

*Three Weeks with
My Brother*

PROLOGUE

This book came about because of a brochure I received in the mail in the spring of 2002.

It was a typical day in the Sparks household. I'd spent a good part of the morning and early afternoon working on my novel *Nights in Rodanthe*, but it hadn't gone well and I was struggling to put the day behind me. I hadn't written as much as I'd intended nor did I have any idea what I would write the following day, so I wasn't in the best of moods when I finally turned off the computer and called it quits for the afternoon.

It isn't easy living with an author. I know this because my wife has informed me of this fact, and she did so again that day. To be honest, it's not the most pleasant thing to hear, and while it would be easy to get defensive, I've come to understand that arguing with her about it has never solved anything. So instead of denying it, I've learned to take her hands, look her in the eyes, and respond with those three magic words that every woman wants to hear:

"You're right, sweetheart."

Some people believe that because I've been relatively successful as an author, writing must come effortlessly to me.

Many people imagine that I “jot down ideas as they come to me” for a few hours each day, then spend the rest of my time relaxing by the pool with my wife while we discuss our next exotic vacation.

In reality, our lives aren’t much different from that of your average middle-class family. We don’t have a staff of servants or travel extensively, and while we do have a pool in the backyard surrounded by pool chairs, I can’t remember a time that the chairs have ever been used, simply because neither my wife nor I have much time during the day to sit around doing nothing. For me, the reason is my work. For my wife, the reason is family. Or more specifically, kids.

We have five children, you see. Not a big number if we were pioneers, but these days it’s enough to raise a few eyebrows. Last year, when my wife and I were on a trip, we happened to strike up a conversation with another young couple. One topic led to another, and finally the subject of kids came up. That couple had two kids and mentioned their names; my wife rattled off the names of ours.

For a moment, the conversation ground to a halt while the other woman tried to figure out whether she’d heard us correctly.

“You have five kids?” the woman finally asked.

“Yes.”

She laid a sympathetic hand on my wife’s shoulder.

“Are you insane?”

Our sons are twelve, ten, and four; our twin daughters are coming up on three, and while there’s a lot that I don’t know about the world, I *do* know that kids have a funny way of helping you keep things in perspective. The older ones know that I write novels for a living, though I sometimes doubt that either of them understands what it means to create a work of fiction. For instance, when my ten-year-old was asked during a class presentation what his father did for a

living, he puffed his chest out and proudly declared, “My daddy plays on the computer all day!” My oldest son, on the other hand, often tells me—with utter solemnity—that, “Writing is easy. It’s just the typing that’s hard.”

I work out of the house as many authors do, but that’s where the resemblance ends. My office isn’t some upstairs, out-of-the-way sanctuary; instead, the door opens directly onto the living room. While I’ve read that some authors must have a quiet house in order to concentrate, I’m fortunate that I’ve never needed silence to work. It’s a good thing, I suppose, or I never would have ever written at all. Our house, you have to understand, is a whirlwind of activity literally from the moment my wife and I get out of bed until the moment we collapse back into it at the end of the day. Spending the day at our home is enough to exhaust just about anyone. First off, our kids have energy. Lots and lots of energy. *Ridiculous* amounts of energy. Multiplied by five, it’s enough energy to power the city of Cleveland. And the kids somehow magically feed off each other’s energy, each consuming and mirroring the other’s. Then our three dogs feed off it, and then the *house itself* seems to feed on it. A typical day includes: at least one sick child, toys strewn from one end of the living room to the other that magically reappear the moment after they’ve been put away, dogs barking, kids laughing, the phone ringing off the hook, FedEx and UPS deliveries coming and going, kids whining, lost homework, appliances breaking, school projects due tomorrow that our children somehow forget to tell us about until the last minute, baseball practice, gymnastics practice, football practice, Tae Kwon Do practice, repairmen coming and going, doors slamming, kids running down the hallway, kids throwing things, kids teasing each other, kids asking for snacks, kids crying because they fell, kids cuddling up on your lap, or kids crying because they need you RIGHT THIS

MINUTE! When my in-laws leave after visiting for a week, they can't get to the airport soon enough. There are deep bags under their eyes and they carry the dazed, shell-shocked expression of veterans who just survived the landing on Omaha Beach. Instead of saying good-bye, my father-in-law shakes his head and whispers, "Good luck. You're going to need it."

My wife accepts all of this activity in the house as normal. She's patient and seldom gets flustered. My wife seems to actually *enjoy* it most of the time. My wife, I might add, is a saint.

Either that, or maybe she *is* insane.

In our house, it's my job to handle the mail. It has to be done, after all, and in the course of our marriage, this is one of those little responsibilities that has fallen in my lap.

The day that I received the brochure in the mail was a day like any other. Lexie, who was six months old, had a cold and refused to let my wife put her down; Miles had painted the dog's tail with fluorescent paint and was proudly showing it off; Ryan needed to study for a test but forgot the textbook at school and had decided to "solve" the problem by seeing how much toilet paper could be flushed down the toilet; Landon was coloring on the walls—again—and I can't remember what Savannah was doing, but no doubt it was something distressing, since at six months old she was already learning from her siblings. Add to that the television blaring, dinner cooking, dogs barking, a ringing phone, and the chaotic roar seemed to be reaching a fever pitch. I suspected that even my saintly wife might be nearing the end of her rope. Pushing away from the computer, I took a deep breath and stood from my desk. Marching into the living room, I took one look around at the world gone crazy, and—with instincts only men seem to possess—I knew exactly

what to do. I cleared my throat, felt everyone's attention momentarily swing to me, and calmly announced:

"I'm going to see if the mail's come in yet."

A minute later, I was out the front door.

Because our house is set a ways back from the road, it usually takes five minutes to walk out to the mailbox and back. The moment I closed the door behind me, the mayhem ceased to exist. I walked slowly, savoring the silence.

Once back in the house, I noticed that my wife was trying to clean the cookie crumb drool from her shirt while holding both babies simultaneously. Landon was standing at her feet, tugging at her jeans, trying to get her attention. At the same time, she was helping the older boys with their homework. My heart surged with pride at her ability to multitask so efficiently and I held up the stack of mail so she could see it.

"I got the mail," I offered.

She glanced up. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she answered. "You're such a big help around here."

I nodded. "Just doing my job," I said. "No reason to thank me."

Like everyone else, I get my share of junk mail and I separated the important mail from the nonimportant. I paid the bills, skimmed through articles in a couple of magazines, and was getting ready to toss everything else into the circular file cabinet when I noticed a brochure I'd initially put in the trash pile. It had come from the alumni office at the University of Notre Dame, and advertised a "Journey to the Lands of Sky Worshipers." The tour was called "Heaven and Earth," and would travel around the world over a three-week period in January and February 2003.

Interesting, I thought, and I began to peruse it. The tour—by private jet, no less—would journey to the Mayan

ruins in Guatemala, the Incan ruins in Peru, the stone giants of Easter Island, and the Polynesian Cook Islands. There would also be stops at Ayers Rock in Australia; Angkor Wat and the Killing Fields and Holocaust Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia; the Taj Mahal and the Amber Fort of Jaipur in India; the rock cathedrals of Lalibela, Ethiopia; the Hypogeum and other ancient temples in Malta; and finally—weather permitting—a chance to see the northern lights in Tromsø, Norway, a town located three hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle.

As a child, I'd always been fascinated with ancient cultures and faraway lands, and, more often than not, as I read the description of each proposed stop, I found myself thinking, "I've always wanted to see that." It was an opportunity to take the trip of a lifetime to places that had lingered in my imagination since boyhood. When I finished looking through the brochure, I sighed, thinking, *Maybe one day . . .*

Right now, I just didn't have the time. Three weeks away from the kids? From my wife? From my work?

Impossible. It was ridiculous, so I might as well forget about it. I shoved the brochure to the bottom of the pile.

The thing is, I *couldn't* forget about the trip.

You see, I'm a realist, and I figured that Cat (short for Cathy) and I would get the chance to travel sometime in the future. But while I knew that someday it might be possible to convince my wife to travel with me to see the Taj Mahal or Angkor Wat, there wasn't a chance we'd ever make it to Easter Island or Ethiopia or the jungles of Guatemala. Because they were so far out of the way and there were so many other things to see and places to go in the world, traveling to remote areas would always fall into the category of *Maybe one day . . .* and I was fairly certain that *one day* would never come.

But here was the chance to do it all in one fell swoop, and ten minutes later—once the cacophony in the living room had died down as mysteriously as it had arisen—I was standing in the kitchen with my wife, the brochure open on the counter. I pointed out the highlights like a kid describing summer camp, and my wife, who has long since grown used to my flights of fancy, simply listened as I rambled on. When I finished, she nodded.

“Mmm . . .” she said.

“Is that a good mmm, or a bad mmm?”

“Neither. I’m just wondering why you’re showing me this. It’s not like we can go.”

“I know,” I said. “I just thought you might like to see it.”

My wife, who knows me better than anyone, knew there was more to it than that.

“Mmm,” she said.

Two days later, my wife and I were walking through the neighborhood. Our oldest sons were ahead of us, the other three kids were in strollers, when I brought the subject up again.

“I was thinking about that trip,” I said, oh-so-casually.

“What trip?”

“The one that goes around the world. The one in the brochure that I showed you.”

“Why?”

“Well . . .” I took a deep breath. “Would you like to go?”

She took a few steps before answering. “Of course I’d like to go,” she said. “It looks amazing, but it’s impossible. I can’t leave the kids for three weeks. What if something happened? There’s not a chance that we could get back in an emergency. How many flights even go to a place like Easter Island? Lexie and Savannah are still babies, and they need me. All of them need me . . .” She trailed off. “Maybe other mothers could go, but not me.”

I nodded. I already knew what her answer would be.

“Would you mind if I went?”

She looked over at me. I already traveled extensively for my work, doing book tours two to three months a year, and my trips were always hard on the family. Though I wasn’t always willing to dive headfirst into the chaos, I’m not *completely* worthless around the house. Cat has a schedule that frequently gets her out of the house—she has occasional breakfasts with friends, volunteers regularly at school, exercises at the gym, plays bunco with a group of ladies, and runs errands—and we both know she *needs* to get out of the house to keep from going crazy. In those moments I end up being solo dad. But when I’m gone, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for her to do anything outside the house. This is not good for my wife’s state of mind.

In addition, our kids like having *both* of us around. When I’m gone, if you can imagine it, the chaos in the house multiplies, as if filling the void of my absence. Suffice it to say, my wife gets tired of my traveling. She understands it’s part of my job, but it doesn’t mean that she likes it.

Thus, my question was a fraught one.

“Is it really that important to you?” she finally asked.

“No,” I said honestly. “If you don’t want me to go, I won’t. But I’d like to.”

“And you’d go alone?”

I shook my head. “Actually, I was thinking about going with Micah,” I said, referring to my brother.

We walked in silence for a few moments before she caught my eye. “I think,” she said, “that would be a wonderful idea.”

After Cat and I returned from our walk—and still in a state of partial disbelief—I went to my office to call my brother in California.

I could hear the phone ringing, the sound more distant than that on a landline. Micah never answered his home phone; if I wanted to talk to him, I had to dial his cellular.

“Hey Nicky,” he chirped. “What’s going on?”

My brother has caller ID, and still tends to call me by my childhood name. I was, in fact, called Nicky until the fifth grade.

“I have something I think you’ll be interested in.”

“Do tell.”

“I got this brochure in the mail and . . . anyway, to make a long story short, I was wondering if you want to go with me on a trip around the world. In January.”

“What kind of trip?”

I spent the next few minutes describing the highlights, flipping through the brochure as I spoke. When I finished, he was quiet on the other end.

“Really?” he asked. “And Cat’s going to let you go?”

“She said she would.” I hesitated. “Look, I know it’s a big decision, so I don’t need an answer now. We’ve got plenty of time until we have to confirm. I just wanted to get you thinking about it. I mean, I’m sure you’ll have to clear it with Christine. Three weeks is a long time.”

Christine is my brother’s wife; in the background, I could hear the faint cries of their newborn baby girl, Peyton.

“I’m sure she’ll think it’s okay. But I’ll check and call you back.”

“Do you want me to send the brochure?”

“Of course,” he said. “I should probably know where we’re going, right?”

“I’ll FedEx it today,” I said. “And Micah?”

“Yeah?”

“This is going to be the trip of our lives.”

“I’m sure it will be, little brother.” I could almost see Micah grinning on the other end. “It will be.”

We said our good-byes, and after hanging up the phone I found myself eyeing the family photographs that line the shelves of my office. For the most part, the pictures are of the kids: I saw my children as infants and as toddlers; there was a Christmas photograph of all five of them, taken only a couple of months earlier. Beside that stood a photograph of Cathy, and on impulse I reached for the frame, thinking of the sacrifice she'd just made.

No, she wasn't thrilled with the idea of me leaving for three weeks. Nor was she thrilled that I wouldn't be around to help with our five children; instead, she'd shoulder the load while I traveled the world.

Why then, had she said yes?

As I've said, my wife understands me better than anyone, and knew my urgent desire to go had less to do with the trip itself than spending time with my brother.

This, then, is a story about brotherhood.

It's the story of Micah and me, and the story of our family. It's a story of tragedy and joy, hope and support. It's the story of how he and I have matured and changed and taken different paths in life, but somehow grown even closer. It is, in other words, the story of two journeys; one journey that took my brother and me to exotic places around the world, and another, a lifetime in the making, that has led us to become the best of friends.

CHAPTER 1



Many stories begin with a simple lesson learned, and our family's story is no exception. For brevity's sake, I'll summarize.

In the beginning, we children were conceived. And the lesson learned—at least according to my Catholic mother—goes like this:

“Always remember,” she told me, “that no matter what the church tells you, the rhythm method *doesn't* work.”

I looked up at her, twelve years old at the time. “You mean to say that we were all *accidents*?”

“Yep. Each and every one of you.”

“But good accidents, right?”

She smiled. “The very best kind.”

Still, after hearing this story, I wasn't sure quite what to think. On one hand, it was obvious that my mom didn't regret having us. On the other hand, it wasn't good for my ego to think of myself as an accident, or to wonder whether my sudden appearance in the world came about because of one too many glasses of champagne. Still, it did serve to clear things up for me, for I'd always wondered why our parents hadn't waited before having children. They certainly weren't ready for us, but then, I'm not exactly sure they'd been ready for marriage either.

Both my parents were born in 1942, and with World War II in its early stages, both my grandfathers served in the military. My paternal grandfather was a career officer; my dad, Patrick Michael Sparks, spent his childhood moving from one military base to the next, and growing up largely in the care of his mother. He was the oldest of five siblings, highly intelligent, and attended boarding school in England before his acceptance at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. It was there that he met my mom, Jill Emma Marie Thoene.

Like my dad, my mom was the oldest child in her family. She had three younger brothers and sisters, and was mostly raised in Nebraska where she developed a lifelong love of horses. Her father was an entrepreneur who ran a number of different businesses in the course of his life. When my mom was a teenager, he owned a movie theater in Lyons, a tiny town of a few hundred people nestled just off the highway in the midst of farmland. According to my mom, the theater was part of the reason she'd attended boarding school as well. Supposedly, she'd been sent away because she'd been caught kissing a boy, though when I asked about it, my grandmother adamantly denied it. "Your mother always was a storyteller," my grandmother informed me. "She used to make up the darnedest things, just to get a reaction from you kids."

“So why did you ship her off to boarding school?”

“Because of all the murders,” my grandmother said. “Lots of young girls were getting killed in Lyons back then.”

I see.

Anyway, after boarding school, my mother headed off to Creighton University just like my dad, and I suppose it was the similarities between my parents’ lives that first sparked their interest in each other. Whatever the reason, they began dating as sophomores, and gradually fell in love. They courted for a little more than a year, and were both twenty-one when they married on August 31, 1963, prior to the beginning of their senior year in college.

A few months later, the rhythm method failed and my mom learned the first of her three lessons. Micah was born on December 1, 1964. By spring, she was pregnant again, and I followed on December 31, 1965. By the following spring, she was pregnant with my sister, Dana, and decided that from that point on, she would take birth control matters into her own hands.

After graduation, my dad chose to pursue a master’s degree in business at the University of Minnesota and the family moved near Watertown in the autumn of 1966. My sister, Dana, was born, like me, on December 31, and my mother stayed home to raise us while my father went to school during the day and tended bar at night.

Because my parents couldn’t afford much in the way of rent, we lived miles from town in an old farmhouse that my mother swore was haunted. Years later, she told me that she used to see and hear things late at night—crying, laughing, and whispered conversations—but as soon as she would get up to check on us, the noises would fade away.

A likelier explanation was that she was hallucinating. Not because she was crazy—my mom was probably the most stable person I’ve ever known—but because she must have

spent those first few years in a foggy world of utter exhaustion. And I don't mean the kind of exhaustion easily remedied by a couple of days of sleeping in late. I mean the kind of unending physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that makes a person look like they've been swirled around in circles by their earlobes for hours before being plunked down at the kitchen table in front of you. Her life must have been absolute *hell*. Beginning at age twenty-five, with three babies in *cloth* diapers—with the exception of those times when her mother came to visit—she was completely isolated for the next two years. There was no family nearby to lend support, we were poor as dirt, and we lived in the middle of nowhere. Nor could my mom so much as venture into the nearest town, for my father took the car with him to both school and work. Throw in a couple of Minnesota winters where snow literally reached the roof, subtract my always busy dad from the equation, throw in the unending whining and crying of babies and toddlers, and even then I'm not sure it's possible to imagine how miserable she must have been. Nor was my father much help—at that point in his life, he simply couldn't. I've often wondered why he didn't get a regular job, but he didn't, and it was all he could do to work and study and attend his classes. He would leave first thing in the morning and return long after everyone else had gone to bed. So with the exception of three little kids, my mother had absolutely no one to talk to. She must have gone days or even weeks without having a single adult conversation.

Because he was the oldest, my mom saddled Micah with responsibilities far beyond his years—certainly with more responsibility than I'd ever trust *my* kids with. My mom was notorious for drumming old-fashioned, midwestern values into our heads and my brother's command soon became, "It's your job to take care of your brother and sister, no matter what." Even at three, he did. He helped feed me and my



sister, bathed us, entertained us, watched us as we toddled around the yard. There are pictures in our family albums of Micah rocking my sister to sleep while feeding her a bottle, despite the fact that he wasn't all that much bigger than she was. I've come to understand that it was good for him, because a person has to *learn* a sense of responsibility. It doesn't magically appear one day, simply because you suddenly need it. But I think that because Micah was frequently treated as an adult, he actually believed he *was* an adult, and that certain rights were owed him. I suppose that's what led to an almost adult sense of stubborn entitlement long before he started school.

My earliest memory, in fact, is about my brother. I was two and a half—Micah a year older—on a late-summer weekend, and the grass was about a foot high. My dad was getting ready to mow the lawn and had pulled the lawn mower out from the shed. Now Micah loved the lawn mower, and I vaguely remember my brother pleading with my father to let him mow the lawn, despite the fact that he wasn't even strong enough to push it. My dad said no, of course, but my brother—all thirty pounds of him—couldn't see the logic of the situation. Nor, he told me later, was he going to put up with such nonsense.

In his own words, "I decided to run away."

Now, I know what you're thinking. *He's three and a half years old—how far could he go?* My oldest son, Miles, used to threaten to run away at that age, too, and my wife and I responded thus: "Go ahead. Just make sure you don't go any farther than the corner." Miles, being the gentle and fearful child that he was, would indeed go no farther than the corner, where my wife and I would watch him from the kitchen window.

Not my brother. No, his thinking went like this: "I'm going to run *far away*, and since I'm always supposed to take care of my brother and sister, then I guess I have to take them with me."

So he did. He loaded my eighteen-month-old sister in the wagon, took my hand, and sneaking behind the hedges so my parents couldn't see us, began leading us to town. Town, by the way, was two miles away, and the only way to get there was to cross a busy two-lane highway.

We nearly made it, too. I remember marching through fields with weeds nearly as tall as I was, watching butterflies explode into the summer sky. We kept going for what seemed like forever before finally reaching the highway. There we stood on the shoulder of the road—three children

under four, mind you, and one in *diapers*—buffeted by powerful gusts of wind as eighteen-wheelers and cars rushed past us at sixty miles an hour, no more than a couple of feet away. I remember my brother telling me, “You have to run fast when I tell you,” and the sounds of honking horns and screeching tires after he screamed “Run!” while I toddled across the road, trying to keep up with him.

After that, things are a little sketchy. I remember getting tired and hungry, and finally crawling into the wagon with my sister, while my brother dragged us along like Balto, the lead husky, pushing through Alaskan snow. But I also remember being proud of him. This was *fun*, this was an *adventure*. And despite everything, I felt safe. Micah would take care of me, and my command from my mother had always been, “Do what your brother tells you.”

Even then, I did as I was told. Unlike my brother, I would grow up doing what I was told.

Sometime later, I remember heading over a bridge and up a hill; once we reached the top, we could see the town in the valley below. Years later, I understood that we must have been gone for *hours*—little legs can only cover two miles so fast—and I vaguely remember my brother promising us some ice cream to eat. Just then, we heard shouting, and as I looked over my shoulder, I saw my mother, frantically rushing up the road behind us. She was screaming at us to STOP! while wildly waving a flyswatter over her head.

That’s what she used to punish us, by the way. The flyswatter.

My brother hated the flyswatter.

Micah was unquestionably the most frequent recipient of the flyswatter punishment. My mom liked it because even though it *stung*, it didn’t really *hurt*, and it made a loud noise when connecting with the diaper or through pants. The sound

was what really got to you—it's like the popping of a balloon—and to this day, I still feel a strange sort of retributive glee when I swat insects in my home.

It wasn't long after the first time Micah ran away that he did it again. For whatever reason, he got in trouble, and this time it was my dad who went for the flyswatter. By then, Micah had grown tired of this particular punishment, so when he saw my father reaching for it, he said firmly, "You're not going to swat me with it."

My dad turned, flyswatter in hand, and that's when Micah took off. Sitting in the living room, I watched as my four-year-old brother raced from the kitchen, flew by me, and headed up the stairs with my dad close behind. I heard the thumping upstairs as my brother performed various, unknown acrobatics in the bedroom, and a moment later, he was zipping back down the stairs, past me again, through the kitchen and blasting through the back door, moving faster than I'd ever seen him move.

My dad, huffing and puffing—he was a lifelong smoker—rumbled down the stairs, and followed him. I didn't see either of them again for hours. After it was dark, when I was already in bed, I looked up to see my mom leading Micah into our room. My mom tucked him in bed and kissed him on the cheek. Despite the darkness, I could see he was filthy; smeared with dirt, he looked like he'd spent the past few hours underground. As soon as she left, I asked Micah what happened.

"I told him he wasn't going to swat me," he said.

"Did he?"

"No. He couldn't catch me. Then he couldn't find me."

I smiled, thinking, *I knew you'd make it.*