

REVISED EDITION

COMING HOME



LOIS
CLOAREC HART

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

Broken Faith
Walking the Labyrinth
Kicker's Journey

R E V I S E D E D I T I O N

C O M I N G
H O M E



LOIS
CLOAREC HART

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I chose to leave the anachronisms of 2001 in place in this revised issue of *Coming Home*. That means there are references to movies and books of 1999–2000 and a lack of common technology such as smartphones, Netflix, and Facebook. While these aspects do date *Coming Home*, they don't change the essence of the story or the timeless nature of love between three good-hearted and well-intentioned characters caught in an impossible situation. Because *Coming Home* and its companion novel, *Broken Faith*, comprise the beginning of a roman-fleuve, which finds later expression in *Walking the Labyrinth*, I kept the natural progression of events, even if they're suspended in the amber of an earlier era.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming Home was always a labour of love—love remembered and new love found. When I originally wrote the story, my late husband was in the last months of his long and relentless battle with multiple sclerosis. I met my wife-to-be when she was assigned to edit the first incarnation of this book. Day still reviews every word I write, and I am so thankful for her and all the treasured friends *Coming Home* brought into my life. Day and Kathleen GramsGibbs are my not-so-secret beta team. They catch my mistakes, correct my grammar, push me gently to better paths, and laugh in all the right spots. They are a joy to work with, and I am deeply grateful to both.

For this third revision of *Coming Home*, I again had the pleasure of working with Ylva's superb senior editor, Sandra Gerth. She'd already done the arduous slog of breaking my bad habits when we revised *Broken Faith* last year, which made this time around a breeze. Sandra, thank you for your patience, tact, and humour. Many authors don't enjoy the editing process, but under your auspices, I've found it to be a delight. I look forward to future collaborations.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of BJ,
who was Rob.
1943-2001

CHAPTER 1

JAN LOOPED HER ARMS UNDER Rob's, tucked her head next to his, and braced herself. "Are you ready, love?"

"I'm ready."

"Okay, here we go." Jan began the simple transfer from Rob's wheelchair to his recliner.

They were in mid-lift when Rob's involuntary leg spasm threw them off balance. Jan tried a mid-air reverse but was unable to get him back into his wheelchair, and they tumbled to the floor.

"Oooph." Jan stared up at the ceiling. *This day is not getting off to a good start.* At least she'd managed to keep Rob on top this time. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. I must say, you dance divinely, my dear."

"Gee, thanks." Jan eased out from under Rob and knelt beside him. She rolled him on his back, straightened his limbs, and checked for any obvious signs of distress, knowing that his multiple sclerosis-induced paralysis could mask an injury. "It looks like you survived our nosedive all right. Now we have to figure out how to get you up in your chair." She grabbed a cushion from the couch to slide under his head.

Rob looked up at her. "Do you think Andrew might be home?"

Jan shook her head. "No, he'll be at work by now."

"You could ask Victor."

She raised an eyebrow.

“You know he’s always eager to help us.”

“Rob, he’s got to be eighty if he’s a day.”

“I know, but maybe between the two of you?”

Jan stroked his hair. “Not your best idea, love. Victor would try, but I’d be afraid to hurt him.” She ran through her list of options. *I could call Kate or John, but I hate to ask them to leave work.* “I think we’re going to have to contact the fire hall again.”

“I know you don’t like to do that.” Rob leaned his head into her caress. “I’m perfectly comfortable here. We can wait until Andrew’s home from work.”

“No way am I letting you lie on the floor all day.” She dropped a kiss on his forehead and stood to get the phone. About to place the call, she glanced out the window. Their letter carrier had just turned into the front gate. “I wonder. All I can do is ask, right? If she turns me down, I’ll call the firefighters.”

~ * * * ~

Terry whistled as she walked up the Spencer walkway. She’d made good progress on her route that morning. *I should be done early today. Lots of time to write later.*

It was a sunny, mid-summer day with nothing to slow her down except the usual challenge from the McFarlane’s noisy dog. He lunged at her from the end of his chain every time she entered his yard.

Striding on automatic pilot, she appreciated the absence of any obnoxious mutts in the Spencer yard. Their green-and-white bungalow was surrounded by spruce trees, lilac bushes, and well-tended flowerbeds. *It’s peaceful. I like it.*

Terry occasionally saw Mrs. Spencer tending those beds. The woman always had a smile and a pleasant greeting for her.

When Mrs. Spencer opened the front door and stepped out, Terry held out several envelopes. “Good morning. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Spencer accepted the mail. "Please, I hate to bother you, but would you mind helping me? My husband's fallen, and I can't get him back into his chair by myself. If you could lend me a hand, it would only take a moment."

"Umm, sure. No problem." Terry followed Mrs. Spencer and slung the mailbags off her shoulders in the foyer. She walked into a sparsely furnished, book-lined living room.

A tall, thin man with a shock of thick, brown hair hanging over his eyes lay on the floor. He smiled at her. "Are you my knight in shining armour?"

Terry grinned. "Well, I can't say I've ever been called that before, but let's see if we can't get you back in your chair. Mrs. Spencer, you'll have to talk me through this. I don't want to hurt your husband while I'm trying to help." She started toward him only to duck as two feathered missiles shot over her head. "Whoa, what was that?"

Mrs. Spencer shook her head. "Oh, dear. I'm so sorry. That's Jamie and Xan, our budgies. They're not used to strangers, so I guess you scared them."

"I scared *them*?" Terry spied two sets of inquisitive eyes peering at her from the top of the nearest bookcase. "They won't strafe me again, will they?"

"No, they should be fine now," Mrs. Spencer said. "I really appreciate you lending a hand."

"I'm glad to help. What would you like me to do?" Terry crouched beside Mr. Spencer's legs.

Mrs. Spencer took up a position near her husband's upper body. "When I say go, we're going to lift him into the recliner. If you grasp him under the thighs, make sure your knees are bent, and don't lift with your back. It should go smoothly. Wait until I get set here." She lifted his head and shoulders, rested them against her body, and got a firm grip on his forearms. "Ready?"

Terry nodded. "Ready when you are." *Jesus, I hope I don't hurt him.*

They lifted him off the floor and angled him toward the recliner. They got him partway into the chair before Mrs. Spencer took over.

Terry backed away to give her room to maneuver. She knocked over the footstool that had been in front of the rocking chair next to the recliner, which sent the book and newspapers piled there to the floor. "Damn. I'm sorry."

"No harm done." Mrs. Spencer adjusted her husband's body upright.

Terry picked up the newspapers and book and raised an eyebrow when she noticed the book's cover. "I'm afraid I lost your place."

Mrs. Spencer eased her husband's legs out and crossed them on a pillow. "That's okay. I can find it again easily."

Terry set everything back on the righted footstool. "I like Laurie King's *Martinelli* series, too, though I didn't think the second book was as good as the first."

"I've only just started this one," Mrs. Spencer said. "But I'm looking forward to checking out her other books as well. Anyway, thank you very much for giving us a hand. We really appreciate it."

Mr. Spencer nodded. "You can be my white knight any day."

"Not that I mind riding to the rescue," Terry said. "But try to stay off the floor for a while, okay?"

"Okay, but you know you get a whole different viewpoint from the floor. You should give it a try sometime."

Terry tilted her head. "To expand my horizons?"

"Exactly. People get in such ruts." His bright blue eyes twinkled.

Mrs. Spencer eyed her husband. “Rob, I’m sure she has to get back to work.”

“I do, but it was a pleasure to meet you both.” Terry walked back to the door, re-shouldered the mailbags, and turned to leave.

“Thanks again,” Mrs. Spencer said.

Terry waved and started back down the path. She resumed her route on automatic pilot mode. *Kind of funny that a straight, suburban housewife would read lesbian mystery novels. She shrugged and turned into the next walkway. No biggie, I guess. Judging by their bookcases, she obviously loves to read, and King is certainly a good writer. She smiled. Who knows? Maybe someday my books will be on her reading list. It could happen.*

~ * * * ~

A week after his unfortunate tumble, Rob sat in the living room while Jan cut his hair. He squirmed as she ran the clippers up his neck.

“Am I tickling you?”

He shook his head. “I was just thinking about the first time you cut my hair – what was it, about eighteen years ago now... and all the grief it caused me at work.”

“Oh, my God. That had to be the ugliest haircut in the history of man, whitewalls and all. I was so afraid that you were going to tell everyone at work that I was the one responsible for it.”

“Well, considering that I’d have had to explain why I was fraternizing with a corporal outside of work hours, I thought discretion was called for. Besides, I knew it’d grow back in eventually, and you did improve with practice. It certainly saved me the aggravation of finding a wheelchair-accessible barber.”

“True, but I don’t know how you put up with all those months of wisecracks while I practiced.” Jan put a final flourish

on her work and whipped the towel off his neck. “There you go, love, you’re all neat and tidy again. No more looking like Saddam emerging from his rat hole.” She held up the hand mirror for Rob to check the results.

“Looks good. You should think of taking up a career as a barber.”

Jan’s smile faded. “I already have a career—looking after you.”

Which isn’t going to last forever, no matter how much you want to deny it. Rob’s gaze softened. “And you’re wonderful at it. I really don’t pay you enough.”

Jan dropped a kiss on his head. “As long as you keep up my book allowance, we’ll call it square.” She wheeled him back to his easy chair.

The transfer went smoothly, and Jan went to get him a coffee.

“Could you flip the news channel on for me, hon?” Rob asked when she returned.

“Sure. By the way, you did remember that it’s my respite afternoon today, right? Donny will be here in a couple of hours.” Jan tucked Rob’s fingers around his covered cup, balanced it on his chest, circled it with a towel to hold it in place, and positioned the straw in his mouth. “I picked up a couple of DVDs for you guys. Lots of explosions and mindless sex to keep you riveted.”

“Hey, I have a sensitive side, too, you know.”

“Better not let your old wingmen hear that, or they’d never let you live it down.” Jan winked and started back to the kitchen, walking through a patch of sunlight that illuminated her hair.

Well, I’ll be darned. I see some silver threads in with the red.

I probably better keep that to myself. Rob shook his head. *Where have the years gone? You were so young when we met. And weren't the odds stacked against us? But you hung in there.* He chuckled.

Jan looked over her shoulder. "Did you say something?"

"No, I was just thinking back to when we met."

"Are you fixating on those old haircuts?"

Rob shook his head. "No. I was thinking about how unlikely it was that we'd end up here, together, all these years later. I was so bitter after Tess dumped me. I blamed every woman for the way she treated me. I don't know how you put up with me in the aftermath...or why."

Jan crossed the room to kneel at his side. "You had reason to be bitter. She let you down when you needed her most."

"That's what I used to think, too."

"You don't still?"

"No, not really. I mean she married me when I was a healthy, young fighter pilot. I certainly wasn't that by the time she left. How can I blame her for bailing?"

Jan ran her fingers through his hair. "Did you forget that part about for better or for worse? She certainly did."

"Most people would've under the circumstances."

Jan shook her head. "I don't agree."

"You've seen the stats, hon. So many marriages crumple under the strain of this disease."

"They're just numbers, Rob. They don't have anything to do with us."

"I know." He pressed his face against her hand. "I may never know why you said yes to that first date, let alone to my proposal, but I know without you I'd have ended up in an institution a long time ago. I just worry—"

"Stop right there." Jan shot him a stern look. "We've been

over this a million times. I'm perfectly happy with my life, and I'm not missing out on anything. Got it, Major?"

"Got it, Corporal." *Except a career and children and freedom.*

Rob accepted the straw Jan put to his mouth and took a mouthful of coffee. "So what time is Donny going to be here?"

Jan rose to her feet. "By noon. I've got some errands to run and I'll have lunch out, but I've left soup and sandwiches for you guys."

"Sounds good." Rob sipped his coffee and watched the news as Jan returned to the kitchen. The more restricted his body became, the more interested he'd grown in world events. The latest developments in the Middle East and the escalating chances of war there were his current preoccupation.

The closest he'd come to actual combat was when Russian tanks had moved in to crush the Prague Spring in 1968. He had been a rookie pilot, newly posted in Europe at the time, and all NATO forces had gone on high alert in case those tanks moved beyond Czechoslovakia's borders. It had been a tense but exciting period.

Engrossed in the news, Rob's mind flitted between the current Mid-Eastern imbroglio and that of long ago when he had been one of an elite band flying countless reconnaissance missions close to the Iron Curtain. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in memories of flashing over fog-filled valleys in razor-winged jets, of lighting afterburners to rocket heavenwards through the clouds, and of facing down MiGs over invisible borders.

He started when Jan took the cup from his hands. "I'm done?"

Jan shook the cup. "Feels like it. Would you like another?"

"No, thanks, but I think my bag needs to be drained." Rob nodded at his leg.

“I’ll go get the bottle.” She crossed the room and turned down the hallway.

Rob cast a rueful glance after her. *From soaring above clouds to needing my urinal bag emptied. Yes, I’ve certainly done well by you, love.*

CHAPTER 2

TERRY STEPPED OFF THE BUS, started down the street to home, and wiped her brow. *Ugh, dog days of summer. I should just swipe one of Michael's Coronas and spend the rest of the afternoon in the hammock.*

When she reached her house, her kid brother was sitting on her front step.

"Hey, Jordy. I thought you had to work today."

Jordy grinned and scrambled to his feet. "Gary wanted to change shifts with me because he's got a date this weekend, so I'm off tonight. I decided to see what you guys were doing, and Michael said he was fixing a picnic to go down to River Park. He invited me along, so I've just been waiting for you."

Terry slung an arm around his shoulders. "Well, if Michael's done the picnic packing, then we don't want to miss out. I have to shower first, though. Is Claire coming, too?"

"Yeah, she's off work today." He bounced up the stairs at her side.

Entering the house, Terry hollered for her roommates.

Michael poked his head out from the kitchen. "Honestly, woman, are you trying to raise the dead?"

"Sorry, I was just wondering how much time I have before we leave for the park."

"I need about twenty more minutes, so yes, you have time for a shower." Michael returned to the kitchen, and Jordy followed him.

Terry climbed two flights of stairs to her garret at the top of the house to get ready.

Half an hour later, the four of them piled into Michael's Pathfinder and drove to the welcome coolness of River Park and a shaded table close to the water's edge. The Bow River was low and placid at this time of year, but the breeze was a welcome relief as Michael started unloading the big cooler.

Terry took a cold stuffed pita and eyed Michael's famous lemon sponge cake. *Glad I didn't pack the picnic. It would've been bologna sandwiches and Cokes for everyone.*

"I forgot to tell you that Marika phoned just before you got home today," Claire said. "I told her that, as far as I knew, you would be home later on."

Terry groaned. "Damn. I wish you'd told her I'd be out tonight."

Claire's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me? I did not know you were avoiding her."

Michael grinned. "Yeah, Ter, what's up with that?"

"You know darned well I've been ducking her for a couple of weeks now. Jesus, I went out with her for one measly month, and now she won't let go. I mean, we had fun and all, but I wasn't looking for a wife."

"It's that old second date, U-Haul syndrome," Michael said. "You all take things way too seriously."

"Oh? Like you weren't mooning over that Owen creep for months last semester?" Terry snagged a cherry tomato from the vegetable tray and threw it at him. "If he'd crooked his little finger at you, you'd have bought him a mansion with a mountain view and moved in with dogs, quilts, and copper pans."

Michael caught the tomato and popped it in his mouth. "Can't argue with that. And I do appreciate the tough love, though it was damned hard at the time."

“I know.” *I’m so glad you finally bounced that gold-digging low-life.* “But lots more fish in the sea, right? Especially for someone like you.”

“Enough about my woes.” Michael flashed a smile. “Let’s talk about your love life instead. What’s so bad about Marika? She’s gorgeous, and she’s crazy about you. What’s the problem?”

“The crazy part.”

“Huh,” Michael said. “I guess it would be. So how’d you two meet anyway?”

“It was all Lisa’s fault.” Terry sighed. “She set us up on a blind date. Said she thought Marika would be just my type, but all I wanted was some fun. I’m not into getting serious with anyone, and she was. Lisa told me that Marika was asking about me at Oly’s after the game the other night. I just wish she’d start obsessing about someone else and leave me alone.”

“I’m sorry I told her you’d be home tonight,” Claire said. “I didn’t realize she had become a problem. Perhaps you should go over to your parents’ place for the evening in case she comes by.”

Jordy’s expression brightened. “Yeah, Terry. Why don’t you? Alex and Diane are bringing the babies over tonight. You haven’t seen them for a couple of weeks.”

“Good point.” *It means another night without getting any writing done, but I can make up for it this weekend.* “Okay, buddy. Why don’t you and I head over there after we get back to the house?”

Jordy beamed, and the conversation moved into a discussion of the upcoming academic year. Terry listened idly, her gaze drifting over the park as Michael and Claire discussed shared courses and professors.

She scrutinized an auburn-haired woman who sat a short distance away in a lawn chair under a tree. “Hey, I know her.”

“What did you say?” Jordy took another pita. “You know who?”

“Remember me telling you about the man I helped lift off the floor last week?” Terry pointed at Mrs. Spencer. “Well, that’s his wife. I wonder what she’s doing here all by herself.” She swung her legs out from under the table and stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t eat all the cake on me.” She started over toward Mrs. Spencer, not entirely sure what she was going to say or even why she was approaching her.

In the week since she had helped the couple out, Terry had thought about them often. She had been impressed with Mr. Spencer’s upbeat optimism and good humour, even while he lay on the floor as helpless as a turtle on its back. Unusual people fascinated her, and he appeared to have the soul of a hero inside that devastated body.

Mrs. Spencer had also made an impression. The woman’s obvious affection and solicitude for her husband and the lively intelligence that illuminated her face made for an attractive mix.

“Hi.” Terry dropped to the grass in front of Mrs. Spencer. “I saw you from our picnic table and was just wondering how your husband was doing. No after-effects from his fall, were there?”

“Oh, hi.” Mrs. Spencer closed her book. “Thank you for your concern, but no, he’s fine. I really did appreciate your lending a hand, though. I was going to have to call the fire department if you hadn’t come along.”

“No problem at all. By the way, we haven’t really been introduced, although I know you’re Mrs. Spencer.” She held out her hand. “Terry Sanderson.”

“Jan Spencer.” She shook Terry’s hand. “And I apologize for not asking your name earlier.”

“No worries. Is Mr. Spencer around somewhere?”

“No, Rob’s at home with a caregiver. I take one afternoon off a week, and today was so nice that after my errands I decided to come down to the park and read for a few hours.”

“It’s nice that you can get away now and then. I’m sure you can use the break. No Laurie R. King today?” Terry looked at the hardcover that Jan was holding. “Oh, Carol O’Connell. Yeah, I know her books. She’s a terrific writer, and I love her *Mallory* series. I don’t think I’ve read *Judas Child* yet, though. Is it as good as her others?”

Jan nodded. “I was disappointed at first when I saw a new Carol O’Connell and it turned out not to be one of the *Mallory* books, but *Judas Child* is every bit as good as her other ones. I was looking forward to another visit with Mallory and Charles, though. They have such a fascinating relationship, don’t you think? Of course, nothing about Mallory is conventional, which is why she’s such an intriguing character. In a way, she’s such an amoral genius that you wouldn’t think you could relate to her, and for me, I always have to have at least one of the main characters that I can relate to or I don’t enjoy the book. But her friendship with Charles really humanizes her.”

Terry blinked at the torrent of words. *So much for her being shy.* “I know what you mean about relating to your characters. I’ve often wondered how authors handle writing despicable characters doing repulsive things. You’d think that if they couldn’t relate to them, they’d have difficulty making them real to the reader, wouldn’t you?”

Jan tilted her head. “You sound like you’ve thought about this a bit. Are you a fellow bookworm?”

Terry smiled. She kept her writing aspirations strictly to

herself, out of an almost superstitious fear that she would jinx her work. “I do enjoy reading a lot, though I don’t think I’m quite in your sphere of ‘worminess.’ It’s difficult sometimes to get any peace and quiet at my place to settle down and read without interruption for long periods.”

“Do you live in a noisy apartment building?”

Terry shook her head. “No, but I might as well. I share a house by the university with a couple of third-year students. I took the top floor because I thought it would be the quietest, and it is for the most part. But Michael—he lives in the basement suite—he likes to entertain.” She laughed. “Actually, I think he’s majoring more in partying than business.”

Jan smiled. “That could catch up to him.”

“True. He comes from a pretty wealthy family back east, and I know his father has high expectations. Sometimes I think he came west for university just to get out from under his parents’ eyes.”

“Is your other roommate also a party animal?”

“No, Claire is pretty quiet compared to me and Michael. She takes her studies seriously. She’s originally from Quebec, but she wanted to improve her English, so she decided to go to school here.”

“You’re not in school, are you?” Jan asked. “You don’t look much older than a college student yourself. Or have you found a way to combine school and work?”

Terry leaned back on the thick grass. “Up until a few months ago, I was a student, but I graduated with my M.A. from the U of C this year.”

“What’s a university grad doing delivering mail? I’d have thought you’d want work in your field of study.”

Terry sighed. “Now you sound like my parents. They couldn’t believe I’d spent six years in university only to pound the pavement every day in the service of Canada Post. But

I'm really enjoying it. The job pays well, which is important because I have a ton of student loans to pay off. It keeps me in great shape, and I have loads of time just to think. Frankly, I'm all schooled out. I may not spend the next thirty years of my life doing this, but for now it suits my purposes." She didn't mention that she had plotted the first four chapters of her book while walking her route in Jan's neighbourhood. "Do you mostly read mysteries, or do you like other genres, too?"

Jan smiled. "I've enjoyed everything from Stephen King to P.G. Wodehouse and from newspapers to comic books. As long as it's well written, it's a safe bet that I'll like reading it."

"What about speculative fiction?" Terry had the glimmer of an idea.

"I don't read as much of that as I once did, but yes, I've always really enjoyed writers like Stephen R. Donaldson and Dave Duncan. Donaldson was the very first one I read, and his *Thomas Covenant* series hooked me right from the beginning. Duncan is a true pleasure as he's so much fun to read. I loved his *Seventh Sword* series. For pure fantasy, I'd have to say Charles de Lint is my all-time favourite. I used to live in Ottawa, and I'd look for the places he wrote about in *Moonheart* and *Jack the Giant Killer*. I thought it was so fascinating to read fantastical stories set in my own town."

"I know what you mean," Terry said. "For awhile I wouldn't read anything but writers like Terry Brooks and David Eddings." *And then I found Naiad's lesbian romances and all bets were off.*

"So did you finish work early today?" Jan asked.

"No, I always start early on hot summer days so that I'm usually done not long after noon." Terry pointed back at the picnic table where Michael, Claire, and Jordy sat. "Would you like to join us? We have lots of food, and Michael is a terrific cook. You're welcome to share if you'd like to."

Jan's gaze dropped, and she ran a hand through her hair. "Thank you for the invitation, but I have to be getting back now. It's almost time for the caregiver to leave, and I hate to be late." She removed her reading glasses, closed her book, and put it in her bag. "It was nice talking to you, Terry. I'll see you around." She folded her lawn chair and walked toward the parking lot.

Terry watched her go, then returned to the picnic table.

The others looked up at her arrival.

"Sooooo?" Michael waggled an eyebrow at her. "Who was that, and since when did you get it on with older women?"

Claire smiled. "Oui, now I know why you are avoiding Marika."

Terry rolled her eyes. "No, you have it all wrong. I just wanted to check that her husband was okay after his fall."

Michael and Claire nodded and returned to their conversation.

Jordy studied Terry.

"What?" She scowled at him. "Do I have something on my face?" *God, I hate it when he does that. It's like he can see right through me.*

"No. Nothing on your face. Nothing at all."

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