

## The Stephanie Fuller Story by Ashley DeNardo (non-fiction)

**-Worthless, useless, gone.** When I was a little girl, people always used to tell me how worthless my real parents were. They would tell me how lucky I was to be with Jen and Paul. They told me I didn't deserve to be with them, a rotten, poor Italian girl like me.

Jen and Paul adopted me when I was 7 years old. My mother had just killed herself and my stepdad was back in prison, and I was all alone...for days. When he was taken away for selling drugs, my mother, Tammie, couldn't take being alone. She would take it out on me, physically and verbally. I was worthless. I couldn't do anything right. I wasn't a man so I was of no use to her.

One day, my face bruised and my body battered, I got up to find my mother. Gunshots weren't unusual around here, but it sounded so close. I found my mother, naked, all skin and bone, lying in a red bath. Where her facial features should have been, a bloody abyss had taken form. I panicked. I hid in the pantry. It wasn't the first time I had cried myself to sleep. I woke up to the sound of a man. Officer Handlin. He had been invited to many family disputes in the past. I didn't have to see him to know who he was. I just sat in the pantry.

"Tammie Fuller. Age 23. Died about two hours ago," he said. "Suicide." I heard a zipper, the word suicide still ringing in my ears. I remember, that was the first time I ever heard that word. I heard a man ask about a child. Was she with a grandmother? They had checked everywhere, they said. All I could do was sit there quietly and try to figure out what a grandmother was. After what seemed like an eternity, the people that had invaded my home and finalized my mother's death left. I went back to sleep.

**-Calgon.** Over the next few weeks, there was no one to call me names, no one to put me down. I did whatever I wanted. I slept when I wanted to, ate when I needed to, and I did things any kid would do. Color in coloring books. Watch television. And, I didn't go to school. I guess Miss Fox noticed I hadn't been there.

One day, I heard a knock at the door. Being 7 and alone, I was extremely frightened. It could have been anyone! So, what do I do? I went back to the pantry and shut the door. I heard the front door creak open. The darkness caused it to seem louder than it really was. "Hello! Miss Fuller?" A woman's voice. "Heloooooo?" Now, although she was 23, Miss Fox had the voice of a nice, little old lady. She was young, but somehow sounded like kindness and wisdom. I will never forgive her for what happened next.

Her soothing voice coaxed me out of my hiding place. I ran to her. Finally, maybe, someone came to take me away from this city, I thought. But, no. With her was a policeman. Standing there, most would see a light. But, to me, it was just as dark as the pantry. I knew what they wanted.

"Miss Fuller..." said Miss Fox, "I'm sorry. You can't stay here like this. It's not healthy for anyone, especially not a child!"

"So you did come to rescue me!" I was praying and hoping.

"No." She said the police were here because there was no one to take custody of me and they were here to take me to an orphanage in the nice part of the city. The only word I had understood at the time was "no". I looked around me. Everything was a mess. Reality pushed the clouds from my eyes. There was still blood in the bathroom, where my mother had been. There were flies swarming everywhere. All I had left was rotten lollipops and moldy crayons. I hadn't bathed in weeks. I realized it was probably a good thing they came when they did. They were my Calgon. They were taking me away.

They led me out into a cop car. Sitting in the back seat in silence, it was the first comfortable silence I had ever experienced. All of my troubles were gone. They would find me great parents. "See, this isn't so bad." The policeman said as we reached the driveway of the orphanage.

**-Sunnyside Up.** As we pulled into the driveway of the orphanage, a big, black lady came running out of the house. The police officer opened my door. "Hey, girl," she sang to me in welcome. She was loud and boisterous, with a deep and cultural voice. "I'm Miss Tucker. Welcome to Sunnyside Up!" I didn't know it back then, but Sunnyside Up was not a motivational title. It was how they served you.

**-The Playroom.** The police car raced away, glad to be rid of me. Miss Tucker took me inside. As soon as we entered the playroom, she left me. The "play" room consisted of 3 chairs, one table, a box of assorted blocks and racecars, one book shelf, and exactly one tattered book; Tuck Everlasting. There were

12 other girls, from ages 5 to 11. I don't know all of their names. Miss Tucker never made us introduce ourselves. The only girl I remember is Alice.

Alice was a 9 year-old, blonde-haired girl. She had deep, black eyes and rosy cheeks. She was the first friend I had had in my first 7 years of life. She came right up to me and said "You're the ugliest little thing I ever seen." By the chuckle in her tone and the light in her eye, I knew she didn't mean any harm. I was dirty and I probably smelled pretty bad. "I'm Alice." A huge, warm smile.

All of the other girls were either whispering to each other or playing with the scarce amount of toys they had available to them. I heard one older girl say, "She's the unlucky 13<sup>th</sup>." Another said, "She looks like it, too." The way they said it, I knew they meant it.

Alice told me not to worry about them. She said that there are two types of kids out there. "The first type watches their parents and they end up jus' like 'em", she said. "But, you...you and I...we're the secon' type. We know what's right. Inside our hearts."

"How do you know what type of kids we are, Alice?" I asked her.

"I jus' know. I dreamt you were comin', Steph." I had never told her my name.

A big, dark-skinned girl came over. I couldn't tell you how old she was. "You're in my way," she said. I didn't move and I didn't know what to say.

"You better move." I moved.

"You're still in my way, 13." My new name. 13. The girl pushed me down. Alice punched this older girl right in the stomach. The other girls gasped.

I couldn't believe it. Someone had stood up for me? Protected me? I was indebted to this girl forever as far as I was concerned.

The dark-skinned girl began to wail.

Miss Tucker came rushing in. "Monique! Are you okay, baby? Who hurt you, baby-girl?" Alice had stood up to Miss Tucker's daughter. Whispers let me know that this was a BIG deal.

"Alice did it, mommy." Still wailing.

"Alice Carmichael! Come here." Alice didn't move. "NOW!" Miss Tucker seemed to fly to Alice. She grabbed her by her ear and dragged her through the room. Alice didn't help her one bit. I wasn't prepared for what I heard next.

Alice was screaming her head off. *Whip. Smack.* More screams. *Whip-smack. Whip-Smack.* The harder each crack of the whip, the louder my new friend would scream. I sat in a corner of the playroom. I held my knees tight and cried hard for the pain in the cries as Alice was beaten, sunny side up.

**-Dreams.** The next day, when Alice and I were getting ready for breakfast together, she needed help getting into her pink dress. As I helped gently slide the dress on, I witnessed scars and deep, fresh gashes where beautiful, young skin should have been. A small tear escaped my eye.

"How long have you been here, Alice?" Me.

"I been here for 5 years, so far." I looked at her, still teary-eyed. "It's really okay," she said. "You get used to it, eventually. As long as you have dreams to hold on to, there ain'ta pain too great. An', besides, someone needed to stan' up to Monique."

"Dreams?"

"Yes, dreams. Come on, you gotta have some sorta dreams, Steph. Not like you have when you're sleeping...like something you want more'n anything in the entire world."

"Like ice cream?"

"If that's what you hope to get outta life. My dream...it's silly. 'specially for a girl."

"You can tell me, Alice."

"I wanta write books. I think I read that Tuck Everlasting 'bout 15 times. I wanna write stories that make other people feel how that book makes me feel."

"What's Tuck...something...about, Alice?"

"Tuck Everlasting. It's about a girl who wants to be freed from her perfect, but protected life. She meets a fambly. This fambly can live forever. There's a bad guy and he wants the secret t' living forever. They won' let him know it. He gets hisself killed an' I didn' feel bad for him, neither. The girl, she has a chance t' live forever. Well, she doesn't take that chance."

"What's so special about that book?"

"See, here. That girl wanted to run away 'cuz her fambly cared about her too much. She didn't know what she was trying to run away from. But, she knowed one thing. She knowed how painful it would be to live forever."

She turned away from me. It seemed like an eternity before she spoke again.

“I just wanna live once, Steph.”

“I have a dream, too, Alice.”

“Good! What is it?” She smiled that safe smile.

“I want yours to come true.”