

|| TEXAS CROSSROADS #3 ||

On
Lone Star Trail

A Novel

Amanda Cabot



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Amanda Cabot, *On Lone Star Trail*
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For April Kihlstrom,
award-winning author, kindred spirit,
and the best of speaking and signing partners.
I miss the April and Amanda gigs.





*R*elax. Gillian Hodge forced her fingers to stop gripping the steering wheel as if it were a lifeline. This wasn't her Carnegie Hall debut or the finals of the Brooks competition when so much was riding on the outcome. This was a vacation, for Pete's sake. A week with her best friend and the woman who'd been a surrogate grandmother. She should be filled with anticipation, counting the minutes until she arrived, not wound as tightly as a metronome.

Gillian took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. In, out. In, out. The technique had never failed when she'd used it before performances, and it did not fail now. She could feel her neck and shoulder muscles relaxing as she repeated the slow, even breathing. The tension began to drain, and for the first time since she'd left the freeway, Gillian looked at her surroundings rather than concentrating on the highway.

Kate was right. The Texas Hill Country was particularly beautiful in the spring. It had been lovely when she'd been here for Kate's wedding last September, but the fresh green of spring grasses and leaves and the patches of vividly colored wildflowers

turned what had been simply lovely into something spectacular. No wonder Kate kept raving about her new home.

Though it was still difficult to believe that Kate, a dyed-in-the-wool city girl like Gillian, had given up a major promotion and traded a glamorous life as an advertising executive to run a small resort in the middle of Texas, that was exactly what had happened. Of course, one particular man had a lot to do with Kate's decision. She had come to Texas almost kicking and screaming and had discovered true love.

Gillian's smile faded. Despite her father's advice that marriage was what Gillian needed, she wasn't looking for love at Rainbow's End, just a change of scenery and a chance to rest. Months of physical therapy had not accomplished its goal. Her dreams had been crushed—literally—leaving her no choice but to build a new life. At this point, Gillian had no idea of what the future would bring other than that concert stages would not be part of it. After six months of dwelling on what she could no longer do, it was time to discover what other talents she had. But before she did that, she wanted time with the people who'd known her before her name ever graced a marquee.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on the progress you're making, not what you can't do. The scars will fade, and so will the memories. Brushing aside the memories that had so far refused to fade, Gillian scanned the roadway, smiling when she saw what appeared to be an armor-plated animal lumbering along the shoulder. Who wouldn't smile at an armadillo? They looked like something out of prehistoric times. Though she thought they were supposed to be nocturnal, what did she know? Other than her weekend trip for Kate's wedding, the only parts of Texas Gillian had seen were airports, hotels, and concert halls. The only armadillos she'd seen were the stuffed varieties in airport gift shops.

The chuckle that curved her lips upward died as she glanced in the rearview mirror. It couldn't be. Not now. Not here. Gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles whitened, Gillian

stared at the approaching vehicle. The bright red motorcycle, the black-clad rider, the black and red helmet were indelibly etched in her memory along with the damage they had wrought.

She bit her lip, trying to tamp down the fear. It couldn't be the same one. *That* motorcycle was almost two thousand miles away. There must be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men in black leather riding red motorcycles. There was no reason to believe this was the one who had changed her life.

He was going faster now, that horrible red machine eating up the distance between them. Maybe it was the same motorcycle after all. *That* one had been going too fast. Though the police had cited the rider for excessive speed, witnesses had said there was no sign of reckless driving, claiming the crash was an accident. An accident that would haunt Gillian for the rest of her life.

She slowed the car, wanting the bike to pass her. The sooner it was out of her sight, the better. Dimly, she was aware of clouds blocking the sun. In mere seconds, the day—like her mood—had gone from bright and sunny to ominously dark. It wasn't an omen, a portent, or a warning. It was simply a change of weather. And yet Gillian could not tamp back the sense of foreboding. She flinched as a crack of thunder split the sky and the deluge began. Within seconds, the pavement had gone from dry to wet. And still the motorcycle drew closer.

He was in the left lane now, getting ready to pass. Gillian's eyes widened and her heart began to pound. No! Not again! No!



He probably shouldn't have detoured. TJ Benjamin frowned as he headed north. Deb would never have done it. She made plans, developed itineraries, and followed them. Deb never took a detour, and none of her plans involved a motorcycle or sleeping under the stars. As much as she loved traveling, she also loved her creature comforts. That's why she'd insisted on renting a class A

motor home equipped with air conditioning and a microwave. There was no roughing it for Deb. But Deb wasn't here, and he had no reason not to detour.

TJ gave the throttle another twist. Speed might not be the cure for everything, but it did help clear away melancholy. So did the countryside. He was deep in the heart of his home state on a beautiful early April day. If only he let himself, he could find reasons to smile.

As if on cue, a hawk soared above him, looking for an afternoon snack and making TJ grin as his stomach rumbled. He could use a snack himself, something warm instead of the energy bars that had become a staple of his diet. He'd stop in the next town and find a greasy spoon. Meanwhile, he was going to enjoy the detour.

He leaned back and started to relax. Though he'd traveled many of the state's highways, TJ had never explored this part of the Hill Country. His plan had been to continue on US 90 heading west. If he'd followed that plan, he would have reached Big Bend today. Instead, when he'd seen the sign pointing toward Dupree, the town that claimed to be the Heart of the Hills, something had urged him to turn, so here he was heading north. The old TJ wouldn't have done that. But, like Deb, the old TJ was gone.

So what if he was a day or two late getting to Big Bend? The park wasn't going anywhere. It wasn't like he had anyone waiting for him or had anything planned after that. Big Bend was the last item on the bucket list. Once he'd seen it, he would . . .

TJ frowned. The problem was that he didn't know how to finish the sentence. His frown turned into a wry smile as he felt a moment of sympathy for his former students with their complaints about open-ended questions. Multiple choice quizzes were definitely easier.

The hawk, more single-minded than TJ, swooped down and landed on the ground, its head diving into a hole. It appeared the hawk had found its prey.

Focusing on the highway in front of him, TJ noticed a light blue sedan in the distance. It had been little more than a speck when he'd seen it from the top of the last hill, but it was much larger now. Judging from the way he was catching it, it must be going under the speed limit. Probably tourists looking at the Hill Country's fabled spring wildflowers. If that's what they wanted, they'd come to the right place. Bluebonnets carpeted the meadows, their color providing a vivid contrast to the green hills.

TJ had seen his share of bluebonnets, but these were extra special. Though his stomach was protesting his decision, he pulled off the road and reached into his saddlebags for the digital SLR that had cost more than a month's pay. As he rotated the polarizing filter to deepen the hue of the flowers, TJ scowled at the realization that a dark cloud was approaching. He probably shouldn't have stopped, but the bluebonnets were as enticing as the road itself had been.

While his head told him to skip the pictures, his heart rejoiced at the sight of the deep blue flowers with the white and yellow tips, and he carefully composed the shots. It might be foolish. It wasn't as if he was going to try to sell the photos. That had been Deb's dream, not his, and yet he couldn't deny the pleasure of composing a picture that lifted his spirits and made him happy, if only for a moment.

With the camera once more safely stowed, he climbed on the bike and headed north, determined to reach Dupree before the rain began. The last sign had said it was only ten miles farther. With a little luck he could get there and find shelter from the storm that seemed to be gaining on him. The thought had no sooner lodged itself in his brain than the clouds opened and the deluge began.

As raindrops dotted his windshield and slid down his helmet, TJ shook his head. He should have known this would happen. It was just another in the string of bad things that had plagued his life for the past eighteen months.

The blue sedan was only a short distance in front of him now,

rooster tails rising from its rear tires. TJ hated rooster tails. They weren't a problem in an RV or even in a car, but they did nasty things to a motorcycle, throwing dirty water on the windshield and reducing the already lowered visibility. There was only one solution.

A quick twist of the throttle and he'd accelerated enough to pull into the left lane. It would take no more than a couple seconds to pass the car. Only one person inside, he noticed as he approached the sedan. A woman. And then TJ felt his bike begin to hydroplane.

Braking did no good. The bike had a mind of its own, and right now that mind was making it slide. *Please, God*, he prayed as he attempted to keep the bike upright. *Keep me from hitting the car*. Though God hadn't answered his other prayers, this time was different. The bike slid past the car's front fender, then skidded into the guardrail. The next thing TJ knew, he was flying over the handlebars.



No! No! No! Gillian stared in horror as the motorcycle crashed into the guardrail, catapulting the rider into the air. With memories of another motorcycle on another day flashing before her, she stomped the brakes. She hated motorcycles! They were nothing but trouble. Big trouble.

Switching on her emergency flashers, Gillian backed up slowly until she was next to the bike, then shifted the car into park. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it began, but the damage was done. The bike had crashed, and the rider . . . She grabbed her cell phone, frowning at the absence of bars. Kate had joked about the spotty cell service, but this was no joking matter. The rider could be seriously injured, just as she had been that day.

Forcing the painful thoughts aside, Gillian climbed out of the car and approached the guardrail. Deliberately averting her gaze to avoid looking at the bike, she stared at the rider.

“Are you all right?” Gillian called to the man who was lying motionless on the ground. *Please, Lord, let him be all right.* Though she’d spent more than her share of time in hospitals, she knew nothing about CPR and almost as little about first aid.

She started to climb over the guardrail, but as she did, the motorcyclist stood. *Thank you,* she said silently. The man appeared to be checking various body parts as he shook first one arm, then another before repeating the process with his legs. It was only when he extended his left hand a second time and winced as he clenched the fist that Gillian felt herself grow weak.

“Just bruises,” he announced. His voice was brusque, almost as if he was unaccustomed to talking aloud. Or perhaps it was the effort of pretending he wasn’t injured. Gillian was certain that, even if his only injuries were bruises, they were painful ones.

As he took the helmet off, she saw that his dark brown hair was pulled into a ponytail and that he sported a beard sorely in need of trimming. If she’d had to describe him in one word, it would be scruffy. And then she saw his eyes. Almost as dark brown as his hair, they were so filled with sorrow that Gillian felt tears well in hers. Something had hurt this man deeply, and her instincts told her it was not having crashed his bike.

“Are you sure?” she asked, surprised that her voice sounded so calm. Inside she was anything but calm. Just the sight of a red motorcycle was enough to send her into a panic, and one with a crumpled front fender brought back memories that still had the power to paralyze her.

“I was going to call 911, but there’s no cell service.” She held up her phone.

The man shook his head as he bent to inspect his bike. “There’s nothing the EMTs can do. They can’t fix this.” He pointed to the front wheel. The fender had been bent so severely that it had cut the tire. Gillian glanced at the bike. Even if he’d somehow been able to straighten the fender, there was no way to repair the tire.

“It’s not going anywhere,” he said, confirming her thought.

Though the sun was once again warming the air, Gillian shivered. She’d come to Texas to relax, to try to forget about motorcycles and the damage they could do, and here she was, only feet from another motorcycle crash.

Instinct urged her to flee, and yet while she wanted nothing to do with motorcycles or the men who rode them, she could not. She couldn’t let him stand here waiting for a truck to rescue him. What if his injuries were more serious than he believed and he collapsed? He might still be in shock and unaware of how badly he’d been hurt. Gillian knew that was possible, because the full scope of pain hadn’t hit her until she’d been in the ambulance, being rushed to the ER.

“Where were you headed? I’d be glad to take you to the next town.” Glad was an exaggeration, but Gillian knew she couldn’t abandon this man.

As he straightened, she revised her first impression. He was taller than she’d thought, probably six feet, and though it was hard to tell through the leather, he appeared well muscled.

The man nodded in what seemed like a grudging response to her offer. “The next town’s where I was headed. Dupree. The place that advertises itself as the Heart of the Hills.”

A frisson of something—apprehension, excitement, Gillian wasn’t sure which—made its way down her spine. It was probably a coincidence that he had the same destination. “That’s where I’m going too. A friend of mine owns the resort there. Is that where you’re heading?”

It wasn’t Gillian’s imagination that he stiffened. “I just wanted an afternoon snack. Now it’s looking like I’m going to need some repairs. Expensive repairs,” he muttered so softly she almost missed the words.

As another car drove by, Gillian was tempted to flag it down and ask the driver to take care of the man who seemed as prickly as the cactus that lined the highway. Instead, she forced herself

to smile as she said, “I don’t know about repairs, but Kate can provide that snack and a nice warm, dry cabin.”

“I’m afraid not.”

The way he was balking made Gillian suspect money was an issue. What he didn’t know was that it wouldn’t be an issue at Rainbow’s End. Kate and her husband had a sliding rate scale, and on numerous occasions that scale slid all the way to zero.

“You’re wet, you’re hurt, and your bike is in even worse shape. Let’s get you to Rainbow’s End and sort the rest of it out there.”

“Are you always so bossy?” The man took a step toward her, his halting gait proof that he’d done more than bruise himself. Gillian wouldn’t be surprised if he’d pulled a ligament or suffered one of those deep tissue bruises that some people claimed were worse than broken bones.

“I’m usually much worse,” she said. “Besides, it doesn’t look as if you’ve got a lot of alternatives.”

“Good point.” He stared at his bike for a moment, indecision etched on his face, then limped toward it. After unlatching one of the saddlebags, he pulled out a backpack and tossed it onto the backseat of Gillian’s car, then opened the driver’s door for her.

“Thanks, Miss . . .” As he extended his hand for a shake, he let his voice trail off, clearly expecting Gillian to offer her name.

“Hodge,” she said. “Gillian Hodge. And you’re . . .”

The man’s shake was firm, and if he noticed that she winced ever so slightly at the contact, he said nothing. “I’m TJ Benjamin, and as you can see, I’m having a very bad day.”

“It could have been worse,” she said bluntly. “You could have hurt an innocent bystander.”