

*A sudden tragedy,
a family's undying love...*

FOREVER

Karen NEW YORK TIMES
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
KINGSBURY
BAXTER FAMILY DRAMA™ – FIRSTBORN SERIES #5

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Sharon

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“The Firstborn series is excellent. I enjoy this author so much and am looking forward to her Redemption series. These are hard books to put down and the messages they contain are inspiring.”
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“I dearly LOVED this series. I couldn’t put any of the books down for more than a moment. I loaned these books, one at a time, to a friend who came back every day or two for the next one.”
Anita

“Karen’s books are addictive. I see a new one and need to order it, and once they arrive, I cannot rest until I complete it. Thank You, Lord, for the beautiful writing gift given to Karen for the benefit of her readers.” —Dee

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Forever

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Designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Edited by Lorie Popp

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kingsbury, Karen.

Forever / Karen Kingsbury.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-0764-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title

PS3561.L4873F66 2007

813'.54—dc22

2006035370

Repackage first published in 2011 under ISBN 978-1-4143-4980-0.

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12 11
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Donald, my Prince Charming

We've reached a new year, another season in life, and still I cannot imagine this ride without you. Our kids are flourishing, and so much of that is because of you, because of your commitment to me and to them. You are the spiritual leader, the man of my dreams who makes this whole crazy, wonderful adventure possible. I thank God for you every day. I am amazed at the way you blend love and laughter, tenderness and tough standards to bring out the best in our boys. Thanks for loving me, for being my best friend, and for finding "date moments" amid even the most maniacal or mundane times. My favorite times are with you by my side. I love you always, forever.

To Kelsey, my precious daughter

You are seventeen, and somehow that sounds more serious than the other ages. As if we jumped four years over the past twelve months. Seventeen brings with it the screeching of brakes on a childhood that has gone along full speed until now. Seventeen? Seventeen years since I held you in the nursery, feeling a sort of love I'd never felt before. Seventeen sounds like bunches of lasts all lined up ready to take the stage and college counselors making plans to take my little girl from here and home into a brand-new big world. Seventeen tells me it won't be much longer. Especially as you near the end of your junior year. Sometimes I find myself barely able to exhale. The ride is so fast at this point that I can only try not to blink so I won't miss a minute of it. Like the most beautiful springtime flower, I see you growing and unfolding, becoming interested in current events and formulating godly viewpoints that are yours alone. The same is true in dance, where you are simply breathtaking onstage. I believe in you, honey. Keep your eyes on Jesus and the path will be easy to follow. Don't ever stop dancing. I love you.

To Tyler, my beautiful son

Can it be that you are fourteen and helping me bring down the dishes from the top shelf? Just yesterday people would call and confuse you with Kelsey. Now they confuse you with your dad—in more ways than one. You are on the bridge, dear son, making the transition between Neverland and Tomorrowland and becoming a strong, godly young man in the process. Keep giving Jesus your very best, and always remember that you're in a battle. In today's world, Ty, you need His armor every day, every minute. Don't forget . . . when you're up there onstage, no matter how bright the lights, I'll be watching from the front row, cheering you on. I love you.

To Sean, my wonder boy

Your sweet nature continues to be a bright light in our home. It seems a lifetime ago that we first brought you—our precious son—home from Haiti. It's been my great joy to watch you grow and develop this past year, learning more about reading and writing and, of course, animals. You're a walking encyclopedia of animal facts, and that, too, brings a smile to my face. Recently a cold passed through the family, and you handled it better than any of us. Smiling through your fever, eyes shining even when you felt your worst. Sometimes I try to imagine if everyone everywhere had your outlook—what a sunny place the world would be. Your hugs are something I look forward to, Sean.

Keep close to Jesus. I love you.

To Josh, my tender tough guy

You continue to excel at everything you do, but my favorite time is late at night when I poke my head into your room and see that—once again—your nose is buried in your Bible. You really get it, Josh. I loved hearing you talk about baptism the other day, how you feel ready to make that decision, that commitment to Jesus. At almost twelve, I can only say that every choice you make for Christ will take you closer to the plans He has for your life. That by being strong in the Lord, first and foremost, you'll be strong at everything else. Keep winning for Him, dear son.

You make me so proud. I love you.

To EJ, my chosen one

You amaze me, Emmanuel Jean! The other day you told me that you pray often, and I asked you what about. "I thank God a lot," you told me. "I thank Him for my health and my life and my home." Your normally dancing eyes grew serious. "And for letting me be adopted into the right family." I still feel the sting of tears when I imagine you praying that way. I'm glad God let you be adopted into the right family too. One of my secret pleasures is watching you and Daddy becoming so close. I'll glance over at the family room during a play-off basketball game on TV, and there you'll be, snuggled up close to him, his arm around your shoulders. As long as Daddy's your hero, you have nothing to worry about. You couldn't have a better role model. I know that Jesus is leading the way and that you are excited to learn the plans He has for you.

But for you, this year will always stand out as a turning point.

Congratulations, honey! I love you.

To Austin, my miracle child

Can my little boy be nine years old? Even when you're twenty-nine you'll be my youngest, my baby. I guess that's how it is with the last child, but there's no denying what my eyes tell me. You're not little anymore. Even so, I love that—once in a while—you wake up and scurry down the hall to our room so you can sleep in the middle. Sound asleep I still see the blond-haired infant who lay in intensive care, barely breathing, awaiting emergency heart surgery. I'm grateful for your health, precious son, grateful God gave you back to us at the end of that long-ago day. Your heart remains the most amazing part of you, not only physically, miraculously, but because you have such kindness and compassion for people. One minute tough boy hunting frogs and snakes out back, pretending you're an Army Ranger, then getting teary-eyed when Horton the Elephant nearly loses his dust speck full of little Who people.

Be safe, baby boy. I love you.

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book couldn't have come together without the help of many people. First, a special thanks to my friends at Tyndale, who have believed in this series and worked with me to get this fifth book to my readers sooner than any of us dreamed possible. Thank you!

Also thanks to my amazing agent, Rick Christian, president of Alive Communications. I am amazed more as every day passes at your sincere integrity, your brilliant talent, and your commitment to the Lord and to getting my Life-Changing Fiction out to readers all over the world. You are a strong man of God, Rick. You care for my career as if you were personally responsible for the souls God touches through these books. Thank you for looking out for my personal time—the hours I have with my husband and kids most of all. I couldn't do this without you.

As always, this book wouldn't be possible without the help of my husband and kids, who will eat just about anything when I'm on deadline and who understand and love me anyway. I thank God that I'm still able to spend more time with you than with my pretend people, as Austin calls them. Thanks for understanding the sometimes-crazy life I lead and for always being my greatest support.

Thanks to my mother and assistant, Anne Kingsbury, for your great sensitivity and love for my readers. You are a reflection of my own heart, Mom, or maybe I'm a reflection of yours. Either way, we are a great team, and I appreciate you more than you know. I'm grateful also for my dad, Ted Kingsbury, who is and always has been my greatest encourager. I remember when I was a little girl, Dad, and you would say, "One day, honey, everyone will read your books and know what a wonderful writer you are." Thank you for believing in me long before anyone else ever did. Thanks also to my sisters Tricia and Susan and Lynne, who help out with my business when the workload is too large to see around. I appreciate you!

And to Olga Kalachik, whose hard work helping me prepare for events allows me to operate a significant part of my business from my home. The personal touch you bring to my ministry is precious to me, priceless to me. . . . Thank you with all my heart.

And thanks to my friends and family, especially my sister Sue, who is a new addition to my staff, and to my niece Melissa Kane, who helped me with a major project this past year. Thanks to Ann and Sylvia and all of you who pray for me and my family. We couldn't do this without you. Thanks to all of you who continue to surround me with love and prayer and support. I could list you by name, but you know who you are. Thank you for believing in me and for seeing who I really am. A true friend stands by through the changing seasons of life and cheers you on not for your successes but for staying true to what matters most. You are the ones who know me that way, and I'm grateful for every one of you.

Of course, the greatest thanks go to God Almighty, the most wonderful Author of all—the Author of life. The gift is Yours. I pray I might have the incredible opportunity and responsibility to use it for You all the days of my life.

 FOREVER IN FICTION 

A SPECIAL THANKS to Heidi Jones, who won the Forever in Fiction auction at the Veritas Classical Christian School in Oregon. Heidi chose to give the gift to her friend Susan Johnson, who chose to honor her sister, Cynthia Crivellone Deming, by naming her Forever in Fiction.

Cindy Deming died in a car accident at age thirty-seven. She was pregnant with her first child and survived by her husband, Sean. Cindy was passionate about animals, and at the time of her death she had eight cats, three dogs, two ferrets, and a rabbit. She was a very giving person, quiet by nature, and a good listener. She was petite with long, naturally curly brown hair, and she had just one sibling, Susan Johnson. She was also survived by her parents, Leonard Murphy and Barbara Murphy, who died seven months after Cindy.

Cindy enjoyed scuba diving and hiking the Oregon mountains, because she was always up for a challenge. She once went to Europe with friends and stayed at hostels, figuring out transportation as they traveled from one place to another. Even so, her favorite vacation spot was easily Hawaii. Cindy was a dedicated sister and daughter and granddaughter and would go out of her

way to spend time with family. She was looking forward to being a mother.

In *Forever*, I chose to make Cindy a neurosurgeon so her character could take part in saving the life of someone who had also been in a terrible car accident. Heidi and Susan, I pray that Cindy is honored by her placement in *Forever* and that you will always remember her with a smile when you see her name in the pages of 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 \$200,000 at charity 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 office@KarenKingsbury.com. Please write *Forever in Fiction* in the subject line. Please note that I am able to donate only 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.



CHAPTER ONE

THERE WERE MOMENTS when the sun shone so brightly on her life that Katy Hart could barely stand beneath it. Moments when she would be getting ready for a day of Christian Kids Theater rehearsals or folding laundry or filling her tank with gas and she'd have to check her ring finger. Just to be sure it had really happened.

Dayne Matthews had asked her to marry him.

She opened the door to her apartment, stepped inside, and exhaled. She'd spent the afternoon and evening with the Flanigans, first shopping with Jenny and then having dinner and watching a movie with the family. Now she wanted to be upstairs when Dayne called, the way he called every night around this time. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a minute.

Overnight God had taken her life from foggy uncertainty to crystal clear panoramas. She and Dayne wanted a simple wedding on the shore of Lake Monroe. He had already met with a wedding planner in Hollywood, a woman known for her

brilliance at pulling off secret ceremonies, events the paparazzi never figured out until they were over.

The job would be a tough one, and Katy had resigned herself to the possibility that the press might find out, that helicopters could circle overhead and cameramen could infiltrate the trees along the lake to get a picture. Whatever. They'd already dragged her name across the cover of the tabloids.

She was marrying Dayne Matthews. Soon the whole world would know anyway.

They hadn't picked a date, but spring seemed perfect. Bloomington was beautiful in April and May. Dayne would have time to film one more movie by then, and it would allow enough time to find a wedding dress and figure out the reception, time to fly to Chicago and talk to her parents about the plans. Dayne had told her they didn't have a budget, but Katy wanted something simple and elegant, something she could find in Indianapolis as easily as in New York City.

It was the third week of July, which meant they had eight or nine months. Not much time considering how busy they would be in their separate lives over the next few months. Dayne was working six-day weeks filming his current movie in Los Angeles, the romance film with Academy Award-winning actress Randi Wells. And Katy needed to sort through the scripts for the lineup of plays slated for CKT's coming year. Sometimes she felt dizzy with everything that had happened in the last two weeks.

Katy sighed. Yes, the sun was shining brighter than ever in her life.

She changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth. As she headed for bed, the phone rang. She darted across the room, grabbed the receiver, and bounced onto the mattress. The caller ID told her what she already knew. It was Dayne. She hit the Talk button. "Hey."

"Mmmm." He sounded tired, lonely, but even so she could practically see his eyes dancing. "Do you know how good that feels?"

“What?” An intimacy filled her voice, one that was reserved for him alone.

“Hearing you, knowing you’re at the other end of the line.” He drew a slow breath. “I look forward to this minute all day long.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

They talked about his day, and eventually that led to Dayne’s recent conversation with his missionary friend Bob Asher. “God’s making it all so clear—the future and how it’s supposed to play out.”

Katy thought about the weeks and months when the future had seemed anything but clear. During Dayne’s involvement with Kabbalah or his time with Kelly Parker. “There were days I didn’t think we’d ever be here.”

“I know.” He was quiet for a moment. “I thank God every night, Katy. Every night.”

The topic shifted again, and he told her about the movie he was making. The director still believed they had a major hit on their hands, and a buzz had started that maybe this was the film that would earn Dayne his first Academy Award. That led to talk about the paparazzi and how a reporter for *Celebrity Life* magazine was getting closer to the truth about the identity of Dayne’s birth family.

“It doesn’t matter.” Katy leaned back against her headboard. “They’ll find out one day anyway.”

“Not now, though. Not before the wedding.”

They talked about the Baxters, how Ashley had accepted the role of assistant director for CKT’s coming season and how the other Baxters were excited about Thanksgiving, when the whole family would be together for the first time.

Dayne steered the conversation back to the two of them. “Have you found it?” His voice held depth and tenderness, a tone that told her how much he missed her.

“What?” She glanced at a photo of them on her nightstand.

“Our house. I keep thinking you’ll call and tell me you found it.”

Katy sat up and crossed her legs. “You’re serious?”

“Of course.” An easy laugh came from him. “If you like it, I’ll like it.”

“But . . .” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Shouldn’t you be here?”

“You find it and I’ll fly out and take a look. How’s that?”

“I don’t know.” If he were any other guy, she’d ask him about their price range. But that wouldn’t be an issue with Dayne—something else that would take adjusting to. “I know we talked about it before, but really, Dayne, you should be here. You said near the lake, but do you want acreage or a smaller place closer to town?”

“Not near the lake.” He chuckled. “*On* the lake. A big yard and a sweeping porch.”

She grinned. “I told you . . . lakefront property is almost non-existent. Something *near* the lake, maybe. But *on it*?”

“I can dream, can’t I?” He laughed again. “Okay. Eventually I want to be on the lake, but for now it doesn’t matter. As long as I’m with you we can pitch a tent in the Baxters’ backyard. Which we might have to do if you don’t start looking.”

“All right, I get it. I’ll look.” She gazed at her ring and adjusted her left hand so the diamond sparkled in the light. “I’ll start tomorrow. I have a CKT meeting at Ashley’s house; then I’ll drive around the lake and see what’s for sale.” The task ahead still felt daunting, but if Dayne trusted her, that was all that mattered.

“No pressure, Katy. As long as we’re in Bloomington . . .” She could almost see his smile over the phone line. “Although . . . I have this props job I’m interested in, so I should probably be pretty close to the theater.”

She giggled. Gone were the sad, drawn-out conversations between them. Instead they were always laughing, always playing. She tried to sound more official. “If the director hires you, you mean.”

“True.” He paused. “But see, I know her. Got her wrapped around my finger.”

“Is that right?” She held the phone closer. If only they didn’t have so long to wait until they were together again.

“Yep.” His tone changed just enough to let her know this next part was serious. “But not nearly like I’m wrapped around hers.” He hesitated. “By the way, my director says I’m more convincing than ever.” Dayne’s voice filled with tenderness. It felt like he was sitting beside her. “Can you believe that?”

“Must be Randi Wells.” Katy was teasing. Dayne obviously wasn’t interested in his costar, though at first the tabloids questioned an offscreen romance. He had kept things so platonic that after a few weeks of filming, the gossip rags did an about-face and hinted at feuding between the two.

“You know what it is, right?”

“What?”

“It’s you.” His tone changed, and she could almost hear his beating heart. “I’ve never been in love before . . . so how could I have been convincing?”

She sighed. “How am I going to survive until I see you again?”

“If you figure it out, let me know.”

Katy opened her mouth. She was about to suggest that maybe she could come out for a weekend, stay at a local hotel, and at least share a few days with him between weeks of filming. But the last time she’d been in Los Angeles the paparazzi had chased them and nearly caused a major collision. Dayne had made it clear: until they were married, they needed to do their visiting in Bloomington. She would’ve suggested he break away for a visit, but during filming there was often weekend work. They’d have to wait until his film wrapped up.

They talked for another half hour, dreaming out loud about their wedding and the days ahead.

When the call ended, Katy turned off the light and lay back on her pillow. For a long time she stared into the dark, replaying

the conversation and missing Dayne. Maybe she would fly to Los Angeles anyway. Show up on his set and surprise him. If they didn't run from the paparazzi, maybe they could avoid a chase. She was still thinking about the possibility when she fell asleep.

The next morning Katy woke up later than she'd intended and hurried through her morning routine. As she raced out of the house, she checked her watch. Thirty minutes until the nine o'clock meeting at Ashley's house, and she still wanted to pick up coffee for the group. Ashley was thrilled about her new position with the theater kids. A week ago CKT coordinator Bethany Allen had asked Ashley to join the theater group's artistic team. She would oversee sets and work with Rhonda Sanders as an assistant director. All of which was wonderful, since Katy would be busy planning a wedding.

This morning the team wanted to come up with a list of props and sets needed for the three upcoming productions. But that wasn't all they would talk about. Ashley was about to become Katy's sister-in-law. By now, all Ashley's siblings knew that Dayne was their brother. It was why they'd made plans for a Thanksgiving celebration.

Katy yawned and focused on the road. Never mind the thunderclouds on the distant horizon; she felt like squinting. The future looked that bright. Yes, they still had some details to work out: How often Katy would visit Dayne during his filming once they were married or whether he'd do all the traveling so their visits could be more private. They needed to figure out a plan for the paparazzi so they wouldn't always be running.

But none of that felt insurmountable. Now that Dayne had decided to live in Bloomington, every aspect of their future felt possible. And one day—maybe not too far down the road—they might even live as normal people. Because Bloomington was the kind of town that treated people like friends and family. Fame had no place in the circles Katy ran in. Bloomington would embrace

them and protect them, and they would virtually disappear from the media landscape.

She checked the digital clock on her dashboard and thought about the coffee. As she looked up, a sign ten yards ahead caught her eye: Estate Home—For Sale by Owner. The stoplight turned red and Katy slowed her car. When she was close enough, she scanned the sign. Most of it was illegible, but she could make out one very distinct word: *lakefront*. The sign pointed right. Katy bit her lip and hesitated. Ashley's house was left.

Dayne's words from the night before filled her senses. "*Not near the lake. On the lake. A big yard and a sweeping porch.*"

Before she could analyze her options, she made a right turn. She flipped open her cell phone and dialed Ashley's number. "I'll be a few minutes late." She didn't want to say that she was following a For Sale sign on a whim.

"I was just going to call you." Ashley sounded out of breath. "Bethany just called. She can't be here till nine thirty, and the kids are running me ragged. Take your time."

Katy smiled. "Okay. See ya." She hung up just as she saw the next sign. Sure enough, it directed her toward a secluded part of the lake. Her heart beat a little faster. She followed the signs another few miles, through a series of turns and onto a two-lane road that ran along the perimeter of the lake. She was familiar with the area, and suddenly she remembered something. There was a house out this way—more of a landmark really—that had been written about in the newspaper recently. Could that be where she was headed?

She rounded a bend in time to see a larger sign posted close to the road, right in front of the house she'd read about. Katy pulled over and stared at the place. The article had been in last Sunday's paper. The rustic, cabin-style structure had belonged to Carol and Elmer Nichols for sixty-two years. Elmer had built the house, and for six decades it was a place of love and laughter and much activity. But several years back, both Carol and Elmer had

grown ill and been placed in a local nursing home. Their kids lived out of state with their own children and grandchildren, and the grand old place had slowly fallen apart. Even so, the family hadn't wanted to sell.

But a year ago Carol died, and last month Elmer followed. Their deaths made the house part of an inheritance, and that was the subject of the newspaper article. The kids had taken a vote and decided that they would sell the house only if no one in the family was able to restore it. The article had quoted the oldest Nichols daughter as saying, "The last thing we want to do is let the place go to someone outside the family."

Apparently things hadn't worked out, because here it was, definitely for sale. Katy pulled into the driveway and realized how large the property was. There were several acres of overgrown grass that made up the distance from the road to the house. Katy's heart beat a little faster. Even in disrepair the house was unlike any other in Bloomington.

The place was big enough to be a lodge, and if Katy hadn't read the recent article she would've assumed it was. It was situated at the far end of the field on a bluff overlooking the most beautiful part of the lake. Wrapped around the exterior was a full-size porch, and from what she could see, an oversize deck came off the back of the house.

Katy parked and got out of her car. The building looked empty, and as she walked closer she could see the house better. The old place had certainly fallen apart. The decks and railings sagged, and in some places they were broken in half. Two of the windows were cracked, and an old screen door hung from one hinge. The exterior of the house needed painting, and the roof looked damaged in some spots. Katy narrowed her eyes, trying to imagine the place fixed up. It would be spectacular, a house even Dayne couldn't have dreamed she'd find in so short a time.

She jogged to the For Sale sign and pulled a flyer from the box. *Six-bedroom, four-bath, lodge-style home in as-is condition.*

The price was seven figures, but the property alone had to be worth that. She looked around the field. The house sat on at least ten private acres bordered by huge maple trees on two sides and a worn-out, split-rail fence near the road. Nothing blocked the view on the lakeside.

Suddenly Katy had to see. Since the house appeared abandoned, it couldn't matter if she peeked at the backyard. She hurried toward the edge of the bluff and angled closer to the house. The backyard was a mess—a broken hammock; an overturned wheelbarrow; a rusty swing set; old, dilapidated furniture scattered about. Beyond that was a damaged staircase leading down to a private dock.

Again she felt her heart soar. She could picture the yard cleared out and cleaned up, with new decking and railings. She took in the lake view and felt dizzy with the possibilities. The setting was perfect. She could almost see the future playing out before her, hear the voices and laughter from family and friends who would come here for a barbecue or a birthday party. She could see it all—and Dayne by her side, the two of them living out a dream.

Katy turned and studied the abandoned house. What a shame the Nichols family had let it fall apart this way.

Katy folded the flyer and headed back to her car. She could hardly wait to talk to Dayne. She dialed his number on the way to Ashley's, and though she couldn't talk long, she told him she'd found it. Their dream house. She would fill him in on the details later when he was off work.

For now she had to focus on the meeting at Ashley's, get the work done so she could tell Ashley about the house. All her life Katy had wanted a sister, someone to share her heart with, someone who would have another viewpoint on family matters and relationships. She had Rhonda and Jenny, but a sister would be more than a confidante and a friend. A sister was family.

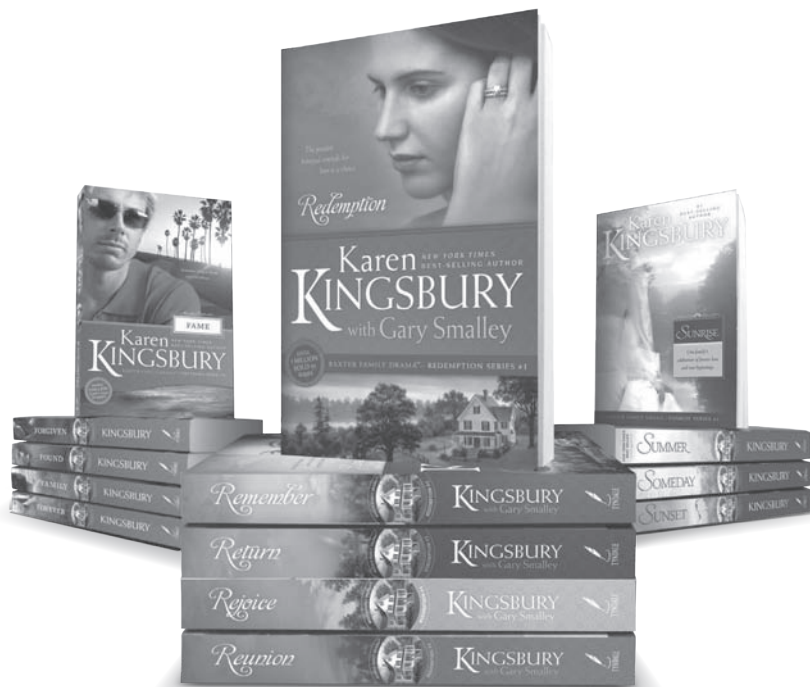
She leaned back in the driver's seat as she made her way to Ashley's house. As the meeting finished and she finally had the

F O R E V E R

chance to tell Ashley all about the house, Katy thanked God. This was just one more way He had blessed her through Dayne's love. Ashley was already a friend.

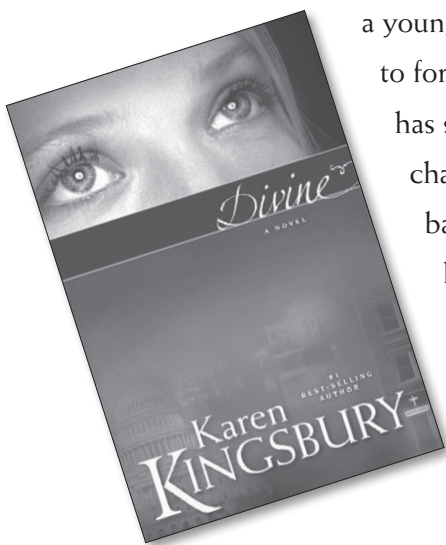
One day soon she would be a sister.

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