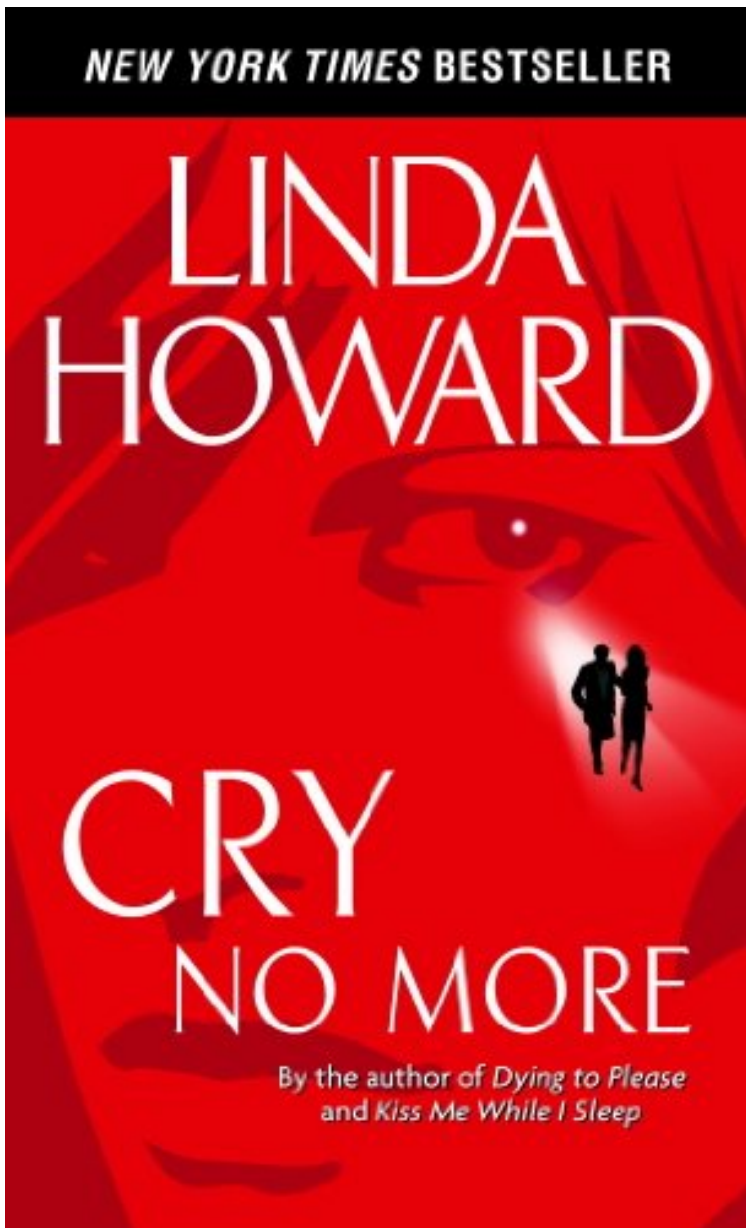


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Cry No More



Par Linda Howard
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Description : Description du produitCount your blessings; they can be snatched away in an instant. It is a sentiment Milla Edge knows too well. With an astonishing blend of savvy, instinct, and passion, Milla displays an uncanny gift for finding lost children. When all seems helpless, desperate souls from across the country come to her for hope and results. Driven by an obsessive desire to fill the void in other peoples lives, Milla throws herself into every caseall the while trying to outrun the brutal emotions stemming from a horrific tragedy in her past.Traveling to a small village in Mexico on a reliable tip, Milla begins to uncover the dire fate of countless children who have disappeared over the years in the labyrinth of a sinister baby-smuggling ring. The key to nailing down the organization may rest with an elusive one-eyed man. To find

him, Milla joins forces with James Diaz, a suspicious stranger known as the Tracker who conceals his own sinister agenda. As the search intensifies, the mission becomes more treacherous. For the ring is part of something far larger and more dangerous, reaching the highest echelons of power and influence. Caught between growing passion and imminent peril, Milla suddenly finds herself the hunted in the crosshairs of an invisible, lethal assassin who aims to silence her permanently. Intense emotion . . . potent suspense . . . pounding action. Linda Howard weaves these elements into page-turning fiction. *Cry No More* is a seductive thriller of heartbreak and obsession that moves with a vengeance.

Prsentation de l'diteur Count your blessings; they can be snatched away in an instant. It is a sentiment Milla Edge knows too well. With an astonishing blend of savvy, instinct, and passion, Milla displays an uncanny gift for finding lost children. When all seems helpless, desperate souls from across the country come to her for hope and results. Driven by an obsessive desire to fill the void in other peoples lives, Milla throws herself into every case all the while trying to outrun the brutal emotions stemming from a horrific tragedy in her past. Traveling to a small village in Mexico on a reliable tip, Milla begins to uncover the dire fate of countless children who have disappeared over the years in the labyrinth of a sinister baby-smuggling ring. The key to nailing down the organization may rest with an elusive one-eyed man. To find him, Milla joins forces with James Diaz, a suspicious stranger known as the Tracker who conceals his own sinister agenda. As the search intensifies, the mission becomes more treacherous. For the ring is part of something far larger and more dangerous, reaching the highest echelons of power and influence. Caught between growing passion and imminent peril, Milla suddenly finds herself the hunted in the crosshairs of an invisible, lethal assassin who aims to silence her permanently. Intense emotion . . . potent suspense . . . pounding action. Linda Howard weaves these elements into page-turning fiction. *Cry No More* is a seductive thriller of heartbreak and obsession that moves with a vengeance. From the Hardcover edition. Extrait 1 Mexico, 1993 Milla had fallen asleep while the baby was nursing. David Boone stood over his wife and child and watched them, aware of the silly grin on his face, of the fullness in his chest. His wife. His child. God, his world. The old fascination, the obsession, with medicine remained, but it was tempered now by something equally as fascinating. Hed never suspected that the process of pregnancy and childbirth, of the rapid development of the infant, could be so engrossing. Hed chosen the field of surgery because of the sheer challenge of it; obstetrics, in comparison, had seemed kind of like watching grass grow. Well, sometimes things went wrong and the obstetrician had to be on top of things, but for the most part babies grew and were born, and that was that. Hed thought that until it came to his own child. Clinically, hed known every detail of fetal growth, but he hadnt been prepared for the sheer emotion of watching Milla round out, of feeling the small kicks and flutters of the baby grow into stronger, more demanding ones. And if the sheer emotionalism had blindsided him, how had Milla felt? Sometimes, even during the physical misery of the last month of pregnancy, hed caught an expression on her face, a rapt, absorbed look as she unconsciously stroked her belly, that told him she was lost in a world inhabited only by herself and the baby. And then Justin had arrived, squalling and healthy, and David had felt light-headed with relief and euphoria. In the six weeks since, each day seemed to bring some small change as the infant grew; the dark fuzz on his head had become blond, his eyes were more blue and alert. He was noticing things, recognizing voices, waving his arms and legs in a jerky, uncoordinated rhythm as his little muscles grew in strength. He loved his bath. He had an angry cry, a hungry cry, an uncomfortable cry, and a cranky cry. Milla had been able to tell the difference within days. The changes in his wife were fascinating, too. Milla had always had a way of holding herself apart from the world, as if she were more an observer than a participant. Shed been a challenge from the moment hed first seen her, but he had stubbornly courted her until she couldnt help but notice him as a person rather than a moving part of the scenery. He could remember perfectly the exact moment when hed won: they had been at a New Years Eve party and in the middle of all the laughter and drinking and general silliness, Milla had looked at him and blinked, a faintly startled expression crossing her face as if he had suddenly come into focus. That was it; no hot kiss, no heartfelt exchanges in the night, just a sudden clarity in her gaze as she finally, truly saw him. Then she smiled and took his hand, and with that simple touch they were linked. Amazing. Okay, it was also amazing that hed surfaced from his studies and work long enough to notice her at one of the deadly dull staff parties his professor parents often hosted, but once he had, he couldnt get her face out of his mind. She wasnt beautiful; maybe she barely qualified as pretty. But there was something about her, in the strong, clean lines of her face and the way she walked, an almost gliding stride that made him think maybe her feet didnt quite touch the ground, that had kept consciousness of her nagging

at him like a persistent mosquito. Learning about her had fascinated him. He liked knowing that her favorite color was green, that she didn't want pepperoni on her pizza, that she enjoyed action movies and, thank God, yawned at the idea of chick flicks, which was surprising because she was so essentially feminine. As she explained it, she already knew about woman stuff, so why would she want to watch more of the same? Trivial stuff, mostly. He was beguiled by her serenity; if she had a temper, he'd never seen it. She was the most evenly balanced person he'd ever met, and even after two years of marriage he still couldn't quite believe his luck. She yawned and stretched, the move popping her nipple out of the baby's slack mouth, who grunted and made a few sucking motions, then was still. Fascinated, David reached out and stroked one gentle finger over the plump mound of her bare breast. He admitted it; he was delighted with the new size of her breasts. Prepregnancy, Milla's shape had been lean, like a long-distance runner. Now she was rounder, softer, and the postbirth moratorium on sex was driving him crazy. He couldn't wait until tomorrow, when she had her six-week checkup from Susanna Kasper, the team's ob-gyn. Actually, because of a couple of emergencies that played havoc with Susanna's schedule, it was almost seven weeks now, and he was close to howling at the moon. Jerking off relieved the tension, but was a long way from being as satisfying as making love to his wife. She opened her eyes and drowsily smiled at him. Hey, Doogie, she murmured. Thinking about tomorrow night? He laughed, both at the nickname and how she'd read his mind not that reading his mind was any great feat. He'd had little else besides sex on the brain for two months now. Nothing else. Maybe Doogie Jr. will sleep all night. She stroked a gentle hand over the baby's fuzzy head, and he responded by making more sucking motions with his mouth. Simultaneously both adults said, I doubt it, and David laughed again. Justin had a voracious appetite; he wanted feeding at least every two hours. Milla had been concerned that her breast milk wasn't rich enough, or that she didn't have enough, but Justin was clearly thriving and Susanna said there was nothing to worry about, the baby was just a pig. Milla yawned again, and, concerned, David touched her cheek. Just because Susanna will give you the all-clear tomorrow doesn't mean we have to make love. If you're too tired, we can wait. Susanna had made damn certain he understood how exhausted a new mother was, especially if she was breast-feeding. Interrupted in mid-yawn, Milla glared at him. Oh, yes, we do, she said fiercely. If you think I'm going to wait another minute Justin will be lucky if I don't leave him with Susanna while I hunt you down at the clinic. Gonna hold a scalpel on me and make me strip? he asked, grinning. It's a thought. She caught his hand and pulled it to her breast again, rubbing her nipple against his fingers. It's been over six weeks. We don't have to wait for Susanna's official okay. He wanted to go with that idea. It had, in fact, occurred to him before, but he hadn't wanted Milla to think that all he cared about was sex. He was relieved she had brought up the idea first, and temptation gnawed at him. He glanced at his wristwatch and the time made him groan. I have to be at the clinic in ten minutes. Already people would be lining up outside the clinic doors, prepared to patiently wait for hours to see a doctor. He was the team surgeon, and in fact had a surgery scheduled in half an hour. He barely had enough time to get to the clinic, change, and get scrubbed. Not that he'd need more than ten seconds to climax, the way he felt, but Milla definitely needed more time than that. Tonight, then, Milla said, turning on her side and smiling at him. I'll keep Justin awake as much as possible so he'll sleep. Good plan. He stood and reached for his keys. What are you doing today? Nothing much. I'm going to the market this morning before it gets so hot. Get some oranges. He'd been on an orange kick lately, as if his body craved the vitamin C. He'd been spending long hours in surgery, so maybe he did. He leaned down and kissed Milla, then brushed his lips against Justin's satiny cheek. Take good care of Mommy, he told his sleeping son, and hurried out the door. Milla stayed in bed a few more minutes, luxuriating in the peace and quiet. Right this moment, no one was wanting anything of her. She had thought she was prepared to care for a baby, but somehow she hadn't realized the work would be practically nonstop. When Justin wasn't needing to be fed or changed, she was rushing around trying to keep up with all the other chores, and she was so tired that every step was like slogging through water. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in what felt like months. No, it had been months; about four of them, since the growing baby had gotten large enough to press on her bladder and she'd had to pee practically every half hour. She had carried him low, which Susanna said made it easier to breathe, but the trade-off was peeing a lot. Being a mother was anything but glamorous; rewarding, but definitely not glamorous. She knew she was beaming as she examined her sleeping son. He was so gorgeous; everyone said so, exclaiming at his blond hair and blue eyes and the sweetness of his mouth. He looked like the Gerber baby, that idealized, big-eyed infant whose image graced millions of baby-care items. Milla was entranced by everything about him, from the tiny fingernails to the dimples that were forming as he gained weight. She could just sit and watch him all day long . . . if she didn't have so much else to do. Immediately her mind

switched into work mode as she remembered everything that needed to be done today, such as laundry, cleaning, cooking, and, whenever she had a spare moment to sit down, catching up on the clinics paperwork.

And sometime today she needed to take care of girly things like washing her hair and shaving her legs, because she had a hot date with her husband tonight. She would never get tired of being a mother, but she was definitely ready to be something else, too, like a sexually desirable woman. She missed sex; David made love with the same total concentration he gave to everything else that interested him, which was very nice when one was the recipient of said concentration. Actually, it was better than nice. It was pretty damn wonderful. First, though, she would go to the market, before the day got too hot. Only two more months here, she thought. She would miss Mexico: the people, the sunshine, the slowness of time. The year David and his colleagues had donated to the free-care clinic was almost over; then it would be back to the rat race of practicing medicine in the States. Not that she wouldn't be glad to be home, back with family and friends and such niceties as an air-conditioned supermarket. She wanted to do things like take Justin for walks in the park or visit with her mom during the day. She had missed her mother a lot during the long months of her pregnancy, and sporadic phone calls plus one quick visit home just hadn't filled the need. She had almost decided not to come to Mexico with David; she found out she was pregnant just before they were scheduled to leave. But she hadn't wanted to spend such a long time away from him, especially while she was carrying their first child. After meeting Susanna, the ob-gyn part of the medical team, she had decided to stick to their original plan. Her mother had been horrified her grandchild would be born in another country! but the pregnancy had gone by the book, without any medical problems arising. Justin had arrived almost on time, just two days past her due date, and since then Milla had felt as if she existed in a fog composed of equal parts love and fatigue. This was so completely opposite to how she had imagined her life would be that she couldn't help but feel amused. Armed with her grand liberal arts degree, she had planned to change the world, one person at a time. She was going to be the kind of teacher people remembered when they themselves were grandparents, the kind of teacher who made a real difference in her students' lives. She was comfortable in academia, even the highly political side of it; she had planned to continue her education until she received her doctorate, then teach at a university. Marriage eyes, after a while. Maybe when she was thirty or thirty-five. Children maybe. Instead she had met David, a wunderkind of medicine. He was the son of her history professor, and when she became the professor's student assistant, she learned all about him. David's IQ was way above genius level; he'd finished high school at fourteen, college at seventeen, blew through medical school, and was already a practicing surgeon at the age of twenty-five when she met him. She'd expected him to be either an arrogant know-it-all with some justification or a total egghead. He was neither. Instead he was a good-looking young man whose face was often lined with exhaustion from long hours in surgery and augmented by a bottomless need for more knowledge that kept him poring over medical books long after he should have been asleep. His smile was sweet and sexy, his blue eyes full of good humor, his blond hair usually shaggy and disordered. He was tall, which she liked, since she was five-seven and liked to wear high heels. Actually, she liked everything about him, and when he asked her out she hadn't hesitated at all. Still, she'd been surprised, at a New Year's Eve party, to catch him staring at her with dark, potent desire in his eyes. Realization had hit her like a blow to the stomach, as if Joshua had blown his horn and all the walls had come tumbling down. David loved her, and she loved him. It was that simple. She had become his wife at twenty-one, as soon as she got her degree, and now at twenty-three she was a mother. She didn't regret a minute of it. She still planned to teach, when they returned to the States, and she still planned to further her education, but she wouldn't undo a single decision that had led to the small miracle that was her son. From the moment she'd realized she was pregnant, she'd been consumed by the process, and so in love with the baby that she felt as if she were lit from the inside with a powerful, incandescent glow. That feeling was even stronger now, to the point that she felt the tug between her and Justin even if he was just in the next room sleeping. No matter how tired she was, she reveled in that connection. She got out of bed and carefully placed the pillows around the baby, even though he couldn't yet roll over. He didn't move while she quickly washed, dragged a brush through her short, curly hair, and then dressed in one of the loose sundresses she had brought specifically to wear after giving birth. She was still fifteen pounds heavier than she'd been before getting pregnant, but the extra weight didn't bother her . . . much. She kind of liked the motherly softness, and David certainly liked the way her breasts had expanded from a B cup to a D. She thought of the coming night and shivered with anticipation. A week ago David had brought home a box of condoms from the clinic, and the mere presence of the box had made them both a little crazy. They had used condoms for a short while when they first became lovers; then she had been on birth control pills until they had decided to have a

baby. Having to use the condoms again made her feel as if it were the first time all over again, when they were in a frenzy to have each other and everything was so new and intense and scary. Justin began squirming a little, his mouth pursing as if searching for her breast. His blue eyes opened, his tiny fists began waving, and he made the grunting sound that preceded his *Im wet, change me, cry*. Pulled from a daydream about making love with his daddy, Milla got a clean diaper and bent over him, cooing as she changed him. He managed to focus his gaze on her face, and he stared at her as if nothing else existed in his universe, his mouth open with delight, his arms and legs pumping. *Theres mommys baby*, she crooned as she lifted him. As soon as she settled him in the crook of her arm, he began rooting at her breast. *Make that mommys pig*, she amended, sitting down and unbuttoning the front of her dress. Her breasts tingled in response, and she sighed with pure pleasure as the baby latched onto her nipple and began sucking. Gently she rocked back and forth, playing with his fingers and toes as he nursed. Her eyes closed dreamily, and she hummed a lullaby, drifting in the moment. She could do without the dirty diapers and loss of sleep, but she loved this part of being a mother. When she held him like this, nothing else mattered. He finished nursing, and she put him down again while she grabbed a quick bite of breakfast. After brushing her teeth, she draped a blue denim sling over her head and put the baby in it. He settled down with his head resting where he could hear her heartbeat, his blue eyes already drooping shut as he dozed. Grabbing a hat and a basket, with money in her pocket, she set out for the market. The walk was only about half a mile. The bright morning sun promised to deliver scorching heat by midday, but for now the air was cool and dry, and the small open-air village market was busy with early shoppers. There were oranges and brightly colored peppers, bananas and melons, yellow onions on strings. Milla browsed, occasionally chatting with some of the village women as they stopped to admire the baby, taking her time in picking out the produce she wanted. Justin was curled in the ball shape of the very young, his legs still automatically drawing up into his prebirth position. She held her hat so it shielded him from the sun. A soft, pleasant breeze played in her short, light brown curls and lifted the babys wispy blond fuzz. He stirred, his rosebud mouth making sucking motions. Milla set down her basket and patted his tiny back, and he lapsed back into sleep. She stopped at a display of fruit and began carrying on an animated, if fractured, conversation with the old woman behind the stacks of oranges and melons. Her understanding was better than her speech, but she managed to make herself understood. She used her free hand to point to the oranges she wanted. She didnt see them coming. Suddenly two men were bracketing her, their body heat and odor assailing her. Instinctively she started to step back, only to find herself blocked by their bodies closing in on her. The one on the right pulled a knife from the sheath at his waist and grasped the straps of the sling, hastily slicing through them before Milla could do more than give a startled cry. Time seemed to stutter, giving her freeze-frame impressions of the next few seconds. The old woman fell back, her expression alarmed. Milla felt the sling that held Justin to her begin to drop, and in panic she grabbed for her baby. The man on her left snatched the baby from her with one hand, and shoved at her with the other. Somehow she kept her balance, terror twisting in her chest as she leapt at the man, screaming, fighting to wrest her baby from him. Her clawing nails scratched down his face, leaving bloody furrows, and he reeled back from the assault. The baby, startled awake, was wailing. The milling crowd scattered, alarmed by the sudden violence. *Help!* she shrieked over and over as she tried to grab Justin, but everyone seemed to be running away from her rather than to her. The man tried to shove her away again, his hand on her face. Milla bit him, sinking her teeth into his hand and grinding down until she felt blood in her mouth and he was yelling in pain. She clawed for his eyes, her nails sinking into spongy softness. His yells turned into shocked bellows, and his grip on Justin loosened. Desperately she grabbed at the baby, managing to catch one tiny, flailing arm, and for one heart-bursting moment she thought she had him. Then she felt the other man moving in close behind her, and a searing, paralyzing pain shot through her back. Her body convulsed and she dropped like a rock to the ground, her fingers scrabbling helplessly in the grit. With the baby clutched like a football under one assailants arm, the two men raced away, one holding a bloody hand over his face and screaming curses as he fled. Milla lay sprawled in the dirt as she tried to fight through the agony that gripped her body, fight for breath to scream. Her lungs pumped wildly but didnt seem to be dragging in any air. She tried to get up; her body didnt respond. A black veil began closing over her vision, and she managed to whimper, over and over, *My baby! My baby! Someone get my baby!* No one did. David had already repaired a hernia and was washing up while Rip Kospers, Susannas husband and the team anesthesiologist, did a final check of the patients blood pressure and heart rate to make sure he was okay before turning him over to Anneli Lansky, the nurse, for monitoring. They had a good group working here; hed miss them when the year was up and they all returned to regular practice in the States. He wouldnt miss

the cramped, one-story concrete-block clinic, with its cracked tile floors and barely adequate equipment, but he definitely miss the group as well as his patients and he miss Mexico itself. He was thinking about the next case, a gallbladder, when he heard a commotion in the hallway just outside the door. There was shouting and cursing, some scuffling sounds, and high-pitched wails. He dried his hands and started for the door just as Juana Mendoza, another nurse, began yelling for him. He hit the door, already running, and skidded to a halt in the hallway before he rammed into a knot of people that included Juana, Susanna Kospers, and two men and a woman who were clumsily carrying another woman. The crush of bodies hid the wounded woman's face, but David could see that her dress was drenched with blood and he immediately switched into emergency mode. What happened? he asked as he kicked a box out of the way and dragged over a gurney. David. Susanna's voice was tight and sharp. It's Milla. For a moment the words didn't make sense and he looked around, expecting to see his wife behind him. Then Susanna's meaning kicked in and he saw the wounded woman's unconscious, paper-white face, saw the froth of soft brown curls around her face, and everything tilted out of kilter. Milla? This couldn't be Milla. She was at home with Justin, safe and sound. This woman who looked as if she'd bled out just resembled his wife, that was all. It wasn't really Milla. David! This time Susanna's tone was even sharper. Snap out of it! Help us get her on the gurney. Only his training enabled him to function, to step in and lift the woman who looked like Milla onto the gurney. Her dress was bloody, her arms and hands were bloody, her legs and feet and even her shoes were bloody. Not just one shoe, a sandal that looked just like a pair Milla often wore. He saw the pink nail polish on her toenails, and the delicate gold chain around her right ankle, and he felt as if all his insides caved in. What happened? he asked, his voice hoarse and faraway and not his own, even as his body moved into action and they rapidly wheeled Milla into the surgical bay he had just left. Knife wound to the lower back, Juana said, listening to the babble of voices around them before they closed the door and shut out most of the noise. Two men attacked her at the market. She caught a shuddering breath. They took Justin. Milla fought them, and one of the men stabbed her. Rip, alerted by the hubbub, burst back into the room. My God, he blurted when he saw Milla; then he fell silent and began readying his equipment. Justin! David reeled from the second shock, and he half turned toward the door. Two bastards had stolen his son! He actually took a step away from the gurney, toward the door, to race out and search for his baby. Then he hesitated, and looked back at his wife. They hadn't had time to clean the operating room, or restock the supplies on the trays. Anneli ran in and began grabbing what they'd need. Juana wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Milla's limp arm and swiftly pumped it up, while Susanna used the shears to cut away Milla's clothing. Blood type O positive, Susanna was saying. How did she know? Oh, yeah, she'd typed Milla's blood before Justin's delivery. Sixty over forty, Juana reported. Moving so fast her actions were a blur, she started an IV line in Milla's arm and hooked up a bag of blood plasma. He was losing her, David thought. Milla would die right in front of him, unless he snapped out of his shock and acted. From the position of the wound, the knife had probably hit her left kidney, and God knows what other damage had been done. She was bleeding out; she had only a few minutes left before her internal organs began shutting down. He pushed everything else out of his mind, and shoved his hands into the fresh pair of gloves Anneli held out for him. He didn't have time to scrub up; he didn't have time to search for Justin; all he had time to do was reach for the scalpel that was promptly slapped into his palm and call on every ounce of skill he had. He prayed, he cursed, and he fought time as he cut into his wife's body. As he'd suspected, the knife blade had hit her left kidney. Hit it, hell; it had all but sliced the organ in half. There was no saving the kidney, and if he didn't get it out and the blood vessels tied off in record time, there would be no saving Milla, either. It was a race, savage and merciless. If he made one misstep, if he hesitated, if anything was dropped or even fumbled, then he lost, and Milla lost. It wasn't surgery as he was accustomed to doing it; it was battlefield surgery, fast and brutal, with her life hanging on every split-second decision and action. While they poured all of their available blood into her, he fought to keep it from pouring out of her just as fast as it went in. Moment by moment he stemmed the bleeding, searched out every severed vessel, and slowly he began to win the race. He didn't know how long it took; he never asked, never found out. How long didn't matter. All that mattered was winning, because the alternative was more than he could bear. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly The superb opening chapter of Howard's new romantic thriller throws the reader deliciously off balance. Milla Edge lives in Mexico, where her doctor husband, David, is posted. She has just given birth to her first child and is basking in a maternal glow when baby Justin is stolen literally out of her arms, with chilling efficiency. A decade later, Milla is divorced from David and has become the devoted head of an organization called Finders. Hunting down the cabals that carry out these crimes, she combs North America for kidnapped babies,

including her own. Her sometimes reckless exploits put her in harm's way and also land her in the path of two very different powerful men. Wealthy businessman True Gallagher contributes generously to Finders and pursues Milla with every donation. The dangerous and elusive Diaz, a mercenary-or is he a government agent?-provides Milla with the name of Justin's kidnapper, and offers to accompany her on the dangerous journey to his headquarters. Both men have secret personal agendas, and Howard, perhaps unwisely, gets into their heads to reveal them; the story works best when the reader is on the emotional and physical roller-coaster ride with Milla, not a few steps ahead of her. But Howard (Dying to Please; Kill and Tell; etc.) keeps a few surprises up her sleeve and delivers a number of exciting jungle scenes. Best of all is Milla, a complex woman whose struggles will win readers' hearts. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.