

“Why did you ask me out?”

Angel managed a smile. “I seem to remember you asking me out.”

“You asked first.”

“That’s a technicality.”

“But still the truth.” Hunter didn’t let go of her hand but lowered it so that it rested against his wet chest.

Was he trying to short-circuit her neglected libido?

“I guess I just saw you in a different light.” A neon one that screamed, *Look at how sexy this man is!*

“It was the brownie, wasn’t it?” he said, teasing.

“The power of chocolate.”

“Well, that didn’t hurt.” Should she tell him the truth? Would it sound shallow? “Although if you hadn’t looked so good in those jeans up on the gallery roof, the brownie likely wouldn’t have been enough by itself.”

The grin that formed on his face could only be described as rakish, a look she didn’t think he wore very often.

“That right?”

Dear Reader,

You have in your hands the story of the last of the five adopted Hartley siblings. Angel is the youngest, and I've been looking forward to telling her story for a long time. Her journey is one of not only finding a forever kind of love with a truly awesome man, but also one of discovering who she is in the literal sense. I also wanted to show that love and self-worth should not depend on the color of one's skin but rather on the kindness and compassion in one's heart. I chose to make Angel Native American because I have from my earliest memories had a great and inherent affection and respect for the Native peoples who first lived on this land that became America and who still protect their legacies and culture. They were the first victims of the racism we are still dealing with to this day. I hope in some small way to combat that racism with this story of love, acceptance and embracing one's heritage.

I can't begin to thank you all for the support, kindness, positive reviews and love you've given to my books, and especially the Blue Falls, Texas series, over the past decade. It truly means the world to me. For now, this is the last story from Blue Falls, but one never knows what the future might hold.

If you'd like to keep in touch and be alerted to when I have new books coming out, visit trishmilburn.com to sign up for my newsletter and to find links to my various social media accounts. I look forward to hearing from you.

Trish

HOME *on the* RANCH
TEXAS COWBOY,
BE MINE



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Home on the Ranch: Texas Cowboy, Be Mine

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Trish Milburn writes contemporary Western romance for Harlequin Books. She's a two-time Golden Heart® Award winner, a fan of walks in the woods and road trips, and a big geek girl, including being a dedicated Whovian and Browncoat. And from her earliest memories, she's been a fan of Westerns, be they historical or contemporary. There's nothing quite like a cowboy hero.

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Chapter 1

No, that still wasn't right. Angel Hartley took another couple of steps backward, wondering if a bit more distance would correct the crooked photo frame. She even closed her eyes for a few seconds before giving the large image of a bull rider sitting atop a fence another look. Nope, still crooked.

Before she could approach the wall, however, Merline Teague, owner of the art gallery, stepped into her path and held up her hand.

"The piece is fine how it is," Merline said.

"It's still crooked."

Merline shook her head. "No, you just think it is. I learned early on that the longer I stared at any art I'd hung—especially if it was my own—the more uneven I thought it was." She gestured around at several other works Angel had already placed on the walls. "Everything looks great so far."

“Are you sure?” Because Angel wanted the show featuring her hard work to be perfect, so perfect that people attending wouldn’t be able to resist buying something to take home with them.

“Positive. Remember, it’s in my best interest as well that your opening be a smashing success.”

Well, that was true. Merline might be one of the nicest people Angel had ever met and this gallery a passion project, but it was also a business that needed to make money to stay open.

“Sorry. I might be obsessing a little.”

Merline smiled and started to speak, but whatever she’d been about to say was drowned out by the sound of banging on the roof.

Angel looked up. “What in the world?”

“Forgot to tell you I was having some roof repairs done today since the gallery’s closed. Had a bit of damage from the storm last week. Wanted to fix it before another storm could make it worse.”

Made sense. Late spring in Texas was no stranger to violent weather.

Merline’s phone rang and she moved toward her office as she answered the call. Angel made one final perusal of the photo in front of her before moving on to a smaller piece showcasing her family’s cattle herd silhouetted against a gorgeous twilight sky. After hanging only two more of her works, however, she couldn’t stand the banging anymore and decided to break early for lunch. Maybe whoever was up on the roof would be done when she returned.

After checking with Merline to see if she wanted anything and finding out the older woman had brought her lunch, Angel headed out the front door. Her phone

dinged with a text, causing her to pause. She yelped and dropped her phone when something fell from the sky right in front of her.

Her heart was still hammering away when she realized it was a piece of lumber with bits of torn shingles attached to it. Not to mention some wicked-looking nails. And it hadn't fallen from the sky but rather had been pitched from the roof.

"Are you okay?"

Her hand pressed against her chest, she looked up but couldn't see the guy's face since he was backlit by the strong midday sun.

"Are you hurt?" As he moved quickly to the ladder, she recognized him. By the time she'd taken another breath, Hunter Millbrook was on the ground striding toward her.

"I'm fine," she finally managed to say. "Just scared the living daylights out of me."

"I'm so sorry," Hunter said as he took off his hat and ran his hand through his sandy-brown hair.

Angel got the impression that his heart might very well be galloping as fast as hers. Still...

"You may want to toss heavy objects somewhere other than over the front door."

"I had been," he said, nodding toward a pile of roofing detritus lying on the ground at the side of the building. "That one got away from me when I accidentally grabbed a nail." He held up his hand, which did indeed have a trickle of blood on the palm, as if she required proof of what he was saying.

"Ouch," she said with a wince. "You should wash that and apply some antibiotic cream so it doesn't get

infected.” She stopped short of asking if his tetanus vaccination was up-to-date.

Hunter stared at her with a confused expression on his face for a few seconds before a small smile tugged at the edge of his mouth.

An odd little flutter in her middle made Angel feel suddenly very awkward and at a loss for what to say or do.

“I almost hit you on the head with a two-by-four and you’re concerned about a minor injury to me?”

She shrugged. “It’s a mom thing. Six years of tending boo-boos.”

The smile faded from Hunter’s face, and Angel found she missed it immediately. Hunter looked inexplicably sad without it.

“Let me make it up to you,” he said as he grabbed the offending two-by-four and heaved it onto the pile of debris. “How about lunch?”

That strange flutter reappeared as if a butterfly had just emerged from its cocoon and was trying out its wings. Was Hunter asking her out? If so, that was...unexpected. No, she was seeing intent that wasn’t there.

“At least I hope a special at the Primrose will make up for my clumsiness.”

She waved off his offer, perhaps with a bit too much gusto. “It’s not necessary. I was just running out to take care of some errands.”

Errands? No, she’d been going for lunch, the very thing he was offering. So why did she feel the overwhelming need to do anything but accept his kind offer? Hunter had never done anything to her. She really didn’t even know him that well considering he’d been ahead of her in school by three years. He’d been in the gradu-

ating class the year she was a freshman, a gulf between their ages and classes that was not easy to cross. Not that she'd wanted to.

Back then she'd had a crush on Chris Ross, a mere sophomore. Of course, he hadn't noticed her any more than Hunter and his fellow seniors had. Well, not until her sophomore year anyway. They'd dated for a while until he'd proved what an ass he was and she'd berated herself for ever giving him a second thought, let alone the entire fall semester.

She'd dated off and on after that, but nothing had been serious until Dave. And that had worked out like water-soaked toast. Except for Julia. Her daughter was the love her life, and there was nothing she wouldn't do to protect her and make her happy. Admittedly it was often a struggle between being a good mother and being too indulgent because Julia's father had abandoned her.

Angel knew what it felt like to be abandoned by a parent. As if the person who was supposed to love you more than life itself either couldn't or wouldn't. In other words, like complete and utter garbage.

Realizing she'd gotten lost in her thoughts, heat rushed up her neck to her face. Thank goodness for her darker complexion. Her very fair and very blond sister, Sloane, would have no such cover in this type of situation. But Angel's unknown Native American background was a lifesaver sometimes.

"Well, I'll let you get back to work," she said. "Try not to jab any more nails into your hands."

The barest hint of a smile made a brief appearance on his face before he nodded and turned back toward the ladder. When she had to resist reaching out to him, saying something to alleviate what felt like his disappoint-

ment, she shook her head and turned toward her truck. Maybe all the banging on the roof had jarred something important loose in her brain because never before had she had such a reaction to someone she'd known since she was a kid.

She felt marginally better once she was in the confines of her vehicle with the air-conditioning blowing on her face full blast. But then she made the mistake of glancing back at the gallery right at the moment Hunter bent over to pick up a pry bar. It wasn't the first time she'd seen a man do incredible things for a pair of worn jeans, but Lord have mercy, Hunter could give all the rest a powerful run for their money.

Hunter's heart rate still wasn't back to normal when he looked over his shoulder as Angel Hartley left the parking lot, her truck spitting gravel. He couldn't help but think she probably was in a hurry to get far away from him. After all, he'd nearly caused her serious injury. The idea of that board, maybe even one of the twisted nails, hitting her in the head caused a cold chill to rush over him despite the intensity of the late May sun beating down on his back.

And of all the people that he could have almost injured, it had to be her. Ridiculous as it sounded even in his own head, he'd had a crush on that woman for close to a decade. He'd imagined dozens of different ways of asking her out, had even been on the verge once—and not the clumsy offer he'd just made to buy her lunch. But fate had this ugly habit of interfering, making him believe that it just wasn't meant to be.

He supposed he was lucky that he didn't see her that often and so he could go for long periods and not even

think about her. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Whenever he thought about having a family of his own, it was always her face that he imagined as his wife. Which was crazy considering how few words they'd ever exchanged and how little time they'd spent anywhere near each other.

Either she'd been dating someone, or he had. Then his dad had died and Hunter was suddenly responsible for the ranch and his mom, for making ends meet however he could. Which was why he was on the roof of Merline Teague's art gallery, why he occasionally drove a load of cattle to market for other ranchers, why he didn't have time for a social life.

Then there was his mom...

Hot as a lit fuse on the end of a firecracker and with his stomach beginning to growl, he climbed back down the ladder and retrieved the cooler containing his lunch from his truck. He sat with his back against a large live oak tree and took a long, slow drink of water. After downing a few bites of his ham-and-cheese sandwich to quiet the growling in his middle, he pulled out his phone and called home. With each ring that went unanswered, he got more nervous. Was today the day his mom forgot something so important it could endanger her life?

"Hello." At the sound of his mom's voice, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hey, Mom. Just checking in while I eat my lunch."

"Doing fine, dear."

He heard the frustration in her voice, though she tried to hide it. For a woman who'd always worked hard, always stayed busy with half a dozen different projects to help others, the diagnosis of early-stage Alzheimer's disease had been a difficult one to take. At first she'd

been in denial, maintaining that forgetting things was just a part of getting older. When she'd finally faced the truth, she'd alternated between angry and sadder than he'd seen her since the months after his dad died. In truth, his moods had followed the same pattern. It was so unfair that he first lost his father to a sudden heart attack, and now he was being forced to watch his mom slowly slip away.

He took a deep breath, reminding himself to focus on the positive. Today was one of her better days, almost as if the disease didn't lurk just under the surface. He could almost convince himself that when she'd not been able to locate the cocoa the night before, it was nothing more than any normal person misplacing something. Only the fact that the cocoa was where it always was indicated something more sinister was going on.

"Good. What are you up to today?"

"Been doing laundry." Which meant when he got home he'd have to make sure she'd remembered to put the wet clothes in the dryer so they didn't end up with sour clothing sitting in the washing machine again. "Mildred called a little while ago. She's going to come over and visit for a bit while the lawn guy is mowing at her place. She hates the noise."

In reality, Mildred was among the group of his mom's friends who had offered to check in on her when he had to be away from the ranch. They'd all done a good job of not letting his mom have any clue that they weren't merely visiting but rather making sure she was okay. He hated being sneaky, but he also knew his mom's pride had taken a lot of punishing blows because of her disease. If he could take years off his own life in order to free her from her diagnosis, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

“That’s good. Tell her I said hello.”

“Will do. You’re staying out of this hot sun, aren’t you?”

Hard to do when you were working on a roof. “I’m fine, Mom. You don’t have to worry about me. Just enjoy your visit with Mildred.”

After they chatted about a couple of inconsequential things, she said she had to go because Mildred was at the door. He finished eating his sandwich, then bit into one of the brownies his mom had made the night before. He waited for some terrible taste to make his tongue revolt like the time she’d put salt in his coffee, but he relaxed when his taste buds encountered only the familiar delicious chocolate. It was moments like this that he could almost believe his mom wasn’t ill. If only that were true.

He leaned his head back against the tree, closed his eyes and tried to think about anything other than how every day brought him closer to losing his mother, at least the woman she’d always been. He couldn’t think of a crueller fate than to lose one’s mind.

The sounds of vehicle engines mixed with the rattle of a horse trailer passing by. In the distance, he heard the laughter of children. Must be coming from the elementary school, which wasn’t far away.

Thoughts of school led his mind back to Angel. He remembered the first day he’d seen her his senior year. She was a freshman then and wore that wide-eyed and apprehensive look so many freshmen did every year. He knew he’d seen her before, likely in town with her family, but she’d looked different that day in the hallway as she worked the combination on her locker. She was becoming more of a woman, leaving the kid she’d been behind. Still, she’d seemed so young, and he was

sort of dating a girl from nearby Poppy then. That had lasted all of three weeks, and he suspected it had just as much to do with his attraction to Angel as it had Sarah's decision that she just wasn't that into him.

For a while, he'd convinced himself Angel was too young to date, especially since she had four older siblings who'd no doubt have had his hide if he hurt her in any way, real or imagined. When he finally realized his attraction wasn't going away, word was she had the hots for Chris Ross. And in what seemed like the next moment, though it had in fact been the following year, she began dating him.

Chris's dad was the district attorney, and his mom had one of those home-based businesses where she sold stupidly expensive makeup. She must have done well, judging by the way she traded for a new, shinier, higher-priced car each year. How was he, the only son of ranchers who barely scraped by, supposed to compete with that? Not to mention that after she and Chris broke up, Hunter was still grieving the recent death of his father.

"Hon, you can come inside and enjoy your lunch in the air-conditioning."

Hunter jerked out of the past as if he'd been physically yanked by the sound of Merline's voice. He opened his eyes to see her standing a few feet away.

"I'm okay, thanks. Easier to go back up on the roof after sitting here than inside."

"Don't you get too hot up there. Can't have you suffering a heatstroke and tumbling off."

"I won't."

Though when the time came to climb back up the ladder, he could think of no less than five hundred things he'd rather be doing.

He looked inside the brown paper bag that had held his lunch, eyeing the second brownie that remained. As he stood, he folded the top of the bag over, then headed toward the entrance to the gallery. When he stepped inside, he heard Merline's voice coming from her office. Good, she was on the phone. He grabbed a black marker sitting atop the front counter and wrote Angel's name on the bag before leaving his chocolate peace offering for her.

As he turned to leave, he caught sight of a large framed photograph on a freestanding wall facing the entrance. It was a close-up of a steer wrestler with his arms wrapped around a steer's horns and his face set in determination. The informational tab below the print revealed Angel as the photographer, which would explain why she'd been in the gallery earlier. He was far from an art critic, but the photo was really good, capturing a moment so fast and so far removed from the normal human eye that no one could ever really see it. And yet Angel had caught it with a snap of her camera. Not only was she beautiful, she was also really talented.

"She does great work, doesn't she?"

Hunter had been so absorbed in admiring the photo that he hadn't heard Merline's approach for a second time. He better not allow himself to get that distracted while up on the roof.

"Yeah. I do well if I don't cut off people's heads in photos."

Merline laughed. "You should come to the exhibit opening."

"I stay pretty busy." Not to mention he'd stick out at an art exhibit opening like a hipster at a rodeo.

"How is your mom doing?" Merline asked, seeming

to guess the real reason he couldn't just go out and do whatever he wanted whenever the urge struck him.

"Good days and bad."

"It's a tough thing to deal with, but she's a strong woman. And you're a good son."

"Thank you."

"You should bring your mom. I bet she'd like it."

But what if she had one of her bigger lapses in memory? She'd hate for that to happen in public where everyone might stare at her. But maybe he'd ask her about it anyway. He honestly didn't think it was good for her to hide herself away on the ranch for fear of looking feeble of mind. He worried that it might actually cause the disease to progress faster. If he worded the idea in such a way that it seemed she was doing him a favor, maybe she'd agree.

Hunter left the building when Merline's phone rang again. He resisted the urge to grab the paper bag on the way out, fearing his gift was too cheesy.

After being inside, the exposure to the cooler air made it feel as if he was stepping through the gates of Hades when he climbed back up on the roof. But he couldn't put it off any longer. He needed to finish this job as quickly as he could so he could get paid and not have to depend on others to check up on his mom. He appreciated their kindness, but it didn't sit well with him not being the one there if she needed anything. After all, she'd been there for him every day of his life, not a series of babysitters.

Yes, logically, he knew he had to work. The bills, including those for his mom's doctor visits, wouldn't get paid if he didn't. And yet he still felt as if he should be the one there if his mom's memory abandoned her, if

she forgot something crucial and endangered herself. He closed his eyes and tried to push away all the things he could worry about because it didn't do anyone any good to borrow trouble. Not his mom, not him, no one.

He'd been back to work about half an hour when the sound of a vehicle pulling into the lot drew his attention. A glance revealed it was Angel returning from her errands. Part of him wanted to tell her he liked her photograph, but common sense stepped up to the plate and reminded him that engaging with Angel any further would just make him wish for something he couldn't have. If he didn't have time to come out to a gallery opening, he sure didn't have time to go on a date. And chances were, after he'd almost knocked her on the head, she wouldn't be receptive to the idea of going out with him anyway.

That was probably for the best considering the demands on his time right now. But even knowing that, he couldn't shed the feeling of disappointment that came with the realization. Once he was fairly certain Angel had made it inside, he paused to wipe the sweat off his forehead and looked at the sparkling expanse of the lake in the distance. Several boats dotted the surface, people enjoying a day of freedom and relaxation. Sometimes when he thought about the sudden loss of his dad and the cruel diagnosis for his mom, it was enough to make him ponder the possibility of past lives, that maybe he hadn't been a good person in one of them and now was being punished as a result. The only problem was he wasn't the only one paying the price.