

Alissa

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good student and seems to have lots of friends," Lammel told the newspaper.

Jinx Kucera, Reider's neighbor, felt the same sense of disbelief.

"They seemed like the typical happy family," she says. "She was a nice person, and I still can't believe it."

Only the four family members, one of whom was dead, could understand why the tragedy occurred.

Abusive home

Alissa says she remembers her mother piling the entire family into the car at midnight one weekend to search for Brett, who had sneaked out of the house to visit friends. When she spotted the 15-year-old boy riding his bike home, the tempest broke. "She threw his bike into the ditch," Alissa says. "She was pounding him and hitting him against the car and screaming, 'What do you think you're doing?' and telling him he was the worst thing that ever walked the earth."

Alissa sat helplessly in the back seat watching her brother and best friend being beaten by the woman both tried to avoid. "She kept screaming at Brett, and Brett looked so scared and just, just terrified. There were cars going by, and this woman was out there beating this kid who is taller than she is.

"It just didn't make sense."

When they returned home, love for her brother made Alissa do something she had never done before.

"She was screaming all these terrible, terrible insults, and they were getting worse. I just couldn't stand it anymore.

"I went down the stairs and stood right in front of Brett and said, 'Will you shut up? Back up and listen to the words you're saying. This is your son. You don't let him have any fun things; you tell him what his fun things can be. The only way he's going to have fun is sneak out in the middle of the night. You did this to him.'"

The speech momentarily shocked Alissa's mother into silence. Then the torrent began again.

"She came up the stairs and pounded on him," Alissa says. "That's the only time I ever fought back."

Often, the abuse was directed toward Alissa — like the time she received a B in algebra on a high school midterm report. "She started slow and got louder and meaner. She screamed and screamed. A lot of it was nontopical ... she would call me names that didn't have anything to do with it — 'you slut, you whore.'"

As punishment, her mother pulled Alissa from the school musical just weeks before it began.

But Alissa says she could weather the attacks as long as they weren't directed at Brett.

"It's natural; brothers and sisters do that." Calm questions and funny jokes were the usual methods Alissa used. Sometimes she had to physically block her mother.

Now, Alissa says, she regrets protecting her brother so much. When she left home for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln last year, Brett was the only target for Claudia's worsening attacks.

"Mom was really hard on him, and the intensity level just jumped when I left," Alissa says. "He couldn't build up a tolerance; he wasn't used to it. He saw her as a monster, a complete monster."

Murder, arrest

That's why when a policeman came to her residence hall room on Feb. 18, 1993, she was confused but not surprised. She called an officer at her home to get the details.

"He told me my mom was dead, and Brett was in the hospital."

A few hours later, feeling neither grief nor relief, Alissa was at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha identifying her mother's body.

"She was kind of warm — rigor mortis hadn't set in. So I stood there and held her hand for quite a while."

Then Alissa rushed to Bergan Mercy, her protective instincts guiding her actions.

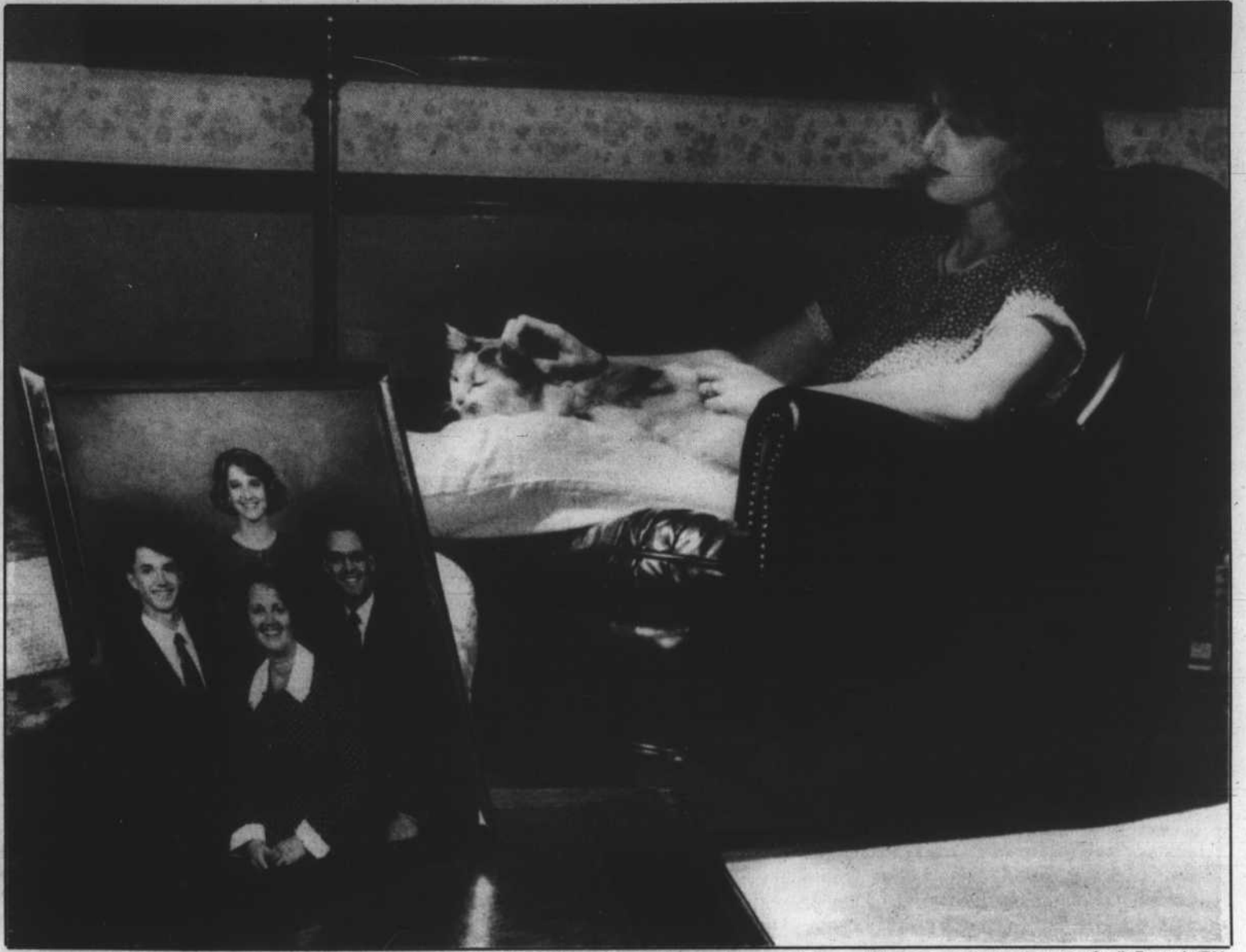
"I just thought, let's go to the other hospital, come on. This will stay this way forever. Brett needs help now."

At Bergan Mercy, Alissa talked with her brother, who was still drugged from the surgery that repaired a finger that had almost been cut off.

Later, in the waiting room, Alissa realized the facade of the perfect family — the loving wife with two obedient kids — finally had been shattered. She explained to her mother's parents how a fight between their grandson and daughter about grades could end with five stab wounds to Claudia's stomach and throat.

"(Grandma's) eyes were wide open, and she just listened ... she was just in shock."

But suddenly, Alissa says, she realized the



A family portrait sits in the Reider living room while Alissa Reider pets her cat Nikky. Alissa's brother Brett, at left in portrait, killed their mother, at center, last year while Alissa was attending UNL. Gerik Parmele/DN

pressure was off: the pressure to be a straight-A student, the pressure to be a doctor, the pressure of getting all her homework done before her 8:30 p.m. bedtime, the pressure of living up to her mother's standards.

"That's what her life was built around. Me. Brett. I knew I was number one on her priority list. I was her purpose, and she felt like I was failing her all the time.

"I didn't want to be number one on her priority list."

Alone with her father in the waiting room in the early morning after the murder, Alissa discussed how their lives would change without the woman who had controlled them.

"We just sat there talking about what our futures could be now. I think we were trying to cheer each other up.

"I said, 'Well, I don't mind things like this, but you probably don't want to live in that house anymore. We can sell the house and get an apartment and be wild and free. We could get a sporty little car.'"

But reality soon set in: There would be new pressures — the pressure of a trial, a conviction, a sentence.

"We were talking about all these options. We forgot there would have to be a trial, and there would have to be some sort of conviction. You can't just get off."

For Alissa, reality came the next day. Two Omaha police officers entered Brett's hospital room as Alissa was dressing him to take him home.

"They said, 'Ma'am ... we need to take him away.'"

"I said, 'What for?' "They said, 'On suspicion of murder.' "I said, 'He's my brother; he didn't murder anybody.'"

The two officers led Brett out the hospital's back entrance with Alissa trailing them.

At the elevator, the officers turned Alissa away. "I was trying to get on the elevator, and they said, 'No ma'am,' the door's closing. I said, 'Bye Brett; I'm going to miss you and see you really, really soon. I'm going to hug you.'"

"He was kind of smiling and looked really sad. I sat down by the elevator and cried a little while."

Then Alissa went to tell her family that Brett wouldn't be going home with them.

Brief reunion

A few days later, after a bond hearing, brother and sister were reunited.

"I held his hand the whole way home. I was just squeezing him tight, saying, 'Things are kind of OK. We have lots of frozen tuna casseroles and pretty flowers.'"

Within hours, all the family members were together at the funeral home. Brett approached his mother's casket to see her for the first time since the fight.

"He started walking toward it in tiny little steps ... pretty soon he was walking in place like he couldn't go any closer.

"He just stood there and cried and cried and cried. I was thinking, 'It's OK, Brett.

She won't hurt you anymore. Just go over and touch her.'"

Alissa said her father pushed the unwilling Brett forward.

"I went over and I hugged Brett for a while and kissed him."

During the days after the funeral, Alissa's grief mingled with anger.

"I was mad at her for taking Brett away from me."

The blur of the death and the funeral soon turned into a frenzy. For the rest of the spring semester, Alissa drove to Lincoln for classes and spent the rest of her time in Omaha with Brett.

"I kind of felt like time was running out. I got up early a lot and went to bed late a lot just to be with him.

"We did a lot of things together that we'd done before, but more intensely. I wanted to be with him every second."

Their time together ended abruptly in June when Brett's bond was revoked. The family had visited grandparents in Illinois without the judge's permission. Brett also had been visiting with friends on the witness list.

"We didn't understand the rules," Alissa says. "They hadn't been explained to us by the lawyer."

The sheriff came, handcuffed her brother for a second time and led him away.

Alissa followed her brother out of the courtroom and returned to find her father and lawyer staring at the floor.

The lawyer told her nothing could be done; she would just have to wait for Brett's trial.

The group left the courthouse one member smaller.

"I just sat in the car with Dad and just cried the whole time."

Trial

The rest of the summer was filled with letters, calls and visits to Brett. Alissa spent her time in the house, cooking and cleaning and anticipating the September trial.

"It was pretty much me and the cat all day. I just didn't want to do anything."

Alissa says she knew it would be up to her to save her brother from jail.

"I was trying to think about the business part of (the trial) and not the testimony. I thought if I thought too much, I would start making things up, and I didn't want to do that."

During the trial, Alissa says, the lawyer told her that she would have to undo the damage her father's three-hour testimony had done.

"He was just a wreck. He wasn't doing what the attorney had told him to do. (The attorney) wanted Dad to show his anger and show how upset he was with what his wife had done to his children. Dad didn't do that. He just started crying and couldn't talk.

"He didn't deliver." Alissa said it was up to her to save Brett again.

Without that motivation, Alissa says, she never could have told the judge the things she did about their family.

"I just told the absolute truth. It was like I wasn't even myself talking. I don't ever talk about what I'm actually feeling."

Alissa says the prosecuting attorney tried to make her look like a liar during cross-examination.

"He was just going through all these things: 'Didn't you have a car? Didn't you have lots of clothes? A stereo? Don't you have everything a normal teen-age girl could want?'"

"I said, 'No.' "He said, 'What are you talking about? You had everything.'"

"I said, 'I didn't have love.'"

Alissa says she looked at Brett, trying to draw strength during the testimony.

"He was just watching me. It was like I was getting strength through his eyes."

Alissa spent the rest of the afternoon following her testimony in the bathroom crying.

"I didn't think I had driven the point home well enough ..."

On Aug. 27, 1993, Brett was convicted of second-degree murder. A month later, a judge sentenced him to 11 to 20 years in the Lincoln Correctional Center.

"The judge read it off. Brett had to turn around to walk back to his seat to be led out. He had five guards this time ... five guards for my little brother.

"They led him out, and then I sat down. I just got lost. I don't think I cried, but I felt completely empty.

"That was a hard day to go home."

Waiting

Alissa says she waits for the day — in five years — when her brother will be eligible for parole.

"I feel like I'm just waiting for something. I can't sit around for five years, and I don't intend to. But there's nothing I would want to do or even feel like I can do. Not even school.

"It feels like the point of my life right now is to get Brett out of jail. That's stupid. That's something I have no control over."

With the end of the trial, Alissa says she is left to deal with the grief.

"It seems everyone who's important to me is gone. Mom, at the top, of course, because she ruled my life, and Brett, my best friend. Mom's dead. Brett's in jail. I guess it's stupid to build your world on so few things, but I had to."

Alissa, who is taking medication to control her manic-depressive behavior, spends time by herself and with relatives, and she visits Brett for 3 1/2 hours twice a week.

"I know this isn't biological, and there aren't any drugs that fix grief. It's hard, and I've been a procrastinator all my life. I've just put it off until now."

Her visits with Brett give her strength, and Alissa says she and her brother may have changed roles.

"He's strong; he's stronger than me in the ways he needs to be in that position.

"In my position, I was stronger. I didn't kill her."