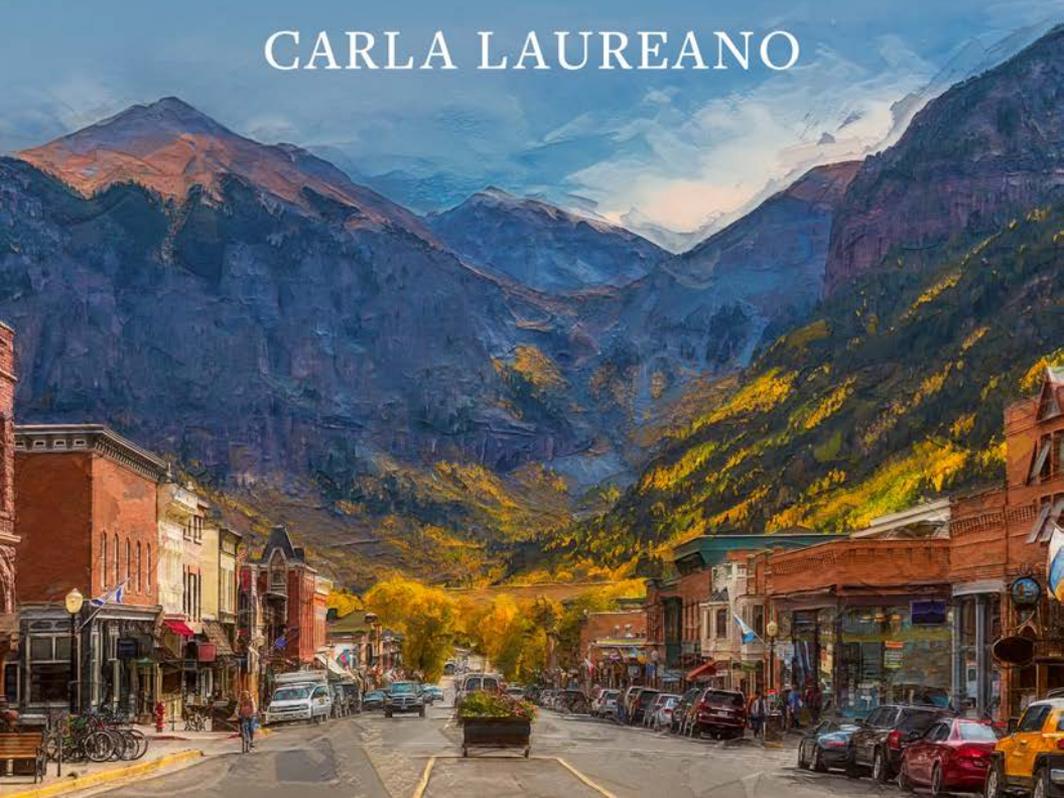




a novel

Provenance

CARLA LAUREANO



PRAISE FOR CARLA LAUREANO

PROVENANCE

“*Provenance* showcases Laureano’s trademark crisp prose and witty banter that culminates in a startling profound exploration of home. You will find yourself falling in love with the quaint mountain town of Jasper Lake, Colorado—and, ahem, with its mayor. I know I did!”

Jolina Petersheim, bestselling author of *How the Light Gets In*

“With her usual relatable, engaging characters and a story line ringing with both charm and depth, Carla Laureano shines in her latest offering. *Provenance* is a delightful read for lovers of small-town romance, and I found its themes of restoration and belonging especially stirring. This is one for the keeper shelf!”

Melissa Tagg, Christy Award–winning author of *Now and Then and Always*

“With her exacting eye for detail, I trust author Carla Laureano to deliver a well-thought-out novel. She does so once again with her distinctive style in *Provenance*. Her characters are strong, the setting vivid, and the plot well-layered. I was pulled into Laureano’s quest-for-home story from the opening page all the way to the extremely satisfying last scene.”

Beth K. Vogt, Christy Award–winning author of the Thatcher Sisters series

“With every Carla Laureano novel I read, I know I’ll be immersed in a world with strong characters whose emotions and authenticity capture me from page one. I love the way she weaves universal

truths into romantic story lines that stick with me long after I close the back cover.”

Courtney Walsh, *New York Times* bestselling author of *If for Any Reason* and *Is It Any Wonder*

“Carla Laureano is a master crafter of compelling characters and enthralling emotion, and her mastery is on full display in *Provenance*. Set against the dazzling backdrop of the Colorado high country, Kendall and Gabe’s story examines the life-changing potential that exists when we accept the love we’re offered and capture the healing power of home. With characters you’ll care about and be cheering on from the moment you meet them, *Provenance* is the story your heart needs right now.”

Bethany Turner, award-winning author of *The Secret Life of Sarah Hollenbeck* and *Plot Twist*

THE SUPPER CLUB SERIES

“Bright, jovial, and peppered with romance and delectable cuisine, this is a sweet and lively love story.”

Publishers Weekly, starred review of *The Saturday Night Supper Club*

“Romance aficionados and fans of stories about overcoming obstacles and the role of faith in everyday life will eagerly await the next entry in this sweet food-centered series.”

Library Journal on *The Saturday Night Supper Club*

“Writing charmingly about faith, love, friendship, and food, Laureano will leave readers hungry for the next installment in the Supper Club series.”

Booklist on *The Saturday Night Supper Club*

“With fun food scenes and organic spiritual elements, Laureano’s book will be relished by sweet-toothed inspirational readers.”

Publishers Weekly on Brunch at Bittersweet Café

“The delightful characterization of baker and pastry chef Melody Johansson coupled with a realistic romance and spiritual message make *Brunch at Bittersweet Café* an exceptional pick.”

Midwest Book Reviews

“This romantic drama portrays realistically flawed characters in messy situations.”

World magazine on Brunch at Bittersweet Café

“By turns funny and serious, this romance is the third novel in the Supper Club series. Author Carla Laureano has effectively drawn characters whose lighthearted insights, soul-searching, and faith experiences ring true. Her narrative subtly weaves fiction with the reality of social justice issues pertaining to coffee farms in developing countries.”

The Banner on The Solid Grounds Coffee Company

“What a bright and engaging story! *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company* is full of snappy and smart dialogue, genuine characters I was rooting for, and sweet romance with just the right amount of tension. I loved getting to know Analyn and Bryan and seeing their two very different worlds dovetail into one layered, romantic, and delicious story.”

Lauren K. Denton, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Hideaway*, *Hurricane Season*, and *Glory Road*

THE MACDONALD FAMILY TRILOGY

“Sweet and scathing, lush and intimate. . . . This story has guts and heart as well as the depth and heat necessary to satisfy any romance reader’s palate.”

USA Today on *Five Days in Skye*

“Achieving an aching depth and a resounding trueness within a heated yet baggage-ridden romance, author Carla Laureano has proven herself a storyteller who is not afraid to take her characters into the darkest regions of their own hearts. An excellent follow-up to *Five Days in Skye*, *London Tides* tugs and churns every emotion . . . right up until the lovely hope-buoying end.”

Serena Chase, *USA Today*’s Happy Ever After blog

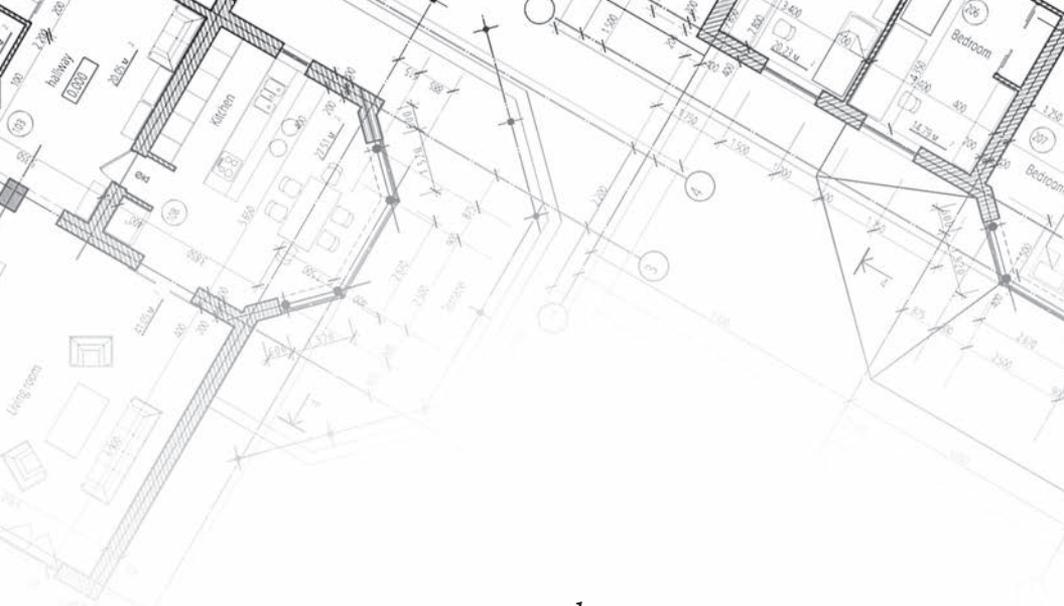
“Laureano’s final installment to her MacDonald Family Trilogy centers on newly widowed Serena MacDonald Stewart as she begins life anew with her two kids and a new job. . . . This emotionally astute tale will appeal to fans of Tamera Alexander.”

Publishers Weekly on *Under Scottish Stars*

“[The] long-awaited final volume in the MacDonald Family Trilogy. . . . Laureano pens a worthy crossover title concluding this modern romantic trilogy that could also stand alone as a winsome story of community and second chances. Fans of light, contemporary, Christian romance along the lines of Jenny Colgan or Bethany Turner will want to add Laureano to their lists.”

Library Journal on *Under Scottish Stars*

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Provenance is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Chapter One

IT WAS GOOD TO BE HOME. Or at least it would be, if she had the faintest idea what *home* actually meant.

Kendall Green levered herself out of the back seat of her rideshare and heaved her roller case out after her, then gave a quick wave to the driver before starting up the steep asphalt driveway. In the month since she'd left Pasadena, the season had switched from summer to autumn—at least as much autumn as one ever saw in Southern California—the turning leaves of the valley oak a striking counterpart to the palms that surrounded the property. Her suitcase bumped over the uneven surface in time with the click of her high-heeled boots until she pulled up short in front of a wrought iron gate bearing a laser-cut metal sign with the words *Chronicle Design*.

Kendall smiled to herself and pressed the button on the intercom. “Sophie . . . it’s me.”

Instantly a buzz came through the speaker, and the gate unlatched with a metallic click. Kendall pushed through with a creak and clanged the gate shut behind her, then inhaled deeply as she stepped onto the Saltillo tiles that paved the front courtyard of the property. If she were going to claim a home, this was where it would be. Never mind that the stately Spanish-style property was only a rental and served as both office and living space. It was where her antiques lived, which meant it was where she belonged. At least for now. The rent went up every year in November; one more hike and they would be out on the street.

Or Kendall would. Sophie actually had family as backup, as little as she liked to ask them for help.

As soon as Kendall stepped through the arch-topped front door, a pretty brunette appeared in the hallway, a cordless office phone pressed to her ear. She held up a finger as she finished the call, then shot a bright smile in Kendall's direction. "Thank goodness! You're back early!"

Kendall laughed and hugged her friend and assistant, Sophie Daniels. The string of wooden beads Sophie wore as part of her usual boho ensemble pressed painfully into Kendall's sternum, but she didn't pull away. She wouldn't say she'd exactly missed Southern California while she was gone, but she'd missed her friend, overpowering rose perfume and all. "Only a day early," Kendall said, finally letting go and pushing the front door shut behind her. She froze while a horrifying thought occurred to her. "There's not a mouse stuck in the bathtub again, is there?"

Sophie shuddered. "No. Thank goodness. If that had happened again, the house would probably be burned to the ground." She grabbed Kendall's roller case and dragged it into the room right off the hallway. "Come sit down. I want to hear all about Europe."

Kendall followed her into the space they used as an office, noting

that it looked just like she'd left it—desks piled high with paperwork and fabric samples, stacks of catalogs crowding the conference table. Sophie's goal to clean up their office obviously hadn't materialized. She shoved aside a box of cement tile samples to make room for Kendall to sit and plopped down across from her.

"Well, despite all the auctions, London was pretty much a bust," Kendall said. "I did pick up a modernist painting for the Vergara project at Christie's and some serving pieces at London Silver Vaults for Rebecca Moon, but—"

Sophie rolled her eyes. "I don't want to hear about what you bought. I want to hear about who you *met*."

That was Sophie, always the optimist. When Kendall traveled for business, she was lucky to see anything beyond the auction house and antique markets, let alone any of the city's more . . . attractive . . . sights. But that didn't stop Sophie from urging Kendall to live a little. Secretly she probably hoped Kendall would fall in love with a European prince or be swept away by a whirlwind romance with some sexy Scotsman.

Never mind the fact that Kendall's seven-year friendship with Sophie was the longest relationship she'd had with any human, ever.

"You know me better than that. What happened while I was gone? Other than a tornado hitting my desk."

"We got a new client . . ."

"And you didn't lead with that? Tell!"

Sophie's face broke into a smile and she jumped up to grab her tablet off her desk. "Wait until you see this place. It's a Thornton Ladd mid-century modern in Long Beach. La Marina Estates. It had a terrible 'update' in the 1980s, but the Thomases want to take it back to its original details." She pulled up her gallery and started swiping through the photos of the house, taken from every angle. No matter what else Sophie might be, she was definitely thorough.

“Wow. Diagonal walnut floors. You don’t see those often.” Kendall swiped back and expanded the photo to see detailing of the home’s cement fireplace, which had been covered with a horrible faux brick. “At least it’s just a veneer. That shouldn’t be too difficult to remove, though it will have to be skim-coated when it’s done.” Excitement began to build in her. Her style ran more toward European antiques and elaborate finishes, anything with the weight of tradition behind it—French provincial, Spanish, Tudor—but it could be fun to work on something so streamlined and modern, especially since their clients were beginning to demand more eclectic spaces with a mix of origins and styles. “When do we get started?”

Sophie didn’t answer immediately, and Kendall raised her eyes to her friend’s face. “What?”

“It’s just that . . . they asked for me specifically. Not you.”

“Oh.” Kendall licked her lips and shoved down the pang of hurt. “Of course. I just . . . No, that’s great.”

“Are you sure? The style is right in my wheelhouse, and after you let me take the lead on the Najarian project—”

“No, absolutely. It makes total sense. You’ll do a great job. It’s high time you start doing some projects without me, and if we’re working independently, that gives us more income.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Sophie exhaled in relief; then her expression shadowed. “I was going to wait until you were settled in to tell you . . .”

Kendall froze. “You’re not quitting and going out on your own, are you?”

“No! Of course not.” Sophie laughed, then sobered quickly. “We got the notice from the landlord.”

If she’d been feeling hurt before, now all Kendall felt was panic. “How bad is it?”

“Not great. Eight thousand.”

“A month?”

“Well, it’s not per year, that’s for sure.”

Kendall closed her eyes and tried to calm the sudden frantic thump of her heart. Eight thousand dollars a month didn’t sound like so much compared to renting commercial space, but since they lived there, only part of that amount could be written off on their business taxes. The rest came out of their salaries, which were fairly paltry considering how much money they always had tied up in inventory and receivables.

“It’s a good thing you’re taking on your own clients then,” Kendall said finally, straightening her spine. “With two of us working independently, we can make it work. And in that case, it’s probably time that we list you on the website as a designer.” She forced a smile. “Let me drop my things in my room and change, and you can show me what you’re thinking.”

Sophie returned the smile, and Kendall pushed herself to standing, her steps more subdued now as she pulled the roller case down the bumpy clay-tiled floor to her bedroom. The Spanish-style house had dual masters—large rooms each with their own en suite—so she and Sophie didn’t have to share a bathroom, though it wouldn’t have bothered Kendall if they did. She felt lucky enough to be living in a multimillion-dollar house in one of the nicest parts of Pasadena, a luxury she hadn’t dared imagine as a kid. Until now, their work relationship had always been divided along certain lines: Kendall had the designer skills and the experience; Sophie picked up the slack on administrative duties and acted as a design assistant. It was only within the last few months that Kendall had let her take the lead on projects, and that was simply because Kendall’s schedule had become untenable. She hadn’t expected to come back from one of her sourcing trips to find that her assistant had been taking on clients of her own.

“Don’t be silly,” she whispered to herself, pushing down a sudden bubble of what felt suspiciously like jealousy. Kendall might be young

for this business at only twenty-nine, but she'd made a name for herself with both her impeccable taste and her ability to find unique furnishings with interesting—and fully documented—stories. Everyone from movie stars to TV producers to socialites wanted to own a cabinet that was passed down from Catherine of Aragon's great-great-great-granddaughter or a Hans Wegner Danish modern prototype that never made it into production. It was her reputation for doing whatever it took to source the pieces and uncover their provenance that made her something of a wunderkind in the Southern California design world . . . and most likely the reason they got the Thornton Ladd house in the first place.

But it was Sophie's design portfolio that closed the deal, and don't you dare take that away from her. Kendall was going to have to push down her urge to oversee the project and let Sophie have her day in the sun. And she would be there to swoop in if anything went wrong.

Kendall pushed open the door to her bedroom and let out an exhale, then dragged her bag over to the closet. While the rest of the house was filled with antique furniture and richly colored textiles, her room was minimal, almost spare in its decor. Its only furnishings were a simple iron bed covered in a fluffy white duvet, a bench with a woven seat at its foot, a single painting on the wall, and a large, threadbare Persian rug that covered the wood floor almost to the edges of the room. Beautiful, simple, and calm. A place for focus and relaxation. Her sanctuary, one that no one, not even Sophie, entered.

Except she didn't own it, and it could go away at any time. Would go away soon, if the rent hikes continued.

Kendall toed off her boots and placed them carefully on the shoe rack in her closet, then pulled out a pair of woven flats made from recycled plastic. The leather jacket got hung up beside her blazers, swapped out for a cozy knit cardigan. Her long blonde hair, which had started out in soft waves but gotten smushed from the ten long

hours on the plane, went up into a messy bun on top of her head. Now she was ready to work.

But when she walked back out into their office space, Sophie was hurriedly packing things into a canvas messenger bag.

“What’s going on?”

Sophie looked up guiltily. “I’m sorry. I just got a call from Renee Thomas. She’s at the tile showroom and she’s found something she loves. She wants me to go over there right away.”

“Oh.” Kendall blinked. “Of course. Go. We’ll talk when you get back. I need to catch up on my mail anyway.”

Sophie grinned. “I’ll pick up something to eat and a bottle of wine on the way back.”

Kendall forced a laugh. “Make sure it’s a good bottle of wine then. Have fun. Go rescue your client from herself.”

“Right?” Sophie rolled her eyes, but the excitement in her face said there was nothing she’d rather be doing. “Back later.”

Kendall nodded and slid into her office chair, turning her back to Sophie like she’d already forgotten she was leaving. She didn’t blame her—clients did things like this all the time. They said they trusted you to pick out their finishes and oversee construction, but they still spent all their free time poring over catalogs and wandering through design showrooms. Sometimes they had impeccable taste and made your job easier; more often, you found yourself diplomatically explaining that glass mosaic tiles went out of style years ago and didn’t suit a Craftsman bungalow in the first place.

The front door closing behind Sophie just highlighted the sudden quiet in the room, so Kendall went over to the bookshelf and flipped on the Bluetooth speaker connected to her phone, then settled back at her desk in front of her overflowing in-box. Half of it was junk mail; the other half were bills, which she’d have to reconcile with her job sheets and send on to Sophie for payment. And then her fingers

touched a thin business-size envelope, its linen texture standing out from all the cheap paper that surrounded it.

“Jasper Lake, Colorado?” Kendall murmured, looking at the return address in the upper-left corner. She’d been born and raised in Colorado, but she didn’t have any family there. Didn’t have any family, period. And she’d certainly never heard of any place called Jasper Lake. This better not be an “invitation” to a unique money-making opportunity. Kendall slid the blade of her silver letter opener under the flap and withdrew a single sheet of paper. Bold black letters at the top announced *Notice to heirs* followed by smaller print: *In the matter of the estate of Mrs. Constance Green.*

To the heirs and devisees of the above estate: This is formal notice that Mrs. Constance Green, the decedent, died on September 8, 2016, and you have or may have an interest in Mrs. Constance Green’s estate. Mr. Matthew Avery, whose address is 21 Main Street, Jasper Lake, Colorado, has been appointed as the administrator of the estate. All documents, pleading, and information relating to the estate are on file in the Clear Creek County Courthouse under case number R000049872. The last day to file claims against the estate is October 21, 2021. The assets of the estate of Mrs. Constance Green will be disbursed 30 days following the date of this notice. Executed by the administrator of the estate of Mrs. Constance Green . . .

Kendall lowered the paper to the desk when she could no longer read the print. Her hands were shaking too hard to hold the letter still. *Constance Green.*

She’d never heard the name before, but they shared the same last name, and someone was informing her she’d inherited part of this woman’s estate. Surely that meant they were related somehow.

In the twenty-four years since she'd been abandoned at a day care center in a Denver suburb, she'd always imagined something like this happening. But now that it was here, she had absolutely no idea what to do about it, other than call the lawyer whose name and number were printed on the letterhead.

And maybe, just maybe, she would finally know what had happened to her mother.

Kendall hesitated for a moment before she picked up her cell phone and dialed the number.

The phone rang, and she half expected a secretary to answer, but instead a gruff voice came through the line. "Matthew Avery."

Kendall cleared her throat, the words suddenly sticking somewhere in her esophagus. "Mr. Avery. My name is Kendall Green. I just got a letter—"

"Kendall Green!" The lawyer's voice boomed out, now more enthusiastic than gruff. "You certainly know how to cut it close."

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"The cutoff date. October 21. It's less than two weeks away."

"Yes, I know, but I just received the letter. I've been traveling for the past month, and I just got home today."

"Right, but it's been almost five years since she passed, and this is a rather critical situation for Jasper Lake."

Kendall pressed her fingertips to her temples, trying to work through the stream-of-consciousness information coming from the lawyer. "For the town? I was under the impression this had something to do with a relative's estate."

The line went silent. She pulled the phone away from her ear to check if they were still connected, then pressed it back. "Hello?"

"Sorry. I . . ." Matthew Avery sounded discomfited. "Did no one contact you when Connie died?"

A laugh bubbled out of her, and she was aware it was tinged with

hysteria. “Mr. Avery, I was abandoned at five years old and raised in foster care. I wasn’t aware I had any family left. I don’t even know their names.”

The lawyer sighed heavily on the other end of the line. “Well. I certainly didn’t expect to be the first to tell you this. You probably know your mother’s name was Caroline, and I’m afraid I can’t tell you much more than that. The estate in question, however, belonged to Constance. Your grandmother.”

A grandmother. She had a grandmother. Of course she had a grandmother, but one who actually knew of her existence? If she knew that Kendall was out there somewhere, why hadn’t she gotten in touch with her? And why had it taken someone five years to let her know she had died? Kendall hadn’t even met the woman, so she was shocked by the sudden pang of loss.

Avery was talking again, and she realized she’d missed a big chunk of the conversation when he said, “. . . come take a look at it yourself and decide what you want to do with it.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, Ms. Green. But it is a sizable amount of property, and as you’re the sole heir, it is going to revert to the county in less than two weeks if you don’t file a formal claim against the estate. You can do it remotely, but I think it would be easier if you did it in person.”

Avery went on, but Kendall had stopped listening. A sizable amount of property. Colorado was getting expensive, wasn’t it? That meant even in a small town, it had to be worth something. She had no time for sentiment with a massive rent hike staring her in the face.

“Of course,” she said, her voice resolute for the first time during this phone call. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, but no matter how long a good story is, I'm never ready for it to end! That went double for *Provenance*: Gabe and Kendall are some of my favorite characters ever, and I wasn't ready to let them go.

So for those of you who feel the same way, I've got good news: I've written an exclusive epilogue to keep the happily ever after going a little while longer! Find it at my website:

carlalaureano.com/provenance-epilogue

Thanks for accompanying me on this ride. You have a lot of books from which to choose for your pleasure reading time, and I'm so honored that you've chosen mine!