

## My Brother's Keeper

As my date worked her way across my body, removing my clothing and warming my bare skin, I tried to put everything but her from my mind. Work went away quickly, as did my list of chores. But even as the movement of her hands and tongue eclipsed all thoughts but those of her, the idea of Danny lingered on the glistening fringes of my attention. She stopped a few times to ask, "What is it?" then forgave me my silence and did what she had come to do.

Later, as I lay in the curve of Lill's body, watching city lights play on the wall across the room, I retraced my day — typing away in the word processing pool of a large law firm downtown . . . the unexpected call from Lillian at noon, telling me she was back in town a few days early from a women's gathering near the Maryland border and asking if she could stop by that evening . . . my quick reply, "Yes, yes!" . . . then having to put in last-minute overtime till seven o'clock . . . hurrying home to tidy my home and my person so that I was presentable to the only woman I'd ever dated, who'd lasted more than a few months with me . . . and the surprise visit from Danny.

Barely a year apart in age, the joke in our family had always been that Danny and I were twins, but he'd been thirteen months more reluctant than I, to come into the world. For brother and sister, we looked eerily alike, with the same dark and sometimes angry features, the same determined gate to our walks, the same inflections in our sentences. He was the one who had christened me "Jax" when as a toddler he was unable to pronounce a "w" sound. My full name "Jacqueline" he'd turned into "Jacselin," which everyone had shortened to "Jax" to make it easier on him. The nickname had stuck with him, and even when he could manage "Jacqueline," he'd stuck with "Jax." It was his way of showing that I was his sister. It was his way of showing that *I* was *his*. Only he was allowed to call me "Jax." And he was the only one who ever did.

We'd grown up side-by-side in our close-knit family, playmates as kids, then rivals as teenagers. Our younger brother Richie had come along six years after Danny's birth, so for the most significant part of my

sentient childhood, Danny had been my constant companion, and I his eager mentor. I learned to ride a bike, then taught him. I learned to climb trees, then showed him how. Even though I was “the girl” and he was “the boy,” I’d always forged boldly ahead, while he lingered safely behind. He learned what not to do, from watching me fall, many times over . . . from bikes . . . from trees . . . from the good graces of our family. And Danny became even more prone to hesitation, watching the results of my rash actions.

Over the years, the two of us had developed a kind of mutual admiration/protection society which worked in both our favors. The areas in which I excelled, Danny lagged, and the skills in life which repulsed me, he somehow managed to master. Launching expeditions into new territory, experiments in fashion, music and art, not to mention striking up conversations with girls who interested me, were my forte, and what I learned over the years (bell-bottoms were cool . . . David Bowie was *not* a has-been . . . punk rock music would change everything . . . 10-speeds were out and 12-speeds — no, 21-speeds — were in) Danny put to good use in conversations and social settings. He would never have ventured out of the house in wildly striped, flared pants in elementary school, were it not for my example, and he never would have taken the time to investigate either Major Tom or Sid Vicious, years later on his own. But dropping names and tossing around the latest terms, scored him points with his school buddies. I was his canary in the cultural coal mine, who sampled the latest trends; what I gleaned, I passed on for him to weave into conversations with cute girls and cool guys he wanted to impress.

Reciprocally, Danny had watched my back and vouched for me in polite company. Growing up enthusiastically conservative, like the rest of our family, the rest of our church, the rest of our town, the rest of our county, he had always fit seamlessly into the staid button-down world that became more foreign and hostile to me with each passing year. The nice people, whose opinion I was supposed to care about, looked askance at my pink hair and single pierced ear, but the fact that I was Danny’s sister always guaranteed me safe passage in their world. When I was with him, I would not be harassed by eternal-hellfire-and-damnation evangelicals seeking another proverbial notch on their Bible case, or rednecks looking to kick some queer ass. Because Danny was my brother, the velour-sweater-Jordache-jean-penny-loafer crowd tolerated me, and I was invited to parties and social events I’d never have heard about, let alone been welcomed into. Being well-behaved Danny’s sister

kept me beneath the corrective radar of teachers, principals and policemen, and under Danny's disapproving but watchful protection, I was able to continue my experiments in fringe culture, even run a small marijuana and speed distribution business out of my gym bag, till I was safely graduated from high school and out of my parents' house.

As much as he loved to lecture me on the dangers of underage drinking and illicit drug use, Danny had lived vicariously through my exploits; he had relished them as much as I, though he would never admit it. And I was allowed to move through life without the threat of a religious intervention or bodily harm, because of his influence. We were a well-tuned partnership of exceptional experience. We were a team. It was a thrilling life we both had, as teenagers in the late 70's and early 80's. The joke about our being almost-twins wasn't far from the mark.

But as we'd grown up and moved along in life, my brother and I had gone our separate ways . . . he, to his managerial career path, motivating accountants to realize their full potential, and I to a bohemian sort of inconclusive drifting. My music became increasingly important to me, as did my freedom. I joined bands, I took temp jobs. I did mini-tours as a rhythm guitarist on weekends in the greater tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey, and I only took jobs that let me come and go as I pleased. With every ounce of energy, I resisted going down the permanent 9-to-5 path my brother had chosen. Just as he'd learned from my failures in life (how not to ride a bicycle backwards down a steep hill, how not to shave your eyebrows), I had learned from his successes. The things he celebrated as "adult accomplishments," the steady job, the promotions, the little plaque on his desk commemorating ten years of loyal service to the company, made my skin crawl, and I used him as a cautionary example, just as he did me. Each of us did precisely the opposite of what the other pursued, and we both thrived in our own ways. Yes, we drifted far apart as adults, philosophically and geographically, but the bond we'd formed in our youth endured.

And so we'd kept in touch. Through regular phone calls every couple of days, and occasional visits, not too frequent, but frequent enough to not lose contact. We both still valued our childhood connection, and although we often ended up falling out in a fight over semantics or life priorities, interacting as brother and sister made us both feel young again. Locked in conflict, we both felt as though we were still fifteen and fourteen, with me sitting on my bed behind barricaded door, counting out black beauties and giving Danny the finger as he knelt outside, peering through the keyhole, yelling at me about how I *put the*

*“mad” in Madigan! and made the whole family look bad!* As we neared forty, we both desperately needed that teenaged feeling to endure.

But constant conflict with Danny got old, after a while. We couldn't fight *all* the time. Tonight, it was good to see that my brother, my almost-twin, was in love. Again.

It's not that Danny didn't have a good heart. He did. That was the problem. Ever since he started high school at Christian Country School (or CCS, as we called it), he'd always fallen (and seriously so) for girls he genuinely thought would be good for him and his faith. Intentionally, he'd always sought out the company of nice girls who were very much like our mother.

It wasn't so much an Oedipal fixation, as the fact that our mother had patterned her life, her behavior, the whole of her being, after the Christian ideal: a moral, upright, steadfast woman, acquiescent to her husband and devoted to her kids, yet as fiercely supportive of her man and children as any lioness. Like all her other church sisters, Mom was resolutely loyal to her congregation and her faith, as well as her family, and she'd jump to their defense at a moment's notice. If Daniel pursued few romantic prospects unlike his mother, it was perceived as a good, not perverse, thing by his immediate circle of friends, family, and acquaintances. After all, he couldn't have done better for himself, than finding a woman who mirrored Mom's example. When I was much younger and newly independent and still had the nerve to share Sunday dinner with my family, looking around the table from Danny's date, to Mom, to Regina, our stiffly upright great aunt who often spent time with my folks, it was like looking at a series of reflections in facing mirrors. I had no doubt that Danny's daughters (if any woman ever settled down with him long enough to beget his offspring) would turn out just so, as well.

It intrigued me now, that Danny was so worked up over this woman, this Jenn-with-two-n's. His courting style was methodical and well-thought-out, like his approach to scriptural interpretation, and it wasn't like him to become so excited about a woman, before he'd spent several months with her. In his eagerness to better understand the Christian coupling ideal, he'd read *Letters to Karen* and *Letters to Philip*, two Christian marriage guidebooks which a loving faithful father had written to his freshly wed daughter and his new son-in-law. Over the years, my brother had read countless works, in print and online, about Christian courting and Christian unions, starting with the books our parents kept on prominent display on our living room bookshelves. I'd

read them, too, in my teen years, but more in the spirit of digging for sexual innuendo, or double-checking the official Christian policy on masturbation. (Word was, you wouldn't actually go blind or grow hair on your palms, but it wasn't the most loving thing to do, depriving your committed spouse, present or future, of your exclusive sexual expression.) To Danny, as to the whole of our family, marriage was a sacramental pact, a natural conduit of man and woman's continuing commitment to faith, through the proper relationship of husband and wife, as well as the Holy-Spirit-led, faith-based raising of children. The order in the home was a reflection of, and support mechanism for, the heavenly order, as God's headship over the Son, and the Son's headship over his bride, the church, was carried into the home — God — Jesus — church — husband — wife — children (male children before female, of course). Everyone had their proper place. Danny needed a mate who was as convinced as he, of the merits of that hierarchy.

Righteousness was in my brother's bones, and his courting technique was as fruitless as it was flawless. He'd sought out his "Suitable Mate," as he called the woman of his dreams, at church functions, choir practice, Bible studies, and vacation Bible school, where he taught school kids each summer and hoped to find a potential wife who was as demonstrably good with children as he. He'd gone to numerous denominational conferences in several different states, as well as holiness retreats at a church-affiliated Bible camp in the hills of south-eastern Pennsylvania. But he didn't attend these events solely for the sake of finding a wife, he'd insisted, when I'd teased him mercilessly about his "wife hunt." That would be sacrilege. According to him, he attended them primarily for the sake of spiritual maintenance in the company of men *and* women who were as dedicated as he, to the health and growth of their Christian faith. But if he met the evangelical fundamentalist woman of his dreams at one of these events, so much the better.

"The best way to find a fitting mate, is to be active in circles that reflect your core values," he'd tell me. "That you be not unequally yoked."

Dan got really freaked out at the prospect of being "unequally yoked," that dread condition of philosophical or spiritual incompatibility, which the Apostle Paul warned about. An unequal yoke spelled ruin for superficially founded unions which were built on the sand of pure physicality, rather than the bedrock of spiritual commitment. Most of what the Apostle Paul warned about, spooked my

brother. Whatever that venerable Pharisee-turned-apostolic-evangelist said, relating to man-and-wife affairs, Danny took as immutable Gospel. He still half-believed women should cover their heads in public.

“Okay Romeo,” I’d tease him, impatient at how little he had to show for his technique and determination over the years. “So where’s the little missy you’re going to marry? Where’s the lady who’s equally yoked with you?”

He’d bristle at being called “Romeo” and bluster about some things being worth the wait.

“Mister hesitation,” I’d scoff. “Tick-tock, tick-tock. In a few more years, you’re going to have to start dating college girls, to find the mother of your children.”

In moments when my words sank in and he did the math, I could hear panic in his voice as he protested my impatience. From the day he turned thirty, the pressure he’d put on himself to court, wed and couple, then be fruitful and multiply, became increasingly palpable.

The rest of our family didn’t help, especially at Sunday dinners after church, when Danny brought his current girlfriend to become better acquainted with the rest of the Madigan clan (the upstanding, God-fearing members, that is). Danny would call some Sunday nights after the fact to tell me how Mom had practically asked his girlfriend how fertile she was . . . If her family had any birth defects in their genetic history . . . If she had many brothers and sisters, and if they had many kids of their own. He’d lament how Dad had gone out of his way to make sure everyone knew what a fine man and excellent provider his eldest son was. Richie could usually be counted on to test his potential sister-in-law’s command of the New Testament with a deadpan intensity that frightened some of them away for good.

“So, don’t take your dates to Sunday dinner,” I’d shrug.

But we both knew that was impossible. Any date was a potential mate, and before Danny committed to any woman, she needed to be subjected to the rigors of a thorough family values examination. Whom-ever Danny married would cleave not only to him, but to his entire immediate family.

Except to me, of course. I was the wild card whose lifestyle couldn’t be discussed around Christian girls. I was the woman who did not know her place, who spoke out of turn, and wouldn’t wait till permitted to freely state what she thought in no uncertain terms. I was the backslider in the clan, whose transgressions negated so many of my parents’ positive expressions of faith, and called the integrity of our family name

(not to mention the parenting skills of my folks) into stark and glaring question. And while the invitation was officially always open for me to join everyone for dinner at parents' place on Sundays, the unspoken understanding was that the invite was a little less open when Danny brought a date.

Three Lisa's, a couple of Beth's, an Emily, and an Ashley later, slowly but surely nearing forty, Danny was still a bachelor — a staid, steady, handsome, good-job-holding, committed-Christian bachelor, who never gave up hope that his True Mate was out there, waiting for him with as much dedication and fortitude, as he was waiting for her. I was happy for Danny, now that his efforts had paid off (so far, anyway) with this Jenn-with-two-n's, and he'd found a new focus for his attention. I was relieved for myself, as well. He needed someone else to keep him company, other than me.

The one person I did want to focus on me, lay beside me in bed, smelling of the road and the stale, enigmatic scent of music clubs. The warmth of her skin against mine comforted me in a way that no other woman ever had. The feel of her breath on my neck calmed me, too.

"I missed you while you were on tour," I heard myself say.

She silently kissed my shoulder.

I realized I'd missed my brother, too, while he'd been gone. The past week had been oddly silent, without his impromptu visits on his way home from work, or his phone calls just before he went to bed. Danny could usually never seem to let me be. I was, after all, his almost-twin. It surprised me that he'd waited several days to catch up with me about his trip and tell me about this Jenn-with-two-n's.

"She must be a nice girl," I thought aloud, startled at the sound of my own voice.

Lill squirmed and pulled the covers closer. "Let's get some sleep," she murmured.