

Lavell Edith

Linda Carlton's Island Adventure



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Chapter I

The "Ladybug"

"There's a young lady here to see you, Linda," announced Miss Emily Carlton, coming into her niece's room the morning after the latter's return from the St. Louis Ground School. The girl had just graduated, winning both commercial and transport licenses, and, besides that, she was registered as the only feminine airplane mechanic in the country.

"Who is she, Auntie?" inquired Linda, rubbing her eyes and peering out the window into the lovely June sunshine. What a wonderful day! Too beautiful to spend on the ground! But she sighed as she recalled that at the moment she did not possess a plane.

"A reporter, I believe," replied the older woman. "Miss Hawkins, from the 'News'."

"But I haven't done anything to get into the newspapers," objected Linda.

"My dear child, you don't have to! Aren't you the only girl who ever flew the Atlantic alone? That's enough to keep you in the spotlight forever."

"But I don't like spot-lights," Linda insisted, starting to dress. "Couldn't you get rid of her, Auntie?"

Miss Carlton shook her head.

"I tried to, dear. But she wouldn't go. She wants to know your summer plans. I told her you'd probably just spend a quiet vacation with me at Green Falls, where we were last year. But she didn't believe me. She said you weren't the type to take your vacations quietly."

Linda laughed.

"I guess she's right, Aunt Emily."

The latter looked troubled. She had been trying for a year – ever since Linda's father had given her an Arrow Pursuit bi-plane for graduation – to keep the girl out of the air as much as possible, but she had not succeeded. The Carltons were comfortably well-off, and it was Miss Carlton's wish that Linda go in for society, and make a good marriage. But though Linda enjoyed occasional parties as much as any normal young person, she had a serious purpose in life, to make flying her career just as a young man would.

"You won't go to Green Falls – with all the rest of the crowd?" asked Miss Carlton, anxiously.

"I can't, Aunt Emily. I – I – can't spare the time. I am trying to get a job."

"A job? But you don't need money. Your father's business is doing nicely –"

"Oh, it isn't the money I want," interrupted the girl. "It's the experience."

Linda finished dressing and came down stairs to meet the young woman who was waiting for her. The latter insisted that she eat her breakfast while they talked.

"Honestly, I haven't done a thing interesting to the world since my ocean flight!" Linda said. "Except win my licenses, and all the graduates' names have already been listed in the papers."

The reporter smiled at her as if she were a child.

"My dear girl," she explained, "you are front-page news now, no matter what you do. You are Queen of the Air, and will be until some other woman does something more daring than your flight to Paris alone. So everything you do interests the public. Naturally they want to know what you are planning for the summer. Flying to South America, or Alaska? And what kind of plane do you intend to buy next, since you sold your Bellanca in Paris?"

Linda yawned, and fingered her mail – a great pile of letters beside her plate. Invitations, mostly from the younger set in Spring City, for she was very popular.

"I'm afraid I don't know yet," she replied, simply.

"Maybe if you read your mail – " suggested the reporter.

"She is to be a bridesmaid at Miss Katherine Claverings's wedding next week," supplied Miss Carlton, entering the dining-room. As usual, social events were all-important to her, especially affairs with the Claverings, the richest people in Spring City. Katherine, or "Kitty," as her friends all called her, was to be married to Lt. Hulbert of the U. S. Flying Corps, and her brother Ralph made no secret of his devotion for Linda. If he had had his way, they would have been married last Christmas, and aviation jobs would be out of the question for Linda Carlton at the present time.

The girl searched through her mail rapidly, and picked out a letter which interested her above all others. It was from the Pitcairn Autogiro Company in the East.

As she read it, her blue eyes lighted up with enthusiasm, and she examined the enclosed circular with excited interest, completely forgetting her visitor.

The reporter waited patiently for a minute or two.

"Well, what's it all about, Miss Carlton?" she finally inquired.

Linda looked up at her as if she were startled, and suddenly remembered her caller. She handed her the circular.

"I am going to buy an autogiro," she announced, with decision.

"A what?" demanded her aunt, thinking Linda referred to some kind of automobile. "A new car?"

The reporter smiled.

"A flying bug?" she demanded.

Miss Carlton gasped in horror. A bug! What would her niece be up to next?

"Linda!" she exclaimed.

"It's a plane, Aunt Emily," the girl explained. "You ought to like it. It's the very safest kind there is. In the eight or nine years since it was invented, nobody has been killed with one."

Miss Carlton looked doubtful.

"No airplane is safe," she remarked.

"This isn't an airplane. It's an autogiro."

"But it flies?"

"Of course."

Linda showed her the picture. It was indeed a queer looking object, with its wind-mill-like arrangement on top, and its absence of big wings. As the reporter had observed, its appearance was very like a huge bug.

"They do say it's unusually safe," corroborated the latter. "You'll have to take a ride in it, Miss Carlton."

"Not I!" protested the older woman. "Firm earth is good enough for me... No, it looks dangerous enough to me."

Linda smiled; she could never convince her aunt of the joy of flying, or of the minimum risk, if one were a careful pilot. She was glad that her father was more broad-minded; if he weren't, she would still be on the ground.

"And where will you go with your Flying Bug, Miss Carlton?" asked the reporter, tapping her pencil on her note-book.

"Not on any long flight," replied the girl, to her aunt's relief. "My aim is to get some sort of aviation job."

"What would you like to do?"

"Anything connected with planes. I prefer flying, but I'd be satisfied at the beginning with ground work... If you will write down your telephone number, Miss Hawkins, I will call you up when I have decided definitely just what my plans will be."

"Thank you very much!" exclaimed the other girl, rising. "I think you are a peach, Miss Carlton. Some celebrities are so mean to us reporters."

"I'm afraid I'm not a real celebrity," laughed Linda. "I'll be forgotten by the public this time next year. I sincerely hope that more and more girls and women will be doing things in aviation, so that my little stunt will seem trivial. That is progress, you know."

Scarcely had the visitor gone before Miss Carlton was begging Linda to open her other letters.

"The Junior League picnic is tomorrow," she said. "And Dot Crowley is giving a luncheon in honor of Kitty Clavering... There are probably a lot more things, too..."

Rather listlessly Linda opened her letters. It was not the same, she thought, without Louise to share everything. Louise Haydock – Louise Mackay now – had been her chum all through school, where they were so inseparable that they were always referred to by their friends as the "double Ls." The other girl's marriage had meant a sharp break to Linda, for the Mackays had moved to Wichita, Kansas, where Ted was employed as a flyer.

As if Miss Carlton understood her niece's thoughts, she remarked that Louise was coming for Kitty's wedding.

Linda's eyes shone with joy.

"Flying?" she inquired, as a matter of course.

"Yes. She and Ted are arriving some time tonight. Mrs. Haydock called up, and asked me to tell you."

Linda could not read her mail for a few minutes, so intense was her happiness at this splendid news.

"Ted can go with me to see about the autogiro!" she exclaimed. "I do so want his opinion!"

"Go where?"

"To Philadelphia, where the Pitcairn Company is located."

Again Miss Carlton looked annoyed, almost shocked.

"You don't mean to say you'll take time to fly to Philadelphia, with all your engagements?"

Linda nodded.

"I'll be here for the wedding, Aunt Emily. Don't worry about that. But nothing else is particularly important."

Miss Carlton groaned. What could you do with a girl like Linda? You might as well have a boy!

The mail was finally opened and sorted, and Linda dutifully went to a dinner dance at the Country Club that evening with Ralph Clavering. But she was tense all evening, for she was hoping every moment that Louise would arrive.

About midnight the young couple dashed in, radiant in their happiness. To everyone's amusement Louise flew into Linda's arms in the middle of the dance floor.

"How do you get that way?" demanded Ralph, pretending to be angry. "As if it isn't enough to endure every fellow in the room tapping me when I'm dancing with Linda, without having girls do it too!"

But the double Ls scarcely heard him. They were so enraptured at seeing each other again.

"I'm going to stay a week!" announced Louise. "Luckily, Ted has some business in Philadelphia and New York, and he'll be flying back and forth."

"Philadelphia!" exclaimed Linda. "Isn't that great! Can we go with him there?"

"Of course we can, if you don't mind a squeeze. The plane isn't very big," explained Louise. "But then, we're not fat. Ted'll be tickled to death to have company – he hates flying alone. But why do you want to go to Philadelphia, Linda?"

"To buy an autogiro!"

"You always were crazy about those things. Remember the time you gave up a dance to fly one?"

"I certainly do. And you wouldn't go with me."

"Well, there was a reason," laughed Louise, making no secret of her admiration for her husband... "I think Ted'll go day after tomorrow," she continued. "We thought we'd enjoy resting a day, and taking in the Junior League picnic."

"Fine!" agreed Linda. "That will give everybody a chance to see you. Besides, Aunt Emily would die if I missed that affair. Remember the one last year. Didn't we have fun?"

"We certainly did," smiled Louise, reminiscently. "But it seems like more than a year ago – so much has happened."

"I wasn't even flying then," observed the other.

"And I hadn't met Ted!"

"You're a real bride, Lou!" returned Linda, affectionately. "But you're just the same old dear!"

The following day was just as delightful as it had been the previous year, and the picnic another success. To Linda it was all the more enjoyable, because of the novelty of seeing her old friends again after the separation caused by a year at the school in St. Louis.

Ted went along with Louise, and entered into all the sports, just as if he had been born and brought up with the crowd in Spring City. Moreover, he was delighted at the prospect of having the two girls go with him the next day, and appeared almost as enthusiastic about the autogiro as Linda herself.

The weather continued perfect, and the three happy young people took off from Spring City the following morning. An excellent mechanic himself, Ted always kept his plane in tip-top condition, and it was a rare thing indeed for him even to encounter a minor accident. This flight proved no exception; straight and swift through the June skies he flew to the field outside the city of Philadelphia where the autogiros were on display.

"You really expect to buy one today, Linda?" asked Louise, as she climbed out of the plane.

"Yes – if Ted gives his approval," replied the capable aviatrix. She had always had the greatest confidence in this young red-haired pilot, who had taken her on her first flight, and who had saved her and his wife from disaster upon two occasions.

"Are you sure that it can go fast enough to suit you, Linda?" asked Ted.

"It can travel a hundred and twenty-five miles an hour, and that ought to satisfy me. If I were entering any air-races, I'd want a special racing plane anyhow, for the occasion. But I'm not going out for races. I want to take a job, and I think an autogiro will be the most convenient plane I can have, to take with me anywhere I want to go. I shan't have to depend on big fields for landing."

"Right-o," agreed the young man.

They walked across the field and were shown a model by an enthusiastic salesman. As the reporter had said, it did look like a flying bug, with its odd wind-mill-like rotor on top, and its small stub-like wings, which were there mainly to mount the lateral controls or ailerons.

"It isn't so pretty as the Arrow," remarked Louise.

"Handsome is as handsome does," returned Linda. "If we'd had an autogiro that time in Canada, when our gas leaked out, a forced landing wouldn't have been disastrous."

"Why?"

"Because the rotor takes care of that, after the engine is dead," explained Linda. "An autogiro can come down vertically at a slower rate than we did with our parachutes."

"I'll never forget how scared I was that time we jumped off," remarked her companion. "You know, it's one thing to see other people do it – in the air, or at the movies – and it's something else to step off into space yourself. That all-gone feeling!"

"I don't mind it any more now – it doesn't seem any worse than dropping ten stories in an elevator. But I know what you mean."

"Well, I have never had to jump since," Louise informed her. "But," she continued as they walked around the autogiro, "isn't there really any danger of crashing?"

"You can crash, of course," laughed Linda. "If you steer straight for another plane, or a tree. But tail-spins are practically impossible; they say no matter what happens the autogiro settles to the ground like a tired hen. It's the principle of centrifugal force – it can't fail."

"Oh, yeah?" remarked Louise, hiding a yawn.

"What I want your opinion on, Ted," added Linda, turning to the young man, "is the engine. You know more about engines than I do."

"I'm not so sure of that last," he replied, modestly. "Looks O.K. to me – I've been examining it while you girls chattered."

The salesman, who had been listening to the conversation, suddenly burst into a smile. He had been wondering where he had seen that girl before. Now he knew! Her pictures had been in every newspaper in the country. She was Linda Carlton, of course!

"You're Miss Carlton, aren't you?" he demanded, excitedly. "The girl who flew to Paris alone?"

"Yes," answered Linda, indifferently. She didn't want to talk ancient history now. "This is a P C A – 2, isn't it?" she inquired, to bring the man to the subject of autogiros.

"Yes. Fifteen thousand dollars. I suppose it's not necessary to tell *you* what instruments it is equipped with – an experienced flyer like yourself can recognize them by a glance into the pilot's cock-pit."

"Yes, I see them. And I had a circular besides... It's complete, all right. The only thing I don't like about it is the separate passenger's cock-pit. My Arrow Pursuit had a companion cock-pit."

"You can always talk to your passenger through the speaking-tube," the salesman reminded her.

"Yes, of course – "

"And nobody you take along now-a-days will be as talkative as I always was on our trips together," Louise observed, with a smile.

"Talkative!" repeated Linda, "All you ever wanted to do was sleep! Every time I looked at you on that flight to Canada, you were peacefully dozing!"

"And she still has a bad habit of dropping off," teased Ted.

"So long as that's the only way I 'drop off,' I'm satisfied," concluded Louise.

In spite of their frivolous talk, Linda had been thinking seriously about the autogiro, and had entirely made up her mind about it.

"I'll take it," she announced. "If you surely approve of it, Ted."

"I do, absolutely."

The salesman looked at her in amazement. Never had he made such an easy sale before. But he did not meet people like Linda Carlton every day!

"Don't you want to try it out?" he suggested. "I can show you how to fly it in a few minutes."

"I have flown one before," she told him. "But I would like to take it up for a few minutes if you don't mind. Am I to have this particular one? I have a certified check in payment."

The salesman blinked his eyes in further consternation. The check right there, the girl ready to take the plane home with her! It was a moment before he could catch his breath.

"Of course," he finally managed to answer. "I'll have her started for you immediately. And – would your friends care to go up with you?"

"Sure!" exclaimed Ted. "We're your best friends, aren't we, Linda? So oughtn't we to be privileged with the first ride?"

"You certainly are!" replied the famous aviatrix, squeezing Louise's hand in her excitement and delight. "Come on!"

It was the Mackays' first flight in an autogiro, and though they were very much crowded in the passenger's cock-pit, they insisted that that only added to the fun. With a sureness which Ted watched in admiration, Linda took off and flew round and round the field, putting the new plane through all sorts of tests, proving conclusively that all the claims for it were well-founded.

Fifteen minutes later they came slowly down to earth, landing on the exact spot from which Linda had taken off.

"Unscramble yourselves!" she cried to her passengers, as she climbed out of the cock-pit. "Let's go pay our bill."

"She's great, Linda!" approved Louise, as her husband helped her out. "I'm for her, even if she is a funny-looking bug."

"Sh!" cautioned Linda, solemnly. "You might hurt her feelings. She's – she's – a lady!"

"Ladybug!" exclaimed Louise, with a sudden burst of inspiration.

"Ladybug is right!" agreed her chum enthusiastically. "You've named her for me, Lou!"

Chapter II

The Aviation Job

"It's marvelous!" exclaimed Linda, as the salesman came to meet her after her test-flight in the autogiro. "Will you have her filled with gas and oil, while I sign the contract? I'll take her with me."

The salesman smiled at Ted Mackay.

"In the same way any other woman would buy a hat," he remarked, to Louise's amusement.

"You found it easy to fly, Miss Carlton?" he inquired.

"Wonderful!" she replied. "So simple that a child could almost do it! It certainly is the plane of the future, or of the present, I should say."

"We'll probably see one perched on everybody's roof within the next five years," teased Louise, although in reality she shared her chum's admiration for it.

While the mechanics gave the autogiro a thorough inspection, the little group strolled to the office to sign the papers and to meet the president of the company.

The salesman introduced Mr. Pitcairn, and added, proudly, "This is *the* Miss Carlton, of world-wide fame! The only woman who ever flew the Atlantic alone! And I have had the honor, to sell Miss Carlton an autogiro!"

Linda blushed as she shook hands, and her eyelids fluttered in embarrassment. She could never get used to public admiration. Immediately she began to talk about her new possession.

"I want it for every-day flying," she explained. "I think it will be wonderful for that."

"We believe that it is," agreed the older man. "And we are honored indeed, Miss Carlton, that you have chosen it. It will be a feather in our cap."

"Miss Carlton never thinks of things like that," remarked Louise. "But I guess we're glad that she doesn't!"

While Linda signed the necessary papers, and handed her check to the salesman, the president inquired what her plans included now that she had graduated from the Ground School with such success.

"I don't exactly know," she replied. "I want to get some kind of aviation job – I am more interested in the use of planes in every-day life than I am in races and spectacular events, though I understand that these have their place. Of course I haven't found anything to do yet, but I mean to try."

"You expect to give your whole time to flying?" asked the other. He had thought, naturally, that a girl in Linda Carlton's circumstances would just do it for sport.

"Yes – a regular full-time job. I'm not sure what – not selling planes, for I don't believe I'd care for that. And not the mail – unless I can't get anything else. You don't happen to know of any openings, do you, Mr. Pitcairn?"

"Let me see," he said. "Things are a little slow now. Of course there are the air-transportation companies, but their routes are about as cut-and-dried as the mail pilot's... I take it you would rather have a little more excitement... There's crop dusting, during the summer. You have heard of that, no doubt?"

"Yes, I have read about it."

"You know, then, that one plane flying over a field can spray as many plants in a day as a hundred of the ordinary spraying machines?"

His listeners gasped in astonishment. What marvelous advances in progress aviation was bringing about!

"I happen to know of a company in the South that is just forming," he continued. "Because of lack of capital, they are in great need of pilots with planes of their own. If you are interested, I am sure they would be glad to take you on."

"That sounds very interesting," agreed Linda, eagerly. "I'm sure I'd like that. And an autogiro ought to be especially adapted for this kind of thing. I could fly so low – and land so easily –"

"Exactly! Incidentally, you'd be doing our company a big favor by showing the public new uses for an autogiro. If Miss Carlton, of international reputation, flies anywhere, the account of it is sure to be in the newspapers!"

"I wouldn't count too much on that, Mr. Pitcairn," protested Linda, modestly. "I really am not 'news' any more... But I shall be grateful for the name of this firm, if you will write it down for me. Where is it located?"

"In Georgia – the southern part," he informed her. "Here is the address," he added, handing her a card. "And I will write myself today to tell them of their good fortune!"

"Georgia!" repeated Louise. "It's going to be awfully hot there, Linda. Compared with Green Falls – or even Spring City."

"Why not pick a job in Canada?" suggested Ted. "You'd like Canada, if you didn't choose the coldest part of the year to visit it."

Louise shuddered at the memory of their adventure during the preceding Christmas holidays.

"I never want to see Canada again!" she said. "And I don't believe Linda does either!"

It was not the memory of that cold night in the Canadian woods, or of the cruelty of the police, however, that made Linda frown and hesitate now. Nor did the heat of the South trouble her – weather was all in the day's work to her. But the thought of the distance between Georgia and Ohio, and what such a separation might mean to her Aunt Emily, deterred her from accepting the offer immediately. It hardly seemed right to be away all winter and spring, and then to go far off again in the summer.

"Would I have to promise to do this all summer, if I took it on?" she inquired.

"No, certainly not. A month would be enough, for the first time. That would give you August with your family, Miss Carlton, before you accepted a regular aviation job in the fall."

This sounded much better to Linda, and she promised to write within the next week, if her father agreed.

It was lots of fun riding back to Spring City in her autogiro the following day, although she flew alone, for Louise wanted to return with Ted. Without a mishap of any kind she brought the "Ladybug" down on the field behind her house.

When she entered her home, she found that her father had arrived during her absence. He was waiting for her in the library.

"Daddy!" she cried, joyfully, for Mr. Carlton's visits were always a pleasant surprise to his only child. "You came at just the right time! Come out and see my Bug!"

"Must you call it that, Linda?" asked her Aunt Emily, who, like all good housekeepers detested every sort of insect.

Linda laughed.

"Take a look at it, Aunt Emily, and see whether you could think of a better name."

Miss Carlton peered through the screen door.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Come out on the porch, and you can see it," replied Linda.

Dragging her father and her aunt each by a hand, she gleefully skipped through the door.

"There!" she cried, as one who displays a marvel.

At the top of the hill, on the field behind the lovely Colonial house, they saw the new possession. Or rather, the top of the autogiro, for it was not wholly visible.

"It looks like a clothes-dryer to me," remarked Miss Carlton. "Or a wind-mill."

"But you agree that I couldn't call it my 'Clothes-dryer,' or my 'Wind-mill,' don't you, Aunt Emily? The words are too long. Besides, Lou thought of the cleverest name – the 'Ladybug.' But you needn't worry, Auntie, she won't ever creep into your spotless house!"

"I should hope not!"

"In a way, Emily," observed Linda's father, "it's a good name as far as you are concerned. You hate planes – and you hate bugs!"

"Only, Aunt Emily is going to love my autogiro," insisted Linda, putting her arm affectionately about the older woman, who had been the only mother she had ever known. "One of my biggest reasons for choosing an autogiro was because it is the safest flying machine known." Her tone grew soft, so low that her father could not hear, and she added, with her head turned aside, "I do want you to know that I care about your feelings, Aunt Emily."

Miss Carlton's eyes grew misty; Linda had always been so sweet, so thoughtful! Her niece couldn't help it, if she had a marvelous brain, and a mechanical mind. No wonder she wanted to use them!

"It's going to be the ambition of my life to convert Aunt Emily to flying," she announced, in a gay tone. "See if I don't, Daddy!"

"I hope so," he said. "How about taking me up for a little fly?"

"A fly?" repeated Linda, playfully. "You a fly – and my new plane a bug! Oh, think of poor Aunt Emily!"

"Now, Linda, I do believe you're getting silly!"

But already she was pulling her father down the steps, eager to show off her beloved possession.

Mr. Carlton proved almost as enthusiastic as his daughter about it. When they returned to the house, he laughingly told his sister that he was thinking of buying one for himself, to use to fly back and forth from New York, where his business was located.

Miss Carlton groaned.

"Then we'll have two flying maniacs in the house!" she exclaimed.

"No – Linda and I will usually be up in the air," he corrected, "not often in the house."

Linda had scarcely time to change from her flyer's suit into an afternoon dress, and no chance at all to talk with her father about Mr. Pitcairn's suggestion about a job, when Ralph Clavering drove over to see her. Linda was delighted, of course; here was another person to whom she could display her autogiro. Ralph was a licensed pilot, too, although with him flying was only a secondary interest, and he had never had his own plane.

"Come out and see my 'Ladybug!'" she insisted. "And wouldn't you like to try her out? I might let you!"

"No, thanks, Linda – I'd be sure to do something wrong. Besides, I'd rather talk to you – those things make such an infernal noise. No, just show it to me, and then let's go and have a game of tennis before supper, if you're not too tired."

"I've almost forgotten how to play," replied the girl. "But I'll try. If you will come out and see my 'Ladybug' first."

After they had examined the autogiro, and were driving to the Country Club in Ralph's roadster, the young man turned the conversation to the topic of vacation at Green Falls, the resort at which Linda's aunt, and most of her friends, had spent the preceding summer. Ralph told Linda about a new motor boat that he was getting, and spoke of the contests in all sorts of sports that would be repeated this year.

"How soon do you think you can get off, Linda?" he concluded eagerly.

"Not till August, I'm afraid," she replied, to his dismay.

"August!" he repeated, in horror. "You're not going to pull some new stunt on us, are you, Linda? Fly the Pacific – or the Arctic Ocean?"

The girl laughed, and shook her head.

"I'm through with stunts for a while, Ralph – you needn't worry about that. No; what I am planning now is steady work. I expect to take a job, as soon as Kit's wedding is over."

"A job? Where?"

"In Georgia, probably." She went into details about the proposition.

"You would!" he muttered, sulkily. "And pick out such a hot spot, that nobody would want to go with you... Linda, why can't you be sensible like other girls – like my sister Kit, for instance?"

"Kit?"

"Yes. And get married."

He leaned over hopefully, and put his hand on her arm. Now that Linda had accomplished her ambition in flying the Atlantic, perhaps she would be willing to settle down to marriage and a normal life.

But she drew away, smiling.

"Don't, Ralph!" she warned him. "Remember that you promised me you wouldn't ask me till you had finished college."

"All right, all right," he muttered, irritably, resolving that he wouldn't again. Let her wait awhile! She'd probably get tired of working after she'd had a taste of it for a month in that hot climate.

They met Dot Crowley and Jim Valier at the tennis courts, and doubled up with them for a couple of sets. But they were badly beaten, for these two were the best team at the Club.

After dinner that evening Linda had a chance to tell her father and her aunt of her proposed plan for the coming month, and won their consent, when she announced her intention of spending August at Green Falls. To Miss Carlton she put the all-important question of clothes; the older woman promised to get her half a dozen flyer's suits of linen for the trip.

During the next week Linda accepted enough invitations to satisfy even her Aunt Emily, and she wore one new dress after another, and flitted from tennis match or picnic to tea or dance, as the program happened to be. The grand finale was Kitty's wedding, at the girl's beautiful home just outside of Spring City.

It was a gorgeous affair, and Linda could not help thinking how Bess Hulbert, the Lieutenant's sister, would have enjoyed it, had she not given her life in the attempt to win the big prize which Linda herself had captured. Personally, she did not like the affair nearly so much as Louise's simple wedding at Easter.

Linda was quiet as she drove home beside her Aunt Emily in the limousine. She could not help wondering whether this event did not mark the end of her girlhood, the beginning of her career as a self-supporting woman – out in the world. No longer would she be free to come and go as she liked, to see her old friends at any and all hours of the day and evening. The thought was a little saddening, and she sighed.

Her aunt laid her hand over her niece's.

"Why the sigh, dear?" she inquired. "Tired?"

Linda nodded.

"Yes – and weddings are so solemn – so sort of sad, aren't they, Auntie? To the other people, I mean – for of course there's nothing sad about Kit and Tom. But it means I won't see them much –"

"It isn't their wedding that causes that, dear," Miss Carlton reminded her. "Kitty and Tom will be back and forth often, I think, for they are not living far away... But it's you who are leaving the rest, Linda. Oh, if you only wouldn't go so far away, dear!"

"I guess you're right, Aunt Emily," admitted the other. "But I can't have my cake and eat it too. There isn't any flying job in Spring City."

Miss Carlton was silent; there was no use in going over the old argument. Instead, she asked:

"How soon do you go, Linda?"

"Tomorrow – if the weather is good. I received my map and my instructions several days ago. I'm all ready. The Ladybug's in perfect shape."

"If you only didn't have to go alone!" sighed the older woman.

"Yes. If I only had Lou!"

"Couldn't you take some other girl?"

"As a matter of fact, I did suggest such a thing to Dot Crowley. She's competent, you know – has her pilot's license – and she's such a peach of a girl. I know we'd get along beautifully together. But she's all tied up with a tennis match, and can't possibly leave now."

Little did Linda think, as she took off the following morning in the bright June sunshine, how deeply she was to regret this decision of Dot's, how she was to wish a hundred times within the next week that she had some companion who was a friend.

For the people she fell among proved to be the worst sort of associates.

Chapter III

Kidnapped

As there was no particular hurry about the trip South – it was only June twentieth – Linda decided to go slowly and to stop often. What a marvelous way to see the country, at the most beautiful time of the year! In an autogiro the flight would never become monotonous, for she could fly low enough to watch the landscape.

Ohio – Kentucky – Tennessee – Georgia! Each day she could travel through a different state, putting up each night at a hotel. Fortunately her Aunt Emily had given up worrying about her staying alone in strange cities. For Linda had already proved herself capable of taking care of herself.

"It is because Linda is always so dignified," Mr. Carlton had remarked to his sister. "The girls who make chance acquaintances, and permit familiarities are usually looking for it. Linda's mind is on her plane – on her navigation – and she is too absorbed to be bothered. I think we are safe, Emily, in trusting her."

"I suppose so," Miss Carlton had agreed. "Though of course she'll always be a little girl to me."

The day after the wedding was warm and the skies were clear; the Ladybug was in perfect condition, and her forty gallon tank was filled with gasoline, so Linda decided to carry out her plan. While her Aunt Emily packed her lunch basket and a box with an emergency supply of food, the girl called Miss Hawkins on the telephone as she had promised.

"But don't put it into the paper until after I start," begged Linda. "I always like to slip off quietly, without any fuss."

"I'll save it for the evening editions," agreed the reporter. "And then you'll be well on your way... And, thank you again, Miss Carlton."

An hour later she bade her aunt good-by, and was off. Heading her plane south-west, she would avoid the mountains in Kentucky, and pass over the blue-grass region, of which she had so often read. It was an ideal day for a flight, and her heart beat with the same exultation she had always felt when she was in the air; there was no feeling to compare with it on earth. Someone had said it was like being in love – but Linda Carlton had never been in love herself.

For several hours this sense of joy possessed her; then, as noontime came, and she landed to eat her lunch, she suddenly grew lonely. If only Louise were with her! She sighed as she thought that from now on she would probably be traveling alone.

It grew hotter in the afternoon as she progressed farther south, but her engine was functioning so beautifully that she hated to stop. Then the sun went down, and the coolness was so delightful after the heat that she continued on her course longer than she had planned, and did not land until she had crossed the border into Tennessee. There she followed a beacon light that led to an airport, and brought the Ladybug down to earth.

No sooner had she brought the autogiro to a stop than a group of curious people surrounded her.

"What do you-all call this?" drawled a big, good-natured looking man, with the typical Southern accent. "It's a new one on me."

Linda smiled and explained, asking that the autogiro be housed for the night, and inquired her way to the hotel.

"The hotel ain't so good," replied the man. "But I can direct you to a fine boarding-house."

Everybody that Linda met in this little town was kindness itself. She found herself in a pleasant home, with a marvelous supper of real old-fashioned Southern cooking, all ready for her.

It appeared to be the custom to eat late in the South; no one thought it strange that she should want her supper at nine o'clock.

These good people's hospitality only served to strengthen her confidence in the fact that she was safe in traveling alone. For this reason the shock was all the greater for her when that trust was so rudely shaken later on during the trip.

Linda liked the town so well that she decided to remain a day, and go over her Ladybug herself. For, she argued sensibly, if no one there had ever heard of an autogiro before, it stood to reason that there would be little chance of a competent inspection by anyone but herself.

Although Miss Hawkins, the reporter, had published the facts concerning her trip that evening, the news had not reached this town in Tennessee immediately. It was not until the next day that the story was reprinted, and someone discovered that this stranger in the autogiro who was visiting them was Linda Carlton of international fame. Then the news spread like wild-fire about the town, and the band was gotten out to give the girl a royal welcome.

It was hardly necessary, with all this celebration, to wire her aunt of her safe arrival in Tennessee; nevertheless Linda did so, as she had promised when she left home.

Her next day's journey brought her across Tennessee, over the mountains where she had a chance to test her plane's climbing ability, and into Georgia. Here again she was received with hospitality. It seemed almost as if she were making a "good-will" flight, so delighted were the people to greet her and make her at home.

A long flight lay ahead of her – across Georgia, the largest state in the southeast. Over the mountains in the northern part, across cotton and rice and sweet-potato plantations, towards the coast. The weather was hot and dry; she grew tired and thirsty, and the thought of her friends, enjoying the cool breezes at Green Falls made her envious for a while. But she carried plenty of water in her thermos flasks, and she reminded herself that she was having a more thrilling experience than they could possibly have. Tonight she could rest – and sleep.

Her head ached and her body was weary, as she looked at her map and tried to find out just where she was from the land-marks. Dismay took hold of her as she realized that she must have gone off of her course – beyond her destination. The ground below appeared marshy, in many spots entirely covered with water, in which water-lilies and rushes grew in abundance. Where could she possibly be?

Panic seized her as she realized that this was no place to land. Even an autogiro couldn't come down in a swamp. She circled around, and went back. If the light only held out until she reached some sort of level, hard ground!

She thought of her flight over the ocean, when she had been so absolutely alone, and she felt the same desolation, the same fierce terror. Where was she? Where was she going? Wild-eyed, she studied her map.

Then she located herself. This must be the Okefenokee Swamp, in the southeastern part of Georgia. That lonely, forsaken land, some parts of which had never been penetrated by a white man! Treacherous, dangerous ground, which would mean certain death if she attempted to land! Miles and miles of desolation, that only an Indian could safely explore!

There was nothing to do but head the plane towards the west, in hope of passing over the swamp. The sun had set, and darkness was coming on, but Linda could still see the ground beneath her. The water grew scarcer, and trees – pine and cypress – here and there dotted the land. But still the earth looked marshy, too treacherous for a landing.

A terrifying thought seized her when she remembered that she had not filled her gasoline tank that morning. Glancing at the indicator, she saw that she had only three gallons left. Would that be enough to take her out of this "trembling land," which was the meaning of the Indian word, "Okefenokee"?

It was like a horrible night-mare, watching the decreasing gasoline supply, the fading light, and the trees and the swamp beneath her. Her breath came in gasps; the idea of death in a swamp was more horrible than that of drowning in the middle of the Atlantic, for the former would be a lingering torture.

But at last to her delight she saw the trees widen, and a level stretch of dry sand below. This must be an island, she concluded, for she had read that there were half a dozen or so of these in the swamp, and that they were several miles in length. If this were true, she could land, and be safe for the night at least.

She brought her autogiro lower, and with her flash-light and her glasses examined the ground. Yes, there was space enough for a landing, with a plane like hers. She uttered a gasp of relief.

But she had rejoiced too soon, for when she lifted her eyes from the ground to the level of her plane she was startled breathless by the sight of another plane, which had come out of nowhere, apparently, and was rushing madly at her. As if it were actually aiming to crash into her! As if this were warfare, and the oncoming plane an enemy, intent upon her destruction!

In that instant she realized that this was an old plane – possibly one of those abandoned by the Army – one that would not now pass inspection. No wonder it was tipping so strangely; it must be out of the pilot's control.

Linda did the only thing possible, for she was too low to turn. She dropped gracefully to the ground, avoiding a tree by a few inches. Thank goodness, it was solid beneath her!

The other plane was landing too, she observed, landing with a speed that was ten times that of the autogiro, in a space that was far too small. The inevitable occurred; Linda closed her eyes as she saw it about to crash. A terrifying thud followed; then a scream of fright – and Linda opened her eyes to see the plane on its side, nosed into a bank of bushes. Had it not been for that undergrowth, the wreck would have been far worse than it was.

Linda had turned off her engine, and she jumped out of the autogiro immediately and rushed to the scene of the disaster. What a smash it was! No one would ever fly that plane again!

Two people were lying tangled up in the wreckage, whether dead or alive Linda could not immediately tell.

At her approach the man in the rear cock-pit opened his eyes and began to move his hands and legs.

"Got a good knife, Linda?" he yelled, to the girl's profound astonishment.

"I'll get one," she replied, wondering how he could possibly know her name. Or was he delirious, and thought he was talking to some other Linda?

Hurrying back to her own plane she took out her thermos flasks and her tool-kit, and returned to the spot of the wreck. It was too dark now to see the men distinctly, until she turned on her flash-light. As she came closer, she saw that the man who had spoken was wriggling himself free. His face was scratched, blood was running down his hands, but he apparently was not seriously hurt.

"Lucky this is an open plane," he muttered. "Now give me a hand, me girl!"

Linda did not like his tone, but she could not refuse to help a human being in distress. Gradually he crawled out.

"Now for Susie!" he announced, as he raised himself unsteadily on his legs.

Linda gasped. Was the other occupant a woman? A thrill of relief passed over her, for she had been terrified at the idea of being alone with such a hard-looking man in this desolate spot.

"A girl?" she stammered, pressing close to the plane.

"Yeah. Me wife. Her name's Susie."

Linda flashed the light under the wreckage of the plane, and distinguished a young woman in a flyer's suit. She was unconscious.

Without another word they both set silently to work to disentangle her. At last they dragged her out – still unconscious. But she evidently was still alive, though the man remarked that her arm must be broken – and maybe an ankle or two. He seemed very matter-of-fact about it all.

"What's in that flask?" he demanded abruptly, of Linda.

"Water," she replied.

"Water!" he snarled angrily. "Water!"

He looked as if he meant to hit her, and Linda recoiled in terror.

"Go hunt my flask in that wreck!" he commanded.

"Do it yourself!" returned Linda, with sudden spirit. "How do I know that that plane won't burst into flames any minute?"

She was surprised at her sudden display of independence; she had always depended upon Louise to stick up for their rights. But she had risen to the occasion, now that she was alone.

The man started to swear, when suddenly the girl on the ground opened her eyes.

"Take care, Slats!" she begged, to Linda's astonishment. "We'll need this girl and her plane – for I can't fly now!"

The man called "Slats" subsided, and went over to the wreckage. Linda bent over the injured "Susie," and put the flask of water to her lips.

Like the man's, the girl's face was scratched and bleeding, and she began to moan of the pain in her wrist. Her helmet had been pushed off, and her blond hair hung about her face. Her lips were painted a brighter red than even blood could have colored them.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Linda, wiping the girl's face with her handkerchief, and pushing the hair out of her eyes.

"My wrist, worst. And this ankle. And my back."

"If I have enough gasoline, we'll take you to a hospital in my plane."

"No! No!" cried the girl, in terror.

"Why not?" questioned Linda.

"You'll find out," replied the other, mysteriously, closing her eyes in pain.

Linda had no way of guessing what she meant, so she sat waiting in silence until the man returned. Five minutes later he appeared with a tank of gasoline, and a flask of brandy, which he gave to his wife to drink.

"We're ready to go now, Linda," he announced. "You can help me carry Susie over to your Bug."

Again Linda started violently at the mention of her own name.

"Do you really know me?" she asked.

"Sure we do! You're Linda Carlton. Think you're about the smartest thing there is in the air today. Bought one of them new-fangled bugs. Ain't that right?"

"Partly," admitted Linda, wincing at the slur in his remark. "But how could you possibly know?"

"Because we are out to get you. Wasn't your story in all the newspapers, tellin' all about this trip of your'n? And ain't your Bug the easiest thing to spot in the air?"

"Out to get me!" repeated Linda. "Do you mean that you wanted to kill me?"

"No, lady. You're more use to us alive than dead – for a while, anyway. No. Our gang decided we could pick up a hundred grand easier by kidnapping you than by swiping jewelry. It was my idea!" He swelled with pride, believing himself exceedingly clever. "And that's what you get for wanting to have your picture and glories in the papers all the time!"

Linda listened wild-eyed to this information, and edged closer to Susie, as if her only protection would be found in the girl.

"So now these is your orders: You fly us to our camp tonight, and we'll keep you there. You can sleep with Susie. We won't hurt you, if you do what we tell you, and don't get fresh, or try to

get away. Once you do that, we shoot. And believe me, I can aim – O.K. I've had a sight of practice in my business! I'm a mighty successful man – in my line."

"And what is your line, outside of kidnapping?" asked Linda.

"High-class robbery. Banks. Big jewels. We don't never hold up nobody on the street, for a few dollars. Too petty for us! Nope! We're big men. Slick! Clever! Ask Susie!"

"Does Susie like all this?"

"Sure she does. We winter in Europe, and South America, and she struts around with all the big dames, flashing diamonds and duds that make 'em all look pale... Now come along!"

It was useless to argue or talk any more, so Linda did as she was told, and together they got Susie into the passenger's cock-pit of the autogiro. Her husband sat with her, holding his pistol up threateningly at the back of Linda's head.

"Go where I tell you!" he ordered.

"I haven't much gas," she protested.

"I've got an extra flask here. But I'm not pouring it in till we need it, which I don't think we will. The camp ain't far – on Black Jack Island."

"Black Jack Island," Linda repeated to herself. "What an appropriate name!"

She was terrified, of course, but there was nothing to do except follow directions, and in a few minutes she brought the plane down on the island that the man had specified.

"Leave the Bug here, Linda," he commanded, as he lifted Susie out of the plane. "And go ahead of me, as I tell you."

For several minutes the little procession made their way to the center of the island, over the white sand towards the cypress and pine trees that grew in greater profusion. Linda did not look back, but she knew that while "Slats" carried Susie with one arm, he kept his pistol at her back with his other hand.

At last, by the aid of her flash-light, Linda spied several tents set up near together, and a welcome smell of food cooking greeted her as she advanced.

"Stop here!" came the order. "This is where you spend the night!"

Chapter IV

Captive

Linda and her companions stopped in front of a large tent that was dimly lighted within by a lantern. Two men were standing inside – one bending over an oil cook-stove, the other at the door.

"We got Linda!" announced "Slats" triumphantly. "Without even smashing her plane!"

He pushed through the doorway, past the other man, and deposited Susie on a cot by the wall of the tent.

The man at the stove, a big, fat, repulsive looking brute, turned around and uttered an ugly, "Hah!"

"Susie hurt?" inquired the tall, thin man who had been standing at the edge of the tent.

"Yeah. Crashed her plane. I've got some scratches meself, but I ain't whinin'!"

"My ankle's broken!" sobbed Susie, unable to suffer any longer in silence. "Hurry up and get some bandages, Doc!"

Linda, who had been standing perfectly still during this conversation, was startled by the use of the name "Doc." Was it possible that this man was a physician? If so, wouldn't he perhaps be above the level of the others – and might she not expect, if not sympathy, at least fair play from him? But "Slats" instantly shattered her hopes with his explanation.

"This is the 'Doc,' Linda," he said. "We call him that because he fixes up all our aches and cuts for us. In a profession like our'n, it ain't safe to meddle with 'saw-bones' and hospitals. They keep records."

Linda smiled at the idea of calling robbery a "profession," but she made no comment.

"So long as you'll be with us fer a while," continued her captor, "I'll interduce you to everybody. That there cook is 'Beefy.' Ain't he a good ad for his own cookin'?"

Linda nodded; she could hardly be expected to laugh at such a poor joke under the circumstances.

"You can go over and wash – there's water in Susie's tent – if you want to, while the 'Doc' fixes Susie up. Then we'll eat."

Glad to be alone for a moment, Linda stepped across to the tent which the man had indicated, hidden behind some pine trees a few yards away. Guiding herself by her flash-light, she found the entrance, and dropped down on a cot inside.

Letting the light go off, she sat, dry-eyed and utterly hopeless, staring into the darkness. What terrible fate was hanging over her, she dared not imagine. Would they torture her, perhaps, if her father refused to raise the ransom, and called the police to his aid?

In these last few hours she had learned to realize how infinitely crueler human-beings were than the elements of nature. The ice and snow, the cold winds of Canada, or the vast, trackless depths of the Atlantic could never bring about such untold agony as these fiends in human form. She almost wished that she had gone down, like Bess Hulbert, in the ocean, before she had lived to learn how evil men could be.

A call from the mess-tent, as she supposed the larger one to be, aroused her from her unhappy meditations, and she hastily turned on the light and washed from a pitcher of water on a soap-box in Susie's tent.

When she returned to the group, she found them already seated about a board table, plunging into the food like hungry animals. Susie, who sat with her bandaged ankle propped up on a box, was the only one who ate with any manners at all. But it had been a long time since Linda had tasted food, and she was too hungry to be deterred by the sight of "Beefy" putting his fingers into his plate. So she sat down next to Susie, and silently started to eat.

She found the meal exceedingly good, and was surprised at her own appetite, for she hardly expected to be able to enjoy anything under the circumstances.

The lantern threw a weird, ghastly light over the strange, ugly faces about her, and the silence was unbroken, except by the noise and clatter of eating. A tenseness took possession of her; she wished desperately that somebody would say something. It was exactly like a horrible dream, whose spell could not be destroyed. And still no one uttered a word until the meal was concluded.

"You girls can go to bed now," Slats announced, finally. "I'll carry you over, Susie, and give you a gun, in case Linda tries to sneak off in the night." He smiled with vicious triumph.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do me any good," replied Linda, trying to make her voice sound normal. "I haven't an idea where I am."

"On Black Jack Island, in the Okefenokee Swamp," he again told her. "With water all around you. Get that! You can't get away, without a boat or a plane. And I'm tellin' you now, I seen to it that your Bug's bone-dry!"

With a conceited grin, he leaned over and picked up his wife so roughly that she cried out in pain.

When they were alone, the girls took off some of their outer garments, and lay down on their cots. Linda longed to talk, but she was afraid to begin, for fear it would only lead to some sort of punishment. So she lay still, trying to forget her troubles, to believe everything would come out right in the end, when her father paid the ransom.

She was just dozing off, when she was abruptly aroused by agonized sobs from her tent-mate. She sat up and asked her companion whether there was anything she could get her. But Susie did not answer; she continued to cry wildly like a child of six.

"Oh, my ankle! My ankle!" she moaned. And then she used worse language than any Linda had ever heard – from man or woman.

Linda was sorry for her, but she could not help contrasting this girl's cowardice in the face of physical pain with Dot Crowley's, when the latter had met with a similar accident, and had smiled bravely at the hurt. She thought, too, of Ted Mackay's courage in the hospital, and Susie suffered by the comparisons.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, again.

"No. Only take me to a *real* doctor – or a hospital."

"I'd be glad to, if your husband would let me fly my plane!"

"Well, he won't!" There followed more oaths. "What does he care – so long as he ain't the one that's hurt?" She continued to cry hysterically, until a snarling order came from without the tent.

"Shut up your noise!" bawled her husband, and Susie softened her sobbing.

Linda lay very still, thinking. Dared she suggest that the other girl deceive her husband – or would she only be punished for such an idea? She decided to give it a try.

"You must know where the men keep the gasoline," she whispered. "Wouldn't you rather have your ankle fixed right, and not run the chance of being a cripple for life?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Susie, raising her head from her pillow.

"I mean – wait till the men are asleep, and then you tell me where the gas is, and we'll sneak off. I'd take you to a hospital, and I'd promise never to tell on you."

"And lose all that ransom money? Slats'd never forgive me!"

"But what good's money, if you're a cripple?" countered Linda.

"Yeah – I see what you mean," agreed Susie. "Only we'd never get away with it. They'd hear us gettin' out – remember I can't walk by myself... No, Linda – it's no go."

Disappointed, Linda dropped back on the cot, seeing that further argument was no use, and, fortunately, fell quickly asleep. Had she not been so tired, she would probably have been disturbed during the night, for Susie tossed and moaned without any regard for her companion. But Linda slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Just as dawn was beginning to show a faint light through the door of the tent, Linda was rudely awakened by a gruff voice. Startled, she looked into the unpleasant face of Susie's husband, and she shuddered as she recalled where she was. The thought flashed into her mind that soldiers and criminals were usually shot at sunrise, and her hands shook with fear. What was the man going to do to her?

"Get up, Linda!" he commanded. "You're working today."

"Working?"

"Yeah. Flying."

"Where?" she demanded, with a trace of hope. If she were allowed to fly, there might be some hope of escape.

"Across the swamp. To an island out in the ocean."

"Oh!"

An island! It sounded like imprisonment. She thought of Napoleon on St. Helena, and she remembered the stories of the cruelties to the French convicts, sentenced to die on an island. Terrible climate, probably, reeking with disease. A slow death that would be far greater torture than being shot – hours of lingering agony, when she would think of her father and her aunt, and of the suffering that she was causing them! And, worst of all, no one to rescue her, as Ted had twice saved her from disasters that were not half so dreadful!

But she did not cry; she was disgusted with tears after the way that Susie had carried on the night before, over her sprained ankle. After all, it was no one else's fault that she had selected this job; she had taken it on, and she must see it through, no matter what the outcome.

When she had washed and dressed, she walked over to the big tent, where she found breakfast ready. Bacon and eggs and coffee – and even oranges! Evidently they meant to feed her well – for this much she could be thankful.

She ate in silence with the three men, for Slat did not carry Susie to the table. When they had finished, and the men were lighting their pipes, Slat pushed back his tin plate and began to talk.

"Our idea in running you down was to get a neat little ransom, Linda," he repeated, with the same triumphant grin which she had grown to loathe. She winced, too, at each repetition of her first name, though there was no way that she could stop him from using it.

"We figured your old man could come across with a couple hundred thousand to get you back. When we get ready, we'll let him know. But in the meantime, we ain't ready."

He winked knowingly at Beefy, and a cold shiver of fear crept over Linda. If they would only get the thing over quickly! Anything would be better than the awful suspense.

The speaker laughed at her expression of terror.

"Don't be scared, Linda. We ain't a goin' a hurt you... It just happens we need you for a couple days in our business."

"Your business?" she faltered.

"Yeah. We got some jewelry right here in this tent worth about a hundred grand. We fly across to an island with it, where a steamer picks it up and gets it to our agent in South America."

"But what has that to do with me?" asked Linda. Did they mean to leave her on the island, or send her to South America?

"Just this: we're usin' your Bug and you as pilot fer the job. Susie's the only one of our gang can fly, and now she and the Jenny are busted, we'll use you. Get me?"

Linda nodded, sadly. So she was to be made to play a criminal part in their ugly game! How she wished they would be caught!

"And you needn't scheme to get away," Slat added. "Because I'll be right behind you, with me gun loaded!"

Linda made no reply; after all there was nothing to be said. She must take his orders, or be instantly killed.

"Ready now?" he inquired, satisfied with her silence. "We always work early in the day. Maybe you better come over with me and take a look at your plane, and I'll give you some gas. See if she's O.K."

Dutifully Linda accompanied the man to the edge of the island, and there was the autogiro, safe and sound as ever – her only friend in the world, it seemed!

She looked about her at the marshy water, the trees and vegetation of the swamp, and then up into the sky, which she searched vainly for an airplane. But except for the birds, there was no sign of life in that desolate, vast expanse of land and sky. Not a human habitation in sight!

Desperately, she wished that she could think of some plan to outwit this lawless gang, but everything seemed hopeless, as long as Slats carried that pistol aimed at her head. So she meekly inspected the autogiro and climbed into the cock-pit.

Her companion was in a good humor; he was enjoying the whole situation immensely, pleased at his own cleverness. He liked to fly, and he admired the autogiro; he even went so far as to say he believed he'd keep this one for Susie.

Linda said nothing, but she was thinking what a mistake that would be for him to make. Much as she would hate to lose her autogiro, she realized that its possession would give the gang away to the police. It was one thing to steal jewelry and money, and another to take a plane, of a make of which there were only perhaps a hundred in existence.

They flew over the trees, eastward to the prairie land, and then on through the coastal plain to the Atlantic Ocean. Whether they were crossing Florida or Georgia, Linda did not know, and for once she was not interested in the country. The sun rose as they came to the water, but that beautiful sight, too, made no impression upon the unhappy girl. Nothing but the sight of a plane or a boat – the promise of rescue – could have any meaning for her.

On and on she went, leaving the land behind them, until finally they sighted an island possibly five miles out. The man behind her shouted to her to land, and she circled about, finally coming down on the beach.

As she brought her autogiro to earth, she was once more impressed by the loneliness, the barrenness of it all. No habitation of any kind, not even a tent! Motionless she sat in the cock-pit, wondering whether she couldn't get away while this thief was unloading his treasure.

Slats, however, was too wise for any such trick; he commanded Linda to get out of the plane, and help him carry a heavy box across the island where a growth of bushes concealed a hole in the ground, which was evidently the pre-arranged hiding-place. In silence they buried the treasure and returned to the autogiro.

Retracing their course under his direction, Linda flew back to the encampment. Here they found the others finishing their lunch, and Susie was sitting with them, apparently much brighter and better, for she was laughing and talking to her companions.

As Linda and her captor finished their meal, a stranger put in his stealthy appearance at the door of the tent. He was well-dressed, in riding-breeches, and clean-shaven. Linda's heart gave a wild bound of hope. Was it possible that this man was an officer of the law, and the criminals were caught?

But Beefy's greeting to the visitor instantly dispelled her hopes.

"Hello, Jake!" he exclaimed. "What's new?"

"Everything ripe for tonight," announced the new-comer, briefly. "Ready to start now?"

Slats stood up. "O.K. with me," he said. "Want some grub first, Jake?"

"No – I just ate." The stranger turned smilingly to Linda. "And how's the most famous girl-pilot in the world?"

Linda recoiled in horror. So he too knew all about the plot to catch her! Another member of this terrible gang!

As she did not answer, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Got the lines out about her yet?" he inquired, of the other men.

"No," replied Slat. "We had a smash-up – wrecked Susie and the Jenny, so we'll need Linda to fly her plane for us till this job's over tonight. I'll give you the high sign when I'm ready to let her old man know."

The four men stood together at the door of the tent.

"We're leaving for a day – maybe two," Slat informed Linda. "But Susie's watching you, with a gun. And your plane's dry, so I wouldn't advise to try any get-away. There's swamps everywhere...

"So long..."

A moment later the girls heard the men tramp away to the boat that the new-comer had brought to the edge of the island.

Chapter V

Escape

It was with a sigh of relief that Linda watched her captors disappear. Not that she had any hope of getting free – without gasoline – but at least she would not see those dreadful men for a few hours. Susie was not nearly so bad.

"I hope you can cook," remarked the latter, surveying her bandaged ankle.

"Oh, yes," replied Linda. "I've often camped out before."

"Then we can enjoy ourselves for a while. I'm glad to get rid of that gang... And, Linda – how 'bout if we be friends? No use making things worse by getting mad at *me*."

"True," admitted Linda, though she wondered what she could possibly find in common with the other girl that might inspire friendship.

Seeing a kettle of water steaming on the oilstove, she set herself to the task of washing the dishes.

"Wish I could help," remarked Susie, in a friendly tone. "But after this there won't be so many dishes – for just the two of us."

"When do you expect them back?" inquired her prisoner.

"Tomorrow morning, probably. If they get their loot."

"Suppose they get caught?" suggested Linda.

"They won't. Don't worry! They've been planning this crack for months, and you can bet everything's all set just right. They never get caught."

Linda sighed. It wasn't very promising.

"Tell me how you got into a gang like this?" she asked, suddenly.

"I fell for Slats," replied the other girl. "Thought he was a rich guy – he spent so much money on me. I was working as a clerk at an airport, and learning to fly. We ran off and got married."

"But when you discovered that he wasn't straight, why didn't you leave him?"

"Couldn't. He said he'd hunt me down, and 'bump me off,' if I did. And he meant it, too. Slats isn't afraid of anything... I saw right away that he didn't want a wife, but a pilot, who'd do what he said... The only fun I get out of it is in the winter, when we go to Europe or South America, and live like swells. Then he lets me spend all the money I want."

"But doesn't it make you feel dreadful – at night, sometimes, or when you're alone – to think of leading such a wicked life?"

"Now, Linda, be yourself!" answered Susie, flippantly. "No preaching! From you, or anybody else!"

Linda turned away and completed her task in silence. What was the use of talking to a person like that? She knew now what was meant by the term "hard-boiled." If ever a word described anyone, that word described Susie.

She wondered, as she worked, whether it would be worth-while to repeat her suggestion of the night before. Susie's ankle was so much better today that she would not be so eager to get to a real doctor. Still, there could be no harm in trying.

"Wouldn't you like to go off in my autogiro today?" she inquired, without turning around.

Her companion laughed bitterly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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