



LEIANNA KENNEDY: MAN TROUBLE

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BOTHERSOME BOYS

NIGHT BRINGS OUR TROUBLES TO THE LIGHT, RATHER THAN BANISHES THEM.

SENECA

Early one evening night my mother gave me a letter from Vincent Maitland. It had been some time since I'd seen Vincent last, not that he hadn't been trying to get to me. I'd jilted him just weeks before our wedding, and he'd never gotten over it. He'd even gone so far as to give my cousin, Erin Gallagher, presents to convince her to influence me. And she had tried, believe me, but it had not done him any good. My relationship with Vincent was over, and had been for years.

Unfortunately, I couldn't seem to convince Vincent of that fact. The letter my mother had given me was not the first that had been passed on through family members. In the beginning his letters had been civil enough, if not somewhat pleading, begging for a second chance for us to be together. In the last few months the letters had changed. He no longer asked me for anything at all. Now he demanded.

I waited until I got home to read the letter, and what I read made me very worried. He'd gone from 'please just let me see you' to 'you will come back to me' and 'don't make me put my foot down'.

"Maybe we should have the gang encourage him to move along," Erin suggested when I showed her and my sister Keelie the letter.

I shook my head. "Maybe we could just take care of this ourselves and not involve them."

"What do you want us to do," she asked, "point a finger at him and shake it vigorously?"

"You are too close to this to be able to handle it personally," Keelie added.

"I would prefer not to have the mob shoo him away," I said firmly. "That would be a bit extreme."

"It's not like they'd shoot him down," Erin pointed out, "or run him out of town."

"I don't think I'd be going knocking on his door demanding anything," Keelie warned seriously. "I'm not sure I'd involve the gang either. Vincent has... well, his extended family is a little bit more than you want to get involved with."

"You're kidding me," Erin gasped, getting Keelie's meaning right away. Vincent had gotten himself aligned with one of the other mob families in town.

When Keelie shook her head, I repeated that we should settle this ourselves.

"How?" Erin demanded.

Keelie looked at me as if I'd gone insane. "Did you miss the fact that he's connected?"

"What do you suggest I do?" I retorted.

"Suck it up and go back to him," she sighed.

"Maybe he won't mind what you are, if you wore the right outfit," Erin said with a smile.

While I told them that I would think about it, I knew that going back to Vincent was impossible. Even aside from the fact that I was in love with another man, there was the point of what I now was, what all three of us were. If I went back to him, he'd have to know the truth about what I was and that could never happen.

A few nights after the latest letter from Vincent, my brother Cameryn showed up at the apartment I shared with Keelie driving a new truck. We all went down to take a look at it, and agreed that it was very nice, too nice for him to be able to afford it himself. Cameryn insisted that he hadn't stolen it and that it had been a gift from an old friend.

"Do we know your old friend?" Keelie asked.

"Yeah, you know him," he muttered, looking anywhere but at me. I had a sinking feeling I knew just who his old friend was.

Keelie wouldn't let it rest. "And the reason you're not telling us...?"

"It was Vincent, all right?" he shot back irritably.

"Why did you take it?" Erin asked, almost as if she'd never taken anything from Vincent herself.

"Don't you think he wants something in return?" Keelie added.

"He does," Cameryn admitted. "He wants me to try and get Leianna back with him."

I turned and walked a few feet away, angry and frightened by turns that Vincent had approached Cameryn with a gift to get me back.

"You know he's been threatening her lately, right?" I heard Keelie say behind me.

"I'm not saying I'm his best friend," he protested.

"He's threatening your sister," she growled. "Do you care?"

At that point he got defensive. "I didn't say I'd do it."

"He could give me a truck," Erin said smoothly. "I'd try for that."

He threw up his hands. "See? She understands."

Keelie stepped closer to him and poked him in the chest with her forefinger. "Do you know he has some strong mob ties?"

"So do we," he pointed out.

Cameryn was right, we did. He and Keelie did moonshine runs, while I did the books for one of the more prominent gangs in Hell's Kitchen.

"Not the same ones," Keelie shot back.

I walked back to them. "Okay, just leave him alone," I said softly. "Vincent's a jerk, but it's not Cameryn's fault."

She rounded on me furiously. "How long before he starts roughing up Cameryn when he doesn't get what he wants?"

"I don't think he wants me the way he wants her," our brother replied.

"How long before he starts demanding things?" she added roughly.

"I said 'stop it'," I insisted, turning and heading back into the apartment building.

"He really isn't that bad," I heard Cameryn muttering behind me as they followed me inside.

It took only a few minutes to find the letter from Vincent and show it to my brother. He seemed concerned, especially when I told him it hadn't been the first letter that he'd sent.

"Did you write him back?" he asked.

"Of course not," I replied tersely. "I just want him to leave me alone."

"That's bad, sis," he replied.

"It's not like she can have him in her life right now," I heard Erin say as I walked into the living room.

"She's got that other guy," Cameryn agreed.

"Vincent is not one of us," she said firmly. At the amused look on his face, she added, "Okay, pulse boy, you're family."

He looked at me. "You have to find something to tell him."

"Write him a letter," Erin suggested.

Keelie seemed to like that idea. "Be firm and to the point. Let him know that you won't take being threatened any more."

I sighed. I knew that writing him would only encourage him, but I also knew I had no other choice. "I'll write him a letter."

With the three of them hanging over my shoulder, I sat down at the desk and began writing. It took four tries before we were all happy with the results. None of us had any real hope that the letter would do any good, but we all agreed that it was the best route for now.

Vincent,

I apologize for not returning your letters, however I have been extremely busy.

I want you to know that neither threats nor bribing my family will win me back. I'm sorry to say that I have changed a great deal and we are no longer suited for one another.

Please do not contact me or my family again,

Sincerely,

Leianna Kennedy

Once the letter was sealed, Keelie and Cameryn left for one of their runs, promising to mail it while they were out. Erin seemed to think I needed to get out of the house so she went through my closet, and Keelie's, to find something suitable for me to wear. We left a note for my sister saying that we were going to the Garden Club, one of the local pubs that we spent a lot of time at.

After we'd been at the pub for an hour or so, Erin pointed out that three men had been keeping a close eye on us since we walked into the place. I remembered seeing them when we'd walked in, and one of them in particular looked familiar. They weren't regulars, nor did they seem to be Irish as most of the patrons were. However, the strange thing was that they weren't really paying much attention to Erin, they were watching me.

It's no lie to say that Erin is beautiful. Men watch her wherever she goes, caught by her looks and her glittering personality. She knows how men perceive her, knows how to show herself in the best light and she does it without thinking. For a group of men to ignore her in favor of watching me was not only noteworthy, but remarkable.

"Go up to the office with Lucas," Erin ordered softly. When I simply blinked at her in surprise, she added, "Just go, I'll be up in a minute."

"He'll yell at me if I go up by myself," I pointed out.

"He will not," she denied quickly. She was lying and we both knew it.

Lucas Goodrich was Erin's boyfriend and the owner of the Garden Club. More importantly, he was the man who had changed Erin, Keelie and me. He was our sire, which meant a lot to him, and to my cousin and sister. It meant a great deal less to me.

I couldn't look at Lucas without remembering the night he'd killed me. I'd walked into the house I shared with Keelie to find her and Erin lying still as death with Lucas kneeling over them. The sight had thrown me for a loop, but before I could so much as scream Lucas had been on me. By the time I'd known what was what, I had no heartbeat and the taste of blood was thick in my mouth.

If I had been given the choice to become what I am, I honestly don't know if I would have agreed. Like Keelie, I might have found Lucas' description of unlife appealing and accepted with little or no hesitation. Or I might have gone screaming from the room, running for my life.

I don't know if I would have accepted the dark gift Lucas forced on me, and of course now I'll never know.

Lucas had made all of us vampires that night. He has another name for it, but I don't like following Lucas' instructions like a child that he's taken under his wing and I can't bear to use the term 'undead'.

Not that Lucas ever really took me under his wing, not to begin with and not in the two years since our embrace. I don't know if it's because of the circumstances of my embrace or the way I look or maybe he just doesn't like independent women, but for some reason Lucas doesn't seem to like me. He doesn't always show it, but it comes out in the way he sometimes snaps at me for no apparent reason.

Of course it doesn't help that he knows about my relationship with Luther Hammond. While Lucas hasn't said anything specific, I know they don't like each other. I also know there have been threats and accusations running between them. I don't like being the source of their animosity, but there it is nonetheless.

When I refused again to go to Lucas without her, Erin took my arm and led me to the bar. I couldn't resist a glance over my shoulder even after she told me not to look, but I didn't let my eyes linger any longer than it took to see that the men had taken notice of our movements.

"I've just remembered that I've seen him with Vincent," my cousin said in a low voice. "Smile and laugh like I just said something witty."

The moment she mentioned my ex-fiancé's name, I knew she was right. Somehow I managed to cover my reaction, but deep down I was very concerned. Matt Poletti was one of Vincent's cronies.

"Do you wanna go home?" Erin asked.

"If I leave now it's like I'm letting him control me," I told her. "I want to go home, but I don't think we should."

She smiled. "Exactly. Let's have fun."

She led me toward the dance floor, pausing only long enough to convince a couple of handsome Irishmen to dance with us. I was too nervous to concentrate on dancing and did so badly that after only one song Erin suggested I go sit down at a table near the dance floor. Eddie, the man I'd been dancing with, came with me out of politeness, but I could tell he was much more interested in Erin than in me.

A few minutes later, I saw Matt and his friends approaching the table. I caught Erin's eye across the dance floor, but there were too many people between her and the table and I knew she wouldn't make it to my side in time.

"Hello," Matt said as he reached the table.

I nodded and pasted a fake smile on my face. "Good evening."

"Who are your friends?" he asked.

There was a hint of a threat behind his words, but I didn't let that bother me. "Friends," I replied firmly. "Who are your friends?"

"You know," he shrugged. "The guys."

I did know. I knew exactly the type they were because there were all too many of them in the gang we ran with, tough men with big reputations and small consciences. "Well it was nice seeing you again," I said as I turned away.

"Leianna, let's go to the bar for a drink," Erin said from behind me.

I nodded and stood, glad that Eddie also got up without prompting.

"You really should give Mr. Maitland a call," Matt said before we could even take a step.

I paused but only for a moment. "I'll think about it."

This time the threat was clear beneath his words. "You think about it real hard."

"Have a good night," I replied as we moved away.

"Was he talking about Vincent Maitland?" Eddie asked in a hushed voice.

I looked at him in surprise. "You know him?"

His face drained of color, and so did Michael's, but it was the later who spoke. "Who doesn't know him?"

Had Erin not convinced them it was more manly to stay and talk with us than to run from the threat of Vincent Maitland, we'd have spent the next hour alone. Fortunately, Matt and his friends left shortly after delivering his veiled threats, but the evening was ruined for all of us.

LUTHER'S CONCERN

AM I IN TOO DEEP? HAVE I LOST MY MIND?

I DON'T CARE, YOU'RE HERE TONIGHT

ENRIQUE IGLESIAS - HERO

My trouble with men really began when I met Luther Hammond. Before that my life was good, if not happy. We'd moved to America to escape the poverty of Ireland and found a much better life waiting for us. My parents opened a small pub in Hell's Kitchen, a pub that with prohibition had turned into a blind pig. The three of us kids settled in to learning our new country and found that we actually liked it here in America.

When Luther first approached me, I didn't want to have much to do with him. He was older than me, and I was engaged to Vincent at the time, but there was something about Luther that drew me to him, regardless of my obligations. Our innocent meetings turned into romantic dinners and dancing by candlelight and still I couldn't bring myself to stop seeing him.

Finally I knew I couldn't marry Vincent, not when I loved Luther. Two weeks before the wedding I went to my fiancé to break the news as gently as I could. He stood there, tall and handsome, loving and patient, and told me that I could have all the time I needed to settle things in my mind, that he'd be waiting for me when I was ready to settle down. It nearly broke my heart to walk away from Vincent, but I knew that I had to. Now I can see that I'm better off without him, even if I didn't have Luther.

If Luther had come to me and offered me the embrace I probably would have accepted, but I hadn't known he was a vampire before Lucas had changed me. I met him at our prearranged spot a few nights after my embrace. I hadn't realized until I saw him that night that Luther was also a vampire. He took one look at me and knew I'd been changed.

After hearing what had happened, Luther had cursed Lucas in three languages, shocking me with the intensity of his hatred for my sire. Even knowing that Luther had disliked Erin's boyfriend, I'd had no idea the animosity between them was this bad. My resolve not to cry had crumbled under his obvious displeasure.

I couldn't stop crying when Luther swore over and over that he loved me and he wanted us to be together always. When Lucas killed me, he made things very difficult for Luther and I to be together but some day, some how we'll find a way, I know it. True love can never lose, after all.

Luther was the reason the girls and I had been forced into seclusion for a year after our embrace. Somehow Lucas had found out about my meeting with Luther that night not long after my embrace. Lucas didn't specifically say that it was my fault we had to stay hidden, he'd just looked at me pointedly and said something about some of us not being able to control ourselves. For the next year it had been difficult for Luther and I to meet, difficult but not impossible. Since Lucas had presented us to the prince it had been much easier for us to be together.

The night after Cameryn got his new truck, I visited Luther at his office. I told him what Keelie had said about Vincent's new mob connections, but he'd already heard the news.

"Our young friend Mr. Maitland has been busy," he said gravely. "He's allied himself with some of the newer players amongst the crime syndicate."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear. The more power Vincent had, the less likely he'd give up on his mission to make me his. "I just wish he would leave me alone."

"Perhaps there's a way to ply his affection for you to an advantage," Luther suggested.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"He obviously has a deep abiding affection for you," he pointed out. "I take it by your unspoken statement that Cameryn's new truck is courtesy of Mr. Maitland. If he wishes to try and bribe his way into your heart..."

He let the words trail off, but I knew what he was getting at. He thought I should let Vincent think he was getting somewhere and accept any gifts he chose to send my way. I didn't much like the idea, and not just because I knew that it wasn't a good idea to give Vincent any encouragement.

"I'm just thinking aloud," Luther said when he saw what I was thinking. "I would never put you in such a moral predicament, and if he ever found out the consequences could be dire. Perhaps he'll just..." he waved his hand as if shooing a fly, "...fade away."

"Maybe in ten or twenty years," I agreed, "but right now his letters are starting to frighten me." Terrify me was closer to the truth, but I didn't want to admit how scared I really was.

"They're simply the ramblings of a scared child," he assured me. "Nothing will come of them. Enough of this seriousness, have you eaten yet?"

We spent the next few hours drinking from his private supply of human blood and enjoying each other's company. I went home shortly before two in the morning, still glowing from the time spent with my lover.

THE TROUBLE WITH MR. MAITLAND

WON'T DO NO GOOD TO GO NO DISTANCE
THE SPACE BETWEEN US IS AS BOUNDLESS AS THE DARK
WON'T DO NO GOOD TO THROW NO FIST, BABE
YOU CAN'T INTIMIDATE ME BACK INTO YOUR ARMS
FIONA APPLE - CARRION

Shortly after I got home I was sitting reading the newspaper when a headline caught my eye. 'Two Men Dead at The Garden Club' it read in bold black letters. It took only a minute to scan the article and find out that a mob hit had gone down just after closing. Then I saw who had died. It was the two men Erin and I had danced and talked with last night.

At first I couldn't figure out who would want to kill those men, but then I remembered Matt and his connection to Vincent. I'm ashamed to say that I immediately believed the worst. Vincent's latest letter had been full of veiled threats, and with Keelie's news that he had mob ties it was easy enough for me to put it all together. The men had been killed because they'd been talking to us, to me last night.

I sat down at the desk and started half a dozen letters berating Vincent for his criminal behavior, but then I realized a letter would never change anything. I'd had it with his letters demanding I come back to him, I'd had it with the gifts he was giving my family to win me back, and I'd had it with him trying to frighten me back into his life. I needed to see Vincent, to confront him face to face and tell him to leave me alone. It probably wasn't the best idea I've had lately.

Keelie came home just as I was getting ready to leave. God knows I love my sister, but sometimes she can be very irksome. We talked for a while about the strange things that have been going on in her life, the knocks on the door, the cold breezes, and the rose she'd found last night while on a run with Cameryn.

When I told her I had to go out for a little while, she wanted to know where and why. I knew if I told her the truth she'd never let me go alone, and it was something I had to do myself, so I lied. She pestered and threatened until finally I told her I changed my mind, took my coat off and went into my room. I love my sister, but there are times she can be relentless. Of course, less than five minutes later I was in a cab on the way to Vincent's mansion.

I stood at the end of the walk and stared up at imposing façade thinking that it seemed bigger now, more formidable than it had when I was engaged to him. For a moment I hesitated, unsure if going there was the right thing to do, but the memory of the men I'd done nothing more than talk with surfaced and knew I had to go on.

No one answered the main door, but there were lights around the side of the building near another door. I knocked loudly and the door opened to reveal a tall man with cold eyes. From the irritated look on his face, he wasn't very happy to be answering the door at three in the morning. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"I need to see Mr. Maitland," I replied as forcefully as I could.

He frowned, and it made him look even meaner. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Someone that you should not speak to that way," I told him coldly. "Get Vincent."

"Lady, do you have any idea what time it is?" he shot back.

I knew it was too late for a polite visit, but I didn't plan on being polite. When I told him I thought it was around three o'clock he closed the door in my face. I wasn't about to be

intimidated by his lack of manners and I pounded on the door. This time when the door opened, the man was holding a gun in my face. I met his eye undaunted by the weapon or his anger.

"Vincent has been trying to talk to me for two years," I stated firmly. "If he finds that you did not tell him I was here he will be very angry."

The man looked into my unwavering eyes for a long moment before gesturing to one of his friends to go for Vincent. We stood there in the doorway glaring at one another until Vincent showed up nearly twenty minutes later.

I'd forgotten how handsome he was, with his dark hair falling across his forehead and his intense eyes smiling in the lamplight. I remembered how soft his hair was, the tender way he used to touch me. It wasn't until he got closer and I could see the look of ownership in his eyes that I remembered the threats in his letters to me.

"When I asked you to call me, Leianna, I didn't quite mean this." His voice had a pleasant drawl to it, but there was something about his tone I didn't like.

I didn't let his soothing voice pacify me. Hitting his chest with the newspaper I still had clenched in my hand, I demanded, "Just who in the hell do you think you are?"

He glanced down to read the headline that screamed up from the paper before looking back up at me in confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I don't know why, but his denial and the honesty in his eyes made me think he was telling the truth. If he hadn't had those men murdered, then I didn't have any reason to be here at this time of the morning. Still, I did have one more thing to say to him. "I know we didn't exactly part on the best of terms," I began.

"The best of terms?" he interrupted with a wry smile. "Leianna, you left me at the altar."

I didn't bother to point out that I had cancelled our engagement two weeks before the actual wedding date. "I really need you to leave me alone," I insisted.

His smile turned hard. "No."

I hesitated for a moment at his quick reply, but I had to continue. "Gifts and threats will not win me back, Vincent," I declared. "Nothing you do will win me back."

"We'll see," was all he said.

I shook my head at his stubbornness. After more than two years you'd think he would have given up on me by now. "I can see you aren't going to be reasonable." When I turned to go I half expected to be stopped by one of the men who had never put their guns away.

"It's a little cold to be out without a coat, isn't it?" Vincent called after me.

The May night was a bit chilly for spring in New York and it wasn't exactly a time for anyone to be coatless, but I hadn't thought about that before I'd climbed out of my window of my apartment. I suppose Lucas would berate me if he knew I'd been so careless; mistakes such as that can endanger the Masquerade. I decided my best course of action was to ignore his comment.

When I continued walking silently toward the gate, Vincent added. "At least let me have someone drive you home."

Without turning, I replied, "I have a cab waiting, thank you."

I spent the entire trip home staring out the window wondering if I'd done the right thing in going to Vincent's house. I hoped that he would think about what I'd said, but in my heart I knew he wasn't going to give up on me. I hoped I could find a way to discourage him before he discovered what I had become.

I was still wondering about that when the door of my bedroom flew open a half-hour before dawn. Lucas stood in the doorway with such an expression of rage on his face that for the first time I was frightened of what he might do. He scowled at me for only a moment before declaring, "I'll deal with you tomorrow!" As he turned to go I saw a brief glimpse of Erin's worried face before she followed him out.

Keelie came into the room looking more relieved than angry. "What the hell were you thinking?" she asked.

"What?" I said softly, trying to act like I didn't know what she was talking about.

She didn't buy my act. "Why did you go over there?"

There was no use in pretending. "I had to go," I replied sensibly. "I had to know if he had anything to do with the hit."

"What did he say?" she demanded.

"He didn't know anything about it," I assured her.

"Well of course he'd say that," she scoffed.

"Come now," I protested. "Why would he lie?"

"Why wouldn't he?" she demanded. "Did you really think he'd admit to doing murder?"

"Well, I-he told me he didn't have anything to do with it," I stammered, wondering if I'd fallen for Vincent's innocent act.

She shook her head. "Leianna, he's not going to tell you the truth about it, but you know it was him. Who else could it have been? I talked to several of our guys and neither of those men had any sort of mob ties."

"They didn't?" When she shook her head, I knew I'd been a fool. Of course Vincent wasn't going to tell me the truth, why would he? He'd say anything he could to get back in my good graces again, and apparently he'd do anything at all to get me back.