



Between Sundays

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DEDICATION

To Donald, my Prince Charming ...

I smile as I write those words because of our recent trip to Ohio. I would take the stage at my speaking events and say, “So, this probably isn’t a good time to mention that I’m a Michigan fan.” When the boos died down, I would hurry and tell them, “But my husband’s a huge Ohio State guy.” After the hearty applause, I would say, “See ... he really is Prince Charming!”

We made great memories with the kids, and Kim and Keith, and we gained thousands of new friends. But here’s the thing: you really are my Prince Charming, Donald. I mean it. I love you more with every passing day, understanding as we settle into these middle years that time is not a guarantee. Today is a gift, and tomorrow uncertain. And so I treasure these beautiful, loving days, looking forward to our intimate moments in a quiet walk or laughing over something only we would understand. The ride is breathtakingly beautiful, my love. I pray it lasts far into our twilight years. Until then, I’ll enjoy not always knowing where I end and you begin. I love you always and forever.

To Kelsey, my precious daughter ...

You are eighteen now, a young woman, and my heart soars with joy when I see all that you are, all you’ve become. We prayed that through the teenage years you would stay true to who you are, to that promise of purity you made when you were thirteen, once upon a yesterday on a bench overlooking a sunlit river. But I never dreamed you’d so fully hold true to that promise. You look forward to that far-off day, when you can share with your future husband the gift you’ve saved for him alone. But in the meantime, you trust God that laughter and friendship and dancing and singing and spending time with your family is enough. More than enough. Honey, you grow more beautiful every day—inside and out. And always I treasure the way you talk to me, telling me your hopes and dreams and everything in

between. I can almost sense the plans God has for you, the very good plans. I pray you keep holding onto His hand as He walks you toward them. I love you, sweetheart.

To Tyler, my lasting song . . .

So many wonderful things are happening in your life right now, things we once only dreamed about. You're the Cat in the Hat in *Seussical*, but not once have I seen you act arrogant about the fact. Worried, yes. Something that makes me smile, because I know . . . I know you'll be the absolute best ever at that part when the show opens later this month. I'm proud of you, Ty, at the young man you're becoming. I'm proud of your talent and your compassion for people, and your place in our family.

But two things will stand out when I look back on this time. The way my heart melts when you sing "Proud of Your Boy," and the earnest look in your eyes when you told me last week that maybe . . . just maybe, you'd want to be a teacher like your dad. A drama teacher, of course. Giving kids the skills to be successful on stage. You're fourteen and six-foot-two, Ty, no longer my little boy. But even as I see the future in your eyes, I'll treasure my memories of all the stages of your life. However your dreams unfold, I'll be in the front row to watch it happen. Hold onto Jesus, Ty. I love you.

To Sean, my happy sunshine . . .

Today you came home from school, eyes sparkling, and you told me you'd tied the school record for the high jump at track practice. The fact that your mark didn't count because it wasn't in a meet didn't dim your enthusiasm even a little. I was struck, as you recounted your jump, how much the story symbolized everything about you, Sean. You're so happy, so optimistic. You have a way of bringing smiles into our family, even in the most mundane moments. I pray that God will use your positive spirit to always make a difference in the lives around you. You're a precious gift, son. Keep smiling, and keep seeking God's best for your life. Make sure the bar's set high — not only at track practice. I love you, honey.

To Josh, my tender-hearted perfectionist . . .

Watching you work on your social studies project today, I saw again what always amazes me about you. Your work is so careful, so detailed, it would almost seem you'd traced pictures straight from the textbook. I couldn't turn in the work you do if I took all week. And yet — even with track and soccer

and homeschool tests — you still take the time to seek perfection. Along with that, there are bound to be struggles. Times when you need to understand again that the gifts and talents you bear are God’s, not yours. And times when you must learn that perfection isn’t possible for us, only for God. Even so, my heart almost bursts with pride over the young man you’re becoming. You have an unlimited future ahead of you, Josh. I’ll be cheering on the sidelines always. Keep God first in your life, and who knows ... one day maybe you and Alex Smith will be teammates. I love you always.

To EJ, my chosen one ...

We had a family meeting the other night, one of those talk sessions you kids sometimes tease us about. The subject was a reminder that sitting around the dinner table each night are the very best friends you’ll ever have. Your sister and brothers. And also that everyone needs to pitch in more. We talked about giving a hundred percent, because some day far too soon, when all you kids are grown and in families of your own, you’ll need to give a hundred percent always. That’s what love looks like. In the days that followed our family talk, Dad and I were thrilled to see you truly stepped up your efforts at helping out. We’d see you standing at the sink, washing dishes and singing a happy song, and you’d grin at us. “A hundred percent!” you’d say. EJ, I pray that you hold onto that very small lesson always. You’re a wonderful boy, son, a child with such potential. Every day, every season, just give a hundred percent, okay? Because God has great plans for you, and we want to be the first to congratulate you as you work to discover those. Thanks for giving your heart, EJ. I love you so.

To Austin, my miracle boy ...

I was editing this book when you came into my writing room yesterday and smiled at me. “You’re the most beautiful mom in the whole world,” you said. “I really mean it.” Then you plopped down on the sofa beside me and put your arm around my shoulders. “I think I’ll cuddle with you here all day.” I smiled, “Okay ... you can watch me edit.” And then—here’s how I know you’re getting older—you jumped up and giggled. “No, Mom. Just kidding. I have schoolwork to do.” You kissed me and patted my cheek, and then you were off.

But in the storage room of my heart, I had a memory I’ll hold onto forever, sweet son. That, and the one from this afternoon. You’re taking voice

lessons, and this week your song is from Casting Crowns—“Who Am I.” When the teacher was gone, you came upstairs with Dad, and from the other side of my writing room door, I heard Dad start to play his guitar. I stopped editing for a moment and stared out at the forest beyond my window, holding tight to the precious sound. You’re my youngest, my last, Austin. I’m holding onto every moment, for sure. Thanks for giving me so many wonderful reasons to treasure today. I thank God for you, Austin, for the miracle of your life. I love you, Aus.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book of this magnitude does not come together without help from many, many people. And so, here I humbly take a few minutes to thank the family and friends who partnered with me to bring you *Between Sundays*.

First, a special thanks to my dear friends at Zondervan Publishing. Without a doubt, in the world of Christian publishing, the team at Zondervan understands best my dedication to writing Life-Changing Fiction™. They are completely committed to getting these books to you, and to praying along with me that somewhere between the first and last pages, people will find their lives changed by the power of story. I am blessed beyond words to work with you. Thank you to Sue Brower, my truest supporter. And to Leslie Peterson, my editor on this project. You pushed me and challenged me, Leslie. I need so much more of that. Let's work together again soon!

Also, thanks to my amazing agent, Rick Christian, president of Alive Communications. Rick, you've always believed only the best for me. When we talk about the highest possible goals, you see them as doable, reachable. You are a brilliant manager of my career, and I thank God for you. But even with all you do for my ministry of writing, I cherish most your prayers. The fact that you and your wonderful wife, Debbie, are praying for my family and me keeps me confident every morning that God will continue to breathe life into the stories in my heart. I could never find the words to truly thank you.

A special thank you to my husband, who puts up with me on deadline and doesn't mind driving through Taco Bell after a baseball game if I've been editing all day. This crazy wild ride wouldn't be possible without you, Donald. Your love keeps me writing, your prayers keep me believing that God has a plan in this ministry of fiction. And thanks for your help with the guestbook entries on my website. I look forward to that time every night

when you read through them, sharing them with me and releasing them to the public, praying for the prayer requests. Thank you, honey.

And thanks to all my kids who pull together, bringing me iced green tea and understanding about my sometimes crazy schedule. I love that you know you're still first, before any deadline.

Thank you also to my parents, Anne and Ted Kingsbury, and to my sisters, Tricia, Sue, and Lynne. Mom, you are amazing as my assistant—working day and night sorting through the mail from my reader friends. I can picture you and Dad sitting there in your family room, while you interrupt his paper or news show every few minutes. “Wait, Ted ... listen to this one!” I love that you and Dad still get tears in your eyes—the way I do—when you hear that another life has been touched, a heart healed through what God’s doing with fiction. Amazing.

Tricia, you are the best executive assistant I could ever hope to have. I treasure your loyalty and honesty, the way you include me on every decision and exciting website change. My website has been a different place since you stepped in, and along the way, the readers have so much more. Please know that I pray for God’s blessings on you always, for your dedication to helping me in this season of writing. And aren’t we having such a good time too? God works all things to the good!

Sue, I believe you should’ve been a counselor! From your home far from mine, you get batches of reader letters every day, and you diligently answer them using God’s wisdom and His Word. When readers get a response from “Karen’s sister Susan,” I hope they know how carefully you’ve prayed for them, and for the response you give. Thank you for truly loving what you do, Sue. You’re gifted with people, and I’m blessed to have you aboard.

Thanks also to my forever friends and family, the ones who have stood by loyal and true through the years. Worldly success does strange things to people who watch it happen, even though that success is transient and pretend. I always say there’ll be no autograph lines in heaven, so this is only about helping people see a little brighter glimpse of God and making friends along the way. Thank you for not seeing me or us differently, and for your love and laughter. You know who you are!

A very special thanks to San Francisco 49ers quarterback Alex Smith, who helped me research an inside look at the NFL and at the country’s foster care system. Thanks for writing a foreword for *Between Sundays*, Alex. Our

children's books are going to be a lot of fun over the next few years. And one of these days, we'll have to see that fox-trot we're not telling anyone about.

And the greatest thanks to God. The gift is Yours. I pray I might use it for years to come, in a way that will bring You honor and glory.

FOREVER IN FICTION™

A special thanks to Candace Rathbun, who won Forever in Fiction™ at the San Ramon Valley Christian Academy auction in Northern California. Candace chose to honor her daughter, Paige Judith Rathbun, by naming her Forever in Fiction™.

Paige Rathbun is nine and loves bringing sunshine to the lives of her family, including her older sister Katie, and her younger brother, John. Paige has blue eyes, blonde hair, and a contagious smile. She loves Disneyland, swimming, playing with dolls, and spending time with the people she loves. She wishes her four cousins still lived next door.

In addition, Paige loves to sing in her church choir and she prays for anyone with a need. Everyone who knows Paige, knows she's a hugger. And while she's passing out hugs, she's also likely to pass out her toys or books, anything someone else takes a liking to. Her huge heart is part of what makes her special.

When her family rescued a golden retriever last year, Paige took him under her care. They named him Shakespeare, and he and Paige have become best buddies. Paige asks a lot of questions, but only because she's intelligent and knows there's an answer.

In *Between Sundays*, Paige Rathbun's character is the niece of the 49ers head coach, Chuck Cameron. During a season when Chuck's career is on the line, Paige makes weekly phone calls to her uncle, encouraging him, and helping him keep his focus on Jesus. Because that's the sort of thing Paige would do in real life.

Candace, I pray your daughter Paige is honored by your gift, and by her placement in *Between Sundays*, and that you will always see a bit of Paige when you read her name in this novel, where she will be Forever in Fiction™.

For those of you who are not familiar with Forever in Fiction™, it is my way of involving you, the readers, in my stories, while raising money for charities. To date, this item has raised more than \$100,000 at char-

ity auctions across the country. If you are interested in having a Forever in Fiction™ package donated to your auction, contact my assistant, Tricia Kingsbury, at Kingsburydesk@aol.com. Please write *Forever in Fiction* in the subject line. Please note that I am only able to donate a limited number of these each year. For that reason, I have set a fairly high minimum bid on this package. That way the maximum funds are raised for charities.

NOTE TO THE READER

While set against a very real backdrop, the characters in *Between Sundays* are completely fictional. There is absolutely no resemblance between 49ers quarterback Alex Smith and the fictitious Aaron Hill, nor is there any resemblance between any of the characters in *Between Sundays* and any real professional football player.

As with any novel, I have taken poetic license in some areas of research, in an effort to create not only believable football players, but relatable characters. I was very careful in my NFL research, but it would be impossible to be completely accurate in my depiction of professional football.

That said, any inconsistencies between this novel and the real-life world of the NFL are entirely mine.

FOREWORD BY ALEX SMITH, SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS QUARTERBACK

As an NFL quarterback, I spend my Sundays during football season calling plays, reading defenses, and avoiding sacks. All of this takes place in front of a national television audience and eighty thousand screaming fans. However, my Sundays were not always spent this way, nor were my days in between. That is why my time spent “between Sundays” is so important to me.

Back in San Diego, California, where I grew up, Sundays were spent with family. Sundays were “game time.” Sundays were times spent talking and laughing and being together. We were able to create a supportive team and that team did not rest during the week. Team Smith consisted of my mom and dad, my older brother Josh, and my sisters Abbey and MacKenzie. I would not be where I am today if it were not for the love and support of my family and the invaluable time we spent together, caring for one another.

My family always believed in the importance of love and encouragement, the necessity of an education, and the value of reading. As a reader, I’ve seen the power of story. Sometimes a story is the only way to touch the heart of a person, to help them see the truth through something that isn’t true at all. That’s the case here. Though *Between Sundays* tells an entirely fictitious story, it is set against the backdrop of a very real problem facing our country today—the problem with our foster care system.

I chose foster care as the focus for my Alex Smith Foundation because most foster children do not have what I have. My “team” structure, my upbringing, and my family life, is the antithesis of what most foster children have. More important, my family’s love and support did not end when I turned eighteen. Foster children are taken from their homes and families for reasons of neglect, abuse, and abandonment; and on their eighteenth birthdays, they are abandoned again by the state.

Less than half of foster kids in our nation graduate from high school. Within a year of leaving the system at eighteen years old, a third end up homeless and another quarter end up incarcerated. College is out of reach for most of these youth. Recent studies indicate that just 7 to 13 percent enroll in college, compared with 62 percent of high school graduates nationally. Less than 2 percent of former foster youth who begin college complete a bachelor's degree. This is compared with 27 percent of the general population. We as a society are failing these children, and, sadly, their stories and struggles go unnoticed today. These children deserve a better opportunity at life. They deserve a chance for a successful adulthood, and they cannot get that on their own. Which of us—alone and poor at the age of eighteen—would be able to succeed?

Giving these foster youth a chance at life, a chance for success, is so much more important to me than improving my passing rating, scoring touchdowns, and wins and losses. I play a game on Sunday for a living, and I have a great team to support me on and off the field. These kids don't play a game for a living. Their game is survival and they need and deserve all the support they can get.

We all need support. Whether that support comes from running backs, receivers, linemen, coaches or parents, siblings, teachers, or mentors, we all have a responsibility to work together. As a quarterback, I know this firsthand. I would be nothing if it were not for the players around me. Likewise, I would not be where I am today if it were not for the love and support I received from my family and friends off the field.

I appreciate Karen Kingsbury for allowing me to share my story, and I appreciate her willingness to expose the positive side of a professional athlete's life between games. But most important, I appreciate the opportunity to create awareness for my foundation and to increase support for foster children everywhere.

It's not what we do in front of eighty thousand people on Sundays that defines who we are. Just as we are not defined by what we do on Sundays in church. It's what we do and how we live Monday through Saturday, when no one is watching, that defines our legacy. It's more than a game, it's life, and we all have a chance to make a difference as we live our lives between Sundays.

For more information about my foundation, you can go to AlexSmithFoundation.org.

See you there!

Alex Smith

PROLOGUE

September 2005

The ache in Amy Briggs's chest hurt worse than before, and every breath came with a frightening wheeze. A wheeze no cough could loose. Not that she had the strength. She'd taken ibuprofen an hour ago, but still her fever raged. It made the air in their boxy apartment feel hot and stuffy, and it blurred her vision. She tried to sit up, but her body was too tired.

Cough syrup, that's what she needed. Cough syrup to break up whatever was suffocating her. She stared at the rickety table next to the worn-out sofa. The bottle of Robitussin lay on its side, empty, next to a stack of bunched up tissues and a half-empty box of Kleenex.

"Cory ..." Her voice barely lifted above the sound of the TV. "Can you get me ... some water?"

Her little boy was six, mesmerized by a special on the San Francisco 49ers. He jumped up. "Yes, Mommy." He stopped near her face, and his eyebrows lowered. "Are you better?"

She struggled for her next breath, but even so, she forced a smile. "A little." The lie was all she could manage. Cory couldn't help her. If things grew worse, she could call Megan, her friend and coworker at the diner. Megan could take her to the hospital if her cough got bad enough.

Her eyes closed and the sounds of the announcer dimmed in the background. Days like this, the battle was almost more than she could bear. Being a single mother to Cory, wondering where next week's food was coming from. Especially now that she was sick. Three missed shifts this week and she wasn't any better. A week without pay would mean she'd be bargaining with the superintendent at the end of the month.

"Mommy ..."

Amy opened her eyes, but it was a struggle. She nodded to the table. "Set it there, okay?"

He held the table so it wouldn't wobble, and waited until the glass was steady. "Need anything else?"

“Yeah.” She took his hand in hers and met his eyes. “I need you ... just you, Cory.” She tried to fill her lungs, but failed. A series of coughs came from deep inside her, and she turned away.

“Your skin’s really hot.” He touched his fingers to her forehead. “Maybe you should go to the doctor.”

Maybe, she thought. But she was too tired to move. “After my nap, baby ... all right?”

He wrinkled his blond brow. “You sure?”

“Yes.” She coughed into the pillow. “You watch your team.”

For a heartbeat, Cory seemed torn. He looked at the TV and then back at her. “Feel better.”

“I will, baby.” She inhaled, but it sounded like she was underwater. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” He still looked worried, but he turned and moved a few feet closer to the TV, then he dropped down cross-legged and stared at the screen.

At his 49ers.

Since Cory was born she’d made the team her single obsession, even moving to San Francisco so that her son might have the chance he deserved, the one she prayed for every day.

The chance to know his father.

Of course, there were other reasons for leaving Los Angeles, reasons that had nothing to do with Cory or football. Those suffocating, terrifying minutes in the dark bushes that lined the campus parking lot that night had changed everything. Even if she hadn’t told anyone then, or now.

A thousand bricks lay stacked across her chest. She had to sit up, had to find a way out from under the pressure. With her elbows, she used all her energy and slid up onto the arm of the sofa. A burst of oxygen filled her airways, and suddenly there was sweet relief.

She felt herself relax and again the sounds around her grew dim. She was falling, drifting into sleep. In the background, the announcer was saying something about Aaron Hill and how this was going to be his best year yet. *Aaron Hill ... the one everyone’s watching*, the voice said. Or maybe it wasn’t the announcer talking at all, but her heart.

Aaron Hill ...

Her heart slipped into a rapid, pounding rhythm and she tried to push herself up again on the sofa arm. This time, there was no relief. She felt hotter than before, her lungs heavy with fluid. She wanted to cough, needed to find a clear breath. But there was none.

“Mommy ...” Cory’s voice held an increasing sense of alarm. He stood over her and ran his little boy fingers along her forehead. “You look sicker.”

“I’m ... I’m okay.” She had to be. Cory didn’t have anyone in all the world but her. “I’ll tell you ... if I feel worse.”

He frowned, nervous and frightened. Slowly he turned back to the TV, to the special still on. The 49ers. Ready for another season. Amy tried to focus, tried to listen to the announcer, but panic pulsed through her veins. Why couldn’t she breathe? What was happening to her?

Strange voices filled her head. Voices from the TV. Or from Cory. She wasn’t sure.

“... Aaron Hill ... the quarterback to beat.”

“... maybe the best year ever ... a team desperate for a championship and ...”

Amy rolled onto her side. She sucked in a breath, but she couldn’t tell if any air entered her lungs. She needed to call Megan. Her friend would find her a ride to the hospital. Amy clenched her teeth and dragged back the smallest bit of air. *Relax*, she told herself. *Everything’s going to be okay.*

A siren sounded in the distance, loud and louder, and after a minute Amy realized the sound wasn’t coming from out on the streets. It was coming from her throat, her chest.

“Mommy, I’m calling Megan.” Her boy was standing near her again, his breath soft on her face.

She tried to open her eyes, but the effort was more than she could make. Instead, she moved her lips and forced just enough air through her lips so he could hear her. “Please ... call her.”

Spots appeared before her eyes and danced in tight circles. The sounds around her blurred more, and time froze. *Aaron, you should be here ...* She wanted to breathe, but the sound scared her. If it weren’t for Cory, she would’ve moved on, as far from San Francisco as possible. But Aaron and Cory belonged together.

And this was the year.

Right, God ...? Please, God ...

I am with you, daughter . . . and I am with your child, now and always.

Peace filled Amy's heart. *Good, Lord. Thank you.* One benefit of leaving her parents' house six years ago was this—she'd found a friendship with God. Not the critical, narrow-minded God of her mother's world. But a God who had sent His Son to open the gates of heaven for her, a God whose Word was alive with hope and promise and direction for her future.

Cory's future.

"Wake up, Mommy." His little hand was on her head again. "Don't go to sleep."

I won't, baby . . . Mommy's okay. Jesus is here with us.

She said the words, but she wasn't sure they made it past her lips. The sounds around her faded a little more, and even the whistling coming from her lungs didn't seem as loud.

Amy wasn't sure if she slept or fell into a dream, but suddenly around her there was a burst of motion. Someone picked her up and she was on a long bed, moving fast, faster down a hallway. And she was in a car and there were sirens again but this time they weren't coming only from her throat but from everywhere, all around her, and she was moving on the bed again and a little boy was crying.

Cory! Cory was crying, and she had a sudden burst of energy. Her eyes opened and there he was, right beside her.

"Mommy, don't go to sleep . . . please." His eyes were red and damp and scared.

She brought his fingers to her lips and kissed them. "I'm okay, baby. Keep praying."

"I am." His breaths were fast and uneven, his features overtaken with fear. "Don't leave me! I need you!"

"You're okay." She pressed his fingers against her cheek. She wanted to do as he asked, but she was so tired. Her eyes blinked twice, three times. Then they closed. "I . . . love you." Her words were the softest whisper, and the darkness settled in around her again, a darkness thicker and more complete than any she'd ever known.

Something was pulling at her. Something or someone, and suddenly she couldn't fight it a moment longer. She let go, let herself be drawn in, and the feeling was wonderful. But as she did, as she moved toward whatever was calling her, she was seized with alarm.

Cory!

She had more to tell him, more to say. Her son needed her. Who would care for him if she wasn't there? The pull was stronger than before, and instead of the darkness, she was surrounded by a warm glow, a living light that was unlike any she'd ever known. With everything in her, she understood that her future was here, in the light.

But, God . . . what about Cory?

At that instant, sound and sight returned to her world and she could see Megan, her arm around Cory, comforting him, and a knowing filled her. Megan would take care of Cory. And one day, she would hold her son again and he would understand that God kept His promises. This was the waiting room, all of earth. The real adventure was on the other side. The adventure she was going to take. Cory would be okay, just like she'd told him.

There was something else Amy was sure about, more sure than ever before. Almost as if God Himself were making the future suddenly clear. Her son would always have Megan, but very soon he would have someone else too.

Cory would have his father.

ONE

Two Years Later

Sometimes Cory Briggs took the long way home, pedaling as fast as he could so Megan wouldn't worry about him. Because Megan said eight-year-old boys should come straight home from soccer practice, especially on late afternoons. San Francisco was the sort of city where it was best if you were in by dark.

But that early August day, Cory did it again. He slipped his backpack onto his shoulders, left the soccer field at McKinley Elementary, and rode his bike up the hill and a few blocks out of the way, to Duboce Park. He would make up time on the downhill, so he stopped just outside the fenced-in play area and stared.

Shadows made it hard to see the bench, the one where he and his mom used to sit. But Cory shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted, and suddenly there it was. The same bench, same brown wooden slats, same way it looked back when he was a first grader, back when they came here every afternoon. He didn't blink, didn't break the lock he had on the bench, and after a minute he could hear her again, her happy voice telling him everything would be okay.

"God has good plans for us, Cory." She would kiss his cheek and smile at him. But her eyes weren't always happy, even when she smiled. "We'll find our way out together."

He remembered her still. He blinked now because he didn't want to cry. A bit of wind blew against his back, and Cory squinted against the tears. The day was hot, but already the bay breeze was cooling it off, which meant it was time to go. He climbed back up onto his seat and looked at the bench one more time. His mom was buried in Oakland somewhere. Megan took him once in a while, but Oakland was far away. When he needed to see her one more time, when he wanted to hear her voice, he came here.

Duboce Park.

“Take good care of her, God,” he whispered. Then without another look back, he set off along the sidewalk pedaling hard as he could, turning down Delores to Seventeenth, and the third story apartment where he and Megan lived.

Cory knew the streets between his school and his apartment. He even knew the way to Monster Park, where the 49ers played. But Megan would never let him ride his bike all the way to the stadium. That was okay. It was enough just knowing it was close. Because once a year he and the kids from his neighborhood entered a drawing for tickets to a game, and this year ... this year he was going to win.

He focused on the ride. He knew which alleys to stay away from, and which areas had gang members standing around. He took the streets with the least traffic lights, because that was smarter. He had to stop for only three before he reached their building, jumped off his bike, and walked it through the doorway.

Bikes were allowed in the elevator if they fit, and his did. At the third floor he stepped off and already he could hear it. The sound of happiness. Laughing and loud voices coming from the Florentinos' apartment. He walked past two doors and stopped. The smell of spaghetti and garlic bread slipped beneath the door and filled the hallway. Sometimes, when Megan had to work late, he would knock on the Florentinos' door and they'd invite him in for dinner.

They had seven kids, but Mrs. Florentino said she always had an extra plate.

Cory raised his hand to knock, because Megan might not be home yet. Then he remembered. She'd made a Crock-Pot dinner this morning because she got paid first of the month. He walked his bike to the end of the hall to No. 312. The newspaper was there, opened, and a little scattered. The Florentinos got the paper every day, and after they read it, they set it outside his and Megan's door. Megan might deliver the paper, but that didn't mean she could take a copy free. That's what she said.

So instead, Mrs. Florentino brought over hers, and that way Cory could read about the 49ers. Especially now, in the preseason.

He used his key and walked into their apartment. Then he set down his backpack and the paper, walked across the room, and opened the front

window. Nothing but alleys and winos below, but Cory loved having it open. A little bit of summer came in with the breeze.

Oreo, the cat, rubbed against his ankle.

“Hi, boy.” Cory bent down and rubbed his fur. He was black and white with a lot of gray around the whiskers. Some days he was Cory’s best friend. Cory straightened and looked around. The apartment was small, but it was clean. Megan liked clean. And almost every day she left a snack for him. Cory went to the table, and there on a napkin, were two chocolate chip cookies and an empty glass.

“So you’ll remember to drink your milk,” Megan always told him.

At the other end of the table was the Scrabble box. Each day was a different game. Sometimes Yahtzee or a deck of cards or Memory. But Scrabble was their favorite. They’d eat dinner first and then they’d play a game before homework. Megan was nice that way. Plus, the TV only got four channels clear. So board games were good.

Cory poured himself a glass of milk and sat at the table. The cookies weren’t warm, of course, but they tasted like smooth vanilla and Hershey bars. Because that’s how Megan made them. Which was nice because Megan didn’t have much time. Early mornings, before he was awake, she delivered the *Chronicle*, and after that, she worked all day at Bob’s Diner downtown. Two jobs because she said that’s what it took to keep food on the table.

There was the sound of a key in the door and then it opened.

“Cory!” Megan stepped inside. She had a grocery bag in her hands and her cheeks were red, the way they got when she walked fast. She held up the bag. “Fudge brownie ice cream.”

“The best!” Cory stood and ran to her and hugged her tight. When he’d first come to live with Megan, he didn’t like to hug her because she wasn’t his mom. But she was his mom’s friend. And after two years, hugging her was almost as good as it used to feel to hug his mom. Plus, Megan liked the 49ers. So that made her and the apartment feel like home. Especially during football season.

Cory took the grocery bag. “Thanks.” He grinned at her. “The Crock-Pot smells good.”

“Not as good as Mrs. Florentino’s dinner, but ...” She grinned. “It’s the best we can do.”

“Yep.”

He helped put the ice cream in the freezer, and he held the door shut extra long because it didn't stay closed that good.

"Salad?" He opened the fridge and looked at her.

"Of course." She lifted the lid on the Crock-Pot. "Always salad."

He took out the head of lettuce and a worn-out knife from the drawer. If he had money of his own, he'd buy Megan some new knives. Forks too. And maybe a warmer sweater for the days she had to walk fast after dark.

They worked together, and Cory smiled to himself. It felt nice having Megan there. When they were sitting at the table eating the Crock-Pot dinner, Cory watched her a couple times when she wasn't looking. She was pretty, and she loved him like he was her own. That's what she said. And maybe she could keep him for good if the court hearings went okay. So far Megan said it was nothing but red tape and the runaround.

Whatever that meant.

Megan put her fork down. "I talked to the social worker again." A half smile lifted her lips. "I told her I want to adopt you, Cory."

He finished chewing a bite of potato. "What'd she say?"

"She said"—Megan raised one eyebrow and looked straight at him—"you told her the same thing. About having a dad."

Cory shrugged. "Yeah." He studied the pieces of meat still on his plate. Then he looked into her eyes. "Everyone has a dad."

She gave him a look that said no-funny-business-mister. "You know what I mean." A sad breath came from her. "If you tell her your dad's in the picture, we'll need his signature. I can't adopt you until he says so."

"Right." Cory checked his dinner again. He poked his fork around and pushed the carrots to one side. "If we get his signature ... I can meet him."

Megan waited for a second. Then she breathed long and loud and looked at her plate. "Let's talk about something else."

They talked about soccer practice and the other guys on the team and about her work at the restaurant, because she had a rich guy come in today, a big baldy, who left her a twenty-dollar tip.

"That's why the ice cream!" Cory raised his fork in the air.

"Exactly."

After dinner, they played Scrabble, but Cory couldn't think about big words. Some turns he couldn't think about any words at all. He wanted to read the newspaper, the sports section. Because the 49ers were getting ready for the season and he didn't want to miss a single story.

Megan won with the word *zebras*, and Cory hugged her. “Good job.” He took a few steps back. “I’m gonna read the paper.”

“How about the dishes first?” Megan had dark hair, and she tossed it over her shoulder when she stood up. It was easy to think of her as older, sort of his mom’s age. Maybe twenty-nine or thirty. But she was twenty-five. Megan said that wasn’t exactly young and that she had an old soul.

The two of them washed dishes, him scrubbing the plates and Megan rinsing. When they were finally done, he grabbed the paper and ran it to the couch. He was halfway through the sports section when he saw it. The headline read, “Derrick Anderson Hosts Pizza Party at Youth Center.”

Cory raced through the short story. It talked about how Derrick Anderson loved foster kids, and that he was having a pizza party on Friday night at the youth center. All foster kids and their parents were invited.

“No way!” Cory shouted. “Megan, look at this!”

She was washing off the counter and made a little laugh. “Must be big. Read it to me.”

“It is big!” He read her the story, every line, and then he let the paper fall to the floor and he ran to her. “Please, Megan. I could meet Derrick Anderson! He’s the backup quarterback for the 49ers, the famous one who used to play for the Bears. Remember him?”

“The whole world knows Derrick Anderson.” She did a sad sort of smile. “Well, they used to know him. Back in his prime.”

“What?” Cory jumped around. “He’s still *in* his prime, Megan! He’s thirty-nine, and he’s still one of the best quarterbacks in the league.” He jumped some more. “I can’t believe we can meet him.” He stopped, his eyes wide. “We can, right? Can we? Please, Megan?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Are you kidding?” She messed her fingers through his hair. “That’s the best Friday night offer I’ve had for a year, at least.”

“Did you know about this, the pizza night?” Cory blinked at her. Megan volunteered at the youth center three times a week. She should’ve heard about this long before the newspaper.

Her eyes danced. “I had an idea. But I wanted to be sure before I told you. The 49ers’ front office set it up. I guess the team wants to do whatever it can for the city. With all the talk about building a new stadium thirty miles south in Santa Clara.”

“Yeah.” Cory didn’t like thinking about a new stadium. The 49ers had played at the same place since 1971. They were the best pro sports franchise in the state. Anyone knew that. Plus, Megan said if the mayor convinced the 49ers to stay in the city, they were going to build a bunch of new houses and stuff. Cory and Megan would have to move for sure. He blinked and tried to forget about the whole stadium thing. “Besides, Derrick’s doing the pizza party for a different reason.”

“Oh, really?” Megan gave him a half smile.

“Yeah, because he likes foster kids. And that’s all.”

Megan tilted her head, and her eyes said she was done teasing. “I think you’re right.”

“So” — he felt his heart dance around inside him — “We’re going?”

A laugh came from Megan. “Definitely.”

He grinned and held out his hand, official-like. “Okay, then. It’s a date.”

“Date.” She shook his fingers, and then she laughed and went back to wiping the counter.

Cory picked up the paper again and stacked it on the sofa. Friday was only four days away. Which meant it wasn’t too soon to do what he’d done a hundred times before. He ran to his room, pulled a box out from beneath the bunk bed, and grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil. He took out a dictionary to use for his table, and he started to write.

Every other time he’d done this, he never actually gave the letter away. Because when his mom was alive, she told him he couldn’t just send it off without knowing where it would go, or if it would even be opened. So usually, he wrote the letter and threw it away. Or tucked it into his box, or his backpack. In case he ever ran into the guy at the park or something.

But this ... this was the most exciting thing to ever happen, because Derrick Anderson could deliver his letter, Cory was sure. And maybe these were the good plans from God his mother had always told him about.

Cory thought for a long time. He would write the best letter yet, stick it in the nicest envelope, and write across the front. So Derrick would know who to give it to. And Derrick would do it, because he loved foster kids. The *Chronicle* said so. And the letter was for one of Derrick’s teammates, one of the most famous football players in the country. A man Cory prayed every night he might someday meet.

The man was quarterback Aaron Hill, but Cory didn't want to meet him because he was the city's favorite football player. He wanted to meet him for a different reason.

Because Aaron Hill was his dad.