

A person wearing a dark suit and a white shirt is holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the person's hands and the heart.

Delayed Valentine

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A Samhain Publishing Freebie

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God, the day was finally over.

A weary ache pulsed at the base of Caitlin Falconetti's spine. Eyes closed, she leaned against the elevator wall. Thank heavens her involvement in this case was near its end. What had been intended to be a mere consulting assignment had turned into active investigating. She feathered a hand through her hair.

Too late.

It had been too late for Kara Marples when Caitlin's plane had set down in Jacksonville, but they hadn't known that. Images of Kara's body, her eyes open and filmy, skin bearing witness to the horrors she'd suffered before her slow death, flashed in Caitlin's brain. Remembered fear and pain flooded her, and she sucked in a deep breath through her nose, expelled it through parted lips. Somehow, she had to get beyond this still-new tendency to identify with each victim. Her own horror was in the past; she'd survived and she had to find a way to move beyond that.

Being with Tick helped. Something about the solid, steady way he loved her smoothed away the shadowy terror. Sooner or later, she'd regain her crucial objectivity.

With a quiet ding, the car arrived on her floor. She straightened and adjusted her laptop bag on her shoulder. Cardkey in hand, she paused as the doors swished open. After a quick scan of the hallway, she strode to her room and let herself inside. A long hot shower to wash away the stress and grime of working through multiple crime scenes, of viewing another autopsy.

Then she'd call Tick and let his deep drawl soothe the remaining strain. With her cell phone charging, she stripped off her wrinkled suit and stepped beneath the hot spray. She let the water pound away at the knotted muscles in her neck and shoulders. Slowly she relaxed.

Adjusting the water to a softer fall, she leaned against the wall. She soaped and rinsed, suds drifting along the curves of her body, soft as her lover's touch. A streak of longing, blending desire and emotional need, blazed through her. Oh, she missed him, maybe even more now that they had a commitment between them

than she had during those long, dark months when she'd been sure he was lost to her for good.

Another month and they'd be husband and wife. She wanted that with a visceral hunger she'd not expected. September couldn't get here fast enough.

Yes, she was hopelessly in love with Tick Calvert. Laughing at herself, she shut off the water and reached for a towel. The last few drops pattered on the tile.

Her cell rang, the particular tone she'd assigned Tick's number. A thrill rippled under her skin, and with the towel wrapped about her, she hurried to snatch up the device.

"Hello?" Breathless, full of anticipation, she perched on the edge of the bed.

"Hey, precious." His rich drawl washed over her, setting off a pinch of desire low in her belly. God, just his voice got her going. "What are you doing?"

"Wishing you were here." She dug her toes into the carpet. "I just got out of the shower."

"Wish I *was* there, then." His dark chuckle tickled her ears. And oh, how she loved that hint of wickedness that lurked beneath his respectable exterior.

"How was your day?" She scooted up against the pillows and leaned on the headboard. Funny how these conversations had so quickly become the high point of her own days.

"Long and slow."

"You sound tired." She rubbed her fingertips over the edges of her cell. "Are you home?"

"Home? No."

With a sigh, she fiddled with the diamond he'd placed on her finger the month before. "You work too hard."

"I'll take some time, soon. A long weekend maybe."

"Good. So tell me about your day."

"Is that really what you want me to tell you about?" His voice dropped deeper on a wicked note.

Her belly fluttered. "Why, Investigator Calvert, are you trying to instigate phone sex again?"

"Well, Agent Falconetti, now that you mention it..." The words faded into a devilish laugh. "Precious, if I can't be there to touch you, I can't think of anything better than talking to you while you do what I'm dying to."

She swept a light caress over her collarbone. "I thought you said you weren't home. Tell me you're not trying to entice me while still at the sheriff's department."

"Let's just say I'm somewhere private." The sound of rustling—paper, or fabric, maybe—filtered over the line.

"As long as we don't end up thrilling the entire department."

"Not a chance." The muffled blowing of a car horn reverberated behind his voice.

"Tick. Tell me you're not *driving* and instigating phone sex."

"Cait, stop worrying. I'm parked, okay?" Dry laughter tinged his assurance. "Concentrate. Where do you want my hands?"

"All over me." Her lashes fell and she toyed with the edge of the towel at her thighs. "Where do you want to touch me?"

"All over. From your collarbone, because you like a soft stroke there, then a fingertip down your chest between your breasts, tracing those curves."

Her fingertips mimicked his description. "Know me very well, don't you?"

"I know what you like, what turns you on and sets you on fire."

"That's you." She shifted, restless. "Always."

"Yeah, but you like me to cradle each breast, then the gentlest touches over your nipples, until they're hard and you're wanting my mouth, my tongue there. You like having me all over you, as much as I like being there, don't you?"

"Yes." She breathed the syllable, excitement and desire mixing with the near-physical ache of simultaneously wanting and missing him.

"Pretend it's me." His rough whisper thrilled her. "Let your fingers go where mine would. Along your thighs, over your skin, to where you're hot and wet and ready for me."

She danced light fingertips along the path he described. Eyes closed, she let herself imagine it was him touching her. She circled her fingertips to approximate the rhythm of his intimate caresses, firm and steady, the way he always stroked

her. Pleasure sheared out from the contact, a heavy pulse taking hold of her lower belly. A moan slipped from her lips.

"Cait?" His voice rumbled at her ear, seeming rough and dragged from him. She ignored the hushed background noise behind his words, focused only on him.

"Does that feel good?"

She shifted, thighs falling open, the towel falling away. "I wish it was you."

"Miss me?"

"Oh, God, you have no idea." A climax danced out of reach.

"Tell me what would happen, if I was there."

"You'd be inside me." The words emerged as a strangled whisper. Pressure bloomed, demanding release, threatening to trap her voice. "I'd be wrapped around you in every way possible."

"Don't come yet." The ragged command startled her.

"What?"

"You heard me." He laughed. "Don't come yet."

"Tick." His name verged closer to a plea than she would have liked. "Please."

"I will, precious, I will. Just hold on for me a little longer."

She slowed the tempo of her fingers. "You don't know what you're asking, Calvert."

"It'll be worth waiting for, Falconetti, I promise."

Again, the rustling sounded behind his words, and she clung to that distraction, staving off the imminent orgasm. "You'd better be—"

A knock at the door cut her off. She jumped, heart thudding in her chest. "Oh, God."

"What?"

She swallowed and tried to get her shallow breathing and still-pounding pulse under control. Feeling exposed and swamped with disappointment, she wrapped the towel around her body.

"Cait? What is it?"

"Someone's at the door."

"You're kidding."

"No." She sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "I'm not."

"Well, see who it is."

She knotted the towel at her breasts. "Are you insane?"

"Precious." Long-suffering patience saturated his tone. "Use the peephole. Maybe it's room service."

"Funny. I didn't order room service, sweet thing." At the door she peered through the security viewer, glimpsing tousled black hair in need of a cut and devilish dark eyes. Surprise blossomed into sheer pleasure. "Oh, my God."

She fumbled with the locks and threw the door open. He leaned a shoulder on the jamb with a trio of roses in one hand, a bottle of champagne tucked under his arm. He snapped his phone shut and lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure you didn't want anything from room service?"

"What are you doing here?" She reached for his lapels and pulled him inside into her embrace. Her cell hit the floor. Her back collided with the wall, the loose towel slipping.

"What am I doing here?" The warm length of his body pressed to hers, reawakening her smoldering desire. "Aren't you glad to see me, Falconetti?"

"Oh, Calvert, I'm very glad to see you." She wrapped her arms about his neck. "I'm simply surprised that's all."

"That was the idea." A lazy smile hitched up one corner of his mouth. "Aren't you going to kiss me hello, precious?"

She pulled his mouth down and opened her lips on a sigh. The sweet familiarity of his mouth moving on hers swirled with reawakened desire. Cellophane crinkled and he levered away with obvious reluctance. He extended the roses in her direction then held the champagne aloft. "We need to put this on ice."

"Champagne? What are we celebrating?"

"Valentine's."

"Valentine's?" She laughed and tightened her towel. "Tick, it's August."

"I know. Humor me." He leaned in for another kiss. "I promise it'll be worth your while."

"Well, in that case" —she trailed a finger along his jaw— "Put that on ice."

He turned away to settle the bottle in the plastic ice bucket. Caitlin moved to the bed, settled against the pillows to watch as he peeled off his jacket and toed

out of his shoes. She extracted a single bud from the rose trio, inhaling the rich, sweet scent. The smell did indeed conjure the idea of Valentine's Day.

In August.

A smile tugged at her lips. Beneath the no-nonsense exterior, he really was a romantic at heart.

She tossed the towel aside, and he paused in the middle of tugging loose his tie. "Holy hell, you're beautiful."

Her smile widened. "Hurry up and get over here."

"Yes, ma'am." Grinning, he dispatched the remainder of his clothing. She let her gaze trail over the play and shift of lean muscles beneath his skin. Anticipation tingled under her own skin.

"I'm so glad you're here." She held his dark gaze. "I want you."

"Oh, precious, you have me." He loomed over her, the warmth of his body seeping into hers, the press of skin on skin ratcheting up the excitement and anticipation. She hugged his lean hips with her thighs. His dark eyes burned into hers. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She stretched beneath him and snagged the forgotten rose. With her best impish smile, she trailed the bud along his jaw, across his lips and down his throat. "Well, Calvert, am I getting ravished for Valentine's?"

A chuckle rumbled from his throat, vibrations she felt all the way to the wet pulse between her legs. "That's what I had in mind, precious."

He lowered his head, not to her mouth, but to nuzzle his way to the sensitive area behind her ear, the spot that made her melt and burn for him every time. A heavy ache of desire bloomed in her belly and she clenched the rose, the bruised bud releasing scent into the air. "Oh."

Another low laugh and he shifted positions, providing him freedom to slip his hands along her shoulders, to trace his fingers down her sternum to the upper slope of her breasts. As he cupped and shaped, long fingers setting her on fire, she played her palms over his shoulders and arms, relishing the heat and texture of his skin. He was here and he was *hers*.

She wound her leg around his and hooked her ankle over his calf. The movement brought them into intimate contact, his erection sliding along her

sensitive skin. He hissed in a breath, fingers tightening for a moment at her breasts before he skimmed across her nipples to approximate the caresses he'd described earlier. The gentle contact fired along sensitized nerve endings, sizzling straight to her belly and below.

"Oh, yes." She slipped her own hands along his ribs, gliding up again to trace his spine, then downward to his hips, pressing him into the cradle of her thighs. "I love the way you touch me."

"I thought about us, about this." His mouth found that sweet little spot beneath her ear once more. "All those months I was gone, I lived on memories of you, wrapped around me, under me like this. I dreamed of us, waiting until it was real again."

A hint of remembered pain roughened his voice. She wrapped her legs more tightly around his and pressed into him. "Don't, please. That's over and done."

He lifted his head and his dark gaze burned into hers. "When we started wrapping up that operation, I was sure I'd be back for Valentine's Day. I'd been missing you like holy hell for months and all I could think about was how freakin' prophetic it would be if we had that day together. I loved you and I never wanted you out of my sight again. Once I knew I'd be flying into Virginia on the thirteenth, I started planning all the ways I wanted to celebrate being with you."

Her heart folded in, aching at the edge of hurt in his words. "And I turned you away. Oh, Tick, I'm sorry, more than you'll ever know—"

"Stop." His lips found hers, silencing, soothing. "You're right. It is over and done. We're together and the past is just that." His mouth quirked. "But knowing you were in Jacksonville, this close, I wanted to surprise you and somehow I got this crazy idea that maybe it wasn't too late to celebrate with all those Valentine's plans I had."

"No," she breathed. She framed his beloved face and feathered her fingertips across his high cheekbones. "Not crazy at all. I love it, and you're right. It's never too late for us."

Her eyes burned and she blinked hard. He brushed a kiss across her eyelids. "Don't cry, precious. We're celebrating, remember?"

"I know." She swallowed against the tightness of her throat and passed her thumb over his bottom lip. "I just regret the time I cost us, the pain I caused you."

"None of that, you hear me? No regrets." He folded his arms about her, hands warm on her shoulders. "All you did was show me exactly what I had to lose and make me determined never to let you go again once I got you back."

That sentiment she understood all too well. This was the one man she meant to never lose again. She caressed his jaw, a little rough with a shadow of evening stubble, with fingers that trembled. "So this celebration of yours...what exactly did you have in mind, Calvert?"

A slow smile curved his mouth. "Let me show you, Falconetti."

She tilted her face to his, lips meeting in a kiss sweet and fiery, sharing and devouring all at once. Lifting his head, he set about caressing and exploring every inch of her, with his hands and lips and body, a loving that was equal parts worship and seduction. She touched him just as eagerly, charting each muscle and hollow of his long, lean form.

"I love you," she murmured near his ear long moments later, the burn in her body threatening to sear her alive. She tangled her legs with his. "I want to make love with you."

"I want to celebrate you." His rough mutter vibrated over her cheek, and he shifted beneath her, arms tightening about her.

"To celebrate *us*."

"That, too." With her locked to him in a strong embrace, he rolled them over so he rested above her on his elbows.

She flicked a stray rose petal away from his shoulder and stretched beneath him, winding her legs about his hips. His erection nudged her and she tilted her hips, adjusting their angle. He slid forward in a slow glide, and she caught her breath on a moan at the exquisite pressure of being stretched around him. She clutched his shoulders and met his thrusts as he set the sure, steady rhythm she loved, the one that never failed to leave her shattered and fulfilled in his arms.

The pressure gathered, washing through her in ever-larger waves, tighter and higher, until she came apart, clinging to him, his name torn from her lips. A few sharp thrusts later, the last incredibly deep, he stiffened on a guttural groan.

He slumped into her loose embrace, and laughter bubbled in her, a spring of sheer, sparkling happiness.

He kissed the side of her neck. She traced a finger along his spine and smiled into his disheveled hair. "I think I like Valentine's in August."

His laughter puffed against her skin, a burst of warmth. "We'll have to do it every year."

"Is this everything you imagined?" She rested her cheek against his hair.

"Oh, precious." He lifted his head and the love in his dark gaze took her breath. "It's better."

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, browse her Samhain author page at <http://www.samhainpublishing.com/authors/linda-winfree>, read her blog at <http://lindawinfree.blogspot.com>, visit her website at <http://www.lindawinfree.com> or join her Yahoo newsletter group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/linda_winfree. Linda loves hearing from readers. Feel free to drop her an email at linda_winfree@yahoo.com.

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