



Bitter Fruit

A LESBIAN ROMANCE



Lois Cloarec Hart



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Bitter Fruit

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Acknowledgements

CONVERTING AND EXPANDING MY 2001 novella, *The Lion and the Lamb*, to this novel, *Bitter Fruit*, wasn't originally on my writing schedule, though that imaginary document is never written in stone. It frequently contorts with whimsy and convolutes with woe. But when my publisher, Astrid Ohletz, suggested that *Lion* would lend itself to a larger story, I took on the project with the help of my wonderful long-time collaborators, Day Petersen and Kathleen Grams-Gibbs. I was writing *The Lion and the Lamb* when Day and I first met over thirteen years ago, and my now-wife has worked on everything I've written since. My dear friend, Kathy, came on board a few years later, and between the two of them, they make our collaborations joyful endeavours. My deepest thanks to you both.

I'm also very grateful to Astrid for her concept and support; to Alissa McGowan for her skilled first edit; and to Ylva's senior editor, Sandra Gerth, for her steadfast encouragement and insightful second edit. Glendon, as usual, your covers are works of art.

For Day

Whose quips make me laugh,
Whose songs make me cry,
Whose love makes me soar.

Chapter 1

“I’M BORED.”

Uh-oh. Victoria glanced at Jac, whose restless gaze swept the bar, stopping occasionally to scan a knot of people or linger on a woman sitting alone.

Victoria sighed. *I should’ve stayed home tonight.* “You were the one who talked me into a girls’ night out.”

“Roger’s out of town. There was no point in you sitting home all alone.”

“But did it have to be The Arc?”

“What’s wrong with The Arc? The music is good, drinks are reasonable...” Jac’s gaze followed a woman walking past them. “The women are fine. What’s not to like?”

The fact that I’m really tired of being your wingwoman. “Just once I’d like to go to a regular bar. Just once. Why couldn’t we try Marco’s on Seventeenth?”

“Marco’s? You’re married and I’m gay. If we go to Marco’s, neither of us are getting lucky tonight. At least here...” She winked.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Here you can walk up to just about any woman and find a cure for your ennui.” Victoria rolled her eyes.

“Just about? You doubt me, old friend?”

Victoria groaned, dropped her head on the bar, and thumped it a few times. “God forbid that I ever doubt Jac the Invincible, Jac the Seductress, Jac the Temptress, Jac the mphhh—”

“Okay, I get your point.” Jac laughed and removed her hand from Victoria’s mouth.

“You are such an arrogant bitch.”

“True, but you love me.” Jac sipped her drink, surveying the room.

“So, what’s the matter? Don’t see anyone to your liking tonight?”

“Aw, I don’t know. Maybe I’m not in the mood or something. Jesus, Vic, look at them.”

Victoria glanced over her shoulder. “What’s the matter with them?”

Jac sighed, turned her back to the crowd, and signaled the bartender for another round. “Nothing, really. Awfully vanilla, though. Hell, they’d probably go running to Mommy if I turned one of them over my knee.”

“Well, if that’s the problem, why don’t you go to Sous-terre?” The ultra-secretive private club was notorious for catering to those with darker sexual tastes, and though Victoria had never been there, Jac was a frequent patron.

Jac continued to stare at the bottles lined up behind the bar, her expression unreadable.

“Maybe later.” She threw some bills on the bar, then downed half the Scotch in one swallow. “There’s

no challenge anymore. Not here, not at Sous-terre. Nowhere.”

Victoria scowled. “It’s not like you can have absolutely any woman you want, you know.”

Jac’s eyebrow rose. “Is that a challenge?”

Victoria froze, and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead. When she failed to respond, Jac smirked and looked away.

Suddenly Victoria wanted nothing so much as to win a round from her charismatic friend. Jac had always been the alpha female in their friendship, and as much as Victoria loved her, she ached to claim the laurels at least once. She didn’t allow for second thoughts. “Yes, it is.”

Now both eyebrows rose, and Jac straightened. “Name your terms.”

“I select the target. You have one month, exactly thirty-one days, to get her into bed or you lose.” Victoria was nauseous, but she couldn’t back down now.

“And the wager?”

Victoria hesitated. She had intended to bet money, but impulsively altered her conditions. “If you win, I’ll talk Roger into us going to Sous-terre with you.”

Jac tilted her head. “I didn’t think you had any interest in the club, but all right. And if you win? Not that there’s a chance you will, mind you.”

Victoria clenched her hands around her martini glass and refused to meet Jac’s gaze. “If I win, you forget about your rules and lines of demarcation, and come to the mountains with me for a whole weekend.”

There was a sharp intake of breath.

Victoria finally forced herself to look up.

Jac's expression was grave. "That really doesn't sound like a good idea. Do you understand the risks? We've been partway down this path before and it didn't work out well for any of us."

Victoria was acutely aware that what she was proposing had the potential to destroy their friendship and her marriage. Jac had always been adamantly against crossing that line, but Victoria was helpless to resist a chance, however remote, to be with the only woman who haunted her erotic dreams. "That's the deal. Take it or leave it." *Dr. Eichler would have my head if he could hear me, but I don't care.*

Long moments passed, until Victoria became sure that her challenge would be refused.

"You're on, but only because I know you're going to lose."

Victoria exhaled deeply and her hands trembled. She didn't know whether to celebrate or pass out.

Jac focused a cool, businesslike gaze on Victoria. "So who's the target?"

"Her name is Lauren Blaine. She's a young woman I work with at the agency."

"Tell me about her."

"She's a great kid. One of those people who has a real, deep down goodness to her, you know? As for looks, she's cute. She's not very tall, but you can tell she's in good shape. She's got short dark hair, kinda shaggy, and big innocent eyes that see right through you."

"So, what aren't you telling me?"

Victoria knew Jac wouldn't renege now that she had accepted the challenge, so, with a smile, she threw down her ace. "She's straight, and engaged to be married."

Jac shrugged. "Minor details. So, when and how do I meet her?"

"I'm taking her out to lunch on Monday for her twenty-fifth birthday. Why don't you meet us at The Aerie for lunch about one?"

"Done."

Victoria raised a finger. "And your thirty-one days start ticking off the moment you meet her."

"All right, but I have terms, too. You're not allowed to run me down to her, or say or do anything to influence the outcome of the bet. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Jac pushed away from the bar. "I'll see you on Monday."

Victoria watched Jac prowl the crowded room. She wasn't the least bit surprised when Jac moved in on the women around the pool table and skillfully separated a curly haired blonde from the pack.

Jac leaned close, lightly running one finger down the woman's arm as she whispered to her. When the blonde laughed and wrapped an arm around Jac's waist, Victoria shook her head. "Here we go again." The evening ended in its usual precipitous manner when Jac and the other woman left the bar shortly thereafter.

Why do I always do this to myself? I could turn down her invitations. I don't have to say yes. She sighed. *Get real. You'll take being with her any way you can, and you know it.*

People were Jac's friends on Jac's terms. If they didn't accept that, she made no effort to try to change their minds. No one, friend or lover, ever truly pierced her impassive exterior. Part of Victoria's sexual obsession was a desire to see if Jac even let herself go in the throes of passion. *That, and the fact that you know she'd twist you in knots and wring you inside out.*

Exasperated with herself, Victoria banished that line of thinking and contemplated the wager. She had a minor crisis of conscience about turning a wolf loose on the vulnerable young woman with whom she shared an office, but Lauren was devoted to her fiancé. All she talked about was house hunting and planning their life together. *She's way too committed to fall for Jac.*

Banishing any ethical qualms, Victoria pushed her empty glass across the bar and shook her head at the bartender. She twisted her wedding ring several times on her finger as her conscience pricked her. *I didn't do anything wrong.*

As she left the bar, she tried hard to stop imagining what Jac and the blonde were up to. She failed.



"I called a cab for you. It'll be waiting downstairs. I've already taken care of the fare." Jac held out the woman's coat and purse.

"I can stay, you know. I don't have to hurry home."

Yes, you do. "I have to be up very early for another engagement and it wouldn't be fair to you to roust you out of here at five o'clock in the morning."

“All right.” The woman took a card from her purse and scrawled on the back. “Here’s my number. I had fun tonight, and I’d love to do it again some time.”

“It was wonderful, wasn’t it? Are you okay going down by yourself or would you like me to walk you?”
Please say no.

The woman leaned close and slipped her hand inside Jac’s gown to fondle her breasts. “If you walk me down, we might not make it outside.”

Jac fought to stop herself from flinching. She gently but firmly removed the woman’s hand, taking it between hers. “As lovely as that sounds, I really need to get some sleep tonight.”

“Your loss.”

“Indeed. Take care of yourself, and thank you again for this evening.”

“My pleasure.” The woman waved and left the loft.

Jac locked the door, leaned against it, and closed her eyes. “Remind me again why I thought that was a good idea?” She turned off the lights and walked to her windows, where she watched her latest conquest get into the taxi. When the car drove away, she lifted her gaze to the cityscape, bright with lights across the river.
Are there any truly happy people out there?

She glanced at the clock. 12:07. *I wonder if Marc’s still up. It’s not even midnight his time.* Jac picked up the phone and hit the speed dial for her brother, but the call went straight to voice mail. She ended it without leaving a message.

For a long moment she stared at the receiver, trying to think who else might help ease the profound melancholy that shrouded her thoughts.

No one. If you took Marc and Victoria out of the picture, there wasn't a single soul she could call in the midnight hours. God, how pathetic.

With a weary shake of her head, she set the phone down and turned to climb the stairs back to her bedroom.

Chapter 2

LAUREN GLANCED AT PHILLIP, WHO was totally focused on a tiny screen. He hadn't looked up from his smartphone since they'd left the city. "Everyone's really looking forward to meeting you. Mom's making a big Sunday dinner, and she asked me what your favourites were."

Phil grunted without looking up.

"Courtney, Adam, and Anjali couldn't make it down from Edmonton, but I think everyone else will be there."

"Trying to watch the game here, babe."

Lauren sighed. He wouldn't even say hi when she and her mother Skyped. It had taken months to convince him to go home with her to meet her family. "Please make an effort, hon. These are going to be your in-laws, after all—the grandparents of our children."

He sighed and lowered his phone. "I'm going, aren't I? I gave up three games this afternoon." The roar of a crowd rose from his phone, and he snatched it up. "Yes! Touchdown!"

Uh-huh, you gave up the games all right. Lauren shook her head and focused on the road. The narrow,

straight lane ran between fields that were golden in the early September sunlight. Her heart rate picked up as she spotted the Andersons' distinctive barn-shaped mailbox. Five minutes to home. She hadn't made the trip from the city since mid-August, and she could hardly wait to see her family. *Phil and Jason should get along well. They're both sports crazy.*

When Lauren turned into the long driveway, her mother and brother were in the front yard watching two small boys pick up windfalls under the apple trees. "Oh good, Brian and Andrea made it. You'll love my nephews. They're adorable." She waved at her mother and slowed as her nephews ran toward the car.

"Who's the dude in the wheelchair?" Phil asked.

"That's my brother, Zac. He's got cerebral palsy."

"He's black."

"So? I've told you six of my siblings are adopted."

Phil shot her a frown. "Yeah, but you never said one of 'em was black."

"And one sister is East Indian and one has Down's, so what? They're my family. That's all that matters." Lauren parked her car next to two pickup trucks, turned off the engine, and hopped out. She swept Jacob and Nick into her arms, laughing as they smothered her with wet kisses.

"Did you bring us something, Auntie Laurie?" Jacob asked.

"Bring, bring, bring," Nick echoed.

Lauren managed to get a hand into her jacket pocket and came up with two Tootsie Pops. "Something like this, you mean?" She grinned at their squeals of delight.

“Come on, you two, let your auntie catch her breath.” Lauren’s mother pried three-year-old Nick out of her arms. “Go tell your daddy that his little sister is here.”

Five-year-old Jacob squirmed to break free of Lauren’s embrace. “Me too, me too! I want to go tell Daddy, too.”

She laughed and set him down to chase after his brother.

Her mother used her apron to wipe Lauren’s face. “Sorry about that. They were having such fun gathering pie apples for me that I couldn’t say no when they wanted one to eat.” She wrapped her arms around Lauren and hugged her. “It’s so good to have you home. Happy almost birthday, Laurie.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Lauren turned to Phil and gestured him forward. “Mom, this is Phillip. Phil, this is my mom, Cynthia.”

Phil shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Cynthia said. “We’ve been so looking forward to this.” She patted Lauren’s arm. “Why don’t we go up to the house? You’re probably thirsty after that long drive.”

Lauren laughed. “It’s only a couple of hours, Mom. I didn’t exactly have to pack up the wagon train to make the trip.”

Her mother chuckled and linked arms with Lauren. They walked up the pathway with Phil trailing behind.

“Is Dad working today?”

“He was, but he’ll be in soon. He and Jason are finishing the last of the harvest. The rain last week

delayed them, but your dad thinks it'll be a bumper crop this year."

"That's wonderful." Lauren stopped to kneel at Zac's side and hugged him gently. "Hey, sweetie. How's my favourite little brother?" She held steady while his arms jerked around her and he rested his head on her shoulder. "Mom said your new therapist is working wonders."

"She's a pistol all right, isn't she, Son?" Cynthia smiled at him.

Zac's eyes shone as he nodded.

Lauren rose and turned to Phil. "Phil, this is my brother, Zac." The door opened and Lauren grinned. "And this is my big brother, Brian, and his beautiful wife, Andrea."

Andrea laughed and shifted Nick to her other hip. "You are such a charmer. It's a wonder you've stayed single this long." She hugged Lauren and extended a hand to Phil. "We've heard so much about you. It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"Thanks." Phil shook hands with Andrea and then Brian before an explosion of noise emanated from his phone, and he snuck a glance.

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Don't mind him. His Seahawks are playing. The world could come to an end, and he wouldn't notice."

"I've got the game on inside," Brian said. "You're welcome to join me."

"Awesome." Phil started to follow Brian, Jacob trailing behind them, when Sara came out of the door and immediately wrapped her arms around Phil. She giggled, jouncing him up and down.

He flinched and tried to pull free.

Lauren winced. She'd cautioned Phil about Sara's affectionate reaction to complete strangers. *I guess he forgot.*

"Sara, come say hi to your sister." Cynthia held out her hand.

Sara let go, and Phil bolted into the house.

Lauren exchanged hugs with Sara.

"See my new shoes, Laurie?"

"I do. They're beautiful." Lauren admired Sara's shoes as she lifted each foot up. "Did Mom help you choose them?"

"Unh-uh. I picked them out all by myself. Do you want to see my new coat? Mom helped me pick that out."

Lauren slung an arm around Sara's shoulders. "I'd love to see it."

After Lauren admired the additions to Sara's wardrobe and spent time with Zac, she went to find Phil, who was in the living room with Brian. "Would you like to come on a tour of the property, hon? It'll be a couple of hours until dinner—lots of time to show you all my favourite spots."

Never taking his eyes off the TV, Phil shook his head. "Maybe later, babe. The fourth quarter just started and the Seahawks are only down by three."

Lauren watched him for a moment, then turned away. "Guess I'll go help Mom."



Lauren leaned over to whisper in Phil's ear. "Please turn it off. Mom's rule is no phones at the dinner table."

He scowled, but muted the phone and put it in his pocket.

"So, Phil, Laurie tells us you work with your dad." Steven nodded at Jason. "I don't know how I'd run this place without my son. Your father must be thrilled that you joined the family business."

"I guess." Phil heaped more chicken onto his plate.

"There are branches of Emerson's Luxury Auto in Calgary, Lethbridge, and Edmonton now, Dad," Lauren said. "Phil was in sales, but he was promoted to management a few months ago, just after we got engaged. Frank—that's Phil's dad—says at the rate Phil's learning the ropes, he'll be able to take early retirement." *Okay, a little exaggeration, but what can it hurt?*

"If Phil is in luxury autos, why are you still driving that old bug?" Jason winked at her.

Phil snorted. "That's what I keep telling her. It's not good for our image when she runs around town in that bucket of bolts."

"It's not a bucket of bolts," Lauren said. "It's served me well since I left high school, and it deserves better than being thrown over for some fancy piece of tin."

Phil bristled. "Fancy piece of tin? I'm not asking you to drive a Porsche, for God's sake, but you could at least let me put you in a Lincoln or an Audi."

"Which you would sell right out from under me in a heartbeat if you found a buyer for it, so, no, thanks.

The Beetle may have a few miles on it, but it's mine and it's paid for."

"I like your yellow car," Sara said.

Lauren smiled. "Thanks, sweetie. I do, too." She glanced at her mother. Cynthia met her gaze for a moment, then turned to help Zac. *Damn it. No one's teasing. This isn't good.* Whenever one of her siblings brought someone home to meet the family, they were usually subjected to endless teasing. Everyone had been perfectly polite to Phil all afternoon, but not even Jason had cracked a joke.

After dinner, Lauren helped her mother clean up the kitchen.

Phillip poked his head around the doorjamb. "Can we get going, babe? I'm going to miss the second half of the night game if we don't leave now."

Lauren hung up her dish towel. "All right. I'll be there in a moment. Thanks very much for dinner, Mom. It was fabulous, as always."

"You're welcome. You're always welcome, you know that. Would you like to take a couple slices of pie home with you?"

"No, thanks. You save the rest. I know how much Jason and Sara love your pie."

"I made three pies, lots for everyone, though I do wish you'd let me make you a birthday cake. It just doesn't seem right not to have one when your big day is tomorrow."

"I appreciate it, Mom. I really do. But there was enough stress with introducing Phil to the family. I didn't want to add to the hassle."

“Phsst. As if celebrating any of your birthdays is ever anything but a pleasure.”

Lauren hugged her mother. “Please don’t worry about it. You made my favourite key lime pie and that’s always a special treat.”

“All right...but I do have some presents for you to take home, and don’t even think of telling me no.”

Lauren chuckled. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Are you sure Phil wouldn’t like another piece of pie for later?”

Lauren hesitated. Phil *had* eaten two slices at dinner. “If you’re sure, you can spare one.”

“I can.” Cynthia busied herself slicing and wrapping a generous wedge.

“Mom?”

“Yes?” Cynthia met Lauren’s plaintive gaze.

“You’ve been awfully quiet. Is everything all right?”

“Of course. I’m just a little preoccupied, that’s all. I’ve got a lot on the schedule this week.”

“I know, but...” Lauren wasn’t sure she wanted to put her question into words.

Cynthia reached for Lauren and pulled her into a long hug. With a sigh, she finally released her. “I’m sure he’ll grow on us, sweetie. All that matters is that you love him.” She pressed her lips firmly together and handed Lauren the pie. “You make sure you stay in touch now, okay? Zac and Sara love to see you on Skype, and so do I. Makes me forget you’re so far away in the big city.”

“Between me, Courtney, Anjali, and Adam, you must spend half your time on Skype.”

Cynthia laughed. “Not quite, and your brother isn’t nearly as good as you and your sisters about staying in touch, but it does liven up the evenings when you all call.”

She walked Lauren to the front door where her family waited to share hugs and kisses.

Lauren glanced out the car. Phil was already sitting in the passenger seat, his head down.

“You come back soon,” Andrea said. “The boys miss their auntie.”

“You mean they miss the Tootsie Pops.” Lauren knelt and hugged the boys one last time. “You two be good, and I’ll see what I can bring the next trip, okay?”

Cynthia pulled a brown grocery bag out of the closet and handed it to Lauren. There were several brightly wrapped packages inside.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I’ll Skype you tomorrow evening, okay? I can’t let your special day go by without singing to you.”

Lauren nodded. “Looking forward to it.” Her family followed her down the ramp to her car.

“We miss you,” her father said. “Don’t stay away too long.”

Jason waved. “See you next time.”

The drive home was quiet.

Phil was lost in his game.

Lauren was lost in her thoughts.

Chapter 3

LAUREN LOOKED UP FROM THE computer when Victoria stopped by her desk.

“Are we still on for lunch today, birthday girl?”

“That sounds wonderful. But you really don’t have to treat. I’d be happy to pay my own way.”

Victoria waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t be silly. Of course it’s my treat. It’s your special day. But I did want to ask if you’d mind if an old friend of mine joins us.”

“Of course not. Any friend of yours, and all that.”

“Thanks. I should warn you that Jac can sometimes be a little overpowering. I think it’s because she had to fight so hard to make it up the corporate ladder and it’s hardened her a little. But she’s got a good heart, and she and I go way back.”

“No worries. I look forward to meeting her.”

Victoria perched on the corner of her desk. “So, did Phil give you a birthday present yet?”

“Um, no. He never said anything this morning, but then he was running late and in such a hurry that he almost forgot his phone.”

“Oh my God, not his phone. I’m sure he has romantic plans for later tonight.”

“Maybe. Probably.” *Hopefully.*

“How did it go with introducing him to your family this weekend? Did they think he was the best thing since sliced bread?”

“It went well, I think. You know how these things go—first meeting with the in-laws-to-be. People just need time to get to know each other, so it was a little stiff.”

“I know exactly what you mean. The first time I met Roger’s mother, I was so focused on being on my best behavior that I’m sure she thought he was engaged to a stick-in-the-mud.”

Lauren laughed. “I can’t even imagine you being a stick-in-the-mud.”

“Neither could Roger’s mother after the stagette party.” Victoria winked and stood up. “Well, I’d best get back to work. I told Jac we’d meet her about one at The Aerie. Is that good for you? Irene and Janet said they’d cover for us.”

“Sure, that sounds fine.”



Jac glanced from the data on her computer screen to the time. She had forty-five minutes before she was to meet up with Victoria, and she needed to pick up the first element of her campaign.

Jac enjoyed the anticipation that curled within. Victoria's challenge had been completely unexpected but welcome. There weren't a lot of thrills left in her job.

Her earlier years with the bank had provided the stimulation of climbing the corporate ladder, and she had taken great satisfaction in advancing from being a freshly minted MBA to senior sales leader—commercial lending in record time. The men who once trained her now reported to her, a fact that occasioned some resentment in the lower echelons.

For the most part, she ignored the rumblings of discontent and muffled complaints of gender preference. At thirty-four, she had forged her career advancement much as a general would wage a military campaign—understanding her opponents, her allies, and the field of battle—with intimate savvy and unrelenting hard work. And of course, it helped to have no home life and no domestic commitments.

She sighed. In the past few months, her six-figure income, the downtown loft overlooking the river, and the perks her wealth and position brought her felt like small compensation for the loneliness that dogged her with increasing frequency. At least the bet was a break in her routine.

Jac wrenched her mind from its maudlin track. "All right. That's enough of that nonsense." She had an excellent job, terrific prospects, and an intriguing challenge to keep her attention for the next month. Once she had bedded Victoria's friend, she would turn serious attention to achieving the next level in

management. “Jacqueline Lanier—Senior Executive. I like the sound of that.”



Jac paused in the alcove of the restaurant. She spotted Victoria and another woman seated at a corner table and took a moment to study her prey. Vic hadn't lied. The woman was cute, in a girl-next-door kind of way.

Lauren had a slim, compact build and a sweet, open face with a healthy crop of freckles. Sunbeams danced off her chestnut hair, illuminating red highlights.

Jac spoke briefly to the *maître d'*, handed her coat to the attendant, and began to make her way across the floor. She held a slim, paper-wrapped cylinder. *Did Vic say what colour her eyes are? I can't remember.* Jac prided herself on her excellent memory for details, and this challenge was going to demand the utmost from her intelligence, charm, and strategic skills.

Just then, Lauren looked up and met Jac's gaze, her big brown eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Hello, Victoria.” Jac extended her hand. “And you must be Lauren. I hope you don't mind me joining you. It's just been so long since I've been able to get together with my best friend that when I heard she was having lunch out today, I rather rudely invited myself.”

There was genuine warmth in Lauren's gaze as she shook Jac's hand. “Not at all. You're most welcome. I've

been looking forward to our meeting. Victoria speaks of you often.”

Jac set the cylinder in front of Lauren. “This is a small apology for crashing your birthday celebration, as well as congratulations on the big day.” She slid into the chair opposite Lauren, amused at the other woman’s childlike delight with the surprise.

Lauren carefully peeled back the paper to reveal two perfect roses—one white and one red—in a tiny crystal bud vase.

“Oh, my heavens. These are beautiful. Aren’t they beautiful, Victoria?”

“Yes. Jac’s always had excellent taste.”

Jac ignored Vic’s acidic glance. “So, which birthday is it?”

“Twenty-fifth.”

“A whole quarter century? Then this is an occasion for celebration. I hope your twenty-fifth year is filled with marvels, magic, and much joy.”

Lauren looked up shyly. “It’s certainly gotten off to a good start. Thank you very much.” She ran a finger over the red rose, tracing the softness of the petals.

Struck by the unintended eroticism of the gesture, Jac took a hasty swallow of her water.

“We’re ready to order,” Victoria said. “You’d better catch up.”

“Of course. I know we all have to get back to the office.”

Once their orders were taken, menus collected, and coffee cups refilled, they resumed their conversation. Well aware that she was under scrutiny by both

companions, Jac maintained an amiable expression, smiling often and chatting comfortably. Small talk did not come naturally to her, but she had trained herself in the art and it stood her in good stead in the corporate world. Now she used it to draw out her target. “Have you been working with Vic long, Lauren?”

“I’ve been at the agency for just over a year now. Victoria was wonderful about taking me under her wing and teaching me the trade.” Lauren smiled at Victoria.

“Do you enjoy it?” Jac liked the sound of Lauren’s voice, but reminded herself this was business, not pleasure. *Though if what’s under that dress looks as good as I think it will, there’s going to be a lot of pleasure involved too.*

“I love it. It’s wonderful helping people plan their dream vacations and go places they’ve never been. And then there are all the business trips I take. I just got back from the Cook Islands last month. Do you like to travel?”

“I do enjoy it. However, a certain best friend, who shall remain nameless, sent me to this godforsaken island off India last year, where I’m convinced they still practice cannibalism.” Jac grinned at Victoria.

“Hey, you’re the one who said she wanted to get off the beaten path.”

“Uh-huh. Off the beaten path, Vic, not on a whole other planet.” Jac exulted in the sound of Lauren’s laughter. *And we’re off...*

They chatted easily as their meals were served, and time passed swiftly.

Jac was pondering her next move when Lauren laid a hand on Victoria's arm.

"Are you sure you can't come on Friday? I hate to waste the tickets, and I don't want to go alone."

Victoria shook her head. "Roger and I have been invited to his boss' place, and we really have to go."

"What are the tickets for, Lauren?" Jac hid a smirk at Vic's instant look of alarm.

"A Blue Rodeo concert at Randall Auditorium. My fiancé and I were supposed to be going, but he says he'd made prior arrangements for a football game with his friends." Lauren shook her head. "I'm sure I checked with him about the date before I bought the tickets, but he says I didn't. I can't get a refund, and I don't have anyone else to go with."

"I like Blue Rodeo," Jac fibbed. "Why don't I buy one of the tickets from you and keep you company?"

"Really? That would be great. But you don't have to buy the ticket—I'll just give it to you."

"No, I insist on paying for it. I wouldn't want to take advantage of you."

Victoria choked, and Jac patted her on the back. "Something go down the wrong way?"

Victoria sputtered into her napkin and glared at Jac.

Jac turned back to Lauren. "Why don't I call you at your office later in the week, and we can make arrangements?"

Lauren nodded, and Jac glanced at her watch. "I'm so sorry. I've really enjoyed our lunch, but I have to get back to work." Lauren raised her hand to signal the waiter, but Jac shook her head. "No, that's all right. I

took the liberty of ordering a small treat, so please stay and enjoy it. It's your birthday after all. I hope you like chocolate."

Lauren beamed. "I love chocolate. It's a spiritual experience for me."

"Then I think you'll enjoy this. The chef only creates it for special occasions, but this seemed to warrant it." Extracting several bills from her wallet, Jac laid them on the table. "I think that should cover it. Enjoy your dessert, ladies. Vic, it was wonderful catching up with you. We mustn't leave it so long next time. And, Lauren, I'll talk to you in a few days, all right?"

"I'm looking forward to it, and thanks again for the roses. They are truly exquisite."

Jac left the table as the waiter arrived with dessert. She smiled at Lauren's rhapsodic exclamation. She knew the confection of chocolate mousse, white and dark Belgian chocolate shavings, and fresh strawberries was sure to delight.

That was actually a lot of fun. Lauren is good company. As Jac walked back to her office, she realized she was looking forward to the concert on Friday, but then reality set back in. *Unh-uh. Remember, this will be step two in the campaign, not a date.* She shivered as she left the sunshine and entered the lobby.



That did not go the way I hoped. Victoria paced at Lauren's side. She hadn't counted on the instant

chemistry between Jac and Lauren, and tendrils of doubt began to grow in her uneasy mind.

“I don’t think she was overpowering at all,” Lauren said. “I like your friend. Maybe she left her hard shell at the office.”

“Well, she was on her best behaviour.” Victoria scowled at the sidewalk.

“And you didn’t tell me she was drop-dead gorgeous. I’d kill for that hair. It’s like molten rose gold, isn’t it? And those blue eyes... Did you see every man’s head swivel when she walked in? I can’t believe she’s single.” Lauren laughed. “Good thing Phil wasn’t with us, or I’d have had to blindfold him to keep him from drooling in his soup.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. “She does know how to make an entrance.” Victoria had been certain Lauren would be immune to Jac’s indisputable charisma, but she had watched her colleague closely as Jac wove her magic. She knew from experience how flattering it was to be in Jac’s orbit. She’d seen Lauren blush when Jac turned the full force of her attention on her, and she’d heard Lauren’s chuckles when her best friend gently teased.

With a frisson of misgiving, Vic summoned the mental image of Jac’s arrival. She’d dressed in a royal blue suit to highlight her eyes. The tailored lines of the jacket clung to her lean body like a glove, and the skirt stopped just above her knees, which emphasized long shapely legs. A white silk blouse, small silver earrings, and a large silver pin on Jac’s lapel completed the ensemble. Victoria hadn’t needed to look around to know that virtually every male eye—and many of the

female ones—in the restaurant were on Jac. She also hadn't missed Lauren's small intake of breath when she first saw Jac.

They'd almost reached the travel agency, and Victoria glumly noted that Lauren had yet to stop talking about Jac and the luncheon.

Damn. I'd better start planting suggestions to get Roger used to the idea of trying Sous-terre some night.

Chapter 4

THE DENSE CROWD EXITING THE auditorium carried Jac and Lauren along with it. Jac glanced over her shoulder, reached back, and grasped Lauren's hand to keep them together.

Lauren raised an eyebrow, but didn't try to extricate her fingers.

When they spilled onto the sidewalk, Jac tugged Lauren out of the throng and then dropped her hand. As she zipped up her black leather jacket against the brisk evening, Jac looked over the mass of people flowing around them. "It'll take forever for that parking lot to empty. I know a nice little café about half a block away. Can I interest you in a coffee while we wait?"

"That sounds wonderful. Let's do it."

Jac stepped aside and motioned Lauren to precede her up the short flight of stairs. She enjoyed the view as she watched the sway of Lauren's hips and the way the faded blue jeans hugged her ass. Suddenly, a rush of desire so strong it made her knees quake overwhelmed her. *Down, girl. Patience.*

She tripped over a stair, but Lauren whirled and caught her, steadying Jac until she regained her balance. “New feet?”

Jac chuckled. “Just breaking the darned things in. Thanks for the rescue.” She drew in a deep breath of cool night air.

They exited on street level, where the auditorium fronted a popular avenue of bars, clubs, and restaurants. The usual Friday night crowds sauntered down the sidewalks in couples and groups.

Jac placed a hand lightly on Lauren’s back, steering her around pedestrians to the door of the café, which she held open. “They make a Bavarian torte here that melts in your mouth.”

“Oh, you think you have my number, do you?” Lauren smiled. “Okay, but you’ll have to twist my arm.”

“Consider your arm twisted. I know you’ll enjoy it.”

They were led to an empty table. The waiter set down plain white coffee mugs and held out two pots. “High octane or unleaded?”

“High octane for me. Lauren?”

“Decaf, please. Phil will kill me if I keep him awake tossing and turning.”

“Two pieces of Bavarian torte too, please.” When the waiter had departed, Jac studied Lauren. “So, tell me about the man who’s captured your heart.”

“Well, his name is Phillip Emerson. He works for his father’s company, Emerson’s Luxury Auto.”

“Oh, I know that place. I lust after that midnight blue Boxster in the showroom every time I walk by.”

“Phil isn’t a salesman. I mean, he was when we first met, but now his dad’s got him working in management. We met about a year ago when I moved from my parents’ farm near Stettler. He came into the agency to book a holiday and kept coming back, even after all of the arrangements were finalized. He’s really sweet. I didn’t know anyone here, and he took me under his wing, introduced me to his friends, and showed me the city.”

Jac observed closely. There was affection in Lauren’s eyes as she spoke of her fiancé, but not passion. “Have you been engaged long?”

Lauren’s gaze dropped, and she fiddled with the cup in front of her. “A few months. We’re getting married next spring.”

The waiter returned with dessert and set plates on the table.

“Is something troubling you?” Jac took a bite as she waited for an answer.

Lauren toyed with her torte, and then finally set down her fork with a sigh. “I feel kind of rushed, you know. I mean, we’d only known each other for four months when Phil proposed. We hadn’t even...um, well, you know.” She blushed.

“I take it you have, ‘you know,’ now?” Jac grinned as Lauren’s flush deepened. “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business. Forget I asked.”

“Well, once we were engaged, Phil said it didn’t make sense to keep two apartments, so I sublet mine and moved in with him. We’re looking for a house now, but Phil can’t seem to settle on one that suits him.”

“Maybe you should look at building a new one.”

Lauren perked up at Jac's casual suggestion. "I'd love to do that—choose all the colours and materials right from scratch. I really enjoy decorating. I guess I'm just a nester at heart." Her face fell. "I did ask Phil if we could build, but he says that contractors just rip you off and you never know what kind of quality you'll get. He says it's safer to buy a proven property."

"Shouldn't you have an equal say in this? After all, it's going to be home to both of you."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Lauren's eyes flashed for an instant, then her shoulders slumped. "But his dad is financing the house, so I guess he feels he should have the final word. Sometimes it's just easier not to keep arguing, you know?"

"Not really."

Lauren looked at her wryly. "I doubt that many men argue too long with you. Maybe if I was a foot taller, they'd listen to me, too."

"Oh, I don't know. I'd pit a terrier against a Great Dane any day. I suspect that when you find something you want badly enough, you won't let anything stand in your way."

The mood lightened, and they finished their torte. Lauren cleaned up every last crumb, and Jac grinned. "Like another?"

Lauren's twinkling eyes peeked out from under her dark bangs. "Would you?"

"I don't think I have room, but please don't let that stop you."

Lauren's teeth worried at her lip.

With a smile, Jac signaled the waiter over and ordered.

“I think I like going out with you. Phil always warns me that I’m going to put on weight, but honestly, I think my metabolism must work overtime because I never gain an ounce.”

“No, you certainly aren’t carrying any extra pounds.” Jac didn’t leave her time to respond. “You know what you were saying about liking to decorate?”

Lauren shot her a quizzical glance.

“I sure could use some help with my loft, if you’re interested. I’ve got nothing in there but bare white walls and hardwood floors. Even the furniture is all relics from my university days. For quite some time I’ve been thinking that I should do something to spruce the place up, but I never get around to it. Would you be interested in lending me a hand and giving me the benefit of your talents?”

“How do you know I have any talent?” Her tone was cheeky, but Lauren’s eyes sparkled with interest.

“Gut feeling. Do you?”

“Yes, I think so. I helped my sisters with the home they share in Edmonton, and they loved it.” Lauren leaned forward. “Are you serious? Do you really want my help with redecorating?”

“Trust me, there’s no ‘re-’ about it, but yes, I’d be deeply grateful.”

“All right then. This could be a lot of fun. When do we start?”

“Whenever you’re ready. And the sooner, the better.”

Lauren fumbled in her purse and scanned the schedule on her phone. “How about this Monday after work?”

“Great. I’ll even make you dinner as a thank you.”
Yes! Step three, locked and loaded.

“Can you cook?”

“You doubt me?”

“Forgive me, but you don’t really strike me as the domestic type.”

Jac clutched her chest. “I’m wounded to the core. I do actually make a mean stir-fry for the nights when I get tired of takeout, so I promise I won’t poison you.”

The waiter arrived with another piece of torte which Lauren took audible delight in eating.

“So, you said Phil went to the game tonight. Too bad, because he sure missed a great concert.”

It was true. The concert had exceeded Jac’s expectations. She was an old rocker and favoured classic bands such as The Stones and Alice Cooper. There was nothing she liked more than having sex to the sounds of Santana blasting from her multi-speaker sound system. But she had enjoyed the evening, though she wasn’t sure if that was entirely due to the music or had more to do with the enthusiastic company. Lauren had grabbed Jac’s arm in excitement every time the band began one of her favourite songs, and fortunately she had many favourites.

“Uh-huh. It was great, wasn’t it? But I know Phil was happier going to the game with his buddies. You know how guys are.”

“Not really.”

Lauren tilted her head. “That’s the second time you’ve said that. Do I take it you’re between boyfriends at the moment?”

“I’m getting the feeling that Victoria didn’t tell you everything about me.”

Lauren’s brow furrowed.

“I’m gay.”

“Oh, um, no, I didn’t know.”

“I hope that’s not a problem. I figured she’d told you.” Actually, Jac had no idea whether Victoria would mention her orientation to Lauren.

Lauren shook her head. “No, not at all. I would never let something like that bother me.”

“Good,” Jac said. “Then I won’t let your being straight bother me either.”

Lauren stared for a moment and broke out laughing. She reached across the table and patted Jac’s hand, then returned to her torte with relish.

When they’d finished a third cup of coffee, Lauren checked her watch. “I’m afraid I have to get home soon. Phil will be back from the game by now, and he’ll be wondering where I am.”

They settled the bill and returned to the nearly empty parking lot at the auditorium where Jac walked Lauren to her bright yellow VW. “That colour sure makes it easy to find your car.”

“It’s one of the reasons I got it.” After unlocking her door, Lauren turned and smiled. “I had a great time tonight. Thank you.”

“So did I. I’m looking forward to Monday. I’ll see you then, right?”

“Right.” Lauren slid into the driver’s seat and waved.

Jac stepped away, hands thrust deep in her pockets, and watched Lauren drive off.

Once inside her black SUV, Jac started the engine and let it idle as she contemplated options. Lauren had ignited a longing within, and she was too restless to call it a night.

She briefly considered The Arc but dismissed the thought of another unsatisfying seduction. “Jesus, I should just go home.” She leaned her head back against the seat rest and sighed. Though part of her longed to do just that, there would be no sleep until she assuaged the agitation that prickled her nerves like quills. *Sous-terre. No strings, no complications. It’ll do.*

Decision made, Jac headed beyond the city limits with her destination firmly in mind.



Several hours after she returned home from the concert, Lauren was still awake, lying on her side, with Phillip’s arm wrapped around her. She stared at the wall, unable to sleep and chafing at the heavy limb that encircled her. She listened to his deep, even breathing until finally, unable to contain her disquiet, she slid out of his embrace and stood up.

Out in the living room, Lauren curled up in the recliner and gazed out the window at the apartment building across the courtyard. She mused idly about the lives going on behind the windows—most darkened, a few not.

Unbidden, an image drifted into her mind’s eye—an angular face framed by waves of copper hair, and

brilliant blue eyes that seemed to see right into her, but never through and beyond her, as Phil's often did.

When they were in the café, Jac's entire attention had been focused on her. She'd listened intently and remembered everything that was said. Her regard never drifted; she never interrupted; and even when Lauren took off on one of her flights of fancy, Jac had smiled and followed her lead.

I don't remember the last time I felt so...comfortable with someone outside the family. She and Jac had laughed and teased as if they'd known each other for years.

Lauren considered Jac's revelation about her sexuality and shrugged. It made no difference to her. It had been fun having a girls' night out again. She'd missed that since moving away from her hometown. Lauren had been adopted into Phil's circle almost immediately upon her arrival in the city, so she hadn't ever tried to make an independent group of friends. With the exception of Victoria, she really didn't know anyone who wasn't primarily Phillip's crony or a girlfriend of one of his cronies.

It might just be time to change that.

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About Lois Cloarec Hart

BORN AND RAISED IN BRITISH Columbia, Canada, Lois Cloarec Hart grew up as an avid reader but didn't begin writing until much later in life. Several years after joining the Canadian Armed Forces, she received a degree in Honours History from Royal Military College and on graduation switched occupations from air traffic control to military intelligence. Having married a CAF fighter pilot while in college, Lois went on to spend another five years as an Intelligence Officer before leaving the military to care for her husband, who was ill with chronic progressive Multiple Sclerosis and passed away in 2001. She began writing while caring for her husband in his final years and had her first book, *Coming Home*, published in 2001. It was through that initial publishing process that Lois met the woman she would marry in April 2007. She now commutes annually between her northern home in Calgary and her wife's southern home in Atlanta.

Lois is the author of four novels, *Coming Home*, *Broken Faith*, *Kicker's Journey*, *Walking the Labyrinth*, and a collection of short stories, *Assorted Flavours*.

Her novel *Kicker's Journey* won the 2010 Independent Publisher Book Award bronze medal, 2010 Golden Crown Literary Awards, 2010 Rainbow Romance Writer's Award for Excellence, and 2009 Lesbian Fiction Readers Choice Award for historical fiction. *Broken Faith* (revised second edition) was published in winter 2013. *Coming Home* (revised third edition) was published in spring 2014.

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