

*Homer The Helicopter*TM *Grand Canyon Adventures*

Story by Julie W. Buscher

Illustrations by C. M. Rogers

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*Dedicated to my beloved mother
Neca J. Watts
teacher and eternal optimist*



Chapter 1



Bang! . . . bang! . . . bang! Buzz-z-z-z-z. Splash, swoosh, splash-h-h-h . . . The sounds of hammers, saws, and paint echoed throughout the giant factory. When the noises finally stopped, a squeaky hoist lowered something slowly to the ground. Ooohs and ahhs moved through the crowd. It had taken many months for the workmen to shape Homer's body into a perfect flying machine. And now, Homer the helicopter was being born right in the middle of the factory's scrap heap.

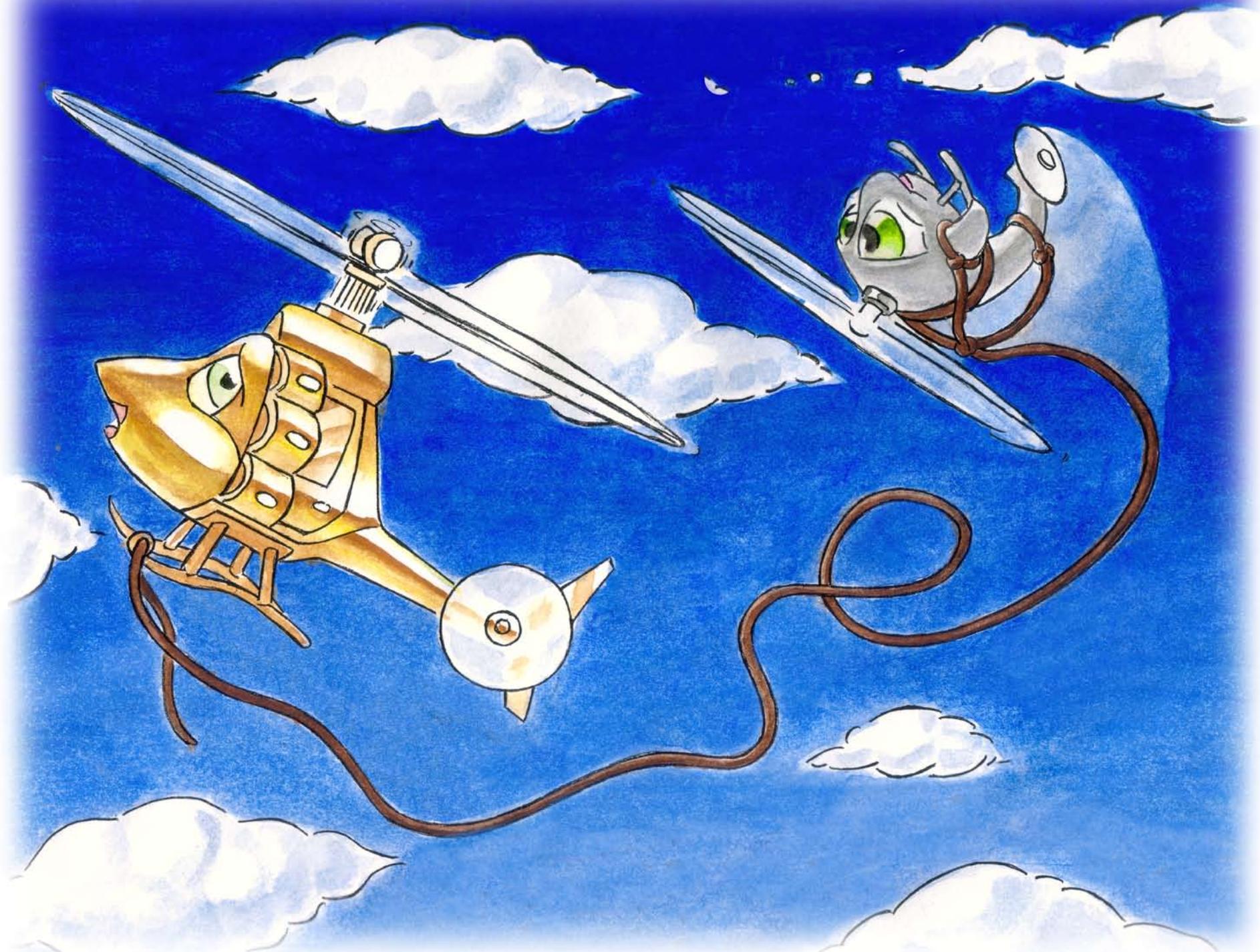
Unlike other newborn helicopters who were timid and made fussing noises, Homer was brave from the start. His shiny skin was cut from the finest silver metal. And on top of the little 'copter sat two sparkling new blades. As the blades began to spin, Homer felt a gentle wind above his head. With each quickening turn of his new propeller, Homer's emerald green eyes danced and flashed even brighter, and his smile turned to a wide grin. The dimples in each corner of his mouth and on his chin deepened with delight and his stubby nose stuck out like a silver jewel.

It was time for the factory workmen to turn Homer over to his mother, the wise, golden-colored Elsa. She was elegant with six glowing lights on her frame. On top of her huge blades sat a brilliant strobe light that twirled around, brightly flashing on and off.

Elsa had waited a long time to raise a son just like Homer. She was so thrilled and proud of her new son that she took him in tow behind her and flew around the factory in a precise, zigzag flight pattern. Elsa wanted to show off Homer to all the other mothers who had come to celebrate the little 'copter's arrival into the world.

Elsa was a graceful flyer, and under her guidance the two of them drifted lightly through the air like floating swans.

After several minutes, Homer became restless and decided to play a prank on his mother. When Elsa zigged, Homer zagged in the opposite direction. Again and again the rope swiftly jerked him backward, each time giving the



little helicopter a thrill.

Young Homer's daring behavior amazed the crowd. His antics were starting to make his mother dizzy. She looked behind her to see what was going on, only to discover what Homer was doing. He was snapping back and forth harder than a rubber band from a slingshot! Elsa quickly whirled around, giving Homer a sharp jolt.

"Now listen to me son," she scolded, pointing one of her long blades at Homer. "Do not play tricks on your mother like that again. When I'm flying, you should keep still and just enjoy the ride."

Homer cringed with embarrassment, his face turning bright red.

"You should always mind and listen to what I tell you," Elsa continued. "It's for your own safety, Homer. Do you understand?"

Looking down at all the other helicopters below, Homer nodded, ashamed. He got Elsa's message loud and clear.

The other mothers, taking in the whole scene, were chuckling. Pointing upward toward Homer, they began teasing Elsa. "You have quite the frisky rascal there, Elsa," called out one of the mothers. "We wish you lots of luck raising that wild little 'copter!"

Elsa was embarrassed by the heckling. She vowed to find the best flight instructor for Homer. She knew one day Homer would make her proud.



Chapter 2



Homer grew very fast. Soon he was old enough to learn how to fly mothers, fathers, and children on trips through the enormous *Grand Canyon*. Homer knew right away that he would enjoy his work. His fondest wish was to gracefully soar in the sky, like the birds he often watched gliding freely on the west wind. But first, Homer had to learn how to fly on his own.

The day finally came for Elsa to take Homer to the Whirly Bird Aviation School, in southern Arizona, to meet his flight teacher and pilot, Hank. Elsa strapped Homer tightly on her back, right up against her cabin, and curled the tow-rope securely around him. She wasn't taking any more chances of letting him loose until he was properly trained to fly on his own. Elsa flew her little 'copter piggyback to his new airport.

Hank was a famous instructor who had trained many young helicopters during his career. He didn't allow his students to disobediently romp around the sky. Learning to fly was serious business!

Elsa sternly told Homer, "I want you to always, always listen to Hank. He will not waste valuable time with naughty little 'copters who do not pay attention to his instructions." Then with a big kiss and tight hug, Elsa bid farewell to her son. Homer couldn't see the tears glistening in Elsa's eyes as she turned around and slowly flew away.

With a twinkle in his eye and a slightly crooked smile, Hank walked over to Homer. Hank was tall and skinny, and as he walked, his sandy-brown, ruffled hair blew in the breeze. He was dressed in blue jeans with a wrinkled flight instructor's jacket worn over a frayed T-shirt that peeked out at the neck.

"Hi, ya, pal . . . Nice to meet cha," Hank said, his words forming slowly. "We'll al' have some fun together, and maybe, if we're lucky, we'll find adventure too!"

Homer was so excited to meet his new pilot and hear him say the word "adventure", that when Hank started polishing Homer's blades and checking out each control stick in his cockpit, the little 'copter could hardly stand still.

Looking Homer straight in the eye, Hank said in a friendly tone, "Now listen up, son. I want you to learn the right way that a young helicopter should fly. First, you should fly forward and then climb straight up into the sky as far as you can go." Hank pointed up toward the clouds high overhead. "I want to see if you are fast enough and strong enough to reach those puffy clouds towering above. But, first, Homer, you need to know how each control stick works."

Homer paid close attention as Hank continued, "You have a 'C' stick and a 'P' stick which are located in front of the pilot, and two foot pedals on the floor. When I press the right pedal, you turn right; when I press the left pedal, you turn left. When I push the 'P' stick down, you dive down; when I pull the 'P' stick up, you climb high. When I hold the 'P' stick in the middle, you hover right in midair and keep your blades spinning fast, or we'll drop like a big rock! When I push the 'C' stick forward, you fly straight ahead. When I pull the 'C' stick back, you fly backward."

Hank paused a moment and a grin crossed his face. "Homer, did you know helicopters are the only aircraft that can fly backward? . . . So, got all that?"

Homer's mind began to spin. He wasn't sure he understood all the new instructions.

Hank encouraged his little student, "Now don't worry, Homer. You'll soon get the hang of all your controls working together perfectly."

Hank gave Homer his first tank full of gas. Homer felt a powerful sensation flow throughout his frame. His confidence started to rise but quickly dropped when he began to wonder, "Will my new engine start up right away? Will my blades go 'round and 'round, turning faster and faster, whistling whir . . . whir-r-r-r . . . whir-r-r-r?"

"Now, don't try to do any of those fancy flippy-flops or cartwheels that other new helicopters try," Hank warned, climbing into the pilot's seat. "They only get themselves into a lot of trouble!"

The moment had finally come. Hank turned the start key and pushed on the thrust button. Homer tightly



held his breath then let out a coughing gasp followed by a booming puff of smoke. His engine started up and began making a purring sound. The engine shook louder and louder. Soon it became a deafening roar. Homer's blades began spinning faster and faster. The vibrations felt like a jumbo eggbeater. He was ready to take off. "WHOOPEE!" He shouted.

With a hard, fast jerk, Hank pulled the little 'copter's "P" control stick. This was a brand-new feeling and experience for Homer. He started to wiggle and wobble on his feet. With all his might, Homer gave a giant leapfrog lunge. To his surprise, he lurched straight up into the sky. He began sliding and staggering sideways in a crooked flight pattern -- but at least he was flying! Although Homer had been warned by Hank, he couldn't resist doing at least one big flip-flop followed by a double cartwheel. As he did these fancy tricks, he punched out of the clouds and started falling wildly out of control.

"Help! Oh, help! Somebody help me!" he cried.

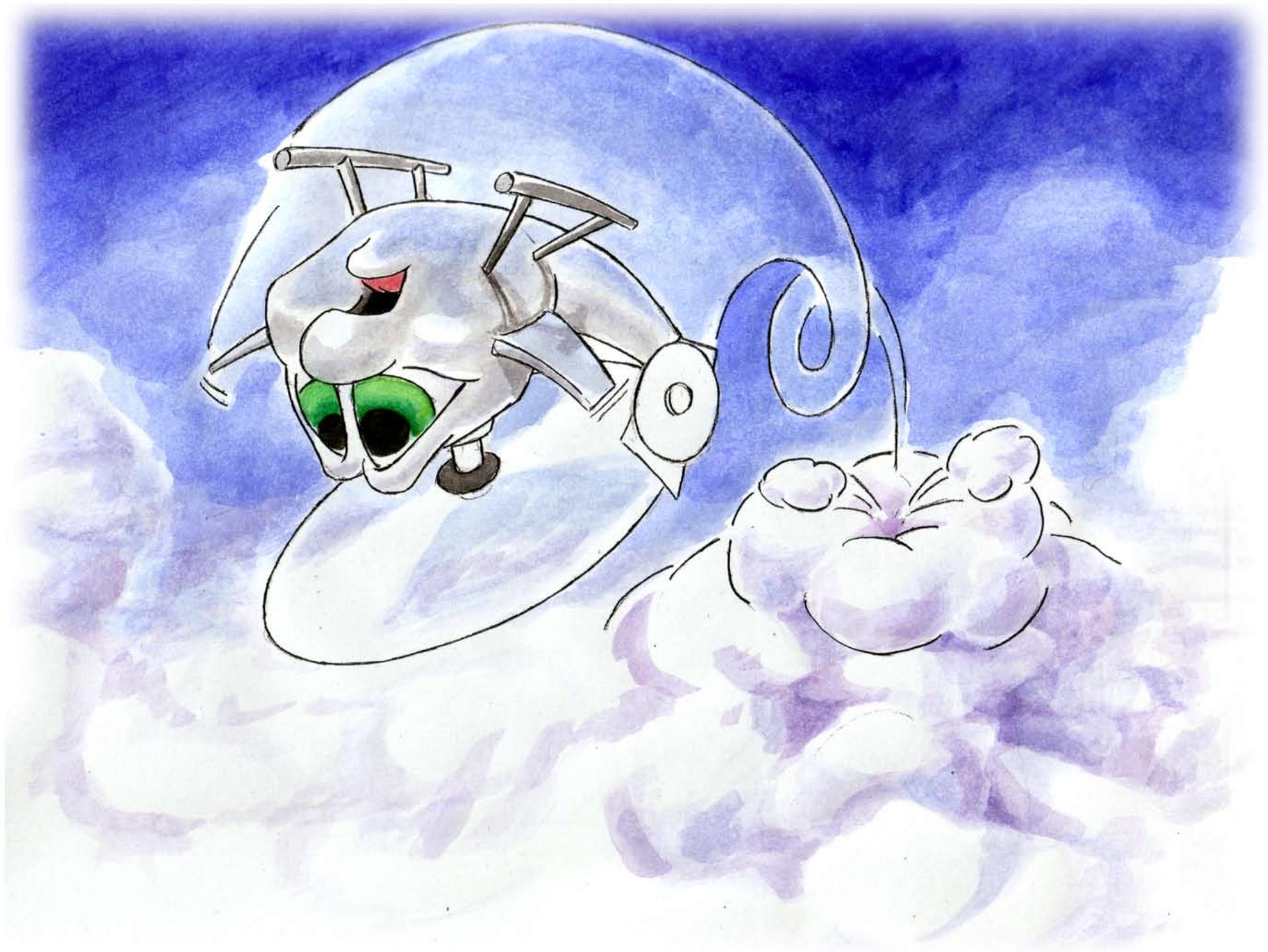
Hank quickly corrected Homer's mishap by bringing him back into level flight. "Now listen, Homer, ol' buddy," Hank called out firmly from the pilot's seat. "Ya gotta pay much more attention to your lessons and quit goofing off if you really want to learn to fly. Understand me?"

Homer lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, Hank," he said guiltily. "From now on, I won't show off any more."

"Good," replied Hank, "then, let's try again." Hank pressed all three of Homer's controls, sending him shooting swiftly back into the air.

Again and again Homer tried and tried his best to fly. At first he flip-flopped by mistake, doing a nosedive toward the ground. Hank quickly yanked the power stick backward. Homer climbed higher and higher, speeding toward the white-capped clouds. But the little 'copter was flying at such a steep angle that his blades stopped spinning. Homer's engine started coughing and all of a sudden quit working. Homer froze dead still, right in midair; he had stalled out!

Homer's whole body turned upside-down, and he slowly floated out of control, going round and round in lazy circles. Spinning in tighter circles, he started to gain speed, coiling into a deadly, tight curve. Again, Hank came to the rescue, pulling Homer into level flight. Soon the little 'copter's crazy flying began to upset Hank's stomach. He



and Homer were getting dizzy.

Hank instructed Homer, "We're both pooped-out. I think we've practiced enough for today. Let's head for home." Hank eased the control sticks to the middle and flew Homer at a gentle pace. Soon they arrived back at the helicopter landing pad. Hank held Homer hovering above the pad while slowly lowering him until his landing skids softly touched the ground.

Homer breathed a sigh of relief as he thought, "It's wonderful to be in the hands of a skilled pilot like Hank. I'll do better next time."

Homer didn't give up. At each lesson he practiced harder, becoming better and better. Then one sunny spring morning, to his utter amazement, Homer found himself flying perfectly. He skillfully circled, spun, and darted sideways, backward, and straight up and down. He even hovered just inches above the ground without flopping over.

Hank was so proud of his new student. Homer had, at last, earned his wings. "Congratulations, Homer," Hank happily hollered, "I knew you could do it!"

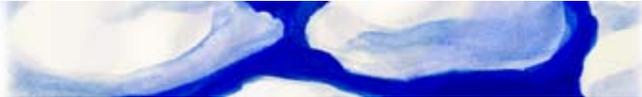
Hank then revealed some remarkable news to Homer, "After you have had enough flying experience, you might be able to operate your own controls without a pilot on board. But remember, pilots who fly helicopters have to think and act fast. So you, too, will have to pass the test of patting yourself on the head while rubbing your belly at the same time." Hank teased, "Want to give it a try, Homer?"

Homer decided he'd try that trick another day.

Homer worked hard over the next few months, paying close attention to his lessons. He quickly became very good at flying under Hank's instructions. Hank thought now was the perfect time for Elsa to come for a visit so she could see her little 'copter had become a skillful and obedient flyer. Hank decided Elsa's visit would be a secret; he wanted to surprise Homer! Elsa was thrilled when Hank asked her to fly to the canyon; she promised to meet them the very next day.



Chapter 3



Sunrise came early. Hank began polishing Homer's blades and frame; he wanted the little 'copter to be sparkling clean for Elsa.

Homer looked into the sky and was suddenly blinded for a second when he saw what appeared to be a fiery flame fly across the clouds. The golden streak was speeding straight toward him! It made a thundering sound, and Homer quivered, confused and a bit fearful.

When Elsa sped by, Homer breathed a sigh of relief; his fears quickly vanished the minute he recognized what the golden streak was. "It's my mother! It's my mother, Elsa!" Homer wildly yelled to Hank. Hank mischievously winked at the little 'copter and shouted: "Surprise!" Homer was so happy to see his mother he started bouncing up and down in glee like a Pogo stick-- boink . . . boink . . . boink.

Elsa soon landed. She and Homer hugged each other lovingly. Elsa smothered Homer with motherly kisses. Homer scrunched-up his face in embarrassment; Elsa was treating him like the little, childish helicopter he was the day she turned him over to Hank. Homer stood as tall as he could and said, "Mom, I'm not a baby helicopter anymore. Hank has taught me to fly perfectly." Homer smiled, full of pride, showing off his flight wings. "When Hank gave me my flight wings, he said I can steer my own controls without a pilot on board, after I gain more experience."

Elsa was delighted. She was very proud of her son, and grateful to Hank for his patient flight instruction.

Elsa couldn't wait to see her little 'copter fly. "That's wonderful, Homer, congratulations! Let's test your skills to see what you've learned." Before Homer could utter a word, Elsa's powerful blades started spinning and she was instantly airborne. She motioned Homer to join her by himself without Hank on board. Elsa instructed Homer, "Fly behind me and do exactly what I do." She assured her son, "Don't worry. If you get into any trouble, I'll help you."

Then the fun began!

Elsa swiftly whirled around and began flying a precise zigzag pattern. Homer realized he had to watch her carefully, think fast, and stay close, zigzagging in the same direction, just as if he were Elsa's shadow. Zig-zag-zig . . . zag-zig-zag . . . zig-zag-zig . . . , through the sky they raced! The peppy Homer had become so nimble he startled his mother by zigging and zagging only seconds behind her.

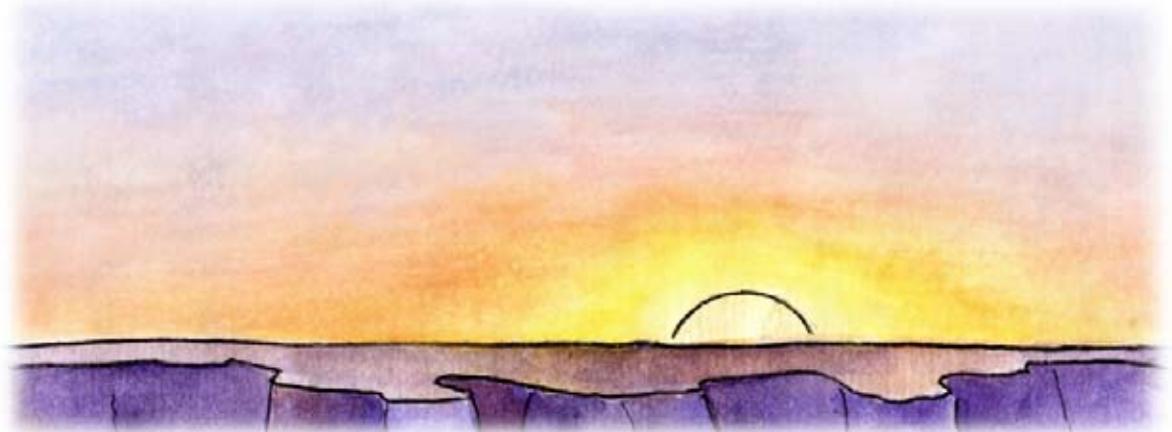
Elsa broadly smiled at Homer with approval and signaled him to land. Elsa stayed in the air to teach one more lesson. She steeply tilted her blades sideways and then immediately tilted them in the opposite direction performing a lightning-quick wing-wag-wave without stalling out. Then, barely inches above the ground Elsa snapped into level flight. She hovered downward and gently landed right in front of Homer. Hank and Homer had never seen such expert flying! Homer knew he'd need more training before he could attempt such a daring stunt.

Homer hugged his mother and told her, "You're the greatest, mom!"

Tears of joy filled Elsa's eyes; she said, "I'm very proud of you, Homer! You've grown from being a disobedient little 'copter into a skillful flyer. Those mother helicopters who teased us will be surprised when I tell them about your progress!"

The sun was sinking low in the horizon. It was time for Elsa to depart. Before lifting off, Elsa said, "Homer, you're almost a full-fledged helicopter. Hank has taught you well, and you're lucky he's your pilot. I wish you and Hank fair weather flying!" Homer and Elsa embraced each other one last time.

Homer and Hank watched Elsa fly westward. Her brilliant strobe lights flashed through the night sky as she swiftly disappeared.





Chapter 4

The next morning dawned bright and sunny. Hank started Homer's engine and pointed the 'copter's nose in the direction of the Grand Canyon, located in Arizona's desert. After flying over the vast desert, Homer was first to spot the massive canyon. His blades shuddered as he stared in awe and disbelief.

The intense sun lit up the many thousands of rocks on the canyon's surface, making them glitter like enormous jewels. There were colors of purple, green, red, blue, brown, yellow, orange, and pink, all mixed together like shades of the rainbow. Homer had never seen anything so splendid in all his life. There were finger-like cliffs, which jutted straight up out of the bottom and climbed an entire mile to the top rim. As Homer and Hank flew closer to the rocky spires, Homer became uneasy. The jagged cliffs looked as if they might reach out and snatch him right out of the sky! Homer's mind raced, "I must respect these dangerous cliffs," he told himself. "I'll fly around them carefully and keep my eyes on where I'm going so that I don't give the treacherous rocks a chance to grab me. Hank trusts my flying and I don't want to disappointment him."

Hank and Homer were now ready to begin their new job as aerial tour guides. The passengers would be taking lots of pictures of the canyon's beautiful scenery, its swift river, and deep gorge. It would be Homer's job to circle around the sharp cliffs, then fly through the bottom of the canyon in a tight, figure-eight pattern, just a few feet above the dangerous river. The fast water wildly rushed over slick rocks, churning itself into rapids that made a roaring, hissing noise like an erupting volcano. The powerful river practically boiled over its banks.

Under Hank's expert guidance, Homer flew many trips through the canyon. Step-by-step he learned to operate his own controls without Hank's assistance. Homer practiced tilting his blades and sharply turning to avoid hitting any cliffs. The little 'copter soon became such a skilled flyer that he could easily steer through any part of the canyon as he came to know the great cliffs, valleys, rocks, rims, trees, river, and landmarks. Hank was proud of Homer and his performance flying solo. Hank still felt he needed to keep a watchful eye on the frisky little 'copter, though, just in case . . .

One day, while practicing flying drills near the bottom of the canyon, Homer finally gathered up enough courage to introduce himself to the river. "Hi! My name is Homer. What's yours?"

The river, with a giant GURR-R-R-R-R, roared its warning, "My name is The Colorado! I am the longest, fastest, and most famous river in the West! They call me 'The Mighty Water'. It took me a million years, but my power carved out this vast canyon. I would never try to land in me if I were you! You'd probably drown!"

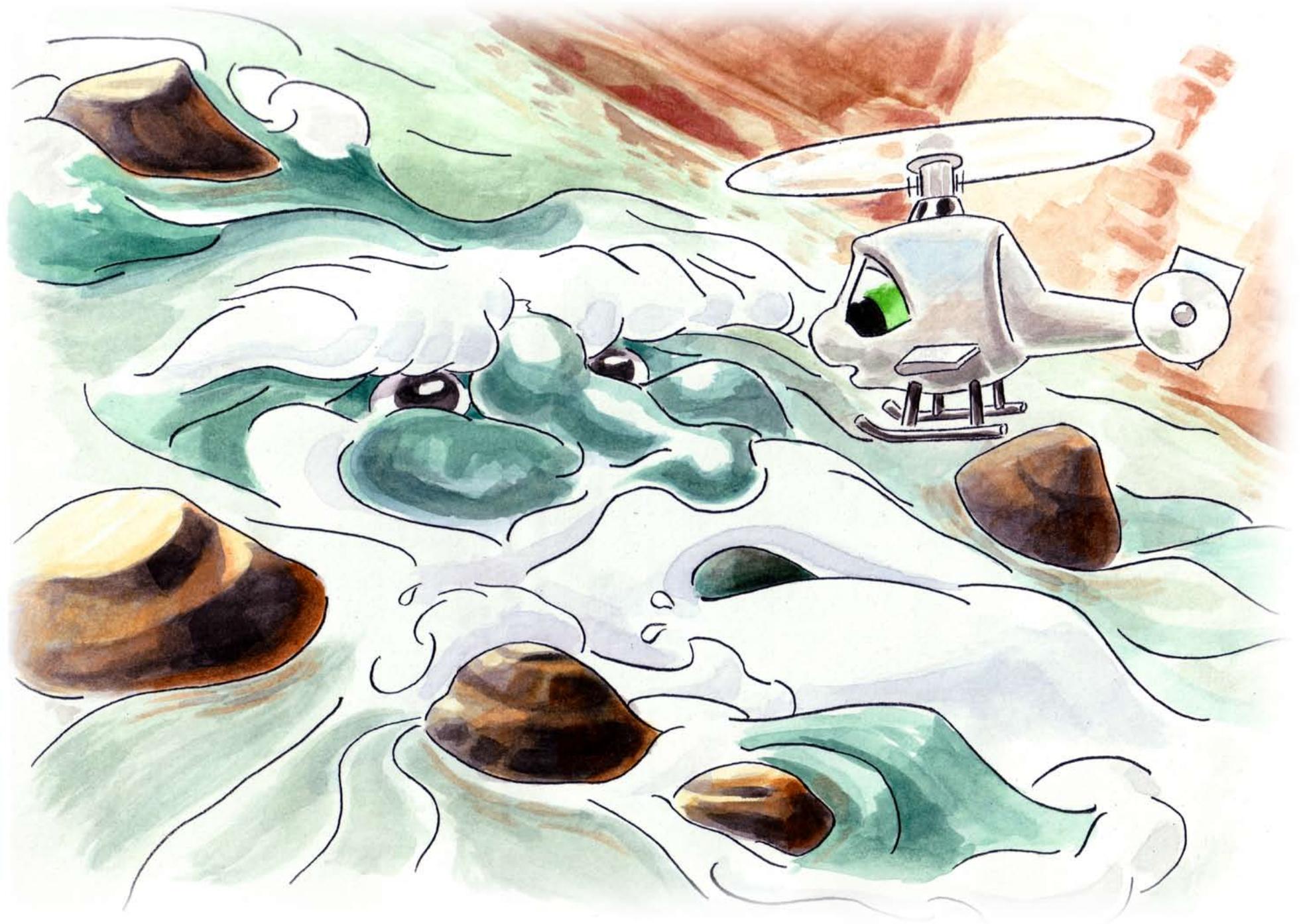
Homer shivered at the thought of such an event ever happening to him and Hank. Homer made a hasty retreat. He climbed straight up and popped over the canyon's rim at a high rate of speed!

As time went by, Homer became even better at flying through the huge canyon. He loved his new job, especially meeting all the children who would come aboard. He cradled them safely inside his strong frame, always protecting them. Sometimes Homer gave the children a special treat by taking them on one of his rare, daring flights. Steeply plunging down into the rugged canyon, he frolicked and skipped along between the sheer cliffs, barely dodging them, making the boys' and girls' stomachs turn upside down!

The children cheered and giggled with delight. They'd plead with Homer, "Do it again, do it again! Please, please, please, Homer, do it again!" But Homer was very cautious and mindful of those little ones in his care, so he wisely told them, "Sorry, kids, but that's the end of your dizzy joy ride for today." Homer then delivered the tired children into the arms of their parents, bidding each boy and girl a warm good night.

The children loved flying around the canyon with Homer. They promptly nicknamed him, The Cliffhangin' Helicopter.

Before going to sleep at night, Homer and Hank watched the bright moonlight shine on the jagged rocks. Craggy shadows crawled across the valley, stretching into eerie-shaped forms that looked as if they wanted to eat Homer and Hank! The two friends chuckled at the weird grimaces the shadows seemed to make. Then Homer drifted off to dreamland, thinking, "I'm so lucky! I get to fly around the Grand Canyon, one of nature's Seven Wonders of the World."



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