

Chapter 3

Rolling

The following days were exciting and still dreamlike as I tried to make sense of it all. My flight instructor was now my boyfriend. Steve was two years younger than me, but he seemed to know it all, and I was determined to learn it all from him. His control over the airplane was complete and never in doubt. Even when he yelled from the right seat of the airplane if I didn't show that same control. "Don't let the airplane fly you. You fly the airplane!" He said it as if the airplane was a living thing, an animal or a child that needed discipline and absolute control. At those times, I couldn't help feeling I was the airplane, and Steve was flying me.

I had more licenses and ratings to get through with him. But not only was I his student and now his girlfriend, I was also the lineman—or rather, lineperson—fueling the airplanes and doing all the other grunt jobs a lineperson does, like scrubbing airplane bellies and cleaning the toilets in the flight school.

Five-Five-Fox taxied onto the ramp with Tim Knight's early morning solo student. I drove the truck to the bottom of the ramp and swung it around, ready to fill the airplane as soon as they tied it down. It was one of Rod's rules that the truck never be put in reverse, and he made sure no one ever forgot, along with the story of how that rule came about. Something about a previous lineman backing the truck into one of Rod's planes. Not someone else's plane, Rod's plane. I quickly made it a standard operating procedure to plan my driving path well in advance so there would never be a need to put the truck in reverse. With two walls of large windows for Rod to oversee all activity on the ramp, he could monitor my movements, even though the windows were thickly coated with cigar smoke. I made sure backing up the truck would never be an issue.

The sun was already getting warm as I pulled out the fuel hose from the side of the truck. There would be no escaping today's heat and humidity during this unseasonable hot spell. Rod did not allow us to use the old air conditioner built into the office wall. In fact, it was so old and rusty that I wondered if it even worked. With no breeze these past few days, the black tarmac would radiate heat all day until it was unbearable.

I looked across the grass behind the airplane to watch a small corporate jet landing on Runway 34. Rod would tune in to Unicom¹ right about now hoping the jet would taxi to his side of the field to buy fuel. I held my breath and waited, letting it out slowly as the airplane turned left at the end of the runway and taxied to the west side of the airport. Fueling jets was my most dreaded job as the lineperson. I felt intimidated standing on the ramp to guide them to within inches of the jet fuel pump (the truck did not carry jet fuel), using hand signals I didn't really know. Often, I made sure I was out of sight when a jet taxied onto the ramp, arriving only after they had parked themselves beside the pump. Let them be responsible for scraping a wing tip. There were already enough headaches with this job.

Even if I avoided parking them, though, I equally dreaded the fueling process. I needed more body weight, and often the jet pilots—young and middle-aged men, cocky with the knowledge they had just arrived in the heaviest iron on the field—would get a good chuckle as they watched me drag the fuel hose like a pony in a pull contest. Between the heat and the heavy hose, it was an exhausting process. From what I was learning about multiple sclerosis, heat sensitivity and fatigue were big symptoms. I couldn't help but wonder if my exhaustion was because of that. It made a difficult job even more difficult.

“Pretty good view from behind in those jeans,” Steve said. “We’re flying tonight, right?”

I tried not to smile but did kind of like the compliment. “Seven o’clock in Five-Two-Five,” I answered.

Seven-Two-Five-Two-Five was one of Rod’s Piper Warriors, a step up from a Cherokee 140 in horsepower, weight, equipment and age. Piper had exchanged the Hershey bar-shaped wing of the Cherokee 140 and some of Piper’s other older models for a tapered wing design on the Warrior, and that changed some flight characteristics. Because these aircraft were newer and had better avionics, they were the only ones on Rod’s line certified for IFR—instrument flight rules for flying in the clouds. The Cherokee 140s did not have the instruments required for IFR, so graduating to the Warriors meant a lot at New England Flyers. Now that I was working on my instrument rating, we were flying the Warriors only. It was more expensive to rent them, but there was no choice. For my private license training, the Cherokees were forty dollars an hour wet—that meant fuel was included in the price. The Warriors were fifty dollars an hour wet.

¹ UNICOM (universal communications) is a radio frequency at each airport for planes to communicate with the service providers on an airfield to arrange fuel or parking. At uncontrolled airports, UNICOM is also used for incoming and outgoing planes to announce their location and which runway they’ll be landing on.

“I figure that will give us an hour or so before it gets dark, unless you want to do some nighttime instrument work,” I said.

“No, we’ll just do airwork. I’ll show you some things I couldn’t show you before you got your private.” Steve’s eyes sparked with a hint of something I hadn’t seen before as he turned back to the office.

“Teach me or show me,” I called after him.

“Some things you just have to learn yourself,” he responded without turning around.

Rod stepped out of the building and yelled, “Hey, Puchalski! Get in here! Your student’s waiting.” Steve didn’t change his pace.

Rod was in a pretty good mood today. Usually when he went home to his wife the night before—that meant no booze, no girlfriend and, I guessed, no sex—his mood was a lot better than if he had a hangover and a tired body to nurse the next day. I turned my attention back to the fuel hose.

Five-Two-Five was another leaseback on Rod’s line. A wealthy Saudi man owned it, and he only flew it when he wanted to impress a date. It had the basic equipment needed for instrument flight and not much more. The transponder worked, so the controllers could always see where we were. That was of primary importance. There were dual radios and dual VOR₂ receivers for navigation, and what they called an Automatic Direction Finder for doing practice instrument approaches. Instrument flying was about using the instruments and radios to get to the right place at the right time. When I passed the test, it would add the rating to my private license, and I could fly in the clouds legally.

Steve sent me out to do the pre-flight inspection while he ate a ham and cheese sub at Rod’s desk. I’d picked it up for him when I made the afternoon liquor-store run for Rod. The store was out of Rod’s favorite cigars, but there was plenty of whiskey, and he was now on his way to a smile.

² VOR (Very High Frequency Omnidirectional Range Station) is a common type of radio navigational aid. The white transmitters on the ground can be recognized by their huge cone shape, often on or near airports.

“You mind if I fly left seat tonight?” Steve asked as he approached the plane. “Sometimes I think I’ve forgotten how. Besides, you need to start learning to fly from the right seat when it’s time for your instructor ratings.”

My instructor ratings were a long way off, and at this point in my aviation career—and it had become a career—it didn’t seem I would ever get to that level. My private license was only four days old, and I had a grand total of only sixty-two flight hours. I was counting on Steve to guide me further down the road. He led, and I followed.

“You said you wanted to show me a few things anyway,” I answered and stood aside as he climbed in first. The only entry door was on the right side, so the left-seat pilot needed to climb in first.

I latched my seatbelt but left the door open for air. “You can do the checklist since you’re in the left seat,” I said, holding out the clipboard for him. He took it and promptly stuffed it in the door pocket.

“If you really want to be a pilot, then you learn to fly without a checklist. Just keep it all up here for the day you need it.” He pointed to his head. “Most of the time, it’s all so routine you don’t even have to think about it.”

Wow! This was a different Steve. I was shocked but tried not to show it. Was this the way it really was? I came from a very rules-based background—there were rules, and I followed them. Now, my flight instructor was giving me a new “rule” that was entirely contrary to what I previously understood. In my new world of aviation, though, Steve was the king of flying, and his rules were the rules. Still, I wondered if this was how every pilot did it or if he was just such a skilled pilot that he could get away with it.

“It’s not how you would have learned it in the Navy. This is real-world flying,” he said with a touch of arrogance.

He ran his fingers across the circuit breaker panel to feel for any that had popped, and then over to the switches. He turned on the master switch and fuel pump. Five-Two-Five was humming the familiar sounds now. He opened the tiny pilot’s window and yelled, not too clearly, “Clear!” The prop was turning before anyone would have had the chance to run clear. It caught on the first spin, the engine was running, and the microphone was in Steve’s hand. “Ground control, Seven-Two-Five-Two-Five, east ramp, ready to taxi with information Charlie.”

“Charlie” was the code word for the current airport conditions recorded on the Automatic Terminal Information Service (ATIS). It told us the wind direction and speed, barometer setting,

visibility, and runway in use, along with other pertinent details. The ATIS information was pre-recorded by the tower controllers and could be heard on its own radio frequency. As the conditions and details changed, the tower controllers changed the recording and the code word, which progressed through the phonetic alphabet. This evening, the weather was stable, so when we returned from our flight, the information would likely only have changed to Delta, if it changed at all.

“Roger, Five-Two-Five, taxi to Runway 34,” the female voice came back. The tower was directly behind us, and all the voices were familiar. This was Laverne, whose voice maintained a monotone at all times.

I looked at him, surprised by how fast he went through the procedures. I almost couldn't keep up with him. “How did you know the information was Charlie?”

“I got it on the radio in the office before I came out.” Steve released the brake and punched the throttle up to get out of the parking spot. “Ground, Five-Two-Five requesting an intersection takeoff.”

“Roger, Five-Two-Five, taxi to Runway 34 at the intersection.”

Steve flipped the frequency to control tower, where the controllers who handled takeoff and landing spend their days. “Tower, Five-Two-Five ready for takeoff. Right turn out.”

“Five-two-five, cleared for takeoff at the intersection.” It was still Laverne. Apparently, she was alone in the tower tonight manning both ground and tower functions.

The words were barely out of her mouth, and Steve had Five-Two-Five rolling onto the runway and right into the takeoff, popping down two notches of flaps as we hit the runway centerline. With a takeoff at the intersection, roughly one third beyond the start of the runway and flaps down, he was showing off his short-field takeoff technique. The flaps on takeoff added lift to the wings so we would be off the ground more quickly. Left hand on the yoke, right on the throttle, he pulled the plane into the air at precisely the moment it could fly and held it a few feet above the runway in what was called ground effect, making it feel like we were floating as we continued to accelerate to gain enough speed for the climb. If only I could have shown such an efficient short field technique when we were preparing for my flight test. But that took practice in real-life situations, and Steve promised I would get plenty of that.

With the flaps back up to zero degrees, he climbed at just above the stall speed³ to get the maximum climb angle. Now and then, he pushed the nose down to check for traffic. He was quiet as we flew to the northeast from the airport. We passed over Hamilton and Ipswich and then on toward Plum Island and the ocean. This was what we called the ‘practice area,’ uncontrolled airspace with very little traffic, where we could safely practice flight maneuvers. It had become familiar terrain to me during my private license training, and I recognized every feature on the ground between Beverly and the practice area. This time, though, I watched Steve’s own movements rather than the visual references outside the plane. It was the first time I had been in a plane with Steve flying from the left seat, and I couldn’t help but feel in awe of his confident movements.

His flying style was distinctive, just like most everything else about him. It all just carried over into the airplane, the car, and the bedroom. Nothing was tentative or appeared unplanned. Control was unmistakable.

We climbed to three thousand feet, the standard altitude for airwork practice, and leveled. He pulled the power back to 2,300 RPM, leaned the fuel mixture, and trimmed the aircraft for virtually hands-off flight. The air was clear and still, a beautiful evening for flying. We flew up the coast from Plum Island, and I waited for his next move. Eventually, Steve turned east over the water.

“You want to see a roll in one of these things?” he asked.

“You can’t roll a Warrior,” I said in disbelief. Rod and Steve always told me that the Piper low-wing aircraft could do nothing aerobatic. Not even a spin unless you tried really hard, and even then, it was never a full spin.

“You can do anything you want with it—you just have to know the airplane well enough. Watch this.”

He pulled back the power and edged the nose down to gain speed. I tried to make mental note of his moves, but in the next moment, I lost all ability to keep track of them as the plane reached some unknown speed in a nose-down attitude, and Steve yanked on the yoke and turned it hard. The right wing dropped violently. I felt the effects of aileron and rudder action as the blood in my head moved with the roll like a momentary high.

And then it was over. Steve’s hands and feet seemed to have hardly moved, and we leveled at just two hundred feet below the starting altitude.

³ Stall is a dangerous situation when an aircraft drops dramatically because of a too-low airspeed and/or too-high angle of attack (nose pointing up).

“Wow!” I laughed out loud. “That was wild!”

Steve had a self-satisfied grin on his face.

“It was over so fast, though. How about once more so I can see how you did it?” I was not scared. No; instead I was in even more awe of his flying skills, and as my admiration grew, so did my own goals. I trusted him.

“Okay. This time to the left,” he agreed. He was definitely enjoying it.

Once again, nose down, speed up, nose back up, power, left wing down ... and we rolled to the left with aileron and rudder forces I still did not understand. Steve leveled the wings, facing the ocean. This time I just smiled. Rolling was sexy, flying was sexy, and Steve was sexy.

The sun cast a reddish-orange glow as it set behind us, reflecting in the water below. Such a peaceful night, and he was twisting it all around with these maneuvers. No other boyfriend I'd had thrilled me like Steve. My boyfriends from high school and college were boring in comparison. I was smarter than them and achieved more than they did. Steve, though, was on a whole different playing field.

“So are you going to tell me how to do it?” I looked at him, waiting for enlightenment.

“It's just a matter of gathering enough speed by stuffing the nose down and then forcing it into the roll with enough aileron and opposite rudder. You've got to be real sure with all the moves, especially in this airplane, because you don't want to lose it halfway and fall through when you're inverted. If you think about the effects of the controls you're using, it makes perfect sense.”

Well, maybe it made sense to him. It was still a jumble of different manipulations in my mind, though I memorized what he said—“speed, aileron, and opposite rudder”—and tucked it away for future reference with all the other things he was teaching me.

He turned the airplane back toward Beverly and switched the radio to the ATIS frequency, 118.7, to hear Laverne's recorded voice still sounding very bored, now with information Delta.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“How about Bloody Marys at my house?”

“Sounds good.” Excitement over anything except aviation would never show in Steve's words, so I found it necessary to keep my own enthusiasm contained. He was cool, and I needed to keep cool.

“You like Bloody Marys, don't you? With horseradish and hot sauce, real hot?”

I nodded. It wouldn't have mattered what drink or how spicy it was.

“Five-Two-Five cleared to land,” Laverne said as we turned from base leg to final leg in the landing pattern.

“Roger, Five-Two-Five,” he confirmed in his radio voice. “Good. We’ll pick up the stuff on the way home. My brother might be home, but my father’s up at the house in Maine.”

“He has a house in Maine?”

The wheels rolled onto the runway in a perfect full stall landing.

“Five-Two-Five, taxi back to the ramp.”

“Roger, Five-Two-Five, taxi to the ramp,” came the tower response.

“It’s just an old house my father bought a long time ago. Kind of a shithole really. Needs a lot of work and has no running water or electricity. But we still like it, and the area is pretty. You’ll have to come up sometime.”

I hung on those last words. His father’s “shithole” could have been in Newark, and they would have had the same impact. “I was thinking of having the whole airport crew up there for a long weekend or something,” he continued. “Maybe you could come up then. You know, like Rod does every year for Labor Day weekend.”

I was immediately deflated. “The whole airport crew”? Is that how he felt about me? Was I just one of the proverbial gang?

“No, I don’t know,” I said, less interested now and even a little annoyed. “What does Rod do?”

He pulled in front of the tie-down spot and shut the engine down. “He has everyone—New England Flyers including the airport bums, his family, friends, students, everyone and anyone—up to his camp in Vermont. We roast a whole pig and camp there for the night. It’s a real good time.”

He tied the wings down while I tied the tail, and we walked back to the office. The lights were on inside, and I could see the usual gathering through the large windows. I cringed when one face came into view. It was Harriet. She was always there. Her frequent, apparently purposeless appearances at New England Flyers always lasted for hours.

Even though she had her private license from years before, Harriet never flew, at least not that I had ever seen. From all observations, I could class Harriet with the airport bums—the old farts, as Rod called them—non-active pilots who never flew anymore but spent endless hours in Rod’s little waiting area, smoking, drinking whiskey, and telling stories of their flying days. Some had been airline captains, flight engineers, or navigators, but some were amateurs who spent their

retirement building experimental aircraft kits at home in the garage. Except for Harriet. She did nothing.

Harriet was in her mid-thirties, a large woman with prematurely gray hair. Her entire social life seemed to be the New England Flyers waiting area, perpetually in waiting while others her age came and went, learning to fly and getting jobs. Not Harriet. She just hung around listening to everyone else's stories. She usually arrived about five thirty in the afternoon when she got off work. I think she sold insurance.

Steve, however, had been another part of her social life in the months before my arrival at the flight school. While I was working on my private, Steve occasionally came to work in the same clothes two days in a row. This happened a few times before I put it together with corroborating comments each of them made. I couldn't understand it. She was unattractive and twelve years older than Steve. At least I was just two years older. Maybe he ended up with her because the pickings for girlfriends in aviation were slim and she was better than nothing. I really couldn't imagine why, and it drove me crazy. Some airport bums called her Harry, for short, because of her masculine appearance. Harriet backed off when Steve and I started dating, but her time at the airport did not change, and it made me uncomfortable.

"Hi, guys," came Steve's usual greeting as we walked in the door.

There were five in the room, including Harriet, each with a paper cup filled with Rod's booze. Jerry Kennedy, one of the younger airport bums who did fly, sat with the bottle between his legs.

"Rod's gone home, Steve," Harriet told him as she reached for the bottle between Jerry's legs. "He said you have to fly early tomorrow, so check the schedule."

I rolled my eyes. She even acted like his mother.

"Shoot some pool, Steve?" Norm Guidaboni asked him. Norm was a retired Eastern Airlines captain.

"No, not tonight, Norm. I'm going to head home if I have to fly early," Steve answered. "Anyway, you beat me the last two times. I can't afford three times in the same week." The pool table was in the basement along with the ground-school classroom. It was an alternate spot some nights after the flying was done.

We left New England Flyers in their care. They were often the ones who locked up after they had drunk Rod's bottle dry. The next day I would have to replace it with my usual trip to the store for whiskey and stogies.

We drove separately to Steve's house, stopping on the way for Bloody Mary supplies and a few snacks. When we got there, the house was dark, so I figured his father and brother were not home. We unloaded the bags, and Steve began mixing the drinks.

Life for these three men in the Puchalski home was strange, at best. Only occasionally did I see his father or brother. If they weren't out, then they were likely behind the closed doors of their respective bedrooms. The origins of Steve's nature were not hard to imagine. His father was a coarse man with a bitter attitude toward life, and his brother disliked his father, spending most of his time alone in his bedroom. Mrs. Puchalski, Steve's mother, had died many years before. Steve's only spoken memory of her was of a sweet woman who hated her husband and loved her sons. He told me many times that his parents did not speak to each other for years before she developed cancer, after which they still did not speak. She died when Steve was twelve years old, leaving him only with the memory of a woman who hated her husband.

The family lived in the same house as they did when she was alive. The small living room was never used, nor was Mrs. Puchalski's bedroom. She'd had her own. These rooms, never touched since her death, seemed to be shrines to her memory even though that memory was bittersweet for all in the house.

On the fireplace were pictures of her with her husband in his uniform from the war, and later with her sons. She had a warm face and smile, and Steve looked like her, though his own face had taken on much of his father's cynicism. I occasionally wandered into the living room, looking at those pictures while waiting for Steve, feeling as though I knew her and was sympathetic to her position in the strange, cold house. Whatever chance she had in life to make her sons something of herself was lost when she died. Both Steve and his brother were so much like their father now.

