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# INTRIGUE®

ELLE  
JAMES

A man in a cowboy hat and a woman holding a baby, standing in front of a dramatic, fiery landscape. The man is wearing a dark shirt and a cowboy hat, looking off to the side. The woman is holding a baby wrapped in a red blanket, looking towards the right. The background is a dramatic, fiery landscape with large, glowing clouds and a dark, rocky foreground.

BUNDLE OF  
TROUBLE



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Police chief Juliette Tremblant recognized the shape of the man strolling down the street—in as calm and leisurely fashion as if it were the middle of the day rather than midnight. She slowed her car, convinced her eyes were playing tricks on her. It had been a long time since Tyler O'Neill had been seen in this town.

As she pulled to a stop at the curb, he turned toward her, and her heart about stopped.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tyler?"

"Well, if it isn't Juliette Tremblant." He made his way over to her, then leaned down so he could look her in the eye. He was close enough to touch.

Juliette was not, repeat, *not* going to touch Tyler O'Neill. Not with her fingers. Not with a ten-foot pole. There would be no touching. Which was too bad, since it was the only way she was ever going to convince herself the man standing in front of her—as rumpled and heart-stoppingly handsome now as he'd been at sixteen—was real.

And not a figment of all her furious revenge dreams.

"What are you doing back in Bonne Terre?" she asked.

"The manor is sitting empty," Tyler said and shrugged, as though his arriving out of the blue after ten years was casual. "Seems like someone should be watching over the family home."

"You?" She laughed at the very notion of him being here for any unselfish reason. "Please."

He stared at her for a second, then smiled. Her heart fluttered against her chest—a small mechanical bird powered by that smile.

“You’re right.” But that cryptic comment was all he offered.

Juliette bit her lip against the other questions.

*Why did you go?*

*Why didn’t you write? Call?*

*What did I do?*

But what would be the point? Ten years of silence were all the answer she really needed.

She had sworn off feeling anything for this man long ago. Yet one look at him and all the old hurt and rage resurfaced as though they’d been waiting for the chance. That made her mad.

She put the car in gear, determined not to waste another minute thinking about Tyler O’Neill. “Have a good night, Tyler,” she said, liking all the cool “go screw yourself” she managed to fit into those words.

*It seems Juliette has an old score to settle with Tyler.*

*Pick up TYLER O’NEILL’S REDEMPTION*

*to see how he makes it up to her.*

*Available September 2010,  
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**“The longer we wait, the farther away the kidnapper gets. I love my son even if you don’t.”**

He dragged her against him, crushing her chest into his. “I love Jake more than life itself. He’s my reason for living.”

His move left her breathless, the feel of his body against hers more shocking than his accusations. “Okay, so you love him. What next?”

“We find him.”

“Then what are you doing now?”

“Making a mistake,” he said, staring down at her, his smoldering black eyes burning into hers. “But for some damned reason, I can’t help myself.”

“Then don’t.” She leaned up, pressing her lips to his, which started an avalanche of repercussions neither expected.





ELLE  
JAMES

BUNDLE OF  
TROUBLE



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## BUNDLE OF TROUBLE

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Golden Heart winner for Best Paranormal Romance in 2004, Elle James started writing when her sister issued a Y2K challenge to write a romance novel. She managed a full-time job, raised three wonderful children and she and her husband even tried their hands at ranching exotic birds (ostriches, emus and rheas) in the Texas Hill Country. Ask her and she'll tell you what it's like to go toe-to-toe with an angry 350-pound bird! After leaving her successful career in information technology management, Elle is now pursuing her writing full-time. She loves building exciting stories about heroes, heroines, romance and passion. Elle loves to hear from fans. You can contact her at [ellejames@earthlink.net](mailto:ellejames@earthlink.net) or visit her Web site at [www.ellejames.com](http://www.ellejames.com).

### **Books by Elle James**

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- 961—LAKOTA BABY
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- 1127—BABY BLING
- 1156—AN UNEXPECTED CLUE
- 1172—OPERATION XOXO
- 1191—KILLER BODY
- 1226—BUNDLE OF TROUBLE

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Tate Vincent**—Texas multimillionaire rancher who adopted a baby boy to satisfy his dying father's wish for grandchildren.

**Sylvia Michaels**—A mother who has spent the past six months desperately searching for the baby stolen from her in Mexico.

**Kacee Leblanc**—Executive assistant with a shady past and shadier relatives who is in love with her boss, Tate Vincent.

**Rosa Garcia**—Former Austin City Police officer medically retired from the police force after receiving an injury in the line of duty. Tate Vincent hired her to protect his son.

**El Corredor**—Man in charge of trafficking babies in the San Antonio area and selling them to the highest bidders.

**Danny Leblanc**—Kacee's brother with a police record recently released from prison.

**CW Middleton**—Tate Vincent's ranch foreman and best friend. He served three tours of duty with the millionaire in the Middle East.

**Jake Vincent**—Tate Vincent's adopted son. Could he really be Sylvia's baby who disappeared six months ago?

**Beth "Bunny" Kirksey**—Woman claiming to be Jake's mother who signed over Jake to Tate in the adoption proceedings.

**Velvet**—Bunny's friend who may have information regarding the sale of babies in San Antonio.

## *Chapter One*

Sylvia Michaels balanced tenuously on one long strand of barbed wire as she slung her leg over the fence. So far so good. Sweat dripped from her hairline, running down her forehead toward her eyes. No chance of brushing it away, not when she needed both hands to hold on.

Bowing her legs around the jagged barbs, she perched one foot on the wire and swung her other leg over. As she dropped to the ground, her jeans snagged on a sharp barb, ripping open the denim and tearing into her flesh. She screamed and fell the rest of the way, landing face-down on the ground, coughing up dust, bleeding and wishing this nightmare would end.

Overheated, tired and scared, she worried that this was just one more wild-goose chase she'd rack up on her quest to find her child. Adding to her stress, someone had been following her for the past couple days since she'd left the coroner's office in San Antonio. She choked not only on the fine Texas dirt, but a sob welled in her throat, despair threatening to take control.

Six months. She'd given up six months of her life to find the son stolen from her in Monterrey, Mexico, last March. He'd be ten months old now. She'd missed seeing him sit up for the first time, missed watching him learn to crawl. Possibly even missed his first word.

Damn it! She pushed to her feet, wiping the tears and dust from her eyes with her dirty hand. She hadn't come this far to fail. She hadn't risked her life investigating a potential baby-theft ring terrorizing mothers from Mexico to Texas. She'd been the only one to come forward and give a detailed description of the person who'd stolen her child. None of the other witnesses in Monterrey had seen the man's face or had the guts to identify the perpetrator if they had. She'd gone to the U.S. Embassy in Monterrey when the Mexican police had done nothing.

She should never have brought Jacob to visit her ex-husband. So what if his work made it impossible for him to travel to the States for his scheduled visit? She should have insisted he come to the States. And he'd blamed *her* when a man had knocked her down and taken Jacob from his stroller in broad daylight in a crowded marketplace.

After six months, a half dozen dead ends and completely draining her savings, she'd reached her limit, her last hope—the Vincent Ranch in Texas hill country. She'd followed every lead imaginable from a frightened Mexican woman who barely spoke English to an adoption agency in San Antonio. A child matching her son's description was adopted by Texas multimillionaire Tate Vincent two weeks after her son was abducted. When she'd tracked down the woman who'd signed over the child, she'd found she'd died in a hit-and-run the day before.

Sylvia had tried to get an appointment with Tate Vincent, but his personal assistant made excuses every time and flat-out told her to buzz off. It didn't help that she couldn't be openly honest with his assistant. What chance did she stand against a millionaire in claiming the son

he'd adopted was in fact her son? She didn't have money left to fight a lengthy court battle to request an opportunity to even get close to the boy. All she had was the cash left in her wallet, beneath her car seat.

After all this time, Sylvia wanted desperately to see Jacob, to hold him in her arms, to hear his baby voice.

Sylvia had hidden her car a mile away behind brush, near a creek along the highway. She moved among the shadows to avoid detection, keeping close to a stand of dwarfed live oaks. A large field stretched in front of her, rising up a hillside with only scattered clumps of cedar and live oak. She hurried from shade patch to shade patch, sweat oozing from every pore.

When she'd left her car, her temperature gauge read ninety-eight. It felt more like well over one hundred. Her gaze darted from side to side, and she listened for sounds of people, horses or motor vehicles. As she topped the rise in the terrain, the Vincent Ranch house came into view, a large, sprawling, white limestone, one-story with a wraparound deck.

Her gaze panned the exterior, searching for movement. Careful to stay out of sight, she made a wide circle around the homestead until she rounded the front of the house. She paused in the shade of a tree, leaning against the gnarly trunk and squinting in the haze of dust and heat. Then she gasped, exhaustion, dehydration and hope bringing her to her knees.

There in the shadow of a large red oak stood a playpen. Leaning against one side was a baby tossing toys onto the grass. The wind ruffled the leaves on the shade tree, and a ray of sunlight found its way through the branches to the baby, gleaming off his head.

Sylvia clapped a hand to her mouth to keep from crying out. The baby had a cap of pale blond hair,

highlighted by the sun's beam. It had to be Jacob. Her baby had spun-gold hair just like hers.

She staggered to her feet and pushed away from the tree, stumbling down the hillside toward the ranch house.

TATE VINCENT SLIPPED his right foot out of the stirrup and slid from the back of Diablo, his black quarterhorse stallion, one of the many horses he'd raised from a colt, since they could afford quality horses on the ranch. When his boots hit the dry Texas soil, a cloud of dust puffed up around him. "Need rain."

His foreman, C. W. Middleton, snorted. "Needed rain a month ago." He reached for Tate's reins, his own gelding tugging to get into the barn. "Let me take Diablo. I thought I heard Jake out in the yard. You go on—I'll manage the horses."

Tate grinned. "I'll take you up on that as soon as I get Diablo's saddle off. And remind me I owe you one."

"You don't owe me nothin'. You're the boss. I'm just hired help."

"Bull. We both know who runs this place." Tate followed C.W. into the cool shadows of the barn, tying Diablo to the outside of his stall. "You've been more than hired help since Dad died." He pulled at the thick leather strap, loosening the girth around Diablo's belly. When the strap dangled free, he lifted the saddle off the beast. The saddle blanket was drenched in sweat and coated in a heavy layer of fine Texas dust from their ride along the northern fence line. "Jake was asleep when we left this morning. I would like to see him again before he goes down for the night."

"Go on. Get out of here." Brush in hand, C.W. took over the care and grooming of Diablo, urging Tate out



the door. "That boy thinks the sun rises and sets on you. 'Bout time you spent a little more daylight with him."

C.W. had been his friend since they'd met as army recruits. They'd gone on to Special Forces training and Afghanistan where they'd tracked down the al-Qaida rebels in the desert hills. Ranching in Texas seemed tame in comparison. But C.W. had fit right in, learning all the responsibilities of a good ranch hand. He'd learned how to ride, rope, brand and mend fences in a matter of weeks, too stubborn to admit defeat. Just like the boss. When the foreman had passed on, C.W. stepped up to the plate, assuming the role like he'd been born to do it.

Tate crossed the hard-packed ground between the barn and the Vincent homestead established by his great-great-grandfather in the mid-eighteen hundreds. He had to remind himself that he could hire people to do the work he did out in the field. The ranch wasn't what made him the money. His investments had taken him from struggling rancher to multimillionaire in just five years. Too bad his father hadn't lived longer to enjoy his son's success.

Richard Vincent had passed on five months earlier, his presence still missed by his son and the ranch staff. He hadn't gotten to know Jake a little better and Jake wouldn't know his grandfather.

Tate flexed his muscles, rolling the tension and weariness from his shoulders. Sure, he had the money to hire more ranch hands, but he liked the hard work. It kept him humble. At one point in his struggle to rise from rags to riches, he thought for sure he'd lose the ranch. He'd lost nearly everything else, including his wife.

Tate's mouth pressed into a thin line. Laura didn't have the stomach for the hard times. When cattle prices had plummeted and the creditors came knocking on their