

POSSESSION

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RENE GUTTERIDGE



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Possession

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*For Sean, John, and Cate
my three gifts from God*

Prologue

“CAN YOU PLEASE state your full name?”

“Lindy Graegan.”

“Your real name is Linda. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Your middle name?”

“Michaela.”

“Mrs. Graegan, do you know why you’re here?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve waived your right to an attorney. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And for the record, your husband is Vance Mitchell Graegan, correct?”

“Yes.”

“For your information, you are being tape-recorded.”

“Fine.”

“Mrs. Graegan, do you understand that you are being questioned in the death of—”

“I understand. I have nothing to hide. Just ask me the questions, okay? Can we just get on with it? Can I get a drink of water or something? Coffee?”

“We can get you a drink of water.”

“Thank you.”

“Let’s start from the beginning.”

“I’m tired.”

“I understand. But we need to piece together exactly what happened.”

“You can’t possibly understand it all. You can’t possibly know what this has done to my family.”

“If we could just start from the beginning.”

“Well, I fell in love with a cop. And that was my first mistake.”

1

LIKE THE SUFFOCATING, squeezing atmosphere of D.C., the small, tattered banquet room at the Montgomery County Fraternal Order of Police closed in, one friendly handshake at a time. Smoke and lively conversation drifted from the bar that was attached to the back of the building. Laughter spilled forward, reaching Vance and Captain Barra just as Vance was about to thank the captain for his kind words.

“We’re going to miss you around here, Graegan,” Barra said, slapping him on the shoulder and causing his seltzer to slosh.

“Thanks.” Vance shook the liquid off his hand.

“Come on, let’s go see if Detective Short is wearing her favorite red blouse.” Barra winked and wandered toward the commotion of the bar, holding his Solo cup high in the air like something from the linoleum might jump up and grab it.

Finally Vance found himself alone. He hightailed it to the back exit, where he indulged in his only vice: fresh air. The sounds of the city swarmed like angry bees, but he didn’t care. They sounded like old friends.

“Hey.” Andy Drakkard hung out the door. “What are you doing, man? We were just about to give a big toast when we realized you weren’t even in the building!”

Vance laughed. “Sorry, man. Just needed some air.”

“I know what you mean.” Drakkard joined him, leaning against the cold concrete wall. The dim light of the setting sun colored the sky in a way that reminded Vance of campfires and cold nights.

“So you and Lindy gonna be okay?”

Vance nodded. Offered the reassuring smile that came free with every handshake he gave out tonight. “This is going to make us okay.”

“A deli? I’m having a hard time wrapping my mind around it. You serving up cold cuts? Not seeing it. I mean, yeah, Lindy makes the best Monte Carlo I have ever eaten in my life, but still . . .”

“Lindy’s the genius behind it. I’ll just be crunching numbers.”

“Sounds like more excitement than you can handle.”

“Funny.” Vance sipped his drink. “I think I’ve seen enough excitement in my lifetime.”

Drakkard blinked slowly. “Yeah, I know, man. We all have. But you gotta push through it all.”

“I’m not running,” Vance said. “I would’ve done that a long time ago.”

“You were never the same, though. Maybe none of us are.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “Short’s in there with that famous red blouse.”

Vance smiled. “What am I going to do without you guys?”

“Serve up salami.”

“Yeah.”

“Seriously, your wife makes outstanding sandwiches. Never had better.” Drakkard puffed on his cigarette, killing the fresh air that was there just moments ago. He flicked the ash into the metal bucket beside them and opened the door. “You coming?”

“In a sec.”

“This is your party, man. You can’t be scooting out early.”

“No way.”

“Don’t make me come hunt you down again.”

Drakkard shut the door, and Vance breathed in the dense air. He closed his eyes. He was tired and just wanted to leave. What was the use in all this celebration? Twenty years on the force. Five years short of retirement. Leaving the only world he knew.

Cheers.

Familiar images flickered through his mind. A bench by a bus stop. Blood dripping onto the concrete.

The sound of a rifle, distant. Cold. Vanishing into the night like a ghost. It never let him rest.

And that's why, somehow, the deli made sense. At least it used to. Until the reality of it was one road trip away.

He pushed out the despairing thoughts and focused on Lindy. He smiled at the thought of when he first fell in love with her. They were at lunch on a Saturday afternoon, and he was complaining about having to be on hold with the phone company. She told him she always pushed 2 for Spanish.

"You don't speak Spanish, do you?" he asked.

She smiled wryly. "No. But they speak English. There's never a wait because fewer calls come in, and when you apologize for hitting the wrong number, they offer to help you anyway."

She then went on to deconstruct the sandwich she was eating, offering an explanation of why the quality of salami matters.

It seemed like two lifetimes ago.

The disappearing sun left only cold air, chilling him quickly. He stepped back inside to say his final good-byes.

* * *

The zipper sound. Again.

Lindy sighed and put down the packing tape. Three more boxes to go. The house always seemed so small, but now it

looked expansive. It reminded her of when they bought it. She'd walked in and known it was to be their home.

"Conner . . ."

"Mom, I'm uncomfortable. This floor is hard. I want my bed."

Lindy walked to the living room, where the tent was pitched right in the middle of the floor. Conner's black hair emerged, followed by the sweetest face she knew. The flashlight in his hand tilted toward him, highlighting the apprehension in his eyes.

He crawled out and sat on the carpet, picking at the edge of his Star Wars pajama top. "I know this is supposed to be an adventure, but it doesn't seem like very much fun."

"You'll get to see new parts of America. Some people go their whole lives and don't get to see as much as you'll see on our drive." She tickled his tummy, and he cringed with laughter. "Plus, hotel rooms! You love hotel rooms."

He smiled, his deep dimples emerging, just like his father's. Where the black hair came from was anyone's guess. But his piercing eyes, speckled green with a dark ring of hazel encircling each pupil, had charmed many women in his life. Luckily, at eight he could hardly comprehend what those eyes were capable of.

Pulling him into a hug, she let him rest against her body for a little while. He looked up at her. "I might cry, Mom."

"When?"

"When the truck takes all our stuff."

"I know. But we can't move all our stuff by ourselves. And

they're professionals. They know how to get it there safely." She stroked his hair. "It's okay. This is a new start for us, and I know it's scary, but you're going to love California. It's very warm and sunny. And we can go to the beach and play in the sand." She stood and pulled him to his feet. "Now, you have to get some sleep or you're going to miss our whole trip tomorrow because you'll be sacked out in the backseat."

"Backseat? Can't I ride in the front? I'm eight."

"I know how old you are, and no, you cannot." She guided him back to the opening of the tent. "I'll be in there a little later on to sleep with you. I've got a few more things to get packed before we leave tomorrow."

"I really like this house. I was born here."

"It holds . . . a lot of memories." She sprouted a smile as her words trailed off. "We'll never forget it, right?"

"Right." He folded his arms. "Well, I'm going to pray, Mom. I'm going to pray hard that we don't move."

Lindy groaned. "Conner, please. Not this again. Not right now."

Hurt flashed across his eyes, and she hated that she couldn't be more patient with him, but she had little tolerance for his infatuation with prayer. It all started two years ago, when he was six and couldn't find the Sunday morning cartoons. He somehow landed on a religious program and hadn't been the same since, insisting on praying and talking about God. And every once in a while, she'd catch him watching a televangelist again. It got so bad that at one point they took him to a specialist, afraid a vaccination might've gone haywire in his

system. The doctor assured them he was fine and that in due time it would go away. But it hadn't.

Conner dropped to his knees and started praying, one hand shooting up like a disco move. Lindy rolled her eyes and was about to tell him to quit it when the phone rang.

She caught it on the third ring.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello? Vance?" Lindy listened carefully but heard nothing. She hung up the phone.

"Mom? When is Dad going to be home?"

Lindy leaned against the counter, her arms resting on its cold surface. That was always the question these days—and one that she could hardly ever answer.

* * *

Vance flipped on the switch, and his side of the office buzzed to life under flickering fluorescents. On the other side of the room a woman ran a vacuum back and forth, moving around like it might be the only dance partner she'd ever known.

His desk stood out among the office clutter, nearly naked now. Two boxes sat next to it, and a few unopened cards lay on top, probably from people who couldn't make it to the FOP.

The hum of the vacuum moved closer. Vance decided there was no reason to linger. He should just take his stuff and go. Except he couldn't get himself to leave the chair.

Then his phone rang. He stared at it for a moment,

wondering who would be trying to call him at his desk at this hour. His former desk. Maybe it was a wrong number.

Maybe not.

“Graegan.” He dropped the *Detective*, since that wasn’t true anymore.

“I thought I’d reach you there.”

Vance paused. “Erin?”

“Surprised?”

“We haven’t spoken in . . . a while.” Vance swiveled his chair away from the vacuum’s noise. “How’d you know I’d be here?”

“Just a lucky guess. If I were leaving the force after twenty years to move across the country and start a deli, I’d probably sleep on my desk. Maybe chain myself there.”

His grip tightened around the receiver. “I, um . . .”

“What can I say? News travels fast—and far. All the way to Chicago.”

“So you’re still in Chicago?”

“I thought you might keep better tabs on me than that.” A soft noise clicked in the background, maybe a pencil tapping. “Yeah. I’m in Chicago.”

“How’s everything going?”

“I don’t know if I can sum up three years with that question. But overall, things are going fine. Chicago’s different, but I like working here. I mean, I’ll never go inside like you did, because I want the streets and have always wanted the streets.”

“You know it was more complicated for me than that.”

“I know.”

There was an edge to her voice, and Vance regretted it. But it wasn't unusual.

“Look,” she suddenly said, “I just wanted to offer my congratulations to you. I know this is a big step for you and Lindy. I think it's a good thing. I hear California is very sunny.”

“I can hear it in your voice. You think I'm making a big mistake.”

“I can't sit here and judge you, Vance. I've made my own mistakes, and I'm not about to judge how people deal with what life hands them. Life handed us a lot. I nearly drank myself to death. You're starting a deli. We all do our thing.”

Vance leaned back in his chair. It was good to hear her voice. Comforting in a strange way. Maybe it connected him to a life that was more normal, years and years ago. “It's hard to believe we're leaving here. We don't even have a place in California yet. Conner and Lindy are going out a couple of days early to try to find us a place to live.”

“Sounds like an interesting adventure. One that should come with a stiff drink.” She paused. “And yes, I'm sober. I realize that I can't make drinking jokes around you because you're like an A.A. sponsor I can't shake.”

“And that's a good thing.”

“So,” she continued after an awkward pause, “there is another reason I'm calling, besides to offer you the best of luck with your sandwiches.”

Vance laughed. “I can tell the sandwiches are bothering you.”

“I was wondering if you might want to swing by Chicago on your way? It’s been a long time. I’d love to catch up.”

Vance leaned back in his chair, eyeing the cleaning lady, who had now worked her way to the other side of the room.

“Hello?”

“Sorry. I’m here. I, um . . .”

“Okay, listen, Vance, I know we had unusual circumstances before. But that was a long time ago. And I just think it would be nice to put all that behind us. Just sort of move on. Why not, right?”

Vance closed his eyes, trying to keep memories—the kind that had caused him to change a lot of things in his life—from racing into his mind. “I know. It seems like another lifetime, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

The faraway drone of the vacuum filled the momentary silence.

“Look, maybe this was a mistake. Maybe there’s a reason we haven’t talked in three years.” Her tone had soured.

“Erin, don’t go there. We don’t need to go back to that place. We’ve moved on from all that.”

“I thought we had.”

“We have. And it’s good to hear from you. I’d love to swing by and see you.”

Even as Erin gave him directions and her cell phone num-

ber, Vance wondered if he'd done the right thing. He hung up the phone, staring at plans to detour to Chicago. How was he going to explain this to Lindy?

"You must be a popular man." The cleaning lady leaned against her cart, her thick South African accent smiling through her words.

"Am I?"

"Yes, my friend. That phone has been ringing every fifteen minutes for the last two hours."

Acknowledgments

I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE this is my seventeenth book. As with each child, this one feels as special and as important to me as my very first one. And at least with my “kids,” it’s true that it takes a village to raise them! I’m especially grateful to Jan Stob, Stephanie Broene, Karen Watson, and Sarah Mason for their vision and work on this book. Thanks also to the entire Tyndale family for their hard work and professionalism. I’d also like to thank Ron Wheatley, my technical adviser, and Janet Kobobel Grant, my agent, for always being there for me. And as always, thanks to Sean, John, and Cate for their support and love. You three are my most treasured possessions. And to my heavenly Father for allowing me the privilege of being a wife, mother, and storyteller.

About the Author

RENE GUTTERIDGE is the author of seventeen novels, including four suspense novels from Tyndale House Publishers (*The Splitting Storm*, *Storm Gathering*, *Storm Surge*, and *Listen*). She is also known for her Christian comedy novels and 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. She now writes full-time and enjoys instructing at writers conferences and in college classrooms. She lives with her husband, Sean, a musician, and their children in Oklahoma City.

An Interview with Rene Gutteridge

Many readers are familiar with your comedies, but how many suspense novels have you written, and what made you decide to write another one?

This is my sixth pure suspense. Suspense is actually my favorite genre in which to write. When I was a kid, the very first novel I attempted was a ghost story. Suspense lets me explore good and evil and all the fears that I sometimes don't want to admit are there. It lets me believe that there are still heroes in the world. It helps me gain perspective on my life. And I can relax a bit in the writing process. To be a great comedy writer, you have to have suffered a bit. Many comedy writers are intense and dark, like you'd expect a suspense writer to be. Suspense writers are usually very witty and engaging, like you'd expect a comedy writer to be. Thankfully, my split personality allows me to toggle between both.

How did the idea for *Possession* come to you?

It sort of came from two different places. I'd read a magazine article about people whose possessions were being held

for ransom by illegitimate moving companies. And that was about the time we were watching people lose all their belongings when the economy crashed. I read news stories about dads killing themselves and their entire families because they lost their jobs or lost their homes. So I wanted to explore the idea of losing everything and what that means and how to gain perspective on life . . . on what really matters.

The story opens with Lindy at the police station. Why did you start there? Were you worried about giving too much away?

I always like to start stories with a little mystery, a small amount of information that readers can carry with them. I like the opening because it casts a tiny shadow of doubt over every chapter until the end.

A lot of the spiritual content in the story comes through Conner, and the innocence of his faith is so powerful. Where did you come up with the idea of Conner's becoming a Christian by watching a televangelist?

I got the idea from my own son, who'd somehow gotten to a televangelist one morning while surfing for cartoons. For days after that he would talk to me about what he heard in that sermon. I had this funny picture in my head of Conner watching this evangelist, his white hair slicked to his head, his hands shooting in the air, and Conner just totally picking up on that, not a thought about denomination or what's

comfortable or uncomfortable for him. Since I wasn't raised charismatic, I thought it'd be fun to explore how a mom would react to her kid acting like a little charismatic televangelist. And how, in the end, she finds her own faith through something that used to embarrass her.

Vance suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. How did you research this? And what made you decide to give Vance this illness? Are hallucinations like Vance's conversations with Doug Cantella common to PTSD?

I've been interested in PTSD since my experience with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. I was there for the whole thing and saw a lot of disturbing things but never had any PTSD symptoms—no flashbacks or anything else—except my eyes water every time I hear sirens, fifteen years later. It's just this weird physiological reaction that happens every time I hear a siren. And that was one of the things that made such an impression on me that day: the sirens never ended. They just kept coming and coming, all through the city. All through the night. I feel fortunate that I was able to come through that without psychological damage. But it gave me a small glimpse into Vance's struggle with PTSD.

In my research on PTSD, I found a lot of interesting symptoms that coincide with the disorder, including the flashbacks that he experiences, the sounds of the bullets and shattering glass. Hallucinations, however, are extremely uncommon, and there you're actually bordering on psychosis. But for the story, I wanted Vance to really struggle with

reality and delusion and then find faith in between. It fit well for what he'd been through with the D.C. sniper case, which is a case I'd been fascinated with since it happened. I always wondered what it was like for those cops, trying to hunt down what must've seemed like a ghost.

Lindy's mother, Joan, is an intriguing character. She is the proverbial ice queen, yet we see that she truly loves her daughter. How did you develop this character?

Joan was a lot of fun to write. It's always fun to play with the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship. I saw Joan clearly from the moment I decided to put her in the story. But what I really enjoyed was ice-picking my way through her coldness, to find her humanity underneath.

Where did you get the motivation for Erin's character?

She's a whole lot of badness wrapped into one! She's misguided, selfish, living for all the wrong things. Rarely does one get this extreme, but I think the thing that makes the bad guy (or gal) so chilling is when we get a little glimpse of ourselves in that character. Erin and Vance both lost their way, but her pride and her own desires kept her from finding the healing that Vance eventually finds.

What do you hope the reader takes away from this story?

The first and most obvious thing is that I want readers to examine what really matters in their lives. It's so easy to get

caught up in the extras of life that were intended as blessings but become harmful when we elevate them over what truly matters. But I also love the story between Vance and Lindy, and how through utter material devastation, they find the compassion and truth they need to restore their marriage. There can be so many obstacles that stand in the way of a marriage thriving, but it is sometimes those very things that cause all the layers to be peeled away so that healing can begin. Lastly, always, *always* read the fine print!

Discussion Questions

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

1. At some point, Vance and Lindy realize they may never see their possessions again. How do they feel about losing their things? Do you think it changed what they valued?
2. Lindy tries to convince Vance to let their possessions go. What do you think would have happened if he followed her advice?

3. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to choose between getting what is rightfully yours and letting it go? How did you feel?
4. Lindy and Vance decide that Vance should leave his job and they should move across the country. Why do you think they had to make such a drastic move? Have you ever been in a situation where you wanted to pick everything up and move far away? Would it have solved your problem?
5. Early in the story we see Vance sitting at his desk in the police station. His retirement party is over, yet he doesn't head home. Why do you think he was hesitant to leave?
6. Joe is gruff and somewhat rude when he shows up at Vance and Lindy's house with the moving van. Why do you think they trusted him to take their stuff? Are there people in your life whom you trust as experts? Are there times when you should be more careful in checking their credentials?
7. Vance quickly signed the agreement with the moving company without reading the fine print. Have you ever found yourself contractually obligated by something because you didn't read the agreement carefully?
8. Why does Vance go to Chicago to see Erin? Does he have feelings for her?

9. Erin has an unhealthy attraction to Vance. How do you think Vance could have handled it differently? Should Lindy have handled it differently?
10. After Conner came to faith through a televangelist, his parents found his talk about God and his behavior very strange. Has anyone ever thought you were strange because of your faith? Have you found someone else's expression of faith strange?
11. Lindy and Vance try to protect Conner from everything going on, yet in some ways Conner seems better equipped to handle the situation. Why do you think Conner adapts so easily?
12. Erin holds Vance responsible for everything she's lost. Is her anger justified?
13. What is on the disc that Vance hides from the authorities? Why was he trying to protect Erin? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to decide between telling the truth and protecting someone you cared about? Would you have handled this differently?
14. Vance continues to see and have conversations with Doug Cantella, but we later learn that the conversations are in Vance's mind. Why do you think Vance communicates with Doug? What does Doug represent to Vance?

15. When Vance is arrested, Joan believes that he's responsible for her daughter's disappearance but later changes her mind. Why do you think she hired a lawyer for Vance? What made her decide he was innocent? Have you ever suspected someone of something only to discover his or her innocence?
16. While Erin is holding Lindy and Conner hostage, her approach to Conner seems to change. Why does Erin tell Conner to help himself to a soda? Did you find it more disturbing when Erin was mean to Conner or when she was nice?
17. When Joan discovers that Vance is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, she gives him medication. Why doesn't Vance take it? Do you think this was the right decision?
18. It's obvious that Joan is against Vance and Lindy's marriage. Why is she so distrustful of Vance? Have you ever been fearful that your children will make the same mistakes that you have? Or have your parents ever shown a similar fear?
19. After Vance arrives at the motel and gives Lindy verbal clues, Lindy walks out of the room, sees the gun on the ground, and shoots through the window. When does she realize that Vance was giving her clues? What does her shooting blindly into the motel room represent?

20. In the end, Conner tells his father that he wanted to come out of the bathroom but he felt a hand pushing him down. How was this similar to Vance's experience? What do you think held them both back? Have you ever had a similar experience?