

An excerpt from *Close Encounters of a Third-World Kind*

Chapter 1: Up in the Air

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I saw a plane like it in a museum once, suspended by cables from the ceiling. Someone famous had flown it. Now its evil twin glittered on the runway.

“We’re flying in *that*?” Fear glued the soles of my sneakers to the asphalt, and my little sister, Chelsea, bumped into me from behind.

It’s not that I’m afraid, but you have to know I’m a 747 kind of girl. I like in-flight magazines and packets of salty pretzels and my choice of soda: root beer, no ice. And did you know barf bags can be turned into really neat puppets?

But I especially like radar.

Dad tugged on the strap of my backpack, towing me forward. “Well, how else do you expect to get to Tumlingtar?” he asked in that reasonable voice of his, as if every day people strap themselves into antique planes and fly off to places no one has heard of.

It could be a bad omen that it is pronounced TOMB-ling-tar, but I am trying not to let that bother me. “I don’t know. Walk?” Ha ha, I knew there weren’t any roads.

He ignored the question. “Annie, I’m really proud of the way you’re adjusting to this. I know it’s hard.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Think of it as an adventure!”

Yeah, *your* adventure. I’m just along for the ride. But just when I’m ready to admit how scared I am, Dad has to go and compliment me.

Now I had a new mantra. It was better than the Buddhist monks chanting, “*Om Mane Padme Hum*,” which chanted fast sounds like “Oh, Mommy, Take Me Home.”

Unfortunately that wouldn’t work; Mom is geared up for adventure with a capital A. She

had Chelsea by the hand now and they'd bypassed us. Dad cocked an eyebrow at me, waiting. There was nothing to do but climb the aluminum stairs, which folded neatly behind us.

The flight attendant doled out cotton to plug our ears and hard candies to suck on. I stowed my backpack under the seat in front of me. Across the aisle, Dad tried to cram both his feet and his pack under the seat, but only his feet fit.

No one demonstrated the proper use of supplemental oxygen masks or life vests in the event of an emergency, not even how to buckle and unbuckle the seat belt. Dad patted my hand. "Annie, we're not going to be flying high enough to pressurize the cabin, and I don't think we're flying over water," he assured me. "Relax."

Like I could. My brain doesn't work that way. When you say "relax," to me, it's guaranteed that my little gray cells won't be able to. Other people's neurons can lie out in their swimsuits, lazing around at the beach, but mine scan the horizon for shark fins.

It is not that I am the most uptight girl you ever met—that would be my best friend, Kayla—but put it this way: You will never see me sky dive or bungee jump for fun. Heights don't scare me. It's the falling that makes me twitch.

Flying on two itty-bitty propellers and the prayers of its eighteen passengers, the plane groaned when it took off, but the pilots and flight attendant didn't look fazed at all.

However, they believe in reincarnation.

When I opened my eyes, Kathmandu, that strange city that managed to be both modern and medieval, had disappeared. Below me lay a rumpled crazy quilt of a country. Terraces dry as bone stairstepped up hillsides. Houses hunkered down by paths; there were no roads. An ant trail of people headed for a village, a bustling metropolis of about

twelve buildings.

Dad was pointing out his window. “Everest,” he mouthed above the bumblebee-flying-into-a-headwind noise of the engines. I leaned forward. You know, looking up from an airplane, the snowy tip of the world’s tallest mountain jutting out of the clouds isn’t so impressive, until you figure out how much of its base lies below them. The rest of the Helping Hearts medical team reached for their cameras. My fingers itched to get its silhouette down on paper, but I could no more draw a straight line than the pilot could fly one. The plane was bouncing up and down like it had hiccups.

“An adventure,” I muttered. Then for good measure, “*Om Mane Padme Hum.*”
Fast.

I concentrated on keeping lunch inside me, where it belonged.

Some forty minutes later, Tracey, the dental hygienist who was sitting in front of me, swiveled, her eyes wild. Even with cotton-stuffed ears, I could hear her scream: “We’re all going to die!!!” The cockpit didn’t have a door, and I could see out the same window the pilots did.

A mountain loomed smack in front of us.

The plane made a slow stomach-wrenching turn, banked sharply, and headed straight down.