



chivalry
makes a
comeback

old fashioned



a novelization of the motion picture by
rene gutteridge

based on the screenplay by
rik swartzwelder



chivalry makes a comeback




old fashioned



a novelization of the motion picture by
rene gutteridge

based on the screenplay by
rik swartzwelder

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 
Carol Stream, Illinois



Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Rene Gutteridge's website at www.renegutteridge.com.

For more about *Old Fashioned*, check out www.oldfashionedmovie.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Old Fashioned

Copyright © 2014 by Old is New, LLC. All rights reserved.

Cover photographs copyright © Old is New, LLC. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Rik Swartzwelder author photograph by Old is New, LLC, copyright © 2014. All rights reserved.

Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Sarah Mason

Exclusive representation by Working Title Agency, LLC, Spring Hill, TN.

Published in association with Books and Such, Inc., Attn: Janet Kobobel Grant, 5926 Sunhawk Dr., Santa Rosa, CA 95409.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica,® Inc. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Exodus 20:2-17, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Psalm 85:10 are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Old Fashioned is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the authors' imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gutteridge, Rene.

Old Fashioned / Rene Gutteridge ; based on the screenplay by Rik Swartzwelder.
pages cm

ISBN 978-1-4143-7933-3 (sc)

1. Love stories. 2. Christian fiction. I. Swartzwelder, Rik. II. Title.

PS3557.U887O43 2013

813'.54—dc23

2012043071

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

acknowledgments

Rene Gutteridge:

In reading just the first few pages of Rik Swartzwelder’s fabulous script for *Old Fashioned*, I knew I wanted to be a part of this project. Like any woman, I love a good love story, but this story held so much more than that. It spoke to my heart. By the middle of the script, I was crying. I was also laughing. It doesn’t get much better than that! I knew we had a strong script from which to work, which makes my job easier and fun. It’s a little shameful when a guy can beat a girl at writing romance, but Rik outdoes me in this department—I fully relied on his beautiful telling of two souls connecting through a journey of hope and redemption.

I’d like to thank Rik for trusting me with his “baby,” as we liked to call his story and script. It is quite an act of faith for a writer to turn his work over to another writer. Rik was gracious and enthusiastic, with great insights that helped make this book the best it could be. He was also really easy and fun to work with. That’s a plus in any collaboration! Finally, I’d like to thank Rik for dropping the *c* off his first name so both of our names would fit on the cover. With names like Swartzwelder and Gutteridge, there’s no telling how small the font might have been had he not made this tremendous sacrifice. . . .

Old Fashioned

I'd also like to thank the team at Tyndale—Karen Watson, Jan Stob, Sarah Mason, and the entire crew—for seeing the brilliance of Rik's script and believing in the book. It's always such an enjoyable, fun, and inspiring experience to work with the Tyndale team, and I'm grateful for any chance I get to be a part of your vision for publishing. Thanks so much for including me in this and for helping steer the novel to its fullest potential.

Special thanks also to Brandon Tylka, who spent hours sorting through stills from the film to send to me so I could get a good idea of locations and scenes. Really couldn't have done it without you, Brandon. You were right on top of every request I sent. Thank you! And also thanks to Nathan Nazario for helping make this whole project come to life.

Last but not least, I have to especially thank my family, Sean, John, and Cate, who willingly gave up some of their summer fun to let me do this project. I appreciate the sacrifice you each make so that I can continue to write. I am so thankful for a family who supports and loves me in all I do and keeps me grounded and secure in all aspects of my life. And as always, I thank Father God, who took me on an amazing spiritual journey that included the writing of this project. Thank You for the loud and clear message You have sent my way, that I never have to rely on my own righteousness, but through Jesus I have the assurance of the Father's love.

Rik Swartzwelder:

I don't even know where to begin. No kidding, writing the screenplay for *Old Fashioned* was relatively easy in comparison to this—my first official “acknowledgments” section. How can I, in just a few paragraphs, possibly do justice to all of the people and divine graces and years of struggle that led to this movie being made—or this book? Like a toddler taking his first steps, I feel unsteady and unsure. Yet I'm also inspired and grateful to those who have held

my hand and taught me how—how to dream, how to try, how to walk on. . . .

Since these are indeed my very first steps, I am compelled to—first and foremost—thank the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for not giving up on me or this idea. There is no question: *Old Fashioned* (the movie, this book, etc.) exists not because of my faithfulness, but because of the Creator’s. All glory, honor, and praise to “The Butterfly Maker” for seeing nobility and hope and colorful wings in places where proof is yet absent or wanting . . . for transformation, for new life. You alone are worthy.

Special thanks to the entire Tyndale House team for seeing something unique in *Old Fashioned* and for having the remarkable insight to know that Rene Gutteridge was the perfect author to work on the novelization. Rene, you are a brilliant writer and such a joyful spirit. Thank you for your patience with this rookie and for wonderfully translating the screenplay into something that stands on its own and illuminates the story in exceptional ways. That said, I’m still trying to forgive you for adding scenes that were so good I wish I’d thought to include them myself in the movie. But I digress.

Thanks and appreciation also need to go out to Gordon and Susan Toering for their belief and steadfastness; you are truly my patron saints and I thank God for you. Also, thanks to Bryan Zervos for getting the *Old Fashioned* ball rolling all those years ago. God’s timing, my friend. Thanks to Nathan Nazario for stepping out in faith and for being the steady influence this project needed and to Dave DeBorde, Jeffrey Stott, and Rachel Dik for helping connect the dots. And likewise, to my diverse collective of other friends and cohorts (too many to mention here, unfortunately) who shared wisdom and perspective as I developed, wrote, and polished the script—I remain much obliged.

To all of our investors and supporters who believed in this story

Old Fashioned

(and us) and had the vision and courage to risk, to throw in, to roll the dice on an independent film—thank you. To the entire cast and crew (and to all the friends and families) of *Old Fashioned*—thank you so much for the long hours, sacrifice, and immense effort. To my own mom and dad, siblings, and various members of my blended and beautifully overextended family—I cherish you all. Thanks for the love, for instilling the confidence and conviction in me that all things are possible, and for being the kind of safety net that I wish every vagabond/starving artist/dreamer could have so that they all might leap boldly.

In addition, for being there year after year and keeping the light of hope alive, even during the darkest of moments, I must pay due homage to Jim and Mary Seldenright, Benjamin Hershleder, Rajeev Sigamoney, Jeffrey Travis, and William and Donna Romanowski. Proverbs 11:25.

To my old hometown and our primary shooting location—Tuscarawas County, Ohio—so many of you opened your hearts (and in some cases, homes and more) to us that our modest budget was able to multiply like loaves and fishes on a hillside in Galilee. You are surely “The House That Built Me” and I am so grateful for that. Thank you.

To the Spirit-filled churches and small groups and believers who nurtured my soul along the way—there cannot be thanks enough.

And finally, to all those who ever tried to show love to a damaged heart long before it was ready to receive it or return it—this one’s for you.

Dream. Try. Walk on.



CHAPTER 1

HIS DAY STARTED OUT quiet and ordinary, the way he liked and assured himself of. The morning light of early autumn rose in the east and filtered through the old, cracked windows of the antique shop, carrying with it smells of dust and wood shavings and varnish.

Every morning for nine years, before the sun fully slipped from its covers, Clay had unlocked the old shop. The store was tidy and presentable, like a perfectly tailored suit, showcasing the uniqueness of all the antiques. Everything, as it always did, had its place.

This morning he stood in the midst of them, carefully surveying the room and inventorying what he might need to acquire this week. Some items he found at estate sales.

Others, the more unique pieces, George brought his way. Most needed, at the very least, a good buffing; typically they needed much more. They came to him as trash. But with hard work—tried-and-true elbow grease—there was rarely anything that couldn't be restored. There was no magic in it, but sometimes when he was finished, it felt otherworldly. A piece would arrive at his doorstep hopeless and pathetic and leave him one day treasured and beautiful.

Wax did wonders. So did sandpaper. And paint.

But the truth was, not everything could be fixed.

It was this early part of the morning that he loved so much, before the busyness of the day began. At the back part of the shop, through the swinging doors, was his little slice of heaven, where the smell of sawdust stirred in him a delight he'd never been able to fully explain to another soul.

Clay set his keys and coffee mug aside, keeping the front lights off because Mrs. Hartnett had a bad habit of dropping by before the crack of dawn if she saw a light on. He knelt beside the small rocker he'd been working on the last several days. An elderly man had dropped it off, hardly saying a word, paying for it in advance even though Clay insisted he didn't need to do that.

"What's your story?" he murmured, his fingers gliding over the now-smooth wood. The chair was a hard-bitten thing when it came in, chipped and cracked and neglected, smelling vaguely of smoke. Whenever he worked on an old piece of furniture—or anything else, for that matter—he found his mind wandering to possibilities of where it once

came from and how it had gotten to where it was now. Most pieces had spent dark days in attics and basements and back rooms that never heard footsteps. Somewhere in their lives, they'd served a good purpose. The lucky ones stayed in the house but sat invisibly in a corner or by a couch, an annoying place to have to dust, a thorn in the side of someone who wished it could be thrown away, except for the guilt attached because it belonged to a great-grandmother who'd spent her very last pennies to acquire it, or some such story.

Yesterday he'd cut and whittled the rocker's new back pieces and today he would stain them. Clay grabbed the sandpaper and walked to the table saw where the slats waited, lined up like soldiers. As he ran the sandpaper across the wood, he could practically hear the creak of the rocker and the laughter of delighted children in another century.

He sighed, rolled up his sleeves, and sanded more quickly. Sometimes he thought *he'd* been born in the wrong century. There was hardly a kid today who would care about sitting in a rocker on the edge of a porch and watching a spring storm blow in. The world that he once thrived in had become a noisy, clangoring, messy place. But here, in the shop, with sawdust spilling through shafts of dusty light, he found his peace.

The sandpaper soon needed replacing, so he went to the corner of the room where he kept his supplies and reached for a new package. Then he snapped his wrist back at the sudden and sharp pain in his hand. It hurt like a snake had bitten him. Blood dripped steadily from the top of his hand

and he cupped his other hand beneath, trying to catch the droplets.

Clay searched the corner, trying to figure out what had snagged him.

There, on the old wooden gate he'd found in an abandoned field: barbed wire. The back side of the gate was wrapped in it when he'd found it, and he hadn't had time to cut it off yet. He looked at the wound as he walked to the sink. It was bleeding so fast that it was actually seeping through his fingers, dripping on the floor.

What a mess.

He ran it under the water. It was more of a puncture wound but mightier than it looked. The blood poured, mixing with the water. And it didn't want to stop, even for the phone.

The shrill ring cut through the still air, coming from the rotary phone he had mounted on the wall next to the sink. Keeping his wounded hand under running water, he answered it.

"Old Fashioned Antiques."

"It's me."

"Lisa. Hi. I'm kind of—"

"I know, I know. Busy. As you always are. Why don't you answer your cell? Do you even carry it with you? Don't you text? People need to get ahold of you sometimes, you know. What if it's an emergency? What about that kind aunt of yours?"

"She finds me through the postal service."

“Anyway, I need to drop off the stuff for the thing.”

“Okay.”

“Are you going to be there this morning? Silly question. Where else would you be?”

“The hospital.”

“What?”

“I might be. You never know. Maybe I got tangled in some vicious barbed wire. I might be bleeding out even as we speak, and here you are completely oblivious.”

Lisa sighed. She never got his humor. “I’m being serious. Can I bring it by?”

In the background, Clay could hear Lisa’s daughter, Cosie, screaming at the top of her lungs. “She okay?”

“She’s throwing a fit.”

“So she’s in time-out?”

“You know we don’t believe in punishment.”

“I know. I just keep thinking you’ll change your mind about that.”

“So I’m coming by later, okay? And remember, this is a total surprise. Not a single word to David about it.”

“I’ll make you a deal: I won’t tell David if I don’t have to come to the party.”

“Clay, he would be crushed.”

“You know I’m just there to boost your numbers, fill in the empty space.”

“True. But you’re still coming. And not a word. I’ll see you later.”

She hung up and Clay raised his hand toward the light.

It had finally stopped bleeding. He put a Band-Aid on and started mopping up the blood droplets all over the floor.

It was a lesson every person learned one time or another in their lives—never cross paths with barbed wire.



“Look at that, would you? Look at it!” Amber let go of the steering wheel with both hands and put her knee underneath to keep it steady. She gestured, glancing at Mr. Joe. “Nobody gets this. I realize that. I do. But see how the road winds, and then off it goes, through the trees? You don’t really know what’s around the bend, see?”

Amber put her hands back on the steering wheel, then gave Mr. Joe a quick scratch behind the ears. She’d temporarily let him out of his carrier, though he tended to get carsick if left out too long. “You’re unimpressed, as usual. But there’s something beautiful about roads. They’re so full of possibilities. . . . Of course, you can always die in a horrific crash, too. But mostly, it’s just about going somewhere. Anywhere. It’s about what’s around that bend, Mr. Joe. What’s there?”

Amber’s Jeep whizzed around the curve, clearing the trees as the road straightened. Her windows were down, the wind tearing through her hair so fiercely that it was going to take a good hour to comb it out, but she didn’t care. She turned the music up. “Lovely Day” was on the radio, and she nudged her cat like he might sing along with her.

Then she saw it. “Whoa.” She slowed and craned her neck out the window for a better view. “Mr. Joe, look at

that!” Large stone buildings seemed to rise right out of the earth, sprawled across several acres. White concrete sidewalks disappeared into rolling hills and hazy light illuminated the branches of all the trees, like a scene out of some kind of fairy tale. The entrance read *Bolivar University*, but it looked like medieval England.

She leaned toward Mr. Joe and gave him a wink. “Apparently we’ve stumbled across Camelot. I told you I knew what I was doing when we hung a left back there.”

Mr. Joe meowed in agreement.

As she drove on, Amber squeezed the fingers on her right hand. Her wrist was starting to throb, probably due to the cast more than the injury. It should’ve healed up fine by now. On the top of the cast was Misty’s name, scrawled in red with little hearts.

She focused her attention back on the road. She couldn’t spend emotional energy missing those friends left behind. But as she passed Camelot, she had to admit, it was always hard not to glance in the rearview mirror.

Still, she had to be resolved to press forward, find whatever was around the bend. She kissed Misty’s name and left it at that.

This was beautiful country, and having spent much of her life on the road, she knew it when she saw it. Amber gazed at the trees. Some of the leaves were starting to turn that fiery-red color she loved so much. Soon, a cool wind would sift through them, lifting them into the air and then cradling them to the ground.

Ahead, a sign said, "Welcome to Tuscarawas County."
How did you even pronounce that?

The speed limit indicated she should be going much slower, so she let off the gas. The last thing she needed was a ticket, and small college towns were notorious for planting police officers everywhere. It was probably how they made half their annual budget. Past the university by only a mile was the beginning of the town attached to it. It looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. She was probably somewhere near Amish country too. She'd have to look at her map at some point, but her best guess was she was in eastern Ohio.

"Charming little place . . . like old-Coca-Cola-sign charming."

The car lurched and lurched again, throwing Mr. Joe off-balance. His ears flattened. Then the engine sputtered and gurgled. Amber smiled but kept driving.

She made it through the town square, going less than twenty-five miles an hour, in ten minutes. A small gas station ahead had a flat, yellow carport extending over only two gas pumps. It looked like it had been built sometime in the 1950s and seemed to be the last stop before the road stretched ahead and turned out of sight.

She deliberately drove on by, her gas light glowing yellow.

Then the engine died. With the momentum she had left, she pulled to the side of the road and let go of the steering wheel. The gas station was a five-minute walk behind her, no more.

Mr. Joe was purring again, wrapping his body around the

empty glass jar he shared the seat with. Amber took the keys out of the ignition and relaxed into her seat just a bit. The temperature was so perfect. It reminded her of Monterey in April. The sky, bright and blue, was totally cloudless.

“What do you think, Mr. Joe? Home?”

The cat blinked slowly like he was fighting a nap. Amber got out and looked around. The trees were still lush and dense, so she couldn't see far.

At the back of her Jeep, she opened the hatch, careful not to let everything spill onto the ground. Boxes of clothes, gently packed dishes, bins full of photographs. And on top of it all sat a huge bulletin board, the colorful pushpins she'd bought somewhere in Michigan still stuck into the cork. It amazed her that her whole life could fit into the trunk of a car. She grabbed her purse from under her travel bag, found her red plastic gas can, and closed the hatch.

Through the open passenger window, she picked up Mr. Joe and put him in his carrier. “All right. You know what to do. Don't be afraid to bare your fangs if you need to. Try not to look so sweet, okay? That's not going to keep anyone away.”

As she walked toward the gas station, Amber tried to take it all in. She didn't see any stoplights. She liked towns that were more partial to stop signs. The buildings had character but also had an air of vacancy to them. Over the tree line, puffs of factory smoke rose like ascending, transparent jellyfish. Toward the east and across a small field was an area that looked a little more developed, with some houses and restaurants, as best she could tell.

At the gas station's convenience store, a bell announced her arrival. It smelled like coffee and motor oil with vague hints of diesel. The man behind the counter wore a stained blue mechanic's jumpsuit with a patch that read *Larry*. He smiled pleasantly, setting down his newspaper. "What can I do you for, young lady?"

Amber put a five-dollar bill on the table. "Just need some gas."

"Five dollars ain't gonna get you very far," he said. "There ain't another town—gas station either, for that matter—for sixty-seven miles."

"I'm staying here for the moment."

Larry grinned. "Is that so? Well, welcome. We got a great catfish place—serves it up all you can eat—just around the corner there."

"Sounds fantastic. I'm looking to rent a small apartment."

Larry pointed to a stack of newspapers by the door. "That's our little publication round here. It's got a section for renters."

"Thank you." Amber grabbed the paper and walked outside to fill her gas can.

When she returned to her car, Mr. Joe's face was pressed up against the wires of his cage, his unblinking eyes staring her down for leaving him behind. She popped the gas tank open and stuck the gas can's nozzle in. Then she spread the newspaper across the hood of her car.

She had two criteria—cheap and furnished. "All right, boy. We're gonna go see if we've got a place to sleep tonight."



“There you go—good as new,” Clay said, rocking the chair back and forth. “Well, maybe not *as* good, but look, you’ve been through a lot. I’ve given you a pretty good face-lift. Let’s face it: you’re never going to be twenty again. But ninety is the new forty.”

Clay stepped back. The varnish would need twenty-four hours to dry, but it looked really nice. He checked his watch. Ten minutes until time to open. He sighed, sipped his coffee, and drew stick figures in the sawdust with a scrap piece of wood.

Sometimes he attributed it to caffeine jitters, but other times he knew it was nothing of the sort. There was a restlessness scratching him from the inside. Not even a quiet workday in the back of the shop cured it. He worked hard to be content, happy even, where he was in this world, making a simple living and being a simple man. It was, however, the slightest tickle of discontentment that edged him into unwanted thoughts about the state of his life.

The quiet of the shop that usually tamped the needling hum of his thoughts was suddenly undone by . . . blaring music? That was nothing new in this town but unusual near the town square. The college kids were more likely to go down the strip, where the bars and restaurants were. *At night.* Clay checked his watch again. It wasn’t even 9 a.m. Who would be blaring their music at this hour?

The bass rattled the more delicate items sitting around

the shop. The little figurines that usually stood perfectly still, frozen in their poses, looked to be dancing ever so slightly.

Then, as if it had been blown away by a breeze, the music stopped.

Clay lifted the rocker, carefully placing his hand underneath it to avoid the new varnish. He wanted to put a few screws in the bottom to make sure it was secure, but he could do that at the front of the store, where he needed to be during store hours.

He was headed for the front counter when he saw her. She didn't notice him at first. She was browsing, her fingers delicately brushing over a lamp, a frame, and then a pile of old books. Her attention moved to the hand-crank phonograph that he'd estimated to be over ninety years old. She stood for a moment looking at its detail, and he stood for a moment noticing hers—curly brown hair, a little wild, like she'd just blown in with a tumbleweed. Bright, playful eyes. Beside the phonograph, in a square, woven basket, he kept two dozen 45 rpm EPs, sometimes more if he hit a good garage sale. Her fingers walked the tops of them, flipping them one by one, before she slipped one out of its black cover and gently guided it onto the turntable, then gave it a crank or two. It came to life, warbling and slow at first, but then a light and pretty piano solo began to play. Dave Brubeck, easy to spot for his unusual time signatures.

Without warning, she turned toward him. For a reason he couldn't explain, Clay raised the rocking chair up a bit.

The woman smiled. "You look like you're in prison."

He blinked. Then realized he was looking at her through the slats in the back of the rocker. He quickly lowered it. Why was she staring at him? Her big brown eyes searched him like he was some interesting antique. He felt like an antique, so it was fitting.

“I like your little store,” she said. “Old Fashioned. Cute.”

She gave him one more long, concentrated look as though something entertaining might happen, then continued to explore the shop.

“Can I help you with anything?”

And then he heard the scream. So familiar, yet it always made him cringe and clench his teeth. Two seconds later, the door flew open and the pint-size tornado blew in, her arms whirling, her face wild with excitement.

A second after that, Lisa came charging after her, carrying something plastic under her arm and a great deal of exhilaration on her face.

The screaming stopped as Cosie leeches herself onto Clay’s leg. She looked up at him and grinned, scrunching up her nose. “Hi.”

He patted her head. “Hi, Cosie.”

“You gotta see this!” Lisa said.

Clay sighed. That sentence was almost always followed by something that he not only didn’t have to see but usually didn’t want to see either.

Lisa set the plastic thing down in the center of the shop.

It was a training toilet. Pink and white. Shaped like a castle. Some princess character on the side looked inflamed

with an enthusiasm that was apparently supposed to encourage peeing on ancient structures.

Clay knew from experience that once Lisa set her mind to something, there was no use fighting it. He gave the woman standing in the store a sheepish grin and an apologetic shrug. Weirdly, she seemed unaffected and totally interested in what was about to happen. Maybe Clay was missing the extraordinary part of this moment.

Surely not.

Lisa had now squatted on the floor and was beckoning Cosie over with gestures big enough to get an elephant's attention. Her voice rose three octaves, a technique supposed to induce compliant behavior in a two-year-old.

"Come on, Cosie. Go tee-tee." She tapped the potty with her other hand.

But as usual, Cosie stared at her, completely disinterested in the event.

"Do it for Mommy. Go tee-tee. Go tee-tee."

Clay glanced down at Cosie. She wasn't budging. For some odd reason, it made him smile inside. He kind of liked that she balked at the unusual way her parents were raising her and instead preferred the status quo of peeing in private.

Lisa's voice was rising by the second. Her eyes were growing large. Real large. Large enough that if there weren't a potty and an antique shop involved, one might think she was about to be killed in some horrific manner.

"Cosie! *Go tee-tee!*"

Apparently Cosie was also going deaf.

Then movement. Cosie took one step, setting off the strobe lights in her tennis shoes. If Clay watched them too long, he got a headache.

Another step. Clay swore he saw tears in Lisa's eyes. Lisa clapped precisely twice and nodded.

Another step. Then another. Cosie stood over the potty now, gazing into the plastic hole. A smile slight enough to be mistaken for a gas bubble caused Lisa to beam like a searchlight.

Then Cosie lifted her leg, and for a second Clay thought she might be going the way of the dog. But instead she kicked the potty. And kicked again. The castle tumbled across the wood floor. Now the small smile had broken into a full-fledged grin. And Lisa's had dropped off her face.

She rose and gasped. "Cosie! No!"

Clay couldn't resist. He walked over to Lisa and put his arm around her. "I am so proud."

She shrugged his hand off, clearly wrecked. Her whole life's worth at this moment hinged on whether her kid could use a castle potty in public. Clay wasn't about to say it, but the fact that the kid had enough sense not to go in the middle of an antique shop made him think Cosie was going to do just fine in life.

Cosie finally noticed the woman who'd come in, recognizing her as unfamiliar. She gave the potty one more nudge with the side of her shoe, clasped her hands behind her back, and grinned at the lady.

Lisa grabbed the toilet with a huff, acknowledging for the first time that there was someone other than Clay in the shop. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I live in the apartment upstairs.”

Clay’s mouth dropped open. “Wha . . . ?”

Lisa glanced at Clay, gave him that same old look: *You never tell me anything*. Clay scratched his head, equally perplexed. Cosie ran to him and he picked her up. She mindlessly combed the back of his hair with her fingers, like always, as they all three looked at the woman.

Lisa was gesturing that he should explain himself, but he wasn’t sure what to say. Nobody lived up there. He would know. He was the landlord.

“Just needed to get the key,” the woman said. There was a childlike quality to her, a mischievous twinkle to her eye that reminded him of Cosie. She looked to be about thirty, but he was never good with ages.

Clay cleared his throat. “The key?”

She only smiled, gave Cosie a wink, and walked out of the shop. Clay hurried after her, handing Cosie to Lisa.

“What’s going on?” Lisa said, a hand on her hip, but Clay just went out the door, trying to figure it out himself.

The woman stood on the sidewalk outside. She took something out of the bag over her shoulder. A pen. Then she held out her hand and he saw the cast on it.

“Sign, please.”

“Um . . .” Clay’s face suddenly started itching—a sure sign he’d landed out of his comfort zone. He scratched it

lightly, hoping it would go away. She just stood there with her arm out. And she was smiling at him. Blinking with those awestruck eyes.

So he signed. There seemed to be plenty of space. He glanced at her Jeep and found a cat perched on the passenger window, watching him closely, its tail twitching with sharp disapproval.

When he looked back, she was studying her cast. “Clay what?”

“Walsh,” he said. “Clay Walsh. . . . You have a cat?”

She held out her hand to shake. It was awkward with the cast, but they managed. He gestured to it. “What happened?”

“Amber Hewson.” And then, without another word but still with that engaging smile, she got her cat from the car, tucked it under her arm, and walked toward the stairway that led up to the apartment.

Clay stayed where he was, trying to get his bearings, blinking in the sunlight, realizing that the loud music earlier had come from her car. He watched her climb each stair, wanting to look away but not able to. He swallowed. Not enough spit. Then too much. And why was he blinking so much? He stuffed his hands in his pockets because that’s what he did when he didn’t know what to do with them.

Amber was at the top now, staring down at him. “The key?”

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.” Clay pulled his key ring out of his pocket. And then he started up the stairs, trying to twist the apartment key off the little circle, trying to get her brown eyes out of his head.

