



The Right Words

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Rain pounded on the squad car roof and pattered off the hood. The headlights pierced the shroud of rain, highlighting the fat drops splattering and bouncing off the paved parking lot. Muted squawking emanated from the radio, competing with the hushed swipe-swipe of the windshield wipers. Chris balanced his clipboard against the steering wheel, his pen scratching across the report. With the heavy thunderstorms moving through the area, bringing high winds and the threat of flooding, the night had been a busy one. He'd already worked three minor wrecks, helped evacuate the residents of retirement trailer park in a low-lying area...and his shift was only half over.

If it kept raining like this, he was pretty sure he could kiss his next couple of days off good-bye, too.

Which meant he wouldn't be kissing Ruthie any time soon.

A sigh rumbled up from his throat and he glanced sideways at the little snapshot of her and the kids he'd tucked into the console. He missed them. Yeah, he was a goner...just as whipped as Troy Lee said he was. Not that he minded, since she—and the kids—had turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He scrawled his signature at the bottom of the report form and slid it into the portfolio folder on the passenger seat. His cell phone buzzed and he lifted it, warm pleasure spearing through him at the first glimpse of Ruthie's number on the display. He held it to his ear, already primed to hear her pretty voice. "Hey."

"Hey, handsome." The words flowed over him, her tone sweet and hushed. He could envision her, maybe on the screened porch at her mama's, stealing a few moments just for him after the kids were in bed. "Busy night?"

He gave a laughing groan. "You have no idea."

"I think I know why my sister's first caterer quit." Ruthie's voice, breathless with laughter, washed over him and left tingling awareness in its wake.

Chris slumped deeper into the driver's seat. "Why is that, sweetheart?"

"Because this wedding has turned my mother into Momzilla."

A smile pulled at his mouth. "Ruthie, she can't be that bad."

"Chris, I swear. She's wedding-obsessed." A metallic squeak accompanied the statement. Yep, the porch swing. He'd stolen enough kisses on that swing during the past five

months they'd been dating to be intimately acquainted with all its squeaks and squawks. "Now she's all worked up because there's projected flooding at Riverpoint."

As much excitement and planning as Lenora Calvert had put into this wedding for her youngest daughter, Chris could imagine, but he also knew she was one of the calmest, most reasonable women he'd ever seen. And that her older daughter, the one who held his heart in her slender hands, *always* had a backup plan. He rested his wrist on the wheel. "You come up with an acceptable alternative for her yet?"

"Tori and I have just about convinced her that we could pull off the reception here if need be."

"See? Everything will be fine and that wedding will come off without a hitch." The words had barely left his lips when she erupted into soft laughter. He frowned, staring out at the rain. "What?"

"Chris, we want this wedding to come off *with* a hitch, remember?"

He grinned. God, he even loved her corny sense of humor. "True."

She sobered with a quiet sigh. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too." He shifted, stretching his cramped legs. The radio crackled, Troy Lee calling in an hourly position check. "A lot."

"I wish I could see you tonight." Her voice dropped, became the sultry whisper she used when they were alone, which wasn't often enough. "It seems like forever since we had some time just for ourselves."

"Yeah." He'd been pulling long shifts the last week and with Tori's wedding on top of Ruthie's normal catering duties, she'd been busy as well, so their time had been limited. They'd managed to meet for dinner one night during his shift and had taken the kids for pizza. Another day, they'd grabbed a few minutes at the coffee shop before he went on duty. The stolen interludes were sweet, but he was jonesing to see her.

A sudden outbreak of hurried voices and ten codes from the radio told him that wasn't happening any time soon. Dispatch called for him to meet Troy Lee at the site of another road washout and possible evacuation area. "Ruthie, sweetheart, I have to go."

"Of course you do." Her exhale whispered between them. "I'll see you, handsome."

He reached for the microphone. "C-5, Chandler. 10-4, en route."

The rain slapped the windshield as he headed south on Highway 3. Typical April weather, roaring in with lightning and wind and saturating showers. If Cookie and Tori had had any sense, they'd have waited a little longer for a May wedding and sunny weather. Of course, after a sixteen-month engagement, maybe they'd waited long enough.

Puddles ponded on the road, and the Crown Vic swerved a bit despite its weight. He slowed to turn onto Bowles Road, headlamps bouncing off the muddy water rushing in the ditches and flowing across the dirt road. Ahead of him, Troy Lee's blue lights illuminated the night. Chris angled in behind him, making sure he left room for Troy Lee to swing his own unit around.

After calling in his arrival, Chris grabbed his plastic-encased campaign hat and settled it on his head. As he stepped from the car, Troy Lee pulled orange cones and yellow caution tape from his trunk. Chris slogged toward him, the mud sucking at his boots. "What have we got?"

"Mandatory evacuation. Fire department, road department and shelter bus are on their way." Troy Lee jerked his chin toward the rural highway behind them. He tied off the caution tape, a temporary barrier until the road crew showed up with barrels and barricades. "Calvert wants us to do a door to door notification."

Chris tugged his Maglite free from its ring and shone the bright beam along the water-covered roadway. "Let's go."

Even through his waders, the chill of the water sank in. Droplets fell from the back of his hat and slithered down his nape. Water splashed up at them as heavy beads of rain poured down.

"How great is this?" Troy Lee flashed him a grin.

"Really great." Irony laced the words. He could think of plenty of words to describe the night—wet, cold, windy, dreary—but "great" wasn't among the choices. "I wouldn't exactly call it that, Troy Lee. You like being wet and cold?"

"Not the wet and cold part. C'mon, man." Troy Lee nudged his shoulder. Using his hands, Troy Lee framed the panorama before them, at least what they could see through the ropes of rain—lights in windows of houses set far off the road, water rushing down the ditches. "The saving people in distress part. What could be better?"

"Yeah, that's pretty cool." One corner of Chris's mouth hitched in a grin. "Although I don't think this counts as rescuing people in distress."

"Sure it does." Rain dripped off the brow of Troy Lee's hat.

"Man, we're going door to door, checking on people with water in their yards, asking them to leave."

"Trust me, it counts."

"All right...it counts." Chris chuckled, unable to resist his colleague's infectious enthusiasm.

Two hours and four homes later, he was agreeing with Troy Lee for real. Working in tandem with local fire officials and the Department of Natural Resources, they'd helped families gather crucial belongings and navigate the water-filled roadway. Although the risk at this point remained minimal, being asked to leave their homes in the dark of night because of a looming threat of real flooding did indeed generate distress.

At the fifth house, he handed off a small pet carrier, containing the elderly owner's two terrified cats, to Troy Lee. He hefted her suitcase and offered her his arm at the front door. "Are you ready, Mrs. Twitty?"

"I think so." Her hand fluttered as she tucked it into his elbow. She glanced back into the small house where she'd lived all her married life and in the years since her husband's death. Chris didn't miss the glitter of tears in her cloudy blue eyes. The frustration of not having the right words to reassure her burned him.

He passed the suitcase to Troy Lee, who'd already stowed the yowling cats in the fire department boat. He covered Mrs. Twitty's trembling hand with his own. "If it's all right, ma'am, I'm going to carry you out to the boat. We don't want you to get your feet wet."

"That's fine."

When he lifted her slight form, he was able to feel the tiny tremors of fear gripping her body. As they traversed the few feet from the stoop to the boat, he kept up a steady stream of what he hoped were comforting words.

Once she was safely ensconced, he and Troy Lee trudged toward the next house. Troy Lee landed a punch on his arm. "More than I've heard you talk all night."

Here it came—the normal ragging about being the strong, silent type. He refrained from replying.

"You do talk to Ruthie, right?"

"Yes, Troy Lee, I talk to Ruthie."

A too-brief moment of quiet fell between them, broken only by the slosh of water under their feet and the distant voices of fellow rescue workers.

Troy Lee cleared his throat. "I think you made her feel better. Mrs. Twitty, I mean. She was bragging on you to the fire guys."

"I hope so." He glanced behind them, but the dark and rain shrouded the Twitty home from view. "Kinda hard to find the right thing to say on a night like this."

"Yeah." For once, ever-talkative Troy Lee seemed at a loss for words. "You did good, though."

The praise, even coming from his best friend, flushed his neck and face with heat.  
“Thanks.”

They lapsed into silence again. The remaining evacuations went as smoothly as such operations could. At four a.m., Chris returned to his squad car, an hour after his split shift had been scheduled to wrap up. He texted Ruthie, the quick “shift over, I’m okay, headed home” message he sent her every night he worked. She didn’t reply, not that he’d expected her to this late. He fired the engine and turned the car in the direction of home.

Dodging roads closed to flooding, he headed for his house. His eyes burning with exhaustion, Chris turned into his driveway. He blinked. Was he hallucinating? Ruthie’s car sat before the double garage. He pulled to a stop beside it, a grin curving his mouth despite the weariness. Anticipation warmed him. He didn’t know why she was here, but he was damn glad she was.

After calling in out of service, ending tour, he killed the engine. Head ducked against the rain, he jogged to the front door. The wooden slab swung inward before he could slide the key into the lock. Ruthie smiled at him. “Hey, handsome.”

“What are you doing here?” He stepped inside and lowered his head to kiss her.

She curled into his chest and walked her fingers over his badge. “I decided to sneak out and meet you after you texted me.”

“I’m glad you did.” He rubbed the ends of her hair between his fingers, the strands like thick satin. His fatigue fell away, and familiar awareness buzzed through him. “Although you really shouldn’t have come out in this weather.”

“I’m fine. The roads are clear between here and home. I left Mama a note, though. I didn’t want her to worry if she woke up before I got back.” A hint of sheepishness warred with the impish light in her dark gaze and he chuckled. Oh, man, he could get used to this, coming home to find her waiting for him. A slow smile curved her full lower lip. “I need to be home before the children wake up, but that still gives us a couple of hours.”

He rested his shoulders against the wall and tugged her closer. “As busy as we’ve been lately, I’ll take what I can get, sweetheart. I’ve missed you.”

She looped her arms about his neck. “Then show me, Chris Parker.”

“My pleasure, Ruth Ann Calvert.” He dipped his head to capture her mouth. She opened to him, pressing to him, taking his mouth with sweet aggression. Her tongue wrapped around his in a teasing swirl and Chris groaned, a wave of need trying to take out his knees. His hat tumbled to the floor. He lifted his head, the reality of his damp clothing filtering in. A rough laugh scraped his throat. “You make me lose my head.”

Her fingers fanned over his jaw. "Is that a bad thing?"

"With you?" He shook his head. "Never."

The certainty that he could lose his head with her and remain completely safe only confirmed what he already knew—this was the one woman for him.

A gust of wind pelted rain against the narrow windows by the door. He stroked a knuckle along her jaw. "I love you."

Affection glowed in her dark eyes. "I love you, too."

"Let me get out of these wet clothes and I'll show you for real." He scrubbed a hand across his jaw, stubble rasping. "I probably need a shower and shave too."

"No." She nudged him toward the hallway. "I like you a little rough around the edges."

Their fingers intertwined, he led her toward his bedroom. The light there cast a softly golden glow on the room. He toed out of his shoes, and Ruthie perched on the foot of his bed, her gaze heavy as a palpable touch on him. His skin tingling under that look, he removed his gun belt and shed his uniform shirt to drape it, all brass in place, over the closet doorknob.

"Just looking at you makes me want you." Her breathless admission trembled between them. "I never thought I'd feel anything for a man again, but you make me feel so much, simply by being you."

"It's mutual." He hopped on one foot, then the other, as he tugged off his socks. He grinned at her. "Sure you don't want me to shower first?"

"I'm sure." She held his gaze, a fire glimmering in hers. "I want to smell you on my skin later, so I can remember having you all over me."

The statement, incredibly sexy in its simplicity, slammed desire into his lower belly.

She gave him a sultry smile and crooked a finger at him. "So come on over here, Chris Parker, and get all over me."

"Yes, ma'am."

As he approached the bed, she scooted up on the mattress, toward the pillows. Her skirt rode higher with the movement, offering him a glimpse of smooth thighs and blue satin panties. He rested a knee on the bed and lifted her foot to press a kiss to her ankle. "All over you, huh?"

"Yes." Her lips parted on a sigh as he rubbed a hand along her calf. "All over me."

He slid his fingers over the sensitive skin behind her knee, avoiding her ticklish spot there. No way he was ruining this particular mood. He leaned over her and threaded his fingers through her hair. "I think I can oblige."

Her impish grin appeared once more. "I thought you might."

When he reached for the hem of her thin T-shirt, she straightened to help him strip it off. The curve of her shoulder begged for a kiss, and he peppered her smooth skin with caresses, finding the sweet spot where her shoulder joined her neck. Her little moan shivered through him, and she wrapped her arms about him, fingers sliding across his back. One fingertip danced down the scar at his shoulder blade. He didn't flinch, and she lavished the same loving touch on the matching scar at his biceps.

His eyes burned at the wave of pure emotion crashing over him, and he squeezed his lids closed. With his eyes shut, he found his other senses amplified. God, she smelled good—the warm curve of her neck holding a hint of lavender soap, her hair beckoning him with spiced vanilla. Sweet and clean. Under his lips and hands, her skin was smooth, warmth growing beneath the chill of damp air still clinging to her. He skimmed his fingertips along the bottom edge of her bra, the satin a close match for her skin. Their bellies pressed together, heat spreading out from the contact, joining the fiery tingling of desire low in his gut. The soft rhythm of her uneven breathing filled his ears.

He dropped a kiss on her collar bone, another in the hollow of her throat. She trailed a caress down his spine and tilted her head back, offering him further access.

"I adore the way you touch me," she murmured.

"How's that?" He nipped lightly at her jaw.

"Like I'm valuable." Her sigh shivered through him. "Priceless."

"You are." He lifted his head, opened his eyes to look down at her.

Her sultry smile made a reappearance. "And I adore how you always have the right words for me."

Amazing she thought he ever had the right words. Quiet came easier to him than expressing his feelings, but for her, he tried. Jiminy Cricket, what he felt for her was too big for words some times. He could show her, though, make her feel how deeply he loved, hell, how deeply he *worshiped* her.

He rose over her and brushed his lips across hers. Reaching behind her, he found the short zipper and eased it down. Inch by inch, he slipped the skirt along her legs and away, leaving her in the thin satin bra and panties. He sat up, and wrapping his fingers around hers, pulled her to sit before him.

With a fingertip, he traced the upper edge of her bra. She arched into his touch, and when he encountered the strap, he slid his finger beneath the thin strip of satin and moved it up to the curve of her shoulder. A soft flick sent the strap dangling on her arm. A naughty smile played about her mouth as she slipped her arm free. He matched her with a wicked grin of his



own and repeated the process with the second strap before making short work of the back hooks.

The thin garment fell away.

Even as many times as they'd been together this way, the gorgeous sight of her still took his breath. He cradled her waist, eased his hands up to cup her breasts. "You're so beautiful."

"You've said that before." She wound her fingers into his hair, arching further into his caresses. "But I love hearing it."

"Beautiful." He feathered his lips over a puckered nipple and blew lightly on it. When it hardened further, he chuckled then drew the swollen tip into his mouth. "Very beautiful."

Her sighs and sweet moans filled the quiet room. He moved to the other breast and repeated his attention there. She shifted, restless, and swept her palms down his torso to rub at his abdominals. Sensation sizzled out from the contact, and his muscles contracted. He laughed, trying to catch the breath she'd snatched away with the simple caress. "That's beautiful, too."

"I've needed this," she murmured, her lips against his hair. "Needed to be alone with you. It's been too long."

He kissed his way down her abdomen. "Then I need to make it worth the wait."

"You're always worth the wait." She danced a sweet touch across the breadth of his shoulders.

Nuzzling her thigh, he hooked his fingers in the blue panties and eased them off. He tossed the wisp of satin aside and stroked his palms up her legs, from smooth ankles to the sensitive skin behind her knees to the softness of her thighs. Need burned, hot, tight spirals in his gut. Sliding his hands beneath those thighs, he parted them to press an open-mouthed kiss to the inside of one. "Love you, Ruthie."

"Mmm." Her breath caught audibly when he kissed higher. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tilted into his intimate caress. "I love you."

He tasted her, adding his fingers in the rhythm he knew she liked best—long, relaxed strokes of his tongue at her clitoris, a slow pulsing of his fingers inside her. Above him, her breathing grew rough and shallow, full of soft panting and softer moans.

Soon, she gripped his shoulders and tugged him toward her. "I want you inside me."

With desire thrumming in him, he reached for the drawer in his nightstand. "Again, I think I can oblige."

Hands shaking with need, he sheathed himself. She wrapped a hand around him, caressing as she guided him into her body. Heat and rippling softness surrounded him, stopping

his breath with a punch of pleasure. He hissed in a breath. With a quiet giggle, she moved beneath him, a silky slide that prompted him to withdraw and thrust again. Together, they set an easy tempo that soon spun into something more frenzied, full of heat and fire and passion.

Beneath him, she arched, his name leaving her lips on a sultry moan. She dug her fingernails into his shoulderblades, contractions rippling deep inside her, surrounding him, dragging forth his own climax. He struggled to maintain a steady rhythm, wanting to prolong her pleasure as long as possible. Finally, as she relaxed under him, he gave in, plunging deeper as an orgasm gripped him.

Gasping, he collapsed into her arms, resting on his elbows to keep his weight off her. He buried his face in the curve of her shoulder, aftershocks running through him. She held him closer and laughed, a sweet sound of satisfaction. He wrapped her in an embrace and rolled to his side, taking her with him. She pillowed her head on his shoulder, and he rubbed his cheek against her tousled, shining hair. Alone with her like this, he never wanted to move again. He wanted this, her in his arms, in his life, every day, every night.

Her laugh puffed against his skin. "I think I've been thoroughly obliged, Deputy Parker."

He tightened his arm about her. "Marry me."

She stilled, then lifted her head. Surprise darkened her brown eyes further. "What?"

"I..." He swallowed hard, nerves tangling his belly. "I'm not sure where that came from."

"Did you mean it?"

"Yeah, I did." He licked his bottom lip. "I didn't mean right away. It's still too soon for that. But in the long run, I want us together—you, me, the kids—all the time. I want to come home to you and wake up with you and...I want to marry you, Ruthie."

A sheen of tears glimmered in her dark gaze, and she touched the corner of his mouth. "I want that, too."

Joy glowed to life in his chest and he hugged her close, seeking her mouth for a kiss more about love and belonging than passion and desire. After several long moments, he pulled away and sat up with a groan. He rested his forehead on his updrawn knees. "Jiminy Cricket, I'm an idiot."

"What?" She shifted to sit beside him and trailed a comforting touch down his arm.

"This has to be the dumbest, half-assed proposal ever. I don't have a ring for you, and Lord knows, I could have at least rehearsed the right words—"

"You gave me the right words." She stroked his hair and rested her lips against his shoulder. "Perfect words from the perfect man."

He slanted a sideways glance at her, a grin quirking at his mouth. "Perfect?"

“Absolutely.” She leaned in to kiss him. “I couldn’t ask for better.”

“I’m pretty sure you—”

“Stop.” She laid a finger against his lips. “All I want is you. Always.”

And those were definitely the right words.

## **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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