

"In well-crafted, often poignant, prose, she offers a jaw-dropping, insider's view of substance abuse throughout three generations. This alternately disturbing and uplifting memoir... ultimately, [is] a testament to Hunt's resilience in the face of unfavorable odds. An inspiring tale that's told with honesty and love." ~KIRKUS REVIEWS

In *Smoke Rings Rising*, the once drug-endangered daughter, Jennifer Hunt, lays out with grit and grace how she turns haunting truths into inspiring triumph. In doing so, she finds the true meaning of love, living, forgiving, and letting go. Please find an excerpt from her book below.

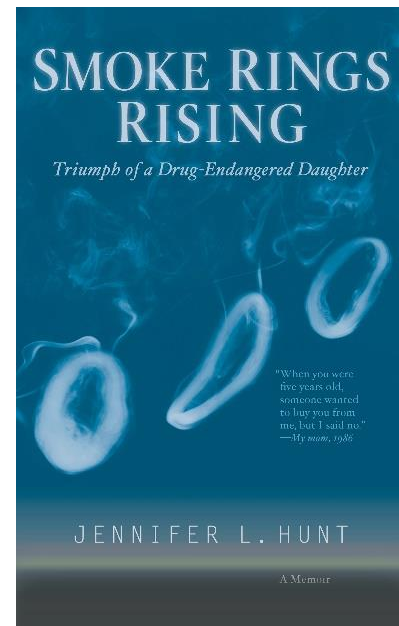
CHAPTER TWELVE OF TWEAKERS AND ZOMBIES

"Aunt Jenny, my dad's taking so long because he's working hard so he can buy us a castle..."

Of my childhood family, Grandma Maggie, Mom, and Lori were no longer with us, and the last I'd heard, Teresa was living under a bridge somewhere in Stockton. The succeeding generation of my nieces and nephews was spread out. I had regular contact with most of them—Sam, Stephanie, Steven, and Stanley—but I hadn't seen Amber or Christina (who disappointingly was homeless alongside her mother Teresa) in years. Missing my kin, I decided to host the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday dinner for my side of the family—Grandma Maggie-style. I contacted everyone I could, and they were all open to it. Sam joked, "We'll be there, as long as you make your banana cream pie!" Of course, I would.

During the months after Sam's fall, if I called and caught her when she was awake, she usually sounded chipper; however, I could tell her recovery was progressing slowly. Given her equilibrium issues, she would often be in bed or on the couch while we spoke. Sometimes she'd be playing with her boys, and I'd hear their laughter in the background. Sometimes she'd be trying to correct them, and I'd still hear their laughter in the background—because they rarely took her seriously.

According to Sam, Kevin was doing quite well holding down the fort, but once bill collectors started calling my home looking for them, I discovered that wasn't true. When I passed along the agencies' information and spoke with Sam about their finances, she became



upset and explained, “Yeah, Kevin’s been waiting for weeks for his boss to pay him.” Then, “Yeah, Kevin is looking for another job because his boss won’t pay him.” In one of our last conversations, she said that Kevin was all decked out in a brand-new suit on his way to interview for a new position. I assumed the couple was only struggling financially, and I was hopeful that it would pass, but along with the bill collectors, soon the SPCA called, too. A good Samaritan had found their family dog running down the road but couldn’t hold her for long. I passed that information on to Sam and Kevin, but suddenly, all communication stopped. At first, if their voice mail wasn’t full, I’d leave messages, but they wouldn’t return my calls. Then their phones were disconnected. The bill collectors kept leaving nasty messages with me, and the SPCA concerned ones.

Thanksgiving’s turnout was a small my-side-of-the-family gathering, with no word from either Sam or Kevin, even though they’d told me they would be there. Finally, in December I heard from Sam. For the first time ever, she asked to borrow money from me. She said they would pay me back when Kevin got his check, which was supposed to be right before Christmas. I wired her the cash without question. Christmas came and went. I didn’t hear from them again for six months.

At 3:00 a.m. on a Wednesday, my phone rang. It was Sam. A police officer had let her use his personal cell phone.

In a hysterical state, she said, “Aunt Jenny, the cops are harassing me. They say if I don’t get my kids to bed they’re going to call Child Protective Services.”

Half asleep, bewildered, and upset about her predicament, I groaned, “It’s three in the morning, how come your kids are not in their bed?”

She answered, “We are eating at a restaurant; they want to close, but Kevin can’t find his wallet to get a room. Please, can you get a room for us? I’ll pay you back. They are going to take my kids away.”

Still trying to understand her situation, I asked, “Where is Kevin? Are you guys fighting? Did you leave him?”

“No, no, I don’t know where he went. He walked off down the road.”

“Fine. Let me look online and see if I can find you a room. What’s the phone number and address?”

She gave me the information I needed, and I turned on the computer and found a nearby motel. Sam and Kevin were living in Sacramento at the time. I had no idea why they weren’t at their home. Once I had promised to fax a copy of my credit card and driver’s license by 8:00 a.m. that morning, the motel attendant agreed to let them stay.

I called the number Sam gave me for the restaurant, but they had already left. Through caller ID, I reached the officer on his cell phone. He said he had dropped them off at a twenty-four-hour restaurant and explained that Sam and her family had been evicted from their home earlier that day and had nowhere to go.

Frustrated, I said, “Why didn’t she just tell me that?” I told the officer that I could rent them a room, and where it would be. He graciously went back, picked them up, and delivered them there.

Once she’d arrived at the motel, Sam thanked me and said she’d call in the morning to explain everything.

Well, morning came and went, and she never called; but at checkout, the motel attendant did, wanting to know if there was authorization for them to stay a second night.

“Absolutely not.”

“I didn’t think so,” she replied.

I heard nothing more until four months later, on October 8, 2012, when I got another call, this time from my nephew Steven’s wife: “Aunt Jenny, Sam’s kids are with CPS. They’ve had them for five days!”

I realized later that five days before would have been my birthday. Happy birthday, right? With a knot in my stomach, I asked, “What? Why? Where?”

“I don’t know, but they’re here in town.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can find out.”

My great-nephews—Kasey and Nick—now age five and four, had been detained by Child Protective Services and were in an emergency shelter because Sam and Kevin had left them unattended with a roommate for days. After my further investigation through family members, I learned that apparently Sam and Kevin were using drugs, and Sam had an outstanding arrest warrant for possession of controlled substances. I couldn’t believe it. The CPS matter was under the jurisdiction of the courthouse where I worked—lovely. To step in meant that I would have to reveal my anomalous background to social workers, attorneys, and the Court—all people I worked with. Talk about blowing your cover. Still, knowing that Sam and Kevin were visiting Kasey and Nick daily at the shelter, and not thinking the outcome of the situation would lead to anything other than reuniting my niece’s family, I opted to do the right thing: apply for placement for the boys. After home inspections and background checks, on October 12, I was approved. The boys had been in the shelter for nine long days.

Upon my arrival, Kasey quickly spotted me. I could hear the stress in his voice when he asked, “Are you here to pick us up?”

“Yes, buddy,” I replied as I bent down to hug him. I gathered my great-nephews and all their belongings—only the clothes on their backs—and we went home.

Expecting a call from Sam and Kevin that evening regarding their children, to my astonishment, the phone stayed silent...for three weeks! When Kevin finally did call, I learned he and Sam had been in Stockton. So rather than jumping on board with CPS to get their children back, once they knew the boys were safe with me, they skipped town! I was livid. During that phone conversation, Kevin claimed to not know where Sam was and explained that he was trying

to get things in order down there so he could get his boys back. Afraid of being taken advantage of, Matt and I cut to the chase: “Kevin, we’re not raising your kids— that’s your job. Get it together.”

“Oh, that won’t happen. You won’t be raising my kids.”

Between Kevin’s first call and Christmas, he phoned us once or twice a week except during an occasional two-week hiatus which baffled me. I later figured out that he didn’t call when he was with Sam. Our discussions were always the same: he was distraught because he didn’t know where Sam was; he was trying to get paid by his boss but was getting the runaround; he was trying to get a car. Kasey would ask him about their mother and when he and his brother were going to be picked up. He’d be fed—in a loving tone—a bogus story full of his father’s good intentions. Sweet Nick would request a new toy, most often a die-cast “green little mini dirt bike.” Kevin would promise to bring him one.

Through the many disappointments dished out by their parents, my great-nephews never lost faith. Being one of the cutest kids on the planet, during mealtimes Nick would remind all of us to pray. At the end of our family prayer, he’d shout, “Amen!” Then he’d giggle. “I opened my eyes while I prayed,” or “I was eating while I prayed.” Matt and I would be taken aback by his heart of gold, convinced that God doesn’t care how you pray if it’s legit. Most bedtimes, both Kasey and Nick would pray for protection over their parents and throw in a quick, “And please let our mom and dad pick us up. Amen.” Other nights, discouraged from awaiting their parents’ return to no avail, the boys maintained their faith but prayed a simple, “Thank you for protecting our mom and dad. Amen.”

(End of excerpt.)

Amazon: [Smoke Rings Rising: Triumph of a Drug-Endangered Daughter](#)

Barnes & Noble: [Smoke Rings Rising: Triumph of a Drug-Endangered Daughter](#)

Google Play Books: [Smoke Rings Rising: Triumph of a Drug-Endangered Daughter](#)

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