



*The
Seventeen
Second
Miracle*

• A NOVEL •

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK



THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Interior text design by Kristin del Rosario.

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PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley trade paperback edition / October 2010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wright, Jason F.

The seventeen second miracle / Jason F. Wright. — Berkley trade pbk. ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-425-23794-6

1. Fathers and sons—Fiction. 2. Teachers—Fiction. 3. High school students—Fiction.

4. Life change events—Fiction. 5. Charlottesville (Va.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3623.R539S48 2010

813'.6—dc22

2010022757

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the teachers who believed.

PROLOGUE



1970

REX CONNER FELL IN LOVE WITH A BODY OF WATER.

The popular lake was part of Chris Greene Park, located in Albemarle County, Virginia, just a few minutes from Charlottesville's northern city limits.

By the summer of 1970, the teen was also in love with his new job, employed by the county's Parks & Recreation Department as a lifeguard.

But mostly, he loved a girl.

The young brunette had thick, long hair that made her easy to spot from his wooden perch overlooking the lake's sandy man-made beach.

Rex spotted her often.

They met after his shift on July Fourth as Rex played Frisbee with friends in a field by the water.

The brunette made trips with her mother to and from their station wagon carrying picnic supplies. When she made the

first trip alone, Rex accidentally launched the Frisbee in her direction.

The girl introduced herself, and after a few minutes of awkward small talk, Rex looked her in the eyes and asked permission to give her a nickname. He'd given nearly everyone he knew a nickname.

"I guess," she said, gathering and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Sparks."

She laughed. "Sparks?"

"Sparks. Because that's what I see all around you."

She blushed, just as he knew she would, and that was the beginning of the summer that changed Rex Conner.

REX ANGLED WITH HIS BOSS TO WORK THE DAYS SHE PROMISED she would be coming to the lake. Which, given their budding romance, was often.

Though far from a seasoned lifeguard, he'd learned the first rule: Keep your eyes on the water.

Sometimes Rex watched Sparks swim alone in the deeper water, back and forth between two orange buoys. She was, at least in his eyes, an expert in every stroke. He particularly enjoyed watching her towel off standing back onshore. She would carefully remove her bulky swim cap and shake her head back and forth, breathing life back into her matted, tangled hair.

He saw sparks then, too.

Sometimes watching the water meant he could watch Sparks

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play with her younger sister. The two squeaked and danced in the shallow waves like SeaWorld dolphins. Their mother would sneak up and take pictures, then race off screaming in delight as her daughters chased and kicked water at her.

The younger sister was a wiry eight-year-old with light brown hair—shorter than her sister’s but styled the same—and a laugh you could hear from nearly every shallow corner of Chris Greene Lake.

Rex gave his pint-sized friend a nickname, too. He chose “Flick,” because she was just like her older sister, but smaller and full of potential to light the world on fire. He promised her that someday she’d sparkle just like her older sister.

Sparks’s sister flickered and beamed every time he called her by the new name.

By the end of the summer, even Flick’s mother had adopted the moniker.

The relationship between Rex and Sparks became a classic summertime romance.

Rex ate Sunday dinners with her family. He went with them on a sightseeing day trip to Williamsburg and, later, one to the Shenandoah Valley. They invited him to family game night, picnics, church, and even a church picnic.

When Rex wasn’t working at the lake, he was pulled to Sparks’s side, stuck between love and lust and feeling like an older, more mature soul trapped in the body of a sixteen-year-old.

More often than not, Flick was right there at his other side.

Rex enjoyed watching the two girls interact. Not simply sisters, they were friends—best friends, despite the age difference. Seeing them together made him wish he weren’t an only child.

When Sparks took a break from the lake water to soak in the sun on a beach towel, Flick followed.

When Sparks rolled from her back to her stomach, Flick did the same, even discreetly and awkwardly adjusting her swimsuit in the same way.

When Sparks stood, stretched, and returned to the water to cool off and show off for her lifeguard boyfriend, Flick followed.

While swimming, Sparks often arched her back and leaned backward into the water to remove the hair from her forehead and face. She held her nose as she lifted her head slowly out, face toward the sky, thick hair streaking behind her and clinging to her shoulders and the back of her swimsuit. Then she looked at Rex in his tall wooden lifeguard chair to see if he'd been watching.

Of course he had.

So Flick did the same, awkwardly dipping her head backward and choking on dirty lake water as she surfaced. Then she also looked over at Rex.

He would laugh and blow her a kiss.

Flick giggled and covered her cheeks, so Sparks caught the kisses instead.

Usually, when Sparks took out her sketch pad at a picnic table to practice her charcoal drawings, Flick would sit across from her and color on sheets borrowed from her big sister. Many of the drawings read "For Rex" in one of the corners.

Rex's favorite creation was a crayon drawing of a boy in a red swimsuit overlooking a deep blue oval lake filled with round, fat fish with bubble eyes and smiley faces. The boy had a crown and oversized eyes, and sat high in a throne that looked more like a

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tower than a lifeguard's chair. A sun with thick rays shined from the left corner of the paper. A few pillowy clouds sat to the right. There were no swimmers in the lake, just a stick figure lifeguard with spiky hair and bumpy muscles watching over the water with wide, attentive eyes and a grin.

WHENEVER REX REMINISCED ABOUT HIS SUMMER WITH Sparks and Flick, which he had so often through the years that the details never blurred, he found time to praise the girls' mother. Worried that her daughter and Rex would make a mistake that would haunt them and effectively end their adolescence, Flick was often sent to accompany the two hormone-crazed teens.

Neither seemed to mind. The threesome saw movies on the downtown mall, ate pizza on the famed Corner by UVA's campus, played volleyball at the lake, and walked the heavily wooded trails. It was on those walks that Flick most often appeared at the most inopportune times.

"Wait up, guys!" Flick said, running toward them as they disappeared into the woods. "Mom said I could come."

"Oh she did, did she? Well, I don't know about that," her older sister said.

"Uh-huh. She did. She said she didn't want you to get lost."

Rex would smile and tickle Flick under the neck with his fingertips. "What if *you* get lost?" he said, and he and his sweetheart would race ahead, around a corner, and out of view.

Flick followed, racing and hollering, "Hey! Wait up! Hey, guys!"

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But they were never far ahead. The couple snuck into the trees, shared a few clumsy but passionate wet kisses, and then jumped out onto the trail when Flick approached.

“Gotcha!” Rex teased, and Flick breathed easy.

“Stop it. Mom said if you lost me out here, I’d be in big, big trouble. And so would you.”

Sparks hugged her little sister. “We’d never lose you, Flick. Never.”

Then, like many times before, and a few times after, they raced back to their mother.

Every single day that summer, Rex felt as if he were one step closer to being a man.

He was almost right.

He was just seventeen seconds from growing up.

REX JOKED THAT VIRTUALLY EVERYONE WHO SWAM AT CHRIS Greene that summer knew that Flick’s birthday fell on Labor Day. She’d convinced her parents to throw a huge party at the lake and, naturally, Rex was invited as a guest. Flick clapped and jumped twice in the air when Rex said he would be honored and that he wasn’t scheduled to work that day. He’d worked the Fourth of July and his supervisor at Parks & Recreation said he shouldn’t have to work both holidays.

Still, Rex knew his invitation to the party wasn’t just for fun. Sparks’s mother wanted another set of trained eyes for the gaggle of girls who would be running in and out of the water, playing games, doing what kids do best at birthday parties.

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The afternoon was filled with pizza, cake, silly hats, balloons, plastic cups of root beer, and gifts. The gifts sat stacked high in a pyramid on a picnic table near the food. Flick wanted to open them last.

For many years after, Rex remembered Flick wanting to save the gifts until the end. Not because it was the most exciting thing about the party or the best part of the day, but because it was the *least* important. What mattered most was having friends there, having family around.

Rex followed that example and taught his son to do the same. “Presents are nice, and who doesn’t enjoy unwrapping a gift?” he would say. “But the real gift is your *time*. Your *laughter*. The memories we make *together*.” The lesson was old-fashioned and Rex knew it. But it didn’t just stay with his son, it may have saved him.

After Flick’s birthday lunch and a short nature hike—some of the children at the party had never been to the lake or seen the trails before—Rex and Sparks led the younger kids out to the lake for water games.

Flick’s mother stayed behind to watch the gifts and to position herself where she could still easily keep an eye on the girls.

The group played in the shallow water on the lake’s man-made beach. They played tic-tac-toe in the sand with their feet.

Rex took a turn playing tag with a plastic water gun. He showed off a little, too, squirting some of his friends and being silly for the two lifeguards on duty, both of them friends from a long summer of working side by side.

At one point Rex began throwing a Frisbee for the kids to catch in the knee-deep water. They took turns diving and

splashing, sometimes one at a time, sometimes in a frenzied scrum to see who could emerge with the bright yellow disk.

When Rex tired of the game, he tossed the Frisbee on the water's edge and spotted Sparks twenty yards away. She was arching her back again in the deeper water, gathering her long hair and pulling it into a thick rope against her neck and back.

Rex took his time enjoying the view and snuck up from behind. He covered her eyes. "Guess who?" he said. "Clock's ticking." Then, as the game demanded, Rex began to count. "One, two, three." It wasn't the first time they'd played the game, and Sparks played her part.

"Mitchell Voltron?"

"Four, five, six," Rex continued.

"John Lennon?"

"Seven, eight."

"James Taylor?"

"Nine, ten, eleven, twelve."

"Santana?"

"Faster! Thirteen, fourteen."

"Tina Turner?"

"Hey!" Rex cackled. "Fifteen, sixteen."

"The handsome Rex Conner?"

"Yes! Seventeen seconds! But that's *way* too long." Rex stole a kiss and Sparks instinctively turned to see if her mother had seen.

She hadn't, Sparks reasoned, because her mother was standing near the table with both hands on her forehead, shielding the sun, studying the water, her focus far beyond the young lovers.

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Sparks's eyes went to the spot where her sister and the others had been.

Flick was gone.

Rex's eyes went to the deeper water, as he was trained, and easily spotted the yellow Frisbee floating atop the surface, glowing in the darker water like the sun peeking through black rain clouds. But Rex saw more than just the Frisbee; he saw frantic splashing, twin thin arms grabbing and clawing at the water.

"Lifeguard!" he screamed, and he dove forward, slicing through, then knifing through, the surface and swimming free-style, churning the water fast and violently, his arms and legs fueled by fear and an adrenaline his body had never known.

He reached the child well before the other lifeguard and pulled her to the surface. He put his arm around her, just as the training and practice and manuals had shown, and swam with the other arm, towing her on her back to safety.

A crowd had gathered at the shore.

Sparks and her panicked mother stood like twin statues, stiff, hands over their mouths.

Flick's body was blue and limp.

Rex performed CPR, but his own panic made it impossible to keep proper form and the other lifeguard pushed him out of the way.

They worked on Flick, counting aloud and regurgitating lessons learned as another parent ran to a pay phone to call an ambulance.

Rex backed away from the scene and covered his face.

Sparks trembled and squeezed her mother's hands.

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“Lisa!” they shouted together. “Flick!”

Sparks’s mother pulled away. She pushed another teenage boy to the side and stood nose to nose with Rex, her face flaming red with rage and confusion. “How could you?”

The other lifeguard took over CPR and the race to save Flick continued.

“How long were you horsing around, Rex?” She breathed and the anger faded to tears. “How long, Rex?”

Tears morphed into deep sobs as she pounded on his bare chest.

Rex answered by covering his face and calling on a God he barely knew.

Just a few feet away, in the shadow of a stack of unopened birthday gifts, Sparks knelt beside her lifeless sister, saying prayers and crying teenage tears of her own.

Flick’s mother gathered her breath and slowed the sobs long enough to look Rex in the eyes and say the words he would live with for years: “Rex Conner, you just couldn’t keep your hands to yourself, could you?”

She followed those with four words only age and disease could wash away: “You killed my angel.”

ONE



The Invitation

2010

Dear Student,

Congratulations! You have been recommended to attend the Discussions on the Seventeen Second Miracle.

Discussions begin Wednesday, November 1, 2010, at 5:30 P.M. Discussions will be held at Paper Gems, a bookstore at 1104 East Main Street in Charlottesville.

Discussions will take place on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 5:30 P.M., unless otherwise scheduled, and last approximately one hour.

Our final Discussion will be a mandatory field trip on November 24, the day before Thanksgiving.

Being recommended to attend the Discussions on the Seventeen Second Miracle is an honor. I look forward to meeting you.

*Sincerely,
Mr. Cole Conner*

P.S. Please bring the enclosed pocket watch to our first Discussion.

TWO



Delivery Day

CHRISTMAS, NEW YEAR'S, EASTER, DELIVERY DAY.

They're each special because all four have their own box of memories with unique tastes, scents, and sights. While each brings me joy, only Delivery Day also brings butterflies.

Delivery Day: a day my father would have loved to celebrate at my side.

Delivery Day: It means I celebrate a private holiday less about the past and more about the daily Seventeen Second Miracles that await each of us.

Of course it also means the Discussions are about to begin in the cozy Reading Corner of Paper Gems, my wife's bookstore. And, naturally, it's also the day my new students get their invitations and a pocket watch.

Three weeks ago on Delivery Day, three teenagers recommended to me by the principal at Albemarle High School in

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Charlottesville, Virginia, opened their mailboxes and pulled out an envelope with a handwritten note and a pocket watch.

Like always, the watches came from a dealer in Richmond, Virginia.

The notes came on stationery my wife bought for me at a shop on the historic downtown mall in Charlottesville.

Three weeks ago, none of the new students knew me, at least not personally. I didn't ask, I never do, but perhaps they knew me by reputation. After all, this isn't the first year of the Discussions.

I've been fortunate; I've never had a student refuse to attend. Maybe now and again one of them has required a nudge. Or three. But they always show up—eventually. In time, I will understand more fully, but for now I can only accept that this was the first fall we did not finish the Discussions at Paper Gems.

This year's recommendations came in the school's familiar reusable oversized envelope with the red string tie and lines on the back to declare for whom the contents were meant. But they were always meant for me.

As in years past, enclosed I'd found a photo and a handwritten, informal, one-page profile for each student. No official transcripts, no family history, no standardized test scores. But while the format wasn't unique, this year's recommendations were.

Mr. Buhl, a longtime friend of my family and the second Buhl to be AHS principal, recommended for the first time that I welcome only three students into my informal program. In years past, I'd had as few as four and as many as eight. I was disappointed there weren't more, yes, but accepted that he must have known something I didn't about this year's crop. Did he ever.

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The principal recommended Miles Bohn and his sweetheart, Kendra Wilson. I'd never had lovebirds attend the Discussions.

Miles was a starting guard for the varsity basketball team.

Kendra was a cheerleader, because her dad bought her first cheerleading outfit when she was four; president of her senior class, because her father had every jock in school work on her campaign; and president of the Young Democrats, something she actually chose for herself because she genuinely liked politics.

Mr. Buhl also recommended Travis Nielson, a wheelchair-bound sophomore who was new to AHS. I'd never had a physically disabled student recommended for the Discussions, and Travis's invitation meant I would spend two days making sure that Paper Gems was really as accessible as our permits said it was.

Just like every year, on the first day of class none of the students knew why they were selected. And just like every year, neither did I.

The Discussions almost ended a few years ago but were saved by the power of compromise and the counsel of a very wise wife. We used to meet on our porch during summer break, but I'd get so involved that Jade and I had *summer* but no break. It wasn't quite as hard on the students—they only came once a week back then—but they still had to give up some hours at their summer jobs. I was about to give up and find a different way to pass on Dad's legacy when Jade suggested moving the meetings to November and holding them in her store, taking our last field trip just before Thanksgiving.

I've always wondered how long Dad would have hosted the Discussions if he could have. Or would he have even wanted

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to? Teaching me about his daily Seventeen Second Miracles was natural for him. He called me his *captive audience*. But I sense that sharing the origin, the legacy, and telling the stories of his life to complete strangers would have felt boastful.

Dad spoke of it often in general terms, as a movement, something he was grateful to be a part of. But taking too much responsibility would have certainly appeared prideful to him. Though honestly, I *do* feel pride, a sense of honor that it has fallen to me to promote his legacy.

And though I wasn't yet alive, I hope he knows how those tragic seventeen seconds in 1970 changed me, and every student who has ever sat on my porch or in the Reading Corner of Paper Gems.