

LINDA
CONRAD

THE
COWBOY'S
BABY SURPRISE



Desire

Mills & Boon Desire

Linda Conrad

The Cowboy's Baby Surprise

«HarperCollins»

Conrad L.

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More than a year had passed since FBI agent Carly Mills's partner disappeared without a trace. Then, just when she'd almost given up hope, she found him, working as a cowboy on a Texas ranch. But, incredibly, he had no memory of his true identity – or the shattering passion they had once shared. She ached to take Witt Davidson in her embrace and tell him who he really was, what he had always meant to her. But what if he could never remember the sizzling desire that had constantly flashed between them? And what would he do when he learned of the beautiful child their love had created?

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“Tell Me How I Was Hurt. Who Shot Me?”

“I don’t know. I wish I did. You disappeared. You were there...and then suddenly you were gone.” Her voice shook and she dropped her chin.

The frustration welled up, making him blind with need. He grabbed her shoulders and lasered a kiss across her lips....

When at last he had to take a breath, he broke away from her with a jolt, gasping for air. Gazing at her kiss-swollen lips, he knew he still didn’t remember, still was at a loss for a past life.

The fact that she knew more about him than he knew about himself was nearly unbearable. The woman in his arms had a history, and she held the key to his past, as well.

Dear Reader,

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Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Cowboy's Baby Surprise

Linda Conrad



MILLS & BOON

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LINDA CONRAD

was born in Brazil to a commercial pilot dad and a mother whose first gift was a passion for stories. She was raised in South Florida and has been a dreamer and a storyteller for as long as she can remember. Linda claims her earliest memories are of sitting in her mother's lap, listening to a beloved storybook or searching through the picture books in the library to find that special one.

When Linda met and married her own dream-come-true hero, he fostered another of her other inherited vices—being a vagabond. They moved to seven different states in seven years, finally becoming enchanted with and settling down in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Reality anchored Linda to their Texas home long enough to raise a daughter and become a stockbroker and certified financial planner. Her whole world suddenly changed when her widowed mother suffered a disabling stroke and Linda spent a year as her caretaker. Before her mother's second and fatal stroke, she begged Linda to go back to her dreams—to finally tell the stories buried within her heart.

Linda's hobbies are reading, growing roses and experiencing new things. However, her real passion is “passion”—reading about it, writing about it and living it. She believes that true passion and intensity for life and love are seductive—they consume the soul and make life's trials and tribulations worth all the effort.

“I am extremely grateful that today I can live my dreams by being able to share the passionate stories and lovable characters that have lived deep within me for so long,” Linda declares.

For Emily Olmstead, Sarah Gross and Donna Kordela, the greatest critique group ever. This book never would have happened without your valuable input.

And to my sister, Susan Zyne, and to my dearest husband, J.C. Both of you believed in me always, and that made all the difference in the world.

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One

“You want me to take my baby on a stakeout?” Carley Mills shoved her chair back from the desk and stood to confront her boss. “Have you totally lost your mind?” she muttered in her typical lazy, Southern accent.

“This isn’t a ‘stakeout,’ for crying out loud. Will you listen to the proposition before you go jumping to conclusions?” Carley’s boss, Reid Sorrels, towered over her, and she felt the brunt of his notoriously dark stare.

As the busy assistant field operations manager for the Houston office of the FBI and agent in charge of Operation Rock-a-Bye, Reid got to the point. “Besides, you know I’d never do anything to put my goddaughter in jeopardy, don’t you?” He plopped down in one of the two secretary chairs facing Carley’s desk.

She stiffened her spine to face him and thought of how far she’d come in the last eighteen months. She’d been so devastated when her partner and lover, Witt Davidson, disappeared that she couldn’t have confronted a flea, let alone someone as burly and determined as her boss.

Witt had vanished into thin air. She’d always thought she was a strong person, able to cope with anything life threw her way. She prided herself on being able to help others with their problems and emotional traumas. But the stress of not knowing what happened to the man who fathered her child had nearly broken her.

All right, so he’d never said he loved her. And he certainly hadn’t shown any enthusiasm for settling down with a family...but Witt hadn’t really known he had a family, either. Carley hadn’t given him a chance to know. She’d been so desperate to be sure he really cared for her that she’d put off telling him until they could get away from their jobs and truly be alone.

But right in the middle of a major sting operation at Lake Houston one fateful August night Witt disappeared. One minute he’d been smiling at her and heading off to check out a suspicious-looking truck—then he was gone. Without a trace.

They’d been so close to a tentative commitment. She’d known he was skittish about settling down, but she was positive she could have made him admit his love. Despite her conviction that Witt was a good man and wouldn’t run away, the doubts continually plagued her.

“You still with me, Carl?” Reid broke into her thoughts, and she set her jaw to tackle her immediate problem.

Carley edged around the beat-up oak desk until she stood a couple of feet from her boss, a man whose chronological age placed him at about thirty-three, only a few years older than she. Regardless of chronological age, he was light years ahead in wisdom and strength.

She leaned her rear against the desktop and forced a smile at the man who’d been her savior more times than she could count. “Of course I know you wouldn’t hurt Cami...intentionally. But to uproot her and go chasing off to some remote part of the West sounds like it might not be in her best interest, either.”

Reid scowled. “You still haven’t listened. That part of the Texas-Mexico border is perfectly civilized.” He ran a few fingers through his chestnut-colored hair, disturbing the lines of a new, trim cut. “The youth ranch is only thirty miles outside McAllen, Texas. It’s a city of over a hundred thousand people, and less than a day’s drive from here.”

“Fine. Great. But what earthly good would I be at a ranch? I’ve never set foot on one in my life.”

“Damn it, Carley, I asked you to keep an open mind and listen. The place is essentially an institution, an orphanage...although they don’t call them that these days. You’re trained in child psychology...and they need a child psychologist. You’ll hardly even know you’re on a ranch.”

With a huge sigh, Carley braced herself for whatever came next. She had a feeling another drastic life change was headed her way. Since a few months before Cami’s birth, the Bureau had

refused to use her for undercover work. Lately she'd spent most of her time certifying the paperwork for the Mexican babies that the operation had recovered, and verifying the children to be fit for the return to their native country.

Now, all of sudden, the FBI needed her to do surveillance at the border? And to take Cami with her? The whole thing sounded ridiculous.

"The foster home is run by the Texas church council, but these kinds of places never have enough money to operate." Reid gave her a few more details. The way he scrutinized her face with his deep-set eyes let Carley know he was closely judging her reactions. "There are always more children than the funds to keep them. The church runs both a cattle ranch and a citrus farm to help provide the means to keep the children's home afloat."

"But what exactly do you expect me to do there?"

"I expect you to do what you're best at...work with the children. All the kids there are throwaways. The babies have been dumped and are unadoptable until the state determines parental rights. The older children are either youthful offenders sent there for rehabilitation or they're disabled in some way. As you can imagine, all of them have emotional problems."

Yep, he knew her well. Her imagination ran rampant with thoughts of the cast-off children who needed the care only she could give them. "But what will I be doing for Operation Rock-a-Bye?"

"The border is where the action is right now." Reid smiled at her with only the corners of his eyes. "You know we've tracked some of the scum from this international baby-selling ring to the McAllen area. Just pay attention to what's going on."

He shifted in his too-small seat and looked decidedly uncomfortable. "We have an agent in the area, Manny Sanchez, who's undercover as a veterinarian's assistant. The job enables him to travel along the Rio Grande talking to farm and ranch laborers. With his information we've stopped dozens of coyotes in the act of bringing Mexican babies across the border."

Reid sat forward in his chair and put his elbows on his knees. "Manny heard a rumor, spreading through the illegal population a while back, that a few of the babies showing up at the church home are coming from across the river, not from the usual state agencies."

He stood to drive home his point. "Manny's been working every day with the vet on the church's cattle, doing the yearly inseminations and inoculations, but we need someone inside the place. Someone with access to the children...and to the records."

Carley knew she was sunk. "And how am I going to get the job?"

"The job is yours. One of the elders on the church-council is an old friend of mine. The person who used to hold the position had a sudden 'family emergency.' The home administrator is expecting you and Cami. He doesn't know your real identity...just that you're a psychologist and a single mother in need of work. His church council supervisor has vouched for you."

"Swell. And when..." Something in her boss's eyes stopped her cold.

"There's something else. Something urgent."

Ah. Here comes the real reason. Carley held her breath and waited.

Reid turned his back and paced to the far corner of the tiny, cluttered office. "Manny Sanchez worked with your old partner, Witt, on an undercover operation near El Paso about five years ago. The mission lasted only a short time, and the two men saw each other for mere minutes, but..."

Carley's heart paused in midbeat. "This is about Witt? Has there been a break in the investigation into his disappearance?" She flew at Reid's wide back and, catching him off guard, spun him to face her. "Tell me what this is about."

"Take it easy." Reid cleared his throat, straightened his back and resumed his agent-in-charge demeanor. "Special Agent Charleston Mills, you know the Bureau will never give up until we uncover what happened to Davidson. Every FBI agent in the world keeps one eye open for him at all times. We don't just lose agents."

Reid gently pulled Carley's hands from his shoulders and held on to her wrists, making her listen carefully to his explanation. "Manny believed a fellow working on the ranch bares an uncanny resemblance to Davidson."

Carley's mouth dropped open, and the room started to spin. "But...but..."

Reid threw an arm around her shoulder and guided her into a chair. "You need some water?"

She shook her head but still couldn't manage to speak.

"We've verified it's Davidson from his prints. But...he isn't using his own name and didn't recognize Manny."

Carley found her voice. "Why didn't you bring him home? Is he being held against his will? Is it possible that's why he couldn't admit who he is?"

Reid shrugged. "Not likely. In the first place, can you picture someone holding Davidson against his will for eighteen months?"

A smile threatened to break out on her face, but she held back, only managing to shake her head once more. So many questions ran through her mind that her own needs were pushed aside for the time being.

"No? Me, neither." Reid sat back on the desk the same as Carley had done earlier. "In the second place, Manny says this fellow comes and goes whenever he wants...seems to have the run of the place."

"Then what's going on? If it's Witt, why isn't he home?" Carley felt her blood begin to boil. How could Witt stay away? How could he do such a thing to the agency? To her?

Reid stood to pace, then stopped, and Carley sensed he was forcing himself to face her again. "We've done some checking with his co-workers and have come to a startling conclusion. Davidson's lost his memory and has no idea who he is.

"Amnesia seems like the only explanation that makes much sense. Before I drag him back here and institutionalize him, I figure you're the perfect person to try to help him regain his memory... you being a psychologist and in love with him and all."

Carley was stunned speechless. Witt an amnesia victim? Strong, dangerous Witt Davidson needed her help?

"I can't spare you much time," Reid warned. "But we're moving the bulk of our operation to the border in the general vicinity of the foster ranch. You go work on bringing Witt back to us, Carley. But keep in touch. If you need anything, let me know."

Twenty-four hours later Carley introduced herself to Gabe Diaz, a man about sixty with gray-streaked hair and kindly eyes behind round, thick glasses. A former church preacher and currently the home administrator, Gabe welcomed her and showed her through the main house.

She'd spent six hours of the last day just driving to this godforsaken place. Carley had checked it out on the map and had the auto club trace the directions in yellow marker. Nevertheless, many times on the trip she'd been convinced she'd gotten lost. No one could live this far out of the way or survive with all this bleak landscape.

Perfectly civilized, my foot.

Carley spent most of the trying, six-hour drive daydreaming about the last time she'd seen Witt. About how his blond hair and boy-next-door good looks made him the perfect undercover agent. Criminals never suspected the steely danger lurking within him. But the man also had a tender side, as she knew only too well. Carley nearly drove herself and Cami off the road remembering his gentle caresses and his seductive kisses.

With Cami buckled securely in her car seat, they'd gone for several hours without so much as seeing a gas station. Every couple of hours Carley had pulled off the road to give Cami a drink or change her diaper. Finally the car had crested a small incline, and she'd been relieved to see the outskirts of a real city.

The city of McAllen, located on the Texas-Mexico border at a bend in the Rio Grande, was home to over a hundred thousand people. In every direction, Carley saw shopping, schools, churches. Everything looked new and clean and prosperous, as the city sprang out of the open range to the north. Unfortunately, the map to the foster home routed her the west, away from this sparkling little city, and into a dangerous looking and desolate countryside.

She'd followed the road along the Rio Grande until she'd finally found the turnoff to the children's home and ranch. Her car had bumped down a pitted, caliche roadway past what appeared to be miles of nothing but cactus and cows.

The end of the road had brought them to a handful of buildings and barns. She'd seen an imposing-looking two-story house surrounded by trees, dirt and a wide black-topped parking lot. The flapping wood sign on an old post had said, Casa de Valle. "House in the Valley," their temporary new home.

"I need to speak to one of the counselors," Preacher Gabe said, bringing her back to the present. "Look around for yourself after you settle Cami into the day room. The older children watch over the babies and toddlers there. They're real good with the babies. You'll be impressed."

Carley handed Cami off to a sweet-looking young girl and dumped their luggage in the upstairs room assigned to them. She didn't even bother to change clothes before heading outside. With no earthly idea of where to begin looking for a man on a ranch, she was determined to track down this person who was supposed to be Witt—that very afternoon.

At first Carley had been shocked by Reid's idea of amnesia. But she quickly adjusted and readied herself for any contingency before packing and making the long drive. Besides her personal gear and the various Bureau-issued weapons and equipment, she'd armed herself with information. She remembered a few things about amnesia from school, but if this was indeed Witt, and he was suffering from memory loss, she intended to help in any way she could.

She'd downloaded every scrap of information from the Internet and called on one of her former professors. What she'd found didn't give her much hope. Most amnesia victims either recovered their memories within a few weeks or, at most, a couple of months—or they never did. The thought of finding Witt after all this time, only to never really get him back, preyed on her mind.

"Maybe the shock of seeing you will jolt his memory," her professor had said. Oh please. If there is a God, it will be that simple.

The other standard piece of advice was not to force things—to let the memories return on their own. "Give him time. Losing your entire existence can be a very frightening proposition."

Easy for a distant professor to say, Carley thought. Much harder to accomplish when it was someone you loved who'd totally forgotten you.

When she stepped outside into the sun, not much appeared to be happening on this hot afternoon in the yard between the back door of the huge main house and the various outbuildings within walking distance. Carley wondered if everyone took a siesta after lunch in this part of the world.

"Excuse me, ma'am, you looking for something?" A cowboy in jeans, a plaid shirt and straw hat appeared out of the shadows and ambled toward her from one of the big, barn-like structures.

"Uh...yes. I'm looking for someone."

"And who would that be? You don't look like you'd be knowing anybody in these parts...if you don't mind me saying so, ma'am."

Carley looked down at herself. Still dressed in the wool-blend pants suit and short heels she'd worn for the trip, she guessed she probably didn't look much like she belonged in a barnyard. Now why hadn't she taken a minute to change into her jeans?

Before doing anything about that mistake, she needed to find a way out of her more immediate problem. Carley couldn't remember what name Reid had said Witt was using. Who the heck should she say she was looking for?

Suddenly she thought of another name she did remember. “Do you know the vet’s assistant, Manny...somebody?”

The cowboy eyed her warily. “Yes’um. He’s down to the stud barn just now. Would you like me to fetch him for you?”

The situation was getting worse and worse. Why hadn’t she thought this through before she’d jumped into action? How would she find Witt when she had no idea what name he used?

“I...” she stammered.

“¿Qué paso, amigo? Something wrong?”

Carley spun in the direction of the familiar voice coming from behind her. She thought she’d armed herself with knowledge. But nothing could have prepared her for the sight of the man who’d haunted her dreams day and night, as he sauntered across the dirt in their direction.

“Thank God...” Her knees buckled and the next thing she knew Witt had her in his arms, holding her against his body for support.

She’d given up on ever feeling Witt’s arms around her again. Months ago Carley had truly lost all hope. And now that she could feel his muscles rippling under her grip, could smell his own beloved musky scent as he held her near, the hope flared.

Witt stared down at her in his arms as if he was holding a complete stranger. The flame of hope quickly died again.

“Feeling all right, ma’am? You delirious or dehydrated, maybe? Being out here in the sun without a hat isn’t too smart.” He set her unsteadily on her feet and backed away—leaving one hand on her elbow for support. “How about if I take you back to the main house? Maybe a glass of water will help?”

Her parched body desperately needed to drink in the sight of him. She’d been thirsty for his embrace for far too long.

Reality splashed her like a cold shower. Nothing would help. Witt’s first sight of her had not stirred any memories—in him.

Unfortunately, the sight of him brought stunning images crashing in on Carley. She fought the tantalizing memory of his kiss, so full of irresistible passion and erotic hunger. Her head swam with remembering his touch on her skin—the touch that could heat the blood in her veins and send shivers dancing down her spine. A fierce craving to draw them both into the inner fire nearly brought her to her knees for the second time since getting an initial glimpse of him after all these months.

“You need my help, Houston?” The ranch hand’s question broke into her daydream.

Witt turned to the other man but moved his steadying hand to Carley’s shoulder. “Naw. You go on back to work, pal. I think I can handle things here.”

Witt eyed her with a sideways glance. “I can handle you, can’t I, little lady?” He bent to whisper in her ear and the feel of his warm breath on her cheek suddenly seemed comforting.

For one fleeting moment Carley wondered if Witt could be faking a memory loss. But within an instant she knew, deep inside her bones, that the man she’d loved could not disguise his real identity—at least, not while he stood so close. When she didn’t respond, his eyes narrowed to slits. He firmly gripped her elbow, leading her to the main house.

“Oh, Wi—” no sense confusing him by calling him a name he would likely not recognize “—cowboy,” she choked. “I imagine you can handle me just fine.”

If I can manage to control myself around you.

By the time Witt ushered her into the kitchen of the main house, Carley had regained, at least, partial control of her emotions. First things first. She needed to address him by a name that wouldn’t be disorienting.

When he handed her a glass of water, she noticed her hands were shaking, but decided to ignore them.

“The name’s Carley,” she said, with more emphasis than necessary. “Carley Mills. What’s yours?”

“Carley?” He took her free hand in both of his. “Nice name for such a dainty lady.”

He grinned at her and she smiled back, not feeling the least bit happy.

“I’m known as Houston...Houston Smith, ma’am. I kinda run the ranch operation around here. You know...the horses and cattle?”

He’d suddenly spoken with cool politeness. She sensed it was as if he’d just remembered that strangers could mean trouble...even “dainty” strangers. His wary distance shattered her heart.

Would she be able to keep herself from pouring pent up desires and dreams all over him?

“And just what brings such a delicate flower to our little corner of Texas, Carley?” He released her hand and motioned for her to take one of the twelve chairs at the wooden kitchen table.

“I’m hardly what one might call delicate... Houston.” She continued to stand but swallowed a big gulp of water to soothe her raspy throat. It didn’t help. She was feeling dizzy, shaky and... delicate. Darn it.

At well over five-eight and a former world-class swimmer, delicate and dainty had never before been words used to describe her. But just now she felt weak-kneed and small.

“I’ve come to Casa de Valle to take over the psychologist’s job while he’s on temporary leave,” she managed past the huge lump in her throat.

“You’re a head doctor?”

“I have a doctorate in child psychology, yes.”

“Should I call you Dr. Carley?”

“Some people address me as Doctor, but I’d prefer you call me Carley.”

“I see. But what were you doing out in the—”

Houston was interrupted by a young girl’s voice coming from the hallway. “Miz Mills?” The teenager appeared in the kitchen doorway carrying the one-year-old, currently whiny, Cami. “Oh, there you are, ma’am.”

When Cami recognized her mother, she started to shriek. “Ma...Ma...Yeee!”

Carley pulled her daughter from the teenager’s arms. “Hush, baby. Mama’s right here.”

“I’m sorry, Miz Mills. I tried to put her down for a nap, but she wouldn’t have any part of it. Then she started to cry and I couldn’t find anything to make her happy.” In Carley’s professional opinion, the round-faced girl appeared to be feeling guilty.

“Don’t worry about it, Rosie. It’s just the new place and strange people. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Carley wiped a few crocodile tears from Cami’s cheeks, but nothing she did consoled her daughter. “I’m sure she’ll adjust just fine after a few days. Until then, don’t hesitate to bring her to me if she seems distraught.”

“Yes’um. I gotta get back now. You want me to take her again?” The earnest young girl looked panicked at the thought but was brave enough to ask.

“No, thanks.” Carley found herself nearly shouting over Cami’s cries. “Tomorrow is soon enough for a repeat performance. I’ll keep her with me for now.”

Rosie beamed with relief and beat a hasty retreat.

Carley inspected Cami until the toddler became uncomfortable with the perusal and buried her face in her mother’s shoulder, still sobbing and heaving heavy sighs. Carley patted her daughter’s back and stroked Cami’s hair as she turned to the man who’d been so silent through the whole scene. He looked rather shell-shocked.

“Anything wrong, Houston?” Carley tensed in anticipation. Witt had never seen his daughter before—hadn’t even known of her existence before his disappearance, but Cami’s resemblance to him was unmistakable. Had he suddenly noticed? Had the sight of his daughter triggered some inner memory?

Two

The man who used to be Witt Davidson drawled a question in his languid, Texas accent. “That your daughter?”

“Yes. Her name is Camille. I named her after your—her grandmother. Her father’s mother.” Carley always wondered what Witt would say the first time he saw their daughter.

“Another pretty name for another pretty little thing.”

That wasn’t the way her dreams had gone. “Thank you. We call her Cami.” Carley did her best to hold back the burning tears suddenly welling at the corners of her eyes.

With the first sound of Witt’s voice, Cami had quieted. Now, at the mention of her name, Cami raised her head to stare at the new person making the baritone sounds. When she spotted him, her whole face lit up. She pointed a finger in his direction. “Da!”

Carley grabbed Cami’s hand and held it to her chest. “Don’t point, sweetie. It’s not polite.”

Houston Smith narrowed his eyes and studied the baby who was inspecting him with matching intensity. Something about this woman’s child seemed familiar.

During the long months he’d lived in the Rio Grande Valley he’d learned to cope with the distressing feeling that everything, and everyone, seemed somehow familiar. But the sensation was particularly strong with Carley Mills and her baby.

As Gabe and Doc Luisa had kindly pointed out, a man without a past might easily mistake an enemy for a friend. He couldn’t imagine Carley being an enemy, but everything was not as it appeared with her, either.

After all, what was a refined and citified-looking woman doing at a children’s home in rural South Texas? The suit she wore probably cost more than she’d make working here in six months. And then there was the matter of her being out in the yard in the middle of the day, dressed to kill and without an obvious purpose.

Still...Houston was strangely drawn to her. When he’d put his arm around her shoulders to steady her, he’d felt a searing heat. Her nearness caused his flesh to jump, and he had a nearly uncontrollable urge to drag her against his chest and smother her with kisses.

He’d controlled his urges with a powerful effort. He’d been so careful up to now. So watchful all this time. His condition, when Dr. Luisa found him close to death and dumped along the side of a farm road, led both of them to believe someone had meant to finish the job and kill him. If that were true, somewhere in the world someone might still be after him. Was it possible this woman was a threat to him?

The baby raised her arms toward him. “Up. Pick me...me...now.”

Carley tried to grab her daughter’s attention. “No, honey. The man can’t hold you right now. You mustn’t beg strangers to pick you up, Cami. It could be dangerous.”

Houston smiled at the baby, but there was no way he was touching that kid. She made him uncomfortable without his really knowing why.

Carley turned to him, an embarrassed smile on her face. “Sorry. She’s usually timid around people she’s never seen before. I do thank you for quieting her down, though. I’d hate having to wait for her to be still on her own.” She scrutinized him with an unsettling gaze. “You must be good with kids.”

“No.” He backed up a step and changed the focus of the conversation. “The baby sure does look like you. Especially when she smiles.”

“You think so? Most people say she’s the spitting image of her father. Except for the eyes, of course.”

Yes. Both the females in front of him had the same exotic shade of green eyes, the same slightly slanted looks when they gazed in his direction. But he could see that the child didn’t carry the mother’s

complexion or hair coloring. And he couldn't imagine that smattering of freckles adorning the baby's nose ever marring the perfect face of the woman who held her.

In fact, something about the baby gave him the same eerie feeling he'd gotten when looking in a mirror. She sort of looked like the strange reflection he'd been seeing gazing back at him. But his own face was so unfamiliar he figured her resemblance must be his mind playing tricks on him. A few moments later he was sure of it.

"Where is the baby's father?" he blurted out before thinking. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. You don't owe me any explanations."

He turned to the door, halting when the same old ache stabbed at his temple. Fighting the urge to rub his hand against the pain, he squeezed his eyes shut for a second instead. Would these headaches never go away?

Carley laid a hand on his arm. "Are you okay? You weren't being rude. That's a perfectly natural question."

She shifted the baby to her other arm. Houston could see she was tiring, but he'd be damned if he would offer to hold her child. He'd never held a baby. At least, he didn't think he had. And he certainly wasn't about to start with one who could make him feel so strange and disoriented.

Cami looked right into his soul—and he had no idea what she'd find there.

"Cami's father disappeared before she was born. He doesn't even know about her."

There were those tears again. The same ones he'd glimpsed the first time she'd made a remark about the baby's father. Houston reached for her face before he could think about what he was doing. He stroked his thumb lightly under her lashes to brush away a tear. When he felt her satiny skin beneath his fingers, the intimate friction excited him, made him want to grab her tightly and...

What in God's name was he thinking? Houston jerked his hand away but continued standing there studying her.

Her eyes had widened at his touch, and she looked like a frightened little rabbit. He figured someone had hurt her badly. He suspected it was the baby's father. Disappeared was the word she'd used. Was that a polite word for ran off?

Houston Smith couldn't imagine a more cowardly act, or any reason on earth that might drag him away from a woman who looked as good as this one did. He hoped someday to come across the bastard who'd run off and left a beautiful, pregnant wife. Houston had a few things to teach him.

The more he gazed at her standing there, holding the now quiet child to her breast, the more he had to fight the urge to take them both in his arms while he placed a searing kiss on the mother's delectable lips. Whew. Where did that come from? Maybe it was the heat.

For a moment he'd thought...he'd imagined...

The crack of the screen door slamming behind his back made him snap to attention. But before he turned to the sound, he saw Carley tense and stiffen her spine. All of a sudden the frightened rabbit was gone. Something in her eyes went taut, and he caught a steel-edged toughness that he'd missed until now.

No question. His first hunch must have been right on target. There was more to this lady than met the eye.

Dr. Luisa Monsebaïs stepped into the kitchen and strolled to Houston's side with her usual familiar ease. The doctor might have gray hair and wrinkles on her face, but she was as spry and agile as a teenager.

"Everything going okay here?"

"Howdy, Doc. Sure thing. I've been getting acquainted with our newest employee." He turned to Carley and the baby, urging them forward to greet the crotchety, sharp-eyed woman who'd just come through the screen door.

"Dr. Carley Mills, meet Dr. Luisa Monsebaïs, the ranch's favorite pediatrician."

Luisa found her voice first. "Doctor?"

“Ph.D. in child psychology, Dr. Monsebaïs. I’m here to relieve Dan Lattimer, who’s taken a personal leave.”

Luisa stuck a hand in Carley’s direction, but her sun-spotted face never crinkled into a smile. “Call me Luisa. Did Houston say your first name was Carley?”

Carley nodded and took Luisa’s hand, but Houston noted that her solemn face held no welcome, either.

Their terse exchange might have made the women uncomfortable, but whatever bothered them didn’t seem to include him. Their problem broke the clutch of tension that had gripped Houston since the baby’s first appearance in the kitchen. Luisa’s steady presence always calmed him when things became oppressive.

Luisa wrapped her arm around Houston’s and spoke to him with twinkling eyes. “You taking the afternoon off?”

Houston grimaced. Trust Luisa to cut to the practical. Every move she’d made since she’d found him, unconscious and bleeding alongside the deserted levee road, had been logical and utilitarian.

He had no memory of Luisa finding him. In fact, no memory of anything before he awoke in her guest bedroom ten days later. It was two more weeks after that before he could think through the haze of pain long enough to question what had befallen him and why.

Doc Luisa had made the decision to bring him to her little home clinic instead of the nearby hospital. When he’d finally asked, she’d explained about his gunshot wounds and the empty ankle holster she’d found. This close to the border, her first assumption had been that he was some kind of drug runner or smuggler and wanted by the sheriff. But with his life hanging in the balance, she hadn’t been able to face turning him over to the authorities. She’d figured if he were to die, there would be plenty of time for all the questions and forms.

Luisa told Houston that by the time it was clear he would live it was also clear he had no memory of his life before the incident—and she’d grown fond of him. Fond enough to persuade him not to seek information about his obviously dubious past—and to help him get on the road to a new life.

Houston was grateful as hell to Doc Luisa. With her gentle probing, he’d managed some snatches of memories about a childhood on a ranch. He remembered enough of a background working with animals so she could find him this job at the children’s home—starting over, fresh and clean.

Luisa convinced Gabe Diaz, the old man who ran this foster home, to hire him without references. Gabe was the only other person alive who knew Houston couldn’t remember a thing, and it was Gabe who’d managed the phony paperwork for his new identity. Good thing the man had a soft heart.

At this point Gabe and Luisa were all Houston had. They’d saved him, protected him and befriended him. And he’d do the same for them.

For a few seconds Houston narrowed his gaze on the woman holding her child. Should he be wary of Carley? Could she be a threat to Gabe or Luisa—or him?

“Well, son? Is today a holiday I missed?”

He could feel his face flush as he grinned at the kindly but stern doctor. “No, ma’am. I’ll be getting on back to work now.” Houston turned from Luisa and addressed Carley as he touched a hand to the brim of his work hat. “Glad you’re going to be around the ranch for a while, ma’am. But from now on, I’d stay out of the sun on hot afternoons if I were you.”

Houston slammed through the screen door and out into that bright sun, all the while wondering how long the two strong-headed females he’d left standing in the kitchen would be civil to one another. And whether Carley Mills would be as much of a danger to his emotional and physical well-being as she’d already been to his hormones.

Man was she a looker! With all that mahogany-red hair, the olive complexion and those exotic green eyes, he was positive she must be the most luscious thing he’d ever encountered. She even

smelled good enough to eat. The fragrance that seemed to belong to her alone was familiar, like over-ripe strawberries, but with a silken muskiness that captured his attention and made her special.

He headed back to work puzzling over the strong impression that he'd met her before. His mouth seemed to know the feel of her lips when they'd never touched them, his hands the feel of her skin in places he'd never even seen. But were those real memories...or just wishful thinking?

Carley stared through the screen door as the long, lanky cowboy strode across the yard, his boots kicking up little dust devils with every stride. She had to fight off the violent need to run after him. Her heart had wanted to beg him to stay and talk to her...for only a few minutes longer.

The sight of the dimple in his cheek when he grinned, the lock of sandy-blond hair that fell over one eyebrow even with his hat on and those pale-blue eyes that darkened to gray when he was disturbed thrilled her. The vulnerability she found in him made her want to gather him up and hold him close until he had no choice but to remember her.

"Our Houston's a special fellow, don't you think?"

The doctor's question disrupted Carley's daydream. She turned to face the older woman. "Special?" Carley bit her lip. "Yes, I do. Definitely."

Cami picked that minute to raise her head and rub an eye with her fist.

Doc Luisa squinted at the baby's face. "That a new enrollee at the ranch? I don't recognize her."

"This is my daughter, Cami. She'll be living here with me."

"Hmm. Doesn't resemble you much, does she?"

Carley felt a bead of sweat forming above her lip. "She has my eyes."

The older woman's deep-set, dark eyes held hers for a few seconds, then her face broke into a thousand creases as she bestowed a smile on the baby and her mother. The angle of her head told Carley that she'd come to some decision about them. But Carley didn't care to discuss anything with Doc Luisa or anybody else just yet. First she needed to get to a phone.

"I'd better put Cami down for a nap. We've both had a long day."

"You came in this morning? Where'd you come from?"

Carley moved Cami from one hip to the other. "Houston. It's a longer drive than I thought."

The doctor chuckled. "A long drive full of mesquite and cactus...and not much else. You from the city?"

"I've been living there for a few years, but I was born in South Carolina, raised in New Orleans."

Luisa's eyes sparkled with intelligence and a secret mirth all their own. "Born in Charleston, I'd wager."

"Well, yes." Carley wanted to be away from this woman who was too quick—too smart. "I really need to get Cami upstairs. If you'll excuse me?" All Carley wanted right this minute was that phone.

Doc Luisa laid a staying hand on Carley's arm. "Go on for now. But we will talk, young woman. I think you have quite a few things to explain." Luisa glanced over to Cami who was about to screw her face up for a good tantrum. "I'm here at the ranch every morning to check on the kids. Only reason I'm so late today is I stopped to look in on a child with a lingering case of measles."

Cami's pout turned into a whine, but the doctor still held on to Carley's arm. "That young man means the world to me. I wouldn't take kindly to anyone who thought to hurt him." She narrowed her eyes and made sure Carley understood her change of topic.

Carley understood perfectly.

Carley climbed the carpeted stairs leading from the front hall to the employees' bedrooms and lounge area. Where the downstairs living and sleeping rooms were typically institutional, with linoleum floors and sturdy metal or plastic furniture, the upstairs wing was tastefully decorated and homey.

Well, okay, the walls appeared in need of a coat of paint, and the carpet had worn spots with a few frays around the edges—but everything was spotless. The warm woods of the floors and furniture

were polished to a high, glossy gleam. The place reminded Carley of her grandfather's house in New Orleans—right down to the smell of lemon oil and vanilla.

When she carried Cami into their room, Carley noticed someone had put fresh flowers on her dresser and had made up both the double bed and the roll-away crib. Grateful for the reprieve from homemaking duties, she lowered Cami into the crib and whispered a few soothing words, hoping she'd close her eyes for a rest.

The poor little tyke was so overtired she barely had the energy to cry. But cry she did—as if her heart were breaking.

Carley pulled open the diaper bag and hauled out a change of clothes, diapers and a half-size baby bottle. She changed Cami and went into the bathroom to fill the bottle with water. When she returned, Carley nearly stumbled over the open bag. She heard a clink and remembered that she'd crammed her framed photograph of Witt into the side pocket.

Of course! No wonder Cami seemed to recognize the man. Carley had kept his picture on her dresser for all these months. Smart kid. Houston Smith was no stranger to her. In fact, Carley had told her over and over that he was her daddy. No doubt Cami was brokenhearted because the man she thought of as “daddy” had not recognized her.

Carley gave Cami the bottle of water and her favorite stuffed toy, a pink crayfish that Carley's mother had given her. Before long, sleep closed the baby's eyes and quieted her sobs.

Carley knew she'd better not keep Witt's picture in plain sight here at the ranch, so she buried it inside one of her suitcases for storage. Then she reached for the mobile phone she'd also stuffed in the pocket of the diaper bag.

Slightly warm in the closed room, Carley pulled open the window, then punched in the many numbers necessary to reach Reid Sorrels. A hot, stiff breeze blasted her as it came from off the range, and she took a deep breath as Reid answered her call.

Before saying hello, he spat the question at her. “Is it Davidson?”

“You knew all the time it was. But, yes, I can confirm he's Witt.” She gave her boss a pithy statement of what she'd found, then cut to what she needed from him.

“Run complete backgrounds on a local pediatrician, Dr. Luisa Monsebaiss, and on the home's administrator, Gabriel Diaz. See if you can get hard copies to me without anyone knowing.”

“They'll arrive in the local field office no later than tomorrow. Someone will get them to you on the ranch.” Reid fell silent for a minute. “He didn't recognize you at all?”

“Not that I could tell. It's so strange here, Reid. Otherworldly. And what with Witt being this Houston Smith person, I feel cut off and alone.”

“Try plugging your laptop into the Bureau's satellite link. Maybe you'll be in range there. And check in with me twice a day by phone.”

Carley smiled grimly at Reid's no-nonsense reply, but she wasn't through with her requests. “Contact a Dr. William Fields at the Cannon Neurological Institute in Chicago and arrange for a conference call today. Both of us need to pick his brain on this one.” She stared absently out the open window at the scruffy live oaks and prickly ebony trees. “Call me back when you've reached him. I'll wait here.”

Carley cut the connection and cradled the instrument against her breast. Reid had bent the rules for Witt. By all rights, he should have picked Witt up and carted him off in custody to interrogation the first moment Manny had ID'd him. But Reid waited for her report—and now he'd wait a little longer.

Witt had been one of the best agents on the task force. His loss set the operation back years, and his unexplained disappearance caused a black mark against Reid. Not to mention the fact that Reid had unfortunately lost her, in a way, to the same calamity: Carley had spent months searching fruitlessly for word of Witt among the lowlife gathering spots and bars near Houston where they'd been investigating the kidnapping ring. She'd researched Witt's background, even visiting the little town in West Texas where he'd grown up.

Digging further, she'd located his former teachers, the grave sites of his family and talked to some old neighbors and friends. All the checking gave her a better picture of the man who'd disappeared—but didn't give her the man.

Carley found that he'd been scarred in many ways because of his childhood. She'd worked with children from similar backgrounds, children who'd shut off their emotions rather than take a chance on being hurt again. Many turned into adults afraid to commit, afraid to trust.

Because his mother had died early and his abusive father had been killed in a drunken rage, Witt might never have been able to give her the love she craved. But she'd been sure he was a responsible and honorable man who would never just deliberately disappear. Still, he was gone without a trace.

As the time neared for Cami to be born, the doctors had ordered Carley to bed. She'd collapsed with exhaustion and despair.

Cami's birth had rallied Carley's spirit. Her little girl was a constant reminder of the man she loved. Carley knew that as long as she and Cami were together, they'd someday find the answers. She never gave up on finding him. Never.

But now she wanted to know what had happened to keep him from her that night eighteen months ago. How he'd lost his memory, and what had become of him during the unaccounted month when he'd first disappeared.

She figured the man calling himself Houston Smith was the only one who could give her all the answers. But Carley needed to find a way to help him remember—and to bring Witt back to her.

The conference call came through two hours later.

Dr. Fields took the time for explanations. In the end, his descriptions were thorough, if not hopeful.

"Please, Doctor," she begged. "We can give you a couple of hypothetical causes for the amnesia. Can't you give us some possibilities?"

After a long-winded, ten-minute lecture on one possible cause, Reid broke into the doctor's explanation. "Hold it. I need a translator."

"The doctor's simply saying that a person can have something so horrible happen to him that his mind refuses to acknowledge it," Carley explained to her boss. "Sometimes the person might even blank out not only the terrible event but also everything that came before."

Carley tried to make the doctor spell out that kind of malfunction for Reid's benefit. "This would be more a psychiatric problem, wouldn't it Dr. Fields?"

"Indeed, but it would be recognized under the branch of medicine called cognitive neuropsychology. Unfortunately, for the condition to continue for a period of eighteen months would, by definition, mean the person had immersed himself in a drastic, multiple-personality disorder that would take literally years of intense therapy to conquer."

The idea of Witt having such a dire mental illness made Carley shudder. "Let's hope that's not the case here. What if it was not the denial of an event but rather an actual physical trauma that's caused this amnesia?"

"That's the other possibility. Any trauma to the head can cause brain damage, bruising the cerebral cortex and causing problems with memory retrieval. I would naturally need to study the brain scans before I could attempt to assess the extent of such damage."

Carley was getting impatient with the doctor's hedging. "Yes, but can't you tell us in general the symptoms and recovery time?"

After a few seconds of indignant silence, the doctor continued. "Brain trauma can cause temporary loss of personal memories...for instance, one's identity, while other memories like language skills and word recognition that are stored in a different part of the brain are not lost."

"Right. I've seen movies where this happens." Reid sounded as eager to get to the point as Carley felt. "But those memories do come back, don't they?"

“Normally, following trauma, patients have what are called ‘islands of memory.’ These isolated events can act as anchors for memory recovery. In most cases, all old memories, except for the actual trauma itself, are recovered. It’s conceivable, though, that large areas of memory will be permanently irretrievable.”

“What?” Reid sounded stunned. “Carley, is he saying that Davidson may never remember who he is or what happened to him?”

“Shh, Reid. Let the doctor finish, then we’ll discuss this rationally.” Carley was amazed her voice seemed so calm when inside she was a mass of nerve endings. “Would it do any good in such a case to force the person to try to remember, Dr. Fields? Or to try something drastic like hypnosis or drugs, perhaps?”

“Absolutely not. Any further emotional or physical shock could cause the victim’s memories to retreat even further. No, the best course of action is to provide a safe environment where familiar things can be introduced slowly. If the patient inquires about his past, do not lie or confuse the issue, but gently steer him toward self-revelation.”

Carley thanked the specialist for his time, clicked him off and tried to placate Reid. Her boss was chomping at the bit to bundle Witt up and drag him off to an institution for examination and second opinions, exactly as she’d feared.

She managed to dissuade Reid by begging for some time to ease herself into Witt’s trust. Carley figured once Houston Smith trusted her, getting his memory back might come along naturally with the familiarity between them.

Finally Reid calmed enough to foresee the dangers he’d missed before. “I’m sorry I got you and Cami into this. I’d imagined that when you showed up, Witt would see you and remember everything. Guess that’s not going to happen. What do you want to do now?”

She couldn’t believe he would even need to ask the question. “Why, stay with him, of course.”

Reid’s voice softened when he said, “Carley, he has another life now. What if it takes a year... two... or more?”

“I’ll be here to help him, no matter how long it takes.”

Her boss lowered his tone to where she could barely hear him. “What if he never remembers you?”

For a moment she hesitated, but every strand of human frailty that held her to this unjust planet screamed the same answer throughout her body. “Then we’ll just have to make new memories,” she whispered. “I believe he loved me once. Deep down he’s the same person. With enough time, perhaps he’ll grow to love me again.”

“Sorry, Charleston. I can only give you a couple more weeks.” Reid’s voice had grown strong and professional once more.

“Being without Davidson has been a challenge,” he added. “Having to do without you, as well, would be more than the operation can stand.”

“Only a couple of weeks?”

“That’s more than I should give you. In the meantime, watch your back...and his. Whoever or whatever caused this amnesia is bound to come back sooner or later to finish the job. You want to stay there with him for a few weeks? Okay. But you’re totally responsible for his welfare. In his condition, he’s completely defenseless.”

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