

THE RIDE IN THE AIR AND THROUGH THE COURTS

“But life goes on like the pages in a book, and we go on. One chapter ends and another begins.”
Tina Morgan

CHAPTER ONE

October 14, 1990

It was the end of the perfect vacation, Tina thought, relishing the crisp feel of the desert air and taking in the picturesque view of the sparkling, blue sea. Tina was glad that they had decided to go on this trip. She didn't know Hunter's neighbors Russell and Christina very well, but they had invited Hunter and Tina to fly with them to Baja Del Sol for an Aerostar airplane convention. Since Russell and Christina were busy with the convention, Tina and Hunter had days of leisure, all to themselves, and it was just what the doctor ordered. Getting away from the daily routine they had left behind in Las Cruces brought out Hunter's romantic side more than ever before. Hunter and Tina had met at a singles' party two years earlier, and they had been together ever since.

It was times like this when Tina wondered why she just didn't marry the guy. After all, he made her feel like a princess, and he was secure, stable, and good looking. No, he was more than good looking, and that in itself was the problem. At 6' 2", Hunter towered over Tina's 5' 2" petite frame. His blue eyes twinkled and his gaze never failed to take her breath away. He loved her-- she knew that. But his humbleness, charm, high cheekbones, and perpetual tan attracted other women, too. He was confident in his own skin, and he certainly could have afforded the designer clothes that many of his country club neighbors wore, but clothes didn't matter to him. His plain style only accentuated his other qualities. In fact, he was almost perfect, Tina smiled inwardly.

Tina nodded and smiled at the shopkeepers as she quickly traversed the shops up and down the hilly streets of old Baja Del Sol. The colorful baubles, Mexican trinkets, and interesting art called to her, *Buy me, Buy me!* She glanced at her watch. She had been gone for an hour and a half. A little boy about six years old followed her out of the last shop with hand-carved wooden turtles, and Tina gave him a quarter as she walked quickly and empty handed back toward the condo. She wanted to spend the last remaining minutes in paradise with Hunter.

“You didn't find anything?” Hunter asked, as Tina breezed through the door.

“Nothing I couldn't live without,” she answered. “We'd better pack so we can get the taxi and pick up Russell and Christina at their hotel.”

The taxi driver helped load the luggage in the trunk and they drove to the Ericksons' hotel. “Hi,” Christina said casually as she smiled broadly, her bags in tow. “It will just be me. Russell left early this morning for the airport with some of his buddies. He wanted to check something out on the plane.”

The taxi driver wound the car through the streets, and Tina took her last look at the shimmering land and the sea. Somehow the light reflecting off the desert and the water made everything seem magical.

The driver unloaded the bags from the car, and Hunter gave him a tip. “Gracias!” the driver waved.

Tina loved the excitement and uncertainty of an airport. It was like watching a play unfold. She loved the hustle and bustle of people meeting relatives, old friends and lovers reuniting. The

stories were endless and Tina was sure that almost all of them represented new adventures with happy endings. Passengers would rush to get to their gate, stand in line to get their tickets or boarding passes, or anxiously await their luggage while the airport employees worked quickly and efficiently, trying to help everyone and take care of their needs. However, at this small airport that had a section for private planes. Hunter, Tina, and Christina entered through a small, quiet entrance. Tina felt like something was missing; it was almost too quiet. Then the silence was broken by a familiar, but loud, voice.

"This is the wrong amount!" Russell shook the fuel ticket angrily as he leaned toward the customs inspector. The Mexican inspector just shrugged and shook his head. "All the pilots from the convention had been fueling their planes at the same time, and I got charged for two planes! My plane can't hold that much gas!"

"Come on, Russell," Hunter said quietly but firmly. "There's obviously been a mistake and you can dispute this with the credit card company when you get home."

"I'm not paying for two planes," Russell protested.

"Since they aren't cooperating, you're just wasting your time. Let's go, and we can take care of it tomorrow when we can talk to someone who will listen. And, by the way, if you keep arguing, they WILL detain us, and we won't be leaving Mexico today," Hunter said as quietly as possible, hoping the inspector didn't hear him.

The mid-day heat was scorching, and there wasn't a cloud in the topaz colored sky. Beads of perspiration trickled down Russell's cheeks. Having been at the airport since early that morning, Russell was barely enduring the heat's growing intensity.

Finally, everyone boarded the plane. Tina elected to take the same seat with the broken backrest that she had sat in on the way down to Mexico. It was directly behind Hunter. As the planes lined up and idled on the runway, Russell fidgeted and complained of the injustice, as he impatiently waited his turn for takeoff. Planes were taking off every three to five minutes. *Well, the engine didn't seem to have a problem today, he thought to himself. We gave it a hell of a workout this morning and it checked out okay. The weather's perfect, he thought, almost out loud. I'll get the engines checked tomorrow when I have more time, AFTER I get this fuel thing resolved.*

Shooting the breeze with the other pilots and checking the plane this morning had been better than having some unknown mechanic inspect it. The mechanic might not have found a problem anyway. Russell loved the camaraderie among the pilots. They shared a special love, a special skill that bonded them together in a way that people who had never flown a plane couldn't understand. Russell had run the plane up and down a side runway as fast as he could to make sure that there weren't any major problems.

This flight will be a piece of cake compared to the trip from New York to Las Cruces, Russell thought.

Tina noticed that Russell's face was red as he complained for the umpteenth time, "Damn trouble with the gas!"

When Russell and Christina flew into Las Cruces from New York, Tina was impressed that they had even arrived in New Mexico on time. The weather was bad and some pilots would have aborted the trip, but Russell was a skilled pilot and had flown from the East Coast at lower-than-normal altitudes clear across the country as he dodged a storm and made sure that ice didn't accumulate on the wings.

The takeoff was smooth, and Tina sat back, closed her eyes, and reviewed the wonderful, delicious sexy days she had just spent with Hunter. Tina was thinking about the moonlit walks

on the beach with Hunter and the gentle lapping of the waves on the sand in the stillness of the evenings they had spent together. “The almost free condo and the free meals make up for listening to the sales pitch about the ground-floor timeshare opportunities,” Hunter said the first morning as they ate breakfast on the patio overlooking the azure Sea of Cortez below. “In fact, let’s see how little we can spend on this trip!”

“Okay, tightwad,” Tina had teased Hunter, who was usually very generous with his money. Playing that game had made the trip even more fun.

“What’s that smell?” Tina asked herself as she thought she detected a light smell of smoke. They had only been in the air for ten minutes, she acknowledged as she glanced at her watch and then at the engines. They were both turning perfectly and there was no sign of smoke or fire outside. In fact, there was no smoke coming from the air vents in the cabin, either, so Tina went back to thinking about the trip. No one said anything, so maybe the smell wasn’t as strong as she thought, or it was just her imagination.

Just then, “I smell something burning,” Christina said, almost matter-of-factly.

“I smell something burning, too,” Hunter, Russell, and Tina said in unison.

Russell radioed the tower. “We need to turn back and land – over.”

“Roger – the sky is clear – over,” the tower replied.

“You need me to follow you in?” radioed one of Russell’s buddies, who had taken off just after them and heard the transmission to the tower over the airwaves.

“I’m turning her around now,” Russell replied. “We’ll land in a few minutes, so you go on ahead.”

Both engines are working, Tina thought calmly. The smell wasn’t like fire, but more like a wire touching something. *It will be okay. We’ll be back at the airport in a few minutes.*

Tina, still not panicked, glanced out the window again. This time she realized something was wrong – dead wrong! “The right engine stopped!” she said out loud. “Oh, the left engine is stopping, too!” Tina heard a horn began blaring through the cabin, and she would never forget that sound.

Christina said, “We know, dear,” her voice much too calm. Then she added quickly, “Why don’t you lay your head on my lap?”

“Are you going to land?” the radio crackled. Russell didn’t answer. A minute or two later, the radio asked for Russell’s coordinates, but he didn’t give them. As a matter of fact, he never answered the tower again. The tower continued to ask, but he remained silent.

Hunter turned to Tina, his shimmering blue eyes gleaming in the sunlight, contrasting sharply with his grey hair, which only made him look more distinguished. “Is your seat belt tight, babe?” Hunter asked matter-of-factly. Tina nodded the affirmative. She didn’t speak – not because she was scared, but because she had been taught not to interfere with a pilot’s concentration. The plane was gliding slowly toward the horizon. Tina remembered the conversation with her cousin when she mentioned going down to Baja Del Sol with her friends.

“Are you sure that a small plane is safe?” Tina’s cousin Susan had inquired and then added in an anxious, high-pitched voice, “Tina, don’t go!”

“It’s a TWIN-ENGINE!” Tina had enthused.