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LINDA LAEL MILLER

THE CREED LEGACY

**“Linda Lael Miller creates vibrant characters
and stories I defy you to forget.”**

**—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author
Debbie Macomber**

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the third and final book starring the Creed cowboys. First Steven and now his cousin, Conner, have settled down to married life, against all odds. But Conner's twin, Brody, has never been one to put down roots; residents of Lonesome Bend, Colorado, know it will take a special woman to tame this restless spirit for good. Carolyn Simmons might be perfect for the job...too bad Brody is the opposite of everything she thought she'd been waiting for!

I also wanted to write today to tell you about a special group of people with whom I've become involved in the past couple of years. It is The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), specifically their Pets for Life program.

The Pets for Life program is one of the best ways to help your local shelter—that is, to help keep animals out of shelters in the first place. Something as basic as keeping a collar and tag on your pet at all the time, so if he gets out and gets lost, he can be returned home. Being a responsible pet owner. Spaying or neutering your pet. And not giving up when things don't go perfectly. If your dog digs in the yard, or your cat scratches the furniture, know that these are problems that can be addressed. You can find all the information about these—and many other—common problems at www.petsforlife.org. This campaign is focused on keeping pets and their people together for a lifetime.

As many of you know, my own household includes two dogs, two cats and six horses, so this is a cause that is near and dear to my heart. I hope you'll get involved along with me.

With love,



Praise for the novels of Linda Lael Miller

“Miller tugs at the heartstrings as few authors can.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Miller] is one of the finest American writers in the genre.”
—*RT Book Reviews*

“Strong characterization and a vivid western setting make for a fine historical romance.”
—*Publishers Weekly* on *McKetrick’s Choice*

“Completely wonderful. Austin’s interactions with Paige are fun and lively and the mystery... adds quite a suspenseful punch.”
—*RT Book Reviews* on *McKetricks of Texas: Austin*

“Miller is the queen when it comes to creating sympathetic, endearing and lifelike characters. She paints each scene so perfectly readers hover on the edge of delicious voyeurism.”
—*RT Book Reviews* on *McKetricks of Texas: Garrett*

“A passionate love too long denied drives the action in this multifaceted, emotionally rich reunion story that overflows with breathtaking sexual chemistry.”
—*Library Journal* on *McKetricks of Texas: Tate*

“All three titles should appeal to readers who like their contemporary romances Western, slightly dangerous and graced with enlightened (more or less) bad-boy heroes.”
—*Library Journal* on the Montana Creeds series

“Miller’s prose is smart, and her tough Eastwoodian cowboy cuts a sharp, unexpectedly funny figure in a classroom full of rambunctious frontier kids.”
—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Man from Stone Creek*

LINDA LAEL MILLER

THE CREED LEGACY



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For Nicole Blint, with love.

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CHAPTER ONE

Lonesome Bend, Colorado

RANCHING, BRODY CREED THOUGHT, shifting in the saddle as he surveyed the sprawling range land from a high ridge. *It can mend a broken heart, this life, and then shatter it all over again, in a million and one different ways and twice that many pieces.*

There were plenty of perils. Cattle starved or froze to death when a hard winter came around, which averaged once a year up there in the high country. Spring calves and colts fell prey to wolves and coyotes and sometimes bears, hungry after hibernating through the coldest months.

It was now May, and all was well, but come summertime, wells might dry up for lack of rain, and turn the grass to tinder, ready to blaze up at the smallest spark. He'd seen wildfires consume hundreds of acres in a matter of hours, herds and houses and barns wiped out.

Year round, good horses went lame and pickup trucks gave up the ghost, and every so often, somebody drowned in the river or one of the lakes.

On the other hand, Brody reflected, the beauty of that land could heal, take a man by surprise, even though he'd called the place home all his life. That day, for instance, the sky was so blue it made Brody's heart ache, and the aspens, cottonwoods and pines lining the landscape were shimmering splashes of green, a thousand hues of it, ranging from silvery to near-indigo. The river wound like a ribbon through the valley, clear as azure glass.

After a few moments, Brody adjusted his hat and sighed before giving the gelding a light nudge with the heels of his boots. The buckskin, long-legged with a black mane and tail, picked his way cautiously down the steep slope that led to the water's edge.

Behind them and a hundred yards farther along the riverbank, in a westerly direction, hammers clacked and power saws screeched, and Brody glanced back, pleased, as always, to see the steel-and-lumber skeletons of his house and barn rising.

Not so long ago, there had been a campground and RV park on the site, owned by Tricia McCall, now his sister-in-law and therefore a Creed. The picnic tables and the concrete fire pits were gone, along with the public showers and electrical hookups for trailers. Only the log building that had once served as the office remained; Brody had been batching in it since last Thanksgiving, when he'd moved out of the main ranch house.

The peace between him and twin brother, Conner, could be a fragile one at times, and they both benefited by a little distance.

Now, ready to get moving, Brody clucked his tongue and gave the gelding, Moonshine, another tap with his heels.

"Come on, now," he told the buckskin, his tone reasonable. "The water's shallow here, and it's real calm. If we're going to be working livestock on both sides of this river, then you've got to learn how to cross it."

Moonshine, recently acquired at an auction in Denver, was young, and Brody hadn't had a chance to train him in the ways of a cow pony.

No time like the present, he figured.

Brody was about to get down out of the saddle and lead the horse into the water, which lapped gently at the stony shore that used to be a swimming beach, back when the River's Bend Campground was a going concern, when Moonshine suddenly decided he was willing to get wet after all.

He plunged into the water, up to his chest, making a mighty splash in the process. Brody, gripping the barrel of that horse hard between his knees, just to stay in the saddle, laughed out loud before giving a whoop of pure delight.

His boots filled, and within moments his jeans were soaked to the tops of his thighs, but he didn't care. Moonshine swam that river like he had Olympic aspirations, his powerful legs pumping, his head high and his ears pricked up.

"Good boy," Brody told the horse, with gruff appreciation. "You're doing just fine."

Reaching the other side, Moonshine bunched his haunches for the effort and bunny-hopped up the steepest part of the bank, water pouring off him in sheets. Once he'd gained level ground, the animal shook himself like a dog and Brody laughed again, for no other reason than that life was good.

He was home.

And, for the most part, he was happy to be there.

Drenched, he got down from the saddle to pull off his boots, empty them and yank them back on over his sodden socks. When he got to the main house, he'd swap his wet duds for dry ones from Conner's closet.

Having an identical twin brother had its advantages, and one of them was access to a whole other wardrobe.

There'd been a time when Conner would have grouched about Brody's tendency to borrow his stuff, but last New Year's Eve, Brody's "little brother," born a couple of minutes after he was, had taken a wife. Conner was happy with Tricia, and these days it took more than a missing shirt or pair of jeans to get under his hide.

They were on a perpetual honeymoon, Conner and Tricia, and now, with a baby due in three months, they glowed, the both of them, as if they were lit from within.

Brody mounted up again and reined Moonshine toward the home-place, feeling a mixture of things as he considered his twin's good fortune.

Sure, he was glad things were working out so well for Conner, but he was a little envious, too. Not that he'd have admitted it to anybody.

Tricia was beautiful, smart and funny, and she'd taken to ranch life with surprising ease, for a city girl. Essentially a greenhorn, she'd gone horseback riding almost every day since the wedding, when the weather allowed, anyway—until her pregnancy was confirmed. Then Conner had put a stop to the pursuit.

No more trail rides until after the baby's arrival.

Period, end of discussion.

Brody grinned, recalling how adamant his brother had been. For the most part, the marriage appeared to be an equal partnership, but this time, Conner had laid down the law. And Tricia, normally the independent type, had capitulated.

That was just common sense, to Brody's mind, though a lot of country women continued to ride when they were expecting a baby, herding cattle, rounding up strays, checking fence lines. Conner's strong opposition was a no-brainer—Rachel Creed, Conner and Brody's mother, had continued to enter barrel-racing events long after she learned she was carrying twins. There hadn't been a specific incident, but soon after giving birth to Brody and Conner, Rachel's health had begun to go downhill.

She'd died when her infant sons were less than a month old.

Blue Creed, their father, hadn't lasted much longer. Overwhelmed by the responsibility, he'd brought the babies home to the ranch, right around their first birthday, and handed them over to his brother, Davis, and Davis's wife, Kim. Soon afterward, Blue himself had been thrown from a horse and broken his neck. He'd been in a coma for six weeks, and then died.

Now, crossing the range between the river and the two-story house Conner and Tricia had been

sharing since they got hitched, the grass rippling around him like a green sea, Brody did his best to ignore the clammy chill of wet denim clinging to his legs—and the old, deep-seated sorrow rooted in his soul. He did take some consolation from seeing the cattle grazing all around, most of them Herefords, with a few Black Anguses to break the red-brown monotony. Two dozen broncos, specially bred for the rodeo, and six Brahma bulls completed the menagerie.

Clint and Juan and a couple of the other ranch hands wove in and out among the different critter on horseback, mainly keeping the peace. Brody touched his hatbrim to the other men as he passed, and those who were looking his way returned the favor.

By then, Moonshine was restless, trying to work the bit between his teeth, so Brody gave him his head. That cayuse might be skittish when it came to crossing rivers, but he sure did like to run.

Brody bent low over the buckskin's neck, holding his hat in place with one hand and keeping a loose grip on the reins with the other.

And that horse ate up ground like a jet taxiing along a runway before takeoff.

Brody was enjoying the ride so much that the corral fence sprang up in front of them as suddenly as a line of magic beanstalks.

Moonshine soared over that top rail as if he'd sprouted wings, practically stretched out flat, and came in for a magnificent landing about one foot short of the place where Conner stood, looking like he'd had rusty nails for breakfast instead of bacon and eggs.

Brody gazed down into a face so like his own that the sight of it even took *him* aback sometimes and he was used to being pretty much an exact duplicate of his brother.

Conner was scowling up at him, through swirls of settling dust, and he looked as though he'd like to grab hold of Brody, haul him off that horse and beat the holy bejesus out of him. So much for personality improvements resulting from wedded bliss!

"Oops," Brody said cheerfully, because he knew that would piss off Conner and he still enjoyed doing that now and again, even though they'd been getting along well for a respectable length of time. "Sorry."

He swung down and faced Conner, who was taut with annoyance, his shoulders squared, his fists clenched and his attitude contentious.

"Damn it, Brody," he growled, "am I having one of my invisible days, or are you going blind? You darn near ran me down, and it'll take me the better part of the morning to get this mare calm enough to work with again!"

Prior to the leap, Brody hadn't noticed his brother or the pinto mare, now nickering and tossing her head over on the far side of the corral, but he didn't think it would be smart to say as much. Instead, he decided to come from a place of helpfulness.

"You starting horses yourself these days, instead of letting one of the wranglers do it?" he asked, bending to pick up the lightweight saddle the mare must have tossed when he and Moonshine came over the fence.

Conner grabbed the saddle and jerked it out of Brody's hands. "Yes," he snapped in response. "You dropped out for a decade, Davis broke both legs the last time he rode a bronc and Clint and Juan are downright creaky at the hinges. Who the hell did you *think* was starting the horses?"

"Whoa," Brody said, recoiling slightly and still grinning. "What's chewing on you? Did you have a fight with the little woman or something?"

"No!" Conner yelled.

Brody chuckled, adjusted his hat and then turned to get Moonshine by the reins. After the river crossing and the hard run over the range, not to mention that spectacular jump, he figured the horse deserved some stall time, free of the saddle and bridle. "Well, what's the matter, then?" he asked reasonably, starting toward the side door of the barn.

“Nothing,” Conner bit out, setting the dusty saddle on the top rail of the fence and turning to the mare.

“Something is,” Brody insisted calmly, pausing.

Conner looked at Brody then, through the haze of slowly settling corral dirt, and sighed. “Tricia and I might have had words,” he said grudgingly.

“Trouble in the vine-covered cottage?” Brody teased, knowing it couldn’t be anything serious. He’d never seen a man and a woman more deeply in love than his brother and Tricia were.

“She says I’m overprotective,” Conner said, taking off his hat and swatting his thigh with it before putting it back on.

Brody flashed a grin. Rubbed his beard-stubbed chin with one hand. “You?” he joked. “Overprotective? Just because you’d wrap the lady in foam-rubber padding, if she’d let you, so she wouldn’t stub her toe?”

Conner glared, but there was a grin to match Brody’s brewing in his blue eyes. He held it off as long as he could, but then it broke through, like sunlight penetrating a cloud-bank.

“Put your horse away,” Conner said. “I might as well turn the mare out to graze for the rest of the day, now that you and that gelding scared her out of three years’ growth.”

Brody led Moonshine into the barn, put him in a stall and gave him a couple of flakes of hay. When he left by the main door, Conner was waiting for him in the yard, throwing a stick for the Lab-retriever mix, Valentino.

In Brody’s opinion, that was a prissy-assed name for a ranch dog, but the poor critter had already been saddled with it when Conner and Tricia took up with each other. Conner had tried calling him “Bill” for a while, but the former stray wouldn’t answer to that, so Valentino it was.

Brody looked around. There was no sign of Tricia, or the Pathfinder she drove.

“She’s gone to town to help Carolyn at the shop,” Conner said. He usually had a pretty fair idea what Brody was thinking, and the reverse was also true. “The woman is pregnant out to here.” He shaped his hands around an invisible basketball, approximately at belly level. “What would be so wrong with staying home for one day? Taking it easy, putting her feet up for a while?”

Brody chuckled and slapped his brother on the shoulder. “She’s running a small-town art gallery, Conner,” he said, “not bungee-jumping or riding bulls in a rodeo.”

Conner’s face tightened momentarily and, once again, Brody knew what was on his twin’s mind because they so often thought in tandem.

“There’s no connection between our mom’s pregnancy and Tricia’s,” Brody added quietly. “Stop looking for one.”

Conner sighed, managed a raw kind of grin. Nodded.

It struck Brody then, though not for the first time, of course, just how vulnerable loving a woman made a man. And after the baby came? It would be way worse.

Brody shivered, momentarily swamped with recollections.

“What happened to your clothes, anyhow?” Conner asked, looking him over. He tended to get around to things in his own good time.

“Moonshine got a little overenthusiastic crossing the river,” Brody replied.

They headed into the house, the dog trotting behind them, and Brody ducked into the laundry room to swipe a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and some socks from the folded stacks on top of the dryer. After a quick shower to thaw out his bone marrow, he dressed in the room he and Conner had shared as kids, with their cousin Steven joining them in the summertime, and emerged to find his brother still in the kitchen, brewing a cup of coffee with one of those fancy single-shot machines designed for the chronically caffeine-deprived.

“How’s the new place coming along?” Conner asked, holding out a steaming mug, which Brody

took gratefully.

“It’s a slow process,” he replied, after a sip of java. “The builder swears up and down that it’ll be move-in ready by the middle of August, though.”

Conner gave a snort at that, retrieved a second cup from under the spout of the shining gizmo and raised it slightly, in a little salute. “Nice clothes,” he observed wryly. “I once owned some just like them.”

CAROLYN SIMMONS held her breath as she watched her very pregnant friend and business partner, Tricia Creed, making her wobbly way down from the top of a ladder. Tricia had just hung a new batik depicting a Native American woman weaving at a loom. The work of a local artist, the piece wouldn’t be in the shop long, which was possibly why Tricia had placed it so high on the wall. No doubt she reasoned that if the picture wasn’t within easy reach, she and Carolyn could enjoy it for a while before some eager buyer snatched it up.

With her long, dark braid, loose-fitting cotton maternity clothes and attitude of serene faith in the all-around goodness of life, Carolyn thought Tricia resembled the weaver a little.

Taller than Tricia, with artfully streaked blond hair, Carolyn wore her usual garb of jeans, boots and a fitted T-shirt. Tricia liked to joke that if an opportunity to ride a horse came up, Carolyn was determined to be ready.

“What were you doing on that ladder?” she asked now, propping her hands on her hips as she regarded Tricia. “I promised Conner I’d keep an eye on you, and the minute I turn my back, you’re teetering on the top rung.”

Tricia dusted her hands together and smiled, stepping back a little way to look up at the batik. “I was nowhere near the top rung,” she argued cheerfully, her face glowing in the sunlight pouring in through the big front window. She sighed. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Carolyn, following Tricia’s gaze, nodded. Primrose Sullivan, the artist, had outdone herself this time. The weaver was indeed beautiful. “I think some of our online customers would be interested,” she mused. “I’m not sure it would photograph all that well from this angle, though—”

The hydraulic squeal of brakes interrupted.

Tricia moved to the window and peered through the antique lace curtains. “It’s another tour bus,” she said. “Brace yourself.”

The business, a combination boutique and art gallery, filled the first floor of Natty McCall’s venerable Victorian house—Carolyn lived upstairs in Tricia’s former apartment, along with her foster cat, Winston. The items the two women sold ranged from goats’ milk soap and handmade pincushions to one-of-a-kind dresses and near museum-quality oil paintings.

“I’m braced,” Carolyn confirmed, smiling and taking her customary place behind the counter, next to the cash register.

Tricia straightened an already straight display of handmade stationery.

The shop wasn’t going to make anyone rich, but for Carolyn, it was a dream come true. In Lonesome Bend, she had a comfortable place to live—not a small thing to a person raised in no fewer than fourteen foster homes—and an outlet for the various garments, decorative pillows and retro-style aprons she was constantly running up on her sewing machine. Formerly a professional house sitter, Carolyn had been selling her designs online for years. Her online business brought in enough extra money to build a small savings account and buy thread and fabric for the next project she had in mind, but that was the extent of it.

The little bell over the front door jingled merrily, and the busload of customers crowded in,

white-haired women with good manicures and colorful summer clothes, chatting good-naturedly among themselves as they thronged around every table and in front of every shelf.

The store, loftily titled Creed and Simmons—Tricia’s great-grandmother, Natty, said the name sounded more like a law firm or an English jewelry shop than what it was—barely broke even most of the time. Tour buses heading to and from Denver and Aspen and Telluride stopped at least twice a week, though, and that kept the doors open and the lights on.

For Tricia, having sold property inherited from her father for a tidy sum and then having married a wealthy rancher to boot, the place was a hobby, albeit one she was passionate about.

For Carolyn, it was much more—an extension of her personality, an identity. A way of belonging, of fitting into a community made up mostly of people who had known each other from birth. It

had to work.

Without the business, Carolyn would be adrift again, following the old pattern of living in someone else’s house for a few days or a few weeks, then moving on to yet another place that wasn’t hers. House-sitting was a grown-up version of that old game musical chairs, only the stakes were a lot higher. Once or twice, when the figurative music stopped unexpectedly, Carolyn had been caught *between* houses, like a player left with no chair to sit in, forced to hole up in some cheap motel or sleep in her car until another job turned up.

Thankfully, there were plenty of opportunities around Lonesome Bend—movie stars and CEOs and highpowered political types kept multimillion-dollar “vacation homes” hidden away in private canyons, on top of hills and at the ends of long, winding roads edged with whispering aspen trees.

Carolyn still did some house-sitting now and then, for long-time clients, but she much preferred the cozy apartment above the shop to those enormous and profoundly empty houses, with their indoor swimming pools and their media rooms and their well-stocked wine cellars.

In the apartment, she was surrounded by her own things—the ceramic souvenir mugs she’d collected from cities all over the country, a few grainy photographs in cheap frames, her trusty laptop and the no-frills workhorse of an electric sewing machine that had been a parting gift from her favorite foster mom.

In the apartment, Carolyn felt substantial, *real*, rooted in one particular place, instead of some ethereal, ghostlike being, haunting lonely castles.

For the next forty-five minutes, Carolyn and Tricia were both so busy that they barely had a chance to look at each other, let alone speak, and when the tour bus pulled away at last, it was almost time to close up for lunch.

The cash drawer was bulging with fives, tens and twenties, and there was a nice pile of credit card receipts, too.

The shelves, racks and tables looked as though they’d been pillaged by barbarians, and the air still smelled of expensive perfume.

“Wow,” Tricia said, sagging into the rocking chair near the fireplace. “*That* bunch just about cleaned us out.”

Carolyn laughed. “That they did,” she agreed. “Bless their hearts.”

Tricia tilted her head back, sighed slightly and closed her eyes. Her hands rested protectively over her bulging stomach.

Carolyn was immediately alarmed. “Tricia? You’re all right, aren’t you?”

Tricia opened her eyes, turned her head and smiled. “Of *course* I am,” she said. “I’m just a little tired from all that hurrying around.”

“You’re sure about that?”

Tricia made a face, mocking but friendly. “You sound just like Conner. *I’m fine*, Carolyn.”

Frowning slightly, Carolyn went to the door, turned the Open sign around, so it read Closed, and turned the lock. She and Tricia usually had lunch in the downstairs kitchen at the back of the house, and sometimes Tricia's husband joined them.

Tricia was still in the rocking chair when Carolyn got back.

And she'd fallen asleep.

Carolyn smiled, covered her friend lightly with a crocheted afghan and slipped away to the kitchen.

Winston, the cat, wound himself around her ankles when she entered, purring like an outboard motor. Like the house, Winston technically belonged to Natty McCall, Tricia's great-grandmother, now a resident of Denver, but because he stayed with Carolyn whenever his mistress was off on one of her frequent and quite lengthy cruises, she loved him like her own.

Apparently, the feeling was mutual.

Or he just wanted his daily ration of sardines.

"Hungry?" Carolyn asked, bending to stroke the cat's gleaming black ears.

Winston replied with a sturdy meow that presumably meant *yes* and leaped up onto a sideboard, where he liked to keep watch.

Smiling, mentally tallying up the take from the power-shopper invasion, Carolyn went to the fridge, got out the small bowl of sardines left over from the day before and stripped away the covering of plastic wrap.

She set the bowl on the floor for Winston, then went to the sink to wash her hands.

Winston came in for a landing squarely in front of his food dish and, at the same time, a knock sounded lightly at the back door.

Conner Creed pushed it open, stuck his head inside and grinned at Carolyn, flashing those way-white teeth of his.

Her heart skipped over a beat or two and then stopped entirely—or at least, that's the way it felt—as he stepped into the house.

Because this *wasn't* Conner, as she'd first thought.

No, siree. This was *Brody*.

Carolyn's cheeks burned, and she barely held back the panicked "What are *you* doing here?" that sprang to the tip of her tongue.

The grin, as boyish and wicked as ever, didn't falter. Clearly, their history didn't bother Brody at all. It shouldn't have bothered Carolyn, either, she supposed, since almost eight years had passed since they were *together-together*. And what they'd shared amounted to a tryst, not an affair of the heart.

Be that as it may, every time she encountered this man—a recurring problem now that his brother was married to one of her closest friends—she wanted to flee.

"Is my sister-in-law around?" Brody asked, well aware, Carolyn would have bet, that he'd rattle her.

Carolyn swallowed hard. Once, when she'd been on a trail ride with Conner and Tricia and a number of their friends and neighbors, Brody and his now-and-then girlfriend, Joleen Williams, had raced past on horseback, their laughter carried by the wind. Carolyn, taken by surprise, had played the fool by bolting for the barn, without so much as a goodbye to the other members of the party, and she'd been kicking herself for it ever since.

"Tricia is in the front," she replied, in a remarkably normal tone of voice. "We had a busy morning, and she fell asleep."

Brody closed the door behind him, crossed to the cat and crouched, extending a hand.

Winston hissed and batted at him with one paw.

"Whoa," Brody said, drawing back.

Carolyn chuckled, relaxing a little. Clearly, Winston was a good judge of character, as well as an expert mouser and a connoisseur of fine sardines.

Having made his position clear, the cat went back to snarfing up his lunch.

Meanwhile, Brody rose off his haunches, still holding his hat in one hand, and looked disgruntled. Being drop-dead gorgeous, he probably wasn't used to rejection—even when it came from an ordinary house cat. “Animals usually *like* me,” he said, sounding baffled and even a little hurt.

Carolyn, realizing she'd been gawking, turned away, suddenly very busy getting a can of soup, a box of crackers and a loaf of bread from the pantry.

Glancing back, she saw Brody approach the inside door, push it open carefully and peer into the next room.

He turned, with a kind of brotherly softening in his eyes, and put his index finger to his lips.

“Shh,” he said.

“I didn't make a sound,” Carolyn protested, in a whisper.

Why didn't the man just *leave* now, if he didn't want to disturb Tricia?

Instead, he lingered, one-hundred-percent cowboy, with his hat in his hands and his mouth tilted sideways in a grin.

“We don't have to be enemies, you know,” he said quietly.

Carolyn, in the middle of slapping a slice of bologna onto a piece of bread, opened her mouth and then closed it again.

“Do we?” Brody persisted.

Carolyn recovered enough to reply, though the words came out in a terse little rush of breath. “Tricia is my friend and business partner. You're her brother-in-law. Therefore, we have to be civil to each other.”

“Is it that hard?” Brody asked. “Being ‘civil,’ I mean?”

Suddenly, all the old feelings rose up inside Carolyn, nearly overwhelming her. Tears stung her eyes and she turned her head quickly, bit down hard on her lower lip.

“Carolyn?” he said.

He was standing right behind her by then; she felt the heat and hard masculinity of him in every nerve in her body.

Just go, she thought desperately, unable to risk turning around to face him.

Brody Creed had never been one to leave well enough alone. He took a light hold on her shoulders, and Carolyn found herself looking up into the treacherous blue of those trademark eyes.

“I'm sorry for what I did, way back when,” he told her, his voice a gruff rumble. “I was wrong. But don't you think it's time we put all that behind us and stopped walking on eggshells every time we happen to be in the same room?”

He was *sorry*.

As far as Carolyn was concerned, *sorry* was the emptiest, most threadbare word in the English language. People hurt other people, said they were *so sorry* and then, in her experience at least, turned right around and did the same thing all over again.

Or something worse.

Carolyn glanced nervously in the direction of the inside door, afraid of upsetting Tricia. When she spoke, her voice was a ragged whisper. “What do you want me to say, Brody? That I forgive you? Okay, for what it's worth, I forgive you.”

Brody's expression was bleak, but his eyes flashed with frustration. He was famous for his temper, among other things.

“You'll forgive, but you won't forget, is that it?”

“I might conceivably forgive a rattlesnake for biting me,” Carolyn responded. “After all, it’s a snake’s nature to strike. ~~But I’d be worse than stupid if I forgot and cozied up to the same sidewinder a second time, wouldn’t I?~~”

A muscle bunched in Brody’s cheek. He was already sporting a five o’clock shadow, a part of Carolyn observed with a strange detachment. Or maybe he hadn’t shaved at all that morning.

Oh, hell, what did it matter?

“You think I’m asking you to ‘cozy up’ to me?” Brody almost growled. His nose was an inch from Carolyn’s, at most. “*Damn* it, woman, I can’t avoid being around you, and you can’t avoid being around *me*, and all I’m suggesting here is that you let go of that grudge you’ve been carrying for seven-plus years so we can all move on!”

Carolyn would have loved to slap Brody Creed just then, or even throttle him, but suddenly the door to the next room opened and Tricia peeked through the opening, stifling a yawn with a patting motion of one hand.

“Have you two been arguing?” Tricia asked, her gaze shifting from one of them to the other.

They stepped back simultaneously.

“No,” Carolyn lied.

“Everything’s just *great*,” Brody added, through his teeth.

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