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Level 5

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The Sugar Glider

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Prologue

The boat came to a stop. A man in a blue shirt shouted ‘South Bank’ and opened a gate in the side of the boat. The passengers began walking off the boat, into the beautiful park in the heart of the city.

Among the passengers was a man in his late fifties with white hair and a red face. He walked slowly, breathing a little heavily. He went across the grass to the Café Marcos and sat down at one of the tables outside, facing the river. On the opposite bank he could see the tall modern buildings of the city centre. It was a bright Saturday afternoon in November, a typical late spring day in Brisbane, Australia. There was a cool wind.

He looked at his watch: two o’clock, the time he had agreed to meet a man he didn’t know. He looked around. There was a play area nearby, full of children. Groups of families were walking on the path next to the river. He heard a voice behind him.

‘I’m Petersen.’ A tall, thin man of about thirty-five, wearing dark glasses, was standing by the table. He pulled out a chair and sat down. Then he took a mobile phone and a notebook from his pocket and put them on the table.

‘It’s a lovely afternoon,’ said the white-haired man. ‘A good day for flying.’

‘I haven’t got much time, Mr Copeman. Let’s get on with business,’ Petersen replied.

Copeman looked at him closely. 'You told me on the phone you had a job for me. Who are you?'

'I work for the government. We know you're a good pilot. We need you to fly to a mine out west to pick up some equipment and chemicals. It's quite simple, but the job needs to be kept secret.'

'Why?' Copeman asked.

'The mine is in the news at the moment. The area has a special meaning for the first Australians, the Murri people in particular, and they're demonstrating to get their land back.' The man picked up his notebook and wrote some numbers down.

'I'm busy. I've got a job flying to Melbourne,' Copeman said.

'We know about that,' Petersen interrupted. 'You're flying an old plane from Brisbane to the Melbourne Air Museum.' Copeman was surprised. How did Petersen know? Petersen continued: 'The timing is perfect for our job. You can land at the mine, pick up what we need and continue your journey to Melbourne. It'll only take a few extra hours, and you'll be well paid for your trouble.'

He pushed the notebook across the table. Copeman looked in amazement at the numbers written there.

'That's a lot of money, I think you'll agree,' said Petersen. 'It would be a big help towards the cost of your new flying school.'

'How do you know so much about me?' Copeman asked.

'That's our business. We know that you want to retire from long-distance flying and start a flying school.'

Copeman thought to himself. With that amount of money, he could start the school soon.

‘There’s something else,’ Petersen said, and wrote again in his notebook. ‘You’ll need a good co-pilot with you.’

‘I don’t know if I can find anyone that quickly.’

‘Yes, you can.’ Petersen put his notebook on the table, next to Copeman and pointed to a name. ‘This is a friend of yours, isn’t it?’

Another surprise. ‘He’s not even in Australia at the moment’ Copeman replied. ‘He’s been working in the Pacific Islands . . .’

‘We know he’s coming back next week, and we know you’re meeting him. He’s an experienced pilot. We know you could both do a good job for us.’

‘And where should we take the stuff that we pick up?’ Copeman asked.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Petersen replied. ‘Just fly on to Melbourne as you planned – we’ll arrange the rest.’ A small smile moved across his face. ‘So, what’s your answer? Yes or no? We need to know now.’

Copeman looked towards the river. Another boat was coming in. He thought hard. It was a lot of money, and he thought he could persuade his friend. Most pilots loved the romance of flying older planes. And there was another thing. His friend had gone off to the Pacific Islands last year after an unhappy divorce and left his family behind. If they could start the flying school together, his friend could stay in Australia and perhaps he could get his family back together again. Family was the most important thing. Copeman looked at the children over in the playground. He had no children himself.

‘All right,’ he whispered.

Petersen picked up his mobile phone and rang a

number. When someone answered, he got up and walked a little way from the table. 'He says yes, Mr F,' Copeman heard Petersen say. Then Petersen put the phone back in his pocket and pulled out two envelopes. The first one had nothing written on it.

'This is all the information you need about where and when to go,' Petersen said and handed the envelope to Copeman. On the front of the second envelope it said simply: N. Manderville, Manager, Warrangi Mine.

'When you get to the mine, give this to the manager.' Petersen handed the second envelope to Copeman. 'Oh, and there's one last thing.'

'What?' Copeman asked.

'Make two flight plans, one to Melbourne direct and one stopping at Warrangi, but that's just for you. Hand in the first one to the airfield office, and destroy the other one when you've finished using it. No one except you and the co-pilot must know you're stopping at Warrangi.'

Copeman was not sure. 'But it's against the law . . .'

'It's for your government, remember? Just make sure nothing goes wrong.' Petersen got up. 'We'll put half the money in your bank while you're away. You'll get the rest when the job is done,' said Petersen. Then he left.

Chapter 1 *Coming home*

Don Radcliffe looked ahead from the window of his new aeroplane. It was small, a two-seater. He had been flying for hours, with nothing but the blue Pacific Ocean beneath him. Now he could see a green line coming towards him. It was the east coast of Australia. Home. Or was it? He wasn't sure any more. Perhaps his real home was up here, high above the earth.

It was a year since he'd seen Australia; a year of jobs flying around the beautiful islands of the Pacific; a year since his divorce. He'd saved enough to buy this small plane, and had money left over. Then his old friend and teacher Paul Copeman had called him. Paul wanted to retire and start a flying school. Why didn't Don come back and join him, Paul had asked. Don knew it wasn't just for the business. Paul and his wife Beulah had been upset about Don's divorce. He had always been like a son to the older couple, and it had hurt them to see Don leave his wife Sylvia and his teenage daughter Judy. It had hurt Don too, but at the time he had just wanted to get away. Now he was coming back and soon he would see them all again.

At last he could see Brisbane below him. Its river went through the heart of the city like a silver snake. He turned the plane southeast, following the river, flying over the green suburbs. In a few minutes he could see Everett's Field, a small airfield, used mostly by private planes. There

were a number of small planes on the ground. He moved the controls and the plane began to go down.

As the airfield came closer, he noticed a large silver-grey plane in a corner of the field. 'That looks like an old Douglas DC4, from the Second World War,' Don thought. 'There aren't many of those left. I wonder what it's doing here.'

Like most pilots, he loved all types of planes, especially old ones. They were simpler, and more fun to fly.

He circled the airfield, looking for Sylvia's Land Cruiser. There were a few cars near the office buildings, but none of them was Sylvia's. 'Had she got a new car since he went away?' he wondered.

Sylvia had been surprised when he'd called her the week before, but she'd promised to bring Judy, their daughter, to meet him. Judy was fourteen now, and Don was missing her growing up. Judy and Don were planning to stay with the Copemans for a few days. Don had promised to take Judy for trips in his new plane. Sylvia had sounded happy with the idea, and Judy had been very excited.

Don hoped he could see more of Sylvia too and he hoped that Sylvia felt the same. He was sorry things had got so bad between them. The stress of a pilot's life had been difficult for them both. He had been away from home a lot, and Sylvia had never liked it. Perhaps a year was long enough to forget the past.

He felt the wheels of the plane touch the ground. He braked and after slowing down. The plane finally came to a stop. Taking a case from behind the pilot's seat he climbed out and looked around. A few mechanics were servicing some of the planes. He walked towards the airfield

buildings. Over near the fence, a man with white hair was waving. Don called out, 'Hey, Paul!'

'Hello, Don! How's it going? Is that your new plane? She looks good.'

Don reached the fence. 'She's beautiful to fly. She almost flies herself. We'll have to take her up together, Paul. It's good to see you!' They shook hands warmly.

'I was expecting to see Sylvia and Judy here too. Haven't they arrived?' Don asked.

Paul shook his head. 'Not yet. I'm looking forward to seeing them again, though. I haven't seen them since they moved out to the farm. I've missed you all, Don.'

'I suppose they'll be here soon. Let's go into the office. I have to check in my papers.' As they walked towards the office, the old plane across the airfield caught Don's eye. It was shining in the sun. He stopped for a moment.

'By the way, Paul,' he said, 'I noticed that old plane as I was coming in. It's a DC4, isn't it?'

'That's the *Sugar Glider*.' Paul smiled.

'Is it still flying?'

'Not for much longer. It's been sold to a museum. Why, would you like to fly it?' Paul asked.

'Sure, I love those old planes . . . ' Don saw the expression on Paul's face. 'You're serious, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am serious. A job has come up, Don, and I need your help.'

'Tell me about it,' Don said.

'I want you to help me fly that DC4 to Melbourne. Tomorrow. How about it?'

'Tomorrow?' Don laughed.

'That's right.'

Don looked at his friend for a moment. ‘Paul, you know I promised to spend some time with Judy. It’s been a year, remember? I haven’t been a very good father.’

‘I understand, Don, but it wouldn’t take much time.’

‘Why do you need me? You can fly it by yourself, can’t you?’

Paul thought for a moment. He didn’t want to tell Don how Petersen had insisted on Don flying with him. Not yet.

‘I just thought you might be interested. There aren’t too many of those planes left.’

‘What is the job, exactly?’ Don was curious.

Paul smiled. ‘It’s going to the Melbourne Air Museum – its last flight – but I also have to make a stop on the way, at a mine out west, and pick some things up for the government. That mine is in the middle of nowhere. Really, I could use some help.’

Don noticed Paul was breathing quite fast. ‘Are you OK, Paul?’ he asked, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

‘I’m fine, Don. Don’t worry.’

‘OK. So it’s just a trip to Melbourne?’

‘Sure. The whole trip will only take two days, and they’re paying a lot of money. We could use it for the flying school.’

‘I don’t know, Paul. What about Judy?’ Don said.

‘I know, I know. I want you to be with her too, but there’ll be plenty of time, now you’re back. There aren’t many chances to fly planes like this one, Don. You know you’d love it. Two days, I promise. Judy can stay at the house with Beulah. She’ll like that.’

‘Just two days?’ Don said.

‘Sure. The mine’s only a couple of hours away. It’s a place called Warrangi. We’ll pick up some chemicals and equipment, then go straight down to Melbourne. We’ll stay overnight, look at the museum, and maybe go to one of those nice Greek restaurants in the city. I’ve even got return flights reserved.’

Don grinned. ‘Were you so sure I’d do it?’

‘Two days, Don,’ Paul said. ‘Then you can take Judy wherever you want!’

Don thought it over. He was looking forward to spending time with his daughter, but it was true, there would be plenty of time later. He intended to stay in Australia if the flying school worked out. Sylvia would be angry, of course. She had always complained that his love of flying came before his family. But it was his job, and he loved it. And when would he get another chance like this?

‘I suppose it’ll be OK,’ he said at last.

‘Good man!’ Paul smiled.

Chapter 2 *A family meeting*

Two hours later, Paul and Don were still sitting in the office, drinking coffee and talking about Don's work in the Pacific Islands. From the window Don saw a red Land Cruiser coming up the narrow airfield road towards them. It came to a stop near the office and a woman got out. Don got up, his heart beating fast as he recognised Sylvia. She looked nervous. Then Judy got out too. She was taller than Don remembered her, but she still had her long dark wavy hair, tied back as always, and the same pretty face as her mother. She looked brown and well from her outdoor life in the country, Don thought. Don and Paul went outside to meet them.

'Hello, Judy,' Don said, going forward to kiss her. She bent her face towards him and smiled. 'Hi, Dad,' she said. 'Welcome home.'

'Who is this lovely young woman?' said Paul. Judy smiled and put her arms round him. Paul had always been like a favourite uncle to her.

'Where's your new plane?' Judy asked her father.

Don pointed across the airfield. 'Can you see that two-seater with the red line down the side?'

'Yes. It looks cool.'

'That's it,' he said.

'When can we go up in it? Tomorrow?'

'Soon. We'll talk about it later.' Don said, looking at the ground.

Sylvia came towards them. ‘Hi’, she said nervously. She kissed Don quickly on the cheek, then turned to Paul. ‘It’s wonderful to see you,’ she said.

‘Nice to see you again, Sylvia,’ said Paul. ‘How are things down on the farm?’

‘Good thanks, Paul.’

‘We were worried about you,’ Don said.

‘Look, I’m really sorry we’re so late. There was a lot of traffic on the roads because there are demonstrations this week out west.’

‘Demonstrations?’ Don had not followed the news in his home country for some time.

‘It’s about land rights for people like the Murri,’ said Judy excitedly. ‘We’ve been studying it in school.’

‘Have you?’ said Don. ‘So you know all about it?’

‘Yes,’ said Judy, and gave him a history and politics lesson right there on the airfield. Don smiled proudly. He knew, of course, about how the British in the nineteenth century had started building cities and farms on the Murri people’s lands – lands they had previously wandered for 40,000 years. But he was out of touch with the progress the Murri people were making in fighting back.

‘So now they want some of it back, at least some of the special places. They should have some rights, shouldn’t they?’ Judy finished.

‘I suppose they should,’ Don said. ‘You’ll have to tell me more about it later.’

Paul decided it was time to leave Don alone with his family. ‘Don, I have to check a few things. When you’re ready we’ll take Judy back to my place. Are you coming too, Sylvia?’

‘No, not today, Paul. I have to go into the city.’ She was looking around as if expecting someone. ‘I’ll see you and Beulah again soon, I’m sure.’

‘OK. Take care then,’ Paul said and walked back into the office.

‘I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes,’ Don said. There was a long silence when Paul had gone.

‘So, how are the Pacific Islands?’ Sylvia said at last.

‘It’s a beautiful part of the world,’ Don replied.

‘Yes, I know you were happy there,’ said Sylvia.

‘And how’s the farm?’ Don asked.

‘It’s good. I’m glad I kept it after my parents died. It’s a nice change, although I miss the city sometimes. It’s such a long drive. It’s been good for Judy though. She really likes it now.’

‘Is that right, Judy?’ Don looked at his daughter.

‘Sure. I’m learning all sorts of stuff about living in the bush and I ride my horse everywhere.’

‘So you have a horse now? How long have you been riding?’ Don asked.

‘About four months,’ Judy answered.

‘She can ride very well,’ Sylvia said, not meeting Don’s eye.

‘So you’re going into the city?’ Don asked. ‘I was thinking, maybe we could all have dinner.’

Sylvia shook her head. ‘Not today. I’m . . . I’m meeting a friend.’

She changed the subject. ‘It will be nice for Judy to fly with you. She’s looking forward to it so much. Look, I’m really sorry we were so late. I expect you want to take her back to Paul’s soon.’

‘There’s no hurry,’ said Don. ‘Not for me,’ he thought, but Sylvia seemed anxious for him to leave.

At that moment, they heard the noise of an engine above them and looked up. A helicopter was coming towards the airfield.

‘I hope I can visit the farm,’ Don continued. ‘I may be here for a while, if we start this flying school . . .’

He realised Sylvia wasn’t listening. She was looking at the helicopter, which was landing a hundred meters away. The engine stopped, and Don saw a tall man with shiny black hair get out of the pilot’s seat. He was wearing a light business suit. He came towards them, waving. Sylvia’s face went red.

‘What’s he doing here?’ said Judy.

‘Hello Sylvia, hello Judy,’ said the man as he reached them. ‘And you must be Don. Sylvia told me she was meeting you here. Welcome back to Australia.’

‘Don, this is Patrick Forsha,’ said Sylvia in a small voice.

They shook hands. ‘We’ve met, but you probably don’t remember, Don. At a party a couple of years ago,’ Patrick said.

‘Maybe, I’m not sure.’ Don thought back. He thought he remembered Patrick’s face. He looked like the sort of rich businessman who liked to show he had money. What was he doing here? He noticed that Patrick smiled at him with his mouth, but not with his eyes.

‘And how’s that horse I bought you?’ Patrick said to Judy. ‘Your mother tells me you’re an expert rider now.’

‘Her name’s Sasha,’ Judy said, rather coldly, Don noticed. ‘I had a battle with her in the beginning, but I can control her now.’

‘I’m sure you can. Look, I’ve brought you something. I was going to give it to your mother to give to you later, but now you’re here . . .’ Patrick took a small package out of his pocket and gave it to Judy. She opened it carefully.

‘It’s perfume,’ she said in a flat voice. Don noticed it was a very expensive one.

‘For a young woman who’s becoming as beautiful as her mother.’ Patrick smiled.

‘Thanks,’ Judy said quietly and put the perfume in her pocket.

Don felt angry. Who did this Forsha think he was, coming out to the airfield like this and giving his daughter presents in front of him?

Forsha turned to Sylvia. ‘Well, are you ready?’ he asked. ‘I thought we’d have dinner in Brisbane and then go down to the Gold Coast after that, if that’s OK.’

‘Gold Coast?’ Don asked.

‘Patrick has invited me to his new hotel on the Gold Coast for a few days,’ Sylvia said, looking away.

‘Yes,’ said Forsha, ‘and I have a meeting before dinner, so we must be off. It was nice to meet you again, Don.’ He turned and walked back towards the helicopter.

Sylvia turned to look at Don.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, and turned to Judy. ‘Have a good time darling. I’ll call you at Paul’s tonight.’

She looked at Don and started to say something, but stopped herself. She kissed her daughter on the cheek and followed Patrick, leaving Don and Judy alone together.

Judy spoke first, ‘I don’t like perfume. He’s always buying me presents I don’t want.’

‘Keep it,’ said Don. ‘You might use it one day.’ He

turned to look at his daughter. ‘Has . . . has that man – Mr Forsha – been seeing your mum a lot?’

Judy looked unhappy. ‘For about six months. She met him on a trip to the city, I think. Sometimes he flies out to the farm. I think he wants to marry her.’

Don looked at his daughter. She had grown up so much while he was away. She was changing fast, and he felt he didn’t know her any more. He didn’t know what sort of things she liked now, or how she felt.

‘Do you want him to marry your mother?’ he asked.

Judy shook her head and looked at her father. ‘I don’t like him very much. And . . .’ She stopped.

‘And what?’

‘He frightens me.’

Chapter 3 *The Sugar Glider*

Paul Copeman appeared at the office door and looked out. 'OK, I'm finished,' he said. 'I thought we could have a quick look at the DC4, Don. Have you told Judy about our plans?' he asked.

'No, not yet.' Don replied. Judy looked at him questioningly. 'Judy, we'll have to wait a couple of days before we do any trips in my new plane,' her father said. 'Paul and I have a small job to do.'

'Oh, Dad,' Judy said sadly.

'Don't worry, Judy,' said Paul. 'You can stay with Beulah at the house, and we'll be back before you know it.'

'OK,' Judy nodded, but she still looked unhappy.

Paul put his arm around her and pointed across the airfield at the DC4. 'We're flying that lovely old plane to Melbourne. It's called the *Sugar Glider*. Come on, let's all go and have a look.'

Together they walked across the airfield towards the plane. Its shape threw a long shadow in the afternoon sun. A ladder stood against it. A painted line went from the nose of the plane back along the roof. There were two great propeller engines on each wing. Oil was falling slowly in drops from one of the engines.

'Is that normal?' Judy asked, pointing at a large tray under the wing filling with oil.

Paul laughed. 'It's like an old car. It uses a lot of oil, but

it's OK. This is a plane with history. It's had a lot of adventures.'

'Really?' said Judy. 'What like?'

'Well,' Paul said, 'it was made in America, and first used for carrying American soldiers in the Second World War. Then a private company bought it, and used it to carry coffee from South America. Later it went to an Asian country. It used to be a president's private plane.'

'How do you know all this?' Judy asked.

'Every plane has a record of its history, of every flight. It's called the log book,' Don told her.

'Can we look inside?' Judy said.

'Of course, let's go,' said Paul.

Don was pleased that Judy was showing an interest in the plane. He pulled open the heavy door to the cockpit, where the pilots sat. The controls were much simpler than in modern planes. There was plenty of room in the cockpit, with two seats for the pilots, and two more seats behind. Don, Paul and Judy went back through a door into the plane and found a heavy wooden table and black leather chairs fixed to the floor.

'This was the president's meeting room, I suppose,' said Don. 'Let's see what else we can find.'

They went through another door to the back of the plane, which was mostly empty space. There were cupboards on either side. Judy opened one, and was surprised to see some cans inside. They looked quite old. They were cans of soup, beans and other vegetables.

'What are these for?' she said.

'Someone must have left them. Emergency food supplies maybe,' said Don, looking over her shoulder.

Judy noticed a set of holes along the floor. ‘What are those?’ she asked.

‘There were seats here before,’ said Paul. ‘I told you the plane used to carry people as well as things.’

‘And why is it called the *Sugar Glider*?’ Judy asked. ‘That’s the name of an Australian animal.’

She pictured the strange animal with its bright eyes, thick tail, and the black line down its body. So that was why they had painted the line on the plane. She had seen a sugar glider once, on holiday in the north Queensland rainforest. She remembered the yip-yip-yip noise it had made.

‘Well, it wasn’t called that at first,’ said Paul. ‘I told you it was a president’s private plane. An Australian pilot, John Henderson, used to work for him. But there was a war in the president’s country. The government was losing the war, and Henderson flew the president to safety in Australia. So he gave the plane to Henderson as a thank-you present. Henderson started his own company, carrying things all over Australia, but now the plane’s getting too old, so he’s just sold it to the Melbourne Air Museum. That’s where we’re taking it, for its last trip.’

‘Wow, it’s been everywhere. I wish I could fly in it!’ said Judy.

Don had a sudden thought. Maybe Judy could come with them on the trip to Melbourne. He decided to speak to Paul about it later.

Chapter 4 *An argument*

Paul and Beulah Copeman's house was a blue and white 'Queenslander', a wooden house painted white with green edges. A jacaranda tree was dropping purple flowers onto the garden. Paul parked in front of the house and they went up the front steps. Paul's wife Beulah came to meet them.

She took Judy's arm. 'My goodness,' she said, 'how you've grown! And Don! You haven't changed at all!'

'How have you been, Beulah?' Don said.

'Fine, Don. I'm so glad you're back. We've missed you. Come inside' she said.

They all went in and Don looked around the house. He knew it so well: the pictures of aeroplanes on the walls; the large shelves with glass doors. Here too, small metal or plastic planes of all kinds could be seen behind the glass. Everything was very neat and tidy.

No children, thought Don. He thought it was a pity. Children always liked Paul and Beulah, and they had always been very special people for Judy.

'Why don't you men sit out in the shade?' Beulah suggested. 'And Judy, you can have a shower if you like. You must be hot after that long drive.'

'Thanks, I will.' Judy followed Beulah out of the room.

'Come outside, Don. I expect you'd like a beer,' Paul said. He took two bottles from the fridge and led Don to the back of the house. They sat down on wooden chairs on

the deck, a raised covered area outside. Below the deck was a small, neat garden. Two beautifully coloured birds came and sat on the wall.

‘So, Don, will you enjoy being back, do you think?’

‘I think so, Paul. I had a good job in the islands; it’s a peaceful kind of life. But when you called, I realised how much I missed home.’

‘And your family.’ added Paul.

‘Of course. I left in such a hurry, didn’t I?’ Don said. ‘After the divorce I just wanted to get away. Now I feel I have to get to know Judy all over again. At the moment, I’m finding it a bit difficult to know what to say to her.’

‘Well, Don, it’s early days,’ Paul said. ‘I can see she’s glad you’re back. She needs a father. It was such a pity about you and Sylvia. Brisbane’s loveliest couple, I always thought.’ He smiled sadly.

‘When you asked me to come back and start the flying school . . .’ Don began.

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t know; I hoped there might be another chance to work things out with Sylvia.’

‘I hope so too,’ said Paul. ‘It’s no secret that I’ve always wanted to help both of you. I think you both need another chance.’

Don frowned. ‘But it looks like I might be too late.’

‘What makes you say that?’ Paul asked.

‘That helicopter that came in to the airfield this afternoon,’ Don explained to his friend, ‘belonged to Sylvia’s new boyfriend. He’s taken her off to the Gold Coast for the weekend. Judy seems to think it’s quite serious.’

‘What’s his name?’