

THE SAGA
OF THE
ELLEN JANE

VOLUME I:
INVENTING A LEGEND

TIMOTHY KLEIN

This book is the result of the author's overactive imagination and all characters and events are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

However, the reader may note certain similarities between the Ellen Jane and a Beech AT-11 Kansan. This resemblance is not coincidental. Anyone wishing to donate such an aircraft to the author's personal collection should contact him immediately.

Scripture quotations taken from
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Brazil, October 9th, 1939

Even from a hundred yards and in the last of the evening light, he could tell she was mad. It had been a long and stressful flight: four thousand miles of thunderstorms, headwinds and low clouds, and now it looked like the worst turbulence was still ahead. Oh, he was glad to see her waiting for him, not that he'd admit it to her. *Nuts*, he swore to himself, *she's wearing that red skirt*.

When he had begun his trek back to the States to fetch a fighter-bomber, he knew it would be challenging. With Britain and Germany declaring war just weeks earlier, and the United States trying to pretend that everything was still okay, there would be some dicey political maneuvering required. However, he had been confident that he could work the system to his advantage. After all, he had dealt with the military bureaucracy before and he knew what obstacles to anticipate.

What he hadn't anticipated was how much he would miss her. Every red skirt he saw was hers. At first these unexpected emotions amused him, but the amusement turned to bitterness when he realized just how deep they went. So deep that he had to switch cars on the train to Wichita since some other woman had the nerve to stink it up with the same perfume she wore. It wasn't that Jeni was unattractive; indeed, she might just be too attractive, if such a thing as that was possible. Her face danced the boundary line

between a girlish cuteness and a more mature loveliness. It seemed to change with the admirer's mood.

Her short hair, cut just above her shoulders, was usually a dark blond but would shimmer with hints of amber in the right light. She had seriously serious eyes, a deep blue that kept most men, him included, confused. At five-foot-seven and 140 pounds, she had what was considered to be just shy of a full figure. Her chest was plenty full enough and her waist slender enough, but her hips were just not quite round enough to qualify her as a pin-up girl. Not that he rated that as important. Well, not highly important anyway.

He taxied the plane past her, letting it roll to a stop with her positioned just past the left wingtip, almost even with the rear door of the plane. She ignored the prop wash messing with her hair and continued to just stand there, staring. He couldn't tell if she was staring at the plane or at him. He applied the parking brakes, casually turned off the electrical systems and then shut down the big radials, first the left one, then the right one; he didn't want to appear hurried. So distracted was he that he found himself fumbling the flap switch and almost flipped the gear switch by mistake.

He stretched out of the pilot's seat, moseyed to the door, and lowered the stairs. As he descended, he noticed something odd: silence. It was deafening. It was louder than the last seven hours he'd spent sitting between those two nine-cylinder noise makers. There was enough light left for him to decipher from her facial expression that the situation would test his diplomatic abilities.

"Mark." She hadn't even waited for his feet to hit the ground. "That is most definitely *not* a B-17." Her voice was deadpan. "It's not even a B-18 or B-20. It's not ... not a B anything!" Her tone had shifted to flabbergasted, and betrayed more than just a hint of her native French inflection.

Finally, as she remembered to breathe, she put her hands on her hips and took a deep, deliberate breath. He liked that. It caused her breasts to heave and he could see just enough cleavage to be momentarily distracted from the coming storm. Then he noticed that her lips were tight together, to the point of being curled inward just a tad. *Time to deploy a good offense*, he thought.

"I know that." He paused for effect. "And, of course, I knew that you would know that." He continued with all the

confidence of an experienced used-car salesman. “However, when we get done with her, Gruber's not going to know that. I doubt he'd know the difference between a DC-2 and a Sopwith Camel anyway.” He moved a bit closer to her. She had her head tilted down and was glaring at him through a blond curl that hung down in front of her left eye. He could see the ice starting to melt in her pupils and her lips were relaxing just a bit as she folded her arms across her chest. More accurately, underneath her chest, which resulted in more heaving. There was a short lull as Mark refocused again; after all, it had been a long flight. He took a chance, reached out and held her gently by her shoulders, making sure to keep his eyes on hers this time.

“Listen Jeni, it was all I could get, and I just about didn't even get it. No one knows what that crazy kraut is going to do next, but they all know they need more airplanes. Hell, the Brits are placing orders after just looking at blueprints still pinned down on a drawing board. Anything rolling off a production line has a crew ready to fly it to Europe, they aren't even waiting for the paint to dry.”

“Probably true, so what?” Her French accent always re-emerged when she got angry, and it was getting thick. She was standing closer to him than she liked but found she couldn't move, fixated by the faint but lingering scent of his Canoe Cologne mixed with the aroma of aviation fuel and sweat. At nearly six feet tall, he could be a bit intimidating to other women, but not to her, or so she told herself. His average looks and speckled brown hair concealed the phenomenon of a man who she longed to understand. But that would have to wait – her mission came first. “It does not help us at all. We need a war plane.”

“Quiet, you'll hurt her feelings.” He rushed to hush her in an overtly serious manner and continued the charade in a whisper. “I've spent the entire flight telling her what a magnificent warbird she is. She's convinced that she's completely invincible, the most dangerous plane in the sky.”

Jeni just stared, not actually surprised. “She? I suppose that you have christened her with an appropriate name?”

“The *Ellen Jane*.” He stated it as a known fact, slightly surprised at his own answer. He hadn't been thinking about it; it was just the right answer. Besides, it would have been pretty embarrassing to admit that he had shared such a long

and intimate adventure with her without knowing her name. Jeni continued to just stare at him.

He didn't relish the silence so he offered her a small flashlight. "Take a look," he said in a voice that blended together just the right amount of self-confidence and sarcasm. "You'll find that it is exactly what you've been waiting for."

She marched defiantly over to the door and started up the short stairs. *Got to love that skirt*, he thought, as she bent over to peer inside. She probed the interior with the flashlight beam, then backed down the stairs and strolled over to him. The frown was gone but he wasn't sure that her smirk was any improvement.

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“It appears that you have brought us a model airplane kit. Are we to build our own warbird?” she asked.

She was clearly disappointed. What she didn't want Mark to know was that she was mostly disappointed that he hadn't jumped out of the plane and then jumped her.

No. She had to remind herself. Remember the promise you made to yourself on your sixteenth birthday? And the vow you took as you sat in that empty church at Mother's funeral? You did not come this far to screw things up by getting involved with a man. The wrong man. Especially one that you have to work with to accomplish the mission that brought you to Brazil. And a pilot? An aviator ruined your mother's life. Don't let one ruin yours. Her head once again won the battle against her heart and hormones, this time anyway.

“Like I said, I couldn't get a fighter or bomber but I could get a lot of parts.” He was starting to sell her and they both knew it. “Look at it.” He spun her around by her shoulders to face the plane. “Imagine her in war paint with a machine gun turret ...” he pointed to the spot just above the door. “Right there. Sven will rig up a bomb rack. It will look like a bomber, sound like a bomber and even drop bombs.” Another spin and she was facing him again. “It will work,” he said confidently.

She wasn't really concerned about the airplane anymore. He had closed the sale, mostly, anyway. First, because she knew that he was a very creative guy who didn't make many

mistakes; and second, most importantly, because they'd be in a lot of trouble if this didn't work. They'd have to make it work. But she was getting uncomfortable looking into his hazel eyes, and the twilight wasn't helping. Somehow, even the scent of the hot engines was affecting her.

So she turned around and moved over in front of the left engine, its massive cylinders moaning as they cooled down, and pretended to be concerned about the oil dripping onto the tarmac.

Now Mark knew that Jeni knew that there are two types of radial engines: those that leak oil and those that are out of oil. Thus, this was just one of her diversionary tactics, as was her fiddling with her hair that had been rearranged by the Beech's prop wash.

So he stood back, letting the floodlight from the adjacent hangar help him admire that red skirt, or more honestly, what it was wrapped around.

There was more here, much more, than raw physical attraction. He genuinely enjoyed her sharp wit and her charm, and she could hoof it with the best of them. What little remained of her French accent had actually grown on him. Had they met in a nightclub some years earlier, back when a long-term relationship meant nothing more than giving the girl his real name, then sure, he would have pursued her with near reckless abandon.

However, he sincerely hoped that he had matured past that stage. He was now after the kind of girl you could take home to Mom. Yes, it was an old cliché, but one that eventually slaps most men in the face. And she was not it. Moreover, he was looking for the kind of girl that he could actually see as a mom. Someday, no rush.

Officially, she had joined the team as a grifter; she had friends in all the wrong places, rubbed elbows with the top hats, and always seemed to come up with information, reliable information, that no one else could. The fact that she could kill a Nazi as casually as most housewives would stomp on a cockroach didn't bother him. Indeed, it actually endeared her to him (probably by conjuring up some subconscious image of a mother bear and her cubs).

No, it was her means to an end, and not the end itself, that concerned him. Her reputation was, well, rather colorful. For none of her victims had been found completely dressed, and

on the few occasions that she hadn't managed to slip away before the body was found, neither was she. True, there was never any solid evidence that she was responsible; the poor bastard died from a heart attack or just fell over the railing from the third floor. Or, having decided to go for a leisurely drive in his sports car, at three o'clock in the morning, ran it right off a cliff.

Now, he wasn't endorsing society's double standard regarding a woman's virtue and a man's right to sow his wild oats. Personally, he felt that virgins were overrated; he appreciated a girl with a little more, say, self-confidence. But Jeni was just so nonchalant about using her feminine charms that he couldn't see even the possibility of building a healthy relationship with her. He certainly wouldn't want her raising his daughter.

Of course, Mom wouldn't have to know all the details, now would she? It's not like she'd pipe up at the Thanksgiving table someday and ask, *"So, Jeni, how do you get a man to talk during sex? I can't get a word out of Mark's father and we've been married forty years."* Then again, his mom might.

And Jeni would certainly answer, probably something like: *"Oh, I just offer them a little special attention down below, if you know what I mean. They sing like canaries and don't even remember what they said. Can you pass me the dressing, please."* That would give his sisters something to gossip about.

Besides, while he trusted Jeni with his life, some of the facts about her just didn't fit right. He often found himself laying awake at night trying to decipher her. Frankly, he couldn't decide if she was an opportunistic whore who had signed on in the expectation of some future payoff, or an idealistic slut, willing to do anything to advance a noble cause. Not that the two were mutually exclusive.

He waited until she was done fussing with her hair and had turned to reevaluate the aircraft before he approached. "Well, if it drops bombs and has a machine gun turret," she conceded quietly, "it might fool him. What is it again?"

"It's a Beech 18 executive transport. The only reason they let me have it was that everyone else wants a Lockheed." He was quite proud of his acquisition. "This poor bird had been ordered by some big shot and he canceled the order after he saw the new Electra."

Jeni let out a rather indignant and boisterous huff. “A passenger plane? It's not even a real combat plane? And Ellen Jane – just who is this fearsome example of airborne terror named after anyway?”

“My mother,” he said rather quietly, standing in almost reverent silence. Now he could feel a lump starting in his throat, followed by the almost tangible taste of his mom's thin pancakes, rolled up with peanut butter and homemade jelly.

“Hmm, what will she think of that, naming a warbird after her?” Jeni had heard quite a bit about his mom and was curious to know just what this woman was really like. They had never met, but Jeni knew that this woman, somehow, could be a major obstacle between her and Mark. Of course, there were bigger obstacles than a mother four thousand miles away. First and foremost was Mark's indifference toward her as anything other than a comrade-in-arms. She had a pretty good idea what he thought about her. Building a real relationship would be hard for her with any male, impossibly hard with one who thought he knew all her secrets.

“Oh, she'd probably think it was flattering in a funny sort of way.” He chuckled. “At least until she saw the nose art I have in mind.”

“I suppose we have to paint a *nudie* on the nose?” She pretended to be exasperated, looking at him with her head tilted and the *oh men* expression on her face. The French accent was almost completely tucked away by now. “I'll be insulted if you ask me to pose for it.”

That started him imagining her, in just her red skirt, sitting on her knees provocatively facing away from the artist with her arms folded modestly across her bare chest and her head turned over her shoulder to leer back at him. *Yeah, that would work.*

“Jen.” It was his *we both know the truth* voice. “You'd be offended if I didn't ask. Besides, it will only be half nude, we've got to keep it tasteful.” When it dawned on her that he wasn't joking, she decided that she might just be both offended and insulted.

Before Mark could begin arranging a studio session, Sven, the engineering guru of the team, arrived with several volunteers from the cafe down the field. The men pushed the plane back between two hangars.

“Worry not, I've readied a stencil and a paint sprayer. By

sunlight, she'll be a proud member of the *Western Brazil Charter Service*." Sven was boasting in his typical low-key manner, his Irish brogue amplifying the effect.

Yeah, Sven McCormick, from Tulsa. He was such an anomaly that Mark hadn't even even tried to unravel him. The best aircraft mechanic that Mark had ever known; but he wouldn't fly. You could hardly get him into a plane. An Irishman who brewed beer but didn't drink? At five-foot-five and 150 pounds, you'd assume he was a wimp. Larger men had made that mistake and had paid for it with the embarrassment of actually being hoisted up and physically tossed like a rag doll. The guy couldn't figure out the amount for a tip in his head, but could redesign a turbo charger on the back of a napkin. His English was clear but, as Sven would say, "with a unique sentence structure at times it had." Since he spoke at least four languages, maybe he just got confused? It always surprised people when a thirty-something kid, with a baby-smooth face and wearing an unironed work shirt, would start swearing in Latin. Luckily, Mark had learned just enough to help translate.

"Take a look at what's in the back, then join us over at Jake's. I'm starving." Mark started down the tarmac with Jeni in tow. About a hundred yards away stood two nondescript metal buildings, aircraft hangars by design, but they now housed Jake's Cafe, the best restaurant within seventy-five miles.

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Jake's Cafe had been started by accident – well, a near accident. About seven years earlier, an engine on an airliner decided that it was being pushed too hard and pushed back, shoving a connecting rod right through the side of the case. The crew then discovered that overloaded twins don't fly very well on just one engine. As they descended over the not-so-inviting carpet of trees, rocks, and other things that tend to bend airplanes, with everyone praying for a miracle, they spotted a miracle.

For there, carved out of the middle of a coffee plantation, was what appeared to be an airstrip. The copilot argued that it was just a mirage and asked the captain why he was winding the clock on the instrument panel. The captain said that it was as good a crash site as any, let's go for it. Regarding his winding of the clock – he insisted that it was an essential step in any emergency situation; he'd expound on it later. The copilot didn't appreciate the sarcasm but was relieved that the pilot had stopped winding and resumed flying. They had just enough power to drag the wounded bird to the happiest landing of the copilot's life.

The mirage turned out to be a private airstrip belonging to a guy named Jake. He was pushing fifty back then, but what was left of his hair was as black as the day he was born. If your scale read anything over 140 pounds, you needed a new

scale. Downright scrawny at five-foot-eight. He always needed a shave, and his skin was as dark as it was tough, a side effect of farming coffee most of his life.

But his true love was aviation. He had built himself his own private airstrip and started fixing airplanes part-time.

On this particular day, he was standing just inside the hangar with the door open, patching a rip in a wingtip, when nine people came rolling up in what was nothing more than a single-engined propeller-driven taxicab. The angry engine hadn't decided if it should stop smoking or not. The other engine, either out of sympathy for its mate or from the frustration of having to carry the load alone, was starting to.

The passengers egressed the smoking craft with no regard to social status, gender, or personal modesty. One so-called gentleman was in such a hurry to get on the ground that he managed to take a lady's skirt with him as he dove out the door. The woman, a widow in her mid-forties, was left standing on the stairs in her garters and hose. She decided to make the best of it by assuming the part of a burlesque dancer. She pranced on down the stairs and retrieved her skirt as if it was just part of an act. Old Jake perked up for that show.

Now Jake was known as a man of few words and who was often just a tad too honest in his assessment of any given situation (which might have explained why he was still a bachelor). So when the crew asked if he could fix an engine, all he said was "probably." When they asked if they could use his phone, he said "certainly." And when they asked if there was anything to eat, he said "pancakes."

Really good pancakes. They should be; he'd spent decades perfecting the recipe because it was about the only thing the old bachelor knew how to cook. Jake fired up his griddle. Bette, the inadvertent burlesque dancer, who had studied the culinary arts at some elite school in Europe, whipped up some extra fancy omelets to complement the meal. Afterward, Jake found a case of beer, tied his Jenny down outside, and they had a bit of a party. Must have been a pretty good party, since everyone ended up sleeping on the hangar floor. Everyone except Jake and Bette that is.

One of the big shots from the airline's headquarters flew in the next day to assess the situation and to haul out the passengers. He congratulated the pilot on an outstanding landing, and then promptly fired him for ignoring the engine

operating handbook. There was also a brief discussion regarding the appropriate time to wind the instrument clock, which the now-former captain insisted was a vital step in any emergency situation. But, mainly due to the adjective *former* having been added to his title, he refused to elaborate.

The boss also figured that Jake's would be a great place for a refueling and maintenance stop. It was located just outside the city on a good road and was near a rail line. Jake figured that making pancakes and fixing airplanes would be a lot less work than picking coffee beans. Besides, considering what the price of coffee had done since the price collapse of '30, who could blame him?

Bette, claiming to be too traumatized by the near disaster, refused to continue by air. She also claimed that a car was coming from Sao Luis to get her. Evidently the driver must have gotten lost. A month later, Bette was still there making omelets.

Truth be told, old Jake saw it coming and didn't bother to duck. First, her cooking was a huge hit in the new cafe, and besides, he was tired of pancakes. Second, and almost as important, well, most people had a pretty good guess but were too discreet to actually ask. In the end, all he said was "I do."

Now, word spreads quickly in the aviation community, be it good or be it bad, and soon pilots from all over were stopping in for food and fuel. And, depending on their flying skills, repairs. Hence, Jake's Cafe and Aeroplane Repair Depot was born.

As Mark and Jeni approached, one of the waiters was sliding open the hangar door on the lounge to give the dancers some fresh night air. The lounge was the smaller of the two buildings and Bette had tried to convert it to a European bistro, which was quite a challenge considering that it started life as a pole barn. She had wanted Jake to lathe and plaster the interior, but all he said was "don't think so." So she settled for paneling improvised from cedar siding and a coat of paint. It had cute little tables with semi-formal tablecloths, padded chairs, and even a wine list. It boasted a small but adequate dance floor and a stage big enough for a quartet as long as they didn't bring a piano with them.

Attached to the right side of the lounge (as you looked from outside the hangar door) was the main hangar that Jake had to put up as the cafe grew. It was plenty big enough to house anything up to an Electra or a Beech 18 with ease. Now no man is going to complain when his wife forces him to build a bigger game room, but when she started using it for overflow customers, Jake put his foot down. While he appreciated the customers, it was just that this was an airplane hangar and was going to stay that way. In what was the longest sentence anyone could remember Jake uttering, he declared, "She can decorate her side how she likes and I'll decorate my side how I like." Some were surprised that he even knew that many words.

Jake's approach to décor was strikingly different. He started with a dozen tables built from the large wooden cable spools used by the utility company. The tables dotted the floor and mingled with the air compressor, valve grinder, and welding tanks. He added the requisite pool tables and a dartboard. Of course there was a bar. It ran the length of the back wall and featured a wide selection of beers and hard liquor. It even had its own wine list – red or white – although Sven's most recent brew was always the most popular.

This conglomeration extruded an ambiance unmatched by any European restaurant. Its location was perfect. Just far enough from town to be left alone, close enough that businessmen could dash out to Jake's for a quick, or maybe not so quick, lunch. Men loved the machinery, their women loved the dancing, and both loved the food. Credit for this incomparable atmosphere would have to be given to three unique characteristics.

The first was the aforementioned hangar door. Constructed in four independent sections, built of miscellaneous lumber and scrap plywood, the doors hung from a track bolted to the front truss and could be slid open in good weather to allow the patrons a view of the runway. Bette had promised Jake sexual favors that even Jeni hadn't heard of to get him to remove it. "Don't think so" was his only response. Pilots could literally taxi right to their table. Of course, doing so usually meant that the pilot was going to buy dinner for at least half the patrons since he had just blown over their tables with his prop blast.

The second was a truly unique artistic display. As part of

her remodeling, Bette had covered the walls with fashionable watercolors of places that none of the locals recognized. Now over the years, Jake had taken to hanging spare parts up in the rafters and along the same walls. One must bear in mind that Jake's definition of spare parts might include, for example, an entire Detroit Flier fuselage, a set of wings off a Cessna of some kind, and the carcass of any engine, propeller, or airframe that might yet yield salvageable components. In other words, pretty much the remains of anything that had crashed at the field. It finally dawned on Bette that the only prints that didn't end up behind an old tire or nose cowl were pictures of airplanes, scantily-clad women, or, ideally, scantily-clad women posing with airplanes. She conceded the fight, gave away most of the artsy prints, and went back to the kitchen.

Mark and Jeni entered via the hangar door in the lounge. Mark nodded to Marie, the head waitress, as they passed by. She didn't bother to take their order but just yelled "M and J" at the cook. He knew that meant one chicken cordon blue, extra cheese, heavy on the ham, easy on the breading but well done, and fruit on the side if it's fresh enough. Mark would take a Dagwood: surprise him with anything but anchovies.

They proceeded to the main hangar and directly up the stairs to the section called the Flight Deck and took a table on the far end, away from any ears.

This was the third and most incomparable feature of Jake's Cafe. Always the pragmatic one, Jake had added a second floor across the back of the main hangar, deep enough for two rows of tables. It became so popular that he added catwalks down each of the sidewalls. They extended the length of the hangar and were each wide enough for an additional row of tables. Both provided an unhindered view of the action below and raised the dining experience to a new level, pun intended. The resulting effect was a hybrid of an aviation museum, art gallery, and baseball game, with an occasional rampage from a rodeo bull. These were the premium seats, only available to members of Jake's private club.

It was soon so popular that Jake had trouble finding room to actually wrench on airplanes. He solved this the only way he knew how. He just added another fifty feet of hangar. The catwalks stayed as originally installed, stopping at the massive beam that had supported the original door. It was too

low to comfortably walk under and moving it wasn't an economical option.

The conversation stopped as Frantz, one of the newer waiters, brought Mark a beer from Sven's latest batch and Jeni a glass of ginger ale. He was a young kid who couldn't decide if he idealized Mark or despised him. His attitude was indubitably related to his jealousy of Mark's relationship with Jeni. He was also the only employee at Jake's that hadn't been cleared regarding the Ellen Jane project.

Sven joined them just as the food arrived. At the same time, the side door of the main hangar opened and a muscular, intense-looking gentleman stepped inside and scanned the room. An untrained observer would assume that he was casually looking for an empty table while digging in his jacket for his wallet. Actually, he was trying to determine if he could take his hand off the pistol in his shoulder holster. Having so decided, he headed to the stairs at the far end and skipped up, two steps at a time, and headed toward Mark and Jeni's table. He pulled up a chair and sat down, back to the wall.

"There appears to be a slight change of plans?" His slight German accent misled many regarding his loyalty. Though his name was Hans Schultz, he was actually born in southern England. His German father moved his family back to the Fatherland after the stock market crash to join in the Hitler movement. While Hans had been a member of the Hitler Youth, his enthusiasm died quickly when he saw the true direction that the Fuehrer was heading in and the horrendous impact that it would have on Germany. He had actually come to Brazil to escape both the Nazis and his father.

When the local Nazis started recruiting him, he humored them so as to not make any unneeded enemies. But as he learned the true nature of their mission, that is, to help pave the way for either an invasion or a revolution, he decided that he had to stay involved. He had inadvertently recruited Jake, who then invited Mark to join the team. Mark had contacts in both the Brazilian military and the U.S. Army that would prove very useful. Somehow, they had found Jeni at a local gin mill, discovered that they shared a common dislike of Nazis, and decided that they should work together.

"Afraid so, Hans, anything with a machine gun is getting lent to the Brits. That Beech 18 is the only thing I could find that has any chance of passing for a bomber." Mark finished

his beer just as Marie was bringing one for Hans and, of course, a refill for him. "We'll have to roll our own. First, we have to make sure it looks like it came in for repairs. Sven, get out there and ding up the belly before any of the Germans see it. Make it look like someone ran it off a runway and into the weeds. You know what it needs to look like." Mark stopped as Jake joined the party.

"Aye, now that's a new one," Sven said with a wide grin. "You flyboys always get the fun of bendin 'em and I get the work of straighten 'em out. Well, when I get done, people will just figure that Jeni had been flying it." Everyone enjoyed Sven's sense of humor as much as they admired his courage; however, none were personally brave enough to laugh.

Jeni was actually becoming a fairly accomplished pilot and could handle Mark's Stinson Reliant. But along the route, there had been some rather exciting events. She just sat there all ladylike, legs crossed, giving Sven that look of hers that they all feared but no one understood, while sipping her ginger ale. In spite of a reputation as a lush, Mark had personally never seen Jeni drink anything stronger.

This left Sven stuck with some rather uncomfortable thoughts, so he prodded the discussion along. "I saw the toys you stuffed in the back of her: a couple of Brownings, 30 cal, a bubble of some sort, and an assortment of servo motors, electrical parts, cables, gears, and other goodies. I suppose you expect me to cobble together a machine gun turret?" He wasn't complaining, but just wanted to make sure everyone would appreciate how much talent this would require. "We can do all the interior work right here at Jake's, but as soon as we put in that turret, she'll need a new home."

"How long will it take to cut some holes in it?" Mark was slightly disturbed by the thought of hacking away on a practically brand-new airplane.

"Oh, cuttin' holes is easy." He grinned at the thought. "And quite fun. Now if you're particular regarding just where ya want them, that takes a wee-bit more time. I'd guess we'll need four weeks or better."

"And bomb racks," Jeni added. She was warming up to the plan but Mark could tell that she had a little ways to come. "We are not just dropping pumpkins."

"Hans. How long before the Germans get suspicious?" Mark was mostly focused on his sandwich, curious as to just what the

chef had concocted, but mostly searching for confirmation that it was anchovy-free. More than once, someone thought it would be humorous to slip in a little salted fish to see if he'd notice; he had.

"Probably the four weeks that Sven wants." He shrugged his shoulders slightly and continued, "Everyone knows that it takes about three days to drill off some bad panels, two weeks to get parts in, and another week to put it all back together. Maybe you can stretch it for another week or so if you blame the weather or an incompetent clerk that messed up on the part numbers, but after a month, they're going to wonder why it's still here. If Sven can get it painted before the local Germans see it and it's bent up a bit, they won't pay any attention to it."

Lufthansa operated a small regional terminal out of Jake's. The bad news was that their personnel were very German. As staunch supporters of the Third Reich, they would report anything suspicious to the local Nazis. The good news was also that they were very German, meaning that they would arrive at precisely 8:55 a.m., eat in the back office at 1:00 p.m., and leave for home promptly at 5:05 p.m., five days a week. They had never been seen at the airport on the weekends and they never wandered off their corner of the tarmac unless something earthshaking was taking place.

"But what if they do ask questions?" Jeni was not convinced that hiding a plane in plain sight would work. It wouldn't fool her for long; she noticed everything about everyone. Especially if it looked too normal. This personality trait had an undesired, and unknown to her, side effect: Mark was always a bit suspicious of those that seemed too suspicious themselves.

"Why would they?" he replied in a tone that made it obvious why the Germans didn't usually get along with just about everybody. "A pilot makes a bad landing, creases some sheet metal, so they bring it to Jake's Aeroplane Repair Depot. What's there to ask about?" Hans was confused by her suspicion. How could she question Germans acting logical? "But Sven is right, once you install the turret, that will be another matter. Until then, no questions, no problems."

"No, we still have a problem: we need a safe base to operate from." Mark had summarized their dilemma. They all knew that they couldn't operate out of any public airport. They

needed one close but not too close, one with easy access for them but no public access. He knew of only one that met all those criteria, and it came with serious complications of its own.

4

Introducing Jeni to Sarah wasn't his first choice. It wasn't even his second choice. It was just that there was no choice. Sarah was the only one he knew who could help them hide an airplane with nearly a fifty-foot wingspan and a machine gun turret.

They had taken Jeni's car. It was larger than his and more comfortable. Of course, that meant she got to drive, which always bruised his ego just a bit. He had to admit that she handled the shifting rather well, especially considering she was doing it in heels.

They had been discussing the mundane details of Sven's progress on the Ellen Jane when she suddenly asked, "So, how long have you known this girl?"

"Oh, about six years." He didn't read anything into her question. For he had first known Sarah's father, Joe, an overly devout missionary who had arrived from Texas in a three-piece suit, planning to build a traditional church, convert everyone, and then head back home. This would only take, "four, maybe five years," Joe had prophesied. It took about three weeks for Preacher Joe, as the locals called him, to figure out that you couldn't get stained glass windows in this part of the country, hymnals were useless since no one could read anyway, and that the people's favorite Bible stories were the ones where Jesus healed someone or provided supper.

Joe had also started a ministry to a semi-nomadic tribe of the natives back in the jungle. While a river ran near their village, it wasn't navigable in anything larger than a small boat and was far too narrow for a float plane. Depending on the weather and water levels, it could take several days to get in or out by water. So, Joe traded steel axes with the men of the village in exchange for hacking out a runway.

That's when he found Mark. The original routine was to drop Joe off on a Monday and come back on Friday or Saturday, depending on the weather. He'd also fly supplies in and patients out to a larger hospital, on an occasional basis. He never charged Joe his full rate and he would often lend a hand with other projects. Not that he was a religious man, but it couldn't hurt to pad the heavenly bank account once in a while.

After a year or so, Sarah showed up. She had been attending a private college to study creative writing or some such nonsense when Joe telegraphed her and told her to high-tail it down to Brazil. God spoke to father, father spoke to daughter, and daughter obeyed. He had signed her up for a six-week nursing course in Dallas and then brought her to a small village outside of Maraba to run the clinic.

Joe had decided that if he wanted to reach people's spiritual needs, he needed to meet their physical needs first. He had stayed just as devout as ever but became far more pragmatic, except for his wardrobe. He never did figure out how impractical a necktie was.

"Well, I don't remember you ever mentioning her before. How old did you say she was?" Jeni inquired.

"She just turned twenty-seven about three months ago. Her dad threw a surprise party for her at Jake's Cafe."

"I suppose you attended?"

"Sure, of course I did." He pointed with his right arm, "take the next left." She slowed down in time, but to his surprise she slipped with the clutch and ground the gears – not badly, but it was certainly not her normal finesse.

"Her father and I are pretty good friends. I even helped plan the party." Now she revved the engine too fast and almost blew another shift. *What's wrong with her driving all of a sudden?* he wondered.

"Really. So you must spend a lot of time with this girl?" She thought that sounded suspicious so she added, "It's good that you understand her, it should help us sell our plan."

“Understand her?” He laughed the mandatory *what man understands a woman* laugh. “No, I don't really understand her. But I have spent a lot of time with her, fly her back and forth almost twice a month.”

To be honest, Sarah was the the other reason he'd often volunteered at the mission. He was actually quite fond of the woman, in a younger sister sort of way. While she refused to play with the “Devil's Deck” (referring to any card game), she did play a mean game of chess. The three of them had had some rather candid discussions regarding the afterlife and how we should be living this one. At first, both Joe and Sarah were a bit uppity: not really snobbish, not a real live holier-than-thou attitude, but just rather smug.

Then, without warning, that aspect of their personalities just vanished. He had returned to pick them up on a Saturday morning; the two people waiting at the airstrip where not the same two he had dropped off on Monday. Mark didn't know just what had transpired but he learned that it involved a young mother and a dying infant. All Joe would later tell him was “God's mighty voice shouted at me from the whimper of a little child.” Soon, he noticed that talking with Preacher Joe was really no different than talking with just any old Joe. And he did enjoy Sarah's company even if she refused to let him take her out for dinner and wouldn't even consider letting alcohol touch her lips. He never did bother to ask her to go dancing.

Now if Jeni was the kind of girl you don't take home to Mom, then Sarah was the kind that you don't take home to Dad. She was offended at even the thought of sex before marriage and she probably wasn't too sure about it afterward either. On that note, it wasn't clear to him just how much carnal knowledge she really had, in the strictly intellectual sense, of course. Obviously, she knew where babies came from because she had helped deliver half the kids in town; but did she really know how they got in there in the first place? Her naiveté was actually a bit astounding to him. Any time the conversation careened toward anything even remotely concerning romance or the propagation of the species, she'd tap the brakes and steer it away. He had once started telling the old joke about “What do virgins have for breakfast?” She got up and left the room.

“Describe her to me, what else should I know about her?”

Jeni said as she revved the engine, hoping that the extra noise would mask any jealousy in her voice.

"She's a very nice girl, woman really. She's older than you are." He smirked at Jeni, but she missed it; she was too focused on not looking at him. "She's very, very smart. Has a habit of thinking too hard. Not too concerned about fashion. I know there's something else, something important that I wanted to warn you about, but I just can't remember what it is. There's the church, pull over behind the building."

"This is going to be interesting. Haven't been to church in years," Jeni stated calmly as she swung the car around and parked.

A true gift for understatement, on several fronts, Mark thought. But he could tell she was a bit nervous, as was he. He wanted to ask Jeni if she was more worried about Sarah or about being in a church. She should probably be worried about both, he reasoned. Then again, he didn't know the details surrounding her last visit to a house of worship.

It hadn't been a particularly uplifting experience, as it was just her, a priest who couldn't wait to get the service over with, and her mother's coffin.

The church part didn't bother him. His only apprehension was convincing Sarah to join forces. Again, there was something truly important that he knew he was forgetting.

They had approached the old church by the side door to avoid attracting attention. He stopped with his hand on the door handle and turned to face Jeni.

"Remember," he said in a near whisper, "we need to play this carefully. I'm pretty sure I can convince her father Joe to let us use the strip even if she objects. But everything will be a lot easier if she's on board. There's something else I wanted to warn you about but I still can't remember what it is." He opened the door and followed Jeni into the church.

"Church" was a strong word for this building. It was actually an old run-down tavern that Preacher Joe had bought years earlier and converted into the Gospel Light Bible Church and Hospital. His goal was to use it to convert the rest of the town. As a convenient side effect, by buying it, he'd shut down the only drinking hole around. Preacher Joe didn't come to town much anymore. He had appointed a local convert as lay pastor, who conducted the worship services on Sundays and Wednesday evenings. Sarah usually kept the

clinic open during the first and third weeks of the month; she spent the rest of the month tending to missionary work back in the jungle. Mark would often fly her there in his Stinson. Two hours by air sure beat the fourteen or more in a motor boat.

They found her standing by the desk in the side room that passed for the pharmacy. Her light brown hair was, as always, pulled back into a nondescript bun. She was wearing her favorite off-white blouse that featured hand-embroidered roses on the collar. The cotton fabric was thin enough that he could easily see the outline of a white, industrial-strength brassiere underneath. It provided much more support than her thirty-four-C breasts required. Her drab, khaki skirt hung to about the mid-calf and her shoes were clearly intended for walking and nothing more. She wore no jewelry except for a simple silver chain that held a cross and a gold ring. He had never seen her in silk stockings, makeup, or anything considered flashy. He wasn't sure of the formal definition of a prude, but one would get you twenty that she was one.

She greeted them with what passed for her smile and suggested that they move to the private garden behind the building. He had sent word that he would be coming; thus, she had tea and cookies waiting on the garden table. How quaint. He didn't know if he should sigh or chuckle, so he combined them.

He sat so that he could observe both the gate in the fence and the back door to the church. Sarah took the chair to his right, and Jeni sat across from him. It was clear that the two women were sizing each other up, and he could feel some friction starting to heat up the evening air.

Women don't dress to impress men, he told himself, they dress to impress other women. He and Sarah had occasionally discussed fashion. He had once, and only once, suggested that maybe, just maybe, she should modernize her wardrobe. Her only response was a Bible verse that said something about how women should dress modestly.

Clearly, Jeni had skipped Sunday School that day. Her flashy silk blouse was cut so low that he had no trouble spotting the black lace of the flimsy undergarment that served as her bra. They were now sitting in the shade and an unusually cool light breeze made it obvious just how nippy she felt. She noticed him noticing and seemed pleased about it. Her straight red skirt

was too short to cover her knees, and the slit in the side was too high to entirely hide her garter when she sat down wrong (or right, depending on one's gender). The one-inch heels were modern but not awkward. They were also red. On the way over he had suggested that the red of the shoes clashed with her red skirt. He didn't really know if they did or not. Besides, he was a man, he didn't really care. But he knew it would irk her to think she had committed such a blunder. He enjoyed teasing her like he would one of his sisters; doing so helped keep any romantic thoughts at bay. At least on his part.

She wore enough jewelry that, except for her watch, it all became a blur of gold, silver, and miscellaneous colored rocks to him. However, the timepiece caught his eye. Most women's watches didn't feature a second hand.

So here he sat. Between a lamb of God and a whore of Babylon. He might be overstating the situation, but this could explode into an argument of Biblical proportions. For he had just remembered what he knew he had forgotten. That one minor detail regarding Sarah. She was, more or less (with the emphasis on more) a pacifist. And he'd brought a tramp dolled up like a cheap showgirl to persuade her to assist a military operation. And a clandestine one at that. He took a deep breath and tried to console himself with the fact that he had no other options.

5

Jeni finished a cookie and broke the silence. “Tell me, do these shoes clash with my skirt?” *Ha*, Mark wanted to laugh but held it in. *I must have really gotten to her!*

Sarah finished her sip of tea and peered over her cup. He could see her eyes follow the curves of Jeni's over-exposed legs down to the footwear. “No, I think they match quite nicely.” She wanted to add, *I wouldn't fret much about it, men don't hire a prostitute for her shoes*. But she didn't.

“See,” she snapped at Mark, “I told you they looked fine. You have the fashion sense of a water buffalo.” She spoke with an artificially indignant tone, clearly trying to establish some level of rapport with Sarah.

Great, he thought, *two women who don't know each other, and probably wouldn't even like each other, are already ganging up on me*.

“Your message said that you needed my help. How?” Sarah put down her cup and saucer and sat perfectly upright with her hands folded, oh-so-ladylike, in her lap.

“Before we continue,” Jeni's voice was curt but not rude, “do you have a Bible around?”

“Certainly, why?” Sarah replied. That was probably one question that neither Sarah nor Mark had ever expected Jeni to ask.

“Oh, just a formality, but we need you to swear that you will

keep our plans in total and unyielding confidence.” Mark couldn't stop from rolling his eyes. Not only was Jeni going too far, she was taking the completely wrong approach.

“I'm sorry.” Sarah replied calmly. “I never take an oath. The book of James says not to swear by anything. You'll have to trust that my *no* will be *no* and my *yes* will be *yes*. Besides, if you're involved in some illegal activity, you'll not want to inform me of it. I will do nothing that could jeopardize our mission, either in town or in the jungle.”

He had known that he should have made the first visit alone, but time was not a luxury he could afford. Damn, now to clean this up.

“Sarah, can I ask a dumb question?” He didn't bother waiting for her reply; he had asked her plenty of dumb questions before. “Do you want the Nazis to win?”

“Of course not, but they're not anywhere near here.” She hesitated, sat for a second with her lips apart, wondering why he would ask that. It was clearly not a question intended to start a casual conversation. He was leading her somewhere and she didn't like the implications. She glanced quickly at Jeni and then turned back to Mark and added, “Are they?” Her voice betrayed her apprehension about the possible answers.

“No.” He paused, purely for theatrical effect. “Not yet.”

The three sat in silence. Jeni knew that she had started to botch it and that she needed to let Mark handle this phase of the negotiations. Mark knew that he needed to let Sarah digest the implications as long as she needed to. Sarah knew that she had to ask some questions and that she probably wouldn't like the answers.

She had picked up her cup of tea and was staring into it. She finally took a long sip, put down the cup, and replied as maturely as she could. “When, then?”

“Soon, if Hitler gets his way.” Mark tried to keep his voice calm and dry, as if discussing the possible outcome of an upcoming baseball game.

“The Brazilian government would never stand for that!” She tried to instill certainty in her response and failed.

Jeni decided it was safe to join in. “Neither did the Polish Government, nor the Czechoslovakian.” She took another sip of tea to appear casual, and then added, “You do know that there is a large German population in Brazil? Many are very sympathetic, if not openly supportive, of the Third Reich.”

Mark pulled his chair over to the side of the table near Sarah and leaned forward in it, resting his elbows on his knees. He looked her in the eyes. He liked those eyes, deep brown, calm, relaxing, hinting at a sense of something even deeper. "Do I have your *yes* that you'll keep this very, very secret?" She swallowed hard and then nodded.

"There is little doubt that Hitler has his eye on this continent." He stopped and sat up. "We have it from very reliable sources that he's planning to sign a non-aggression pact with Stalin. With the Soviets out of the way, it's only a matter of time before he attacks somewhere. Someone has to make sure it isn't here. If the north coast of Brazil appears to be an easy target, he'll go for it. With the British just barely keeping their island afloat, and the U.S. not officially involved, that someone is us."

"How?" While the question was honest, the tone revealed an underlying pessimism.

"If we can dupe the German decision-makers into thinking that the Brits have a major, albeit secret, military presence in the area, then they may decide it isn't worth the risk." Mark knew her face well enough from all those chess games, which she usually won, to anticipate the next question. "Remember the U.S. isn't officially in the war, so any official actions by the Americans would be considered an act of aggression. There would also be serious political ramifications back home. Most Americans aren't ready to get involved in another war. Also, Vargas hasn't decided whose side he's really on. We're pretty sure that he's going to join the Allies, but as long as he remains uncommitted, Brazil will do nothing. In fact, the Germans are counting on this indecisiveness. Once they get established, not only can they interrupt the supply lines from the U.S. to Brazil to Europe, but they'll be very hard to dislodge."

"And how can I help?" Sarah's pessimism had changed to suspicion.

"By letting us base the 17th bomber squadron of the British Royal Air Force at your airstrip." Mark stated casually, as if he were expecting her to respond, *Oh, the 17th squad – those gents are always welcome, can I make them some tea?*

Jeni was dumbfounded. To a professional grifter, it seemed way too early to lay this out on the table. But Mark knew Sarah. If he had led her gently to the final request, she would

have spent too much time evaluating, processing, and analyzing every aspect. *Heck*, he remembered, *she once tried to analyze why she analyzed everything*. But by intentionally dropping this into her lap like a grenade with the pin pulled, she wouldn't have time to overthink it. She'd just have to react. And react she did.

"There are plenty of airfields around!" Sarah bolted upright and lurched toward Mark. She had been barely on the edge of her chair to start with and now found herself standing, having pushed back her chair in the process. It was not in keeping with the self-controlled ladylike image she spent so much energy cultivating. "What's wrong with Jake's runway? Our airfield is tiny, how many planes in a squadron anyway?"

"Well, actually, in this particular squadron, one," Mark said, trying not to make it sound silly. It was always hard to explain a truly ingenious plan to people who weren't at the original planning meeting. Especially if that meeting had been held in a bar on the second floor of an aircraft hangar.

Sarah looked at him, then at Jeni, then back at Mark, then, having decided he wasn't joking, she retrieved her chair, pulled it back into position, and sat down.

"So, you're planning to stop the German army with one plane?" Her sarcasm was understandable. "You'll need a miracle on the order of Gideon's."

"You needn't concern yourself with such details." Jeni, always the cautious one, wanted to spill no more than needed. Besides, she was baffled as to what hotel room Bibles had to do with any of this.

"Oh, no." Sarah had recovered and was quite firm, and convincing. "I must concern myself with exactly such details."

Mark exchanged eye contact with Jeni, letting her know that if they wanted to be trusted, they would have to trust first, and that it was her turn to talk.

Jeni was caught just a bit off guard at being handed the floor. But she was good at thinking on her feet (and according to rumor, in other positions as well), and jumped right in.

"Basically, we're playing a rather serious game of poker. You see, the plane only needs to make its presence known at key times in front of certain German agents. If they see it flying around their secret bases, patrolling the coast, bombing their secret weapons caches, they'll naturally assume that there are dozens of planes watching them. They'll probably suspect that

they're based in British New Guinea or launched off an aircraft carrier. Doesn't matter. Their spies will search but not find. Of course, we will be sure to, shall we say, supplement the reports."

True, she had left out some details, but she hadn't actually lied. Probably close enough to the whole truth for now. "If the Ellen Jane can put up enough of a bluff, they'll fold rather than risk raising the bet. They don't know what other cards we hold."

"Mark, what does your mother have to do with this?" Sarah inquired.

So she knows his mother's name, Jeni thought. His mom would be thrilled with little Miss Goody-Goody-Two-Shoes. She added the extra "goody" to the traditional label for her own amusement.

"It's traditional for pilots to name their airplanes. I was going to name it the *Sarah Marlene*, but I wasn't sure how that would go over," Mark jested. Jeni didn't laugh. *So he knew Sarah's middle name as well.*

Sarah just rolled her eyes. "So, anyway, you're not planning to actually kill anyone then?"

Ah, the pacifist was joining the party. Mark smiled.

"It would be ... less complicated if we don't have to," Jeni reassured her.

"But you can't guarantee it?" Sarah inquired. Her expression suddenly shifted to one of confusion and she continued, "I should have asked earlier but just who is this 'we' that you keep referring to?" She turned from Mark and stared at Jeni, "And I don't mean to be rude, but just who are you and how did you get involved with Mark?"

6

Jeni looked over at Mark. He motioned for her to answer. “I’m a member of the EPS. Have been for months. Our mission is to keep the Nazis out of Brazil. I thought that Mark had explained all that.” Jeni replied tilting her head back just enough to appear smug about it.

“The EPS?” Sarah asked. “The Erie Pilot’s Society, isn’t that just the private club at Jake’s Cafe? I thought all they did was sit around and drink beer? Though I never understood what it had to with Pennsylvania.”

“It has nothing to with with Pennsylvania. And there’s a lot more to it than just a beer swilling social club. It’s a rather long story actually, rather funny, but long.” Mark said.

“We’ve got all evening.” Sarah replied solemnly.

Mark shifted to get more comfortable and took a deep breath. “Well, it all started several Halloweens after Jake opened his cafe. A bunch of us were hanging around after closing. It was the regular crowd: several guys from the States, a few from England and the rest, like a lot of guys in Brazil, weren’t all that keen on being from anywhere.

“Anyway, someone started talking about the Halloween tricks they’d played when they were kids and much fun it had been to throw pumpkins and watch them explode. Of course it didn’t take long for someone to suggest throwing pumpkins from an airplane.”

"I can guess who that was." Sarah interrupted with a smirk.

"Funny, I can't seem to remember." Mark replied, also smirking. "Anyway, we snuck over to Pedro's farm next door and gathered up enough ammo for several sorties.

"Jake claimed he was still mostly sober, and since his airplane was right there, Bette jumped into the back seat and we covered her with pumpkins. Mac, who was also still reasonably sober, loaded a buddy into the front seat of his plane, also armed with pumpkins, and off they went, just looking for targets of opportunity.

"I should mention that it was almost dark by then, but since Jake's field had runway lights and a beacon, no one considered that to be an issue. However, even with a full moon, it was difficult to identify drop sites."

Mark started to chuckle. "Let's just say that not all the pumpkins landed exactly where intended. To be honest, I don't think any of them did. Whatever the case, the local police were soon getting reports of pumpkins falling from the sky and the chief had a pretty good idea how they got up there. He headed out to Jake's."

By this point in Mark's story, previous listeners had already started to laugh along with him. Sarah just sat there. *Maybe it's funnier if you've been drinking?* Mark thought.

"Anyway, the chief arrived just as we had finished tying the planes down. Of course, none of us knew anything about falling pumpkins, but we promised we'd let him know if any landed near the field. Now the chief is a very suspicious individual. Comes with the job description, I suppose. But he's even more superstitious. He was pretty upset and threatened to arrest the lot of us if anything else fell from the sky. I can still hear him," Mark shifted to a reasonably good Brazilian accent, and trying to sound very serious, said, "'This is a very eerie night and you are some very eerie pilots.'

"Well, we all took that as a high compliment, and the name stuck. It was so much fun that we have a pumpkin dropping contest every Halloween. Of course, now we takeoff well before dark. Anyway, the Flight Deck became our official meeting ground and soon Jake put up the sign limiting access to 'members only.' If you know Jake, you'll know that spelling isn't exactly his strong suit; he left the second 'e' off of *eerie* and nobody's been able to get him to take the time to correct it."

“A private club for all you scofflaws. What does that have to do with my airstrip? Are you hoping to open a second branch?” Sarah asked. It wasn't clear if she was joking or not.

“On the surface, the EPS is just a very exclusive private club. Of course, it's open to just about anyone who has a strong interest in aviation. Provided that they met Jake's criteria for membership. Meaning, that they're willing to spend enough at the bar.” Mark grinned at his own commentary.

“However, hidden within this group of beer-swilling socialites, is a secret society. Something that Jake envisioned years ago. You probably know that his airfield was started by accident ...”

“Yes, I've heard the story, hard to imagine accidentally starting an airport.” Sarah interrupted. (The story is included as Appendix I for the interested reader.)

“Not really, not if you know Jake.” Mark replied with a chuckle but quickly shifted back to a serious tone. “This is probably the one significant thing in Jake's life that was of his own intentional design and what I'm about to tell you, you must promise to keep secret.” He waited; she nodded sheepishly.

“About a week before the Halloween adventure, a guy named Hans was in the bar, drinking. He had been taking flying lessons for a while, and after discovering that Sven's beer is as good as any to be found in Germany, he became a regular customer. That night the guy was unusually depressed. Now normally, if a guy wants to cry in his beer, we just let him. It usually involves a woman anyway.” Jeni and Sarah exchanged glances and then both glared at Mark.

“Well, it usually does,” Mark replied. “Anyway, since no one else understands you females any better than the guy crying does, we just leave him alone. But this was different. Jake knew that whatever was bothering him hadn't been inflicted by a woman. So he told Hans to 'start talking.' I guess Hans went on for over two hours. By the time he had finished, he had ratted out the Nazis and everything they were planning to do to Brazil. Two weeks later, and Jake put up the misspelled sign for the EPS.”

“What does this have to do with the Nazis?” Sarah asked.

“The organization is much more sophisticated than it appears,” Jeni interjected and then paused. She glanced at

Mark for his approval, he nodded and she continued. "There are several levels. First, there are almost a thousand 'line boys,' or as the case may be, 'line girls,' scattered across Brazil. At just about any airport, in any major city or port, there is at least one person, who either by personal connections or personal actions, has earned enough respect and trust to be inducted in."

"Line boy?" Sarah asked.

"Line boys are the guys who work on the flight line at an airport. They do all the dirty work; washing planes, pumping gas and all the other jobs that pilots and mechanics don't want to do," Mark replied. "It's the nickname we've given to the general membership. These guys know that the EPS is camouflage for something bigger and more mysterious. They love being in on the secret, even though they don't really know what it is. All they know for sure is that we don't like Nazis. Very, very few know *anything* about the Ellen Jane. But when given a task or asked for help, they don't ask a lot of questions, things just get done."

"Certain line boys, or girls, have been promoted to *flight crew* status. They know what is happening and usually, but not always, why. Most have been briefed on the Ellen Jane but few know where she's based. Their main job is to direct the line boys. Sometimes they're consulted during decisions, and most know who the directors are."

"Directors?" Sarah asked.

"Yes, there's a small group, five to be exact, that runs the organization," Mark answered curtly, not mentioning that he was one of them.

7

Sarah just sat there, pretending to be studying her cup of tea.

“So it's all been a facade? You've been part of an underground organization all along?” Sarah asked Mark, sounding more than just a little disappointed.

“To be honest, it has been more of a social club until recently. Now that Germany and England are at war, it has taken a more ... serious tone,” he replied.

“But then why all the cloak and dagger drama? Sounds like you've been reading too many cheap spy novels.” Sarah countered.

“It should be obvious,” Mark interjected. “You must also remember that the Brazilian Government must not be implicated in any way ...” He paused. *Need to keep this friendly and informal*, he reminded himself. *I'm not talking to a bunch of military brass*. “Let me start again,” he said as he refocused.

“The German's have been slowly establishing a spy network throughout Brazil, over the last several years. They have a lot of official agents, many that are unofficial and even more people that don't realize that they're being used as agents. It would be darn near impossible to base the plane at a known airport without at least several kraut spies reporting it. The ruse would be up before it started.

“Also, like I was saying, the Brazilian Government must not be connected to our operation in any way. For them to allow the British to base a warplane on their soil could be considered a declaration of war. You've got the only airstrip that is isolated enough that the Germans won't find it and yet close enough that we can reach the coast without too much effort.”

“That airstrip was built for peaceful purposes. Not for war,” Sarah decreed.

“True.” Mark said as he nodded in agreement. He had plenty of experience discussing complicated topics with her. *Just like landing an airplane*, he thought, *you've got to have the right approach*. “However, aren't you supposed to help the good guys? What about being the salt of the earth?” He let the question linger. Jeni was privately extending the analogy toward open wounds but held her tongue.

After reflecting for a moment, Sarah countered, “I fear that you may not appreciate my first calling. After all, 'our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.' This isn't my battle.” Sarah was truly sympathetic but also somewhat confused. She needed to talk to her father about this. Or maybe even discuss it with Mark without the harpy present. *Oh, it's not up to me to judge this woman*, she thought to herself, *maybe she's not as lost as she appears*.

There was a disconcerting silence as none of them was sure who should speak next. Finally Sarah announced, “I must consider this overnight. Can you return tomorrow around, say, four-thirty?” Mark knew that was her code for saying she wanted to pray about it. Fine. He had already told Jeni that this would probably take more than one conversation. In the worst case, they'd appeal to Joe.

They got up to leave and Mark gave Sarah a brotherly hug. As he reached the gate he stopped and turned back toward her. She was standing by the table, expressionless. Then, in his wise-older-brother voice, he said, “History tells us that those 'spiritual hosts of wickedness' are usually marching in lockstep with some very flesh and blood ones. We may be fighting different battles, Sarah, but it's the same war.”

With that they quietly returned to their car and snuck off.

As they drove away, Jeni remarked, "She didn't seem all that friendly there at the end. Will she help us?"

"I can tell she's a bit confused. I've seen this before when playing chess with her." Mark was getting a little uncomfortable with Jeni's driving; she seemed careless tonight. "Anyway, she'll need to really think things over and then have a long talk with her father. Actually, he's the one we must convince."

Jeni was shocked, then she realized he had said *playing chess with her* and not *playing with her chest*.

"Do you play with her often?" Jeni asked. Mark missed the innuendo.

"Usually after supper." He had begun to relax but then Jeni started to swerve off the road. She caught herself before he could comment on it. After he recovered his composure, he continued, "She makes a mean fettuccine, probably not as good as you French girls could make, but it's almost good enough for Bette's kitchen."

"Fettuccine is Italian, I don't cook Italian." Actually, she couldn't cook anything, but why advertise it.

8

Jeni had a rather nice apartment on the second floor of a newer house and a landlord that knew better than to ask too many questions. Maybe it had more to do with apathy. After all, if her money was good, why should he care if an attractive single woman wanted to rent the entire floor.

Mark arrived to pick her up around four o'clock. Everyone at the house knew him, so they let him in and didn't even blink when he went straight up to her apartment. He knocked and received a "come in." As he entered, she was turned slightly away from him, fussing with her skirt. Once she was satisfied with it, she turned toward him. At least it was a bit longer than last time, even if it did have a slit, this time in the front. He liked the slit. *Fashion*, he thought. Then he thought again.

"So, and I mean this as a serious question with no innuendo regarding your feminine anatomy, *whatchya got under that skirt?*" She smiled both at his clever wording and his even cleverer detection of her hidden cargo. Setting her foot on a nearby chair, she deftly grabbed her skirt at the slit and pulled it aside, immodestly revealing a holstered pistol strapped to her inner thigh and hints of a lot more as well.

"Hmm, interesting," he said, hoping she'd think he was referring to the firearm. He recognized the make and model instantly, but had pretended to study it inquisitively so as to prolong the view.

She could tell that he liked what he saw but when she found herself enjoying his gaze, she put down her leg and redressed her skirt. To be honest, she would like to show him more, but there were vows to keep and open wounds that would have to heal before she'd risk new ones.

"Looks like a Walther PPK. Where did you get it?" Obtaining a German gun in this part of the world wasn't easy. The compact, .32 caliber autoloader was a good fit for a garter holster. Everything else down there looked like a good fit too.

"I found it in Fredrick Meier's coat pocket, I did not figure he'd need it anymore." Well, she was right, Meier wouldn't need it anymore. He was dead.

"Are you really that afraid of a missionary girl?" He asked half seriously.

"Don't be silly, I've never met a pacifist that could fight worth a damn. She'd never get close enough to lay a hand on me. I am, however, very afraid of the friends she could have waiting for us if she has decided that we are endangering her 'first calling.'" Her sarcasm was unjustified but not surprising. He hadn't expected those two to become great friends.

"She may not support us, but she won't turn on us either. Of that I am completely confident."

"Really?" she reached around him and slapped him on the small of his back. Just hard enough for the Colt .45 to dig into his skin.

"I'm always armed these days. Has nothing to do with this particular meeting. Besides," he said, wanting to change the subject. "We need to convince her father, Joe. He's the key. But things will go much smoother if she's on-board."

They arrived a few minutes late; Jeni had insisted that they take the long route, double back at least once and then park two blocks from the church. Not that she was paranoid.

Sarah met them at the door. From her demeanor, it was clear to him, as he had expected, that she hadn't made a decision. After silly and insignificant social banter they arrived back in the garden. They took the same seats as before.

"I'll tell you up front that I cannot make this decision. You will have to discuss this with my father. However, I'd like to know exactly what you are asking for." Sarah was polite, unemotional and firm.

“We need to lengthen the runway at Yale and want you to build a new clinic at Bethel,” Mark replied. “It will help provide cover for our activities.” Since Jake's Flying School was advertised as the *Harvard of Aviation*, it seemed reasonable to nickname the remote strip Yale. No disrespect intended, but the pilots involved did enjoy bragging that they had been to both Harvard and Yale.

Bethel was the name that Preacher Joe had given to the cabin built in the village near the airstrip. As Mark remembered, it was only two rooms with a tin roof. He'd actually only visited it once, and concluded that he'd rather stay in the bunkhouse at the airstrip. He didn't figure it was worth the three-mile walk even if the women did run around topless. Back when he was fifteen, he would have walked twice that far to see some tits; but he had higher standards now. No, now he liked firm, full breasts, just big enough ...

“Mark. Maaarrrrk!” Sarah was calling him back to reality.

“Oh, sorry, I was trying ... to remember ... um, just how long is the airstrip?” Nice save. Not that he could have actually forgotten, for it was one of those runways that a pilot couldn't forget. One thousand, one hundred and twenty-seven feet long with sixty-two-foot trees at the end. He had paced it off at least a dozen times. A one-wayer. You had to land to the southwest and take off to the northeast regardless of the wind. You flew the approach from the northeast, slowing your bird down to just over stall speed to establish a nice gentle descent over the water before setting down on the grass – all the while trying to ignore the trees blocking any attempt to go around while worrying about just how worn the brake shoes were. At least you didn't have time to contemplate the piranha-infested river underneath and the equally dangerous trees on each side.

Sarah piped in. “If I recall correctly, it's around eleven hundred feet?”

“Let's look it up,” he said as he pulled a ratty old notebook from his crocodile-skin flight bag. He laid a map with hand-drawn annotations on the table. He tapped his finger on the runway.

“See how the river turns sharply, flows to the south and then cuts back again, forming a horseshoe with the runway in the middle? If we cut down the trees from the southwest end all the way to the river,” using his thumb and index finger as

draftsman's divider, he projected the map scale onto the section in question, "see, we'll have another fourteen hundred feet. Plenty of runway. Besides, then we could take off and land in either direction."

He engaged his most endearing tone, because the worst was yet to come. "We need to move in food, fuel storage and put up a large hangar. And to complicate matters, we need it in less than a month. I know that this will be a herculean effort."

"We wouldn't be counting on Hercules. We have access to a higher power." She wasn't tossing it in their faces; just stating her position. "You mentioned providing cover?" She was anticipating this would involve lying, sneaking around, and other such dishonest activities. It could be a bigger moral dilemma than providing the runway.

"We'd like you to start building a clinic at Bethel. Have a fundraiser, send out prayer letters, whatever you would normally do." This time he was soft selling the plan. No grenades. "Behind the scenes, we'll provide the materials and labor to help make it happen."

This moral dilemma was clearing itself up fast, but she was mature enough to remain skeptical. "Sounds very simple, why the generosity?"

"There's a kraut in town, Herman Gruber, he keeps very close tabs on everything." Mark made no effort to disguise his disgust.

"Should I have heard of him?"

"Probably not. He's officially the 'Director of Lumber Development,' or some other made-up title, for a German front company. He took over recently after the death of a Mr. Meier, also a spy." Sarah noticed that Jeni had looked startled at the mention of the name but had recovered gracefully.

"That was in the paper. Fell over a railing, I believe? Another victim of the evil of alcohol." Sarah interjected, looking at Jeni for her reaction.

Jeni replied consolingly while maintaining her best poker face. "Oh, yes, I did hear that."

Mark almost announced, *I'll say she heard it*, but he kept his bemusement to himself. Oh, Jeni had heard it alright. Heard him go *splat* on the Italian marble when he nose-dived from the third floor.

Supposedly, the man had been listening to a soccer game on the radio in his den on the second floor. The newspapers

didn't say why, but he apparently wandered up to the third floor and somehow, *accidentally*, fell over the railing at the top of the stairs that overlooked the atrium. Minus his pants.

Fortunately, his wife was visiting friends on the other side of town and was spared having to help clean up. But in a twisted bit of luck, his brother, sister-in-law, and several guests were playing bridge in the dining room adjacent to the landing zone. They found Jeni waiting for him in his bedroom, wearing his jacket. Just his jacket. While reports differed regarding exactly what else she was wearing, all agreed that her dress had somehow fallen off.

His brother, to avoid a scandal, loaded Jeni, still holding her dress in her lap and wearing Meier's jacket, into a car and had someone (possibly the local chief of police, but here again, the unofficial witnesses weren't sure) drive her back to her apartment. By the time the newly minted widow returned home, they had retrousered the body and straightened up the bedroom. His brother then used a combination of a little bribery and a few threats to keep Jeni's name from ever appearing in the papers. The official cause of death: Mr. Meier had gotten drunk, accidentally fallen over the railing, and plunged to his death. Two weeks later, Meier's butler appeared at Jeni's place to retrieve the jacket. The widow was starting to wonder why it had been at the cleaners for so long.

What none of the krauts bothered to ask Jeni was, "Did you happen to see our plans for invading northern Brazil? We seem to have misplaced them." Good thing for her no one thought to unfold the dress she was clutching.

Mark reasoned that Sarah didn't need to know everything about Jeni, so he skipped the details and continued. "Gruber has agents everywhere, even one of Jake's waiters is on his payroll. If we were to start shipping supplies, fuel, anything to Yale without a good reason, they'd investigate. Then they'd make a list, cross-check it with other lists and report it to Berlin."

"You want to turn our peaceful airstrip into a military base? And use it to deceive others? My father wouldn't allow that." Sarah digested her own comments for a second and then announced, "I need to go out to the village tomorrow anyway, Mark can fly me out and we can discuss this with my father."

"Okay, fair enough." Jeni was trying to be reasonable. "We can meet at Jake's and leave first thing in the morning."

“Only Mark needs to bother coming.” Sarah caught herself being almost surly and retreated. “But I guess there's room in the Reliant for all of us.”

9

Sven just stood there, staring. It was one of those moments when the artist stands alone, looking at the blank canvas, brush in hand, palette ready, anxious to start, knowing full well that the time of dreaming has passed and that the images he has so clearly contrived in his mind must now, somehow, be made real, and the canvas sneers back at him.

He knew that if he does not stand resolute, then the doubt instilled by a simple inanimate piece of fabric, will be replaced by panic. For he knows all too well that the possibilities are endless. But so too are the possibilities for disaster and embarrassment. What if the images that are so inspiring in his internal landscape cannot be wrestled out for him to display to others?

Worse yet, what if he succeeds in reproducing his vision with meticulous accuracy, only for his audience to ridicule it? It is neither self-confidence nor arrogance but rather courage, the raw courage to dip the brush and make the first stroke, that separates the Rembrandts and da Vincis from those whose names have never been remembered, much less forgotten.

Of course, Rembrandt had it easy. If he was not happy with a particular rendering, a quick swipe of the palette knife and it was gone; he could try again. Even a finished painting, judged not worth the purchase price of the canvas, needs just a coat of white paint and the artist can try again.

Poor Sven had no such luxury. For he stood before the pristine work of another artist, metal shears in hand, ready to slice the sensual aluminum curves into a new, and hopefully even sexier shape, fully aware that the fragile skin, once deformed, could not easily be restored. Welding it was impossible. Patches and rivets would be the only repair; there would be no hiding his mistakes.

There was an additional fear as well. One that the mere painter, author, or composer cannot even imagine. Sven's masterpiece would actually have to *work*. Failure to account for the unyielding laws of physics and mechanics would undoubtedly cause his creation to rend itself into scrap metal, most likely at the most inopportune moment, killing all those who had trusted in his judgment. Creating art under such constraints is not for the faint of heart.

Fortunately, Sven was not a philosopher. Any such concerns were dismissed as soon as they uncrated the new ten-foot hydraulic shear and an equally impressive finger brake that Jake had bought for this job.

Sven had been in his third year as a mechanical engineering student when he had gotten fed up with studying the thermodynamics of the Carnot cycle in archaic steam engines and quit. He'd decided he wanted to wield both a welding torch and a slide rule and founded McCormick's Mechanical Services. How he ended up at Jake's had never been adequately explained, but it had something to do with a very fast car and an equally fast woman.

"I've never seen him this excited about anything," Jeni said as she looked down from the catwalk. Sven was practically dancing around on the shop floor below them.

"Yeah, he's been up late every night at his drawing table with his T-square and triangles. Practically wore out his slide rule," Mark added.

Just then Marie walked up to Sven with a plate and bottle of Coke.

"Bette must have noticed that he hasn't eaten all day," Mark said with a laugh. "Sometimes she thinks she's everyone's grandmother."

Sven actually gave the girl a quick kiss on her cheek as he took the plate and sat down on a shop stool next to the Ellen Jane. Holding the plate in his lap, he tilted his head back to take a swig of the Coke and noticed that he had an audience.

Deciding he deserved a more formal break, he headed up the stairs and joined Mark and Jeni.

"Not trivial, fitting in all the warrior features that you insist on," he said to Mark as he sat down.

"Come on, Sven," Mark replied. "Nothing's too hard for you. What's the problem?"

"First, ya can't just hang those bombs wherever you want. That heavy load has to be exactly on the center of gravity or the effect would be a disaster on the aerodynamics, it would," Sven replied in his version of English. "Second, and of even more import, ya can't just drill and tap holes into the main spar at will. At least not if you hope it will keep holding the wings on."

"I only need five bombs," Mark replied. "I'm sure you can figure it out."

"Gave you seven bombs actually," the engineer answered between bites. "Took designing some rather clever rack assemblies, it did, if I say so myself. We'll rivet them to the ribs, bulkheads, and formers between the gear legs."

"Seven," Jeni repeated with satisfaction. "That is more than enough for our propaganda mission. But when will you be done?"

"Oh, I've got a half dozen assistants cuttin, bendin, and rivetin," Sven replied a bit nervously. Any conversation with Jeni put him on edge. "She'll be ready to fly soon."

Six days later, Sven invited Hans and Mark in for a tour. Jake and Jeni tagged along.

"I made it really simple, as I knew pilots would be using it." Sven was introducing his customized bombardier's control panel. "Only three things to remember, can you boys handle that without a checklist or do I need to write one up?"

Without giving them time for a snide comeback he went on, "First, seven switches you have. One switch for each bomb on the belly, I even arranged them in order. Flip the switch up to select that bomb. But wait, even more exciting, it gets. This knob decides how far apart they'll be released. All the way counter-clockwise and they'll all leave at the same time; clockwise all the way and you'll get one second between them. I even took the extra time to label it in eighth-second intervals. Then just press and hold the bomb release until they're all gone. Did I go too fast for you? Questions, gentlemen?"

“Nein, but you didn't tell us – which bomb drops first?” Hans inquired.

“Just as they're labeled, starts with number one on the port wing, then all the way to number seven on the starboard wing.”

“Gotta change that,” Mark replied.

“Change what?” Sven was dumbfounded, no one ever had to fix his creations.

“I know you're an engineer, so I'll try and make this as complicated as possible.” That gave Hans something to grin about while Mark was thinking with his eyes closed.

“This configuration would result in an unacceptably asymmetrical distribution of mass should the operator choose not to jettison all the warheads. The effect would be exasperated during crosswind landings, thus increasing the probability of losing control of the aircraft. Which could result in severe damage to the aircraft and injury to the crew.” Mark was pretty smug, having actually remembered some of the fancy words that Sven liked to throw around.

Sven just stared. He wasn't about to ask for a translation and Mark wasn't about to offer one. Hans was patient.

After about forty seconds, Sven replied, “I should have seen that, I should have. By dropping the bombs starting from one wing first, it could leave a lot of weight hanging way out under the other wing. That would throw you off balance, make flying harder and landing more risky. Fixed by morning, it will be.”

The few times that Mark had gotten one on Sven, it was something obvious.

Anxious to change the subject, Sven took them to the back of the plane and pointed just in front of the tailwheel. “Well mates, whatcha think?”

“Looks real to me.” Jeni was impressed.

“Real it certainly is, donated by a Vought SBU-1,” Sven replied proudly. “I mounted it a bit further forward and away from the fuselage on purpose. Want to make sure everyone can see it.”

“Does it work?” Jake asked.

“No, strictly ornamental, bolted in place, purely for the purpose of deception.”

“Doesn't need to work. Krauts see a plane sporting a tail hook and they'll start looking for an aircraft carrier. Paint it a

different color, something contrasting, make sure they can notice it," Mark told him.

"Have you figured out how to work the tail numbers?" Jeni asked.

"Might have, I think," Sven went to the workbench and returned with a box of sixteen-inch-high, cutout aluminum numbers, painted black, and a screwdriver. "This is all we need to do." He demonstrated, selecting the numbers *1* and *4*. Lining the *1* up with some pre-drilled holes on the vertical fin, he inserted a screw and tightened it down; four more screws and the port side of the *Ellen Jane* was now labeled *14*. He moved to the other tail fin and Jeni handed him a *2* and a *1*; soon the starboard side was marked *21*. "That's all there is to it," Sven said "Cut four complete sets, we did. We can change her numbers after every sortie."

More propaganda. If the Germans bothered to record the tail numbers of the planes threatening them, and Hans was certain that they would, they'd have a whole squadron to worry about. Granted, the scheme depended, to some extent, on the chaos and confusion of combat, but that seemed a reasonable assumption.

The machine gun turret was considerably more complicated. It required a fair amount of machining, both on a lathe and a milling machine. Sven decided to mount it in the bed of a truck. This would allow them to transport it to a remote location where they could test fire it before mounting it on the plane.

In the meantime, they spread tarps between the catwalks and improvised a paint booth. This protected the *Ellen Jane* from dust as well as prying German eyes. They covered her top with a dark olive drab, her belly in a light bluish-gray, and the engine cowls in red.

The red matched Jeni's skirt, both the one she often wore and the ones that now adorned each side of the nose. Jeni had never actually been asked for permission to use her image, much less posed for it. But apparently, Sven had paid more attention to Jeni than she had realized. And no one had any idea that his skill with an airbrush extended so far beyond just painting flames on the side of a roadster.

Just as Mark had envisioned, she was sitting on her knees with her bare back to the viewer, her arms folded across her chest and her head turned to leer over her shoulder. Even Jeni, after initially being infuriated about it, had to agree to

its artistic value. Besides, Sven had given her the slightly more rounded derriere that she had always wanted.