

“Snares the reader from page one!”

Rosalyn Alsobrook, Bestselling Author

SUDDENLY LOVE



Catherine
Sellers

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



LionHearted Publishing,[®] Inc.
P.O. Box 618
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448-0618
888-546-6478

Send us email at admin@LionHearted.com

Visit our web site www.LionHearted.com

Copyright © 2001 by Catherine Sellers

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, except for excerpts used for reviews, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact LionHearted Publishing, Inc.

ISBN: 1-57343-048-X

Printed in the U.S.A.

For the three most influential women in my life:

My mother, Barbara Armstrong Rhodes, whose love, support, and never-failing belief in me gave me the strength of character and moral fortitude that has seen me through my share of life's tribulations. You made me the person I am today, Mama.

I like me just fine, so "You done good."

For my wonderful aunt, Edna June Maples, who was always happy to have me as her sidekick when I was a child and she was a teen; who listens, giving advice only when asked; who gently encourages me to be the person she knows I can be; who has earned my love, my respect and my loyalty by simply loving me unconditionally.

I love you, Edna.

And in loving memory of my grandmother, Alma Armstrong Pruitt, whose home in Henderson, Texas, was my childhood haven.

I miss you, Big Mama.

Additionally:

A special thank you to Felicia Colton for her invaluable knowledge of banking.

And, as always, for Bill, who is ever-constant in his love, support, and devotion. There's a little bit of you in every hero I create.



Viewing Tips

To make the text larger, smaller, or change the window size, select an option under the **View** menu. Pictures are best viewed at **Actual Size** or **100%** in the size box at the bottom of the screen.

To view 2 pages at a time, select menu option **View > Continuous - Facing Pages**

To view 1 page at a time, select menu option **View > Single Page**

If you are not seeing the bookmarks in the left column, select menu **Window > Bookmarks**. Clicking on a bookmark will take you directly to that page in the document.

To improve text appearance in Acrobat version 5 on Laptop or LCD screens, select **Edit > Preferences > Display** (✓ the CoolType box)

For page-at-a-time scrolling, center the page box on the screen and use the **Page UP** and **Page DOWN** keys.

Click on a email or web address ([blue underlined](#)) to activate your web browser and send a message or visit that link.

Chapter 1



It was one of those rare and welcome mornings when Jillian Burke had a few precious minutes to herself. A harried workday complete with a full appointment calendar and a tedious monthly board meeting lay ahead of her. She took a moment to savor the quiet, then spread the *Dallas Morning News* across the uncluttered surface of her cherry wood desk. She perused the front page, sipping at the cup of steaming coffee Sherry had handed her as she walked in through the reception area. The headline just below the banner immediately caught her eye.

HEIR'S FATHER FOILS KIDNAP ATTEMPT

Good news, Jillian thought as she set her coffee aside. It so easily could have gone the other way. Thank God the man had been alert enough to intervene.

Unbidden, an old pain resurfaced. She knew first hand how it felt to lose a child.

With deftness born of long practice, Jillian

thrust the thoughts away and turned her attention to the photograph. It wasn't the best press photo she'd ever seen, but she easily made out the image of two male figures pressing their way through a throng of onlookers. The man shielded the youth at his side, holding up one hand to ward off the camera. While it was hard to make out his features, the rigid, protective stance said it all—*I'm mad as hell, so stay out of my way*. Her gaze dropped to the youth, whose face was buried in the front of his father's shirt, and she felt a surge of anger that he had suffered such a horrifying ordeal.

Lowering her gaze to the caption beneath the photo, Jillian read aloud, "San Antonio entrepreneur and CEO of Grayson Worldwide Group, Thomas Grayson Del Rio..."

Why did that name sound familiar? She read further "... surprised would-be kidnappers by rescuing his thirteen-year-old son Christian—"

Her windpipe constricted, trapping the words in her throat. She read the names again. Thomas Grayson Del Rio. Christian Del Rio.

Christian.

Suddenly, Jillian felt faint, as though her heart had actually stopped beating. An icy numbness spread from her solar plexus, engulfing her body. It was impossible, but the facts were clear; this couldn't be a coincidence.

Her son—her Christian—was alive.

She leaned back in her plush executive chair and hugged her arms around her mid-section. *Slow down, Jillian*, she cautioned herself, amazed her brain could still function. *Take some time. Review the facts.*

She took a deep breath and picked up the newspaper again, this time willing herself to read the entire article. Thomas Grayson Del Rio was not a common name, but fear of being hurt again warred with the hope urging her on. The details took away the possibility of coincidence: One, the Del Rio name; two, Christian Del Rio was thirteen years old.

Her hands trembled. Could Nancee have lied to her? Had the telephone call all those years ago been a cruel ruse to keep Jillian from tracking them down? One tear, then another escaped to trail unchecked down her cheeks. So many years, so many tears. And still it wasn't over.

No, Jillian corrected herself. After all these years it was just beginning. Nancee had a lot of explaining to do.

She gave her wet cheeks a swipe, then leaned forward and pressed the first button on the intercom. "Sherry, see if you can find Scott." Thank God her voice was still strong. "It's important I see him as soon as possible. Then clear my calendar and get me on the first flight to San Antonio."

"Any idea how long you'll be gone?" Sherry asked, her voice as cool and efficient as always.

“As long as it takes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Jillian felt her courage slip. “I’m not sure, Sherry.” She propped both elbows on her desk and rubbed her throbbing temples. “Just tell everyone I’ve taken some vacation time.” No one would question that. Hadn’t Scott tried for months now to get her to take some time off?

Burke Enterprises had become more than her life since Carl’s death. It had been her salvation. Scott could take care of business while she was gone. He had to. Her son was alive, and nothing, *absolutely nothing*, would prevent her from doing what she couldn’t do all those years ago.

Find her son.



Gray Del Rio drove past the security guard stationed at the entrance to Grayson Manor, and turned onto the highway that took him to San Antonio every day. Even though it was nearing the end of November, the weather was unseasonably warm and balmy for this part of the state. Both windows were down, but he was scarcely aware of the breeze whipping his dark hair around his sunglasses.

“Dad, this really isn’t necessary.”

Gray was so intent on making sure there were no suspicious vehicles in front of or behind him

that he didn't hear his son's comment. "What?"

Chris's brow wrinkled beneath a shock of brown hair a shade darker than Gray's. "I said you don't have to do this. You were right when you said I should go back to school, but I could have finished out the week living at the academy. No one's going—"

"We're not taking any chances, Chris." Gray hadn't meant to sound so vehement, but he still wasn't over the scare of the past few days. "Sorry," he apologized. "I know you're right, but indulge me. Besides, this is the last day of classes before Thanksgiving vacation and the academy isn't far out of my way."

Chris accepted the explanation without argument, then glanced at the stretch of highway before them. Gray knew by the way his son's eyebrows drew together that he was thinking.

"You know I understand about your work, don't you, Dad? And I really don't mind boarding."

"Yes, son, I know, but—"

"Dad," Chris interrupted with a look so sober it added years to his young features, "a lot of people depend on you and GWG for their living; you have to be free to take care of business. And you can't be around every minute of the day," Chris continued. "You're not to blame for what those guys tried to do."

In his head, Gray knew Chris was right. But in his heart, he felt he was to blame. If his business

trip hadn't been canceled at the last minute, he wouldn't have stopped by the academy to tell Chris of his change in plans. He wouldn't have been there to stop the kidnappers from trying to drag Chris off the sidewalk and into the waiting van. If anything had happened to his son— Gray cut off the thought and focused on the road ahead.

“As for Veronica,” Chris said, “I know she loves me; she just isn't the grandmother type. All I'd do is cramp her style. And I really am happy at the academy.”

The boy never ceased to amaze him. “How did you get so smart in just thirteen years?” Gray asked, allowing himself the luxury of a smile. Chris had just pegged Gray's mother to a “T.” Veronica simply wasn't a nurturing soul and becoming a grandmother hadn't mellowed her any. Wasn't that the reason Gray had been more than willing to go away to the academy when he was Chris's age?

“Almost *fourteen* years,” Chris corrected, breaking into Gray's thoughts.

“Just a subtle way of reminding me your birthday's next month?” They both grinned.

A few moments passed before Chris broke the silence again. “Dad?” he asked. Gray heard tentativeness in that one softly spoken word. “Do you suppose my mother's heard about what happened?”

The note of hope in Chris's voice cut straight

into Gray's soul. He glanced at Chris, then back at the road.

"Why do you ask?" he asked.

"I just thought she might come home to check on... things." Chris turned away.

"I've never lied to you, Chris, and I won't start now. Some women simply aren't cut out to be mothers." What an understatement, Gray thought, trying to keep his true feelings about Nancee from bleeding through.

"You just told me you understand about Veronica," he went on. "We both know she cares, but it's hard for her to see past her own needs. I guess maybe I made the mistake of choosing a woman very much like her. I don't think it's a matter of your mother not loving you, son, it's just—" He searched for the right words. "Well, she's never thought too much of herself, so how can she care about others?"

They left the freeway and Gray continued, wanting to make sure Chris understood. "The marriage was over a long time before you were even born, son, and Nancee and I agreed you'd be better off with me."

No amount of explaining could ever excuse Nancee's lack of attention, especially when she missed such special events as Christmas and birthdays. The bright lights and night life of New York City and Monte Carlo were more to her liking than family get-togethers and holidays.

Chris nodded and turned to look out the window. Gray wasn't surprised he dropped the subject as easily as he'd brought it up.

He'd always done his best to answer his son's questions honestly, without maligning Nancee in Chris's eyes. She was his mother, after all, and didn't all boys want to adore their mothers? Hadn't Gray always wanted more from Veronica?

He was saved the ordeal of further soul searching when the academy came into sight. They pulled up to the curb in front of the main hall where Gray killed the engine and reached for the door handle. Chris stopped him with a touch on his arm.

"Dad, don't get out. I'm safe here and I promise to be more careful. Go on to work," he said, gathering his books. "And please don't call to make sure I made it to class okay. It's embarrassing."

Gray felt a twinge of guilt. "All right, son. But I'll be waiting right here at four o'clock." He saw a protest die on Chris's lips. Joel Fowler's older brother usually picked both boys up on Friday after school, then dropped Chris off at the front steps of Grayson Manor.

"Two o'clock today, Dad. We're getting out early for the holiday. Can we stop by the mall? There's a new poster I'd like to pick up."

"As long as she's wearing more than a wet T-shirt."

Chris made a comical sour face on his way out

the door. Gray fought back the urge to follow him inside and through the halls to the safety of his classroom. He'd known from the day Nancee left that raising a child on his own was going to be difficult, but he hadn't figured the horror of kidnap attempts into the scheme of things.



Jillian decided against showing up unannounced. She'd probably never make it past security without an appointment. What surprised her was the person making the appointment hadn't called back to cancel after letting Nancee know she had called.

Still, Jillian expected more resistance when she approached the sentry at the Grayson Manor gate and stated that she had an appointment with Mrs. Del Rio. After checking her identification against his admittance list, he let her pass.

She followed the evergreen-lined drive to the horseshoe curve in front of the house, then sat behind the steering wheel and looked at the house for several seconds. Palatial estates were as old hat to her as corporate meetings and business trips, but Grayson Manor was more than she'd bargained for. Three stories with two wings off the main body of the house, Grayson Manor was as beautiful as it was imposing with its wide front gallery and six massive columns that supported the upper portico. At least that was one thing

Nancee hadn't lied about.

Once again stifling her anger, Jillian got out of the car and mounted the flight of steps leading to the front door. She hesitated, then squared her shoulders and straightened her backbone. She'd come this far and wasn't about to let a case of nerves stop her now.

She lifted the brass knocker on the massive door and let it fall. The sound reverberated inside her head, competing with the pulse hammering in her ears. If getting into the Del Rio residence was this hard for her, how in the name of heaven was she going to handle confronting Nancee after all these years?

The door opened and an older woman dressed in a smart black and white uniform looked at Jillian with an expression that could be considered neither friendly nor hostile.

"Jillian McBride Burke to see Mrs. Del Rio," she said after an awkward moment of silence.

The maid's clear gray eyes moved over Jillian. "We've been expecting you, Mrs. Burke. I'll tell Miss Veronica—"

"No," Jillian interrupted, wondering briefly who Veronica might be. One of Nancee's in-laws, most certainly. "I should have been more specific when I called earlier. Nancee Del Rio, please."

For the first time the woman's expression altered. "Miss Nancee isn't here at the moment." She paused, giving Jillian the impression she

needed the extra time to collect her thoughts. “You’re welcome to wait, if you’d like.” She stepped back, inviting Jillian in.

The foyer, all marble tile and priceless antiques, was every bit as impressive as the exterior of the mansion.

To her right, two English column pedestals supporting a pair of seventeenth-century urns flanked a Neo-Classical bench. To her left hung an ornate gilded mirror. Its frame literally crawled with near-nude cherubs sporting bows and arrows or harps. The combination would have given her nightmares had she been forced to be in the same house with them for any length of time.

The only thing she couldn’t fault was the housekeeping. Everything sparkled. She wouldn’t have hesitated to eat off the shiny-clean floor, had the invitation been extended.

A chill shot straight through her, suddenly transporting her back to another time. For several debilitating seconds, she was once again Jillian McBride, the girl from the wrong side of the tracks who, no matter how much she dared to dream of a better life, would never measure up. In that instant, it didn’t matter that the cost of the navy blue linen suit she now wore would probably buy groceries for a family of six for more than a month, or that the shoes on her feet were from the same cobbler who boasted of supplying footwear for the royal family. She was still the fifteen-year-

old girl whose life had fallen apart on a glorious spring afternoon in her home town of Pride, Texas, so many years ago.

“If you’ll wait in the study,” the maid said. “I’ll serve tea.”

Jillian gave a stiff smile of thanks, and stepped through the magnificent pocket doors. Noiselessly they glided closed behind her. The room smelled of brandy and books and bayberry. A large mahogany desk served as the centerpiece of the bookshelf-lined room, but the framed photograph facing her from one corner of the desk caught her attention.

She crossed the room to pick up the photo, and gazed down at the boy dressed in military garb. The youth’s image stirred her heart and her memories of another young man named Christian.

She let her fingertips graze his cheek, touch his lips through the glass covering his youthful face. Full dark brows arched over his eyes. Her eyes. Large and darkest brown, she considered them her own best feature. On her son they were utterly captivating.

Oh, Christian, she thought. Holding the frame to her breast, she looked around once again. This time she saw her surroundings through the eyes of the frightened fifteen-year-old girl who would always live somewhere deep inside her. The room suddenly grew larger and darker and more imposing. With sudden clarity and certainty born of hope, she knew she was right to have come today.



Gray's forehead furrowed when the guard told him he'd admitted a visitor for Veronica. Any other time he wouldn't have thought twice about his mother having company so late in the afternoon, but with the kidnap attempt so fresh on everyone's minds, it would be a long time before things got back to normal.

"I don't recognize the car, do you, Chris?"

Chris shook his head. "No, sir. Maybe it's one of the new members of the DAR Veronica mentioned last night."

Gray knew Chris was trying to lessen his suspicions, but until he knew who had come calling, he wouldn't let his guard down. He pulled up behind the sleek white Seville and stopped.

Chris gathered up the gaily wrapped present lying on the console between them and reached for the door. He never brought luggage on his visits home, but he always remembered to bring Veronica a gift on Fridays. Stopping by the mall for the poster had probably been an excuse to shop for her. Gray suspected it was the boy's way of trying to gain his grandmother's love, a tactic Gray had also used to no avail.

He turned off the ignition, grabbed his briefcase, and followed his son up the front gallery steps. Grayson Manor had been in his mother's family

since before the turn of the century, and, if the truth were known, Gray was more comfortable in his suite of offices in downtown San Antonio than here.

Eloise met them in the foyer. The look of concern on her usually expressionless face immediately made Gray uneasy.

“Mr. Del Rio,” she said, giving Chris a perfunctory smile of welcome.

“Hello, Eloise.” Gray tried to sound casual for Chris’s benefit. “I see we have company.”

“Yes, sir. A Mrs. Burke.” Gray saw her glance over her shoulder as Chris made his way toward the kitchen. “And, sir, she asked for Mrs. Del Rio.”

For as long as Gray could remember, Eloise had called his mother Miss Veronica. “She asked for Nancee?” At his housekeeper’s affirmative nod, Gray placed his briefcase on the foyer table. “And you told her—?”

Eloise looked affronted. “Why, not a thing, sir. I knew you and Chris would be home soon, so I asked her to wait in your study.”

Gray felt a rush of relief. Over the years, Nancee’s creditors had come to him from time to time for reconciliation of various debts, debts he honored for no other reason than to keep her out of his life—and Chris’s. He and Nancee had a pact, after all: He had the divorce and his son; she had a home on each coast and all the money she’d ever want or need. Not an ideal arrangement, but

one that had worked for almost fourteen years. Before today, however, her creditors had never come to Grayson Manor.

Feeling confident now nothing was amiss, Gray patted Eloise on the shoulder. “I’ll let you know if we need anything,”

The heavy doors to his study slid open with the slightest of sounds. He wasn’t sure what he expected, but it certainly wasn’t the sight before him.

A young woman—in her late twenties, if he were any judge of age—stood at his desk, the framed photo of Chris in her hands. Dressed in a trim business suit, she was attractive and well groomed. The navy skirt hugged her nicely rounded hips, while the matching jacket accentuated the well-defined curves of her waist and breasts. A vibrant green blouse complimented her dark features. Impeccable. Classy. Beautiful. She could have just stepped off the runway of a fashion show or out of a corporate board meeting.

He hadn’t made a sound, but she seemed to sense his presence and raised her head to look at him. Gray was no stranger to a woman’s charms, but the instant her gaze locked with his, something raw and powerful hit him. Brown eyes so dark they seemed to pierce his soul held him transfixed. Thick dark brown hair framed a face one could only describe as angelic. For a moment, Gray imagined he knew her. Intuitively, however, he

knew it couldn't be so. No, he told himself; this one he would have remembered.

"Mrs. Burke," he said, shaking off the distracting thoughts and closing the distance separating them. "I'm Grayson Del Rio." He briskly took the hand she extended, but not without noticing how small and cool it felt in his own. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long."

A smile curved her lightly tinted lips. "Actually, Mr. Del Rio, I've been waiting only a few minutes, and your housekeeper has made me very comfortable." She nodded toward the tea service on the bar behind her.

Gray didn't realize he was studying her more closely than good manners allowed until her gaze dropped and a blush crept across her face.

"I must apologize, Mrs. Burke," he said with an embarrassed laugh. "You looked awfully familiar just now. Have we met before?" Good grief, if *that* didn't sound like a pickup line, he didn't know what did.

This time when her dark gaze met his, he was better prepared. Brown eyes in Texas, especially in San Antonio with its Hispanic population, were the rule rather than the exception, but the deep, rich shade of darkest brown gazing back at him made him forget to breathe. Not even Chris's were so dark they camouflaged the pupils, he thought. A warning bell went off inside his head, a warning that confused him almost as much as

this woman intrigued him.

“No, Mr. Del Rio, we’ve never met, but we do have something in common.” The remark added to his growing sense of unease.

“I see,” he said. Offering her one of the wing chairs facing his desk, he settled into his own chair before opening the middle drawer and taking out his checkbook.

“How much does Nancee owe you?” Gray leaned forward, pen poised to write the check that would put an end to her visit. The sense of regret he felt wash over him was both unsettling and uncharacteristic.

The woman looked confused, then she began to fidget with the hem of her jacket. “I’m afraid I haven’t made myself—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off. He didn’t think he wanted to hear her call him Mr. Del Rio one more time. “I’m afraid I understand all too well. My ex-wife pursues a very extravagant lifestyle. She doesn’t know the meaning of the word restraint and lives beyond her monthly allowance more often than not.” Again he poised his pen. “Now if you’ll tell me how much Nancee owes you—”

“You’re divorced?” she interrupted, her features suddenly paling. “For how long?”

Gray was usually careful about not revealing too much about himself or his family, but something told him this was important. “It’ll soon be fourteen

years.” He hadn’t thought it possible for her face to lose more color; he was mistaken.

“Fourteen years,” she repeated, her voice now a near-whisper. She leaned back in her chair and Gray watched her struggle for composure. Finally, she looked up.

“Mr. Del Rio, I’m not here because of Nancee. Well, not in the way you’re thinking, at any rate.” She looked completely vulnerable.

“Mrs. Burke, if you’re not here because of Nancee, would you please explain? I’m a very good listener.” He’d been accused of having a smile that could charm anyone, from grandmothers and children to corporate big wheels and, of course, the ladies. He flashed one at the woman sitting across from him.

She returned it with a tentative smile that nearly knocked him out of his chair. And she wasn’t even trying.

“I don’t think you’re going to like what I have to say.”

A premonition of doom too strong to ignore crept over him. “We’d better get on with it then,” he said. In his experience, in both his business and in his personal life, he’d found that putting things off never accomplished anything.

Mrs. Burke stood and began to pace before him. She stopped, then went to the doors and slid them shut before turning to face him. “First, I have to know Christian is all right.” The softly

spoken demand took Gray by surprise. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, but I saw the article in the Dallas paper about the kidnap attempt. I know you don’t understand my concern, but, please, I have to know he wasn’t hurt.”

This, too, Gray could see, was of grave importance to her. “Chris is fine. In fact, he’s upstairs right now hanging a new poster on his wall.”

Her reaction wasn’t what he expected. She closed her eyes and leaned against the closed door. She finally opened her eyes and looked directly at him.

“My maiden name is Jillian McBride. Does that mean anything to you?”

He shrugged, and she looked crestfallen. Gray felt his stomach churn.

“I honestly don’t know any easy way of saying this, Mr. Del Rio, so I’ll just say it.” She took a deep breath. “I’m Christian’s mother.”

Chapter 2



Gray saw her lips moving, knew she was still talking, but the roar in his ears drowned out her words. He held up his hand and she stopped.

“I’m not sure I heard you right,” he said as calmly as the thundering of his heart allowed.

“I know I’ve taken you off guard, but when I saw the newspaper article about you rescuing Christian, I had to—”

“I think you’d better leave, Mrs. Burke,” he said, standing and skirting his desk. Being wealthy meant being a target for any con artist with a scheme designed to steal part of his family’s fortune. This was a new one and although he wasn’t sure where it was headed, it was stopping here. Now.

She took a step toward him. She was either very brave or very stupid. “I’m sorry. I’ve handled this badly. My attorney suggested—”

“Not another word.” His tone was as firm as his grip on her arm as he prepared to escort her

out. He pulled up short when the doors suddenly slid open and they were face to face with his son.

“Oh,” Chris said, his eyes widening in surprise. He had changed out of his uniform. “I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t know you were with someone.”

Gray’s grip tightened in silent warning.

A puzzled expression crossed Chris’s face. “Is something wrong?” He looked at his father’s fingers wrapped around Jillian Burke’s arm.

Gray released her. “No, son. Mrs. Burke was just leaving.” He fixed her with a glare that would have nailed any man his own size to the wall. Its effect, it appeared, was lost on her.

Jillian Burke’s gaze never left Chris’s face, and if Gray had been asked to describe the look in her eyes, he’d have been at a loss. What he saw was a mixture of conflicting emotions: happiness and heartbreak; love and despair.

The boy extended his hand. “I’m Chris, Mrs. Burke. It’s nice to meet you.”

She hesitated, then reached for Chris’s outstretched hand. “You look so much like your father,” she said, her voice soft and a little breathy.

Chris’s response was a good-natured laugh. “That’s funny,” he said. “Everyone says I look more like my mother.” He turned to Gray. “Eloise is going into town before dinner. I’d like to go along, if it’s okay.”

A few days ago, Gray wouldn’t have given the request a second thought, but he’d come too close

to losing his son to be complacent so soon. Then he looked at Mrs. Burke. He couldn't be sure how he was going to get rid of her or what her next move might be. It probably would be best if Chris weren't in the house.

"Go ahead, son, but have Eloise take one of the guards. I have some paperwork to clear up, then I'll be free."

"Great. We shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours," Chris called on his way out.

The moment they were alone again, Gray turned to his unwanted guest. "Are you leaving on your own—"

"Mr. Del Rio," she broke in, her voice still weak. "I know how this must look to you, but I've come a long way to set a lot of things straight."

"You've come a long way for nothing." He reached for her again, but she avoided him by turning away and going back to his desk.

"No," she said, her tone quiet but filled with resolve. "For almost fourteen years I've thought the son I gave up was dead," she continued. "I'm not leaving San Antonio until I find out why Nancee lied to me." She sat down.

For one of the few times in his life, Gray didn't know what to do. Short of physically hauling her to her car, it was evident she wasn't budging.

"You're incredible, lady." Over the years, he had been subjected to every crooked scam known to man, but this one took the cake. Hell, maybe it

wasn't a scam. She was awfully convincing, even *looked* as though she was telling the truth. Maybe she was just a beautiful, demented woman who'd escaped from an insane asylum.

Either way, he wasn't buying into her delusion. "If you were a man saying you were the father of my son," he said, "you might have a fighting chance."

Even that didn't wash with Gray. Nancee might be a lot of things—selfish, greedy, a liar deluxe—but she wasn't stupid. There was no way she'd have chanced losing her meal ticket by being unfaithful, then trying to pass off another man's child as his.

"To even suggest you're Chris's biological mother is absurd, especially when I have his birth certificate right here in my safe."

Shock registered on her face as her dark eyes widened. "Nancee didn't tell you, did she?" She leaned back in her chair. "I'm sorry, so very sorry. If only I'd known—" She began to fidget with the strap of her handbag. "Mr. Del Rio, I don't know how Nancee faked a pregnancy, but if you've thought Christian was your son all these years, you've been gravely deceived."

Every muscle in Gray's body tensed. "You've wasted enough of my time, Mrs. Burke." He couldn't believe he'd let her get this far with her preposterous claim. "We have nothing else to discuss."

She stood and started to pace. "I knew coming here today wasn't going to be easy, but I never intended to cause you any trouble or to upset Christian. I just needed to see for myself that he was okay." She stopped to face him. "And to talk with Nancee. Where is she, anyway?"

Her demand for information angered him. "Your guess is as good as mine," he responded, hearing the thinly veiled rage in his own voice.

"I see," she said. Opening her handbag, she withdrew a business card, then reached for the discarded pen lying in front of him and scrawled something on the back of the card.

"This is the hotel where I'm staying and my room number. And this," she said, continuing to write on the card, "is my attorney's name and phone number in Dallas." She straightened to look him squarely in the eye. He saw determination tempered with sympathy in the dark gaze holding his.

"I realize how cruel this must seem to you, Mr. Del Rio, but all I know is I've found my son and I can't just walk away now. I have no idea what my legal rights are but believe me, I plan to find out." She was calm, collected, very much the professional. "You have my word I won't interfere in your life—or Christian's—until we've reached some sort of agreement. I'll be talking with my attorney as soon as I get back to the hotel."

"For someone who hadn't *planned* anything,

you sure came prepared.” His sarcasm hit the mark. She flinched.

“I’m truly sorry,” he heard her say as she turned away.

Cool, he thought, watching her walk out the door. Too damned cool and collected. And good. He picked up her card and glanced at it, surprised to see his hand trembling.

“Well, Mrs. Jillian McBride Burke,” he read off the card, “President & CEO, Burke Enterprises, Dallas, Texas, if it’s a fight you’re after, it’s a fight you’ll get.”

His gaze shifted from the card in his hand to Chris’s photo on the corner of his desk. An uneasy knot of dread began to form and grow in the pit of his stomach. For the first time ever, he didn’t see Nancee’s dark eyes mirrored in his son’s. From nowhere, Jillian Burke’s words came back to taunt him: *I don’t know how Nancee faked a pregnancy*—

With an oath that would have made a trucker blush, Gray tried to quash the fear. It wasn’t possible. Nancee couldn’t have pulled off something like this. It wasn’t in his nature to consider defeat, especially before the battle had even begun, but what if Jillian McBride Burke had a legitimate claim?

“No,” he said to the empty room, reaching for Chris’s photograph and holding it tightly in his grasp. “No one will take you from me,” he

promised. “*No one.*”



Somehow Jillian made it down the steps and into the rental car just seconds before she started trembling. Years of refining out the small-town insecurities dissolved along with her composure. All she wanted was to get away from Grayson Del Rio before he could look at her again with those steel-blue eyes—eyes she’d found warm and gentle until they’d turned cold and ruthless. She’d known all along this encounter wasn’t going to be easy, but the instant he stepped into the room in Nancee’s place, nothing had gone as planned.

Her gut reaction to the newspaper article—to take the first available flight to San Antonio—had been nothing more than maternal instinct. To learn so many years after the fact that her son was alive had been a shock. She hadn’t thought much beyond confronting Nancee or getting to see for herself Christian was happy and well and living the life Nancee had promised to provide him.

Then Grayson Del Rio had casually mentioned his ex-wife. *Ex-wife*. That had been her first inkling something else was desperately wrong. But the look on his face when she told him she was Christian’s mother would forever haunt her. Not once had it occurred to her he wouldn’t know.

But he had seemed genuinely shocked.

Jillian shook her head in amazement. Surely there was no way Nancee could have faked a pregnancy while living under the same roof and sharing a bed with a man like Grayson Del Rio, a man who epitomized everything masculine—healthy and virile, and sexy as hell. No matter how nervous she'd been, she hadn't missed *that* about him. The moment she'd looked up to see him standing in the doorway studying her so intently, she'd felt something potent and primal strike clear to her toes.

An involuntary rush of warmth flashed through her. *A man like Grayson Del Rio?* She almost laughed aloud. What she knew about men like Grayson Del Rio would fit on the head of a pin—with room left over. She'd known only two men intimately in her almost thirty years. One, so long ago, a mere boy; the other a man twenty-five years her senior, a man who had loved her dearly and tenderly for the thirteen years they had been together, but a man who—

A streak of guilt chopped the thought off. She wouldn't do this to Carl's memory. He had been good and kind and had seen her through some very rough times. If it hadn't been for Carl, the news of Christian's death, fabricated though it had been, might have been more than she could have borne. He deserved more than her gratitude and certainly much more than being compared to

another man—especially one who looked as though he'd never been ill a day in his life.

Suddenly angry with herself, Jillian turned the key in the ignition, wishing now she'd taken advantage of the limo service the hotel's concierge had suggested. If she had, she'd be able to sit back and quietly fall apart while someone else worried about the drive back to San Antonio. But she'd chosen to drive herself and now she'd have to deal with this disaster the same way she'd dealt with all the others in her life before Carl and after his death—alone, and the best way she could.

Still shaking from her encounter with her son's... *father*, Jillian choked back threatening tears. She couldn't believe what had just happened. Was she seriously thinking about trying to take Christian from the only family he'd ever known? No, she decided, that would be too cruel. She would have to calm down, think rationally. After all, Christian had seemed well adjusted in the brief seconds she'd seen him.

Her knuckles strained as she glanced in the rearview mirror. Grayson Manor loomed behind her in the distance. Cold and impersonal with its priceless antiques and pieces of fine art, it had felt more like a museum than a home. No matter how well adjusted Christian had seemed to her during their brief encounter, she couldn't help wondering if he lived all these years fearful of bringing someone's wrath upon him by accidentally touching

one of those god-awful urns or other objects of fine, albeit atrocious, art.

Jillian found herself wanting to cry, to crawl into herself and wait for the storm to pass. But she couldn't.

The more Jillian learned, the more she realized how Nancee had manipulated her. Had she done the same thing with her husband? And why did Christian live with his father and not with Nancee? What a mess! In less than five minutes, the direction of Jillian's entire life had changed.

Unbidden, an image of Christian's photograph came to mind. This time, however, the image disturbed her. *The uniform*. Why hadn't she thought about this before? She drew a deep breath and tried not to lose her composure again. The pieces all fell into place, pieces that formed a picture of a typical busy, divorced executive's teenage son being shipped off to school to keep him in line and out of the way. That wasn't what she'd had in mind at all the day she decided Christian would have a better life with the Del Rios.

Myriad questions and emotions flew through her mind as the Cadillac ate up the miles between Grayson Manor and San Antonio. By the time she reached the hotel and her suite of rooms, Jillian knew what she had to do.

She'd learned a lot in the years since marrying Carl. He'd taken her into his business, taught her

all she would need to know to run Burke Enterprises efficiently. He'd told her early on her survival in the corporate world hinged on his skill in teaching her all he knew and on her ability to carry on in the event of his death.

“When you have an objective and you're faced with an obstacle,” he'd also told her, “strike fast and with as much force as it takes to get over or around it.”

Well, Jillian thought, sitting on the edge of the king-size bed, she hadn't meant for it to come to this; but now that she knew Christian was alive and his home life wasn't what she'd hoped for, she couldn't just walk away. She had as much to offer her son now as did Grayson Del Rio.

And Grayson Del Rio most definitely would be an obstacle.

She glanced at her watch, then reached for the telephone. Scott would still be in his office. She removed her earrings, dialed his number, and waited for the head of Burke Enterprises' law department to answer his private line. He picked up on the third ring.

“Scott,” she said, tucking the receiver between her ear and shoulder. “I've done something I'm not sure is—”

“I know,” Scott interrupted. “I just got off the phone with Lyle Draper. Your Mr. Del Rio's a mover and a shaker and has a powerhouse of an attorney.”

Jillian kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the bed. “I’m not surprised.” Drawing a deep breath, she raised her free hand to gingerly massage her throbbing temple. “I should have listened to you, and waited for you to do a little digging into the situation.” She had to keep the disappointment from showing in her voice. “They’re not married anymore, Scott, and Christian lives with his father. I need to know—”

“Hey,” Scott broke in again with a good-natured chuckle, “are you trying to tell me how to do my job?”

His laugh was the most pleasant thing she’d heard since Grayson Del Rio had first spoken to her.

Jillian smiled. “No more than you try to tell me how to do mine.” The pause that followed made her uneasy.

Finally, he spoke. “I can be packed and on a plane—”

“No.” Since long before Carl’s death, Scott had been a godsend, but the man made no pretense at hiding his growing feelings for the young widow. She couldn’t afford to lean on him any more than absolutely necessary. No matter how valuable he was to her, both as legal counsel and as a friend, she would never allow herself to become too dependent on any one person again.

“There’s really nothing I can do at this point, Scott, but I—”

How could she tell him how comforting it was just to be in the same town with her son?

“I’ve decided to take some time off. It’s been a rough couple of years for me, Scott, so I’m going to stay in San Antonio for a few weeks. Just fax Mr. Draper copies of everything I left with you and give him any information he wants about me and Burke Enterprises.”

She knew Grayson Del Rio could afford the best private investigators money could buy, but investigations took time and she wanted to move on this as soon as possible. More to the point, she had absolutely nothing to hide.

“Everything’s happened so fast, Jillian,” she heard Scott say. “Exactly what is it you want?”

She drew a deep breath. “At this point, Scott, I’m not really sure.” The silence on the other end of the line began to worry her.

“I’ve spoken with my friend who specializes in family law and he tells me all you have to do is prove you’re the boy’s birth mother.”

“But what about the birth certificate?” she broke in. “I don’t have anything saying who I am.”

“Not to worry, Jill. Greg assured me that although the birth certificate is a legal document stating the Del Rios are your son’s natural parents, it isn’t worth the paper it’s written on. Since there was never a legal adoption, all they’ve had all these years is possession of an illegitimate child.” He cleared his throat.

“Still,” he went on, “I wouldn’t recommend a full-blown custody suit. Del Rio’s well known in that part of the state, not to mention respected and influential as hell. And then we have to be careful where judges are concerned. Unfortunately, there are judges out there who are notorious for being overly sympathetic to fathers, especially when—” He cut himself short.

“Especially when *what*, Scott?” Her stomach began to feel queasy.

“You know I’m on your side in this, Jillian,” she heard Scott saying. “But since you’ve admitted to agreeing to let the Del Rios raise your son—”

“At first, Scott!” she cut him off. “I changed my mind, and Nancee stole my baby.”

The note of hysteria she heard in her voice scared her. It had taken years for her to achieve the facade of unemotional professionalism she wore like a protective suit of armor. It was important for her to keep her emotions in check now more than ever. Emotions made one vulnerable and she couldn’t afford to be vulnerable now.

“I know, Jill, I know,” Scott said. “Still, it’s going to be tough explaining all that to a judge.”

“I understand, Scott,” Jillian finally said. “Like you said, this all happened so fast. There is one thing we can get started on, though.”

She placed her earrings on the night table. “Hire someone to start looking for Nancee. Mr. Del Rio told me he didn’t know where she was,

but I need to talk with her.”

“And you believe him?”

She thought for a moment. Something in his voice and his steady eye contact told her he wasn't lying.

“Yes,” she answered. “I believe him. I'll get back to you in the morning.”

With a promise to keep her distance from Grayson Del Rio, Jillian said goodbye. Drained, she sank back into the bed pillows and allowed fatigue to take control of her body. Tired. She was so tired. She'd been operating on overload since long before Carl's illness and death. And now there was this to face.

Untying the silk bow at her throat, she unbuttoned her collar, tugged her blouse free of the skirt's waistband, then turned on to her side and closed her eyes. She'd rest a while before going down for dinner. Perhaps then she'd be better prepared to plan her strategy against Grayson Del Rio.

Chapter 3



He had to be crazy. Lyle had advised him not to talk to her if she showed up again and here he was about to knock on her door. Gray lowered his hand, then raised it again and knocked briskly before he talked himself out of confronting Jillian McBride Burke. If, indeed, that was her real name.

No judge in Texas would consider taking Chris away from him. He was a man of status in the community, wealthy and respected. He had led an exemplary life, and had a reputation for honesty and integrity. Even if her claim was true, then everything would still work to Gray's advantage. Not that it mattered. She'd prove her ridiculous claim the day the devil ice-skated in hell.

Things didn't look so good for Jillian Burke. By her own admission, she had agreed to give up her baby at birth. If her story was true, why had it taken her all these years to claim her child?

For almost fourteen years, I've thought the son I gave up was dead. Her words echoed in his

mind with a force that stunned him.

Gray shoved the thought away. Why was he doing this to himself? Her story was a crock, and if Lyle's private investigator was half as good as his reputation, he would have no trouble proving it.

Everyone knew Nancee had been three months pregnant when he'd left for Europe all those years ago; he'd talked with the doctor himself, just to make sure she and the baby would be all right while he was gone.

The overseas merger had promised to be a tricky one, with the trip expected to take several months, at the very least. Granted, he hadn't been in Dallas for Chris's birth, but had no reason to doubt Nancee had delivered their son. She never could have pulled off something as diabolical as Jillian Burke suggested.

Gray waited, knocked again, then glanced at his watch. Eight forty-five. It looked as if it had been a wasted trip; hell, she'd probably gone out for supper. Still, he just couldn't go home after leaving Lyle's office. He'd come close to losing Chris earlier in the week, but in many ways Jillian Burke's scheme was far more frightening. What she was saying was that Chris wasn't even his son. Legitimate claim or not, it promised to be a battle to the bloody finish, because, damn it, he cared enough to fight for his son, unlike—

He severed the thought before it fully formed. He was past all that, and he wasn't about to roll

over and play dead just because a smooth-talking con artist thought she'd worked up a clever way to get a few thousand dollars out of him. He raised his hand to knock again. The money wasn't important, and it wasn't as though he hadn't done it before.

"Who's there?" Jillian Burke finally called from behind the closed door.

"Gray Del Rio."

The silence that followed gave him a certain degree of satisfaction. He had a reputation for not putting things off, and he hoped to rattle her. He just wasn't sure which tactic to use—intimidation or charm.

The satisfaction, however, was short-lived. The first thing he saw through the small crack in the door was a pair of sleepy brown eyes, widened by surprise and slightly smudged with mascara.

"Mr. Del Rio," she said, her voice husky with sleep, "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Maybe not," he agreed, pushing the door open and stepping inside, "but I'm not leaving until we've talked this out." He set his briefcase on the table just inside the entry and looked down at her.

Jillian Burke was tall, a good five feet nine inches in her bare feet, but she looked smaller and more vulnerable than she had earlier today. She also looked sexier than any woman had a right to look with her dark hair cascading about her

shoulders and her blouse pulled free of her skirt.

If he didn't know better, he'd have figured this to be some sort of feminine trick to take him off guard. And damned if it wasn't working.

"Have I interrupted something?" Gray let his gaze slide down her disheveled clothes, and was rewarded by a flush of color to her cheeks.

"No, of course not," Jillian responded in a perfectly modulated voice touched only by a soft East Texas drawl. "I was resting. Have a seat while I make myself more presentable."

She turned away, but not before he saw the fatigue in her features. She staggered slightly, leaning against the wall for support.

Immediately he was at her side. She might be the enemy, but he wasn't a complete cad. "Are you okay?"

She looked up and Gray could have kicked himself for coming on so strong. Either the woman was a consummate actress or she was close to physical exhaustion.

She straightened and tugged her arm free of his grasp. "I'm fine. Just a little lightheaded. I skipped breakfast and lunch, then I fell asleep before going down for dinner."

Gray was here for answers but he wouldn't be getting any if she wasn't up to it physically. "I missed supper, too," he said. "Go ahead and freshen up and we'll grab a bite." If she was serious about this claim of hers, it might be better to get

to know her on a more personal level before whatever legal battle she had in mind became a reality.

Jillian hesitated before looking up. “Thanks.” The smile she managed was as guileless as it was weak. “I won’t be long.”

Alone, Gray glanced around the room. Business kept him in town several times a month and on occasion he’d stayed at this very hotel instead of his office apartment to accommodate business associates. This suite was one of the best the hotel had to offer. He had to give the woman credit. If she was, indeed, the con-artist he suspected her to be, she was good. There was nothing cheap about her little scam, but if she was smart enough to go after big game like him, she’d also be smart enough to play it to the hilt. Why take chances on having her ruse detected by trying to save a buck or two?

Jillian came back in the room wearing neatly creased jeans and a red sweater that put a little color in her cheeks. Her hair had been pulled back and neatly restrained by a broad gold clip at the nape of her slender neck. Simple, yet elegant gold loops adorned each ear. Even tired, she sure as hell didn’t look old enough to be the mother of a thirteen-year-old.

“I assumed from the way you’re dressed we’d be going someplace casual,” she said, her dark eyes traveling from his favorite western shirt and

wind breaker to his most comfortable faded Wranglers and the scuffed cowboy boots on his feet.

“I spent the rest of the afternoon tossing a football around with Chris,” he said, wondering why he felt the need to explain anything to her.

“He plays football?”

“Among other sports. Are you ready?” Gray asked, not wanting to broach the subject of Chris until he’d had a chance to size her up better. As lovely and amiable as she appeared, he hadn’t gotten this far in life by taking his opponents at face value.

“I’ll get my jacket.”

The elevator ride and walk to his car were probably the longest and quietest on record. Thankfully the restaurant he had in mind was only a mile or two from the hotel. The drive took only a few minutes.

“Are we too late to grab a bite?”

“Never for you, *Tio*,” Juanita Guerrero teased with a broad and friendly smile as she hung the closed sign in the window and locked up behind them. “Pop would have my hide if I turned you away.” She paused.

Gray put his arm around Juanita’s shoulders and steered them toward his favorite booth in a secluded section of the gaily decorated dining room. The area had never seemed so romantic before. Short of making a production of turning

the lights up, though, there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

He waited for his dinner companion to be seated before he slid into the booth opposite her. "Are there any fajitas left?" he asked Juanita with a glance across the table at Jillian Burke. "If that's all right with you."

"Fajitas sound wonderful," she answered, glancing up at Juanita. "Chicken, if you have them. And some lemon wedges."

Juanita jotted the order on her pad, looked from Jillian to Gray, then—apparently realizing an introduction wasn't forthcoming—left them alone. She returned momentarily with two glasses of water, a basket of chips, and a bowl of chunky salsa.

Gray picked up the salt shaker and held it over the chips. He added a light sprinkling only after his reluctant dinner companion nodded her head. Dipping the chip in the salsa, he took a crunchy bite. An awkward silence followed. He'd never been at a loss for words with a woman before. But where did you start a conversation with a stranger who claimed to be the mother of your son?

"There's so much to talk about, I don't know where to start."

He looked up at the sound of Jillian's voice. "My thoughts exactly." He watched her dip a chip and pop it into her mouth. Instantly, she began to cough, and her eyes started to water. They both

reached for her water glass and it toppled over, covering the table top with ice and water.

“Here,” he said, scooting his own glass across the table to her. She gulped the water down and took the salt shaker he handed her. “Sprinkle some in your palm and lick it. It’ll help cut the heat.” Gray unfolded his napkin and placed it over the spilled water to keep it from running over the edge of the table.

Without hesitating, she slipped her tongue across the salt in her hand. Then she repeated the process. Teary-eyed, she looked across at him and gave a sigh of relief.

“I’ve had salsa and I’ve had *salsa*. That’s definitely *SALSA*.”

“Sorry,” he muttered. “It’s my usual. I should have asked for the mild for you.”

“No, no, it’s okay. It just took me by surprise,” she said, reaching for another chip. This time she didn’t dip so much. “I’m not really a salsa pansy,” she said with another heart-stopping smile.

Her smile and the teasing light in her eyes reached across the space separating them to rattle him again.

“Why don’t we get to it,” Gray said. He leaned back fixing her with what he hoped was his most serious down-to-business look.

Juanita chose that moment to reappear with two frozen margaritas. “Compliments of the house,” she said, efficiently swiping the spilled

water off the table and onto her tray in one deft movement. She picked up another napkin and placed it before Gray. “Pop sends his apologies for not coming out to say hello, but the cook... I mean, the chef... had an argument with... one of the waitresses.” She stared down at the worn leather huaraches on her feet. “He’s threatening to quit unless I apologize.”

Gray had no idea what had transpired, but Juanita looked so distraught, he couldn’t resist the urge to do something to help out. Maybe it would help his cause to let Jillian Burke stew a while.

“Don’t worry, Juanita. If Alejo’s too busy to come out to see his favorite cousin, I guess I’ll just have to go to him. I won’t be long,” he told Jillian, brushing his fingertips against her hand as he slid out of the booth.

Jillian watched him disappear through the double swinging doors, her skin still tingling from his touch. She couldn’t help but wonder at the man who had taken her by surprise this evening, in more ways than one.

First, he’d shown up at her door wanting answers; then he invited her to dinner. Now, he’d abandoned his questions to go to the aid of a relative in distress. Was this the same man she’d heard so many horror stories about? The man who masterminded takeovers of powerful conglomerates the same way most people bought their clothes at neighborhood shopping malls?

“Isn’t he just about the most wonderful man you’ve ever met?”

Jillian had forgotten the young waitress’s presence until she spoke. “I... I wouldn’t know,” she stammered. “I’ve only known him a few hours,” she hurried on when the girl looked at her as if the only brain cell she suspected Jillian of possessing had been burned out by the salsa.

“Well, that would explain it,” Juanita said with a smile. “I’m Juanita. *Tio* and Pop are really cousins, but they like for us kids to call him ‘Uncle’.”

Jillian extended her hand. “Jillian Burke.”

The sound of male voices arguing from the kitchen interrupted them. Two sounded angry and unrelenting, while the third, Gray Del Rio’s, stayed calm. All three spoke in Spanish—or a Tex-Mex version of it—leaving Jillian to understand only a word or phrase here and there, enough for her to know the squabble was winding down.

“I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble,” Juanita said, drawing Jillian’s attention away from the ruckus in the other room. “I couldn’t keep quiet another minute. Heriberto thinks just because he’s the best cook—*chef* around, he can keep making passes at the waitresses and no one will say anything to him. Well, he’s wrong. These girls need their jobs, and if Heriberto keeps at them, they’re the ones who are forced to leave. It isn’t fair.”

Jillian could see the concern in the young

woman's face. "So you told your father, and now Heriberto denies it." Same story, different town. "For what it's worth, Juanita, you did the right thing."

"Right thing, maybe, but was it the *smart* thing?" Juanita and Jillian exchanged looks, but neither seemed to have the answer to her question. "I'll be right back with your fajitas."

No sooner had Juanita left than Gray Del Rio returned to their table. "Sorry," he apologized, sliding into the booth. "Alejandro and his family are the only relatives on my father's side I really know. Alejo's helped me out of a jam or two over the years," he said with a laugh. "Once when I was in military school..."

Jillian suspected he let his words trail off because he realized he was close to revealing more than he wanted. Still, he'd left her an opening.

"Is that why you sent Christian away to school, Mr. Del Rio, because what was good for you is good for your son?" It wasn't the best way to start their talk, but they'd danced around it long enough.

The man across the table from her didn't answer right away. Instead, he leaned back and unfolded his napkin, then calmly spread it across his lap.

"I have a feeling we're going to be seeing a great deal of each other in the future, so we might as well be on a first name basis. I answer to Gray," he said, looking up as Juanita approached

the table again. “Why don’t we talk after we’ve eaten?”

Sometime after their arrival at the restaurant, Gray had changed tactics on her. Fine, she could wait.

“Okay,” she said with what she hoped was her most dazzling smile. “Call me Jillian, please.” Two could play his game.

The food looked and smelled mouth-watering. After a short, silent blessing, she reached for a steaming flour tortilla and spread it with refried beans, then layered it with strips of grilled chicken, onions, and green pepper. Next she squeezed a small amount of lemon juice over it all before adding *pico de gallo*, shredded jack cheese, and sour cream. Then she folded the tortilla from both sides to make a neat south-of-the-border sandwich.

“I wondered what the lemons were for.”

She glanced up. “Just a touch I think brings out the flavor.” Jillian watched him follow her example, somehow gratified when he took a bite and smiled his approval.

“So you’re from Dallas,” Gray said, taking a sip of his margarita. Granules of salt clung to his lips.

Jillian watched him lick the salt away, momentarily distracted by the movement of his tongue, the fullness of his lips. She cleared her throat and laid her fork aside.

“Yes. I... moved there when I was fifteen.” Whether it was the way his lips parted or the

reminder of her past, she wasn't sure, but suddenly she felt on shaky ground. "I met Carl about a year later."

"Carl?"

She took a sip of water. "My husband."

She saw his gaze drop to the large diamond on her ring finger. "He was... extremely generous."

"Was?"

Jillian cringed. Once men learned she was a widow, it seemed to encourage them to think she was fair game or easy. She had no intention of letting Gray Del Rio think she was either.

"He died seven months ago after a lengthy illness." Saying it still hurt, but at least she could bear it now.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"Would you like something else to drink?" He nodded toward her untouched margarita.

"No, thanks. Alcohol and I don't mix well, so I'm not much of a drinker." Her allergy to liquor had been diagnosed years ago, and since she'd never found a drink she really liked, it hadn't been much of a loss for her. "Water's fine."

They ate the rest of their meal in relative silence, but the quiet was disrupted by a short, stocky man as he emerged from the kitchen.

"*Mi primo*," he called loudly as he crossed the dining area with outstretched arms. "I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to talk earlier."

Gray stood and embraced the older man. “So did you and Heriberto reach a meeting of the minds?”

“*Si*, he understands if he touches my girls again, we’ll have a new item on the menu.” He shot a look at Jillian. “You didn’t say you had someone with you.” He took Jillian’s hand and brushed his mustached lips across her knuckles. “I wouldn’t have mentioned such a beauty to my most handsome cousin either.”

Gray shook his head. “Now, Alejandro, what would Catalina say?” he asked with a wickedly teasing grin.

Jillian thought her heart might stop beating right there in the darkened dining room of a Mexican restaurant. A body would have to be blind not to be affected by Gray’s handsome features, but his upturned lips and the crinkling at the corners of his eyes were as breathtaking as anything she’d ever seen.

Grinning broadly, Alejandro scooted into the booth beside Gray. “I won’t tell if you won’t.” Again he grinned at his cousin. “And how is our Christian?” he asked after a brief introduction to Jillian.

“Things are about to get back to normal,” Gray answered. “With the extra security, I felt I could leave him and Veronica alone for a few hours while I came into town to take care of some business.”

Alejandro beamed. “And what a pleasant business it is,” he said, the twinkle in his eye

aimed at Jillian.

The comment from anyone else might have offended her, but there was no way to take offense at anything Alejandro might say.

Gray glanced at his watch. "Let's settle up, Alejo. Jillian and I still have... business to discuss."

Alejo pushed Gray's gold card back at him. "You know better than that, Gray."

"Alejo, how do you expect to keep this place going if you insist on feeding your friends and relatives free of charge?"

"Ah, maybe you'll reward my generosity by letting me in on your next hostile takeover." Alejandro's dark eyebrows rose in a villainous arc.

"Yeah, right." Gray clapped his cousin on the shoulder. "This from the least aggressive man I've ever known."

The men continued their razzing all the way to the door. It was hard to believe this was the same Grayson Del Rio the business community respected and feared. Neither was he the same brooding man who looked for hidden meanings in every word spoken.

"*Hasta luego, Alejo.*" Gray embraced his cousin and gave Juanita a farewell peck on the cheek. "Give my love to Catalina."

Outside, the brisk night air was cold, but not enough to be unpleasant. Gray opened the door to his Porsche and helped Jillian inside. His hand wasn't at all what she expected of a high-powered

executive. In addition to his skinned knuckles, calluses covered his palm, dozens of tiny scars marred his fingers. But the sensations leaping from him to her surprised her more than anything. His touch lingered longer than necessary to see her safely inside the car, and, suddenly embarrassed, they each pulled their hands away.

Seconds later, he slid behind the wheel, and in the cozy confines of the sports car his proximity all but overwhelmed her. Like the car he drove, everything about him bespoke power and vitality. She tried to avoid thinking in terms of masculine and virile, sensual and passionate, but perversely those were the words that danced through her mind. Even his cologne, a subtle blend of musk and spice and something she couldn't quite define, reached across the tiny space separating them to leave her a little breathless.

Stop it! Jillian commanded herself. She couldn't afford to be distracted, especially by the man who had reared her son, the man who didn't believe a word she'd told him so far. She glanced his way and caught her breath.

It was hard to accept, but he was as much a victim of Nancee's scheme as she had been. And even harder to admit—her son had appeared happy and well adjusted during their brief encounter.

She decided she would have to find the right way to assure Gray she had no intention of showing up at this late date to yank Christian out of the

only life he'd ever known. She would talk with Scott in the morning about the possibility of joint custody. Surely Gray would see this was the only fair and decent way to resolve their problem.

And somehow she still had to convince him she wasn't lying.

Thankfully, it didn't take long to reach her hotel.

"Going to Alejandro's wasn't such a good idea," Gray said, waving the parking attendant away. "We never did get around to talking."

Jillian sensed he planned to come up to her room to finish their talk. "It's probably for the best." She fingered the strap of her handbag, torn between wanting to get things settled about Christian and, not wanting to be alone with Grayson Del Rio in her room.

"You aren't trying to put me off, are you?"

"No, of course not," she lied. "It's just that my attorney isn't going to be happy we had dinner together, much less discussed our case..." She let the words trail off.

"Your attorney?"

"Yes." She gathered her purse. "Thank you for dinner, Mr. Del Rio."

"Gray," he corrected.

She nodded and reached for the door handle. Immediately, he did the same. "Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Del Rio—"

"Gray," he corrected again, ignoring her and

getting out of the car. Seconds later, he opened her door.

Jillian stepped out and onto the curb. “Really, Mr. Del Rio, this isn’t necessary.”

This time he smiled, actually smiled at her. “I thought we’d agreed on first names,” he said so softly his words were almost lost in the brisk November breeze. “Is Gray so hard to say?”

She fleetingly wondered at his reasons for being so charming. Was he intentionally trying to throw her off guard?

“No, of course not,” she replied with a sheepish smile. “It’s just... different.” His soft chuckle seemed to warm the night air—or was it just her imagination?

“Grayson is my mother’s maiden name, and a terrible thing to do to a child.” He put one hand at the small of her back and gently began to propel her toward the door. “And I have to go up with you. I left my briefcase in your room.”

Dear LionHearted Reader,

You have just finished reading what we feel is one of the Crown Jewels of the romance genre. You may have noticed a difference between our novels and other publisher's books, beginning with our fresh looking covers. We choose not to publish "bodice-ripping" covers or stories with horror, abuse, rape, degradation or excessive violence. We prefer romantic fiction with empowered heroes and heroines who show that integrity, persistence, and love will ultimately triumph over adversity.

A "quantity" rather than "quality" mentality and a shortage of display space have led to a shorter shelf life for most titles. Over half of the paperbacks printed today wind up as waste in landfills or oceans. Also, many books being released today are not new titles but re-prints of old titles avid romance fans have already read.

We saw a need for a different approach. So from the beginning we have utilized small print runs and continuous distribution. Our books never go out of print. We do not dump our books nor ask bookstores to strip covers for returns. We may not change an industry wide practice, but we can do our part to save trees and be a more environmentally responsible company.

We publish many sub-genres of romantic fiction including contemporary, historical, time-travel, Regency, comedy, suspense, intrigue, futuristic, fantasy, westerns and more. All of our titles are available in a variety of ebook formats as well as paperback.

Please consider donating your used novels to your local women's shelters.

LionHearted is a reader and author friendly company. We want your reading experience with us to be exciting and delightful and continue well into the future. Please visit our website to see other releases at www.LionHearted.com or call us toll free at **888-546-6478** for a free catalog.

Thank you for choosing a LionHearted book.

Mary Ann Heathman
President & CEO

LionHearted Publishing, Inc.
P.O. Box 618
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448

admin@LionHearted.com

888-546-6478 Phone • Fax • Voice Mail

LionHearted Order Form

Call 888-546-6478 or visit us at www.LionHearted.com

Click on any Info link to see reviews on our web site.

Charades	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Destiny's Disguise	Info	___ x \$7.00 ___
Echoes of Love	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Family Portrait	Info	___ x \$9.00 ___
Forever, My Knight	Info	___ x \$7.00 ___
Heart of the Diamond	Info	___ x \$9.00 ___
Isn't It Romantic?	Info	___ x \$7.00 ___
Knight's Desire	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Lady Alicia's Legacy	Info	___ x \$9.00 ___
Lord Darver's Match	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Lovers Never Lie	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
My Captain Jack	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Oracle	Info	___ x \$7.00 ___
Outrageous	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
P.S. I've Taken A Lover	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Something In Common	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Spirit of the Heart	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Suddenly Love	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
The Alliance	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
The Magic Token	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
The Rebel's Bride	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Turnagain Love	Info	___ x \$6.00 ___
Unbridled	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___
Undercover Love	Info	___ x \$6.00 ___
Yesterday Once More	Info	___ x \$8.00 ___

For Paperback books:

\$2.50 per order, plus

\$1.00 per book.

Sales Tax if purchased in Nevada

Make check to "LionHearted" for

Shipping _____

Sub-Total _____

6.75% _____

\$ _____

Catherine Sellers

Affectionately known as (AKA) "K" to family, friends and peers, Catherine was born in West Texas, the oldest daughter of an oil field rough-neck, she never stayed in one place long—her parents divorced when she was six.

At age 15, she met her future husband Bill and knew he was her soul mate. One son, one daughter, and two grandchildren later he still is her ideal of the all-American hero.

“K” has been a telephone operator, insurance agent, tax consultant’s assistant, and secretary—but in 1983 she realized how much she wanted to write. She began free-lancing for the local Better Business Bureau while she studied the craft of writing and attended writers’ conferences. She sold her first romance novel in 1989. With three published novels to her credit, she put her writing on hold to help her husband and son start their construction company, but is excited and eager to continue her writing career with LionHearted.

She defines writing as “a little talent and a lot of hard work combined with massive doses of frustration and self-doubt. She loves it when a reader writes to say how much one of her stories touched her. That makes all the work, frustration and self-doubt worthwhile.

Email her at catherinesellers@worldnet.att.net, or write to P.O. Box 1103, Frankston, TX 75763.



Catherine Sellers

“An engrossing tale from strands of unexpected love, heartbreak and hope. She snares the reader from page one.”

*Rosalyn Alsobrook
Bestselling Author*

“Compelling and suspenseful! Wonderful characters... gripping, intriguing. Once I started reading, I couldn't stop.”

Susanne Marie Knight, Author

Jillian Burke scans with interest a newspaper article about a boy rescued by his father from kidnapers—then the impact of the names hit her. The infant she thought dead is alive and now this man's son! Determined to claim the child “stolen” from her through deception and lies fourteen years earlier, she heads toward San Antonio to get young Christian back in her life.

Grayson Del Rio is not in the mood for an unscrupulous con-artist claiming to be his son's mother. It's absurd! No way could his ex-wife have pulled off such a scam, that would mean that Chris is not his child. He discovers that the beautiful widow has more gall than Texas has highways.

“Tightly written, with great drama—it grabs your attention and draws you into the whirlwind of events.”

*4.5 Stars ****1/2 Nan@ARomanceReview*