If you want," Marc said, "I can run her home and come right back."

"Oh, no," protested Gerard. "I can get a room here for the night."

Again I felt embarrassed. This was humiliating — and costly — to Gerard. But what was I to do? If Gerard was dumb enough to lend his car to his rival, and spend money for a room, that was *his* business. Let the best man win, I said to myself — as long as it's Marc.

I guess all three of us were wondering what was going to happen in the next couple of hours. I wasn't sure myself. I was on the pill now, but that didn't mean I actually had to *sleep* with anyone if I decided I didn't want to.

Marc and I set off with a squeal of tires. When we got to the main road, he turned the car to the right.

"I live in the other direction," I told him.

"I know," he said, but didn't turn around. Instead, he headed the car down the road at top speed. "Have you seen the lake at night?" he asked me.

"Yes. Once. Coming back from Nice with my father."

"With your *father*?" he laughed. "That doesn't count."

The car shot along the narrow road. Marc hadn't attached his seat belt so I didn't attach mine. At home I always used a belt but I didn't want to insult Marc by letting him think I was afraid of his driving.

When we got to the lake Marc drove across the bridge and parked the car in a dirt parking area on the far side. Not a soul was there besides us.

"Have you been swimming here yet?" he asked, slipping one arm around my shoulders and the other into my blouse.

"Swimming?" As he put his hand into my bra I felt my mind swimming, my body

swimming, in a slow fire. I wanted him so *much*. “No.” I was so choked up with desire, my voice was almost a whisper. “I haven’t swum here. Not yet.”

“The water’s not cold,” he told me. “And anyway, I’ll warm you up first.”

“Okay.” My heart was pounding so fast and there was a kind of pulse in my neck that I’d never felt before. The wine I’d drunk made me feel heavy and slow and sexy.

“C’mon,” he said. Getting out of the car he came around and opened my door.

“I ... isn’t it too soon after eating to go swimming?” I asked stupidly.

“Come on. We’ll swim afterwards.”

“After what?”

“After we make love.”

He took my hand and tried to pull me out of the front seat, but it was like I’d put down roots. I couldn’t be budged.

How could I get across to him — in English or French — that I’d never made love with anyone before? That I was taking the pill but maybe I wasn’t ready to really do anything just yet.

If only I could tell him I’d like to neck with him but not make love. Only I didn’t know the word for “necking” in French, or even the word for kiss. I searched my memory. Wasn’t a kiss *un baiser*? Yes. I was sure it was. Timidly I told him he could *baiser* me.

“Alors!” he exclaimed.

What a relief. With the pressure off, I got out of the car without hesitation. Marc took me in his arms and roughly forced my chin up with his knuckles. Then his lips were all over my mouth, his tongue reaching around inside, over my teeth, into my throat. I was thinking, so this is how Frenchmen kiss. I’ll have to write Sylvia.

“*Viens*.” Pushing forward the front seat, he tried to pull me in back.

“Why can’t we sit in front?” I asked.

“I thought you wanted me to *baiser* you.”

“Yes, but we can do that in the front.”

“No. There isn’t room.”

That’s when I started wondering if *baiser* meant “to kiss.” “I want to kiss,” I said in English, making little kisses with my lips. “How do you say kiss in French?”

“*Embracer*,” he sighed. “*Merde!* *Embracer* means to kiss. *Baiser* means to fuck.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry. I meant to say *embrace-moi*.”

He looked very disgusted, even angry. “I think I need a swim to cool off,” he said.

I followed him across the road toward the lake. In the moonlight we easily found our way down a little path leading toward the water. A bit farther along we came to some large boulders. Without a word, Marc stripped off his clothes and dove naked into the water. A few seconds later he came up snorting and puffing. “Dive in. *Elle est bonne*.”

I *did* want to go in. I *did* want to be brave and adventurous. I *would*! Swimming at night in a French lake with a handsome pilot? Sylvia would be *green* when I told her.

“Don’t look,” I called, starting to untie my shoelaces.

“*D’accord.*” Closing his eyes, he sank under the water.

I removed my shoes and pants and shirt, but decided to leave on my panties and bra. From the stories I’d heard, just about every girl in Los Angeles swam naked with guys, but I never had, and I felt a little awkward to say the least.

Marc had come up for air and was treading water, watching me. The air was cool and the boulder I was standing on positively freezing. I figured if I jumped into the water feet first my bra and panties would stay on, but if I dove ...

“Dive,” Marc said.

“I can’t. I’d lose my”

“Dive,” he insisted. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

“No.” Standing at the edge of the boulder, I looked at the black water. I could hear my mother telling me she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life nursing someone paralyzed because she’d hit her head on a rock diving into shallow water at night. But mom, Marc dove there and *he* was okay.

“*Un, deux, trois, PLONGE!*” cried Marc.

I dove as shallowly as possible. I didn’t hit any rocks, but could feel my panties down around my knees. My bra stayed on, but both breasts popped out.

When I came up again Marc was right there. Taking me in his arms he forced me back through the water, against the icy rock. Putting down his head he took almost one whole breast in his mouth. Trying to protect my breasts with one hand, I pulled on my panties with the other, but his free hand was down there too, pushing them back down.

“You’re ripping them!” I cried. And then, to keep them from ripping, I helped him push them down.

Once my panties were off, Marc didn’t put them up on the rock. Swinging them around his head, he sent them flying out over the water. Then he lunged at me.

“Marc, don’t,” I begged, but he didn’t listen. He pulled me out of the water and onto the rock as if I weighed nothing, then got on top of me. The icy water hadn’t cooled him off at all. He tried and tried to get inside me, but I wouldn’t let him. I was too scared.

“No,” I protested, pushing him away. Suddenly something hot shot over my leg. Marc collapsed on top of me. The cold rough boulder dug into my back as I tried to wriggle out from under him. But he was too heavy.

“Marc,” I whispered. “Get off.”

After what seemed forever he came to his senses, rolled off me and lay looking up at the stars. Free of his weight I sat up and began pulling my clothes on. I felt cold and clammy and wanted only to get home and take a hot bath.

Marc didn’t say anything and I wondered what he was thinking. Was he disappointed in me? Disgusted? Would he ever want to see me again? I sure hoped so. How could I tell him that even though I’d been too afraid tonight, I’d decided he would be the

one — the *first* one? This just hadn't been the time or the place.

Marc drove me straight home, his foot pressed hard on the accelerator. The whole way neither of us said a word. He never even turned his head in my direction.

We drove through Ste. Alice, past Libby's house, and when we reached the "deer track" Marc cursed under his breath. "I'm glad this isn't *my* car," he said, hardly slowing down.

The road got bumpier as we approached the house and Marc cursed more. When we reached the mailbox I asked him to let me out. I wanted to sneak inside before daddy and Tara saw my wet hair.

Marc stopped the car. He was in a terrible mood and I didn't want to leave things that way.

"*Je regrette ...*," I began.

"*Allez*," he said roughly. "*Bonsoir*."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's my day off."

"Oh, good! Then maybe we could go somewhere together, take a drive in the mountains."

"I don't have a car," he reminded me. "And anyway, my sister is coming tomorrow."

"Your sister?"

"She lives in Nice. She comes here sometimes to visit me. Are you going to get out?" he asked then. "I have to take the car back to Gerard."

"All right. I'm just sorry you're so angry at me."

"I'm not angry at you," he said. "I just made a mistake. I thought you were more mature."

"I am," I cried, "but I wasn't using any protection. Next time I will."

"Sure," he said in English. Then he pounded the steering wheel once with his fist, turning toward me in exasperation. "Are you getting out?"

I couldn't bear it. He was leaving me in anger, without a kiss, without an affectionate word.

"*Embrace-moi*," I begged.

He sighed, rolling his eyes in defeat to the heavens. "*Allez, vas*." Reaching across the seat he hooked my neck with his fingers and drew me toward him, kissing me roughly on the mouth. I touched his cheek and suddenly felt his hand plunge into my blouse. Grabbing my bra he tried to pull it off over my breasts.

"Stop," I cried in pain, trying to pull away his hand.

He thrust me from him. "*Allez*," he said. "*Je me sauve*."

I got out and shut the door. He turned the car around and drove off, the tail lights bouncing up the narrow road until they disappeared around a bend.

I don't blame him, I thought to myself. What happened is all my fault. I'm such a

damn coward. Sylvia was right — as long as I behave as if my folks were there watching me, lecturing me on their values, I'll never learn to be the real me.

Thinking these thoughts, I turned and walked slowly back toward the house.

CHAPTER 10

Days passed before I went back to the airfield. Each day I'd look at the weather and decide it wasn't right for taking my first gliding lesson — too windy, too cold, too hot, too blah. But really I was ashamed of my behavior and didn't want to see Marc again so soon.

My mornings were spent helping daddy. The rest of the time I mostly moped around the house, unable to concentrate on reading, running outside every time a plane droned by or a wispy scream announced a glider passing overhead.

Eventually daddy noticed my preoccupation with the air traffic. He, Tara and I were having lunch outside. "I thought you were no longer interested in flying," he remarked.

I'd told him — after my visit to the lake with Marc — that I wasn't interested in learning to fly any more. Now I admitted that becoming a pilot was the most important thing in my life. Daddy frowned. He didn't like flip-flops but was tired of seeing me drooping around the house. "What do lessons cost?"

"Not as much as college."

That pleased him even less. "You're willing to give up your education to learn to fly?"

"Flying is an education," I told him. "It's even a profession. One of the guys is a *pilote professionnel* — that's the same as having a commercial pilot license. Lots of airlines hire women pilots these days."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Crumpling his napkin, daddy tossed it in his plate, got up and left the room.

"That's all right," I called after him. "Tara and I don't mind doing the dishes."

"Don't worry," Tara told me. "If you want to fly badly enough, I'm sure you'll find a way to convince him."

"I don't *want* to convince him," I told her. "He can't stop me from taking lessons. In August I'll be eighteen and he won't have any more say in what I can and can't do."

"You'll still need his financial support."

"No I won't. I'll earn my own money. I'll get a job waiting on tables or baby sitting. I'll *faire le trottoir*."

"What does *faire le trottoir* mean?"

"It means being a streetwalker," I told her, and we both collapsed giggling on the table.

For the next hour or so daddy and I didn't talk to each other. When Tara mentioned that Simon's sheep had arrived, I decided to walk down and see if I could find them. I'd hardly gone thirty feet past the chain across the road, when I saw a woman standing up ahead, watching me. She was of middle age with reddish, dyed hair wearing a skirt and blouse, and low-heeled open shoes.

"Hi," she said, in English. "You must be Mademoiselle Witemayer."

"Yes," I replied in French. "You must be Madame Pinchot."

"That's right," she smiled. "Are you looking for Simon?"

"I heard about some sheep. I thought I'd come and see."

She pointed to a long, low, stone shed built on the side of the hill above the valley. "They're in *la bergerie*," she told me. "Simon is with them."

I was surprised she'd voluntarily tell me where Simon was. "Would you mind if I go talk to him?" I asked hesitantly.

"Not at all. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you, and the sheep too."

"Thank you," I said, a little drily. "And I'll be happy to see them."

When I entered the shed I found Simon on his knees wrestling with a large sheep, trying to put a spoonful of something into its mouth.

"Can I help?"

At the sound of my voice the sheep, startled, looked around. Simon popped the spoon into its mouth with a triumphant cry, then released the animal which ran back with the rest.

"*Merci*," said Simon, wiping his brow on his sleeve. "She didn't want to take her medicine."

"Wouldn't it be easier to put it in her water?"

"But not half as much fun."

As he rose to his feet I looked at him in amazement. How he'd changed! Instead of the nice clothes of the other day, he was dressed in baggy pants and a drab, shapeless shirt like the local farmers wore. He looked exhausted, as if he hadn't slept in days.

"I haven't," he told me. "I've been sleeping here, with the sheep. They're all sick, except for two."

"Two are healthy?"

"Two are dead." He walked outside, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"That's terrible," I gasped, following him out.

"Why are you surprised? You knew even before *I* did that they were sick."

"I heard Madame Laugier tell Libby Crouch. I don't know how Madame Laugier knew."

"She knows because I bought them from a relative of hers. She told him I was looking for sheep."

"Madame Laugier set you up to buy sick sheep?" It seemed hard to believe.

Moving like a slow, old man, Simon lowered himself to sit on a rock. He looked

out over the valley. “I was a sucker,” he said. “I should have been more careful. Anyway, I don’t think she knew they were sick until after I’d already bought them.”

“You only say that because you trust people. You should never trust *anyone*. My father is always telling me that. Have you called a vet?”

“No, I don’t trust vets.” But he laughed and winked at me to show he wasn’t serious. Then, reaching into his shirt pocket he pulled out a well-thumbed book. “It’s on sheep diseases,” he told me. “I’m going by the book, treating them myself.”

I advised him to call a vet. “The sooner the better.”

“You aren’t a shepherd,” he smiled.

“Neither are you.”

“I will be. When these sheep are well, I’ll be almost a shepherd. This is step one.”

His self-confidence impressed me. “I want to be a pilot,” I told him. “I wish I could learn to fly from a book. It would be a lot easier and cheaper. And faster.”

“Anything worthwhile takes time.”

As Simon said this I felt a crazy desire to be in his arms, kissing him, dirty and smelly from the sheep as he was. Should I throw myself at him? After all, Madame Pinchot wasn’t far away.

Then I heard a sound, a sound like I’d never heard before, a roar that got louder and louder faster than anything I’d ever known.

As I jumped to my feet it was right there — right *there* — screaming through the valley — a dark grey jet plane. So close, so low it flew — at eye level, maybe fifty feet away — that I could see the pilot, see the oxygen mask on his face, see his head turn to the left as he passed.

The jet disappeared behind the trees in the direction of our house, then just before reaching the end of the valley it nosed sharply upwards and shot back into view, rolling over and over in the sunlight, heading for the sky.

“A friend of yours?” Simon asked as the plane and its roar faded enough to talk.

“Don’t I *wish*.”

Simon went inside to look at the sheep. The noise hadn’t frightened them.

“They’re probably deaf too,” he said, laughing, when he came out. “By the way, that was an Etendard, a navy jet.”

“Navy? I have a friend in the French navy, but he’s a glider pilot, not a jet pilot.”

Then the truth struck. That was Gerard! Gerard must be a *pilot* in the navy, not someone on a boat. He must fly jets!

“That’s my friend,” I screamed. “I *do* know him.” I’d never felt so excited and flattered. “I can’t *believe* it,” I cried, jumping up and down. “Why didn’t he *tell* me he flew jets?”

“Maybe he wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, he sure did.”

A few minutes later, nearly treading air with excitement, I hurried home. Gerard

obviously still liked me in spite of my going off with Marc in his car. It wasn't his fault that Marc was better looking than he was, and that I'd met him first. Next to Marc I liked Simon. Gerard was last on the list, but his buzzing my house in a jet was pretty impressive.

When I got home daddy was red in the face and about to explode. "Did you see that plane?" he demanded. "It could have hit the house. I'm going to report him."

"You *can't* report him," I said. "He's a friend of mine. He was just saying *bonjour*."

"*Bonjour*? Is that what you call it? Well, young lady, you tell your boyfriend if he ever says *bonjour* like that again I'll call his commanding officer and have him grounded."

"He's not my *boyfriend*," I snapped. "It's that guy I flew in the glider with. I pointed out our house to him when we were over this way."

"Well, please don't point it out to anyone else. I don't want the entire Luftwaffe — or the *force de frappe* — dropping in for tea."

Tara tried to calm him. "The pilot was just trying to get his lady's attention," she told daddy. "I remember a crazy thing *you* once did for the same reason."

My father turned and stared at her. Then he seemed to deflate. "All right," he said. "I won't report him. But tell him not to come so low. The sound waves could collapse this old house."

Later I tried to get Tara to tell me what crazy thing daddy had done to get her attention, but she laughed and laughed and wouldn't say.

CHAPTER 11

Friday I got back in daddy's good graces by making a very interesting discovery about one of his authors, a discovery that would save him weeks of work. As a reward he promised to finance my flying lessons on a trial basis, as long as they didn't interfere with my working for him. Fantastic!

By this time most of my negative feelings about my behavior at the lake had been rationalized away. I truly believed that what had happened didn't mean the end of my relationship with Marc. So after lunch I climbed on my Mobylette and headed toward the airfield.

The first thing I did was pay the air club initiation fee at the office. Goudron and Marc were *en l'aire* when I got down to the piste, Marc's Rallye towing Goudron's Bijav toward the mountain. I could hardly wait until they came down.

Marc landed a few minutes later and taxied his plane up the field toward the gas pumps. He made no sign to me, though I was sure he'd seen me waving at him. Not good. Why couldn't I ever be cool?

For a while I hung around, talking with some of the student pilots, trying to appear natural but feeling really sick with disappointment and worry. Then, swallowing my pride, I got on my bike and rode up the field toward the pumps. But just as I was getting there, Marc jumped back into his plane, gunned the engine, and taxied so fast back toward the *piste* that for a second or two his wheels left the ground. This time he waved at me as he went by.

Damn him. Why didn't he sit still? I turned and started back toward the *piste*, then turned around again, deciding to use the bathroom while I was so near the office. I'd just parked my bike and was walking past the large hangar, when a crunching sound behind me made me scramble to get out of the way.

A Bijav had whizzed up from the bottom of the field to come to an abrupt halt just a few feet from me. Inside the plexiglas bubble sat an equally startled student and behind him was the burly *chef du centre*, his moustache not hiding the self-satisfied smile he wore for having scared me out of my wits.

Goudron had brought the glider up to have the mechanic make a minor repair. I asked him if he had time to give me a lesson.

"Are you next on the list?" he asked in his gruff voice as he released his harnesses and swung up and out of the glider.

"What list?"

He turned his head away and gave me a disgusted look out of the corner of his eye. "What time did you arrive?"

"About an hour ago."

"Did you help take the gliders out of the hangars?"

I had to strain to understand him when he spoke. He had some sort of accent, plus he talked as if his mouth was full of marbles. I told him I'd arrived on the field a half hour earlier and that I worked weekday mornings for my father.

"Gliding is a *sport d'équipe*" he told me, looking at his watch. "Stay on the piste. I want to see you on the piste all afternoon, helping out. Maybe around five or six I'll have time."

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter after one. "Five or six o'clock?" I cried. "That's *hours* from now."

"Oh, ah, oh," cried Goudron, making little horrified motions, as if fending off attacking birds. "*Alors*, be here to take the gliders out at eight tomorrow morning and *don't leave the piste until they're put away for the night*. If I have time, I'll take you for a lesson." So saying, he strode off toward the hangar.

It didn't seem possible. Did he expect me to spend the entire day on the hot dusty airfield waiting for him to *maybe* get around to me? *I* was the one paying. *He* was there to instruct.

"What about Chantal?" I called, running after him. "Maybe *she* has time to take me up."

Goudron stopped and turned. "Madame Meunier is where she belongs, home with her children. But that doesn't concern you because *she* won't be your instructor. *I* will." Then he turned and walked on.

I stared after the man. Where did he get off telling me I couldn't have a different instructor when he was too busy to take me himself?

Damn! What to do? Then the solution hit me. I'd ask for my money back. The thought of spending all my time and energy waiting in the hot sun and dust for glider lessons from that jerk didn't interest me. With a withering look at the back of Goudron's thick head, I turned my steps toward the office.

But instead I went to the rest room. There I refreshed myself, splashing water on my dusty face and washing my hands. What nerve he had. Did he think he was still in the air force? Well, he wasn't. And *I* didn't have to obey his commands.

"Can I help you?" the secretary, Claudette, asked when I entered the office.

"Is it normal for a person to have to spend an entire day on the piste for just one lesson?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "Soaring is a *sport d'equipe*. You have to help others and they help you."

I was really getting sick of hearing that soaring was a team sport, but what bugged me most of all was Goudron's attitude about where women belonged. *Quel* male sexist pig! He was worse than daddy!

I left the office still undecided about what to do. Returning to the hangars to get my moped, I ran into Goudron again. He was talking with the mechanic, Francois, about the problem with the Bijav. Seeing me, he motioned for me to join them. Then, with his gruff voice and manner, he introduced me to Francois, the mechanic, whom I'd already met.

All the same, it was a nice gesture, showing Goudron was trying to be friendly despite his steely disposition. As I stood there, something caught my eye, a little red and white airplane at the back of the hangar.

"What's that?" I asked.

Goudron looked at me with exaggerated disgust. "An airplane," he replied. "A Jodel. You aren't interested in *that*, I hope."

"Why not?"

"Because it has an engine. It's not a glider, not *sportif*."

"It looks very *sportif* to me," I told him. "Can I take lessons on it?"

He told me that the plane was privately owned. "It belongs to a *militaire*," he told me. "If you want to fly airplanes, go to Cannes or Frejus. Here we fly gliders."

I asked him whether the club owned a plane and he pointed to an aircraft which looked identical to the other one except that it was yellow and white and covered with bird droppings.

"Only that one," he said.

"I want to learn to fly it," I told him earnestly. "Will you give me lessons?"

His look of disgust intensified. "If you want to fly it, you'll have to wash it."

Victory! Suddenly everything made sense. A plane was what I wanted to fly, not gliders. A plane could go places — Paris, London, Rome. A glider could only bring you back where you'd started from, or leave you stranded in a field somewhere. But best of all, flying planes wasn't a *sport d'equipe*! No cables to attach, no wings to lift because — ta da! — they had their own engines.

"I'll wash it," I told him, "if you'll give me lessons on it."

"We'll see."

Coming from Goudron, that sounded like a promise. I couldn't believe my luck. A plane! I was going to learn to fly a plane! Me. Ariel-the-Coward had a new, heroic persona.

It took over an hour to wash the Jodel. As I worked I questioned Francois who explained that the wings were wooden frames over which fabric was stretched. The body of the plane, the fuselage, was plywood.

He also taught me the names of different parts of the plane in French. The propeller was *l'helice*, the wings *les ailes*, the tail was *l'empennage*. Inside were the rudder pedals — *les palonniers* — and the control stick — *le manche*.

When I was done the mechanic inspected my efforts. "*Pas mal*," he said approvingly.

"That was the *easy* part," I told him, squeezing out the sponge. "The *hard* part will be pinning Goudron down for a lesson."

"Maybe not," said Francois. "He may need some hours of dual to keep his airplane instructor's license current."

And whether it was the reason or not, that afternoon I had my first flying lesson — on the Jodel!

CHAPTER 12

I got home a little before dark, tired, dusty and excited. Daddy and Tara were sitting on the patio having a drink as they watched the day fade. Neither looked particularly happy.

"I flew, I flew," I cried, running down the path. "I flew a *plane*. Did you see me? We circled overhead about four o'clock."

My father turned his head slowly in my direction. His face looked anything but pleased.

Tara smiled nervously. "Your friend came by again."

My heart skipped a beat. Had Marc been here? "My friend?"

"The Red Baron," daddy said coldly.

Then I realized they meant Gerard, in his jet. Damn! Gerard had arrived at the airfield just as I was leaving. I'd avoided him because I was afraid he'd ask me to Chantal's party before Marc had a chance to. I hadn't even thought of telling him I'd seen him fly by our house. Poor guy!

"It's not the noise," daddy said. "It's the danger. He could run into a glider. He could have hit your plane."

"I'm sure Gerard knows what he's doing," I said. "Anyway, I've decided that I want to fly planes, not gliders."

"Planes?" my father said. "You've changed your mind again? Maybe next you'll want to be an astronaut. Ariel, I wish you'd make up your mind and follow through with what you start."

There were times when I really resented my father, and this was one of them. Whenever I was enthusiastic about something that wasn't in a book, he got uptight.

"Have you had dinner?" Tara asked.

"No. I wanted to get home before dark so you guys wouldn't *worry*. Stupid me." Then I stalked off into the house.

Even as I did it I knew that I'd behaved badly in order to be alone and think about Marc. His sister had been at the airfield and he'd spent most of the day with her. She was as gorgeous as he was, tall and slim with dark hair, and thick black lashes. Watching them walk arm in arm, hugging and kissing one another, made me wish I had a brother.

The next morning, on my way to the village for groceries, I saw Libby's car parked down behind the hamlet where the Laugiers lived. I couldn't resist riding down to tell everyone about my first flying lesson, but found them all standing around looking like it was the end of the world.

"Ariel," said Libby in a gloom-doom voice, "the most awful thing. Jane Turrell's whippet has been at Madame Laugier's chickens and has killed the lot."

"Killed her chickens!" I looked at the old farmer ladies and they looked back at me with tragic expressions.

"*T-t-tous!*" cried Marie, wringing her hands in her apron. "*Eh?*" she squeaked. "*Eh, ben. Ah, ou-ou-oui.*"

"That's *terrible*," I cried.

"Terrible," nodded Libby. "And it's not the first time. Jane Turrell — she's that English lady who lives below me — lets her whippet off the leash and each time she does it comes straight over to Madame's *poulailler*, and in ten seconds slits the throat of every *poule*."

In spite of her words and gloomy voice, I felt Libby was only just managing to keep a straight face. I even had the impression that Madame Laugier and Marie were trying hard not to laugh too.

"What will you do now?" I asked the two old farmers.

Libby answered for them. "Well," she said, "for one thing they'll be eating plenty

of chicken for the next fortnight.” To relieve the pressure to laugh she let out a low chuckle, “Huh,” without letting her mouth smile. “*Eh, Madame Laugier? Vous allez manger beaucoup de poulet cette semaine, n’est-ce pas?*”

“*Ah, ou-ou-oui,*” nodded Marie, raising her arms and letting them fall again to her sides in a gesture of hopelessness, then doing it again. At the same time she sent a small, sly wink my way, perhaps to tell me not to get too upset about the chickens.

Madame Laugier looked less amused. They had been *her* chickens, after all.

We kissed them and took our leave and walked back toward our vehicles. “Of course Jane will buy her some hens in Draguignan, like she did the last time,” she told me. “Last time she bought them the very best hens, but very young. They’d only just started laying properly, and now they’re gone.”

“Why don’t they build a better chicken coop?” I asked.

“Oh, they’d never do that,” Libby assured me. “They like a bit of excitement now and then, the same as anybody. The same as you and I. You can’t blame them, can you Ariel? You can’t blame them for wanting a bit of excitement now and then in their poor, dull lives.”

“I guess not,” I said, feeling silly for agreeing with Libby’s bizarre interpretation of events, but at a loss how to come up with anything better.

On my bike I followed Libby’s car back along the road to their house, eager to tell her and Anna about my airplane lesson. When I told them I’d been directly overhead that afternoon, making turns, they were amazed.

“You’re not going to get yourself killed, are you Ariel?” Libby asked with exaggerated concern. “We wouldn’t like that, would we Anna?”

“It’s her choice,” Anna shrugged. “No one’s forcing her.”

“Yes, Anna’s right,” agreed Libby immediately. “No one is forcing you. It’s your choice whether you live or die. But we’ll be here, won’t we my pet, to make sure Ariel gets a decent funeral. That’s one thing they do very nicely in France: funerals. And all the time, it seems.”

“Monsieur Benet who tumbled out of his window in the village, that’s one,” counted Anna on her fingers. “Mademoiselle Aragon who ate the wrong mushrooms, Monsieur Bertrand by the lake who sent that package bomb and killed the postmistress by accident.” She thought back a moment. “The people who were walking along the road when that car missed the turn.” She counted the rest of the fingers on that hand and all the fingers on the other.

“Seven happy, unsuspecting tourists,” sighed Libby. “Never even saw it coming. Smeared into paste. The mayor had to send three *cantonniers* to scrape them off the roadside.” Libby paused. “But Ariel was telling us about her flying. Go ahead, dear.”

Our conversation had taken away my enthusiasm for talking about my lesson. Anyway, I had to get back with the groceries and then go to the airfield. So I said goodbye and rode on down to the village.

CHAPTER 13

I wasn't sure Goudron would have time to take me up for a lesson that day because of the crush of gliding students on Saturdays, but I wanted to be at the airfield anyway. Chantal's party was that evening, and I still hadn't spoken to Marc about going. I was hoping he'd invite me to go with him and his sister.

Unfortunately, the first person I ran into was Gerard. "*Bonjour*," he said, looking happy as a puppy to see me. I was relieved when all he asked was whether I'd seen any UFO's recently.

I told him I'd guessed who it was and had been very impressed. "But aren't you afraid of running into gliders?"

He assured me that gliders wouldn't be found that low in the valley. Besides, the navy expected him to be able fly at treetop level and everywhere else without crashing into small, friendly aircraft. "Are you going to Chantal's party tonight?" he asked.

"Yes. With Marc."

"With Marc?" He seemed surprised.

"Is something wrong with that?"

"No. I just thought Marc was going with Hyacinthe."

"Yes. We're all going together."

"*Eh, ben*," said Gerard, looking even more perplexed.

To change the subject, I told him that from now on I was going to fly planes instead of gliders. "I had a lesson on the Jodel yesterday." I told him proudly.

"The Jodel?" He sounded less than enthusiastic.

"I know, I know," I told him impatiently. "Everyone around here thinks gliders are superior to planes and that people who fly planes instead of gliders aren't really pilots."

"That's not it."

"What then?"

He pointed down the field. At the far end was a small yellowish object. It looked like a funny little cartoon plane having a nap, its nose and wings resting on the ground, its tail stuck up in the air. Suddenly the truth of what I was seeing struck me.

"Is that the Jodel?" I gasped. "Did it crash?"

"Yes. This morning. Monsieur Clos, the club president, took off without opening the fuel cock."

"My God! Was he killed?"

"No. He and his passengers are fine, but the plane was totaled."

"I can't believe it," I said, dazed. "Just like that? He just took off and crashed?"

Gerard shrugged. "He doesn't fly often, but someone had washed the plane, so he decided to take it up."

"I washed it," I told Gerard. "It's *my* fault they were almost killed."

"It's not your fault. He just didn't do the check list."

Then the meaning of the accident hit me. "If the Jodel is crashed, there's no plane for me to take lessons on. *Merde!*"

"*Ooh, la!*" blushed Gerard. "Such language."

I'd never felt so frustrated. Everything about flying was a frustration. You had to wait for the right weather, for an instructor to have time to take you up. You had to beg and plead for lessons. And, most of all, you had to have an aircraft.

"Will the club replace the Jodel?" I asked him.

"I doubt it. They have trouble affording new gliders. I offered to sell them *my* plane, but they aren't interested."

I stared at him. "*You* have a plane? *What* plane?"

He took me into the hangar and pointed to the red and white Jodel. "*Voila.*"

I gasped. "That's *yours*? Goudron told me it belonged to a *militaire.*"

"*Je suis militaire.*"

"You're a " Of course he was. He was *the militaire* Goudron was talking about. "Oh, Gerard, *dear* Gerard, can I take lessons on your plane?"

He shrugged. "It's not airworthy right now. Francois works on it when he has time, but he hasn't had much time. And anyway, I only bought it to help out a friend who needed the money. I'm hoping to sell it as soon as I can."

"Oh, please don't sell it," I begged him. "I'll talk to Francois and keep after him to work on it. When it's airworthy will you let me take lessons on it?"

He hesitated briefly, then nodded, smiling. "*D'accord.*"

I knew he was only agreeing because he really liked me. I didn't like *him* in the same way, so it wasn't fair of me to ask him the favor. But what could I do? I *had* to fly and this plane was my only hope. With just one lesson I'd become addicted.

"Why don't you come to the party with Marc and me this evening," I said to Gerard. "You could be his sister's date."

"His *sister*?"

I looked around. A short distance away Marc was talking to the tall, dark-haired girl. "Her," I said, pointing. "Did you say her name is Hyacinthe?"

"Yes, but she's not his sister. She's his *petite amie.*"

"His *petite*" I felt the blood drain from my face. I looked again. No. Impossible. Gerard had to be mistaken. Marc and Hyacinthe looked almost like twins.

My mind was suddenly in utter confusion and a sick feeling churned in my stomach. "Well," I said, "Chantal *did* invite everyone to her party, so nobody needs a date. We can just go."

"Yes," said Gerard.

His eyes searched my face, but I turned away. "So I'll see you at the party tonight," I said, and walked off in a daze, desperate to learn the truth about Hyacinthe. Had Marc lied?

As I went I felt Gerard's eyes on me. Dammit, if something was bothering him it was *his* problem, not mine. I'd never asked him to like me, just to borrow his plane.

It was mid-morning and gliders were still being rolled out of the hangar, then attached to cables behind cars. At the side of the *piste*, Goudron was preflighting the Bijav with a student. I walked straight up to him. "Monsieur Goudron, do you have time to take me for a glider lesson today?"

He stopped and looked at me. "Ah. You saw what happened to the Jodel, did you? Moral: engines don't protect pilots from their mistakes. So now you want to take glider lessons again."

"Yes." I looked him in the eye.

"I have no time today."

That was the answer I'd expected. "Well then," I told him, "I'd like to take a lesson with someone who *does* have time."

"Oh? And who might that be?" Goudron's voice was calm, but his moustache bristled dangerously.

I looked around. There were two or three guys who instructed on Saturdays. I nodded toward one. "Patrice, for instance."

"He's busy too," Goudron said. "And anyway, I'd advise against flying with Patrice or with any of the others."

"Why is that?" I felt like shouting, like hitting the man, but concentrated on keeping my voice as calm as his.

"Because they can't solo you. If you ever hope to be soloed around here, in this club, you'll fly with me."

"I can get myself soloed somewhere else," I told him.

"Certainly you can. And you can take lessons there too."

This time it was impossible keeping the anger out of my voice. "How can you stop me?" I demanded. "I'm a club member. France is a free country, or at least I thought so until now."

"It's a free country," Goudron told me, "but I command this airfield. If you want to fly here and get soloed here, you'll do what I say." Then he turned his attention to his student.

The *nerve* of the man. Who did he think he was? I didn't have to take that from *anyone*. I didn't even have to be in this club. I'd ask daddy to let me take the car and I'd go to Cannes or Frejus and take lessons on *real* airplanes, metal airplanes, not stupid little Jodels made of wood and cloth.

Just then I saw Marc sitting in his Rallye. I walked over to him. "Marc," I said, "will you take me to Chantal's party tonight?"

"Sorry," he said. "I'm going with my sister. But you don't need anyone to take you. Everyone's invited."

"What's your sister's name?"

“Hyacinthe.”

“Somebody told me she isn’t your sister. That she’s your girlfriend.”

He laughed. “My girlfriend?” He laughed again. “Who told you that?”

“Then she isn’t?”

“I told you. She’s my sister. Don’t you believe me?”

His words reassured me. I felt ashamed of myself for doubting. “Yes,” I told him.

“I do believe you. Then I guess I’ll see you at the party.”

“Sure.” As we talked, Marc was watching the Bijav. Goudron had just gotten inside and was just closing the canopy. “Stand clear,” Marc told me, attaching his shoulder harness.

I backed away. Frustrated and angry I walked toward my Mobylette, hearing the crack and roar of the Rallye’s prop starting to spin. As I rode through the valley toward Ste. Alice, Marc’s Rallye droned overhead, towing the Bijav toward the mountains where cumulus clouds were starting to sprout like white mushrooms. It was a gorgeous day and everyone would be flying in it but me. Damn, damn, damn.

I reached home in the same terrible mood. Tara was just going outside to set up her easel. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No,” I snapped.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see my father enter the room. I knew he’d heard our exchange.

“I’m sorry, Tara,” I said hastily. “I didn’t mean to bite your head off. I’m just pissed.”

“Did something happen?”

“Oh, the idiot president of the flying club crashed their only plane so now I’ll have to take glider lessons again and Goudron, the instructor, never has time for me.”

Daddy came over. “Did you talk your friend?” he asked.

“*What* friend?”

“The friend who thinks this valley is a practice bombing range.”

“Gerard? Yes, I did. He says there’s no danger.”

“Did he say he’s going to stop?”

“Why should he stop?”

“Because I *say* he should,” said daddy, raising his voice as his face grew redder and redder. “I want that damn noise to stop.”

“He’s a navy pilot,” I shouted back. “He’s doing his job. And anyway, I don’t *want* him to stop. It’s the only exciting thing that ever happens in this boring place.”

Whirling around, I headed toward the kitchen when daddy’s voice stopped me.

“I’ll tell you this, young lady. If that friend of yours comes by one more time, I’m reporting him to his commanding officer.”

“Oh, fine!” Furious, I turned to face him. “Go ahead and report him. Do you think his commanding officer will care? This isn’t the United States, you know. This is *France*

and the *French* make the rules, not *you* or me.”

I stamped out of the room, my hands curled into fists. I’d never spoken to my father like that before and really expected him to come up behind me and hit me.

But the next voice was Tara’s. “Didn’t you say something about wanting to make a cherry pie for the party this evening?”

I turned and looked blankly at her. “Did I? Oh, yes. I did.”

“Then why don’t we pick some cherries. We’ll make a cream custard to spread over the cherries, and cover it with meringue.”

“I’m not sure I want to go to the party,” I told her.

“Of course you do,” she laughed. “You told me you wanted to wear your blue dress. Maybe that jet pilot will come down to earth if he sees you in that dress.”

“Gerard?” I laughed. “It’s *Marc* I love. Gerard’s already my willing slave. He’s lending me his plane to take lessons on.”

“The jet?” she asked in horror.

“Don’t I wish. No, he owns a little plane.”

But Tara looked worried. “I’m not sure your father will consent to pay for any more lessons,” she told me. “He’s terribly upset. He’s even thinking of sending you home.”

I stared at her. How *dare* daddy mess around with my plans? “Tara,” I said, “I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks. I won’t be a minor any more. I’ll be able to do what I want. And I’ll tell you this, I’m not going to leave France until I’ve soloed, no matter what daddy says or does.”

“Well, whatever. But now let’s make that pie. And we’ll make one for your father too. It’ll put him in a better mood.”

I smiled, grateful to have an ally. “Okay, let’s do it. But only if you ask daddy to pit the cherries.”

“I wouldn’t press my luck,” laughed Tara.

And I had to agree.

CHAPTER 14

It was getting dark as daddy, Tara and I drove over the bumpy road through the woods. On the seat next to me was a large pillow upon which rested the pie. I watched with dismay as the jouncing caused the meringue to separate from the crust. Soon it had shrunk until it looked like a little white island in the middle of a creamy sea.

Lights in the hamlet of Rocquebrune, and at Libby’s house, were illuminated. All over the hills lights were coming on in the stone farmhouses — *les vieux mas*. Most of these had been sold to foreigners, many of them single women, some of them writers. It was funny how Libby kept trying to marry off Lou-lou, the gendarme, to one of them.

She believed Lou-lou was dashing in his uniform, but I'd seen him in Rayol village and knew he was really a moldy, drab old man with a big belly and grey, thinning hair.

No woman could be *that* lonely, especially not writers. It seemed to me women writers would far rather live completely alone in an old French farmhouse, than live in one with any man. *I'd* like it. I'd own a huge library and have lots of love affairs with pilots and shepherds.

Thinking of shepherds, I asked Tara about Simon. She'd seen him that morning and told me the sheep were recovered from their illness. "The man who sold him the sheep sent Simon a sheepdog as a gift," she said. "It seems to be helping him a lot."

"How fantastic!" I asked my father whether he'd seen the sheep yet, or met the shepherd, but he replied sourly that he had no interest in sheep *or* shepherds, outside pastoral poetry.

When we reached Chantal's house several cars were already parked on the road and in her driveway. From there we could see that the outside of the house was decorated with large paper lanterns. Quite a few people with plastic cups in their hands were standing around a barbecue, listening to French popular music coming from loudspeakers.

"If you can't get a ride home, just call," daddy told me.

"Thanks." I said goodnight, then, carrying the still-warm pie, I walked up the driveway, my highish heels sinking into the gravel with every step. As I entered the circle of light, a great "*ah*" arose as people caught sight of what was in my hands.

Although I knew just about everyone there by sight, the first person to come up to me was a stranger, tall, slim and good looking. "I'm Robert Meunier, Chantal's husband."

His intensity made me suddenly shy. "Happy birthday," I said. "I brought a pie." Because I couldn't remember the word for pie in French, I said it in English. That made Robert laugh because it sounded like *paille*, the French word for straw.

He thanked me for the tasty-looking straw and had me put it on the table with the other food in case any horses came to the party. "Beer, wine, or cider?"

"Cider."

As Robert poured it, I looked around for Marc. Then I spotted him with Hyacinthe over by the rainwater cistern where a couple of people were swimming. She was dressed in an ultra-mini wrap-around dress with a jungle motif, her hair hanging loose down her back to the tops of her long, tan legs. They were talking and laughing together as if the other people at the party didn't exist.

I must have been staring at them when I heard Robert's voice complimenting my French and my "*petit accent americain*." Trying to be sociable, I tasted the cider. Wow! It wasn't apple juice — it was *strong*. And it went right to my legs and head.

Standing there trying to keep my heels from wobbling and at the same time concentrate on what Robert was chatting about, I noticed Gerard looking my way. I pretended not to see him. Instead I smiled across the patio at Chantal who was looking

rather sternly at her husband and me. I wished she'd come and get him so I could get away and maybe talk to Marc.

Chantal had made an effort to get dressed up for the party, but her dress and makeup didn't make her appear more feminine; she looked like a guy in drag. It was amazing that someone as good-looking and successful as Robert had married her and had three children with her.

Perhaps noticing his wife's cold glance, Robert went over and spoke briefly to her, then led her back in my direction. "Ariel brought a lovely *tarte*," he was saying.

"Thank you," said Chantal without enthusiasm. "Robert's been telling me what a charming accent you have." Then she excused herself, saying she had to see to the other guests.

"I'll be there in a minute," Robert told her. "I'm looking forward to tasting the pie," he said to me.

I looked over at the table where the pie had been put. To my horror, Hyacinthe was standing above the depleted pie tin with a long, sharp knife. Marc stood next to her holding two plates at the ready. "If you want some you'd better come quick," I told Robert.

He followed me across the patio. When we got to the dish only one small slice remained. "It's for you," I told Robert. Then, seeing Gerard heading our way, I took a fork, cut off a piece of the pie and held it toward Robert who leaned forward and took it in his mouth. As he tasted it, his expression was blissful. He rolled his eyes toward heaven, swallowed, and asked for more. I cut another piece and fed it to him.

Suddenly Chantal seemed to arrive from nowhere. "Time to go swimming," she bellowed, grabbing her husband by the arm and nearly pulling him off his feet.

Robert protested, laughing, as Chantal pushed him toward the pool. Two of the pilots joined in to help her and a moment later Robert was balancing on the edge of the cement pool. Then he half fell, half jumped into the dark water.

A great cheer went up. We waited a moment, then another. Robert didn't reappear. There was consternation. Was he kidding around? Suddenly everyone knew something was wrong. Two fellows jumped into the water and a moment later brought Robert up, unconscious.

"Call the ambulance," bellowed Chantal, dropping to her knees and starting to pump her husband's arms up and down.

What had happened? I heard a word being spoken that sounded like "hydro-electrocution." Could someone be electrocuted by water? Was Robert dead or dying? Taking my glass, I nervously drank the cider down, feeling the alcohol course through my body. Marc was standing off to the side by himself. I walked over to him, wobbling on my heels.

"I want to go swimming at the lake," I told him.

He stared at me. "Don't you see what's happened?" he asked. "Robert may die."

"We can't do anything about it. You told me Hyacinthe's your sister, but she isn't." Tears welled in my eyes. The cider had really gotten to me, but I didn't care.

"So I lied. What do you want from me?"

"I want you to take me back to the lake," I said. "I want to go swimming with you, only ... this time" I couldn't spell it out. He'd have to guess what I was trying to say.

He told me he couldn't go, that he was at the party with Hyacinthe and they were using her car.

"Then we'll take her car," I said. "Tell her you need it for something important. No one will notice we're missing. Everyone's worried about Robert."

"You aren't?"

"I worry about me," I said, again feeling tears of self-pity brimming in my eyes. I was sure Marc would give Hyacinthe up if I gave him what he wanted. I just needed this one chance.

The idea seemed to grab him. "I'll get the keys," he said. "Meet me at the car. It's a red BMW parked up the road. I don't want anyone to see us leaving together."

Neither did I, but as luck would have it, Gerard was standing by the side of the road waiting for the ambulance when I came down the driveway.

"Are you leaving?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said, stupidly. "I may be back."

"If you need a ride later, I can drive you home?"

"Maybe," I told him, walking past him.

Dammit. What if Gerard saw me driving away with Marc? Well, so what? I didn't care. I didn't care if he hated me for it and wouldn't let me use his plane. I'd already made up my mind that Marc was going to be my first lover. Gerard and Hyacinthe would just have to accept it, or not.

CHAPTER 15

I got to Hyacinthe's BMW a minute before Marc did. He was very tense, not looking at me, biting his lips. Maybe he'd had an argument with Hyacinthe about taking the car. I didn't care. He was with *me*, not her. He wanted me more than her.

Marc started the engine and made a hard U-turn. The tires squeaked as he stomped the accelerator and we roared off in the direction of the lake.

This time I didn't mind the speed. I wished he'd go faster. The wind through the car window whipped my hair. It felt wonderful, refreshing. What I'd drunk filled my head with numbing pleasure and made my body heavy and sensuous. I leaned back and smiled stupidly at nothing, feeling us go, go, go. I couldn't wait to undress and swim with Marc and say *baise-moi*.

At the lake Marc brought the car to a sliding stop. He pulled on the hand brake

and opened his door. “*Allons-y*,” he said. Let’s go.

I thought he meant we were going down to the water, but I’d hardly stepped out of the car when he grabbed me and pushed me into the back seat.

“Marc, I” But he wasn’t listening, he wasn’t stopping. “Marc!”

“You want it,” he told me, “and you’ll get it.”

It was true that I wanted him, wanted him so much, but ... oh, god! I hadn’t remembered to take the pill for the past week! “Maybe you should put something on,” I whispered urgently.

“I thought this was your first time.”

“It is.”

“You can’t get pregnant the first time.”

I guess at this point I freaked out. I hadn’t wanted it to happen like this. Why couldn’t he have been kind and loving? It would have been so beautiful. I remember thinking, so this is what it’s like making love.

The next thing I knew Marc was getting out of the car.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Go? Go where?”

“Back to the party, of course.”

“But why?” I asked. Why go anywhere? He couldn’t go back to Hyacinthe now. “I love you,” I told him, reaching out my hands. “Kiss me.”

“I have to get back.” He looked off toward the lake.

I got out of the car slowly. “Would you drive me home?” I asked. “I can’t face anyone just yet.”

“They won’t be thinking about you and me. Robert may be dead for all we know.”

“Drive me home anyway.” It was the least he could do, the very least I could ask. Such a small thing.

“I went to the party with Hyacinthe,” he reminded me. “It’s her BMW and I’m not driving it on any deer track. Your father can pick you up.”

He drove us back along the road as fast as we’d come. My mind was in confusion. Was it possible he would go back to Hyacinthe after what had happened between us?

“Tomorrow is your day off,” I said. “Could we go somewhere together?”

“No. I’m having lunch with Hyacinthe and her family in Nice.”

I felt I was going to be ill. I was breathing rapidly, feeling desperate. “I have to see you again,” I said. “You have to see me.”

We reached Chantal’s house. On the patio flashed the lights of an ambulance. Getting out of the car, Marc slammed his door and started walking rapidly toward the house. I climbed out and followed more slowly, holding my shoes in my hand and wincing from the pain of walking on the rough roadside.

If only the earth could have swallowed me up so that I wouldn’t have had to face

the next hour. My hair was mussed and my dress probably torn. I had to find a bathroom and clean myself.

Approaching the house I could see most of the guests gathered over by the ambulance. The front door was open and as I went through I spotted a door off the hall that was probably the guest bathroom. It was. Hurrying inside I turned the lock. I'd never been happier in my life to be alone.

And I'd never felt so ashamed, so disgusted with myself. What Marc and I had done had nothing to do with love or lovemaking. And I couldn't blame anyone but myself. Like Marc had said, I'd gotten what I'd asked for.

There were no paper towels, so I cleaned myself with one of the linen guest towels, rinsing it out and smoothing it over the towel rack when I was done. Then I fixed my hair and makeup and adjusted my clothes. If only I could stay locked in that bathroom forever.

But finally, after what seemed an eternity, I overcame my dread, opened the door, and walked out. A few feet down the hall someone was rummaging through a coat closet, looking for something. Chantal.

I tried to sound natural, concerned. "How's Robert?"

At the sound of my voice Chantal turned and stood for a moment glaring at me. When she spoke her voice was full of hate. "I don't ever want you in my house again," she said. "I don't ever want you to speak to me or my husband again. *Garce*."

Then, carrying a coat over her arm, Chantal turned and went out the front door.

Garce. My knees buckled and I sat down suddenly on the floor. *Garce*. Whore. That's what I was. *Une garce*. I closed my eyes, grasped my legs and rested my forehead on my knees. Feeling lower than the slimiest snake, all I wanted to do was sit there until I died.

"*Ca va?*"

Someone with a friendly voice was standing above me. It wasn't Marc's voice so I didn't look up. "*Ca va*," I whispered at the floor, hoping he'd go away.

"People are leaving. Do you have a ride home?"

It was Gerard. I told him I didn't have a ride and asked how Robert was.

"He'll be all right. You had nothing to do with it. Don't feel bad."

"I feel terrible," I told him. But since at least *someone* still wanted to talk to me, even Gerard, I felt a little better. Shielding my tear-stained face in one arm, I held up the other. Gerard took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

Outside, the ambulance was gone and the last of the guests were tossing paper plates and cups into the barbecue fire. I found the stainless steel pie tin that belonged to the Bernsteins and wrapped it in a plastic bag to take home.

Walking to Gerard's car I saw Marc open the front door of Hyacinthe's BMW and help her into the passenger side. They were both laughing as he grabbed playfully at her bare legs.

Not wanting them to see me, I got quickly into Gerard's car. If he noticed anything strange in my behavior, he didn't mention it. I had the feeling Gerard knew everything that had happened that evening and was just being terribly kind and discrete by not saying anything.

On the way home he talked of flying. I tried to listen, but my thoughts were on Marc and his "sister." Were they going to sleep together tonight? I hoped not. Marc couldn't be *that* big a hypocrite. I hoped I'd at least ruined one night for them. If Marc wouldn't sleep with her, maybe Hyacinthe would get angry and tell him to get lost. Then he'd be mine. How I wanted him to be mine.

"*Par la?*"

Gerard's voice startled me. I looked around. We'd arrived in Ste. Alice and he wasn't sure which road to take. He only knew how to find my house from the air. "*Par la,*" I nodded.

A few minutes later, as we left the main road and headed off into the countryside, I tried to concentrate on what Gerard was saying. "Personally, I think you should study gliding with Goudron now and think about planes later."

"I suppose you're right," I said, trying to act natural, "but I really hate the man. He was nice when he gave me that lesson on the plane, but when I ask him for a glider lesson, he just won't take me."

"That's because you don't spend all day on the airfield. Gliding is a team sport. Goudron expects people who use gliders to help with them."

"But I have to work with my father in the mornings," I protested. "I *can't* be on the field all day. Goudron refuses to understand that."

It was incredible. Here I was stuck between a rock — my father — and a hard place — Goudron. If I stopped working with my father, dad would send me home to the US. But if I *continued* working with him, Goudron wouldn't give me lessons. How did I get myself in a double-bind like this?

At the mailbox Gerard stopped the car. "Would you have dinner with me next Saturday?" he asked.

I told him I couldn't — that my father didn't let me go on dates. It was a lie, of course. But I didn't want to go out with Gerard and ruin any chance I might have of eventually becoming Marc's girlfriend.

Gerard accepted my excuse like he seemed to accept everything — without an argument. I appreciated this because there was no way I'd have changed my mind.

"Don't come to the door," I told him, giving him a peck on the cheek. "My father will still be up."

He started to say something, then backed off. "*Alors, a la prochaine,*" he said simply.

"*A la prochaine.*" Getting out of the car, I wobbled off toward the house in my heels while Gerard sat with his headlights on so that I could see the way.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't face the day. Daddy and Tara were up, having breakfast on the lawn. My brain was in a fever and I lay in bed tossing and turning, trying not to think of the evening before.

I was sure that the moment daddy or Tara saw me, they'd guess I wasn't a virgin any more. It must have been written all over me. Only that wasn't what was torturing me. I was frantic about losing Marc.

The sad truth was, after last night I wanted to see Marc more than ever. I yearned to feel his arms around me, to have him make love to me. My body was still on fire for him. All I wanted was one more chance. The next time it would be different. *I would be different* — a real lover, not a scared virgin.

I rolled over and something dropped off the bed onto the floor. Oh, yes. I'd seen a letter from Sylvia on my covers the evening before. I hadn't wanted to read it then, but now I picked it up and tore it open.

Sylvia was replying to a letter I'd written her right after meeting Marc. I must have said something about my always liking the wrong sort of guy, the kind that rejected me. Her letter was the future psychology major speaking.

We like men who reject us, Sylvia wrote, because of our infantile love for our fathers. Our fathers reject us because of our mothers. So we keep loving men who reject us like our fathers do.

Typical psycho-babble, I chuckled. Sylvia's theory obviously didn't apply to me because I didn't like my father all that much. I didn't like the way he'd treated my mother *or* me. And I didn't like the way he treated Tara. So why should I look for a man like my father?

Marc sounds a lot like your father, continued Sylvia. He's probably the good-looking, unfaithful type too, so it's no wonder you like him. The more he rejects you, the more you'll like him. But you should reject your self-destructive, Oedipal tendencies and look for a real man!

I threw the letter across the room and pulled the covers over my head. People like Sylvia carried psychology too far. She was always analyzing everything, taking all the mystery out of everything. Love was mysterious and beautiful. It didn't follow rules or logic. In a logical world I'd fall in love with Gerard. Gerard was everything Marc wasn't — dependable, gentlemanly and probably completely faithful. The only problem was, I didn't love Gerard; I loved Marc. And now maybe I was even pregnant by him.

What a disaster last night had been. What an awful party. And that Chantal. How *dare* she treat me like a tramp. How *dare* she order me out of her house. What a bitch. It wasn't *my* fault her husband paid attention to me. I hadn't asked him to. And I was sure he was just being polite. Chantal jumped to conclusions.

Well, I would never speak to *that* lady again. Never. She called me a *garce*. That was the worst thing you could call someone. Whore. But she was busy looking after Robert and couldn't possibly have noticed I'd left the party with Marc, couldn't possibly know I'd been making love with him. Or had she? Maybe everyone at the party had known. Oh, God! What had driven me to it? How could I ever face anybody again?

Holding the covers tightly over my head I twisted and turned as the images of the night before overwhelmed me. How could I have behaved with so little dignity and self-respect?

It was impossible to stay in bed. I had to escape my thoughts. Throwing back the covers I got up, opened the windows to the blue sky and green forest, dressed and went downstairs.

Neither daddy nor Tara seemed to notice anything different about me. I told them about Robert's accident and how the party had ended when he was taken off in the ambulance. It was incredible how easily I could twist the truth. Had I inherited the ability from my fiction-writer mother or from my cheating father?

"What are you guys doing today?" I yawned, sounding perfectly natural.

They told me they were going to visit a village about an hour's drive from Ste. Alice, where one of daddy's authors had lived for a while in the 1920's. They were going to see if the little restaurant he'd written about still existed, and planned to lunch there if it did. Tara would take along some pens and drawing paper and make some sketches for a possible book jacket.

"What are *your* plans?" daddy asked me.

I told him I wanted to hang around the house, write some letters — I owed one to mom — and do some reading.

It seemed forever before they left. I waited a few minutes to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything that would bring them back, then got on the Mobylette. For the next fifteen minutes I rode as fast as I could back and forth the length of the deer track. In case I was pregnant, jouncing over the rocks might jar something loose.

The pregnancy question did worry me and there was no one I could talk to about it. Then I remembered Libby. She might be able to answer a hypothetical question about a "friend of mine."

Libby was in her garden and waved to me when she saw me coming along the road. Before I could say anything, she grasped my arm. "Do come in and talk to Anna," she said, looking at me with large, pleading eyes. "The poor child's in a shocking state."

I was in a shocking state myself, but there was no way to say no to Libby. We were almost to the front door when we heard a shriek, followed by what sounded like swearing in French.

"She's been like this all morning," Libby told me, "and it's all my fault. I'm really counting on you, Ariel, my girl."

"Maybe you should tell me what happened," I suggested.

“Yes, I should,” sighed Libby. “Well, dear, I’ve been *testing* Anna. The same thing happens each time I test her, only this time it’s worse.”

“What kind of testing?”

“Oh, you know, *magazine* tests. They’re in all those silly weeklies. Are you going about it the right way to meet your future mate? Are you loveable and capable of being loved? Do you sick up every time you think of sex? I’m sure you’ve seen them a thousand times.”

“But why is Anna so upset?”

Libby opened the door and we entered the living room. The house still smelled of damp plaster, but was beginning to look rather nice with some potted plants hanging from the ceiling beams and a few pieces of country furniture. Curled on the sofa, thumb in mouth, Anna was sobbing hysterically.

“Anna, dear, do tell Ariel why you’re so upset,” Libby said. “Perhaps she can help.”

But Anna only wailed louder. Rolling over she hid her face in the cushion.

“You see, Ariel, today it was a test called ‘Are you a good mother?’ It had an entire list of things to be checked off, such as ‘Do you tell your teenager a certain time to be home from a date?’ You’re supposed to answer ‘yes’ to that, but of course Anna’s too young to date, so”

“Go away,” screamed Anna. “Leave me alone!”

I was wishing I could get away from there myself, but a kind of morbid curiosity held me fast.

“Anyway, there was one question that truly interested me. You know those little squiggles that children make — I’m sure you do — on bits of paper? Something like writing, but not. I call them squiggles.”

“Drawings?”

“Yes, that’s it, drawings. Little squiggly drawings that no one can understand but the child who does them. Well, the test question was something like, ‘Do you ever go into your child’s private cupboard and tear up the meaningless little squiggles you find there?’

“Well, naturally, Ariel, I’d never even *thought* of doing such a thing. Never. So I looked ahead at the answer part and it said that this was the *worst* thing one could possibly do to a child, tear up its secret little squiggles.”

“I would say so,” I nodded agreeably.

“*Would* you, Ariel. That’s most perceptive of you. But you see, *I* didn’t believe it for a moment. How can anyone believe these silly magazines? All hype and no substance is what they are. Well, said I, I’ll just put that theory to the test. So I waited until Anna had gone into the garden to play, then walked straight up to her room, found the place where she hid her squiggles, and tore up the lot.”

As she said this, there was a horrible wail from Anna.

"You *destroyed* them?" I could hardly believe my ears.

"Every last one, yes I did. And this is the result." With a sweep of her arm, she indicated her sobbing daughter. "So you see, Ariel, the people who write those tests aren't complete idiots, *are* they? They know what they're talking about, *don't* they?"

"I guess they do," I said. "You completely wiped out Anna."

"Wiped her out," nodded Libby. "And you can't say I wasn't warned, *can* you, Ariel? You can't say the magazine hadn't foretold what would happen, *can* you?"

Her question, the entire scene, was so ridiculous I couldn't help starting to laugh. Then Libby began to chuckle her low chuckle. But as funny as it was to us, it must have been terrible for Anna, so I went and knelt down next to her.

"Anna," I said, "don't feel bad. Your mother is completely mad. Completely mad but incredibly funny. She does very strange, funny things. Very few people have mothers who are funny and crazy like her, so it's kind of a challenge. You mustn't let her get you down."

Anna lifted her head and turned an angry, tear-stained face toward her mother. "My mother destroyed my things," she said. Thumb in mouth, she looked accusingly at Libby.

"And now she regrets it," I told her.

"That's not true," protested Libby indignantly. "I don't regret it one bit. Anna had boxes full of the nasty things. I don't know where we'd have put any more. Now she can begin all over again with plenty of room."

"I'll *never* begin again," shouted Anna, but with my urging she was beginning to see the hopelessness and humor of her situation. Dramatically she took her thumb out of her mouth, raised her arm and wiped her wet eyes with her sleeve.

"There you see?" said Libby. "Better already. And you know, Ariel, Anna *hates* drawing, don't you dear? Art was your least favorite subject after reading and arithmetic. You hate paint and brushes and marker pens too, don't you."

"Yes," admitted Anna.

"You're glad I threw out all that clutter, aren't you my girl?"

"Yes," Anna sighed. "There was no room for my *poupees*."

"Of course there wasn't. No room at all for your dolls." Libby gave a triumphant chuckle. "So you agree, mummy did the right thing."

"I guess so," nodded Anna begrudgingly.

"Aha," said Libby. "Then the magazine was wrong. Wrong after all. I *knew* it. A mother's instinct is always right. Now go wash your face, Anna, and we'll be off to town to buy something for lunch. Something you particularly like."

Anna went out and Libby turned to me. "Thank you, Ariel, for sorting that out for us. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," I said. "Maybe you can answer this question that a friend of mine wants to know. Can a person get pregnant the very first time she makes love?"

Libby frowned. "Let me see. Can a person...a *woman* of course ... get pregs the first?" She pondered a moment, then looked up brightly. "Well of course she can. *I* only did it once, with Anna's father, and look at the result! I had Anna."

"You only did it *once*? How long were you married?"

"Eight years."

"You only did it once in *eight years*?" Was she joking?

"Well," she laughed, "I *had* to have done it *once*, wouldn't I have, or there would be no Anna. There now, Ariel, have I answered your question?"

"I think so," I said, starting toward the door. "I hope Anna recovers from losing her squiggles."

"Oh, don't you worry about that girl," said Libby, following me outside. "She's a real little trooper, she is. No need to worry about her. Worry about that poor girl who's pregs after doing it for the first time."

"I will," I promised.

Waving goodbye, I rode off down the road, praying: "Please, God, let me not be pregnant."

And by the time I'd reached home, my internal radar — homing in on a funny sickish feeling deep down inside — told me my prayers had been answered.

CHAPTER 17

Over the next few days my period washed away any worries I had about being pregnant. Feeling more in control with the passage of time, I blamed my disgusting behavior the night of the party on the cider and a bad case of pre-menstrual syndrome.

Soon I was eager to return to the airfield and see Marc again. Then one evening daddy told me he was going to Nice the following day and I could have the morning off. *Formidable!*

The next morning I got to the airfield at eight, determined to do things the *right* way — Goudron's way. To my surprise, no one else was there, not even Francois, the mechanic. So what, I wondered, was all this nonsense about getting to the field at eight to help push gliders?

The door to the canteen was open, so I went in. Three or four persons were having breakfast at one of the long tables. Marc, his handsome face puffy and red, smiled sheepishly when he saw me. "*Ca va?*"

"*Ca va.*" I sat down tentatively a little distance from him on the bench. "How's Robert?"

"All right. Back at work."

"That's good."

A silence fell. None of the others at the table spoke or looked at us. Probably

everyone knew about Marc and Hyacinthe and me. I felt utter humiliation, but there was nothing to do but brazen it out.

When Marc finished his breakfast, I followed him outside. “I got here early to help with the gliders,” I told him. “I want to do everything right so that Goudron will give me a lesson.”

“Then you better get down to the hangars.”

“I was, but no one’s there. The hangars aren’t even open.”

“You should wait there,” he told me very earnestly. “Someone will come. I have to fuel the Rallye.” And off he went.

Men! *Espece de...* All the swear words I’d learned since arriving in France leaped into my mind. But then I reconsidered. After all, Marc had to hide his feelings in front of the other guys. I was sure he liked me — he wouldn’t have left the party with me if he hadn’t.

Walking toward the hangars I felt a surge of determination. I would learn to fly. I would become a famous aviatrix and win Marc’s respect and love. The only thing standing between me and my dream were the damn flying lessons, and Goudron.

About an hour later there were enough pilots assembled to start lifting the gliders onto dollies, push them out of the hangars, and walk them across the field cabled to cars and the club tractor. When all the gliders were arranged in rows and the tow planes were parked by the side, I and the other pilots and students sat down by the side of the piste. An hour passed.

“What are we waiting for?” I finally asked one of the fellows.

“For Goudron.”

“What time will he get here?”

“Oh, any time.”

“Really?” Luckily I’d brought along a book just in case — Emerson’s *Essays*. A friend of daddy’s who’d read Emerson’s essay “Self Reliance” while in college said it had changed his life. Instead of going to graduate school he’d become a fire lookout in a national forest.

But when I took out the book, a howl went up. “Reading isn’t allowed on the piste,” one of the pilots informed me.

“Says who?”

“Goudron. If he sees you with a book, you’re dead.”

“Isn’t it better to read than just sit here doing nothing?”

“Why do you want to *do* anything? You Americans always need to be busy. Learn to relax. Half of being a pilot is learning patience.”

What he said made sense in a way, but what a waste of time. If Goudron wanted people to wait on the field all day waiting for lessons, what good did it do to let their brains rot?

“Would he let us read books on flying?”

My question was met by more hoots and derisive laughter. Obviously Goudron didn't want even a textbook competing with his instruction, and everyone was too stupid or timid or lazy to confront him.

Well, I'd decided to play it Goudron's way, so Emerson would have to wait. Not wanting to leave the book on my bike rack all day, I decided the safest place to store it would be in the cockpit of Gerard's plane. Getting on the Mobylette, I rode up the field to the airplane hangar.

I'd just put the book in the Jodel's map pocket and was getting back on my bike, when Goudron came out of the mechanic's shop. He started walking toward the piste so I ran after him. "Monsieur Goudron," I called, "will you have time to give me a lesson today?"

But he muttered something incomprehensible and kept going. I followed and repeated my question. Without slowing down he told me over his shoulder that if I wanted a lesson I had to come at eight o'clock and help with the gliders. I told him I'd been there at eight sharp and had worked very hard.

"Once you get here you can't leave the piste," he threw back.

Trotting at his side I explained very politely that I'd only left the *piste* to put away a book because I understood reading wasn't allowed.

"You brought a *book*?" He stopped and stared at me in horror. "Are you here to read or learn to fly?"

The unfairness of the question made me gasp. With difficulty I controlled my temper and started to explain once more about the book, but he was already walking on. What to do? I couldn't leave the Mobylette in front of the hangar, so I had to return to get it. Tearing down the field I arrived at the piste ahead of him, but when I tried to speak to him, Goudron walked right past me and began talking to a student.

Shoot. What to do? Even if I waited there until the end of the day, I had no guarantee Goudron would give me a lesson. If not, I'd waste hours. As much as I didn't want to, I had to interrupt him and ask.

At the sound of my voice, Goudron turned with an expression of complete exasperation. "Mademoiselle," he said, "— or should I call you 'The Voice of America'? — I have explained to you that if you want a lesson you have to come here at eight o'clock and help *take out the gliders*."

"I was *here* at eight," I repeated, my voice by now low and desperate. "*You* weren't."

"Did you sign up?"

"Sign up?"

"*Bordel de merde!*" cursed Goudron, whacking his thick thigh with his knee board. "Don't you even know *that*?" Sighing deeply, he shook his head. "Well, I may have time for you at the end of the day, but if you don't sign up, what do you expect me to do?" Throwing up his hands in a gesture of helplessness, he turned and helped his

student into the Bijav.

I stared at him. Why hadn't someone *told* me I had to sign up for a lesson? Was another day going to be wasted just because I'd overlooked some stupid detail? No. I refused to let that happen.

"I've been here pushing gliders since eight o'clock," I told him with a rising voice. "I was the first to arrive. Ask Marc. I've helped with the gliders and I've waited hours and now you say you may not have time to give me a lesson?" My voice had risen to a shout. "I want a lesson. I want a lesson." I didn't care what anyone thought. Beside myself with frustration, I stamped my foot on the dusty ground.

Calmly, Goudron bent over, pulled his parachute straps up between his legs and buckled them, then swung into the cockpit behind his student. The Rallye's engine cracked, the prop spun. "Attach the cable," Goudron told me.

I ran to grab the end of the cable and attach it to the nose of the glider, yanked it for the release test, reattached it, then hurried to kneel at the end of the wing. A moment later I was running down the field as fast as I could until the wing tip was snatched from my hand.

Watching the aircraft continue on down the field, I felt ... fantastic! I'd played by the rules — his rules. I'd eaten dust — *his* dust. Goudron had wanted me to grovel and I'd groveled. He'd take me for a lesson, I was sure of it. At the far end of the field, plane and glider were rising on the air. How I wished I were at the controls.

My only mistake, as it turned out, was that I'd misjudged the man again. Goudron *didn't* give me a lesson that afternoon. More frustrating, humiliating, boring days were to pass before Goudron "found time" to take me up.

CHAPTER 18

The next day I got back into the routine of working with daddy before lunch. I had no idea whether I'd ever succeed in learning to fly. It was very discouraging.

After lunch Tara showed me the work she'd been doing since we got to France. Some of the watercolors were of sheep.

"These were the first I did," said Tara, setting up a succession of paintings on her easel.

They were really terrific water colors, the flock done with a big, soft brush and lots of water. Off to one side stood the figure of a shepherd, but the focus was on the sheep.

In the next studies the sheep were still the main subject, but the shepherd appeared in more detail. It looked a little like Simon now, a kind of romanticized version of our neighbor leaning on his stick.

In the next pictures I saw something else. A dog. "Are you making this up?" I

asked Tara.

“No. I told you the other day someone gave Simon a sheepdog. That’s it.”

I looked more closely at the small black and white figure dashing across the scene. “It almost looks more like a wolf than a dog,” I told Tara.

She looked thoughtfully at her painting. “I know what you mean,” she nodded. “But that’s the way it looks to me. I guess I’m a little afraid of it.”

“Did you show these to dad?”

She hesitated before answering. “He’s not very interested in sheep or shepherds,” she reminded me.

What Tara said about my father was true, and it irked me. My *father* irked me. I had the feeling he was only interested in one thing women had to offer, and it wasn’t their artistic talent.

The sound of a plane passing nearby drew me out of the house. The Rallye was towing a glider toward the mountains. Another beautiful day for gliding, and I was still on the ground.

Bored and restless, I walked back to the orchard to see if any cherries were left on the trees. Before going far I heard the baa-ing of sheep, and pretty soon I saw Simon and his flock heading toward me along the right-of-way.

Suddenly a small black and white figure flashed into view — the dog I’d seen in Tara’s painting. With its red eyes, lolling tongue and sharp white teeth, I could understand why she’d felt afraid of it.

Running alongside the sheep, the dog snapped loudly at the air, keeping the flock bunched and terrified on the road. Behind them plodded Simon, his stick in his hand.

“Simon,” I cried. “Your sheepdog is *formidable*. He’s really got those sheep organized.”

“*Bonjour*,” smiled Simon.

The sound of exhaustion in his voice made me look at him again. How he’d changed! Weeks of sun had made him very brown, his facial features had grown thicker, and his hand on the stick was large and broad, like a farmer’s hands. He moved very slowly and seemed to have gained a thickness all over his body.

“Simon, you really look like a shepherd now,” I told him. “You even walk like a shepherd.”

“Sheep take a lot of work. I find that by moving slowly I use less energy.”

“The dog must be a big help. Look at him go.”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “A very big help. Do you want him? You can have him.”

He had to be joking, but his expression was more ironic than amused. “Don’t *you* want him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to decide.”

As we spoke the sheep reached the orchard, but instead of letting them spread out, the dog kept them tightly bunched. Around and around them he ran, growling fiercely

and snapping at their woolly flanks. Suddenly Simon gave a curse and a shout.

“Did you see that?” he cried.

“No. What?”

“Look what he did to that sheep.”

I looked where he was pointing and saw that one sheep had a large red hole in its side.

“The dog did that?”

“*Espece de salaud!*” shouted Simon, shaking his fist at the dog. Then his shoulders sagged. He looked defeated. “I don’t know what to do about that damn animal,” he told me.

I couldn’t believe what I’d seen. The dog had taken a whole plug of wool out of a sheep!

“And that’s not the first time.” Simon pointed. “*Regard.*”

Following his gaze, I realized that several of the sheep had gauze bandages wrapped around their entire woolly bodies. “Has he bitten all of those?”

“Yes. He’s crazy. Completely crazy.” Again Simon swore. “I need him, but look what he’s doing to the sheep.”

“Maybe you could get a different dog.”

“You can’t just *get* a sheep dog,” he explained. Nobody *sells* them. You have to train them yourself. Even if one was for sale, it would cost a fortune.”

“Tara said someone gave this one to you.”

“Yes. The same fellow who sold me the sick sheep gave me the dog. Now I see why. He wanted to get rid of it too.”

Simon ordered the dog to come and the dog loped toward him, looking back over his shoulder to make sure none of the sheep moved an inch while he was gone. When he reached Simon he sat down on his haunches and looked up into his master’s face.

“You’re crazy,” Simon told the dog. “The next time you bite a sheep I’m getting rid of you.”

The animal looked as if he understood every word, but didn’t take the threat seriously. He yawned, showing two rows of dangerous teeth. Then, with a loud huff he stood up and looked at the flock, his face working through a range of wolflike expressions. He was obviously eager to get back to bullying the sheep.

“*Couche,*” Simon ordered, but the animal didn’t lie down. It didn’t budge. The grazing flock had started to come apart and the dog was watching them carefully, probably waiting for the right moment to catch them off guard. “Down, you filthy beast.”

But even as Simon cursed him, the dog seemed to be listening only to some internal clock. Time was up for this nonsense, it must have told him. Without another glance at his master, he charged the sheep, his jaws snapping dangerously close to their flanks.

“He’s got the devil in him,” Simon told me grimly. “*Le diable.* In fact I’ve named him Diablo.”

"I think you should give him back to the person who gave him to you."

"I tried to, but he returned here by himself. A hundred kilometers over the mountains. He was waiting for me in front of the house when I got home. To get rid of him I'll have to shoot him."

"Shoot him! Oh, Simon, please don't do that," I pleaded. "Give him another chance. I'm sure he'll stop biting the sheep if he sees you mean it. He's terribly intelligent."

"I'll have a flock of naked sheep by then," laughed Simon grimly.

Watching the dog work the flock was really fascinating. After a few minutes, grown tired perhaps of showing off, he finally let the sheep spread out a little, moving off a few meters, but never taking his eyes off them. The sheep watched him fearfully.

Simon and I were just sitting down on one of the low retaining walls, when there was a light cough behind us. We turned. About twenty feet away stood Madame Pinchot. She was neatly dressed in a linen suit with stockings and low heels. Her hair had obviously been done at a beauty parlor.

Simon and I walked over to greet her and she smiled graciously, looking me in the eye as she shook my hand. Then she turned away and spoke very rapidly in a low voice to Simon. I walked off a few steps to let them talk alone. Madame Pinchot looked upset about something. I wondered if it bothered her to find her *petit ami* talking with another woman.

Simon's lady friend wasn't badly preserved for someone over fifty, but it was obvious he lived with her only because she paid for his sheep and had a nice house. I knew that if I were ever old and alone, like her, I'd kill myself before paying a gigolo to keep me company.

Their conversation didn't last long. After Madame Pinchot had walked off down the road in her city shoes, Simon returned to sit next to me. I was dying to ask if he really slept with the woman or if they were just platonic friends. It wasn't any of my business of course, but being in a foreign country gave me the courage to be nosey. Speaking a foreign language made it easy to say things I'd never have said in English.

"*Madame* seems very nice," I began, nonchalantly.

"She's very nice," he nodded. "A very good person."

"Do you love her?"

He looked at me in surprise. "Yes," he said, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "I do love her."

"Are you going to get married?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Do you marry everyone you love?"

"Then you love her like a friend," I said, "not like a wife."

"She's a very special friend," he agreed. "Almost a wife."

So now I was back to square one. 'Almost a wife' could mean they shared a house, not a bed.

“Why are you so curious?” he asked.

“Because I am. I want to know if you sleep with her.”

“*Rien que ca!*” he exclaimed with a laugh. “Why do you want to know that?”

“Because I’m *curious*,” I said. “Because she’s so much older than you are.”

“I suppose she is,” he nodded pensively.

“So, do you sleep with her?”

“*Oui.*”

I’d expected him to lie, or make some excuse. His yes hung in the air like a sound that wouldn’t fade. I felt dizzy and almost sick because it seemed to ring horribly in my ears. He *slept* with her. Simon really *was* Madame Pinchot’s gigolo.

“I didn’t tell you this because you were curious,” Simon said then. “I told you because you need to know. It’s part of your education of life. She’s a very fine lady and I love her and sleep with her.”

“But you aren’t going to marry her?”

“No.”

“Does she know that?”

“She knows that,” he said. “She knows that when I meet the woman I want for a wife, I’ll move out of her house and into the cottage near the *bergerie*.”

We sat for a long time watching the sheep and sky, smelling the pine air, neither of us saying anything. Diablo had come over and lay panting near our feet, his eyes on the herd, his tongue lolling. The sheep, nervously, went about their task of grazing. Every now and then Diablo would jump up and go snapping around them for no apparent reason.

“Tell me if you decide to get rid of Diablo,” I said. “Maybe I could find someone to take him. I’d hate to see you do something rash.”

“Something rash with a gun?”

“Diablo,” I called, “you promise to come and tell me if this mean man ever threatens you again.”

The dog, looking proud and very much in charge of his destiny, turned his head and our eyes met. A moment later he looked away again, toward the sheep. But I could have sworn that in the brief moment our gazes met, he’d made a promise.

CHAPTER 19

Sunday was Goudron’s day off. Saturday the airfield was mobbed with military pilots, students and baptisms. But Saturday was the only day I could be there at eight in the morning. So that Saturday at eight a.m. I was on the airfield, the first to sign up for a lesson, the first to help push the gliders out of the hangars.

While doing this I kept an eye out for Marc, but he wasn’t there and no one had

seen him. Gerard arrived from the base to sign up for the Fauconnet, which only he seemed to love.

When Goudron showed up, at about eleven thirty, he consulted the list of prospective students, then wagged his index finger toward one of the guys. I knew the boy had signed up after I had, so I stepped forward and explained this politely to Goudron.

"I'll take you later," he told me, "when there's less thermal activity. I want the air calm for your first lesson."

That seemed fair enough. Then I made the mistake of asking at what time the air might be calm.

Goudron's moustache bristled. "That's for me to decide," he barked. "You be here when I'm ready for you."

"*Oui, mon capitaine,*" I saluted, determined to play by his rules.

It was a long day. As the hours passed I became more and more convinced that Goudron could have taken me up a lot earlier, thermals or not. At least two of the other students — both guys — were also there for their first lessons and he took *them* up before me. More depressing yet, neither had been there early to help with the gliders.

No matter. I was determined to play it Goudron's way and prove I was serious. Eventually he'd *have* to take me. Each time he got in a glider with another student, I'd attach the cable and run with the wing. I always smiled when he looked my way.

"The air force really made a jerk out of Goudron," I remarked to Gerard as he strapped on his parachute. "I thought military pilots were supposed to be nice guys."

Gerard laughed. "Goudron wasn't an air force pilot. He was a mechanic."

"A *mechanic*?" Somehow that seemed to explain everything about Goudron. A short, stocky air force mechanic, now in charge of an airfield? God help me!

Day was waning and most of the gliders had returned to the field when Goudron signalled to me to approach the K-13. Suddenly all my frustration vanished. It was my turn! My turn!

My heart beat wildly as *le chef* fitted the parachute on me. He helped me climb into the cockpit and showed me how to adjust the rudder pedals — *les palonniers* — the seat — *la siege* — and the seat belt and shoulder harness — *les bretelles*. Then he climbed into the rear seat and together we went through the checklist — *les actions vitales*. By the time Goudron reached up and closed the plexiglas canopy, I *loved* the man!

Suddenly it was another world, *my* world. My cockpit world looked different, felt and smelled different, had different sounds from anything I'd ever known. It was a world so small that I could touch any part of it — the control panel with its instruments, the trim tab, the control stick. Even the hillside village of Rayol, gleaming in the setting sun, seemed caught in the plexiglas, just inches away. This world was so small and personal that the glider skin felt like my skin, my mind like a ball of light with wings.

A tow plane roared out in front of us, its cable snaking along behind it. A guy ran

to grab it and attach it to the Bijav's nose. For me! He was doing it for me like I'd done it for him! Gliding was a team sport, and I was part of the team!

"*Tirez*," he called.

The litany of soaring was familiar by now, only this time I was in the pilot's seat and I had no idea what I was expected to do.

"Pull the handle," said Goudron.

Once the cable was firmly attached, the tow plane, its control surfaces wiggling and flexing, moved slowly out ahead of us as the cable tightened and became taut. The glider lurched slightly as Goudron applied the ground brake, then a handle next to my arm moved as he pulled in *les aerofreins* — the air brakes.

"Steer with the rudder pedals until we get up speed," he told me.

"*D'ac*," I replied in my best pilot slang. Then I sat and waited. And waited. Why weren't we moving?

"When you're ready, give the signal to your wing man."

Oh.

I held up my thumb. The boy kneeling at our wing tip rose to his feet, raising the wing. Through his rear view mirror the tow pilot saw this and pushed in the throttle. An instant later we were on our way down the field.

But something was wrong! To my horror, the control stick wiggled loosely in my hand. One wing dipped and touched the ground.

"*Palonniers*," Goudron reminded me.

I pressed the rudder pedals, but they seemed wiggly too. To my relief I felt Goudron take over the controls. The glider snapped to attention and as we picked up speed. "*A vous*," Goudron told me, letting me know I had control back.

All the same, as our nose wheel crunched across the gravelly ground behind the plane, I could feel my instructor's hand still on the dual control stick as he monitored my movements from the rear seat.

"Now ease back."

I pulled back on the stick — too much! The glider bounded upwards and I felt Goudron quickly push the stick forward, blocking my error. "If we get too high it'll pull up the tail of the plane."

My imagination was good enough to imagine the crash that would result.

Seconds later the plane was airborne, rising slowly, struggling with its load. Suddenly I felt completely disoriented. Piloting the glider was nothing at all like flying the plane had been. The airplane had a propeller — the glider was being towed at the end of a rope. The forces acting on the glider were incomprehensible to me, the controls didn't respond as expected. I began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Keep the nose down," Goudron said. I pushed forward on the stick. "Too low. You're in the prop wash." Caught in the wind from the propeller, the glider tugged and swung from side to side as if struggling to evade the commands of its own aerodynam-

ics. Could Goudron see my knees knocking together?

But there was no stopping, no getting off. Slowly we were towed onwards and upwards. In spite of my desperate concentration on the task at hand, I couldn't help noticing how incredibly clear and vast the outside world looked through the plexiglas.

"Ca va?"

Was I all right? Kind of him to ask. No, I wasn't. I wasn't, dammit. The coward inside me was alive and well.

The plane out ahead put up its nose and floated higher on its blue wings, then started to turn. Oh, God! A new challenge! The horizon blurred. What to do?

"Manche et palonniers, conjuguez," Goudron told me. Stick and rudder, coordinate.

Gently I tried to turn the glider by moving the stick and rudder, but something didn't feel right.

"La bille," Goudron shouted.

"What?"

"La bille! La bille!"

The slip indicator was a little black ball in a curved glass tube. I looked at it. The ball was way off to the side of the tube. What was I supposed to do? Instead of telling me, Goudron cursed, moved the controls, and the *bille* went back into the center.

"A vous," he said.

I took back the controls, not knowing what he'd done to straighten things out, but ashamed to admit it.

My knees continued to shake as we were towed across the gulf of air toward the mountains. Eventually the altimeter read 1000 meters.

"Larguez," said Goudron.

He wanted me to release the cable, but I remembered how awful it had felt when Gerard had released it. My trembling hand reached toward the cable release ... and hesitated ...

A curse, a loud snap, and suddenly the world smeared across my eyeballs as the breath deserted my lungs. The plane ahead made a sharp turn, put its tail in the air, and dove away from us, the cable lashing out behind.

"A vous."

"What do you want me to do?" I cried.

"Manche et palonniers, conjuguez," Goudron muttered. Stick and rudder pedal, coordinate. "To turn right, stick and rudder right. To turn left, stick and rudder left. Don't let the nose come up."

Obediently I pushed at the stick and the rudder pedals, managing to wrestle the large, unwieldy machine to the right although now we seemed to be plunging. I tugged at the control stick and felt it was about to wrench it out of the floor.

"Manche et palonniers, conjuguez," said Goudron.

And from then on, those were the only words my instructor spoke when we were in the air, although sometimes he'd bark or curse.

Manche et palonniers, conjuguez.

The constantly repeated litany became a nightmare phrase. *Conjuguez* as I might, the Bijav would porpoise in the turns, its nose rising and falling. Goudron offered no advice on how to correct the problem other than repeat his phrase. Obviously I wasn't a natural-born pilot. Nor did he or anyone mention to me that the Bijav was an old, very poorly designed glider with a strong tendency to porpoise, or that Goudron only trained people on it sometimes because the club hadn't been able to sell it.

After that first day Goudron no longer insisted I come at eight in the morning — I could come afternoons. But even while accepting me as a student, he never took me for a lesson until the sun was about to descend over the horizon, when no thermals were left. Often we floated down when the airfield was deep in evening shadow so I'd have to call daddy or Tara to pick me up. This didn't sit well with my father.

In spite of all the minutes, adding up to hours of instruction that I was writing in my logbook, I felt I wasn't improving. Each of my landings was worse than the last. Even when I thought I was coming in just right for landing, flaring out just right, at the last second the glider would nose sharply up, fall belly down, and grind to a slithering stop. More than once I accused Goudron of yanking the stick back at the last second and deliberately spoiling my landings. He would only laugh.

After a couple of weeks of lessons my initial fear of flying was replaced by the terrible realization that Goudron really wasn't teaching me anything. I was no closer to flying solo than the day I'd begun taking lessons with him.

Then one day, to my great joy, Gerard announced that the Jodel was ready for its airworthiness inspection. "But I don't want you to stop lessons on the glider," he cautioned.

"You think a pilot isn't a real pilot unless he can fly gliders."

"It's an added safety factor," Gerard nodded, "especially around mountains. And who knows? You may get to like it."

"Never," I told him. "I want my liberty. I hate kissing Goudron's *cul* every day. I hate *les sports d'equipe*!"

"*Ooh la!*" cried Gerard. "*Fille en colere!*"

A week later the inspector, "Monsieur Veritas," pronounced the Jodel airworthy. Impatiently I waited for Gerard to arrive from the base. When he didn't come, I asked Francois if he'd seen him.

"Gerard went to the soaring competition up north," he told me. "He'll be back in a week or two."

"Oh, no! Another delay! Why did he have to go away *now*."

"Because the competition is now. He took the Fauconnet."

"The Fauconnet?" I couldn't believe my ears. "Why did he take that miserable old

thing?”

Francois shrugged. “Nobody else wanted it.”

“That’s really stupid,” I told Francois. “He won’t have a chance of winning. Everyone else will be taking *plastique*. He should have more pride.”

Just then Marc walked into the hangar. Seeing him, I felt my heart beat crazily. It was so long since I’d seen him close up, I almost didn’t recognize him. His face looked puffy, his eyes swollen. He really looked dissipated.

“That’s really dumb of Gerard, isn’t it?” I asked Marc, “taking the Fauconnet to the soaring competition.” I was never so anxious to hear him agree with me. “I mean, everyone else will be taking *plastique*, won’t they?”

“Sure,” said Marc, then asked the mechanic for a pair of pliers. Francois found him one and Marc took it and walked out.

“I think it’s dumb,” I said to the mechanic, feeling my face go red. “Gerard hasn’t a prayer.”

And then I left quickly, so that Francois couldn’t see how Marc had wounded me by his indifference.

CHAPTER 20

The next day the mistral wind turned the sky into a screaming blue parrot. Or so I wrote in my letter to Sylvia, to give her something to psychoanalyze. Daddy had gone to do some research in Nice that afternoon, taking Tara who wanted to buy art supplies. I’d planned to spend the afternoon reading, but after I’d looked everywhere and couldn’t find the copy of Emerson, I decided to write a story instead. It would be a story about Marc and me. A beautiful love story, with gliders and a lake.

I’d hardly begun when there was a scratching at the door. *Scratching?* I went and opened it.

Before me, stretched out on his stomach, his front feet pawing — clawing — at the threshold, was Simon’s dog.

“Diablo,” I cried. “What’s the matter?”

His eyes on my face, he let out a scream of anguish, got up, advanced a short way, then returned. Stretching his legs way out to the front and rear, he grovelled, screaming piteously.

“What’s wrong, Diablo?” I asked, bending down but not daring to touch him. “Are you sick?”

At this the dog leaped to his feet, reached forward, and tugged gently at the front of my jeans. Then he bounded off a few feet, stopped, and looked back at me over his shoulder. When I just stood there staring at him in amazement, he came back and repeated what he’d done, this time pulling harder at my pant leg and wailing impatiently.

It was perfectly clear what he wanted. Even if his pantomiming had been less obvious, I'd seen enough dog movies to know he wanted me to follow him. It was just hard to believe it was really happening.

"All right, Diablo," I said. "Lead on."

Understanding instantly, the dog shivered all over, then bounded off, looking back to make sure I was following. An expression of fierce determination burned in his eyes. I even had the feeling he felt superior to me — for letting myself be manipulated by a dog. So, what else was new?

He led me to the cherry orchard where Simon was standing under an oak, his long stick in his hand. The flock of sheep grazed nearby, throwing nervous glances as the dog appeared. Simon didn't turn as we approached, although I was sure he knew we were there.

"Simon," I said, "Diablo came to my house to get me."

At this the dog ran forward, screaming and crying, and began grovelling on his stomach before his master. His front legs stretched almost to Simon's feet, his back legs full length out behind. He looked up at Simon's face, then back at me, then at his master.

"What happened?" I asked, although I was pretty sure I knew.

"I threw him out," Simon told me. "He bit another sheep and I told him it was *finito*. I told him if he stays, I'll shoot him."

I looked at the frantic animal. "He wants you to forgive him," I told Simon. But as I said it I realized Diablo didn't need anyone to interpret for him. He was an expert at self expression. What he wanted was an ally, a character witness, someone with elegant rhetoric to plead his case.

As this realization came to me, I could swear Diablo nodded his head approvingly. "He's terribly sorry," I said, grasping for arguments. "He'll never do it again. He loves you and wants to stay. He has puppies to support, a sick wife. *Please* don't send him away."

It was a sorry performance on my part, and not very heartfelt, but Diablo, who had few options left, looked hopefully up at his master.

"It's too late. I've had it with him." Simon crossed his arms and looked stubbornly off and away, ignoring the drama at his feet.

I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand seeing a poor animal rejected like that. I really felt a kind of sympathy for the dog — empathy even. Okay, he wasn't perfect, but who was?

"Please reconsider," I begged Simon. "Can't you see he's sorry? Where will he go if you kick him out?"

"What do I care?"

"But he'll starve. You can't just abandon an animal like that."

"Would you prefer I shoot him?"

Of course I didn't. For a moment I considered asking daddy to let me keep him,

but that didn't seem too likely. In any case, it was obvious the dog had no desire to be with anyone but Simon. But Simon was right in that he couldn't keep him.

"Diablo," I began, then broke off. It was difficult talking to a dog that suddenly refused to look at you. He must have sensed that I'd tried and failed, and had decided not to waste another glance on me.

Then Simon looked down at Diablo with an expression of disgust, held out his arm and pointed away with his stick. "*Va t'en.*"

Diablo gave his master a long, heartbroken look, got to his feet, choked out a sob, turned, and slunk away.

We watched him cross the orchard toward the woods beyond. Every few yards he looked back over his shoulder, hoping to see some sign of softening in his master's resolve. But there wasn't one.

"And don't come back!" shouted Simon as the dog disappeared into the forest.

Good grief, I thought. Who needed this? I waited a few minutes, hoping to see Diablo reappear, hoping Simon would reconsider. But neither happened and a short time later I headed back to the house, feeling utterly depressed.

CHAPTER 21

That evening after they came back from Nice, daddy and Tara didn't seem to be getting on very well together. The next morning, having awakened in an ugly mood, daddy told me to take the day off. The mistral had abated. I was down on the airfield bright and early.

It was going to be a gorgeous day, especially for making cross-country flights. A lot of pilots who only came for that kind of flying were at the field. Chantal, who hadn't been around since her husband's accident, was preparing for a three-hundred-kilometer triangle which would take her far into the mountains.

Because they'd be spending most of the day belted and nearly motionless in a tiny cockpit at high altitudes, cross-country pilots had to wear heavy clothing — sweaters, jackets, woolen caps and gloves, and even long underwear and boots. But the only flyer to arrive on the piste at eight a.m. already dressed for the arctic north was Chantal.

Chantal looked really ridiculous, all the more so because of the angry look that came over her face when she saw me. I guess she was trying to show off in front of me, because she started bellowing orders at everyone like she was running the show.

Since her insulting words to me at the party, I'd hated the woman. Really hated her. Robert's accident was *her* fault, not mine. I felt she knew perfectly well she'd been unfair to me — that I had absolutely no interest in her husband nor he in me — but didn't have the decency or guts to apologize.

Then suddenly her bellowing was directed my way. "*Allez, Ariel, why are you*

standing there? Pick up that wing!” She was pointing at the wing of the glider she planned to fly.

“Pick it up yourself,” I snapped. “I’m not your servant. And anyway, we have to get the Janus out first.”

Anyone could see Chantal’s K-6 wasn’t next out of the hangar, so what was she bothering me for? The bitch.

By ten thirty the sky was beginning to look good for long distance soaring. The first tows of the day were reserved for pilots needing an early start on their 300 and 500-kilometer triangles.

Down on the *piste* I watched Chantal install in her glider the barometer that would record in ink on a long roll of paper the altitudes, hours and minutes of her voyage. She also had maps, a camera for photographing the points of the triangle to prove she’d passed over them, and food and drink for the lengthy ordeal. I didn’t even want to speculate on how she’d go to the bathroom during the flight.

“*Allez, Ariel, le cable!*”

As the tow plane taxied in front of the K-6, I was the only one nearby to attach Chantal’s cable. I didn’t walk, I ran to attach it, and gave it my best tug. Chantal released and I fell over backwards on my *derriere*. Good. I’d showed her I was serious about testing her release. Re-attaching the cable, I ran to kneel by the wing.

Chantal sat making her last minute checks, then turned her head in my direction. For one brief moment our eyes met. How odd! Hers weren’t filled with hate or anger. Why not, I wondered? Then an answer came to me. Was it because she was leaving on a great and possibly dangerous adventure? Had she put all the petty cares of her life — including me — aside?

She held up her thumb. I raised the wing and a moment later was dashing down the field until I could hold onto it no longer. Panting to a stop I stood looking after the departing sailplane, so rigid on the air. This time *I* was the envious one. Would I ever learn to fly like her?

Good luck anyway, I said silently after her.

Turning, I started back. Goudron was standing by the K-13 with a student. Just the sight of him filled me with anger. Why was he taking that guy up in the K-13 when he always took me up in that horrible old Bijav? Why didn’t he treat me like the others? Why didn’t he teach me anything or let someone else teach me? Was it some quirk of an evil nature, or because I was hopeless, too hopeless to trust with a better glider?

Knowing he wouldn’t take me until the end of the day anyway, I walked right past him. Then I saw a young man beckoning me. “Are you Ariel?” he said.

“Yes.”

“I’m Claude, the new instructor. I’m taking some of Goudron’s students today and saw your name on the list. Do you want to fly with me?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. *Did I?* I was about to give an enthusiastic *oui!* when I

saw Goudron looking at us. He shook his head and waved one finger back and forth. Claude hesitated.

I exploded. "I'm flying with Claude," I shouted at Goudron. "You can't stop me. *Comprenez-vous?* You can't stop me."

Of course I knew he *could* stop me, but to my amazement he simply shrugged and turned his attention back to his student. Then I remembered. Oh, yes. I could fly with Claude but only Goudron could solo me. Fine. Fuck him. A few moments later Claude and I were lifting off behind one of the tow planes.

How can I describe the hour that followed? I'd never known what soaring could be. For one thing, we were using the K-13, not the Bijav. Thermals were everywhere and at last I was with an instructor whose great love was flying, and teaching.

From the moment we started to turn and the *bille* sailed off into the corner, he showed me what to do, how to use stick and opposite rudder to get out of the slip. When I released the tow cable in a thermal, he showed me how to spiral up inside it.

We gained altitude quickly and then the scary part started — the stuff Goudron had never showed me — stalls and spins. My legs and hands trembled as the glider's nose dropped and we fell toward the earth below. I'd never been so terrified, but Claude was encouraging. All the same, he couldn't believe I'd had so many lessons and never done stalls and spins.

Goudron never teaches me anything," I told him. "All he ever says is *manche et palonniers, conjuguez*. I'll never learn how to fly with him. I'll never be soloed."

But Claude just laughed and told me to prepare my approach to land.

That day I made my first perfect landing.

"Can I fly with you again tomorrow?" I asked Claude as we pushed the glider back to the start of the *piste*. "I've learned more with you in one hour than with weeks of Goudron. I was beginning to think I was hopeless."

To my utter despair Claude told me he'd only be at Rayol once a week and wouldn't be there the following one. "Fly with Goudron," he told me. "It may take longer, but you'll get it. Don't give up."

What could I say? He was abandoning me to my doom.

Goudron hadn't said anything to me since I'd arrived at the airfield that morning and after the scene I'd made over Claude I had no idea whether he'd ever take me up for another lesson. If not, I intended to concentrate on learning to fly Gerard's plane. Pilots had warned me that 'tail draggers' like the Jodel, were more difficult to land and take off than planes with nose wheels, like all the modern planes had, but I had no choice. The vintage Jodel was the only plane available and, sad to say, the vintage Bijav probably the only glider, unless Claude took me up again.

To my surprise, in the late afternoon Goudron beckoned me to get in the Bijav. What surprised me most was that he did this when the sky still had some thermals left. Great! Now I'd show him what I'd learned with Claude. Maybe he'd take the hint that I

was ready for more advanced training.

A few minutes later we were airborne behind the Rallye. On our first tow turn I pressed the rudder pedal and sent the *bille* smartly back into the center of its tube.

“*Eh, ben,*” said Goudron, as if he’d been waiting a long time to see me do that.

Yuck, yuck, yuck, I chuckled to myself, wishing I could see his face.

Then, without warning, the Bijav bounded higher. The unexpected movement made my hair prickle. “Keep her down,” Goudron roared.

Wait a *minute*! This time I’d seen what he’d done. Out of the corner of my eye I’d seen the trim tab move. By pulling it back he’d made the glider shoot upwards without even needing to touch the stick.

Gotcha! I thought, pushing the trim tab forward. *Gotcha!* Now there was no more doubt. The creep really *was* sabotaging my efforts.

Up ahead the tow plane entered a thermal current and rose high above us. I held the controls steady, as Claude had taught me, and seconds later we were pulled into the same updraft. All the while my left hand guarded the trim tab. Did Goudron notice? If so, he said nothing.

I was congratulating myself on my cleverness, when suddenly a shadow swept over us. A cloud? Then a flash of something large and white, like a great bird descending. A glider!

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! As we watched in horror, the spinning glider met the tow plane in what looked like a powerful handshake, smashing into it with terrible force. Their mid-air greeting ripped the glider’s right wing completely off.

A loud snap! Goudron had pulled the cable release. “*A moi,*” he said, taking the controls. For a moment we seemed to hang motionless on the air, watching the scene unfold, the truncated glider spiraling slowly out of sight toward the village below — the blue tow plane spinning earthward.

“No, no!” I screamed. Then, just feet above the ground, the tow pilot somehow pulled his damaged plane out of its spin, belly-landing in a corner of the airfield, barely missing a moving car.

Goudron pointed the Bijav’s nose away and down. With the wind whistling we rounded base onto final, hardly touching down before we were airborne again, sailing left, one wing tip nearly grazing the ground, then down again but not stopping, whizzing straight up the field until we came to an abrupt stop in front of the main hangar.

Before I could grasp what was happening, Goudron had opened the cockpit canopy. Already out of his harnesses, he climbed out, yelling instructions to people who were standing around looking dazed.

Then he was on the ground, running toward his office. I unbuckled my safety straps and climbed out.

A hundred yards away people were helping the tow pilot out of the plane. It wasn’t Marc. Thank God! I started walking toward the office. “Who was in the glider?” I

asked a fellow walking in the same direction.

“Whoever was using the K-6,” he replied.

My breath seemed to freeze in my lungs. “Chantal was,” I said.

A moment later the injured tow pilot walked by, impatiently waving away those trying to help him. “*Foutez-moi la paix*,” he shouted, clutching his side and grimacing with pain. Later I learned he’d believed the accident had been his fault. No one could stop him from getting in his car and driving off. Days later the doctor he finally let examine him found four broken ribs.

For the moment, everyone seemed headed somewhere, or nowhere. The village siren wailed to call in emergency volunteers. There was nothing I could do to help, so I went to the canteen. Others had gathered there and we sat and talked quietly about what had happened. After a while Marc came in and told us excitedly that Chantal’s body had been found in someone’s backyard just outside the village.

I wanted to go home and sort out my feelings, curl up under the covers and grieve not for her perhaps but for the human condition. But instead I stayed and helped put away the gliders.

CHAPTER 22

If Chantal’s accident had happened in the U.S., people would have complained that the airfield was a danger and should be closed. Americans don’t like bodies dropping out of the sky into their backyards. Chantal fell in two pieces, in two different backyards, having been cut in half through the middle. In the U.S. both of the people who owned the backyards would have sued.

The French aren’t as litigious as Americans, but there was a question of insurance, so the blame had to be fixed. Gliders always have the right-of-way over power aircraft, even planes with a glider in tow, but it wasn’t as simple as that.

Seconds before the crash Chantal had radioed the gliding center to tell them she’d successfully completed her 300-kilometer triangle and was inbound for landing. To lose altitude quickly she’d put her glider into a tailspin, but apparently hadn’t seen the tow plane in time to avoid it.

Given the facts, everyone thought the accident was Chantal’s fault even if technically her glider had the right of way. The pilots thought so at least partly because Chantal was a woman. The club’s insurance company thought so because they didn’t want to pay her family some huge sum. And French officialdom thought so because it was the easiest way out of the mess.

I was probably the only one who suspected *I* was to blame for the accident; if I hadn’t been taking a lesson, the tow plane might not have been in that spot. If I hadn’t hurried so to attach her cable and run with her wing, her take-off might have been de-

layed. And maybe, too, I'd wished something bad would happen to her.

Robert, who was on a layover in Athens when his wife was killed, flew home immediately but never came out of the house until the day of the funeral. The following week we heard he'd suffered a nervous breakdown.

Chantal's family came from all over France for the funeral. I met her mother and a younger sister, Michelle, whose wedding the following week had to be postponed. Their mother brought with her the beautiful lace bridal veil she was sewing — she'd even made the lace herself. She told me she there was no time for her to make Chantal's shroud, so one had been purchased ready-made.

I was speechless hearing her tell me these personal facts, but Chantal's mother seemed cheerful enough about it. "I have four daughters," she told me, "and Michelle is the first I didn't have to make a special size wedding dress for."

"A special size wedding dress?"

"Michelle isn't pregnant."

I stared at her. Their *mother* was telling me this? "Was Chantal pregnant at her wedding?" I somehow dared to ask.

"*Ah, oui. Tres.* Robert was a very difficult man to pin down. A real bachelor. Chantal was six months along before he agreed to set a date."

"But they must have been happy together. They had two more kids."

She looked at me in surprise. "Well, they were married. After that there's no problem any more about having children, *n'est-ce pas?*"

So that was the reason behind Chantal's jealousy. She must have felt Robert only married her because she was pregnant, not out of love. If only she could have known he'd suffer a nervous breakdown over her death!

I decided not to tell daddy about Chantal's accident, worried he might decide to stop my flying lessons. Libby read about it in the local newspaper.

"Well," she said to me the next time I saw her, "I suppose that's the end of your flying."

We were in her garden. I looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

"Why, because now you've seen how dangerous it is. Did you read all the gory details in *Nice Matin?*"

When I told her I was an eye witness and had even attached Chantal's tow cable before the fatal flight, she was non-plussed.

"And you're not afraid an accident like that could happen to you?"

I thought about it a moment. In fact, Chantal's glider could just as easily have hit the Bijav as the tow plane. If it had, there was no way Goudron or I would have survived. Oddly enough, Chantal's death hadn't made a dent in my desire to fly. Was something wrong with my imagination?

"No," I shrugged. "I suppose it could happen to me, but I'm not *afraid* it will."

"Well, I must say, Ariel, you've got courage." Libby turned to her daughter.

“Hasn’t she got courage, Anna?”

Anna shook her head. “She’s crazy.”

“Yes,” nodded Libby agreeably. “Crazy. That’s the word. Quite mad. Around the twist. Tell me, Ariel, is your father going to continue coughing up lolly for your lessons after this awful affair?”

I explained that my father only read the *Herald Tribune* and that if Libby and Anna said nothing about it to him, he might never hear of the accident.

“Oh, we’ll keep mum,” promised Libby, “but you must be careful, eh?”

“We don’t want to find you in our garden one morning cut in half,” Anna added in her serious way.

“Certainly not before Anna’s party. You *are* coming to Anna’s birthday party, aren’t you, Ariel? It’s her eighteenth and we don’t know whom to ask but you. You’re Anna’s only friend.”

“I am?”

“Oh, but we’ll have others here too. All the unmarried foreign ladies who live around here, and of course Lou-lou. It’s already August, time for him to come to a decision. With any luck we’ll have him married off by Noel.”

I told Libby I’d be happy to come to Anna’s party. My own birthday was a few days later, but I wasn’t having a party. I wondered what sort of present Anna might like. Another doll?

In the following week, news of Chantal’s accident brought strangers out of the woodwork. One afternoon at the airfield I heard English being spoken. It was *English* English, like Libby spoke. Two persons, a man with a ruddy face, beard and moustache, and a woman with blond, upswept hair, were wondering about the recent accident, so I described what had happened.

“Extraordinary,” said the Englishman when I was done.

“Bloody awful,” said his lady friend.

The man looked around at the airfield and the village perched on the hill above it and the mountains. “God, this is a lovely spot.” He turned to his friend. “Poops, what say we buy an old ruin and fix it up and live here the rest of our lives?”

She laughed. “And what about the magazine? You’d never leave that.”

“Of course I would. I’d sell the magazine and we’d open a cafe on the *place* and sell pastisse and croissants. What do you say?”

After listening to them a few minutes, I couldn’t resist asking about their magazine. They introduced themselves as Ian Butterfield and Janet Farley, publisher and managing editor of *Flight Today*. “We publish articles on flying,” Mr. Butterfield told me.

“Do you ever publish articles by beginners?” I asked.

Ian Butterfield gave me a peeved look. “Oh, damn,” he said. “Another writer. I’d hoped you were a subscriber.” Then he laughed. “Do I publish articles by beginner

whats?”

“Beginner pilots and beginner writers.”

“Yes, of course, all the time. That is, if it’s well-written and suits our needs. Do you have an idea for an article?”

I told him I could write an article about the Rayol gliding center and what it was like learning to fly there.

“Learning to fly in southern France. That’s a marvelous idea, really, isn’t it Janet? And I could take some smashing photographs while we’re here, to illustrate it.” He looked at me thoughtfully. “You’ll want dollars, won’t you. All right. We’ll pay four hundred U.S. dollars for any article we accept.” He handed me a business card. “Send it to that address, and I’d be quick about it if I were you. I may decide to sell the magazine tomorrow and settle down here.”

Later that day I thought about our conversation. But how could I write about learning to fly when I was as far from soloing now as on the day of my first lesson? How could I write about the gliding center when my thoughts about its chief were so negative?

Since the accident, my learning to fly had become an even lower priority with Goudron. Involved with paperwork and bureaucrats, he never had time to take me up, though I noticed he got in quite a few lessons with his male students.

Fine. Then I’d forget about gliding and concentrate on the plane. The Jodel was airworthy and I’d heard that Gerard had been seen recently at the airfield. Riding home on my moped I thought of all the terrific articles I could write for Mr. Butterfield’s magazine at \$400 apiece — if ever I learned to fly!

CHAPTER 23

The week following Chantal’s accident I didn’t get to fly at all. Only two events worth noting occurred that week. One was that the air club hired a new tow pilot. Then someone told me the new pilot was Marc’s replacement! Marc had given notice and quit.

I learned this while having a Coke in the canteen. It was embarrassing discovering in front of the entire world that my lover had left without telling me — everyone knew I was crazy about him. One of the fellows said he’d heard Marc had joined Air France, another that he’d taken a job flying for a company in Africa. Another was sure Marc had gone to Montreal to do aerial crop dusting.

I pretended to be delighted for him and walked away quickly, hoping no one would notice the tears in my eyes.

The second event of the week occurred a few minutes later, as I was driving home, when a guy on a huge motorcycle blinked his headlight at me. Both of us pulled over.

The biker was Pierre, another of Goudron’s students. Pierre was older than most of

us, about thirty-five or forty. He drove an old sports car and kept his even older Harley-Davidson in one of the club hangars. Powerful and athletic, Pierre had been a mercenary in North Africa and was reputed to have killed several men. He lived in Frejus and had been coming to the airfield once or twice a week for lessons since before I arrived.

Getting off his bike, Pierre crossed the road, came up to me, pushed back the sleeve of his T-shirt, and flexed his biceps.

“Feel that,” he ordered me. “*Allez.*” Gingerly, I poked his muscle. “Do you know where I’m going now?” he asked.

“No.”

“To see Goudron.” Standing in the road Pierre looked angry, defiant, and fed up. “I’ll tell him if he doesn’t solo me today, I’ll knock his head off.”

“Goudron won’t solo *you*?” I gasped. “*You*?”

“*Moi.*”

It was impossible to even imagine. “How many hours of dual do you have?” I asked curiously.

“Forty.”

“*Forty!*” It was incredible. I’d heard that most of the students — the male students — were soloed in about ten hours. A coward like *me* might need forty hours, but not someone like Pierre.

“If Goudron doesn’t solo me today,” shouted Pierre, striding back across the road, “I’ll *kill* him.”

His exaggeration made me laugh. “Good luck,” I called, thinking that whether he killed Goudron or succeeded in getting soloed, it could only help my cause.

Driving home, I made the moped growl and jump like a baby Harley. If *I* had big muscles, I’d threaten Goudron too.

But then the truth hit: I wasn’t anywhere near ready to fly alone, and, worse, might never be. Face it, Ariel, I told myself, you don’t know anything about flying at all!

Even with such negative thoughts, by the time I reached home my mood had improved. Knowing Marc was out of my life took a huge load off my spirits. As for my flying, I still had another month in France — plenty of time to solo on both the plane *and* the glider, if I set my mind to it.

“The Red Baron was back,” Tara told me when I came in.

My heart gave a little jump. “Gerard?”

“I think so. He didn’t come through the valley this time, though. He came straight over the house. I was back by the orchard. After he’d gone by, all the twigs on the trees sounded like they were making hollow music.”

“Oh, I wish I’d been here,” I cried. “I’ve really missed Gerard. I can’t wait to see him.”

It was true. I did want to see Gerard. There was so much to talk to him about: flying, Chantal, Goudron, my hopes and plans. And I wanted to hear how he’d done at

the soaring competition.

Thursday evening Gerard called from the base and asked if I'd be at the airfield Saturday morning because he wanted to get me started on the Jodel. I told him I would be and that I was really looking forward to flying it. We didn't talk long because he was in a telephone booth, but when we hung up I know both of us were smiling and feeling very excited.

The next day I went down to the airfield after lunch and talked to Francois about finding someone to give me lessons on the Jodel. He introduced me to a fellow named Patrick who'd come to the center for two weeks of gliding. Patrick had an airplane instructor's license and said he'd gladly give me lessons on the Jodel, free of charge, whenever he had the time, tho he didn't have the pilot rating necessary to solo me.

No sooner had I made the arrangement with him, than I saw Goudron walking toward me. "Starting Monday I'll have time for you," he told me.

"But I still can't be here at eight," I told him guardedly.

He started walking away, then turned his head and called back over his shoulder, "Did I *ask* you to?"

"Not recently," I admitted.

As Goudron walked off, I jumped up and down, delighted by my unexpected victory. Francois held up his thumb. "Bravo," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Things were finally starting to come together. My efforts, my patience — if one could call it that — were starting to pay off. Maybe Goudron was feeling a little less hostile toward women since now there was one fewer of us.

And then the most remarkable thing of all happened. Who should walk up to me but Hyacinthe. Wanting to talk privately, she took me aside.

"Ariel," she said, "you don't know me, but Marc talked about you often. I almost feel I know you."

"Marc talked about *me*?" Was I hearing correctly?

"He said you were like a sister to him."

"A *sister*." The word so stunned me I missed the chance to make a really ironic comment.

"I was supposed to meet him here this weekend," she continued, "but now they tell me he left days ago. Is that true?"

"Yes." I'd doubted my hearing, now I doubted my eyesight: were those *tears* in her eyes?

"You wouldn't know where he went, would you?" she asked. "He didn't leave any forwarding address with the club secretary."

I couldn't believe this was happening — Marc hadn't only run out on me, he'd stood up a girl with whom he was really involved, a girl ten times prettier than me.

"I heard he got a new job," I told her. "With Air France, or in Africa or Montreal."

"I know he was involved with some really creepy types," she told me. "*Des vrais*."

“*Des vrais?* You mean like ... criminals?”

“I don’t know what they were. I know they were looking for pilots and offering big money.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t noticed any creepy types *ever* around the airfield, except for Goudron.

The tears in Hyacinthe’s eyes spilled down her cheeks. “I guess I’ll go back to Nice,” she said. “I was going to spend the weekend here, but what’s the point now?” Taking out a handkerchief she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

I was about to suggest she stay anyway, then remembered Gerard would be there. As sorry as I felt for Hyacinthe, I certainly didn’t want her getting her beautiful claws in *him*.

“Well,” I said, “*Au revoir.*”

“*Au revoir, ma petite.*” Leaning forward, she gave me a peck on one cheek, then the other. Then she turned and hurried away.

Ma petite? Yuck! When I rejoined Francois a moment later I could tell he was curious to know what had happened between Hyacinthe and me. But I said nothing, and he was too French to ask.

CHAPTER 24

Yes, things were definitely on the upswing. When Saturday morning came I was really looking forward to seeing Gerard. He arrived at the airfield beaming, got out of his car and kissed me vigorously on both cheeks — smack smack smack. “*Ca va?*”

“*Formidablement!*”

“Good. I have something to show you.” Reaching in his car he brought out a briefcase from which he extracted a newspaper clipping. The photo heading the article showed Gerard sitting in the Fauconnet.

Eagerly I scanned the text. It was an article on the gliding competition — and it was all about a young navy pilot who had had the courage to bring a humble Fauconnet to a world class gliding event — and had become the talk of the event!

“Gerard,” I cried, “did you *win*.”

“No,” he guffawed modestly. “Go on. Read.”

I read on. The article described how Gerard, in his tiny sailplane, would center himself in a thermal, spiral hard and tight, tighter than the larger, faster sailplanes, and go right up the middle, faster than they. Between thermals, of course, speed would tell. But Gerard had proven that even with the simplest machine, a fine glider pilot could put on a virtuoso performance.

“Oh, Gerard,” I cried. “I’m so proud of you.” Throwing my arms around him, I kissed him smack.

Then he reached back into his briefcase and pulled out a manila envelope. “*Cadeau*,” he said, handing it to me.

“A gift for me?” Inside the envelope was a glossy photograph with letters and numbers written along the sides in black ink. I studied the photo. Trees? Millions of tiny trees? Then I saw that in the middle of the trees was a house — our house!

“You took this from the air?”

“*Affirmative*,” he said proudly. “My Etendard is equipped with aerial cameras.”

“It’s perfect,” I marvelled, examining it more closely. Everything was so clear — every stone in our walls, the windows, garage and lawn. Out back was the cherry orchard, and ... “Oh, Gerard! The sheep are there.”

“I saw them. And the shepherd and shepherdess.”

“Shepherdess?”

I looked again. Then I saw them. Over by the sheep two persons were standing — and *kissing*! One had to be Simon. And the other? It was hard to tell. It didn’t look like Madame Pinchot. Then I realized who it was. “That’s Tara,” I blurted. “My father’s *petite amie*. She’s kissing Simon!”

Gerard gulped and reached for the picture. “*Desole*,” he said, then added in stilted English, “You want I throw it up?”

“Throw it *away*,” I corrected him, laughing. “No, you said this was a present, so it’s mine. I promise not to let anyone see what’s happening in the top corner.”

“There is also a dog,” Gerard told me. “*Regarde*.”

I looked more closely at the photo. There, about ten meters from Simon and Tara, was ... Diablo! The dog had returned.

“It’s Simon’s sheepdog,” I cried. “Look at him. He’s watching them like a wolf. Oh, Gerard, I have to keep this. Half my summer is in it.”

Reluctantly he agreed to let me have it. I understood the way he felt, but had no intention of hurting anyone. I just wanted the picture as a memento of my time in France.

That afternoon Patrick gave me my first lesson on Gerard’s Jodel. Flying the plane felt fantastic after my hours with Goudron in the Bijav. The plane was faster and snappier. Best of all, one could look forward eventually to flying off somewhere, visiting other places, seeing new sights.

All the same, I knew Gerard wanted me to continue my lessons with Goudron, so when *le chef* motioned for me to get in the Bijav that afternoon, I did so obediently. But if I’d expected him actually to *teach* me something for a change, I was disappointed. The whole time it was *manche et palonniers, conjuguez*, until I was nearly in hysterical giggles.

When the day was almost over, Gerard invited me to have dinner with him in a restaurant in Rayol. I called daddy for permission, and he gave it.

This wasn’t just my first date in France — I couldn’t really call my times with Marc “dates,” — it was my first date ever in a restaurant with white tablecloths, napkins

that didn't come out of metal holders, and a wine list. The menu card had a la carte dishes and three fixed-price menus. I chose the least expensive of the three, but Gerard suggested I try the *escargots* — snails — which were on the middle-priced menu, so I did. Then he ordered a carafe of wine, pouring me a glass.

It was the best meal I'd ever had in my life, and we had so much to talk about. Gerard listened to my story about meeting Pierre on the road the day before and feeling his muscles.

"Goudron soloed him last evening," I told Gerard. "Maybe I should use threats too."

Gerard chuckled at my story, but as a man was more prone to forgive Goudron's faults. For one thing, in the navy he'd experienced a lot worse bullies than our *Chef du Centre*.

Gerard then told me the most incredible news. He'd read in the paper that Marc had been caught flying drugs from North Africa into France and faced a prison term. He'd also had his pilot license revoked.

But news that would have devastated me a few weeks ago hardly fazed me now. "Is that so?" I remarked. "A pity." Then I changed the subject.

That evening Gerard drove me home. "Learn to fly well," he told me as we drove along the deer track. "Don't worry about soloing. When you're ready, if Goudron won't do it, we'll find someone who will."

I asked Gerard to let me out at the mailbox because there was always the risk of running into daddy at the house and I didn't want daddy to get nosy and maybe deduce that Gerard was the "Red Baron." Gerard kissed me three times on the cheeks and said goodnight.

I got out and started down the moonlit road toward the house, a warm, happy feeling inside me. I was about halfway there when a rustling in the woods made my heart thump. Not waiting to see what it was, I hurried forward, faster, when suddenly a wild, howling scream in the trees nearly made my hair stand on end. I broke into a mad dash. Was it a wolf? A cat? Wild boar didn't howl. A few moments later, panting from the exertion, I safely reached our front door.

The living room was deserted; daddy and Tara were watching television in bed. I didn't want to bother them about the noises in the woods. As for the photo, I'd show it to them the next day, being careful to keep my thumb over the part with Tara and Simon. If daddy saw Tara kissing Simon, he'd go bonkers.

And anyway, before showing anything to anyone I wanted to talk to Tara. Maybe she loved Simon but was staying with daddy out of some mistaken notion that daddy was going to marry her. On the other hand, maybe he *was* planning to. I'd certainly been wrong about men before.

CHAPTER 25

Whoever said life is always feast or famine, flood or drought — was certainly right! In the days that followed I found myself with more flying instruction than I could assimilate, almost more than I could bear.

As soon as I'd finish working with daddy, I'd ride down to the airfield where, sometime during the afternoon, Goudron would take me for an hour in the Bijav. Then, when the thermals died down, I'd hop into the Jodel with Patrick for an hour of turns, stalls, landings and take-offs.

One week passed, then another. I became a nervous wreck, so intent on my work and lessons that everything else was forgotten. I didn't even remember to go to Anna's birthday party. Damn! I thought to myself. Down below was the party, and here I was, five hundred meters in the air. Well, nothing to be done. I'd stop by their house later and apologize.

Gerard had been on duty the Saturday before, but came up the next Saturday. Again he invited me to dinner in "our" restaurant. This time I really looked forward to my glass of '*le gros rouge qui tache*'. With the first sip I could feel my tense body begin to relax.

"*Alors?*" smiled Gerard. "*Raconte.*"

How to explain my new set of frustrations? "I'm flying *too much*," I laughed. "I'm stressed out. The worst thing is, I'm still not *getting* anywhere."

"Why not?"

"Why? Because I'm just not a pilot. I'll never learn how to fly."

Gerard listened to my tale of woe, how although Goudron took me up every day I still wasn't able to learn anything from him. Goudron mumbled. He had a terrible accent. All I could understand was *manche et palonniers, conjuguez*. "And he still yanks back on the stick to spoil my landings. Either that, or I'm hallucinating. But the results are the same: lousy landings."

"How are you doing on the Jodel?"

"No good," I sighed. "I can understand what he's telling me — the words anyway — and I'm fine in the air making turns and all that. I even do stalls now without twisting around in my seat and trying to crawl up into the fuselage when the nose drops. So I feel I can *fly* the thing. What I can't catch onto is how to land and take off."

"Did your instructor explain how to hold back on final? You have to *refuse* to let the plane land."

"Yes. He keeps telling me, '*Refuse le sol.*' Refuse the earth. And I try. I really try. We come onto final and just before we land I hear him say, "*refuse le sol, refuse le sol, refuse*" ... And then, whammo. I fly the sucker into the ground."

"*Ah, oui?*" Gerard had turned a little pale.

“Gerard,” I cried, “unless something happens, I’m going to destroy your plane.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said, quickly recovering his gallantry. “But I think you should stop flying with Goudron a while. You’re under too much stress. Concentrate on the Jodel.”

“Fine, except what’s Goudron going to say? He’ll consider it an insult if I give up gliding in favor of a plane. You jet pilots and gliding enthusiasts are all prejudiced against internal combustion engines.”

I drained my wine glass and pushed it across the table. “*Ooh la*,” Gerard chuckled, pouring in a few more drops. “*Fille soulee*.” Drunken girl!

“So what’s new with *you*?” I asked, my speech slurring a little.

“*Moi*? Nothing much. I’m quitting the navy.”

His words popped me out of my mental haze. “*Tu quittes l’aeronaval*? What are you going to do?”

“Apply to Air France. Become an airline pilot, I hope.”

“Well, you certainly shouldn’t quit the navy unless you’re sure Air France will hire you.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Air France won’t consider anyone who’s still in the armed forces.”

“But what if Air France doesn’t take you? Could you go back in the navy?”

“*Negat*. I’d have to get a job with some smaller airline, or fly business jets.”

“Would you like that?”

“No,” he admitted. “I only want to fly with Air France.”

I couldn’t blame him. Being an Air France pilot was the top job a pilot could aspire to; all the guys at the airfield were in awe of them. “What are the odds of them taking you?”

“*Bof*,” he shrugged. “At least as good as anyone else’s. Maybe better. Dozens of guys apply for every opening.

“If you’re quitting the navy you must be pretty confident you’ll get accepted,” I told him.

“No choice. Supporting a wife and kids costs a lot.”

“Is that what you want? A family?”

“Don’t you?”

Before answering I paused to mop up some of the *steak au poivre* sauce in my dish with a piece of bread. “I don’t know,” I told him finally. “I’m too young to think of marriage.”

“You’re almost eighteen. Eighteen is old enough.”

Without looking him in the eye, I sensed Gerard was watching my reactions intently. If the conversation went on like this, I was afraid he might suddenly propose. Guessing what was on my mind, he hurriedly put me at ease. “I wouldn’t marry for a year or two anyway, not until I could support my family.”

I laughed at his cautious words. "Isn't that a little old fashioned?"

"*Je suis un peu vieux jeu*," he admitted, all the same looking me proudly in the eye.

"So young, so old fashioned," I kidded him. Or was I kidding myself?

That evening as Gerard drove me home I thought about our conversation. Even if I didn't want to get married yet, I hated the idea of leaving France, of leaving flying, and leaving him. Not that I loved him. I didn't feel at all toward Gerard as I had toward Marc. Gerard was more a friend. I liked being with him and talking to him. And, I had to admit, I was getting physically attracted to him too. Only not like I'd been with Marc.

No, I told myself, whatever I felt toward Gerard definitely was not love.

Again I asked Gerard to let me out at the mailbox. This time when he said goodnight, instead of kissing me on the cheek, he gave me a hard quick kiss on the lips. It was so unexpected I didn't even kiss back. But I wanted to, so I gave *him* a quick peck on his lips, and we both blushed.

"I'm on duty tomorrow," he said, "but I'll be up next Saturday."

"I can't wait," I told him, and meant it.

As I walked toward the house, the night was cool and pleasant, a full moon rising. I felt good, if exhausted from the long day. There were no howlings in the woods. If any "wolves" were around, they must be at home with their families. Approaching the house I paused to look out over the moon-lit valley.

Then a strangled cry froze me in my tracks. Something came crashing through the trees toward me, then bounded out of the shadows. Standing in the moonlight, gaunt and terrible, was Simon's dog.

"Diablo!" I cried. Still about ten feet away, the dog held his head low, watching me. His tongue lolled drooling from his rows of razor-sharp teeth. Red crescents ringed the lower rims of his eyes as he looked up into mine.

For a moment he stood motionless, then leaped sideways with a terrible howl, snapping at the air as if tormented by unseen devils. Then, with a despairing cry, he bounded back to grovel at my feet, screaming, pleading, weeping.

"What do you want, Diablo?" I cried. "I can't understand you this time. What do you want?"

He yelped. Turning his head he snapped at his flank. Then I saw the trouble. My God! Half one side of his body was missing. Moonlight shone on the huge, red, gaping hole, the torn flesh and pieces of bone. He'd been shot. Had Simon done it?

Tears sprang to my eyes. "Diablo," I cried, "what can I do for you?" It would be impossible to get him to a vet, and even if I could no vet could heal the animal's real wound — his broken heart.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him frantically. "Do you want something to eat?"

He looked at me another second, then bounded away into the woods. I stood there,

helpless to do anything, tears running down my face. Poor animal! He couldn't help what he did, what he was. And he knew I couldn't help him.

The forest swallowed him up, but as I ran the rest of the way to the house I could still hear him off in the trees, crying, howling at the moon.

CHAPTER 26

Daddy was reading a book in the living room when I entered the house. Already exhausted, the encounter with Diablo had strung me out to my limit. I was hoping to get to bed without any conversation, but my father was in a mood to talk.

"Did I tell you your mother refused to waive child support payments this summer?" he asked.

His words confused me. What was he talking about? Child support payments again? That wasn't any of my business. It was between him and mom. "So?"

"So? Is that all you can say?" He was obviously in a testy mood.

Well, so was I. "What do you *want* me to say?" I snapped.

Dad slammed shut his book. "That's it, young lady," he said. "That's exactly what I wanted from you. More of your damn lip."

"*Lip*?" I cried indignantly. "I'm not giving you any lip. I don't even know what you're talking about."

"Then I'll tell you. I'm talking about no more flying lessons. I'm talking about no more France. I'm talking about your going home as soon as I can get you on a plane."

I couldn't believe it. Leave France *now*? No more flying? Unsoloed? And what about Gerard? Daddy couldn't order me around and wreck all my plans just like that.

"I'm not going home," I shouted. "You can't make me."

"Keep your voice down," he said in a harsh whisper. "Tara's trying to sleep."

"Well maybe she should hear this. Who knows? Maybe you'll decide to send *her* home too."

"I am. She'll be going with you."

"You're sending her home?" I stared at him. "Have you told her? What did she say?"

"I'll tell her when I'm good and ready, and she won't say anything. I'm the one who makes the decisions here."

"Well what has *she* done to deserve this?" I demanded. "Did *her* mother refuse to waive child support payments? Tara's young enough to be my sister, after all."

At this my father got to his feet and came toward me threateningly. "Don't you ever say that to me again," he said in a deadly calm voice. "Don't ever ..." Grabbing my arm, he shook me so hard I nearly fell. I was shocked and terrified. Neither of my parents had ever laid a hand on me in anger before.

"I've had enough shit from you, young lady," he hissed. "I should never have brought you here in the first place. You're a trouble-maker. You've always been and you'll always be. If it wasn't for you, your mother and I would still be married."

I gasped. How could he say such a lie? "*My* trouble-making!" I shouted. "She divorced you because you cheated on her. I'll bet you're sending me and Tara home because you've found some new girlfriend. How old is *this* one? Fifteen?"

For a moment I really thought he was going to deliver the fatal blow, but with a great effort he controlled himself. "The lady in question is Swiss," he said, releasing my arm, "and happens to be *twice* Tara's age. We're going to Paris together in two weeks. She has a large apartment on the Avenue Foch. If your mother had agreed to waive child support payments, and you hadn't insisted on those damn flying lessons, I'd have been able to get through the year without Mimi's help."

"On your salary you need help?" I asked disbelievingly. "You don't just sponge off taxpayers, you're sponging off some poor unsuspecting Mimi. Well, fine. Send me and Tara home. But maybe Tara has a surprise for you, too."

This time he grabbed me with both hands and shook me hard. "What kind of surprise?"

"Ask her yourself. Ask her if she doesn't love someone else. Ask her if she hasn't been kissing someone else."

The words were hardly out of my mouth when I felt his hand crash across my face. My legs buckled, but he held me up and drew back his hand for another swing.

"Daddy, don't!"

"Tell me who!" he shouted in my face.

At this my anger overcame my fear. How *dare* he hit me? How dare he shout at me like that? With all my force I threw myself back, breaking his grip, but not before another blow glanced off the side of my head.

"Ethan, stop!"

It was Tara. She'd heard us and had come up from their room. I ran to her. "Tara," I cried, "he's found out about Simon. We have to run."

But she didn't move. "Ethan. What's the matter here?"

"Stay out of this," my father shouted, trying to get past her to get me. I dodged past him, got to the front door, and stood there ready to escape into the night.

"He's going to send us home," I told her breathlessly. "Both of us. He's found some rich lady and plans to live with her in Paris."

"Ariel's exaggerating," said my father. "Nothing is definite yet."

"Nothing is definite?" I screamed in disbelief. "You mean you don't know yet if the Swiss lady *wants* you to be her gigolo?"

"Ethan," Tara said. "What's Ariel talking about?"

"I don't know," he replied angrily. "Shut up, both of you."

"Tell daddy about Simon," I urged Tara. "Tell him you love Simon?"

She stared at me. "I don't love Simon."

"Of course you do. You were kissing him in the orchard. Gerard took a photo of you from the air, with his jet."

The look of puzzlement on Tara's face turned to understanding. "You mean ... that plane that went by ...?"

"Yes! He was taking aerial photos. You were kissing Simon."

"No," said Tara. "I wasn't kissing him. You're wrong."

"Where are the pictures," demanded daddy. Grabbing Tara by the arm, he whirled her around.

"Don't hit her," I cried. "They're in my desk upstairs. The top drawer."

Releasing Tara, he ran upstairs, taking two at a time.

"Your father's gone mad," said Tara. "We have to get out of here. Come." She walked quickly toward the door. A moment later we were out in the moonlight.

As we hurried in the direction of Madame Pinchot's house, I filled Tara in. "Daddy's going to live in Paris with some rich lady, so he's sending both of us back to the States. Only we don't have to go. You can stay with Simon and I can hide somewhere until my eighteenth birthday."

"Why would I stay with Simon?"

"Because you love him. You do, don't you? The photos...."

"I sometimes tell Simon my problems. He's very kind and understanding. Sometimes I'm depressed... But Simon was only comforting me. We've never kissed."

"But the photo showed him kissing you."

"A kiss on the cheek, maybe. Not a love kiss."

"I think Simon loves you," I told her, tripping over a stone that nearly sent me sprawling. "Doesn't he?"

"Perhaps," she said. "How can you ever believe what they say?"

"Simon isn't like daddy," I assured her. "He isn't like my friend Marc. Simon is *serieux*."

"Oh?" said Tara, glancing at me sharply. "Then what about his relationship with Madame Pinchot? I happen to know he sleeps with her."

"Well if he has, it's just because they're friends and she needed someone to sleep with her. I'm sure he never lied to her about his feelings. He just stays with her because they're friends and she has lots of money."

"Get real," snapped Tara. "Madame Pinchot hasn't a dime. She lives in a dream world. That house is in hock up to its chimneys but she refuses to sell it. They're both living off Simon's savings."

What Tara was saying was really news to me, but more interesting than her words was her tone of voice. She sounded angry, even jealous of Madame Pinchot. If so, maybe she was in love with Simon without even knowing it.

By now we'd reached the edge of the Pinchot property. Off in the woods an animal

wailed, its voice rising into an anguished scream. Diablo. The sound made my skin shiver. We hurried on. "Do you think we should just walk up to their door and knock?" I asked Tara.

"No. Simon has moved out of the main house. He's living in a little cottage over near the *bergerie*."

"Can you stay with him tonight?" I asked her. "I don't think you should go back to daddy's."

"I don't know. Perhaps I'll go to a hotel. There!" she cried. "There's the cottage."

I was relieved to see a light in the window. Simon was home.

We started toward the little house, when suddenly an animal came slinking out of the woods. It was Diablo. Walking slowly across the ground ahead of us, he took a position in front of the cottage door. We stopped and he stood watching us. I took a tentative step forward and he lowered his head and drew his lips back, exposing his teeth. A rasping sound came from his throat.

"Diablo," I said, "it's me. It's us." The growl grew louder. I looked at Tara. "What do you think?"

"I think he's just acting," she said. "He knows us. He won't hurt us."

I wasn't so sure. "Somebody shot him," I told her. "He's wounded. I think he's gone crazy."

"Diablo was *born* crazy."

Tara took a step forward, but the intensity of the growl increased to a low roar. "We can't go any closer," I said. "We'd better shout for Simon to come out."

"Yes," she agreed, looking worried now. "We'd better."

Perhaps to show Diablo her good intentions, Tara took a step back. But her retreat acted as a signal. Leaping forward, the dog covered the ground between us in a few long leaps, then, in terrible silence, launched itself through the air at Tara.

With a warning cry I tried to push her out of the way. Too late! The dog was on her.

It was like a nightmare, trying to pull in breath to scream while screaming. "Help!" Grabbing one of the dog's rear legs, I tried to pull him off, but his teeth were firmly buried in Tara's leg.

The door of the hut burst open. Simon stood silhouetted in the light, a rifle in his hands.

"Shoot him, Simon," I screamed.

"Diablo!" he shouted. "Let her go."

At the sound of his voice, the dog reacted. Without losing his hold on Tara, he swung his hindquarters around until he could see Simon. Grinding his teeth even harder into Tara's flesh, he breathed in and out with a horrible, seething growl.

"Simon, he's killing her."

Simon ran forward. It was impossible for him to fire at the dog without hitting

Tara. "*Lache-la!*" he commanded.

For a second the dog hesitated, then, to my infinite relief, responded. Releasing his bloody grip, he slunk toward Simon. Prostrating himself on his belly, he wriggled forward, screaming softly and wiping at his bloody muzzle with his paws.

In one swift movement Simon stepped to the side, put the rifle to his shoulder, aimed it and pulled the trigger. Diablo flipped into the air as the rifle crack reverberated in the hills, and fell back to earth dead.

Laying the rifle on the ground, Simon ran to Tara, lifted her in his arms and headed for his car. "The keys are in my back pocket," he shouted to me. "You drive."

Lights had come on in the front patio of the house. I saw Madame Pinchot hurrying down the front steps in her bathrobe, curlers in her hair.

Simon, already in the back seat with Tara, rolled down the rear window and shouted something. I caught the words "Tara" and "*clinique*." Then, to me, "*Allons-y*."

Carefully I drove down the narrow road. It must have cost Madame Pinchot a fortune to have the road built, but in several places it was nearly eroded away.

With Tara half conscious and moaning in back, the ten kilometers to Rayol seemed to take forever. The clinic, halfway up the hill between the airfield and the village, had been alerted for our arrival, thanks to a phone call from Madame Pinchot. Simon helped lift Tara onto a waiting stretcher and she was whisked away to the emergency room.

When she was gone, Simon went to the desk and offered to donate his blood. A nurse came and led him away.

Alone in the waiting room I debated whether or not to telephone daddy. I was so furious at him. Tara's injury was all his fault. How many more lives would he ruin with his damned ego and unfaithfulness? One thing was sure: Mimi, his new lady friend, wasn't getting any bargain. He'd live off her a year, then walk out.

But despite my anger, when the nurse returned I asked to borrow her phone and called my father. He must have been sitting with his hand on the receiver because I didn't even hear it ring before he answered.

"It's me," I told him. "I'm at the Rayol clinic with Tara. She was attacked by a dog."

"I'm coming," he said, and hung up.

There was nothing to do but wait. The minutes dragged by. Then Simon reappeared wearing a light green medical gown which they'd given him to cover his bloody clothes.

"They've stopped her bleeding," he told me. "As soon as they get her stabilized they'll take her by ambulance to Grasse."

"Will you go with her?"

"Maybe. In a few minutes somebody's going back with me to get Diablo so they can test him for rabies."

"I don't think he had rabies," I said. "I think he knew you and Tara love each other

and it drove him crazy with jealousy.”

Simon smiled at my use of the reflexive verb. “Do you think she loves me too?”

“Yes.” As I said this, he reached out and pulled me to him in a warm hug. “I’m so happy for you guys,” I told him.

Suddenly the door burst open. It was daddy. “Where’s Tara?” he demanded.

Simon moved me gently aside. “Who wants to know?”

“I’m Tara’s husband,” daddy told him. “Obviously you’ve already met my daughter.” He looked at Simon’s medical gown. “Are you a doctor?”

My father’s attitude really pissed me off. “This is our neighbor, Simon,” I told him.

“Oh, right,” said daddy. “The photogenic shepherd. You s.o.b., I’m going to fix you ...” He started to square off like a boxer, jabbing the air, preparing to land a punch on Simon’s jaw.

“Daddy,” I shrieked, “you have no right. You told me you were *through* with Tara. You were sending her home.”

“Shut up!” With that daddy swung at Simon, but before the punch could land, Simon grabbed daddy’s fist and pulled him off balance, at the same time putting out his foot to trip him. Daddy fell heavily to the floor, then floundered back to his feet, roaring with rage.

I couldn’t stand it. “Daddy, stop!” I cried, throwing myself between him and Simon. “You don’t even love Tara. Go find your rich Swiss lady. Go look for Mimi.”

There was a low cough from the doorway. We all whirled. Standing there was Madame Pinchot. She was wearing a dress and her hair was neatly combed, her voice very calm. “He doesn’t have to go looking,” she said. “Mimi is here.”

CHAPTER 27

It was too much. When Mimi — Madame Pinchot — showed up, I cut out of there. They were supposed to be adults. What did I care who they loved, married, or slept with? Let them sort that out for themselves.

As I stepped outside I found a stream of cars filled with partying guys and gals heading up the hill to the village. Summer evenings had been so quiet at our place in the countryside, and I’d spent so much time at the airfield, I hadn’t even realized it was the height of the tourist season.

As I made my way across the road, guys leaned out of car windows calling to me in French and German, offering rides. No way. After a few minutes I noticed a paved footpath that cut across the switchback road and seemed to lead directly up to the village. A few minutes later, a little out of breath, I found myself in the crowded cathedral square of Rayol.

It was a wild scene, the whole village alive with music, drink and dancing. Fantastic-looking French guys in narrow pants and trendy shirts — all looking like Marc! — flirted with girls in miniskirts — all of whom looked like Hyacinthe!

As I made my way through the jostling crowd, a high, clear voice reached my ears. “Ariel!”

Turning, I could just make out Libby waving at me. We struggled toward each other. “Ariel,” she cried breathlessly as we came together. “Have you seen your father?”

“I just left him. Why?”

“Oh, good. He called up an hour ago, asked if I’d seen you. Of course, I hadn’t.” Libby clutched her hands together. “Oh, Ariel,” she wailed, “it’s so difficult being a parent. Your father was so worried about you, and I’m so worried about Anna.”

“Anna? Why?”

“She’s lost. You haven’t seen her, have you?”

“Anna?” I glanced around. “Where did you see her last?”

“Not here,” she wailed. “Anna didn’t get lost *here*. She got lost at her birthday party.”

Oh! Anna’s birthday party! “Oh, Libby,” I said, “I completely forgot her party was today. It was so stupid of me. I remembered it in the air.”

“No matter, no matter. The important thing is, we must find Anna.” Taking me by the arm, she drew me out of the crowd into the patio of a little shop.

“But I don’t understand. How did she get lost?”

“Well, there was the birthday party — just a few friends, you know, the Laugiers, Marie, Jane Turrell who owns the killer whippet — she’d locked it up, thank God — about ten people, the regulars. Then off I had to go to the village to pay the bill at the *epicerie* or they would have cut my credit right off and we’d have been without a piece of cheese or a can of prawns come tomorrow. When I returned to the house, no one was there.” Libby stopped and looked at me with round, astonished eyes. “Can you understand that, Ariel?”

“No one was there?”

“No one. Not Anna, not Madame Laugier, no one at all. And Ariel ...” Libby placed her hand on her heart, looking at me tragically.

“What?”

“Ariel,” she cried, “even her dear *clothes* were gone.”

“Her clothes?”

“Anna’s clothes. Everything. Even her poor little torn knickers. All gone.”

I studied Libby’s face. Was she really as concerned as she sounded? You never could tell with her, she so relished the drama in every situation. Even now the expression in her brown eyes seemed somehow so cool, so detached. “Did you look for a note? Maybe she left a note.”

“Yes,” said Libby. “Now that you mention it, there *was* a note.”

“What did it say?”

“Nothing.”

“*Nothing*? How is that possible?”

“How? Because Anna has never learned to read or write. It’s my fault, of course, I should have seen she got to school more often, but how can a mother *know*?”

“Then what was *in* the note?”

“Squiggles,” she cried. “Nothing but squiggles.”

I stared at her. “What did you do then?”

“Well, of course I went immediately to ask Madame Laugier and Marie if they’d seen where she’d gone, but they said they’d left the party directly after I had. So I called Jane. She said she’d had to get home and feed the dog and had left even before Madame Laugier. I’ve tried to contact the others who were there, but haven’t been able to reach them.”

“That’s awful,” I said. “But why have you come here?”

“Why, I’ve come to find Lou-lou. I want him to put out a police bulletin to locate Anna. That’s what gendarmes are for, isn’t it? To find little lost girls? I was just making my way to the *gendarmerie*, when I saw you and thought I’d better tell you your father was looking for you.”

“I’ll come with you to the *gendarmerie*.”

“Oh, Ariel, will you? That’s so kind. I’m so terribly worried.”

We started to push our way through the crowd, when suddenly there up ahead was Anna, standing on a low stone wall by the plaza steps. “There she is,” I cried, pointing her out to Libby. “On that wall.”

As her eyes found her daughter, Libby put her hand to her mouth in alarm. “She’ll fall,” she cried. “She has nothing to hold onto!” Flinging herself into the crowd, Libby called loudly, “Anna, Anna.”

Hearing her mother’s voice Anna looked our way, then smiled and waved.

“Hold on, my *pou*,” cried Libby. “Mother’s coming.”

It was then that we saw Anna wasn’t in any danger of falling. On the contrary, a man standing on the stairs next to her had one strong arm around her thighs. The man had balding grey hair and wore a khaki uniform.

“Lou-lou,” cried Libby. “You’ve found Anna. Oh, thank you.”

Libby ran to Anna and held up her arms, but Anna made no move to climb down. “Didn’t you get my note?” she shouted over the noise of the crowd.

“Yes, dear, but you know I couldn’t read it. You know mother can’t read.”

Anna leaned down and said something in Lou-lou’s ear.

“What did she say?” Libby asked him eagerly.

“She said she’s eighteen,” he replied, taking a harder grip on Anna’s legs.

“Of course she’s eighteen. She had her birthday today.”

Anna shook her head, frowning. “I’m eighteen,” she shouted, “and I can do what I

want from now on.”

Libby laughed gaily. “Of course you can, my *pou*. Now come home with your mother.”

“I don’t *want* to come home. I’ve moved in with Lou-lou. We’re going to get married.”

I watched Libby’s expression turn to utter shock. Her breath seemed to desert her lungs. Her face flushed red, then turned grey. “Oh, Anna,” she said, “live with him if you must, but *please* my girl, don’t *marry* him.”

It was hard to believe this was really happening. The scene was too perfect. Anna too perfect, standing there firm and unrepentant like a real-life Joan of Arc, chin raised proudly, thumb held firmly inside her fist, gazing up at Lou-lou. Bravo, Anna, I shouted silently.

I turned back into the crowd and it whirled me away. I didn’t look back. Tears streamed down my face. Bravo, Anna! I didn’t know if my tears were happy or sad, were shed for her or for myself. Next to Anna’s — next to anyone’s — my own life had never seemed emptier.

CHAPTER 28

I walked and walked. At some point I left the crowded square and village streets and started back down the hill, not knowing where I was going or even caring. As I got to the bottom my mundane bodily needs got to me; I needed a restroom. The only one I knew of was at the airfield, so I started walking along the road in that direction.

The night was clear and beautiful but that didn’t help calm my feelings of anger and rebellion toward my father. My thoughts kept going back to Anna. Could I ever be that brave — to launch myself, without permission or discussion, into unknown dangers and mysteries? Would *I* have the courage on my eighteenth birthday to tell daddy I wanted to stay in France, become a pilot, support myself writing articles and maybe marry Gerard? Or would my imagination interfere, imagining the worst: the plane crash that would kill me, my articles returning in their SASE’s, my divorce from Gerard?

When I got to the airfield the canteen was closed, the entire place deserted. I used the restroom, then wandered out to the hangars. Because they’d needed the hangar space for a visiting glider, I’d parked Gerard’s plane out by the fuel pumps that afternoon after my lesson. I decided now to sit a while in the cockpit, maybe even sleep there.

As usual, the keys were hidden on top of the right hand tire, inside the wheel faring. Opening the plexiglass door, I lowered myself into the front passenger seat. The smell of imitation leather, dials and gauges surrounded me. My world. My new world. Wanting to stretch out and be comfortable, for the first time I realized how tiny and cramped the cockpit was for any purpose other than piloting the plane.

Climbing into the back seat I tried curling up, but that wasn't any better. The only other choice was to sit outside on the ramp with my back against the hangar door. I opted for that, taking a life vest from the plane to use as a cushion.

But soon, tired of sitting, I curled up with the life vest under my head. Boy, was I uncomfortable, but it was better than going home and facing my father, especially now that he'd lost Tara and made a complete fool of himself over the penniless Mimi Pinchot.

The night wore on, getting colder by the hour, and damper. After a while I decided to wear the life vest for warmth, and take another out of the plane to use as a pillow. While looking for the second vest I discovered the lost volume of Emerson's essays. Oh, great. Just what I needed.

Lying on the hard concrete, unable to sleep, I did a lot of thinking. In less than a week I'd be eighteen, legally an adult. Daddy wouldn't be able to make me return to the United States. Mom probably wouldn't mind if I stayed in France. Her life would be a lot simpler without me, especially since the child support payments were ending with my eighteenth birthday anyway. Without me to consider, she could give up the house, marry Marty, and move in with him.

Toward dawn I slept a little. When I awoke the stars and moon were gone and the sky had started to lighten. Another day. How would I face it? If only Gerard were here, his arms around me. Why did I have to leave France just when we were getting to know one another?

Was I leaving? Was I just kidding myself about staying on? After all, even if I could talk Libby into letting me rent Anna's room, could I possibly support myself writing articles? I'd never even written an article, much less sold one. I wasn't even a pilot, not even soloed. I'd never done anything special, had no special knowledge of anything, had never really succeeded at anything, so what was I going to write about?

One thing was terribly clear: in spite of all those hours in the Bijav and Jodel, I was nowhere near being ready to fly alone. My landings and takeoffs in the Jodel were terrible. What did they mean by "*refuse le sol*?" Refuse the earth. Maybe it meant more in French than in English.

My self-confidence was zero. Why couldn't I catch on? Had anyone else ever had so much trouble learning to fly?

Getting stiffly to my feet I walked over to the plane. It sat in the dawn's early light as squat and serene as a little frog. Stupid plane. Why can't I figure out how to fly you? Anna could probably solo on you in ten minutes. She's brave and unimaginative. She'd probably love stalls and spins.

I climbed onto the wing, spread the dewy life vests on the back seat to dry, then lowered myself into the left hand seat. Stiffly I stretched my feet out to the rudder pedals and took the stick in my hand. Okay. Say I wanted to take off right now. I'd push in the throttle, gain speed, and then....

Then suddenly, just as Gerard had said it one day would, the light switched on in

my brain. Of course! As the plane gained speed the controls would tighten. When there was enough resistance, I'd move the stick forward so the tail would rise off the ground. I'd keep going on the front wheels until I reached take-off speed, pull back on the stick, and *voila!* Airborne!

Taking off was so *simple*. Why hadn't I grasped it earlier? Was landing just as easy? I'd never really taken time to think about these things before. It was always rush. I'd jump into the plane hoping everything would be explained to me, without trying to work it out for myself.

Okay, so let's say I'm flying and want to land. I'm coming down, coming down, now how do I land without flying into the ground?

Refuse le sol. Refuse the earth. Fine. But what did it *mean*?

Asking myself that, I moved the controls, picturing myself a few feet above the earth. Then boing! Another light switched on. Refuse meant hold off. Hold back on the stick. Instead of trying to land, try *not* to land. *Refuse* the earth. *Refuse* the earth. Make the earth come up to *you*.

Oh, wow! No question about it! I knew how to take off and land the Jodel. I was ready to solo.

I looked at my watch. *Damn*. It was only five thirty. I'd have to wait three or four more hours at least before Goudron appeared. From where I sat I could see the house down by the mistral *piste* where Goudron and his wife lived, where they were surely sleeping right then. If only I could march down there, pull him out of the sack and make him solo me. I'd go nuts waiting three hours. And the worse of it was, when Goudron *did* arrive, the creep wouldn't solo me anyway!

I sighed. More patience was needed. A little more patience. If only there was some way to pass the time, something to read. Then I remembered! The Emerson! What luck. I took out the book and looked through the index. "Self Reliance," the life-changing essay. Perfect. Time for my life to be changed. I flipped the pages and stopped, frozen by what I read:

Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string.

Trust thyself. Trust *myself*? It didn't say trust my father or trust Goudron. The meaning couldn't have been plainer — I should trust *me*. No wonder I hadn't been getting anywhere with flying. All along I'd really wanted Goudron or someone else to fly the plane for me, to be with me, make it safe for me, tell me exactly what to do.

Trust thyself. All right. I'd give it a try. If I was going to solo before leaving France, it was entirely up to me.

Putting the book aside, I found the key in my shirt pocket, put it in the ignition and pressed the master switch.

"*Personne?*" All clear? It better be. If anyone saw what I was about to do, especially Goudron, I'd be grounded — for life!

I turned the key and the prop swung slowly, once, twice, then caught and roared.

Immediately I reduced the power, hoping to keep the engine as quiet as possible, so as not to awaken Goudron. But what difference did it make? Even if he heard a plane take off, he'd never imagine *I'd* be in it, not Ariel-the-Coward, alone at the controls.

I taxied to the *piste* and went down the checklist. Then it occurred to me I hadn't done the pre-flight. If any dew or condensation had gotten into the fuel, the plane might crash on takeoff. Damn! Purging the fuel tanks would mean turning off the engine and increase the risk of Goudron hearing it when I started up again.

No way would I take that chance. If I got killed it would be proof I was too stupid and incautious to be a pilot. The human race would be better off without my stupidity genes being handed down to my children and grandchildren.

I taxied the plane into position. Not a soul anywhere. I pushed in the throttle. The engine roared. Full power.

Moving forward I let the speed rise, then tentatively nudged forward on the stick. Nothing. A moment later I tried again. Nothing. Something was wrong, something I hadn't counted on — sheer terror had taken over. My hands and feet were shaking uncontrollably. I had to abort the takeoff! I had to stop the plane.

Only it was too late for that. Most of the field was behind me. Pull off power now and I'd crash into the fence. No choice. I had to take to the air.

Oh, God, how had I planned to do it? I couldn't remember. Oh, yes, raise the tail. But the plane was almost at takeoff speed with its tail still on the ground! With shaking, sweating hands I nudged the stick. Up came the tail, so fast and far it nearly rotated the prop into the ground. Off balance, well past takeoff speed, I clutched the stick in my trembling hand and pulled my arm back. The plane bounded into the air like a released balloon.

What had I done? Too high, too far, I'd stall. Alarmed, I pushed forward on the stick but the stick said no. I pushed harder and the plane gave a terrible roar of protest, so I gave up and let it go where it wanted. Shooting pains of anxiety jabbed my armpits. I certainly wasn't ready to solo, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Meanwhile I was still rising, rising with the sun. I shot a quick glance at the altimeter. Oh, God. It was rising too. I *had* to level off, I *had* to turn. The plane was heading toward the coast, the open sea. If I kept climbing I'd enter controlled airspace, the traffic of airliners approaching Nice airport.

Why had I done it? Was I crazy? I'd never broken any laws before, had never put myself in life-threatening danger. I knew I was going to die. Why had I done it? Trust myself? There was no one in there to trust!

I had to level off, I had to turn. But the stick still resisted. Then I saw why — I'd forgotten the trim! With shaking hand I adjusted the trim tab forward, pushed the control stick, and the horizon rose up in front of the nose.

Fine, I was straight and level, but now the roar of the engine was terrible. I couldn't remember it ever screaming like that. Or did it just seem extra loud because I

was all alone?

Manche et palonniers, conjuguez. Goudron's voice was telling me how to turn. Stick and rudder, coordinate. Fine, fine. But how do you move the stick and rudder when your hands and feet are shaking and paralyzed with fright? Stick and rudder, coordinate. Nothing. Nothing budged. The stick felt blocked.

Desperate, calling up all my courage, I used my hip and knee to shove my petrified left foot forward on the pedal. The pedal creaked, the plane turned, the horizon marched off toward the right. Five degrees, ten degrees, but the *bille* was way off in the corner! Was I more afraid to tip the plane in a sharper bank than skid outwards to my death?

Crying aloud with fear, I flung my limp hand at the stick, pushing it with elbow and shoulder. At last the stick moved — and the *bille* slid safely toward the middle.

I'd gotten the plane to bank and turn. It turned and turned and when it pointed back toward the airfield I released the pressure on the controls and let the plane stabilize itself. What a cop-out. But my limbs were almost useless with fright.

It was then I realized I wasn't wearing a headset. That explained why the engine sounded so loud. What else had I forgotten? I scanned the instrument panel. Oh, lord! The engine revs were in the red. I hadn't reduced power when I leveled off. *That's* why the poor engine was screaming.

Quickly I pulled back the throttle. To my relief the noise level lessened considerably. But now what? Oh, if only I could park a few minutes and think things out. But no way. A new danger! — a mountain up ahead, rushing like a fly swatter toward my tiny plane.

In a moment it would hit, I'd die, and they'd never know Ralph Waldo Emerson was the cause. Trust thyself? I'd trusted myself too soon, trusted the wrong me, and now both me's were going to die.

Then I saw the mountain wasn't that close after all. I still had a few minutes to live. The village of Rayol was coming up on the right. The human fly, unable to stop, was about to pass over it. Fly sensors looked down at the red roofs and narrow streets. Then the wing intervened, hiding the village, so the eyes rotated forward, toward the next village, Ste. Alice, toward our house.

I scanned the hills. There it was! The house! I could see the white chicklet parked outside. Daddy was home. Suddenly everything came back: the dog's attack, Tara wounded in Simon's arms, the clinic, daddy and Mimi, Anna and Lou-lou.

But how calm and peaceful everything looked from up here. How small and insignificant. The battlefields — our tiny roads and driveways — were quiet now. Night had passed over the land bringing people to their beds.

How I wished I were safely in my bed too. But it seemed unlikely I ever would be. I pictured the Jodel crashed in a field, heard the wail of village sirens calling the volunteers from their *cafe au lait*. Gerard would come up from the base and survey the wreck-

age....

Then it hit me. Oh, my gosh! This was Gerard's plane. I was about to wreck his plane. Would his insurance cover an illegal flight? Probably not.

No more nonsense then. I had to bring the Jodel back in one piece. If no one could help me, I'd have to do it alone.

Without even thinking about what I was doing, I turned the plane back toward the airfield. Stick and rudder, coordinate. Training was taking over where imagination had run wild. Feet and hands were doing the job they'd been taught. *Manche et palonniers, conjuguez*. Maybe I'd live after all.

It was still very early. As I approached the field I could see no one below. No cars, no people, no Goudron. Entering downwind leg, I went through the landing checklist: reduce airspeed, carburetor mixture full rich, electric pump, air brakes ...

Then suddenly my heart went thump! Near the piste was a man. It looked a little like — but couldn't be — Goudron. No, not Goudron. The chief pilot would have been looking up, shaking his fist at me. This man was walking along the edge of the airfield picking wild flowers, paying no attention to me at all.

As I turned onto base leg the man still hadn't looked in my direction. Fine. I'd forget about him. I'd forget about everything.

Somehow, don't ask me how because I wasn't even thinking about how to land at that moment, the Jodel turned final and lined itself up with the runway. A hand — mine — pulled on the spoilers. Short final. Over the fence. Refuse the earth, said a voice in my head. I eased back on the stick. Refuse ... I eased back ... refuse ... I eased back ... refuse

Then the miracle. The earth came up like a wide palm and gently took the Jodel from the air. Three wheels touched down. I pulled on the hand brake. The plane rolled to a stop.

I'd done it. I'd brought the plane down safely. The real me was alive and well and living in France!

Pushing in the throttle I started to turn the plane up the field toward the hangar, when the man picking flowers by the piste suddenly stopped, turned, and held up his hand. It *was* Goudron. *Damn*. I braked to a stop.

As Goudron walked toward the plane I was thinking that this was the end of my flying in France. The engine idling, I watched him stride like some terrible dark fate in my direction. So many thoughts raced through my mind. Whatever my punishment — even if he grounded me for life — it didn't matter. What mattered had happened already, up there. Nothing could ever change that.

Goudron approached the plane and walked around the tail to the right side. I heard his heavy tread on the wing. Then the plexiglas door opened on the passenger side, and his moustached face looked in.

For several seconds he said nothing. We just looked at each other. Could he see

how unafraid of him I was? Could he see?

“*Trois fois*,” he said.

“Three times *what*?” I snapped. Chin high, I looked him straight in the eye.

Goudron sighed, rolling his eyes up, then down. “To solo, you have to do *three* landings,” he said very patiently. “You’ve done one. Now do two more.” He started to withdraw, then stopped. “And next time, do a pre-flight.”

Amazed, I saw him reach down, locate the two ends of the other seat belt, and arrange them in a neat crisscross on the right hand seat, the instructor’s seat. Then his face withdrew and the cockpit door closed. The door latch moved up, then down, as he shut it carefully from the outside.

He was soloing me! The creep was really soloing me. I couldn’t believe it. Could I fly with tears running down my cheeks? Of course I could. I waited until Goudron was clear, then hit the rudder with a blast of wind from the prop to turn the nose around, taxied back, and swung the plane into position for takeoff.

For a moment I paused, looking over at Goudron who stood at the side of the piste with the bunch of wild flowers forgotten in his hand. Then the ex-air force mechanic smiled and held up his thumb.

I pushed in the throttle.