

Flying Free
by Amber Polo
Treble Heart Books

CHAPTER 1

Lia was certain, if she opened her mouth, her heart would pop out and explode across the plane's instrument panel. Her hands loosened on the yoke and she whispered in disbelief, "I did it!" One more hour of flight training finished. No time to think. Stay calm. Land the plane. Compared to landing, flying was a breeze. She laughed out loud at her wordplay.

Scanning the sky in all directions, she noted a plane far to her left. Below, the grid of the town of Sunrise looked like a model train village in the tan, mesquite-scattered desert. Close to the base of the airport's mesa, the dirt-brown Cottonwood River snaked through the valley, easy to spot between wide bands of green trees and farmland.

Without warning, a gust of wind threw the plane sideways. The yoke twisted in her hands. As she fought to regain control, another plane appeared close on her tail. Its red underside cut in front of Lia's plane and dropped into the landing pattern. Her landing pattern.

"I'm going to die." Lia's fingers squeezed the yoke. "Damn you, Ben! I don't belong here." How fitting. Talking to her dead father, who with thirty years flying experience, had died in a plane like this one. But not before he wrote a will requiring her to learn to fly. She wished she could have afforded to say no, thank you.

With a flash of red, the plane passed close. Her head brushed the ceiling and she bounced against the harness. Her plane shuddered from the near-miss. Engine roar filtered through her headset. Now Lia's heart stopped beating. She tried to move, to think, but her body and mind froze. The cockpit closed in. She fought the urge to close her eyes.

She pulled up on the yoke. The plane rose carrying her higher, back into the sky.

It seemed like forever until she felt safe enough to exhale and whisper, "Danger's over. Over. Do what Flo trained you to do." Why didn't small airplanes have flight attendants serving drinks or at least a mini-bar?

Her hands moved automatically. She held her altitude, eased the flaps up, and kept the nose of the Cessna level. Keeping the plane straight, she heading away from the runway, and increased the throttle.

Sounding more confident than she felt, Lia spoke into the mike using formal aviation radio language, "Sunrise, this is Cessna Five Five Victor extending my downwind, Sunrise."

Immediately she heard her instructor Florence Keene's reply, "You did great, Lia. Take her around and bring her in."

Lia wanted to scream. Just open the door and leave. Her shirt, sweaty and cool against her hot skin, clung to her chest. She moved her head and stretched her frozen neck muscles from side to side, shrugged her shoulders up towards her ears, and let them drop. Her heart began to shrink back to normal size. Her body had been tense. The near miss turned stress to panic.

The red plane that cut her off could have killed her. She was too old for this. Learning to fly was for immortal eighteen-year-old boys not for perishable forty-year-old women. Her father wanted her to learn when she turned sixteen. To spite him, she refused. Now his last will and testament required her to fly in order to claim her inheritance. Sneaky bastard.

She watched her altimeter. At 1,000 feet above the airport she reduced throttle and started her descent. Looking up and out over the instrument panel, she glanced down at the desert airstrip. Right now her only objective was to get this plane and her feet back on solid earth. Staying in the air was not an option.

Coming in to land, she glimpsed trouble. The orange windsock on the south end of the runway flew straight out, while the one on the north hung flaccid as yesterday's pantyhose. So far she'd been lucky. The weather every morning of her training flights had been perfectly calm. Each flight had been exactly like her textbook directions and CD-ROM program exercises. Flo had told her landing in a crosswind was difficult and monsoon season winds unpredictable. So what! She'd never planned to stay here longer than it took to get her license.

White knuckled, she inched the yoke to the left and pushed her left foot against the pedal. Coordinate. That's what Flo called it. Coordinate the turn. The plane responded. She was back in control.

A mile long runway stretched down the middle of the mesa. Hangars and houses spread along both sides of the strip. Although she'd always told people her dad's airpark community was like a golf course development, except with a runway instead of a fairway, she hadn't actually come here until after Ben died. For now, this was home.

Lia turned into the final leg of her pattern. She glanced to her left and saw a golden eagle gliding off her wing. The eagle turned its head toward her. She whispered, "I want to be free." Then louder, "Now I'm talking to birds."

Lia brought the Cessna in line with the runway. Thankfully both windsocks now flopped limply. The large white number seventeen loomed up in her windscreen. She held the plane's nose in line with the centerline of Runway One Seven. Five hundred. Four. Three. Two. One hundred. The ground came closer and closer.

She heard and felt the right wheel hit with a chirp. Then the left. With a thump the nosewheel settled onto the tarmac.

She slowed and taxied the plane to a complete stop near a stucco building and metal hangar and shut off the engine. It sputtered to a stop and she exhaled a long whoosh and forced her sweaty palms to release the yoke. She wiped one hand and then the other on her jeans, folded her arms across the yoke, and laid her head upon her trembling crossed arms. Every cell in her body tingled from fear and surged with adrenalin. Lia unbuckled her harness, opened the cockpit door, found a foothold, and jumped to the ground. She commanded her legs to support her.

Though her legs wobbled, her feet were, at last, on solid ground. Since Flo Keene hadn't rushed out, she'd have time to settle herself. She hated flying lessons, but respected her seventy-something flight instructor.

Still in shock, Lia's queasy stomach knotted. If she'd had time for breakfast, the cockpit would

be a disaster. She stretched up her arms. Her breathing felt close to normal, but the muscle tightness and backache she always experienced after flying remained. Rubbing her right hand and wrist, she tried to soothe the chronic ache from long hours of computer work interrupted by PDA texting. She straightened, took one unsure step, then started toward the pilot shop. Her body shivered at the memory of her fear, feeling no pride in her response to a real emergency.

Lia removed her long-billed flight hat. Her headset plastered her dark hair flat to her head and she shook it out to let dry in the Arizona sun. Eight in the morning and the temperature was close to ninety-five. August in Arizona! She'd thought dry heat would be somehow drier.

Even without the usual stress of flying or a near midair collision, an hour in a cockpit was brutal. Flying lessons. Arizona. A huge mistake. And now she blamed a dead man.

Commercial airliners had been a big part of her life in advertising. She'd loved the excitement of terminals and the peaceful quiet of cross-country flights to catch up on work and sleep. Refreshed, she'd bound off the plane ready for meetings, conferences, and presentations. That kind of stress energized her. Obviously, her body was not made for any plane smaller than a 747.

CHAPTER 2

Lia attached the towbar to the Cessna 152's nosewheel and maneuvered the plane into the hangar. She'd quit, then figure out how to get on with her life without a job, a home, or anyone who cared about her.

A tall, sandy-haired man walked up and helped her position the wings. "Hi. I'm Seth. I heard Ms. Keene say you're a student pilot. I hope you keep flying."

"Keep flying?" her voice sounded like Flo's, while her knees still felt like wet leather. Could he read her mind? This guy stood too close and looked directly into her eyes. Short for a Texas girl, she's grown up around tall men and set her stance firm. Her message was clear. Do not underestimate me because of my size. He'd casually ignored her message and invaded her space. Most people wouldn't have noticed, but her personal space extended out further than most. Her ex-husband always told her she kept the whole world at arms length.

"I mean, if someone had done something like that to me when I was learning." His eyebrows merged into a straight line. "Are you okay?" Seth reached out and touched her cheek. "You look flushed."

Lia backed up. "I am fine. It's hot." He still stood too close. "I'm fine." She turned, walked into the wing, and lost her balance. The stuffy hangar smell of used motor oil must have made her woozy.

His hands reached out and held her shoulders to prevent her from toppling backwards.

"Thank you," she began. He turned her to face him and Lia looked up into his eyes, and lost her voice. His hands still held her shoulders firmly and his sky blue eyes showed concern. Heat radiated from his body and she smelled an exotic smoky scent. Strangely, instead of discomfort, a wave of calm washed over her.

He slowly withdrew his hands from her shoulders.

Still wobbly, she leaned away. She couldn't pull her gaze away from his. Was he concerned or he was flirting? She had no time for either.

His mouth softened. “*Shanti*,” Seth said softly.

“What?”

“*Shanti* means peace in Sanskrit.”

“Why do you talk in Sanskrit?”

“I’m Buddhist.”

“I’ve never met a Buddhist.” Embarrassed, she added too quickly, “I have to go.” She stuffed her headset into her new black vinyl flight bag and walked toward the pilot shop. Why did she have to buy a special bag when one of her designer totes would have worked?

Her shoulders still felt warm where his hands had rested as she avoided the vicious prickly pear cacti and a determined mesquite bush grown into a tree.