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One More Night  
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One More Night  
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Silvery slants of rain blew across the road. Altee Price gripped the steering wheel tighter and squinted, peering into the twin beams cast by her headlights. On a dry day, the red clay road was bad enough. At night, with clouds obscuring the moon and rain pouring down? Morass wasn't the word. Why did Memaw insist on living out here in the middle of nowhere? And why couldn't Yolanda at WALB ever get the weather forecast right?

"Mild and clear tonight, my ass." Altee squirmed forward in the seat. She'd turn around and go back, spend the night at Memaw's, if she wasn't so damn scared that if she tried a three-point turn, she'd end up in the ditch. Hiking the five or six miles back to her grandmother's, in the dark and rain and mud, didn't appeal. A couple, maybe three, miles and she'd be at Gravel Hill road. Even inching along, she was better off heading for the blacktop road than going back.

This was a hell of a way to spend New Year's Eve—

The car lurched with a rough bang and Altee jerked to attention. What the *hell*? She'd hit something, maybe a log hidden in the sloppy mud ruts. The front end slipped in a wild arc, and she struggled to bring the nose straight. Instead of straightening out, the car slid in the opposite direction, rear tires fishtailing in the mud. The ditch yawned, embankment rising above, and she cringed.

The vehicle came to a surprisingly soft rest in the ditch. Beyond the rain, the headlights picked out exposed roots snaking through the eroded bank. Shit, could the night get any worse? Altee rested her forehead against the steering wheel for a moment, the windshield wipers providing a hushed swipe-swish-swipe accompaniment to her frustrated groan.

Lifting her head, she shifted into reverse. The wheels spun, whirring a little in the mud. The car wobbled but didn't budge. Damn it . . . She pressed the gas again. Nothing. Going forward, rocking it out of the quagmire wasn't an option, because of the angle at which she'd slid into the ditch.

She was well and truly stuck.

On a sigh, she killed the engine and turned on her hazard lights. The windshield wipers stopped in mid-stroke. With the yellow flashing hazards piercing the rain, she fished her cell out of her bag and flipped it open.

Holy Baby Jesus in the manger. No freaking signal.

Well, that answered her previous question, didn't it? Yes, Virginia, it could get worse. She tapped her nails against the wheel. What to do, what to do . . . walk to Memaw's in the rain? Walk the shorter distance to the paved road and one of the houses there? Sit it out in the car and wait for someone to find her, which could easily be tomorrow morning?

A glow over the slight rise in the road backlit the rain. Altee straightened. Maybe she wouldn't have to wait it out or walk in the downpour after all. Maybe her luck was changing. Xenon headlights flared, blinding her, and she shielded her eyes. A heavy rumble of an engine shifted, slowed to a stop beside her car. Something about that truck engine sounded awfully familiar. A door slammed and a tall figure crossed before those headlamps. Something about that tall male form was awfully familiar as well, and somehow her heart managed to fall and lift at the same time.

*Dix.* What the hell was he doing out here?

And what was she going to say to him?

Dix Singleton leaned down and rapped on the passenger window. He should probably be wondering why Altee was stuck in a muddy ditch on a rain-soaked New Year's Eve, but considering her devotion to her grandmother and her complete inability to navigate a slick red-clay road, he didn't bother. He was too busy trying to control a wayward leap of anticipation.

Rivulets slid down the glass, obscuring his view into the Toyota. He tapped on the passenger window and reached for the door handle. The door swung open and he leaned down to peer inside. Fat droplets dripped off the brim of his cap and splashed over the front of his rain gear. In the dim flashing glow from the hazards, Altee gazed at him, her eyes big and dark.

He cleared his throat. "Do I want to know?"

"You know I don't do sloppy roads." She released her seatbelt and scooted over the console. "I'm glad to see you."

Her rough-velvet voice slid over him, bringing a spurt of resentment. She was happy to see him now, in the role of rescuer. That was the last role he actually wanted to play in her life, but she wasn't willing to risk accepting him in the ones he wanted: partner and lover. At least, that's the way they'd left things two weeks ago, right before Christmas, and her silence over the intervening days only underscored that he was out of her life.

"Come on." He held out a hand. "Let's get you in the truck and I'll see if I can get her loose for you."

With his arm held high, he sheltered her the best he could and hustled her into the passenger seat of his Dodge. Reaching the driver's door on her Toyota proved impossible, and somehow he managed to clamber over the console. His attempts to extricate the little car from the quagmire were unsuccessful. Killing the hazards, he palmed her keys and jogged to the truck.

"I can't budge her. We'll have to call out a wrecker in the morning." He laid the keys in her palm, the warmth of her fingers tingling up his arm. Lord, he'd missed the easy touch of her fingertips on his skin.

"Thanks for trying." She stared at the rain-spattered windshield and dropped her hands into her lap.

"So let me be your hero tonight. Do you want me to drive you home or to your grandma's?"

"Home, I guess." With a trembling finger, Altee smoothed the edge of her bangs, dark and glossy as a raven wing. "She was going to bed when I left and I don't want to wake her."

"Good deal." The four-by-four had little difficulty navigating the mud as he used a turnoff to pull around and head back toward the paved road. No, the difficulty was his, trying to concentrate on driving when the woman he'd been missing with visceral fierceness for weeks now occupied his passenger seat on New Year's Eve. He slanted a half-grin in her direction. "Gotta get you home before midnight. You know what they say, right?"

She glanced at him, seemingly pulled from deep thought. "What?"

He flexed his hands around the wheel. "That you'll be doing whatever you're doing at midnight on New Year's Eve the next one as well. We don't want that to be stuck in the rain."

"No." She looked down at her hands, fiddling idly with the seatbelt.

Silence fell between them, broken only by the swish of his windshield wipers and the low music wafting from the radio. Gravel Hill Road loomed before them, and he slowed for the stop sign before turning right to head toward town.

He cleared his throat once more, his gaze trained on the silvery ropes of rain falling before his headlights. "I've missed you, Altee."

With his gaze trained on the roadway, he sensed rather than saw the way her head swiveled in his direction, sensed the surprise and emotion trailing over her. He'd always been able to read her without looking at her.

"Dix... I don't want to get into all the reasons why we're not a good idea."

"I didn't ask you to. You were pretty plain with those reasons, sweetheart. I just said I missed you."

"I've missed you too." Her torn admission emerged as a small whisper. "More than you can imagine."

Then why was she doing this to them? He bit the words off. "Baby, I don't care what anyone says or thinks about us. I care about you."

"Please don't. It's easy enough to say these things now, when it's just the two of us, but later, when everyone's whispering and giving us looks, when it makes it hard for you at work—"

"It won't change anything. I don't care how hard anyone makes anything. Nothing is as hard as being without you. Do you hear me, Altee? Nothing matters more than you."

She heaved a shivery sigh. "Better be careful. It's almost midnight. Keep it up and you'll be arguing with me again next New Year's as well."

He might as well go for broke. "I hope to God I am. I hope we're together and my ring is on your finger and we're arguing so we can make up later."

"God, Dix, don't say things like that." Her voice cracked on the words. The rural country side opened up into the suburbs around Coney. "You make it too hard—"

"Good." He spun the wheel, swinging the truck into the left turn onto her street. Under the waning rain and parting clouds, the lake glimmered under a weak moon. "I want to make it hard for you to put me away. We're important, the way we feel is important, more important than what anyone thinks, Altee, and I gave you the last couple of weeks to see that. If I hadn't run across you tonight, I'd have been on your doorstep in the morning. I'd already made up my mind about that."

"What am I going to do with you?" Her hands over her face muffled the words, and he smiled as he turned into her driveway.

"Love me?" He killed the engine and turned sideways to face her. With a gentle tug, he pulled her hands away from her face. He leaned in to mold his mouth over hers. "Because I love you. Give me a night to prove it to you. One night, sweetheart, and if you still want me to stay away after that, I will."

He levered away and she stared at him, her eyes big and dark and tortured with uncertainty. Her lashes fell, and when she lifted them, need burned deep in the brown depths of her eyes. "Yes. One more night."

With Dix's warm fingers wrapped around hers, Altee led him down the dim hallway to her bedroom. Nerves flickered low in her belly, but her resolve didn't waver. If she had nothing else, she'd have these final few hours with him, precious and not to be missed.

Not to be regretted later, either.

He stopped at the bedroom doorway and sifted his fingers through her short bob. Shivers traveled out from the soft contact, down her nape. Desire licked along her spine in a fiery trickle. He touched his mouth to the curve where her shoulder and neck met.

"Lord, I've missed you, baby." His dark murmur shivered over her skin. He slipped his hands down her arms, fingers skating over her skin.

"You said that already." Her voice emerged breathy and trembled, and he chuckled.

"Because it's true." He punctuated the words with soft kisses along her neck, up to her jaw. One strong arm wrapped across her torso, palm curving about her shoulder. "Every night, every day, every single damn minute since you sent me away, I've missed you."

She closed her eyes. Resisting that voice, the rough emotion there, loomed as an impossible task. Besides, did she really want to resist him? Did it matter what people thought or said or did, as long as they were together?

"Don't think so much," he whispered. "Just think about us while I love you."

"Yes." She turned in his embrace, looped her arms about his neck and pressed close. "Love me tonight, Dix."

"Love you forever," he corrected. He lowered his head to kiss her, mouth moving over hers. With tender persuasion, he teased her lips apart and dipped his tongue inside with teasing darts, inviting her to duel. She leaned into him, accepting the invitation. Their tongues tangled

and withdrew, came together again, and she slid her hands over his shoulders and arms, tracing muscles, reveling in the warmth and strength and reality of him.

He groaned his approval and dropped his hands to knead the small of her back, urging her into him. His fingers fanned over her hips. She let her head drop back as he trailed open-mouthed kisses down the line of her throat. Stepping back, he gripped the hem of her thin T-shirt and stripped it over her head. His followed.

The lamp gilded his torso, delineating the curves and indentions of muscles. She traced the enticing blend of shadow and light, delighting in the play of smooth skin and rough hair beneath her fingertips. In turn, he trailed the backs of his knuckles along the rise of her breasts, just above the satin edge of her bra. The simple exchange of touch set the tone for an easy exploration, words falling away into sighs and kisses and moans. They rediscovered one another, mouths following hands, bodies pressed closer and closer once they stripped away clothing and barriers.

Dix stretched them out on the bed and leaned over her, resting on his elbows. He feathered his fingers over her cheekbones, her jaw, her lips. Then lower, traveling along her throat, her clavicle, the tops of her breasts, skimming one tight nipple. Sensation speared out from the simple caress, setting off quivers of excitement deep in her belly, between her thighs. His touch always did that, turning her inside out with little more than a brush of fingertips on her skin, a press of his lips against hers.

He turned her inside out, with a smile, a word, a declaration of love.

Her eyes prickled, and she squeezed them shut. How was she supposed to let him walk away again, when one more night would never be enough?

She wound her arms around his neck and pulled him close, sought his mouth. This time the kiss was far from simple, a hungry coming-together of lips and tongues. The kiss went on and on, and he touched her, drawing out her response, painting desire and passion over her sensitive skin. The need built, layer upon layer of sensation, until she shifted beneath him and ran her hands over the hot, bare skin of his back. "Dix, please. I need you."

"Anything, sweetheart, whatever you want." He levered away long enough to snag his jeans and retrieve a condom from his wallet. Moments later, he returned to her arms. She wrapped her legs around his hips, and with some adjusting of positions, he thrust inside her with a muffled groan. Altee caught her breath as intimate flesh adjusted to him, as the sweet pleasure-pain of being stretched around him flashed out through her body. He caught her chin with one hand and held her gaze, easing them into a steady rhythm. "Missed you, Altee."

Sensation wrapped around her, pleasure building in her body, tingling and buzzing along each nerve ending, through each vein. She clutched him closer, fingers digging into the warm, resilient flesh of his back and shoulders, and tilted her hips to meet each of his hard thrusts. Pressure and need pounded low in her belly, a coiling of desire curling tighter and tighter, then spinning free in a release of tension and joyful pleasure. His name left her lips on a broken whimper.

He maintained the rhythm, drawing out her climax, binding her to him all over again. Altee let her lashes fall. Sudden tears stung her eyes and threatened to leak from beneath her lids. Let him walk away, after this? *Send* him away, after this?

Above her, his body went taut, and he lunged deeper. A rough groan ripped from his throat, and he pulsed inside her. Altee held him to her, exulting in his pleasure even as the same old emotional tumult tossed her about.

Dix collapsed in her arms, whispering endearments near her ear, whispering kisses across her skin. He nuzzled her neck, and his laugh shivered through her. "It's after midnight, sweetheart. You know what that means, right?"

She knew, but she ignored his teasing. Instead, she pretended to misunderstand. Stretching beneath him, she graced him with her sultriest smile and trailed a fingertip along his stubbled jaw. "It means we still have several hours left in our one more night."

Dix stirred. Bright sunlight bounced in Altee's tall windows from the crisp, cold morning outside. Last night's rain was nowhere in sight. He blinked against the glare and levered to his elbows. A soft touch grazed his ribs, and he turned his head to find Altee still beside him. Remembered pleasure washed through him, mingling with the joy of waking with her again and the dread that she really would send him away. She watched him with dark, somber eyes.

He rolled to his side and rested on one arm. "Hey."

A hint of a smile flirted with her lips and disappeared. "Hey."

Barely resisting the urge to touch her, he darted a glance over his shoulder at the windows and the sunlight beyond. "Looks like a bright beginning to the new year."

"Yes." She cradled his jaw in her palm, bringing his gaze back to her own. "Dix...I don't want you to go."

*Thank God.* He closed his eyes as relief sucker-punched him. He lifted his lids to find her still watching him, her eyes still deadly serious. "Good. Because I don't want to leave you again."

"I'm scared." Her voice emerged small and uncertain, and the thought of Altee—*Altee Price*, for God's sake—scared of anything floored him. "I want you, I want *us*, but what if it's not enough, if we're not enough, to stand up to—"

"Baby, we're enough." He leaned in and gathered her close so they lay pressed together from chest to belly to thighs. The intense embrace held no desire, simply the relief and the need to be as near and together as possible. He sighed into the curve of her neck. "I promise you, we're enough. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but together, we can do it. We just take each challenge as it comes, and we handle it."

She pulled away only far enough to look into his eyes. "You believe that, don't you?"

"I do."

After a moment's pause, while she searched his gaze, she feathered her lips across his. "I love you, Dix."

Sheer joy blazed through him. "I love you too, sweetheart."

An impish grin lit her face. She wound her hands into his hair. "So, what we were doing at midnight last night...you know what they say about that, don't you?"

On a laugh, he rolled them until she lay beneath him. "That we'll be doing it next year as well. Hell, baby, I wouldn't it any other way."

"Me, either." She caught his mouth in a kiss that took his breath. "Happy New Year, Dix." He smiled against her lips. "It already is, baby. It already is."

THE END

## Author Biography

How does a high school English teacher end up plotting murders? She uses her experiences as a cop's wife to become a writer of romantic suspense! Linda Winfree lives in a quintessential small Georgia town with her husband and two children. By day, she teaches American Literature, advises the student government and coaches the drama team; by night she pens sultry books full of murder and mayhem.

To learn more about Linda and her books, visit her website at <http://www.lindawinfree.com> or join her Yahoo newsletter group at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/linda\\_winfree](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/linda_winfree). Linda loves hearing from readers. Feel free to drop her an email at [linda\\_winfree@yahoo.com](mailto:linda_winfree@yahoo.com).

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