

A young boy and girl are sitting on a wooden swing set in a field of tall, golden grass. The boy is on the left, wearing a red t-shirt and khaki shorts, and the girl is on the right, wearing a white dress with a yellow floral pattern. They are both barefoot. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a building in the distance. The overall mood is warm and nostalgic.

Just 18 Summers

A NOVEL

Rene Gutteridge
& Michelle Cox

*Based on the screenplay by Marshal Younger,
Michelle Cox, and Torry Martin*

Praise for *Just 18 Summers*

“Michelle Cox is one of my favorite authors. Her books are in my office at the Fox News Corner of the World in New York City. She writes the kind of books that are best read with a glass of sweet tea and a box of Kleenex. This latest work, *Just 18 Summers*, is a must-read for moms and dads. It reminds us that our greatest legacy has ten fingers and ten toes.”

TODD STARNES, Fox News Channel

“A sweet, powerful novel about the brevity of the time we have with our children. Touching, laugh-out-loud funny at points, and a poignant reminder of how vital it is to make the most of every fleeting moment.”

DEBORAH RANEY, author of *The Face of the Earth* and *A January Bride*

“I had planned to read the book over a period of several days but found that I just could not put it down. As a father of three grown children, *Just 18 Summers* really made me think back to the first eighteen years I had with my own children and realize I need to make the eighteen years with my grandchildren even more special.”

ISAAC HERNANDEZ, vice president of programming, The Parables Network

“I love this book! *Just 18 Summers* will grab your heart, shake you up, and remind you of the brief, yet impacting, time we have in just eighteen summers in our child’s life. . . . Michelle Cox and Rene Gutteridge have written a book filled with characters you will fall in love with and a story we can all relate to. It will awaken and inspire you—and make you laugh!”

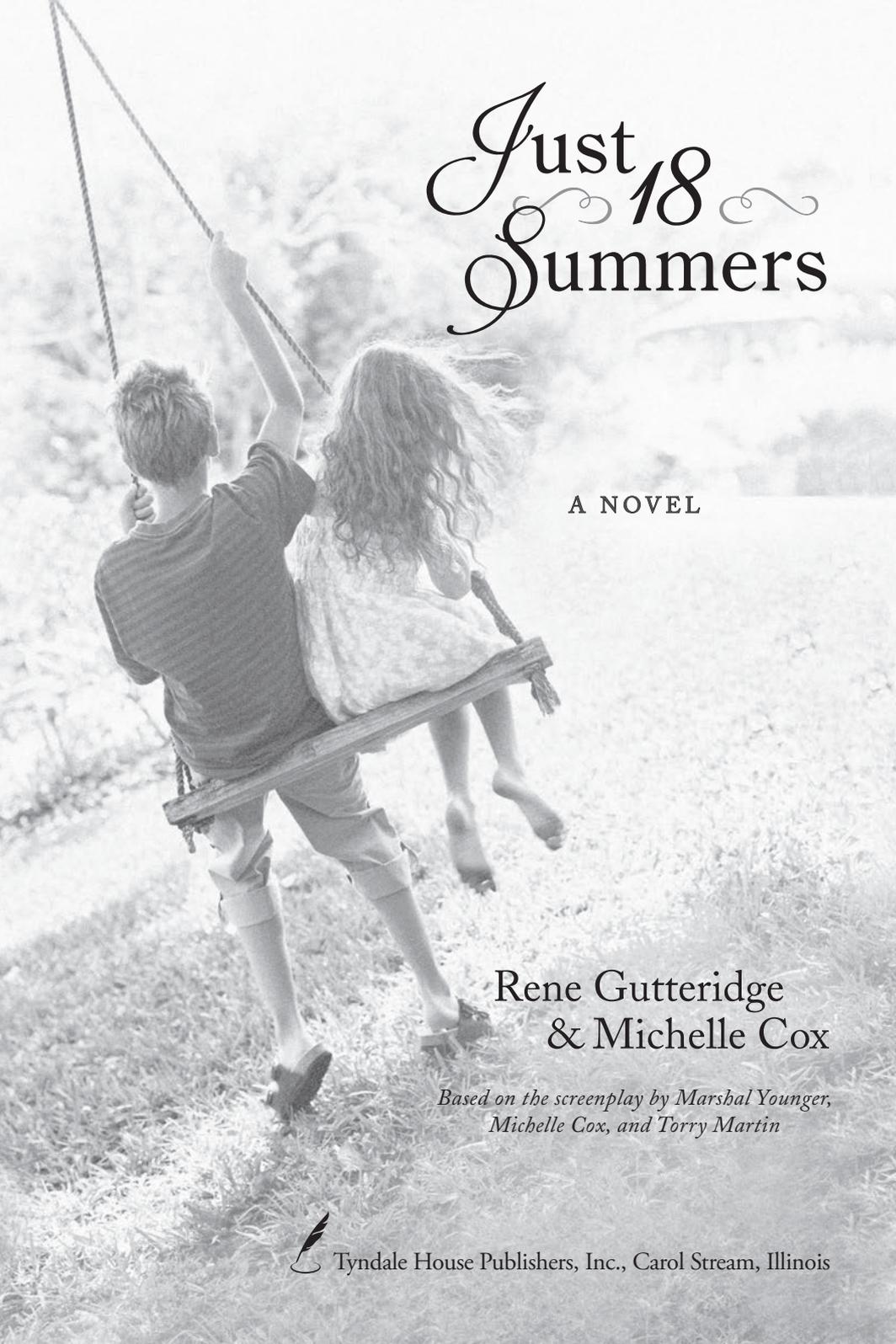
NANCY STAFFORD, actress (*Matlock*), speaker, and author of *The Wonder of His Love: A Journey into the Heart of God* and *Beauty by the Book: Seeing Yourself as God Sees You*

“Every word, every page . . . spell-binding. A must-read for every parent, grandparent, or anyone who has a place in their heart for a special child. Bravo to Michelle and Rene for reminding us of what we should instinctively know already—that there is a time to embrace and a time to let go, and precious little time in between.”

EVA MARIE EVERSON, author of *Waiting for Sunrise*, a Christy Award finalist

“*Just 18 Summers* . . . reminds us that we have such a short time to impact the next generation, such a short time to demonstrate the love we have for our family, and that we must make the most out of every day raising our children.”

LAINE LAWSON CRAFT, WHOAwomen founder and publisher and television host



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Just 18 Summers

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Just 18 Summers is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. Other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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CHAPTER I

BUTCH

USED TO BE, in the “olden days,” as his father-in-law called them, the seasons were predictable. Winter ushered in a chill that stayed in the bones until spring thawed the snow and ice and brought in comfortable temperatures, gradually warming day by day into summer, when stifling heat had to be endured only for a little while because fall was around the corner.

But that was before global warming, or as Butch Browning liked to describe it, before seasons became irrelevant. Now there were tornadoes in winter and heat waves in May.

The kind of sweat induced by both heat and extreme boredom dropped from his brow onto the face of his watch as he checked it for the fourth time in ten minutes. He tugged at the collar of the only starched shirt he owned and listened to a young woman, introduced by the principal as Madison Buckley, read from the

dictionary during her valedictorian speech. She was literally reading, word for word, all the definitions of *success*. For the price of valedictorandom, he thought she might be able to come up with one on her own, but it didn't look like it.

Butch endured this graduation ceremony at the football stadium, during record-breaking heat on a virtually windless day, only for his nephew. Jenny's nephew, to be exact. But this morning when he was thinking of skipping the ceremony and mailing the gift, he'd heard her displeasure, in the form of guilt, like a wave rolling him right out of his bed. She placed a lot of importance on family. Always had. When he'd had a falling-out with his father years ago, it was Jenny who worked to get them set right.

It wasn't Butch's thing, though.

He was soaking straight through his only good shirt, listening to an eighteen-year-old lecture other eighteen-year-olds on how to succeed in life. *Yeah, well, life has a way of making sure you don't see what's coming.* That's what he'd say if he were up there.

He glanced down at Ava sitting next to him, her hip touching his. Now that Jenny was gone, she never sat by him without touching him. It was something he'd had to grow used to. He was a man who cherished personal space.

He'd been a lot of things before, with no clue as to what he should be now. Every day was like wandering into a dark forest with no map, no compass, and a flashlight that had pulled nearly all the juice from its nine-volt battery.

Ava tugged at the neck of her shirt. Sweater, to be exact. Christmas sweater, to be more exact. It had Rudolph on the front, with a bright-red blinky nose that had actually worked before Butch accidentally washed the battery pack he was supposed to know to remove. But it was the only thing he could find that was clean this morning, as they'd overslept and he'd rushed to get them

both ready. He didn't turn on the news to hear the meteorologist's prediction of unseasonably warm weather. But who was he kidding? A sweater like this shouldn't be worn past February—any idiot would know that.

His daughter's cheeks were bright red and her bangs had curled into a wet mess on her forehead, but she sat upright, not complaining, focused on the young blonde woman at the podium who droned on and on about her vast achievements. Ava's little mouth moved as she unconsciously repeated the words to herself. It broke Butch's heart. Jenny used to do the same thing when she was intently focused on a conversation.

Finally, at the point that his deodorant had failed its commercial claim of lasting for twenty-four hours in the Sahara, they got around to calling out the names of the graduates.

"Nathan Anderson," said the monotone voice over the loudspeaker. Cheers erupted and Butch clapped loudly and whistled through his fingers.

Ava, a sweaty mess of heat and charm, grinned at him. "You gotta teach me how to do that whistle thing."

"Okay," he said. At least once a day she asked him to teach her something. He hadn't gotten around to any of it yet. He was still teaching himself how to do laundry. He'd almost gone broke buying them new packages of underwear every week for the first eight weeks after Jenny died. Now he could do the basics of throwing in a load with all the right colors, at the right temperature, with the right detergent—when he had the time.

He remembered a moment three weeks after they were married—Jenny holding up a white shirt that had ended up smeared with pink, thanks to the lipstick she'd left in a pocket. *That laugh.* He missed it. He craved it.

Suddenly hats shot high into the sky on the football field

and the band started playing something triumphant. Time flies when you're lost in thoughts of days before you had to learn to do laundry.

Like an avalanche, the crowd rolled down the bleachers and onto the field to find their graduates.

"Hey, Ava, stay right by my—" Butch looked down, but she was gone. "Ava?"

He barely caught the top of her little head bobbing between people as she raced to find her aunt Beth. Maybe he should worry about her more, but sometimes it seemed his little girl knew how to take care of herself better than he did.

With the back of his sleeve, he wiped his forehead as he made his way down the bleachers. The field was so crowded he was actually locked in place by a couple of families, unable to move anywhere. All he could do was stand there and wait for someone to step aside. Jenny used to tell him he should be more assertive, but he could only assert himself in the place he felt most comfortable—a construction site. So he just stood.

But then his gaze wandered to the place he'd tried not to look the entire time he'd been at the football stadium. Across the field were the home team's bleachers. And eight rows up, in the center section, was the place he'd first seen Jenny. He'd transferred over from his old school and been backup quarterback his junior year. It wasn't until his senior year that he even had the courage to talk to her. She sat in the same place every home game, cheering and holding up some kind of poster she'd made. He'd heard she used to be a cheerleader but blew out a knee her sophomore year. She was voted "most liked" their senior year. Four days before they graduated, he asked her out.

"Madison! Beautifully done!" a woman said. Butch snapped his attention back to the field. A striking and severe-looking blonde

woman embraced the valedictorian. She swept the girl's hair out of her face and smoothed her gown. "I thought you were going to get your bangs trimmed."

He imagined what Jenny would say to Ava if she were valedictorian. Probably nothing about her bangs.

A man, presumably the girl's father, shook her hand and nodded in agreement like they'd just signed a binding contract. The whole family seemed very pulled together, dressed correctly for the weather and weirdly sweat-proof.

Finally the sea of people moved and Butch was able to make it to Nathan, who he swore had grown a foot since he last saw him. He was now taller than his father, but still an inch short of Butch.

"Congratulations, Nathan," Butch said. He handed him the small box he'd been clutching for two and a half hours. The paper was red, the corners crisp, the tape invisible. The silver bow sparkled in the sunlight.

"Thanks, Uncle Butch." Nathan took the box.

"Yeah, good job," Ava said, tugging at Nathan's gown.

Nathan ruffled her hair and said, "Thanks, Ava." Was it just him, or had this kid's voice dropped four octaves?

Beth was now by Butch's side, looking adoringly—not at Nathan and not at Ava, but at the package. "Wow, look at that, would you? So well wrapped!"

"Oh, Jenny wrapped it before she . . . Well, obviously it was Jenny. She'd been eager to give this to Nathan for months."

He expected Beth's expression to fade into the same one everybody wore around him these days, bobbing her head steadily as she tried to find words to change the subject without looking too obvious. If he'd seen it once, he'd seen it hundreds of times. The guys at the site were just now starting to look him in the eye, and only if it was more awkward not to.

But Beth didn't do that. She smiled at him, met his eyes, just like old times.

They all watched Nathan unwrap the gift. He dropped the paper to the ground and opened the box, pulling out the small, brushed-silver pocket watch.

Beth stepped forward, touching it lightly with her fingertips. "I recognize this."

"Yeah, it was her father's . . ." Butch cleared his throat and tried a warm smile toward Beth. "Your father's, too. There's an inscription inside."

Attention shifted back to Nathan as he opened the watch and read it. "Psalm 90:12. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.""

"Beautiful," Beth said, patting her heart while simultaneously taking Butch by the arm, leading him to turf a few feet away.

Beth had a warmth about her that reminded him of Jenny. The sisters didn't look alike, but they cared alike. Beth was just slightly nosier. Her hand was on his shoulder now. "Are you okay?"

He tried to appreciate the gesture. "Yeah. I'm fine, Beth. We're making it."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Because Ava's wearing a Christmas sweater during a heat wave in May."

"Oh . . . that . . ." Butch sheepishly glanced his daughter's way. Even while she was shaking the sweater to try to create a breeze on the inside, she still managed to look poised and carry on conversations. She was Jenny's Mini-Me. "I couldn't find anything else that was clean."

As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't, because that kind of statement caused a woman like Beth to believe it was her moment

to be a superhero. By indicating there might be a need in his household, he'd just handed her a cape and permission to dominate. He should've said something about misreading the weather report—thought there was a chance of snow.

“... come over and do some laundry? I have to work tomorrow. Starting to sell a new line of party products. So far it's beating my Tupperware stint. But I could definitely come over in the evening and even set up a system to—”

“No, I can do laundry.”

“Oh.” She sniffed. “Do you need a meal?”

“We're fine.”

“I know Ava has a couple weeks of school left. Can I give her a ride?”

“I can do that.”

Butch could almost hear the hiss of air leaking from Beth, like she was about to collapse right into the grass. Even her hair looked to be wilting.

“Butch . . .” She dabbed her wrist against each eye. “I promised Jenny I'd help out with you guys if something ever . . .” Beth placed a gentle hand over her mouth, pausing as the tears rested against the rims of her eyes. “Let me live up to that promise.”

Butch nodded, fully understanding the burden that came with not being able to lend a hand. Beth had a good heart.

“You can. I promise. At some point. But right now, I've got this new life. I need to get used to it.”

For once they seemed to understand each other. Beth inflated with a smile, a warm hug, and a whispered thank-you. She came away a little wetter, but they'd had a moment Butch knew she needed.

“You know we pray for you every day,” Beth said as she stepped back.

“Yep. Thanks.”

Then he felt a hard punch on his arm. He turned to find Tippy standing next to him, grinning like a ten-year-old. “Butch.”

“Hey, Tippy. Hi, Daphne.” Butch assumed Daphne had come to support Beth, but he knew there were a thousand other things Tippy would’ve rather been doing. Butch could relate.

Daphne, however, seemed fully engulfed in something else. It wasn’t immediately clear what that was. Since she’d gotten pregnant, Tippy had lamented on the job site every day about what was happening to his wife. “She’s lost her mind,” he would whisper, almost like she might be somewhere close enough to hear him make the confession. Last week he’d described her sudden need to clean everything in the house—and not just clean, but scrub “till the germs scream and run.” But she seemed fine to Butch when they worked on the company’s books, so it was hard to know.

“Are you two coming to the party?” Beth asked them.

Tippy nodded just as Daphne answered, “Oh, we can’t. The book says I need to synchronize my sleep schedule with when I want the baby to sleep. I’m already six minutes late for my nap.”

“Yeah, what was up with Madison’s speech? I think the polar ice caps melted during point number seven,” Tippy said.

“Shhh!” Daphne subtly pointed over her shoulder in a way that said, *Don’t look*. Naturally Butch looked.

Ooooooh. He was putting it together. Madison’s mom was Helen, a lady Jenny used to scrapbook with. They were neighbors with Beth and Larry. He’d thought they looked vaguely familiar in a neighborhood-barbecue sort of way.

Daphne rubbed her belly with both hands, circles in opposite directions like the “wax on, wax off” scene from *The Karate Kid*. “Beth, I’ll see you at scrapbooking,” she said.

Butch glanced at Tippy, who looked weary just thinking about

what was ahead for him at home. "See you at work tomorrow, buddy," Butch said.

"*Save me,*" Tippy mouthed as Daphne pulled him along. They disappeared into the crowd.

Butch wished he could offer Tippy some advice, but the truth was, he wasn't around much when Jenny was pregnant with Ava. He was consumed with work, trying to make enough money to support this kid he was bringing into the world. He'd worked long hours and weekends, too. Before he knew it, the pregnancy was over and Ava had arrived.

The conversation moved on to other things and Butch was left alone for a moment. He observed Ava chatting with the adults like she was one of them. When he was eight, he couldn't have carried on a conversation with an adult if his life depended on it.

He was about to grab Ava and leave when he once again found himself within earshot of Helen. He tried to remember her husband's name. Jenny had talked about them, said they were the kind of people she had a hard time relating to. But Jenny always found the best in everyone. She had faith in people even when they didn't deserve it. She believed every person had a good side.

He took a couple of steps back, just for eavesdropping purposes, and turned slightly to observe as he heard the father ask if Madison was ready for her gift.

Diamond earrings, Butch guessed. That's what he would want to get Ava for her graduation gift, even though he'd have to save for months.

He noticed no one was holding any kind of gift. Instead the father took Madison by the shoulders and turned her toward the parking lot. "Right there," he said, pointing.

Helen and Madison were both looking the direction he pointed, as was Butch. They all saw it at the same time: a brand-new black

Mustang with a big yellow bow on it. The father handed Madison the keys and she squealed, jumping up and down, hugging everyone around her, then running toward the car, two younger siblings trailing in delight.

Butch stared at the car in disbelief. He'd wanted a Mustang his whole life.

"Can we really afford that, Charles?" Helen asked.

Charles. Right. That was his name. Jenny said she'd met him only a couple of times but that he seemed to be an uptight kind of fellow. He and Helen looked to be in their early forties, but their stuffy ways—and late-generation names—suggested they were older.

"Oh yes," Charles said. He didn't appear that uptight. He'd bought a car without his wife knowing and seemed extremely sure it was okay.

"Do you know something about our budget that I don't?" Helen asked.

Butch was in a full-blown stare now. She *really* didn't have a clue that Charles had bought a car, and by the strained look on her face and the way her eyebrows were almost touching her hairline, Butch realized this could get ugly very fast. At least there was something interesting to listen to on this football field.

Charles turned toward his wife and took her hands. "Well . . . I was going to wait until after the party to tell you this, but since you asked . . . I got a promotion!"

Helen jumped into his arms. It felt a bit like *Christmas Vacation*, when Clark announced they were getting a pool, until she abruptly stopped the hug and adjusted herself from the top down.

"It's a big one, too!" Charles said.

But the squealing was apparently over. Butch sighed and turned away from the glee. He observed Ava for a moment and wondered

if diamond earrings would be the last thing on earth she'd want. Was he that out of touch? Didn't every girl want diamond earrings?

No. Every girl wanted a sports car. How was he going to be able to afford a car for her? At best, it'd be an old clunker, the kind with half the paint stripped off that you could hear coming a mile away.

Just then Larry, Beth's husband, gathered everyone around and turned to Nathan. "We got you a present!"

"What?" Nathan asked.

"Here you go!" And with great dramatic flair, he held out keys.

Butch shifted his attention to Nathan, expecting him to howl with excitement. He didn't.

"These are the keys to the car I already own," Nathan said flatly.

"I know. I filled it up with gas."

"Oh. Awesome." Nathan, good kid that he was, was trying awfully hard to look enthusiastic, but his shineless eyes weren't cooperating.

Larry smiled and patted him on the back. "And there might be a check on the driver's seat."

Nathan grinned and started trotting toward the car.

Family wasn't his thing, but Butch knew there was a reason he liked Jenny's so much. They were grounded, for one. And as he watched Ava cling to Beth's waist, he knew no matter what, he had to keep them in her life, even if it meant having Beth come do his laundry once a month.

He just hoped his little girl could endure a life full of disappointments. He wasn't going to be able to give her what Jenny had given her. Jenny had almost a magical way about her, like she was born to be a mom and had superpowers to prove it.

Butch, on the other hand, knew how to draw a paycheck and keep up on the mortgage. That was it.

There was no fairy dust. Just sawdust.

“Come on, Ava,” Butch said, taking her hand. “Time to go.”

“Are we going to the party?” she asked. Beth slid an arm around her shoulder. A hopeful expression grew on both their faces.

“Well, um . . . yeah, maybe we’ll stop by. We’ve got things to do. Laundry and whatnot. We’ll see.”

Ava began walking, glancing back at Beth. “That’s a no, if you’re wondering.”

Butch waved and they walked to the truck together. Maybe he should take Ava to do something fun today. A trip to the park. He opened the door and she climbed into the front seat, where Jenny would’ve never let her ride, but where she’d been riding since the day Jenny died.

Once inside the truck, he turned on the air conditioner full blast. Her hair blew backward like she had stepped into the path of a hurricane. It looked like she was riding the wind. The seat nearly swallowed her whole, though. Sometimes, with all her wisdom and maturity, he had to be reminded of how small she was.

As he managed his way out of the crowded parking lot, Butch knew the truth was that he didn’t really know how to talk to his daughter. He knew he should talk more. Mostly they watched TV together and let other people do the talking for them.

“Cool enough?” he asked over the noise of the air conditioner.

Ava nodded. Her cheeks were returning to their normal color.

“Hey, listen, sorry about the sweater thing. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“That’s okay.” Just like her mom, she always forgave. Always.

He reached for the radio. “Mind if I put on the game?”

“Go ahead.”

He smiled at her because above all things, he loved to see her smile.

And on cue, she did. “Go Chiefs.” She pumped her fist.

“Red Sox.”

“Football?”

“Baseball. It’s baseball season now.”

“Oh. Got it. Go Red Sox.”

“You betcha. They’re going to be good this year.”

“That’s good.”

“Yep.”

“Pizza tonight again?”

“You want hot wings instead?”

“Pizza’s okay. Hot wings are usually just for adults.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He smiled and drove on, but he knew something—he’d never really understood women, and he certainly didn’t understand them in pint size.

A Note from Michelle Cox

DURING A SUNDAY CHURCH SERVICE, my pastor prayed with a couple who were dedicating their infant son to God. As they turned to walk off the platform, Reverend Sexton said these words: “Don’t forget—you have just eighteen summers. Take time to make some memories.”

Whew! The poignancy of those words moved me to tears. I was at the end of my eighteen summers with my youngest son, and I knew how quickly each of them had zoomed by. Even though we had made an effort as a family to have fun and make memories, I found myself wishing that we had taken even more time to enjoy those precious fleeting moments with our sons.

Most parents can relate to that. Sometimes we’re so busy with the responsibilities and tasks of parenting that we forget to enjoy the journey. We’re busy. So are our children. Activity fills every space in the daily schedule. Before we know it, that newborn in pink is zipping around the cul-de-sac on her bike. That tiny boy is yanking at his collar as he poses for graduation pictures. We’ve heard it before—so many times: “Enjoy these days now. Time passes quickly.”

Believe it.

Eighteen years sounds like a long time. The fact that we have just eighteen summers really brings it home. Enjoy those days with your child now because someday you'll wish you could . . . Just ask any mother as she watches her child leave for college.

That's the message behind the Just 18 Summers brand. Our novel is the first piece of the brand to release and we're excited about that. We are in the process of raising the funds for a feature-length film and have plans for additional books, music, and other Just 18 Summers products.

Be sure to check out our blog at just18summers.com. I think you'll love our staff of amazing contributors! We will feature eighteen categories each month, ranging from home decor and hospitality, recipes and meal ideas, to fun things to do with your kids, parenting and relationship tips, inspiring stories, and much more.

Moms and dads, you have just eighteen summers with your children. Please don't miss the moments! Take it from a mom who would give a million dollars if she could walk down the hall and tuck her little boys into bed just one more time.

How many summers do *you* have left? What you do with your children now will determine whether you look back someday with regrets or sweet memories.

I'll close with the words of the elderly lady who stopped me at the mall when my son was just a little guy: "Enjoy that sweet little one. The time goes by so fast and he'll be grown before you know it." Turns out she was right.

Blessings to you and your family,
Michelle