


FOR SPICY LATINO MYSTERIES OR MAGICAL TEXAS TALES

look no further than melissa

 **S**he's Dolores "Lola" Cruz, the spicy Latina private investigator who, when not finding missing mothers or tracking down criminals in a nudist resort, spends her time salsa dancing and getting *muy caliente* with a sexy blast from her past. Balancing her Latina roots and American way of life, Lola navigates her world with smarts and sass.

She's also Harlow Jane Cassidy, the great-great-granddaughter of the famous Butch Cassidy. She possesses a magical charm passed down through the generations – a charm granted to her outlaw ancestor while he was on the run in Argentina. Now Harlow Jane Cassidy, dressmaker, grants the desires of others through the garments she makes especially for them.

Confused? Both Lola and Harlow spring from the imagination of bestselling author Melissa Bourbon Ramirez, who combines the Texan and Latina influences in her life to create mystery novels. Her Magical Dressmaking Mystery series featuring Harlow Jane Cassidy (great for teens and adults) is a two-book series so far, while her Lola Cruz Mystery series (the steamy romance makes it an 18-and-up read) features three books. Thankfully for fans that love her authentic Mexican-American characters and crazy plots, she shows no signs of slowing down. She has three romantic suspense novels on the way, all based on Mexican legends. The

first, *A Deadly Sacrifice*, is due at the end of 2012. Whether she's writing Mexican-inspired dialogue or creating Texas towns, however, Melissa is true to where she comes from and where she is now – a married mother of five and a publishing *empresaria* living on the outskirts of Denton.

The blonde-haired, green-eyed author, who identifies as Latina-by-marriage, leans back in her desk chair, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear while trying to put a label on her own ancestry. Though born in California, her family is Texan. She works hard to keep her husband's Mexican-American culture alive, both in family life and on the page, while still being true to her Texas roots. She thinks the publishing world is short on strong Latina characters, and it's her mission to change that. Her muse? Her 11-year-old daughter. "She's this sort of hybrid of these two cultures," Melissa says. "I just want to write characters that she'll relate to, that she'll understand." Although the Lola series is a fun series, "I think that it has a little bit more meaning for me, because I feel like creating [Lola] really is a bridge to my own kids," she says.

Melissa puts her characters in all kinds of crazy situations involving mysticism, stolen identities and murder, of course. The plots are little bits and pieces of things she reads and hears in the news. Real life. A little unnerving, but not for Melissa, who spent every high school lunch in a math classroom reading Agatha Christie. For her, mystery comes naturally.

Her Magical Dressmaking Mystery series is set in Bliss, Texas – a fictional town based on Glen Rose, Granbury and the Denton Square. The cozy mysteries invoke a magical sense of history and spirituality, all through the art of dressmaking. "In my world, [Butch Cassidy] goes to Argentina and makes a wish in this Argentinian fountain that all his ancestors will be blessed or taken care of," Melissa says. "So Harlow, when she makes things for people, their wishes and dreams come true – good or bad." The latest in the series, *A Fitting End*, puts Harlow in quite the predicament: When a local golf pro is murdered with dressmaking shears, Harlow becomes the No. 1 suspect.

Melissa's Lola Cruz Mystery series, on the other hand, is set in Sacramento, California, where she used to live. The plot of the latest book, *Bare-Naked Lola*, stems from a real-life murderous tale. "Years ago, there were the Yosemite Killings," Melissa says, her eyes wide. "There was a guy who murdered this woman and her daughter and a Brazilian exchange student. He escaped and hid out in this nudist resort." Creepy stuff. In her book, Lola goes undercover for a fictional pro basketball team and dances in a barely-there cheerleading outfit (a duct-taped bra is involved) to solve the crime.

Harlow and Lola come alive in Melissa's cluttered office. A rainbow of sticky notes covers the iMac desktop computer. Piles of paper litter the desk. A large white board



hangs nearby, featuring a storyboard grid for Melissa to fill in. *Seq. 1 – Climax. Act II, Part 2. Promise of the Premise.* “It acts as a road map,” she says. “So much develops as I write.” On the carpeted floor, propped against a dressmaking form, is her “dream board.” Like the collages children make in school, the black cardboard panel is covered with inspiration for her Magical Dressmaking series: Sandra Bullock in the movie “Hope Floats,” a cutout of the state of Texas, pictures of dress forms, and the word *colorful* cut out from a magazine.

She and her husband, a first generation Mexican-American, moved from California to Texas four years ago wanting to live close to family in a place that afforded them more financial freedom. Melissa’s mother, a watercolor artist, lives in nearby Coppel, and her brother is an art professor at the University of North Texas. Her husband won a job as principal at the Newton Razor Elementary, the lone International Baccalaureate elementary in Denton. Melissa is grateful for the move – and the inspiration it brought. “If I were still in California, there’s no way I would ever have even dreamt of a town called Bliss, Texas, and Harlow Jane, and all the little Southern-isms

that come into play,” she says, tugging on her knitted sweater and flexing her jean-clad legs. “The food, the accents, the slower way of life. I hear their voices in my head.” She looks through her window at her backyard where her two boxers are galloping in the late afternoon sun. Melissa finds charm in small towns, like Denton’s historic Square. Three of her children go to school in Denton.

As her burgeoning library of books proves, she knows how to work the system. She didn’t always. (She can still laugh about the “very nice personalized rejection letter” that she got for her first book about time travel.) Familiar with how hard self-promotion and marketing can be for beginners, Melissa and author Tonya Kappes penned a how-to book, *The Tricked-Out Toolbox*, to help new writers navigate the publishing world. “I joined a couple of writing organizations and started to learn the process, found an agent, and she sold it and the rest is history,” she says of her Lola series. Now, as marketing director for Entangled Publishing, a publisher of romantic novels, she helps new authors with their publicity. Even with a demanding job and five children, Melissa makes it work. “I had to write. So I had to write with them around,” she says.

Her success relies on her fresh approach to the mystery genre as well as her attention to creating well-rounded characters, something her editor loved about her books from the very beginning. Readers from all cultures can connect with her gutsy private investigator Lola Cruz. “You don’t have to be Latina to like her, and you don’t have to not be Latina to like her,” says Toni Plummer, Melissa’s first editor on the Lola series. “She’s relatable to anybody.” Just like Melissa.

The house is quiet as she walks through the living room, looking for a good place for an upcoming photo shoot. She pauses to ruffle her teenage son’s hair as he sits reading on the couch. The light streaming in from the windows highlights pieces of what she loves most, including a framed watercolor painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe by her mother showcasing the Mexican side of family. Melissa works hard to instill those traditions in her children, but she is equally proud of her Texas family, whose sewn and quilted creations hang in her home and in museums across the state. In many ways, Melissa is like the area in which she lives – half Texan and half Latina. With no need to choose one culture or the other, both flourish. ■

[just the facts]

New books by Melissa Bourbon Ramirez:

Bare-Naked Lola: The latest in the Lola Cruz Mysteries (out now).

Deadly Patterns: The third installment in the Magical Dressmaking Mysteries (due October 2012).

A Deadly Sacrifice: The first in her new romantic suspense series based on Mexican Legends (due late 2012).

The Tricked-Out Toolbox: A roadmap for the publishing world – great for new authors.

Read more about Melissa: Visit her website: misaramirez.com. Yep, “Misa.” Curious how she got the nickname? “The Misa came from the Chinese cooks at the Orange Hut, a restaurant I worked at during college. They couldn’t quite say Missy, my nickname since childhood, and it came out Misa.” They called her “chicken legs” in Chinese, too. “Small favor that one didn’t stick!” she laughs.

Photos by Agnes O’Hanlon

