

the promise

by Pat Spears

Kate pulls the Wagoneer into the driveway and the smell of charred wood drifts to her on the chilled air. When the Toyota isn't in the garage she's reminded of all the other evenings Sara has worked late, and right or wrong, it's starting to get to her. She gathers her things from the back seat, dreading the emptiness of the house.

The odor from the cats' litter box hits her as she opens the door and it's as though the cats are embarrassed, for neither comes to greet her. Their food bowls are empty and in the back yard Scout is barking and jumping against his kennel. Dropping her luggage in the hallway, she steps to the answering machine in the kitchen and listens to the message she left Sara last evening from the motel. She'd waited up, but when Sara hadn't called by midnight, she'd gone to bed, sleeping cold. Embarrassed by the loneliness in her voice, she hurriedly erases the message before turning toward the sound of Sara's car pulling into the driveway.

"Hi, Sweetheart," Sara calls, coming through the back door, smiling, carrying shopping bags. "How was the conference?"

"Okay," Kate says, reaching for a bag.

"Had to take time to shop. We're out of everything. Worked late last night. Poor babies had to use dirty litter today."

"Yeah, the house smells. They're out of Meow Mix too."

"There are more bags in the car," Sara sighs, setting a bag on the kitchen counter and giving Kate a quick hug. "I picked up Chinese for dinner. Hope that's okay. I've got to get back to the agency by eight."

"Tonight?"

"Kate, I'm sorry. I know this project is taking more time and effort than it probably should, but you know it's my first big assignment, and we can't afford for me to mess up. Toni has agreed to meet me back at the office."

"Can't you two do that during regular hours?"

"Look who's talking regular hours," Sara says in a teasing tone. Sara's only asking for fairness, Kate realizes, but she turns and leaves the room.

"Kate, the bags," Sara calls after her. But when Kate doesn't answer, Sara kicks off her shoes and begins to place cartons of food on the counter.

Coming back into the kitchen wearing sweats and running shoes, Kate says, "Save mine for later. I'm going to work out some road cramps." Picking up Scout's leash, she walks out the door, the dog leaping ahead, barking and running circles on the driveway.

"Kate," Sara calls, following her onto the porch. "We could skip supper. I have an hour before. . . ."

"Catch you later," Kate calls back over her shoulder, Scout tugging her forward.

Kate began jogging the day she took leave from her job as a real estate salesperson. Her modest savings plus Sara's salary is to buy her two years in which to finish a manuscript she's worked at, off and on, since college. She has no idea whether it's any good or not. No one, other than Sara, has even suggested that it is, or could be. It's been ten months now, and she's spent part of each day telling herself that she's a fool. Money is tighter than they expected. They hadn't counted on expensive repairs to the roof or Sara's Aunt Fannie needing help with home nursing expenses after a nasty fall.

At forty-one and twenty pounds overweight, expensive running shoes and a neon-orange jogging outfit had taken her no farther than the first block. Each time thereafter for weeks the pain was excruciating. Giant blisters live on her heels and the balls of her feet. Still she runs three or four times a week, and always on those evenings when Sara works late. Lately, they are too exhausted to do much more than fall into bed, promising each other a special weekend soon.

At the one-mile marker, Kate gets a second wind and settles into a comfortable pace, Scout striding easily alongside her. While running, she often works out problems with her writing or fantasizes about some erotic adventure with Sara on a nude beach in Key West. There were other women before Sara, but no one she'd ever wanted to make a commitment to. Then six years ago, Sara happened, a complete and wonderful surprise.

They met at a local art show she'd been dragged to by co-workers, not for the sake of art, but to see and be seen by potential clients. She smiles, remembering that Sara was so

completely absorbed by the exhibit that she hadn't noticed Kate following her. She'd been an art student, surviving on a teaching fellowship by sharing a crumbling rental house with a lesbian couple who became their best friends.

Kate approaches the house and, although the Toyota isn't in the garage, the porch light glows warmly in the darkness and she's glad Sara has left it on. After a hot bath, she dresses for bed and stretches out on the sofa to read, but her eyes won't focus. Even the ring of the bell on the microwave and Scout's bark don't move her off the sofa. Next, she hears Sara's voice, soft and sweet, coming to her from a warm, wet place in her dream. "Katie, wake up and come to bed. You'll freeze in here all alone."

Kate completes a synopsis of her novel and, along with the first three chapters, addresses the package to an agent picked from a reference book in the library. She drives to the post office with the brown envelope resting on the seat next to her, hoping the agent remembers their phone conversation of three months ago. She slips the envelope into the mail slot and stands watching as it disappears into the bowels of the steel and glass building. She wants the moment to feel special, but she's alone, surrounded by strangers, and already the faceless agent's disapproval is playing through her mind like a one-woman show.

She drives to Sara's office without calling first, and the secretary says, too cheerfully, that Ms. Randolph is having lunch with the boss. When Sara calls later to say she's sorry she'd missed her, Kate reminds her of the game, but Sara has plans to work. "Oh, Sara, come on. We could both use some fun. Besides we haven't missed an opening game in five years. No, forget it, I won't go without you."

Sara relents, but she'll skip beers and hoagies, meeting Kate and the others at the game. When Nancy and Donna pick Kate up, she assures them that Sara will come later. Good thing, she thinks, because the two of them are beginning to act as though they've decided something is wrong between her and Sara.

When they arrive, the sports arena is packed and Sara isn't in her seat. They make their way through the noisy crowd, stopping to greet friends. Excited by the pep band and the

hoopla of the game, Kate relaxes and forgets about an agent she's never met and a novel that will probably never be good enough. It's during the third quarter that she stops looking for Sara, and after the game she goes with Nancy and Donna for victory beers. For the first time in six years, Kate asks a woman she doesn't know to dance. The four of them are among the last to leave the bar.

Leaning on Donna's arm, Kate steps out of the car and makes her way onto the porch. Slouching against the wall, she's both surprised and embarrassed at how quickly she's gotten drunk.

"Kate? Where have you been? I was worried."

"Having a super time," Kate lies.

"Hi, Sara," Donna says, grinning as though she's bringing home a tipsy teenager. "A little too much, a little too fast, I fear."

"Guess you could say she was in the mood," Nancy giggles.

"Yeah, right. Thanks for bringing her home," Sara says, taking Kate's arm. "Come on, Katie. Let's get you in bed."

"That's a hell of a thought," Kate mutters. "You're the second woman tonight who's tried."

Kate wakes with her mouth feeling like the inside of a goat's stomach and her blood beating a war chant against her skull. Beer hangovers are a living death, she moans, pressing her fingers against her temples. She strains to hear sounds of Sara, but the house is quiet as a rock. Raising her head from the pillow, she studies the fuzzy green numerals on the clock face. Startled that it's already mid-morning, she flips back the covers and a wave of nausea forces her head back onto the pillow. She lies quietly, untangling her thoughts. Crap, had she really said something to Sara about going to bed with another woman?

The cats jump onto the bed, and Scat Cat begins kneading Kate's stomach. "Oh, no, please," she moans.

The bedroom door opens and Sara walks in with two steaming cups. Thank God that there's no fairness in the world, Kate thinks. She makes a royal ass of herself and the woman brings her coffee.

"Oh Katie, hon, you're a mess," Sara says, placing the cup between Kate's trembling hands.

"Yeah, you'd think I'd grow up," Kate says.

"Someday, maybe," Sara smiles, kissing Kate's pale cheek. "Sorry you were disappointed, but by the time I finished the game was nearly over. I was too beat to fight the crowd for a quarter of basketball. I thought you'd be right home."

Grateful that Sara had made it easy for her, Kate says, "I'm the one who should be sorry. I behaved like a jerk and I made up the woman in the bar, except for trying to dance. Have you seen the stuff they're doing?"

Sara laughs, and although Kate's head throbs, they make love for what feels to Kate like the first time in ages. Afterwards they snuggle together by a warm fire, eating bran muffins and drinking strawberry herbal tea. "I'd love it this time without the bass drum in my ear," Kate says, drawing Sara close.

"You're on, but first I'll need to call the office."

Afterwards, they dress warmly and take Scout for a long walk in the park and talk about Sara's project and Kate's writing. When Sara has to leave, Kate stands as sunlight filters through the bare limbs of the giant sycamores that line the street, waving good-bye. She watches as the car disappears around the corner before turning back toward the house.

After Halloween the weather turns unusually cold, and although there are mornings in which the jogging path is covered with patches of frost, Kate is determined to run. The phantom agent calls to say she's managed only a weak commitment from a small publisher to read the first chapters. During the silent days that follow the call, Sara tries convincing Kate that delays are normal, and that she should use the time to write. Yet she splits her time between brooding, running poor times, and waiting for the agent's voice on the telephone recorder. When the call finally comes, she reports that things are slow. The publishing world evacuates the city for the month of December, she explains, and there has been no word from the publisher. "Go ahead, relax and take a holiday," she says, promising to be in touch.

In a fit of jitters, Kate chaotically launches into the holiday season, pumping Sara for decisions. "Where we always put the tree," Sara answers, hurrying out the door. And to the question of where and with whom, she calls, "I don't know."

Please, Kate, I just can't think about it now."

Her anxiety grows, although she's sure it has little to do with where they'll put the tree, gifts, or even where they'll spend the holidays. She's not ready to handle her dad's telephone call. "Katherine, it would mean a lot to the family. Your sisters miss you, and you won't believe how much their kids have grown. Please, honey, come home. You'll see, everything will be fine again."

He just doesn't get it, she thinks. "Dad, I am home. Sara and I are a family."

"Katie," and then there's a pause in which she imagines him pulling on the hem of his favorite gray sweater, struggling to accept what he doesn't understand.

There was awkwardness two years ago when she and Sara had refused to sleep apart, so last year they took a skiing holiday, creating tension between Kate and her family. Going home could redeem her with her dad and sisters, even if things remained strained between her and her mom. She knows her dad and sisters want to smooth things over, so she says okay.

"Kate, how could you?" Sara says, salad makings flipping out of the bowl onto the counter top and floor. "There's no time to shop. There must be ten kids by now, and I never know what to get your prissy sister Alice."

"There's time," Kate says, her voice strained.

"You've got to be absolutely crazy. There's less than twenty-four hours. We couldn't do it if we staged an all-night shopping spree."

"Well, there's always fresh Florida fruit."

"Oh God, Kate, don't get cute. Toni is expecting us for dinner at her place on the beach. Important clients have been invited. And since we didn't have plans. . . ."

"Damn, you mean you're working Christmas Day?"

"It's work, yet it's social, too. She asked last week."

"Since when do we spend our holidays with a bunch of money-grubbing strangers?"

"It's not about our being with strangers, it's about my career and your freedom to write."

"Fuck that. Your career's all that matters to you any more and I'm sick of hearing about it," Kate shouts.

"Katie, please, we're okay, just scared. That's all."

In moments like this Kate hates that Sara stands to the side of things, seeing past what shows, with eyes that can be like a mirror. Without changing, she hurries by Sara and runs down the driveway, shivering in the cold.

"Kate, please come back. You'll freeze."

"So, don't bother leaving a light," Kate shouts.

When she's finished a five-mile run the sky is crisscrossed in patterns of brilliant red and orange and the temperature has dropped to near freezing. Her earlier fury calmed, she expects to find Sara's car in the driveway. When it isn't, she showers and dresses, and afterwards builds a fire.

She sits for a while on the rug, with the cats and Scout curled next to her, trying to remember the exact moment when things began to go badly. Then suddenly something like panic grips her, and she understands Sara doesn't intend to come home tonight, or any night maybe. She stands, putting more wood on an already blazing fire, wondering where Sara could be at this hour? Maybe with Toni, who has a townhouse in the city. Please God, with anyone as long as she's somewhere safe. Yet her stomach churns and her hands are icy at the thought of Sara with someone else.

She sits again on the floor, feeding Reese's Pieces to Scout and reassuring herself that Sara isn't fooling around and that they've had worse arguments. When Scout eats the last of the candy, he rubs his nose against her cheek, and she cries.

Standing at the bay window, calmer than before, she watches as a neighbor's outdoor lights reappear brightly from a ghost-like fog and she remembers their promise. The day Sara moved in, they sat together on the patio, drinking champagne and swearing that should either leave the other, they would check into the Howard Johnson's on Maple Avenue and wait overnight, giving themselves cooling-down time. She prays Sara remembers, and that she meant to keep her promise.

She drives as fast as she dares to the motel that is no longer a HoJo but the Happy Trails Motel. She drives the Wagoneer between two squatty green cement cacti, stopping before a hitching rail near the entrance to the hotel. The night clerk, a tall boy dressed in a Santa suit topped off by a plastic Stetson, refuses to tell her whether Sara is registered or not.

She swears at him and hurries outside to a public telephone. The clerk answers and puts her call through.

"Kate?"

"Yes, where are you?"

"Room 17, in the back. And please hurry."

Kate opens her eyes and a wedge of sunlight filters through the window, spreading warmth across the bedroom carpet. She slips her arm around Sara's bare waist, drawing her closer and it's as though the part of last night before they talked until four and made love until dawn hadn't really happened. She snuggles her face in Sara's hair and it smells sweet like cinnamon, with a whiff of woodsmoke.

"Good morning," Sara says, her voice husky with sleep. She draws Kate's arm tighter, placing Kate's hand over her breast. Lying close and warm, postured like velvet spoons, with Sara's buttocks cradled against Kate's thighs, they drift in and out of sleep, until Kate is jarred awake.

"No, Katie, please tell me you aren't running this morning?"

"Yeah, I gotta. I'll be crammed in the car for four hours," she says, pushing back the covers and sitting on the side of the bed. "You still going to Toni's for dinner?"

"Yes," Sara says softly. "She's counting on me to help with the guests, but I'll be home by eight. Will you be back by then?"

"You bet," Kate says, reaching around to kiss her. "But for right now, you stay put. I'll be back before your next dream is ended."

Dressed, Kate stands at the refrigerator, drinking cranberry juice straight from the bottle. Scout jumps at the door. "Hold it down, boy," she says, smiling. She snaps the leash on his collar and stands on the top step, breathing in the wet, cold air. Although the sun has topped the horizon, she reaches back inside the door and flips on the porch light, feeling so good she thinks she'll take up flying.
