

## Legally Adopted

I was eleven when I finally told my mother about my stepfather. It was almost as if she didn't believe me. Her crystal blue eyes stared into mine with skepticism. The wrinkles that crossed her face were of disbelief. I'll never forget the moment of truth, of devastation, as we sat at the kitchen table, just her and me, having an afterschool snack while I divulged my secret.

“Oh, honey. How can you say that about him? Karl loves you. He would never do anything to hurt you. He has legally adopted you, Samantha. He has set up a trust fund for you, and everything. If anything, God forbid, ever happened to us, Karl wants you to be taken care of as if you were his own. I'm sure there is some sort of a misunderstanding. He loves you. He brings home special gifts for you,” she said as she twisted a paper napkin into shreds. “How could you think he wants to hurt you?” My mother had a distorted look on her face. She kicked back from the table and drew me to my feet, forcing our eyes to meet. “I love you, Samantha. I wouldn't let anyone hurt you.” She pulled me into her chest and compressed our two bodies together. “You are my heart,” she whispered. “I'd die before letting something happen to you.”

Her neck, it was soft. My mother was small, too. Though, at eleven years old, I fit nicely against her. Her smell was always fresh, her hair often up in a beautiful twisting pony. Her makeup brightened her face, gave her creamy skin, color, but it didn't change her true features. I felt her arms push me away slightly, and her soft hand cupped my chin, raising it so our eyes met, once again.

“I promise you, I will have a talk with your stepfather. I am convinced whatever has happened between the two of you has been misconstrued. I know he loves you, baby.” She kissed me on the forehead and that was that. She turned away and went about her day.

A few weeks went by and he hadn't come back into my bedroom. I was sure my mother

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had said something to Karl. I washed dishes with my mom, helped her make the beds, and we went grocery shopping, and to the mall, several times. Not another word was mentioned. We talked about everything. Everything but that. I was so happy I could finally sleep without the disturbance of my mother's husband wanting to touch me in the middle of the night. He never appeared to be mad about her talking to him, nor was he curt in his behavior with me. Karl still treated me well, like one of his own, as my mother would say. We watched TV together, played cards, ate dinners. I had persuaded myself she took care of things. I convinced myself his touching was all in the past. Until one night, not even a month after my mother's promise to attend to things, I woke to his touch, his scent; a tang that exuded filth.

When my eyes opened, his hand was stroking my head. He was sitting beside me on my small, twin-sized bed. He began to vigorously rub my hair, then my shoulders, his free hand moved to his midsection.

“Move over.” He drew back the covers and began to stretch his long body beside mine.

I turned my gaze away from him. That is when I saw her. My mother, her eyes were wild as they peered through the small opening of my bedroom door. I'm sure she was searching for truth, searching for answers. She pushed through the threshold and flipped on the light. Her long hair was even more untamed than her eyes. It was rare I ever saw it down, brushing her shoulders, stringing toward her face.

“What are you doing?” She had a pitch in her voice I hadn't heard before. “Get your hands off of her!” Her jaw twitched, her teeth were clenched.

I was scared. I lied rigid in my bed, pulled the covers back up to my chin, and I stared at the stranger who was unexpectedly protecting me. She was my mother, yes. But I was faintly familiar with this person.

Karl abruptly stood. “It’s not what you think,” he yelled. Becoming a statue, he froze in place.

“What is it I am thinking – Karl?” Her voice hitched mid sentence and sounded like ripping metal. “Besides, it isn’t what I’m thinking, Karl – it’s what I see. I see you being a monster to my child.”

“You’re crazy!” He was intently looking right at my mother, staring her in the face, trying to convince her she was delusional. “Tell her, Samantha.” He turned back to me. “I just came in here to kiss you goodnight.” All of a sudden his desperate stare was on me.

I sat up and twisted my body, swung my legs out from under the covers, I sat shaking, perched on the very edge of my mattress.

“Tell her, goddammit!” His words seemed to cut his tongue while slicing through my psyche.

My chest began to throb, like maybe his eyes were drilling a hole into me. I said nothing. I could no longer look at him. I diverted my eyes back to my mother. With a sinking heart, I saw my mom’s arm swing around from behind her back, there was a handgun was in her grip.

“Back-off, Karl. How could you do this to Samantha? For Christ’s sake, Karl, she’s eleven years old. She says you’ve been doing this for years. Is that true?” The gun shook in her clasp, even as both hands firmly gripped the handle, the point of the weapon wobbled.

“Whatever she told you is a lie, Carolyn.” His tone was becoming more fraught as he reached out for her. “She’s a liar,” his cries pinged off the wall of my bedroom.

“You’re the liar, Karl. We’ve been married seven years and I don’t even know who you are. Who are you? Who are we?” The tears rolled down her face.

“Samantha – tell her.” His face twisted with angst, his hands went to prayer position.

“Please, tell her,” he begged me. His eyes were like that of a helpless animal.

“I already did,” I said. A low moan escaped through my strangled voice as I caught his pleading stare.

“I do not want you to talk to her. Do not even look at her, Karl.” My mom screamed even louder and waived the weapon in his face. Her voice was like a conduit of hysteria, causing a frenzied madness in my gut. “I defended you, Karl. I doubted my own child. You said you loved her – loved me. You don’t do those things to someone you love, Karl.”

“I do love her, Carolyn. Honey, please – I love you.” He extended his long arm toward her, his hand open, palm up. “Please, Carolyn.”

“That’s not love, Karl – that’s abuse. It’s sick is what it is.” Her eyes were angry slits in her head.

My body began to tremble uncontrollably as I listened to my mother’s resentment rise. Her cries came out in shrill heartbroken jags. She made him look her in the face then pressed the gun to his head. The fear in his eyes was evident. His posture was ramrod straight and unflinching. Swiftly, he made a lightning-fast motion for the gun.

The shot was loud.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, “NO!”

In one powerful moment the bullet exploded his head. A shower of blood sprayed me. I felt panicked. An out of control sensation started in my extremities and coursed through my veins as I watched him limply fall to the floor beside my bed. His body bounced back on me before hitting the floor with an immense thud. I forced the bile that had crept into my throat back down, that and the small pieces of my evening dessert tart. For one stunning moment, I felt relief

and grief all at once. I'd spent so much time thinking of him as a cruel, vile man, someone who had stolen my childhood. It was hard to believe I still had a vein of compassion for him as his head lie in a spreading pool of blood. I looked through the red splatters that now coated my eyes. I could barely see my mother's horrified, apologetic gaze.

“My God, what have I done? My God – My God! What did I do? I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry. I should have protected you. I should have protected you sooner.” Her eyes overflowed like a river that was too full.

For a brief moment, time stood still. I looked at my lost mother and I swear she was encased in a blue-gray cloud. My Gram called it an aura. I'd started seeing people's colors when I was real young. Though, I'd never seen anything like this. My mom's glow was flickering. Kinda like a broken wire that sparks, just before bursting into flames.

“I failed you, Samantha. He should have never been able to do those things to you. I neglected my baby girl.” Her cries were loud, blubbering, not really even directed toward me.

I was climbing off the side of my bed to reach for my mother, just as she raised the gun to her heart and looked me straight in the eyes.

“Please, forgive me.” Her voice fell, confusion pleated her forehead, and then she pulled the trigger.

My screams rang out louder than the bang of the gun.

“NO!”

My stomach flipped with dread as I jumped toward her. But it was too late. Blood quickly soaked through her nightgown. She twitched a few times then lay motionless, her legs bent in unnatural angles. For a brief moment, I was immobile, frozen in disbelief. It felt as if I was hovering from above, looking down on the scene. My stepfather and my mother lay on the floor

beside my bed. Their blood began to mix together as it seeped into the white carpet that covered the floor. I turned back to collapse onto the bed, but stopped, abruptly, when I noticed the red spots and clumping flecks on my covers, suggesting the spray of blood, of brain matter, and possibly pieces of my mother's heart, her husband's head. Instead, I dropped to the floor next to her and curled in a ball. I hugged up to her, close. I was in a place so dark, I couldn't even imagine light. It seemed I had dissolved into my tears, into her. Then I smelled her. She smelled pleasantly of face soap and night cream, which for me became the odor of profound, horrific grief. My cries became louder. There was a chill that had overtaken my bedroom. It was suddenly so cold, as if I could see my breath while I wailed my pain.

Once I finally caught a gulp of air, my brain began to work again, and I realized there was no one to come to the rescue. Suddenly the silence was as heavy as the burden of being alone. I felt panic take root. I jumped to my feet, ran down the hall to the kitchen, and jerked the phone off the wall and dialed 911 just as fast as I could. Every kid was taught that was a sure way to get aid. I pressed the phone to my ear, trembling, my legs feeling as though they would buckle under me at any moment, I waited for a voice.

I screamed frantically into the mouthpiece, "There has been a shooting. My mother needs help. Please hurry." Once the woman on the other end repeated my address, I banged the receiver for a quick click and dialed my grandmother. "Gram, wakeup," I cried. "I need you. We need you – now! Something terrible has happened. Grandma, please hurry. 911 are on the way." My tearful screams turned to grief stricken hiccups, my hands slick and slimy with blood. Without waiting for Gram's response, I slammed down the phone and ran back to my bedroom and dropped to the floor next to my mother, again.

She was already beginning to look like a dead person. At least the dead people I've seen on TV. Her face was ashy, her small hands were colorless, except for the crusty crimson that drenched her right hand. The bloodied weapon lay on the floor between her and my stepfather's body. Mom didn't move as I cradled her twisted, limp body in my arms. On impulse, I began to hum one of her favorite Beatle's songs. At the same time, the words slapped at my consciousness. *Yesterday – all my troubles seemed so far away, now it looks as though they're here to stay.* My mom was of the opinion the Beatles had a song for every occasion. This, however, didn't seem like the right one.

As I robotically hummed and chanted the words in my head, I could no longer look at her stillness. Instead, I glanced around my room and waited. I waited for someone – anyone. I glimpsed the pink and white dresser my mother and I had painted together. The lace curtains we put up in my room, with the pink ruffled valance to match my bedspread – my now blood-splattered bed cover. In the corner, was a tall shelf with a mosaic of colors, representing the assortment of outfits on each of my dolls, the dolls my mother had bought for me over the years.

Above my desk, tacked to a piece of memory-board, there were pictures of my mother, my grandmother and me, along with some of my friends from school. On top of my desk was the homework that she'd helped me with earlier, just before saying goodnight for the evening. Next to the spiral notebook was my beading tray. My mother and I were learning how to make earrings, bracelets and necklaces together. We had just brought home a gang of new beads, clasps and a roll of leather, and stretchy string. We were going to create something beautiful for Grandma for a birthday present.

The doorbell chimed loudly through the house. I gently laid my mother's heavy body on the carpet and moved quickly in the direction of the thunderous wrapping noise that hammered at the front door.

“Police – Open up!” A booming voice shot past the thick wood.

I rose onto my tiptoes and looked through the peep hole. There stood the officer, his weapon drawn, and a gaggle of others in uniform behind him.

“Yes, one minute and I'll let you in.” I tried to yell back with the same force as the officer, but my voice trembled wildly.

My heartbeat felt like a nervous hamster's would. I drew back to unlatch the locked door. I was shocked by what I saw. Blood smears were everywhere on the backside of the white raised wood panels. My handprints framed the peep-hole, my fingertips, my cheek marks, my palms, even where my knees bumped the door, left reddish-brown smudges. My nightgown, my hair, my feet, I was covered in blood. I swung back the door.

“I'm officer...” His words seemed to stick in his throat, his jaw hung. The large man in uniform was momentarily rendered speechless. “Are you hurt? Do you need medical attention?” He knelt in front of me and lightly clutched my shoulders. “Is there anyone in the house with a weapon?” His breath smelled like bubblegum. He turned his head back toward the others. “We need social services – ASAP!” He shouted a few words out to the officers in the street, along with a few hand gestures, they began moving. I was in a fog, at the same time, very alert. It's hard to explain. It was almost like I was watching a movie.

I grabbed his arm, hoping to pull him toward my mother. “There is no one else here. Please help her. Please save my mother.” I screamed my dread.

He firmly, but gently, held me at the entrance. Officers stormed passed us, an ambulance

waited across the street, and a team of people gathered near our driveway.

“There is a gun on the floor in that front bedroom.” I turned toward the hall and watched as three policemen overtook my home. Guns waving, they maneuvered our living room and hallway, then broke off in different directions throughout the rest of the house. Everything was moving at lightening speed.

“All clear sir,” a strong voice shouted from the back of the house. “We’ve got one weapon and two dead.”

“Officer – watch what you say!” Like the cracking of a whip, the large man’s voice snapped in a reprimanding tone. He put his hand on my shoulder, turned his head out the front door, “Get in here, now!”

I saw him swing his glare back to the young cop who walked toward us. It wasn’t as if the big-mouthed policeman was saying something I didn’t already know. Nevertheless, to hear it from someone else was unsettling. Karl was definitely dead. Even I knew that for sure. Half of his head was missing. I was afraid my mother was gone. I was pretty sure she was dead, too. But I held out hope. She never really moved once the bullet penetrated her. The insensitive, loud mouth cop had a plastic bag in his grasp, revealing what looked like the bloody gun my mom had had in her grip just before falling to the floor.

“Honey, do you have someone we can call to come and be with you?” The big policeman had a consoling stare as he looked into my face.

“I already called my grandma.” I could barely hear myself speak. My vision seemed to close in around me.

“That’s good, Honey. That’s real good. I need you to sit right here for a few minutes.” He pulled me toward our kitchen and gently settled me in the chair at the table. Then he turned and

started shouting orders. “It’s safe. Get the paramedics in here, now. First take care of her.” He pointed to me. “Then, have ‘em check on them.” He head nodded down the hallway before stepping over to the cop holding the weapon. “They are trained professionals, not you.” He towered over the guy. “They are the ones who make the call, not you.” Again his fierce look went to the young man whose head was hanging low.

Even though his tone was muffled, I could hear him discipline the young officer. As I sat, I looked around at the blood I had transferred to the doorway, the counter top, the walls, and the telephone. Queasiness overtook me. It was like one of those horror films I’d always been restricted from watching, yet managed to see anyway. The officer in charge wheeled around and stepped back in my direction.

“Can you tell me your name?” His bones popped and snapped as he stooped in front of me.

“Samantha, Sir.” My knees were bouncing as my feet nervously sprung off the ground, even as I tried forcing them to stay down. My tears were unusually large as they flowed off my face. Through the hefty droplets, I looked down at my hands, crusty with my mother’s blood. My cuticles were strangely outlined in burnt red.

“I need to get just a few pictures of you before I have them wipe you down, Samantha. Is that all right?” The officer lightly guided me out of the chair.

“Yeah.” I stood. For some reason I touched my hair. I don’t know why, as if I were going to fix myself for the photo, maybe. To my disgust, I felt the moist, clumped, bloody chunks that were caked to my head. I heard the top-cop snap his fingers, and in less than a second the flash of the camera was lighting up my horror. A crime scene photographer was documenting the little girl covered in her parent’s blood.

“What the hell is going on?” A large, heavy-set woman with darkish hair pulled into a messy up-dew, something she obviously did in a hurry, stood before me. “There will be no more pictures.” Her sharp eyes looked around the room filled with police officers and emergency personnel. “Get me a blanket – now!” She snatched the soft piece of material from the paramedic’s hand and wrapped me in it. I immediately felt safe. She dropped to one knee and pulled me into her arms. “Hi, honey. My name is Elizabeth Hanson. You can call me Beth. I’m a social worker with the Child Protective Services. I’m here to look out for you. Are you hurt? Are you thirsty? Are you alone?”

She fired off her questions fast, never letting up on the hold she had on me. I found such comfort in her strong embrace, even as I trembled inside. She looked to be my mother’s age, somewhere around thirty-eight, or so. Ms. Beth was plump on top, soft and cuddly. Her clothes smelled clean. She was casually dressed, khakis slacks and a collared tee-shirt with a blazer and a pair of tennis shoes. Her grip on me felt genuine. She handed me a soft, squishy stuffed bear to hold as she stood and stared down the large officer who remained at my side. I was only eleven years old, suffering through the worst tragedy of my life, and I had just figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

“Hanson, don’t look at me that way.” He spun away from Ms. Beth’s face. “I was just about to get Samantha a blanket.” Now it was the big cop who was looking sheepish.

Ms. Beth pushed past the officer and turned back toward me. “Samantha, I want to have these nice people check you over for injuries.” Ms. Beth pointed to the medic. “I want someone to take a look at this little girl, NOW!” Ms. Beth’s eyes were kind and gentle, even as she became the bull in the room.

*Check me over for injuries, I thought. Is it that easy to see I am wounded?*

“Do you have any pain?”

“No,” I lied. In fact, I had never felt such heart wrenching pain in all my eleven years.

“There is an awful lot of blood – have you been cut?” One of the emergency worker’s hands was exploring my head.

“It’s not my blood.” I can see their eyes searching my nightgown for tears, cuts, holes, but there were none. I had a person on each limb as they washed me down while I sat at my own kitchen table. The table, where only hours ago, I had dinner with my mother.

The police officers were the first to arrive and then the paramedic units were allowed to enter the crime scene. That was what everyone was calling it, *a crime scene*. The officer in charge left me, only when Ms. Beth appeared. He took charge of securing the premises. A yellow plastic ribbon roped off the area. It appeared they wanted to bar the observers that were beginning to gather. A group of people dressed in normal clothes carrying suitcases and bags began to descend on my home.

“Hi, my name is Detective Stevens.” He didn’t extend his hand, but he knelt to the floor in front of me and looked into my eyes. “I am a Crime Scene Investigator.” His voice was deep, strong.

“Isn’t that CSI?” I blurted. “That is my mom’s favorite show!”

“I am the investigator who will oversee things. You know, I will find out exactly what happened.” He stood, his gaze went from me to Ms. Beth. “Hanson, we will need to ask her a few questions.” He remained in the doorway of the kitchen, retrieved a pen from his shirt pocket and a small notebook from his coat pocket. He was wearing rubber gloves.

“What crime scene? What the hell happened here? My God, Samantha! Oh my God, are you all right? Where is Carolyn? Where is your mother? Where is my daughter?” My

grandmother made a thunderous entrance as she plowed through the barricade of people to get to me. Her flowered housedress was wrinkly, her hair flat, pressed to her head on one side, and her neck bared a slight crease, undoubtedly left behind by her bedcovers. Without hesitation, she took me in her arms and steadied me. “Are you okay?” When she whispered into my ear, my chest loosened, my shaking turned to relief. “My God, baby, where is your mother? What happened here? What have you been through? Where is Carolyn?” Her voice was quivering wildly.

“She’s dead, Gram.” I spit it out. I didn’t even know the words were coming before I said them. “She’s dead. Mamma is dead, Grandma.” I began to sob loudly.

Gram’s skin turned a sickly shade of gray. She dropped her hold on me and started tearing through the house. Two police officers grabbed her before she reached my bedroom.

“Please, let me see her. Let me see my daughter.” Gram pleaded with the two men that held her back. “Oh, God – please!” Her voice was as hollow as a cave while it echoed through the hallway of our home. “Why? Why? Why?” A great big howling scream filled the house, Gram’s crying turned to inconsolable sobs.

I hated to be the one to tell her that her daughter was dead, her only child, my mother, dead.

I watched my grandmother fall to her knees in our hallway. She took a moment to crackup before becoming my solid rock. Ms. Beth immediately walked over to her. I followed. We both rested our hands on her shoulder. Ms. Beth fished in her jacket pocket and came out with a tissue she offered my Gram. She pressed it into the palm of her hand. Gram wiped at her dripping nose.

“She was protecting me, Grandma. Mama was looking out for me.” She lifted her upper body and turn to face me. The skin beneath her lower lids was almost lavender in color and loose with wrinkles as the tears unreservedly streamed.

Our eyes locked. “Protect you – protect you from what? – From who?”

“From her husband, Grandma. She was protecting me from Karl.” I stared as a puzzled sadness overtook my grandmother.

She reached out. “Oh, Sam. What did that son-of-a-bitch do to you?” It was a rhetorical question. She swept me up in her arms. “Why hasn’t anyone washed this child?”

“They did,” I muttered.

“Well, Grandma can do a better job than this. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

My body collapsed into her arms. Finally, someone I knew, someone who could take control.

“Get out of the way.” Gram’s determined look was convincing, as the sea of people parted.

I saw the officer in control give his nod of approval, and Ms. Beth was clearing our way. She sidestepped past all of them into the hall bathroom, me in her arms. She carried me in and we cuddled on the cool tile floor and sobbed together. I thought my tears were big, until I saw hers. My grandmother was a tender individual. She smelled of fresh flowers, her skin was as soft as tissue paper. She was a young widow, my grandfather died when I was a baby. She never remarried, still lives alone. I knew she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

My Gram managed to bathe me, and with Ms. Beth’s assistance, get me a pair of underwear, jeans, a tee-shirt, socks and a pair of tennis shoes, all without disturbing any evidence. After endless minutes in a small blue room, one the was designed by my mother to

resemble a beautiful lagoon in some tropical paradise, we emerged; red, swollen eyes and brokenhearted – but blood free, or so it appeared. We walked into the living room, and into a flurry of activity. It had become apparent by the site of brown paper sacks and Zip-lock bags that were scattered about the carpet, the CSI Unit had been busy. The photographer who snapped my picture was still clicking away. I never glimpsed the photographs from the scene. Yet, they are pictures that are crystal clear in my mind, even today.