



## Lethal Attraction: Against the Rules Fatal Affair

By Linda Howard, Marie Force

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Two worlds collide in these timeless stories of love and deception...

Against the Rules by Linda Howard

At seventeen, Cathryn Ashe fought her attraction to Rule Jackson and lost. Humiliated, she fled to the anonymity of the city. Now she's back, independent and more sure of herself than ever—and ready to challenge him again.

But Rule is raising the stakes, and what Cat stands to lose is something she's known all along is his for the taking—her heart.

Fatal Affair by Marie Force

Detective Sergeant Sam Holland needs a big win to salvage her career—and her confidence—after a disastrous case. The perfect opportunity arises when she's assigned to the investigation of a senator's murder. But she has to team up with Nick Cappuano, the senator's friend and chief of staff...and the man she had a memorable one-night stand with years earlier. Their sexual chemistry still sizzles, but sleeping with a material witness is a mistake Sam can't afford—especially when the bodies keep piling up.

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**Editorial Review**

Review

"You can't read just one Linda Howard!"

-New York Times bestselling author Catherine Coulter

"Linda Howard writes with power, stunning sensuality and a storytelling ability unmatched in the romance genre. Every book is a treasure for the reader to savor again and again."

-New York Times bestselling author Iris Johansen

"This book starts out strong and keeps getting better. Marie Force is one of those authors that will be on my must-read list in the future."

-The Romance Studio on Fatal Affair

"Marie Force's second novel in the Fatal series is an outstanding romantic suspense in its own right; that it follows the fantastic first installment only sweetens the read."

-RT Book Reviews, 4 ½ stars, on Fatal Justice

About the Author

**Marie Force** is the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling, award-winning author of 25 contemporary romances, including **The McCarthys of Gansett Island Series**, **the Fatal Series**, **the Treading Water Series** and numerous stand-alone books. Her new series, The Green Mountain Series, is coming in early 2014. While her husband was in the Navy, Marie lived in Spain, Maryland and Florida, and she is now settled in her home state of Rhode Island. She is the mother of two teenagers and two feisty dogs, Brandy and Louie. Subscribe to updates from Marie about new books and other news at [marieforce.com/subscribe/](http://marieforce.com/subscribe/). Follow her on Twitter @marieforce. And on Facebook at [facebook.com/MarieForceAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/MarieForceAuthor). Join one of her many reader groups! View the list at [marieforce.com/connect/](http://marieforce.com/connect/). Contact Marie at [marie@marieforce.com](mailto:marie@marieforce.com).

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Cathryn wearily dropped her travel bag at her feet and looked around the air terminal for a familiar face, any familiar face. Houston's Intercontinental Airport was crowded with holiday travelers over the long Memorial Day weekend, and after being pushed both backward and forward by people hurrying to make connecting flights, Cathryn stepped back out of the worst of the crunch, using her foot to push the travel bag along. Her flight hadn't been early, so why wasn't someone there to meet her? This was her first visit home in almost three years, so surely Monica could have—

"Cat."

The irritated thought was never finished; it was interrupted by a husky growl in her ear and two hard hands curving around her slim waist, turning her around and pulling her against a lean male body. She had a startled, fleeting glimpse of unreadable dark eyes before they were covered by drooping lids and long black

lashes; then he was too close, and her lips, parted in surprise, were caught by the warmth of his mouth. Two seconds, three...the kiss lingered, became deeper, his tongue moving in to take sensual possession. An instant before she recovered herself enough to protest, he released her from the kiss and stepped back.

"You shouldn't do that!" she snapped, her pale cheeks becoming warm with color as she noticed several people watching them and grinning.

Rule Jackson thumbed his battered black hat farther back on his head and regarded her with calm amusement, the same sort of look he'd given her when she was an awkward twelve-year-old, all long arms and legs. "I thought we'd both enjoy it," he drawled, leaning down to pick up her bag. "Is this all?"

"No," she said, glaring at him.

"It figures."

He turned and made his way over to the luggage claim area, and Cathryn followed him, fuming inwardly at his manner but determined not to let him see it. She was twenty-five now, not a scared kid of seventeen; she would *not* let him intimidate her. She was his employer. He was only the ranch foreman, not the omnipotent devil her adolescent imagination had painted him. He might still have Monica and Ricky under his spell, but Monica was no longer her guardian and couldn't command her obedience. Cathryn wondered with well-hidden fury if Monica had deliberately sent Rule to meet her, with the knowledge that she hated him.

Unconsciously watching his lean body as he stretched and claimed the lone suitcase with her name tag on it, Cathryn shut off the rest of the violent thoughts that flooded her mind. Seeing Rule had always done that to her, driven her out of control and made her do things she would never have done except in the heat of temper. I hate him, she thought, the words whispering through her mind, but still her eyes moved over the width of his shoulders and down the long, powerful legs as she remembered\_\_\_\_\_

He brought the suitcase to where she stood and one straight black eyebrow arched questioningly. After making her feel that she had imposed on him by having more than one piece of luggage, he grunted, "Not planning on a long visit, are you?"

"No," she replied, keeping her voice flat, expressionless. She had never stayed long at the ranch, not since that summer when she had been seventeen.

"It's about time you thought about coming home for good," he said.

"There's no reason for me to."

His dark eyes glinted at her from under the brim of his hat, but he didn't say anything, and when he turned and began threading his way through the groups of people Cathryn followed him without saying anything either. Sometimes she thought that communication between her and Rule was impossible, but at other times it seemed that no words were necessary. She didn't understand him, but she knew him, knew his pride, his toughness, his damned black temper that was no less frightening for being controlled. She had grown up knowing that Rule Jackson was a dangerous man; her formative years had been dominated by him.

He led her out of the air terminal and across the pavement to the area where private aircraft were kept, his long legs eating up the distance without effort; but Cathryn wasn't used to keeping up with his strides and she refused to trot after him like a dog on a leash. She maintained her own pace, keeping him in sight, and at last

he stopped beside a blue-and-white twinengined Cessna, opening the cargo door and storing her bags inside, then looking around impatiently for her. "Hurry it up," he called, seeing that she was still some distance away.

Cathryn ignored him. He put his hands on his hips and waited for her, his booted feet braced in an arrogant stance that came naturally to him. When she reached him he didn't say a word; he merely pulled the door open and turned back to her, catching her around the waist and lifting her easily into the plane. She moved to the copilot's seat and Rule swung himself into the pilot's seat, then closed the door and tossed his hat onto the seat behind him, raking his lean fingers through his hair before reaching for the headset. Cathryn watched him, her expression revealing nothing, but she couldn't help remembering the vitality of that thick dark hair, the way it had curled around her fingers\_\_\_\_\_

He glanced at her and caught her watching him. She didn't look guiltily away but held her gaze, knowing that the still blankness of her face gave away nothing.

"Do you like what you see?" he taunted softly, letting the headset dangle from his fingers.

"Why did Monica send you?" she asked flatly, ignoring his question and attacking with one of her own.

"Monica didn't send me. You've forgotten; *I* run the ranch, not Monica." His dark eyes rested on her, waiting for her to flare up at him and shout that she owned the ranch, not he, but Cathryn had learned well how to hide her thoughts. She kept her face blank, her gaze unwavering.

"Exactly. I'd have thought you were too busy to waste time fetching me."

"I wanted to talk to you before you got to the ranch; this seemed like a perfect opportunity."

"So talk."

"Let's get airborne first."

Flying in a small plane was no novelty to her. From her birth she had been accustomed to flying, since a plane was considered essential to a rancher. She sat back in the seat and stretched her cramped muscles, sore from the long flight from Chicago. Big jets screamed as they came in for landings or lifted off, but Rule was unruffled as he talked to the tower and taxied to a clear strip. In only minutes they were up and skimming westward, Houston shimmering in the spring heat to the south of them. The earth beneath had the rich green hue of new grass, and Cathryn drank in the sight of it. Whenever she came for a visit she had to force herself to leave, and it always left an ache for months, as if something vital had been torn from her. She loved this land, loved the ranch, but she had survived these years only by keeping to her self-imposed exile.

"Talk," she said shortly, trying to stem the memories.

"I want you to stay this time," he said, and Cathryn felt as if he had punched her in the stomach.

Stay? Didn't he, of all people, know how impossible that was for her? She slid a quick sideways glance at him and found him frowning intently at the horizon. For a moment her eyes lingered on the strong profile before she jerked her head forward again.

"No comment?" he asked.

"It's impossible."

"Is that it? You're not even going to ask why?"

"Will I like the answer?"

"No." He shrugged. "But it's not something you can avoid."

"Then tell me."

"Ricky's back again; she's drinking a lot, running out of control. She's been doing some wild things, and people are talking."

"She's a grown woman. I can't control her," said Cathryn coldly, though it made her furious to think of Ricky dragging the Donahue name in the dirt.

"I think you can. Monica can't, but we both know that Monica doesn't have much mothering instinct. On the other hand, since your last birthday you control the ranch, which makes Ricky dependent on you." He turned his head to pin her to the seat with his dark hawk's eyes. "I know you don't like her, but she's your stepsister and she's using the Donahue name again."

"Again?" Cathryn sniped. "After two divorces, why bother to change names?" Rule was right: she didn't like Ricky, never had. Her stepsister, two years her senior, had the temperament of a Tasmanian devil. Then she slanted a mocking look at him. "You told me that *you* run the ranch."

"I do," he replied so softly that the hair on the back of her neck rose. "But I don't own it. The ranch is your home, Cat. It's time you settled down to that fact."

"Don't lecture me, Rule Jackson. My home is in Chicago now—"

"Your husband's dead," he interrupted brutally. "There's nothing there for you and you know it. What do you have? An empty apartment and a boring job?"

"I like my job; besides, I don't have to work."

"Yes, you do, because you'd go crazy sitting in that empty apartment with nothing to do. So your husband left you a little money. It'll be gone in five years, and I won't let you drain the ranch dry to finance that place."

"It's my ranch!" she pointed out shortly.

"It was also your father's, and he loved it. Because of him, I won't let you throw it away."

Cathryn lifted her chin, struggling to keep her composure. That was a low blow and he knew it. He glanced at her again and continued. "The situation with Ricky is getting worse. I can't handle it and do my job too. I need help, Cat, and you're the logical person."

"I can't stay," she said, but for once her uncertainty was evident in her voice. She disliked Ricky, but, on the other hand, she didn't hate her. Ricky was a pain and a problem, yet there had been times when they were

younger when they had giggled together like ordinary teenagers. And as Rule had pointed out, Ricky was using the Donahue name, having taken it as her own when Cathryn's father had married Monica, though it had never been made legal.

"I'll try to arrange a leave of absence." Cathryn heard herself giving in, and in belated self-protection tacked on, "But it won't be permanent. I'm used to living in a big city now, and I enjoy things that can't be found on a ranch." That much was true; she did enjoy the activities that went on nonstop in a large city, but she would give them up without a qualm if she felt that she could have a peaceful life on the ranch.

"You used to love the ranch," he said.

"That was used to."

He said nothing else, and after a moment Cathryn leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She recognized her complete trust in Rule's capabilities as a pilot, and the knowledge was bitter but inescapable. She would trust him with her life, but nothing else.

Even with her eyes closed she was so aware of his presence beside her that she felt as if she were being burned by the heat of his body. She could smell the heady male scent of him, hear his steady breathing. Whenever he moved the nerves in her body tingled. God, she thought in despair. Would she never forget that day? Did he have to shadow her entire life, ruling her with his mere presence? He had even haunted her marriage, forcing her to lie to her own husband.

She drifted into a light doze, a drifting state halfway between awareness and sleep, and she found that she could recall with perfect clarity all that she knew about Rule Jackson. She had known of him her entire life. His father had been a neighbor, a fellow rancher with a small but prospering spread, and Rule had worked the ranch with his father from the time he was old enough to sit a horse; but he was eleven years older and had seemed a grown man to her instead of the boy he had been.

Even as a child Cathryn had known that there was scandal attached to the name of Rule Jackson. He was known as "that wild Jackson boy," and older girls giggled when discussing him. But he was only a boy, a neighbor, and Cathryn liked him. He never paid much attention to her whenever she saw him, but when he did talk to her, he was kind and able to coax her out of her shyness; Rule was good with young animals, even human ones. Some said that he was better suited for the company of animals, but, for whatever reason, he had a rare touch with horses and dogs.

When Cathryn was eight her world changed. It had also been a time of change for Rule. The same year that her mother died, leaving Cathryn stunned and withdrawn, solemn beyond her years, Rule was drafted. He was nineteen when he got off the plane in Saigon. By the time he returned three years later, nothing was the same.

Ward Donahue had remarried to a darkly beautiful woman from New Orleans. From the first Cathryn didn't quite like Monica. For her father's sake she hid her feelings and did her best to get along with Monica, establishing an uneasy truce. Each of them walked softly around the other. It wasn't that Monica was the stereotypical wicked stepmother; she simply wasn't a motherly woman, not even to her own daughter, Ricky. Monica liked bright lights and dancing, and from the first she didn't fit in with the hardworking ranch life. She tried, for Ward's sake. That was the one thing Cathryn never doubted, that Monica loved her father. For that reason she and Monica existed in mutual if unenthusiastic peace.

The upheaval in Rule's life had been even greater. He had survived Vietnam, but sometimes it seemed as if only his body had returned. His dark, laughing eyes no longer laughed; they watched and brooded. His body was scarred with wounds that had healed, but the mental wounds he had suffered had changed him forever. He never talked about it. He seldom talked at all. He kept to himself and watched people with those hard, expressionless eyes, and soon he became an outcast.

He drank a lot, sitting alone and steadily downing the alcohol, his face closed and stony. Naturally he became even more attractive to women than he had been before. Some women couldn't resist the aura of danger that clung to him like an invisible cloak. They dreamed of being the magic one who could comfort him, heal him and take him away from the nightmare he still lived.

He was involved in one scandal after another. His father threw him out of the house and no one else would hire him, the ranchers and merchants banding together to rid the neighborhood of him. Somehow he still found money for whiskey, and he sometimes disappeared for days, leading people to speculate that he had crawled off somewhere and died. But he always turned up like a bad penny, a bit thinner, more haggard, but always there.

It was inevitable that the hostility against him would escalate into violence; he had been involved with too many women, snarled at too many men. Ward Donahue found him one day lying sprawled in a ditch on the outskirts of town. Rule was battered from the punishment a group of men had decided was his due, and so thin that his bones shone white through his skin. Still silent and intent, his dark eyes glittered up at his rescuer with grim defiance even though he was unable to stand. Without a word Ward lifted the younger man in his arms as if he were a child and placed him in the pickup, taking him to the ranch to be cared for. A week later Rule crawled painfully onto a horse and rode with Ward about the ranch, performing the hard but necessary chore of riding fence, repairing broken fencing and rounding up strays. He was in such pain for the first few days that sweat poured from his body whenever he moved, yet he continued with grim determination.

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