



The Cowboy's Secret Baby (The Mommy Club)

By Karen Rose Smith

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It takes two to make a baby...

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...but three to make a family.

Moving to Ty's ranch was supposed to be just a temporary move for Marissa and the baby. Instead it's proving to be a temptation for her, and if appearances are to be believed, for Ty as well. But Marissa has to resist, for their son's sake. Because nothing—and no one—can keep a rodeo cowboy in one place. And when he leaves this time, she'll be damned if he takes her heart with him...again.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Award-winning author Karen Rose Smith lives in Pennsylvania and has sold over 80 novels since 1991. Her romances have made both the USA TODAY list and the Amazon Contemporary Romance Bestseller list. Believing in the power of love, she envisions herself writing relationship novels and mysteries for a long time to come! Readers can e-mail Karen at www.karenrosesmith.com or follow her on Twitter @karenrosesmith and on Facebook.

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Marissa Lopez's heart began beating faster. Her stomach seemed to turn upside down. Oh, no. That couldn't be Ty Conroy over there, could it?

She'd stopped in at the physical therapy center to talk to her friend, Sara Cramer. On her lunch hour, she didn't have a whole lot of time. But she needed Sara's advice.

However, now—

"What's wrong?" Sara asked. "You suddenly went pale."

Marissa pointed her chin toward the other side of the room, where one of the physical therapists was sitting in a chair across from Ty.

Ty.

The father of her baby. Ty. The father of her baby who didn't *know* he was the father of her baby.

Sara looked in the direction Marissa had indicated. "Do you know him?" she asked.

Sara wasn't from Fawn Grove. She didn't recognize the boy who had made good in the rodeo riding circuit. She didn't know the bull rider who Marissa had spent a night with. A mistaken, foolish night.

Although she could never even think about her life without her son, Jordan. Not for a moment.

Sara was one of the few people who knew the name of her baby's father.

"That's Ty Conroy," Marissa answered in a shaky voice.

Sara's eyes went wide. "Are you serious? What are you going to do?" She knew Marissa had never expected Ty Conroy to return to Fawn Grove, California.

"Do you know why he's here?" Marissa asked, edging toward the door.

Sara shook her head. "I don't work with him. Even if I did, I couldn't tell you—patient privacy and all that."

Marissa couldn't help but take another glance at Ty, who was now minus his cowboy hat and boots. His hand

was on his knee and she spotted a cane leaning against the table. Just what had happened?

She was definitely out of that bull riding loop. Her job at Jase Cramer's winery, Jordan and her volunteer work with The Mommy Club, an organization that helped parents in need, captured all of her attention and energy. She rarely even watched the news or any TV for that matter, except for SpongeBob and The Disney Channel. Sara was the same. They were both busy women.

Her glance at Ty lingered a little bit too long. The physical therapist moved away from him and Ty's gaze zeroed right in on hers.

Oh, no! she thought again.

Though she told herself to look away, her eyes took him in. Two years hadn't made much difference in her appearance, nor had they made much difference in his, though there were more lines around his eyes now.

Where before his expression had been pensive, now he broke into a grin and motioned her over.

She groaned.

"How are you going to play this?" Sara asked, clearly worried for her.

"I don't know," Marissa murmured. "I need some time to think about it."

"You can run out of here," Sara suggested.

"Running never helped anything. I'll just have to figure this out as I go."

Ty motioned to her again. She walked across the room, every step filling her with anxiety, every inch closer to him making her pulse race faster. They'd definitely had chemistry that night, and she could feel it now, even this far away from him.

He looked glad to see her and that made her feel even worse.

By the time she reached him, he was on his feet. Even without his boots, he was over six feet tall, and those broad shoulders—

In a snap-button shirt, with the collar open and his sleeves rolled up, he looked good enough to...to...hug. But she wasn't about to do that.

He was still smiling.

Before he could say a word, she blurted out, "What are you doing here?" Once the question was out, she couldn't take it back. Besides, she had to know.

"I've been back about two months," he said, not really answering her question.

She motioned to the physical therapy room. "But what are you doing *here*?"

He looked down at his left leg and grimaced. "I guess the latest gossip hasn't reached you."

Fawn Grove was a small town, and if you kept your ear to the ground, and the coffee shop, and the family diner, and the feed store, rumors floated all over the place. But she didn't get to any of those places. Besides, only Sara and their friend Kaitlyn knew she'd had a fling with Ty. So why would anybody tell her anything about him?

"So let's bypass the gossip and get to the truth," she suggested.

His Stetson was on a chair beside the table where he'd sat. He studied it for a moment, then raised his gaze to hers. "My rodeo days are over. A bull got the best of me, and I had to have a knee replacement."

Wow! She hadn't been expecting that.

"When did it happen?"

"About four and a half months ago. I had surgery in Houston, and I did rehab there. But I've come back to the Cozy C to help out my uncle, to get plans going that we started when I was in Houston. The doc in Texas thought it was a good idea if I continued physical therapy here, considering I wanted to be back in the saddle sooner rather than later."

"You'll be able to ride again?" she asked, knowing how much it meant to him.

"I am riding. Horses, not bulls." His tone was wry and she suspected there were a lot of feelings behind it. However he didn't express them.

"I did hear your uncle's having a tough time of it." Jase Cramer, Sara's husband, had mentioned he was thinking about buying the Cozy C property if it ever went up for sale. He'd mentioned Eli Conroy was having a problem paying his taxes. She'd briefly thought of Ty when she'd heard that, but she'd never imagined he'd be back here.

"Yeah, Uncle Eli has had it rough. He was finally honest with me about it after this happened. But I won my best purse ever the night that bull did me in. So Uncle Eli and I are going to turn the Cozy C into a vacation ranch."

Marissa supposed that was one solution. That would take an awful lot of money, and one huge overhaul. Which meant Ty was going to stay around...

She had to get out of here. She couldn't make chitchat with him. She didn't want him to find out anything she didn't want him to know, at least not yet. Though she understood in her soul that the day was coming when she'd have to tell him about Jordan.

She checked her watch. "I'm on my lunch hour and I have to get back to work. It was great to see you. Good luck with your uncle's ranch."

And before Ty could say another word, could even utter a goodbye, she turned and fled.

Ty stared after Marissa Lopez, totally baffled by what had just happened. When their gazes had connected across the room, he'd seen the same sparks there now that he'd seen when they'd attended the wedding of friends together two years ago. They'd known each other years before that. They'd gone to the same high school, known some of the same kids, though he'd been two years older than Marissa and had stayed away

from her. No easy feat, because she'd been a beauty even back then.

Automatically his thoughts returned to the wedding they'd attended in Sacramento. He'd known the groom and she'd known the bride. At the reception, they'd hooked up. Then they'd gone back to his motel room.

That had been a night that had been hard to put out of his memory. That had been a night he'd even thought about the day the bull had ended his career. Thinking about Marissa had helped him deal with the pain. He had to admit he'd intended to look her up again eventually—when he was whole once more, when this PT was all done with, when the Cozy C was an amazing success. He didn't know why all that had been important, but it had been.

Seeing her today.

His gaze still on her as she headed toward the door, he watched the receptionist stop her. He listened, without being concerned at all about eavesdropping.

The blonde at the reception desk asked, "Are you going to be helping with The Mommy Club food drive for Thanksgiving?"

Casting a quick glance his way, Marissa turned her back to him, nodded and then murmured something in reply.

Then she was gone.

Just like she'd been gone the morning after their night of passion.

He'd awakened as she'd dressed, but he'd known they really hadn't had anything to say. He was going out on the circuit again. She would be staying in Fawn Grove. He didn't know when he'd be back. So he'd let her leave without a word.

And that had been that.

But the receptionist's question stuck with him.

The Mommy Club? What did Marissa have to do with *that*? Every once in a while he checked in on Fawn Grove's Chamber of Commerce's Facebook page, just to see what events were going on, what was happening in the town he'd grown up in. He vaguely remembered seeing postings about The Mommy Club.

As soon as he got back to the ranch, he'd have to check it out.

As Ty opened the newly painted white wooden screen door and stepped into the Cozy C's renovated kitchen, he was barely mindful of the smell of new paint and coffee. Yet he couldn't miss the sight of his uncle Eli sitting at the oak pedestal table nursing a mug of a dark brew.

"You're leaning on that cane pretty heavy. Tough workout?" his uncle asked.

If it were up to Ty, the cane would be tossed into the recycle bin. He rarely used it now, though his physical therapist wanted him to. But after today's exercises, he needed to ice the muscles around his knee before getting along with his day.

"No tougher than any other," he assured his uncle, leaving the cane by the door and hanging his Stetson on the hat hook. There were four of them there now, for any of the dude ranch's guests who came to visit the main house's kitchen.

"Still smells like paint in here," his uncle grumbled.

"You wanted to keep the wooden door. It needed a facelift."

"And that stainless-steel stove and refrigerator make me want to close my eyes when I come in here in the morning. It's so damn bright."

That was an exaggeration if Ty ever heard one, but he could tell his uncle was in a complaining mood.

"You like the new touch faucet, though, don't you?"

His uncle glanced at it and scowled. "I liked that old white porcelain sink just fine. And in my day, a spigot for hot and a spigot for cold was all I needed. Now we've got that fancy sprayer and a filtered water tap." Eli shook his head.

"Any complaints about the new guest cabins?" Ty asked, amused by his uncle's rant.

"If somebody wants to stay here, they should be happy with the bunkhouse," Eli muttered.

"You can't expect a family to stay in a bunkhouse, even if we did give it an overhaul and a more refined look. Single guys who come for the ranch experience can bunk with the hands there. But what if we get a couple who wants to explore the area on horseback for their honeymoon?"

"So you want to provide a love nest?" Eli sounded aghast at that thought.

"I want to provide a cozy cabin where they'll be happy so they spread the word to their friends and we get even more guests. Instead of all these changes, would you have rather sold the Cozy C?"

They'd had the conversation many times since Eli had confessed the state of the ranch while Ty was still in Houston. Ty supposed his uncle hadn't wanted him to return and be shocked by what he found. And Ty would have been. When he returned two months ago, the place had been sorely run-down. The tax collector had been on Eli's doorstep for the past year. With his bull riding winnings tucked into a bank account, Ty had been able to think, plan and move fast—from his rehab facility in Houston. He and his uncle had spent long sleepless nights over this decision before renovations started, but there really had been no other choice but to turn the Cozy C into an income-generating ranch.

Now Eli took a long swig of coffee, then set down his mug with a thump. "I still don't like the idea of using all your winnings for this. You could have had a sweet retirement fund."

"That's a long way off."

At twenty-nine, Ty had plenty of years to worry about retirement. If they could make a success of the Cozy C, he and his uncle would both be set.

"This place is going to be great, Unc. You'll see."

Eli pushed his chair back, stood, and went to the new sink. "All I see is you working day and night when you should still be recuperating."

"I'm done recuperating. Haven't you noticed?"

Eli turned and looked him in the eye. "I don't know if you've ever started."

Ty wasn't even going to ask what *that* meant, though his uncle was probably referring to his childhood, not just the bull riding accident. Ty had spent the first few years of his life in Texas. Vague memories that had to do with dust and heat and hills sometimes shadowed his dreams. His dad had ridden the circuit and his mom, well, she'd gotten tired of the whole thing—the dust, the heat, as well as being alone and taking care of a child all by herself. One weekend, when his dad had come home between rodeos, she'd announced she was leaving. Not only leaving, but she was leaving Ty with his dad.

His father hadn't had a clue how to take care of a four-year-old, so he'd called his brother Eli. In no time, the two had moved to Fawn Grove, California, and the Cozy C. Once they had, his dad had gone on the circuit again. He'd been killed by an ornery bull a few years later. Maybe Ty had gone into bull riding to prove he wouldn't have the same fate.

No, not the same. A different one.

Needing to change the topic of conversation, Ty went to the coffeepot and filled his own mug. Standing there as casually as he could, he said offhandedly, "I ran into Marissa Lopez in town."

"That gal who turned your head when you were in high school?"

"She didn't turn my head. She was two years younger and—"

Eli cut in and waved his hand. "Never no mind. Just stay away from her. She had a baby with no dad in sight. You don't want to get tangled up in that kind of complication."

She'd had a *baby*? That's why she was involved in The Mommy Club.

"How old's her baby?" Ty asked.

"A year, maybe a couple of months more. It's not like I keep track of everybody in town."

A year? Fourteen months? His heart pounded in his ears.

His uncle acted as if he didn't keep track, but Eli often drove into the diner for breakfast, and he and his cohorts gossiped as much as any women's group. They knew the comings and goings. They knew the old-time residents. They knew who was new. They just knew.

Making quick calculations in his head, Ty didn't like what he came up with. *If* her baby was a couple of months over a year old, and it took nine months to have a baby.

That would put the night of conception right about when he and Marissa had hooked up after the wedding.

He hoped he was totally mistaken. The thing was, he had to find out...and soon.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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