

Chapter 1 *Control!*

‘Golf Bravo Alpha. You are cleared for take-off.’

Eighteen-year-old Swiss-Italian, Francesca Bartolli, sat in the small single-engined Cessna 152 and stared through the window at the runway ahead. A white dotted line stretched down the middle of the concrete far into the distance. Had the moment finally arrived? Was she really going to pilot a plane at last?

‘Well?’ said a voice in her headphones. ‘What are you waiting for?’ It was Doug, the flying instructor, in the seat beside her.

Francesca felt hot. The sun was shining brightly through the windscreen, turning the plane’s small cockpit into an oven. And the headphones were tight and painful on her ears. ‘You mean you want me to ...’ she began.

‘Push the throttle in smoothly and hold the control column steady,’ the instructor said. ‘When I tell you, just pull back gently. I’ll do all the rest.’

‘OK,’ Francesca answered in a shaky voice.

Doug called the control tower for permission to take off, but Francesca didn’t take in what he said. Now that the moment had finally arrived, she suddenly wondered if it was really what she wanted.

The instructor’s voice became firmer. ‘Right, let’s go!’ he said.

Francesca didn’t hesitate now. Setting her mouth with new determination, she stretched out her right arm and

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pushed carefully on the throttle. Immediately, the engine roared and the little aircraft seemed to sit up. The next moment it was being pulled forward as if on a huge elastic band. Within a couple of seconds, they were already racing along the runway. The white dotted lines began disappearing quickly below the nose of the plane.

‘Keep your eye on the airspeed dial,’ she heard the instructor say in her headphones again, above the roar of the engine. ‘When the needle reaches 60, pull back gently.’

Francesca didn’t answer. There was so much to look at, so much going on. It seemed somehow crazy, this race down the runway. She watched the needle going round the dial: 40 … 45 … The white dotted lines on the runway flashed below the plane. Her head felt as if it was bursting. All of a sudden, the needle was at 60.

‘Right, pull back!’ came Doug’s voice.

But already Francesca was pulling back on the control column. It was much lighter than she expected, just like pulling your hand slowly through cream. Straightaway the nose of the aircraft lifted and the runway disappeared from view. The next moment she felt the plane rise into the air.

‘OK, hold it there!’ said Doug.

Francesca felt a strange smile pull at the sides of her mouth. She couldn’t help it. They were flying!

‘That’s enough! Keep the nose down. Don’t climb too fast. Keep your eye on that airspeed dial. Climb at 80. 80’s the perfect climb.’

Francesca wanted to look around. Already the airfield was beginning to slip away below, and new fields were coming into view, but Francesca had to keep her eye on the airspeed dial. The needle was dropping. 70 … 65 …

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‘Nose down! Keep it down!’

Francesca pushed the control column forward quickly. The engine roared and the plane began bouncing up and down. She pulled back, trying to correct the movement, but then the wings began rolling. She felt a bit desperate; everything was going wrong.

‘OK,’ said Doug, ‘I have control.’ He reached out to the control column in front of him and the plane began flying steadily. Francesca felt her face burn red with shame.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean ...’ She couldn’t even finish.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Doug answered. ‘Everyone finds it difficult at first.’

She glanced across at the man. He was smiling at her.

‘Just relax,’ he said. ‘I’ll take us up a bit higher, then we can level out and you can try again.’

Francesca watched as the instructor settled the plane into a proper climb, then looked out through the side window. A sick feeling was rising up inside her. Was flying really going to be so much harder than she’d imagined? She’d been looking forward to this moment for so long, dreamed of piloting a plane for so many years – surely it wasn’t going to be a disappointment after all?

‘You OK?’ Doug called. Francesca didn’t look round. She was determined not to let the man see her nerves.

‘Yes, fine,’ she answered. She looked down. She saw a farm pass beneath them; the buildings getting smaller even as she looked. Then there was a road. Already the cars on it looked like toys that she might reach out and pick up in her hand. Next a wood slid below, and the silvery S-shape of a river, then the sharp brown line of a railway.

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At last, when Francesca felt in control of herself again, she began looking round the cockpit. She stared at all the dials and switches in front of her. Would they ever make sense to her? She must have shaken her head slightly.

‘Confusing?’ the instructor’s voice came.

She could see him smiling again.

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘Yes, they are.’

‘You’ll get used to them. Just remember where the airspeed dial is – that’s the most important. Speed through the air. That’s what keeps you flying.’

Francesca nodded and looked for the airspeed dial again. There it was in the top left-hand corner, the needle pointing directly to 80.

The instructor made another quick call to the control tower, so sudden and rapid that Francesca didn’t catch it. Then he glanced across at her once more.

‘So, how long have you been in England?’ he asked.

‘Six months,’ Francesca answered.

The man nodded. ‘They did a good job at the language centre,’ he said. ‘Your English is very impressive.’

‘Thank you,’ Francesca answered. ‘I did ten years of English at school, so it wasn’t starting from zero.’

‘And you didn’t fancy university?’ the instructor asked. ‘Came straight here to England when you left school?’

‘Yes,’ Francesca replied. ‘My parents tried to make me do a degree, but all I’ve ever wanted is to learn to fly and become a commercial pilot. In the end, my father said, “Well, if I don’t have to pay for university, I suppose I can pay for a language school and some flying lessons.” And as English is the language of aviation, England’s the best place to learn to fly.’

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Doug replied with a nod. ‘So, what will you do after this? You realise the commercial pilot’s course is ten times the cost of the private pilot’s licence you’re doing with me?’

‘Yes, I know,’ Francesca answered. ‘But I’m working as an au pair for the family I live with here. And then when I go back to Switzerland I’ll get a job and give extra English classes in the evening. I’m hoping I can make plenty of money like that.’

Francesca saw Doug glance across at her. For a moment a smile played around his lips again as if an idea had occurred to him, but then he said very simply, ‘You are a very determined young lady, Francesca.’

Francesca looked back into the man’s dark sunglasses, but couldn’t see his eyes. ‘I am,’ she said quietly. ‘Yes, I am.’

Doug turned his attention back to the controls. Francesca watched him push the control column forward very slowly. As the nose of the plane dropped, suddenly the horizon came into view through the windscreen. Francesca felt their speed increasing rapidly, and when she looked at the airspeed dial, she saw it was already pointing to 120. A few moments later, Doug reached for the throttle and the speed dropped back a little.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘We’re flying straight and level now. You take control again and see if you can keep the plane steady like this.’

Very firmly, Francesca took hold of the controls once more. For two or three seconds as she took over, the plane started bouncing around again.

‘Gently!’ Doug called. ‘You don’t need to hold the controls so tightly. Imagine you’re with your boyfriend,’ he added with a little laugh.

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Francesca gave a small frown, but concentrated on the control column. She relaxed her grip slightly. The plane seemed to respond. Slowly, she moved the control column around with tiny actions. It was strange. The plane seemed to fly itself somehow, as if it were an animal, a horse perhaps, which was just beginning to trust its rider.

‘That’s better!’ Doug called. ‘That’s the idea.’

Francesca felt her confidence returning. Gradually, she increased the movements she made, watching and feeling how the plane responded. Slowly, a strange feeling came over her. She felt as though she wasn’t sitting in the cockpit holding the control column, but instead had her arms stretched out, like a child pretending to have wings. And as she imagined this – seeing herself as the pilot of her dreams – the wings of the plane seemed to melt into her own. It felt like a miracle. She was flying all alone.

All of a sudden she glanced across the cockpit. Doug was staring at her, and nodding his head very slowly.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘I’m full of admiration.’