

# WISSEN

RENE GUTTERIDGE



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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*Listen*

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Published in association with the Books & Such Literary Agency, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, [www.booksandsuch.biz](http://www.booksandsuch.biz).

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gutteridge, Rene.

Listen / Rene Gutteridge.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-2433-3 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3557.U887L57 2010

813'.54—dc22

2009038254

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Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To those whose lives have been forever altered by words*

# Acknowledgments

I've had this book on my heart for quite some time, and it's so thrilling to have it completed and ready to offer to readers. I knew when God put this story in my heart that it would strike a chord with many people. I wrote it for everyone whose lives have been touched, either negatively or positively, by words. Everyone has his or her own personal story, but I believe we can agree that words are powerful, whichever way they are used. I have been hurt by words, and I have been forgiven for words that have hurt others. But I have also been lifted up and encouraged by words, and I hope that I have lifted and encouraged too.

I'd like to thank the magnificent team at Tyndale, who believed in this story from the beginning: Jan Stob, Karen Watson, Stephanie Broene, and Lorie Popp, plus everyone else from Tyndale who contributed to this book. You are a talented and lovely group of people, with great vision and purpose!

Thanks to the Kansas Eight, who encouraged me through some difficult rewrites. Also special thanks to Janet Grant, my agent and constant guide, and Ron Wheatley, my loyal friend and technical adviser.

As always, I cherish and adore my family—Sean, John, and Cate, who stand by me and lift me up daily with their words. To my friends and family, thanks for your loyalty and love.

Thanks also to my readers, some of whom have followed me for a decade now! I appreciate each one of you and thank you for taking the time to read this offering. I pray that God moves in your heart and that you will be encouraged to use your words with grace, discipline, and love.

And thank You, Father, for all that You do inside me so that I may write for Your glory.

# Prologue

MEREDITH SAT QUIETLY in the center of her room on the carpet that had been freshly steam cleaned for the party. Against the far wall sat all the gifts she'd received, still in their fancy sacks.

The wind rattled the windows as the evening news, barely audible from another room, reported a blizzard on the way. She loved snow and the sound of haunting wind ushering it in. The house creaked against the gusts, and she closed her eyes, listening to the invisible. She liked that things unseen could be heard.

Her mother would be gone for exactly thirty-two minutes to take home the toddler and infant she babysat three times a week to earn a little extra cash for the family. Her brother was at work, his third job, to try to make ends meet.

Such small problems, money and food.

Meredith wanted to keep listening to the wind, but time was running out.



She placed the baby monitor and its receiver in front of her. Sky blue plastic, both with long white cords. She stared at them . . . portals to reality, a reality that told her who she was. What she was.

Her friends still didn't know she had heard them when she'd gone to the back bedroom to get a sweater. But she heard everything through the baby monitor. Every word.

She didn't know she embarrassed them by how she dressed. She didn't know her hair was ugly.

She'd clutched the sweater she'd gone to retrieve, the one with the small hole in the sleeve, and listened for a long time. She didn't come out of the room until they left.

The wind howled, reminding her that she had better hurry.

Meredith took the end of each unit, where the plugs were, and tied them together, pulling them as tight as possible. Then, with the rope to the toy horse her grandfather had made her when she was four, she added more length, closing the knots. She stood and tugged against the rope, tightening each knot one more time.

Her knees shook, which surprised her because until now she had felt calm and peaceful. Nearly euphoric, which made her realize she had indeed chosen wisely. But the piercing whistle of the wind through the house caused her to shiver. She never questioned whether she had the guts to do it. Other people questioned things about her, though.

She stood for a moment in her room, reconsidering the closet. The high bar would hold, but she knew her mother

and knew she would need a place of solace when this was over. So she went to the garage.

The garage door shook against the wind, its metal rattling as if someone were outside shaking it furiously.

Her father's workbench stool would do. Something without wheels but unsteady enough to kick over.

Meredith studied the steel tracks bolted to the ceiling. Their family was the last on the block to still have the manual roll-up garage door, but she respected that about her dad. He wasn't a sellout. She always wanted to be like him. He was charismatic, likable. But her brother got all those traits.

She carefully climbed onto the stool. The last thing she needed was to fall and break her arm or something. That'd be just her luck.

She stood erect, looking down at all that was in the garage. Her gaze fixed on the oil stain her dad had been trying to remove for a week now. He scrubbed and scrubbed but couldn't get rid of it.

*Stains are permanent, Dad.*

From her back pocket, she pulled the rope and notes she'd copied from the library yesterday. She glanced over the drawing she'd made. It was pretty self-explanatory. She stuffed the paper back in her pocket and felt her other pocket for the small envelope, a note to her parents and brother telling them she loved them and she was sorry. She pushed it in deeper.

Meredith tied the noose like she'd studied, then lifted the other end and tied it twice around a thin, sturdy beam



on the track above her. It didn't have to hold forever. Just long enough.

Her heartbeat reminded her that this was not going to be an easy task. She never expected it to be. But the euphoria had vanished.

Her hands started shaking. Tears fell against her cheeks. She'd prepared for this.

She'd decided on a countdown. After all, she was blasting off to somewhere far better for her and everybody else. She'd settled on starting at twenty, because that was her age and that seemed like a decent number. Not too long, not too short.

She had one more test. She took a deep breath and then yelled, "Can anyone hear me?"

She listened. But all she heard were those awful words from the girls. Over and over. She couldn't get them out of her head.

She tried one more time, this time louder, to give it a fair shot. "Can anyone hear me?"

Nobody answered. Nobody ever would.

Meredith pulled the noose around her neck and turned to see out the garage door windows. Her favorite tree, the weeping willow her father had planted when she was born, was in sight. She tightened the noose one more time so that the cord pressed deeply into her neck.

"Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen. Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve. Eleven. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two." She clenched her fists. "Can anyone hear me?"

She thought she heard a voice nearby. Then another sound, like a door shutting. She stopped breathing to hear better. But it was only the wind teasing her. Tears bled down her cheeks. She fixed her eyes on the dark stain below her.

“One.”

# 1

PRESENT DAY

Damien Underwood tapped his pencil against his desk and spun twice in his chair. But once he was facing his computer again, the digital clock still hadn't changed.

In front of him on a clean white piece of paper was a box, and inside that box was a bunch of other tiny boxes. Some of those boxes he'd neatly scribbled in. And above the large box he wrote, *Time to go*.

This particular day was stretching beyond his normal capacity of tolerance, and when that happened, he found himself constructing word puzzles. He'd sold three to the *New York Times*, two published on Monday and one on Wednesday. They were all framed and hanging in his cubicle. He'd sent in over thirty to be considered.

He'd easily convinced his boss years ago to let him start publishing crosswords in the paper, and since then he'd been the crossword editor, occasionally publishing

some of his own, a few from local residents, and some in syndication.

The puzzle clues were coming harder today. He wanted to use a lot of plays on words, and he also enjoyed putting in a few specific clues that were just for Marlo residents. Those were almost always published on Fridays.

A nine-letter word for “predictable and smooth.”

Yes, good clue. He smiled and wrote the answer going down. *Clockwork.*

He glanced over to the bulletin board, which happened to be on the only piece of north wall he could see from his desk at the *Marlo Sentinel*. Tacked in the center, still hanging there after three years, was an article from *Lifestyles Magazine*. Marlo, of all the places in the United States, was voted Best Place to Raise a Child. It was still the town’s shining moment of glory. Every restaurant and business had this article framed and hanging somewhere on their walls.

The community boasted its own police force, five separate and unique playgrounds for the kids, including a spray ground put in last summer, where kids could dash through all kinds of water sprays without the fear of anyone drowning.

Potholes were nonexistent. The trash was picked up by shiny, blue, state-of-the-art trash trucks, by men wearing pressed light blue shirts and matching pants, dressed slightly better than the mail carriers.

Two dozen neighborhood watch programs were responsible for nineteen arrests in the last decade, mostly petty thieves and a couple of vandals. There hadn’t been a violent

crime in Marlo since 1971, and even then the only one that got shot was a dog. A bank robbery twenty years ago ended with the robber asking to talk to a priest, where he confessed a gambling addiction and a fondness for teller number three.

Damien's mind lit up, which it often did when words were involved. He penciled it in. An eight-letter word for "a linear stretch of dates." *Timeline*. Perfect for 45 across.

So this was Marlo, where society and family joined in marriage. It was safe enough for kids to play in the front yards. It was clean enough that asthmatics were paying top dollar for the real estate. It was good enough, period.

Damien was a second-generation Marlo resident. His mother and father moved here long before it was the Best Place to Raise a Child. Then it had just been cheap land and a good drive from the city. His father had been the manager of a plant now gone because it caused too much pollution. His mother, a stay-at-home mom, had taken great pride in raising a son who shared her maiden name, Damien, and her fondness for reading the dictionary.

Both his parents died the same year from different causes, the year Damien had met Kay, his wife-to-be. They'd wed nine months after they met and waited the customary five years to have children. Kay managed a real estate company. She loved her job as much as she had the first day she started. And it was a good way to keep up with the Joneses.

Until recently, when the housing market started slumping like his ever-irritated teenage daughter.

The beast's red eyes declared it was finally time to leave.

Damien grabbed his briefcase and walked the long hallway to the door, just to make sure his boss and sometimes friend, Edgar, remembered he was leaving a little early. He gave Edgar a wave, and today, because he was in a good mood, Edgar waved back.

Damien drove through the Elephant's Foot and picked up two lemonades, one for himself and one for Jenna, his sixteen-year-old daughter, who had all at once turned from beautiful princess or ballerina or whatever it was she wanted to be to some weird Jekyll and Hyde science experiment. With blue eye shadow. She never hugged him. She never giggled. Oh, how he missed the giggling. She slouched and grunted like a gorilla, her knuckles nearly dragging the ground if anyone said anything to her. A mild suggestion of any kind, from "grab a jacket" to "don't do drugs" evoked eyes rolling into the back of her head as if she were having a grand mal seizure.

So the lemonade was the best gesture of kindness he could make. Besides offering to pick her up because her car was in the shop.

He pulled to the curb outside the school, fully aware he was the only car among the full-bodied SUVs idling alongside one another. It was a complete embarrassment to Jenna, who begged to have Kay pick her up in the Navigator. Some lessons were learned the hard way. But his car was perfectly fine, perfectly reliable, and it wasn't going to cause the ozone to collapse.

She got in, noticed the lemonade, asked if it was sugar-

free, then sipped it and stared out the window for the rest of the ride home. It wasn't sugar-free, but the girl needed a little meat on her bones.

"Your car's ready."

Finally, a small smile.

\* \* \*

"Have a seat."

Frank Merret shoved his holster and belt downward to make room for the roll of belly fat that had permanently attached itself to his midsection. He slowly sat down in the old vinyl chair across from Captain Lou Grayson's cluttered desk.

"You got a rookie coming in this morning."

"I thought we had an agreement about rookies."

"You ticketed Principal MaLue. We had an agreement about that too."

Frank sighed. "He was speeding in a school zone."

"He's the principal. If he wants to hit Mach speed in the school zone, so be it. The rookie's file is in your box." Grayson's irritated expression said the rest.

Frank left the captain's office and killed time in the break room until lineup, where the rookie stood next to him, fresh-faced and wide-eyed. He was short, kind of stocky, with white blond hair and baby pink cheeks like a von Trapp kid. There was not a hard-bitten bone in this kid's body.

Frank cut his gaze sideways. "This is Marlo. The most you can hope for is someone driving under the influence of pot."



Lineup was dismissed, and the kid followed him out. “That’s not true. I heard about that bank robbery.”

“That was twenty years ago.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the rookie said. “I’m on patrol. That’s cool. I’m Gavin Jenkins, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Did you read my stats from the academy?”

“Not even one word.”

Gavin stopped midstride, falling behind Frank as he made his way outside to the patrol car. Gavin hurried to catch up. “Where are we going? Aren’t we a little early?”

Frank continued to his car. Gavin hopped into the passenger side. Frank turned west onto Bledsoe.

“Listen, Officer Merret, I just want you to know that I’m glad they paired me with you. I’ve heard great things about you, and I think it’s—”

“I don’t normally talk in the morning.”

“Okay.”

So they drove in silence mostly, checking on a few of the elderly citizens and their resident homeless man, Douglas, until lunchtime, when they stopped at Pizza Hut. The kid couldn’t help but talk, so Frank let him and learned the entire history of how he came to be a Marlo police officer.

Gavin was two bites into his second piece and hadn’t touched his salad when Frank rose. “Stay here.”

Gavin stared at him, his cheek full of cheese and pepperoni. “What? Why?”

“I’ve got something I need to do.”

Gavin stood, trying to gather his things. “Wait. I’ll come.”

Frank held out a firm hand. “Just stay here, okay? I’ll come back to get you in about forty minutes.”

Gavin slowly sat down.

Frank walked out. He knew it already. This rookie was going to be a thorn in his side.

*“But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.”*

—JAMES 3:5-6

## Discussion Questions

USE THESE QUESTIONS for individual reflection or for discussion within your book club or small group. If your book club reads *Listen* and is interested in talking with me via speakerphone, please feel free to contact me through my Web site at [www.renegutteridge.com](http://www.renegutteridge.com), and I'll do my best to arrange something with you. Thanks for reading!

1. Do you believe words have power over you? What about the words you speak in private? Do they still have power? over you? over someone else?
2. Can you recall an instance where words changed you, either for better or worse?
3. Kay's life was changed by words when she was young, but the pain it caused her and others continued into the next generation. What steps can we take to make sure painful words do not continue to cause harm through more generations?

4. Why do you think Frank kept his sister a secret, even from his best friend?
5. If you were the one who discovered who was behind the Web site, would you turn them in? What if it were a friend or family member? Would you try to protect them from the consequences?
6. How have social networking sites and other technological advances—like texting and Twittering—changed what we say about ourselves and others? Do you think people feel freer to share personal details? What issues can this present?
7. If you have a damaged or estranged relationship in your life, and you were asked to write the person a letter, could you do it? Why or why not? What would make it hard or easy?
8. What are three words you'd like to have spoken about you?
9. What do you think are five of the most powerful words in the English language? What makes them powerful?
10. The Bible has a lot to say about the power of the tongue. For instance, Damien quotes James 3:5-6 in his letter to Marlo. Read and discuss the following verses: Psalm 34:12-14, Proverbs 13:3, and Proverbs 15:4.

## About the Author

RENE GUTTERIDGE IS the author of sixteen novels, including the Storm series (Tyndale House Publishers) and *Never the Bride*, the Boo series, and the Occupational Hazards series from WaterBrook Press. She also released *My Life as a Doormat* and *The Ultimate Gift: The Novelization* with Thomas Nelson. Rene is also known for her Christian comedy sketches. She studied screenwriting while earning a mass communications degree, graduating magna cum laude from Oklahoma City University and earning the Excellence in Mass Communication Award. She served as the full-time director of drama for First United Methodist Church for five years before leaving to stay home and write. She enjoys instructing at writers conferences and in college classrooms. She lives with her husband, Sean, a musician, and their children in Oklahoma City.