

Chapter 1

The pilot

Mr Desmond looked at Simon in the mirror. 'Have you been out to the desert before?' he asked.

Simon shook his head. 'No, sir. This will be our first time. Our parents only moved out to the gold mine a few weeks ago. We lived in Sydney before that. Dad was a doctor at one of the big hospitals.'

'And our mother didn't go out to work at all back then,' Angela added, without looking up from her drawing.

Mr Desmond smiled. 'I suppose they're finding the desert very different from living in Sydney.'

'Dad says there aren't as many cars out there,' Simon said. 'Life's different for Angela and me too – not being with our parents, having to live at school. When we were in Sydney, we all lived in a house.'

'Your family has seen a lot of changes, then,' Mr Desmond said as he began to slow down, then steered the car through a gate. 'Well, this is Geraldton airport. I'll find a place to park, then I'll help you inside with your bags.'

He found a parking space and stopped the car. Angela watched her twin brother. Simon was very interested in the small aircraft lined up on the other side of the high fence. *Sometimes he is such a typical boy*, she thought.

'What are you thinking about?' she asked him. She already knew, but she wanted to hear him admit it.

'I'm thinking about flying in one of those,' Simon replied.

Angela rolled her eyes. 'You soon will be,' she said. He was seven minutes older than her, but sometimes it felt as if he was seven years *younger*.

'No, Ange, I'm thinking about being the *pilot* in one of those planes.'

Angela laughed, but Mr Desmond saw it as an opportunity to be encouraging.

'Keep working hard the way you have been in my Maths class and you can be, one day, Simon,' he said. 'Come on, we need to hurry. Your pilot will be waiting for you.'

They took their luggage from the back of the car and carried it into the airport terminal. 'The pilot said he'd meet us near the café at two o'clock,' Mr Desmond said, looking at his watch. 'His name is Gus.'

'I hope he's a good pilot,' Angela said as she quickly took out her notebook and began to sketch an old woman sitting nearby. She was always sketching in her notebook. It helped the time pass, and she enjoyed people telling her how much they liked her pictures.

'I've heard that Gus is a very good pilot,' Mr Desmond said. 'I wonder if this is him coming over now.'

Angela looked up. She hoped that Mr Desmond was wrong, and that the man walking towards them *wasn't* their pilot. She'd always thought that pilots wore clean white shirts, polished shoes, and caps. This man wore a dirty grey T-shirt, old shorts, and sandals on his feet. The sandals had black grease on them.

The man stopped in front of the children. 'Are you the Smith children?' he asked, scratching at his half-beard.

'Yes, this is Simon Smith, and this is his sister Angela,' Mr Desmond replied. 'Are you Gus?'

The man shook his head. 'No, I'm not Gus. Gus is in Esperance. There was a big storm down there last night, and he couldn't fly back, so I'm going to take you out to the gold mine in my plane. My name's Eric.'

'Are you a real pilot?' Angela asked.

'Of course I'm a real pilot!'

'You don't really look like one, that's all,' Angela said.

'Ange!' said Simon.

'What?'

'Don't be rude!'

'Don't tell me what to do,' she snapped back at him.

'Simon's right, Angela,' said Mr Desmond. 'I think you should apologise to Eric.'

'Sorry, Eric,' Angela said, without looking up at him.

'I want to be a pilot,' Simon interrupted.

'Well, you can start by being a passenger,' Eric replied. 'Is this your luggage? Yes? Then follow me and we'll put it in the plane.'

Angela slipped her notebook into her school bag and swung the strap over her shoulder. There was something about Eric that she didn't like, but he'd been waiting for them near the café just as they'd planned, so he was obviously the right person. But there was something about his face. Maybe it was his eyes. They didn't look right. Or maybe it was the colour of his skin, which was pale and a little sickly, she thought. But he was their pilot, and pilots had to know what they were doing before they were allowed to fly. She'd also been told how safe it is to fly – even safer than riding in a car – so she felt sure that it would be all right.

'I'm going to sit in the front seat,' Simon said as they walked across the tarmac towards the plane.

'He wants to be a pilot,' Angela told Eric.

'I know,' said Eric. 'He said that before.'

'It's the only thing he ever talks about.'

'So *can* I sit in the front seat, Eric?' Simon asked, placing his bags on the tarmac and trying to see into the plane's cabin.

'Yes, as long as you don't touch anything.'

'I won't,' Simon replied. 'I do know what all the controls are, though. I've been reading for years about how to fly, and I've got a programme on my computer as well.'

'Reading about it is completely different from doing it,' Eric said quietly. 'So is playing computer games.'



Angela looked around at the other planes. They were all quite small, but Eric's was definitely the smallest. 'How many seats are there?' she asked.

'Four,' Eric said as he pulled the door open. An empty drink can fell out and landed on the tarmac, and Eric kicked it under the plane. 'Just throw your luggage over behind the back seat,' he told the children. 'I have to clean up a bit first.'

As he said this, Eric took a plastic bag out of his pocket and started to fill it with papers and other rubbish from the floor of the cabin. The children watched without speaking. Angela glanced at Simon, then at Mr Desmond. She wondered if they were each thinking the same thing she was. Were they wondering how wise it would be to fly with this man?

'All right, you can get in now,' Eric said to Angela. 'There's a step just here.'

Angela climbed in and sat down in the back. There wasn't much space – even less than in a car.

'There's a seat belt back there,' Eric told her.

Angela didn't need an invitation to fasten her belt. When she had done it up, she took a moment to look around. The inside of the plane looked quite old. Bits of the cloth from the ceiling had torn, and the seats were cracked. And it smelt like old food.

Mr Desmond put his head through the open doorway. 'Goodbye, Angela. I'll see you when you get back to school.'

'Mr Desmond, is this plane safe?' Angela asked.

'Oh yes, they're very careful about air safety these days,' Mr Desmond replied. 'Air travel is perfectly safe. You'll be fine. I'll see you back at school in two weeks. Enjoy your holidays.'

Then Mr Desmond was gone, and soon after that Eric was seated on the left, and Simon on the right. 'I heard you asking whether or not this plane is safe,' Eric said to Angela as he began to look over the instruments. 'I've been flying for twenty years, and I haven't crashed yet.'

'That's good.'

'I know what most of these do,' Simon said, pointing at the dials on the instrument panel.

'Good for you,' Eric replied. 'Do you see that?' he asked, pointing at the strange steering wheel in front of Simon. There was another one exactly the same in front of Eric. 'That's the yoke. Don't touch the yoke, do you hear me?'

'Of course,' Simon replied. 'I won't touch it.'

'Good. Then I think we're ready to go.' Eric reached across in front of Simon and pulled the door closed. It didn't lock properly, so he opened it and tried again, harder. This time it worked. Angela hoped that Simon had fastened his seat belt well. She found him annoying a lot of the time, but that didn't mean she wanted him to fall out of the door when they were in the air.

Eric was talking to himself. He looked over the dials once more, then tapped one of them with the tip of his finger. 'Come on, what's wrong with you?' he said.

'What's wrong?' Simon asked.

'It's nothing,' Eric replied. 'It's nothing at all. It's fine. Now, where's my GPS?'

'What's a GPS?' Angela asked.

Her brother answered her. 'It's electronic, and it works from a satellite. You know what a satellite is, don't you?'

Angela rolled her eyes. 'I'm not stupid, Simon! Of course I know what a satellite is! It's up there in outer space, going around and around.'

'That's right,' Simon said. 'And the satellite talks to the GPS, and tells us where we are.'

'But right now we *know* where we are,' Angela argued. 'We *know* that we're in Geraldton, so why do we need some electronic thing to tell us that?'

'Because we might not know where we are in an hour or more,' Eric said as he pressed some of the buttons on the GPS.

'This battery is almost flat, but I've got a spare one somewhere. I'll change it on the way.'

'Shouldn't you change the battery *before* we...?' Angela began to say, but Eric quickly raised one hand to stop her. He was talking on the radio, asking for permission to take off, so Angela closed her mouth. *It's all right. He's a professional pilot,* she reminded herself. *I have to trust him, just like I have to trust that these wings will stay connected to the plane.*

Angela jumped in her seat as the engine coughed twice and started. The blades of the propeller began to turn, which made the plane shake, and soon the blades were spinning at full speed. The plane moved slowly forward across the tarmac, and Angela noticed that she was holding the handle of her bag so tightly that her fingers had gone white. *Relax,* she told herself. *Air travel is perfectly safe.*

It seemed to Angela that Simon was enjoying himself more than she was. He clearly loved being in the front seat of a plane, even when they were only moving slowly along the tarmac of the runway, getting ready to take off. Angela could tell that he was keen to talk to Eric about what he was doing, but Eric was still concentrating on instruments and his misbehaving GPS. Angela was glad that her brother wasn't talking anyway. He didn't always notice when other people were too busy to talk to him, and he could make a nuisance of himself. She hated that.

They reached the end of the runway, and Eric brought the plane to a stop. Angela wondered why he was hesitating. It was as if he was thinking about something other than the job he had to do. As well as that, his face was dotted with sweat, as if he'd just run in a race. Angela looked at Simon. He didn't seem concerned, but that wasn't unusual for him.

Then, in an instant, Eric was sitting up straight, as if he was suddenly awake. He gripped the yoke with one hand, and with the other, he reached forward and pulled a handle. The plane

began to move forward, slowly at first, then more quickly. *Relax*, Angela reminded herself again as the runway began to flash past her window, faster and faster. She looked at Simon. A smile had spread across his face, and he wasn't even trying to hide it. *I'm glad he's enjoying it*, she thought. *Because I'm not.*

The plane was going so fast now that she thought it was going to shake apart. Then, just as it seemed that it couldn't go any faster, the shaking through her seat stopped, and the ground began to fall away. Angela felt a smile beginning to creep across her own face as she realised that they were really flying.

It surprised her to also realise that for the first time since she'd climbed into the cabin of this tiny aircraft, she felt safe.