

From Glowing Embers by Emilie Richards
Excerpt

Chapter 1

Dear God! The child sitting next to Gray Sheridan was only a little younger than Ellie would have been!

Julianna Mason took a step backward, as if putting additional distance between herself and the little girl sitting by the airplane window would somehow shield her from pain. Nothing could shield her now, however, nothing less than a magical return to the moments before she had stepped into the next cabin of the DC-10 carrying her to Honolulu and seen Gray Sheridan relaxing beside the brown-haired, brown-eyed pixie.

Brown hair and brown eyes. What color would Ellie's eyes have been? They had been blue at birth; Julianna knew that much. Blue eyes in an impossibly tiny face. Blue eyes that had seemed to grow dimmer and dimmer with each faltering heartbeat. Blue eyes that might someday have been the deep tarnished silver of her father's. If Ellie had lived.

Ellie.

How long had it been since she had let herself think about her daughter? The time between memories could be measured in weeks now. Sometimes even a month went by. But then, just as she thought she was learning to forget, she would awaken in the middle of the night to Kauai rain tumbling over the eaves of her house, and for a moment she would believe she was back in Mississippi. And Ellie...

Julianna pulled her eyes from the little girl to the man sitting beside her. From their position in the two seats by the window, and from Gray's relaxed posture and closed eyes, Julianna guessed that the little girl was his. She wasn't surprised he had a child, but one this old? How long had he mourned Ellie's death? Six months? Three?

Julianna was almost close enough to touch him, although she had learned a long time ago that touching Gray wasn't possible. Not really. There was no way to get to the man under the classically handsome facade, a facade that was aging just as flawlessly as she would have expected. Gray was what, thirty-one now? Thirty-one to her twenty-eight, ages when a woman passes the first flush of youth and a man comes into his power.

Of course Power was an easy word to associate with the Mississippi Sheridans. Julianna had no reason to doubt that Gray had become a powerful man. Power was something he would feel

comfortable with. He had grown up with it, seen it nurtured and twisted and used to his family's advantage. She imagined Gray had become a man much like his own father, one who could stroll down any sidewalk in his home state and know that any man he met would inch toward the street, if necessary, to make room for him.

Gray's daughter.

Julianna couldn't define the feelings those words evoked. She was seething with feelings, and there was no separating them. She only knew that she hurt. She had to get away before she made a fool of herself.

"Excuse me, miss."

Julianna heard the flight attendant's words. Without turning, she knew she was blocking the progress of the beverage cart. She had to move, and yet, for a moment, she couldn't seem to make her body obey her brain's command. She wanted one more look at the child whose eyes were examining her. One more look at the child who should have been hers.

Brown hair and brown eyes and a smile that would live in her dreams forever.

Julianna stepped to the other side of the aisle, away from Gray and his daughter, and started to turn to find her way back to her own seat.

"Are you from Hawaii?"

Julianna heard the clatter of the cart as it was rolled down the aisle away from her. The child's question had been a quiet one. Julianna knew she could pretend she hadn't heard. She could turn and be gone before the child could ask again. Gray hadn't opened his eyes. He would never know she had stood an arm's length away, envying him his daughter and hating him for letting *her* daughter die.

"Are you from Hawaii?" the little girl asked again, louder.

Julianna turned back. Gray's eyes opened. She watched his expression, waiting for him to realize who she was. "Yes, I am."

"Can you do the hula?"

Julianna willed herself to smile. "I don't dance the hula, but I wish I did."

"Do you surf?"

"No, but I snorkel."

Gray was frowning now. Julianna could almost see his mind working. She had changed enormously in ten years. Gone were the short flyaway hair and the granny glasses. Gone were the

painfully thin body and the three-sizes-too-large clothing she had overcompensated with. The woman before him was still slender, but her body was a woman's, not a girl's. Her dark hair fell in gleaming natural waves well past the middle of her back, and her skin was golden from hours in the sun. Wearing hand-dyed silk clothing that she had designed herself and three leis of island shells, she was a far cry from the teenager Gray had known.

But she would be surprised if he didn't recognize her voice. He had always said it was the thing that had drawn him to her in the first place.

"I hope you enjoy your trip to the islands." Impulsively, Julianna leaned past Gray and slipped off one of the leis. She dropped it over the little girl's head. "*Aloha.*"

"Thanks!" The little girl tangled two fingers in the shells as if to make sure the present was real.

"You're welcome." Julianna turned to go and she realized her hands were shaking.

"Julie Ann."

She started down the aisle, ignoring Gray's summons.

"Julie Ann!"

But she wasn't Julie Ann anymore, and she hadn't been for ten years. Julie Ann had died on the day of the funeral for the only child she'd ever borne. Julianna didn't answer to the name Julie Ann anymore. And she didn't answer to Gray Sheridan. She would never answer to Gray Sheridan again.

Julie Ann was on this plane.

Gray shut his eyes, forgetting for a moment where he was. The coincidence telegraphed shock to every part of his body, and his mind worked at maximum speed. *Julie Ann was on this plane.*

He had been so careful. He had learned her itinerary and then adjusted his accordingly. She had been scheduled to fly straight through to Kauai this morning; he had even seen a copy of her ticket. What had gone wrong?

It took him only seconds to realize that if he'd thought a little more clearly, he would have known this possibility existed. The plane was crowded with passengers from other flights that had been canceled because of a big storm in the Pacific. Obviously, Julie Ann was one of those whose plans had been changed.

The change was going to cost them both. The advantage had been his; he had known where to

find her in Kauai, and when. Now he no longer had the element of surprise on his side. Julie Ann knew he was on his way to Hawaii, although she didn't know why. She would be wary; she would be prepared. She would be waiting for him.

How could he not have recognized her immediately? He had seen the stunning woman dressed in stylish Hawaiian clothing, and he had admired her the way any man would have. But until she had spoken she had been just a rare, exotic creature, an island woman with more than her rightful share of beauty.

He had managed to make himself forget more than he remembered about Julie Ann, but he had never been able to forget her voice. Low and husky, with just the tiniest catch in it, her voice had always melted over him with the sultry heat of a Mississippi night. She had never cultivated the moonlight-and-magnolias accent of a true Southern belle. There was a Deep South flavor to her words, but they flowed naturally, cleanly, with a complete lack of artifice. It was a voice he could listen to forever and never tire of its music.

But, of course, he hadn't listened to it forever. And that was why he was here right now.

"Do you know that lady?"

Gray opened his eyes again and looked at the little girl by his side. For a moment he'd almost forgotten that Jody Whitham was sitting beside him, counting on him for support and entertainment on the long flight. "I used to know her."

She held up her necklace for him to examine. "It's made out of shells. She looked like she was going to cry when she gave it to me."

Gray had been too shaken to notice Julie Ann's expression. He imagined Jody was right, though. He hadn't cried in ten years, but now he felt as close to it as he probably ever would again.

"Is she Hawaiian?" Jody asked.

"She comes from Mississippi."

"My mommy says I ask too many questions, but how am I going to know anything if I don't?"

He tried to smile. "I'm not an expert on kids, but that's how everybody learns, isn't it?"

"You don't have any kids?" Jody asked.

Gray shook his head.

"That's too bad," she consoled him. "Maybe you will someday."

Those sympathetic words were just one more thing to haunt Gray as he stared down the aisle and tried to decide exactly what he should do next.

Julianna found her seat, stepping past her broad-shouldered Australian seatmate to take her place by the window. If she'd been anywhere else she would have run from Gray, just as she had run from him a decade before. But where could she escape to now? She cursed the coincidence that had brought them together in the prison of a DC-10.

For months after leaving Mississippi, she had watched for Gray everywhere. After a year she had become less careful; after two she had stopped worrying. Even in the beginning if Gray had searched for her, the search would have been perfunctory. "I tried to find her," he would tell everyone who needed to be told, "but she didn't want to be found. Julie Ann is gone for good."

He would have been right, of course. The day her bus pulled out of Granger Junction, she had known she would never see the town again. The relief that had filled her at that thought had been her first respite from the terrible grief she had suffered after Ellie's death. Each mile she put between herself and the town that had given her nothing but heartache had eased her misery a little. But the real healing process had been slow, because there had been so much loss, so much betrayal.

Now she knew that the healing wasn't complete. It probably never would be. Angrily, she wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Look, it's none of my business, I know, but I can't help noticing you're a bit upset. Is there anything I can do?"

Julianna wiped away another tear. She didn't look at the man beside her. They had exchanged a few sentences after their takeoff from Los Angeles. She remembered that he'd introduced himself as Dillon, and that he was an Australian, an opal miner from a town with a funny name.

"I'm all right," she told him.

"Is it the flight?" His voice was surprisingly gentle. "I've known people who get in a flap the minute they step onto a plane."

"I'm not one of them." Julianna reached in her flight bag for a tissue. She didn't want to involve this stranger, but she suspected she might need his help if Gray came looking for her. "I fly all the time."

"In weather like this? I'd rather be almost anywhere else, myself."

Julianna could understand his feelings. It was an unusually turbulent flight. She had made the trip between the mainland and Honolulu dozens of times, but she couldn't remember another that had been so rough. The captain had warned them to expect things to get worse, too. For several

days there had been tropical storm activity in the Pacific. A number of flights had been canceled, her original flight included. Julianna knew she had been lucky to get a seat on one that had actually departed. Now, after seeing Gray, she realized how relative luck could be.

She explained her problem as succinctly as she could. "It's not the ride that upsets me. I just saw someone I hadn't seen for years. It wasn't a good surprise."

"Do you owe them money?"

Julianna attempted a smile. She examined Dillon. He was a big man with curly brown hair that was almost hidden under a cockily tilted wide-brimmed felt hat. His nose had been broken at least once, and it tilted cockily, too, although the tilt only added charm to a face that had obviously had plenty to begin with. His encouraging smile matched the concern in his green eyes, but she suspected he didn't feel at ease comforting a distraught woman.

"It's a man," she answered. "And I don't owe him anything."

"His loss."

Julianna was glad to hear that male approval. Most of the time she had no doubts about her attractiveness. The shy, undernourished teenager had been replaced by a woman who turned heads when she passed. But it hadn't been admiration she had seen in Gray's eyes. It had been shock. Dillon's reassurance helped her remember who she had become.

She knew she needed to warn him. "He may come looking for me. Maybe I'd better apologize beforehand."

"Apologize?"

"We'll have nothing good to say to each other if he does."

Dillon nodded. "Do you want me to find another seat when he gets here?"

"No!" Julianna realized she sounded entirely too desperate. "I mean, don't feel like you have to. The plane is completely filled. I thought they were going to stack people in the aisles. There probably aren't any other seats."

"You don't want me to go."

"I don't," she admitted. "I'm sorry. I know this isn't your concern."

"I'll stay." Dillon tilted his seat back another notch and pulled his hat down over his eyes. "Let me know if you need me."

Julianna wound a strand of hair around her finger and watched the masses of clouds below the plane. Normally she used the five-hour flight to work, either sketching ideas for new collections

of the clothing she designed or checking the latest batch of figures from her accountant and business manager. Now there was no hope of work getting done.

What diabolical force had arranged this meeting with Gray? Was life too good for her now? Did the eternal balance have to be tipped once more? The last few years had been successful ones in every way. The Julianna Islandwear Corporation was making more money than she had ever dreamed possible. Her personal life, if not wildly exciting, was pleasant and stable. She was sought after for parties, catered to by interesting men, and detached enough that she could chuck her social life at a moment's notice and retreat to her house on Kauai for the privacy she needed.

She had so much more than she'd expected to have when she left Granger Junction. And she would be damned if she'd let running into Gray change anything.

"Julie Ann."

The name she no longer used twanged along her nerve endings. She had known Gray would seek her out, but there hadn't been enough time to prepare herself. She wished there was some way of ignoring him now, as she had ignored him earlier, but Julianna knew that was impossible.

She turned her head slowly and met his gaze. She said nothing, just examined him as she had before. He was dressed in a lightweight gray suit that perfectly matched his eyes and nickname, but there was no gray in the golden brown hair combed back from his forehead. The honey-colored strands were sun-lightened at the tips, and he was tanned and fit. She imagined he spent much of his time living the good life on the Mississippi Gulf coast with his family. She wondered if there were other children, too. She would be surprised if Gray hadn't tried for a son to carry on the Sheridan name.

"You've hardly changed," she said at last.

"You have."

"I imagine you'd be surprised how greatly."

"Nothing much surprises me."

She nodded, waiting.

"Shouldn't one of us say it's been a long time?" he asked.

"It hasn't been long enough."

Gray's expression didn't change. His stern mouth hadn't once approached a smile. It didn't tighten with anger now, either, but Julianna knew her words had affected him. She had seen the flicker in his tarnished silver eyes.

“How long is long enough?” he asked.

“A lifetime.”

“That’s what you were hoping for.”

The words were neither a question nor a statement, but rather an observation that could be disputed if she wished. Julianna felt no need to.

“I’d like to talk to you,” Gray said after he’d given her time.

“I can’t think of anything I’d like to talk about.”

“Then I’ll be glad to do the talking.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like to listen to.”

“You’re making this very difficult.”

Her laughter was as low and husky as her voice. It was also humorless.

“I’m not here to cause you trouble,” Gray told her, his lips tightening in a thin, straight line.

“Then you *have* changed, Gray.”

“The captain has turned on the seat belt sign,” a woman’s voice informed them over the public address system. Gray spread his feet wide and lightly rested a hand on the back of Julianna’s seatmate’s chair. His eyes left hers to flicker over the lounging man before he gave her his full attention once more.

In the seconds after recognizing Julie Ann he’d had time for nothing more than fleeting impressions. Now he took several moments to study her more carefully. Only the dark blue eyes and the perfect oval of her face were familiar. Ten years was a long time. He wondered if ten years ago he had recognized the potential of the teenager with the pale skin and razor-sharp bone structure. He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure if he had been mature enough to really think about her at all.

Gray cleared his throat, realizing as he did how out of character the mannerism was. “Julie Ann, I know this is difficult for you. It’s just as difficult for me, but I need to talk to you. *We* need to talk,” he added.

When she didn’t answer, he turned his attention to her seat-mate. “Excuse me. I’m sorry to disturb you, but would you mind taking another seat for a few minutes? I have to talk to this lady for a little while.”

For a moment it seemed as if the man wasn’t going to answer; then he lifted one hand and readjusted the brim of his hat, pulling it down an extra inch. “It seems to me the lady doesn’t want

to talk to you, mate.”

Gray wished he could see the man’s face. “The lady and I are way overdue for a conversation. I’d appreciate your help.”

“If the lady tells me she wants a conversation, I won’t mind a move.”

“Julie Ann?”

“My name is Julianna,” she said softly. “One word.”

“It suits you.”

Perhaps if his answer hadn’t been so conciliatory, Julianna would have agreed to the conversation. She could handle his anger, his arrogance, even his condescension. But she couldn’t handle his warmth. It brought back memories of a Gray whose existence she had stopped believing in a long time ago. She did not want that Gray in her life again. That Gray had almost destroyed her.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” she said, turning back to the window. “Not here, not anywhere.”

“You’re acting like a child.”

Dillon pulled the brim of his hat up to expose his face. “The lady gave you her answer,” he said, a steel edge to his voice. “It was no.”

Gray watched as the man brought his seat forward. He wondered what the husky Australian’s relationship was to Julie Ann. . . Julianna.

“The lady doesn’t realize I’m not here to stir up trouble,” Gray said. “I’m not trying to hurt her.”

“Maybe the lady has reason to think otherwise.”

Gray nodded, although he could feel his own irritation building into anger. “Julianna,” he said, without stumbling over the name, “you’ve had ten years to hate me. Give me just a few minutes to try and change your mind.”

As soon as he saw the fury in the eyes that had turned to challenge his, he knew that he had said exactly the wrong thing. “A few minutes? God, you are arrogant! Do you think that’s all it will take, Gray? Just a minute or two of your patient explanations and I can forget everything that happened?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“I think it’s time for you to leave.” Dillon stood and faced Gray. “The lady is getting upset.”

“Stay out of this. It’s none of your business,” Gray told him.

“The lady made it my business before you got here.”

Julianna’s anger receded as she watched the two men. She hadn’t believed it would come to this. Their raised voices had drawn the attention of the passengers across the aisle. She wondered how many others were witnessing the confrontation. “Just go, Gray,” she said, reaching out to put a restraining hand on Dillon’s arm.

Gray shook his head. “I’m going to talk to you, and *I’m* not leaving until I do.”

The two men were well matched in height. Gray assessed the Australian. Whatever advantage the other man had in weight, Gray knew he could probably make up for in speed. He never settled his problems with his fists, but he knew he could if the occasion arose. And the occasion would arise if the Australian took a swing at him.

“Gentlemen, please.”

The two men broke eye contact at the sound of a woman’s voice.

“Everyone is supposed to be seated. The seat belt sign is on.” If the young flight attendant knew exactly what she had interrupted, she didn’t let it show in her voice. “Sir, will you please take your seat? And you, sir, will you sit down and buckle up? We’re heading into worse turbulence, and we don’t want anyone to get hurt.” She emphasized the last part of her sentence.

For a moment Gray considered ignoring her. But he knew he had lost this round. He gave the young woman a curt nod, then addressed his next words to Julianna. “I know where I can find you, both at work and at home. So we’ll talk, whether you think it’s a good idea or not. Maybe by the time we do, you’ll realize how childish you’ve been today.”

“This isn’t Mississippi. The Sheridans don’t own Hawaii. If we talk it will be because I want to. And that won’t be until hell freezes over!”

“We’ll talk.” Gray turned and strode down the aisle, disappearing into the next cabin.

Dillon made sure Gray was out of sight before he sat down again. He buckled his seat belt before he spoke. “Are you all right?”

“I’m so sorry.” Now that Gray was gone Julianna blinked back tears. “I never use people the way I used you.”

It was obvious that Dillon would have been more comfortable throwing a punch than he was with Julianna’s tears. “Nothing happened,” he reminded her. “And he’s gone now.”

“For a while.”

“Will you be all right?”

“He won’t touch me.”

“Maybe you should have talked to him. Now you’ve got to worry about meeting him again.”

Dillon’s words were only an echo of Julianna’s own thoughts. She listened to the sounds he made settling back in his seat as she cursed her own behavior. She’d been childish and spiteful and so full of fear and anger there hadn’t been room for anything else.

There had been a time when things were different. Once there had been room inside her for much more. Those days were gone, but as the plane hurtled through the storm-filled skies, she remembered them. She was powerless to do otherwise.