



WINGS

DANIELLE STEEL

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

From small-town America to a world on the cusp of World War II, *Wings* is an uplifting story about one woman's fight to fulfil her dreams.

From her family's dusty farmland airstrip near Chicago, Cassie O'Malley would look at the planes shimmering in the moonlight and feel the pull of taking to the skies. Her First World War veteran father Pat wanted his son to be a pilot, not his reckless red-haired daughter. But her father's partner Nick, fellow air ace, was willing to break all the rules and teach her to fly.

When Cassie is invited to California to become a test pilot, her record-breaking flights make her a media darling. Risking her life, in a world preparing for the Second World War, she decides to chart her own course and pursue her own destiny, whatever it might cost her ...

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Also by Danielle Steel

About the Author

Copyright

DANIELLE STEEL

WINGS

*To the Ace of my heart,
the pilot of my dreams ...
the joy of my life,
the quiet place I go to
in the dark of night
the bright morning sun
of my soul
at dawn ...
the bright shining star
in my sky,
to my love,
to my heart,
to my all,
beloved Popeye,
with all my heart and love,
always,
Olive.*

1

The road to O'Malley's Airport was a long, dusty thin trail that seemed to drift first left, then right, and loop lazily around the cornfields. The airport was a small dry patch of land near Good Hope in McDonough County, a hundred and ninety miles southwest of Chicago. When Pat O'Malley first saw it in the fall of 1918, those seventy-nine barren acres were the prettiest sight he had ever seen. No farmer in his right mind would have wanted them, and none had. The land was dirt cheap, and Pat O'Malley paid for it with most of his savings. The rest went to purchase a beat-up little Curtiss Jenny, it was war surplus, a two-seater plane with dual controls, and he used it to teach flying to the rare visitor who could afford a lesson or two, to fly a passenger to Chicago now and then, or take small cargo loads to anywhere they had to be flown to.

The Curtiss Jenny all but bankrupted him, but Oona, his pretty little redheaded wife of ten years, was the only person he knew who didn't think he was completely crazy. She knew how desperately he had always wanted to fly, ever since he'd seen his first plane on exhibition at a little airstrip in New Jersey. He'd worked two jobs to make enough money to pay for lessons, and he'd dragged her all the way to San Francisco to see the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in 1915, just so he could meet Lincoln Beachey. Beachey had taken Pat up in his plane with him, which had made it all the more painful for Pat when Beachey was killed two months later. Beachey had just made three breathtaking loops in his experimental plane when it happened.

Pat had also met famed aviator Art Smith at the exhibition, and a battalion of other flying fanatics like himself. They were a brotherhood of daredevils, most of whom preferred to fly than to do anything else. They only seemed to come to life when they were flying. They lived it, talked it, breathed it, dreamed it. They knew everything there was to know about all the intricacies of every flying machine ever built, and how best to fly it. They told tales and traded advice, and the most minute bits of information about new planes, and old ones, and seemingly impossible mechanics. Not surprisingly, few of them were interested in anything but flying, nor managed to stay in jobs that had little or nothing to do with flying. And Pat was always in the thick of them, describing some incredible feat he'd seen, or some remarkable airplane that somehow managed to surpass the accomplishments of the last one. He always vowed that he'd have his own plane one day, maybe even a fleet of them. His friends laughed at him, his relatives said he was daft. Only sweet, loving Oona believed him. She followed everything he said and did with total loyalty and adoration. And when their little daughters were born, Pat tried not to let her know how disappointed he was that none of them were sons, so as not to hurt her feelings.

But no matter how much he loved his wife, Pat O'Malley was not a man to waste his time with his daughters. He was a man's man, a man of precision and great skill. And the money he had spent on flying lessons had paid off quickly. He was one of those pilots who knew instinctively how to fly almost every machine, and no one was surprised when he was one of the first Americans to volunteer, even before the United States had entered the Great War. He fought with the Lafayette Escadrille, and transferred into the 94th Aero Squadron when it was formed, flying with Eddie Rickenbacker as his commander.

Those had been the exciting years. At thirty, he had been older than most of the other men, when he volunteered in

1916. Rickenbacker was older than many of the men too. He and Pat had that and their love for flying in common. And also like Rickenbacker, Pat O'Malley always knew what he was doing. He was tough and smart and sure, he took endless risks, and the men said he had more guts than anyone in the squadron. They loved flying with him, and Rickenbacker had said himself that Pat was one of the world's great pilots. He tried to encourage Pat to stick with it after the war, there were frontiers to be explored, challenges to be met, new worlds to discover.

But Pat knew that, for him, that kind of flying was over. No matter how good a pilot he was, for him, the great years had come and gone. He had to take care of Oona and the girls now. He was thirty-two, at the war's end in 1918, and it was time to start thinking about his future. His father had died by then, and left him a tiny bit of money from his savings. Oona had managed to put a little money aside for them too. And it was that money he took with him when he went to scout around the farmlands west of Chicago. One of the men he had flown with had told him about land going dirt cheap out there, especially if it was unsuitable for farming. And that's when it had all started.

He had bought seventy-nine acres of miserable farmland, at a good price, and hand-painted the sign which still stood there eighteen years later. It said simply 'O'Malley's Airport,' and in the past eighteen years, one of the l's and the y had all but faded.

He'd bought the Curtiss Jenny with the last money he had left in 1918, and managed to bring Oona and the girls out by Christmas. There was a small shack on the far edge, near a stream, shaded by some old trees. And that was where they lived, while he flew anyone who had the price of a charter, and did frequent mail runs in the old Jenny. She was a reliable little plane, and he saved every penny he could. By spring he was able to buy a de Havilland D.H.4.A., which he used to carry mail and cargo.

The government contracts he got to do mail runs were profitable, but they took him away from home a lot. Sometimes Oona had to manage the airport alone for him, as well as take care of the children. She'd learned how to fuel the planes, and take calls concerning their contracts or charters. And more often than not, it was Oona flagging in someone's plane for them on the narrow runway, while Pat was away on a flight, carrying mail, passengers, or cargo.

They were usually startled to see that the person flagging them in was a pretty young woman with red hair, particularly that first spring, when she was very obviously pregnant. She had gotten especially big that time, and at first she'd thought it might be twins, but Pat knew for certain that it wasn't twins. It was his life's dream ... a son to fly planes with him, and help him run the airport. This was the boy he had waited ten years for.

Pat delivered the baby himself, in the little shack he had slowly begun to add on to. They had their own bedroom by then, and the three girls were sharing the other room. There was a warm, cozy kitchen and a big spacious parlor. There was nothing fancy about the house where they lived, and they had brought few things with them. All of their efforts, and everything they had, had been sunk into the airport.

Their fourth child had come easily on a warm spring night, in scarcely more than an hour, after a long, peaceful walk, beside their neighbor's cornfield. He'd been talking to her about buying another airplane, and she'd been telling him about how excited the girls were about the new baby. The girls were five, six, and eight by then, and to them it seemed more like a doll they were waiting for than a real brother or sister. Oona felt a little bit that way too, it had been five years since she'd held a baby in her arms, and she was longing for this one to arrive. And it did, with a long, lusty wail, shortly before midnight. Oona gave a sharp cry when she looked down at it and saw it for the first time,

and then she burst into tears, knowing how disappointed Pat would be. It was not Pat's long-awaited son, it was another girl. A big, fat, beautiful nine-pound girl with big blue eyes, creamy skin, and hair as bright as copper. But no matter how pretty she was, Oona knew only too well how badly he had wanted a son, and how devastated he was now not to have one.

'Never mind, little one,' he said, watching her turn away from him, as he swaddled his new daughter. She was a pretty one, probably the prettiest of all, but she wasn't the boy he had planned on. He touched his wife's cheek, and then pulled her chin around and forced her to look at him. 'It's no matter, Oona. She's a healthy little girl. She'll be a joy to you one day.'

'And what about you?' she asked miserably. 'You can't run this place alone forever.' He laughed at her concern, as the tears coursed down her cheeks. She was a good woman, and he loved her, and if they weren't destined to have sons, so be it. But there was still a little ache in his heart where the dream of a boy had been. And he didn't dare think that there would be another. They had four children now, and even this mouth to feed would be hard for them. He wasn't getting rich running his airport.

'You'll just have to keep helping me fuel the planes, Oonie. That's the way it'll have to be,' he teased, as he kissed her and left the room for a shot of whiskey. He had earned it. And as he stood looking up at the moon, after she and the baby had gone to sleep, he wondered at the quirk of fate that had sent him four daughters and no sons. It didn't seem fair to him, but he wasn't a man to waste time worrying about what wasn't. He had an airport to run, and a family to feed. And in the next six weeks, he was so busy, he scarcely had time to even see his family, let alone mourn the son who had turned out to be a beautiful, healthy daughter.

It seemed as though the next time he noticed her again, she had doubled in size, and Oona had already regained her girlish figure. He marveled at the resiliency of women. Six weeks before she had been lumbering and vulnerable, so full of promise, and so enormous. Now she looked young and beautiful again, and the baby was already a fiery-tempered, little redheaded hellion. If her mother and sisters didn't tend to her needs immediately, the entire state of Illinois and most of Iowa could hear it.

'I'd say she's the loudest one of all, wouldn't you, m'dear?' Pat said one night, exhausted from a long round-trip flight to Indiana. 'She's got great lungs.' He grinned at his wife over a shot of Irish whiskey.

'It's been hot today, and she has a rash.' Oona always had an explanation as to why the children were out of sorts. Pat marveled at her seemingly endless patience. But she was equally patient with him. She was one of those quiet people, who spoke little, saw much, and rarely said anything unkind to or about anyone. Their disagreements had been rare in nearly eleven years of marriage. He had married her at seventeen, and she had been the ideal helpmate for him. She had put up with all his oddities and peculiar plans, and his endless passion for flying.

Later that week, it was one of those airless hot days in June, when the baby had fussed all night, and Pat had had to get up at the crack of dawn for a quick trip to Chicago. That afternoon when he got home, he found that he'd have to leave again in two hours on an unscheduled mail run. It was hard times and he couldn't afford to turn any work down. It was a day when he'd wished more than ever that there had been someone there to help him, but there were few men he'd have trusted with his precious planes, none he'd seen recently, and certainly none of the men who'd applied for work there since he'd opened the airport.

'Got any planes to charter, mister?' a voice growled at him, as Pat pored over his log, and went through the papers

on his desk. He was about to explain, as he always did, that they could rent him, but not his planes. And then he looked across the desk and grinned in amazement.

‘You sonofabitch.’ Pat smiled delightedly at a fresh-faced kid with a broad smile, and a thatch of dark hair hanging into his blue eyes. It was a face he knew well, and had come to love in their turbulent time together in the 94th Aero Squadron. ‘What’s a matter, kid, can’t afford a haircut?’ Nick Galvin had thick straight black hair, and the striking good looks of the blue-eyed, black-haired Irish. Nick had been almost like a son to Pat, when he’d flown for him. He had enlisted at seventeen, and was only a year older than that now, but he had become one of the squadron’s outstanding pilots, and one of Pat’s most trusted men. He’d been shot down twice by the Germans, and both times managed to come in, with a crippled engine, making a dead stick landing and somehow saving both himself and the plane. The men in the squadron had called him ‘Stick’ after that, but Pat called him ‘son’ most of the time. He couldn’t help wondering if, now that his latest child had turned out to be yet another girl, this was the son he so desperately wanted.

‘What are you doing here?’ Pat asked, leaning back in his chair, and grinning at the boy who had defied death almost as often as he had.

‘Checking up on old friends. I wanted to see if you’d gotten fat and lazy. Is that your de Havilland out there?’

‘It is. Bought that instead of shoes for my kids last year.’

‘Your wife must have loved that,’ Nick grinned, and Pat was reminded of all the girls in France who had pined for him. Nick Galvin was a good-looking lad, with a very persuasive manner with the ladies. He had done well for himself in Europe. He told most of them he was twenty-five or twenty-six, and they always seemed to believe him.

Oona had met him once, in New York, after the war, and she had thought him charming. She’d said, blushing, that

she thought he was exceptionally handsome. His looks certainly outshone Pat's, but there was something appealing and solid about the older man that made up for a lack of Hollywood movie-star looks. Pat was a fine-looking man, with light brown hair, warm brown eyes, and an Irish smile that had won Oona's heart. But Nick had the kind of looks that made young girls' hearts melt.

'Has Oona gotten smart and left you yet? I figured she would pretty quick after you brought her out here,' Nick said casually, and let himself into the chair across from Pat's desk, as he lit a cigarette, and his old friend laughed and shook his head in answer.

'I kind of thought she might too, to tell you the truth. But she hasn't, don't ask me why. When I brought her out here, we lived in a shack my grandfather wouldn't have put his cows in, and I wouldn't have been able to buy her a newspaper if she'd wanted one, which she didn't. Thank God. She's one hell of an amazing woman.' He'd always said that about her during the war, and Nick had thought as much too when he'd met her. His own parents were dead, and he had no family at all. He had just been floating around since the war ended, getting short-term jobs here and there at various small airports. At eighteen, he had no place to go, nowhere to be, and no one to go home to. Pat had always felt a little sorry for Nick when the men talked about their families. Nick had no sisters or brothers, and his parents had died when he was fourteen. He'd been in a state orphanage until he'd enlisted. The war had changed everything for him, and he had loved it. But now there was nowhere for him to go home to.

'How are the kids?' Nick had been sweet with them when he met them. He loved kids, and he'd seen plenty in the orphanage. He had always been the one to take care of the younger children, read them stories at night, tell them wild tales, and hold them in the middle of the night, when they woke up, crying for their mothers.

‘They’re fine.’ Pat hesitated, but only for a moment. ‘We had another one last month. Another girl. Big one this time. Thought it might be a boy, but it wasn’t.’ He tried not to sound disappointed but Nick could hear it in his voice, and he understood it.

‘Looks like you’ll just have to teach your girls to fly eventually, huh, Ace?’ he teased, and Pat rolled his eyes in obvious revulsion. Pat had never been impressed by even the most extraordinary female fliers.

‘Not likely, son. What about you? What are you flying these days?’

‘Egg crates. War junk. Anything I can lay my hands on. There’s a lot of war surplus hanging around, and a lot of guys wanting jobs flying them. I’ve kind of been hanging around the airports. You got anyone working with you here?’ he asked anxiously, hoping that he didn’t.

Pat shook his head, watching him, wondering if this was a sign, or merely a coincidence, or just a brief visit. Nick was still very young. And he had raised a lot of hell during wartime. He loved taking chances, coming in by the skin of his teeth. He was hard on planes. And harder on himself. Nick Galvin had nothing to lose and no one to live for. Pat had everything he owned in those planes, and he couldn’t afford to lose them, no matter how much he liked the boy or wanted to help him.

‘You still like taking chances like you used to?’ Pat had almost killed him once after watching him come in too close to the ground under a cloud bank in a storm. He’d wanted to shake him till his teeth rattled, but he was so damn relieved Nick had survived that he ended up shouting right in his face. It was inhuman to take the chances he did. But it was what had made him great. In wartime. But in peacetime who could afford his bravado? Planes were too expensive to play with.

‘I only take chances when I have to, Ace.’ Nick loved Pat. He admired him more than any man he had ever known or

flown with.

‘And when you don’t have to, Stick? You still like to play?’ The two men’s eyes met and held. Nick knew what he was asking. He didn’t want to lie to him, he still liked raising hell, still loved the danger of it, playing and taking chances, but he had a lot of respect for Pat, and he wouldn’t have done anything to hurt him. He had grown up that much. And he was more careful now that he was flying other people’s planes. He still loved the thrills, but not enough to want to jeopardize Pat’s future. Nick had come here, all the way from New York, on the last dollar he had to see if there was a chance that Pat could use him.

‘I can behave myself if I have to,’ he said quietly, his ice blue eyes never leaving Pat’s kindly brown ones. There was something boyish and endearing about Nick, and yet at the same time he was a man. And once they had almost been brothers. Neither one of them could forget that time. It was a bond that would never change, and they both knew that.

‘If you don’t behave, I’ll drop you out of the Jenny at ten thousand feet without thinking twice. You know that, don’t you?’ Pat said sternly. ‘I’m not going to have anyone destroying what I’m trying to do here.’ He sighed then. ‘But I have to be honest, there’s almost too much work for one man. And there’s going to be entirely too much for one, and maybe even two, if these mail contracts keep coming in the way they have. I never seem to stop flying anymore. I can’t catch up with myself. I could use a man to do some of these runs, but they’re rough, and long. Lots of bad weather sometimes, especially in the winter. And no one gives a damn. No one wants to hear how hard it is. The mail’s got to get there. And then there’s all the rest of it, the cargo, the passengers, the short runs here and there, the thrill seekers who just want to go up and look down, the occasional lesson.’

‘Sounds like you’ve got your hands full.’ Nick grinned at him. He loved every word of what he was hearing. This was

what he had come for. That and his memories of the Ace. Nick needed a job desperately. And Pat was happy to have him.

‘This isn’t a game here. It’s a serious business I’m trying to run, and one day I want to put O’Malley’s Airport on the map. But,’ Pat explained, ‘it’ll never happen if you knock out all my planes, Nick, or even one. I’ve got everything riding on those two out there, and this patch of dry land with the sign you saw when you drove in here.’ Nick nodded, fully understanding everything he said, and loving him more than ever. There was something about flying men, they had a bond like no one else. It was something only they understood, a bond of honor like no other.

‘Do you want me to fly some of the long hauls for you? You could spend more time here with Oona and the kids. And I could do the night stuff maybe. I could start with those and see what you think,’ Nick asked him nervously. He was desperate for a job with him, and scared he might not get it. But there was no way Pat O’Malley wasn’t going to hire him. He just wanted to be sure Nick understood the ground rules. He would have done anything for him. Given him a home, a job, adopted him if he had to.

‘The night runs might be a start. Even though’ – he looked ruefully at his young friend. There were fourteen years separating them, but the war had long since dissolved the differences between them – ‘some nights that’s the most restful place to be. If that new baby of ours doesn’t start sleeping nights pretty soon, I’m going to start dosing her with whiskey. Oona says it’s a heat rash, but I swear it’s the red hair and the disposition that goes with it. Oona’s the only redhead I’ve ever known with those quiet, gentle ways. This one is a real little hellion.’ But despite his complaints, Pat seemed taken with her, and for the most part, he’d gotten over his disappointment about not having a son. Particularly now that Nick was here. His arrival was just the godsend he had prayed for.

‘What’s her name?’ Nick looked amused. From the moment he’d laid eyes on them, he’d loved their family, and everything about them.

‘Cassandra Maureen. We call her Cassie.’ He glanced at his watch then. ‘I’ll take you over to the house, and you can have dinner with Oona and the girls. I’ve got to be back out here at five-thirty.’ He looked apologetic then. ‘And you’ll have to find a place to stay in town. There are some rooms to rent at old Mrs Wilson’s, but I don’t have a place for you to stay here, except a cot in the hangar where I keep the Jenny.’

‘That would do for now. Hell, it’s warm enough. I don’t care if I sleep on the runway.’

‘There’s an old shower out back, and a bathroom here, but this is a little primitive,’ Pat said hesitantly, and Nick grinned as he shrugged his shoulders.

‘So’s my budget, until you start paying me.’

‘You can sleep on our couch, if Oona doesn’t mind. She’s got a soft spot for you anyway, always telling me how handsome you are, and how lucky the girls are with a lad like you. I’m sure she won’t mind having you on the couch, till you’re ready to rent a room at Mrs Wilson’s.’

But he never had done either. He had moved into the hangar immediately, and a month later he’d built himself a little shack of his own. It was barely more than a lean-to, but it was big enough for him. It was tidy and clean, and he spent every spare moment he had in the air, flying for Pat, and helping him to build his business.

By the following spring they were able to buy another plane, a Handley Page. It had a longer range than either the de Havilland or the Jenny, and it could carry more passengers and cargo. Nick spent most of his time flying it, while Pat stayed closer to home, did the short runs, and ran the airport. The arrangement worked perfectly for both of them. It was as though everything they touched turned to magic. The business went beautifully. Their reputation

spread rapidly through the Midwest. The word that two hotshot flying aces were operating out of Good Hope seemed to reach everyone who mattered. They handled cargo, passengers, lessons, mail, and within a very reasonable time, began turning over a fairly respectable profit.

And then the ultimate bit of luck occurred. Thirteen months after Cassie was born, Christopher Patrick O'Malley appeared, a tiny, wizened, screaming, scrawny little infant. But a lovelier sight his parents had never seen, and his four sisters stared at his unfamiliar anatomy in utter amazement. The second coming could have made no greater stir than the arrival of Christopher Patrick O'Malley at O'Malley's Airport.

A large blue banner was flown, and every pilot who came through for a month was handed a cigar by the beaming father. He'd been worth waiting for. Almost twelve years of marriage, and finally he had his dream, a son to fly his planes and run his airport.

'Guess I might as well pack up and leave,' Nick said mock glumly the day after Chris was born. He had just taken an order for a huge shipment of cargo to be delivered to the West Coast by Sunday. It was the biggest job they'd had so far, and a real victory for them.

'What do you mean, *leave*?' Pat asked, with a terrible hangover from celebrating the birth of his son, and a look of panic. 'What the hell does that mean?'

'Well, I figured now that Chris is here, my days are numbered.' Nick was grinning at him. He was happy for both of them about the baby, and thrilled to be Chris's godfather. But the one who had stolen his heart from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her was Cassie. She was just what Pat had said she was from the very first, a little monster, and everything everyone had ever said about a redhead. And Nick adored her. Sometimes he almost felt as

though she were his baby sister. He couldn't have loved her more if she were his own child.

'Yeah, your days are numbered,' Pat growled at him, 'for about another fifty years. So get off your lazy behind, Nick Galvin, and check out the mail they just dumped out there on our runway.'

'Yes, sir ... Ace, sir ... your honor ... your excellence ...'

'Oh, never mind the blarney!' Pat shouted at his back, as he poured himself a cup of black coffee and Nick ran out to the runway to meet with the pilot before he took off again. Nick had been just what Pat had hoped from the first, a godsend. And there had been no funny stuff in the past year. He'd taken his share of chances flying in bad weather the previous winter, and they both made their share of forced landings and emergency repairs. But there was nothing really outrageous that Pat could complain about, nothing Nick did he wouldn't have done himself, nothing that truly jeopardized one of Pat's precious airplanes. And Nick loved those planes as much as Pat did. And the truth was, having Nick there had really allowed Pat to build up his business.

And that was just what they had continued to do for the next seventeen years. The years had rushed past them faster than their planes taking off from the four meticulously kept runways at O'Malley's Airport. They had built three of them in the form of a triangle, and the fourth, running north/south, bisected it, which meant that they could land in almost any wind, and never had to close the airport due to problems with planes blocking one of their runways. They had a fleet of ten planes now too. Nick had actually bought two of them himself, and the rest were Pat's. Nick only worked for him, but Pat had always been generous with him. The two were fast friends after long years of working together, and building up the airport. He'd asked Nick to become partners with him more than once, but Nick always said he didn't want the headaches that

went with it. He liked being a hired hand, as he put it, although everyone knew that he and Pat O'Malley moved as one, and to cross one was to risk death at the hands of the other. Pat O'Malley was a special man, and Nick loved him as a father, brother, friend. He loved his children as he would his own. He loved everything about him.

But other than Pat's, families and relationships were generally not Nick's strong suit. He had married once in 1922, at twenty-one. It had lasted all of six months, and his eighteen-year-old bride had gone running back to her parents in Nebraska. Nick had met her on a mail route late one night, in the town's only restaurant, which was owned by her mother and father.

The only thing she had hated more than Illinois was everything that had anything to do with flying. She got sick every time Nick took her up, she cried every time she saw a plane, and she whined every time he left to go fly one. It was definitely not the match for him, and the only one more relieved than his bride when her parents came to pick her up was Nick himself. He had never been more miserable in his life, and he had vowed never to let it happen again. There had been women since, a number of them, but Nick always kept quiet about what he did. There had been rumors about him and a married woman in another town, but no one was ever quite sure if they were true or not, and Nick never even said anything to Pat. From his striking boyish good looks, he had become a handsome man, but no one ever knew his business. The women in his life were never obvious. There was nothing anyone could talk about, except how hard he worked, or how much time he spent with the O'Malleys. He still spent most of his spare time with them and their kids. He was like an uncle to them. And Oona had long since given up trying to fix him up with any of her friends. She had even tried to start something between him and her youngest sister when she'd come out to visit years before, she was pretty and young and a

widow. But it had been obvious for years that Nick Galvin was not interested in marriage. Nick was interested in airplanes, and not much more, except the O'Malleys, and an occasional quiet affair. He lived alone, he worked hard, and he minded his own business.

'He deserves so much better than that,' Oona had complained to Pat for years.

'What makes you think that marriage is so much better?' Pat had teased, but no matter how convinced she was of what would be good for him, even Oona no longer broached it with Nick. She had given up. At thirty-five, he was happy as he was, and too busy to give much time and attention to a wife and kids. Most days, he spent fifteen or sixteen hours a day at Pat's airport. And the only other person there as much as Pat and Nick was Cassie.

She was seventeen by then, and for most of her life Cassie had been a fixture at the airport. She could fuel almost any plane, signal a plane in, and prepare them for takeoff. She cared for the runways, cleaned the hangars, hosed down the planes, and spent every spare moment she had hanging out with the pilots. She knew the engines and the workings of every plane they had. And she had an uncanny sense of what ailed them. There was no detail too small, too intricate, too complicated to escape her attention. She noticed everything about every plane, and could probably have described almost everything in the air with her eyes closed. She was remarkable in many ways, and Pat had to fight with her most of the time to make her go home to help her mother. She always insisted that her sisters were there and her mother didn't need her. Pat wanted her out of his hair, and at home where she belonged, but if he succeeded in driving her off one day, like the sun, she'd be back at six o'clock the next morning, to spend an hour or two at the airport before school. Eventually, Pat just threw up his hands and ignored her.

At seventeen she was a tall, striking, beautiful blue-eyed redhead. But the only thing Cassie knew or cared about was planes. And Nick knew, without ever seeing her fly a plane, that she was a born flier. He sensed that Pat had to know it too, but he was adamant about Cassie not learning to fly. And he didn't give a damn about Amelia Earhart, or Jackie Cochran or Nancy Love, Louise Thaden, or any of those female pilots, or the Women's Air Derby. No daughter of his was going to fly, and that was final. He and Nick had occasionally argued over it, but Nick had also come to understand that it was a losing battle. There were plenty of women in aviation these days, many of them quite remarkable, but Pat O'Malley thought that things had gone far enough, and as far as he was concerned, no woman would ever fly like a man. And no woman was ever going to fly his planes. Certainly not Cassie O'Malley.

Nick had taken him on more than once, and pointed out that in his opinion, some of the women flying these days were better than Lindbergh. Pat had become so apoplectic he had almost thrown a punch at Nick for that. Charles Lindbergh was Pat's God, second only to Rickenbacker in the Great War. In fact, Pat had had his picture taken with Lindy when he had landed at O'Malley's in 1927, on his three-month tour of the country. The photograph still hung, nine years later, dusty and much loved, over Pat's desk, in a place of honor.

There was no question whatsoever in Pat's mind that no woman pilot would ever top or even match Charles Lindbergh's skill, or his prowess. Lindbergh's own wife, after all, was only a navigator and radio operator – to Pat, Lindy was a kind of God, and to compare anyone to him was a sacrilege, and one he didn't intend to listen to from Nick Galvin. It made Nick laugh when he saw how excited Pat got about it, and he loved goading him. But it was an argument he knew he would never win. Women just weren't up to it, according to Pat, no matter how much they

flew, how many records they broke, or races they won, or how good they looked in their flight suits. Women, according to Patrick O'Malley, were not meant to be pilots.

'And *you*,' he looked pointedly at Cassie as she came in from the runway in a pair of old overalls, having just fueled a Ford TriMotor before it took off for Roosevelt Field on Long Island, 'should be at home helping your mother cook dinner.' It was a familiar refrain she always pretended not to hear, and today was no different. She strode across the room, almost as tall as most of the men who worked for him. She had shoulder-length red hair that was as bright as flame, and big lively blue eyes that met Nick's as he grinned at her mischievously from behind her father.

'I'll go home in a while, Dad. I just want to do some stuff here.' At seventeen, she was a real beauty. But she was completely unconscious of it, which was part of her charm. And the overalls she wore molded her figure in a way that only irritated her father more. As far as he was concerned, she didn't belong here. It was not an opinion that was going to change, and theirs was an argument that everyone had heard at least a thousand times if they'd ever been to O'Malley's Airport, and today was no different. It was a hot June day, and she was out of school for the summer. Most of her friends had summer jobs in the drugstore, the coffee shop, or stores. But all she wanted to do was help out, for free, at the airport. It was her life and soul, and the only time she worked anywhere else was when she was desperate for a little money. But no job, no friend, no boy, no fun could ever keep her away from the airport for long. She just couldn't help it.

'Why can't you do something useful, instead of getting in the way here?' her father shouted at her from across his office. He never thanked her for the work she did. He didn't want her there in the first place.

'I just want to pick up one of the cargo logs, Dad. I need to make a note in it.' She said it quietly, looking for the

book and then the page that she needed. She was familiar with all their logs, and all their procedures.

‘Get your hands off my logs! You don’t know what you’re doing!’ He was enraged, as usual. He had grown irascible over the years, though at fifty he was still one of their finest pilots. But he was adamant about his philosophies and ideas, although no one paid much attention, not even Cassie. At the airport, his word was law, but his battle against women pilots and his arguments with her were fruitless. She knew enough not to argue with him. Most of the time she didn’t even seem to hear him. She just quietly went about her business. And to Cassie, the only business she cared about was her father’s airport.

When she’d been a little girl, sometimes she’d sneaked out of the house at night, and come to look at the planes sitting shimmering in the moonlight. They were so beautiful, she just had to see them. He had found her there once, after looking for her for an hour, but she was so reverent about his planes, so in awe of them, and of him, that he hadn’t had the heart to spank her, no matter how much she’d scared them by disappearing. He had told her never to do it again, and had taken her back to her mother without saying another word about it.

Oona knew too how much Cassie loved planes, but like Pat, she felt it just wasn’t fitting. What would people think? Look what she looked like, and smelled like, when she came home from fueling planes, or loading cargo or mail, or worse yet, working on the engines. But Cassie knew more about the inner workings of planes than most men knew about their cars. She loved everything about them. She could take an engine apart and put it back together again faster and better than most men, and she had borrowed and read more books on flying than even Nick or her parents suspected. Planes were her greatest love and passion.

Only Nick seemed to understand her love for them, but even he had never succeeded in convincing her father that it was a suitable pastime for her, and he shrugged now, as he went back to some work on his desk, and Cassie went back out to the runway. She had learned long since that if she stayed away from Pat, she could hang around for hours at the airport.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with her ... it’s unnatural ...’ Pat complained. ‘I think she does it just to annoy her brother.’ But Nick knew better than anyone that Chris didn’t give a damn. He was about as interested in flying as he was in getting to the moon, or becoming an ear of corn. He hung out at the airport occasionally, to please his dad, and now that he was sixteen, he was taking flying lessons, to satisfy him, but the truth was, Chris didn’t know anything, and didn’t care, about airplanes. He had about as much interest in them as he did in the big yellow bus which took him to school every day. But Pat was convinced, or had convinced himself, that one day Chris would become a great pilot.

Chris had none of Cassie’s instinct for it, or her passionate love of the machine, or her genius about an engine. He only hoped that Cassie’s interest in planes would get his father off his back, but instead it seemed to make him even more anxious for Chris to become a pilot. He wanted Chris to become who Cassie was, and Chris couldn’t. Chris wanted to be an architect. He wanted to build buildings, not fly planes, but as yet, he had never dared to tell his father. Cassie knew. She loved the drawings he did, and the models for school. He had built a whole city once out of tiny little boxes and cans and jars, he had even used the tops of bottles and all sorts of tiny gadgets from their mother’s kitchen to complete it. For weeks she had been looking for things, bottle caps had disappeared, small tools, and vital utensils. And then it all reappeared in Chris’s remarkable creation. Their father’s

only comment had been to ask him why he hadn't designed an airport. It had been an intriguing idea, and Chris still said he was going to try it. But the truth was, absolutely nothing about flying enticed him. He was intelligent and precise and thoughtful, and the flying lessons he was taking seemed incredibly boring. Nick had already taken him up dozens of times, and he had logged quite a few hours. But none of it interested him. It was like driving a car. So what? To him, it meant nothing. And to Cassie, it was life itself. It was more than that, it was magic.

She stayed out of her father's office that afternoon, and at six o'clock, Nick saw her far down the runway, signaling a plane in, and then disappearing into one of the hangars with the pilot. He sought her out a little while later, and she had oil on her face, and her hair was tied in a knot on her head. She had a huge smudge of grease on the tip of her nose, and her hands were filthy. He couldn't help laughing as he looked at her. She was quite a picture.

'What's funny?' She looked tired, but happy, as she smiled up at him. He had always been like a brother to her. She was aware of how handsome he was, but it didn't mean anything. They were good friends, and she loved him.

'You're funny. Have you looked in the mirror today? You're wearing more oil than my Bellanca. Your father is going to love that look.'

'My father wants me cleaning house in a housedress, and boiling potatoes for him.'

'That's useful too.'

'Yeah?' She cocked her head to one side, and was an intriguing combination of absurdity and sheer beauty. 'Can you cook potatoes, Stick?' She called him that sometimes and it always made him smile as he did now when he answered.

'If I have to. I can cook too, you know.'

'But you don't *have* to. And when was the last time you cleaned house?'

'I don't know ...' He looked thoughtful. 'Ten years ago maybe ... about 1926?' He was grinning at her and they were both laughing.

'See what I mean?'

'Yeah. But I see what he means too. I'm not married and I don't have kids. And he doesn't want you to end up like me. Living in a shack off the runway and flying mail runs to Cleveland.' His 'shack' was very comfortable by then if not luxurious.

'Sounds good to me.' She grinned. 'The mail runs I mean.'

'That's the problem.'

'*He's* the problem,' she disagreed. 'There are plenty of women flying and leading interesting lives. The Ninety-Nines are full of them.' It was a professional organization founded by ninety-nine female pilots.

'Don't try and convince me. Tell him.'

'It's pointless.' She looked discouraged as she looked up at her old friend. 'I just hope he lets me be out here all summer.' It was all she wanted to do now that she was out of school until the end of August. It would be a long summer, hiding from him, and trying to avoid confrontations.

'Couldn't you get yourself a job somewhere else, so he doesn't drive us both crazy?' But they both knew that she preferred to do without any extra money at all than miss a moment at the airport.

'There isn't anything else I want to do.'

'I know. You don't have to tell me.' He knew the extent of her passion better than anyone else. He had suffered from the same disease himself. But he'd been lucky. The war, his sex, and Pat O'Malley had made it possible for him to spend the rest of his life flying. Somehow, he didn't think that Cassie O'Malley was going to be as lucky. In a funny way, he would have loved to take her up in a plane one of these days, just to see how well she would fly, but that was one

headache he didn't need, and he knew Pat would kill him for it. Without meddling in Pat's family life, Nick had his own work to do, and there was plenty of it at the airport.

As Nick went back to his desk to clear up the last of his paperwork, he saw Chris arrive. He was a good-looking boy, a handsome blond with fine features like his mother's, and his father's powerful build, and warm brown eyes. He was bright and nice and well liked. He had everything in the world going for him, except a love for airplanes. He was working at the newspaper that summer, doing layouts, and he was grateful he didn't have to work at the airport.

'Is my sister here?' he asked Nick hesitantly. He almost looked as though he wished Nick would say no. He looked as though he couldn't wait to leave the airport. As it was, Cassie had expected him an hour before and she'd asked Nick impatiently half a dozen times if he'd seen him.

'She is indeed.' Nick smiled at him. He kept his voice low so he wouldn't irritate Pat, in case he overheard him. 'She's in the back hangar with some pilot who just flew in.'

'I'll find her.' Chris waved at Nick, who promised to take him up again in a few days, when he came back from a run to San Diego. 'I'll be here. I came out to practice my solos,' he said solemnly.

'I'm impressed.' Nick raised an eyebrow, amazed at how badly the boy obviously wanted to please his father. It was no secret to Nick that Chris really didn't enjoy his lessons. It wasn't that he was afraid, it was more that they just bored him. To him, flying meant nothing. 'See ya.'

Chris found Cassie easily, and she left her newfound friend very quickly once she saw her brother. She was quick to berate him. 'You're late, now we're going to be late for dinner. Dad'll have a fit.'

'Then let's not do it.' He shrugged. He hadn't even wanted to leave work as early as he had, but he knew she'd be furious with him if he didn't.

‘Come on,’ she blazed at him. ‘I’ve been waiting all day!’ She flashed an angry look at him, and he groaned. He knew her too well. There was no escaping Cassie when she set her mind to something. ‘I’m not going home till we do it.’

‘Okay, okay. But we can’t stay up for long.’

‘Half an hour.’ She was begging him, pleading with him, turning her huge blue eyes imploringly to his gentle brown ones.

‘Okay. Okay. But if you do anything to get us into trouble, Cass, I swear I’m going to kill you. Dad would have my hide for this.’

‘I promise. I won’t do anything.’ He searched her eyes as she promised him, and he wanted more than anything to believe her, but he didn’t.

Together, they walked toward the old Jenny their father had had for several years. It had been built as a trainer for the military, and Pat had told Chris he could use it now any time he wanted to practice. All he had to do was tell Nick, and he just had. Chris had a copy of the key, and he took it out of his pocket. Cassie almost salivated when she saw it. She was standing close to him, and she could feel her heart beat as Chris opened the door to the small open-cockpit airplane.

‘Will you stop it?’ He looked annoyed at her. ‘I can feel you breathing on me. I swear ... you’re sick ...’ He felt as though he were helping an addict supply his habit as they walked around the plane, checking the wires and ailerons. Chris put on his flying helmet and goggles and gloves, and then got into the plane in the rear seat, and Cassie climbed in quickly ahead of him intending to look like a passenger, but somehow she didn’t. She looked too knowledgeable, too comfortable, even in the front seat, especially once she put on her own helmet and goggles.

They both buckled in, and Cassie knew the plane was well fueled, because part of her deal with her brother was doing all the scutwork for him; and she had done it herself

that afternoon. Everything was ready and she inhaled the familiar smell of castor oil that was characteristic of the Jenny. And five minutes later they were headed down the runway, with Cassie watching Chris's style critically. He was always too cautious, too slow, and once she turned around to signal to him to go faster, and pull up. She didn't care if anyone saw her. She knew that no one was watching now, and everything she knew, she knew from listening and watching. She had watched her father and Nick, transient pilots, and barnstormers. She had picked up some real skills, and a few tricks, and she knew flying by instinct and by sheer intuition. It was Chris who had had the lessons, and yet it was Cassie who knew exactly what to do and they both knew she could have flown the plane easily without him, and a lot more smoothly.

Eventually, she shouted at him over the sound of the engine, and he nodded, willing her not to do anything foolish. But they both knew exactly why they had come up here. Chris was taking lessons from Nick, and in turn he was giving Cassie lessons. Or, in fact, the way it had been working out, Chris was taking her up in the plane, and letting her fly it, and she was giving him lessons. Or just enjoying the opportunity to fly. She seemed to know how to do everything, a lot better than Chris did. She was a natural. And she had promised to pay him twenty dollars a month for unlimited opportunities to fly with him in their father's plane. He wanted the money to spend on his girlfriend, so he had agreed to do it for her. It was a perfect arrangement. And she had worked hard all winter, at odd jobs, baby-sitting, and loading groceries, and even shoveling snow to save the money.

Cassie handled the controls with ease. She did some S turns, and lazy eights, and then moved on to some deep turns, which she did carefully, and with perfect precision. Even Chris was impressed with her easy, careful style, and he was suddenly grateful to her for how good she would