



There was no special equipment he had to wear: no goggles, no footwear, no helmet, even. Just headphones and the safety harness, which was a seatbelt with straps over both shoulders and a buckle that came up between your legs like in a baby seat.

He'd sat in the *Drifter* heaps of times before, when he was waiting to watch Dad fly, but sitting in it before *he* was about to fly felt completely weird. The glider's wings stretched away either side of him, disproportionately long.

'This is quite rare now, this design of glider,' Dad said, 'with the seats side by side like this. Most of the gliders these days are tandem, with the two seats one behind the other.' Dad put his hands on his seat and said, 'But this is so much more fun, I reckon, because we can see each other during the flight.'

Spencer nodded, and then furrowed his brow. 'Does that mean this glider is quite ... old?'

‘It is old, but it passes all the same strict safety checks that the most modern aircraft do, mate. I have total confidence in her.’

Around him, the fibreglass cockpit was close, and the sun beat onto his skin. He could see why Dad was so full-on about wearing sunscreen and a hat when he went up. As Reg’s plane began taxiing, Spencer felt his bum must be nearly scraping the tarmac the seats were so low to the ground.

Spencer sucked a slow ribbon of air through his nose, and tried to relax as Reg towed them along the gravel runway, the wind catching and buffeting lightly under the *Drifter’s* wings. As they rose, it felt like the plane was being lifted from its own weight, somehow. Like being in an elevator.

‘It’s easier than driving a car, most pilots reckon,’ Dad said, but Spencer looked at the equipment and controls all around them and couldn’t believe that being in charge of this or any plane could be easy.

They went up and up and up, hanging from Reg’s plane like a baby on an umbilical cord.

‘Okay, we’re at about two thousand feet now,’ Dad said. ‘I’m going to release us from the tow plane,’ and Spencer saw the metal cable whipping away like a cut snake.

Once they'd been on their own for a few minutes Dad said, 'Look around us, Spence. What do you see?'

'Uhhh ... sky. A couple of birds. Clouds.'

'Yep. Anything else?'

'No.'

'Exactly.'

And it was true. Apart from the hard splats of insects as the void between them and the ground grew, there was nothing else up here. In the distance Spencer could see another small plane-like thing, but it was a wedge-tailed eagle, circling the scrub, making perfect, silent spirals.

'The wedgies always hang at the top of the thermals,' said Dad. 'It's their spot.'

They were up high now, and it was cold outside — the air was fogging the edges of the windscreen — but in the cockpit they were sealed in, snug, silent. The silence is like something pressing on you, Spencer thought, and it's almost ... loud. Up here, it felt like he had bat's ears: sonic radar detectors, picking up every little squeak, every *shushhhh*, every bend in the wind as the *Drifter* cut through, dipped down, yearned upwards.

Dad looked over, lifted his headphones off one ear. 'What do you reckon?'

Spencer's face was full of amazement. He tried to find words.

Dad nodded, smiled. 'I know, mate, I know. Just enjoy it. Keep the headphones off for a while. There's nothing like it.'

You could call his dad a fanatic. Mum did. 'Fanatic's a bit harsh,' Dad said in his own defence on one occasion.

'Is it? It's fanaticism, or hobby-obsession at the very least. The *Drifter* takes up a lot of your in-your-head time, put it that way.'

'I love how scientific you are about these things, Suze.'

Mum'd roll her eyes. 'You know what I mean.'

'I know. I do love it,' he sighed. 'I love it when I'm up there and I love it when I'm down here, thinking about being up there.'

'Just so long as there's a bit of us up there with you — and a lot of you down here with us.'

'There is,' he looked at her. 'There always is.' He paused. 'I wish you'd still come up with me, Suze. I miss our flights together.'

Mum shook her head, but didn't meet his gaze. 'Not now. Not now we've got these two. Imagine if something were to——'

‘More chance of us being killed in a car crash, you know that.’

She shook her head but quietly said, ‘I know. I know.’

The year before they moved down to Skippers Cove they’d had a rough patch, the Gray family. Spencer and Pippa had watched as their parents orbited one another like unfriendly planets, with more than the occasional fiery collision. The tension got to Spencer, and he found himself blowing up at things at school that wouldn’t normally bother him. He’d even got upset with his oldest mate, Stew, when they were partnered up on the climate change project. Stew hadn’t believed him when Spencer wrote down cling wrap on their list of the things you can put in the recycling bin.

‘Nah, you can’t put that stuff in the recycling.’

‘You can! It’s plastic.’

‘Yeah, but it’s a different *kind* of plastic from OJ bottles and stuff. Look, my mum’s a total nutter about this and she’s actually got the list of what can go in the yellow bin stuck up on the fridge. She downloaded it from the Council website. I’m telling you, she’s a psycho about recycling — and she *hates* that you can’t recycle cling wrap!’

Spencer had let out a kind of animal roar of frustration at that and Mrs Lewis asked Spencer in her shocked voice to leave the classroom until he felt calmer.

The next day, Mrs Lewis had called his mum. Apparently she'd said Spencer had been 'sullen' and 'lacking in focus' lately in class. There was a long, tender hug from Mum after school that day.

Not long after that, the whole family went to see a counsellor at Relationships Australia, which was possibly the most embarrassing thing Spencer had ever had to do. But the counsellor was warm and kind and made sure everybody listened to one another, one at a time. They all had to say one thing they loved about another member of the family. Dad said he loved Mum's calmness, and then went quiet. Mum choked up a bit and said she loved that Dad was an adventurer, and said without him she'd be stuck in her comfort zone and never push herself to do the hard stuff. Pippa said she liked Dad's sausage sizzles. Everyone managed to hold in their laughter at that.

'And what about you, Spencer?' the counsellor asked. 'What's something that you really appreciate about one of the people in this room today?'

Spencer had never felt so awkward, and nearly had to put his hand over his eyes just to speak. 'Um ...

I guess I like that Mum and Dad are sort of ... two halves of an apple, if you know what I mean. It's like they're kind of opposites, but if you put them together they are just right.'

The counsellor had smiled and looked over at Mum and Dad, who were staring at their feet.

Mum and Dad had kept going to see her after that, but without Spencer and Pips. The mood in the house lifted like a cloudbank, slowly but surely.

Now, Spencer checked out the controls and dials around them.

'They're all the same flight controls as you'd have in most light aircraft,' Dad said, pointing and reeling off the names: *rudder pedals, control stick, air brakes*.

'Brakes?' Spencer said. 'What do you do with those? Slam them on, midair!'

'No, it's not a Road Runner cartoon, Spence. Applying the brakes in midair helps you to dump height, if you need to leave a thermal, say. The brakes are also for when you're on the ground — you use them to slow and stop the aircraft on the runway, and sometimes for ground-turns.'

'Now, these,' his dad fondly tapped the dials and glass-covered needles in front of him, 'are the instruments.

They help you manage the controls — the flaps and stick and so forth. The instruments *tell* you things about the aircraft; the controls *do* things to the aircraft,’ he said. ‘We’ve got the airspeed indicator, the altimeter, and over here, the variometer.’

*Leon will totally spew when I tell him all this,* Spencer thought.

He wanted to know everything about those instruments. There were so many things to understand, to know how to use.

‘What’s that?’ he said, pointing to a yellow thing dangling from the console.

‘That’s the bung. You pull it to release the tow cable, to make you independent of the tow plane once it’s pulled you up high enough. I used it earlier, to separate us from Reg’s plane.’

Half an hour later, when Dad murmured *lowering landing gear*, Spencer felt a flood of adrenalin. He knew Dad knew what he was doing, but he wished Reg’s plane was still in front of them, towing them back down like he’d towed them up.

‘Relax,’ said Dad. ‘You’re clenching. And gripping.’

‘Are you really up for this, Dad?’

‘Put your headphones back on now. It makes it easier to talk when I’m having to concentrate.’

Spencer adjusted the mic. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘Very well, mate. And you me?’

Dad gently pitched the aircraft downward, pushing on the stick.

‘I can hear you,’ Spencer squeaked. ‘Don’t worry about me, just ... focus on all *that*,’ he waved at the instruments.

His dad pulled his sunnies down over his eyes as he turned into the sun. He pushed the glider into the wind. Months ago, when he’d described to Spencer how it felt to be up in the sky, Dad’d said he ‘went into himself’ up here, like he was entering another world. He said it must be a bit like how a yachtie feels out on the ocean. He told Spencer that over the years he’d learned how to read the currents of the air, the eddies of wind coming off the land. Dad reckoned he knew the *Drifter* like he knew an old friend. He loved that plane. He loved how it felt to be up in the sky, like flying with your lungs full of helium, almost as if your body itself was the plane, your arms the wings.

‘We’ll be on the ground shortly, Spence,’ he said into his headset. ‘Thanks for coming up with me. Can’t imagine a better flight companion.’

Spencer grinned at him. ‘Don’t lose it now, Dad. Get this thing back on the ground safe and sound, okay?’