

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.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-53661-5 - The Sugar Glider Level 5
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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.

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‘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.