

I Am Not My Brother's Keeper

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I would like to dedicate this book to my husband for his never-ending support in making my book a reality. And thank you to my two precious children Abbey and Lucas, Abbey who helped me so much and to Lucas for being a good baby and allowing Mummy to write! I also would like to thank four of my life long friends for always keeping after me to write a book: Meredith (mostly), Barb, "Mia" and Vicki.

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"What a day. What a rotten day."

It was drizzling rain and chilly. The locals are used to it, the sudden summer chills of San Francisco that surprise and catch visitors to the region rushing for their sweaters. Almost every morning and afternoon through the months of May, June and July, a foggy, gray soup rushes in from the Pacific Ocean to envelop the northern coastal and valley regions of California. This was one of those days. I suppose it fit the occasion.

I was inside the local Pharmacy store, standing at the wire transfer desk for the third time in a week preparing to send money to my brother, Adam. As I completed the paperwork, I could feel myself getting really angry. Well, outrage is a better way to describe what was happening with me. Bastard! Yes, outrage mixed with stomach churning anxiety threatening to break through the brave, smiley face I was so adept at portraying to my family, friends and what seemed like the entire planet.

Happy, happy Amelia, nothing ever bothers Amelia. Need help; call Amelia! Oh, she may say no sometimes, but she never means it, always gives in, every time; can never say no and really mean it. Just keep at her. After all, she is married to that rich Australian and he is so generous. She can afford to help. They have plenty to spare. She should help. She is family isn't she?

God, I am so tired of giving in to them, especially to Adam and that idiot wife of his, Susan. I have had enough! This is it, the last time! Oh, I know I have said that before, a hundred times, a thousand times probably over the last 10 years. What is the matter with me?

Here I am again and to make matters worse my baby son, Lucas, is sick with a cold and running a fever. I should not have him out in weather like that. It is so unlike me. I never put my children at risk. Never! I may have been a bit overprotective, even with Abbey, my 10-year-old, but that is how it is when you've had as much trouble as I've had getting pregnant. I love my children.

Lucas was an in vitro baby. He only came along after nine, disheartening attempts. But, that's me; I am just that determined. And, I am planning to have a third child even if it takes me until I am 50 to do it.

As I stood there waiting for the receipt, my mind kept running the same old mantra about how all of this came to be, how I allowed myself to be sucked into the vortex of my brother's nightmare. And now, what was once a deep love for baby brother, Adam, was evolving into a poisonous hate.



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The poison ran deep. Giving him money was just a symptom of the heartaches he had caused our family.

As I said, I am married to a generous man. Jack had never come right out and said “no” to Adam’s incessant demands.

“We should help if we can,” he would always say to me.

Unfortunately, in those early days neither of us knew what a narcissistic and conniving monster we were dealing with.

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Adam was a cute kid and even though he was eight years younger than me, I loved being with him then. We played games and went for walks. He liked that, and he had a real curiosity. He was very intelligent. That’s what was so shocking; he really could have been whatever he wanted. He could twist me around his finger with just a look. I spoiled him. We all did, probably because he was the only boy.

Ma loved us all, and she was a great mother. Her life was not an easy one. She was a looker, very attractive. Two of my sisters and Adam had a different father than me. Their father was the brother of my father. His name was Steve. I loved him and mostly called him Dad. I was raised by him and my mother. Ma did the best, but somehow she messed up with everyone. She even admitted that, saying to me once, “What have I done? Why do all of my children have problems except for you?” She drives me crazy with the excuses she makes for Adam’s behavior, but that’s her story. He is her only son. Heck, as I said he could play and game me every which way, why not her.

There is quite a story about how I came to have two fathers, about my real Daddy, Bill, and Steve, who I called Dad, and I loved them both. This is one of those stories that, if ever told at all, are usually only whispered surreptitiously within the confines of the family clique.

Ma’s first and only husband, Bill, was my father and the father of my older sister, Margaret. I called him Daddy. When he was in Korea in 1959, and I was just a year-old, he came home on a surprise leave and found my mother in bed with his younger brother. Surprise! Shocking! I cannot remember anything of how the discovery played out at the time, I was too young, but it could not have been pleasant. Mother and Daddy divorced and Uncle Steve(Dad) and my mother got together and had three children, Adam, Michele and Chrissie.

It would be many years before I was to hear the real story of what happened. Ma never told me. I eventually learned the story from one of my aunts and other relatives. There are no signs that Adam, Michele and Chrissie have a different father from Margaret and me. I once talked to a geneticist about it when I was pregnant with Lucas. She said, “Well, the fathers are brothers. The DNA chain would be close.”

Ma treated us all the same, loved us the same and taught us the same manners. She did her best to teach us to love and respect people. By some standards, we might have been judged a poor family, but Ma, because she never married Steve, was able to continue to receive welfare checks. What she was doing was probably illegal because she and Steve were cohabitating, and he was working two or three jobs. We had money, but my parents

just misappropriated it. We had great clothes, took many nice trips and had all the toys imaginable, but the tenement houses and the schools were hardly fun! Other children around us thought we were rich – if only they knew!

I liked having three sisters and a young brother around. We had a lot of fun playing together even though we moved around a lot and lived in houses we never owned. We grew up in the crummy areas of South Boston and Dorchester. I think we may have lived in as many as nine houses, or I should say apartments. When I was 25 I got out of there and followed an ex-boyfriend to San Francisco.

I don't mean to imply that Dorchester was a bad place to grow up. There were a lot of fun things to do, especially in the summer with the beaches of Dorchester Bay. Many a night we would go to Carson Beach or Savin Hill Beach to dig for clams and then take them home to feast. Only a New Englander would eat slimy black clams out of Dorchester Bay, but they tasted great.

I think I was 13 when I had my first kiss on the beach. His name was Ron, and I remember he was older than me, about 15 I think. He had jet black hair and bright blue eyes. I thought he was extremely handsome. I was with two of my girlfriends standing on the water's edge, all of us in our bathing suits trying to look good for a couple of boys from our school who were hanging out and trying to look cool. They eventually came over. Ron was just staring at me with, and I can still see them now, with those beautiful blue eyes and long, dark eyelashes. My heart was beating so fast. I don't remember what he said, but later that afternoon we separated from the others. He kissed me lightly on the lips, and I think I thought I had gone to heaven. The experience still brings a warm glow to my heart. He was a kind person, actually.

South Boston is known for being an Irish Catholic district, some might say enclave, and it has many churches, some of them extraordinary structures built in the 1800s, and church schools. We were Catholics and poor. Amazing how the church could collect money from the poor parishioners and build such huge buildings. I loved going into them. We would go up Dorchester Street to Broadway, which ran all the way to the end of the peninsula to Boston Harbor, and turn down E Street to the magnificent Gate of Heaven Catholic church. Gate of Heaven was my favorite church. The inside was so big and the roof so high, I would feel tiny, tiny. I would save pennies to buy a small candle just so I could light it and place in the votive. Then I would kneel down to pray to the saints and watch the flame flickering along with all the others. It was quite surreal being in such a beautiful place, while close by were the decaying and bug ridden apartments we lived in.

I remember telling Margaret, "No way! No way am I going to live this way for the rest of my life. Crummy houses, crummy schools; I'm going live in my own home, a nice home in a great neighborhood and send my children to private schools, or I'll home school them."

Margaret was sitting on the edge of her bed tying her shoe laces didn't even look up. "You are always going on about what you are going to do. How do you think you can afford to live like the rich? You could find a rich guy and marry him, I suppose."

“I would never, ever do that, Margaret. I can take care of myself, even if I have to work four jobs, I’ll save for what I want, and I’ll have what I want. I’ll go to college and get good jobs.”

Little did I know then that no matter how much I worked at building a life away from the circumstances of my childhood, the lives of my mother and siblings would impact me in a far more dramatic and consequential way than I could have ever thought possible. And, guess what, it would be Adam, the cute little brother, the little guy I adored, born eight years after me, who would innocently re-enter my life and then in a few short years drag me and my family to the edge of the hell he was creating for himself.

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In 1989 I married Jack. He was one of those ruggedly handsome Australians with the charisma that make so many of them such great leading men in Hollywood movies. Errol Flynn, Peter Finch, Mel Gibson, Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Guy Pearce are a few of them. Jack was my Mel Gibson, the swashbuckling hero with the winning smile and an eye for the ladies. He has that Gibson devil-may-care twinkle in his eye along with the same brilliant smile.

In his own way, Jack was as courageous and ambitious as those stars when he came to the United States at 18 to make his mark. It can’t be easy to move from your home country, but Jack has done extremely well and today is a Vice President of one of America’s prestigious and successful companies. I met him in San Francisco at work. He swept me off my feet, and I had no resistance when he asked me to marry him.

The wedding was held in Boston. Jack’s company had moved him to Syracuse a couple of years earlier. Boston wasn’t far away, and I was always going back home for visits and then for planning my wedding. Perfect. Well not quite. Adam was there, and he was...well, being Adam.

The guests were tapping their wine glasses with spoons, a tradition not lost on Jack. He turned and kissed me. “I love you, Amelia.”

“I love you,” I said to my handsome husband, returning the kiss and enjoying the tingling sensation running through my body. Our guests responded enthusiastically with a resounding cheer. As I looked around them, there was Adam, pouting, and Susan sitting next to him wearing a most inappropriate cowgirl outfit with a short skirt.

I saw Adam turn to Susan and say something. In unison, they stood up and then started to walk toward us. I could see Adam was really angry. He scared me. He really did. He reminded me of some kind of gothic deviant.

“We’re out of here,” Adam said. “We’re hungry. You can’t eat any of the fancy crap served up here. This food is for you and your friends, not us. We’re going to Burger King to get some real food. Besides, you wouldn’t allow us to even bring the kids, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. As much as I love all my nieces and nephews, none of them were invited. I didn’t want children here. I wanted a strictly adult wedding. Now, I know you don’t like that, but you did exactly what you wanted for your wedding.”

“How could you know? You weren’t even there.”

“And you know why. I’ve said sorry a thousand times. It’s time you let it go,” I said. Jack put his hand on my arm.

“C’mon, Adam, this is your sister’s wedding day. Now, if it’s your intention to upset her, then it is best you and Susan leave now and go enjoy your Burger King banquet.”

Adam never liked Jack, said he was arrogant, but he was wary of him. Talk about calling the kettle black. I could see how he was struggling to keep from screaming obscenities at my Prince Charming, like he did at me many times over. Jack looked the kind of man who could handle himself and, as the future was to prove, Adam was very much aware that my husband was very smart and likely to be making a lot of money. And he did!

It wasn’t long after our marriage when Adam called and asked us to co-sign a loan he wanted to take out, a very big loan of \$125,000.

“No way, Adam, we don’t have the money. For God’s sake, we don’t own our own property or home yet!”

I assumed that would be the end of it, but I had no idea of his ability to wear people down. Yes, he was pushy and aggressive, but this was my first experience at seeing how pushy he had become.

For the next two and a half months, he called every day, sometimes two and three times a day. I was at college full time, so by the time I arrived home it would be late afternoon. That’s when he would always call. It got to the point that I did not want to answer the phone.

“Did you think about it, Amelia? Did you talk to Jack? You know, this isn’t what you would call a traditional co-sign deal. This is different. There’s no risk in it for you. I can make the payments.”

“C’mon, give me a break! I didn’t fall off the turnip truck yesterday, Adam, there’s only one type of co-sign. You don’t pay; I have to pay. It falls on me and Jack.”

“No, this is different.”

“Don’t try to lay that crap on me. The answer is for the last and final time, no! We can’t anyway. I’ve told you before, we don’t have the money.”

“You can’t or you won’t?” he screamed.

“Interpret it anyway you want. We are not going to do it, and that’s the end of it!”

He had nerve I had to give him that! Little did I know this was just the beginning? I should have been more aggressive and not let it go on for 2-1/2 months. Who am I kidding? I could never be that way with him. Saying no to him this time would turn out to be a short-lived breakthrough.

‘I could never be that way with him!’ Oh! There was the clue, in the language. His power over me, I could hardly ever say no to him and mean it. The pathology of my behavior seems obvious now, but it wasn’t at the time. Despite a degree in psychology, it would take years to see how it applied to me.

That was the first time he ever asked for so much, and the first time I said no and meant it. But, he was always asking. Demanding really, money and help, as if he was entitled to

whatever he wanted. He once said he was God, and he was not being flippant. I kept giving in to the smaller requests and demands.

“He’s my brother and that’s what families are supposed to do, help,” I kept telling myself.

I was eight when he was born. I loved him a lot, but he was extremely spoiled. We would take walks, especially in the fall and jump in the leaves together. I really did enjoy those times. One of the best times I recall was the blizzard of 1978. We walked in snow that came up to his chest and crossed over the reservoir with me holding his hand and doing my best to forge a path for him.

As he got older, he became condescending and judgmental. He did not care whose feelings he hurt. When he was 15, I moved to San Francisco. I didn’t see much of him after that, but when I came home to visit I would occasionally go out to a movie or have lunch with him. For the most part I had a good time, but not always.

It was my birthday. Adam had won tickets to a Joan Jett concert, so he took me. It was a beautiful night. I was in a good mood, happy to be hanging out with my brother and happy to be home with my family and friends. The place was crowded, people everywhere, excited, waiting for the concert to start. Then it happened. Some guy stepped on my foot, accidentally.

“Ouch!” I yelled and grabbed my foot.

Adam went ballistic. “What’s up with you, buddy! You step on my sister’s foot, and do I hear a sorry, an excuse me, or an ‘are you okay?’ No!” He screamed, threatening and taunting the poor guy.

Then I saw Adam had a knife on his belt. I could not believe it! What was he doing with a knife? That freaked me out! I was really scared then. The guy who stepped on my foot was clearly ready to take Adam on. I knew that something really bad was going to happen. I forgot about my foot. I had to act and quickly. I stepped in front of Adam.

“Cut it out, Adam!” I yelled. “I’m not hurt. It’s no big deal.”

Adam was crazed and for a moment I thought he was going to attack me. “What is the matter with you? don’t you get it? It was an accident. Now, for God’s sake cut it out!”

Adam lowered his eyes and adopted what had become part of his defense, his belligerent pout. “I was looking out for you.”

I apologized to the guy, and he moved on, thank God.

Later, when I asked Adam why he had a knife, he said nothing and told me it was none of my business.

“You know, Adam, you used to be cute once. I don’t know what is going on with you now, but you’ve developed a huge chip on your shoulder. You better get over it, or your life is going nowhere.” How prophetic these words would turn out to be.

What I said had as much meaning to him as water running off a duck’s back. His behavior only got worse. He got meaner, nastier and more threatening. I couldn’t figure it out. Maybe his behavior at the concert, in his own demented way, was that he liked the

idea of family and was being protective of me. Indeed, he was to have seven children of his own, but paradoxically a story was to emerge of such hellish abuse of his children that I, in all conscience could not ignore it, and I got involved. Silly me, but I had no way of knowing of the consequences that would profoundly affect my life and the lives of my family.

Our dealings with one another after the concert were minimal for many years.

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In 1987, Adam married Susan. He was only 21. She was just a few years younger than I am, so that put her age at around 25.

They met at a Pharmacy store where they were both working. Adam had been seriously involved with another young woman, Donna. I had already moved away from home, so I did not get to know her that well, but the rest of the family liked her. Adam was tall and very handsome. Women certainly took notice when he was around. Then suddenly, it was Susan and marriage. It turned out she was three month's pregnant at the time.

The kindest way I can describe my relationship with Susan is that we were never close. She is the antithesis of me. To look at, she reminds me of a tiny rodent, and if she ever speaks her voice has the pinched quality of a squeaking mouse. We rarely shared conversations. Well, except when I helped her move from hotel to hotel and to pay for things. She was attractive, but thin, very thin, much thinner than I, and I'm about 105 pounds.

What is surprising is the way Adam is with Susan. Unlike how he controls and treats everyone else, he would do anything for her, anything. It is I who he would call a stupid idiot. He would never speak to Susan like that, ever.

Ma said, "Oh, Adam and Susan together; it's a match made in heaven. They are so much in love."

"C'mon, Ma, get real. A match made in hell is more like it," I wanted to say.

What really got to me was the way they treated their children. They were never fed, clothed, sheltered or schooled properly. They were not even taught the rudimentary necessities of personal hygiene. A litany of charges, court appearances, jail sentences and flights from the law were to become the core features of Adam and Susan's macabre trek through life. Susan was hopeless as a mother. She would never defend her children over him, ever, ever. They would reach out to her for affection, but she would never respond.

As said earlier, I didn't make it to their wedding. I tried to explain why. Adam couldn't care less. It was a personal affront to him and Susan. He carried a grudge about it for his whole life. He was not disappointed or upset; he was angry, mad angry.

I met their first child, my niece, Cindy, when she was born. What an exciting occasion that was for me. I love children. My own, Lucas and Abbey, are everything to me.

I didn't see Cindy again until she was almost a year old. Adam and Susan came to visit Jack and me in Syracuse. It was weird, really weird. Why would I expect anything different? Hope springs eternal is a common saying, isn't it? God, I call it me being naive, or as Jack would say when he was being very Australian, "Bloody naive."

Cindy was pretty much confined to her playpen most of the day and night I was to find out, poor little thing. When we first got there and I reached down to pick her up and give her a hug, Adam stopped me short.

“Don’t do that,” he snapped. “And always ask us first if it’s okay.”

“What are you talking about? We haven’t seen our niece in nearly a year, and you’re telling me I can’t pick her up unless I ask first. What’s the problem?”

I was to find out that asking made no difference. When I did, they usually said no anyway.

“She’s not used to people,” Adam replied sharply.

“Dear God, how on earth can she ever be used to people, if you don’t let us touch her?”

Jack knew I was getting upset. “Oh, Susan, we wouldn’t want to spoil the child and have her turn out a brat like some people we know, would we?” Jack said looking right at Susan and ignoring Adam.

Jack could be so Australian at times. Later that night in bed we talked, or rather whispered about how ‘fucked up,’ Jack’s words, was the way Adam and Susan were raising Cindy.

“They won’t let her do anything. We’re walking on eggshells in our own apartment! And, Susan is pregnant again. Why, Jack? They don’t even like the one they already have.”

“Your brother has never taken responsibility for his life, and he sure as hell is not about to start. There are more kids to come and a whole lot more crap is going to come with them, Amelia.”

Prophetic words from the man I loved so deeply. We made love, conscious to adjust from our usually robust and noisy romping.

When Adam and Susan left our apartment a few days later, I was relieved, but sad for the life I knew was coming at my little niece, Cindy.

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Adam was soon asking for larger amounts of money. He said needed fourteen hundred dollars urgently, told us his tax refund was due, and that he could pay us back as soon as the tax check arrived in the mail.

I had just had Abbey. “Look, we have a brand-new baby; I can’t afford to give you a cent.”

Well, we did end up giving him the money and, unbelievably, he paid it back. It was to be the one and only time.

There was more, of course. The biggest amount we actually loaned was when Abbey was two. We had just bought and moved into our first home, so we had a lot going on. Would that deter dear brother Adam? Of course not!

Adam and Susan had bought a little house in Maine for something like \$36,000. It was cheap and it needed a lot of work, but it was the first house they bought, and Jack and I were happy for them. They were only in it for eight months when Adam called.

“We owe five thousand dollars in back mortgages.”

Jack said we would sign a tax refund check we had just received over to Adam. The check was made out for six thousand dollars, more than was asked for, but it was the full amount of the back mortgages. Buying the house was the first decent thing Adam had ever done, and we didn’t want them to lose it.

“You’ll never see the money, Amelia, so don’t even worry about it.” Jack is a wonderful man. As I said earlier, he was generous to a fault. He had already said to me that if we were in a similar situation, he would hope family would help us out. That’s not very likely, I thought.

They sent us a thank you note, which was a pleasant surprise. Perhaps they were turning a corner. Hope springs eternal! No way! What came next blew any vestige of hope I had left for them right out of the water. They lost the house! Adam came up with some fiction that the bank manager told him that he would accept two thousand dollars toward the back mortgage.

“Two thousand! We gave you 6,000 to pay the lot. What’s this about two thousand? Where is the other 4,000?”

“A business opportunity came up that would put us right back on our feet.”

“A business opportunity! What business opportunity? We gave you money, our hard earned money so you and your family would have a house to live in.”

“The bank manager let us down. He said the \$2,000 would keep us in the house...”

“What! Well, what happened? What happened to the \$2,000? Haven’t you spoken to the bank manager?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but he died and the bank couldn’t find the documents.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! You have signed copies of the documents, don’t you?”

“Oh, hang on, I remember. It was a handshake deal, so I could get the business deal done.”

“You liar, you rotten liar, Adam! Go to hell!” I slammed down the phone. I was in tears, desperately disappointed, our money just thrown away.

Of course, there was no bank manager who said he would accept two thousand dollars. There was no bank manager who died. We found out later that they used all the money we gave them to buy cheap merchandise and rent a warehouse. They would buy salvaged goods damaged in a fire, or water damaged and try to resell them cheap. He spent all the money on that, nothing went to the house, nothing!

So, here was Adam and Susan with four children, with nowhere to live and no money. I knew that Adam and his family were in for a tough time, but I could not know how horrific and bizarre their story was to become, or how deeply my life and my family’s lives would be affected.

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I liked living in Syracuse. I was able to go home to New England on a regular basis to see my family and friends. Despite saying I didn't want to see Adam again, I did drop in to visit several times when I was in Boston.

Adam's attitude never altered. He was always rude and condescending to me. Every time I reflect on those visits, I get angry with myself for allowing the bastard (pardon my language, but right now as I write this I am angry, and I actually yelled the word out anyway, so why not write it down here?) to abuse and humiliate me! I let him get away with it all the time and kept coming back for more. Is that crazy or what? I have heard it said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and each time expecting a different result.

I had not seen Cindy in five months, which was the last time Adam and Susan came to Syracuse. So, while we were back east, Jack was with me, we visited with them. Adam let us in to the house.

"What's going on, Adam?" Jack asked, as I kissed my brother's cheek.

"Usual crap," he replied as he led us into the kitchen where Susan was leaning back against the sink.

Chewing gum and looking hot and sweaty, Susan tried to smile as she opened her mouth to squeak, "Hello, Jack. Hello Amelia."

"You're late. We thought you weren't coming," said Adam.

"Yeah, I can see that. Looks like you were in the middle of cooking something hot, hey, Susan?" said Jack.

"You don't have to be crass. I thought you might have taught Jack some American etiquette by now, Amelia."

"Jeez, Brother Adam, lighten up," said Jack.

"Where's Cindy, Susan? I would love to see her. It's been five months."

"She's upstairs, sleeping. She's not to be disturbed," said Adam.

"Well, I'll wait until she wakes up," I said.

"She won't wake up until supper time."

"All right then, we'll wait," said Jack knowing how disappointed I'd be if I did not see her. "What's for supper?"

Susan looked at Adam. "I don't have anything for all of us," she said.

"No problem. We can get a pizza and bring it back here to eat; enough for all of us, our treat." Jack grinned, enjoying Susan and Adam's discomfort, who we could tell would rather not have us around for supper. "Amelia's here to see Cindy, and so she shall. C'mon, Adam lets go get the pizza."

Adam left reluctantly with Jack. Susan, who rarely had anything to say to me suddenly found the need to attend to some laundry. As was her usual style, she didn't bother to ask if I wanted something to drink, so I took the liberty of going to the refrigerator. In no way was it a surprise to me, the refrigerator had plenty of food in it for them.

I guess 15 minutes had gone by; Susan had been in and out of the kitchen a couple of times. I heard Cindy waking up, so I went upstairs to her room. She was standing, holding onto the side of her crib. I smiled, and she giggled.

Suddenly, Adam was at the door.

“What the hell are you doing? You woke up Cindy?”

“No! I heard her wake up. I came up to see if she was okay.”

“Will you ever learn to mind your own business, Amelia? There are three good reasons why you shouldn’t have done what you did! Number one! Cindy is my child, and I have a very specific way I will raise her and the other children Susan and I intend to have. Number two! She does not really know you. You can see she is upset.”

“She is upset because you are yelling and scaring her, Adam.”

Adam ignored me and kept up his rant, his voice so full of contempt that I was shocked and even a little frightened.

“You don’t just run up to her without asking us! And, number three! We never, ever come to her right away. We let her cry for a bit.”

Well, Cindy was crying now, screaming really. Suddenly, Jack appeared. “What seems to be the problem up here?”

Susan burst into the room and went to Cindy. I could see that Jack was livid. His face was red with anger. With a clenched fist held to within an inch of Adam’s face, he spoke in voice edged with icy venom.

“Listen to me carefully, Adam. You should never talk to anyone like that. You should never, never talk to any woman like that, let alone your sister. And, let me be very clear, if I ever hear you talk to my wife like that again, I’ll have your nuts on your breakfast plate by morning, and there’ll be no more little Allertons to kick around in the future.”

Susan, terrified, was clutching Cindy and looking for direction from Adam. Adam, who I knew was capable of using a knife, was like most bullies, a coward when confronted one on one.

“Hey, back off, Dude. I didn’t mean to set off World War Three just by talking to my sister. All I want Amelia and anyone else having anything to do with my kids is to understand I don’t want them spoiled, that’s all.”

“Amelia, give Cindy a hug. We are leaving,” said Jack.

Susan, paralyzed with fear, managed to look at Adam again for guidance.

“Give her the kid.”

As I stepped forward, Susan held Cindy out for me to take her. The gorgeous little baby stopped crying when I cuddled her into my body, but she was trembling and wide eyed with anxiety. My heart felt like it was being torn apart as every motherly cell in my body cried out for the little girl I cradled in my arms.

As we rocketed along Interstate 90 heading for Syracuse, I was watching Jack. He was my dream man, no doubt about it. I watched his hands, strong and lean, lightly gripping

the BMW's leather steering wheel, guiding the car with the easy confidence of a surgeon skillfully maneuvering his scalpel through a complex matrix of blood vessels, tissue and organs without ever raising a sweat. I watched him, feeling safe, feeling the warm tingling energies that rushed through my body every time I fell in love with him all over again. I wanted him. I wanted to make love right there and then. I placed my hand on his thigh. Rain started to hit the windshield. He turned to me and smiled.

"Later, Honey, after I get you home in one piece," He reached forward and flipped the switch to turn on the headlights. "It's getting dark, and this rain is forecast to get heavier as we get closer to Syracuse. Love you, Honey."

I felt a twinge of disappointment, but I knew he was looking out for me. He always did. My mind turned to the events at Adam's house. Sorrow and frustration slowly pushed aside the warmth I had been feeling only moments earlier. Nobody else had ever talked to me like that. Why did I allow Adam? I was shocked. He had been rude many times before, but this was the first time he had been that aggressive and nasty.

God, if only I knew what was ahead. His behavior, as mean as it was that afternoon, would turn out to be only the tip of the iceberg.

Over and over again I would say, "I will never visit with him ever again." And, over and over again I did. I told myself then, he was family. I wanted to know his children and help them where I could. God, every time I saw him, something negative always happened. And, Susan? She never, ever said anything to him, nor did anything, like apologize to me for his behavior. That might have meant something. Adam reduced me to tears more times that I can remember. Susan would just sit there and watch.

"Why do you keep going back, baby?"

I could never hide anything from Jack, even if I wanted too. He could read my mind.

"You always ask me that, and the answer is always the same. He's family, you know that."

"Yeah, I know. Sometimes, though, I wish you could see what I see. I don't think he'll ever change. You know what, I look forward to the day, and it will come, when you've had enough of that bastard and Amelia will begin to look after what Amelia's needs are."

"Thank you for caring about me, Honey. And, thanks for what you did this afternoon. I've never seen you that mad; sure caused Adam to back down. He was scared of you, really unsure of how to handle things, what to do next. Heck, you scared me."

I knew deep down that Jack was right, but way back then family was and still is important to me, however no one is more important, of course, than Jack, Abbey and Lucas.

"Screw him, Jack. Screw him and his pathetic wife. I'm done with them. Let's get home and get our own family started. I can hardly wait for you to hold me in your arms and make love to me."

"Okay, I'm all for that," he said grinning.

The rain suddenly cleared, and Jack pushed the pedal a little closer to the floor. The BMW surged forward, and we were soon rushing by smaller towns and quickly closing in on Syracuse.

Oh, dear, what a phony I was. I couldn't stay away. I just couldn't. I was to go back and back and get ever more involved. Eventually, the law, social services and the court systems of Maine were to become part of this tragic story as Adam and Susan grew their family out to seven children.

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I so badly wanted to have children of my own, but as much as Jack and I tried, pregnancy eluded me. I couldn't stop the visits to Adam and Susan's place. I had to see the children, they had two now, Cindy and Brian. Brian was the first born son. Susan was pregnant with her third child. For the most part, seeing the children helped to lessen the ache I felt in my heart from not having my own, but there were times my heart ached more.

Nothing changed about Adam. He was as verbally abusive as ever, except when Jack was with me, and I was very concerned about the way he was raising and treating his children.

I had been visiting my mother in Boston. After I left, I called Adam to tell him I would drop by their place on the way back to Syracuse and stay the night. They were still living close to the Eastern Seaboard, Jack was out of town, and I was in a bad place emotionally. I had learned earlier in the week that despite all the doctor and clinic visits, injections and drugs and years of doing this, I was still not pregnant.

I arrived outside Adam's apartment, turned off the engine and sat still in the car for a few minutes, staring through the windshield and across the hood without seeing anything, wondering whether I had the energy to put up with what I knew was coming, more of the same old crap. Well I'm here, I thought. Besides, Cindy's birthday was coming up, and I had brought her some books as gifts.

I walked into the kitchen. Adam was standing at the sideboard preparing what looked like a cookie mix. He did a lot of the cooking and cleaning, I'll give him that. I hugged him, anxious, but hoping for the best.

"What are you making?"

"What does it look like?—chocolate chip cookies. You're late. You said you'd be here half-an-hour ago."

Oh, God. It was all I could do not to break into tears. I took a deep breathe and tried to ignore his gibe.

"Where's Susan?"

"She's resting. Taking care of two kids and having a third one on the way, tires her out. Of course, you wouldn't know any of that, not having kids and all."

"Why are you so mean to me, Adam? You know I want my own children more than anything. Jack and I have been trying really hard for a long time."

"Well, there's a lot of fun trying though, isn't there?"

I could feel my face getting red with embarrassment and anger. I wanted to scream, but I knew that Cindy and Brian had to be in the house somewhere.

“Where are Cindy and Brian?”

“In the parlor.”

That’s where I stayed for the next two hours, playing with the children while Adam was cooking spaghetti and making chocolate chip cookies. Cindy was about to turn five, and Brian was two. Both were kept in the playpen, confined there for most of their waking hours. I learned from my previous experiences that taking them out of the playpen only caused major outbursts from Adam. Oh, to be fair, there were times when he let them out to play house with me.

Susan would drift in and out of the parlor every so often to see what we were doing, hardly saying a word to me. It was well past lunch time, and I was feeling hungry. I had not been offered anything to eat or drink since arriving. I had some snacks, cheese-its and dried apricots, which I shared with the children, but that was all. Then Adam appeared out of nowhere and snatched the snacks away. Brian started to cry. Cindy dropped her chin to her chest and held up her little arms, limp across her chest and throat. It broke my heart.

“Why did you do that, Adam? That’s healthy food. It’s good for them.”

“Look, Amelia, they have breakfast between 8:00 and 9:00 and supper between 5:00 and 6:00. I don’t allow any snacks in between.”

“What time do they have lunch?”

“There is no lunch. Two good meals a day keeps them healthy. They don’t get overweight, fat and disgusting like a lot of American kids. Teach them this kind of discipline now, and they’ll do well as adults.”

I was stunned. “You have to be crazy, Adam! Where the hell am I? Is this some kind of twilight zone you’re living in here? Who told you that crap? For God sake, children need to eat small amounts of food throughout the day, or they won’t develop fully. You can see that Cindy is small and way too thin for her age. You’re a control freak. God save the children!”

Susan slunk into the room, picked up Brian and slunk out again.

“This is none of your business, Amelia. What the hell do you know about raising kids, anyway?”

“A lot more than you do it seems to me. Let me remind you I have a degree in psychology, which includes studies in child psychology and what it takes to develop healthy young minds. Proper nutrition is critical.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore of this crap.” Adam stared right through me. He had lowered his voice, but its tone was cold and menacing. He scared me, and I knew it was time to shut up.

I regained my composure, turned my attention to Cindy and tickled her under the chin.

“Cindy, you’re going to be six soon.” I reached into the shopping bag I had placed on the couch and took out the books I had bought for her. “Here, these are for your birthday. They are from Uncle Jack and Auntie Amelia.”

Adam was watching intently. Cindy was looking at the colorful front cover of a book called *The Adventures of Blinky Bill* and giggling as she poked the face of the main character.

“That’s Blinky Bill, Cindy. He’s a little koala who lives in Australia, a big country like ours but a long, long way over the sea from here. That’s all his friends there, little critters that live in Australia.” I took her finger and guided it to each of the other four characters. “That’s Nutsy Kola, Splodge Kangaroo, Flap Platypus and Marcia the Marsupial Mouse. Blinky Bill was one of Uncle Jack’s favorite story books when he was a little boy growing up in Australia. He got it for you when he was way over there last time.”

“Uncle Jack said to me about Ostraya. He said about the big lizards that eat little kids up.”

Cindy’s eyes were as large as saucers.

I laughed. “Uncle Jack was telling you fibbers, sweetheart, teasing you. There are no big lizards in Australia that eat anyone.” I gave her a hug. “Anyhow, I wouldn’t let anything get you. I’d eat them first, myself.” I growled and shook my head from side to side. Cindy gave me a big smile and laughed.

Actually, I wasn’t really too sure at all about what was in Australia to tell you the truth. I had encounters with hordes of the biggest cockroaches I had ever seen, over four inches long, infesting the harbor-side suburbs of Sydney, horrible creepy creatures, believe me. So, it wouldn’t surprise me someday to pick up a paper and read about a tourist being eaten by a giant lizard somewhere out in the wilds of the Australian bush.

It gives me the shivers when I remember the newspaper story of a beautiful young American woman who was eaten by a ‘big salty’, the name given to the monster-size saltwater crocodiles by the locals, as she swam back to a tour boat anchored in an inlet along the far north coast of Western Australia. The other tourists on the boat watched in horror, powerless to do a thing to help. As I tell Jack when we are traveling, good clean hotels in big cities will do it for me.

“She needs to learn about America’s animals, not that foreign crap.”

I could hear the malice in Adam’s voice. The affect on Cindy was immediate; the joyous face of the bubbly little girl of a moment earlier became anxious, wary. Nervous, but determined not to let my brother’s ugly dark energy shut me down I ignored his remark and took out another book, one of my childhood favorites. *The Cat in the Hat* by famous author, Dr. Seuss.

As I was showing Cindy the cartoon drawing of the cat in its high, high top hat on the front cover, her face started to lighten up again. I smiled. She reached for the book. Then, I remembered I had not written on inside the cover, something I always did in books.

“Wait just a minute, sweetheart.” I took a pen from my pocketbook and opened *The Cat in the Hat* to the inside cover.

“Give me that!” Adam snatched the pen from my hand. “don’t let her see you write in the book.” He glared at me.

I was perplexed, speechless.

“Are you stupid?” he said.

I would buy mostly books when I got Cindy gifts. Usually, there wasn’t a problem. There was a book one time that he wouldn’t let her have, and a doll I gave her another time, but this? Holy Mary Mother of God, is this the love Christ died for! I wanted to scream and scratch Adam’s face off with my nails, but Cindy was already crying.

“Give me back my pen, Adam,” I said, my voice trembling with anger. Maybe, he sensed that this time he had gone too far because he gave it back without a word. I opened the book and scribbled a happy birthday message to Cindy, signed it from Auntie Amelia and Uncle Jack and handed it to her.

Cindy looked at her father. Adam didn’t say a word, just shook his head and went out to the kitchen. And, that is where I spent what was left of the afternoon, in the parlor with Cindy and eventually with Brian. Susan brought him down from his crib shortly before supper, which was already long overdue.

While I was playing with the children, my mind was occupied with a real concern for them, and what was happening with my brother. I had learned enough in my psychology studies to have real concerns about Adam’s sanity. He needed treatment, of that I was no longer in no doubt after what had happened earlier. And, the children, two now and soon to be three (there would be seven), what was to become of them? Their future health and well being could be in serious jeopardy. The food thing appalled me! Children need healthy snacks throughout the day.

At one time, I had talked with Ma and a few other family members about his yelling and abusive language. They all had similar stories, including Ma.

“What! He treats you, his own mother, that way?” I said to Ma.

“It’s just the way he is, and we have to deal with it,” she said much to my consternation.

Get real. Holy Jesus, the only son, Ma’s little boy syndrome, I thought at the time. Not to judge her, of course. I mean, wasn’t I coming from a similar thinking. Still seeing him as the cute, innocent little brother I loved to play with, even though I was eight years older. I started to question my own sanity.

Susan poked her head into the parlor.

“Supper time, children,” she squeaked.

“Is it just for the children, or does it mean me, too?”

“Well, you can eat if you want to.” Such hospitality! Why did I suggest I stay the night?

A few minutes later, we were all seated at the kitchen table. “No cookie for you until you eat all of this up, Cindy,” said Adam, piling spaghetti and meat balls high on Cindy’s plate. “Your Auntie Amelia doesn’t think you get enough to eat.”

Here we go already, I thought. The set up was in.

“Don’t take it out on her, Adam, it’s not fair. You’ve put so much food on the poor child’s plate she can’t possibly eat it all. That lot would make up three meals for me.”

He ignored me. I watched her struggle. In the meantime, Brian, sitting in his highchair, was doing his best eating pieces of KIX cereal. Susan was feeding the skinny little baby one and two bites at a time. Strange, I thought, he doesn’t complain or scream for more, but just waits until Susan thinks to hand him another bite. I knew I was going to be in more trouble before the night was over, but KIX cereal! “Why isn’t Brian eating the food we’re eating, Susan? He won’t eat pasta, is that it?”

I guess the tone of my voice was not at its most congenial when Susan, unexpectedly, found herself being yanked into the conversation. She had never wanted to talk with me, ever. I watched, and I have to admit with some measure of barely hidden mirth, her nearly choke on the spaghetti and meat balls she was shoveling into her mouth right at that moment. Next was the urgent and reflexive cough to clear her airway, sending bits of spaghetti and meat ball exploding onto the table, some of it managing to splatter Adam as she jerked her head in his direction. I knew I was pushing the envelope, but what the hell.

Coughing and spluttering, her face turning to a bright red, Adam was fully attentive to the most precious possession in his life. For a few moments, he forgot all about me and the children.

I took advantage of the distraction, grabbed up a handful of cereal and dropped them onto Brian’s highchair table top. He stared at me for a full minute. Unsure of what to do, he lightly pushed the cereal around the small table. Then he gave me...well, I interpreted it as a wry smile as he started stuffing the KIX into his mouth.

Adam turned from Susan to talk to me and immediately realized what I had done. I knew what was coming, but I didn’t care anymore. My insane brother was stuffing one child with food and almost starving the other one.

“I’m full, Daddy,” said Cindy, her little hand toying with the fork, slowly winding and unwinding the spaghetti. “Can I have my cookie now?”

“Eat what’s on your darn plate, all of it. There’ll be no chocolate chip cookie until I see that plate clean.” Then he turned back to look at me and smiled. “Auntie Amelia says you will get sick if you don’t eat enough.”

“That is not what I said, Adam, and you know it. You can’t possibly expect her to eat all of that food.”

“Oh, c’mon, Amelia, we have to make sure she gets enough to eat. You said it, huh, this afternoon, right? She doesn’t get have a cookie until the plate is clean.”

I got it; this was the pay off to the set up. Auntie Amelia is to blame. Bitch from hell she is. All right, well, screw him; I can be as unrelenting over the long haul.

Susan began hacking and wheezing again. Adam’s attention shot back to her.

“Some water, Adam, quick.”

“Damn you, Amelia, look what you have done,” Adam said as he leapt to his feet. “Go sit on the couch, honey. I’ll bring the water to you.”

Susan, holding her hands to her chest and throat, her face contorted with the most tragic countenance she could contrive, tottered coughing and spluttering to the parlor. She was brilliant. I wanted to shout, “Cut the crap and get your own damn water,” but I was thinking it would be a relief to have the both of them out of the room.

I know it wasn’t right, but when they were out of the kitchen, I scraped some of Cindy’s food onto my plate. Oh, my goodness, I got the biggest surprise of my life. Cindy looked at me as if I had done the most terrible thing; as if how dare I go against her father’s wishes. I put my finger to my lips. “Shhh,” I hissed quietly.

There was still a lot of food on Cindy’s plate when Adam came back into the room and sat down. Susan followed him, but without so much as a look in my direction, took the baby out of his highchair and left without saying a word. I didn’t get to say goodnight to Brian, let alone give him a hug. I didn’t need to be treated like that. I was wishing I’d gone straight on home to Syracuse.

“All right, Cindy, finish the rest of it and you can have your cookie.” I held my breath, wondering if she was going to rat on me. For a moment, everything except for the ticking of the wall clock was absolutely quiet, although each tick sounded like a gun shot to me.

“I’m stuffed, Daddy.”

“She has done her best for you, Adam and eaten way more than she wanted, or needed. Give her the cookie. Please.”

Unbelievably, he handed her the cookie, just gave it to her without a word.

Cindy looked at it. A couple of tears started rolling from the corners of her eyes.

“I’m stuffed. I can’t eat it.”

“Off to bed then.”

She wiped her eyes and turned to leave. “Hey, where’s my kiss ‘night?” I asked.

She paused a moment, and then came to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. As I kissed her on the cheek, I whispered, “Thanks.” And then I gave her a really big hug. “Night, Cindy, I love you.”

It tore at my heart to see her leave, clutching the cookie in her tiny hand. Adam knew she couldn’t eat the cookie. That’s why he gave it to her then. The mean bastard.

“Cindy, what are the rules?” said Adam. She turned, came back, handed the cookie to her father and left for the second time.

I shook my head as I watched and thought about how fallacious the food thing was. It really was all about his control obsession.

“You need to apologize to Susan, Amelia.”

“You’re kidding. I have nothing to apologize for...”

“You accused Susan of not feeding Brian properly.”

“I did not accuse her!” I said emphatically. “I asked her a question. A simple question about why Brian was not eating what we were eating. Now, if she has some kind of guilt about...”

I stopped and held up my hands with a kind of back off, calm down gesture. I'd really had it. I didn't have the energy to get into another argument that would end the same way with his abuse and name calling.

"Adam, I am tired. I really want the best for you and your family, but..."

"You keep interfering with how I want to raise my family."

"Will you just keep quiet for this one time in your life and listen? I really care what happens to you and the children. Some things get to me, especially about how important the right food and enough of it is to a child's future."

"There you go, accusing us of..."

I hammered the table with my fists. "Shut up! Shut up and listen! If you can't keep quiet, I'm going home tonight, and I won't visit again. I mean it. I've had it. I'm tired of the upset every darn time, Adam." I could see that my brother was caught off guard, strangely threatened by the thought that we may not be there for him if he needed us, I surmised.

"No. No, I don't want you driving back to Syracuse at night. Stay here and leave in the morning."

I stayed the night. Adam and I managed to continue our conversation without it becoming a war.

I got up at 5:30AM and couldn't wait to get out of the place. I wanted to leave before anyone heard me, but I was shocked when Adam came down the stairs at 6:00AM! He had a bag of Christmas presents for Jack and me. This was April, and he wanted to do Christmas presents.

"I didn't even get a chance to give you your presents."

I was completely taken by surprise and could only think to say quite calmly, "If you weren't so busy stressing everyone, we could have done it." None of it made any sense, but I was too stressed to deal with another of Adam's rants.

"Just take them," he said handing them to me.

We hugged and I left, relieved to be out of there, heading back to Syracuse and my life of love and normalcy.

• • •

My heart was singing! I had just come from my doctor. I was pregnant! Thank you, God! I was so happy. For five years Jack and I had been trying to get pregnant. There were doctors, fertility treatments, pain, miscarriages, uncomfortable surgeries for endometriosis, and then in the month I transferred to an in vitro specialist, I got pregnant. I didn't do the in vitro. That was to come, another long and testing process when I decided to have a second child. A lot of people would try to talk me out of that, but I am a very determined woman. When I set my mind on something, I won't let anything or anyone stop me. It might be painful, and it could take a long time. It took me 12 years to graduate with a degree in psychology, so you can bet on me getting what I want in the end.

I could hardly wait for Jack to get home from work. I prepared a basket with a blue theme on one side and a pink theme on the other. On the blue side, I put baby boy things and on the pink side, of course, girl stuff. Oh, I had blue ribbons, pink ribbons, balloons, and a doll for the girl and a teddy bear for the boy. I also put in a bottle of our favorite champagne for a celebratory toast, and then placed the basket so Jack could see it as he walked through the front door of our condo.

I waited. I was so excited I had to pee twice before I heard Jack's car drive up. Moments later the front door opened and he stepped inside, oblivious to the basket.

"Hiiii, there," I crooned.

"Amelia! Hi, honey." He stood looking at me and then broke into a big smile. "You're up to something."

I walked slowly toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh, oh, you look like the cat that just swallowed the canary. Tell me."

"Jack, you walked right by it. Look behind you."

"What?"

"The basket," I said pointing.

He picked up the bottle of champagne. "Wow." He looked at me suspiciously. "Okay, Amelia. What are you up to? What do you want?"

"I'm pregnant!" Jack's eyes were the size of saucers.

"No shit! How...I mean...you only began going to the in vitro guy a month ago?"

I laughed. I had been thinking about the timing. "Baby, remember, weeks ago now, when you took me to Long Island for a dirty weekend, that's the way you Aussie's put it, isn't it? Well, I think that's when I conceived."

Jack let out a hoot, picked me up and carried me to the sofa, hugging me as tight as he could. "What wonderful news, Amelia, for you, for us." He lowered me onto the couch. "I know how much you have wanted this. I've known how tough it's been on you, the doctors, the hope, the heartbreak and despair at times." He kissed me, crushing his lips to mine. Oh, his kiss exploded through my body, a wonderful sensation of red hot passion surging, consuming. Every part of me cried out for my husband. I wanted him in the wildest way, and he took me, right there on the sofa.

Afterwards, we sat holding each other and reveling in the peace and easy conversation that comes after making love when, suddenly, Jack sat bolt upright. "Shit!"

That startled me; frightened me, really. "What's wrong?"

"The promotion I was waiting for. It came through today. I'm being transferred to San Francisco."

My heart dropped. I was almost too afraid to ask.

"When?"

The promotion was a big deal, a breakthrough onto the fast track to the high altitude levels of corporate management with one of the world's biggest, brand name corporations.

"In two weeks. They provide a corporate condo for us to live in until we buy something."

"I don't want to move, Jack. I don't want to risk a miscarriage after all I've been through. The doctor said the risk of me miscarrying was high. Bed rest would be crucial and compulsory for the third trimester." I paused and looked intently at the man I loved, knowing what this promotion meant to him and us. "Jack, there's no way I'll change my doctors at this stage. You have to understand, I can't leave here until after the baby is born."

"Yes, I do understand, Amelia, but I have to go. This is my chance, our chance, what I have been working for. There may not be another."

So, that was it. I stayed in Syracuse. Jack went to work in San Francisco and commuted regularly. Despite lots of scares along the way, the psychological highs and lows a woman with a normal pregnancy would have to go through, and a car accident early in the third trimester, everything worked out.

On the 4th of July, 1994, our daughter Abbey was born in Syracuse; simply the most beautiful baby girl that had ever been born.

. . .

It was a wonderful and glorious time in the weeks that followed Abbey's birth, but it was also very stressful. We were preparing for our move to California. We had bought a house in a small town located on the coast near San Francisco.

All the family gathered for Abbey's christening in the Boston Grand hotel, the very same place that Jack and I were married five years earlier, to the day. I was just bubbling over with excitement and pride. Family and friends were fawning over Abbey. Adam was coming with Susan, Cindy, Brian and the now the third born, Becky, who was about a year old. I was growing apprehensive. They were yet to arrive, and my last conversation with Adam had not gone well.

They had come to visit with us a couple of weeks after Abbey's birth and had already been with us for a couple of days before I managed to catch Adam alone outside the house.

"Adam, Jack and I have been talking, and we would like you to be Abbey's Godfather."

"Okay. I'd like Susan to be her Godmother, too. I know she would love to do it."

Here we go again, I thought. He just cannot be grateful for anything. There always has to be something more.

"I won't be asking Susan."

Oh, my God, did he go off the deep end. "Why not? What's wrong with Susan? What did she ever do to you? You have never liked her, have you?" What was I thinking asking him to be my baby's Godfather?!!!

“I have my own sisters to choose from. Why would I choose my sister-in-law with whom I have never had more than a two sentence conversation in all the time I’ve known her? And no, I don’t like her.”

After that, he got really pissed and abusive. I didn’t mention anything to Jack, but I was sure ready for Adam and Susan to go home. Two days with seeing how mean and controlling he was with his children, and getting worse, had been a trying ordeal. Not once did I see either of them pick up Becky, except to change her diaper or feed her with only ever a bottle of milk. Did I ever see them hug Cindy or Brian? No way. Oh, they were very affectionate with each other. If they didn’t like the children they had, why did they keep having more? I couldn’t figure it out.

Poor Brian banged his head on our marble table; a heavy square table that did not budge an inch! He ran into it a second time and cried.

“Stupid. You are stupid, kid. You hit your head once and you don’t learn from it. You deserve what you get,” said Adam.

He was a cute little boy. Susan never went to his defense. Sadly, I saw all of this going on, and it really bothered me. What should I do, I would ask myself? The man yelled at the children all the time and called them horrible names.

“Why don’t you take the children out? There’s a great playground at the end of our street,” I said to him. We lived in a wonderful little neighborhood, and the kids never left the house except for nighttime when they might get to go to the store.

“I didn’t come all the way to Syracuse to take them to a park!” said Adam.

I was tired of being around him. Oh, there were the times when I would picture him as my cute little brother and consider the concept of family and think that, maybe there was a small chance he might change for the better.

Eventually, I reached the end of my rope, again. It happened as I was walking by the playpen, carrying my newborn baby, Abbey. Acting on impulse, I reached down to pick up Becky.

“Don’t touch her! Leave her alone!” Adam yelled.

Abbey’s eyes opened wide. I could see she was frightened. Becky hardly reacted. That told me how used to the abusive tone of Adam’s voice she had become. That was it!

“You frightened my baby, Adam. That’s a major mistake. Now, get your things and get out. Get out of my house! I want you out of here and on your way before Jack arrives home.”

So, here I am. Seven weeks post partum and thoroughly joyful and expectant of sharing Abbey’s christening with the people I love most in the whole world, my family. With some relief, I saw my brother had arrived and was in the hotel lobby. With Abbey in my arms, I went over to give him a hug. The bastard pushed me and my baby away.

“How dare you,” I barely managed to get out a little more than a whisper because I was so upset.

“We got here late because the directions you gave us were wrong, and we got lost. When we finally get here I’m told we couldn’t come up to your room. We had to wait down here with everybody else. I am your brother, and you treat me like shit.”

“Keep your voice down, Adam, please. This is Abbey’s christening, for God’s sake.”

Adam always wanted to be the most special person around. So, he’s upset because he couldn’t come up to my room. I could have let him come up, but he always causes such stress, and now he was proving I made the right decision. What a pig.

I saw Susan waiting across the room. I couldn’t believe what she had on. For our daughter’s christening at one of the finest hotels in Boston, Susan was wearing corduroy pants, cowboy boots and a sweater! She dressed like she was going to a rodeo.

“Why is Susan dressed that way?”

“I told her that since she wasn’t part of the ceremony, she didn’t have to dress up.”

Adam could be so vindictive.

. . .

I have made mention of some moments of kindness that would come from Adam. I want to be fair. After all, it was also these positive aspects of his nature that would emerge from time to time that helped keep alive the flicker of hope I had for his reformation.

It was at the christening that he paid us back the \$1200 he borrowed. Oh, it was the first and last time he would ever do that, but it made for a favorable impression at the time. There was the beautiful baby album and card he gave Abbey as a christening gift. He liked giving gifts and would spend outrageous amounts of money on them. For Abbey’s christening and her birthdays, he would spend upwards of five hundred dollars on presents for her. Money and material things meant everything to him, but he spent money on things he couldn’t afford. And then there was the expectation that we should spend as much on Susan and him and his children. I remember an occasion when I gave him a very nice Polo shirt, and Susan a brand name pair of slacks, but it wasn’t enough; it was never enough.

“What’s this, Amelia? You know I don’t like shirts with logos on them. And those pants, they just aren’t Susan. She’ll never wear them, and frankly I wouldn’t let her be seen dead in them.”

Sadly, he had a way of quickly killing off the goodwill his gifts created. I think family was important to him, and gift giving was his attempt to prove it.

I guess he gets the spending thing from Ma. She was totally into material stuff. She spent lavishly on gifts for us as kids. We wanted for nothing, but I could’ve cared less. I wanted a home; a really nice house like my cousins that didn’t have cockroaches running all through. I would have given anything, traded everything I had, the record players, the records, the Barbie stuff and the expensive clothes, just to have a nice, stable home.

As an aside, my sister Margaret was just like Ma and Adam. She had always been struggling for money since she gave birth to her first child, but she’d spend on things she couldn’t afford, like diamond pendants for her children’s graduations!

“You have to be crazy, Margaret,” I said to her once when we were at Ma’s visiting. She was complaining about not being able to pay her mortgage while showing me a diamond ring she had just bought for Joanne, her daughter, who had just graduated eighth grade, for God’s sake! “You don’t have enough money to pay the mortgage, but you go to Costco and spend three hundred dollars instead of going to bank and telling them what you can pay them. What is that?”

“I owed the bank \$1400, and I only had \$900. What’s the point?”

How can you argue that kind of logic?

Another side to Adam that pleased me was his fondness of Abbey; the gifts he gave her were certainly an expression of that, and she really liked him. He was great with Lucas when he came along and his other nieces and nephews; Margaret was to have nine children. So, it was this behavior, these sporadic acts of kindness that kept me thinking that something good for he and his family was a possibility.

I could be so naive!

• • •

Eighteen months after Abbey’s christening, Abbey, Ma and me went to visit Adam and Susan and their five children, baby Keith was the newest arrival, in the house they had managed to purchase in Maine. We were happy for them and, of course, our hope was that this signaled the beginning of new and better possibilities.

We had the occasional contact and visits after the christening despite my usual and adamant declarations after every visit that it was the last. But, I would always come back to my concept of family and what it meant to me. As I said before, and I was to say it again and again, I was always hopeful that Adam might change; revert back to that cute little boy that was my brother.

We pulled up in the front of the house after a two and a half-hour drive from Boston. There was a good amount of fresh snow on trees, house roofs and the ground. Everything looked so pretty. I carried Abbey, who was wrapped up in her winter clothes, into the house. Ma and Jack followed.

Abbey was surrounded by Cindy, Brian and Becky as soon as I put her down. I picked up Becky and hugged her.

Adam appeared out from the kitchen yelling, “Cindy! Brian! Becky!” He pointed to the adjoining room. “Out of the way until you are called; you can look after Keith.”

“Adam! We just walked in. I haven’t seen my grand children for months, and I want to give them all a hug,” said Ma, chastising the son she spent his lifetime spoiling. “And you might be a little more thoughtful and appreciative by first of all giving your ma a hug and a kiss.”

Adam gave Ma what could only be described a quick peck on the cheek. “You know I love you, Ma.” He turned back to the children. “Now, give your Nana a hug and then scat.” He took Becky from me. “You too, Becky; you can be in the playpen with Keith,” he said pointing.

I looked at Jack who simply returned a “well, same old crap” roll of his eyes.

As the children left, Adam scooped up Abbey. "How is my favorite kid," he cooed as he tickled her under the chin. Becky stopped in the doorway to look back. Her sad little face said all. My heart broke for her.

"Come on, Abbey; let's show you around our new house," said Adam.

"Where's, Susan?" asked Ma.

"She's busy in the kitchen. C'mon, let's take a look at the house. You can see her later."

Becky was still standing in the doorway. I leaned over to pick her up. "Leave her, Amelia. Becky, I told you to get in the pen with Keith, now get."

I ignored Adam and reached to put my arms around her, but she pushed me away and ran into the room with the other children.

"You are such a prick, Adam," I hissed quietly not wanting the children to overhear me. "There was no harm in letting Becky come along."

"I gave her an instruction. You tried to interfere, once again. I have told you before, don't do it. I'm raising my kids a certain way and that's the end of it."

"You can shove your house, Adam. I'm going to stay here with the children." I reached for Abbey. "Come, Abbey, come play with Becky."

Abbey held onto Adam's neck and looked at me, her eyes squinty. "Na, na, stay unca Adam." Wow, that really stunned and hurt I can tell you! My baby preferred my brother to me, what? I looked at Jack. I could see he was getting frustrated. Poor man, he'd had just about enough of dealing with the dysfunctional antics of my brother. He had told me over and over that it would never change, just get worse.

Ma somehow broke through the frustration and building tension by being assertive.

"Well, I want to see the house, so I'll show myself. If you kids can't stop your squabbling, I'm probably better off without you. C'mon, Jack, you and I can check the place out."

"No! No, Ma, I don't want you tramping through the house and...And not seeing it properly," Adam replied suddenly a little panicked by Ma's challenge to his authority, and worse, in his own home. "I'll get Susan, and we'll all go. I want everyone to see it."

God I wanted to yell "screw it," but with the children in mind, I managed to keep my mouth shut and nod a reluctant affirmation, and so keep the peace.

Susan and Adam showed us the house. I made a few suggestions about room colors and furniture placement. By the time the tour was complete I was feeling conciliatory and genuinely pleased for them once again. I had Abbey after she drove Adam crazy squirming about in his arms trying to get back to me. I must admit I felt a certain smug validation of my motherhood as I slipped my daughter onto the comfortable support of my hip, something the male body form was not designed to do.

Oh, everything was soon a return to the same old crap, though. Back in the kitchen, Adam and Susan sat nibbling on nuts and cookies while we looked on. They didn't offer us or the children a thing! I never experienced such a lack of manners like these two could manage. Where they learned it, I have no idea? Not from my mother? She was

generous to a fault and always made sure we were never hungry. I should have been used to his weird behavior, but I kept hoping he would get some manners or something.

“Well, while you two are stuffing your faces, I’m going to be with the children. C’mon, Jack.”

Before anyone could say a word, I was out of my chair and heading for the living room. Keith was standing up, holding onto the side of the playpen. He was only eight months old, and he spent most of his time in there, as had Cindy, Brian and Becky through their infant years. Sadly, because of the amount of time they spent standing up and circling the confined space, rarely being allowed outside to play and exercise in the fresh air and open parks even as they got older, the weight on their tiny little legs would eventually result in all of them having bowed legs, seriously bowed legs that would become another issue for Adam and Susan to answer for when the Department for Families and Children Services would become a huge part of this story.

Abbey and Becky were in the pen standing on each side of Keith watching Cindy who was sitting on the edge of a couch holding up her Blinky Bill book and pointing out the Australian animal characters one at a time.

“That’s a kangaroo, Keith. See his big tail. They hop, hop, hop like this.” Abbey jumped around the pen looking very earnest about her imitation. Becky joined her. Keith giggled and dribbled. I wiped his mouth.

“Tell them where the kangaroo’s come from, Cindy,” I said.

Brian cut in. “They come from where Uncle Jack lived when he was little like me.”

“Good job, Brian. Where is that, Cindy? Where does Uncle Jack come from?” said Jack.

“Ostraya,” said Cindy.

“Right, Australia,” I said. “Now, who wants to come outside and play in the new snow?”

“Me, me, me,” a chorus of voices shouted back. “All right then. We all need to get some warm clothes on first.”

Suddenly, Adam was in the room. “Hey, what’s all the noise here?”

“Auntie Amelia said we could go out and play in the snow,” said Cindy, her gleeful face of a few moments earlier now worried and uncertain.

Adam looked at me as if I had five heads. “Are you crazy? They’re not going out. don’t just assume that they can go out and ask them without asking me first. It’s too much work for us to get them all dressed; you only have one so you don’t understand.”

I glared at him and then turned to the children. “I’m sorry, children, your father said you can’t come with me.” My heart dropped, but I was determined I was not going to allow Adam to stop my child from having fun in the snow. “Abbey, come with Mummy.”

“If I wasn’t married to your sister, Adam, I wouldn’t give you the time of day. You shouldn’t have kids. In fact, if it was up to me I would advise some serious surgery,” said Jack.

“Stop it, Jack,” I said. “Not in front of the children. I’ll get Abbey into her warm clothes, and then we’ll have a play in the snow before we go home.” I turned to Adam’s children.

"I'm sorry children. We'll do it another time." The only one of them not crushed was Keith. He was too young to know how mean and controlling was the creature who was his father, or was he? Keith started raising hell. I had seen him have tantrums before, but this one was frightening. It was an insight into a personality that I could tell would get him and his parents into a lot of trouble.

Ma rushed into the room and picked him up. "Goodness gracious, Keith," she said patting him on the back, her voice soft and soothing. "It's all right; Nana will take care of you." Keith started to calm down. "What on earth happened, Adam?"

"I was taking the children out to play in the snow, but Adam said they couldn't, Ma. It would take way too much work for him and his precious wife to get them ready. What a schmuck."

"It would do the kids good to go outside, Adam. I can help get them ready."

"Don't you start in on me, Ma. I said no and that's what I mean."

"You are being unreasonable and..."

"Ma, let it go. I'm taking Abbey outside for a few minutes before we leave for home."

The children watched us from the front window looking so sad. I was all at once angry, exhausted, disappointed with the continual let downs and tired of not being able to shut Adam out of my life. Whatever I said, I knew I couldn't do it, not to the children. Whenever I would think of them, I would see their sad little faces and know what they were going through. I couldn't desert them. I just couldn't.

I enjoyed the children when we visited, and I liked that my baby got to play with her cousins notwithstanding that it was on most occasions in a very odd way. Adam's controlling and "in charge" mentality over everything they did, how to play, when to play, what to play would prove to be extremely damaging to them as they got older. He hovered over them like a hawk. Even Ma and I had to talk to them in a certain way, play with them in a certain way. We couldn't voice our opinions without being eventually dragged into a vortex of darkness, which I now know it to be an "evil" energy that would leave me feeling empty and soulless for days.

On our drive back to Massachusetts Ma and I spent most of the journey talking about Adam, Susan and the children. Frustrated at not being able to figure out Adam's crazy behaviors, we agreed all we could do was let go and pray.

• • •

It was shortly after we arrived back in San Francisco from the trip to Massachusetts that things really started to unravel for Adam. I have already told you part of the story about the money we loaned him for the back mortgages, the time when he approached us and we loaned him the \$6,000. You have some understanding now why we couldn't let his children suffer, we just couldn't. And this was the first time in their lives that they had any stability. They had already moved, as I recall, in and out of at least nine homes.

So, you heard the first part of the home loan story, but there is 'a rest of the story.' Just when you think things can't get worse they do.

Before I get into the 'rest of the story' and pick up on the business opportunity that went bad, which Adam eventually told us about, I want to back up a little, because I did give him some advice in the phone conversation when I told him Jack and I had agreed to give them the money.

"Adam, you have to stop having babies. It's time for you to grow up and be responsible, for God's sake! You've had seven different jobs in the last year."

"I keep telling you, I haven't found the right fit. It's tough. I try."

"Give it up, little brother, I've heard it all. The jobs will never be any good as long as you keep quitting. The truth is you don't want to work to get ahead. You think you should be the boss and giving orders right away."

"I've been injured working hard for these pigs and then they fire me."

"Yes, five times that I know of where it was disputed that you were actually injured on the job."

"They happened for real, Amelia. You have a vat of hot grease spill on your arm, or a heavy shelving unit that falls on your back and see how you feel. A back injury can cripple you for life."

"That can happen, but, Adam, in every one of your accidents, it's never your fault, and you sue, or try to sue the employer, every time." "But you've never been successful, have you"? You're just lazy and don't want to work for a living like everyone else.

"I got disability."

"And a reputation. The employers soon figure out whether or not someone's trying to swindle them."

Adam had high hopes of suing all of these companies and making his fortune, but it never worked out. He always wanted to be rich, but he wouldn't do the work it took. He was willing to take the low road, to lie, cheat and break the law to get what he wanted. What's really sad is that he's extremely smart. He could have gone to college and succeeded in anything he set his mind on. It took me 12 years to get my bachelor's degree in psychology, but I never gave up. He could have done the same.

"Adam, go to college in the evenings. Work hard at something that will take you into a career and a good pay check every week for the rest of your life."

"What! I can't leave Susan alone day and night with all the children?"

"I have an idea, stop having children!" I replied.

I was wasting my breath. His only chance an alcoholic friend of mine in recovery told me was self recognition of the problem and then wanting to do something about it. Until he reaches that point, no amount of counseling, cajoling, promises or threats will make him want to change, my friend said.

So, here's 'the rest of that story!' It was a miserable day. A misty rain had the roads wet and visibility made driving difficult and dangerous. I was on my way to the airport to pick up Jack who was returning from London after being away on business for 10 days. I was so looking forward to his return. As I strained to see through the mist and the spray

flying up from the speeding cars that make up San Francisco's kamikaze traffic, thoughts of Adam's latest mischief kept crowding my mind.

He'd lied to us. He had already lost the house when he asked us for the \$6,000. He used most of it to buy pallets of merchandise that he was going to sell cheap from a warehouse. The story he fabricated was what my brother had become, a liar and a cheat. He rented the warehouse, and they lived in it! I was shocked and furious that I had been so duped and such an idiot.

God, where did that come from? Of course, that's what he called me, an idiot, didn't he? Maybe, he was right; I am a soft touch, aren't I?

A car raced by and a huge wave of water blanketed the windshield. I had the wipers on full speed, thank goodness. I saw the red brake lights of the car in front in time to brake and avoid slamming into the back of it; just the sort of incident that starts one of those deadly chain reaction accidents that happens all too often on Californian highways. Abbey let out a tiny squeal, but I had her well strapped into her car seat. "Sorry, baby girl. We're nearly to the airport. We'll see daddy soon."

"Daddy," she said and a big smile lit up her face.

Relieved, I smiled and then jerked my attention back to the road. Jack was so right when he told me we would never see the money again. Adam was spiraling out of control and making bad decision after bad decision. Now, he, his wife and four children were living in a warehouse with no windows and no bathroom except a toilet and a sink. I was disgusted that he would let that happen to his children. I didn't give a damn about his wife, she was old enough to do something but she chose not to. What mother who would allow her children to be...well, I didn't have a scrap of respect for her.

I was late by the time we made it to the San Francisco International Airport. Fortunately, the bad weather had delayed the arrival time of Jack's flight, so he had been waiting no more than a few minutes.

It was so good to have him back. I missed him when he was away, Abbey too. The sun was starting to break through the mist as we reached the coast highway. Abbey was strapped into her car seat in the back and Jack was driving, so I was able to look about and appreciate the magnificent views of the surrounding hills that eventually dropped spectacularly into the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

"What's the latest on that brother of yours?"

I looked past Abbey at Jack and shrugged. "As usual, nothing good. In fact, their situation in the last few days has gone from worse to desperate."

"So? Tell me."

"They are on the street, sleeping in his van. They don't have a thing. The landlord found out that they were living in the warehouse, and he told Adam they had to move out. Of course, Adam was his usual belligerent self and that just made matters worse. One evening when they were all out of the building, the landlord changed the locks. When they returned they couldn't get back inside. Their clothing and furniture were still in there, and the landlord's not letting them get a thing until they pay the rent they owe."

“Can’t say I blame the landlord. How much is he asking for this time?”

“Eight hundred dollars.”

“You can bet that is more than he owes the fellow. I’d rather we didn’t give Adam cash. There has to be a better way of dealing with this brother of yours, Amelia.” Jack looked out to the ocean. “Get a boat, set a southwesterly course, keep sailing for 7,000 miles and we run slap bang into the east coast of Australia, Honey. We just might do that someday, be a great adventure.”

“You’d be on your own, mister. I have a terrible time with cockroaches on dry land let alone all those eat-you-up critters out there. I’ve seen pictures of great white sharks big enough to swallow people whole.”

“No. They like to have a bit of a chew first and color the water up with blood and guts.” Jack laughed, bared his teeth and made ripping noises as he acted out a shark biting into a fleshy carcass.

“Would the big shark eat me up, daddy?” Abbey’s voice, barely audible, carried with it a tinge of fear. I turned and saw that her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“No, my love, daddy is being silly. Sharks don’t eat little girls.” I patted her knee to reassure her. “Jack, you frightened her.”

“I wouldn’t let a shark get my little girl, Abbey. I’d punch it on the nose and scare it way, way, away across the big water so it would never come back.”

Jack drove quickly through the twists and turns along the coast highway. I felt very relaxed and happy for the most part. Another child and my world would be just perfect. My eyes started to feel heavy and slowly began to close.

“A lawyer!”

“What?” I was suddenly alert.

“A lawyer; yes, that might be best. Get Adam a lawyer to sort this out. We’ll pay the retainer.”

“Oh, I forgot, he did mention a lawyer. He said that’s one of the reasons he needed the \$800 in cash.”

“Well, he’s not getting cash. I’ll contact a lawyer tomorrow.”

“Adam’s not going to like that.”

“He’s in no position to argue.” Jack aggressively changed gears and gunned the BMW through a series of S-bends where the coastal highway edged dangerously along a precipitous drop into the waters of the Pacific. As the tires fought the forces threatening to break their grip on the black tar, their squeals of protest mixing with the throaty roar of the BMW’s motor had my body tingling with excitement, stirring within me a powerful desire to be in my husband’s arms wrapped in the intimacy I missed so much every time he was away for even a few days.

Jack turned to me and smiled, a knowing smile of how his driving that way was a turn on for me, and he was so right. My attention went to his hands as he negotiated a bend. I loved his hands, beautiful hands. I was mesmerized by them in their effortless

choreography of deft movement around the leather steering wheel as they kept the car perfectly aligned and under control. The realization of being on the edge of the cliffs with the possibility of oblivion a few feet away only stimulated me more.

Abbey was laughing and slapping the car seat with obvious delight. Mother-awareness kicked in immediately. "Honey, you'd better slow down. We have Abbey on board, and it has been raining."

He slowed right away and looked back to his giggling daughter. She gave him a beautiful Daddy's-little-girl precocious smile. "Drive faster, Daddy, drive faster."

"You like that, Abbey, don't you?"

"Daddy and mummy were being silly, Abbey."

"Mummy and daughter are beautiful, Amelia. It's good to be home."

God, how I loved this man.

"I'll talk to him, if you like?" said Jack.

"What?"

"Adam! I'll talk to him."

"Oh, yes, of course, Adam." I looked at Jack and felt so cared for. "I love you looking out for me, Sweetie. But, no, I'll talk to him. You have enough going on. Now, get me home, mister. All that charging through the gears and squealing through the S's... We have some catching up to do, Galahad."

. . .

It was dark outside. I had just settled Abbey into bed. Jack had called to say he was on his way home, and I was taking advantage of the time I had to myself to relax and catch up on a little reading. I had left messages for Adam during the day asking him to call me back, but telling him I would not be available in the evening. So, ignoring my request and displaying his usual lack of consideration for any inconvenience his timing might cause, the phone rang and, of course, it was Adam. Yes, my cynicism had grown to the point that I could no longer think of anything other than he was deliberately calling at this time to get a rise out of me, or more probably, in some perverted sense best known to himself, he was asserting his perceived power over me. Unfortunately, as I look back, he did exert enormous power over me, didn't he?

"Is Jack back? Did you talk to him? Do you have the money?"

"It would be nice, Adam, if you would ask how we are first. You know, like, how is Abbey? How was Jack's trip? Are you pregnant yet? The sorts of inquiry normal families engage in when they greet each other." I could sense my brother's tense and agitated energy readying to cut loose from the other end of the line. "Jack and I spoke, yes. We are considering how best we might help you."

"Amelia, we're desperate. I need that \$800 now. You have to help us, for the sake of the children."

There was an edge of panic to his voice, and it caught me by surprise. I immediately dropped my guard. He knew me inside and out, and he was going after the area of my greatest vulnerability, family and children.

“I told you last week, everything we have is in that damn warehouse; our furniture, our clothes, the household things and the storage unit full of stuff we need desperately. Everything we have in the world is in there; baby pictures, wedding pictures, the kids’ books and playthings, everything that you would have in a home. The kids are devastated. Even all that merchandise I purchased to get us a start, a way of building a new life where I could give my family everything they needed in the world to make them happy. It is all locked inside of that warehouse. Now, they have nothing, Amelia, nothing!”

I was conscious of the sadness and compassion I felt for Adam and the children. I had to stick to my guns, or the feelings were going to overwhelm me. I remember focusing on my 56breathing as I fought for control and the strength not to cave in.

“Jack is making inquiries with a law firm to see how realistic it would be to even fight this, or maybe set up a payment so you can get your stuff out.”

He lost it. “I need that money, Amelia! I need it now, and I want it now!” he screamed.

He couldn’t contain himself. The demonic Adam emerged, and he became his belligerent, nasty and thoroughly rude personae. Strangely, he didn’t frighten me this time. In fact, I was suddenly empowered. I think I was so outraged by the ferocity and vitriol of his attack and demands that it really stirred up the anger I had been suppressing.

“Shut up, Adam! Who do you think you are talking to? You just assume that we should help, don’t you? No, worse! You somehow in your twisted thinking believe you are entitled to our help. My God! We gave you \$6,000 and hundreds of other dollars here and there. None of it has been paid back. No acknowledgements of gratitude. You have no shame. And, here we are giving it another shot, still backing you, trying to work something out. If you would just for once take responsibility for your circumstances, Adam, there would be no need for us to be screaming at each other.”

“Yeah, well while you’re thinking about working something out just keep in mind that mostly everything we own is in that warehouse.”

“Hey, that’s entirely your fault. I’m not going to take any blame; try being responsible for once in your life.”

“You don’t trust me!”

“Oh, that’s a news flash. Get real, Adam, you don’t have any bridges left to burn. Take it or leave it, that’s it.”

There was a long pause. I said nothing and waited in the deafening silence.

“What you are proposing won’t work.” The tone in Adam’s voice was suddenly conciliatory. Just like that, it changed from belligerent and nasty to the opposite, charming and respectful in a few seconds. Well, I think there was a hint of panic in there, too. “Amelia, please. Will you talk it over with Jack one more time? Think of the children, please?” I heard a couple of muffled sobs.

Oh, I was a sucker every time he trotted out that act from his vast repertoire. He was the master. I'm almost too embarrassed to write what happened next.

"Adam, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry about what's happening to the children, but this is your entire fault, yours and Susan's, accept that."

"I'm sorry, too, Amelia. If it was just me, it wouldn't matter, but...the kids...it's just the kids are having such a hard time, and Susan is struggling to..."

"Adam, stop it. I don't give a damn about Susan, I never have." I paused and let out a deep breath. "I'll talk to Jack."

I put the phone down. What had I done? I felt sick to my stomach. Once I had bought into the children and the family strategy dished up from Adam's playbook along with a few tears thrown in to maximize the effect, it was over. I was powerless.

I wasn't looking forward to telling Jack I'd been suckered again. I need not have worried. He smiled, told me I had a beautiful heart, and asked me how I wanted to handle it.

Eventually, we gave him \$800.00. They were able to get most of what they had in the warehouse and storage units. It turned out that they had two units stacked full of personal belongings, clothing and furniture that they accumulated from their constant changes of address between all the places they lived.

Adam was out of work. Well, he had the boxes of merchandise to start his business, but I think he even knew that was going nowhere. They had four children, plus one on the way and no place to live. They were desperate. For a second time, they went to live with Susan's parents. It was inevitable that these arrangements couldn't last.

Ron and Louise had a nice house and property with an in-law unit they had built for Louise's mother, Susan's grandmother. When she died it became available. Perfect for Adam and Susan, and you guessed it, Adam had no problem taking advantage of the situation when it suited him.

The family would move in, but it would be Ron and Louise who would move out into the in-law unit. Adam, Susan and the children would take over main part of the house. This was the arrangement on three of their occupancies. I say occupancies in the sense of an army taking over another country. Ron and Louise found that they were living under rules laid down by their son-in-law. It was the usual Adam control freak mentality. You might ask why people would put up with it at all. Adam has an extremely powerful personality. You really have to experience his presence to get it.

Poor Ron and Louise were at their wits end by the time the third occupancy was under way. They hated Adam. They were beginning to despise Susan, their own daughter. I mean, that's how bad Adam's tyranny was getting to them.

They reached the stage where they didn't want anything to do with their grandchildren. Adam shut them out of the children's lives just as he shut them out to a greater or lesser degree with all of us. Domination and control, the central themes of his way of being, have already been well documented in the story, and I am yet to get to the worst of the consequences, horrific consequences.

Ron and Louise were mortified, of course. In their own home, they were not able to touch their grandchildren when they wanted. They were forbidden to talk to them about Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny. In fact, it was basically inferred that they shouldn't have conversations with the children unless one of the parents was present.

There came the fourth and final time when the Allertons, desperate as usual, needed a roof over their heads, and once again they turned up on the doorstep of Ron and Louise's home. At last, but still generous to a fault, Ron put his foot down. "Fine, but you guys are in the in-law unit."

Adam and Susan never paid a cent for anything. Ron and Louise would buy them food, clothing and personal items that soon add up to substantial amounts of money for a large family. It cost Ron and Louise a small fortune to repair all the damage done to the unit. The bathroom was flooded time and again, eventually ruining all of the downstairs area. One way or another, Louise and Ron were out almost as much money as Jack and I.

For the next year or so we continued to send money for groceries, gas, oil for in the house, money to fix the car, and on and on and on. Adam went through jobs like crazy. I don't know how his wife could stand it. I know I was getting tired of continually bailing them out. What we had given them, I couldn't say 'loaned' anymore because I knew we would never see any of it again, was adding up to a considerable sum.

There was the \$6,000, the eight hundred dollars and the hundreds of other dollars given here and there, running up a total already past the \$9,000 mark. Jack was amazing the way he supported me, but I knew it wasn't fair on him, on both of us. And it was very stressful for me. I was trying to get pregnant with our second child, and I just didn't need Adam's problems any longer. Something had to change. I picked up the phone and called his number.

"Yes?"

"Adam, it's Amelia. Can you...?"

"I know it's you. Do you think I'm stupid? I've got caller ID to check what idiot is calling. What do you want?"

Why did I bother to call? It was always the same unless he wanted something. My energy level tanked.

"Why can't you be decent to me, Adam? Gosh, we've helped you out so many times. Jack works hard to provide Abbey and me with the things we need to have a good life. Why can't you do the same for your family?"

"You have got to be joking? Jack's had a charmed life; a silver tail job handed to him on a platter. That's never happened for me. What's he making, a million plus? "Yup, you're right Adam, millions and millions"! Don't insult me, Amelia; I know he's making millions. What's a few dollars to him to help out family? It's what he should do."

I wanted to scream. His sense of entitlement and absence of any gratitude whatsoever was so frustrating. I wanted to go after him and tell him how Jack worked extremely hard to get to where he was, and that if he, Adam, would have done the same, he could have been just as successful. But, I didn't. I'd been over the same story on countless occasions. I decided on a different approach, to confront him head on.

“The old game just ended, Adam. No more cash. That’s done. Instead of wiring \$200 here and \$300 there, we are setting up an account at the local grocery store.”

“What! What do you think this is, some small town like Mayberry RFD, and they’ll let you do that? Are you stupid?” He yelled at me, a reaction I pretty much expected, and for the most part I was resigned too. His use of the word stupid, something he called me many times over the years somehow relieved me of the guilt I usually felt over these conversations.

“Yup, I already checked with them. And take this anyway you want, Adam, I’m tired of your condescension, your anger and abuse; I don’t like you, what you’ve become, and I don’t care what happens to you. The only reason we are working out a deal with the grocery store is because of the children, so they won’t starve since you can’t take care of them.”

“You’re crazy. I have to buy gas, stamps and other things I can’t get at the grocery store.”

“Not my problem,” I said relishing the new found power in my voice. “We’ve gone way above and beyond what help any rational person could expect from a family member.”

“But, Amelia, how do you...?”

“You have two months to work it out. Then, the cash payments are over and the new deal kicks in.”

We set up the account so he couldn’t go over a certain amount in a month’s time. He was furious, but the little bit of sense that he had left took over, and he accepted our deal. Eventually, he found another job, but his car broke down and he didn’t have the money to fix it. I’m not going to try to explain why we did it, but we helped him out again. And, here they were still living with Ron and Louise and not paying them a penny in rent. I guess they were so good at conning us that they were able to put enough money away to get a down payment on an apartment they eventually moved into.

We didn’t hear much from them for some time, but with Adam and Susan’s history of screwing up now firmly established we knew that it would only be a matter of time before the phone would ring, and it would be Adam on the end of the line demanding we help him out.

. . .

In the winter of 1997 I finally became pregnant. It seemed that all the tests, the treatments, the pain, the discomforts and challenging commitment to the in vitro process were worthwhile and had paid off. I was wrong. To my consternation, I miscarried in April. It was a horrible, horrible period in my life.

When I arrived home after getting the news from my doctor I just collapsed on the couch worn out from crying. I think I was still in shock when the phone rang, and I answered without bothering to check the caller ID.

“Amelia?”

Oh, God! Adam! He was the last person in the world I wanted to hear from. I thought about hanging up.

“Amelia? Answer me, damn it.”

“Yes.” I could hardly get the word out.

“Speak up, I can’t hear you.”

I sobbed a couple of times.

“What’s the matter with you?”

I explained.

“I’m sorry about that. I suppose it wasn’t meant to be; God’s will and all that stuff.”

There was a pause. I waited for what I knew was coming. “Amelia, we don’t have any electricity.”

The only time I ever heard from him was when he wanted something, so I wasn’t surprised by his ‘problem;’ it was always money for some damn thing. I was on auto pilot, asked him how much he needed and hung up. I didn’t want to bring up Adam’s request with Jack, so the next day I closed out an old savings account I’d had for ages. There was \$800.00 in it. I wired the full amount to Adam and followed up with a phone call.

“I’ve sent the money, Adam. don’t call anytime soon. We’re raising our own family, and all of us are very upset from losing the baby.” I spoke quietly, hardly having enough energy to speak to anyone let alone Adam. The last thing I wanted was more abuse or a fight. “We can’t raise your family. Just leave us alone. Stop having babies; you are incapable of looking after those you have.”

He cursed me and hung up. There was no thank you for the \$800 I sent him. Good riddance.

Jack was really good. Over the years, he did extensive research looking for places where Adam could get a good job; where it would be a good environment to raise the children and an inexpensive place to live. It didn’t matter what Jack came up with, or what advice we gave him, he was either above it, it wouldn’t work for him, or he’d tried it before. He never accepted any advice. All he wanted was a free ride and money just handed to him.

We wouldn’t have a lot of contact with him for the next few years, and I wouldn’t meet his last three kids until the next disaster erupted, which was inevitable, of course.

So, he never called, and I certainly wasn’t about to be the one to pick up the phone and call him. Besides, I was very focused on my infertility treatments, and they took almost all of my commitment and energy to keep to the demanding and risky regime necessary for any chance of my getting pregnant again. And of course, more important of all taking care of my baby girl during all of this. I have to admit that I was rather peeved more than a couple of times when the thought crossed my mind that not once did Adam call to see how I was doing, or if I was pregnant yet, nothing. He knew what it meant to me about having another child. Despite knowing who he was and what he was like, I couldn’t help feeling sad and hurt when he never called to inquire. It would have meant a lot to me, if he had shown some empathy.

Eventually, we heard through the family that he was homeless again. There were seven children now; all of them, along with Susan and Adam, living in a van he was driving. I

can't imagine how horrible that must have been. He home-schooled the children and always had. It wasn't a good situation, how could it be with Adam's control issues. The children had no social life, they had no friends, and they didn't go out to play whether it was outside in front of their house, or going to the playground. They didn't go to museums and beaches. It was so sad.

"Why don't you let the children go out to play, or be with other children, Adam?" I asked once.

"They have each other. They don't need anyone else, or be in a place where they would be exposed to germs. The playgrounds, parks and schools are teeming with them."

I could think of a thousand reasons about what Adam was saying was not only wrong, but tragically, he was denying his children the opportunity of developing a normal and successful life in their community. I knew it was hopeless to argue, but...

"For God sake, Adam, I hate to say it, but if this is what you truly believe then I have to wonder about your sanity and..."

"My sanity! My sanity! Listen, you bitch, you don't say that to me! You hear me? I'll tell you who's crazy. You! I'll raise my kids anyway I want. They will do exactly what I tell them to do, and they'll be all the better..."

"Stop screaming, Adam!" I shouted. I was really angry now. In that moment, I wished my brother would disappear from the face of the earth. "You selfish, conceited loser, the way you are raising those children is going to screw them up for the rest of their lives. They will be so incredibly maladjusted that they won't know how to fit into their communities. It'll be all struggle, courts, prisons or mental institutions that will be the story of their lives after you are done with them."

"Bitch!" he screamed. Then he was gone, leaving me with a shrill ringing in my ears.

Unfortunately, these words would soon have a prophetic authenticity to them. The courts, prisons and psychological inquiry were to become a reality in the lives of the Allerton family.

I washed my hands of him, or so I thought. Oh, how so naive I would prove to be yet again.

. . .

After years of in vitro and nine surgical procedures, I finally succeeded in getting pregnant. Surgery, of course, carries with it risks and often friends and family would ask, "Why are you doing this, risking your life? You have Abbey to take care of."

While it is not up to anybody to tell me that I should be satisfied and responsible, their comments caused me to consider whether or not there was an ethical dilemma I had not faced up to. After all, if the worst happened and I died Abbey would be left without her mother. I think it was shortly after I miscarried, Abbey was three at the time and playing with her dolls on the couch, when I decided to talk with her.

"Darling, as you know, mummy lost the little baby growing in her not long ago, and I know that was a really, really sad time for all of us." Abbey nodded. "I have something

very important to ask you. You know how much it means to me to have another baby, a little sister or brother for you to play and grow up with, too, don't you?"

"Yes."

She looked so sweet and vulnerable. My eyes moistened, and my heart felt like it was going to explode with the love I felt for her. "I love you, Abbey; I don't want to ever hurt you."

"What's the matter, Mummy? I love you and daddy, too." She was hugging her favorite doll, and her beautiful brown eyes big like saucers, were looking right into mine. I leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"It's just that sometimes I worry you might not think mummy loves you enough because she is trying so hard to have another baby. Do you ever think that?"

Abbey looked puzzled. Her frowning face seemed to be saying what a stupid question.

"What?"

"Abbey, do you want me to keep trying to have another baby?"

Her face broke out into a huge smile. "Oh, yes, mummy, of course I do. It would be such fun. I could bath him and feed him and..."

I laughed, relieved. "Abbey, our baby could be a girl. We can't know what it will be yet."

"I know. It will be a boy."

I couldn't know then that Abbey would be proven right. It didn't really matter, though, I just wanted a baby and the odds for that that happening were not good.

Months later I was at my doctor's clinic and on my eighth in vitro fertilization. With the miscarriage and the failures of getting pregnant weighing heavily on my mind, depression was becoming a frequent visitor. Each visit to the clinic seemed to last longer than the previous one. My doctor was worried.

"You know what, Amelia; we're not doing this anymore," Dr. Rasheed said. "There is only so much medication we can give you. As women age, starting at the age of 35, so do their eggs."

To say I was stunned would be putting it mildly. "Doctor, there are women out there older than me who are having children."

"True. But, you don't know how those women became pregnant, there are so many ways; and you having a uterine abnormality doesn't help".

I knew he was right, but I couldn't bear the thought of giving up. "So, that's it, there is nothing I can do. I would do anything for one more try?"

A Donor, someone else's egg in my body, no way. "I can't do that. My baby has to come from me. A baby from a Donor would not be mine." I could feel my heart racing. I wanted to cry as I began to realize that any hope of having another child of my own was over.

"No, it doesn't have to be like that, Amelia. We have come a long way with in the reproductive sciences. These days, we can take DNA out of the good part of your egg and

inject it into the Donor's eggs." The procedure is called "cytoplasmic transfer" and the baby would be genetically yours, and it would be fantastic if you had a family member, especially a sister.

Suddenly, there was hope. My heart thrilled with possibility, a miracle? "You mean...you're saying the baby would still be genetically mine, right?" Dr. Rasheed nodded his head.

I was over the moon with joy. "Amazing! That's wonderful! Let's do it."

"Okay. Find your Donor and remember it won't be easy for her. She has to go through the same kind of rigorous testing, medications and surgery that you go through. A good place to start looking might be among your family, your sisters and cousins."

I don't know why, but right away my sister's face, Tina, flashed into my mind. "Thank you, Doctor; I think I know who I can ask. I'll be in touch."

I left my doctor's office, picked up Abbey from the receptionist who was keeping an eye on her and walked to the car, feeling like I was floating on air.

As we started out onto the highway, I glanced over to Abbey. "You know what, my Love, we are going to Scranton to find Auntie Tina. We haven't seen her in years, and I'm not sure if she still lives in the same place, but that's where we will go."

"Oh, fun, Mummy. I'll be Nancy Drew, and we'll find her. Can I be Nancy Drew, Mummy?"

I chuckled; it might be handy to have a super sleuth to help track down Tina, I thought. "Of course, you can, Nancy Drew. You're just the one I need to help me find Auntie Tina."

On the drive to Rhode Island, I thought a lot about Tina, our lives together, her life after she left home pregnant at 16, and the years between that had passed so quickly. Of all my siblings, Tina had always been my favorite. We shared a special bond. I would do anything for her. I wondered if she would be willing to help me now. It had been a long time since we had seen each other.

She was the youngest of us all; Uncle Steve's third child with Ma. Some might refer to her as my half-sister, but she was like a full sister to me, and because of the common DNA threads of our fathers being brothers, whom I mentioned in the opening pages, scientifically she was as much as 85 or 90 percent my full sister. It seems silly mentioning it again, but I am still fascinated by the extraordinary circumstances that are the causation of the DNA speculation. Whatever, we were very, very close despite the sixteen years difference in our ages. Sometimes, it almost seemed like she was my child. I loved taking care of her.

Tina's adult life has been turbulent, that's for sure. She was sixteen when her first child was born, Andrew, who is now 18 as I write this. The twins came along 2 years later. The father of the twins was an alcoholic and a no hoper, but I have to say that his daughters were two of the most beautiful girls I'd ever laid eyes on, next to my own, of course.

Tina has always been a single parent. She has a ton of guts and has really done her best for the children without any help from their father. He has rarely given her one penny for

child support, ever. We helped out when we could, but she was fiercely independent and usually reluctant to accept help. She put herself through nursing school and graduated as a registered nurse.

Moving to Rhode Island was a huge decision. It was totally a selfless act on her part because she went there for her children's education. She knew that as single working mother, she would never have the money to send her children to a decent school, however, by moving to Rhode Island, especially Scranton, and after living there for two years, the children qualified to go to the Academy for free. This was the only way that Tina could afford to give her kids a decent education and the opportunity to ever to amount to anything. Talk about guts. She had it in spades.

As hard as Tina tried, Andrew and the twins hated Rhode Island. They went to the academy, but all three of them ended up leaving for various reasons. As tough as she was, the constant struggle of being the sole income earner along with raising her troubled children gradually wore her down. She went into a depression and kind of isolated. She wouldn't return phone calls, and finally we rarely had any contact. Most news of Tina came through Ma, which was how I learned she was working in a hospital and at the time living with some guy named Jimmy in her trailer park home.

I called the hospital and left messages without telling her what I wanted, but she didn't call back. I thought about giving up, but Abbey wouldn't let me.

"Please, Mummy, we have to find her. Let's go there. I know Nancy Drew could find her."

"She's not calling me back, my Love. I'm not sure I can remember where they live. Besides, she might not want to see us."

"She does, I know she does. She loves us, and I love her. don't you love her, Mummy? She is your own sister. She would want to help you, if you asked her."

"Of course, I love her. She is my favorite sister, and you're right, Abbey, she would want to help me."

We arrived in Scranton around noon after a three hour drive from Syracuse. It was summer, and the weather was beautiful.

"I think before we start looking for Auntie Tina we should stop in at the maple store, Nancy Drew. What do you think?"

"Oh, yes please, Mummy." Abbey's face was beaming as she clapped her hands excitedly.

An hour later and still sucking on maple candies, we were turning into the first of Scranton's motor home parks.

"This doesn't look very familiar," I said as the first signs of the anxiety I was feeling crept into my voice.

"No, Mummy, this is not it. It's not far from where you can see the hospital on the hill. don't you remember?"

“No, Baby, and I don’t know how you can. You were only small when you and I were here last.”

“Nancy Drew could always remember everything.”

We drove through that park and then the next two. While I thought I saw Tina’s trailer a number of times, they all looked so alike, Abbey would be adamant that they weren’t. Finally, as we drove around the little roads in the fourth park, Nancy Drew pointed to a trailer and said, “That’s it, there.”

Abbey waited in the car while I went to check. Tina’s boyfriend, Jimmy, came to the door. He was startled to see me.

“Oh, my gosh! What are you doing here?” The twins suddenly appeared, saw Abbey who was getting out of the car, and ran to her.

“I’m here to visit my sister.”

“Do you want to come in? Tina’s not here. She’s at work, at the hospital.”

There was no way I wanted to go inside and wait with Jimmy. I could hear the girls laughing behind me, playing and having fun like they always did when they got together. The twins had always been Abbey’s favorite cousins. “No, thank you. I really must speak to Tina. How do I get to the hospital?”

“You can see it from here.” He pointed. “It’s on top of the hill, there.” I grinned to myself as I thought of what Abbey had said earlier. ‘It’s not far from where you can see the hospital on the hill.’ She was amazing. I turned to leave.

“I don’t know why your sister doesn’t want anything to do with you, but you had better make sure you don’t upset her.”

I looked back at the man. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t set her off again, that’s all.”

What the hell did he mean? I could feel the level of my anxiety rising and the muscles in my stomach beginning to knot.

“Can I stay with Linda and Casey, Mummy?” My attention shifted to the girls. I declined but offered to bring the twins with me. It was joyful looking at their happy smiles...

Jimmy said it would be alright to take the girls.

After waiting in the reception area for about 10 minutes, Tina arrived. She took one look at me and started to cry. We hugged. I was so happy to see her.

“It’s been so long, Tina. I’ve missed you.” She stopped crying. We sat down in two sofas facing each other, clasping hands. “I have a question for you,” I said. “Why did you drop out of our lives?”

“I really don’t know.”

“I left messages. You never returned one of them.”

“I can’t talk about it,” she said.

I nodded. I didn't want to upset her. She was obviously going through a tough time. Her face was certainly showing signs of strain, she actually looked much wiser. We talked some more, and then she said she had to get back to work.

"Wait, Tina. I have to ask you something. I need your help. Can I have one of your eggs?" I was not being very subtle, but I needed to get to the point. I had to get this done, time was running out.

"What?" she said somewhat startled. As I began to explain, she got it and stopped me.

"I'm off in an hour, meet me at home."

"I'm going to get a hotel room for Abbey and me."

You meet me at the hotel."

"It's okay to stay at the house."

"No, really, it's okay. You stay at the hotel with us.

We ate at the hotel. Tina and I were able to talk later on about the eggs while the children watched television in the hotel room.

"So, will you do it?"

"Yeah," she said. "The only thing I am worried about is the medication. Hell, I don't like taking an aspirin, but I'll do it for you, Amelia. You took good care of me when I was a kid."

Tina was marvelous. When I asked her how she really felt about giving me her eggs she said, "What do I care, I'm never going to use them. Besides it wouldn't be my baby."

When I look back over my life and the lives of my family members there seemed to be more surprises, twists and turns than were in the most complicated maze ever constructed. The story of my in vitro and Tina's eggs really was the most amazing of them all.

Tina and I went through the all the preparation and medical procedures and the transfer took place on July 18th 2004. A month later, I went back to see Dr. Rasheed. He examined me using the ultrasound.

"Ah, good. So, you are just about two months pregnant now."

"No, Doctor, I am exactly at a month today. The transfer was done on July 18."

"No, no, according to this ultrasound you are at two months."

"That can't possibly be."

"Well, did you and your husband have intercourse in the months before the transfer?"

"Well, of course, but... It can't be... I had this transfer," I stammered, somewhat shocked and puzzled by what I was hearing.

"Then you were pregnant before the transfer."

Holy Mary Mother of God, it seemed that Jack had fertilized one of my own eggs. Oh my, it is so weird thinking back over the circumstances of how the doctors believed this

happened. The in vitro doctor I was seeing was going through bankruptcy. His group had most of their equipment taken away, so when they did the transfer, I was literally in a little closet space area, and they had no ultrasound machine. Normally, they are supposed to use the ultrasound while doing the transfer to make sure that the transfer had, in fact, taken place.

I just sat there for a full half-hour without saying a word. I didn't know what to think. There was the doctor's explanation, but I wasn't completely satisfied. I had doubts. When I got home I called Tina and told her.

"I'm going to do a test," I said when I had finished. "Why bother, it's your baby?"

I went ahead, anyway, and had the blood test. The test is very expensive, but I did it. I was told that they can find with above 85% certainty who the baby is genetically, but when there is so much genetic sharing as in my case, it's just harder to tell. They told me about a test that cost \$4,000.

I decided, "He's my son whether it was my own egg or my own sister's.

When I saw Tina again, she was thrilled. "You know, I'll do it again for you, Amelia."

I gave her a huge hug. "You're so beautiful. Thank you."

Lucas was born in February of 2005, on Valentine's Day. A beautiful baby boy, two months early but he was fine after a month's stay in the NICU. It was a scary time, but once I got him home things couldn't have been more perfect.

. . .

It had been two and a half years since I had seen or heard from Adam. I really didn't want to have anything to do with him ever again to be honest. But, the inevitable happened. I found out that he and his family were in serious, serious trouble. And, as crazy as it sounds, I was about to allow them to re-enter our lives again, both emotionally and financially, and watch, powerless to change anything really, as the shocking consequences of Adam and Susan's insane behaviors dramatically impacted the lives of their children.

It was October 1999, and Adam was living in Maine. Social Services where they lived was investigating an allegation of educational neglect because Adam's school aged children had not been properly registered for home schooling. Adam being Adam, of course, disputed the claims in his usual confrontational manner.

A Maplewood police lieutenant was assigned to assist in the resulting investigation. Coincidentally, the Lieutenant knew Adam professionally when Adam worked as an animal control officer for the Maplewood police department. Yes, I have said it over and over that Adam was brilliant, that he could do whatever he set his mind to, and here he was once again able to convince an employer to give him a job that was in the midst of an institution that was the antithesis of what he believed should be applied to himself.

Lieutenant Randall¹ was surprised; Adam had never mentioned that he had children. He had never seen children playing outside whenever he drove by the Allerton home, or when he dropped Adam off during the day. He did notice the blinds would be drawn, or at night there would be no lights on, that the house would always be dark like nobody else was living there.

They moved from there and were living in the “in-law” apartment of Ron and Louise’s home. Randall arrived at the ‘new’ address and began knocking on the door. He had to knock hard and for some time before anyone answered. Louise opened the door.

“Do you have to make so much noise? Who are you?”

“Lieutenant Randall, Maplewood police department, ma’am,” said the plain-clothed officer holding out his identification wallet. Louise took her time to read the details, looking carefully at the picture of the face on the ID and then at the man standing at her door.

“I don’t know why you police can’t wear your uniforms these days?” Louise said taking one last look at the ID. “Scare an old lady half to death, you do.”

“I’m sorry if I upset you, ma’am. I’m looking for a Adam Allerton. I believe he and his family live here?”

“What do you want to talk to him about? Nothing good, I’m sure.”

“Why would you say that?”

“It’s about his kids, I bet, or the bills? Always in trouble, that man; debt collectors or government people all the time showing up at the door.”

“You don’t like him?”

“That’s putting it mildly. He’ll finish up in jail. He never was going to amount to much. Tried to talk sense into that girl of mine, but she never would listen to anything I had to say. She’ll finish up in there with him.”

“Who are you talking to, Louise?” Randall recognized Adam’s voice shouting from the back of the house.

“Tom Randall, Adam. I need to talk to you,” Randall called out.

“I’d invite you in, but he’d go psycho if I did,” said Louise. Randall was aware of the sad, weary eyes of the woman standing in front of him.

“Why don’t you go on inside, Louise,” said Adam as he suddenly appeared at his mother-in-law’s side, and then immediately ushering her back into the house and quickly closing the door after her. Randall had already noticed that the curtains were drawn, and it was dark inside. It was obvious that Adam did not want him to see into the house, or talk to his mother-in-law. “What are you doing here, Randall? On some kind of official business, are you?” Adam’s tone of voice was harsh and confrontational.

¹ Lieutenant Randall – Name changed.

“As a matter of fact, Adam, I am, and you know why, don’t you? About your children not being properly educated in accordance with the law of the state of Eastern Seaboard? You claim you’re home schooling them...”

“You bastards can’t leave us alone, can you? Always chasing us down, always harassing us. My kids get the best education there is under my tutorship, and they get proper discipline 24 hours a day from me and my wife, Susan!”

“Do they, Adam? We’ll have to see about that. Now, listen up, you have already been advised that your children have to be registered for home schooling. That’s not done. Second, as part of the investigation, I’m going to have to see your kids. We get that done, and I can get on down the road.”

“No way! No way are you coming in here! I’ve got two of them down sick and two coming down with the stomach flu. You want to come in here; you’ll need to get a warrant.”

Randall looked at his flip board, scribbled a few notes and then flipped back a couple of pages.

“All lies. That’s all you’ve got there, Randall. I’m going to have my lawyer sue for all that stuff written about me,” warned Adam.

“Yeah, right,” said Randall. “You have quite a history of making it hard on yourself, Adam. I’m not going to argue with you now, but as you’re going to be in touch with your attorney, anyway, you can give this to him to look over.” Randall handed Adam the flip board and his pen. “And, sign on the line I’ve marked with a cross. You have an appointment along with your family at the CPS offices Monday...”

“I’m not signing this!”

“You are signing to acknowledge that you have been served these papers, which you now have in your hand, Mr. Allerton.” Randall reaches behind his back and pulls out his handcuffs. “Now, I’m warning you, if you don’t sign the paper I’m going to cuff you and take you in, right now.”

That was our Adam, his own worst enemy. No matter how often his behavior came back to kick his butt, he did the same thing again and again. There’s that definition of insanity again? If it was just Adam in trouble, who would care, but it affected all of us around him, his children especially.

By February 2003, the family had registered for home schooling in accordance with state law, so there was some reprieve for Adam and Susan. The pressure would build again as the children’s state of health was becoming more and more of an issue with the Dept. of Social Services where they lived.

Prior to May 2004, Dr. George Mitchell², board-certified in their state, was the Allerton children’s pediatrician at the Anders Health Clinic. This was where the story began to get particularly grubby. It was when the worst consequences of Adam and Susan’s unconscionable practices of how they fed and raised their children began to show up in

² Dr. George Mitchell – Name changed

subsequent physical underdevelopment problems and other health issues. Later, when I was given the document listed in the footnote³, I had to force myself to read it all. The chronological record was so shocking in its point by point portrayal of my nieces and nephews' lives that I wanted to throw it away. The children's suffering was made all the more painful for me when I realized my own part in it, how much I had been in denial of the extent to which my brother and sister-in-law had maltreated them. I really did try to do my best. I lived in a false hope that things could change, that Adam was really a good person who wanted to be a good family man. In the meantime, the children were going through a living hell.

All of them, for the most part, were small and underweight Dr. Mitchell reported in the court document. Becky, who was born in November 1996, was extremely emaciated. She was also behind on her immunizations. The clinic made numerous appointments to see her, but Adam and Susan wouldn't show up. It was October 1988 when Dr. Mitchell saw her again. She was still underweight, and her language and speech problems had not improved.

It was the same for all the children. Keith's height and weight were far below the fifth percentile, and he was behind on his immunizations. When further medical evaluation was recommended, Adam and Susan didn't follow through.

Lilly was found to be severely emaciated, and as with all the attempts of the Anders Clinic to engage Adam and Susan in scheduling and maintaining appointments to address the children's various medical ailments, their parents failed them.

So, all of this was going on in the two and a half years I was estranged from them. And, it was, of course, the time when I was preoccupied with getting pregnant again and taking care of Jack and Abbey. It would be 2005, after Lucas's birth, before I would see them again. There was to be a lot more to happen in their lives, a steady spiraling downward of events at an ever increasing tempo, before I would be engaged in an even more active role than I had been in the years I have storied so far.

A year before Lucas was born, Dr. Mitchell made a report⁴ of suspected failure to thrive regarding Katherine, born in July 2003, to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (CPS) in Maine. Katherine had gained only a few ounces over a four month period, and she had a heart murmur that was to be checked.

Adam and Susan missed all the scheduled medical appointments set up to monitor the situation. Not only that, but the Anders Health Clinic had not been able to locate the family at all. Honest to God, with all that was going on in my life, had I have known about this I would have found Adam and had him thrown in jail. How can you possibly treat your children like that? I don't understand it, and I want to throw up almost every time I think about my rotten brother doing such a thing.

³ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103 Docket

⁴ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

The CPS opened an investigation and throughout February and March 2004 they sent him letters and spoke to neighbors and relatives. They didn't speak to me because I was in California. When they went to his home they saw an eviction notice on the door. The shades on the house were drawn and a van was in the driveway with the lights on occasionally, they reported. Talk about keystone cops, it had to be a no-brainer that Adam and the family were holed up in the house. Why didn't they just break in, for God's sake?

Eventually, he contacted the police claiming he had been out of state, and it was no longer necessary for the police to check up on the baby. Adam left a voice mail at the CPS, but wouldn't tell the investigator where he was hiding out. They left him a note telling him that an appointment had been made for Katherine on March 29th, 2004 at the Anders Clinic. He didn't show, but he left another voice mail saying that he had learned about the allegations from the police, and that he or the family would not keep the appointment because Dr. Mitchell was no longer Katherine's pediatrician.

I have to tell you, my mind was spinning as I was reading about this stuff. How could Adam get away with just simply sticking up his middle finger at law enforcement agencies? I couldn't believe that the CPS didn't have the cops take out a warrant and arrest him. Where was the bottom line concern for Katherine in all this if there was such serious fear for her well being? Didn't they have to act?

Susan was in it up to her ears. CPS investigators were finally able to meet with her on May 2nd at the place they were being evicted from. She told them that they were moving out of state, but would not say where they were going. She wouldn't allow CPS into the home to check on Katherine.

"You can't come in here. Katherine is asleep, and I don't want her disturbed. Besides there is nothing wrong with her other than she is a colicky baby, but she is growing and happy."

"We want to see her," said the female investigator.

"I don't want my child disturbed. You people keep harassing us. My husband is going to sue you if this doesn't stop."

"We want the best for your child. If your child is not seen by a physician, you will end up in jail."

"I told you, we are leaving the state. We will find her another doctor after we settle into our new home."

God, I wanted to scream. Arrest the bitch and get the children out of there I shouted as I slammed the document down on the floor and stomped into the kitchen to make coffee. Jack was away overseas. The children were in bed, and I was having my late night time, which I almost always used for reading and writing and often preparing lessons or cleaning house.

I poured my coffee and settled back onto the couch, feeling a little teary, missing Jack and wishing he didn't have to be away so much of the time. Still, I realized and was proud of my husband who had an important job in the world. He was generous to a fault,

and made sure that his family did not want for anything we needed to live a comfortable life.

I picked up the court documents and read on from where I'd left off. It certainly was a comprehensive expose. At times, I'd wish I had not read all that was in there, that maybe they'd got it wrong, but I knew in truth it was my brother who was the villain living in the pages, and that he deserved to go to jail for the rest of his life for what he was doing to his children.

The CPS reported that the Allerton family left Maine at the end of May 2004 and went to PA in the wake of the child neglect investigation. I have no idea where he lived for the first few months other than he had his van with him, and they probably lived in it. There was a report that he had checked into a hotel in September in PA. He was told to leave there after a few weeks for not letting the housekeeper into the room to clean it, and then typical Adam, abusing her when he did let her in. For a couple of weeks after they checked out, the maintenance man said he saw the van frequently parked in the Inn's parking lot at all hours of the day and night.

So, it was in the van where Adam and Susan and the children must have lived until late October when he somehow conned another landlord and moved into a condominium in Allentown. It was not long before the Allertons attracted the attention of their neighbors and law enforcement officers. It was rare for anyone to see the children. Certainly, none of the family was ever seen outside during daylight. Here is another episode, Adam 101, taken word for word from the page 14 of the court document⁵.

The father would back the family van very close to the front door to load and unload the children. All seven children, from the oldest (age 12) to the youngest (age 1), were carried by the parents to the van. Mr. Allerton avoided all attempts by his neighbors to speak to him and turned his head away to avoid having to engage with them. The school-aged children were not attending public school, nor were they enrolled in an approved home study program in Maine. The windows of the condominium unit were covered and the blinds drawn.

Adam and Susan's life continued to become ever more complicated as they tried to stay ahead of the Maine authorities. Finally, all of Adam's shenanigans came to a head on February 28th, 2005. A warrant was issued for his arrest.

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In July 2005, I went back home to Massachusetts to show off my brand new baby, Lucas. Abbey was now 10. Lucas was five months old, but technically only three months as he was born two months early, so he was still very small. We were visiting Ma who was in the rehabilitation hospital and looking worse than I ever remember. She was sitting up in her bed with plastic tubes feeding oxygen through her nose. It was sad and scary to see how a hard life and deteriorating health was ravaging this once attractive woman whom I loved so dearly, I was frozen with fear of losing her, I didn't know what I would do. She

⁵Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

had emphysema and breast cancer, but like the fighter she had been all her life, she claimed she was winning the battle.

Of course, I was all smiles showing off Lucas. Ma was holding him, but he looked a little distressed at first. The plastic tubes, I thought. Abbey started tickling Lucas's chest and giggling. She had bonded with him from the first day she saw him and, thereafter, had spent every spare minute with him. She had him soon making baby smiles at his Nana. Ma was delighted. What a joy I felt showing off my babies.

Finally, Ma handed Lucas to Abbey. "He is going to be a very handsome young man, Amelia. He'll be quite the honey pot for the young ladies. He looks a lot like you. You went through a long and demanding process to have him. I admire you for that. Congratulations, Honey."

"Thank you."

"Speaking of Adam, he usually visits me after dark. If you could be here on one of those nights, I know he would love to see Lucas and Abbey."

"No, Ma. I don't want to see him. I know he and his family are probably having a hard time. Some things never change. But, I'll keep my visits to the daytime. Please make it clear to him not to show up when I'm here."

"Amelia, he is your..."

"No, Ma. I'm serious; I just don't want to get involved with his problems ever again. I have no respect for him, and the way he behaves and treats the children he deserves everything he's got coming to him."

Abbey glanced over at me with an ugly frown on her face. She liked her Uncle Adam who had always treated her like a princess. Pity he couldn't do that for his own kids. It would have been wonderful to show my children off to him and see them playing with their cousins, but I had too often experienced Adam draining my energy on every occasion we met or talked. He was a taker (a bloodsucker). Giving, except for the presents to my children, was an anachronism as it applied to him.

"Why do you hate Adam so much, Amelia?" Ma asked.

"C'mon, Ma, you know I don't hate him. I've just had it up to here," I said raising the horizontal palm of my hand to my forehead, "with his troubles. All we ever mean to him is our money, and he'll try to soak us for more and more of it whenever he can. And, I don't need him around upsetting me emotionally, because that's what happens every time."

It was time to leave. I wasn't really comfortable bringing Lucas to the hospital, so I kept my visits short. My mother's doctor told me that it was not a good place to bring my children, especially the baby because he was so little and a preemie.

I took Lucas from Abbey, and we all kissed Ma. "Bye, Ma, we'll be in again tomorrow morning. I love you. Keep up the good work. You're looking a little better everyday," I lied. I always hated leaving her.

"I'll be looking out for you. You've done well for yourself, Amelia, a good husband and two fine children. I wish your siblings could have done as good."

“Thanks, mama. That was a really nice thing to say.”

She’s up to something, I thought. Nevertheless, I leaned over, put my free arm around her and gave her a hug. Then we left.

The next day was a scorcher. The 2005 summer was very hot one, and the temperature was a blistering 99 degrees that day. It was late in the morning, and I was sitting on the porch at the hospital, Lucas in my arms, with Ma, Abbey, and my other brother, Billy. Ma seemed a little nervous and what happened in the next few moments explained why.

“Look, it’s Uncle Adam,” screamed Abbey as she leapt from her chair and ran toward my brother who was coming from the direction of the parking lot. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was an obvious set up.

I looked directly at Ma, “You set this up.” She just sat there looking very complacent. I should have learned that she was never one to be underestimated when she went after something she wanted.

I turned away in time to see Abbey leap into Adam’s arms and watched as he whirled her around, laughing with her as he had always done. I was surprised that he looked as well as he did, a little on the thin side, but he still had his good looks. He put Abbey down and came over to the porch, kissing Ma, shaking hands with Billy, who he usually treated like dirt and called him ‘the Chink,’ and then turning to me. My heart was racing. After all, I’d not seen him in years, and our last conversation was pretty heated. We didn’t hug, but he reached out and gently took my baby out of my arms without saying a word and held him. Lucas kept smiling and smiling and cooing.

“He’s a fine looking boy, Amelia. Looks like his mother.”

It was a bittersweet moment for me. I would have liked a relationship that was normal with my brother, one where I genuinely wanted to hug him and be really happy to see him, but it was way too late for that.

“Is that your van?” I said pointing toward the parking lot. “Isn’t that Susan and the children?”

I mentioned earlier, it was a stinking hot day. As I looked to where his van, with Susan and the seven children in it, was parked out in the hot sun, I was filled with anguish for all of them.

“Adam, it’s stinking hot. What are you doing leaving your wife and children out there like that?”

“They wanted to stay there.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m going to see about that.” I stepped off the porch and headed for the van. Adam handed off Lucas to Ma and chased after me. Before I was half way to the van, everyone jumped out. I was appalled. All of the children and Susan had on long sleeve shirts and long pants. It was 99 degrees, for God sakes! Adam caught up with me a second later.

“Adam, what’s the matter with you? Why aren’t the children wearing shorts, or short sleeves and sandals in this stinking heat?”

As we know, Adam was not one to be questioned about anything he did. However, on this occasion he was almost cordial, and that told me that he was in a desperate situation and was angling for our help.

“They never dress like that, Amelia. They are used to pressure like this. The heat doesn’t bother them.”

I didn’t know then the real reason Adam had the children covered up, but I was to find out later. He didn’t want anyone to see to see the abnormal development of his children’s bodies. In the court documents I was to read, all the children were described as having badly bowed legs. Medical doctors would explain that part of the reason for their condition was because they had been confined to their play pen for days and weeks at a time. They did not get the proper exercise and nourishment they needed to develop normally, they reported.

“Hello, Susan. Hello, children,” I offered as I walked up to each one of them, and gave them all a hug. There wasn’t much of a response. Susan, carrying Katherine, murmured a hello and tried to smile, I’ll give her that. It was like they were waiting for orders from Adam on what to do next.

Abbey arrived with Billy who was carrying Lucas.

“This is your new cousin, Lucas,” announced Adam. The children gathered around Lucas and immediately began to smile and giggle as they fussed over him and then talked with Abbey who was having a great time being with her cousins.

Darn it! This was how I had always wanted it, our cousins, siblings and spouses playing together, getting along, being family and supporting one another. Suddenly, it was over.

“Okay, time to go. Everyone in the van,” ordered Adam.

We waved goodbye as we watched them go. I was sad. Where were they going? Their future, what? No future, more likely. Lost souls, drifting rudderless into a world that could be tough to navigate even for the best prepared children?

“He’s in serious trouble, isn’t he?” I said to Ma after I had walked back to the porch.

She nodded and sighed.

I kept telling myself for the rest of the day and all that night that “I WILL NOT get involved, I won’t.” It was my mantra!

A couple of days later, Ma was home from the hospital. I was there, at her place with the children. Abbey was sitting on the couch, cradling Lucas who was sound asleep.

“You told me the other day that Adam is in serious trouble. What’s been going on, ma?” I hated myself for asking, but I couldn’t help it despite my mantra. I expected I would come to regret the question, and I did.

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Once again, Adam was homeless and living between his van and Ma’s apartment.

“He’s in trouble with the law!” said Ma. She was sitting, propped up by lots of pillows, on the chair she sat in day in and day out, fiddling with the television constantly. I was

facing her, sitting close enough that I could hold her hand if she wanted. She reached to the side table for the packet of cigarettes prominent and easily accessible to her reach.

“What do you think you’re doing, Ma?” I took the packet from her. “Here you are with emphysema, breast cancer, pure oxygen feeding through those tubes, and you want a smoke? You could go up like a roman candle lighting up next to that oxygen. You’ve been warned about that before.”

“For goodness sakes, Amelia, I take the tubes out. Besides, another cigarette isn’t going to make any difference. I’ve been a smoker all my life, and I’m not going to change that now.”

“No, Ma, not with the children around. I don’t want them getting second hand smoke or me for that matter. You can have one later. Now, tell me about Adam.”

Ma pouted, folded her arms in front of her chest and glared at me. I just sat there looking back at her, remembering how beautiful she had once looked. A tough life had taken its toll. She had been diagnosed 14 years ago with breast cancer, but nothing ever happened. We were all beginning to wonder if she really did have that horrible woman cancer thing. The doctors confirmed it; “slow growing” they said, “inoperable.” So, here she was with breast cancer, emphysema, neuropathy, something wrong with her hands, a shell of her former self where once she was beautiful, a beautiful woman, bright and smart and now looking like she’s 99 years-old and not the 68 years her recent birthday celebration revealed.

She finally let her arms down and sighed. “There is a bench warrant out for his arrest. The police have been here. That’s why he keeps moving around.”

“The Police!” This was a new one on me. “Why do they want him?”

“He was summoned to appear in the Kent Family Court in Maine. He didn’t show up. All of the children have been court ordered into the custody of the Maine Department for Children and Families.”

“What?”

“Oh, that’s not the end of it. Apparently, he’s also in trouble in places along the Eastern Seaboard with the Children and Families court.”

“My God, he’s on the run from the law? But, the children, what in God’s name has he done to them?”

Of course, at the time I was yet to read the story in the court documents I now have in my trust. Ma did her best to find excuses for her boy.

“Adam really hasn’t had a lot of luck with his career. And with seven children, Susan has to be at home to look after them. You are lucky to have a husband with a very good income. You can afford to stay at home.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it, Ma. I worked hard to get into a position where I could take care of myself. Now, I have my own children, and because Jack and I saved before Abbey came along we can afford for me to stay home. Adam could have done the same thing. He was bright enough, but too lazy to make the effort it takes to be successful. He

still thinks everything should be given to him. God knows how much help he's had from us. It might do him some good to spend time in jail. But, the children...?"

"You're right, Amelia, you have made a good life for yourself. I don't know why I failed with the others? They..."

Her voice trailed off into an inaudible whisper. She was watching me, wary, pushing on the oxygen tubes feeding wretchedly into her nose, her face a mix of deep sadness and a defiant righteousness. Ah, the burden of conscience; few of us can resist forever the worsening affect of its periodic torture. I can only guess at how Ma's youthful transgression and its affect on the three brothers, Bill, Steve and Alton, weighed on her mind. Bill, my father, and Uncle Alton, who both lived in Florida, passed on five years ago, just six months apart, of lung cancer. My father was just 67, and it was sad he didn't get to know my baby. Uncle Steve left Ma 20 years ago for another woman. I think it was at that point she lost it.

I have absolutely nothing to do with Uncle Steve after that. His new wife didn't want anything to do with any of us and Uncle Steve was so weak he went along with her plans. It was a shame because he mostly raised me, and I loved him very much then. But, he was so weak that he let Peggie get away with throwing his family away. I get angry thinking about it, the weakling.

So, here was Ma alone, in pain, unhappy and for a woman who felt she was nothing without a man, she had to be living in her own creation of a purgatory here on earth.

Well, she had us, her children in her life. Although, I have to think that we have been an enormously heavy burden for her to deal with. And no wonder. There was Adam, of course, the biggest pain in the butt to her and the rest of us.

And Margaret, 51-years old as I write, my oldest sister with nine children, who has been in trouble with Social Services since her first child was a year old. The youngest one is now seven, so Margaret will probably be involved with Social Services for years to come, until her youngest turns 18.

Margaret had a really tough time from the beginning. The father of two of her children was murdered. That was very sad time for everyone and especially for her. It was a drug bust that went terribly wrong. A case of mistaken identity; the father had a brother, an identical twin who was doing the drug thing, and the police thought he was the bad guy – accidental, yeah.

She had more children, but the relationships with the fathers didn't stick. Then she met Tom, a really nice guy from a very wealthy family. It seemed that they were doing well when all of a sudden we lost contact. I tried calling her and leaving messages, but there was never a response. Eventually, when in the area on business, Jack went to the last address we had for her in PA. He called me from the house.

"You are not going to believe this, Amelia. I'm at Margaret and Tom's house, and it has been remodeled and renovated. The realtor told me that they were foreclosed on four years ago, but it took the new owner two years to get them out. They were living in such squalor that the new owners had to gut the house because the interior was in an absolutely foul and putrid mess, completely unlivable. God knows how anyone could live like that. I can't imagine what happened."

So, for four years Margaret kept her circumstances secret. She didn't let me know that she had been foreclosed on. Tom was supposed to be from a wealthy family. We could only wonder.

"God, sometimes I'm so thick, Jack. I kept asking myself why anyone wasn't answering the phone. I hope they're okay."

"With your family, you have to be ready for anything, Honey," said Jack. "Expect the worst and there'll be no surprises."

It was at our step-mother's funeral when I eventually caught up with Margaret. As I mentioned earlier, my father Bill married Nancy when I was four, after he had divorced Ma. Billy and Shari were there. It was a sad, sad occasion. They had now lost both their parents.

Margaret was not looking good. She was overweight and looked older than her 51 years. Her hair ran all the way down her back and had turned a salt and pepper grey. Her spleen had been removed a few years earlier, and it was obvious that she had other serious health problems.

"What on earth happened to you, Margaret? I have tried to call you, but..."

"I don't want to talk about it, Amelia. We are living in Pennsylvania now, and I can't legally discuss anything."

That was it. She had nothing more to say. I was distressed to see my sister in such bad shape, but there was little I could do.

"Amelia," Ma's raspy voice sounded a little agitated. She had pulled the tubes from her nose. "Amelia, pass me a cigarette and don't argue with me. I need one."

I couldn't be bothered arguing. She looked so wretched. I lit one and put it to her lips. She inhaled and when the smoke hit her lungs, she went into a coughing fit.

"Water!" she cried as she managed to keep the cigarette to her lips despite the coughing. I passed her the glass of water. A few seconds passed, the coughing stopped, and she resumed smoking. "Have you spoken to Michele?" she said her voice a raspy whisper.

My sister Michele lived in Sacramento and kept pretty much to herself so far as the family was concerned. She didn't have any children of her own. She hated Adam and for the last 20 years had no contact with him.

"Not in a long time."

"I worry about her too, I've called her a million times and she never answers. I would love her to have a relationship with Jack and me and Abbey and Lucas."

"Last I spoke with her, she was with someone so at least she's not lonely"

Ma stubbed her cigarette into the ashtray filled with the butts I always found disgusting. The color of her face was almost as gray as the ash of her cigarette. Her breathing was becoming more shallow and raspy. She was fumbling about the blanket spread over her legs, trying to find the oxygen tubes. I reached over, recovered them from where they had fallen to the side of the chair and placed them in her nose. The oxygen helped and a little her feistiness returned.

“What do you mean a partner?”

“A friend, someone she cares about.”

Actually, they had been together for a long time, but I didn’t want to go there with Ma. I was afraid the next question would be about Tina, but she gave me a hard look, closed her eyes and seemed to settle into the chair. The nicotine was having an effect.

Tina was the youngest, my beautiful nurse sister who I absolutely loved, the gritty mother, fiercely independent, who moved to Scranton, RI to give her children Andrew, Linda and Casey, a chance in life by getting them the good education she knew she could not afford as a single mother if she stayed in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, Tina’s struggles in her early relationships with men and then later with other problems gradually wore her down, was another worry for Ma. In fact, she and Ma had been estranged for 12 years. But Tina remained very strong.

With me, it was my relationship with Adam that upset Ma most. I think she thought of me as the smartest of her children, and it was hard for her to accept that I could be so merciless in my criticism of her only son despite my attempts to help him.

With all the aforementioned going on throughout Ma’s life, it was no wonder that she looked as she did then. But, I have to say she had a certain inner strength that I admired, and I loved her so much. She made sure we were well fed and clothed as children. She had to be extremely strong to survive. Indeed, it would be her strength that would sustain her for a few more difficult years of serious health problems before she would to succumb to life’s inevitable summons.

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It was night, and it was hot. I was still in Massachusetts, visiting Ma each day and sometimes at night. That meant occasionally I would run into Adam. It wasn’t so bad, actually. He was being mostly cordial. I was sitting out on the porch looking out over a park across the road. My eyes were suddenly attracted to the flare ups of tiny balls of light zipping around a few bushes in the distance. I was delighted that the fireflies were out. There they were blinking away, some of them flashing green light while others were burning with a fiery orange-yellow before they faded into the dark.

“They remind me of life, a brief blaze and then darkness,” I said. I loved catching fireflies when I was little, as did my siblings and cousins.

“Aren’t you the philosophical one tonight?” Adam said as he sat in the chair next to me.

“Perhaps. Ma told me that the police in Maine have a warrant out for your arrest. What on earth has been going on with you?”

Oh darn, talk about opening up the door. I knew instinctively I would live to regret the question, and I did. I guess part of it was the psychologist in me, but I was truly concerned for my nieces and nephews, too.

“She had no business telling you that.”

“Really! You cause her more worry than the rest of us put together, Adam.” He sat there, not saying a word. I could feel his energy, though. He was biting his tongue, I’m sure. Adam did not like to be challenged or criticized. He wanted something; money probably.

We sat there in silence for what seemed like an eternity. I was ready to leave.

“Nothing changes, does it, Adam?” I started to get up.

“Wait.”

“Yes,” I said settling back into my chair, dreading the thought that I had once again opened Pandora’s Box.

He gave me his spin on what we already have some knowledge of, that all of his problems were everyone else’s doing, the police did this, the neighbor did that, the lady next to the grocery store did something and on and on and on.

It was so frustrating that he could never take responsibility for anything. He told me he got a job at a local fabric store where they lived in Maine. He said they lived in a rental and had to lie about how many children they had. When the landlord came by one day and needed to get into the apartment, Adam told him that he couldn’t come in, that he’d paid rent, and he did not need to let him into the apartment. He was confrontational and argumentative with everyone! He had no friends, all he had was enemies. Is it any wonder?

“You don’t get it, do you?” I said

“Don’t get what?”

“You make people dislike you. Half of your problem starts from being mean and nasty. Like the neighbor that came over to welcome you with an offer to help when you moved into the little peach colored house. When I arrived you were yelling at him. ‘don’t ever come into my home, you are not a friend and you are not family, and I don’t even know you.’ Well, he didn’t waste much time contacting the police and truant officer when he noticed the children weren’t going to school.”

“Just goes to show, they’re all out to get you.”

I shook my head. “There’s no hope for you, Adam.” I left.

Over the next few days, I learned more of what happened. It was basically the story in chapter sixteen from the Maine Court Documents. I could hardly believe that he fled the state of Maine. I didn’t know he could be that bold and brazen. The more I heard and found out, the more I was dumbfounded by how he blatantly ignored the authorities.

“Why didn’t you just take the children to the doctors and get their physicals like the court ordered? You wouldn’t be in this pickle now?”

“I couldn’t afford it.”

“This was the health of your children at stake. You’ve asked me for money for far less important things.”

There had to be another reason why he didn’t want them to get checked out, I thought. There was always an ulterior motive with Adam.

“You’re in trouble with the law now, Adam. That’s no joke.”

“It’s not a big deal. You don’t let these people push you around, especially when it’s family.”

It was so simple, all he had to do was take the children to have their physicals and the authorities would leave them alone. They would just be dealing with the home schooling thing, but no, he had to make his life, and more to the point, his children's lives hell.

As I learned more from doctors and state officials, I knew why he didn't want them checked out. Adam was hiding the heart murmur showing up in my youngest niece, Katherine, and the bowed legs the children had from being confined to the playpen until they were four-years old. They were kept from running and playing around outside, for God's sake! What can be more normal, no essential, for the raising of healthy and well adjusted youngsters? And, probably the most egregious of all the issues Adam wanted to hide from the officials was the fact that his children were malnourished.

I kept asking myself, "Why would such a smart man allow this to happen?"

Later, I spoke with the court psychologist who did the evaluation of him. He said that Adam was of 'superior intelligence' however, he also had personality disorders. I could have told the guy that much myself.

When he fled Maine, he went to Margaret's house in PA for a few months. While he was there, she told me later, he tried to talk her into buying a house with him. When she said no, he came back to Massachusetts to Ma's place. He had nothing more to do with Margaret after that. That was our Adam; if you couldn't, or wouldn't help him out he had nothing more to do with you. God help you if you needed his help!

After hearing about Adam's troubles and what led up to them, I should have left. My gut was telling me to get the hell back to California. But, no, I stayed and suckered myself into the whole sorry mess. Who needs the psychologist??? To be honest, I wasn't ready to leave Ma right then. I wanted to spend as much time with her as I possibly could. I always felt like that when I had to leave her, but this time was different. And, how could I abandon those children?

. . .

Abbey was having a great time visiting with her cousins, and she always had so much fun. Her eighth birthday was coming up, and she wanted to do something with them. So, I set up a party for them at Ma's place with cake, ice cream, balloons and a few presents, not a big deal. My nieces and nephews were having such a good time. But, it was a different experience for them. Their birthdays were usually quiet celebrations with Adam presiding, so it was heartwarming to see them having a great time with their cousins present.

I was eating a piece of birthday cake, enjoying the cousins fussing over Lucas, but deep down I worried. Their health issues were much more apparent to me now that I knew about the warrant for Adam's arrest.

Lilly was standing up in the playpen, giggling, looking at me and holding out her hand. Poor little thing had clumps of hair missing.

"You want a piece of my cake, Lilly?" I asked as I broke off a piece and handed it to her.

"Don't give her that!" Susan's shrill voice cut through the laughter in the room. Suddenly it was dead quiet. Ma, who was sitting in her chair, stared at the bitch.

I glared at her. “What?” I hissed through clenched teeth barely able to contain my anger.

The ‘ulterior motive’ Adam jumped in, realizing that his best interests would not be served by upsetting me. “We don’t ever give her sweets, Amelia,” he said while giving Susan a ‘shut the f...up look.’ “The sugar is not good for kids. I don’t mind the older kids getting a small piece on special occasions.

“You’re worried about sugar hurting your children. What’s causing all these bald spots in Lilly’s hair?”

“Oh, that happens when she gets bored. She pulls her hair out.”

“You’re kidding. You’re concerned about her having a piece of cake, and here she is, two years old, and pulling her hair out because she is bored. She needs to be taken to a doctor.”

“Well, we have and that’s what they told us.”

Later, when I had all the court paperwork, I found out Lilly suffered from severe anxiety attacks, and that’s why she yanked out the chunks of hair. The more I learned, the worse it got. When I gave my nephew, Brian, he was 10 at the time, a piece of the cake he said, “We don’t usually take things from strangers.” That I would be considered a stranger was shocking to me, but what concerned me much more was that his speech was so bad I had a hard time understanding him. In fact, it was difficult to understand what any of the children were saying because their speech was so bad. All of the children sounded the same but I guess that’s to be expected when all they hear are their own voices bouncing back at them.

It was obvious that here was another reason Adam did not want these children to be exposed again to the court doctors. In fact, he didn’t want anyone to have contact with them, which was why he never took them out, of course. Did he seriously think he could do this forever? I think his pride was part of it, too. He claimed that home schooling was best for his children. How could he explain the bad speech problems? They could only point directly to him and Susan.

We didn’t stay late that evening; I just couldn’t bear being around Adam any longer. My mind was going a mile a minute; should I call the authorities, should I take Katherine, what could I or should I do? I had to get out of there and think. I still had a couple of weeks left in Massachusetts before we went home to California. It had been a stressful time dealing with Ma’s illness, and Lucas was little more than five months old. I have to say that he behaved superbly, considering how the familiar surroundings and routine of his early life had been disrupted.

I did my best to avoid Adam, but he showed up a couple of times when I was at Ma’s house. What was unusual, though, was he was almost cordial in his discourse with me on both occasions. I know he liked seeing Abbey and Lucas, so most of his attention was centered on them.

We left to go home to San Francisco in August. I was hoping that this was the end of having to deal with Adam. I couldn’t have been more wrong. Labor Day was fast approaching and the worst of my brother’s transgressions were soon to have an even greater impact all of our lives.

• • •

My brother was arrested on September 4th 2005 in the parking lot at a department store in Massachusetts. He had managed to get a late shift job at the Kohl's department store while he was staying at Ma's house. Most times, he left the whole family with her while he went into work. On this night, however, his luck finally ran out. He and Ma had words, so he decided to take Susan and the children with him. They sat out in the van while he worked. Because they were used to being in the van for hours on end, it was probably not a big deal for the family. All of the children wore pull-ups, so they wouldn't have to find bathrooms.

It was around four in the morning. The Hingham Police were doing their check on cars in the department store parking lot. For whatever reason, they saw the van and ran the license plates. There was a warrant out for Adam's arrest. The cause was for disobeying a judge's orders to get medical physicals for his children and to provide proof of their home schooling. While this was going on, Adam was finishing up his shift inside the store. When he came out to the parking lot he was handcuffed and arrested on the spot. Here is the account of the circumstances as recorded in the court document.⁶

On September 4, at approximately 4:00 A.M., Officer Sarah Knab found the Allerton van in the parking lot of the department store in Massachusetts where he worked. Sleeping inside the van were Mrs. Allerton and the seven children. All of the children were sleeping either on the belongings, in car seats or curled on the floor.

Inside the van were bags of personal belongings such as clothes, bedding, furniture, toys and assorted groceries and food. The bags of clothing were stacked up in front of the sliding door, impeding access to the outside. The clothes, toys and furniture were also piled around the children, creating a dangerous situation for them. In addition, the family had other personal belongings on a roof rack on top of the van. Contrary to the parents' assertions, the court finds that the family was living in the van.

While Mrs. Allerton identified herself, she would not answer any other questions without her husband present. Mr. Allerton was eventually located in the store. When law enforcement told him there were outstanding pick-up orders for his children from Maine, he told police there was no paperwork preventing him from having his children. Mrs. Allerton was arrested on an outstanding DLS warrant from Maine. Mrs. Allerton and the children were brought to the police station and the Maine social services were contacted.

To this day, chills still run up and down my spine when I think of the terror the children must have felt on that dark morning. At the time, I even felt a flash of sympathy for Adam. That was short lived sentiment, as I later learned the full extent of the unforgivable damage he and his wretched wife had inflicted upon my nephews and nieces.

Adam and Susan spent the day and that night in the jail. The children were eventually driven out of state by a social worker and a police officer to the home of their great aunt, Susan's aunt, in Maine. The children were terrified out of their minds. They'd never been

⁶ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

away from their parents before, and here they were in the middle of the night in a car with strangers for over two hours, knowing they were leaving their father and mother locked up in a jail.

A few days later, on September the 12th, Adam was incarcerated for contempt of court. Their van was impounded along with all of their “things”. He lost the job at the department store, of course and was fired from a temporary position he’d been working at. It was one of those temporary Halloween store locations at the local mall. The police found boxes full of Halloween costumes among the “things” in the van.

It was the Labor Day weekend 2005. We were visiting friends in San Francisco. It was one of those beautiful Indian summer days. Lucas and Abbey were playing with the children of our hosts and other guests on the back lawn. They were having a great time. On the barbecue, steaks, sausages and hamburger meats were sizzling and spitting, their familiar aroma mixing and drifting with the slightest of breezes to my nose, even stirring within this almost vegetarian practitioner that the time to eat was fast approaching.

From the patio, where I was sitting with Jack, the wife of our host and other guests at the table laden with drinks, salads and barbecue condiments, we could see the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge spanning the narrow channel where the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean rush in and out of San Francisco Bay at least a couple of time a day, connecting the city of San Francisco from its northern tip to the south end of Marin County. The Bridge had the dubious reputation for being the most popular place in the United States and the world for people to commit suicide. I remember thinking at the time how could those people go through with so final an act of capitulation with nature’s rugged beauty on display for all to marvel and contemplate. There it was an internationally recognized symbol of man’s extraordinary ability to overcome the most daunting of challenges represented in the mighty span of concrete, steel and cable? How tragic that there were so many that unhappy.

My cell phone rang. It was the inevitable call I knew would come. Ma had already called to tell me that Adam and Susan had spent the night in jail and that the children had been taken to the home of one of Susan’s relatives, her auntie living in Maplewood. I was upset by the news, of course, and the old feelings of sympathy for Adam’s dilemma crept over me despite my best efforts to suppress them. Even with all his faults, his narcissism, his dishonesty, his personal attacks and the absolute absence of gratitude for all Jack and I had done to help him and his family, well over \$35,000 in cash up to this point in time alone, I couldn’t shake the thought, He’s my brother, he’s my family and I used to really love him, and he looked so sad and drawn when I saw him. The number one thing that weighed so heavily on my mind was that I would want my children to do anything to help each other. I would want them to be able to help each other no matter what. However, with Adam I knew a line had to drawn somewhere.

“Yes?”

“Amelia?”

I was aware of my heart thumping heavily against the wall of my chest. Suddenly, my enjoyment with all the activity of the children playing and the conversations with our

friends changed into the familiar darkness, even melancholy at the sound of Adam's voice.

"Wait a minute, Adam, I have to find a quiet place where I can hear you."

Jack scowled, "You should have left that bloody phone in the car like I suggested."

"Yes, you're right, I should have listened to you."

"He only ever calls us for one reason, Amelia, money!" said Jack. "You ought to cut him off. I don't want him spoiling your day."

"I'll be quick," I said as I grimaced and nodded before going into the house and then on into the living room, which was away from the outside noise. I stood and stared out of the big bay window at the same view of the Golden Gate Bridge that could be seen from the patio.

"Amelia, I have a problem, and I need to get a lawyer."

"A problem. Of course you have a problem, Adam. That is all you ever have are problems. It's the only time we ever hear from you."

"Listen for a minute, will you?" he said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "I've been arrested on some trumped up charges. Susan and I spent the night in jail. The kids were taken from us, and I have to appear in court in a few days. I need money to get a lawyer."

"Ma called me. I know."

"You know! You know what happened to my family, and you didn't call!"

Oh, God, here we go again, I thought. Even though my hands were trembling and my tummy was in turmoil, I managed to keep my voice calm.

"Why would we? You only have yourself to blame. You ignore the Judge's order and think you can get away with it. You'll just have to deal with it yourself."

"Please, Amelia, think of the kids, they..."

"That's precisely what you should have been doing. Your neglected children are the only reason I'm talking to you now."

"I need \$500 to hire a lawyer. Help me out, Amelia. The kids are terrified."

"Oh, spare me. Those kids haven't been getting proper meals, and there are questions about their health; they are not being educated; they can hardly be understood because their speech is so unintelligible, and their parents are going to jail. No wonder they are terrified. They probably would be better off if they were fostered out with other families."

"How you can even think that, let alone say it. We are family, Amelia, you, me, ma and our sisters. Susan and my kids mean everything to me. I can't give them up. Please help us out with the \$500," he said, his voice breaking with a hint that he was sobbing.

"We can't do it any longer, Adam. All you do is take and take until you've got as much as you can, and then we don't hear from you until you're desperate again. You never call to ask how my family is doing. Jack, who has a good job and works hard, has been extremely generous. I know you have never thanked him. No, you'll have to figure your

own way out of this situation. You know, I wish I didn't see you when we were home this summer." I could almost see him gritting his teeth. There was a pause. I waited.

"I'm really in trouble this time, Amelia. Will you talk to Jack? Please, just this one last time, please."

It had been a few years since I sent him any money, and I didn't want to start up the pattern again.

"You've caused enough stress in our lives. As I said, you wouldn't be in this mess if, for once, you'd done what you were told to do by the authorities."

It was exhausting listening to him. He went on and on about what happened, trying to slant it his way, but I already had all of the "real" facts from a woman in Social Services, who I'd contacted after Ma had told me of their arrest. He blamed everyone: the landlord, the police, social services, the judge, etc. etc. Finally, I couldn't stand to listen to another word.

"I'll talk to Jack." I snapped shut the lid of the cell phone, stared out at the bridge for a moment and then left to rejoin Jack and the party.

You guessed it; we gave him the \$500. I didn't know what kind of lawyer he could get for \$500, but that wasn't my problem, I remember thinking at the time. I told him "NO MORE" after this. What a joke! I really meant it when I said it, but Ma would call and ask us to help; she would cry and say he had nobody else to help him. She wasn't well, and she was getting all stressed out. I worried about her.

Just like whenever Adam got into trouble before, I would feel compelled to help in some way. I was hoping it wouldn't have to be financially, but what happened in the months and years yet to come was shocking, a saga that was to go on and on and continues to this day I wonder if it will ever end? As long as Adam was around, I didn't think it ever could or would.

And, there were the children, always the children to think about.

Here is an extract⁷ from the Maine Family Court document, which was to substantiate what I was finding out about the children's disposition. It vindicates why I could not just walk away from those two nephews and five nieces.

To both the police and Massachusetts social workers, the children were thin and appeared much smaller and younger than their ages. Cindy did not have the strength in her arms to hold her two-year old sister Lilly. Lilly did not walk on her own all of that day.

Maine CPS workers and police picked up the children from Massachusetts and brought them to the home of a great aunt in Massachusetts. All seven children were examined on September 5, 2005 at the Region Hospital. The physician expressed concerns with Cindy's emaciated appearance and Lilly's heart murmur. He also recommended dental care. The four youngest Lilly, Rachel, Charlotte and Keith, were not toilet trained. While

⁷ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

this is not unusual with respect to the youngest children, it is remarkable for five-year old Keith.

. . .

Two weeks after Adam called asking for the \$500.00 he was in jail again, this time serving 30 days for the contempt of court charge. Cindy, Brian, Becky and Keith were placed in foster care, while the youngest three, Grace, Lilly and Katherine were given back to Susan. Because of a home schooling investigation, which did not involve the three non-school aged children, Susan was able to have them with her.

So, here I was once again fully involved, my life turning inside out because I couldn't just walk away from those children without making sure they that they were going to be looked after. I was full of resentment for him for interrupting my wonderful life with my family and I wanted him to disappear.

I was doing lots of the leg work, making phone calls, talking to key people and lawyers. At the same time, I would question my own sanity at getting involved in my crazy brother's life again when I swore a thousand times over that I would not.

Things were chaotic at my house; the phone never stopped ringing, Adam's lawyers, their assistants, or the judge's office would be calling me back. I was in touch with social services because the children wanted to see me. Next to my mother, I was the only family they knew. I didn't always answer the phone, my children came first. If I was doing something with them, I let the phone ring. Adam would call from the jail and leave rude messages when I didn't pick up. To this day I screen my phone calls. He called collect, sometimes several times a day. My bill was ridiculously high. I don't know why, but this made me extra mad, it was so unnecessary. What an idiot I was for accepting any of his calls. Quite often, I just let the answer machine pick up. And then of course I had to show them to Jack, and I knew that would really get to him as well.

Susan was living in different motels paid for by social services, or me and other organizations like welfare or churches. Ma even sent him money from the small amount she had! While Susan and later Adam, after he got out of jail, were living on government handouts and charity, they were always uncooperative and lacking in any gratitude for the help they received. In fact, it seemed they went out of their way to cause problems.

Here is another extract⁸ from the Maine Family Court document.

Throughout September, October and November 2005, the family lived at three different extended stay hotels. In addition to motels, the family was offered shelter care at the local shelters. The family also stayed for two weekends at the condominium of their lawyer's assistant. Financial resources for motels and shelters came from the Maine Department of Health. This assistance for housing was discontinued due to the family's inability to cooperate with motel staff around room access for housekeeping. Additionally, the family received food stamps and general assistance. The children received Medicaid.

⁸ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

Ma kept calling everyday, crying and begging me to get Adam out of jail. “He doesn’t deserve to be in there, Amelia. It’s terrible for him, wearing those same prison clothes day after day, locked up with men who are real criminals. I know you and Jack have done so much for him, but please help him again.”

The pleas would keep coming, but there was nothing I could do to get him out. Besides, I was hoping the 30 days in jail might do him some good, change his thinking and realize that if he wanted a different life for himself and his family he needed to be responsible, get a job and work hard like the rest of us. Forgive me for my naivety. There is that saying pigs might fly, isn’t there?

I sent him \$50 to buy small item necessities the jail authorities told me he needed. And, I sent money to Susan, so she could take a bus to the jail with the children. There were days when the social services people would take them. It was approaching fall, so I also sent her boxes and boxes of warm clothes, along with toys and other items the children could use for writing and drawing.

Of course, Adam’s gratitude for our help was underwhelming, why it would be any different? I think I mentioned earlier that doing the same things over and over again without different results was the definition of insanity – wake up Amelia! At some level, though, I think I eventually accepted that Adam was not going to change and that neither could I. I would always be the bleeding heart. Helping family was a sacred duty I could not ignore, fundamental to my being. Oh, the contradictions were there, all right. I hated Adam with a passion at times, but as I came to know who I was at my core, I knew it would always be impossible to cut away from family completely, however badly they behaved, and especially when they needed help.

The collect calls from him were relentless. Ma would get them, too. The conversations were always of the same tone, demanding, judgmental and abusive.

“Why did you send me \$50? It’s not going to do anything.” “I was told you needed it to buy necessities in the jail,” I replied. “If you don’t need it, give it to the children. I’ve sent them clothing and they could do with more.”

“They don’t need that stuff.”

“Junk you called it. Ma told me.”

“Use your head, Amelia. If you’d saved all the money you spent on hotels, clothes, phone cards, buses or whatever, you would have been able to send the money I need. None of this would be happening!”

I laughed. “So, now it’s my fault. You are a piece of work, brother.”

“The money saved would be enough for a proper lawyer instead of some useless court appointed one.”

“If you behaved like a grown man instead of a childish, irresponsible idiot, you wouldn’t be in jail. You’d have a life like mine, living in a nice home with healthy, well educated children.”

On the day of Lucas’s christening on Sunday, September 14, 2005, we were just walking out the door when the phone rang, another collect call from the jail. I grabbed the phone.

“Amelia, it’s Adam. I want...”

“Oh, I figured it was you.”

“I know, you’ve got caller ID. That’s how you deliberately avoid my calls, isn’t it?”

“Get used to it.” I was cuddling Lucas close to my chest. He gave me a gorgeous smile. Yeah, that smile softened and melted my heart. “Adam, I don’t want this day of all days to be spoiled. Give me some peace, so I can christen my little miracle baby without worrying about you.”

There was a noticeable change in the tone of Adam’s voice. Was it sadness? Christenings were a family event, one that always seemed to touch him in a special way. I’ve mentioned that he treated all the family children with a special affection he could not give to his own. What a pity.

“Well, at least you have yours,” he managed to say after a long pause.

“That’s right, I do, and it will stay that way.”

“Congratulations, Amelia, have a great day,” he said.

I did, we all did. We had a fantastic day, and I didn’t think about him, not once.

Adam was released in early October. He joined Susan and their three youngest, living in different hotels, upsetting staff wherever they went, pulling their usual uncooperative and confrontationist stunts whenever challenged with requests that did not suit them.

As reported in the court document on page 160, housekeepers had a difficult time getting into their rooms to carry out their cleaning duties. The stories were always the same. They were doing ‘things’ and did not want to be bothered, or someone was sleeping. They slept a lot during the day.

Eventually, they would have to leave. At one place, they lost the financial assistance they were getting from a particular welfare group. Certain standards of behavior were required and one transgression was all it took to lose any assistance. Adam knew that, but the pathological sense of self he had of being special meant he was excluded from the rules and more to the point, he was entitled. He and his family paid a huge price. We all did!

October continued with him doing battle with the whole state of Maine. They weren’t making any headway in the battle to get the children back. No wonder, Adam and Susan were belligerent, rude and extremely self righteous!

Of course, the children were suffering most. I thought about their future and worried about them being able to function successfully in society. Whenever the CPS would make some progress with the children’s schooling, Adam and Susan would act as saboteurs. Why in God’s name they would want to deny their children an education was confounding to me. The more I learned, the angrier I got.

Ms. Reed⁹ often observed the children in their classes. There were periods of cooperation and at times the children seemed to be enjoying school and their peers. On one occasion,

⁹ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

when Mrs. Allerton asked the children how their school day was, they responded, “stupid, we did what they wanted.” Ms. Reed noted that this response was in direct contrast to the cooperative behaviors she had observed during the day. In Ms. Reed’s opinion, and the court so finds, the Allerton children were torn between what they actually experienced and what their parents told them to believe and say. The court finds that this sad dynamic was detrimental to the Allerton children.

Moreover, the children were socially isolated: they had no interpersonal skills beyond the immediate family circle and would not interact with children and adults other than themselves. Important childhood experiences for these children were lacking, such as structured learning, friendships, and interactions with people other than each other. The risks to these children of such social and emotional isolation are obvious: an inability to function in society. The court concludes that the parents isolated the children to their emotional detriment.

Instead of complying with the people who could help them, Adam and Susan just kept pissing them off. It was unbelievable! Excuse my language, but what I know now to be true, the details of what was really going on as documented in the Maine court document makes me darn angry. Social Services helped them, or tried to, despite knowing they were the number one problem in the way of the children’s well being.

During October, they were able to have visitations with the four older children. The visits were supervised, which really angered Adam. He constantly complained of the supervised visits, saying the foster parents were stupid morons, using words I don’t want to repeat here.

“Don’t ever refer to the foster people as foster parents,” he told me.

I nearly lost it. “They are better parents for those children than you ever have been, Adam. I keep hearing more and more stories of the neglect and deprivation they were subjected to by you. How could you ignore court orders regarding their medical and dental care appointments? You deliberately missed taking them for their immunization program shots time and time again. God, you think that you and that pathetic creature who calls herself a mother are worthy parents. Spare me, please.”

I spoke with the children often. Social services wanted me involved, and I wanted to be involved. I didn’t want the children to feel completely abandoned. They trusted me. I guess I had been a regular visitor in their lives who always stuck up for them. They had so many questions. None of this should have been happening - it was so sad. They thought I was working on getting them back to their parents. Secretly, I thought they would be better off with foster parents, but I told them the social workers were trying to work out a solution for everyone. It broke my heart when two of them asked me why their Daddy was so mean and always yelled.

I begged Adam to help the children get through this easier by being nice to them. But not him, he had to tell them not to listen to anyone, that they didn’t have to talk to anybody, and that they could do anything they wanted while they lived in other people’s houses! He literally made things worse for his own children.

As the CPS people and I had more contact, we developed a greater level of mutual trust. From them, I was to learn of even more horrific consequences the children suffered from Adam and Susan's neglect.

What happened next in this long and painful saga is best described in the following extract¹⁰ from the Maine court documents.

At the end of January 2006, the Allerton family went to Newark to commence proceedings in Eastern Seaboard courts to divest Maine of legal jurisdiction of this case. The children were removed from school to do this in violation of the Maine protective order.

On January 31, 2006, local law enforcement located the Allertons at a nearby hotel where they lived (we paid for that hotel as well). All seven children were with the parents. The police knocked on the door and stated that they were checking up on the children. Mr. Allerton let the police in and was arrested on a warrant from Maine for contempt of court. Mrs. Allerton was near the bed and in the process of changing one of the children. Sergeant Arnold Goldman of the Newark Police Department asked Mrs. Allerton to come with him. However, he permitted her to first finish changing the child. Rather than go with the police officer, Mrs. Allerton picked up one of her other children. The police officer, fearing that this child was going to be used as a shield, grabbed Mrs. Allerton, who resisted and kicked him. She was eventually subdued on the floor. All of the children witnessed this and were understandably upset about what was happening in the hotel room. The parents did nothing to make this difficult situation easier for the children. The children grabbed onto each other and started to chant, in unison, about letting their parents go, including two-year old Katherine. The chanting was unusual and appeared to be pre-programmed. Seven social workers were needed to remove the children from the hotel room and bring them to the CPS office in Newark. While at the office, the children continued to resist and defy social workers. Social workers noted that the children had layers of clothes on. The feet of the youngest two girls was green, and their toe nails were so overgrown that they had begun to curl under their feet.

The parents were incarcerated until March 2006, awaiting extradition to Maine. Moreover, Mrs. Allerton was charged with and subsequently pled to resisting arrest, child endangerment and assaulting a police officer in the court.

All seven children were placed in foster care. Becky and Cindy were placed together, and Katherine and Lilly were placed together. Grace was placed by herself in a foster home.

Can you believe this? It's insane! My brother's wife wrestled to the floor by police and arrested. Both parents in jail, the children chanting like they'd been programmed by some cult, the youngest two with green feet and toe nails curling under them... What the hell had happened? This was right out of a Hollywood horror movie.

I was at home in California when I got a call from the social service person in the afternoon saying that both Adam and Susan had been arrested at the Ramada Inn in front of the children! Of course, I didn't know all the details then, just that Adam was back in

¹⁰ Ref – Taken from State of Maine Family Court Kent County Docket Nos. 569-12-04CnJv 101/1/2-2-05CnJv Pgs. 40 thru 103

jail and Susan was in with him for assaulting a police officer. I was devastated for all of them. All the crazy stuff of the last few months caught up with me right there on the phone. I started crying and amid the tears and sobbing, I told the woman from Social Services that I would arrange for a flight back east as soon as I could.

It was mid February when I arrived in Boston. Right then, I hated Adam more than at any other time in my life.

• • •

I had Abbey and Lucas with me when I went to the Ramada Inn to get all of the Allerton family's worldly possessions. Adam was concerned mostly for his legal documents and important paperwork that related to his forever battles over the children's education and health issues with the Family Services department of Maine. What upset me most were the little jars of baby food for Lilly and Katherine, half empty, still with spoons in them. It was hard for me to keep it together. There were the clothes, food and other possessions left where they must have been when the police busted them. They didn't have enough time to get anything. The legal documents and paperwork had gone. It was later discovered that Brian actually had the documents in his possession.

The people at the Ramada Inn were wonderful. They helped with the packing. After I had the car loaded, I left and went to meet with the Social Services officer. She gave me a thorough briefing on the events leading to Adam and Susan's arrest. Here is a summary of the conversation I had with the officer. The precise details are all available in court and case plan documents from the family court jurisdictions.

Adam and his family first came to the attention of the Maine Family Court in December 2004. An officer from the DCF filed an affidavit alleging the children were not being properly educated, lacked proper medical care, and were living in social isolation in their condominium.

After seeing the children, the DCF and police were concerned about their physical health. They were pale and gaunt, most had severe speech impediments, some had awkward gaits and inward facing legs, and there were clear dental issues. There were concerns with Adam and Susan's housing instability, resistance to cooperating with the CPS and compliance matters associated with the children's education. On December 26 the judge issued a protective order that the four school-aged children should be either enrolled in school, or that Adam and Susan provide CPS with documentation with Maine home schooling criteria by January 5, 2005. They were to provide DCF with home school plans they had utilized from 1999. Adam signed the order, but wrote that he did not agree with it.

It was from this point on that Adam started down the road to serious trouble with the law. Ignoring court orders and fleeing from their jurisdictions was not smart. Why he thought he could get away with it is beyond my understanding, given that I always thought he was inherently a smart guy.

On January 7, 2005, the court issued another protective order that included Susan and Adam inform the DCF and their attorney of any change of address; the family should remain in the Eastern Seaboard area if they relocate there; they should cooperate with the Eastern Seaboard social service agency; Maine should communicate concerns to Eastern

Seaboard Department for Children, Youth and Families; they should satisfy the court that the children's medical and educational needs were addressed in Maine; the children should be enrolled in an approved home school program in Maine; and Adam should sign medical and educational releases for the children prior to leaving court. Adam signed, but again wrote that he did not agree to the conditions.

It was not my intention to lay out a long chronological list of Adam's court matters, but these events do, I think, offer some insight into the dilemma behind why the hell I would get involved again with my brother and his family problems, particularly, when the cost to me and my family would once again be enormous in both emotional and financial terms.

On February 5, the court found that Adam did not comply with the January 7th order, he had moved but he did participate in the hearing by telephone. The judge ordered Adam's attorney to provide DCF with the family's address, and that Adam was to ensure the medical follow up for the children.

On February 26, the Maine Court found that Adam did not comply with the January 7 order that the children be examined by a medical doctor. The judge ordered that Cindy, Brian, Becky, and Keith be placed in CPS custody, and that the children be returned to Maine. On February 28, the judge issued a pick up order for Grace, Lilly and Katherine, and an arrest warrant was issued for Adam.

So, what do Adam and Susan do? They take off, flee. They and the children were missing from February to August. A nationwide Protective Services alert was issued! Adam, Susan and their van identification number were entered into the National Crime Information Registry. Unbelievable! My brother and his wife had managed to get listed on the National CRIME Registry! My brother and his wife were on the run from the law, and law officers across the country were on the lookout for them! They weren't Bonnie and Clyde, but, my God, I remembered that Adam had access to a gun. I am horrified at the thought, but how often are there stories on television or in the newspapers about desperate people who have a gun committing some terrible act of violence, and often against those who are closest to them?

I found out about the gun after Adam had served his 30 days in jail in September, 2005. Actually, his behavior in jail was somewhat eccentric, or bizarre might be a better description, let alone the story about the gun. What else could be expected? He chose to create a real stink around his incarceration, literally. He decided he was not going to change his clothes, or his underwear. I'm pleased that I didn't have to pick him up when he got out. I wouldn't have let him in my car.

Ma would call, "Oh, the poor kid, the poor guy, he's still in the same underwear."

"Whose fault is that, Ma? He's the one wanting to be some kind of a martyr, and he chose to stay in the same clothes. I sent him money to buy what he needed. Hell, he chose to go to jail in the first place."

The correction officers eventually forced him to shower, and they got him fresh underwear to change into before he was released. Normally, you have to bring or buy everything you need, toothbrush, toothpaste, essential hygiene products, even a pencil

and paper. The prison regulations require that prisoners provide and pay for all their personal items.

Anyhow, back to the gun. I was on my way to Ma's. She was having a tough time with her breathing. Of course, she was continuing to smoke despite her doctor's orders. The power of addiction never ceases to amaze me. Adam was riding with me in my car. I'd picked him up from Social Services where he had to report in physically to department officers on a regular basis under the threat of being thrown back in jail if he did not. The gas gauge was showing almost empty, so I swung into the nearest gas station. Adam sat in the car while I filled the tank. It was cold, and I was getting angrier by the minute. I wanted to drag him from the car and smack him to the ground. He just sat there, the bastard, not lifting a finger to help, entitled like some Lord of a Realm.

As I turned back into the traffic, I opened up. "You are the most selfish, ungrateful person I have ever had anything to do with, Adam. You have this idea that you are somebody." I was on the verge of tears. "Let me tell you, you're not. You are at the bottom of the totem: a loser, a jailbird, a rotten father and abuser of your children. I don't know how you can look in the mirror." I couldn't stop. Years of pent up anger had come to a head.

"You are like a leech. You live off us, off my family, off the government, off welfare and you have the temerity to sit on your backside and whine. It's always someone else's fault. There are never any thanks for the help you do get; only the ongoing demands for more handouts. You might at least offer a thank you sometimes, but no, not you! My God, we have spent tens of thousands of dollars on you guys. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of you and your dumb wife. If it wasn't for those poor kids..."

"Shut up, Amelia!" I did 'shut up,' immediately. It wasn't his words, but the icy cold tone of his voice sending a chill up my spine that stopped me. He went on in the same deadly tone. "You know, Amelia, I had to do something in prison, and I have a gun."

I was stunned. "What! You've got a what?" I said, barely able to get the words out. "You have a gun? What in the world are you doing with a gun, Adam?" My mouth was dry.

"Don't worry, it's not on me."

"Where is it?" I managed to ask, fearful of the answer.

"It's at home. I'd never use it; I just wanted to shut you up." Just like that, the tone of his voice softened. "A guy in the jail asked me to take it out with me as a favor to him; told me I could keep it. He didn't want to get caught with it, I guess. Some gang kid had been shot the week before. There had been cell searches, but this guy had it well hidden. He was kind of dangerous, a scary guy."

I can't help myself. Suddenly, I'm feeling sorry for Adam being in that jail with such horrible people. My brother didn't really belong in there with them—or did he?

"I'm taking you home," I said. "Get rid of it; bury it or something. All that gun can do, Adam, is bring more trouble, really serious trouble." Part of me was scared to death, and I wanted to get away from him as fast as I could. I drove to the condo the local church provided to distressed families and stopped out front.

“Amelia, I’m sorry I scared you. Please don’t abandon us. We really need you to stick with us now. I know you’ve helped a lot, and I haven’t always said how much Susan and I appreciate what you and Jack do. Don’t abandon us. Please.”

You are such a con, brother, I thought. “Let yourself out, Adam. I’m not coming in.”

“I’ll call tomorrow. I want to talk about, Ma.”

“Get rid of the gun.”

As I drove away, I could see him in the rear view mirror, standing on the pavement watching after me. At the end of the block, I turned into the cross street, and immediately broke down. I had to pull over. I was trembling and exhausted. “God, when will it end?” Tears started to flow and I sat there, head in my hands, sobbing.

Their van was spotted in New Jersey in April. They avoided arrest and didn’t resurface again, well so far as the authorities were concerned, until Adam’s arrest in the department store parking lot on September 4, 2005.

When Adam was released from jail, the same pattern of noncompliance with court orders continued. The older children were in foster care with regular supervised family visits allowed. The younger ones stayed with Adam and Susan.

By January 27, of 2006, the Maine judge had had enough. He issued a written order that all of the children were to be placed in the custody of the State of Maine. That order led to the arrest of Adam and Susan on January 31.

I still get pangs of pity and sadness when I think of how awful it was for the children and yes, for my brother, even though he was responsible for the whole terrible business. I think that he knew his fate when he didn’t get that home school report in, but some craziness deep inside him wouldn’t allow him to obey orders from other people, whatever their level of authority, it didn’t make a scrap of difference to Adam.

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I contacted Mary, the social services officer; we had become friends by the time she had finished telling me about the facts of Adam and Susan’s arrest and were on a first name basis, and told her I wanted to see the children right away.

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” she said. “Even though the oldest two try to act cool, they are all frightened to death. Actually, the older ones have asked to see you. I’ll talk to the foster parents and get this put together.”

Abbey was very excited about seeing her cousins. Mary got it organized, and a few days later our social services van was pulling up to a drab looking government office building. The children were waiting in a large conference room. The visit didn’t have to have a supervised, despite the foster parents’ unease, but Mary authorized it.

“I told them of the help you and your husband had provided for the family over many years, and that you had only the children’s best interests at heart, even if that meant permanent separation,” she told me.

Gosh, it’s hard to write thinking back to that visit. My eyes are wet with tears now, just like they were when I walked into the room that afternoon. They were so pleased to see

us. I have to say that they all were looking much better physically, especially the four eldest who had been placed in foster care since Adam's first incarceration. The good food they were getting was making a difference. I knew from Mary, though, that there had been some hellish experiences the foster parents went through as the older ones, Cindy, Brian and Keith were the worst, would not cooperate in their new circumstances. And, it was always much worse after their visits with Adam and Susan, the saboteurs. No wonder the foster people were wary of an unsupervised visit by the father's sister even with Mary's assurances. But, I have to say that not all of the foster parents treated the children right, some were in it for the money.

The questions came thick and fast.

"Why are Daddy and Mommy in jail, Auntie Amelia?" asked Brian.

"I want to be with them," said Cindy. "How come they are in jail? They didn't do anything wrong," she said pouting, defiance stamped all over her face, her body tense.

"Daddy told us not to tell anybody anything. He said the people who captured us were evil and wanted to keep us away from them. Will you help us, Auntie Amelia?"

It was heartbreaking. Adam's lies and manipulation of his children were what was evil. God knows how his children would ever have a chance in life. I could see only trouble ahead for them as they would have to eventually assimilate into the community.

I couldn't really tell them much, other than we were working on things. It stunned me that as badly as they had been treated, their parents continued to have an extraordinarily strong hold over them. Apparently, it was quite a common occurrence, and it was not until the child had been outside of the parents' influence for a good period of time that there was a switch of loyalties, but even then not in all cases.

It was a dilemma for me, a major one. I wanted them taken away from Adam and Susan because they were unfit to be parents, and the court said so, too. Yet, the children wanted to be with them. They were their parents no matter what was done to them, or what they went through and that was that.

Nevertheless, they were enjoying our visit. Abbey was handing out the new clothes we had purchased for them, and those that Social Services had donated. I was aware that a big snowstorm was coming in, and I wanted to get back to Massachusetts before it hit. Abbey and the children wanted us to stay longer.

It was hard leaving. I told them to stay in touch and gave them a phone calling card to call me anytime. Most of them were paired up in foster care, but Grace ended up alone. Saying goodbye was harder for her. I could see she was so sad and frightened. I wanted to take her home with us, but I couldn't stay in New England for much longer. I had a home in California and a husband who, even though he was away on business most of the time, I needed to take care of when he was home.

As I hugged and kissed each child goodbye, I knew that there was more trouble coming.

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Adam was going nuts. He had been let out of jail on his cognizance and assurances that he would not interfere with, nor attempt to contact his children without Social Services

permission and supervision if granted. He wanted Susan out of jail, but her charges of assaulting a police officer were more serious. Bail had been set at \$3,000, and Adam was desperate to get her out.

Yes, you're right to think, is the woman crazy. Hasn't she had enough?

We were still in Massachusetts. Ma had taken a turn for the worse, and she was crazy with worry for Adam, Susan and the children. The phone was ringing off the hook everyday. The children, who each had a Guardian Ad Litem person, called, Adam's lawyer, the Social Services officers, my mother and Adam were constantly on the phone. There was some relief from Adam when he was in jail, regulations did not allow me to call him and I would not accept his collect calls. It was unbelievable how many people contacted me, and how many that I had to contact.

Ma was verging on hysteria and kept calling, begging me to help Adam. I went to see her just about everyday to try and calm her down.

"Please call him, Amelia. I know you and Jack have done so much for him over the years, but he is desperate to get Susan out of jail."

I was at her place. She was sitting at the kitchen table smoking. I was in the middle of sipping a cup of green tea. Suddenly it was just all too much, and I lost it. I slammed the cup down. Hot tea splashed over the table and my hand, scalding it. The pain was intense, and I screamed, more from the frustration of dealing with the previous days than the pain of the scald.

"Hell, Ma, when are you going to realize that your son is a jerk, just like his father was a jerk? Jesus, if you'd been faithful when my daddy was in Korea, maybe, just maybe, Adam wouldn't have been around to cause all this trouble. What kind of a man is it that bangs his brother's wife while his brother is away serving his country? Maybe Adam would have turned out all right, if his daddy had been my daddy. Hell, you keep telling me you wish your other children were more like..."

I stopped. Ma was upset. Tears were welling in her eyes; pain she was showing on her aging face, the pain that I had inflicted. I couldn't believe what a terrible thing, things, really, I had said to her. She was weeping, and her terrible cough started up again.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I didn't mean it. I am angry, so angry and so tired of dealing with Adam and his mischief. He is the root cause of all our dysfunction, and I can't handle it anymore. I'm done with him, I'm sorry, I don't want to hurt you, I would do anything for you but I can't take it with him anymore"

"You're right. You're right about all of it, Amelia. I have lived with what I did to your father all my life. What I did was wrong. I've suffered, you've suffered, all the family have had to pay the price for my wrong doing. Karma, Amelia," she whispered, hardly able to get the words out before another bout of coughing left her almost breathless.

"There's good and there's bad. You have always been there for all of us. There has to be a whole lot of good karma coming your way."

The cigarette, now back in her mouth, was about to drop its ash. I pulled it gently from her lips and stubbed it into the ash tray. "Adam calls me all the time. I don't know what to tell him. I don't really want to speak to him."

She won't ever give up on him, I thought. "I can't help him out with money, Ma. I'll do what I can for the children, but I'm not spending another cent on him or his wife. If you can get me the money, I'll bail her out."

When Adam eventually got out of jail, he began leaving messages on my cell phone all the time. I ignored them. I kept up my visits to the children, bringing them clothing and essentials from toothpaste to books and pencils. I knew I couldn't do anything on a permanent basis, but I felt that I needed to be there for support. Abbey really liked helping out, and my nieces and nephews thoroughly enjoyed her being with them. I had no idea how any of this was going to end, or if it would ever end, but Ma's comment about good karma coming my way was something I held onto tenaciously. I prayed there would be enough of it to help out all round.

We were on our way back to Massachusetts from Maine when my cell phone began to sing. Oh, I need to explain. Abbey thought we needed to make the ring tone friendlier. She had played with it for a couple of minutes, and then given it back with a selection of bird songs. I liked what she picked. Sometimes, I even smiled when a song would suddenly burst out from my pocketbook when someone called.

The cheery birds made me answer this time.

"Adam? What do you want?"

"I have to get Susan out of jail, Amelia. She can't be in there. She's going crazy. I need \$3,000 for the bail. You have to give it to me."

"If it was up to me, I would see to it that she never got out. I've read the charges. Good heavens, Adam, endangering her child to protect herself from some perceived harm from a police officer, and then striking the officer."

"We were set up. They hate us and lie through their teeth."

"Whatever. I don't have another cent for you, Adam. You're going to have to use your brain and find another way. I'm done with you."

"You don't understand. This isn't for me, it's for the children. They want their mother."

"No," I said quietly. "You don't understand. I'm done with both of you."

I snapped the phone shut and smiled. It felt good to close down on him for once.

Late that night, while Abbey and Lucas were sleeping, and I was just settling into my journaling, the birds started to sing again. I flipped open the lid to my cell.

"Amelia, it's me. Michele."

"Michele!" I'd been estranged from her for years. She lived in Sacramento, a two hour drive north of us, but attempts by me for us to get together never worked out. I gave up.

"What a surprise," I said. Indeed it was. We chatted on for a few minutes catching up and getting acquainted again.

"You heard about Adam, I suppose?" I said.

“Yes, Ma told me. It’s the main reason I’m calling you. She said families were supposed to stick together and help each other out. Susan shouldn’t be in jail. She needs to be home taking care of her kids.”

“That’s why she’s in jail. She and Adam weren’t taking care of them.”

“Sure. Anyway, I told ma I would help out. I can’t do the \$3,000 on my own, but I could do half if you can do the rest.” I couldn’t think of a thing to say. “Look, if you can’t do it, don’t feel guilty. Ma told me you’d already helped them out with a fortune.”

I felt good with her part about me not feeling guilty. I was happy to hear from her, but really impressed that she would help our brother. They hadn’t seen each other in over 20 some years, and she had never planned on seeing him again, but she really wanted to help. God help me. I didn’t want to do it, but this was Michele coming back, joining up for family. I wanted her to meet Abbey and Lucas, and I wanted her back in our lives.

“Okay,” I heard me saying. “We have a deal.” I must admit, I felt stupid and angry almost as soon as the words were out of my mouth. What annoyed me was that once again I had given in to what I said I would never do again. Is there some pattern here? Duh! And, I was really pissed that we were doing this to get Susan out of jail. After what she put her children through and what she let Adam get away with, she was the last person in the world I wanted to help.

I called the lawyer’s office to tell them that we would post the bail. When we had finished with the details, the secretary said, “I probably shouldn’t say this Amelia, but I want you to know that I think your brother is very fortunate to have you on his side.”

“I’m not on his side. I’m on the children’s side.”

“Precisely the point, we have known your brother for some time.”

I called Adam and gave him the news that Michele and I were fronting for the bail money. I made damn sure he knew I was not happy. He seemed contrite, but I knew him too well to take any of his acts seriously.

How right I was. He was about to get Susan out of jail and at the same time screw us out of our \$3,000.

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It was mid-afternoon when I met Adam in Franklin, Maine. He was living in a beautiful old house, a rental Susan’s auntie had gotten for the family. Their lawyer had told them that it would help their case to get the children back, if they had a good home for them to live in. I knew it would take more than that, and after my conversation with Mary, the social services officer, I doubted they would ever get them back no matter what they did.

It was a three hour drive out to the County Corrections Center to get Susan. Billy was with us. Abbey and Lucas were their usual animated selves, and they kept my brother distracted enough so that I could avoid having to converse with Adam.

Unfortunately, at least for Adam, we arrived a few minutes late. He went into the facility to get his wife while we waited in the parking lot. We weren’t out there for very long when Adam reappeared without Susan.

“Oh, oh, bad news,” said Billy as we looked at each other.

Adam got into the car and slammed the door shut, looking like he was about to break into tears.

“We were 10 minutes too late. I pleaded with them to let her out. I told them we had been driving for three hours. Too bad they said. Come back tomorrow. If we had been...”

“Don’t even think it, Adam,” I said looking right at him, “or you can find your own way out here tomorrow.” He didn’t say a word during the drive back to his house other than to suggest we stay the night with him.

When we walked into the house, I was caught totally by surprise to see a huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree that must have cost a fortune set up in the parlor. Hanging from the mantle were beautiful stockings filled to the brim, nine of them I counted. The base of the tree was surrounded by wrapped presents. Toys and candy were everywhere!

“What’s all this,” I said amazed and feeling let down at the same time. Where did he get the money? C’mon Amelia, I thought, this is just more of the same. I was so gullible.

“When I have Susan and the children back I want them to have the Christmas they missed last year, Amelia. They have been through a terrible time.”

I was thinking about the \$3,000 for Susan’s bail and the thousands and thousands we had given over the years. Even then, I couldn’t help the feeling sorry for him over the sentiments he was expressing for his family. I’m a softie when it comes to family. “Adam, you don’t have money for all this. Jack and I don’t spend like this on our own Christmas celebration.”

“But you give gifts. Santa comes to your house. How do I explain to my kids that Santa didn’t come to them?”

“You tell them that Santa Clause gave them the gift of being all together.”

“Give me a break, will you? You’d do that no more than I would.”

“You don’t know me at all. Having my family is what really matters to me. All this stuff doesn’t mean a thing. You need to count the blessings that are your children.”

“You don’t have to tell me what counts,” he said turning away toward the kitchen. “I have to call Susan.”

He would be on the phone to her for two hours. I was surprised he could do that, she was in jail for crying out loud! I think he told me that he just kept calling her back, or she kept calling him back.

I was to find out later that the children’s school donated hundreds of dollars for the Allerton family’s Christmas. Mary told me, “We Donated a thousand dollars from the Social Services office. They got a couple of thousand for tree, presents, stockings, everything.”

Adam lied, lied about everything. Like telling me about walking for three hours to the local department store to buy material, so Susan could make Christmas stockings for the children! What a bunch of crap, I could not believe the abundance of goodies, all of his

lies pissed me off but for some reason, the fact that he kept saying that he didn't have a cent and wanted me to wire him money and all along he had a couple of thousand dollars and then some – I despised him, the liar! I was sooo glad I didn't do it.

Billy was taking good care of Abbey and Lucas, so I called Jack on my cell and told him about the tree, the presents and everything else about the day. As we were talking, I noticed the tree was very close to the heater vent, and it looked as dry as a bone.

Now, Jack is not the type to overreact, but there was a level of urgency in his voice I had not heard before when he said, "Get that thing out of there, it is over 2 months old. Get everything off it, unplug any lights and get it out of there. A spark could set the damn thing off, and the house would go up like a Roman candle in seconds."

My blood ran cold. Without consulting Adam, he was still on the phone with Susan in the kitchen, we unplugged the lights, took every ornament off of the tree and carefully wrapped them all. I knew Adam would get mad, but if we were going to spend the night in his house, I was going to make sure that we were not going to die in a fire.

I took Billy and the children out for pizza. By the time we got home, Adam was waiting for us in the parlor, sitting on the sofa and staring at the tree. Rather than the anger I expected, he seemed rattled, bewildered, and on the verge of breaking down.

"What have you done? I told you this was for the children when they came home." I wanted to tell him I knew they weren't coming home, but I held my tongue.

"That tree is a tinder box, Adam. It's so dry it could catch fire from the slightest spark. It needs to go outside."

"I'm going to leave it there, Amelia. I want those decorations back on it, too."

Surprisingly, the usual nasty tone of voice Adam used when he was challenged wasn't there this time. I could see that a lot of the fight had gone out of him. Yeah, at least for that moment.

"There's no way I'm about to risk our lives. We're not staying tonight unless that tree is out of here." Adam kept staring ahead. "I mean it, Adam. And, I won't come back to get Susan tomorrow. C'mon now, Billy will help you get the darn thing outside."

Without a word, Adam jumped to his feet, grabbed the tree, and then he and Billy took it outside. By the time they were back in the house, I was already herding Lucas and Abbey up the stairs to the bedroom.

"Amelia, wait!"

I stopped and turned. Adam quickly crossed the room, wrapped his arms around me and started crying. I was shocked and confused. He had never done anything like that before. An overwhelming sadness consumed me, and I was unsure of how to respond.

"Things will work out for you, Adam," I muttered unconvincingly.

I could only hope for the best. Maybe, this breakdown was the beginning of a change. Who was I kidding, I didn't really believe it, and my gut was telling me that they were definitely going to lose the children. It could be the only possible outcome considering how Adam and Susan were handling things.

I didn't get much sleep that night. Lucas was next to me. He was restless, and I could tell he was not well. His temperature was 102 degrees. I gave him Motrin and then went downstairs for some water. Adam was still up.

"Lucas has a fever. If you want me to pick up Susan, we need to leave here by seven o'clock in the morning. I want to be back in Massachusetts by mid-afternoon to get Lucas to the doctor. If anything holds you up, you'll be left to your own devices."

"Why don't you just take him to a doctor here?"

"I see this doctor all the time when I'm home. I trust him."

We arrived at the women's prison by mid-morning. How surreal, I have never had anything to do with a jail, yet here I was with my brother getting his wife out of jail. I was down to counting the minutes left before they would be out of my life for good, or so I thought. The temperature was below freezing, so we stayed in the car with the motor running. Adam, the \$3,000 bail money in his pocket, went into the administration building. Abbey was behaving really well, all of us trying to keep each other entertained. I was holding Lucas in my arms. The Motrin must have been working because he seemed to be doing better, and his fever wasn't as bad as it had been overnight.

After waiting about an hour, an urgent need to go to the bathroom forced me to get out into the cold and start walking to the administrative office building located next to the jail's main entrance. Apparently, Adam could see me on one of the monitors. He came rushing out, as I approached main door.

"What are you doing? You can't come in here. Susan is being processed. She should be through it in a few more minutes."

"What do you mean, I can't come in here? I want to use the bathroom. Is there a law against that?"

My brother was certainly acting very strangely. He's up to something, I thought. He had the look of a child caught with its hand in the cookie jar.

"Look, wait here a moment, Amelia, I'll see what I can do."

He was back a minute later. "C'mon." He led me inside and pointed to a female restroom on the visitor side of the security screen. "You can use that."

"What's the big deal, it seems like it's for public use?" I pushed quickly through the door, the pressure on my bladder and its aching cry for immediate relief was pushing all other concerns from my mind.

Adam was waiting by the door when I had finished. His behavior certainly seemed odd at the time, but I let it go thinking he was stressed with getting Susan processed. It wasn't until a couple of months later when the return of the bail money was past due, and I was asking Adam what he knew about it and when that the memory of the event flashed into my mind. Adam didn't want me in there making inquiries and talking directly to the authorities about the return of mine and Michele's bail money. He was making his own arrangements with them.

A few minutes later, Susan was ushered through the security door, and Adam rushed to her. It was quite a scene watching the two of them blubbering and mauling each other, but I was relieved that she was finally released, and I could get my babies out of there.

Susan didn't say a word all the way to her home. Adam was quiet apart from a few words with the children, but his main preoccupation was with Susan. He held her close to his body, protecting her, fiercely determined that no one would take her away from him again. Like Adam, she apparently didn't believe in showering, her hair was filthy.

I stopped in front of their house, but I didn't turn off the motor. And then, much to my chagrin later and against my better judgment, I took a few hundred dollars from my pocketbook and handed them to Adam.

"I have no idea what your plans are, Adam, but that is the last of the money you will get from us. You'll have to find another way, get a job. I know it's a novel idea to you, but try it."

"I'll pay it..."

"Don't, Adam. You may have the best of intentions right now, but your track record proves otherwise."

I thought about the bail money, but that would require my signature for cashing, so I wasn't worried about it. I should have been.

He leaned over into the front of the car and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks, Amelia. I'll get us on our feet, get the kids back and be a family again. You'll see." He hugged Abbey and Lucas and left with Susan, grasping her hand. I watched them go. A forlorn, sad looking couple wandering toward...what, what future did they have that would be different? I couldn't see anything other than more of the same.

I drove off and that was that.

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I called Adam a couple of months after I had arrived back in California.

"Adam, where is my bail refund?"

"How would I know?" he said the belligerent tone back in his voice. "Wouldn't that be sent directly to you?"

He didn't know I had already made calls to the appropriate authorities. I found out the bail money had been sent to Adam's address back in March.

"Usually, but when I inquired at the jail they said the check had been sent to you at your request."

He did not miss a beat, answering immediately, "They lied. They always lie. I swear to God, I never got it."

I had also found out from the County Corrections department the name of the bank he used to cash the check.

"The bank sent me a copy of the canceled check, Adam. Your signature was on the back along with your license number and other personal information."

His response was vintage Adam. “Anybody could have signed my name and gotten the other details. Looks like someone stole it from the mailbox, happens all the time.”

“You’re a lying S.O.B., Adam. The handwriting was definitely yours. You forged my signature, and then told them I had signed the check over to you. It occurred to me that on the day we went to get Susan out of the jail, the day I needed to use the bathroom, you didn’t want me going inside the administration building. Why, I realize now, is that you were afraid I might ask about how and when the bail money would be returned. You were planning to steal that money from Michele and me even before Susan was out of jail.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No. I’m just getting a little smarter. I could have you back in jail in a heartbeat for forgery, but I’m not going to do that. Just stay away from us, Adam, for good. I have receipts for the tens of thousands of dollars we sent you over the years and plenty of emotional scars to go with them. Enough is enough.”

I ended the call and thought I was done with him for real this time, but I would be wrong, again. There would be a period of hostile phone conversations involving his children and more money. That wasn’t so bad; I had toughened up enough to deal with him. But there was something much worse coming, and it would catch me when I was at my most vulnerable. A terrible and personal loss would be the time of his choosing to launch the worst of his attacks.

• • •

It was 2007, when I answered a phone call I shouldn’t have. The caller ID was showing a number I didn’t recognize. My instinct told me to ignore it, but...

“This is Amelia.”

“Amelia, it’s me, Adam.”

It turned out that he had a new number. I guess it was because the calls he’d been making over the previous two years I’d mostly ignored. I really didn’t have to ask him what he wanted. Social Services and my involvement with his children’s lives had kept me informed of his contact with them. I knew he was losing them, but I didn’t give a damn about him anymore.

“Cut to the chase, brother. You want money. I told you two years ago, there’s no more for you. We are helping out your children, but that’s it.”

“This is to help the children. I have found an apartment. My lawyer says that if I have place to live, I have a chance at getting all the children back,” he said in a voice that he was struggling to keep under control. “Things are going much better. I have a job, and if I can get that apartment the lawyer is confident the court will give me back the children. That’s what Susan and I want, Amelia, more than anything else in the world.”

“No it isn’t, or you would have made sure of that a long time ago. You and Susan brought this on yourselves. You ignored all of the advice from those of us who tried to help you, now you have to wear the consequences of your selfishness. I don’t care what you and Susan want, or what happens to you, there is no more money.” I flipped the cell phone lid shut.

I was kept informed about what was going on with Adam through his lawyer, Social Services, the children and the foster families. There was serious talk about the children being adopted. I spent hours in conversations with Social Services to see if there was any chance of Jack and me adopting any of the children. Our consideration mainly focused on Keith. There were encouraging signs that the other children were making progress, and they were thought to have a real chance of being adopted by the foster families they had been living with. I was sure that Keith had no chance because of his extreme behavioral problems.

Adam's telephone calls continued on through August and September of that year. I took a few of them, but ignored most. Of those I answered I always said "no" and always finished by hanging up on him. His messages were obnoxious, each one more abusive than the other.

"All I need is a measly \$1200 for the rent to get that apartment. You won't even help me with that. You're a fucking bitch, Amelia," he screamed.

It was this message that finally got to me.

"I've had enough, Amelia. My life is falling apart and you; you won't do a thing to help me. I'm done, it's over. I'm about to take a very long walk off of a very short pier, and I hope you feel guilty for what you have done. Maybe, if you have a shred of decency left, you'll send Susan the pictures you have of the children you tried to steal away."

I couldn't believe my ears. He kept repeating over and over again that this was his last chance, and he couldn't believe that his own sister would not help him.

I heard something in his voice that I had not heard before. There was an authentic tone to his voice. Although I knew him to be a coward, I was concerned. I called him. Almost instantaneously, he answered. His voice was shaky, desperate. He may have even been on the verge of tears.

"Amelia, thank God. I was hoping you would call. I want to apologize for the way I have been speaking to you, and the messages I've been leaving. The stress of not having all the kids together is taking a terrible toll on Susan and me. I'm at the end of my rope, and you truly are the only person who can help us."

"Oh, c'mon, brother, I've heard it all before. I'm sick of the abuse, I'm sick of your demands for money, and I really don't care what happens to you and Susan. Jump off the pier if you want to, I don't care. It's because of the children we have continued to help out. I should want to steal your children? You slob, after all we've done you come up with that crap. You're insane."

"Amelia, please listen. One more chance," he pleaded. "I want to do it right this time. I have a plan to pay you back."

I couldn't stop myself. I cracked up laughing, but decided to play along because, well, as ridiculous as it sounds, I was going to give him the money and exorcise him from my brain forever.

"Why should I believe you would pay me back after everything we've given you?"

The response was so Adam. "Because I never told you before that I would pay you back."

“Stop it, Adam, or I’m going to throw up. Listen, I have maxed out all my credit cards from what we have spent on you and the children. I have a new card, but I can’t afford another payment.”

“Perfect,” replied Adam. “That was my new offer. I would pay off the loan each month - before the statement hit your mail box even.”

I just shook my head and sighed, but I did it anyway. I gave him the money. I was relieved, actually. When the first bill arrived, I called to tell him. I wasn’t surprised when I didn’t hear back, so I made the payment. I sent him an e-mail, requesting he keep his promise and put the money in the mail. He did call back the same day, which was a surprise.

“Sorry, Amelia, it was returned to me with ‘wrong address’ scrawled across the envelope.”

“Oh, Adam; how silly of me for not asking you if you had our current address. We’ve only been living here for the last 10 years,” I responded sarcastically.

I gave him our current address, and he said he would re-send it. Of course, it didn’t turn up. I had learned not to hold my breath with any of his promises. The next month it was the same, no payment. This time he said he sent a money order, “but it must have gotten lost.” Then, the real Adam re-emerged.

“You know, Amelia, it is Halloween. I can’t go trick or treating with my kids, and here you are bugging me about money,” he screamed.

I laughed. “I didn’t believe you would ever pay us back, Adam. You know, it’s weird. I don’t regret giving you the \$1,700 because I gave you one last shot, and you screwed up just like I expected. It is officially over helping you out, and I feel no guilt about it.” I was thinking to myself that after everything we had done, the money, the time, etc., etc., it was a mere \$1700 that I sent him and I knew, I KNEW that this was truly the end, I could officially feel no guilt whatsoever, the lying about sending the money to me, I didn’t care anymore, there was so much badness between us now, I knew it was over for good and I felt relieved!

Adam said nothing. I think somewhere deep in that perplexing mind of his he got it. I was done with him. Without another word, I hung up and laughed out loud, gathered up Abbey and Lucas and went out to trick and treat, extremely happy with my life and grateful for my wonderful husband.

That was the last conversation we had for a year. I felt wonderfully calm. No Adam in my life, and I was having fun with my two babies and Jack.

• • •

“Who the hell do you think you are? You have no right to have Keith for the summer. You’re just an aunt. He doesn’t need you; he needs his parents and his brother and sisters.”

It was another abusive message from Adam yelling and screaming about Keith coming to visit us in the summer. It really made him angry that I could visit and talk to the children without supervision. They were in the custody of the court, and he could do nothing

about it. He left many of these messages trying to scare me, but it didn't work. I never called him back. I have to be honest, it gave me great satisfaction to be in control. I told Mary at Social Services about the harassment.

"We can get a court order to stop him, Amelia."

It was a tempting offer, but I really wasn't scared of him anymore. I really wasn't. "That won't be necessary, Mary. I'm not responding to him. He'll eventually stop calling." And, he did.

Adam's children had been my main concern over the years since Susan's release from jail. I would keep in touch with them by phone from California. Whenever we were in Massachusetts, and that was quite a lot because of Ma's health, we would drive up north to see the children. Most of the time they were with foster parents, and most of the time they were causing all sorts of problems. Much of the trouble came from Adam and Susan who did their best to sabotage the relationships of their children with the foster parents. The children seemed to like my visits.

I tried to talk some sense to my brother during one of our rare conversations. Brian, 14, and Becky, 12, behaved so badly in foster care that nobody wanted to take them. Eventually, the court judge sent them back to Adam and Susan where they were to remain in the protective custody of the court until they reached 18 years of age.

I was pleased that I had a part in looking out for their best interests. During our visits some of the children would tell me about their foster parents, usually complaining that this one was mean, or they didn't get breakfast that day and other happenings that were very disturbing. I would take these complaints up with Mary, and she would look into all of them. I suspected the children were being coached to do this by their father and Susan, but it still worried me. I'd heard some nightmare stories about the way some foster parents were with children in their care. My relationship with Mary, knowing that she was looking out for the children, was reassuring.

To be fair, some of the children behaved so badly that at times the foster parents had to be at their wits end. There were stories of the children trashing homes and putting rolls of toilet paper down the toilet bowl to clog it. Keith, the most troubled one, was very violent. He would fight anyone and punch holes in the walls of the homes and buildings. He spent a lot of time in psychiatric hospitals and group homes.

They were all lashing out in their own ways. Cindy and Becky would try to jump out of cars on their way to school, or other court ordered appointments with doctors and social service officials. At first the children were paired up. Keith and Brian, Cindy and Becky, and Grace and Lilly were together. Katherine and Lilly were eventually adopted by their original foster care parents.

As a psychology major, I found it interesting that two of the pairs, Cindy and Becky and Brian and Keith, fought like the dickens. I thought that they would look out for each other, but they didn't. I'm still puzzled by it. Eventually, they were separated and sent to different homes, many different homes.

Grace, 9, who was on her own, did much better. She was adopted by the foster family she had from the beginning. On one of our trips up north we met with Grace and her adopted mother, Madeline. She was a little reserved, but it seemed like we would be able to keep

our relationship with Grace. Abbey was delighted. She and Grace got along well together. This was an uplifting experience for me. After looking out for the children for most of their lives and experiencing so much of their pain and struggle, I felt a strong bond with all of them.

Keith, because of his extremely bad behavior, was the one I was most concerned about. Despite his destructive and self sabotaging conduct, I was not going to give up on him easily. It was until after the shocking mess my sister, Michele, got into trying to help the boy that I knew Keith was beyond anything I could do for him, and that his best chance had to be left in the hands of the professionals.

However, Michele contacted me, and she wanted to do something to help Keith.

Jack and I had planned to have Keith with us in California for Christmas in 2006. I mentioned earlier that Adam had accused us of wanting to steal his children. Nothing was further from the truth, of course, but I knew he was sick. Adam had been seen by professionals of a Psychological and Psychiatric service contracted to Social Services who said, "Mr. Allerton's provisional diagnosis is Paranoid Personality Disorder. He is estimated to have superior to gifted intelligence. Mr. Allerton's views are extreme and under stress could manifest into harmful behavior."

The paranoid Adam could have truly believed we were trying to steal his children. He kicked up such a fuss with Social Services that we gave up on bringing Keith out to our home that year. I felt badly for him, but I was not willing to subject my family to the stress and disruption that Adam would cause. We had been through so much, and the timing was not right, certainly not then. Even the courts, with the powers given them by the legislature could not keep Adam and Susan from negatively influencing the lives of their children. What hope did we have?

Here is an extract from a 2005 court document that relates to Keith and his parents. "While Keith is connected to his biological family, the court concludes that, on the whole, his parents have not played and do not play a constructive role in his life. They express affection and love, but this becomes lost in their desire to control their child's thoughts and reactions to his experiences. Their pervasive negativity regarding the positive experiences of their children, in school, in foster homes, and in social situations beyond the immediate family has had devastating effects on the children's emotional and psychological health, including Keith's. In Keith's case, the father's sabotage of his placement with the paternal aunt in California in December 2006 and their failure to support him in a later placement, illustrate the pernicious influence these parents have had, unabatedly, on their children."

Well, none of this was new to me, but to see it in the black and white of an experts report got me thinking. If we could only get Keith away from his parents, and with Michele's help, he might stand a chance of looking forward to a better life. I decided to consult with Social Services and with their permission arrange to have Keith go out to California for a trial visit. Apart from Michele wanting to do something for Keith, I was no longer in fear of Adam.

The San Francisco International Airport was crowded with people. Michele and I were sitting on chairs running along the back wall of the luggage pickup area. Jack, Abbey and

Lucas were waiting at the bottom of the escalator where the Social Services counselor from Maine who was escorting Keith had arranged to meet us. When I knew that Jack would be working in San Francisco for a couple of weeks, I arranged Keith's visit for the same time. I knew that Keith would be hard to control, and I wanted Jack's male energy around as a safeguard.

"I'm sorry we have not had more contact over the years, Michele. When you left home, none of us knew where you had gone, or what you were doing. It was only that you contacted Ma that we knew you were and living in Sacramento."

"I checked out. I had to get away from that house. Jesus, Amelia, that whole situation was bizarre, wasn't it? Ma gets pregnant with me while sleeping with your father's brother, and while Uncle Bill is away in Korea! Jesus! You were smart to leave home as soon as you were old enough. You made a success of your life. Look at the rest of us, failures. Adam is a pig, who can't do a thing wrong in Ma's eyes. He's become crazier with the passing of the years. You were best at handling him because you were older." Michele was staring in the direction of the children. "They get along together. Jack seems like a nice man."

"Were you angry at me for leaving home?" I asked.

"I guess I was. But, you know, we were very different. I realized that later in life."

"You found a partner, though. Were you happy?"

I saw that her eyes were misty. "Yes, we loved each other. Together we bought the cute little cottage in Sacramento that I'm still living in today. When Roberta died of cancer, I didn't think I could go on. I called Ma. She gave me an update on the family news. Most of it was about Adam's troubles."

"I'm glad you're here, Michele," I said and gave her a hug. Jack was waving to us. "Oh, they've arrived."

We stood up as the entourage walked up. It was wonderful to see that it was Mary who accompanied Keith. I hugged her.

"What a lovely surprise, Mary. Welcome. I hope you both had a good trip."

"Yes, we did. Keith was a model passenger, weren't you?" Mary said looking at Keith. Jack was holding Lucas, and Abbey was standing off to the side of Keith.

"Hello, Keith," I said stooping down to kiss him on the cheek. He immediately stepped back and wiped away my kiss.

"My dad said you wanted to steal me from him."

I looked at Mary and shrugged. This wasn't going to be easy.

"That's rubbish, Keith," Jack interjected with the brusque Australian manner he could bring forward when he wanted to make a point. He had Keith's attention immediately, and I'm sure I saw Mary and Michele do a double take. "Your Auntie Amelia brought you out here, so she and your Auntie Michele could get to know you better while at the same time having fun with Abbey and Lucas. That's what summer vacation is supposed to be for normal kids, lots of fun."

Mary left us for her hotel. She was returning to Maine the next day. I found it rather unsettling when she gave me the anti-psychotic drugs that Keith had to take. Michele had lunch with us at the airport restaurant. She and Keith seemed to be getting along great. We arranged with her to come and stay at our home later in the week.

From the first day, Keith started acting out and being disobedient. He had a quick temper. He liked Lucas, and they played well together, but when Lucas aggravated him or made him angry he would scream and aggressively push Lucas away. Lucas liked him, though. Abbey was different; she was a year older than Keith and was able to hold her own. Jack was away for the day, and I thought it would be a good idea to get out of the house and take them for a ride to the ice cream parlor.

“Okay, who wants an ice cream?” All hands went up. Keith gave me a huge grin, which immediately wiped away all the stressing over the squabbles I had been dealing with through the morning. It wouldn’t last.

The children had eaten their ice-creams, and Abbey and Keith were playing in the park. I had put Lucas in the car seat because he had fallen asleep. As a little guy of 4 years-of-age, he just couldn’t keep up with the other two. I looked at my watch, it was time to go.

“Abbey, Keith, come on, we’re leaving.”

Abbey ran over right away. Keith ignored me and ran to a set of monkey bars.

“Come on, Keith. We’re leaving.”

It took five minutes of coaxing, pleading and threatening to get the boy to the car. When I opened the car door he climbed in yelling and swearing.

“You fucking bitch,” he screamed viciously kicking every thing he could lay into, and breaking two of the air vents at the back of the center console. Lucas woke up and started crying. Abbey tried to comfort him. Keith continued his rant and would not put on his seat belt. Frustrated, angry and at wits end, I started the car and drove straight to my local Sheriff’s Department building, a few minutes drive from the park.

I don’t know what the deputy said to Keith, the sheriff was out of the office, but on the drive home he was very quiet. Lucas was asleep, resting his arm on Abbey from his car seat.

“You’re lucky the policeman didn’t put you in jail, Keith,” said Abbey. “You were being so nasty to us, and you made Lucas cry. You won’t get anymore ice-creams, will he, Mummy?”

I could see a very contrite Keith in the rear view mirror. A tear from the corner of one eye was trickling down his cheek. His eyes were trained on me.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Amelia,” he blurted out. Then the first tear was followed by a flood. Of course, my heart melted. I thought of all the boy and his siblings had been put through. Raised by sick parents, what chance did any of them have? They all needed a ton of love, care and validation. I really doubted, though, that I had the capacity to do what it would take, and I didn’t want my children to have to go through what had happened earlier again.

After we got home, I sat down on the couch next to the still subdued boy and put my arm around him.

“Aunt Amelia, are you going to tell Uncle Jack about today?”

“Yes, Keith,” I said. “We don’t keep secrets from each other. Uncle Jack is a kind man, and we all know what you have been through, but you have to understand that we won’t put up with the way you behaved today. If it happens again, we’ll have to put you on the next plane back to Maine.”

I stroked his hair. His head was slightly bowed, as he stared at his hands, clasped tightly together between his knees.

“Back to the foster home? They hate me there.”

“Keith, they don’t hate you. But, when you behave badly, it’s hard for people to like you.”

“My dad says those people are just trying to take us away from him and mom. He says that about you.”

I ruffled his hair and kissed his cheek. “We know that’s not true, don’t we? You are family, and we love you. Now, off you go and have some fun. Abbey is in the sunroom.”

“Auntie Amelia, you could adopt me?”

Talk about being caught off guard. Certainly we had thought about it. It was part of the reason we had him staying with us.

“We might look at that later, Keith, but first we have to see if you can behave yourself. There would be no way we would, if you repeated the likes of today’s tantrum.”

Unfortunately, even after that conversation, every time something didn’t go his way Keith went into a fit of rage. I just couldn’t have him around the children. He really wanted us to adopt him and kept on asking me. I told him he was always in fights with Abbey and bullying Lucas, and I didn’t like that. I think he tried to restrain his anger, but he had been damaged so severely that he was pathologically unable too. He needed the expert help I could not give him.

We were at the beach a couple of days later. The children had been getting along well, no fights or yelling at each other. Keith approached me.

“Auntie Amelia, if you didn’t have Abbey and Lucas would you adopt me?”

“You bet I would,” I said.

He gave me a big smile and then scampered back to Abbey and Lucas. As I watched him flop next to them at the waters edge, an incredible sadness came over me. I was so sorry for the struggles and disappointments I saw ahead for this boy.

“Damn you, Adam. You and Susan have a lot to answer for,” I muttered.

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Michele arrived for the weekend. It was only the second time she had been with Keith; the short meeting at the airport had been the first. She had never met any of Adam’s children before because she and Adam had been estranged for so many years.

“Hello, Keith,” Michele said as she grabbed him, lifted him off his feet and whirled him around. Keith was completely taken by surprise, as was I even more so by his reaction. When Michele placed him back on his feet, he took a long minute to give her an incredulous stare, and then they both burst out laughing. “You can call me, Auntie Chele, if you like.”

Wow, I thought, there’s a little bit of fairy dust floating around here, fantastic. I could hardly stop from thinking ahead. Maybe...

We went bowling. Keith got upset when Abbey got a strike and he didn’t. He got angry, and I tried to calm him down.

“Shut up, you bitch.”

“Hey, Keith, that’s no way to talk to Auntie Amelia,” said Michele

“Shut your mouth.”

Michele laughed and grabbed him in a head lock. “Come here, you little monster. You are going to say sorry to Auntie Amelia, or I’m going to drag you into the bathroom and wash your potty mouth out with soap.” He struggled and stamped his feet, but she held on. Finally, he gave up.

“All right, what have you got to say to Auntie Amelia?”

Keith stared at the ground. “Sorry.”

“Good. Now, what about me?” said Michele.

“Sorry, Auntie Chele.”

Ah, I thought, there just maybe a real chance here.

Michele thought Keith was a great little boy - he can be adorable - but she saw him act out only a couple of times in her short visit.

“Are you thinking about adopting him,” she asked me.

“No,” I said and went on to explain my fears and the episode involving the sheriff.

“Taking him to the sheriff was a little harsh, wasn’t it,” Michele said obviously disturbed by what I had done.

After she left and went back to Sacramento, she called me later in the week and said she had some thoughts about maybe adopting Keith. I was excited because it was a way we could keep Keith in our lives, and I would not have to be responsible for him.

“Well, he can be a handful, Michele, but the way you dealt with him at the bowling alley, it could work out. After losing Roberta, your companion for so many years, he could help you fill that hole.”

“Well, I would like to see if he can come out and stay with me at Christmas. Will you help me with that?”

“Yes, of course. I can give you a contact at the Maine Social Services Department. I’ll let them know you will be calling.”

“Thanks.”

“And, Michele, any help you need, we are there for you and Keith.”

Everything went well with the Maine Social Services officers, and they agreed for Keith to spend some time with Michele over Christmas. I helped where I could, and despite the expected objections from Adam, Keith came out to stay with my sister for 10 days. They had Christmas day together, and she lavished him with presents.

I had a tough time pinning her down to a day when we could come visit them at her place. She was keeping Keith pretty much to herself; I think, because of the things that happened when he was staying with us, like the fights with Abbey and Lucas. Also, I knew she was still concerned about me taking Keith to the sheriff's office, although that was sure going to change later as her best efforts were to leave her bitterly disappointed and financially ruined.

Anyway, Keith spent Christmas with her. We set out to visit with them at her place on New Year's Day. It turned out to be a stress filled day. The weather was terrible. Pouring rain driven by high winds continually lashed the windshield. Thank God, Jack, a very good driver and race car instructor at the SF BMW car club, was at the wheel. We found Michele's place without much trouble, the wonder of GPS technology relieving us from the headache of straining over a map, arguing about whether to turn left or right, and getting lost and having to backtrack.

We arrived mid afternoon. Despite the gloomy light and the lashing rain, the cottage looked very cute. I was reminded of the cottage in the children's story book 'Hansel and Gretel.' We scurried through the gate opening of the waist high, white picket fence. It only took a few steps to reach the verandah, which ran two thirds the length of the front of the cottage. I was carrying Lucas, holding him tight to my chest. Jack was pressing the door bell button. Nobody came.

“Knock on it,” I yelled through chattering teeth and the noise of the wind. “The power might be off.”

Jack hammered on the door. Seconds later Michele appeared. “Oh, you poor things,” she said holding the door wide open. “Come in; come in, out of the cold, quick. Amelia, you must be freezing.”

Inside, the house was lit to some extent by candles. There were lots of paintings and photos in frames hanging on the parlor and living room walls, but it was difficult to make out any details in the gloom.

“Sorry, but the power went off a couple of hours ago. Luckily, the heater works on gas, so we at least have that.”

“Yaah, eeeii!” The sudden loud scream almost had me peeing myself. Keith had entered, appearing out of the gloom wearing some kind of medieval costume and wielding a plastic sword. He ignored me and began circling Abbey and Lucas, yelling something about coming to his castle where they would be put in the dungeon. Lucas responded with big smiles while Abbey was not at all amused. Abbey had grown to dislike Keith and that was another reason we would not adopt him.

Jack took us all out for an early dinner at a local restaurant. Afterwards, we went back to Michele's house for dessert. The power was still out, but with Michele lighting more

candles and the gas fire working the house was cozy and warm. Keith's behavior for the most part had been good, although Jack had to warn him about being too rough with Lucas. Lucas actually adored Keith, loved playing with him and usually put up with a lot of the rough handling without making a fuss. Keith with his mood swings was highly unpredictable. He could be very loving and then very aggressive in the space of a few minutes.

As the night wore on Keith's mood soured, and he didn't want anything to do with Lucas. He wouldn't let him look at any of his Christmas things, and when Lucas got too close Keith would yell and push him away. Then what happened next really freaked me out.

Michele had two cats. She had a scratching pole for them that was anchored into a sturdy, elevated platform and placed on the living room floor. Lucas would climb up onto the stand where he would pretend he was the kitty, and Auntie Chele would pat him. I didn't want him up there, but he liked it and it was their thing. Keith got very jealous.

"Just get off from there, Lucas," Keith said in a voice laced full of hate. "I hope you fall off and die."

I was appalled, but I didn't want to overreact. "Keith, what did you just say?" I asked in an even tone.

"I said I hope Lucas falls off and dies," he repeated.

"I really don't think you mean that," I said, but I'd had enough. We had talked about staying the night. The storm was raging and the power lines were down, but I wanted to go. I was really upset. I said to Jack, "Take us home."

It was only for a minute that I left Lucas on the monkey bar structure at the playground while I walked to the car to get water. I thought I heard a thump, but it did not concern me at the time. As I walked back to the playground, I saw that a young couple were bending over a tiny figure on the ground. I ran. Blood was everywhere. The woman was holding Lucas's wrist and shaking her head.

I woke up in my bed screaming. Horrified, I slid out of the blankets and stumbled through the darkness to Lucas's room; I had to be sure he was all right.

As I hugged Lucas, Jack came rushing into the room. "What the hell's going on?"

I couldn't respond. I was crying.

"Did you have a nightmare?" I could see he was relieved. "Come on, back to bed. Bring Lucas with you."

After Lucas went back to sleep, I told Jack my dream.

"That rubbish Keith went on with tonight really shook you up, didn't it? It's just kid talk, Amelia. Kids fight among themselves, and Lucas is going to take a few knocks as he grows. He'll learn to deal with them, as long as you don't over protect him."

I said nothing. How could he understand? It had taken a miracle for me to have this little boy. No, I couldn't let anything happen to him so long as I was alive to prevent it.

It was April when I heard that Michele had gone out to Maine to visit Keith. She did not tell me, and I was a little annoyed. Social Services called, and they informed me that

Michele was seriously thinking about adopting Keith, which is the main reason she went there. A few weeks later, Michele returned home to California and called me.

“Yes, I know. Maine Social Services have been in touch,” I said. “I was annoyed at first that you didn’t tell me. I told you I would help all I could. You’re going to need it, Michele, Keith has serious issues.”

“What he needs is love, and I’m going to give him that,” Michele replied. She really wanted to give it a shot, and I admired her for that. “Keith will be good for me, Amelia. And really, where else does he have to go other than back to foster care and more institutions. They do the best they can, but they’re not family. I am.”

I liked that she was so emphatic about claiming her place in the family.

“It won’t be easy, Michele. You’ll still have to work, so you won’t be able to stay home. You’ll have to make sure he gets to school in the morning, and then after school you’ll have to make sure he is kept under supervision until you can pick him up.”

“You’re not going to talk me out of it.”

“I’m not trying. I just want you to make sure that you have thought through every aspect of what you’re taking on. We’ll support you and Keith as best we can, but I can’t be available at the drop of a hat.”

In June, Keith came out to stay. Michele was excited and, of course, overwhelmed. We went to visit right away. Keith had already started with his problems. He was angry because he couldn’t get a particular pair of shoes; he was mad because Michele wouldn’t get cable; he didn’t want to get out of bed in the mornings, which was a warning sign that my sister was going to have problems getting to work on time, and the list went on and on.

A few days later, Michele called and asked if we could take Keith for a few days while she squared away a few things. Although, Jack was out of state on a company job, I said okay. I was hoping that if Keith got to be with family on a more permanent basis, there would be some improvement in his behavior, so I told her that I would help in any way that I could, but that I would not tolerate any abuse.

So, while Michele got things in order, looked for a job, and figured out where Keith would be going to school, I brought him home. Disaster! We had the same issues come up, which once more culminated in another visit to the sheriff’s office. “I can’t have him in my home or around Abbey and Lucas unless Jack is home. But, eventually he acted up even when Jack was around sometimes,” I told Michele. “He’s scared of Jack, but at the same time he likes him.”

“He just needs to be told ‘no’ once in a while. He’s used to getting whatever he wants, that’s the problem,” she said.

I don’t know how she came to that conclusion, but I let it go. “Well, he needs to get into a counseling program, and we are prepared to pay for that,” I said.

We went to visit quite a few times. Michele was having difficulty finding a job and was beginning to get really concerned. Keith’s abusive behaviors were worsening to the point that he was throwing things at Michele, swearing and calling her horrible names.

Everything came to a head when he hit our niece, who was staying with Michele to help out. He hit with his game-boy causing serious bruising to her arm. It was obvious that Keith would not be able to stay. Michele had always been completely independent and never had a problem finding a job, but Keith was a brick wall for her at every turn.

On his last night with Michele we went to Chuck E. Cheese and it was very sad, Keith wasn't certain exactly what was happening, and at that point Michele really wanted him back, but she had no money, needed a job and her world had fallen apart. Keith spent a few days with us, and it was a very stressful time dealing with the same old behaviors. After a few days Mary came to get him. Despite all the turmoil, it was difficult to see him leave.

Keith went back to Maine. Michele has not seen him since, or talked to him. She left her home with her cats in the house and everything else she owned. She had a complete breakdown, and her world just slipped out from under her feet. I tried keeping in touch with her, but she wouldn't answer any of her e-mails or phone calls. I tried driving there to see how we could help, but she had disappeared without trace.

Months later I was at the dinner table with the family when the phone rang.

"Yes." I listened to the voice on the other end of the line, nodded a few times and then hung up.

"What was that all about," asked Jack. "Has Michele shown up?"

"No, it was a Real Estate agent. The house is in foreclosure or something. He asked if you could go through Michele's stuff and get the house ready. It seems there's no forwarding address for her."

From August to October of 2007, I went with my children a couple of times a week and cleared out her things. I kept what I thought she might want some day and sold the rest in a few estate sales to try and get some money for her. It was not very successful.

Today, her house is gone. I don't know what her situation is, as we have not spoken. The point to telling this sad story is that here was another life ruined in the aftermath of Adam's dysfunctional behaviors and its effects. Not only have seven children's lives been seriously affected, but my sister's lives, my Ma's life and, of course, the lives of my family have all taken a beating.

And yet, more to come, and perhaps it would be the most painful and heartbreaking episode of all.

• • •

I was home in California, back from a six week summer in Massachusetts with Abbey and Lucas. Ma's health had been worsening, so I had spent most of my time visiting her each day and tending to her needs. It was late afternoon on October 2nd 2008 when the call came. Michele had moved back home to help take care of Ma. It was time for my sister to move on with her life, and they could help each other. It was a huge relief to me, actually.

"Amelia, it's me, Michele."

My heart started thumping right away. Michele calling me could not be good news.

“Ma has taken a turn for the worse. The doctors don’t think she’ll make it through the night.”

I burst into tears. “Oh, my God, Michele, she can’t be dying. It is only a few weeks ago that I left her.” I was shaking and sobbing uncontrollably.

“The doctors said there is no more they can do.”

“But, they can keep her alive, at least until I get there. I’ll get on a plane tomorrow.” My mind was racing. “I need to call Jack and have him get me on a plane. I’ll be back to you as soon as I’ve spoken to him.”

Jack was in Connecticut, but I was able to get a hold of him right away. He got us on a plane from San Francisco that left early in the morning, which would get us to Boston around midday.

I called Michele off and on through the night. I was able to talk to Ma’s doctor who said her lungs were failing, and I better get there sooner rather than later.

“Doctor, can you keep her alive until I get there?”

“Well, your mother signed a Do Not Resuscitate order.”

“Doctor,” I pleaded, “under the circumstances, can you ignore that order until I get there.”

“I’ll do my best, Mrs. Bradford.”

Later that night, I was able to talk to Ma. Her voice was frail, and I could hardly hear her. I started crying hysterically and shouting into the phone.

“Ma, don’t die! don’t do this, have a will to live, please! You have so much to live for. I love you. We all love you.”

“Amelia, you are a good daughter. I’m so sorry, but the truth is I have not wanted to live for a long time.” Her voice was little more than a gravelly whisper.

I was shocked to hear her say that. What about her grandchildren and...and... What? My mind went blank. Then it struck me. She had been living with failing health, suffering for a long time. And, there was the burden of the Catholic guilt that many of the faith carry. Even those of us who have forsaken the Church are unable to completely shake the impositions of original sin and unworthiness loaded on us by the determinations of the Church’s Augustines. Tortured by their own brooding introspections, they cloistered in monasteries to shelter from the harsh life of the real world.

She told me again that she was sorry.

“Please wait until I get there, Ma,” I cried. “I want to hold you, and kiss you one more time. Please wait for me and Abbey and Lucas.”

“I’m sorry, Amelia, I’m sorry for not being a better mother. I’m sorry I put you...

“No, no, Ma. You have been wonderful. You always tried to make sure we had all we needed when we were children. I love you.”

“Hello, Amelia, it’s me, Michele.” Her voice was surprisingly gentle. “Ma’s exhausted. She needs to rest now.”

“Yes, yes,” I sobbed. “Michele, I want you to promise me, promise me that you will have Ma resuscitated, if something happens before we get there.”

After Michele hung up, I managed to stop crying. I was angry for leaving Ma at the end of the summer. She didn’t want me to go, but I had to get Abbey back home and settled into school. Ma didn’t like the idea of Abbey going to public school at all.

“You won’t have the freedom to move around anytime you feel like it, Amelia. Abbey will have to show up for school everyday,” she said.

“I know what you mean, Ma, but don’t worry for a minute. When I need to be here for you, Abbey will have to stay with one of our friends.”

We arrived in Massachusetts on October 3rd and went directly to the hospital. I was so relieved to see Ma again. She was doing a little better, surprising her doctor. For the next seven days we went to visit her everyday. I rubbed her back, brushed her hair, and all of us took turns feeding her. She loved ice-cream and custard. Abbey and Lucas were great with her. They loved their Nana, and she adored them. I began to hope that she was going to be okay, although, she still had trouble speaking.

I gave her a manicure and joked that she owed me \$80 because I was the best and she got the best. She laughed when I said, “Since you are my mother, I’ll only charge you \$75.

As much as I wanted to stay with her all day and through the night, it was impossible. The children had to be cared for, and they needed a place to stay where there were no germs, and where they could get a good night’s sleep. Michele was with her most of the time, anyway.

On October the 10th she was released from the hospital. It was wonderful to see her back home, in the car alongside me and then in her own bed. She was amazing.

“You should get back to California now, Amelia,” she said. “I’ll be fine, and Michele is here to take care of me.”

I hugged and kissed her and tried not to cry. It was with a great deal of reluctance that the children and I left two days later.

Michele called me at 10:30PM on October the 16th to tell me Ma was gone.

The trip home to Massachusetts was awful. I had a fever, a temperature of 104. On the plane from San Francisco to Denver I sniffled, sneezed, coughed and cried. Lucas was my bright spot being ever so gentle and telling me not to cry. After a short layover in Denver, we left for Boston. Lucas and I were playing and talking, but my mind kept going back to the fact that Ma was gone. I was never going to see her again. I couldn’t fathom that she had really died! Perhaps it is something we all do with the loss of those we love, denial?

Finally, we landed ‘back home.’ No, I knew that I would never again refer to Boston as ‘back home’. In fact, I felt that with Ma gone it was possible that I wouldn’t return to Boston ever again. There was no point. ‘Back home’ was now in California with my husband and children.

The cab pulled up in the parking lot outside the entrance to Ma’s apartment complex. Despite the children being with me, and Jack soon to join us from Connecticut, I felt very

alone and so sad. I stared at the front door; memories flooded my mind. One of my favorite things to do with her was to call when Lucas said something cute, or when Abbey had a flawless dance recital. We had this tradition where every Christmas Eve we would talk for hours while I wrapped presents.

Michele opened the front door. I jumped out of the car, tears once again beginning to roll down my cheeks. We held each other, sobbing.

"I'm glad you're back, Amelia," she said. "Ma wanted to go. She was comfortable and ready. I never saw her looking so peaceful. I'm sorry you weren't here."

"You know what, Michele? I'm grateful I was able to be here with her five short days ago. C'mon, let's go inside." Actually, I wasn't feeling particularly brave about going into Ma's house. There was a lot of stuff to go through, a lot of memories that would come up, some of them joyful, many of them painful. Michele led the way. My phone rang. It was Adam.

"Go ahead, Michele. Children, go with Auntie Chele." I waited until they were inside. "When did you do it?"

"What?"

"Clean out Ma's bank account? You must have done it before she died. Where is your shame, Adam?"

"I'm the executor of her will. I'm in charge, Amelia, of all her possessions."

"Good, then you will have the money to pay for the funeral expenses."

"I heard you are at Ma's. don't touch anything until I get there."

"Take a dump, Adam. I'll do what I like," I said and then flipped the cell lid closed. What a creep, I thought, not a mention of Ma's death, or even hint of sadness in his voice. What the hell, Adam's behaviors no longer surprised me. All I could do was pray for his soul. Little did I know of more dirty dealings yet to come?

I walked inside Ma's apartment. Immediately, I could smell and feel her presence. I was in a kind of fog for the first couple of hours. Michele and I were looking at each other trying to figure out where to start. That was soon taken care of when Margaret arrived with four of her children. I was happy, though, that Abbey and Lucas would have the two younger cousins to play with.

Margaret and I embraced and then immediately, and I mean immediately, she and two of her daughters started going through everything; they seemed to be in and out of every room all at once. I was stunned by the swiftness of it all. It was surreal, almost as if what was happening had been rehearsed. We were all talking over each other and at times arguing; we wanted to do different things. I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. Margaret and the girls worked faster and harder than movers on a million dollar incentive! As far as I was concerned, she was welcome to anything she wanted, which was mostly furniture, so long as I got to check inside each piece to make sure there was nothing precious to me or my children in any of the drawers.

I recovered cards, letters, pictures and things personal that I had sent Ma over the years. In one incident my two nieces were dragging out a large chest. I stopped them and said that I would like to look in it.

“It’s all Adam’s stuff, boy scout stuff and such,” Margaret answered when Sandra looked to her mother for guidance.

“Let me look,” I said, suddenly alert. Surprise, surprise, there was nothing of Adam’s. But, old school records of mine and some of Ma’s doll collection. I didn’t see one boy scout item. I shrugged, disgusted, and closed the lid. “It’s all yours.”

Something felt very strange to me. A picture of Adam and Margaret conversing surreptitiously flashed into my mind. What the hell, I thought. Is Margaret selling me out? I better watch her.

Actually, I was angry that both my oldest nieces were even there. One of them lived 45 minutes from Ma, and Sally was only a two hour drive away. Neither of them had ever taken the time to visit Ma when she was alive. Sally had an absolutely adorable two-year old boy that Ma, who loved children, was very disappointed about having never met. Yet, it was hardly a day after Ma’s passing that they were at her apartment ransacking her possessions! I’m reminded of the breaking news stories on television of disasters where looters arrive quickly on the scene to pick through the victims possessions before their blood has hardly had time to cool. With family members behaving with what seemed to me a similar mindset, the disappointment and heartache over Ma’s death was even more pronounced. I checked everything they took out after that.

Another trunk was full of knitted and crocheted items. Ma’s work was extraordinary. I had told her many times that she could make a good living doing it professionally. I closed the trunk and let it pass. What was the point of creating a fuss when these people were so desperate to take everything? Anyway, I was thrilled that my children and I had at least a dozen Afghans, blankets and dolls at home in California, which Ma made especially for us.

After a lot of stress and squabbling, we finally called it a day. Abbey, Lucas and I prepared to leave after Margaret, a little after midnight. As Michele walked with us to the car, my phone went off again. Being so late, I thought it was probably Jack, but the voice on the other end was not that of my husband.

“Hello, Mrs. Bradford?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Amelia, this is Doug Mahoney. I am the funeral director at Mahoney and Patrick. I’m sorry to be calling you at this unseemly hour, but we had a phone call from your brother, Adam Allerton. He said he was the executor of your mother’s affairs.”

“Oh, really? I haven’t seen any documentation to that effect.”

“Well, it is what he claims, and we are not in a position to ignore him. I have to tell you that he was infuriated that your mother’s body was removed from the hospital and already embalmed, without instructions from him. I’m calling you because I have a note in our files that you were paying the funeral costs.”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s right, but I didn’t leave any instructions. Just a minute please, Mr. Mahoney.” I explained to Michele what had happened.

“I certainly didn’t give any instructions. It might have been Frank,” said Michele.

Frank, my cousin, was a friend of Doug Mahoney. Doug was very nice, and he went on to say that there seemed to be some miscommunication and that since there was a mix-up Mahoney Patrick would not be charging us anything.

The mix up didn’t bother me because we wanted Ma to be viewed. I certainly wanted to see her one last time. Anyway, Adam had managed to create another full blown mess, and I was now going to have to deal with him. It would be nasty, I knew that. I arranged with Doug that Michele and I would meet with him in the morning.

The children and I left Michele and went to spend the night at Billy’s house. I got very little sleep. I missed Ma, and here I was putting up with Adam’s crap again when this terribly sad time ought to have been an occasion for bringing us all together. I was also concerned about how Abbey and Lucas would react at seeing their Nana dead.

The next day was Sunday, and the early morning meeting with Doug did not accomplish much. He explained that his hands were tied because of Adam’s claim that he was the executor, and the fact that none of us had seen any supporting documentation made no difference.

“I can’t tell you much at this stage,” Doug said. “Your brother has instructed me that he would be arriving either tomorrow or Tuesday, and he would make the final arrangements then.”

That was Adam being as controlling as he could, keeping everyone waiting until the last minute. It was very chaotic and upsetting. I couldn’t tell anyone anything, I had no information. We were captive to my brother’s whims.

We went back to Ma’s apartment. Margaret was there waiting with her two younger girls, which I was happy about for Abbey and Lucas’s sake. I had a phone call from one of Mahoney Patrick’s funeral director’s saying that Adam had called and told them he would be arriving at their parlor at three in the afternoon. My heart started beating a little faster with anxiety at the thought of seeing him again. But, I had no idea of how much crap was coming my way.

“I will bring my two sisters’ with me,” I told him.

“Respectfully, Amelia,” the assistant said, “Mr. Allerton has requested he meet with us on his own.”

“He did, did he? Then you can tell Mr. Allerton that he will be responsible for the payment of any of your company’s charges.” Then I remembered there would be no cost anyway.

“The bastard!” I shouted. “How dare he!” I was stunned and pissed at the same time. Margaret seemed unfazed. Michele looked angry, but said nothing. What was it with these women? It did occur to me that they had not had a lot of contact with our mother over the years, was that it? I decided to hold my own counsel and went on about sorting what was left of Ma’s possessions.

I had most of what I had wanted or needed by the time we started to clean out her closets. We put the stuff into separate piles to give to goodwill, hospitals, churches and other needy institutions. It was a tough task, her whole life was staring me in the face. The emotional side of me wanted to take everything home; it was painful to let it all go. I got through it. The children had fun doing dumpster runs.

As I was closing the closet doors, I heard a commotion in the front room. I could hear the children coming in through the front door. I went into the room, and there was Adam with a police officer at his side! I honestly can't remember what I was thinking. I knew, of course, that the officer was there to head off any trouble; in fact, I was relieved to see him. I know I didn't even say hello to Adam. I felt like we were supposed to hug, but there was nothing left between us.

The police officer asked to see me and Michele in the hall way.

"Which one of you is Amelia?" he asked.

"I am," I said.

"And you're Michele?"

"Yes. What's it to you? What are you doing here?" said Michele, a surprising belligerence in her voice.

"I'm here to see that there is no trouble between you and your brother and, in particular, with you Mrs. Amelia Bradford. He is the executor of your mother's will and..."

"Is that so?" I interrupted. "Have you seen any documentation to support his claim?"

"My boss is satisfied that everything is in order. I'm here to escort you off the premises."

"You've got a problem there, Officer," said Michele. "I live here, and I'm not leaving."

"Your brother has said you can stay, Michele. Now are you going to be a problem, Mrs. Bradford?"

I shook my head and went back into the apartment to get the children. I was so angry I wanted to yell at Adam, but I ignored him as best I could.

"Abbey, Lucas. We have to be going now. Help me with these pictures, please." I reached for the pictures I had set aside.

"Leave them right where they are, Amelia."

"They're pictures of me when I was a baby, Adam. You have no use for them."

"Leave them right where they are. And, if you want to see Ma, you can do it at 12:00 tomorrow."

I wanted to attack him right there. The police officer was in the doorway watching.

"Officer, this man has been in and out of your police department's custody for 15 years, and I can't believe that you..."

"Yes, we know all about your brother, Mrs. Bradford, and I'm sorry to say that this is an entirely different matter."

So, that was that. One law abiding citizen against a seasoned criminal!

When we got back to Billy's, Michele called. She said Adam wanted to know where certain things were, in particular, Ma's jewelry. I said to tell him that I had it all, anything he was asking for, and in particular, the jewelry Ma gave me to sell to get back something of the \$60,000 he owed us. Of course, it would never come close to paying all that. Ma, God Bless her, even wanted me to take a life insurance policy on her life to help get some of the money back. That was not an option for me.

Michele told me later that Adam was livid. He ranted about getting search warrants, but he didn't have a leg to stand on. Thank God, Jack was arriving early the next day.

• • •

The clock on the wall of the reception lobby of Mahoney Patrick was showing 12:00 noon when we walked in. Billy and Shari had come with us. Michele was on her way. Margaret and Tina were coming with Adam and his family. It hurt that Tina hadn't contacted me despite the messages I left for her to call me back.

Doug was waiting in the lobby, and he took Jack and me into the viewing room while the children waited in the reception area. I lost it. Sobbing loudly, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I sat next to the open casket, babbling words I can't recall clearly, kissing Ma's face, and noticing how cold her skin felt. I do remember thinking how inanimate and waxen the human body looks when the soul has left it. It was a very painful and surreal situation.

Jack was standing at my side. As always, he was an anchor of strength when it came to family matters.

"Do you want to say anything to Ma? Like, maybe, thanking her for giving you such a beautiful wife," I said trying to bring some levity to the situation that in all honesty I did not feel.

"I have, Honey, many times," Jack said as he squeezed my hand. I was touched. It's amazing how something so simple can make a difference.

"I think you had better get the children to come in and say goodbye to their Nana now. I don't want to be here when Adam arrives at one o'clock."

Jack left and came back with Lucas. "Abbey said she would wait for Auntie Michele."

Lucas climbed onto my lap, looked for a time at his Nana and then leaned over to touch her face.

"Good-bye Nana, I love you," he said. That set me off again, and he turned and hugged me tight.

I didn't know how I was going to leave her. Michele came in with Abbey who stood at the side of the casket and stared at her Nana. She bent over and kissed Ma gently. Michele didn't stay long. It's funny how we're all so different. I didn't want to leave, and I was so grateful that Jack and the children stayed with me.

Finally, Jack tapped my shoulder. "Adam will be here in 10 minutes, Honey." I wanted to stay with Ma, but I knew there would be a scene if I was still there when Adam arrived. How I loathed my brother in those last moments with Ma. "We'll wait outside while you have a few minutes alone, Amelia."

The tears flowed freely, as I leaned over the casket to be close to Ma's face and whispered, "I love you Ma. I'm sorry your life was so sad and that you didn't want to live anymore." I gripped her hand, conscious of how cold it felt. "Now, you can rest in peace. Goodbye, my Love." I kissed her cheek and stepped back from the casket. Ma looked beautiful and at peace. "I will carry you in my heart forever, Ma. Thank you so much Ma for giving me life." I am so grateful for that last image of her.

We left the funeral parlor and passed Adam on the road.

As far as I knew there was no formal reception, or place of gathering for the family after the viewing. Ma was to be cremated and that was it; sad really that we couldn't all get together to celebrate Ma's life.

Jack, the children, Michele, Shari, Billy and I went to lunch at one of my favorite restaurants on the water. My father used to take me there when he was alive. I always enjoyed those occasions. Today was different, but we made the best of it and shared stories of our experiences with Ma, doing the best we could to remember the good times.

After lunch, we went back to Billy's place. I tried to ignore the anger I was feeling that we were not all together as a family, but as the afternoon wore on I it got the better of me.

"Jack, I'm going over to Ma's apartment. How dare Adam order me to stay away? Fuck him. I want my pictures, and I'm going over there to get them. Are you coming?"

Jack, the children and I went over. Michele and Billy stayed back at the house. What a surprise I got when we arrived! Two of my nephews were outside, and I gave them a hug before ringing the door bell. We went inside while Abbey and Lucas stayed outside with their cousins. It seemed everyone from the family was there, except for us. It hurt to see Tina and the twins, Linda and Casey, and that she had not bothered to call me.

I looked around the room and saw Susan. Adam, the great executor, was doling out items that he determined certain people should have.

"I'm here for my pictures, Adam," I said. He looked at me with disdain. After all the help we had given him, it was unbelievable.

"The pictures," Jack interjected, his voice cold. "And, please, don't screw around." Adam did not miss the tone in Jack's voice, and he passed over the pictures Jack without uttering a word. "One more thing, from this moment forward you are persona non grata. You will not call my wife, my children, or me. And, that includes you, Susan. As far as I am concerned you do not exist. I'll be waiting outside, Amelia."

I gave Margaret a hug as I turned to leave with the children. I found out later that she had been talking with Adam all the time, keeping him informed about where I was and what I was doing. It wasn't supposed to be like this, was it? Ma had died and everyone was supposed to get along, hugging and being supportive. I guess not in my family. In fact, everyone seemed to be smiling a lot. Jesus!

Jack left that evening to go back to Connecticut. I spoke with Tina on the phone and found out that the family had all gone out to dinner the night before. Well, the message was unmistakable, we clearly were not welcome. I guess Adam had made it pretty clear to the rest of the family what a bitch I was.

On Wednesday there were errands to do, clothes and Ma's things to be packed, enough to do and keep me busy until we were to leave for California on the Saturday morning. Michele and I some spent quality time together, and that helped me a lot. When we left on Saturday, I knew that I would not be returning to Boston.

EPILOGUE

It has been two years since Ma passed. Writing this book has had a tremendous cathartic affect on my life. I have been doing a lot of letting go. I still miss Ma, and I know the pain of her loss will be with me for the rest of my life. While Adam is no longer in my life, I find that I have been able to let go of the much of anger I had in my heart. I am able to see my part in my behaviors. Enabling him, trying to fix him instead of saying no to his appeals for cash; a real "no" in the beginning might well have forced him to make some changes that would have made a difference in all our lives. I find that I am feeling wonderfully free of the guilt and disappointments I put on myself over the years. I am responsible for my part.

Jack and the children seem happier. Michele is staying with us and working at getting her life back together. I don't have much contact with the rest of the family, but that is okay. I love them all.

If I was asked by anyone who reads this book and has been struggling with family experiences like mine, "What should I do?" I would tell them.

"Do not be an enabler, you are not your brother's keeper, and write a book for you that is your story. There is a power for good in telling your story."

Amelia Bradford (not her real name) lives on the Northern California coast with her husband and two children. She enjoys fitness, tennis and travel.

She is currently at work on her next book.

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