

Loved to Death:

One mother's journey through fostering and the murder of her son...
and the fight to change a system that let him die.

Prologue:

In a span of only 22 months, I lost my father, brother, marriage, and the adoption of my only two children. It's more than anyone's fair share of grief but the murder of my son Anthony has been more devastating than all other losses combined. My world was forever changed the day I learned he was no longer in it.

In order to preserve the integrity of the details of these events, I relied heavily on audio recordings, emails, text messages, social media posts, personal journals, and legal documents shared by the prosecution team. Therefore, every single word is true.

Chapter 1:

887 days—that’s how long I was legally Anthony’s mother. Two and a half years of knowing his every move, anticipating his every need, interpreting his every sound. I didn’t birth him, but I loved him like I did. The years spent raising Anthony were my greatest honor; he was, without a doubt, the absolute love of my life. From the moment I held him, only 8 weeks old, I knew I was meant to be his and he was meant to be mine. It was a surreal sensation of dormant gears clicking into place and—suddenly!—I was finally what I was made to be. I have no regrets, not one, in the way I raised him while he was mine; I fought as hard as I could, as long as I could, until the very end. I only wish it had mattered.

My boy was delicious and delicate, an absolute dream to raise. Since learning of his death, I both cling to and try to drive away flashes of his smile, his laughter, his hugs. As I reflect on my time as his mother, I remember every detail of our life together; intimate moments that feel permanently locked away where no one can touch them. I’ve excavated every memory I can find: 2,000 photos, dozens of video clips of our life together, his laughter and mannerisms. I smile as I recall his beautiful long eyelashes, the gap in his front teeth, the way he sucked his thumb with his pointer finger curled over the bridge of his nose. I am oddly fixated on the crook of his elbows, how I loved the softness of that thin skin and how it made him giggle when I kissed him there. I swear I can still feel him—the shape of his head in the palm of my hand, the soft satin of his cheeks, the thick pillow of his lips, the texture of his hair, the cadence of his breathing when he fell asleep, his strong arms gripped around my neck when we hugged. I can still feel the weight of his body against my chest while we slow danced in the kitchen, and the ebb and flow of the nursery rocking chair as we sang “You Are My Sunshine,” whispering altered lyrics of “please don’t take my son away...” I’m afraid the weight of these memories, of our time together, will swallow me whole.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around how this came to be, but at the end of a two and a half year legal battle, Anthony and his sister Blessing were court-ordered into reunification with the woman who birthed them. When they left I grieved like a death with no end, unable to move passed the gaping hole that remained. I stayed stuck in the memories of the family I used to have, too devastated to try motherhood again, finding it unfathomable to have a more perfect experience than I did with him. There was a suffocating suspension of unfinished business in adoption being denied because there wasn't a physical death that could categorize the crushing weight of the loss. I knew my kids were out there, but I had no way to protect them, to reassure them, to know if they were safe. It felt like a real-life kidnapping, except it was a judge who said they could be taken and that I had no way of communicating with them or knowing their whereabouts.

I had envisioned our reunion hundreds of times; Anthony standing at my front door and I'd look for the freckle below his left eye, wrap my arms around his ribcage where the right side is kissed with a heart-shaped birthmark. I'd laugh as I notice that his left front tooth is no longer chipped now that he'd lost his baby teeth. I thought he'd be grown, matured, unknown yet familiar at the same time.

Instead, my son will never lose his first tooth, or go to summer camp, or learn how to drive. He will never have his first kiss or go to prom or graduate high school. He will never get married and build a life with someone he loves, or buy their first home where they can raise their children. A shred of solace comes when I realize that instead, I was the most important woman in his life and the one who lived to love him back. I was the one he danced with each day and kissed goodnight at bedtime. I was his soulmate and he was mine. And perhaps, that is enough.

The woman who gave life to Anthony also brutally took it, just weeks after his 4th birthday. Her name is Sophia but I cannot call her a mother, obviously. He had her DNA but they were nothing alike; it seems the evil in her rejected the goodness and purity in him. When I think of this woman I have a surprising softness in my heart—compassion is too strong of a word—but a sensitivity to her nonetheless. She had trauma, was in

foster care herself, had no family to speak of. But she's also a 45-year-old woman who birthed at least 7 children, an unfit caretaker to every single one of them. Rather than hate her, I've decided to try to understand her.... to understand how any parent could do what she's done.

Right now, suspended between my past dream and present nightmare, I await a murder trial and "closure" however and whenever it will come. I don't know how to live with the terror that was his reality, to keep breathing and existing with those images in my head. I don't know how to, but I have to. There are glimmers of joy that his torment and torture is over, but also a deep, desperate sorrow that I must make peace with—I do not want agony to be the anthem over my life. There's no beauty yet from these ashes. There's no resolution, no justice, only the hope that healing will come in droplets. I have to walk the road ahead of me with eyes and heart open to the glimmers of Grace along the way, teaching me how to accept the unacceptable and survive the unimaginable.

I've learned that the grittiness of grief produces pearls of wisdom, if we let it. From the very early days of learning of his murder, I've had this vision of walking along an abandoned beach, toes in the surf of gently lapping waves. As I walk the shoreline the sorrow keeps spitting up valuable treasures at my feet. I pluck them from the sand, wipe them off and examine them, bury them deep in my pocket so I don't lose their precious beauty.

Chapter 2

Let me paint the picture. I'd spent a quiet Christmas with my best friend, Charis, and on Tuesday, December 27th I return home after an overnight of baby-sitting her toddler. She was only weeks away from welcoming their second child. As I make her two-year-old's breakfast, my sister JoNell calls me and we laugh about running background checks on the crazy people in our lives. It plants the seed and I have a lingering feeling that it's time to look Sophia up again, in hopes of information about my kids.

When I get home around noon, I am restless. The first year after losing the kids, I did this background-checking quite often. It had been awhile since I ran a search on her and I feel a deep knowing in my gut that it's time to do so again. I pace circles around my kitchen and living room, feeling unsettled, questioning if anything good would come from digging.

Before I sit down to enter her details into the database, I work out my anxiety by tidying up the house. Months earlier I'd taken a small wooden chest, about 10"x14" with beautiful black hardware, and finally rid it of the mementos I had called my ex-husband's "death box"—the Detroit Tigers jersey I'd held onto for his funeral, a painful letter he wrote but never sent to the recipient, a few key items to comfort his parents in the event of his passing...

The chest had sat empty in my office for 3 months. When I come across Anthony's belongings that day—various onesies and t-shirts, stuffed animals, a blue crocheted baby blanket—I make an impulsive decision. For absolutely no reason at all, I carry the empty box to my living room and feel compelled to gently fold Anthony's items into it, one by one. I leave the chest propped open on my living room floor, mementoes spilling out as some sort of shrine to him.

Six hours later, I learn that he is dead.

It happens like this: At 3:32pm, JoNell and I had been talking over FaceTime for nearly an hour, laughing as we run our respective background checks. I'm scrolling through Sophia's long criminal history when I see new records with the most recent date: March 6, 2022.

I audibly gasp and my hand flies up to my mouth.

"What?" my sister asks. I'm too stunned to say anything. "Kara, what did you find?" I read it out loud: Murder—Felony and 4 counts of Cruelty to a Child.

There isn't any other information listed. I start crying, panicked. We hang up so she can search for more details and I immediately look for any press coverage of the murder. I call Charis and she and her neighbors start sleuthing, trying to find public records for the Atlanta area. I text her full names, birthdates, social security numbers. We are all frantic.

At 5:03pm I text JoNell, *"I can get to their last known address in 4 and half hours and I'm seriously considering just going there tomorrow and knocking down doors."*

She reassures me, *"We can be to you by morning and we can do whatever you need."*

I reply, *"I am losing my shit."*

Minutes later, I have a 3-way call with JoNell and another sister, Lora. They agree to drive through the night to North Carolina so we can head to Atlanta first thing in the morning.

When we hang up I'm agitated and riddled with anxiety over what we're going to find. I can't sit still and decide a hot shower might calm me. I strip down naked in my closet and suddenly a wave of panic forces me to double-over, my fists shaking as I scream, "Let me see my son—I want to see my son!" My palms have nail marks dug deep into them. In the shower I turn my face into the stream of water to drown out my tears.

Three hours go by and we still haven't learned who died. Charis has found court documents, an indictment outlining the charges and a denial of bail, but we can't see who the victim was. (Months later she tells me she must have been blinded to the part that specifically listed Anthony, some sort of divine protection until the time was right.)

By 8:20pm I'm still looking for any media reports of a death near Sophia's last known address. I finally stumble onto a news clip from December 23rd with the headline "*4-year-old taken to hospital with gunshot wound in his foot, police say.*"

I immediately send the link to my sisters commenting, "This video is about a 4-year-old boy that lives in their actual apartment complex—it was only 4 days ago! Is it truly possible that it's Anthony???"

For ten minutes my heart is buoyed with incredible hope. I feel badly about whoever Sophia killed, but I'm elated that the reunion I've dreamt of is now only hours away. It all starts to click—that this must be the reason my heart had never let go, the reason I had never feel released from my kids, the reason I could never move on! I am pacing and thanking God that He has finally answered my prayers by giving my boy back to me. I envision driving to Atlanta as soon as my sisters arrive and doing whatever it takes to get my hands on my son. I believe with everything in me that he is alive.

Through Facebook, I'm somehow able to track down Blessing's paternal grandmother, Carol, and I send her this message:

8:32pm — "Hi Carol, I'm not sure if you remember me but I was Anthony and Blessing's foster mom for two and a half years. I received word about Sophia and am desperate to know if the children are alright. Could you please share with me whether they are okay? I'm begging for any answer you can give me."

The ping of Facebook messenger goes off. She asks me who I am.

8:39pm — I attach our family photo. *“They lived with us from 2018-2020. I've been trying to reach Sophia for years but have never gotten a response. Can you please confirm that they are okay?”*

She tells me to Google Sophia's name and search for her charges.

8:40pm — *“I did see the court records and charges, but can't find any information about any of the children.”*

She tells me that the kids are with her now, that she had gotten custody back in August.

8:42pm — I again ask for answers. *“So both Anthony and Blessing are okay? Are their siblings okay?”*

A pregnant pause until I hear the ping again. *“Anthony passed away.”*

Ping. *“She killed him March 6”*

Ping. *“I knew the court should have never gave her back those children.”*

Ping. *“She beat him to death.”*

And here is where my world goes black.

~

I remember screaming. The shrill, blood-curdling screams of a wild animal, and I'm confused because I have no idea where they are coming from and then realize they are my own. I slide off the couch to the floor, landing hard on my knees, then fall onto all

fours with my forearms on the ground. I fumble for my phone as my vision closes into darkness, my hands shaking as I text Charis: “*Get here now. Anthony is dead.*” She immediately calls, and I am slamming my open palms into the floor, screaming “She killed him—she killed my baby—he’s dead—she killed him!” Charis frantically tries to shout over my cries, “Are you sure? Kara, are you *sure?*” But she knows by my anguish it’s true. She runs down her hallway screaming to her husband that it was Anthony who was murdered, and he shouts back just one word: “Go!”

My delirium continues but my hands seem to have a life of their own; I manage to screenshot Carol’s words and send it to my sisters with no other explanation. In the car, racing to me from Michigan, they lose their minds. JoNell is driving, Lora in the passenger seat. JoNell starts shouting and has to pull the car over but Lora insists, “We have to keep going!” so they switch seats and get back on the highway before calling me. I’m still screeching, “She killed him—she killed my baby—why?—why would she do this?” They are both horrified and crying, telling me to breathe and they are on their way but all I can choke out is for them to contact my ex-husband, Brian.

Meanwhile, Charis is speeding to my house and fighting her own hysteria. She calls our friend, Tara, shouting that she doesn’t know what to say or do, that she just knows I’ll need sedatives. She prays during the rest of the drive, afraid of what she might find when she gets to me.

Waiting for Charis, everything passes in a blur of blinding flashes, like a strobe light. I have no control of my body, rocking back and forth on all fours, driving fists so hard into the floor I can’t feel them anymore. I bury my face in the rug and scream until my throat is hoarse and my lungs burn. When Charis flies through the door, she finds me hyperventilating, gagging and dry-heaving, bile on the floor. I try to clean it up with tissues but I can’t see my hands in front of me. I am oddly still blind.

She drops down to the floor to hold me, and I’m wailing “He was perfect—he was so perfect—why would she do that—he was so perfect!” Charis sees that every item I had

put in the wooden chest that morning is now spread out around me and I'm clinging tightly to them. My sorrow turns to rage, "I knew this would happen—I knew it—I wanted him back—she didn't have to do this!"

My rage then turns to despair and I moan, "I don't want to live without him in the world." Rightfully, she fears that I mean it and texts Tara to hurry with the sedatives.

At 9:26pm I'm still on the floor, curled tightly inward with agony, when I get a text from a number not stored in my phone: *I'm calling you now. Answer. Brian*

A minute later, his call comes through and I hear his voice for the first time since my dad died. I can't speak, only wail.

"I know—I know" he manages. I am weeping, he is raging, cussing out Sophia, vowing that we're going to get Blessing back. I pull myself together enough to gently plead with him to stop, to calm down, to let himself feel the pain, but he's just roaring and slurring his words. After 6 minutes we hang up.

Tara arrives shortly after and they dose me with multiple Ativan and my prescription sleeping pills. I'm laid out on the floor, head pounding and still blind.

"When will they kick in?" I beg. "How much longer?" Charis reassures me that it won't be long until the pills take affect. With Tara on the floor rubbing circles on my back, Charis slowly backs away and sits on the couch, stunned into silence as she goes into shock. Her only thoughts are "*What is happening right now?*" and "*How do we get her through the night?*" (Days later she tells me that without being sedated I would've had to be hospitalized, and she's right. I've never experienced hysteria like that before.)

By 10:15pm, they have gotten me into bed and Charis is laying next to me, praying over me while we both cry until the drugs blanket me with numbness and I fall asleep. She later recalls that at 10:57pm I snap awake and roll over to say something. It was

profound enough for her to make a memo in her phone: “I need you to remind me not to give up. I am going to change foster care.”

I roll over again and immediately fall back into a deep sleep. She texts my sisters updates until midnight, letting them know that she’s not going anywhere until they arrive and can keep watch over me. They ask if there’s any other details about who was hurt. Charis replies, “Only Anthony.”

My sisters make it by 4:00am and arrive to find Charis sleeping next to me. JoNell tries to fall asleep on the couch and Lora starts to pray while walking in circles around my house. At 6:00am our brother Nate offers to head straight to me if that would help, but they tell him to stay and prepare to break the news to our mom and other siblings. When I finally wake up, my sisters hear me sobbing and come straight to my bedside. I don’t remember if any words were shared, just tears.

For those first few days I am fed a steady stream of Ativan and occasional swigs of whiskey to keep the hysteria at bay. My palms and fists are stiff and bruised a deep purple from slamming them into the floor. I barely move from the couch so my sisters keep giving me fluids and try to make me eat. Lora never leaves my side, sleeping next to me so she can fetch more pills, water, tissues, whatever I need in the middle of the night. Every time I crawl under the sheets I need every tangible item of Anthony’s close to me—I bury my face in his blanket, pull his stuffed rabbit tightly to my chest.

On Friday, December 30th, while Charis and my sisters are talking quietly in the kitchen, I strip down and take a shower for the first time in days. I whisper to my Google smart speaker to play a worship song that I’ve kept on repeat and I tap the volume all the way up in hopes that it will drown out my cries. I step into the spray of hot water and immediately collapse. I’m on the shower floor and hear screaming again, genuinely not registering that it’s mine. I wail and claw like a wild animal at the tile floor and drain plate until my nails are torn and ragged.

At some point Charis, 38-weeks pregnant, quietly enters the bathroom, strips down to her bra and underwear, opens the shower door and steps in, pulling my broken body into a seated position. She is also crying and starts gently washing me and I'm too stunned with grief to understand what is happening. I just surrender.

Later, I'm on the couch rocking back and forth and the tears are relentless. Of course I think of death; it would be a welcomed mercy. The day before I had text one confidant, "I will not survive this." And now, knees hugged tight to my chest, I whisper to Charis "Please, please let me die. I can't do this..." and I hear her firm resolve insisting, "I'm never going to let you give up, Kara."