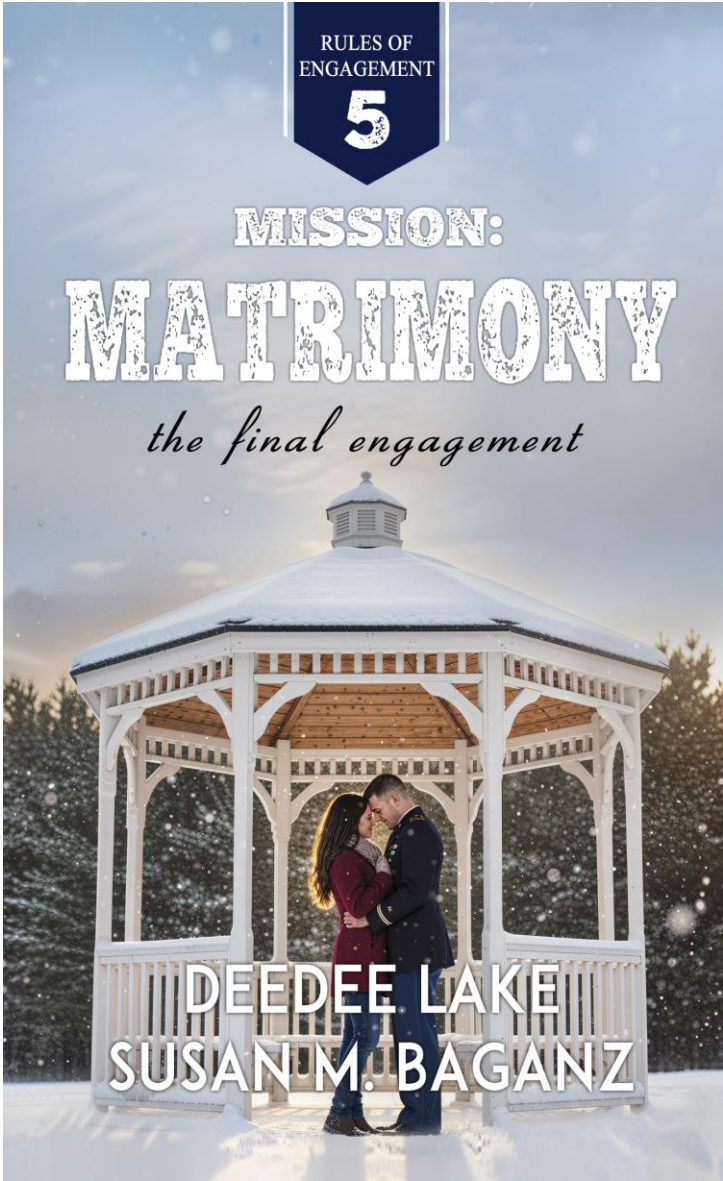


RULES OF
ENGAGEMENT

5

MISSION:
MATRIMONY

the final engagement

A romantic scene of a man and a woman in a snowy landscape. The man is in a dark military-style uniform, and the woman is in a red dress. They are standing inside a white wooden gazebo with a snow-covered roof, holding each other and looking at each other. The background shows snow-covered evergreen trees under a soft, hazy sky. Snowflakes are falling around them.

DEEDEE LAKE
SUSAN M. BAGANZ

Mission: Matrimony

The Final Engagement

Rules of Engagement Series #5

DeeDee Lake
Susan M. Baganz

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CHAPTER 1

"No!" Harley Barnett screamed as she jerked awake. The shocking images in her night terror hovered in her mind as she adjusted to her dark bedroom. Her left hand rested over her heart as she gasped for breath.

Emily. Young, sweet, innocent Emily.

Dead.

An involuntary shiver overtook her. A clock projected the time onto the ceiling. 20:00. She should be able to sleep two more hours, but there was no way she would return to bed now. She rushed to the shower. Maybe the scalding water would purge her of the horror and guilt that had plagued her since her senior year of high school.

Once dressed, she entered her living room to find the sun had already set. Another beautiful day of waning fall in Augusta, Georgia had passed her by, but at least she'd gotten a few hours of rest, something that had been hard to do lately. It was becoming a problem.

Emily.

It had been months since these nightmares had invaded Harley's sleep, but now it was as if her best friend had decided to haunt her for good. She tried to ignore the lingering feeling of terror and headed out

the door.

As if a helmet could keep memories at bay, Harley put on hers and revved her namesake motorcycle as she hit the highway. The thrill of riding was dampened by the dream she could never escape. Soon she'd lose herself in work, and that would keep the darkness away.

Coming in for an off-hour shift made the commute easier, and working third shift paid better. A benefit of working as a civilian as opposed to military. That, and no uniform. She passed through security at Fort Gordon and arrived at the building that housed National Security Agency personnel. She'd left the Army but still ended up spending her days on post.

Harley pulled into her parking spot under one of the large lights, and turned off the engine. Once she had the kickstand secured, she relaxed her hold on the bike before unfastening her helmet and removing it. Her long hair fell free and there was something soothing about swishing it back and forth as if to shake off the remnants of horror.

With her helmet under one arm, she headed for the office, but after a few steps her phone rang. Her pulse quickened as she accepted the video call

"Hey Canyon, why are you calling so late?" She stopped under a lamp staring at his handsome visage. Oh, the Captain exuded confidence in his uniform. His physical attractiveness was only part of his appeal.

"You emailed about working third shift this week, and I'm on my lunch break. I hoped I'd calculated this correctly, so you'd have time to chat. Would you be

available to meet this weekend?"

"You'll be back in the States? Are you done in Okinawa?" A thrill of excitement raced through her. Canyon was the only guy who'd ever really ticked all the right boxes. Being with him was as thrilling as racing helmetless on a deserted road with the wind in her hair and the sun on her face.

They'd met at her friend Jane's wedding two years ago. They'd dated occasionally and flirted over the phone with video calls, but she'd grown tired of a long-distance relationship. Yet, she still wasn't sure she was ready for a firmer commitment.

"Yeah, my next Permanent Change of Station is at NORAD. Any chance you'll be heading to Colorado soon? NSA has offices there too. Hint, hint." He winked, and she returned his cheeky grin.

The racing bike in her imagination pulled over. "North American Aerospace Defense Command. Nice assignment. Too bad you couldn't be stationed at Fort Gordon instead. I'm not confident NSA would consider a transfer. Besides, by the time I move out there, you'll be stationed somewhere else. Maybe you'll work with Jane. Guess you'll be happy to connect with your friend Rusty, too. Now I'm jealous. My only plan to go to Colorado is for Selah's dedication after Thanksgiving." She headed to the building. "I'm available this weekend if you are thinking of coming to Augusta. I'd be happy to spend time with you. I need to get into the office. No personal calls while at work. You know the rules. Same here as in the Army."

"I'm flying into to Augusta Friday. I've really missed you, Harley." His tone was wistful, and his puppy-dog eyes pleaded with her for more time.

She bit her lip. "I miss you, too. We'll talk again...or email me?"

"Sounds good. Have a good night keeping the world safe," he said with a little salute.

"You too, Captain Davis."

The call ended and she powered down her phone as she went into the building. The imaginary bike was now parked with the motor off. She needed to focus on work, but her brain wouldn't cooperate. Was there a future with Canyon? His military career was her biggest hesitation. She also never believed herself worthy of a happily-ever-after. Emily never had that opportunity...

It's all your fault.

A shuddering breath escaped her.

She switched mental gears as she got into the elevator, and pondered what they might do when Canyon was in town. The thought of him made her grin.

Exiting the elevator, she made her way to her cubicle area. She dropped her bag and went to grab a cup of coffee.

"I forgot you're pulling the night shift as well."

The deep voice startled her, and she spilled some of the brew.

"Sam. Please don't sneak up on me like that," she sniped. Not the best way to start the evening.

A sly grin decried any remorse. "Someone needs

to keep a watch over you. Figured it was my turn."

She set down the coffee pot and grabbed her mug. She glared at him. "Really? You think I need protection here at work? It's a secure building on an Army post. The only one I need to be protected from is you."

His hand went to his chest. "You wound me. I'd never do anything to harm you. I am wondering, however, if you're available Saturday. It'd be nice to hang out when we're not at work."

"I already have plans for the weekend. A friend is coming to town." She took a sip of the coffee. She closed her eyes to enjoy the bitter, hot liquid. She imagined the caffeine surging through her veins to her brain to keep her awake through the long night ahead.

"I've got a friend; we could double date." His smug expression almost made her want to spit her coffee at him. She restrained the impulse. Her closest friends would be shocked at that.

"Sorry, not going to work."

"What, is she ugly?" Sam asked.

"No. He's a dashing Army Captain." She grinned, shrugged a shoulder, and strode back to her desk.

Sam didn't follow her. Harley settled in at her station and began poring over information that had come in during the day. Having an ability to learn languages was a gift she'd uncovered in high school. She spoke and read Spanish, German, Korean, and was now learning Mandarin. She put on her sound cancelling headphones and set to work translating the chatter that had been recorded in an effort to uncover any potential threats to the United States or their allies.

The night flew by, and all thoughts of her personal life evaporated until the sun began peeking in through the windows on the other side of the room. She checked the clock; the night shift would end soon. Working swings and mids confused her system. After saving her work and powering down the computer, she shrugged on her backpack purse and grabbed her helmet, ready to head to the stairs to avoid the influx of day shift people.

Steps echoed in the hallway from behind her. She glanced back. Sam.

"Hey, wanna do breakfast?" he asked.

"I'll pass. I need to get some sleep." A yawn testified to the fatigue that had become a part of her daily life in recent weeks.

He rushed to get in front of her and turned around. "You can't spare an hour to eat with a friend? I like you, Harley, and could be more than a friend if you'd let me."

His earnest expression almost made her pause.

"Anything beyond friendship with coworkers is frowned upon. I'm going home, I'm tired."

He turned and opened the door. "Fine, but I'm not going to give up asking."

Harley shook her head as she walked past him and continued down the stairs.

He followed at a slower pace. At least he'd stopped pleading with her. She gave him a wave as they left the building, and went to the bike.

Harley wasn't sure what it was she wanted—or was it *who*? The thought of Canyon stopping to spend

time with her before heading to Colorado made her smile. The guy was as good as they came, handsome, a Christian, and for some odd reason, he liked her.

She rode home enjoying the rumble of the bike. Reaching her apartment, she stopped to inhale the autumn air before heading inside. She loved living in Georgia, but missed the crisp fall days of Wisconsin or visiting her grandmother in Minnesota. The aroma of apple and cinnamon anywhere reminded her of homemade apple pies resulting in homesickness, something she'd not experienced in years. Nothing like September in the Midwest.

~*~

Captain Canyon Davis ended his final shift in Japan and went to his room to finish packing. As he worked, he prayed for Harley. She'd been a beautiful hurricane of energy and light when he met her two years ago at his friend Rusty's wedding to Jane Adams, Harley's friend. As a former Army intelligence officer Harley intrigued Canyon. She exuded a vibrancy that drew people to her. He'd been sucked in like a magnet.

A few months back he'd asked if she would consider returning to the Army. Dreams of them serving together were unrealistic, but a guy could hope. She understood the work he did. Other women might struggle to adapt to the confidentiality that surrounded his job. There was darkness all around and dangers most could never fathom. If he didn't believe in Christ as the ultimate Victor, he would despair

about some parts of the world.

Up to this point, Harley refused to consider reapplying for active duty stating she wasn't great "Army material." He struggled to understand her hesitation.

He'd been praying consistently that Harley would be willing to pursue something more with him, but they were both aware of the challenges of Army life. She'd experienced it as an officer, but would she be equally adept as a wife? Canyon could only image the wonders of serving around the world with her to come home to. Their children would experience amazing things as well. He didn't regret his own military brat upbringing.

He grinned as he picked up a framed photo of the two of them at Rusty and Jane's wedding. He'd be with her soon.

He'd arranged for most of his luggage to go to Rusty's home until Canyon could get to Colorado. He finished packing and sat down to email his itinerary to Rusty. Spending time with his adventure-loving friend after he settled in at Fort Carson would be great. Someday soon he hoped to be living a life of marital bliss like Rusty and Jane. And if God was gracious to him, Harley would be the bride.

Lord, You know my heart and my dreams and desires for Harley as my wife. Please speak to her heart and make my way clear if this is Your will.

CHAPTER 2

Canyon's plane landed at the Hartsville-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. He grabbed his duffle and made his way to the train that went to the terminal for the connecting flight to the Augusta Regional Airport. Exhaustion weighed heavy after too many hours cooped up in a large tin can, but there was only one more leg of this trip to go. Anticipation bubbled up inside for dinner tonight with Harley. Wherever they went, he expected an adventure.

Settling in to the plane seat he closed his eyes. He wanted to dream of a certain young woman who'd captured his heart. He awakened when the plane was about to land and waited patiently for others before getting his duffle and following the crowd to baggage claim.

After finally locating his suitcase, he headed to the hotel shuttle area, found a shuttle to his hotel and stifled a yawn as stowed his suitcase and duffle on the rack provided. He had traveled back in time half a day, and instead of it being Saturday in Japan it was Friday in the United States.

He strode to the front desk of the hotel to check in. The clerk gave him a soft smile. She asked a couple questions and typed the answers into her computer,

ran the credit card, and gave him a key.

"Are you new to town, Canyon?" she asked.

"I'm here visiting a friend," he said.

"Well, if you need anyone to show you around, I get off at five." She handed him a key card and a printout. "I'll be here until then."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll be fine." Canyon went to the elevators. He glanced at the paper. Lorelai had scrawled her phone number at the bottom. Pretty name, but the desk clerk wasn't Harley. His imagination conjured up Harley with her dark almond shaped eyes and that long brown hair and cute bangs. *Cool it, man. You'll be seeing her soon enough.* He arrived at his room and unpacked. With a few hours before Harley would pick him up, he changed and went for a run.

After returning to his room, he called his mom.

"Canyon," she said. "How was the flight?"

"Hi, Mom. It was long. Nice hotel. Thanks for taking care of making the reservations for me. Having a travel agent for a mother comes in handy sometimes."

"It's the least I could do. Your flight out of here is late Sunday. I realize you can't stay long but your father and I look forward to having you home for Thanksgiving dinner. You're going out with Harley later, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. I can't wait for you to meet her. I sure you and Dad will love Harley."

"Get married here in Kentucky so your dad can perform the ceremony."

"Isn't it usually the bride's choice?"

"I don't remember. It was so long ago since I got married."

"Mom, you're not that old."

"Having a son in the military ages a woman."

"And having an Army husband didn't?"

"Your father was a chaplain," she protested.

"Mom, every one of us is trained to fight and shoot. I'm in intelligence, so I'm not on the front lines either."

"You still go to dangerous places."

"Not recently, but I appreciate your concern. Anyway, I wanted to touch base, so you'd know I'm here and all is well. I finished a run and need to get a shower before Harley picks me up."

"Enjoy your visit. We look forward to seeing you soon."

"Thanks, Mom. Love you. Give my love to Dad, too. Bye."

"Love you too, son. Bye."

Canyon set down the phone and got ready for his date with Harley. They would have less than three days together. Since he'd made her his first stop after returning to the United States, he hoped she understood the depth of his interest. It was too early to propose, and he was trying to decipher when the right time would be. The clock was ticking and the hit-and-miss nature of their relationship had become frustrating. *Lord, I need You to show me the way.*

~*~

Harley exited her apartment. Her neighbor strode up the walk to the front door and she held it open for him. "Good afternoon, Bob."

Bob paused and grinned. "It is now. You've been working odd shifts?"

"Yes. Sometimes I think I get more done at night with less distractions."

"Do they pay you more for that?" His grocery bags hung off both arms.

"That would be privileged information. Have a good night." She moved past him.

"You're heading out?" Bob didn't seem daunted by the weight hanging on him.

"I'm meeting a friend who is in town for the weekend."

Bob nodded. "Great. Have a good time and stay out of trouble."

Harley winked. "What fun would that be?" She let the door close behind him as he moved away.

She strapped another helmet onto her motorcycle before donning hers. It was a beautiful fall evening. She almost wished Canyon's motorcycle was closer so they could go for a ride tomorrow; however, without the proper equipment it was difficult to have a conversation that way. She wanted as much real face time with him as she could get.

Harley found a spot to park, hung her helmet on the bike, and fluffed her hair. Inside the lobby, Canyon was chatting with a perky young desk clerk. Harley narrowed her gaze as a twinge of jealousy rippled through her. *He's not mine—yet. I have no permanent*

claim on him. Had she ever experienced this level of possessiveness with any other man she'd dated? No. So why now? She took a deep breath and pasted on a smile. Why was she getting bent out of shape when she wasn't sure about a future with this man? It didn't make sense. *Why did he need to be so friendly?*

His eyes crinkled and his smile grew wide when he saw her. His high-and-tight haircut suited him well, and she wiggled her fingers with a strange desire to touch his hair. He gave a little wave to the clerk as he headed Harley's way.

"Hey, beautiful," Canyon said with smile.

His arms opened wide, and she stepped in for a hug. After his call, she'd finally broken down and found a perfume she liked. Her dad always called it "stink-good," which made her mother giggle. Harley didn't want to think about why she wanted to impress this man.

Canyon evidently had put on stink-good as well since his cologne tickled her nose. The embrace made her want to snuggle up and stay here forever. Was she that tired of being alone? She stepped back as he released her, mildly dizzy.

"You don't look so bad yourself. You clean up pretty well for an Army guy."

His deep chuckle did something to her insides that she'd rather not think about. It was hunger—for food. Of course, it must be. Her stomach grumbled to confirm that.

"So, where are you taking me tonight?" he asked.

"I thought a ride on my namesake would be good.

I'll even let you drive her if you wish." They headed for the exit. "I'm thinking dinner might be in order. What are you in the mood for?"

Canyon stepped up to the motorcycle and grabbed the helmet she'd brought for him. "You drive. I'll trust you to find the right spot since you live in the area. Not Japanese tonight. I love the food, but I ate a lot of that during deployment."

"Good ol' Southern cuisine, then." Harley strapped on her helmet and lifted a leg over the seat. Canyon climbed on the back and put his arms around her. Almost like a seatbelt. Only better. Soon, they were back on the road. Being an experienced cyclist himself, Canyon moved with her on every turn. It wasn't too long before they were at the local eatery.

They dismounted and hung their helmets.

"I think that's the first time I've ever ridden with you, isn't it?" Canyon asked.

Harley nodded. "First time you've come to visit me here, too. We've met up for a day in Atlanta, and we've hiked in Colorado at Garden of the Gods. This is the first time we've both been available for a longer visit."

"Someday I hope we could ride together. That is if your hog can handle being around a Japanese bike," Canyon joked.

"Ruby does have her standards but that is a nice bike, so I'm sure she'll accommodate you," Harley said.

"You named your bike?" Canyon asked.

"Of course. She's a deep claret color and Ruby

sounded appropriate. You didn't name your bike?" Harley asked.

"No, can't say I did." Canyon laughed.

They got to the hostess counter and Harley put up two fingers. The hostess led them through the room to a booth by the window. She set the menus on the table. "Cicely will be your waitress. She'll be with you shortly."

"Thank you," both Canyon and Harley said in unison.

"Jinx!" Harley crowed.

"Does that mean I need to pay for dinner?" Canyon inquired.

"We can go Dutch this entire weekend. If you need to pay for everything for both of us, you'll never visit me again." Harley picked up the menu and perused the meals.

"Dutch is fine, but don't deny me doing anything nice for you along the way if I wish."

Harley set down her menu. "Far be it that I should deny you the pleasure of spoiling me."

The chuckle from across the table caused strange sensations in her stomach. She needed to order food — fast.