

Wheeler Ruthe S.

Jane, Stewardess of the Air Lines



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Chapter One

Graduation Night

Jane Cameron looked breathlessly around the room where seventeen senior nurses of the Good Samaritan hospital at University City sat primly awaiting their diplomas. It was graduation night and Jane was among the seventeen who had completed all of the requirements for a certificate in nurses' training.

Delayed half an hour by an emergency case on third floor surgery, Jane had just slipped into the room and taken the remaining chair on the end of the line.

Dr. Albert Anthony, trim, energetic young head of the staff, was speaking. Beside him was the little white stack of diplomas, all of them rolled and tied with blue and white ribbon. Doctor Anthony's sharp voice was informing the student nurses that they were about to embark on careers of their own. Jane smiled a bit grimly.

She wondered just what career was ahead of her. The girl next in line turned and a fleeting suggestion of a smile hovered about her lips. She was Sue Hawley, friend and companion of Jane through the long, arduous months of training.

"Here's hoping he'll tell us where we can get jobs," whispered Sue, the words so close-clipped that it was almost impossible to detect her lips moving.

Jane nodded. That was the one big problem facing most of the girls who were graduating from nurses' training at Good Samaritan. As for herself, she had no idea what she would be doing after the following noon when she stepped through the doors of the great hospital.

Doctor Anthony finished his speech and the nurses applauded politely. He picked up the diplomas and called the roll of graduates. As her name was called, each girl stepped forward, her stiffly starched skirts swishing, and received the tube of paper.

Queer shivers chased themselves up and down Jane's back. For three years she had been working toward this moment and now that it was at hand she suddenly felt cheated. Perhaps it was because she was grasping so desperately for something to do after she left the hospital.

Sue's name was called and she stepped forward and received her diploma. Jane was the last and she walked slowly toward the rostrum. A mist clouded her eyes and her hand shook as she accepted the diploma. It meant cutting loose from the old routine, leaving the firmly established and venturing out alone.

Jane wouldn't have admitted, even to Sue, that she was *scared*, for she was far too proud.

Then the program was over. Parents hastened up to congratulate their daughters and Jane and Sue drifted away from the others. Their homes were in a neighboring state and it had been too far for their own fathers and mothers to make the trip.

Sue looked down at her diploma. She was slender, blond, with sparkling blue eyes and peach-bloom complexion.

"Wonder if I'll ever have this framed?" she sighed. "Right now I've just exactly \$2 and I'm not going to send an SOS home for money unless I get down to my last penny."

"I've a little more," confessed Jane, tucking a wisp of wavy, brown hair back under her prim little cap. "To be exact, there's \$4.23 in my purse and I don't want to ask the folks at home for anything if I can help it."

Jane was a bit taller than Sue and her brown eyes matched the color of her hair. They had stuck by each other through all of the tribulations of nurses' training; now, though both hesitated to mention it, each feared that graduation would terminate their close companionship.

Miss Hardy, the supervisor of nurses, broke away from another group and joined them.

"Drop in at my office before you go to the dorm for the night," she said. Before she could explain what she wanted, an interne stepped into the room and called her away on an emergency case.

Rules had been lifted for graduation night and a kindly theater manager, realizing how little spending money most of the girls had, sent up passes for his show.

Jane and Sue slipped out of the assembly room, diplomas in hand. Hurrying to the dormitory on fourth floor back, they changed from their uniforms into street clothes and a few minutes later were on their way down town, the towering bulk of Good Samaritan with its scores of shaded lights behind them.

The show proved entertaining and they passed a pleasant two hours at the theater. On their way home, Sue slackened her pace in front of a drug store and looked longingly at the gleaming soda fountain inside.

"Feel the urge of a chocolate soda?" asked Jane, who knew her friend's weakness.

"It's practically irresistible," confessed Sue.

"Then let's celebrate. The treat's on me for I'm at least two dollars richer than you."

The sodas were delicious and the newly graduated nurses sipped them in luxurious leisure.

"My, but it's going to seem good not to have to jump every time a bell clangs," said Sue.

"I don't know about that. I'm so used to bells I'm afraid I'll miss them just a little bit," Jane said.

"What do you suppose Miss Hardy wants?"

"Maybe it's about a job."

"Don't worry. If there was anything like that in sight, she'd give it to one of her pets. We'd never have a chance," said Sue bitterly.

Jane and Sue had steadfastly refused to court the favor of the supervisor of nurses and as a result many unnecessary little tasks had been heaped on their shoulders. It had been just enough to arouse their determination, and they had finished near the top of the class despite the apparent prejudice of the supervisor.

It was nearly midnight when Jane and Sue pushed open the double doors of Good Samaritan. Only the night lights illumined the halls and the strained quiet which pervades a hospital at night had settled down over the building.

The elevator boy had left his post half an hour before and they walked the four flights of stairs to fourth floor back where the nurses lived. Most of the girls were in the dormitory and the hall was almost deserted as they neared the office of the supervisor. The door was closed and they knocked discreetly. An irritated, tired voice bade them enter. Jane opened the door.

Miss Hardy's cold, blue eyes held little welcome for her visitors as she peered up at them through steel-rimmed spectacles.

"You asked us to stop here before we went to bed," Sue reminded her.

"Oh, yes. So I did. It's a pity you couldn't have come in a little earlier."

"It isn't often that we have a night off and passes to see a show," replied Jane tartly.

Miss Hardy made no comment, but shuffled through a pile of papers at one corner of her desk. She selected a letter and scanned it rapidly.

"Either one of you girls decided what you'll do when you leave tomorrow?" she asked.

"I haven't been able to learn of a single job," said Jane, "and Sue has been no more successful."

"Then here is something that might interest you."

Miss Hardy tossed the letter across the desk. Jane looked at the letterhead and her eyes blurred. It bore the name of the personnel manager of the Federated Airways.

Chapter Two

Opportunity Knocks

The pulses of the young nurses quickened as they read the letter and they hardly heard Miss Hardy saying, "Of course, I haven't had time to fully investigate this company and it seems a little foolhardy for any young woman of common sense to seek such work."

That was typical of Miss Hardy. She was so conservative that anything new seemed foolish.

Jane read the letter rapidly and Sue, looking over her shoulder, kept pace with her. It was from Hubert Speidel, personnel manager of Federated Airways.

"My dear Miss Hardy," the letter began. "For some time Federated Airways has been considering a plan to improve its service to passengers and to provide even further for their welfare and comfort while they are guests aboard our transport planes. We have come to the conclusion that the addition of a stewardess to our flying crews is essential and at present we are contacting young women who might be interested in this work. Our first requirement is that the prospective stewardess be a graduate nurse. Hence, this letter is directed to you.

"I have consulted a number of eminent physicians and they have highly recommended the nurses' training school of Good Samaritan hospital for the high calibre of young women who are graduated. I will appreciate your contacting any of the girls who might be interested in joining our air line as stewardesses. On your recommendation, we will provide passage for them to come to Chicago where they will undergo the necessary examinations. Girls who weigh more than 120 pounds or who are more than five feet four inches tall can not be used."

Sue looked expectantly at Jane when they finished the letter.

"Well, what do you think of that?" she asked.

"I think it's a great opportunity," replied Jane. "It's a real chance to get into a new field for girls. Air travel is developing rapidly and perhaps we can grow with it."

Jane handed the letter back to Miss Hardy.

"It seems to me like a very dangerous type of work," the supervisor of nurses said.

"I don't think it would be any more dangerous than the everyday things we do. I've noticed advertisements of the Federated Airways. Their planes have flown thirty-five million miles without a fatal injury to a passenger. If I can go that far without getting hurt very seriously, I'll consider myself lucky."

"You've always been lucky," retorted Miss Hardy, as a seldom-seen smile flickered over her face.

"I guess both of you have thought me pretty much of a tyrant," she went on, removing the spectacles and smoothing back her straight, grey-streaked hair. "I'll admit I've been unnecessarily harsh with you on occasions, but it was all a part of my system. Some day you'll thank me for it for you are the best young nurses Good Samaritan has turned out in many a year."

"But, Miss Hardy," protested Sue, "we thought you had a grudge against us. Usually we had all of the mean little things to do."

"I know, but I was just testing the kind of spirit you had. You came through fighting a hundred per cent and even now, when I spoke discouragingly of this possible work with the air line, you showed your determination. I am convinced that this is a real opportunity and I should have been greatly disappointed if you had not shown a keen interest in its possibilities."

Miss Hardy's eyes were twinkling and Jane and Sue were astonished. Behind the hard, outer shell of the martinet they had known beamed now a very warm and friendly personality. For the first time in three years they felt they really knew Miss Hardy and each was a little ashamed of the harsh things they had said about the supervisor.

“Are you both interested in going to Chicago and personally applying for positions with the Federated system?” asked the supervisor.

Jane and Sue replied in unison and Miss Hardy picked up the telephone directory and after ascertaining the number of the local field of the Federated line, dialed the airport.

The night operations manager answered and Miss Hardy informed him that she had two graduate nurses who needed transportation to Chicago for an interview with the personnel officer.

“When do you think we’ll go in?” Sue whispered to the supervisor.

“That will depend on when there is space,” replied Miss Hardy. “I expect that since you will be traveling on passes it will be a day or two.”

Sue thought of the small sum in cash she had and wondered just how she would subsist in Chicago if she failed to get the job as stewardess.

Miss Hardy jotted several notations on the pad beside her phone, thanked the operations manager, and looked up at the girls.

“The first plane eastbound for Chicago with room for you will be through at three o’clock this morning. That will get you there shortly after seven. Can you get ready by that time?”

“We can be ready in half an hour,” gasped Jane.

“I thought you could. That’s why I told the operations manager to arrange for your passage on the three o’clock plane.”

“I’ll have to finish packing,” said Sue.

Miss Hardy looked at the clock.

“It’s midnight now. If I were you I’d go to the dorm and go to bed. Sleep until two o’clock. I’ll come in and call you in plenty of time to get dressed and get to the airport. Don’t pack anything except what you’ll need for a night or two. If you secure the positions with Federated Airways, you can write to me and I’ll have your things sent in.”

“That’s kind of you. Thanks so much,” said Jane.

“I’m just making up, a bit, for the grind I put you through in the last three years. Now get along to bed and don’t wake the rest of the girls by talking. A couple of hours of sleep will be the best for both of you. I’ll call you in plenty of time.”

Jane and Sue left the supervisor’s office and hurried down the hall.

“What do you think of it?” asked Sue.

“First of all, I think Miss Hardy’s an old dear, and as for the chance to become a stewardess, my vote is unanimous.”

“So is mine, but I’ve never been up in a plane before. I’m going to be just a little nervous.”

“I’ve never been up, either,” confessed Jane, “but it certainly won’t be any worse than riding in an express elevator. Why, the pit just drops out of my stomach every time I get in one of those things.”

They entered the dormitory and went quickly to their own beds. They undressed in the dark and hung their clothes in the lockers which stood at the head of each bed.

Jane slipped between the cool, crisp sheets and closed her eyes. But sleep did not come readily. She was too tense, too excited at the events of the last few minutes.

Earlier in the evening she had been wondering, a little desperately, just what she would do. Now there was a fair chance that she would become one of the pioneers in this new profession for girls. And Sue was going with her. That was what made Jane supremely happy. It would have been tragic to disrupt the bonds of friendship that had grown so close through the trying days of their training.

Then there was Miss Hardy. What a revelation she had been. Jane smiled as she recalled the friendly look in Miss Hardy’s eyes. After all, the supervisor had been doing the best thing for them even though many of the tasks she had placed on their shoulders during training had been extremely disagreeable.

Jane wondered what her father and mother would say if she got the job in Chicago. It might take more than a little diplomacy to win them over to her side.

In the next bed, Sue was breathing regularly and deeply and a little later Jane's tensed nerves relaxed and she slept. It seemed as though she had been asleep for only a minute when Miss Hardy shook her gently and whispered, "It's two o'clock and I have lunch ready in my office."

Sue was already dressing, and Jane hurried into her clothes.

Jane had a pretty brown suit with beret to match while Sue wore a two-piece dress of heavy blue crepe. She had a spring coat of similar material and a close-fitting toque, also of blue crepe.

They tip-toed to the door of the dormitory and looked back for just a moment. This had been their home for three long years and there was just a touch of heartache as they stepped into the hall and Sue pulled the door shut.

Miss Hardy was waiting for them in her office. Spread on top of her desk was an appetizing lunch which the supervisor had prepared in the tiny kitchen which adjoined her office. There was a large plate of sandwiches and cups of hot chocolate.

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble," protested Jane.

"It wasn't any trouble. I wanted to do it for I want you to have pleasant memories of Good Samaritan."

"We're going to take away a very pleasant memory of you," promised Sue, as she finished a sandwich.

"I have written my own recommendation and a letter of introduction for you and I am also enclosing Mr. Speidel's letter," said Miss Hardy. "This should insure your seeing him tomorrow morning in Chicago. I'll be anxious to know the outcome."

"We'll telegraph," promised Sue. Then, remembering how little actual cash she had, she added, "That is, we'll try to telegraph you."

Miss Hardy smiled for she knew how little money most of the girls had when they left training school.

They finished the lunch just as the horn of a taxicab squalled in the street below.

"There's your cab. It's a fifteen-minute ride to the airport. You'll have to hurry."

Miss Hardy handed the letter of recommendation to Jane, who folded it and placed it in her purse. They hurried downstairs, the girls carrying the small week-end bags with them.

Miss Hardy walked to the cab with them. Farewells were brief.

"I know you'll both make good," said Miss Hardy. Then she turned and hurried back inside the sheltering walls of Good Samaritan.

The cab lurched ahead, gaining speed rapidly as the driver headed for the airport.

Jane and Sue settled back on the worn leather cushions. In another half hour they would be aboard an eastbound transport plane, speeding toward Chicago. Their hospital days were definitely behind them and new careers, holding the promise of great adventure, were ahead.

Chapter Three

Adventure Ahead

The cab sped through the sleeping city. The business district was soon left behind and the paved road bordered the Wapsipinicon river, which skirted the south edge of University City. The road swung across the river and ahead of them gleamed the red, green and white lights which marked the boundary of the airport of Federated Airways.

The taxi slowed and drew to a halt in front of the administration building. The driver helped Jane and Sue from the cab. Jane opened her purse to pay the fare from her slender funds, but the driver waved the money away.

“Miss Hardy at the hospital said to charge it to her account,” he said, and Jane and Sue were given another glimpse of the warm heart which beat beneath the grim exterior of the supervisor of nurses.

The driver led them into the waiting room and left their bags there. Jane looked around. It was her first visit to the administration building, although she had been at the field a number of times.

The waiting room was furnished with modernistic wicker pieces. Soft tan drapes were at the windows and a rug of tan and black squares covered the floor. At a large table in the center was a neat stack of magazines while at a buffet along one wall was a silver tea service.

The ticket office opened to the right and Jane stepped up to the window. The night manager looked up from his desk.

“We are the nurses from Good Samaritan that Miss Hardy phoned about. We’re to go out on the eastbound plane for Chicago,” she explained.

The night manager swung around to his ticket rack and made out the passes for their transportation to Chicago. He was efficient but pleasant.

“You’ll have to sign permits releasing the system from liability in case of accident. Of course this isn’t required from regular passengers, but you are traveling free.”

Both Jane and Sue signed the papers he placed before them.

“I’m making out round trip passes,” he said. “In case you don’t get the jobs, you’ll be able to get back here.”

Jane wasn’t sure there was much consolation in that for there was probably more chance of getting a job in Chicago than in University City.

The night manager stepped into the dispatcher’s office to inquire the position of the eastbound plane.

“Your ship will be here in about nine minutes. How about baggage?”

“We have small pieces,” replied Sue.

The baggage was weighed, checked and placed on a small cart to be wheeled into the hangar when the plane arrived.

The dispatcher stuck his head out of the operations room.

“Charlie Fischer wants the flood light,” he said.

Jane wondered who Charlie Fischer was and just why he wanted the flood light, but to the field manager that message appeared important for he hurried into the hangar. A moment later a flood of blue light illuminated the field and the drone of engines could be heard.

Lights flashed on in the hangar and Jane and Sue left the waiting room. Two stars appeared to be descending out of the west and the hulk of a great tri-motor biplane drifted into the brilliant light of the field.

The plane settled gently and rolled smoothly along the crushed-rock runway. Its motors boomed as the pilot swung it into the hangar.

Jane and Sue looked at the big ship apprehensively. It didn't seem possible that the three motors could lift the great plane off the ground and hurl it through the air at two miles a minute.

The ground crew wheeled the portable steps up to the cabin and the pilot and co-pilot came down. They were young, clean-cut chaps.

The pilot hastened into the operations room to obtain the latest reports on the weather between University City and Chicago while the co-pilot supervised the refueling.

Jane saw the baggage cart wheeled alongside the plane and their bags disappeared into the forward hold. Then the night manager was at their side.

"You have seats eight and nine, which places you together on the right side of the ship. This way, please."

The girls followed him across the concrete floor and into the spacious cabin. Lights inside were turned low for several of the passengers were dozing.

Jane was amazed at the roomy interior. Along the right side was a double row of comfortable reclining chairs, very much like those in a railroad coach. There was a single row along the left side, with the aisle running the length of the cabin. Overhead were baggage racks for parcels and wearing apparel and there were individual lights for each chair.

A shaded light in the bulkhead ahead revealed two dials, one marked air speed and the other altitude. A door led forward to the baggage and pilot's compartment while a door at the rear opened onto a tiny pantry and a lavatory.

Jane counted the seats. There was room for fourteen in the cabin and counting themselves, twelve passengers were now aboard.

Chairs eight and nine were almost at the rear of the cabin and Jane and Sue settled into the seats. The night manager handed them each a small, sealed envelope.

"Here's your traveling packet of gum and cotton. Better put the cotton in your ears. The noise is a little bad the first few minutes. If you think the altitude will affect your ears, chew gum while you're going up. Will you want a blanket so you can sleep?"

"I should say not," replied Sue. "I'm going to see everything there is to see."

The pilots re-entered the plane and walked up the aisle to disappear through the forward door. The cabin door was closed and made fast and the three motors came to life with a thundering roar. The big ship vibrated strongly as one motor after the other was tested until the chief pilot was sure they were ready for the four-hour flight to Chicago.

The huge biplane moved slowly as the pilot taxied it out of the hangar. Then the tail was flipped around and the plane headed down the long runway.

The night was shattered with the powerful beat of the engines and blue tongues of flame licked around the exhausts of the wing motors.

Sue, who was next to the window, reached over and gripped Jane's hand. Both girls had stuffed cotton in their ears and both were chewing energetically on the gum.

With rapidly increasing speed the plane rolled down the smooth runway. The ground flashed by at an amazing speed and before either Jane or Sue realized it, the transport was winging its way over the edge of the field.

The flood light below came on, outlining the entire airport with its penetrating brilliance. The pilot banked the great biplane gently and headed away into the east.

The roar of the motors filled the cabin but, by leaning close, Jane and Sue were able to talk.

"Scared?" asked Jane.

"Not now, but my heart was in my mouth when we started. How about you?"

"I guess I felt the same way, but now it seems as though flying was the most ordinary thing in the world."

The lights of University City faded and the transport bored east into the night. Jane watched the dials on the bulkhead. The indicator for air speed pointed to 110 miles an hour while the altimeter showed they were now 1,200 feet above ground.

In a pocket at the rear of the chair ahead was a folding map which showed the route of Federated Airways from Chicago to the west coast and Jane and Sue scanned this with intense interest. Each city and emergency landing field was marked, with a brief description printed on the map.

Chapter Four

An Emergency Case

Dawn came as the tri-motor sped over the level farm lands of Iowa. Passengers who had been dozing roused themselves to watch the sun shoot over the horizon.

The night mists were dispelled and the fresh greenness of the corn belt in spring was unfolded below them. Wisps of smoke rose from the chimneys of farmhouses as breakfast was prepared and Jane and Sue, looking down, saw farmers about their chores in the farmyards.

There was a brief pause at Bellevue for refueling and then the big ship sped away on the last leg of the flight to Chicago. In another hour and a half Jane and Sue would be in the Windy City.

An elderly man two seats ahead and on the aisle had caught Jane's attention and she watched him closely. His face was pale and he appeared slightly ill. Perhaps the motion of the plane was unsettling, she thought. The flight would be over in a short time.

Jane's attention went back to the panorama below and for several minutes she paid no attention to the man ahead. When she looked at him again, she felt genuine alarm and she leaned close to Sue to speak.

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, the man two seats ahead is mighty sick."

Sue looked ahead and her eyes widened.

"He's pale as a ghost. Can't we do something?" Jane nodded and rose from her chair. It wasn't any of her business, really, but there might be something she could do. She stepped forward and leaned down.

"You look ill," she said. "I'm a trained nurse. Is there anything I can do?"

The stricken man managed to smile and his eyes spoke his thanks. Jane bent low so he could speak directly into her ear.

"Appendicitis, I fear. I've had it before, but never an attack as severe as this. How long before we'll be in Chicago?"

"Not long," replied Jane. "I'll see if I can't find something to make you more comfortable."

Jane hastened back to Sue.

"It's appendicitis," she said. "Let's see if we can find anything in the pantry to make into a compress or fix up an ice bottle. That may help check the inflammation until we get to Chicago."

While the other passengers looked on a little startled, the girls went back to the pantry.

"Here's a bottle of cold water," said Sue.

"I've found some towels. We'll make some cold compresses."

Some one tapped her on the shoulder just then and she turned around to look into the stern face of the co-pilot.

"Passengers are not allowed here," he said. "You'll have to go back to your seats."

Sue started to make a sharp reply, but Jane silenced her.

"The man in No. 4 is suffering from an attack of appendicitis," she explained. "We're trained nurses and thought we might find something here we could use to relieve the pain until we get to Chicago."

The grim expression on the co-pilot's face vanished.

"Why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't give us a chance," retorted Sue.

"Do you think his condition is serious?" the flyer asked Jane.

"He's pretty sick right now and he's not a young man by any means. If you can send word ahead some way to have an ambulance waiting at the field, that will help."

"I'll get a radio off at once. Is there anything I can do?"

“No, we’ll do everything possible,” Jane told him.

“The other passengers seem to be a little alarmed,” said Sue. “I’m going to tell them just what’s up.”

“Good idea. I’ll have the compresses ready when you come back.”

Sue went along the cabin and stopped to tell each passenger just what was the matter with the elderly man in No. 4. Everyone was sympathetic, but there was nothing they could do to help.

The girls made the stricken man as comfortable as possible and changed the cold packs frequently. It seemed to Jane as though the engines were droning along at a higher pitch and a glance at the air-speed indicator revealed that they were traveling 135 miles an hour.

They passed over Aurora and Jane knew they would soon be in Chicago. The co-pilot came back.

“How’s he getting along?” he asked Jane.

“He’s much more comfortable. Did you get a message through?”

“An ambulance is waiting at the field right now. Gosh, but I’m glad you girls were along. You ought to apply for jobs with the company. They’re going to put on a bunch of girls as stewardesses.”

“That’s just exactly why we’re on this plane.”

“Then this bit of first aid won’t hurt you in getting a job,” grinned the co-pilot.

He ducked back into the forward compartment and a few minutes later the plane swung over the municipal airport, Chicago headquarters of the Federated Airways.

Word had been flashed around the field that the incoming plane was bringing in a sick man, and the ship was given the right of way over all other planes.

Jane and Sue were too much interested in their patient to feel the slightest discomfort as the plane landed and rolled along the concrete ramp.

Sue hurried the other passengers out and an ambulance backed up to the plane.

“I’m deeply grateful,” whispered their patient, as he was lifted from the plane to the ambulance.

A white-garbed interne waved to the driver and with its siren clearing a path, the ambulance sped away.

Jane smiled at her companion.

“I wonder who he was? I forgot to ask his name.”

“I was too busy to think about that,” confessed Sue. “Perhaps we’ll see him again if we are fortunate enough to secure positions on the air line.”

The chief pilot of their plane paused beside them.

“That was fine, level-headed work,” he said. “You girls did exactly the right thing. I’m mighty glad the line is going to add a trained nurse as stewardess on all of the passenger runs. The co-pilot said you were going to apply.”

“We hope to see Mr. Speidel, the personnel director, today,” said Jane.

The chief pilot glanced at his wrist watch.

“It’s just seven-thirty. Mr. Speidel won’t be here for another hour. Tell you what. Let’s have breakfast together here at the field and then I’ll see that you have an interview with Mr. Speidel as soon as he reaches the field. Believe me, I’m grateful for what you girls did on the flight in.”

Jane hesitated a second, but Sue accepted enthusiastically.

“That’s fine. I’ve got to see that the ship is berthed properly. I’ll meet you in the waiting room.”

The lanky flyer hurried away and Jane and Sue went into the waiting room.

“Do you think we ought to have accepted the invitation?” asked Jane.

“Yes. If we get on as stewardesses, we’ll have to know all of the pilots fairly well. Besides, think what a free breakfast means to our slender purses.”

Jane smiled. “You would think of that.”

A few minutes later the pilot of their ship rejoined them.

“Say, I forgot to introduce myself,” he chuckled. “I’m Charlie Fischer.”

“And I’m Jane Cameron and my friend is Sue Hawley.”

“Now that everything’s in order and we know who’s who, let’s eat.”

The flyer led the way into the modernistic restaurant which adjoined the waiting room and they sat down at gleaming black and silver tables.

“The sky’s the limit,” advised their new friend and Jane and Sue added bacon to their usual breakfast of toast and fruit.

“Do you know very much about the plans for using stewardesses?” asked Jane.

“Only the talk that’s heard along the system. With passenger traffic getting heavier all of the time, some step must be taken to have a member of the crew in the cabin where the needs of the passengers can be looked after. I think selecting trained nurses is a mighty good idea.”

“Have any girls been hired?” Sue wanted to know.

“Not yet. I think today is the first on which Mr. Speidel is to have interviews with candidates.”

“Is he nice?” persisted Sue.

“He’s not half bad and I’m certainly going to give both of you the best possible recommendation. Have either of you flown much before?”

“This was our first trip,” said Jane.

Charlie Fischer whistled softly. “Well, you certainly are a cool pair. I hope you’re assigned to my crew.”

They finished breakfast and the chief pilot walked with them to the near-by administration building.

The field was roaring with activity. Planes were at the ramp being loaded with mail and express, ready for swift dashes to almost every point of the compass. Passengers were saying hasty farewells to friends, and porters, laden with baggage, hurried from taxis to the planes. It was a fascinating picture and Jane knew that she would thoroughly enjoy being a part of it.

Chapter Five

With Flying Colors

Charlie Fischer took Jane and Sue up to the second floor of the administration building. They entered a broad hall with chairs ranged along each wall and in every chair was a girl.

Jane's heart sank for she knew instantly that every one of them was there to apply for the position of stewardess. Sue looked at her and somehow managed a brave smile.

"There's going to be plenty of competition," she whispered.

Charlie Fischer glanced at the double row of girls waiting to be called into the office of the personnel director.

"Wait here," he told Jane and Sue. "I'll see if we can't manage to slip through ahead of the rest."

Jane and Sue sat down in the last two chairs along the hall and Jane looked at their competitors. The girls were all about her own age, most of them very attractive to look upon. They were trim and capable and had the calm bearing which their training had instilled.

A secretary came down the hall, taking the names and addresses of each girl. Finally she reached Jane and Sue and they gave their names.

"What is your Chicago address?" she asked.

"We just arrived," explained Jane, "and hope to see Mr. Speidel this morning."

"I'm afraid you won't be able to see him today. There are all those girls ahead of you," the secretary advised.

Jane's spirits ebbed but she went on determinedly.

"I have a letter here from the supervisor of nurses at Good Samaritan hospital at University City," she said. "Mr. Speidel wrote to her asking that she recommend several girls for this work."

"Yes, I know. Mr. Speidel wrote to a number of supervisors. Almost every girl here has her recommendation from a supervisor, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait your turn."

The secretary returned to her desk at the head of the hall and several minutes later the first two girls at the head of the line were called into the office of the personnel director.

"Looks like our flying friend has forgotten all about us," said Sue when half an hour had elapsed and there was no sign of Charlie Fischer.

Jane nodded a bit dismally.

Slowly the girls were called into the office and Jane knew that there was little chance she and Sue would have an interview that day.

It was nearly an hour later when Charlie Fischer reappeared and instead of coming out of the personnel director's office, he came up the stairs which led to the ramp. In his hand was a typed report.

"Think I'd forgotten all about you?"

"We had almost given up hope," conceded Jane.

"I had quite an argument with Mr. Speidel about seeing you girls out of turn. He's a stickler for detail and fair play and is afraid that if you are taken in ahead of the others they may feel he is playing favorites."

Jane nodded. She could understand that and she didn't want to start work, if they secured the positions, under a handicap of resentment by the other girls.

"I didn't argue long enough to make him mad," said the flyer, "but skipped out the back way and went down to get a complete report on our flight in. I also checked the hospital to find out about your patient. He's getting along fine, thanks to the emergency treatment you were able to give him. Now I'm going to hand these reports in and we'll see what happens."

The lanky flyer hurried down the hall and went into the personnel director's office. In less than five minutes he opened the door and beckoned for Jane and Sue to join him.

The young nurses smoothed their dresses and gave their hair a final pat as they hurried down the hall.

The office of the personnel director was large and, like the entire administration building of Federated Airways, was furnished in a modernistic style. One whole wall was of glass, giving a wonderful view of the entire field.

The personnel director looked up from the typed report he had been scanning. He was short and stocky, with dark, close-cropped hair and a heavy face, but his eyes were pleasant and he greeted them warmly.

"I've just finished reading the complete report of the fine piece of work you did coming in on trip No. 6 this morning. Charlie tells me neither of you had flown before."

"It was our first trip," admitted Jane.

"Then I must say you were remarkably cool-headed under the circumstances. Do you have a letter from your supervisor?"

Jane handed him the envelope from Miss Hardy and he read the letter of commendation thoroughly.

"Your supervisor thinks rather highly of you," smiled Mr. Speidel when he finished. "Do you really think you'd like flying?"

He shot the question at them unexpectedly.

"There's danger, there's a lot of responsibility, and there's a great deal of work at times," he went on. "You may be trapped in almost any kind of weather – rain, snow, hail, sleet, fog. You must be calm and resourceful and courageous. We demand a great deal of loyalty."

"We've thought the whole thing over," said Sue, "and decided we'd like the work. Now, after the trip in from University City, we are certain we are making no mistake."

"How about you, Miss Cameron?"

"I am sure I would like it," said Jane.

"Very well. We'll put you down on the tentatively accepted list. Final acceptance will depend on your ability to qualify under our physical requirements. You'll find the office of Dr. Emma Perkins at the other end of the hall. Give her this card and she'll put you through the routine. If you pass, return here at three o'clock." When they emerged from the office of the personnel director, a little breathless and flushed, it was nearly lunch time.

"I'd like to treat you to lunch," said Charlie Fischer, "but I've got to get down town."

"Thanks a lot for all you've done," said Jane. "We'll do our best to pass the rest of the examinations."

"You'll come out all right," prophesied their new friend.

Jane and Sue went down to the restaurant on the main floor where they ate a leisurely lunch. Outside planes were landing and taking off and a constant crowd swirled along the ramp and through the waiting room.

Already the tempo of the whole thing had gotten deep into their blood.

"I'll be terribly disappointed if we don't pass the physical tests," confessed Sue.

"Don't worry about that. We're in perfect health."

At one o'clock they reported at the office of Dr. Perkins and were taken into the examination room at once. Doctor Perkins, small and business-like, put them through the regular routine.

"Humph," she said as she checked the results. "If all girls were as healthy as you two, there would be little for doctors to do."

"Then you mean we've passed all right?" asked Sue anxiously.

"Your physical report will be 96 per cent, which is unusually high. Take your cards back to Mr. Speidel's office."

When Sue and Jane returned to the other end of the hall the line of girls had thinned. They presented their health cards to the secretary and were admitted almost at once to the office.

“It looks like I’m about to sign two more stewardesses,” he smiled as he took their cards. His eyes widened as he read the final report. “Why, this is rather remarkable. Doctor Perkins is pretty much of a stickler for detail. A 96 mark from her is about 99 from any other examiner.”

The personnel officer took two blanks from a pile at one corner of his desk.

“Now we’ll get down to the serious business of enrolling you for the stewardess service,” he said.

“You mean we’ve really got the jobs?” asked Jane.

“You certainly have. Your pay starts today with a salary of \$125 a month and uniforms furnished by the system. Does that sound attractive?”

“It’s more than attractive,” smiled Sue.

In less than ten minutes they were formally enrolled as members of the Federated Airways’ stewardess service.

“We’ve signed a dozen girls, including you two, and are sending them all west to Cheyenne tonight aboard a special plane. Uniforms are being made here. Take a company taxi and go to the Barclay Tailors on North Michigan Avenue. They are outfitting all of the girls. Be back at the field at five o’clock. Miss Comstock, who is chief of the stewardess service, will be here. Report to her at this office.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Speidel,” said Jane.

“We’ll do our best,” promised Sue.

They were in a cab and speeding toward the loop before they relaxed, for the strain of the last few hours had been terrific for both girls.

Sue’s eyes filled with tears and Jane felt her own throat choke up. With their funds so low, securing the positions with the Federated Airways had been essential and now that it was no longer a dream, it was hard to believe.

“Would you mind pinching me to see if I am awake?” said Sue, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“We’re awake all right,” said Jane as the cab struck a bad bump and threw them to the ceiling. The meter was clicking up an astonishing taxi bill and Sue stared at it questioningly.

“Maybe we’d better get out and take a street car down town,” she suggested.

“Don’t be silly. This is a Federated Airways cab. It won’t cost us a cent and the driver will come around and take us back to the field when we’re ready.”

“How do you know?” Sue asked suspiciously.

“Because I took the time and had the good sense to inquire at the ticket office. When I told them we were new stewardesses they gave me a card entitling us to round-trip transportation to the loop in a company cab.”

“I didn’t see you do that,” protested Sue.

“No, you were too busy watching the plane coming in from the west.”

At the tailors they were measured for trim serge suits of a smoke-green. Berets of the same material and color were furnished.

The fitting required an hour and the tailors promised to have the suits in Cheyenne within the week.

“What do you think of the uniforms?” Jane asked as they left the tailors.

“I love them. They’re so trim and business-like, yet feminine at the same time. What a contrast to a nurse’s uniform.”

Jane was willing to admit that the neat, serge suits would be much more comfortable than the primly starched outfits they had been accustomed to wearing.

They had to wait a few minutes until the cab arrived and then they were whirled rapidly toward the field on the outskirts of the city.

When they reached the airport, Jane went straight to the waiting room and sat down at a writing table.

“Going to write home?” asked Sue.

“First of all I’m writing to Miss Hardy back at Good Samaritan. After all, it was because of her interest that we managed to get these positions. Then I’ll dash off a letter home. There’s half an hour before we report to the chief stewardess.”

“I wonder if the folks will object?” mused Sue as she sat down at the other side of the desk and picked up a pen.

“I’m going to tell mine that Miss Hardy felt it an excellent opportunity. They have great faith in her and I’m sure they’ll not protest.”

Chapter Six

Westward Flight

It was shortly before five o'clock when Jane and Sue reported to Miss Comstock at the office of the personnel director. By five o'clock all of the girls who had been signed for the stewardess service were in the office and Miss Comstock spoke to them briefly.

"When we arrive in Cheyenne," she explained, "you will go through a two weeks' training course which I will conduct. The purpose of this is to thoroughly familiarize you with your duties and to acquaint you with the special geographical features of the line for, as stewardesses, you must not only care for your passengers but be qualified to answer their questions. I can assure you that they will ask a great many. While in training at Cheyenne, you will make trips over the routes to which you will be assigned. Since the stewardess service is to become effective June 10th, you understand that we have much to do for I am counting on you girls making a fine record on the line."

As Miss Comstock finished speaking, a huge tri-motor rolled up on the ramp and Charlie Fischer stuck his head out to look for his passengers.

"Our plane is waiting. We'll have a late lunch in Omaha," said Miss Comstock. "I suggest that on the way down you girls introduce yourselves to one another."

With the chief stewardess leading the way, the girls trooped downstairs. Just ahead of Jane and Sue were two girls about their own age.

They turned around and introduced themselves. The taller one was Grace Huston while the shorter one, a red-head, was Alice Blair.

"We took our training here in the county hospital," said Grace. "Are you from Chicago?"

"No," replied Jane. "We flew in from University City this morning. We graduated just last night from the training school at Good Samaritan there."

"Well, that's certainly fast work," smiled Alice. "In less than twenty-four hours you're starting on a new career."

"Twenty-four hours ago we didn't have any idea what we would be doing," confessed Sue.

"I'm excited about this position," said Grace. "Think of the thrill of flying day and night through all kinds of weather!"

"I've thought all about it," replied her companion, "and it may be too thrilling once in a while, but it's a job and a good paying one. How do you like the uniforms?"

"They're fascinating," said Jane. "I can hardly wait until they are delivered at Cheyenne."

"Which reminds me," put in Alice, "that I'd like to know what Cheyenne is like."

Her question went unanswered for they had reached the tri-motor and Miss Comstock hurried her charges inside. Jane and Sue were fortunate to find a double seat and Grace and Alice sat directly behind them. The last of the girls' baggage was placed aboard and the cabin door closed and locked. The big ship trembled as Charlie Fischer opened the throttle. Then it rolled smoothly down the ramp.

Other planes were being wheeled from their hangars and made ready for the overnight runs. The great airport was almost at the height of its daily rush.

Jane, next to the window, saw the dispatcher in his tower signal their pilot to go ahead.

The motors roared lustily and the plane shot down the long runway, lifted smoothly into the air, and started westward, boring into the setting sun in a slow climb.

Chicago faded behind them as they sped over the fertile farm land of Illinois.

Jane relaxed in the comfortable chair and closed her eyes. The nervous strain of the last few hours had been terrific and she welcomed the opportunity to rest and relax. Sue, likewise tired by the day, closed her eyes and both girls dozed.

They were over the Mississippi at dusk with the lights of Clinton, Iowa, visible to their right. Then the plane sped on above the rich acres of Iowa. Below them the headlights of automobiles dotted the highways and an occasional cluster of lights marked a village. Then a field blazed into blue-white incandescence and the beat of the motors slowed.

Miss Comstock came down the aisle and Sue asked her their location.

"We're landing at Iowa City to refuel. We'll stay there about ten minutes. You can get out and walk about the hangar if you like."

There were only a few people at the airport when the tri-motor rolled into the hangar and the girls stepped out of the cabin.

"I'm getting hungry and Omaha is a long distance ahead," said Grace Huston.

"There's a restaurant just a block away, by that old hangar," pointed out Alice. "We could get a chocolate bar there. That should keep off the wolf until Omaha."

They agreed that chocolate bars would taste good and Alice, collecting a dime from each of her companions, hurried away toward the restaurant. When she returned, the candy bars were welcomed eagerly and when the girls stepped back into the plane they felt refreshed.

The floodlight opened up the night with its blue-white brilliance and the tri-motor rolled across the field and soared westward again. Miss Comstock came down the aisle with an armful of the latest magazines.

"This will be one of your duties," she said as she offered them to Jane and Sue. The girls made their selection but Jane found her eyes too heavy for reading. She changed places with Sue and dozed again while her companion read.

At the end of another hour, the plane started bucking sharply and sleep became impossible for any of the girls.

Miss Comstock came along the aisle and spoke to each girl.

"There's a bad cross-wind. See that your safety belts are buckled securely."

The plane continued to bounce up and down, sometimes dropping for what seemed to Jane hundreds of feet only to bound upward again with a jarring shock.

Sue was white and perspiration stood out on her forehead.

"I hope we won't have many trips like this," she gasped. "Oh, I wish I hadn't eaten that candy!"

Jane looked around to see how Grace and Alice were faring. Grace looked like a ghost, but Alice seemed unaffected. One of the girls at the rear of the plane became violently nauseated but Miss Comstock, cool and undisturbed by the rough weather, cared for her.

One thing Jane realized; they were all getting a thorough test of their weather ability on their first long flight.

The weather was rough all the rest of the way to Omaha, but after the first half hour, Sue recovered her equilibrium and managed to smile at the white face and tight lips of some of the other girls. Poor Grace was in agony most of the way.

"Lunch is ready at the field restaurant," Miss Comstock announced when they rolled into the hangar at Omaha.

Various replies greeted her announcement. Some of the girls were ready to eat, while several could only groan at the thought of food.

Charlie Fischer climbed down and spoke to Jane and Sue.

"A little rough the last hundred and fifty miles," he grinned.

"It was more than a little rough," retorted Sue. "It was terribly rough."

"Say, that was smooth compared to some of the weather we strike west of here. You've got lots of surprises ahead."

"I've had enough for one night," replied Sue, "but maybe I won't notice it from now on."

"Some people are all right after the first time and others never get over air sickness," replied Charlie cheerfully.

“What a great help you are,” countered Sue.

“I’m leaving you here. This is the end of my run tonight. Maybe you’ll be assigned with me when you go into active service.”

“If flying with you means weather like this, I hope not,” smiled Jane.

Miss Comstock, anticipating that some of the girls might be air-sick, had ordered a light supper and only one of them, Pert Meade, who had been ill aboard the plane, was unable to enjoy the attractive meal.

It was eleven o’clock when they re-entered the cabin, ready for the flight over the windswept Nebraska country. A new pilot, an older man than Charlie Fischer, was at the controls.

The girls took their places, fastened the safety belts, and the big ship roared away again.

The weather was still rough as they followed the Platte River valley, riding high above country along which the pioneers had struggled in the early days of the West. They were following the U. P. trail, but were covering in an hour a distance it had taken the first settlers weeks to traverse.

Jane looked at the air-speed indicator. They were traveling only a little more than a hundred miles an hour and she knew that the wind outside must be blowing a gale. Below them one of the department of commerce emergency landing fields, outlined with red, green, and white border lights, drifted by. She looked at the route map. The field must have been Wood River, just west and a little south of Grand Island. They were still another hour out of North Platte.

It was well after midnight and most of the girls were dozing. Jane looked around and saw Miss Comstock in the last of the single seats on the left side of the cabin. The chief stewardess was looking out the window, staring with a sort of desperate intentness into the night, and Jane wondered if there was anything wrong. She listened to the beat of the motors. They were running smoothly, with whips of blue flame streaking from the exhausts, and Jane concluded that she had been imagining things when she decided Miss Comstock was upset.

Several minutes later the chief stewardess hastened up the aisle and disappeared along the passage which led to the pilots’ compartment. She returned almost immediately and snapped on the top light, flooding the cabin with a blaze of brilliance. Just then the motor on the left wing stopped and Jane knew that something was decidedly wrong for the chief stewardess’s face was pale and drawn.

Chapter Seven

Crash Landing

Jane shook Sue into wakefulness, and, cupping her hands so that only Sue could hear, said, “Get the sleep out of your eyes. Something’s gone wrong. One motor has stopped.”

Sue, thoroughly aroused at Jane’s words, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and sat up straight. Miss Comstock hurried down the aisle, shaking the girls into consciousness. Then she returned to the front of the cabin. The two other motors had been throttled down and by speaking in a loud tone, she could be heard by every girl.

“We are about to make a forced landing,” she began and as she saw quick looks of alarm flash over the faces of the girls, hastened to add, “There is no need for undue alarm. I am sure no one will be injured for one of the most experienced pilots on the line is at the controls. Please see that your safety belts are fastened securely. Try to relax your muscles if that is possible.”

The plane heeled sharply as a vicious gust of wind caught it and Jane looked out, hoping that lights of one of the emergency landing fields would be visible. Only a solid mass of black greeted her eyes and she knew that their situation was indeed dangerous. Had Miss Comstock only been talking bravely, attempting to reassure the girls?

Jane looked at her companions. Apprehension was written on the face of each one, but none of them was flinching, a tribute to the fine courage which their nurses’ training instilled. They were accustomed to emergencies, even though this one was more than they had bargained for on their first long flight.

Jane tried to analyze her own feelings, but found that there was a peculiar lack of emotion. There was nothing she could do to ease the situation. She looked at her companion.

Sue smiled back bravely and reached over and took Jane’s hand. It made them feel a little closer.

“How far above ground are we?” asked Sue.

The needle on the altimeter dial was jumping crazily and Jane shook her head. The air speed was down to eighty miles an hour and they seemed to be drifting into the wind.

Miss Comstock started to turn off the top light, but one of the girls asked her to leave it on. It was much easier sitting there with the light on than waiting for the crash in the dark.

Miss Comstock walked down the aisle and Jane marveled at her ability to remain so calm in the emergency. She admired the chief stewardess immensely for her control of her nerves, for Miss Comstock didn’t appear to be more than three or four years older. She was a little shorter than Jane with a tinge of auburn in her hair and she was dressed in the natty smoke-green suit which was to mark the stewardesses of the Federated Airways.

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