



HEART OF THE COUNTRY

SOMETIMES TO GO
FORWARD, YOU
HAVE TO GO BACK



Now a Major Motion Picture from Twentieth Century Fox
Home Entertainment Starring JANA KRAMER

RENE GUTTERIDGE & JOHN WARD

Heart of the Country

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RENE GUTTERIDGE
& JOHN WARD



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Heart of the Country

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CATHERINE

IT WAS A STRANGE THING to know that I was to become a memory to them. I kept searching for pain because pain means life. Instead, I smelled Lip Smackers on Olivia's pale-pink lips. I heard Faith's high-pitched giggles that still sounded childish even though she was growing into a young woman. I couldn't move my arms, but against my fingertips, I felt their hair, their shoelaces, their sticky cheeks.

I knew this would break their hearts into thousands of tiny pieces that one lifetime couldn't mend.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

I wished that he knew my name. I wanted somebody to know my name. The sirens wailed and screamed and I

wondered if I was coming and going out of consciousness or if that's just how sirens sounded from the inside.

Above me, out of a light misty-gray that seemed like steam from a shower, I saw a man's face come into view. His eyes were frantic but gorgeous and blue. Above him I caught my reflection against a long metal strip that ran the length of the ambulance. There was a familiarity to him, but that was true of everyone in Columbus County. If I didn't know you, I knew your mom or your grandpa or your second cousin.

"Blood pressure . . ."

The words faded, just like the sirens, and his beautiful eyes retreated to a far place that I longed to reach for. I only saw the girls now, their faces passing by me like living, breathing photographs. And Calvin standing by his horse.

I wanted to be more than a memory. I hated that for the rest of their days they would only be able to touch me in their minds or set their gazes on a tiny glimpse captured by a camera.

A mother's heart cannot let go. Not even to a father who had all the love in the world to offer them. I could never be replaced.

I looked again to that long metal reflection above me. I was covered in blankets. The EMT was covered in blood, and I thought that was strange. Warm and cold sensations drifted through my body, and I searched again for any sign of pain. My face looked distorted against the metal, like in a fun house mirror, except nothing else seemed out of proportion.

"Fourteen minutes out!"

Yes, it was a long way to the hospital when you lived in the country. Only one winding road led through our neck of the woods. Columbus County did not have a well-designed road system. The state was involved in a plan to pave “farm to market” roads, the idea being to improve transportation of tobacco, corn, sweet potatoes, cotton, soybeans, and livestock to places like Whiteville and Tabor City, where the train tracks ran. But instead of designing a modern road system, they paved the old dirt roads that had generally followed horse and carriage paths. They once connected neighboring farms, working around and over the swampy areas, resulting in a system of meandering roads. I could feel the ambulance hugging the curves of the concrete. It was often on these roads where I heard the music play.

I closed my eyes, or maybe they were already closed. I told myself to live, no matter what, to live. And then I felt it, a tiny prick of pain in my heel.

About the Authors

RENE GUTTERIDGE is the author of nineteen novels, including *Misery Loves Company*, *Possession*, *Listen*, and the Storm series from Tyndale House Publishers and *Never the Bride*, the Boo series, and the Occupational Hazards series from WaterBrook Multnomah. 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. Visit her website at www.renegutteridge.com.

JOHN WARD has over twenty-five years of experience in the film industry on both sides of the camera, in projects ranging from large studio blockbusters to independent films to cutting-edge emerging media.

He began his show business career at age twelve when his little sister, Jennifer, became Drew Barrymore's photo double for the film *Firestarter*. Within a few weeks of shooting, Drew moved in with the Ward family, and John was thrust into Hollywood. Catching the acting bug, John appeared in twenty-seven feature films and television episodes including *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and *Matlock*, to name a few.

While continuing his acting, John attended the University of North Carolina, where he began screenwriting and directing films. While in school, he wrote and directed *Go West*, which was nominated for a Student Academy Award.

John wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *Enchanted*, which was sold to the Showtime and Starz networks. It also garnered John's admission into the Directors Guild of America as a director member at the age of twenty-five.

By the release of *Enchanted*, John had sold his screenplay *Cindy: A Cinderella Story* to Lakeshore Entertainment (maker of *Million Dollar Baby*, *Runaway Bride*, and *Underworld*). He

continued his relationship there, writing an additional seven screenplays on the Paramount lot.

With a desire to return to film production, John began work on the Liquid DVD series in 2006. He wrote, produced, and directed the seven-film series for Thomas Nelson. The films parallel books of the Bible, giving them a modern context and feel. All seven DVDs (*The Ten: 1-5*, *The Ten: 6-10*, *Money Talks*, *Live at Five*, *Mirror Image*, *Fork in the Road*, and *Crossing*) debuted worldwide in September 2007. To date, Liquid films have been experienced by over 2 million people.

In 2009, John wrote, directed, and starred in his first faith-based feature film, titled *I AM*. The movie portrays the Ten Commandments, unknowingly lived out by ten different characters as their lives intersect on the streets of Los Angeles. Released by 20th Century Fox in October 2010, *I AM* made history by premiering on 10/10/10 to over 2,500 churches on six different continents to an estimated audience of 1.5 million people.

John currently serves as president of Bayridge Films, where he creates feature films and television as well as consults on fiction and other multimedia communications.

He and his wife, Christy, reside in Newport Beach, California, with their two children, Cali and Jack.