



HARLEQUIN®

Super Romance

BACK TO EDEN

Melinda Curtis

A LITTLE SECRET

Courage is easy.
Trust takes time.



“What I’m trying to say is that your daughter needs stability.”

Rachel continued. “She doesn’t need someone like you coming into her life only to fall out of it because you’ve taken one risk too many or you want to be somewhere else.”

Cole stared at Rachel for a moment without speaking. Then he leaned forward and asked, “Why are you so good for her when you’ve done the same thing—risking your life on some stunt?”

“That *stunt* saved the lives of a fire crew.” A crew she’d been certain was Cole’s.

“You know as well as I do how lucky you are to be alive.” Cole leaned even closer. “Don’t talk to me about stability, either. I can’t imagine you make it home to cook dinner every night.”

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Dear Reader,

Have you ever had an unrequited high school crush? If so, you'll relate to Rachel Quinlan, who adored Cole Hudson in high school, even though he always treated her like a younger sister. Now that Cole is back in Eden, she has to learn to see him through the eyes of the woman she is today, not the starry-eyed gaze of a teenage girl.

Cole has a lot to learn himself. He's always been protective of others, and now he wants to enclose Rachel and her family in a bubble, despite the fact that doing so will keep all of them from achieving their dreams.

I love to hear from readers, either through my Web site—www.melindacurtis.com—or regular mail at P.O. Box 150, Denair, CA, 95316. To the many who've written about Victoria, yes, her story is coming!

Warm regards,

Melinda Curtis

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BACK TO EDEN

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HARLEQUIN SUPERROMANCE

1109—MICHAEL'S FATHER

1187—GETTING MARRIED AGAIN

1241—THE FAMILY MAN

1301—EXPECTANT FATHER

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As always, with much love to my family, who continue to think of pepperoni pizza as fulfilling all major food groups

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Special thanks to Susan Floyd and Anna Stewart
for providing inspiration and reality checks
when I needed them most

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PROLOGUE

COLE HUDSON WAS NEVER going to love her.

Rachel Quinlan stared at Cole's parked truck. The engine wasn't even pinging or popping because it had long since cooled, and the sick sensation caused by unyielding truth settled in her gut.

Oh, Cole liked her well enough and had even taken her out to dinner and to the movies a time or two. If pressed, he might even say he loved her. But it would be clear that he didn't "love her" love her, not in the happily-ever-after kind of way.

With tear-filled eyes, Rachel stared up at the blue sky blossoming above Eden, Wyoming—a sky that cruelly promised a beautiful October day fit for a wedding—someone else's wedding.

It wasn't just that Cole was four years older than Rachel and treated her as if she still hadn't reached puberty. Heck, she'd filled out a bra three years ago, and Cole hadn't seemed to notice.

And it wasn't for lack of bodily contact. He gave Rachel a hug every time he saw her, sweeping her up and twirling her around, his deep laughter rumbling through to her soul.

Rachel sighed. Nope. The problem was Cole Hudson didn't love her like a man loved a woman. He could never love her that way.

Because he'd lost his heart to Rachel's older sister, Missy.

Not that this was a news flash. But in that moment, staring at Cole's truck on Missy's wedding day, the reality of it all smacked into Rachel harder than it ever had before. She was a silly, daydreaming girl, just like Missy always told her, wasting time staring at the sky and weaving fantasies that would never come true.

Missy didn't understand Rachel's dreams, which tended to involve leaving home. Missy was a big homebody. Heck, Missy protested if she had to leave Sweetwater County. She'd refused to fly anywhere since their mother had gone away, claiming to want only to provide a good home for Rachel and their father. And Missy had. Because of her, Rachel could dream. She'd earned her pilot's license, reveling in the joy of soaring

through the sky. Rachel had even helped her father rebuild the engine on his C119 warplane.

It did seem disloyal to have such strong feelings for someone Missy had once so dearly loved, but Missy had let Cole go, which left the door open for Rachel, didn't it?

Rachel fidgeted. Only if Missy and Cole didn't still love each other, which didn't seem to be the case. The impossibility of having Cole love her threatened to overwhelm Rachel as she stared at his truck parked in front of room twenty-two of the Shady Lady Motel on the outskirts of Eden.

The question was: Who was in the motel room with Cole?

Rachel shivered, crossing her arms against her suspicions and the early-morning chill.

In less than four hours, Missy was supposed to be marrying Lyle Whitehall in front of God and everyone at the Chapel in the Valley on Main Street. Lyle was the son of Eden's shyster mayor, who was also the bank president and holder of the note on the small Quinlan ranch and airstrip. Brian Quinlan ran an air freight business, but he wasn't very good at making money, and Lyle and his daddy knew it.

Not that Missy didn't seem to care for Lyle, but Lyle's affection for Missy was...not what Rachel would call love. Rachel shivered again. This time for a different reason.

If Missy...*when* Missy married Lyle later today, their worries were supposed to be over. Rachel had no clue as to what would happen to them if Missy didn't marry Lyle at eleven o'clock, but she'd bet it wouldn't be very good.

Rachel had known there'd be trouble when Missy had slipped out of her bachelorette party last night, running down the sidewalk to Cole's waiting truck, blond hair flying behind her. Rachel had been the only one to see her leave. She'd lied to cover Missy's absence—by that time most of the women were too tipsy to notice the bride had flown the coop anyway—and driven home in Missy's truck, hoping old Sheriff Tucker wouldn't catch her driving without a license. After spending a sleepless night waiting for Missy to come home, Rachel had climbed into Missy's truck again, her heart heavy, and driven back into town at daybreak only to discover what she'd dreaded to find— Cole's truck parked at the motel. Now she wondered— was there going to be a wedding?

What in the world was Cole doing messing things up like this? Rachel's dreams, her home, all would be lost. Suddenly filled with an anger demanding an outlet, Rachel ran up to the door and pounded on it.

Before her knuckles hit the warped wood a second time, Cole opened the motel room door and stalked past Rachel without so much as a glance. Missy huddled in the mussed bed, a sheet pulled up to her shoulders and tears streaming down her pale face.

Missy, who had always been Rachel's rock as well as sister, mother, friend and confidante, and who always looked model perfect, looked as if she was thirty-nine, not nineteen.

Rachel forgot all about her own shattered dreams as she ran across the worn, stained carpet to comfort her sister.

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CHAPTER ONE

COLE HUDSON FINISHED sweeping the razor across his chin, rinsed the last of the shaving cream from his face and paused to stare into the sliver of a mirror someone had hung above the outdoor sinks at the Flathead, Montana, base camp.

“We made it through a day without the fire getting the better of us,” Jackson, the supervisor of the wildland firefighters known as the Silver Bend Hot Shots, announced beside him. “I think that calls for a beer, don’t you?”

“And a thick, juicy steak,” Logan seconded, shoving his shaving kit into his pack, pausing to look at the plastic-encased picture of his family dangling from the strap.

Cole hesitated. It had been a tough few weeks in the Flathead Mountains of Montana. The beast had toyed with the crews on a daily basis and finally overrun them with near deadly consequences two days ago. Cole’s best friend, Aiden, better known as Spider in Hot Shot circles, had nearly lost his dad in the flash fire. Spider now sat vigil at a hospital in Missoula waiting for his father’s recovery.

“I heard they were serving steak tonight, too.” Jackson dried his hands with a towel, lingering over his wedding band.

“But not beer,” Logan lamented. Alcohol wasn’t allowed in fire camps. “Let’s get into the chow line before they run out of beef. If I lose any more weight this season, Thea will kill me.”

Cole knew exactly what Logan meant. After six months away from home, the entire crew was pretty lean. Thanks to the demanding physical labor and the fight against dehydration, they didn’t carry much fat.

“Just another day or so,” Cole murmured. They’d served their time, and the Forest Service would have to decide if they would stay on with a day of rest, or if they’d be sent home.

Now that they had air support, this fire just might be brought under control. Although some teams would continue working for another few weeks, others would begin winding down from the long season and go home in time to take their kids trick-or-treating and make plans for the

holidays. This year, for the first time in a long time, Cole would be the only one of his friends to go home alone.

Jackson had reunited with his wife. Logan had found someone who'd brought light to his dark side. And now Spider had reconciled with his dad and was about to become a husband and father himself. Spider, who Cole had been certain would never grow up, was eager for his new role.

Poor, lucky sap.

Cole stared into the mirror, noting the wrinkles and the laugh lines emphasized by so many fire seasons under the hot summer sun. It wasn't that he didn't have a pretty decent life. With a job he loved and a group of friends he'd trust with his life, Cole had nothing to complain about. He even had someone at home, or at least someone in his heart. A woman he loved.

A woman he'd let go.

"You're the only one for me," Missy had whispered to him.

Eleven years ago he'd walked out of Missy Quinlan's life, hoping she'd follow. Today, after battling a monster of a fire, and about to face three to four months of life alone in a small apartment, something unsettling crept into his thoughts.

It was time.

He was finished waiting for Missy. He had to know if she was happy without him. If so, he'd move on, no regrets. As soon as they were released from the fire, Cole would drive to Eden and find out if he'd been a fool all these years or an incredibly wise man.

"LOOKING FORWARD to the end?" Danny asked as he and Rachel walked through base camp on their way to dinner. He moved with a limp and shoulders stooped with age, but he was still one of the best air tanker pilots around.

"Hey, we're heading into October and I'm in the black this year. Why would I want it to end?" Rachel joked, even as she wished herself home with her family. It was weird how she absolutely loved to fly and absolutely hated the guilt her job created.

Rachel operated Fire Angels air tanker service. She'd picked up several good contracts from the Forest Service in states to the east of Wyoming over the past few years, purposefully avoiding Idaho and Montana. But at the end of a long season, federal parks were still burning in many of the

western states, so all the firefighting resources and personnel were shifting west instead of hunkering down in their homes for the winter.

Danny removed his baseball cap and gestured at the firefighters in front of them with a laugh. “Yeah, these losers are probably more than ready to head home, and we’re itching to get in the air again.”

“We’ve got the promise of tomorrow. That’s more than we’ll have next week.” Although Rachel wanted the fire to be out and the season to be over, she couldn’t help but appreciate any reason to take to the skies. Nothing could compare to the feeling Rachel got from flying.

“Look at these ground pounders,” Danny said, casting his gaze over the men around them. “I’m almost three times the age of most of them, and they’re dragging their asses like little schoolgirls.”

One of the men in front of them shot Danny a deadly look, so Rachel decided to let the conversation drop. The last thing she wanted was a fight drawing attention to herself, just in case she knew someone here.

Trying to appear like the professional she was, Rachel glanced around, but it was impossible to pick out anyone she knew beneath the yellow helmets and layers of grime. A few of the men looked her up and down, then flashed an interested grin Rachel ignored. With a body built for sin—or so Missy used to tell Rachel—and eyes that even Rachel had to admit slanted more provocatively than Missy’s, it was often hard for Rachel to blend in. And she desperately wanted to blend in today.

Rachel knew Cole was, or had been, a Hot Shot in Idaho eleven years ago. It was with mixed feelings that she’d looked at the fire camp roster a few minutes earlier and seen two Idaho crews listed. Eleven years was forever in a Hot Shot lifetime. The work was tough on the body and the mind. Chances were slim that Cole was still on active duty. With his love of horses and his bent for the big thrill, Cole could have turned from the Hot Shots to the rodeo or NASCAR for his adrenaline rush.

Still, Rachel pulled her baseball cap low over her eyes as she fell into the dinner line with the other fliers and ground support teams. The pilots and their crews had been bussed over to base camp from the airstrip twenty miles away with the promise of hot showers and a steak dinner celebrating the containment of the fire.

“Let’s not go looking for trouble.” Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel caught a glimpse of someone with blond hair and broad shoulders. Controlling the flutter in her stomach, she turned away from the man.