



Love Leads the Way

Claudia Pemberton

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This novel captures the imagination and puts a face on America's military involvements overseas.

In Claudia Pemberton's new military thriller *Love Leads the Way*, newlyweds Mikayla and Jesse Daulton experience the pains of war, both on the home front and in the heat of action.

Jesse, a retired United States Army Ranger who works as a flight medic on a rescue helicopter, has had plenty of action in his life. He is excited to finally start a family with Mikayla, but a hotheaded decision puts their plans on hold. He returns to Afghanistan as a contractor in Operation Enduring Freedom, leaving Mikayla behind.

Pemberton, also the author of *Love Leaves No One Behind*, does a terrific job of exploring her subject: military families and the struggles they face, whether together or separated by duty. The novel's insights into the struggles and rewards of military life are spot-on, and its depiction of a married couple coping with a long, dangerous deployment is accurate, compassionate, and honest.

Details—from the much-coveted long-distance phone call to the ache of missing someone who's in a combat zone—add depth to the characters and raise the stakes on plot elements like a crazed stalker and a pregnancy.

When Cliff, a "friend" whose obsession with Mikayla turns dangerous, breaks a restraining order, he initiates a nightmare that there's no clear path out of. The knowledge that Mikayla's husband and protector won't be back for months only heightens the fear factor in the story.

The novel falls somewhere between a romance and a thriller, and the mash-up of genres may be confusing for readers expecting one or the other. Although love scenes are extended, detailed, and exciting, they're outrun by long, graphic depictions of rape and assault. The novel skews heavily toward violence and uses shock value to get pulses racing.

Jesse's day-to-day life in Afghanistan is carefully detailed, revealing what soldiers' experiences in the Middle East are really like in a humane and realistic way. Descriptions of heavy combat fire and injuries are hard-hitting and true to life. Afghani characters are also realistic, afforded a sense of depth and humanity that sets this novel apart from other thrillers.

Love Leads the Way makes global issues personal by focusing on characters' relationships and inner lives. Pemberton shows that combat isn't just a matter of war—it involves families, too. The novel puts a human face on America's struggle overseas, imparting important truths about real military life.

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