



Reluctant Press

The Promise



Maggie Finson

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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THE PROMISE

By Maggie Finson

CHAPTER ONE: REMEMBERING

Lisa was my twin, and I recall her with a warmth that still fills me with pleasure every time I think of her. Warmth mixed with loss, memories of pain endured and overcome, and of a promise made that I'm still keeping. Will keep for the rest of my life, even though it turned my existence up-side down.

As a result of that promise, two people are happy, who maybe never would have been that way again, before I made and followed through on it. Barry Anderson, Lisa's husband and my lifelong friend is one of those. And even though I would have denied it once the full implications of that promise to a dying woman became clear, I am the other.

Both Barry and I have had good, no make that wonderful, lives since I made good on my words. Even if doing so involved taking things to an extreme no one who took part in the events would have believed possible for me to do at the start of this.

But that's something for later in my story, all the grief, anger, fears, eventual reconciliations, and genuine love will unfold through the telling and I don't want to get ahead of things. Another promise I made, to myself and the memory of Lisa, was to tell this as it happened, from start to finish without skipping from one part to another.

Remembering can be both something of joy and pain, or a neutral thing without the color of real life if you hold the emotions of recalled events at arm's length or dismiss them altogether. I sometimes envy those who can do the latter, but not

so often as I used to. My own recollections of both my sister and my experiences with her while she lived remain as vivid to me as the days when they happened.

The Times of Joy still bring smiles to my face. After these many years, The Times of Grief, with the gaping holes it left in more than one soul and life still cause me no little pain, and some tears. Because I still miss my sister, and love her more than I am able to express. I wouldn't have it any other way.

So I'll go on remembering you, Lisa. So will a lot of other people, through my agency. And, as things have turned out, that isn't such a bad thing for any of us.

But all that will be made clear as this story progresses. For now, it's enough to start telling it.

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Lisa and I, named Peter by my parents, were born in 1962, to Eugene and Mary Beth Hennessey. Fraternal twins, we still looked startlingly alike up into adulthood, and as children were as near to identical as two people could be without being the same sex.

This caused me some not so small difficulties while growing up. We had both inherited my mother's fine bones, delicate features, and petite stature, along with my father's Irish green eyes, flame red hair, and light creamy complexion. The results were quite lovely in Lisa, who grew into a stunningly beautiful little girl and, later, young woman.

In me, those traits took the same path without the secondary sexual development Lisa had by the age of fourteen.

To quote my Aunt Audrey, father's sister, when she thought I was out of hearing, "The poor little fellow is much too pretty for a boy. I hope that doesn't give him too much grief later on in life."

I eventually shed my girlish appearance as I matured, but never became one of those well muscled, jock types in spite of well defined masculine shape, and very carefully calculated male responses to minimize my girlishness. But I always was pretty, and if I didn't keep my thick hair, that always tended to natural waves and curls, cut short looked more like an immature girl than otherwise.

So, I got past that by; choosing clothing that accented first my boyishness, then my maturing masculinity, being quite active in any sport I could participate in, and not worrying over things I was unable to change.

All in all, I grew up fairly well adjusted, and outwardly confident of my own sexuality, no matter what private leanings in orientation I wrestled with. If other people worried about the way I looked, I decided early on it was their problem not mine. I knew I was, physically male, and did my best to be that in all I did.

At five foot six, and weighing one hundred and twenty-five pounds, with thick red hair, embarrassingly large green eyes, and delicately featured face, I may not have been the most prepossessing of males, but as mentioned before, I was male.

Lisa went the opposite direction almost immediately. She was always feminine, and showed it in both her choice of clothing and behavior from an early age. Where my hair remained short, hers became an awe inspiring mane she cared for diligently. Where I, quite naturally, entered into the boy's games and roughhousing with a bent that was almost suicidal at times, she avoided even the usual tom-boy phase many girls went through and devoted her time to helping mom around the house, or just doing girl things.

We seemed complete opposites in behavior, likes, dislikes, and inclinations, but without the frequent disagreements often endured by brothers and sisters. That lack of fighting mystified a great many people, as did our single minded pursuit of things traditionally accepted as proper for our genders. Most people we knew simply considered it as an expression of our very real love for each other, and an early maturity in respect for the other's personality differences. In spite of seeming so divergent, we seldom clashed, and shared intimacies that normal brother and sister relationships seldom showed.

There was a reason for all that, our apparent lack of need to experiment 'with the other side', as many children do, our early acceptance of traditional gender roles and activities. Lisa and I were much, much closer than anyone suspected.

It sometimes happens with twins, that each of the pair is aware on some level, call it psychic or whatever, of the other. Lisa and I had such an awareness of each other. One that went far deeper than simply feeling vague things in relation to what the other was going through.

We had a connection to one another that was akin to telepathy, able to communicate non verbally and know what was going on with each other without being told. We were able to share experiences, learn what the other twin did as he or she went through it, and even actively participate at times in the other's activities through each other's senses.

So, Lisa had no need to play ball, or rough and tumble as I did, while I had no requirement to try playing with dolls or experimenting with feminine behaviors. We each knew without that. Lisa knew, from that awareness, what it was to be a boy. I, in turn, learned with a soul deep certainty what it was like to be a girl, and how that felt.

At times, it was like being one person with two bodies, our connection was that intimate.

We learned to separate our own individual psyches out of self defense, but shared each other's lives while growing up to such an extent that it was like living two separate existences, one male, the other female.

Spooky, I suppose, if you haven't experienced such a thing. We learned early on not to let our playmates, or adults, notice.

On our fourth birthday I innocently let slip how much I had loved playing with Lisa's new dolly and the feel of her new party dress when everyone except my sister and I were positive I hadn't either held the doll or even touched the dress.

Or the time Lisa began screaming in pain while clutching her arm for no apparent reason. I had fallen out of a tree and broken mine, she had ridden the air down to the hard ground with me.

Then there was the time I abruptly found my mind transported to Mrs. Benning's fourth grade class while I was suppose to be attending Mrs. White's class across the hall. I was in Mrs. Benning's class wearing Lisa's new everyday dress and taking the math test she had been terrified of failing. Meanwhile, she was 'me' attending Mrs. White's class.

And when I got sick during her first period, and she went through my first sexual self stimulation, those incidents were terribly embarrassing to both of us for obviously different reasons.

We had tried describing our experiences to others, with the result being strange looks, and having ourselves told by the adults who heard us that we had wonderful imaginations, but probably shouldn't be so graphic when we allowed them to roam. Our peers simply thought we were weird the few times they were told.

So it was our secret, and one we each alternately delighted in or hated, depending upon what the situation was.

But we treasured our closeness, and were always conscious of the other's presence, and doings, no matter how far apart we might have been physically.

Such an intimate attachment to one another might have resulted in our becoming introverted, and secretive to the point of unhealthy attachment to each other. It didn't.

Instead, we both became quite popular with our peers, teachers, and relatives. Being so well aware of what the other sex liked, and expected was something we used shamelessly, and though I was less enthusiastically extroverted than my sister, both of us were open, friendly, and easily accepted even in a new group.

So our growing up was reasonably normal, and we emerged as well adjusted teen-agers in an era when maladjustment was considered common.

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In 1980 we had just graduated high school and were preparing to go our separate ways to university, myself to a nearby State school where I planned to major in Computer Science, and Lisa to the City University for pre-Law. Both schools were good ones for the careers we had chosen, and we were anticipating getting started with unrestrained excitement.

Our father had done well in the financial community, with interests in several banks, apartment complexes, and real estate which had grown as we did. Paying for our educations wasn't something that hung over our heads like it did for so many of our friends, and we had lived fairly well up to then.

Our parents had left for a well deserved vacation several days before, going to visit friends in California, then on to Hawaii for another two weeks, which left Lisa and I alone in the house.

My sister sailed into my room following a rapid knock and settled on my still unmade bed with a wide grin.

“Hi, good looking.”

I watched her long tanned legs, trim waist, and wealth of flame red hair bounce on my mattress, noting that she wasn't wearing a bra by the way her well shaped breasts swayed with her motion. I looked into her wide, mischievous green eyes.

“What's going on, Sis?”

“Just wanted to tell you how much I like Julie.” She was referring to my latest girlfriend, a willowy blonde from across town who hadn't met Lisa yet. “She's nice, and likes you a lot.”

I winced at her grin.

The night before I had suddenly found myself underneath Barry, her boyfriend and my own long-time buddy for several uncomfortable minutes of wrestling while Lisa checked Julie out through my senses.

“Remind me to get even for that one, lady. Maybe like getting you to listen in to what the guys in the gym locker room say about you. I like Barry, but not enough to do that with him, if you know what I mean.”

“But I already know what they say about me, and it isn't all that bad. Besides, Barry likes you,” she giggled.

“He wouldn't if he found out what happened last night,” I groused, not really angry but acting as if I was to go along with the joke. “You're the one he's got his sights on, not me riding your body. At least give me some warning next time, okay? I just about knocked him off the couch last night.”

“Then I started being extra nice to him to make up for `my' clumsiness.” My sister's grin widened. “Just remember, that if I get pregnant, you get to go along for the ride, sweetie.”

“Point taken.” I shuddered at the thought. I still got sick with her during the worst of her periods, and wasn't looking forward to her first pregnancy for the same reasons. “But surely you didn't just come in to tease me about last night?”

“Nooo,” Lisa fiddled with my bedspread before glancing up at me from under her lashes. “But you already know what I'm going to ask you.”

“I'm not going out with Angela, Lisa,” I sighed, grimacing at what I recalled of Barry's obnoxious cousin. “We've been through that. Last time she was here, I went to that Halloween party with her, and I am still living it down.”

“That was two years ago,” Lisa frowned, then brightened. “She's really grown into a beauty, and isn't at all like she was last time. You'll like her, Pete. Really.”

Angela and I had switched roles for our costumes, and embarrassingly, I had made a better looking girl than she did. Plus she had compounded things by going out of her way to be courtly, and exaggeratedly masculine that whole evening, much to my discomfiture.

Being a girl as Lisa was one thing at the odd times, but doing so as Peter was something I wasn't interested in at all.

Lisa had been after me all week to double with her and Barry once Angela arrived. She had even gone so far as to show me photos of Barry's cousin and, to be fair Angela, had lost the skinny angularity I remembered her having and blossomed into a very attractive young woman.

“She's too pushy,” I argued.

“She just knows what she wants,” Lisa countered, “and isn't afraid to go after it.”

“Just like you,” I sighed, knowing that any point I brought up would be smoothly handled until I ended up seeming like a jerk by refusing. “Only I can't figure out what made her decide it's me she wants. We hardly know each other any more.”

“She's nice,” Lisa assured me, “and still has a crush on you after all these years.”

Angela had chased me mercilessly for years while we were growing up, as Lisa had pursued Barry, though my best friend still thought he'd done the stalking and made the catch. I had actually been relieved when Angela's family had moved to another city five years before and made no pretenses otherwise since.

But there sat the most important person in my life giving me long, soulful looks that implored me to go ahead and give it at least one try before I wrote off my friend's cousin once and for all.

“All right,” I blew out a breath through puffed cheeks, already basking in my sister's happiness. “I'll give it a shot. This time and this time only.”

“Great!” Lisa rose at the end of a bounce on my mattress, seeming to gracefully arc through the air to hug me. “If it's too awful, I'll swap with you for the evening, until we can get her home to bed, okay?”

“And leave me to handle your randy boyfriend?” I frowned in mock fury. “Again?”

“No thanks, I'll take my chances with his randy cousin if it's all the same to you.” I finished with a lopsided grin. “Besides, you have so much fun with Barry, I'd feel like a real heel making you endure Angela while I got to play with your husband to be.”

“Don't you dare tell him anything about that,” Lisa glowered at me for a second, then chuckled. “He doesn't know about that part of my plan yet.”

“Sure he does,” I teased. “You've had to notice all those stars in his eyes, and he goes all mushy off and on when we talk about you. Especially when he asks me what you're planning after this summer. I bet he asks you before you start school just to get his claim registered.”

“Which I will duly accept,” Lisa grinned. “I've worked too hard to hook him and bring him in to let him go, you know. Even have my net ready to scoop him up. Provided he'll wait till I get through school.”

“Barry would wait until the second coming if you asked him to,” I snorted. “The guy's head over heels in love, has been since either one of you finally learned the important difference between boys and girls.”

“But like most guys,” my sister's eyes twinkled at that, since she never included me among “most guys” thanks to our unique sharing of perspectives, “he still hasn't admitted to it.”

“Don't worry,” I assured her, “he will.”

“It's great having such an understanding brother,” Lisa hugged me tightly. “Especially one who really knows what being a sister is like.”

“I love you, too,” I murmured, returning her hug with a smile. “And not just because you know what it's like being a brother, either.”

Angela's pictures hadn't done her any justice at all. I just about polished my shoes with the underside of my jaw when Barry's cousin swirled out of the room she was using at his place. Blonde hair that I recalled as being straight and lifeless, was now a thickly glossy mane of pure gold waves framing a face I equated with paintings of angels I'd seen. She was neither skinny or awkward any longer, showing the graceful economy of motion you see in professional dancers, and a trim, inviting figure that I knew had just about every normally sexed guy who saw her in fits.

All of this was packaged in a snug violet summer dress that left her shoulders bare and showed more than enough smoothly luscious leg to fire the imagination of a dead man.

But I'd already seen all of that, except the unstudied grace of her movements. The thing that really transcended any photograph, or painting, of anyone, especially Angela, was her personality. I felt her energy, and warmth, the minute she entered the room, and wondered how I had ever thought of her as obnoxious.

Her nervousness about seeing me again was well hidden, though clear enough to me through tiny gestures and hesitations someone not well versed in feminine behavior would likely have missed.

She wanted to impress me, had gone to a great deal of trouble to look just right for the meeting, and was terrified that I wouldn't like her. But she was also determined that I would.

“Hi, Pete,” was her simple greeting, in a voice that had grown rich over the past few years, changing from the piping shrill soprano I winced at remembering into a silky contralto that stroked my ears, even saying nothing more than that.

“Earth to Pete,” my sister's amusement wafted through my mind as she nudged me while whispering into my ear. “You might want to say hello back to her. That is considered the polite thing to do, you know.”

My grin was wide enough to park a fair sized truck in, as I did just that. “Hi, Angela. It's good to see you again.”

Her smile in response sent skyrockets into that normally dark region behind the eyes, and we spent the next hour or so exchanging small talk, getting to know each other all over again.

During that time, I caught the mixture of amusement and satisfaction from Lisa and her, “Gotcha!”

At that stage, I had already forgotten about Julie, or any other girl I'd been dating over the past several years. There was an electricity between myself and Angela that both of us felt from the beginning of that evening. One that never faded as long as we were together.

“Told you you'd like Angel, ol' buddy,” Barry grinned down at me from his six foot three height as the girls were taking care of their little last minute details before we set out for the dinner and then movie we'd planned on going to.

Barry looked like the perfect image of a well to do jock, with his height, and a breadth of muscle to throw into the mix. Carefully cut and combed black hair, sweeping above deep blue eyes that belied his exterior if one was perceptive enough to look past his size, still insisted on falling across his forehead no matter how often he tried to keep it neat.

We had first met before even starting kindergarten, with his family living down the street and his parents involved in the same business and activities as mine. Always big for his age, with me always on the other end, we seemed about as unlikely to become friends and remain that way as just about anyone. But we had both shared the stigmata of being different, because of our respective sizes, and my girlish appearance thrown in. We bonded, and remained close friends throughout grade school, then high school when our activities diverged somewhat.

Barry had played football, while I excelled at track and gymnastics. He was attending pre-Law courses in the fall at the city university along with Lisa. He was paying for school with his own money, though a full scholarship for football had been offered. His opinion on that was that someone who needed the money should have the help to get an education. Just one of the qualities that endeared him to my sister, and myself.

He also had the brains for Law School, and had taken advance courses through his senior year to prepare for that, with his usual straight A average.

I enthusiastically approved his interest in Lisa, and her return of that. Barry had always been a good kid, and was growing into an impressive young man. But where I had grown up tough minded, and working past things I could do nothing about and not sparing much anguish for what I couldn't change, Barry had sailed through life with ease up to that stage.

Lisa and I had helped him through some problems off and on, that either one of us would have shrugged off, and I privately worried about how my friend might respond to a real crisis in his life. These were worries that proved to be well founded in later years. I was sure he would have Lisa's strength to draw upon if the need ever came up, and my own if he required it.

None of that, however, was foremost in my mind just then. I grinned back at my friend, then cast a glance toward the stairway the girls had gone up to put on their finishing touches before leaving.

“Okay, so you and Lisa were right,” I agreed, then questioned with a chuckle. “Like usual, I might add. Doesn't it get a little boring being right all the time?”

“Nope,” Barry kept grinning. “You're the major subject of conversations I've had with Angel all year long. I knew she was right for you, and you were for her. Glad you didn't have to be pulled out of the house kicking and screaming to see her again.”

“You'd have done that, too,” I accused.

“You bet I would have,” Barry grinned even wider, “And you'd have been thanking me for doing it the rest of your miserable life.”

“Thank you,” I responded on cue as the girls returned. “I hope that once will do for now.”

“Hah,” he responded with a companionable clap on my shoulder that nearly propelled me into Angela and Lisa with it's consciously applied force. “That'll do for now. Be nice to my cousin, okay?”

“I will,” came my own reply. And I was.

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The next week was pure heaven for me, getting intimately acquainted with Angela. I opened up with her in ways I'd never done with anyone but Lisa. We found that we had always been in love with each other no matter how I protested the fact.

“You were always so good to me,” Angela brought the fact up during one of our frequent conversations. “When all the other boys were picking on me for being skinny, gawky, and ugly, you never did. Defended me, off and on as I recall, when Barry wasn't around to do it.”

I'd taken some lumps from the other guys over that, but I just couldn't allow myself to be drawn into the cruel teasing and nasty pranks, on the girl. Nor could I let my group of friends get away with it. My admittedly odd sense of perspective helped, along with the sharing I held so closely with my sister. There was no way I ever did anything to purposely make any girl feel bad about herself unless she had asked for it. Angela never did, but received the brunt of children's, and later, early teenager's cruelty simply because she was so awkward.

"I made up my mind that I was going to marry you by the time we were twelve," she went on, snuggling closer to me on the bench of the local watering hole I'd taken her to for a few drinks and some dancing. "I think I loved you back then, though I didn't know what it was I felt. Then after that disaster on Halloween, I thought I'd blown it forever. I really am sorry for the way I behaved."

"No need for apologies," I shrugged. "You weren't really out of line, after all, we were switching roles for the night. I was just going through one of my bad times about the way I looked, and that night just seemed to point out that I was still more girlish than the man I thought I had become. Stupid, really, but things happen."

"Does it still bother you?" she seriously questioned, with a concerned look at me.

"No," I grinned easily as I thought of the heartache reaching that state of mind had caused me, then gave a small laugh. "Things were a little shaky for me a couple of years ago, but I know what I am, and that is definitely not a girl."

"I'm sure glad of that," her hand gave my leg a squeeze then moved up to tease my crotch, telling me wordlessly exactly what she was glad of at the moment.

"So am I," my answer came out as a combination of gasp and chuckle as her hand kept teasing. "You'd better stop that if you don't want me to cause more excitement around here than they've had since Carolynne Saunders got blotto and decided to show everyone what she really had under that dress."

We were rapidly reaching that stage when a heart rending flash of grief hit me followed with an empty numbness that had a cold sweat forming on my forehead before I actually realized where the feeling had come from. Something had hit Lisa hard, and I couldn't reach through the waves of grief to discover what it was.

"Are you okay?" Angela asked, giving my pale face and trembling hands a frightened look. "You just acted like someone rammed an icicle up your backside."

"I have to call home," I told her. "Right now."

Lisa's voice, dead with shock, answered on the fifth ring. "Pete, you need to get home, it's mom and dad."

"What happened?" I pressed, already motioning for Angela to call the waitress so I could settle up the bill.

"They're dead, Pete," my sister sobbed into the phone. "A small plane crash in the mountains."

"Get Barry over there," I told her, going numb with shock myself, but concerned enough for her to put that aside for the moment.

"He's already here," she informed me. "Just get here fast, please?"

"On my way, Sis," I don't even know if I replaced the receiver on its hook, barely taking time to toss a twenty on our table and abruptly waving Angela out of her chair.

I drove like a maniac getting home, with a silent Angela holding to her seat like it would eject her in a heartbeat if she didn't hang on with every ounce of strength she possessed. In my frantic need to get home, it might have.

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The funeral passed in a continuous wave of gray, though I know it was cheerfully sunny through the entire proceeding. Lisa and I managed to thank everyone for their concern, and to sit in William Davidson's office while the will was read.

Davidson had been a long time family friend, and had put in good references for both Lisa and Barry when they had applied to Law School through his own connections as a practicing lawyer.

We were well set up, with trust funds for education and living expenses that would be opened to each of us until we reached the age of twenty-five or graduated university, whichever happened first. After that, we stood to inherit a tidy fortune, in property and cash that would insure neither one of us needed anything for the rest of our lives provided we were careful with how we managed things.

Alone with each other for the first time since the tragic news had hit us, Lisa and I simply stared at each other for a short time without voicing anything. We already knew how the other felt, miserable. We winced in concert at reminders of the loved ones we had so recently lost.

Barry had gone to the airport with Angela, who was making a flying trip home to finalize arrangements on financial aid for her own upcoming college education. She would attend the same school I had chosen, and would be back in several days.

"Angela has been a real champ with you through all this," Lisa told me. "I'm glad for that."

"You having Barry around wasn't such a bad thing either," I pointed out. "For either one of us."

Our friends, and lovers, as it turned out, had hovered on the periphery as our grief ran its course, then swooped in to offer whatever comfort they were able once the initial numbing shocks had worn off.

"Hard to believe they won't ever be back," Lisa idly picked up a porcelain figurine I'd bought for one of mom's birthdays.

"I'm still here," I assured her. "And always will be, Sis."

"I know," she smiled and I felt the caress of her mind against mine. "Just like I'll never leave you."

"We'll get through this," I promised, fighting the heavy feeling of emptiness that threatened to overwhelm everything else, now that we were back home and surrounded with so many bittersweet reminders.

“Together, like always,” Lisa responded, carefully replacing the elfin statuette on the table where it had held a place of honor for years.

“Never doubt it, Sis.” I hugged her fiercely while making the promise. “Never doubt it.”

CHAPTER TWO TIMES OF JOY

We did get through it. Sharing the pain helps, especially when doing so happens on such a deep level. That unspoken sense of a nearby loving presence that was always with me, and my presence in Lisa's mind eased us both through a very difficult time of adjustment.

It was the day before I was supposed to leave for university, something I had thought about canceling for a while, or at least attending classes in town so Lisa and I wouldn't be separated by even the fifty miles between home and the State University I was going to.

“Don't worry about me so much,” Lisa smiled, having regained her bounciness and verve for life in general fairly rapidly. “Barry will be around, You'll only be an hour away, and just think of how disappointed Angela will be if you don't show up there as scheduled.”

I promised you I wouldn't leave.” I still had my doubts about going, even when Angela had gone on ahead to get the apartment we would be sharing ready for us.

“You won't be leaving, silly boy,” Lisa teased while giving my hair a mock severe yank, then tapping a fingertip against her head and chest. “You'll still be here, just like I'll still be there.”

She repeated the motions with my own head and chest. “Nothing will ever separate us from that, you know.”

“I know,” I sighed, then shrugged. “We have lives of our own to start living, as you so insistently keep telling me.”

“It isn't as if you wouldn't know what happens to me as it does,” she needlessly added. “If you're really good, I'll let you peek in off and on, too.”

“When you're nosing into my affairs, probably,” I grumbled, then softened it with another smile.

“Goes both ways, brother,” she teased. “If you pry too much yourself, I might just arrange for you to find yourself on the bottom again when Barry and I are making love.”

“I'll behave,” my fervent promise had both of us laughing.

“I'll always be there,” Lisa promised softly, referring to my life and not the other position mentioned.. “You of all people should know that. Always.”

“Close as a thought,” I added with a nod. “Take care of yourself, Sis, and of Barry now that I won't be around to watch out for the big lunk.”

“Be sure of it,” she gave me a serious look that quickly dissolved into another mischief filled grin. “You'll be much too busy keeping your Angel happy to worry about either me or Barry.”

“Keeping up with her can be a wearing experience,” I responded with a yawn that had nothing to do with the pace of living in general that my fiancée maintained.

“You sure didn't seem backward about asking her to marry you,” Lisa chuckled, “In spite of the pace you have to run just to keep up with her.”

“Nope,” I returned with another yawn. “Getting late, Sis, and I've got to get an early start in the morning. Tell that gloating future brother-in-law of mine that I would have forgiven him for pulling me out of the house kicking and screaming to get reacquainted with his cousin, and that I said he'd better get around to asking you what I asked her last week.”

“I'll be sure to do that,” Lisa laughed, then leaned over to place a kiss on my forehead. “Good night.”

Sleep well,” I forced past my increasing yawns while heading upstairs for my bedroom.

My night's rest was interrupted by her joy when Barry did ask her to marry him, and the reactions that I vainly tried to leave to the happy couple.

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Life was very good to all of us after that. I finished my degree in Computer Science and graduated with honors into a promising job programming gaming software for an up and coming local company.

Angela finished her Theater Arts curriculum at the same time and was already in demand as a dancer in local productions, with interest in her talent being shown by more than a few heavy hitters in that field.

Lisa and Barry were well on their own ways to earning the last credits for their law degrees, carrying a load of classes that seemed impossible with an ease I came to envy, while still having more than enough time for each other.

Angela and I waited for the formality of a church wedding long enough for my sister and friend to graduate, then took part in the double ceremony all four of us had planned since the first year we were in University.

Happy times for all. I didn't think it was humanly possible to feel better about life, even with the onset of Lisa's pregnancy and the twinges I felt through her. One time when I had been inadvertently casual about Angela's pregnancy, at least

in Lisa's opinion, I had the dubious pleasure of spending several nights in succession exploring the wonders of sleeping on my back and searching for a comfortable position with a full bladder and uncomfortable weight pressing at my middle.

I still felt it every time my niece moved, but got to the stage where it was more a thing of wonder for me instead of something to be avoided. More guys should learn firsthand what being pregnant is like, and maybe there would be a lot less grief between men and women.

We had to let both Angela and Barry in on just how completely my sister and I were connected after I involuntarily groaned and grabbed my stomach during one very active period for the little dear. Fortunately, convincing them it was true was done with little more than one demonstration. One that had me enduring one of Lisa's interminable visits to her obstetrician, and Lisa regaling the others with my reactions to that visit as it happened, with my voice.

After the initial embarrassment of learning that Lisa and I were far more intimately aware of both her husband and my wife than would be normal for even close siblings, Angela and Barry accepted the truth as just another part of us to appreciate, mostly.

"Uh, Pete," Barry got me alone several days later with an embarrassed, halfway worried look on his rugged face. "Have you really ridden along with Lisa when we....you know, make love?"

"By accident," I admitted. "She loves you so much that sometimes control just goes away and there I am whether I'm willing or not. It has been educational at times, I've got to say."

"I'll bet it has," he gave me an odd look. "Were you ever alone in there, her head I mean, with me?"

"Off and on," I shrugged, holding up a hand to fend off his coming retort. "Not often, and you know that I'm firmly male, my friend. It's just hard to explain, how Lisa and I have shared stuff all our lives without things seeming weirder than they really are.

"Do you, uh, trade back and forth a lot?" he questioned, with genuine curiosity instead of the distaste I had anticipated.

"We used to," I shrugged. "When we were kids, and after puberty hit us both between the eyes. We were just curious about how it felt to be in the other's shoes. It really taught me a lot about what a girl really likes and doesn't. You ought to try it sometime."

"Not even if I could," Barry shuddered, then laughed uneasily. "So how do I stack up from a woman's viewpoint?"

"Real good," I succinctly responded, feeling the color rushing to my cheeks as I did. "Now could we talk about something else, please? Discussing Lisa's feelings and experiences in that respect make me antsy as hell, if you want the truth."

“Fine with me,” my friend nodded, then nudged me gently in the ribs. “No wonder you always managed to do so well with the girls. Every guy who knows you used to be jealous, and wished he had your secret. If only they'd known.”

“They would never have believed it,” I replied shortly. “Or if they had, I'd been in lots more fights than I was through school.”

“Your secret's safe with me,” my friend honestly told me, then chuckled without the least hint of embarrassment. “Besides, who on Earth would believe me if I told them?”

“Good point.” My relief was evident. “Now let's talk about something else, please?”

“Sure thing,” Barry nodded judiciously. “If you think it makes you uncomfortable you ought to try it from my end of things. It isn't often that a guy's best friend can tell him from experience what it feels like going to bed with him, you know.”

“Rest assured,” I fervently promised him. “I won't tell you again.”

“Guess that'll have to do,” he agreed, then returned the conversation to our pending golf match with the girls on the following weekend. If we lost, I had agreed to swap with Lisa for the entire week after, pregnancy and all, though neither my sister or I mentioned that little side bet to our spouses.

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Angela was curious about the interchanges between Lisa and myself, too, though she tended to think it was great instead of being a source of embarrassment as her cousin did. Which was just as well, considering most of those conversations occurred during the truly miserable week I spent paying off my loss on the links and giving Lisa a much needed break from the rigors involved with the later stages of pregnancy.

Like I'd told Barry, who was blissfully unaware of what was actually going on in his wife's lovely head through that week, it was educational.

An education I hoped would not be repeated ever again.

How I hated myself for feeling that way a little later on.

CHAPTER THREE TIMES OF GRIEF

Lisa and Angela had become great friends, renewing their childhood relationship almost the moment Angela had re-entered my life. The pair did a lot together,

prenatal classes, shopping for the babies, and simply getting ready for the coming additions to both families with their usual verve and love of life.

The Tuesday morning they left for a combined baby shower held for them by friends seemed little different than others the previous week.

Spring had returned slowly that year, but the soft breeze coming out of the south promised a warm, lovely day with clear skies and more gentle temperatures.

I'd kissed Angela good-bye as I left for work, giving her swollen tummy a light stroke while telling her to have a good time at the shower, and that I might be a little late getting home that night.

Lisa pulled her car to a stop in front of the house, waiting for me to get mine out of the driveway, and I recall waving to her as I drove off. A fairly normal start for a day.

It was, until ten thirteen that morning. I was working on a fascinating game program involving laser disk technology and should have been immersed in code and interfaces. Instead, I caught a brief flash of uneasiness, building to fear, then escalating into horrified terror from Lisa.

In less than a second, between breaths, I was with her long enough to see the careening mass of an out of control semi tractor trailer looming huge in her eyes. Then there was a sudden crushing, stabbing pain, and blackness.

Nothing.

I wasn't aware of that emptiness in the beginning.

As my view from Lisa's eyes, and Angela's scream in her ears were so abruptly cut off, I jerked as if I had taken a blow to the entire front of my body then lost consciousness with a gasping, bereaved scream of anguish.

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I awakened in a strange bed, surrounded by electronic monitoring equipment and smelling faintly of antiseptics with the soft beeping of a monitor in the background. The monitor was connected to me, and the series of soft, insistent beeps increased in tempo as I became more aware of my surroundings. I was in a hospital bed, and felt as if my entire body had gone through a ride inside a concrete mixer and was bruised as if I really had done so.

But the real pain was inside, where the bruises didn't show.

Part of myself that I had taken for granted for twenty five years was gone. Not just withdrawn, but ripped away irretrievably. The formerly warm place in my own being once occupied by my sister was nothing but coldly, echoing emptiness, an agonized void that screamed with its silence and was still an open, bleeding wound whenever I unconsciously reached out to her.

I couldn't face that the first time. How can I describe what I'd lost when descriptions of what I'd had failed to explain it properly? As vague figures began a

flurry of activities around me, my battered, halved mind and soul spiraled back into darkness, wrapping the comforting, unfeeling blanket of unconsciousness around my wounded psyche.

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She was waiting for me there, in that grey place where I had thought nothing could reach. And where she was, things were beautiful.

We were in the middle of a well tended park, green shot with a riot of flowering colors and heady scents carried on a soft breeze that caressed my flesh like a long lost lover who had found me after years of separation and feared I would dissolve into smoke if I was touched too firmly.

“You have to go back,” Lisa, looking healthy and holding the hand of a beautiful little girl, sadly informed me.

“Lisa!” my voice shook and I reached out to touch her, then engulfed her in a tight hug, soaking in her presence as my joy faded when she drew away from my embrace. “I was afraid I'd lost you.

Looking down at the child, who returned my regard with a serious expression, I questioned, “And who is this?”

“Your niece,” she responded. “Her name is Audra.”

“Hello Audra, you're as beautiful as your mother,” I spoke to the flame haired child who returned my regard with a silent smile.

It finally dawned on me that Audra appeared to be about three years old. Lisa hadn't given birth to her child before the accident.

“Time works differently here,” Lisa responded to my unasked question, just as she had so many other times in the past. “You've only been out a few hours.”

“But how?” I began asking.

“Never mind,” Lisa soothed, looking even sadder as she shooed the child off into the distance. “But this place isn't where you belong yet. You have to go back, people need you there.”

“Who?” I asked, then flushed with guilt at the thought of Angela and the unborn child she carried.

“They're gone ahead of us, Pete,” she softly told me while the implications of that sank in and grief dug its claws into me all over again. “Audra just went to join them, and I'll have to go soon myself. You can't come with us, not yet. There are things for you to do before that happens.”

“Like what?” My own tears mirrored those in her green eyes.

“I want to touch you physically before I leave,” she told me, “Have you hold my hand when I ask you to do something special.”

“Then you're not dead?” Hope flared as I whispered that.

“Not yet,” she answered. “But I’m dying, and need you to be with me in that horrible room for awhile. Please go back, we’ll have to say our good-byes there, Pete. You’ll need to hurry, though, I can’t hang on much longer and this is important.”

Her hand, which I had been gripping like the last safety line remaining to a desperate, drowning man, withdrew from mine and she slowly backed away with an imploring expression on her dear, lovely face. “Hurry, Pete. For all of us. Please go back, then come to me.”

Her familiar shape dwindled rapidly into a distance I was unable to wholly plumb as the place again went grey, then passed from my perceptions altogether.

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I don't have any memory of ripping out the IV needle in my right arm, then the monitoring strips as I got out of that bed. Nor do I clearly recall shrugging off a nurse, several orderlies, and at least one doctor, or the half staggering progress that became a strong, purposeful stride that carried me straight past the shocked attendants of the ICU wing and into the room where she was fighting to hold to life just a little longer. All I do remember of those frantic few minutes was the urgency of my need to be there with her regardless of what anyone else thought of my presence.

I do remember gently moving around a surprised Barry to take Lisa's one undamaged hand in my own as I stared down at her battered face with a sob. And her eyes opening when I did, her smile at seeing me, the slight return pressure from her fingers against my palm as I gently, carefully seated myself on the edge of her bed.

“You made it,” her whisper was strained, weak and breathy, but gained strength as she spoke, then shook her head slightly as my vaguely formed plan came clear to her. “Don't get into my head, Pete, I wouldn't survive my body dying even in your mind, and it would only kill you too. I want you to do something for me, and that means you have to stick around, okay?”

“I could at least give you a few minutes of feeling whole again, without pain,” I whispered, still trying in spite of her resistance to trade places with her mentally.

Her pain, and a flash of familiar anger drove me back.

“I said no, Pete,” her frown softened as I withdrew, then returned to the tired smile she had greeted me with. “But thank you for trying.”

“You have to promise me something,” her bruised, bandaged face twisted with the effort speaking caused, but her eyes held mine steadily, mercilessly.

“Anything,” I assured her, giving her hand a slight squeeze.

“Live,” she told me. “And take care of Barry for me. He isn't strong like you, and is going to need your help getting through this, okay? You watch out for Barry like I won't be able to do. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure,” I faltered, still not wishing to acknowledge that she wouldn't be around in the future, but sickly aware that would be the case. “I'll do my best.”

“Promise me that you will,” she gripped my hand with a fierce strength. “Promise!”

“I promise,” was my quiet response. “I swear to you that I'll do whatever I can to help him.”

“But who's going to help me?” I wordlessly beseeched.

Her hand pulled away from mine, to weakly reach up and brush first my forehead, then chest, before falling back to the bed and allowing me to capture it again. “I...Will... Always..Be....There. Always.”

It was small comfort, just then, as I sat beside her and watched the vitality leached out of first her face, then her eyes. But it was some.

“Barry,” she whispered.

I nodded, slowly standing up to wave her husband forward to be with her. “He's here. Love you, Sis. Good-bye.”

“Love you,” she mouthed back with a weak smile, then finished. “Never good-bye. Remember. Always.”

“I will,” I managed to respond through waves of still choking grief, then retreated to a reasonably clear corner of the room to be with my loss in private for a space as a haggard looking Barry took my place at her bedside.

She went easily after that, happily too, I believe. Soft fingers of thought, and echo of her one-time presence caressed me, leaving the impression of peace and a whispered, “Always,” with me as it passed.

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I learned later that Angela and our unborn child had been killed immediately in the crash, as had Barry and Lisa's baby.

My physical recovery was rapid, and I was released from the hospital the next day with vague explanations regarding sympathetic reactions between twins offered by the doctors for my evident injuries and loss of consciousness at the time of the accident.

I listened to the theories impassively, and quietly agreed that was probably so just to have them leave me alone, then returned to a terribly empty house to begin arrangements for the funerals.

The details of all that can be left out of this, I think.

Some griefs are better left in the past, and that week is still more than a little hazy for me even now. I got through it, then the following one, and the one after that more or less on automatic pilot with everyday necessities and activities. Accepted the sympathy of friends, Angela and Barry's family since I had none of my own left, and went back to work. Life does go on, overused as that phrase is, and I was alive whether I wanted to be or not.

Gradually, that echoing, empty space in my mind, the hole torn in my soul, filled again. First it was little things, like the way Lisa had chided and cajoled me whenever I was down about something, insisting that I deal with the problem, put it behind me and get on with more important problems.

Each time my thoughts perversely returned to that spot, like a tongue probing the aching void where a tooth had once been, something else had surfaced. It was almost like Lisa was being reassembled in my head, slowly and hesitantly, but as promised, she was there.

In memory. It wasn't her, just echoes and my own recollections building back into a picture to replace what was gone. I knew it wasn't her, and that even trying to believe such a thing was unhealthy and dangerous no matter how tempting such a delusion might have been.

The way her face had looked when she told me Barry had asked her to marry him, or when she was teasing me over accidentally sharing some experience with her that had been extra embarrassing for both of us. Mostly though, it was her determination to live whatever life she had as fully, and joyously as possible. God, I missed her, but those memories were more helpful than painful, assisting my climb out of the misery her, and my own wife's death had plunged me into.

Oh, my recovery was slow, but no one expected me to recover easily from such devastating personal losses and were subsequently patient with my lapses.

Angela's mother, Renee, and my sister-in-law, Beatrice helped me pack and store my wife's things. Not without a lot of shared tears, but also with chuckles and outright laughter at the images some of the things we came across brought to mind.

It would be lying to say the pain was gone, or that I didn't lie in my too wide bed at nights and cry after absently reaching across to touch Angela, or inadvertently reaching mentally to see how Lisa was getting along.

But after several months I was able to shrug when something like that happened instead of choking. I'd been wounded, terribly so, but was recovering from the injuries and picking up the remaining pieces of my life as I did.

Not so for Barry.

And there was the matter of a promise made that I meant to keep.

CHAPTER FOUR BARRY

While I had kept and maintained the house Lisa and I had grown up in, Barry had purchased a rambling two story ranch style several blocks away just before he and Lisa were married. They had planned to have a large family, and wanted a lot of room to grow into it.

Curiously, since we had always been such close friends, I hadn't seen much of him since the funerals. The first time I visited, he stared at me like he was seeing a ghost for the entire time I was there, then mumbled a vague apology once the uncomfortable get together had fizzled to a close.

I couldn't really blame the guy. I was still flinching when I looked into a mirror back then, thinking that if my cheeks were only a little fuller, my hair longer, and my arms less muscled, I could be staring at Lisa herself.

What he was seeing, and thinking when he saw me, I had not the least idea of at the time. Had I known the truth, promise or not, I would have very likely sold my house and moved clear across the country. Or at least had the urge to do so before trying to change his mind.

There was no outward sign of the trouble at Barry's. The service that maintained his yard still came, so the lawn was immaculate as always, and the shrubs, flower beds Lisa had refused to take care of, were still carefully, lovingly tended. The walk and drive were clean, hosed and swept regularly while the house itself had been freshly painted and its brickwork cleaned recently.

But a small stack of newspapers was piled beside the front door, out of sight from the street, still in the plastic wrappers they had been delivered in, and the mailbox was overflowing when I rang the bell the Saturday afternoon when everything actually got started.

Barry, unshaven, bleary eyed, and smelling of accumulated sweat mixed with bourbon, answered on my fifth ring, just as I was ready to give up and try calling him from home again.

“How's things, Pete?”

He still wouldn't look directly at me, even while moving aside so I could enter after scooping up the papers, and depositing them at least inside the door, then gathering up the assorted mail and depositing it on the hall table.

“Okay, Barry.

“The point here is,” I glance past him to see a collection of bottles, most of them empty, scattered over every surface that could hold them, amid a clutter of old newspapers and more unopened mail in the living room, “how are you?”

“Getting by, ol' buddy, getting by,” my long time friend answered dispiritedly, slurring his words slightly as he did.

“Have a party in here?” I asked lightly as I cleared a stack of month old papers and an over filled ashtray off a chair and seated myself to give Barry a penetrating examination.

He flinched, turning away from that with something close to embarrassment. “Life's one long party, Pete.

“Only,” he faltered briefly, then went on with a note of bitterness in his voice. “Some people leave before the damn thing's over, and others keep inviting themselves in whether I want them around or not.”

“I can leave,” starting to get up and do exactly that, I noted that he didn't look good at all.

The dark circles under his eyes had progressed to the stage where they were bags, and threatening to engulf his sallow cheeks, and the eyes above those were bloodshot and mattered.

“No,” his voice trembled with weariness, and those formerly clear blue eyes held a hint of entreating apology. “You don't have to do that. I'm sorry, didn't mean you.”

“Yes you did,” I sighed, sitting down again anyway. “But I understand. How long has it been since you got any real rest?”

I moved the subject from the potentially explosive track it had been on as Barry stumbled over some litter in front of the fireplace and gently took a wedding photo of himself and a radiant Lisa from the mantle.

“I dunno,” he replied, staring at first the photograph, then at me, running comparisons through his blurred mind, then gingerly replacing the picture from where he had taken it. “Before all this, I suppose.”

Barry's capacity for booze was prodigious, legendary in the circles he had run in through college, but I could see that he was rapidly approaching even his own limits as he carefully shuffled back across the room to fall heavily into the couch that had become a nest of rumped, stained sheets and assorted trash.

Sorting through that mess, he came up with a twelve ounce tumbler, one of the set Angela and I had given him and Lisa as a wedding present, and filled it to overflowing with amber liquid from a bottle sitting on the coffee table between us. Then gave me an ironic salute and downed half of it in one long swallow.

“Booze won't stop the hurting,” I told him as he refilled the glass and stared into it after letting the emptied out bottle fall into his lap.

“Sure's hell numbs it, though,” he muttered, then looked up to watch me with an unhappy sigh. “Good ol' Jim, and Jack stood by me. They didn't leave, don't ever act like they will, and if they do, I just call down the street and they come runnin' like a big tackle to clear the way to the goal line for me.

“Side's,” he mangled the words even more, “S'only way I get any sleep at all any more.”