

LAST FLIGHT HOME

Born to fly, a teenage Nebraska girl soars to the pinnacle of the global airline industry.

Kelly Cavanaugh fearlessly meets challenges in the air and of the heart. As she matures, she learns valuable life lessons from her family, the love of her life, a recurring powerful nemesis, plus a host of friends and mentors. Like the proverbial phoenix, she rises from the ashes of tragedy, not only to survive, but to flourish and soar over obstacles and adversaries. Through it all, the freedom of flight sustains her.

Crisply told with breathtaking flight sequences and riveting emotional conflicts, *Last Flight Home* brings this engaging saga to a warm and satisfying conclusion.

LAST FLIGHT HOME

Robert J. Wetherall

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To Ronni, my copilot.

**LAST
FLIGHT
HOME**

by

Robert J. Wetherall

CHAPTER 1

Kelly Cavanaugh snuggled against the lush mink collar brushing her throat and burrowed deeper into the corner of the soft limousine seat. She put a hand down by the air vent.

“Turn up the heat, Jimmy.”

“Ma’am,” said the driver.

Icy bits of snow swirled past as the sleek black car snaked its way through the dense Manhattan traffic. She squinted up at the gray overcast, then checked the time on her wrist; 10:15. *Another hour, and it'll be all over,* she thought. *All over or just beginning. I'll either still be in business, or out on the street with those pinstriped mercenaries gnawing on my carcass.*

The big car made a right turn and braked abruptly to avoid a pedestrian who had slipped on the slushy street. *God, she thought, so it has to come down to this. All those years. The learning. The doing. The dodging. The gambling. Worst of all, the heartaches, the disappointments. And only a few golden moments. Where had all the time gone?*

If she could start over would she do it the same way? *Sure she would.*

Would she make the same mistakes? With the same people? Make the same friends and enemies? Be as misunderstood? Burn so many bridges? *Probably.*

Now she was just minutes away from the showdown. The confrontation that would decide whether a grand creation would continue under its own banner — or fall into the clutches of the circling vultures.

TransCon Airlines. Born before her time from a ragtag collection of oil-streaked hangar queens. Outdated old fabric and aluminum shells that flew slower than mallards — with much worse on-time schedules. Now the country's third largest trunk airline: twenty-two thousand employees, two hundred thirty-seven aircraft with routes connecting eighty-four cities in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and South America.

And now all of it her baby. Every jet, every hangar and building, every piece of equipment down to the last nut, bolt and cotter pin. The works. Including the debt.

At least for the next few hours.

She wiped the moisture from her palms with a linen handkerchief. Now comes the climax.

A wave of nausea engulfed her and, for a brief moment, she was afraid she was going to be sick. *Well, isn't this just great? Do I really need this?* She felt totally adrift, but then remembered the tidy packet of papers in her briefcase. Ammunition for the final defense.

She forced herself to sit back in the seat and inhale deeply. *Take it easy. You've been through rougher times than this. It will work out. You'll make it work out. This is no different than the other times. And most of the faces will be the same. Smiling cons. Cutthroats. Hand-in-hand ass-kissers. Yes-men. Gilt-edged pricks. Judgmental holier-than-thou horses' rears. I-told-you-so weak sisters. A great cast of characters for a horror movie, including the inevitable leading player trying to even the score with a corporate boardroom gangbang. No wonder I feel like puking.*

The big Cadillac cruised up to a stoplight. Through the smoked safety glass, she saw a young couple on the corner. The girl, jumping up and down, was laughing deliriously at something her escort had said. The young man, tall and sapling thin, wore a smug grin.

Hidden in the limousine, she took in the scene. Unbidden, from the depths of her memory came the vision of another young man who wore that same brash, cocky look. Her eyes moistened as she remembered a girl who was just as enraptured by his easy humor.

Now, don't start acting like a big baby, she thought. *This isn't yesterday. That was a long time ago. A couple of lifetimes at least. That girl and boy don't exist anymore. But could they? Could she resurrect them, snatch them back out of the past? Or was it too late for reclamation? To hell with it. Stop the daydreaming, pull your gut in, and get that chin up. Emotions sap your strength. Don't give those slime balls any more of an edge than they already have.*

The car pulled to the curb alongside an elegant canopy where a doorman stood, collar up, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his crisply tailored overcoat.

The knife-edged cold wind struck her full in the face as she stepped onto the sidewalk.

“Good morning, Miss Cavanaugh,” said the doorman. She turned toward the street, half hoping to catch another glimpse of the young girl and her string-bean boyfriend. But they were nowhere in sight.

* * * * *

Eleanor Bridges gazed across the Manhattan skyline from the lofty glass-draped citadel sixty-four floors above 57th Street. She lifted a stack of chocolate brown folders imprinted ‘TransCon Project’ and frowned. Almost ten-thirty. The boss would be here any second — and most likely all hell would break loose. She opened a heavy oak door and entered the wood-paneled conference room next to the office of the Chairman of the Board of Ryerson, Incorporated. Eleanor straightened the deep cushioned chairs ringing the massive conference table and put a thick folder, sharpened pencil, and bronze ashtray in front of each place. *Just like setting a dinner table*, she thought. *Except in this room, the host eats the guests.*

The conference room door opened behind her, and she could feel her ears redden in a blush. *Heavens, lady*, she chided herself, *he can't hear you thinking* — *not yet anyway.*

“Has Miss Arrogant Bitch arrived yet?”

Herman Hedstrom was known by his few friends and many enemies as Herm the Hatchet, and with good reason. His billion-dollar business successes were carved out by a shark-like personality. Aggressive and decisive, he could smell the blood of a wounded victim from far off and strike silently and swiftly. His steel gray eyes, cold and glacial, were set into deep pockets of perspiring flesh, and his round, baby-smooth face had an almost Porky Pig quality.

Eleanor turned and looked down at the squat, powerfully built man. Trying to look unruffled and efficient she ran a thin veined hand through her short silver hair. “Whom are you referring to?” she asked. Her head throbbed.

Hedstrom jammed a stubby half-smoked cigar into one of the clean ashtrays and grunted. “Don't get cute with me, Bridges. Is she here yet?”

“If you mean Miss Cavanaugh, I understand she entered the lobby a few moments ago.” *What an utter animal he is*, she thought.

“What about the rest of those assholes?”

“The other gentlemen are in the anteroom, Mr. Hedstrom.”

“Tell them to shuffle their buns in here, and let’s get some business done before the Great White Bitch arrives.”

Bitch. He liked that word. Eleanor turned and stalked out of the room. *Why do I put up with this? My God, I wish lightning would strike that man.*

Eleanor had worked as Hedstrom’s executive secretary for little more than a year, since that black Monday when her predecessor was found dead in the garage at her employer’s Connecticut condominium. A garden hose attached to the exhaust pipe had carried a lethal dose of carbon monoxide into the interior of the tan Mercedes. Rumors of the woman’s death abounded; however the talk soon subsided, and most of the rumor-carriers found themselves on the street.

Eleanor welcomed the increased income and the modestly elevated standard of living the new position afforded her. But even though she no longer had to bear the cross of poverty, she had a frightening new burden: her employer. Increasingly, she found herself flinching at the mere presence of the man. She sometimes blinked with wonder at his raw crudeness. His filthy mouth and mind. His physical ugliness. His brutal wielding of power. His utter disregard for human sensitivities. And not least of all, his blatant sexual overtures, which surpassed any she had ever come up against.

It was common knowledge that if you worked for Herman Hedstrom, you worked *under* Herman Hedstrom. So far, she had managed to avoid this catastrophe. The thought of his naked, sweating corpulence pressing down upon her was enough to set the vein in her forehead pounding.

She walked into the anteroom off the conference area. A knot of men standing in the center of the room caught the jerk of her head and began drifting in her direction. They looked as if they were being marched off to face a firing squad.

The chairman of Ryerson, Inc. usually kept his minions waiting for several minutes before making any boardroom entrance. But the imminent arrival of his vaunted female guest prompted him to call the meeting to order without delay. With the smoke from a freshly lit Havana billowing upward, Hedstrom surveyed the gathering thoughtfully. *Weak pricks,* he thought. *Couldn’t tie their fucking shoes if it weren’t for me.*

“Okay, let’s wake up, for Chrissake, and get this show on the road.” He opened the report in front of him, riffled through the pages, and smiled broadly. *Christ, this was rich.*

“Today we’re going to strike a mighty blow for the cause of men’s liberation.” He cackled and flicked a mound of ash onto the shiny tabletop. “We’re going to take that Cavanaugh cunt down a peg. Who knows, maybe we’ll even bring her to her knees.” He lowered one eyelid in a grotesque stage wink and ignored the stricken looks from his audience. He was enjoying himself immensely, relishing the moment; more so because he knew that among the assemblage, there were men who once counted themselves as friends of Miss Cavanaugh.

Jack Abelson, who’d spent ten years at TransCon before being enticed away to Ryerson as chief financial officer.

Tony Richards, sixteen years at Delta as director of operations, now a Ryerson board member.

Saxon Oakes, who’d earned his reputation as an industry intelligence gatherer, now known as the chief Hedstrom hatchet man.

Senator Wiley Sorrel, serving his third term in the U.S. Senate, ranking member of the Aviation Committee, attending today’s meeting as ‘a friendly observer.’

Scott Aspinwell, former head of the Airline Pilots Association, now a Ryerson board member running Fairchild Industries.

Les Nielsen, director of Interstate Banking, whose firm held most of the outstanding TransCon paper, also a Ryerson board member.

But today Miss Cavanaugh would not be rescued by her friends. *No, sir.* Today was Herman’s day. He rubbed his plump hands together and licked his lips. He had waited many years for this meeting, for the vengeance that was rightfully his. He’d strip the bitch of everything she owned, namely TransCon Airlines — cut it up and sell off the pieces so that it would never fly again. He’d show the bitch who was the fighting cock. She’d be peddling her pretty little ass on the street before he was finished with her. Sweet retribution for the humiliation she had heaped upon him.

The chairman swiftly took the men through the report and watched their nodding assents. *Fucking toadies.*

With a hesitant knocking on the door, Miss Bridges poked her head

inside. "Miss Cavanaugh has arrived."

"Good, send her in," Hedstrom replied.

Miss Bridges disappeared from view as the door closed. Hedstrom's lips contracted into a thin smile. "Now, the fun begins."

Scott Aspinwell half rose from his chair. "Don't you think you're overdoing it just a bit, Herm?"

Hedstrom glowered at the renegade. "I haven't even got started."

CHAPTER 2

Kelly sat perched on the sagging fence alongside the narrow blacktop road, her bag of schoolbooks almost hidden in the tall stand of prairie weeds at her feet. She was dressed in a well-worn deep blue turtleneck sweater and patched blue jeans. She impatiently swiped mahogany hair out of her eyes with one hand, using her other hand to brace herself atop the weathered gray fencing. Her attention riveted on a moving speck in the sky to the east, she eyed the trail of a silver streak caught up in the rays of the afternoon sun, dancing, diving, climbing, turning. Her ears picked up the faint buzzing of the four-cylinder Lycoming engine. The sound made her heart pump faster. Her hands clenched the top fence rail as her imagination carried her aloft to join the god in the cockpit high above. *So free*, she thought.

The tiny speck grew larger, transformed into a small airplane as it descended and passed overhead. The girl scuffed her new penny loafers on the fence as she twisted to watch the plane turn parallel to the runway. She followed the machine's path as it flew westward, then made another turn, then still another, finally coming in directly toward her and the rolling grass runway that lay beyond the fence.

This was the moment she loved best. The plane descended ever lower, showing its delicate white underbelly as it swooped overhead toward the evenly cut sod strip. She reached upward with a slim arm as if to touch the creature as it soared past, maintaining a true path against the breeze, dipping its wings first right and then left. It lifted its nose ever so slightly, ran out of airspeed, and touched the earth. She sighed.

A rusty pickup truck lurched to a halt in a cloud of dust and the weathered face of an old man appeared in the window of the passenger side.

"Seen one airplane, Kelly, and you've seen them all." She frowned, hopped off the fence, and ran toward the truck.

"Don't forget your books, girl."

She retrieved the bag in the weeds and came back to the truck. "That's the dumbest thing in the world to say, coming from you, of all people," she said, clambering into the vehicle.

Ed Cavanaugh smiled and let out the clutch. "Yeah, pretty dumb."

He studied the girl as he wheeled the old vehicle down the narrow road he knew so well. *Just like her mother*, he thought. *Maybe even prettier. Lot taller. Narrow shouldered and thin-waisted with long legs like a baby giraffe. Going on seventeen now, and just as independent and set in her ways as was his own daughter, who drew a last breath bearing this girl beside him in lonely agony at that windswept Nebraska homestead.*

Stubborn lot, us Cavanaughs, he thought. *Himself no different. Hell, Mom is only half-joking when she says I should be hauled out behind the shed at least once a week to have some crazy idea thunked out of my head with a two-by-four. Probably where Kelly gets it.* Ed stroked his chin with his gnarled hand and he chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Kelly shouted over the pounding racket of the old truck.

"Just day-dreaming," he yelled.

"You old liar."

"Hey, child, that anyway to talk to your gramps?"

She frowned and shook her head. "No hope for you at all. Must be swelling of the brain or something." She leaned her head to one side and watched the pancake prairie bounce past. Fence. Scrub. Waterhole. Jackrabbit. Fence. Scrub. Waterhole. Jackrabbit.

After a few minutes, she turned to look at the skinny, roughhewn old man. "So, when you going to take me up again?"

"Soon enough," he said.

"When?"

"Soon enough, I say. Don't be in such a rush, Kelly. That old plane ain't going to disappear. 'Sides, a gal your age shouldn't be so taken up with such craziness. Ain't natural. Should be making doll stuff and learnin' how to bake a fine chocolate cake and sewin' and practical things. How else you going to find a nice young man, get married, and raise a mess of brats?"

He grinned at her, a sassy glint in his eye.

"You don't believe a word of that trash," she said. "If you didn't have me to go flying with, that dumb old tail-dragger airplane would just roll over and die, just like an old cow. And you with it, most likely."

Ed hooted and slapped his knotted old knee. *Got a mouth just like her*

mother, too.

“Well, lessee. How about Saturday morning?” he said. “Providing of course you get your chores all done with.”

“Don’t you worry about the chores none,” she said.

Of course, the girl was absolutely right, the old man admitted to himself. She was a blessing in his old age, to be sure. Mom? She’d sooner go over Niagara Falls in a pickle barrel before she’d go up in his old Cessna. And all of his buddies had either died or moved into the county home. So who was there left to show off to? Thank the good Lord above for this free-spirited but mouthy girl sitting beside him. She had come into their home as a foundling, then wormed her way into their hearts, giving him and Clara both a new lease on life. He was certain that Kelly’s mother, cast aside by a troubled drunk of a man and left to die alone in the supreme act of creation, was happy knowing that the product of her flesh was turning out to be such a grand piece of work.

Of course, when he and Clara had first brought the screaming little bundle into their home, friends were quick to warn against the perils of trying to raise a girl in such a day and age. But their warnings went unheeded and, as things turned out, the little girl had never been a trial, only a joy.

Kelly was barely knee-high when he first welcomed her to the old barn of a hangar alongside the sod runway. It had been her second home ever since. She followed at his heels like a puppy while he pattered with the old plane which, despite its advanced age, was in superb flying condition. Just like its pilot.

Sometimes he felt a bit guilty, worrying that he was monopolizing the child, that she should spend more time with her friends, doing those things that growing girls do. But whenever he and Clara tried to turn Kelly’s attention elsewhere, her interest always returned to the sweet-smelling sod of the airport and to the curious machine squatting inside the dilapidated hangar.

Now, on warm sun-splashed days, if he were heading home from town about the time school had let out, he could pretty much count on finding Kelly sitting on the rickety fence, awash in the sights and sounds of the airport. Although he had stopped his truck to give her a ride home countless times, the silhouette of the solitary slim figure perched on the fence against the backdrop of empty prairie always made him glad that he was still alive and

kicking. Instead of pushing up daisies like some other old farts he knew.

"I'll tell you, Mom," he'd tell Clara as he and Kelly trooped in through the side door, "this girl's rear end is actually wearing a groove into that ol' fence, and that's the God's truth."

* * * * *

Saturday morning arrived cool and fresh, filled with long shadows sculpted by an uneven line of hangars strung along the edge of the dew-covered runway. Kelly was charged with excitement as she took up her position behind the right wing strut. Ed, on the plane's opposite side, grunted, "Okay!" and they pushed the machine out of its dark resting-place into the sunlight.

To Kelly's eyes, the little aircraft looked almost eager to fly, squatting tail low and nose high, as if sniffing the breeze. Its polished aluminum skin reflected the light, and she could see her image in the shiny door as she ducked under the strut and approached the passenger side. The smooth fuselage felt crisp and cool against her hand as she opened the small door and inhaled the aroma of oil, gasoline, grease and leather.

The Cessna 140 had rolled off an assembly line in Wichita nearly four decades before, among the first such machines built to answer illusory post-war predictions that ensuing prosperity would be so overwhelming that small family airplanes would soon be tied down outside most homes.

Ed had owned the machine for some ten years. He had plunked down nearly two-thousand dollars cash at an auction at the big airport sixty miles away in Kansas City where he had worked as an airframe and powerplant mechanic since he and Clara had been married.

Now, with the sun climbing higher in the sky, he climbed into the cozy cabin and carefully latched his door. He glanced sideways at his passenger, knowing that, having been aloft with her grandfather many times now, she knew the ritual by heart.

She locked and tightened her seatbelt and watched as Ed's practiced hands flitted about the instrument panel, tweaking, toggling, adjusting.

He lifted the small vent window next to his left shoulder and pushed a button on the panel. "Clear prop!" he yelled to the crows in the nearby

cornfield. The propeller a few feet in front of their faces turned once and was suddenly caught up in a roar of motion, blowing back a great wash of air that sent waves coursing through the tall grass behind the tail. The plane rocked gently. Ed winked at Kelly. "Your turn, Amelia."

Kelly grasped the right control wheel in front of her and felt the precious tingle that gripped her each time Ed let her fly. With her left hand she pulled out the big black throttle knob, and the plane answered with a slight roar and lunged forward on the thick turf into a slow roll that rocked the fat wings. Kelly checked the limp orange windsock hanging from a tall pole across the strip from the hangars. She pushed on the left brake with the tip of her toe, urging the Cessna to roll south down to the end of the runway. Moments later, the plane's big doughnut wheels departed the grass, and the plane rose skyward with Kelly gripping the throttle and firmly holding the control wheel. She watched the airspeed indicator rise through sixty, then pushed the wheel forward to lower the nose.

She glanced sideways at Ed who, with arms crossed, looked in the direction of the shrinking fields below. *Who's he kidding, the old fox?* She knew his ancient hawk eyes were following her every movement.

"Let's go north a ways," he shouted over the din of engine and air leaks. The airspeed built to one hundred miles an hour, and Kelly pulled back the throttle and lowered the nose slightly again. The plane leveled off precisely at two-thousand feet, where it flew serenely in the velvet morning air, unruffled by thermals — rising air currents that would be building as the sun rose higher. Ed nodded imperceptibly as he watched the altimeter glued dead-on at the two-grand mark. Not bad. They flew straight and level for a while. Old man and girl, saying nothing. What needed to be said?

The faint image of the spinning prop pulled them forward together over jade fields, twisting creek beds, and dense stands of oak and cottonwoods. White toy church steeples crowned tiny miniature towns. Country roads meandered with the occasional bouncing car, crawling ahead of dusty plumes.

After a time, Ed led the girl through a familiar pattern of maneuvers, including several kinds of stalls, where the plane's chubby wings would surpass what flying books referred to as the critical angle of attack, and the plane would shake and suddenly sink rapidly toward the ground. There were

steep turns and slow flight. Spins to the left and right where, from Kelly's view within the cockpit, the plane froze in the air, and the earth spun rapidly in front of the windshield.

Through it all, Ed watched her closely, ever amazed at the almost icy concentration the young girl brought to bear. Fear seemed alien to her. Even when she blew a maneuver, she suffered no sweaty palms, instead insisting on trying again and again until she got it right. She obviously thought everyone who flew felt as she did. Little did she know. But he knew, arrogant immortality of youth aside, sooner or later, if she continued flying, she would fear — and fear greatly. She would have to pay her dues by becoming more proficient and increasingly disciplined.

The old man had much more to teach her about flying. He would show her that, for woman and man, there were only so many ways to fly. You could slam the throttle to the firewall, streak down the centerline, eyes glued to airspeed indicator, runway lights flashing past in a blur, suck the control column into your gut, hit the gear switch, bang the strut doors shut beneath your butt, lean into a steep climbing turn, clawing for altitude, hanging by the props, screaming upward straight like the arrow, punching through rising turbulence tucked into passing clouds, topping the layers and breaking into the silver clear, awash in purest sunshine gold, flying fast and free.

Or you could feel your way gently into the sky, measuring octanes into pumping cylinders, coaxing tires into a roll, pacing the aircraft down the straightway, feeding the concrete ribbon of white into your cowlings, transforming bouncing rush into delicate jiggles, dancing on the rudders, wing down into the crosswind, easing control column back, willing the nose to rise, smoothly soaring upward, watching the earth fall away.

Or fly strictly by the numbers, throttle 2,700, RPMs 2,600, track runway heading 330 degrees, rotate at precisely 105 knots, stow the gear, count three bright green gear lights, push control-column forward, adjust for climb, throttle 2,500, airspeed 135, pull skyward at 1,200 feet per minute, level at 14,000, nose forward, throttle and RPMs squared at 2,400, airspeed 210 knots, sipping 17 gallons per hour, serene in precision and purity.

Ed had learned long ago that all the ways of flying are really just one. He was convinced that, in the hearts of many, there beats the pulse of birds eager to soar, eyes skyward even while earthbound, forever testing the wind,

hoping to soar again and again, shouting their freedom to the heavens. Maybe longing never to return home.

"So how'd I do?" Kelly yelled over the noise of their homeward-bound pickup.

Rudely jarred from his reverie, he lied, "You've done better." *If I could ever have flown like that*, he thought, *I'd a been a pilot instead of a grease monkey. She was a born sky jockey, that girl. No doubt about it whatsoever. In a taildragger yet. Imagine how she'd fly one of those pansy tricycle-gearred jobs. Or if she had an honest-to-goodness instructor who'd let her fly from the left seat where she belonged.*

"Don't strain yourself with the compliments," she said.

"Okay then, you were pretty good."

"Especially the landing."

"Yep. Especially the landing."

He shook his head, remembering. A gusty westerly breeze had developed as they flew back to the airport. He offered to take over for the landing, but Kelly insisted she could handle it. He needn't have worried. She flew the approach with calm precision: Cessna crabbed far to the right. Full left rudder. Heading straight as an arrow. Engine idling. Airspeed nailed. Changing rudder and aileron inputs all the way to the touchdown as the wind tore at the big barn door wings. The plane's upwind landing gear touched the grass first, and the craft thumped to a halt with barely a roll. Like a little pro.

Kelly stared down the road ahead and relived the flight. That was the flight that made up her mind. To fly and fly and fly. There was more sky than the tiny patch of blue around Carson Airport. There were bigger planes. Faster planes. Some day, some how, she would fly them all.

She looked over at Ed and returned his smile. She could almost feel the old man reading her mind. He nodded and returned his attention to the winding road. *Some bird, this girl.*

CHAPTER 3

In their ankle-length gowns and mortar boards, members of the Carson high school class were energetic and brimming with enthusiasm. Just the opposite of the way they looked for most of the school term just ended.

Ed and Clara, sitting on hard bench seats near the back of the sloping school lawn, craned their necks to see their graduate.

On the makeshift stage, Kelly could see the old couple clearly. She caught their eyes and waved madly. She was excited at the prospect of never again having to walk the green-plastered corridors of Carson High. She had never really felt at home there. Even among her small cluster of friends, she had few interests in common. She seldom dated, was convinced that the boys her age were just too young. And she was terribly bored when talk with the girls turned to the subject of boys — which was most of the time.

But now she was sad, too. For a new life stretched out before her. A life that precluded her remaining within the comfortable confines of the Cavanaugh home, spoiled and protected by Ed and Clara. Like many of her fellow classmates, Kelly, for the first time in her life, faced the awesome yet gloriously exciting prospect of leaving familiar surroundings.

The graduation ceremonies ended in applause, sighs of relief and a blizzard of four-cornered caps flung into a hazy late afternoon sky. That evening, the Carson Country Club rocked with graduation night festivities. But Kelly missed out on the grand tradition. Instead, she was high above the plains under a gauntlet of stars in the darkened left front seat of a small Piper Cherokee, her eyes methodically scanning a forest of pointers and needles that danced and trembled behind dimly lighted circles of class. She was utterly alone. Yet not alone.

* * * * *

September 23, 1977

Dear Grams and Gramps,

Hi, from the big city! Bet you thought I'd been kidnapped or something. Sorry I haven't written you sooner, but this first week has been such a mindbender, you wouldn't believe! Getting my dorm room all set up, buying my dumb books, finding my way to class — it's really too much. Awfully exciting — and fun.

Have met several neat kids, too, and really look forward to knowing them better. Anyway, here's what's been going on:

Monday, I met my Aviation Administration instructor. He's been here at Nebraska for over ten years and is supposed to be the best. Only twenty-two students in the class — I'm the only girl, can you imagine!

They looked at me as if I just waddled in from outer space, but you should have seen the looks on their faces when they found out that I'm the only student in class that already has a Private Pilot's License! I was really surprised but didn't show it. Mr. Fosse, the instructor, told me later that for being only eighteen, girl or not, I'm way ahead of myself. I can't believe it! Anyway, while these other guys are futzing around getting their Privates, I'll be working on my Instrument Rating.

Our classroom is here on campus in Lincoln, but we'll be spending lots of time over at Lincoln Field. The university has two single-engine Pipers and a big Cessna 510 twin (like Sky King's!). Mr. Fosse says that's the plane I'll get my multi-engine rating in — if you can believe it. Imagine — TWO engines!

The rest of my classes aren't nearly so interesting. I've got Philosophy, Economics and Humanities sprinkled through the week and all the professors have little beards and wear brown corduroy sportcoats with wrinkled pants just like yours, Gramps! I really can't see what any of these classes have to do with flying but I'll hang in just like I promised.

The girls in my dorm are pretty nice. My roommate, Ellie, is majoring in English and plans to be a teacher. Ugh!

When I told her I wanted to be a pilot, she almost broke down laughing. She's down at the student union tonight trying to sign on as a football cheerleader. I still like her a lot.

Well, I've got to hit the books for a while. Don't worry about me none — I'm a big girl now, right? And I want you to know that I appreciate everything you're doing for me.

Love, Kelly

Ed Cavanaugh had heard about the University of Nebraska's aviation program from his friend, Charlie White, a Frontier Airlines captain who operated a small ranch a few miles south of Carson. The curriculum was designed to provide students with a Bachelor of Science degree along with enough knowledge to help them earn their way in two career tracks — commercial pilot plus aviation administration.

"I don't have to go to college to fly airplanes," was Kelly's reaction when Ed mentioned the school to her a few weeks after her high school graduation.

"That's what you think, young lady," Ed said. "You forget, you're not going to get any kind of a decent aviation job unless you pack a little more book learning between those ears. Unless you want to join the Navy or Air Force or something."

"I don't want to fly a typewriter."

"Then listen to what I'm saying, girl."

They were sitting on the front porch, munching on Clara's peanut butter cookies.

"Don't have any money, anyways," Kelly said.

"We ain't exactly in the poor house, girl."

It turned out that Ed raised Kelly's tuition money by selling off 100 acres of scrubby grazing land he owned near the county line to a Kansas City real estate developer.