



*Ride the Lightning*

*By*

*Rebecca Goings*

## **Ride the Lightning by Rebecca Goings**

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### **Ride the Lightning**

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### **Dedication**

To Deanna and Sable, for believing in this story when no one else did.

## Chapter One

*Cold Creek, Texas, Present Day*

There he was again. Silhouetted against the slate-gray sky, Jillian Brady knew she hadn't been seeing things a few weeks ago—the first time she saw that cowboy. He sat on his horse overlooking the ranch from Bunker's Hill, calm as could be in the pouring rain.

Another flash of lightning lit up the land, followed by thunder a few seconds later. That was a close one. Likely this storm was here to stay for a spell. So why on Earth was that man out in the weather as if he didn't have a care in the world? Especially when night was about to fall.

Who'd want to ride in the rain, and at night to boot?

The last time she saw him, it had been storming too. Strange. But even stranger than that—he was on her land.

The man was much too far away to yell at him. She'd have to go out into the downpour to give him a piece of her mind. If he was a neighbor welcoming her to the area, she'd say howdy. If he needed help, she'd be willing to give it. But he hadn't come to the ranch house. He just sat on the hill, gazing down, as if he were God looking out upon His creation.

And that irked Jillian like nobody's business.

She'd bought this ranch with her own piddly savings, the money she'd scrimped and saved over the years on her waitress's salary and tips. The property had been secluded enough to suit her, as well as being the

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right price for her pocketbook. The bank had foreclosed on the previous owners, and Jillian had jumped at the chance to own a bit of land far away from civilization.

The house itself was rundown, but she'd been told this homestead had a history. All of the original buildings from the eighteen seventies remained, except for the barn, which had been struck by lightning and burned down a few decades back. No one had ever seen fit to build a new one, even though the foundation still stood not too far away from the main house.

In fact, this land hadn't been used as a ranch probably for a hundred years. It was overgrown, aside from the yard around the house, and she owned it all. Forty acres was quite a spread. She couldn't wait to explore it.

Rumors of the ghost hadn't swayed her at all.

Her realtor had jokingly mentioned that this "ghost" had been the reason they hadn't been able to sell the place. Jillian thought the woman had invented the ghost to add a bit of mystique to the land. But upon her visit to Cold Creek for supplies, she'd been stopped by a few folks asking if she'd seen him yet—the lonesome cowboy who appeared during thunderstorms.

Jillian's eyes narrowed. That man on the hill now was probably a local, saddling up to scare the bejeezus out of her. Not even a few weeks settling in before her neighbors began playing pranks on her? Nice.

At that moment, she regretted not owning a shotgun. Perhaps she should invest in one. Maybe even a baseball bat. Right about now, she was mad enough to use it.

Grabbing her jacket off the wall, she'd barely pulled up her hood before marching out onto the porch and down the steps. It was wet, but nothing she wasn't used to. She'd moved to Texas from Oregon. Nothing wrong with getting a little wet. Besides, that damned cowboy was going to get an earful. It was about time her neighbors knew she couldn't be so easily scared.

But doubt ate at the back of her mind. Her closest neighbors were Mr. and Mrs. Prichard, who were great-grandparents in their eighties, and

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one of the nicest couples she'd ever met. But that didn't mean the rider wasn't someone from town. It could be anyone from Cold Creek, deciding to give her a fright.

But the closer she got to the top of the hill, the more her thoughts plagued her. Would someone really take the time to come all the way out here on their horse, on the off chance she'd be looking out her window during a storm?

The man on the horse hadn't moved. He was watching her. Jillian's skin pebbled with goose bumps as she approached. Deciding to be civil until she knew the whole story, she waved.

"Hello."

The man sat on his horse a moment before tipping his hat. The way he did it made her heart shudder in her chest. Most men flipped their brim in a rush, if they did so at all. But this man, whoever he was, slowly reached up, inclined his head, and dropped his hand back to his reins as if he had all the time in the world.

His horse was gorgeous, a white and black piebald, apparently used to the rain, with its ears back and its head hung low.

Within a few moments, Jillian stood before the man and stared up at him. A bolt of lightning flashed, and she saw his face for a split-second. Rugged and handsome, he didn't seem to be a mere prankster. His nose was straight and his lips full, set in a face with strong cheekbones and a square jaw peppered with stubble. He gazed down at her with interest.

"Hello?" she said again. "Are you all right out here? I...I saw you from my window."

The man glanced over her shoulder to the house, then back at her. "You live here now?" he asked. His voice rolled over her, almost like the thunder had, seeming to reverberate every hair on her body.

She nodded. "Name's Jillian. Jillian Brady. You live around these parts?"

"Used to."

The sad way he said those words had her wondering just what this man's story was. If he used to live nearby, what was he doing out here now?

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"I think I saw you a while back."

"You did?"

Jillian nodded. "It was raining then too."

The man seemed to heave a sigh. "I ride the lightning."

"Come again?" What did that mean?

"I ride the lightning," he repeated.

"I don't understand."

"I don't expect you to."

Great. He was talking in circles while the rain soaked her through.

"Do you need any help?" she asked.

"Don't think anyone can help me, ma'am."

He chose that moment to dismount. Peeling the glove from his right hand, he held it out to her. "Name's Crenshaw. Mitchell Crenshaw."

She took his hand, and her entire body zinged as if from an electrical shock. But she couldn't bring herself to pull away first. He was a tall man. She barely came up to his chin.

He withdrew slowly, and his palm grazed hers. It was all she could do not to gasp at the sensation. She'd been too long without a man. That thought had her blushing. His gaze was captivating, and she was hard-pressed to look away.

"Mr. Crenshaw, it's rather cold and wet out here. Would you like to come in for some coffee? I don't get any visitors, and I'd hate to think of you all by yourself in the rain."

The man smiled as if her words amused him. "I've been by myself in the rain for decades, ma'am. Think I can manage. And you can call me Mitch."

She knit her brows in confusion. He wasn't that old. He was maybe thirty-four if he was a day. Perhaps he was teasing her with his choice of words. But the husky way he'd told her to call him by his first name made her want to keep him talking, if only to hear his voice again.

"My house is warm and dry."

Why was she trying to entice him back to the house? She didn't know the man from Adam, but if he didn't want to join her for coffee, it wouldn't be the end of the world.



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"Sounds wonderful, ma'am. Maybe it's about time I come in from the rain."

He looked at the sky, then back to her. A shiver raced down her spine, and she swallowed hard.

"Don't have a place to put your horse," she told him.

"That's all right," he said, patting the animal's neck. "Gypsy here is used to the elements."

"Pretty name for a lovely horse."

"Thank you, ma'am. But if you don't mind me saying, we should probably get you inside before you catch a chill."

She had to grin at his sincerity. "Oh, I'll be fine. Been stuck in weather nastier than this. Come on, I'll get you warmed up."

Jillian walked back down the short hill and glanced over her shoulder. He followed her, leading his horse behind him.

The clouds were dark, but another flash lit up the heavens, sending a rumble of thunder all around them. She couldn't help but remember what he'd said to her a few minutes before.

He rode the lightning. What had he meant by that? Maybe that was some rodeo term she wasn't familiar with. Probably. Perhaps he could tell her more about it once they were inside.

It didn't take long to reach the house. Mitch hobbled his horse on the railing of the porch and followed Jillian up the steps.

"Been a long time since I've been in here," he said, his voice rumbling behind her.

He must have known the previous owners. "You were friends with the people who lived here?"

She opened the door and kicked off her muddy shoes, leaving them on the porch. He watched her and did the same with his boots. She had to smile at the hole in one of his socks. His big toe peeked at her.

"Uh...no. I used to live here."

That shocked her. She left the door open longer than she intended, letting out precious heat. By the time she'd come to her senses, he was grinning at her.

Instead of being struck by his words, now she was struck by his

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beauty. The man in front of her was a vision. He'd taken his hat off, and his dark hair was wet, plastered to his head. The coat he hung up on a peg next to the door had taken most of the rain, but the tan button-up shirt underneath was still damp. It fit him snugly, accentuating every curve of his upper body.

She tried not to look down his frame, but couldn't stop herself. He was wearing a gun belt. Men still wore gun belts? Two revolvers rested on his hips, while his muscular thighs were covered in a pair of dark brown pants.

If she didn't know any better, she'd swear she was looking at a gunslinger from a John Wayne western.

"You gonna close that door?"

His words snapped her out of her reverie. She cleared her throat and turned away, mortified that he'd caught her staring.

"Sorry," she said, still flustered. "It's not every day I see a man wearing guns."

He looked down. "They bother you?"

"No, no, it's fine," she said with a smile. "Let me go make that coffee."

She breezed through the living room on her way to the kitchen, but the moment she passed him, the undeniable scent of leather came to her, mixed with something else she couldn't quite place. Perhaps it was his cologne. Thinking about it had her swallowing her pounding heart.

Maybe inviting him in hadn't been her finest idea. She was alone with a smokin' hot cowboy who claimed he used to live in her house. Once she'd measured the coffee grounds and poured in the water, she flipped on the machine and turned around.

By the groaning of the floorboards, she knew he'd followed her, but Jillian hadn't been prepared for how completely he filled her kitchen. The man had been big outside, but he was enormous in here.

"So you used to live in this house?" she asked.

He nodded. "Long time ago."

"Is that why I found you on the hill? Do you come out here to reminisce?"

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Mitch pulled out one of her dining chairs and sat in it, running his fingers through his wet hair. Ah damn. The man probably wanted to dry off some. She pulled open a drawer and handed him a clean dishrag.

"I'm sorry. I don't know where my manners have gone."

"That's all right, ma'am."

"Please, if you want me to call you Mitch, least you can do is call me Jillian."

He took the towel and ran it over his head and face before wiping his hands on it.

"Ah, feels good to be dry," he said, closing his eyes. Lord, he was handsome. She tried not to stare, but she wasn't too successful. He opened his eyes and caught her watching him. He gave her a slow, easy grin. "Mind if I call you Jilly?"

She reached for the other chair and plopped into it. If she'd remained standing any longer, her legs would have given out. Right about now, he could call her "hey you" and she'd be giddy about it.

"Sure, I guess. No one's ever called me that before. It's usually Jill or Jillian."

He narrowed his eyes, studying her from across the table. "Nah, you look like a Jilly to me. Jillian sounds too stuffy."

She should have been offended. She loved her name. But the way he'd called her Jilly in his raspy voice had her melting into a pile of goo. Damn. She suspected he knew it by that grin of his.

"Is that why you go by Mitch instead of Mitchell?"

He shook his head. "Just like it better."

The coffeepot beeped to let her know it was finished. Jillian stood and walked to the cupboard to pull out two mugs.

"You take cream and sugar?"

"Black suits me just fine."

She turned back to the counter and smiled. She'd pegged him right. A rugged cowboy fresh off the range wouldn't take any less than black coffee. But that didn't stop her from pouring the creamer into her own cup.

"So tell me, Mitch," she said, holding both mugs as she returned to

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the table. "When did you live here?"

He glanced around the kitchen, as if remembering another time. "The seventies."

"Oh you must have been a baby back then."

He gave her a strange look then took a sip of his coffee to hide it. After he swallowed, he nodded, but remained silent. She noticed the way he wrapped both hands around his mug as if his hands were icy cold. How long had he been in the rain?

"So why were you up on Bunker's Hill?"

He smiled and took another sip. "Still call it that, eh? Thought someone might have renamed that rise by now."

"Not as far as I know."

"Well, it's like I told you. I ride the lightning."

"What does that mean?" Jillian took a sip of her own coffee, hoping he'd start making some sense. It'd be a damn shame if this fine specimen of a cowboy wasn't right in the head.

"It...means I'm always out in the rain. I ride during the storms. But not just any storm."

"Only the ones with lightning?"

"Right." His eyes twinkled over the brim of his mug. "This is good coffee. It's been so long, I'd almost forgotten what it tastes like."

"So you're the one everyone talks about."

He arched a brow at her.

"Folks around these parts. When I first moved in, the realtor told me they had a hard time selling this place due to the ghost cowboy who still haunts the property. That had to be you she was talking about." She giggled. "They think you're a ghost."

Mitch gave her a long, hard stare. He didn't laugh with her. The seriousness in his expression quieted her mirth.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

"Think I might have overstayed my welcome. Thank you for the coffee."

He stood and put his hat back on, making sure it was firm on his head.

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"Wait!" she yelped. "It's still raining out there. Don't you want to stay until it passes?"

"I can't stay, Jilly. I'll disappear on you."

She stood and looked into his eyes. They were as dark as his hair. "What are you talking about?"

Mitch turned his head as if listening for something. "The lightning's almost gone. I've gotta go."

He put his empty mug on the table and strode into the living room. Jillian trotted after him. He pulled his jacket off the peg and swung it onto his shoulders.

"Wait, I don't know anything about you! You never told me why you ride the lightning. Will I see you again?"

He turned abruptly, making her suck in her breath. With his coat and hat, he was a menacing figure and sexy-as-hell. Her body took notice and responded by gravitating even closer.

"Whenever it storms, whenever you see the lightning, I'll be there on the hill."

Without another word, he opened her front door. The sun had gone down. It was completely dark outside save for the light of her lamps shining through the doorway. Jillian spotted his horse right where he'd left her.

He grabbed his boots on the porch and pulled them on. Jillian stood, watching him helplessly, knowing he was going to leave whether she wanted him to or not. But why did she feel so disappointed? She wanted him to stay. She knew her feelings were irrational, but she couldn't help but grasp at straws to think of a way to keep him with her.

"Where do you live?" she asked suddenly.

He turned back to her, his face a mixture of frustration and determination. "Nowhere."

His hand suddenly cupped her cheek. Once again, the touch was electric, and her entire skin buzzed with energy.

"Thank you for making me feel...alive again, Jilly."

She opened her mouth to say something, but the words she'd planned to say died the moment his mouth covered hers.

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Mitch's lips were soft and warm—his kiss, quick and chaste. When he pulled back, she leaned forward, wanting more. He merely tipped his hat once more and gave her a sad grin.

"I sure do hope I get to see you again," he said, his voice caressing her. "Very soon."

"Wait." Jillian followed him onto the wet porch despite her stocking feet. He didn't stop but bounded down the steps and grabbed the horse's reins. "Mitch, wait!"

He mounted up. "I'm sorry, honey, I can't stay any longer. But look out your window the next time you hear thunder. I'll be waiting on Bunker's Hill."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"The folks from town were right, Jilly. I'm not what you think I am. But damn if I didn't wish I was. You take care now."

He turned Gypsy toward the hill and kicked her into a trot. And just like that, his form vanished into nothing, right before her very eyes.

## Chapter Two

Jillian stumbled back and fell onto the porch with a crash. Her jeans soaked through, but she didn't care. She scrambled to her feet and ran to the door, slamming it shut behind her, then locked it for good measure. Her shock couldn't have been any greater if God Himself had appeared before her.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God..."

Jillian's heart rate shot through the roof. The man had disappeared. Mitch and his horse had disappeared into thin air. This couldn't be happening. She was asleep.

Pinching herself, she winced.

Nope, not asleep.

What the hell?

She cupped her hands over her mouth and took a few deep breaths. He was a ghost. He had to be a ghost. Everyone said there was a ghost on this land.

"Calm down, Jillian," she told herself. "There has to be a rational explanation for this."

But running through her thoughts, she couldn't think of one single explanation that fit. No one was that good of an actor. If Mitch had been a prankster, she would have known it. And he'd mentioned living here in the seventies.

That didn't necessarily mean the *nineteen* seventies.

A shiver raced through her. She walked to the dining table and put

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their mugs in the sink with shaking hands. He'd definitely been real enough to drink coffee, as his cup stared back at her, empty.

Hell, he'd been real enough to kiss her. Those weren't ghostly lips that met hers. There was nothing cold and ethereal about him. He'd been warm, soft, and he smelled so damn good...

*Stop it*, she chided.

"Perhaps I was seeing things," she murmured, her hands still clutching the sink. "That has to be it. A trick of the light. There was no light. Nothing but the lamps. So maybe it only looked like he...no. The man fricken' disappeared!"

Running her hands through her hair, she blew out her breath and marched to the staircase. She was going to shower and go to sleep, even though it wasn't very late. Any further pondering on what had just happened would drive her crazy. She needed to clear her head.

The hot water warmed her skin, but visions of that handsome cowboy swam before her. His voice, that smile, those intense, dark eyes.

One thing was for sure. If he was a ghost, he wasn't like any ghost she'd ever heard of. Whenever people whispered about ghosts, it was usually about evil hauntings and things that went bump in the night. But Mitch didn't repel her in the least. No, she had half a mind to run back out to Bunker's Hill and look for him, despite the fact the storm had moved on.

He'd told her he rode the lightning, appearing only when a thunderstorm was overhead. A sudden disappointment rippled through her. When would she see him again? Did she even want to see him again?

Jillian turned off the water and stepped out, toweling herself dry. After she'd donned her nightgown and brushed her teeth, she crawled into bed and stared at the darkened ceiling. The house was too quiet, and her thoughts once again ran away with her.

Mitch said the folks in town were right about him. He'd all but confirmed her suspicions, preposterous though they may be. But judging by the look in his eyes, he'd seemed despondent, as if he was resigned to his fate. But what was his fate?

If Mitch Crenshaw was indeed a ghost, what tied him to this land?



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Why couldn't he cross over to the other side? And how long had he been haunting the place?

No, Jillian thought. He wasn't haunting. He was merely existing. Just before he gave her that sweet kiss, he'd said she made him feel alive again.

Just like that, she wished he were there with her. Good Lord, what had he done to her?

He'd tossed everything she knew about the world right out the window, that's what he'd done. She was a good girl from Oregon, one who'd wanted a fresh start on her own chunk of land, who didn't want to make a fuss about things.

Now, it seemed she'd inherited a hot-as-hell ghost who'd shared coffee with her at her kitchen room table. A fit of giggles suddenly overcame her. She was going mad. There was no other explanation.

But once her giggles passed, she rolled over and stared out the window. Where was Mitch right now? Did she even want to know?

One thing was for sure. If he was a ghost, then he was dead. Harboring any tender feelings for the guy was hopeless. Yet the way he'd told her no one could help him tugged at her heartstrings. Maybe she could find some way to put his soul at rest. Maybe she could help him cross over.

Otherwise, Mitch was trapped wandering the Earth—probably forever.

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Hoof prints. There, on the ground, was evidence she wasn't losing her mind. A horse's hoof prints were clearly visible in the soft mud.

Jillian had woken with the sun after going to bed so early last night. Her stomach had protested until she fed it with some scrambled eggs and toast, deciding against making coffee like she did every morning. Seeing that second mug, still in the sink, had her heart quickening. She wasn't convinced she hadn't been hallucinating last night.

Without bothering to wash her dishes, she'd gone outside to

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inspect the ground, just to see what she could see. She didn't know whether to be relieved or alarmed at what she'd found. The sky was still gray, but a darker cloud was rolling in over the far hills. Within an hour or two, it would be a deluge.

Watching the sky, Jillian shivered at the sudden chill whipping through the trees. The only sound around her was the wind, blowing the tall grasses and bushes this way and that. Not even the birds were calling to each other under the threat of a looming storm.

Would it thunder?

"I hope so," she said under her breath.

It wasn't quite ten in the morning, but Jillian didn't care. It was the weekend. She had nowhere to be. Besides, she hadn't found a job that suited her yet. Sure, she'd been in town for a few weeks, but she had enough in her savings to sustain her for a little while longer. But if she wanted to continue making payments on this place, she had to find a job.

Only thing was, she didn't know much more than waitressing, and Billy's Diner wasn't exactly a class act in these parts. Maybe she could find a position at the restaurant in the hotel on the way out of Cold Creek.

Or maybe she could try an office job, something new, something different.

For now, she was content trying to solve the mystery of her handsome ghost. Jillian had put on her jacket and hood before coming outside, deciding to even bring an umbrella for the occasion. Gazing at Gypsy's hoof prints wasn't the only thing she wanted to do outside. If Mitch was coming on the heels of that next storm, she wanted to be there when he appeared.

He'd told her he'd be waiting for her on Bunker's Hill, and that's where she'd seen him the last two times. It only made sense that his soul was tied there. Perhaps he'd passed away up on that rise. Was there a grave?

Jillian was going to find out.

Putting one foot in front of the other, she left the house behind and climbed to the top of the nearby hill. From that vantage point, she looked out over her land, overgrown though it was. It must have been quite a

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sight back in the day, cleared of brush and trees, with cows grazing on the range.

It wouldn't be long now before that cloud reached her. She watched it with anticipation as the first few drops of rain fell on her face.

Jillian wondered if she should open her umbrella. If Mitch appeared with the lightning, perhaps it wasn't the best idea. The barn had burned down years ago from a lightning strike, after all.

Good Lord, she was nervous. What was she nervous about? Seeing Mitch again? Having her world rocked by knowing he really was a ghost? All of the above?

Bunker's Hill had a few trees growing on it, but nothing that resembled a grave. Jillian didn't see a tombstone or any kind of marker that might signify one was there. If Mitch's soul was tied to this hill, it wasn't because he was buried here. Unless his grave was unmarked.

She tried not to wring her hands together as she paced back and forth, looking down at her home. She had sandwich fixings. If Mitch appeared, she'd be able to feed him. Maybe ask him more questions about his life, who he used to be, why he was still here.

So many questions, so much anticipation.

Butterflies roiled in her stomach at the first sign of lightning. It flashed in the darkened cloud that moved slowly overhead. After ten seconds, thunder rolled.

Nothing happened.

Jillian swallowed her disappointment. Perhaps that bolt had been too far away. Maybe the storm needed to be directly overhead. It was almost upon her.

She couldn't help but fidget with her fingers and bite her bottom lip. Would he come? It was daytime after all. Didn't ghosts only appear at night? Maybe she was being foolish. Why was she out here, waiting for a ghost to appear like a love-sick schoolgirl?

As soon as she had that thought, another bright flash lit the clouds, followed soon after by a booming rumble of thunder. And just like that, Mitchell Crenshaw materialized, astride his black and white piebald, moments before the heavens opened and soaked them both with fat drops

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of rain.

### Chapter Three

Jillian stood and stared helplessly as Mitch climbed off Gypsy to stand before her. His tall form loomed close, but he smiled, and the sight of it took her breath away.

His dark eyes crinkled at the corners, and the lines of his face softened just enough to make him even more handsome, as if that was possible. Without preamble, he winked.

"Ah, Jilly, you're a sight for sore eyes."

That voice... She closed her eyes and took it in, wanting to press her ear against his chest to let it echo throughout her body.

"I...I wasn't s-sure you'd show up." Great. She was stammering. His smile widened, and she smacked her own thigh. Hard.

"Told you I would."

"Wasn't sure you were real."

His brows knitted together. "What do you mean by that?"

"You...you're a ghost, Mitch. I don't believe in ghosts. Well, until this very moment. Thought I was seeing things when you went and disappeared on me last night. And yet here you are, out of thin air!"

He stepped closer, and his scent plagued her once more. She took a deep breath.

"Thing about ghosts, Jilly, is we don't need your belief to exist."

His words brought all her questions to the fore. She knew she should be hospitable and offer to get him in out of the rain, but she couldn't stop herself from opening her mouth.

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"Why are you a ghost?"

"I don't know."

"Did you die on this hill?"

Mitch's gaze dropped to the dirt as he heaved a sigh. "Yeah."

"Are you buried here?"

He shrugged. "Don't rightly know."

She wanted to ask him how he died, but for some reason, she was too afraid to. It seemed a personal question, one he might not want to share with her.

"You're all wet, honey," he drawled. "Let's get you inside."

Mitch held out his arm, gesturing toward the house as if he owned the place and urged her forward with his other hand. She walked next to him, unable to keep herself from glancing at him every now and again.

The house wasn't too far, and once he'd secured Gypsy to the railing, he ushered Jillian up the steps to her own porch.

"Before you...died...you owned this spread, didn't you?"

Mitch took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Thick and dark, Jillian stared at it, wanting desperately to do the same. He found her gaze and smiled at her, this time only lifting one corner of his mouth. If that look didn't knock the wind right out of her sails, she didn't know what did.

"Yes."

"I can tell."

"Sorry, Jilly. Just so used to being here that I sometimes forget this house belongs to you now."

"It's all right, really," she said, pulling off her shoes and setting them by the door. Just like last night, Mitch did the same with his boots. He was wearing the same holey socks as before.

In fact, he was wearing the same outfit.

Of course he was, she thought. Ghosts don't have closets full of clothes.

She smiled. He noticed.

"Whatcha grinnin' about?"

"Your clothing. Just wondering if you ever change them."

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He looked down at himself. "No, I don't. This is what I was wearing when I... Well, on that day."

"Oh." Turning away, Jillian opened the door and invited him in. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," he said, sauntering past her. There it was again, the scent of leather and...sandalwood? "I like it when you smile. Been a long time since I've beheld a beautiful woman."

His words stopped her in her tracks. She'd hung up her coat and closed the door, but now, she leaned back against it lest she fall over. The casual way he'd called her beautiful stirred something within her.

"I like your smile too," she admitted, watching with fascination as he took off his jacket. He glanced at her, then approached her. His coat dangled from his hand as he leaned over her to hang it on the peg by the door, but his nearness made her want to reach out and touch him.

"Seems we have something in common," he said. He was so close he could probably hear her raging heart.

"How are you...real?" she whispered. Raising her hands, she prepared to touch him, then thought better of it and dropped them to her sides.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging again.

"I thought ghosts weren't tangible. I thought they walked through walls."

"Not me."

"I've noticed."

He grinned. "You want to touch me?"

"Yes. I—I mean..."

Mitch chuckled. "It's okay, honey, I know I'm not like other men."

*You can say that again.* Jillian was glad she didn't say that out loud.

She was too much of a chicken to raise her hands. Mitch took it upon himself to lift her hands in his, placing them on his chest. Amazingly, he was solid and warm. His gentle countenance urged her on, and she touched him, running her hands down his strong arms, back up his shoulders, across his face and through his hair.

He bowed his head and moaned a bit, as if he liked what she was

doing. That sound alone brought her out of her reverie and made her snap her hands back as if she'd touched a flame.

His eyes opened, and his gaze bored into hers. She shouldn't have taken such liberties with him, yet the man was gorgeous, and he'd given her free rein to do as she would. But dear Lord, he looked like he wanted to do the same to her.

She probably wouldn't survive it.

"You hungry?" she asked, biting her bottom lip. Mitch's eyes rested on her mouth.

"You have no idea."

Her breasts tightened until her nipples chafed against her bra. Probably not the best question to ask the man. He'd been dead for God only knew how long. He was probably hungry in more ways than one.

Clearing her throat, Jillian stepped around him and took a deep breath. She retreated into the kitchen, shielding herself from him by opening the door to the fridge. Mitch followed her, but kept his distance, as if knowing full well what his double-entendre had done to her libido.

He's a ghost, Jillian, not a real man. Get a damn grip!

"Can you eat?" she asked, her nose still inside the refrigerator. "Well, obviously you can eat, you drank my coffee yesterday. How about sandwiches? Do you like them?"

"I like most things," he said, his voice closer.

Taking a chance, Jillian looked at him and nearly dropped her lunchmeat. He'd rested his hip against her countertop and stood relaxed with his arms crossed over his chest.

Why couldn't he be a real man? One of flesh and blood, one that could be here any time he wanted, instead of riding on the edge of a thunderstorm?

"Can I ask you something?" She made her way to the other side of the sink, away from him, and began making two ham hoagies.

"Shoot."

"When did you die?"

Mitch looked away, but answered. "Eighteen seventy-seven."

"And you've been...riding the lightning ever since?"



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He nodded. "Was storming the day I died. Guess that has something to do with it."

"So all this time, you've been caught in a storm?"

She glanced at him with curiosity. Goodness, no wonder he said it felt good to be dry.

"Yeah."

"Have you interacted much with people? I mean, obviously the folks in town know you. Or at least, they know of you."

"I've only been seen from my perch on the hill. If I was ever approached, I would merely disappear. A few people have shot at me, yelled at me, told me to leave and never come back. But I have no control when I appear. It's all tied to the storms. However I can choose to disappear if I want."

"So last night when you left—"

Mitch shook his head. "No, last night I didn't want to go." He gave her a long, lingering stare. Goose bumps raced across her skin. She had to look away. "I disappeared because the storm was moving on. I can only stick around when it's thundering, or else I'll...leave."

"Where do you go? When you leave?"

Jillian had finished making the sandwiches and now she was reaching for the chips on top of the fridge. But dang it, the bag had been pushed toward the back. She couldn't quite get it.

Mitch stepped up and grabbed the bag himself. He handed it to her with a soft smile.

"This what you're after?"

Gazing into his rugged face, she finally understood how women of the past swooned in front of their men. She was on the verge of swooning right then and there.

"Yes," she said, somewhat breathless.

"Let's eat." He stepped away and grabbed both plates, taking them to the table.

A crack of thunder rumbled in the sky, and he grinned while he held out her chair.

"Sounds like I'll be here awhile yet."

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Jillian walked to the chair and sat, watching as he took his own seat across from her. He'd avoided her question about where he went when he disappeared. Perhaps he didn't want to talk about it. Or maybe he was just damn hungry.

Mitch waited patiently while she poured a few chips on each of their plates. He didn't dig in until she'd taken a bite first. Well, her ghost certainly minded his manners.

"How old are you?" she asked. He looked at her as he chewed. "I mean, how old were you, when..."

"Thirty-one," he said after he'd swallowed. "Good food, Jilly."

She blushed. She didn't even know why. Just doing something for this man, even if it was feeding him a silly old sandwich, filled her with pride. He'd been on his own for far too long. The least she could do was offer her friendship.

"How old are you? If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind. I'm twenty-seven."

"And some lucky man hasn't claimed you yet?"

There was a twinkle in his eye, one of mischief, but she had to wonder if it was something more. The way he'd said those words was almost like he was shocked she wasn't married. Well, considering the era he came from, that probably wasn't too far from the truth.

"There was one man," she said softly, playing with her chips. "But I left him."

"Why?"

Jillian cleared her throat, wondering how much she should tell him. But Mitch was a ghost, what harm could there be in letting him know?

"He would...smack me at times. Controlled who I saw, who I didn't see. He wanted to marry me, and I almost went through with it, but he snapped one night while we were making wedding plans and I had to go to the hospital. He broke my nose, that's all, but I knew I didn't want to marry someone who beat me. So I packed my bags, moved to Texas, and bought the one big spread in the middle of nowhere that I could afford."

The look of horror on Mitch's face shocked her.

"A man hit you?"

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She stared at her plate and nodded. "Yes. But I haven't seen him in a few months. Hope I never see him again. I've avoided men because of it. Well, except for you."

Mitch let out a slow breath. "I haven't wished I could beat the shit outta someone in a very long time."

The venom in his sexy voice brought her eyes back to his. "It's not your problem."

"The hell it ain't."

He seemed tense. Perhaps she shouldn't have told him.

"Your conviction is endearing," she said with a smile. "But that man is ancient history." Jillian coughed behind her hand. "Um, no offense."

Mitch took an angry bite of his sandwich and continued to brood. Another flash of lightning lit the kitchen and crack of thunder rumbled across the sky.

"Jilly?"

"Yeah?"

His eyes were softer now, but he was still intense as he leaned forward. "I will never hurt you. You can count on that."

Her heart swelled, and her eyes filled with unexpected tears.

"You all right, honey?" he asked, reaching across the table to take her hand. The contact sent another pulse of electricity through her.

"Why do you have to be a ghost?" she whispered. Afraid she'd said too much, she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

"I might be a ghost, but I'm real enough. And I know a mighty fine woman when I see one. I've been alone for over a hundred and thirty years, Jilly, and you're the first person to give a damn about me and about why I'm here. Most folk run for the hills. Maybe we are from two different worlds, but it seems to me we could both use a friend, don't you think?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. She didn't know what to make of him or where any of this was going, but a friendship she could do.

"I really could," she admitted.

"There now. Then it's settled." Mitch finished his food, and she watched him with a smile on her face. But when he returned her smile,

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he'd grabbed hold of her heart without even knowing it.

Yup, she was officially out of her mind.

She had the hots for this gorgeous, dead cowboy.

## Chapter Four

"You're spoiling me, Jilly."

Mitch's deep voice rumbled through her, much like the thunder that just rolled a few moments before. She'd made him coffee again, at his request, and now they were sipping it in her living room.

A modest TV, a couch, and a loveseat were present, next to a looming stone fireplace. It was a gorgeous fixture of the house, and one of the main reasons why she loved the place. It had been made from brown and tan rocks mortared together, but she had yet to find a reason to start a fire. Perhaps today would be a good day for one.

"I'm not spoiling you," she answered, turning her attention back on him. "I'm just being hospitable."

"Well, I sure do like your hospitality. Don't believe I need to eat and drink, but it's mighty nice to do so. Makes me feel normal."

Jillian hid her questions behind her coffee mug. She knew if she didn't have a distraction, she'd ask him how he died, and she'd already convinced herself it would be rude to bring it up. But Mitch set his mug down on the nearby coffee table, then sat back, staring her right in the eye.

"I suppose you want to know how it happened?"

She cleared her throat. "I wasn't going to ask."

"Why not?"

With a shrug, she said, "Figured it'd be...impolite."

He smiled. "You can ask me anything, Jilly. If you asked me for the moon, I'd try my hardest to reach up and pluck it out of the sky for ya."

Her hands clamped down on the mug she was holding. If she set it down, she'd be too tempted to take his hands, touch his chest, anything to get closer to him. The man oozed a certain kind of easy charm that was downright sexy. But remembering he was a ghost brought her to her senses.

"I was a witness to a murder."

Jillian's loud gasp reverberated throughout the room. Her eyes widened, and she couldn't help the look that must have crossed her face. He nodded at her shock.

"Watched a man gun down a woman for nothing at all. Mr. Fred Hennessy. Told the sheriff what I'd seen. But Hennessy had already high-tailed it out of the area. Or so I thought. It would seem I'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He hadn't expected there to be anyone to witness his crime. Guess he figured if he got rid of the witness, he could get the murder charge dropped.

"There was a bounty on his head after I'd told my story to the sheriff, so Hennessy couldn't show his face. But he was pissed enough to seek me out at my own home."

"Oh my God." Jillian covered her mouth.

Mitch sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together. "It was storming that day, like it is now. I'd saddled Gypsy and went exploring up Bunker's Hill because I'd heard a gunshot. Someone was shooting on my land. Thought maybe rustlers had come for the cattle or maybe one of my ranch hands was having a dispute. I needed to find out what was going on.

"So, I rode up the hill, heard another shot, and Gypsy went down."

Jillian's eyes filled with tears, and she covered her mouth. She'd wanted to know how he died, but now that he was telling her, she wasn't so sure she did.

"I couldn't get out of the way fast enough. Her body landed on top of me as we tumbled back down that hill, and I remember hearing all sorts of snaps and pops."

"Oh, Mitch..."

"I was in agony, pinned under my horse, when that bastard

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Hennessy walked right up to me and raised his gun. That was the last thing I remember before riding the lightning. Been appearing as a ghost ever since."

She sniffled and scooted closer. She wanted to soothe him, to soothe herself, and almost reached out to touch him.

"But that's not the worst of it."

Her heart stopped. "How can it not be?"

He gave her a look of pure sorrow. She scooted even closer.

"I've been appearing with every thunderstorm that rolls across the countryside in all the years since my death. And every time the storm is over, I have the pleasure of getting sucked back to that day, reliving it again and again. No matter how I try to do things different, no matter how much I try to change things, at the end of the day, I'm dead, and a new thunderstorm is brewing in your present.

"You wanted to know where I go when I disappear. Now you know."

Jillian didn't know what to say. She stared at him, not able to comprehend what he'd told her. Not only was Mitch a ghost, but he had to relive the day of his own murder. Every inch of her skin prickled and her eyes fairly burned.

How many times had he died?

Holy shit.

"Mitch," she managed to say after a few moments of silence. "Are you sure you go back? How do you know it's not just a memory of your death? Maybe you're stuck in some kind of...of limbo. Maybe it's just—"

"The pain, Jilly. I know from the pain."

She stared at him, dumbstruck. His eyes were hollow, haunted. He was an exhausted, lonely man, stuck in an endless loop of terror and misery. She didn't know what to say, what to do, that could possibly be a comfort to him.

Lifting her hand, she smoothed away the lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. He turned toward her and let her touch him, watching her all the while. She felt the soft texture of his hair, the curve of his ear, and the prickly stubble on his cheek.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

In that moment, something changed in the air between them. Mitch grabbed her and dragged her to his lap before she'd even seen him move. His arms were like bands of steel as he held her close. He lowered his head and hid his face in her neck.

"I want it to end, Jilly," came his tortured reply. "I want to rest. I want to die. Truly *die*! Why is there no heaven for me? Why can't I go there?"

His warm breath puffed on her skin, sending ripples of awareness across her body. "I don't know," she said. Her fingers trailed through his hair as she clung to him.

"No matter how I try to change what I do that day, no matter how many times I live it, I can't stop what happens. If I don't go up the hill, Hennessy shoots me in the barn. If I don't go to the barn, he breaks down my front door. If I confront him, I'm never quick enough on the draw.

"I've set traps for him, I've surprised him, I've even tried running away, but he always finds me, he always...kills me."

"Don't talk about it," she said. "Don't think about it."

"How can I not?" he asked, pulling back to look into her eyes. "When I leave you, that's what I've got to look forward to. The only solace I have now is dying again to be with you."

Swirling heat pooled in her belly. What he'd just said was much too intimate for mere friends.

"When will that be?"

"Whenever there's a thunderstorm."

"Mitch, I...I can't wait on the whim of the weather. And you're a ghost. You're not—"

"A real man?" he interrupted.

She nodded and held his eye contact, no matter how much it pained her to do so. She wanted him, Lord, how she wanted him. But this was madness.

Mitch set his jaw and twisted his hand in her hair.

"The storm's moving on," he whispered.

Jillian's heart hitched. No, not now. Not yet. Clutching him closer,



she straddled his thighs. "I don't want you to go."

"I've got no choice."

"Will you think of me? When you go back?"

"Every damn minute."

"I don't want you to die again!" More tears sprang to her eyes before she could stop them.

"Oh, honey, I do. I want to die so I can come back and hold you, just like this."

His arms tightened, bringing her flush with his body. Every hard inch of his cock pressed against her. She had no doubt what he wanted. She wanted it too. But was it even possible?

"I don't know if we...can," she said.

"You can feel me, right?" He raised his brow and cupped her ass.

"Yes!" she yelped.

"Then we can. Do you want to?"

"Mitch..." She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Jilly, I've gotta go, honey."

"No."

"I have to leave. Tell me you want me. Please."

She couldn't help herself; she kissed her way up his neck and across his cheek. "I want you, Mitchell."

He pulled her mouth to his in a rough kiss. His stubble scraped her cheeks, but she didn't care. All she cared about was his tongue, stabbing into her, rasping against her own. His lips were an inferno, raging on hers.

"Don't leave me," she whined against his mouth.

"Damn it, I have no control, Jilly. I can't hold on much longer."

"You say you get pulled back, to the past?"

"Yes," he answered, breathless.

Leaning her forehead on his, she said, "That board in the master bedroom upstairs, the one under the window. Is it loose in your time?"

He gave her a look of confusion.

"Leave me something under there. Anything. I don't care what it is. I've just got to know you're with me, even when you're in the past."

"You got it."

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His form began to dissipate right there on the couch.

“Mitch!”

“Jilly, wait for me...” His voice faded with the rest of him, until nothing remained but the scent of leather and sandalwood.

## **Chapter Five**

Jillian didn't know how long she lay on the couch and cried. The storm had broken, revealing patches of blue sky and sun. Even a majestic rainbow painted the heavens.

But she couldn't find beauty in any of it. All she could think about was the man of her dreams dying a horrible death in order to be with her again. He'd said he knew he was dying over and over—because of the pain.

No man should ever have to endure that many deaths without passing on.

She'd asked him to leave her something under the loose floorboard in her room. She was almost too terrified to go and see if something was there. Would it have survived all these decades?

One thing was for sure. If something was there from Mitch, it would prove once and for all he did indeed travel back to the past. But if nothing was there, would that prove she was off her rocker?

She'd been sitting on his lap when he disappeared this time. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't experienced it herself. The desperation in his final words had ripped her heart out.

He wanted her to wait. For him.

But he was a ghost. None of this made any damn sense.

Did she want it to? Her experience with men hadn't been stellar. Before she'd gotten herself engaged to Vince, there had been Andy, who'd cheated on her—with his best friend Michael.

Adding a dead man to the mix would only round out the crazy.

But Mitch was different. He cared about her in a way the others hadn't. It was obvious to her he wanted her, but it was deeper than that. Mitch wanted a friend, someone to confide in. He needed a shoulder to lean on, and in all these years, she'd been the only one to reach out to him.

"Don't be such a coward," she growled to herself. Taking a deep breath, she peeled herself from the couch and marched up the stairs, her heart filled with trepidation. Whatever he'd left for her, she prayed it was still there. Would it still be in good condition? Good Lord, it would have been tucked away for one hundred thirty-three years.

She'd found the loose floorboard the first time she attempted to open the second-story window right after buying the property. The wood had groaned loudly when she stepped on it and gave just a little. She'd gotten on her knees and noticed it wasn't tacked down. Underneath the plank had been a small, dusty space, but nothing had been inside.

Now that Jillian stood in her bedroom doorway, she stared at the floorboard with her heart pounding. She crossed the room and knelt down. Would there be something in there now? With trembling fingers, she lifted it and gasped.

Tucked inside was an envelope, covered in dust. It sat there, looking as if it had been undisturbed for over a century. But that wasn't what made her breath catch in her throat.

Written on the envelope was one single word. *Jilly*.

"Oh, God," she whispered behind her hand. Her entire body trembled at the sight.

She lifted the envelope out of its nook with careful fingers. Her eyes burned, but she refused to cry. She gave in to a few sniffles, however.

Despite the dust covering the paper, she hugged it to her chest, as if she could hug her handsome cowboy through the ages. Mitch. He'd left her a letter.

She wanted to read it.

Then again, she didn't want to read it.

Once she read it, she wouldn't have anything more to look forward to until she saw him again—whenever that would be. But she wasn't

about to leave it unopened. Maybe she should wait to read it, perhaps in a few days when she couldn't stand it any longer.

She imagined Mitch sitting here, bending over this very plank all those years ago, tucking his letter for her under the floor. Her heart swelled, and she sniffled once more.

She missed him. She barely knew him, but that didn't matter. The fact that he cared enough to send her a message through the years touched her deeply.

What the heck was she doing? Pining over a man who lived and died long before she'd been born... It was insanity! What kind of future could they possibly have? None whatsoever. What could he offer her? Absolutely nothing.

Jillian stood and glanced out the window, watching as a few birds flew from tree to tree. Mitchell was gone. He was dead. They had no hope of a relationship. She couldn't possibly wait for a thunderstorm every time she wanted to be with him.

But her logical brain wouldn't listen to her heart. She needed to help him. Maybe see if she could point him toward the light, or whatever it was people saw when they died. Despite who he used to be, she was now all he had, and she wasn't about to cut him loose and let him fend for himself.

Not anymore.

Jillian ripped the envelope open and strode to the bed to sit down. She gingerly pulled out the pages within and opened them. After being folded so long, they didn't want to cooperate, but she managed to hold them open.

Looking at the words, she was amazed at how beautiful Mitch's penmanship was. Each word was meticulously written, but it didn't shock her. He'd been brought up in an era when handwriting was almost an art form.

*My dearest Jilly—*

She closed her eyes and breathed deep, allowing the pages to fold once more. Good Lord, this was going to be harder than she thought. Crossing her legs and scooting up to the pillows, she opened the letter and

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began again.

*My dearest Jilly,*

*For the first time in my long existence, I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I don't know when that will be for you, but for me, in a few short hours, I will be with you again, holding you again, kissing you again. I know I'm coming on strong. I know that to you, I'm nothing more than a ghost. But I have been alone for so long, I sometimes begin to wonder if I'm still sane.*

*The first time I saw you approaching me as I sat on that hill, I contemplated disappearing. It would have been easier than a confrontation. But in all my years riding the lightning, I've never been approached by a woman. You intrigued me.*

*With your bright, honey eyes and lovely golden hair, you've gotten under my skin. I can't stop thinking about you, Jilly. If you lived in my time, you'd be my woman, no damn two ways about it.*

*But you haven't even been born yet. I'm writing a letter to a woman who doesn't exist. Knowing I'll never see your smile as a real man makes my heart ache. I can only be with you as a ghost. But when we're together, all I want to do is crush you to me and kiss you senseless.*

*But how can I possibly be with you? You're a passionate woman with needs I simply cannot fill. My destiny is this, dying countless times, riding countless storms in the hope that one day, I'll see heaven.*

*Now that I've met you, I know that I have seen heaven—in your eyes. You're my heaven, Jilly. If my death leads me to you, then I welcome it.*

*I can't give you my life. But I can give you my soul.*

*Watch the skies, honey. They'll lead me to you.*

*Always,*

*Mitch*

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Jillian's face was wet with tears. She read the letter two more times before hiding her face in her pillow, crying, aching for the man who wrote it. He'd ridden into her life and turned it upside down, tossing all of her pre-conceived notions right out the window.

The memory of his mouth on hers wound her up like a coiled spring. The t-shirt and jeans she wore chafed on her skin, but she knew the only remedy was Mitch himself.

If his intense gaze and his sultry mouth hadn't snared her, his letter certainly did. He'd claimed she would have been his if she'd lived in his time. Hell, she was his anyway. No other man could hold a candle to Mitch, living or dead. And that was a fact.

But the afternoon sun shining through her window mocked her. Who knew when another thunderstorm would boom across the Texas sky? The thought scared her.

When would she see him again?

Jillian curled around the letter as if it was Mitch himself. She caressed the pages and shuddered. She needed to get a hold of herself before she lost her mind.

She'd already lost her heart.

## **Chapter Six**

The forecast for the next few weeks showed no storms on the horizon. Jillian couldn't help but stare at the clouds regardless. The sun shown warm in a pale blue sky, but despite the wildflowers blooming on Bunker's Hill, the only thing she wanted to see on that rise was the silhouette of a lonesome cowboy.

After two days, she left the ranch to do a little shopping. She hadn't wanted to leave, but her shampoo bottle was running on empty and her coffee supply was getting dangerously low. Coffee had been the one thing that brought a certain spark back to Mitch's eye. If he appeared again, she'd have it waiting for him.

While she was in town, she decided she might as well ask around for job applications. Her car, a little white Honda Civic coupe, needed gas before she did much of anything.

She'd pass the gas station on the way to the store. Thankfully, she didn't need anything that had to be refrigerated, so she'd be free to drive around and ask if anyone was hiring.

She tried hard not to think about what she'd do if a thunderstorm came through when she was at work. The thought tormented her. Knowing Mitch would be alone on her ranch sent her stomach into upset.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," she said under her breath, finally reaching the road that would take her into town.

She liked living far out of the way, even if going to pick up shampoo and coffee was a pain in the ass. It meant she was free to make



as much noise as she liked or enjoy the silence as she saw fit. It also meant she probably wouldn't have any unwanted solicitors trolling for her to buy the latest double-paned windows or get an estimate on a new roof.

It only took a few minutes until she rolled into Cold Creek, a town that was actually bigger than the speck on the map. Two grocery stores and a few fast food joints dotted the main drag, as well as a handful of dry-cleaners and pet shops. Jillian stopped and pumped her gas before doing her shopping.

Then she made her way to the store, where she bought what she needed. As she was walking out, an older woman stopped her. If memory served, her name was Adelaide Newman, and she lived here in town.

"Ms. Brady, so good to see you again. How've you been?"

"I've been good," Jillian answered.

"You see that ghost of yours yet? Been stormin' pretty good lately."

She shook her head, not wanting to talk about Mitch with a mere acquaintance. It was too personal. Not to mention a tad bit loony.

"No ma'am. Beginning to think it's just an old story."

Adelaide chuckled. "Oh, I'm sure it is. Nothing like a good ghost story to get your blood pumping, eh?"

The woman had no idea.

"Listen, I wanted to ask you if that friend of yours found your ranch?"

Jillian blinked a few times and shook her head. "My friend? What are you talking about?"

The older woman frowned. "Oh dear. Well, that is a problem if you haven't heard from him yet. A man came through town last night asking about your spread. I overheard him talking to Bud down at the sandwich shop."

A man? Jillian didn't have any male friends aside from Mitch, and that sure hadn't been him.

"Do you know his name? What he looked like?"

"Don't know his name," she said, tapping her chin. "But he was good-looking. Sandy hair, nice smile. Think he was wearing a green shirt and a pair of khaki slacks. Driving a big ol' black truck. He your

boyfriend?"

The world dropped away from Jillian's feet. Only one man would be interested to know where she was. The man she'd left behind in Oregon.

Vince Hampton.

"Uh, n-no, Mrs. Nelson, he's not my boyfriend. I've got to go. But if you see the man again, don't tell him anything about me. Can you do that?"

The woman touched her arm and lowered her voice. "Sure, honey. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Not yet," she answered.

With quick steps, Jillian raced to her car and tossed her groceries into the passenger seat. Looking for a job would have to wait. Vince was in town. The longer she stayed in the area, the more likely he'd find her. No doubt he already knew where she lived, and bile rose into her throat.

The man wasn't openly abusive. He'd never dare to hit her in public. But in private he was different. And he'd probably be right pissed about the way she'd taken off and left him.

She thought she'd been able to get away from him. She'd left him a letter while he'd been at work, telling him she wasn't coming back. It had been the only way she could think of to leave him. He never would have let her go otherwise.

Knowing he was in Cold Creek nearly put her in a panic. But somehow, she'd managed to sit still at a red light, only to peel out once it turned green. All she could do for now was hole up in her home and call the cops should he step on her property.

Staying away from her own ranch was out of the question. She was not about to leave Mitch by himself if another storm brewed. Besides, maybe he could help her.

She groaned hopelessly. Not unless he could conjure the weather out of a clear blue sky.

Chewing her bottom lip until it hurt, Jillian finally turned onto her drive and barreled up the dirt road. A cloud of dust and rocks followed close behind. Relief washed over her when she didn't see any other

vehicles parked in front of her house.

She braked hard and threw her car into park before tearing the keys out of the ignition. Grabbing her grocery bags, she sprinted across the yard and up the porch. She unlocked the door with shaking hands. Once it was open, she dashed inside and slammed it behind her, re-locking it firmly.

Now that she was alone, she gave in to the panic that had nearly choked her in town. Jillian slid to the floor and clutched fistfuls of her own hair to try and snap herself out of her freak-out. Cupping her hands in front of her face, she breathed into them, half sobbing, half gasping for breath.

"Mitchell!" she cried, banging her head against the door. She didn't know what to do. She was alone out here. The one man who wanted to kick Vince's ass wouldn't be able to help her.

"What do I do? Think, Jillian. Think!"

No matter how hard she tried, nothing came to her.

Just then, a shadow moved across the sun. In her state of mind, she probably wouldn't have noticed, aside from the fact she knew damn well there hadn't been any clouds in the sky that morning.

Wandering to the window, she pulled the curtain as much as she dared and saw for herself the beginning of a thunderhead looming above the countryside.

*That cloud appeared out of nowhere.*

Moments after she'd called for Mitch.

Her breath caught in her throat. If Mitch was caught in some kind of time loop, perhaps the property itself was tied to the past. Wherever he was, could he hear her? And was it possible he could will himself to appear?

"Mitch!" she cried out again, pressing her hand against the glass. Jillian watched as the cloud grew darker and more ominous—she witnessed for herself a few flashes of light within. "He can hear me!"

A sudden, heavy knock pounded throughout the room. Someone was at her door.

"Jillian, I know you're in there. I followed you from town. Open

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this door right now!"

Shit. It was Vince.

Her heart rate shot through the roof. She'd been so damned preoccupied with that cloud, she'd never heard him pull up.

Weighing her options, she could stay put or she could run out the back door. But if she ran outside, she risked getting caught, and no doubt Vince wouldn't mind taking out his vengeance in the yard.

If Mitch was coming, she didn't have much longer to wait. The clouds were now covering the sky, rolling in with uncanny speed. Taking a chance, Jillian called out once more.

"Mitch, I need you!"

Thunder rolled. It was still far off in the distance, but close enough for her to know she wasn't losing her mind.

He was coming.

"I hear you in there," Vince said through the door. "Open up, honey, and we'll talk. You left me...rather suddenly."

She wasn't buying his nice-guy routine. That's exactly how he'd managed to break her nose not too long ago by luring her in with promises of hugs and kisses, then unleashing his fury by punching her in the face.

"I left you because you're a no-good asshole, Vincent! I want you off my property."

He laughed. "I'm not going anywhere. You're my fiancée, and we're going to set a few things straight. Open this door!"

Jillian rushed into the kitchen and grabbed her phone. "I'm calling the cops," she yelled. "I'm not your fiancée. Leave me alone!"

Another loud bang came from the living room, making her jump.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

The crash of breaking glass filled the house.

"Jillian!"

"Oh, my God."

Dropping the phone, she ran out the kitchen and past the staircase to the back door. With a cry, she unlocked the door and ripped it open, jumping down the back porch steps two at a time.

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Rain had just begun to fall as she raced across the yard, spotting Vince's huge black Ford F-350 parked right behind her Honda, blocking her in. She made her way around the house to Bunker's Hill, running for all she was worth.

"Mitchell!"

"Get back here, you bitch!"

Christ, Vince was chasing her. His legs were longer. He'd catch her before she got to the top of the hill.

"Mitchell!" she cried again, stumbling in the dirt. With a scream of desperation, she pulled herself back up, but she wasn't fast enough. Vince caught her by the hair and slammed her back to the ground.

"You have yourself a new man, Jillian?" With strong hands, he flipped her over and straddled her hips. The fire in his eyes was unmistakable. He was going to pummel her until there wasn't much left.

"You took off with another man, is that it?" he screamed at her.

A flash of lightning lit the sky, followed soon after by a clap of thunder. Jillian struggled as hard as she could, but Vince had her pinned. The only thing she could do was cover her face and hope for the best.

Rhythmic drumbeats came to her, getting closer. She didn't have time to think on it before Vince lifted his closed fist, intent on making a new hole in her face.

But before it connected, a gunshot filled the air, and Vince cried out in pain. He rolled off her, clutching his right hand to his chest. Another hand grabbed her arm, lifting her to her feet.

"Get on my horse, Jilly. Now!"

It was Mitch! And sweet Jesus, he was mad as hell.

"Mitch..."

"*Do it!*" he ordered, pointing at Gypsy.

She rushed to the horse, wondering how she was going to get her foot into that high stirrup. Gypsy chuffed at her and tossed her head, but stood still as she managed to lift her foot high enough on the third time.

She grasped the saddle horn, and with a mighty heave, vaulted onto Gypsy's back, grasping the reins with trembling hands. The horse was tall, but Jillian didn't care.

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Right before her eyes, she watched as Mitch hunkered over Vince, letting his fists fly again and again.

"You will never touch Jillian again, you got me? You won't even look at her. You'll turn around and get your sorry ass out of town if you know what's good for you."

"You shot me!" Vince yelled, doing nothing more than shielding himself from Mitch's punches. She noticed Vince's hand was bleeding.

"You're lucky I didn't kill you. You lay one more hand on my woman, and I swear to God, I'll do it. Might go to hell, but I'll be takin' you with me!"

"She's my fiancée. That bitch is mine! I'm going to nail you to the wall, Mitchell."

Oh God... The tone of Vince's voice sent chills through Jillian's blood. Her fear nearly choked her. But it was obvious Mitch had the upper hand as he loomed over the wounded man.

He gave Vince a swift kick in the ribs.

"Don't think so, asshole," he growled. Vince struggled for breath, obviously in a world of pain. Mitch spat on him, then turned back to his horse. His foot found the stirrup on the first try, and he swung up on Gypsy with ease.

"Get off our land."

With that, he urged Jillian into the curves of his body and turned the horse back toward the hill.

Vince yelled at their backs, but she'd stopped listening. She was with Mitch, riding his horse. A calming relief flowed through her.

"Hold on." Mitch's voice in her ear sent shivers down her spine, but she did as he said. She clutched onto Gypsy's mane just as his hold tightened, and he kicked his horse into a gallop.

Suddenly, the world around them began to fade away, as if they'd been swallowed by the dark. An inky blackness pressed in from all sides, and the rain was gone, the trees were gone, and nothing existed but Mitch and his horse, galloping to God knows where. She closed her eyes and didn't question it. Leaning into him, she trusted him with her life.

Only a few moments passed before she once again felt the wind on

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her face. A few small drops of rain fell onto her hair, and the lush scent of wildflowers filled her nose. Another sound came to her as well, the lowing of cattle.

Opening her eyes, she saw they were on Bunker's Hill. Acres of cleared land greeted her, as well as a huge barn, and in the middle of it all, her own house, looking new, complete with a fresh coat of paint.

What the hell? Where were the cars? Where were the trees?

Where was Vince?

"Mitch?" she asked over her shoulder.

"It worked," he said with awe, squeezing her closer. "I can't believe it worked!"

"Where are we?"

"You're on my ranch, Jilly."

His voice tickled the hairs on the back of her neck.

"You mean my ranch?"

"Our ranch," he amended.

"But it's...not right."

"It's perfect," he murmured, tucking his face in her neck. He breathed deep, and just like that, she wanted to turn in the saddle and kiss him into oblivion.

"Everything's gone."

He chuckled. "Everything's here, honey. You're just used to your time."

"My time?" she asked, confused. Then it dawned on her. She glanced over her shoulder, and he kissed the tip of her nose. He gave her a wink and a nod.

"Welcome to eighteen seventy-seven, Jilly."

## Chapter Seven

*Cold Creek, Texas, 1877*

"Is this for real?"

"This is for real," he answered, leading Gypsy down the hill to a corral near the barn. His voice dropped an octave. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Just a little shaken up is all."

"I won't lie to you. I wanted to kill that bastard."

"I'm glad you didn't. But you saved me. He can't hurt us here."

"No, he can't," Mitch said with conviction.

"How did you...hear me?"

They'd reached the corral. He jumped down and held up his arms for her to do the same. She welcomed them and curled her own arms around his neck as he slid her down his large frame.

"Don't know how I heard you. I just did," he said simply. "I was somewhere in the black, waiting for the next storm to ride when your voice hit me. I heard the panic, and I knew something was wrong. I concentrated all my thoughts on you, and before I knew it, I appeared on Bunker's Hill."

"Maybe there's a connection between us."

His grin made her heart skip a beat. "You can say that again, darlin'."

She blushed at his intensity. They weren't alone. A few ranch hands were riding a little ways out, keeping the cows where they were supposed



to be. Another man was repairing the barn door while a few others looked to be tending a small field of crops.

"Should we be holding each other?" she whispered, glancing around. "I don't want to tarnish your reputation."

He chuckled, and dear Lord, she wanted to cling to him until her dying day. "It's not my reputation you should be worried about."

His arched brow made her smile. "Ah, Mitchell, I'm a twenty-first century woman. I think your ranch hands are going to witness much more than a tarnished reputation if you don't get me inside this very minute."

He looked at her in shock. But he didn't question her words. He let her go so fast she stumbled, but his large hand grabbed hers, and he fairly dragged her behind him. She trotted to keep up.

"Carter!" he shouted.

"Yes, boss?" The man repairing the barn door turned toward them.

"Take care of Gypsy for me."

Mitch suddenly scooped Jillian into his arms a moment before bounding up the porch steps. She marveled at his strength as he strode through the living room to the staircase. She only had a brief glimpse of the furnishings, but they were about what she'd expected. Leather-bound chairs, a plush burgundy couch, and heavy drapes.

Once he reached the top of the stairs, she was the breathless one. He was real in this time. He wasn't a ghost, but a flesh-and-blood man—one who was about to stake his claim.

Lord in Heaven, she trembled in his arms. She'd never wanted anything so much in her entire life.

"I got your letter," she whispered to him. "I read it over and over. I missed you so much."

"Aw, baby," he growled, kicking open his bedroom door. "I missed you too." Once they were inside, he kicked it shut behind him.

"I couldn't help but dream about you making love to me. Kissing me all over."

His big body shuddered. "Shut up, Jilly. You're gonna cut this short."

"No," she said. He laid her on his bed, which groaned from her

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weight. She didn't let go of his neck, forcing him to lie on top of her. She took off his hat and threw it across the room. "I want to touch you, cowboy. Take off your shirt."

She was bunching it in her hands before he could do it himself. Pulling it out of his waistband, she slipped her hands underneath and felt the soft skin of his belly. Mitch sucked in his breath.

"Jilly..."

She kissed him before he could say anything else. She didn't want him to change his mind. He'd confessed his feelings for her in his letter and saved her from Vince by bringing her back in time with him. She was in love with this man. She wanted to show him just how much.

The moment her fingers grazed his nipples, Mitch surged forward with a groan, connecting his cock with her aching clit through their clothes. He sat up and hastily unbuckled his gun belt, then dropped it to the floor. With an impatient groan, he tore out of the shirt, popping buttons every which way until his sculpted chest was right before her eyes. Jillian's mouth watered at the sight.

He wasn't overly defined, but rather, had the muscles of a man who worked hard, one who tilled the earth and wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

"You're gorgeous," she said, rubbing her palms on him.

"Stole the words right outta my mouth."

"Mmm, speaking of your mouth..." Lifting herself up, she kissed him, holding the back of his head to ensure he couldn't get away. Her tongue plunged into his mouth, again and again, until he responded in kind. He stroked the roof of her mouth, the top of her tongue and the back of her lips in long, sweeping licks, luring her tongue into his mouth only to start anew.

Damn, the man knew how to kiss.

He pulled back just enough to whisper, his lips on hers. "Your turn, baby." She was confused for only a moment before he'd untucked her pink t-shirt. "I wanna touch you, too."

He managed to yank her shirt over her head, but stopped cold.

"What's this thing?" he asked, staring at her lacy bra.

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She giggled at him. "My bra," she told him. "You didn't think I wore a corset, did you?"

"Hell no," he answered, amusement in his eyes. "But how do we get it off?"

Jillian wrapped his arms around her. "Don't worry. Most men in my time don't have a clue either. There are hooks in the back. Just pull 'em free."

Despite the fact that he'd never seen a bra before, he had it unhooked in just a few seconds.

"You're a natural," she said, beaming at him. He returned her grin.

"Only when it comes to titties."

Jillian laughed out loud. But once she was bared to his gaze, her nipples tightened at his look of pure wonder.

"Baby, baby, baby," he breathed, shaking his head.

His reaction amused her. "Has it been as long for you as it's been for me?"

Mitch's dark brown eyes caught hers, and he appeared to be thinking about her words. "Honey, I've never been with a woman I haven't had to pay for."

"You've only been with..." She let the sentence hang.

He nodded. "Your last time was with Vince?" Even saying his name, Mitch spat the word.

"Unfortunately, yes," she said. "But I never..."

"What?"

"I never felt this way about him. I never ached for him. Never longed for him to touch me or else I was going to fly apart."

Mitch leaned over her once more, palming one breast. His rough skin raked across her nipple and made her suck in her breath at the answering clench in her pussy.

"You want me to touch you, Jilly?"

"*Everywhere,*" she whispered.

That seemed to snap something inside him. He attacked her mouth, cutting off her air while he continued to roll her nipples on his palms. The moment he pinched them at the same time, she bucked underneath him,

opening her legs wider.

He gave her one last swirl in her mouth before his tongue was gone, suddenly licking one of her breasts. Mitch's low moan had her pressing against him, wanting full contact with all that glorious skin.

Jillian reached between them, desperate to find the buttons of his pants so she could hold his cock in her hand. He lifted off her to help her out, but refused to let go of her nipple.

He must have been working the button and zipper of her jeans. She hadn't even been paying attention. But the moment his finger slid between her slick lips, she cried out with shock.

"Mitchell!"

"You like this?"

"Don't you stop," she demanded. She couldn't believe how charged and sensitive she was. When his finger probed her clit up and down, her hips followed him until a bright light exploded behind her eyelids. She was coming hard. Her legs wrapped around his hips, holding on for dear life.

Mitch's mouth returned to hers, capturing her every gasp as he continued his sweet assault.

"Can you do that for me again? When I'm deep inside you?"

His raspy voice brought another bolt of pleasure thundering throughout her body. She strained for it, wanting every last ounce he could give.

"Take my pants off," she ordered, wanting to be filled with him.

With fast, jerky movements, he managed well enough, and even pulled away to kick off his own boots and pants. Her first glimpse of his naked body stole her breath. His chest was smooth except for a thin line of hair that ran from his belly-button to his dick which was thick, long, and ready, oh-so-ready—for her.

"Come here," she groaned. She reached for him, and he approached her, but paused to open her legs and caress her inner thighs.

"You're so soft, Jilly baby. And you smell so damn good."

"Mitch."

"What?"

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"Come here." Her voice sounded rough, even to her own ears. He crawled over her once more with a smile on his handsome face.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Make love to me. I can't stand it any more. I want to feel you."

"Christ, Jilly, I never knew a woman could enjoy this so much."

She grinned. "I wouldn't think so," she told him. "I was born after the sexual revolution, after all."

"The what?" he asked with a confused chuckle.

"Just shut the hell up and come inside me, Mr. Crenshaw."

He gasped, and she lightly bit his upper lip while cupping his ass at the same time, pressing him forward. In one fell swoop, he buried both his tongue and his cock inside her, pressing in until he couldn't thrust any deeper.

"Oh, God," she moaned. Her lonesome cowboy had come home. The fullness of him was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She'd had sex before, but not like this. Not with a man she loved beyond reason.

"Jilly," he panted, his rhythm steady. "Woman, you fit me perfect."

She stroked his face and marveled at just how much her heart overflowed for him. She never wanted to make love to another man for as long as she lived. It was Mitch or no one at all.

"Make me come again," she commanded, raising her hips for each of his thrusts.

With a growl, Mitch sat up on his haunches and brought her with him. The strength in his arms ensured he hadn't slipped out of her. Jillian wrapped herself around him and followed his every demand. In this position, he pressed against something so deep within, it made her ache to feel it again and again. Good God, had he found her g-spot?

One of Mitch's hands disappeared between them only to stroke her clit as he made sure she moved against him. Back and forth, she rode him, desperate to explode with another orgasm, still marveling at his thickness inside her.

He leaned forward to give her a sweet, loving kiss, and just like that, Jillian came for him once more, falling over the edge, bringing him right along with her. He guided her hips up and down, making her

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pleasure ripple on and on, until it finally passed.

Once it had, he continued his kiss, a combination of passion and play. His hands roved over every inch of her skin, exploring her shoulders, her arms, her ass. She pulled back only to lean her forehead on his.

"That was incredible."

"Ah, Jilly," he said, panting. "You can say that again. Damn, girl. I think I broke somethin'. But it was worth it."

She giggled at his tone, still very much aware he was inside her. Then he turned serious, tucking her long hair behind her ears.

Gazing into her eyes, he took a deep breath. "I love you, honey." She must have looked shocked. He continued before she could say a word.

"There's no other woman for me. I've lived and I've died countless times without finding anyone in all those years. Hell, no one even caught my eye while I was alive. But you, you're different. You're amazing. And you're the woman I want, more than my own life."

Her hand found its way through his thick hair. "You're alive right now," she reminded him.

"Only until sundown."

The certainty in his voice brought goose bumps to her skin. "Will I stay here in this time or will I return to the future?"

"I don't know."

"If I return, I'd see you again. But if I stay, then this is all I get, isn't it?"

"It's a possibility," he confessed. "I believe I'm the only one who lives this day over and over again. But your life would continue on."

"What am I supposed to do if you die and I can't be with you anymore?"

"Live. For me. Know that I'll think about you every minute."

Fear choked her. If Mitch left her in an unfamiliar era, she wasn't sure she could survive it on her own. She clutched onto him, hiding her face on his shoulder.

Taking a few deep breaths, she took in the scent of him, trying to

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imprint it on her heart. "I love you too, Mitchell."

His arms crushed her, but she didn't care as she bit and suckled her way up his neck.

"Christ, Jilly. I feel like I'm on fire."

"I need you. Please. If this is our only time together, let's make the most of it."

He didn't argue. Once again she found herself flat on her back, this time with the man she adored pressing her into the pillows, proving his love for her over and over again.

## Chapter Eight

"This is crazy."

"I don't want to get out of bed."

Jillian snuggled up to Mitch while caressing the skin of his chest. "I wish we could stay here forever."

He pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. "Me too."

"None of this makes any damn sense."

Mitch chuckled, and she sighed at the seductive vibrations. Her limbs were like jelly after their exquisite lovemaking, however, just the sound of his voice made her arch against him like a cat. "I stopped questioning it."

"Oh? When?"

"About half an hour ago."

She grinned up at him. "How can I love you so much when I haven't known you for more than a week?"

"Been asking myself that same question. Well, until I decided to stop questioning it, mind."

"Of course," she said, smiling and nodding matter-of-factly.

"I think it's because we're both trying to reach out and grab hold of something that's slipping through our fingers. No matter how much we wish it to be so, I don't believe we have a future, Jilly."

She swallowed and tucked her head into the crook of his shoulder. "Don't talk like that."

"It's true, honey. I'm gonna die by sundown. There's nothing we



can do to stop it."

Jillian's eyes burned at the reminder. "Maybe we can."

"I've tried," Mitch said, frustrated. "No matter what I change about this day, it ends up happening anyhow."

"Well, in all those other days, you didn't have me to help you."

She looked him in the eye once more. He arched his brow. "And how do you figure that will help matters?"

"We have the element of surprise. That man doesn't suspect you have any idea what he's up to."

"But it doesn't matter, honey. I've known what he's been up to for over a century and still can't stop him."

"You can't," she stressed. "Maybe I can."

"What are you suggesting?"

"A distraction. Maybe a confrontation. I don't know, just thinking out loud here."

"If you think I'm going to let you confront Hennessy on your own, then we need to have a heart-to-heart."

"Mitch, it might be the only way."

He sat up to look down on her. "I refuse to trade your life in place of mine."

"And I refuse to let you keep dying! We've got to do something."

"I saw him gun down a woman. I don't know why, but that man is capable of killing anyone. He won't think twice about killing you."

"Not if we approach him a different way."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe I can get his attentions." She wagged her eyebrows.

Mitch shot out of bed and rooted around the room for his trousers. "No way in hell!" he shouted.

"If I get him close, I can pull a gun on him."

He didn't bother buttoning his pants before stalking to the bed and grasping her chin in his hand, forcing her eye contact. "There's only three outcomes to that scenario. You'll either get yourself raped, get yourself killed, or become a murderer yourself. And none of those options are on the table!"

"Mitch..."

"No, Jilly. Do not cross me on this. I will not allow you—"

"Allow me?" she yelled back at him. "*Allow me?* This is your life."

"You don't get it, do you?" he yelled right back. "*You* are my life, Jillian! You are the only thing I have to hold on to. If I have to live this hell without you, knowing I could have stopped you from risking your life, I would go mad. I...I...Christ!"

He took deep gulps of air and lifted his hands to his head. He clutched onto his hair and threw his head back, as if trying to calm his raging emotions.

Jillian pushed off the bedcovers and walked up to him. Without a word, she embraced him, pressing her face into his chest. His arms circled her tighter and tighter until she thought she couldn't breathe, but she wasn't about to complain.

"I can't risk you," he said, calmer.

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know."

After a moment of silence, inspiration struck her.

"Mitch?"

"Hmm?"

Framing his face in her hands, she said, "Marry me."

His eyes widened. "What?"

"If this is all we get, if you're going to die and I'm left here in eighteen seventy-seven, I want to know I was your wife, not just some woman you brought back for a quick tumble."

His countenance hardened. "You know damn well that's not why I brought you back with me."

"Then you shouldn't have any objections."

"You'll be a widow before you're properly bedded."

"Oh, I've been bedded, cowboy."

He scoffed and turned away.

"Besides, the church is in town, right?"

He nodded.

"Maybe Hennessy won't take the chance to shoot you in such a

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public place."

"He'll just kill me tomorrow."

"Maybe. But it would have stopped the cycle, right?"

A flash lit the sky outside the window, followed by the boom of thunder.

"I really hate rainstorms," he said with a sigh.

"At least give this idea a try."

He gazed back at her.

"Unless you don't want me as your wife. I could tarnish the name of Crenshaw after all, what with my wanton ways and my smart mouth. I could get you in a lot of trouble. I'm not like other women of this era you know." She pulled away, as if contemplating her own logic. "People would whisper behind your back, and my word! What would they say?"

Mitch yanked her back into his arms and smiled down at her, his eyes twinkling. "They'd say what a goddamn lucky man I am to have such a spitfire for a wife."

"And they'd wonder if I was a spitfire in your bed."

He laughed out loud. "I'd never tell!"

With that, he silenced her with his mouth, his tongue plunging deep.

"Is that a yes?" she asked around his lips.

He nodded, but continued kissing her while caressing her backside.

"Better get dressed, woman. I get any more glimpses of your sweet body, we'll never make it to the preacher."

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"We don't have time to hitch the wagon." Mitch looked at the sky as he saddled Gypsy in the barn. "It's getting late."

Jillian didn't miss the panic in his voice. "Think we can make it?"

He scoffed yet chuckled at the same time. "After all these days I've had to live, my bet would be on no."

"We've gotta try." She wasn't going to let him give up on her.

"You're right. But we're in for a rough ride. We've gotta hightail it

to town as fast as we can."

Once he was done cinching the girth strap, he swung up on his horse and held a hand down for her. She took it and found herself being hauled across his lap.

Mitch walked the horse out of the barn just as a sharp gunshot echoed all around them.

"Shit!"

"What was that?" Jillian exclaimed.

"Hennessy. Christ, I must have lost track of time. Hang on to something, baby!"

Jillian's blood pounded through her head the moment Mitch kicked his horse into a full gallop. He turned Gypsy toward the range, leaning over her, pressing Jillian closer to the horse's surging body.

She'd never ridden so hard or so fast. Not even when Mitch had brought her back in time. Right now, he was running, and she hoped like hell he could outrun a bullet.

Please, please, please...

For the first time ever, she found herself praying. If Mitch could survive this, she'd do any damn thing to appease the Lord above. But as another shot rang out behind them, she knew they were in a race for Mitch's life.

The cover of trees was so far away, near the far-off foothills. They wouldn't make it in time. Instead, Mitch pulled Gypsy to a hard left, presumably so that bastard Hennessy wouldn't have a clear shot.

But the horse was getting tired from carrying so much extra weight and, to Jillian's horror, began to slow down.

Mitch hissed at her, urging his mare to give it her all. The horse stretched her long legs, but it wasn't enough.

Another shot sounded a moment before Gypsy's front legs went out from under her. The horse screamed and went down. Jillian screamed as well, watching as the ground rushed at her. Before she knew it, she'd hit the dirt and an explosion of pain wracked her entire body. She couldn't draw breath as she spat a mouthful of mud.

Behind her, Gypsy continued screaming, raising every hair on her

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body. She'd never heard the squeals of a horse in mortal pain, and now, it brought tears to her burning eyes.

Where was Mitch?

Gasping for breath, Jillian looked behind her only to see Gypsy finally calming as death crept over her. Holding back a sob, she found Mitch, pinned under his dead horse. He was dazed. She could tell by the way he stared at the sky.

She had to free him!

They still hadn't reached the cows, but the ranch hands were galloping toward them. So was Hennessy.

Crawling on her hands and knees, Jillian pushed futilely on Gypsy's heavy body. "Mitchell! I need you to focus. Baby, look at me!"

He did, and the pain written across his face was unmistakable. "Jilly..."

"I know it hurts, but I need your help."

It was useless. The horse was too heavy, and Mitch's injuries were too great. There was no way they'd outrun that bastard outlaw now.

"Hold still," she told him, giving him a soft kiss on the cheek.

Digging underneath the horse, she did the only thing she could do—reach for one of Mitch's guns.

"What...are you..."

Another shot rang out, closer this time. Hennessy was only a few yards away and closing fast. Jillian grabbed the handle of the gun and tugged hard. It was stuck.

"Get out of...here," Mitch panted, pushing on her shoulder with barely any strength.

"No, cowboy. I'm not leaving you!"

Finally, the gun pried free just as Hennessy shot again, this time finding his mark. Mitch grunted, and she glanced down, only to see blood. So much blood.

Mitch had been shot in the head.

"No. Mitch, no! No, no, no!"

His eyes widened as his face slackened, and his gaze became fixed and dilated. With agony, Jillian realized the man she loved was dead.

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Hennessey's horse stopped just short of running them over, and he grinned from ear to ear, pointing his gun right at her. She raised hers as well, cocking it at the same time.

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch!" she shrieked.

A gun fired, but she had no idea whose it was. The shroud of darkness closed in upon her as a bolt of lightning arched across the sky. The world disappeared around her, and a rushing wind seemed to tug at her very soul.

Before she knew it, she was eating another mouthful of mud. Raising her head, she recognized exactly where she was.

Bunker's Hill. But trees were everywhere. Tall grasses and brush dotted the landscape. Glancing at the house, she saw her Honda parked innocently in front of it. She'd returned back to her time, riding the lightning, just as Mitch had for all these years.

"Mitchell!"

Jillian stood, only to be scooped up from behind into a strong pair of arms. His scent surrounded her, and she turned in his arms, crying at the horror she'd just witnessed.

Hitting his chest a few times, she sobbed uncontrollably, feeling as if her entire reality had been ripped to pieces.

Mitch had just died, right in front of her, and yet his ghost was holding her in his arms. She clung to him, knowing damn well she'd collapse if he wasn't holding onto her just as tightly.

"Shh," he breathed into her ear. "It's over now, Jilly. You're safe. I'm here."

She couldn't talk, she couldn't answer him. All she could do was hold on as he lifted her in his arms and strode toward the house.

## Chapter Nine

*Cold Creek, Texas, Present Day*

"You died."

"I know."

"You were dead."

"I know."

"I watched you die, Mitch!" Jillian held his face in her hands as more tears slid down her cheeks. He'd brought her up the staircase, just as he'd done years in the past, and laid her on her queen-sized bed. He stretched out next to her.

He wiped her tears away with the pads of his thumbs. "I knew we wouldn't get away."

"Every time?" she asked. "You have to live through that nightmare every time you go back?"

She watched as Mitch's eyes swam with moisture. He nodded.

"There's got to be a way to stop this cycle. Next time we can—"

"There's not going to be a next time, Jilly." Mitch's voice was firm. He'd apparently made up his mind she wasn't going back. Too bad she'd made up her mind as well.

"Yes, there is."

"No, there isn't. I put you in danger, honey. Hennessy could have killed you just as sure as he was gonna kill me. We're damn lucky you're still breathing. What happened after he killed me?"

She stared at him for a moment before answering. "I managed to raise your gun and cock it. One of us fired, but I don't know if it was me or him. A...huge crack of lightning flashed, and the next thing I knew, I was being pulled back to the present."

"You followed me through time. Seems we're connected after all."

"Exactly. And I'm the only one who can help you."

"You're not going back."

"The hell I'm not!" The vehemence of her words shocked him. He sat up to glare at her as he leaned on his elbow.

"Listen to me," she said, trying to reason with him. "The only reason we didn't have the upper hand was because we'd spent the entire day in bed!"

He gave her a soft grin. "And I enjoyed every damn minute of it."

"So did I. But if we'd prepared, if we had a plan, we could stop your murder."

He shook his head. "Jilly—"

She gasped as she gazed at him. "Mitch, look." She tugged on his blue plaid shirt. He'd grabbed it after ripping out of his other one, the shirt he'd worn for years. "We changed something."

He glanced down at himself, then back up at her. "It's just a shirt."

"The shirt isn't the point," she growled at him. "The point is we changed it. We managed to change your past. You said you've been wearing the other one since you died the first time. If we can do that, then there's hope for beating Hennessy at his own game."

"Besides," she continued. "You can't leave me here. Vince is gone now, but I don't know if he'll come back. Heck, I don't even know how long we've been gone. By the layer of dust on everything, I would guess a couple of weeks at most. But if there's one thing I know about that man, he's tenacious, and the fact you shot him will only serve to piss him off. I'm sure the cops came out after we traveled back in time. I'd called nine-one-one, then dropped the phone. They would have come out to investigate."

"Nine-one-one?"

"Yeah, emergency services. You can call the sheriff out or people to



help if you need to go to the hospital. They probably came out here and found Vince with his hand shot up. No doubt the sheriff might try to come talk to me and find out what happened. They don't let gunshots slide. For all I know, I'm a missing person. And I wouldn't put it past Vince to move somewhere close by to get some kind of revenge on you."

Mitch fell back on the pillows and released his pent-up breath. "I can't take you with me, but I can't leave you here. What the hell am I going to do with you, Jilly?"

"You're going to bring me back to eighteen seventy-seven. Then, we're going to figure out a way to keep you breathing."

He gave her a long, hard stare. "What happens if we succeed? And what happens if that lightning brings you here again? I wouldn't be able to return to you anymore."

The weight of his words pressed on her. "As much as it would pain me never to see you again, at least I could rest in the knowledge that you were able to live your life and not have to experience your own death over and over again."

"What would happen to me?" he asked. "I'm not sure I could go on without you."

"Yes, you would." She rubbed his chest through his shirt. "You told me you wanted me to live for you if we were separated, and know you were thinking of me every minute of every day. That's all I want for you, Mitch. And...maybe you could leave me more notes in the cubby?"

He rolled on top of her and took her hands in his, lacing their fingers together. He then brought them above her head, pressing them into the pillow.

"I'd tuck myself into that damn cubby if I could," he murmured, his voice reflecting the fear on his face.

"Please don't," she said, chuckling through her sorrow. "I'm sure you wouldn't be quite so handsome after all those years."

He chuckled and rested his forehead on her shoulder. "I'm scared."

Caressing his back, she urged him to lie fully upon her, then wrapped both her arms and legs around him. "Whatever happens to us, I'll still love you, no matter what."

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"One way or another, honey, I aim to make you a Crenshaw. Don't care how many lives I gotta live."

"If we find a way to stop Hennessy and I ride the lightning again to my time without you, I'll change my name. I know we wouldn't be married in the traditional sense, but I'll legally change it."

"You'd do that for me, Jilly?"

Pulling his lips to hers, she answered him with a kiss. She opened her mouth and made love to him with her tongue alone. He groaned loudly.

"Yes, I would, Mitchell Crenshaw."

He breathed her breath, taking it inside his lungs a moment before kissing her once more.

After long, heated moments, he lifted his head. "If we get through this, if we're together, I gotta formally ask you. Will you marry me, baby?"

Her fingers dug into his hair, keeping him close. "You don't have to ask me."

"Yes, I do." Mitch rubbed his nose on hers. "I don't want to merely assume."

"If I remember correctly," she told him with a grin, "I asked you to marry me over a hundred and thirty years ago, and you said yes."

"Well," he said, returning her grin. "Now, I'm askin' you."

"Yes, you silly man," she said without hesitation.

He bent to kiss her again, but stopped a whisper away. "If we're able to stop my death, you might be stuck in the past."

Jillian bit her lip and brushed his face with her fingertips.

"Are you ready for that, honey? You wouldn't be able to come back, see your family, your friends."

"I don't have any friends worth keeping. I lost respect for my family when my parents refused to acknowledge the fact Vince was beating on me. The two times I asked for help they turned me away and told me to go back home to my fiancée. We've never been close. This move to Texas was supposed to be a clean slate for me. Can't get any cleaner than eighteen seventy-seven."

"You're sure?"

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His concern touched her deeply, but she understood his hesitation. Knowing he didn't want her to make the decision lightly made her love him all the more.

"I'm sure, Mitch. You're all I want. All I have." She kissed his stubbled cheek. "All I need."

"Thank God," he cried before taking her mouth through a fit of chuckles. "If you said anything else, I was prepared to abduct you."

"Were you now?"

"Well," he considered, "maybe abduct is rather harsh. More likely I'd take my time convincing ya."

"Mmm, I'll still let you convince me, cowboy."

He gave her a beaming, sexy smile. "My pleasure."

## Chapter Ten

My God, that mouth...

Jillian's fears that they might not be able to make love because Mitch was a ghost were laid to rest the moment his tongue swirled around her nipple. He'd ripped her tee in an effort to get it off, and hadn't bothered unhooking her bra before ripping that too. It joined her shirt in a heap on the floor.

"You taste good, Jilly."

His voice reverberated throughout every nerve-ending in her body, prompting her legs to open wider. She reached for him, but Mitch moved away, once again unzipping her pants and baring her pussy to his greedy eyes.

"I've been dreaming of this," he murmured before lowering his head.

Every thought vanished the moment his tongue made contact with her slick, sensitive clit. The man sure seemed to know what he was doing as his head bobbed between her legs, licking her as if her arousal was the sweetest ambrosia. He groaned, and it only served to excite her more. Without thinking, she lifted her hips to him, silently asking for his tongue.

The moment his fingers entered her, she rode them like a bucking bronco, needing more of his touch, more of his pleasure. His mouth worked faster while his fingers pumped, and within mere seconds, she was coming, pulsing around his face and hand.

"Mitchell, get up here right now," she said, gasping for breath. He

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hesitated only long enough to shed his clothes. The moment he was naked, she flipped him down on the bed.

"And I've been dreaming of this." Jillian straddled his hips with her thighs.

"Damn, honey, I've got quite the view."

She chuckled as her tits swayed in his face. "Oh, you'll have quite the ride when I'm through with you."

"Mmm, then ride me, Jilly. Take me inside you."

That sexy timbre in his voice had her primed and ready for another peak of pleasure. Her pussy found his cock, and he slid right in to the hilt. With a gasp, she lifted up, only to take him deeper, over and over, again and again. His hips helped her in her rhythm until they were in perfect tune, striving for completion.

When it came, they both cried out, grinding together in a passionate dance until the waves of ecstasy crashed right over them.

Mitch's body trembled from head to toe, and Jillian couldn't help but collapse on him, thrusting gently to feel the fiery sparks that still leapt inside her.

"Damn, girl," Mitch whispered, ruffling her hair. "I'm never gonna get enough of you. I'm one lucky bastard."

She grinned at him and kissed the underside of his jaw, working her way up his cheek to his lips.

"You are indeed," she said playfully. "I've got to say I'm very pleased you seem to be as...solid as ever in your ghost form."

He arched a brow. "Me too. Sweetheart, I can feel the storm. It's moving on. If we don't leave now, you're not coming with me."

She hadn't been prepared for his words.

"Okay, what do I have to do?"

"As far as I know, nothing. But if I disappear on my own, I don't think you'll follow. You didn't follow the other night when you were on my lap. But the one time I made myself disappear, you did."

"Is there time to get dressed?"

"Hurry."

Jillian scrambled off the bed and rummaged through her closet for

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her most comfortable set of clothes. Once she was dressed in a loose pair of jeans and a royal blue shirt, she grabbed the duffel bag on the floor.

"Can I bring something?" she asked over her shoulder.

"We have only a couple minutes, Jilly. Make them count."

Damn. She felt like she was in one of those fire drills where you could only grab the important things. Into the duffel went every pair of her panties and socks, her favorite pair of flannel jammies, more comfortable blouses and pants, along with her slippers and a new pair of tennis shoes she'd bought on her trip to Texas. Next, she flew into the bathroom and grabbed her toothbrush.

With a flash of inspiration, she waved at Mitch to follow her. "Come on!"

Bounding down the stairs, she dashed into the living room, where one of her windows still gaped wide from being broken by Vince.

"Jilly, what are you—"

She found her shopping bag and clutched it with glee, stuffing it into her bag as well. "Can't leave without my shampoo and coffee!"

The sound of a car engine came to them from outside. Jillian glanced out the window only to see a cop and his partner exiting the vehicle. They glanced at Gypsy with curiosity.

"Shit," she murmured under her breath.

"Who's here?" Mitch asked.

"The law."

"Damn."

"Think it's time to go, cowboy. Will your horse be all right?"

"She'll be fine. You ready?"

She nodded and stepped close to him, grasping the duffel bag and holding onto him at the same time. Thoughts of cars, toilets, and airplanes flittered through her head. She wasn't just giving up her family. She was giving up all the luxuries of the modern age. Washing machines, fast food joints, air conditioning...

Was it worth it?

The cops pounded on the door. "Ms. Brady? This is the police department. We'd like to have a word."

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"Mitch," she whispered. "If this doesn't work, if I don't go back with you, I'll love you until my dying day."

"I'll love you beyond that," he answered with a wink.

Another knock. "Ms. Brady?"

A distant thunder rumbled as a sudden wind kicked up in the living room. Blackness surrounded her once more, and the room fell away while she was sheltered in Mitch's arms. She closed her eyes and held on tight, not willing to let him go for a second. This was it. She'd chosen him over every other aspect of her life. She hoped to God they could stop Hennessy, or else she'd be stuck in a hell of her own. One with no hope of a future with Mitch.

"We're here," Mitch said with a squeeze.

She opened her eyes to eighteen seventy-seven and breathed the scent of rain on the air deeply. They stood on Bunker's Hill, once again looking down on the ranch with Gypsy heaving a sigh right next to them.

"I know, ol' girl," Mitch said as he soothingly patted the animal's neck. "I'm sick of it too."

He turned and gave Jillian a gentle smile. In her heart of hearts, she knew she'd made the right choice. Just like Mitch, she wasn't going to question it anymore.

She was home.

## Chapter Eleven

*Cold Creek, Texas, 1877*

"How much time we got?" Jillian began walking down the hill to the house. Mitch fell in step next to her, pulling Gypsy by the reins.

"About four hours by my estimation."

She nodded and clutched at her growling stomach. "Here's what we're going to do. We'll grab something to eat and make our way into town. Then we're going to talk to the sheriff. He's got to be able to help us."

Mitch shook his head. "Don't you think I've tried that already, Jilly?"

She stopped in front of the porch steps, her hands on her hips, uncaring for the rain falling on her face. "And he didn't help you?"

Scratching the back of his head, Mitch said, "Well, the first time I approached him, I wasn't making much sense. He probably thought I was insane going on and on about how I was going to die and how I rode the lightning—"

"You told him that?"

"I didn't know what to do. I was desperate."

"Okay, well you said that was the first time. Did you see him again?"

"The next time I went to him, I was ready to beg for his help, do whatever I could to get him to listen. But I just couldn't get him out of that



damn jailhouse! He'd heard wind Hennessy fled to Colorado, so he wasn't too keen on riding out to my ranch. Besides, today's his daughter's birthday. Every time I talked to him, he was anxious to get home."

"I'll make him listen."

"And just how are you going to accomplish this?"

"If I know one thing about the eighteen seventies, Mitch, is that women of your time are viewed as the weaker sex. Am I right?"

He gave her a non-committal shrug. She grinned at his obvious effort not to offend her.

"I just so happened to take a few drama classes in school. I'm pretty good at the waterworks."

"Waterworks?" His brows knit together.

"Tears. I'm good at bringing on the tears. If I'm right, your sheriff won't be able to soothe the crying, hysterical wife of Mitchell Crenshaw."

Jillian turned and leapt up the porch steps. Before she'd reached the top, he clutched on to her elbow and stopped her.

"Wife?"

"You betcha." She winked at him. "All this talk of marriage and you didn't expect me to claim I was your wife already? Can't very well get the sheriff out here on my tears alone if I'm merely your lover, now can I?"

He swallowed hard. She watched his Adam's apple bob at her frank words. "But...he'll know we just got hitched if we go to the jailhouse straight from the church. He'll think something's up."

Jillian grinned and kissed him lightly on the lips. Standing on a step above him, she was finally able to look him in the eye.

"I said I was going to claim I was your wife. How much do folks in town know about you?"

"Not much."

"Take any trips recently? I mean...before you were..." She cleared her throat.

"Went to Dallas not too long ago for a business deal with my cattle."

"How long?"

"Month?"

"Perfect!" she said, clapping her hands together once. "You met me in Dallas. It was love at first sight, and we were wed. No one's seen me around because it was only just recently I've been able to move to the ranch, what with all my stuff I needed transported."

"What stuff?"

She waved her hand in front of her face. "Not important. All we need to do is convince the sheriff."

"You sure this is going to work?"

Looking down at herself, she said, "Not if I'm wearing this. Tell me you have some dresses I can wear."

"Sorry, Jilly. You're stuck on a ranch full of men."

"Damn it." Now what?

She glanced back into Mitch's eyes. "Do you care about your reputation?"

"Of course I care. It's good for business."

Heaving a sigh, she ran her fingers through her hair.

"Why? What's going through that pretty little head of yours?"

"If I don't have a dress to wear, we're going to have to improvise."

He kept silent, waiting for her to explain.

"I'll have to wear my jeans, Mitch. If I can borrow one of your shirts, some boots, maybe a hat, too, I might be able to get away with being a tomboy of sorts, a woman who was born and raised on my daddy's spread."

His eyes widened, but he didn't say a word. The silence stretched on until he finally said, "We can ask Robert for his extra pair of boots. He's the smallest man on the ranch."

Jillian jumped into his arms and kissed him all over his face. "I promise I won't embarrass you much."

"Ah, honey," he whispered, holding her close. "You'll never embarrass me. I'll be nothing but proud of the woman who gave me her love and fought for my life."

She rewarded him with a firm, passionate kiss for that declaration.

"Let's get some food, cowboy. I'm famished."

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Rummaging through the kitchen, Mitch found a half of a loaf of bread along with a few cuts of a left-over roast cooked from the night before. Or at least, he thought it was from the night before. Jillian smiled at him when he said he honestly couldn't remember. It had been so long that he'd lived this very day over and over, after all.

She decided not to be picky when her stomach growled at the delicious aroma. He showed her the finer points of making coffee in his metal pot on the stove, and in no time, they were sipping the coffee she'd brought through time. It wouldn't last long, but having a piece of her old life comforted her somewhat.

After they'd eaten, she dressed in a dark red shirt that was at least two sizes too big. Mitch had left the house only to return with his ranch hand's extra pair of boots. They were still a bit big on her, but they'd have to do. She even braided her hair, hoping she'd look more respectable if her hair was pulled back.

"How do I look?"

Mitch regarded her and rubbed his chin. "Gorgeous, as always. You're gonna create quite a stir in town, honey."

"That's the idea," she said, looking at herself in his standing mirror. "I'm hoping I'll create such a stir, it'll be nigh impossible for that sheriff of yours to ignore me. I'm not leaving town until that lawman is following us."

She set her jaw and turned to see the wide, handsome grin on Mitch's face. "Couldn't ask for a better woman."

His approval meant the world to her. "You're not going to die today. I'll see to it."

He nodded. "I believe you will."

She gave him a grin. "You got another horse?"

"An old gelding, Beauregard. Why?"

Walking past him, she ran her hand across his chest before exiting

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the room. "You don't think I'm going into town in a wagon, do you?"

"Well, I—"

Jillian began walking down the stairs. "Nope. If we're going to pull the wool over the sheriff's eyes, he's gotta believe I am who we say I am. If I'm not afraid to wear a man's britches, then I ain't afraid to ride no horse. Like a man."

Mitch laughed at the tone of her voice. She laughed too and took his hand, leading him back out into the soft rain.

"Come on, that lightning and thunder will be here before we know it."

He led her to the barn and showed her how to saddle old Beau before helping her astride. In no time, he was on Gypsy, and they were on their way to Cold Creek.

"Okay, now I'm nervous." Butterflies swirled in her belly. "What if he laughs at me? I have no idea how your etiquette works in eighteen seventy-seven."

"Calm down, you'll be fine. And if it doesn't work, we'll think of something else."

She sure-as-shit hoped so.

Riding a horse into town took decidedly longer than it did in a car. But it was pleasant riding Mitch's gelding, who was a sweetheart of a horse, flipping his ears back just to listen to her talk. She patted his dark brown neck and gave him a few scratches. Beau shook his head and chuffed.

"Think you've made a friend," Mitch said, his eyes twinkling. "He likes you."

"Let's hope he's not the only one."

Cold Creek was much smaller in Mitch's time than it was in hers. A big white church stood at the edge of town, its steeple reaching for the sky. A few buildings spread on either side of the main drag, which was nothing more than a dirt road with wagons and cowboys meandering to and fro. A general store, a saloon, and a mercantile were evident, along with the jailhouse and a few homes of local residents.

As they passed the bank, Jillian heard a few gasps. She chanced a

glance at the wooden boardwalk and noticed two older women staring at her in shock with their hands over their mouths. Not knowing what else to do, she smiled and tipped her hat. The ladies gasped again.

Mitch chuckled at her. "Come on, Jilly. Don't you worry about them."

She did her best to ignore the people of town, but she knew, she just knew, they were staring at her. Once they stopped in front of the jailhouse, Mitch dismounted and reached up to help her down.

She accepted his help gladly. She'd probably fall on her ass if she tried to dismount herself.

"Wanna give those old gossipers something to titter on about?" he asked, giving her an absolutely devilish grin.

He didn't wait for her answer. Instead, he curled his hand behind her neck and brought her mouth to his. And he didn't give her a chaste kiss, either. His tongue plunged into her, over and over again, leaving no room for doubt exactly how passionately he was kissing her. Once he let her go, she couldn't see anyone but him.

"You're a bad boy, Mitchell," she whispered, breathless.

He tapped her nose and stepped away. "Nah, I just claimed you in front of all these cowboys. I ain't gonna share."

"Oh, is that what you were doing? And here I thought you just wanted to kiss me."

"I wanna do more than kiss you, Jilly."

Someone heard his words and scoffed on the boardwalk behind them. Mitch didn't even bother to see who they were. He merely smiled down at her.

"Well, damn," she said. "And here I was worried that I'd ruin your reputation. You seem to be doing a fine job on your own."

He cocked his head at her, then grabbed her hand. "Come on, sheriff's in here."

Mitch walked into the jailhouse. Thankfully, no one was in the two cells in the back of the room.

"Crenshaw," the sheriff bellowed. He stood and held out his hand. "What brings you into town? And who is this...lovely woman?"

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Mitch shook his hand, then nodded to her. "Sheriff Duffy, this here is my wife, Mrs. Jillian Crenshaw."

She didn't miss the way his chest puffed when he said that. He was obviously proud to introduce her as his wife.

The sheriff held his hand out to her as well. "Your wife? Didn't know you were married."

She took his hand and managed to blush when he kissed the back of hers. "It was a whirlwind courtship, I assure you," she said. "We married in Dallas."

"Oh, wonderful." The sheriff glanced down at her clothing and coughed behind his hand. She smiled at him, knowing full well he was probably overcoming his shock, yet too polite to say a word.

For the next few minutes, they explained to the sheriff the circumstance of their marriage and her history, just like they'd agreed upon. It didn't take long before the sheriff relaxed a bit and asked them to have a seat in two chairs that sat in front of his desk.

"So," Sheriff Duffy said, folding his hands in front of him. "To what do I owe this visit?"

Mitch opened his mouth, but Jillian stopped him by placing her hand on his arm. "I've heard my husband was a witness to a brutal murder."

Duffy nodded. "That's right."

"Well, sir, I haven't been on my husband's ranch long, but I'm hearing all sorts of talk your Mr. Hennessy is out for Mitchell's blood. As you can understand, I'm more than a little upset over it."

The sheriff sat up in his chair. "And where have you heard this?"

Her heart was pounding, and her palms were sweaty. She desperately wanted to wipe them on her pants, but figured that wouldn't be proper. Thankfully, Mitch saw her fidgeting and reached for her hand, holding it in his own, lending her his strength. Duffy smiled at the tender gesture.

"My husband's ranch hands have been saying all kinds of colorful things, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Men have been known to say all sorts," Duffy said. "But I've

heard news Hennessy's hightailed it to Colorado."

"Pardon me saying so, sir, but you're wrong."

Duffy pinned her with his stare. "You have proof Fred Hennessy is in town?"

Think, Jillian, think!

"Not definite proof," she said. "But in riding around our ranch, I've found signs someone's been snooping on the property."

"Oh?"

"Hoof prints where there shouldn't be any, a few random butts of cigars."

"That's hardly proof Hennessy is out to kill your husband, ma'am. Any of the ranch hands could have—"

"I know!" she exclaimed, then cleared her throat. "But, you see, things have been out of place in the house as well. Even in our..." she glanced at Mitch, "bedroom."

Sheriff Duffy seemed to blush himself.

"Well, I...I...still don't believe there's anything for you to worry about. Your husband is an astute man. You seen anything suspicious, Crenshaw?"

Mitch nodded. "Yes, sir. And the rumors we've been hearing have kept my wife up at nights."

"How do you know you don't have a crooked ranch hand?"

"I don't," he answered. Jillian was ready to kick him in the shin. She gave him a look of shock. He ignored her. "But I trust my men with my life. And when Jilly gets ideas in her head, I'm not one to stop her. She wanted to come and talk to you herself."

Jillian nodded when Duffy looked back at her. "Ma'am, I appreciate all your concern, but I have it on good authority Hennessy isn't anywhere near your husband's ranch. If you have further concerns, feel free to come back and talk to me. But today is my daughter's third birthday, and if I don't get back—"

"Please." Jillian began to panic. The sheriff wasn't listening. Mitch said he probably wouldn't, but she hadn't been prepared to face that reality. She'd told Mitch she was good at the waterworks, and that had

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been true. But she wasn't so sure the tears that welled in her eyes now weren't real. "Please, Sheriff, you've got to at least come out and take a look around."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but..."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Please," she said again. "You don't know how much this scares me. These rumors, they're getting worse, and all the ranch hands believe someone's been snooping around. We do too. Every day it's something new. Considering that my husband is your star witness to put Hennessy behind bars, I think his life should be worth saving."

"Mrs. Crenshaw, I did not mean to imply that I do not care if your husband lives or dies."

"Sheriff Duffy, I'm begging you." Tears rolled down her face, and she couldn't keep her voice from wavering. Leaning across his desk, she took his folded hands in hers. "I need you to come out and check the property. At least check on these rumors. I...I'm terrified to go back there. What if Mitchell dies?" She choked on the word. "Sir, I could not survive it."

Duffy sighed. "I'll come out tomorrow, ma'am, and—"

"No!" she yelped. "It has to be today! I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Sheriff, but it's been eating at me for the better part of a week now. You can't let me down, you just can't! Not when Mitch has been singing your praises."

Duffy glanced at Mitch, who inclined his head, but said nothing.

In that moment, Jillian couldn't hold it together anymore. True terror overcame her, and she couldn't stop sobbing. Mitch's strong arms pulled her to him until she sat on his lap in the chair.

"Sheriff," Mitch pleaded. "Surely you can ride out, take a look, and be home in time for supper? For my wife's peace of mind."

Jillian clutched onto Mitch's shirt, holding him close. The sheriff was silent for so long, she thought he wouldn't answer. But his words were the most blessed words she'd ever heard.

"All right, Crenshaw. I'll come. But Maggie won't take too kindly to this."



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"We'll make it up to your wife," Mitch said, relief clearly in his tone. "I promise."

"You had better," Duffy said, standing from his chair.

Jillian wiped her face and glanced up at the sheriff with hope. New tears fell, but this time, they were tears of joy.

"You'll come?" she squawked.

Duffy grabbed his hat off a peg in the wall. "Yeah, I'll follow you two out of town. After I have some lunch. On your dime."

Jillian glanced at Mitch who nodded. "More than fair."

She poked him in the ribs.

"More than fair," he said again, his eyes searching hers. They had time. Not much, but some. If the sheriff wanted to eat before he came out to the ranch, they'd humor him. As long as he came. That was all that mattered.

## Chapter Twelve

By the time the sheriff had eaten his fill, it was late afternoon. Jillian worried her lips with her teeth as she looked at the giant storm cloud brewing above them. Off in the distance, a flash could be seen within that cloud, followed by the slow rumble of thunder a few seconds later.

"It's gettin' late," the sheriff said behind a yawn as they made their way back to the ranch. "Won't be able to stay long, mind."

Jillian shook her head and put on her best smile. "Just a quick look around the property is all we ask."

Duffy squirmed in his saddle like it was all he could do not to point his horse toward his own home. It was obvious the man thought he was wasting his time. But all they needed was for him to be there when Hennessy showed his face, and maybe, just maybe, they'd get the upper hand this time.

The house was in the distance when the rain fell harder.

"Great," the sheriff complained. He turned up the collar on his coat and pulled his hat down low. "Hate this weather."

"Tell me about it," Mitch grumbled under his breath.

"You say you've seen discarded cigars on your land, Mrs. Crenshaw?"

She glanced at Duffy. "That's right. Over by Bunker's Hill."

He pointed to the rise near the house. "That Bunker's Hill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great. I'm sure you won't mind if I take your leave to look

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around?"

He didn't wait for a reply. Kicking his horse, the sheriff took off in the direction of the hill.

Mitch let out a breath. "Bringing that man out here was like pulling teeth!"

"At least he's here. I'm hoping it's enough of a change to disrupt your...murder."

"Me too."

She glanced again at the sky and heaved a breath.

"I'm terrified, Mitch. What if this doesn't work?"

He shrugged, obviously more calm than she was. How could he give her such a nonchalant glance? The man was facing his own death. Wasn't he the least bit scared?

Of course he was. But he'd faced it for so long, it was now a part of who he was.

"If it doesn't work, then we'll try again next time."

"You think there'll be a next time?"

"I know there'll be a next time," he said. "Been riding the lightning long enough to know that beside my death, it's the only sure thing I've got to look forward to."

"How much longer?"

He looked at the sky. "Very soon."

Chills raced along her skin as she glanced around. There wasn't much brush to hide that bastard outlaw, but there were a few bushes near the road and a small copse of trees at the bottom of the hill. Those were the most likely places he was hiding. He was probably there even now.

Mitch looked at her like he knew what she was thinking. "I want you to take Beau to the barn. You don't come out for any damn reason, you got me?"

"I'm not going to leave you out here to get shot!"

"Yes, you are, Jilly." His eyes shot daggers at her. She shot them right back.

She opened her mouth to reply, but he cut her off.

"I'm not about to have you in the way of bullets when you don't

have a weapon to defend yourself."

"Then give me one of your guns," she said flippantly, holding out her hand.

"Don't be absurd."

"You're the one that—"

"I know what I said, Jillian!" He was upset. Mitch never used her full name unless he wanted her to listen to him. "I want you in that barn, and I want you to promise me you'll stay there. Things are about to go from bad to worse. If you die in this time, I won't have a goddamn thing to look forward to. If we break this cycle at the price of your death, then I'll only be trading this hell for another one. I refuse to face the rest of my life without you!"

He stared hard at her. His logic made sense, damn him.

"Fine, I'll go," she said sourly. "But if you're in trouble, I'm not making any promises to stay there."

"Jilly. Jillian!"

She rode past him to the barn, ignoring his calls. She'd probably pissed him off, but she didn't care. She wasn't about to let him die, even if she had to fight Mitch himself to do it.

Old Beau knew where his stall was and walked into it without her prompting. She dismounted, albeit clumsily, and gave him a few pats on the neck. He nudged her with his large head.

After watching Mitch put the tack on the horse, she figured she could take it off. Loosening the buckle on the bridle, she pulled it off and hung it on the wall. Next, she loosened the girth strap and slid the saddle to the ground. It was heavy, but not unmanageable. The small blanket placed underneath the saddle slipped right off, and in no time, the gelding was eating oats from his feed trough.

Taking care of the horse gave her something else to think about, at least. But when the shot rang out across the yard, she couldn't help the shocked screech that came out of her mouth.

Dashing from Beau's stall, she raced to the doors of the barn. Hunkering down, she watched as Mitch and the sheriff headed for cover behind the house.

"That him?" Duffy called out.

"Yep!" Mitch replied.

The men dismounted once they had cover and leaned against the wall. The sheriff glanced around the structure only to get shot at.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed.

Jillian's heart was in her throat. That outlaw was mad. Plumb nuts. He didn't care who he killed. The woman he'd gunned down had most likely not been his first.

"Hennessy!" Duffy yelled. "Give it up. You're already gonna hang for murder!"

A voice called out near the hill. "Then I ain't got nothin' to lose!"

More shots filled the air, but this time, bullets hit the barn door right where Jillian was listening. She squealed and jumped back into the building.

"Jilly!" Mitch's voice was panicked.

"I'm okay!" she yelled.

Laughter echoed across the yard. "Did I find your woman, Crenshaw? Maybe I'll kill her instead o' you!"

"Oh, God." Jillian's heart was in her throat. Crawling on all fours, she attempted to hide in the empty stall near Beau. She was a sitting duck in here, and that bastard probably knew it. If she ran out the front or the back door, she'd be vulnerable. There was absolutely nowhere to hide, and she didn't have a gun.

Damn Mitch for not giving her one!

"You stay away from her, Hennessy. It's me you want."

A sudden rain of gunfire came from outside moments before Hennessy himself rode right into the barn like he owned the place, looking for her.

"I know you're in here, darlin'. Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Jillian vaguely heard shouting from outside. She could only hope Mitch and Duffy were running across the yard to her rescue. But she couldn't think about that. Hennessy had found her.

"There you are!"

He jumped off his horse and walked right up to her in the stall,

grabbing her by her braid. He hauled her in front of him. His breath stank like sour whiskey, and his eyes were wild. His greasy hair and body odor were proof he didn't bathe much, while the gaps in his teeth made her turn away from his cruel grin.

"My, you're a pretty 'un, ain't ya, sweetheart? Might have a bit of fun before I end you."

She tried to get out of his grasp, but he was strong, twisting her arm behind her back.

"You ever fucked the barrel of a gun?" he whispered in her ear. "Oh, you might just find out what it's like."

"Mitchell!"

Hennessy twisted her arm until fiery pain shot throughout her entire body. He pressed her so close to him, she could feel his cock digging into her hip as he undulated against her.

Without another thought, Jillian brought her right knee up and connected with his balls. He squealed like a pig and let her go. Clutching her hands together, she beat the side of his face with all her might. He stumbled, and she tore out of the stall.

He cursed behind her, but despite her efforts, she went down when the man launched at her. His entire weight fell on top of her back, knocking the wind from her lungs.

"Let her go!"

Duffy's blessed voice was followed by the cocking of his gun. Hennessy laughed and stood, dragging her with him. The cold gun in his hand rested directly on her temple.

Her heart exploded in her chest as her fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. The sheriff pointed his gun at them while Hennessy used her as a shield.

Where was Mitch? He wasn't in the doorway with Duffy. She could only hope he was circling around the barn to come at the outlaw from behind.

Her fear was so great she tasted bile in the back of her throat. Christ, she was going to be sick.

"Let her go, Hennessy," the sheriff said again. "She has nothing to

do with this."

"You're wrong, Sheriff," the man said, mockingly. "She's gonna choke on my dick, and I'm going to make that asshole Crenshaw watch!"

"You're insane!" she yelled just before he tightened his hold around her neck. She couldn't draw a deep breath to save her life.

"No one's askin' you, sweetheart," Hennessy growled in her ear.

The man was strong. She had no hope of weaseling out of his grasp. The sheriff stepped closer, prompting the outlaw to dig his gun harder into her temple. She hissed with horror.

"Looks like that man of yours done pissed his pants and left yer ass."

Hennessy's horse trotted out of the barn, apparently not happy with all the shouting.

"Back off, Duffy," he said. "I'm takin' this woman, or I'm killin' her. Your choice."

Another gun cocked behind them. "You're the only one who's gonna die today."

Mitch!

He must have rounded to the barn's back door, the one that led to the range.

Hennessy turned sideways to keep both men in his sights. Neither Duffy nor Mitch could get a clean shot. She was in the way. Then something came to her, something she'd seen in the movies. If she went limp, he wouldn't be able to support her weight without falling with her. There was a chance she'd get shot, but that was a price she was willing to pay to stop this man from killing Mitch.

She took a chance and fell to the ground, bringing that bastard right along with her.

## Chapter Thirteen

What happened next was a blur. Jillian dropped, making Hennessy cry out in shock. His gun went off, and the bullet narrowly missed her head as it struck the rafters of the barn. Her heart thundered against her ribs as she twisted out of his grasp, only to hear another gunshot behind her.

Mitch had fired, but missed, hitting the dirt next to Hennessy's leg. The outlaw twisted to return fire, but she managed to knock his hand, just as he pulled the trigger. Mitch cried out in pain.

"No!" she shrieked, watching as he fell to the ground, favoring his right calf.

Hennessy backhanded her and suddenly her field of vision exploded with stars. Her ears rang, and she could barely make out the sound of the man scrambling to his feet.

Without warning, Sheriff Duffy launched himself at Hennessy, knocking him back once more. The two men scuffled on the ground, too evenly matched in strength to tell who would get the upper hand.

Jillian crawled to Mitch. "Are you all right?" he asked her through clenched teeth.

"I should be asking you the same question. Where are you hit?"

He pointed down, and she saw his pants wet with blood from his knee down. "Don't think it's so bad," he gritted out. "Think he just nicked me."

Someone got in a good punch, and the sound of it echoed



throughout the barn. The muffled gunshot took Jillian by surprise. Sheriff Duffy went limp, but still tried to draw his other gun with a useless arm. Hennessy kicked him off and stood, pointing his gun directly at her.

Mitch tried to put himself within the line of fire by covering her body with his, but the hollow click told her the outlaw's gun was empty. With a growl, Hennessy sprinted for the door.

He was getting away!

Not on her watch.

Jillian took hold of the pistol on Mitch's left hip and tugged it out of his gun belt.

"Jilly, what are you—"

"I'm finishing this!" she screamed at him.

He looked at her in shock before his features hardened. "The hell you are!"

"Watch me." She stood and sprinted out the barn door, narrowly missing his hand as it swiped at her ankle.

"Jillian, get your ass back here!"

She didn't listen. There was Hennessy, dashing toward his horse like the cowardly son of a bitch he was.

"Freeze, asshole!"

The man reached his horse but didn't mount. Instead, he barely held his hands up, then turned to face her. A mocking grin was on his face.

"Well, I must say, I've never been in this situation before."

"Looks like you're the one who's gonna be fucked by the barrel of this gun."

He laughed. "Do it then, honey. Go ahead, kill me in cold blood. I dare ya."

Her eyes burned, but that didn't stop her from cocking Mitch's gun.

"Jillian!"

His voice distracted her. In that moment, Hennessy pulled a shotgun from a holster in his saddle and pointed it right at her. Her gun shook as he cocked his own. The sound raised every hair on her body. He began walking slowly toward her.

"From far away, buckshot'll just hurt. Give you a few stinging welts. But do you know what it does to a body when you fire point blank?"

"Don't come any closer!"

"It'll rip you apart," he said, continuing to advance.

"I'll shoot you!"

Hennessy shook his head. "No you won't. If you had it in you, then you would have done it already."

She began to hyperventilate. The bastard was right. She couldn't kill him. She thought she'd be able to do it. Oh...God.

He raised his gun and aimed right at her. She stood there, frozen like a deer caught in headlights. Move! Her body wouldn't listen to her brain. Move, goddamn it!

She hit the ground just as Hennessy fired, sending his buckshot into the side of the barn. She rolled and pointed in his general direction. Saying a prayer and hoping she had a good aim, she squeezed her trigger, thankful she hadn't dropped Mitch's gun.

The gun exploded, knocking her arm back against the ground, but her shot went wide.

Hennessy raised his shotgun again and stood right over her like a conquering hero, grinning evilly from ear to ear.

"Checkmate," he growled, his eyes on fire. The barrels of his gun were mere inches from her nose. She felt the heat radiating from them. "Get on yer knees, bitch. I'm as hard as a rock, and yer gonna suck me dry."

Another shot rang from the direction of the barn, and the outlaw's breath escaped him in a whoosh.

He dropped right in front of her, his shotgun clattering to the dirt. Jillian cried out at the unexpectedness of it and stared into his cold, lifeless eyes. A look of shock was still written on Hennessy's face as his thick, red blood stained the earth from a gaping wound on his chest. The bastard was dead.

"Jilly!"

She turned at the sound of that voice. Mitch had managed to crawl

to the barn door and shoot him. With a cry, she stood and ran to him, sliding in the dirt to embrace him. He crushed her to his chest with a strength she didn't know he had.

"Jilly, you ever, ever do something like that again, I'll kick your ass. Thought I'd lost you, woman."

"I thought I'd lost you too," she whispered to him, finally letting her tears fall. "Oh, God, Mitch, he was going to make me..." She couldn't finish.

"Did I kill him?" His voice was soft as he stroked her hair.

"Yes." She pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. "He's dead. He's finally dead!"

"I should have shot the bastard when I witnessed him murder that woman. It's no less than he deserves." Mitch spat in disgust.

A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky with a clap of thunder following not too far behind. Jillian glanced at the angry, grey sky, then back into Mitch's face.

He stared at her as well, and a slow smile of understanding crossed his face. He wasn't dead. He was alive. And he'd never ride the lightning again.

"We did it," she said, sniffing.

He took her into his arms again and breathed deep. "You did it, Jilly. You saved me." His arms tightened. "Without you, I couldn't have stopped him. You saved me."

She lost track of how long he held her close, but she wouldn't have let go of him for all the riches in the world. He hid a sob in her shoulder, and she clutched onto the back of his head, trying her best to soothe his raging emotions.

"I'm alive," he cried. "I'm alive, and I'm with you."

The way his deep voice trembled had her tears falling freely as well.

"I'm never leaving you, cowboy."

He pulled back and framed her face with his hands. Now, instead of tears, she saw a look of utter joy on his face. He laughed and tossed back his head, grunting as he stood on his one good leg.

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She stood with him and shrieked when he grabbed her and swung her in circles.

“I’m alive!” he exclaimed before swooping in for a passionate, desperate, liberating kiss.

They’d done it. They’d saved his life.

The fact she wasn’t disappearing to the future told her she was in eighteen seventy-seven to stay. With Mitch. Forever.

Her euphoria couldn’t be any greater.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Sheriff Duffy had been shot in the right shoulder. Despite the blood, he was up and talking, shocked that Hennessy had been in the area, much less dead. Mitch's ranch hands had heard the shots from the range and had ridden in just as it was getting dark.

Within no time, both Mitch and the sheriff had been bandaged. Mitch was right about just being grazed by the outlaw's bullet. It hadn't gone through his leg, but it had taken a good chunk as it whizzed on by.

"I don't want Hennessy buried on my property," Mitch growled as he stood over the man's corpse.

"We'll take care of him, boss," a man named Robert said, smacking him on the shoulder. "We'll take him into town and let the undertaker deal with him."

"S'pose you should, much as I want to leave him for the buzzards."

Jillian touched his arm. He glanced down at her and gave her a half-hearted smile.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He wrapped his arm around her and turned away. "My leg hurts. But I'd trade death with a wound any damn day of the week."

She chuckled at him.

He walked over to where the sheriff sat just inside the barn. "I think you should go with the boys into town," he told him. "See the doc, make sure you'll live."

Duffy nodded. "Yeah, think I might do that. Help me up?"

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He winced as Mitch hauled him to his feet. Once the wagon was loaded with Hennessy's dead body, Mitch threw a canvas over him, then made sure the sheriff's horse was tied to the back.

"All set, boss," Robert said.

"Maggie's gonna kill you, Crenshaw," Duffy said with a wink. "Probably tomorrow, she'll come out fixin' to finish what Hennessy started."

Mitch laughed. "I wouldn't expect any less of her, sheriff. She's got every reason to be right pissed."

Duffy offered his hand to Jillian. She took it, and he gave her a firm handshake, despite his pain. "You're a good woman, Mrs. Crenshaw."

"Please, it's Jillian," she told him.

"You take care of this lady." Duffy gave Mitch a long, hard stare.

He nodded once. "I aim to take care of her for the rest of my life."

"I'll send the doc out here first thing in the morning to check on you."

Mitch moved his leg and groaned. "Appreciate it."

"You go on in the house," another ranch hand named Barney said, shooing Mitch and Jillian away from the barn. "We'll clean up this mess. You go take care of your husband, ma'am."

"Thank you," Jillian said with a grin.

Mitch leaned heavily on her, but managed to hobble to the house and hop up the steps.

"Damn, this hurts, honey," he said through clenched teeth.

"I know. Can you make it to your room?"

"What are my options?" he asked, glancing at the staircase as if it were Mt. Everest.

"If you can make it up the stairs, you'll be in your bed. If you can't, you've got the couch."

"Only one option has you in my arms, though, right?"

She blushed at him. "Don't think that couch is big enough for two."

"Then it's settled. You're never leaving these arms. If I hold on to the railing, I can make it upstairs."

"You're sure?"

"Now's not the time to question my ability as a man, Jilly."

She chuckled. "It has nothing to do with being a man and everything to do with getting yourself shot."

They were halfway up the staircase when his body tensed.

"Don't you talk to me about getting shot. You could have died today from your antics."

She gasped and almost let go of him. He swayed precariously before she caught him again. "My antics? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know damn well what it means." He was angry. Probably downright pissed, but she knew he would be. She'd defied him, gone against his wishes and went after Hennessy. She was probably about to get a piece of his mind.

"Look, Mitch—"

"No, you listen to me." Once they reached the top, he was almost out of breath. But he turned to face at her, regardless. "That man was about as unstable as they come. He's been killing me for over a century, and you chased after him like he was timid old Beauregard!"

"He was going to get away."

Mitch leaned in close. The scent of leather and sandalwood tickled her nose. It was all she could do not to swoon.

"I don't give a shit if the man was killin' nuns on a Sunday. I told you to leave him, and you didn't. You could have gotten killed. If it hadn't been for my lucky shot, I'd be burying you instead of Hennessy."

She swallowed hard at his intensity. She knew he'd never hurt her, but the sparks in his eyes made her wonder. Her belly jumped, and sudden memories of Vince filled her mind. She took an involuntary step away from him, backing against the wall.

He must have recognized the fear on her face. His anger was instantly gone, replaced with remorse.

"Jilly, I'm sorry, honey." His voice was soft, soothing. He held his hand out to her. "I'm furious at you for risking your life, but I'll never lay a hand on you in anger. Ever."

She closed her eyes and nodded, knowing full well he meant what he said. But that fury had been there, so close to the familiar look in

Vince's eyes that she couldn't quite swallow her trepidation.

"Hey." Mitch's palm cradled her face. She nuzzled into it, finally opening her eyes. His dark gaze searched hers.

"I know you're not Vince," she whispered. "That's why you've got to understand. I had to do what I could to save you. I'm in love with you. If I didn't lose you today, I'd only lose you tomorrow if we let Hennessy get away."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do," she countered. "If Hennessy has killed you in a new way every time you've come back to this day, there'd be no stopping him. For all we know, he would have circled around and waited for us to emerge from the barn before picking us off."

Mitch glanced at his boots and ran his fingers through his hair.

"You're the one who told me that, no matter what you did, he'd always kill you by the end of the day. Every single time, without question. I couldn't let him leave. I couldn't, Mitch."

Stepping close, she pressed her hands to his chest. "Don't be mad at me for something that could have happened. I'm right here. I'm not hurt."

"That doesn't excuse the fact you didn't listen to me, Jilly."

She nodded. "You're right."

"If we're going to be married, my job is to protect you. I can't do that if you don't listen to me."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he stopped her with his finger.

"You're in my world now, honey. You don't know a thing about life in my time. I do."

"I'm not going to be a slave, Mitch."

"No one's asking you to be."

"I won't always agree with you and obey your every order, either."

He looked as if he was amused. The slow grin on his face confirmed her thoughts. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"I don't expect you to," he answered, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. "Marriage is about give and take."

"But—"



"All I want you to do," he said, interrupting her, "is to give me the benefit of the doubt that I might know what I'm talking about when it comes to your safety in my time."

His words took the wind right out of her sails. Damn it, he was making sense again.

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I'll give you that much."

"Good," he said with a grimace. "Because I can't stand here much longer and argue with you."

She clutched onto his waist again, helping him down the hall to his room. To their room.

Once she had him undressed, she ignored his heavenly body and stared at the bandages on his calf. "You're going to have one hell of a scar."

He shrugged. "Worth it."

She smiled, then stood and began undressing until she was in nothing but her cotton panties and the red button-up shirt he'd given her earlier.

"Come lay with me, baby," he said, patting the bed with a yawn. "I'm so tired."

She yawned with him and stretched out against his warmth. She'd never been more content than she was at that moment.

"I just thought of something."

He pried one eye open and looked at her warily. "What?"

"We've been telling everyone we're already married, that we got hitched in Dallas."

"Yeah?"

"Well, we can't get married in town, now can we? That'd raise too many eyebrows, and we'd face too many questions."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Mr. Crenshaw, that if you ever intend on marrying me, we'll have to make a trip all the way to Dallas."

He pulled her closer and kissed the tip of her nose. "Done. We'll just tell folks you wanted to get away after recent events."

"Mmm." She snuggled up to him. "Mitch?"

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"Yeah?" he said again, this time sounding even more exhausted.

"Why do you think you were solid in your ghost form?"

He thought about that for a moment. "I don't know, unless whatever pulled me through time pulled my body through as well."

"But...you were dead. Weren't you?"

"In this time, yes. But maybe..."

"What?" she asked when he'd left his sentence hanging.

"I was always pulled through the storm at the very moment of my death. It could be that my body, and Gypsy's, were pulled through the void, healed somehow, and dropped back into the same day once the storm passed in your future."

"So you think you might have been alive in my time as well?"

"I don't now. I'll probably never know. But I didn't feel any different than I do right now. I appeared and disappeared with the storms, but I couldn't walk through walls. I just couldn't stop this damn endless cycle—until you came along. Then somehow, some way, I was able to control when the storm would come in your time. It makes my head hurt just thinking about it."

She leaned up and kissed his lips softly. "Do you think Hennessy is riding the lightning now?"

Mitch heaved a sigh and closed his eyes. "I don't know. Guess we'll find out during the next thunderstorm."

After a few minutes of silence, she whispered, "The storm's moving on."

He didn't answer her. He was sound asleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

Jillian was dreaming of Mitch. His hands were rolling her nipples, tightening her belly and sending tendrils of desire throughout her entire body. His face, scratchy with stubble, was nuzzling her neck, whispering for her to wake up.

It wasn't until she felt his heavy cock against her thigh that she realized she wasn't dreaming. Mitch was indeed fondling her, lowering his hand to rub her clit through her panties.

She opened wider and raised her hips.

"Mornin'" he said, a downright devilish grin on his face.

Glancing at the window, she could see the gold and pink of dawn shining in the sky.

"You know how long it's been since I've seen sunlight, Jilly?" he asked, rolling on top of her. "You've given it back to me."

His words melted her, but she couldn't answer. His mouth found hers, and for long, heated moments, he pressed his tongue into her while making damn sure she felt his erection.

He'd managed to unbutton her shirt while she slept, but that's as far as he'd undressed her.

"I want you," he whispered, setting her skin on fire.

She caressed his long cock, watching in awe as he hissed through his teeth.

"Let me taste you," she said, holding his eye contact. He shuddered and kicked off the blankets with his good leg before lying back, allowing

her full rein of his body. "Close your eyes, Mitchell."

He complied, and she smiled. Kneeling between his legs, she cupped his balls before licking her way up his shaft, from root to tip. He cried out the moment her mouth encased him, pumping up and down slowly. She made sure he felt every sensation as she swirled her tongue upon his cock, savoring his male scent and the salty flavor of his skin.

She took him into her until he hit the back of her throat, moaning as he gasped. She was wet for him, wet and ready to have him thrusting into her. But not yet. For now, she was content to suckle him, to give him back the pleasure he'd once given her. She tried to take him in as far as she could, over and over again.

Suddenly, he grabbed her arms and hauled her up his body. He didn't say a word as he flipped her to her back, but he didn't have to. Her ministrations had broken his control. He was going to take her now, fast, and rough.

She welcomed him into the hollow of her hips and cried out the moment he rammed forth, claiming her body. His mouth captured her cries as he possessed her, in, out, slapping his skin against hers.

She wanted him, just like this, making her come as he thrust hard and deep inside her. Her pleasure didn't take long in coming. She surrendered just as he did, digging her fingernails into his shoulders at her powerful release.

"Mitch," she gasped, "don't stop, cowboy. Ride me again."

Her words turned him savage. With one fervent kiss, she knew she was in for the ride of her life when he forcefully turned her onto her belly. He grunted when he rose on his knees and concern for his injury flitted through her mind.

Once he entered her from behind, however, all thoughts of his wound were gone as he reached around and caressed her sensitive clit with his expert fingertips.

Oh, Lord. He was pushing against her g-spot again. With each plunge, she felt her orgasm building, and she pushed her hips against him, striving for his pleasure.

When it washed over her, she screamed his name into her pillow

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and hung on tight as he guided her hips against him so hard, the bed shook. With a few more forceful thrusts, he poured into her, and Jillian wasn't sure if she was coming again or merely riding the waves of her previous orgasm. All she knew was he'd just banged her brains out, and she'd loved every damn minute of it.

He released her hips, and she fell to the bed, panting. Mitch pushed her hair away from her neck and kissed her there, his stubble sending goose bumps along her heated skin.

"I love you, Jilly."

The emotion in his words brought tears to her eyes. He withdrew, allowing her to roll over and face him.

"I love you, too, Mitch. So much."

Nothing else mattered to her in that moment but the man who'd staked his claim on her heart, the man she walked through hell for.

The man she'd now take to Heaven.

## Epilogue

It had been a few months since the last one that had brought them back in time, but there it was, another thunderstorm brewing on the horizon. It was moving fast and wouldn't be long before it reached the ranch.

Jillian watched on the porch just as Mitch opened the door to join her.

A few scattered raindrops hit them, and for the first time in a long time, she felt cold fear. What if Hennessy's ghost came back to haunt them? What if he now rode the lightning?

While the thought of him reliving the day of his death filled her with a certain sense of poetic justice, she wasn't looking forward to the possibility that they might have to put up with his ghost.

And if he wasn't a ghost, if he was a real man who rode the lightning like they suspected Mitch had been, could they kill him again?

Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled on top of them. Mitch circled her waist with his arm, drawing her close.

"If he shows, you go into the house, no arguing."

She looked into his eyes but knew better than to argue with him this time. She was his wife now, well and truly. They'd taken that trip to Dallas right after he'd been examined by the doctor of Cold Creek, and he'd made it clear she wasn't to interact with Hennessy's ghost in any way—should he even show.

She nodded, but still managed to be reasonable. "You're giving me

one of your guns whether you like it or not, cowboy."

He narrowed his eyes, but didn't say a word before handing her a gun from his belt. At least he'd given her that much.

Another flash of light and clap of thunder boomed overhead. The rain was a deluge, instantly making rivers of mud in the yard. They scanned the ranch, the barn, and the hill from where they stood on the porch, but Jillian didn't see a sign of that no-good outlaw.

The clean scent of rain was in the air, reminding her of when she'd first met Mitch, when he'd been a mystery, a man she had no hope of being with. Now, she was living in eighteen seventy-seven, with no regrets about the decision she'd made to be with him. Her heart skipped a beat when she glanced at his strong, handsome profile. He'd probably always have that effect on her. She'd never get tired of looking at him.

The storm didn't last long. The rain let up after a few minutes, and the clouds fractured into pieces in the sky, allowing a few beams of sunlight to touch the earth.

"Guess that answers that," Mitch said, now grinning from ear to ear.

"He didn't come," she said in awe.

"He didn't come."

"Why not?"

Mitch shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe timing? Or maybe the Good Lord sent him straight to Hell."

She looked into his eyes. "Your first death was on Bunker's Hill. Maybe that hill sits in some kind of time rift."

"Time rift?"

She nodded. "Like a doorway into the future that also allowed you to return to the past. And that might explain why Hennessy didn't return. He didn't die on that hill."

"But I didn't always die on that hill every time, Jilly."

"Maybe it doesn't matter," she said. "Maybe it's just your first death that trapped you in that loop. We'll probably never know."

He sighed deeply and gazed up at the rise. "I think it's simpler than that."

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"Simpler how?"

"I think his death was justified, and mine wasn't. Perhaps God was giving me a chance to make things right by killing him. Lord knows I had plenty of chances. That bastard was meant to die, not me.

"But I'm not questioning it anymore." He glanced at her, and she smiled. He smiled as well. With a small cry, she jumped into her husband's arms. He squeezed her tight.

"We're free, Mitchell," she whispered against his ear. "We're free!"

He didn't bother with any more words. He merely scooped her against him and walked into the house, silencing her with a breathless, torrid kiss.

The End



**Author Bio**

Rebecca resides in Portland, Oregon with her husband and five children who are the light of her life. A native Californian by birth, but a native Oregonian at heart, Rebecca loves the Pacific Northwest and never plans on leaving.

She's written over twenty novels and loves to hear from her fans. You can visit her on the web at [www.rebeccagoings.com](http://www.rebeccagoings.com) or email her at [rebeccagoings@gmail.com](mailto:rebeccagoings@gmail.com).