

Chapter One

Copacabana Beach

Am I too low? Ronaldo never second-guessed himself. He'd got top marks for landings and take-offs on his last report card.

His technique is textbook, his instructor, Wing Commander Blitsen, had written. *More typical of a student twice his age.*

But today, runway six wasn't glistening with snow in the afternoon sunshine. In fact, it didn't have a fleck of snow on it! No, the path at the most southern tip of The Reindeer Flying Academy resembled a holiday destination – *the Copacabana Beach!*

Do I lower altitude yet? The question bounced around Ronaldo's brain as he zoomed over the airfield. He gave a decisive nod and straightened his back legs.

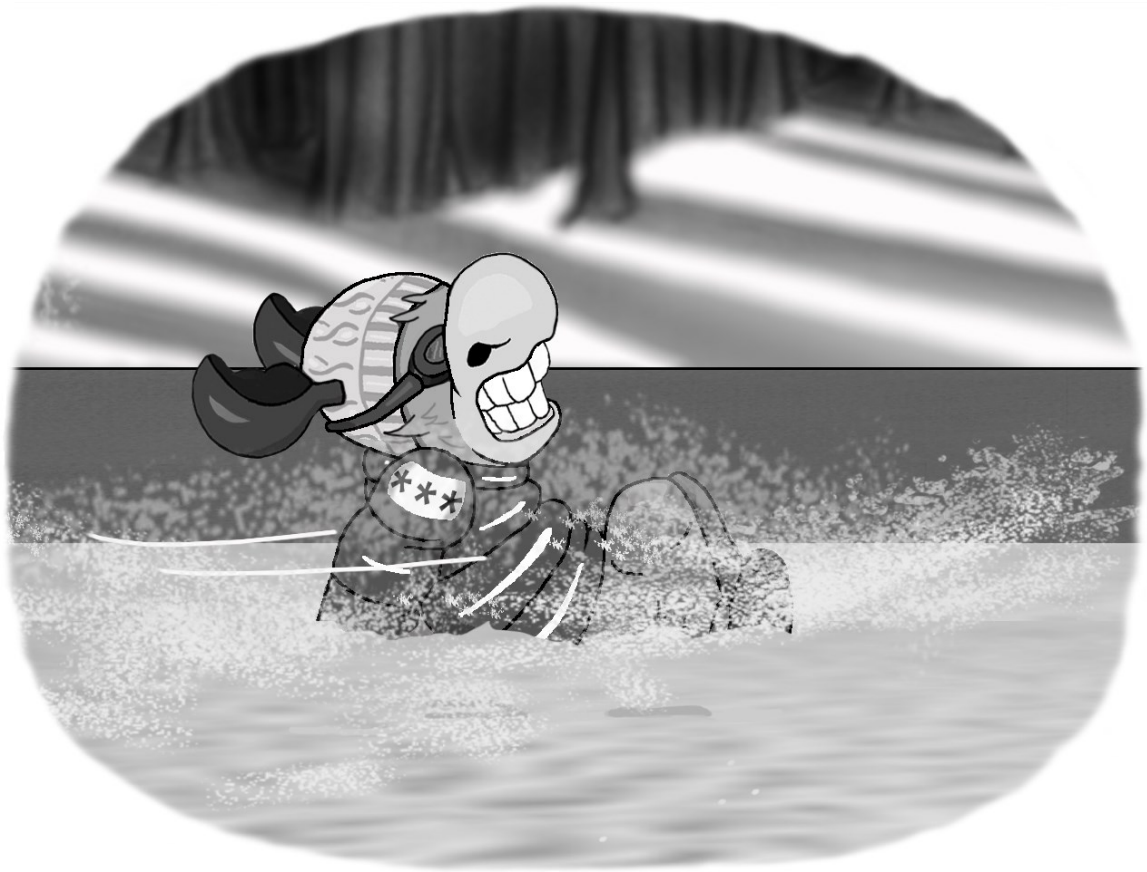
Going last had its advantages. Ronaldo had learned from his classmates' mistakes. Most had hit the ground too fast and wound up on their heads. Pupils on the sidelines had howled with laughter at the sight of their bottoms in the air and their hooves kicking like crying babies.

Closer... closer... closer. The runway whizzed below him like a honey-coloured carpet.

Now, Ronny! Do it! he told himself.

TOUCHDOWN! A wave of golden sand coated his goggles and flew up his nose.

I can't breathe! He inhaled through his mouth. Sand splattered his tongue. "Yuck!" he griped and spat it out.



His backside skimmed the surface. Sugar-shaped grains shot up his leggings and into his underwear. The force pushed his knees to his chest. Determined to nail his landing, Ronaldo extended his legs and arched his back, his nose pointing up at the sky. And then, with a sudden jolt, he came to a stop. “I did it!” he exclaimed with pride.

After a loud blow to clear his nostrils, he took off his goggles. Wing Commander Blitsen was standing by his side wearing a lime-green onesie over her hefty frame. She removed a snowmobile helmet from her head.

“Well done! That’s the best landing I’ve seen today,” the officer said, and browsed the notes on her clipboard. “There’s room for improvement on your take-off. Next time, take bigger leaps as you exit the runway.”

The cadet nodded. “I can’t wait to try again, Wing Commander,” he replied.

With his teacher leading the way, Ronaldo shuffled along behind her with sand trickling down the back of his legs.

“*Hee! Hee! Hee!*” Laughter rang out from the bushes. He glanced across. Dasher, the class troublemaker, was placing a hoof against one nostril and snorting sand out of the other. Comet and Prancer, his brothers, rolled around in fits of giggles. “Do it again! Do it again!” they pleaded.

Ronaldo looked away, more concerned about his next take-off.

“YOU WERE BRILLIANT, RONNY!” his best friend, Rudi, shouted.

“Thanks, but I’ve still got work to do,” Ronaldo replied. With any luck, the class would be on the same runway next week, and he could have another crack at it.

TOOT! TOOT! TOOT! The end-of-day horn blew.

“Enjoy your weekend. We’ll be back on the Copacabana Beach on Monday morning,” Wing Commander Blitsen said, chortling at the runway’s new nickname.

“OH NO! NOT SAND AGAIN!” Rudi said in a loud voice.

“Rudolph, I believe you need to clear your ears,” the officer commented.

The cadet tipped his head upside down. “Ooh, that is better,” he sighed, after emptying a cupful of sand from each ear.

“I don’t know why you are all making such a fuss,” Wing Commander Blitsen said. “There aren’t snow-covered runways all over the world for Santa’s reindeer to land on. They touch down on the *real* Copacabana Beach... in Brazil!”



“Really, Wing Commander?” Ronaldo said with wide eyes.

“They’re trained to land on *any* surface... and this class needs to do the same if you want to follow in their hoof-steps.” The commander tossed her hair and strode away with her helmet under her arm; not a grain of sand on her.

“It’s all right for her,” Rudi huffed. He leaned closer to Ronaldo and whispered, “I’m itchy in *very* peculiar places.”

The two buddies headed home through the woods.

“I bet you’re *really* looking forward to going to Candy Cane City tomorrow,” Rudi said.

“I’ve been counting down the sleeps for two months!” Ronaldo replied. He had glimpsed ‘The Big City’ from the air during speed tests at flying school, and licked his lips with delight every time he saw the giant red-and-white-striped Candy Cane, the tallest building in the city, shooting up into the sky.

“D’you know there are twenty billion reindeer that live there,” Rudi said, giving his bottom a scratch.

Ronaldo could have sworn his *Reindeer Explorer* guidebook said twenty thousand. He would double check as soon as he got

home. Well, maybe after a bath, as he was getting prickly in a few private places himself.

“Are you going on the *Candy Cane Express*?” Rudi asked. “I’ve heard it smells of strawberries and vanilla and that every seat has a free candy cane on it.”

“I’m pretty sure Nan’s bought tickets,” Ronaldo replied. *Although the guidebook definitely said the train smelled of peppermint.*

They paused at the crossroads where the paths split. “I wish I was coming but Nana’s spending the weekend. Anyway, have a fantastic time and take lots of photos with that posh camera you got for your birthday.”

“D’you think ten rolls of film will be enough?” Ronaldo asked.

“Your camera takes film?”

“Yes. It’s an old style like Grandad’s.”

Rudi rubbed his brow. “Maybe buy ten more rolls to be on the safe side.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Cheery bye,” Rudi waved, and trotted away.

Butterflies the size of dragons whirled around Ronaldo’s tummy. He could visualise the bustling streets and the skyscraper buildings towering over him like stretched-out giraffe necks. Nan said there was a bakery where the carrot cakes were as enormous as hula hoops, and he could imagine the delectable aroma of buttercream and cinnamon wafting through the city.

One sleep left, Ronaldo thought to himself.

He skipped along the path to his house yelling, “Candy Cane City, here I come!”

