

BURNS SURVIVOR:

‘My mum tried to kill me – now I’m helping others’



Ashley now

Ashley Hodo thought she nearly died in a house fire as a baby – but the truth was even more tragic...

nightmare. She explains, “I’d be watching my dad snoozing on the sofa, before mum picked me up and carried me into the kitchen. I’d then feel pain and terror before waking up in a hospital with a nurse looming over me. I could never understand it.”

NIGHTMARE

Ashley was brought up by her aunt Rhonda, her father’s sister. Ashley says, “I was confused by my set up. I used to ask, ‘Where’s mummy and why don’t I live with daddy?’ but she always said it was too hard to explain.”

“She did tell me that I had been in a house fire as a baby, though. I just presumed my nightmares were linked to that trauma. I’d suffered third-degree burns to over 30 per cent of my body and had constant skin grafts and operations every six months. I also had saline bags implanted under my burn scars to stretch the new growing skin. The pain was torture, but the nurses lifted my spirits. They let me sit with them and play games – they were like family.”

But as Ashley got older, she became more inquisitive about the fire and her parents – and the more her aunt refused to answer questions, the more questions it raised. Ashley says, “It felt like there was a big secret. By my teens, I was certain my burns weren’t from a house fire, but

I didn’t know what happened.”

After her 72nd surgery, when she was 15, Ashley was taken to see a public prosecutor by her aunt. When they sat down together, Ashley was dealt with a life-changing bombshell. She says, “The lawyer said to me, ‘I don’t know if you know this, but when you were a baby, your mother put you in the oven’. I was stunned as he told me she was in prison and had a parole hearing shortly and that’s why I needed to know. My own mother had tried to kill me – it felt like a nightmare.”

‘I COULDN’T BELIEVE MY OWN MOTHER TRIED TO KILL ME’



Mother, Melissa, was jailed

When the lawyer showed Ashley photos of her as a girl, horrifically burned and blistered, she burst into tears – and that’s when she realised her reoccurring bad dreams weren’t nightmares – but in fact memories. She says, “Newspaper clippings revealed that when I was 14 months old, mum removed the racks from the oven and put the grill on. She turned it to high and forced me in, headfirst.”

“During her trial, the court heard she’d done it because she was jealous of the attention dad gave me. It was like something out of a horror film. I couldn’t believe it had happened to me.”

BEHIND BARS

Ashley’s mum, Melissa Wright, had been sentenced to 25 years for attempted murder in 2003. But after finding out the truth, Ashley was determined to see her behind bars for longer and



Her mother was jealous of the attention her husband gave her daughter



Ashley still has scars



Poor Ashley suffered third-degree burns



She needed years of surgery afterwards

bravely took to the stand at her probation hearing in 2016. Ashley says, “I said that I didn’t trust her around children, and that I don’t hate her, but I don’t love her.”

Melissa’s parole was denied and, eventually, her father opened up to her and relayed the full horrific story. Ashley says, “He said mum started acting strangely and he wanted to

leave with me. But one day, after giving me a bath, he fell asleep and was woken to the sounds of screaming. He ran to the kitchen and saw me in the oven.”

“With my skin peeling he drove me as fast as he could to the nearest hospital. He was diagnosed with PTSD after what he’d seen.”

TRUTH

Knowing the truth, Ashley started to put her past behind her and went on to meet the love of her life, Anthony, in 2020, through friends, at the age of 19. The couple, who live in Alabama, USA, went on to have three children.

She says, “My scars are visible, so when Anthony asked

what had happened to me, I told him I was burnt as a child. Over time, when I felt comfortable, I told him what happened in full. He was shocked. ‘How does a mother do that to her own baby?’ he asked me. He couldn’t understand it. Nobody could. It’s so extreme.”

Ashley says, “I received a letter from my mother, but there wasn’t an apology. She wanted to see pictures of my kids and asked if she could have a second chance to be a mum, but there was no way. I wasn’t interested in having a relationship with her.”

Now Ashley has become a paediatric nurse, citing the impact the nurses had on her as a girl as inspiration. She adds, “I’m the girl in the oven who made headlines around the world. I know I’m so much more than that, though – I’m a survivor.”

As told to Danielle Lett and John Parrish



Ashley put the trauma behind her and now has three children

IMAGES: PHOTOS OF MELISSA WRIGHT AND ASHLEY SMITH IN COURT WFSAY MUG; SHOT OF MELISSA WRIGHT ALABAMA DEPT OF CORRECTIONS