



## The Creed Legacy (The Creed Cowboys)

By Linda Lael Miller

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Carolyn Simmons is looking for Mr. Right in Lonesome Bend, as the ticktock of her biological clock gets ever louder. Then she falls for gorgeous Brody Creed, the opposite of everything she wants. Until lassoing his wild heart becomes everything both of them need.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than 100 historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the “First Lady of the West” hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the New York Times list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. She personally funds her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women. Visit her at [www.lindalaelmiller.com](http://www.lindalaelmiller.com).

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#### *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 bathing 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 groused 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 critters on horseback, mainly keeping the peace. Brody touched his hat-brim 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-stubbled 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.

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