



Big Sky Secrets (Hqn)

By Linda Lael Miller

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The "First Lady of the West," #1 New York Times bestselling author Linda Lael Miller delivers the stunning finale of her acclaimed series set in Parable, Montana—where love awaits

Self-made tycoon Landry Sutton heads to Hangman Bend's Ranch to sell his land to his brother Zane. Though he's got cowboy in his blood, Landry plans to return to city life before the dust even settles on his boots. Of course, he didn't count on falling for Big Sky Country...or Ria Manning.

Ria's starting to settle into country life herself...until she has a close encounter of the terrifying kind with a buffalo. Turns out the peeping monster belongs to the cowboy next door—and he has her running even more scared than his bison. She wants a home where the buffalo don't roam, and the men don't either. Could Landry's homecoming be her heart's undoing?

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Editorial Review

Review

"Miller's fans will find all her comforting standbys: romance with a dollop of humor, a few charming animals, and an optimistic happy ending"-Publishers Weekly on Big Sky Secrets

"Linda Lael Miller creates vibrant characters and stories I defy you to forget."-#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

"Miller has created unforgettable characters and woven a many-faceted yet coherent and lovingly told tale."
-Booklist on McKettrick's Choice

"Miller's name is synonymous with the finest in western romance."

-RT Book Reviews

"Full of equal parts heart and heartache, Miller's newest western is sure to tug at the heartstrings from the first charming scene to the last."

-RT Book Reviews on Big Sky Summer

"Miller's down-home, easy-to-read style keeps the plot moving, and she includes...likable characters, picturesque descriptions and some very sweet pets."

-Publishers Weekly on Big Sky Country

"A delightful addition to Miller's Big Sky series. This author has a way with a phrase that is nigh-on poetic...this story [is] especially entertaining."

-RT Book Reviews on Big Sky Mountain

"A passionate love too long denied drives the action in this multifaceted, emotionally rich reunion story that overflows with breathtaking sexual chemistry."

-Library Journal on McKettricks of Texas: Tate

"Miller's prose is smart, and her tough Eastwoodian cowboy cuts a sharp, unexpectedly funny figure in a classroom full of rambunctious frontier kids."

-Publishers Weekly on The Man from Stone Creek

"Miller's return to Parable is a charming story of love in its many forms. The hero's struggles are handled in an informed and heartwarming way, and it's easy to empathize with the heroine's desire to start an independent, new life in this sweetly entertaining and alluring tale."

-RT Book Reviews on Big Sky River

About the Author

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

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Scowling and warm behind the ears, Landry Sutton picked himself up off the hoof-hardened ground of Walker Parrish's main corral. Stubbornly setting his jaw and squaring his shoulders, he laid silent claim to his dignity and finally bent to retrieve what remained of his hat. The bronc, a gelding aptly named Pure Misery, had stomped it flat in the brief but hectic process of throwing him that third and—for today—final time.

Landry reckoned he should be glad his skull hadn't met the same fate as his headgear, but he couldn't quite make the philosophical shift from adrenaline-fused annoyance to gratitude. He was frustrated, embarrassed and pissed off—and those were just the emotions he had *names* for.

Arrogance on four legs, the sweat-lathered horse took a few prancing turns around the corral, moving outward in ever-widening circles. He snorted once or twice, nostrils flared, neck bowed into a curve, head held high and proud, ears laid so far back they were almost flat against his hide.

Finally, the gelding came to a purposeful halt about a dozen yards away from Landry, hind legs planted firmly in the dirt, flanks quivering with a barely contained strength that seemed about to bust loose in a whole new way, like a primeval thunderstorm.

Go on, cowboy—try it again. That was the message.

Slowly, Landry became aware of their immediate surroundings, his and the horse's—that son of Satan—though most of what lay beyond their battleground was still a dust-roiled haze, a void with its own heartbeat. Landry did register the presence of his brother Zane perched on the top rail of the corral fence. He knew his sibling was looking on with charitable, even benign, interest, waiting to see what would happen next.

Was Landry fool enough to get back on that crazy cayuse, he might have been wondering, or would he finally see reason and call it a day?

"Anything broken?" Zane called, in a jocular drawl. He was only thirteen and a half months older than Landry, but the gap might have been wider by a decade, considering the dynamics between the two of them. Zane tended to come from the place of older-and-wiser, like a father, or a venerable uncle—or a justice of the Supreme Court.

Stung anew, Landry merely glared in Zane's general direction for a few moments, then slapped his ruined hat against one thigh to vent some of the steam still building inside him. A handful of ranch workers—all employed by Walker Parrish, local rodeo-stock contractor and older brother to Zane's wife, Brylee—ducked their heads briefly, in half-assed attempts to hide their grins of enjoyment.

It was no big stretch to figure out what the other men were thinking, of course. After nearly a year in

Montana, Landry was still an outsider, still that dandified greenhorn from Chicago, still the perennial dude. Still and always the great Zane Sutton's kid brother.

And not much more.

Six feet tall, smart as hell and a self-made man, an independently wealthy one no less, and a ranch owner in his own right, Landry normally didn't sweat the small stuff. The fact was, he'd never failed at anything he set out to do, in all his thirty-plus years of life, unless you counted his efforts to stay married to Susan Ingersoll without committing murder, that was. To him, the ill-fated marriage had been a disaster, yes, but he wouldn't have described it as an actual defeat. He and Susan never should have tied the knot in the first place, if only because they hadn't wanted the same things, even in the beginning.

Now, aching in every muscle, bones seeming as brittle as if he'd aged by twenty years since breakfast, his pride chafed raw as a sore with the scab ripped off too soon, Landry watched glumly as one of the ranch hands roped the bronc, led him out of the corral and turned him loose in the adjoining pasture.

Zane stood next to Landry now, there in the slowly settling dust. "Buy you a beer?" he said quietly. He started to raise one hand, as if to slap Landry on the back, perhaps in brotherly reassurance, but he must have thought better of the gesture in the end, because he refrained.

It was just a beer, and Landry wanted one badly, but his first impulse was to refuse the offer, all the same. He and Zane had been close as kids, and right up through their late twenties, but then, around the time their mom died...

Well, things had just gone to hell. Some kind of chasm had opened between the brothers, and there didn't seem to be a way across. For the most part, they'd gone their separate ways, Zane taking to the rodeo circuit and eventually winding up in the movies, of all things, while Landry headed for Chicago, a place that had always intrigued him. By going to night school and working days and weekends as a barista at one of the coffee franchises, he'd gotten his degree, taken a job with Ingersoll Investments, originally landing in the mail room. He'd climbed the corporate ladder and eventually met and married the boss's daughter, Susan.

Certain he'd found his niche at long last, Landry had pushed up his figurative sleeves and proceeded to make money—a shitload of it—for the company and, through bonuses and finally a partnership, for himself, as well.

"I wouldn't mind a beer right about now," Landry heard himself say, instead of the "No, thanks" instinct dictated. The more sensible thing would have been to take his sorry self straight home, of course, back to his half of Hangman's Bend. There, he could have tossed back a Scotch or two, gulped down some aspirin and maybe stood in a hot shower until his muscles stopped screaming.

So it was that they walked out of the corral together, Zane and Landry, passing through the gate, shutting it behind them. Zane waved a farewell to the others as he and Landry headed for his rig, a silver extended-cab truck so covered in dried mud that it might have been any color in the spectrum. Zane's adopted mutt, Slim, waited patiently in the bed of the pickup, panting in the bright June sunshine, perfectly content to be just what and where he was.

A person could learn a lot from a dog, Landry reflected silently. Stepping up onto the passenger-side running board, he paused long enough to pat the critter on the head and ruffle his floppy ears. "Hey, dog," he said, with gruff affection. "How ya doin'?"

Talk about your rhetorical question.

Slim wagged his tail, appreciative but, at the same time, taking the greeting as his just due, and then settled down for the short ride over to neighboring Hangman's Bend.

Without pausing, Zane climbed behind the wheel, pushed the ignition button and looked back over one shoulder, acknowledging the dog with a grin. He loved that goofball canine, no question about it, would have let him ride in the cab if the critter had shown any inclination to do so. Slim had recently developed a preference for the back, though, seemed to like riding with a pile of feed sacks and whatever else Zane happened to be hauling at the time, and he showed no signs of changing his mind anytime soon.

"You ought to get yourself a dog," Zane remarked, maneuvering the truck into a slow, wide turn. "They're real good company, you know."

His brother, the authority on loneliness, Landry thought, with an ironic inward sigh. As if Zane had ever suffered any lack of "company," even before he'd settled on the run-down, abandoned ranch outside Three Trees, Montana, the one he and Landry had bought together, sight unseen, a few years before. These days, Zane had his beautiful bride, Brylee, first and foremost. And then there was the formidable but ever-faithful Cleo, their housekeeper—and Nash, Zane and Landry's half brother, a rowdy thirteen-year-old with a childhood behind him that made their hardscrabble upbringing look downright pampered.

"I'll get around to it," Landry allowed, still distracted by other thoughts. "Getting a dog, I mean." A pause, followed by an irritated "There's no hurry, is there?"

Zane didn't answer, and that was all right, because sometimes—and this was one of them—they didn't feel a need to talk. The rig bounced down the long, rutted driveway, dog and gear rattling in the back.

Walker's place, called Timber Creek, was a prosperous spread, to put it mildly, but the dirt trail leading to the main gate was in little better shape than a cow path after a month of pounding rain followed by a ten-year drought. Out here in the wilds of Montana, Landry had observed, folks weren't overly concerned with either convenience *or* appearances, whether they had two nickels to rub together or not. It probably wouldn't have occurred to most of them to smooth the way with a layer of asphalt. Sure, one or two showy types might have sprung for a load of gravel, if the bills were current and the price of beef was decent, he supposed, but nobody paved a driveway.

Nope, even ranchers as successful as Walker Parrish seemed content to cope with whatever conditions presented themselves—waist-high snow in the winter, the sticky mud of spring, which the locals called "gumbo," or the deep, dry dirt furrows of summer and fall.

There were times, usually short-lived, when the lure of the place eluded Landry completely—like now.

Still cheerfully pensive, Zane drove on. The living quarters on his share of Hangman's Bend Ranch were relatively modest, considering the size of his bank account. He'd been what amounted to a modern-day John Wayne before he suddenly decided to leave movie stardom behind for good, go back to the land and subsequently reinvent himself. Now he and Brylee shared a nicely renovated stone house, large and comfortable, but certainly nothing fancy, by Hollywood standards at least. The barn was sturdy and the old-fashioned garage was detached, with a dented aluminum door that had to be raised and lowered by hand. Neither a tennis court nor a swimming pool marred the landscape.

Brylee was weeding the vegetable garden when Zane and Landry drove in, her ever-present German shepherd, Snidely, supervising from the sidelines.

Zane's bride wore a floppy straw hat, her rich brown hair stuffed fetchingly up inside, a sleeveless blouse and denim jeans, frayed where she'd cut them off above the knees to make shorts. Brylee's long legs were sun-browned, like her arms, and her feet were probably muddy and probably bare.

Seeing the truck, she beamed like a war bride at the approach of an overdue troop train and came toward them, hurrying but graceful, moving between rows of corn and green beans and Bibb lettuce.

Watching Brylee, Landry felt a pang of something sharp and forlorn, bleaker than loneliness, but not quite qualifying as envy, while Zane jumped out of the rig, strode to meet his wife and, with a laugh, swept her right off her feet, swinging her around in a broad circle of celebration and then kissing her soundly.

Slim, like any good country dog, bounded down from the back of the truck and rushed toward his master and mistress, barking, delighted by the ruckus, making himself part of it.

Brylee had lost her hat by then, and her hair spilled down over her shoulders in glorious, coffee-colored spirals, threaded with gold. Belatedly noting Landry's presence, his sister-in-law blushed apricot-pink, a modern-day Eve just now coming to the realization that she and her Adam weren't blissfully alone in the Garden of Eden after all.

So much for a bout of lovemaking right there in the tall grass, Landry thought. He wouldn't have put it past them, if the circumstances were right. Wouldn't have blamed them for it, either.

He smiled a "hello" at Brylee, reached for his hat and remembered that he'd tossed it into the back of Zane's pickup, but the words in his head, surprisingly affable, were meant for his brother. *You lucky bastard.*

"I promised this yahoo a beer," Zane announced, still grinning, cocking a thumb toward Landry to identify him as the yahoo in question. The taut air around the couple almost snapped, like a rubber band stretched beyond its limits, and then let go. "As you can see, the man's a little the worse for wear."

Although he was sure Zane hadn't meant anything by it, the remark reminded Landry with a wallop that he'd been thrown three times, that his clothes were stiff with dust and dried sweat and a combination of the two and that his boots were caked with manure. Plenty of good old-fashioned dirt had ground itself right into his hide, filling every pore, coating every hair on his head.

Again, it swamped him, that sense of selfconsciousness mingled with some indefinable loss, a factor he'd never had to cope with before the move to Montana.

"I'll be fine out here on the porch," he suggested, and instantly wished he'd kept his mouth shut, if only because the offer sounded so lame.

Brylee smiled warmly. Although she hadn't liked Landry when he first arrived in Parable County, she'd mellowed noticeably since last Christmas, when she and Zane had gotten married. "Don't worry about it," she responded, with a rueful glance at her own grimy feet. "This is a ranch, and dirt comes with the territory."

The screen door creaked just then, and Cleo— Zane and Brylee's housekeeper—trundled through the gap and

out onto the porch, her skin a glistening ebony, her dark eyes flashing, her gray hair partially tamed by a bandanna scarf. She looked stern, but that was a pose, Landry suspected, the ruse of a tenderhearted person trying to hold on to a little personal space.

"Say what, Mrs. Sutton?" Cleo challenged, making it clear that she'd overheard Brylee's statement about ranches and the inevitability of dirt. "I just now finished mopping the kitchen floor—it isn't even dry yet—and I don't care *how* much dirt it takes to make up this ranch. You're *not* setting foot in my clean house until you hose those feet off good." In the next instant, Cleo's gaze moved over both Zane and Landry, sweeping them up into her good-natured consternation. "Same goes for the two of you. I don't work my fingers to the bone around this place for my health, you know. And a person's got to have standards!"

Zane, apparently used to being lectured, simply grinned and gave the woman an affable salute of acquiescence. The discourse sounded familiar to Landry, too—he could easily imagine that warning coming from Highbridge, not quite so colorful, but with better enunciation and grammar.

Ah, Highbridge. Yet another reason Landry fit in around here about as well as an extra toe in a narrow-soled boot. He employed a butler. What self-respecting cowboy did that?

"You tell me what you want and I'll bring it out here," Cleo prattled on, hands on her hips, elbows jutting. By then, the hint of a grin had appeared in her eyes, and the corners of her mouth twitched slightly. Like Highbridge, she clearly relished stating her opinion, asked for or not.

"Beer," Zane replied lightly. "And make sure it's cold, if you don't mind."

Cleo narrowed her eyes, then fixed Brylee with a look. "Iced tea or lemonade for you," she informed her crisply. "If you're not pregnant, it's not for lack of effort, now, is it, and we both know alcohol is no good for babies."

Brylee shook her head, but her color was high again. "*Cleo*," she scolded, laughing a little.

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