

Lori: In my mind's eye, I can still see us, like a snapshot: me as a teenager, curling my hair for a date as my little sister sits beside me, pretending she's me as she smudges on lipstick.

But we share something deeper now. Because Kristal was there for me in a way I never imagined possible . . .

I was 10 years old when Kristal was born. To me, she was like a real live doll. Sometimes, as a toddler, she'd climb into bed with me after a nightmare. And she was a good excuse for me to

Sisters are our first friends, our partners in crime, the keepers of our most embarrassing secrets. But for Lori Lindsey, her baby sister, Kristal, is far more. This is the story of sisters who love each other so deeply, one gave the other a miracle . . .



"More than ever, we're two of a kind," says Lori, left, with her little sister, Kristal.

Kristal:

I'm not tough, the way my sister is. But I've learned that you don't know how deep your well of strength is until you're forced to dive deep down into it. The day of the surgery, I thought I'd be scared. Yet I was more at peace than I'd ever been.

Once I could see Lori, she hugged me. "Because of you, I'll get to see my little girl grow up," she said. "That's the most wonderful gift."

Lori still thanks me all the time, but she gave me a gift, too: to see my sister healthy. Other than the anti-rejection medication she takes, Lori's fine. She'll even be in my wedding when I marry Jay!

Back home, we flip through a bridal magazine. "Pick this one, Aunt Kris," Alexis giggles, pointing to a gown that looks like exploding icicles.

"Reminds me of some other little girl I once knew," Lori says, and we crack up.

Lori:

Sometimes, I'll think, Kristal used to borrow my earrings, my jeans . . . but just look at

My sister, my angel

keep playing with Barbies.

Then, in eighth grade, I was trying out for the basketball team when the school doctor frowned. "Your eyes look yellow," he said, sending me for tests.

I didn't know how bad it was, but I remember my mom wearing sunglasses one morning while she made pancakes. Later, I found out it was to hide her eyes, red from crying—because the doctors had said I had just months to live.

"Stop being the big sister," Kristal said. "I'd do anything for you"

Luckily, they were wrong. But somehow, I'd developed autoimmune hepatitis, a liver disorder that left me susceptible to infection. Suddenly, a cold was never just a cold—I'd end up in the hospital. Eventually, specialists told my parents, the disease could ruin my liver. For now, though, we'd try medication.

I could be a sick person, I thought as I swallowed a dozen pills a day, or I could be a person who just happens to be sick. And so, I told myself I wouldn't let this disease rule my life.

Kristal:

Because I was just a child when she was diagnosed, I

don't remember when Lori wasn't sick. All I knew was that I wanted to be like her. To me, Lori was a cool second mom. She'd play with me even though she was exhausted. So when she was in the hospital, I'd send her cards covered with smiley-face stickers. *Get well, sis!* I'd scrawl.

Oh, she could be bossy, too. "Get out!" she'd fume when she caught me using her makeup to draw rainbows. But we both cried the day she went to college.

Years later, when I was 16, Lori called with the news: "You're gonna be an aunt!" And since she would be a single mom, she was moving back home.

Lori:

"Hello, Alexis," I breathed as the doctor lay my newborn daughter on my breast. That a damaged body like mine could create something so perfect was a miracle.

As time passed, I tried to live a normal life. And except for the medication and occasional hospital stays, I did, working as a nurse and raising Alexis. Sometimes, in the mail, people would compliment my tan, and Kristal would joke, "We were just in Hawaii." But we knew my skin wasn't sun-kissed; it was the beginning of jaundice.

Then, during surgery for a gallbladder attack, doctors found I was going into liver failure. "You're number four on the transplant list," my dad said, his voice breaking.

Night after night, I'd wait for my pager to beep, a sign that a liver was available. As I watched Alexis sleep, my heart would hurt. Who would love her the way I do?

Be the best person you can be. Never forget that Mommy loves you, I wrote in a letter I hoped she'd never have to read. But how could I pray for someone's life to end so that mine might go on?

Besides, finding a match could take years. Please, I prayed, let me hold on!

Kristal:

I felt guilty that my life was so good—college, my marketing internship, dates with my boyfriend, Jay. But I couldn't imagine my future without Lori in it. And Lori's liver was failing . . .

So when the doctors told our family about living donor transplants—that they could take up to 60% of one person's liver and transplant it into another, that both livers would even regenerate—I told Lori, "I'll do it."

"No," Lori insisted. "Stop being the big sister for once," I blurted. "I'd do anything for you."

Lori wrapped her arms around me. "Well, you'd have to quit smoking . . ."

"Done," I said. "Are you sure?" our parents

asked as I underwent tests. I knew they were worried they could lose both of us now. But we were all relieved when the transplant coordinator said, "You're a match!"

Lori:

"We always were," I smiled.

The night before surgery, our family went to dinner at a theme place called Magic Time Machine. As Superman and Superwoman danced around, I couldn't help but think who the true superhero was: Kristal.

The next day, as Kristal was being wheeled into surgery, I gave her a teddy bear holding a card. *You're giving me a second chance,* I'd written. *I love you.*

"Love you, too," she replied. Though it seemed like minutes, it was six hours until I heard a voice through the anesthesia: "Your new liver's working fine."

"Kristal?" I breathed.

"Because of you, I'll see my little girl grow up," Lori said

what she gave me.

I think then, too, about our matching scars. More than ever, we're two of a kind. Except that Kristal shows hers off like a badge of courage—she still wore a bikini last summer.

Apparently, angels don't always have halos and wings. Sometimes, they have fading scars and walk right here alongside us. I know, because mine does. She just so happens to also be my baby sister.

—Lori and Kristal Lindsey, San Antonio, as told to Elizabeth Holzemer

What makes sisters so special?

Kristal's gift of life to Lori "is a perfect example of the unconditional giving of sisters," says psychologist Marjory Levitt, Ph.D., who co-authored *Sibling Revelry*, with her own siblings. "And that's because sisters often

know each other's history, struggles, beliefs and flaws."

And women who maintain connections with their sisters are more likely to avoid depression and loneliness. Says Levitt: "That's the strength of sisterly love."

