*WHAT WE KNOW OF TAMARA & BRITT’S STORIES AT THE TIME OF CONTINUED CUSTODY:*

Tamara’s DOB: 7-17-2005

Britt’s DOB: 5-15-2014

Tamara is 11 years old and in the 6th grade at East St. Aloysius Parish Middle School. She was born in July of 2005. Her mother is Sophia Pederson and her father is Jared Hutchins. Jared left the family a little over a year ago, in April 2015, but he and Sophia are still married. Within a few weeks of Jared leaving the family home, Sophia began dating a guy named Charles Blankenship, and began drinking a lot more than usual. Tamara lives with her mom, her 2-year-old little brother Britt, and as of 2 months ago, Charles. Britt was born in May 2014 when Jared and Sophia were still together and the family was doing well. Jared hasn’t seen Britt since just before his 1st birthday.

Tamara is really close to her grandma Cathryn, who she loves and trusts, but Cathryn and Sophia don’t get along so Tamara has to talk to Cathryn by phone when no one else is around. She misses her dad and was very close to him when he was around, but he lives in Mississippi now. He hasn’t called her in a long time and she’s worried something bad has happened to him. Tamara used to be close to her mom, but ever since Charles started coming around, Sophia doesn’t seem to care about anyone but him.

Lately, Charles has been coming into her room at night and touching her breasts. He has been touching her during the day when no one is looking for months, even before he moved into the house with them. He’s sneaky about it, and tells her that she can’t tell anyone because no one will believe her. Who would believe that he could touch her like that and not be caught, in broad daylight, in front of her mom? But he did. Then he moved in a couple of months ago. That’s when he started getting into her bed at night when everyone else was asleep.

He sometimes talked to her when he did it. She pretended to be asleep, but that never stopped him. Last night, he put his hands on her bare breasts underneath her pajama top. She tried really hard to stay completely still and prayed she would just disappear. She was worried what he would do next. A noise in the other room distracted him, and that’s when he left and she got up, got dressed, and got in the closet. She brought her phone with her into the closet in case she needed to call for help, even though she wasn’t sure who she would call. She watched the clock on her phone from 2:45 am until 5:45 am when Britt started crying. She went into his room as she did every morning, stepping over toys, clothes, and shoes to get to his crib. She picked him up and realized his diaper was wet and dirty. Britt’s room smelled like what she remembered her grandmother’s litter box smelling like when the cats were left alone in the house for the weekend. There were old, soiled diapers piled on top of the dresser and the trash can was overflowing again. Tamara used to take the trash out herself in the morning before school, but that was before Charles moved in and she had to worry about waking him up. Lately, she pushed the mess on the floor out of the way with her foot and set Britt down on the dirty carpet. That’s where she changed his diaper and put a different shirt on him. She couldn’t find any shorts or pants, though, so just a diaper and a shirt.

Britt was still fussing, so Tamara brought him into the kitchen to look for something for him to eat. There was no milk or juice in the refrigerator, which only worked some of the time anyway; food left in there went bad quickly. Tamara was trying to find something to stop him from crying because she didn’t want him to wake up Charles who she thought might try to pick up where he left off a few hours earlier. There was one small pack of crackers in the cabinet, and a can of beets that was dusty. Tamara gave the crackers to Britt – there were only 2 left in the pack – and then found a cup on the countertop that she rinsed out and filled halfway with water for him. She knew he would spill some of the water because he couldn’t really drink out of a cup yet, but she couldn’t find any clean baby bottles and her mom had never bought him any sippy cups. Britt ate the crackers quickly and drank the water, spilling most of it on his shirt and the floor. It was enough to keep him quiet, so Tamara picked him up and put him back in his bed. She tickled him and played with him for a few minutes. She was worried that he was starting to look sick. She knew Sophia wouldn’t bring him to the doctor, so she would try to get some medicine from her friend at school who has a little brother of her own. Maybe Amanda could sneak some to her tomorrow.

Tamara’s phone said it was 6:09 am. A whole hour before the bus. After she got Britt settled into his bed, Tamara went back into her room and shut the door. She couldn’t lock it because the lock was broken, but she moved a bag of clothes the neighbor had brought over from the local church clothes drive in front of it to try to hold it shut. She really had to use the bathroom, but she was afraid Charles might hear her and come back. She sat on the floor and leaned against the big bag of clothes and shut her eyes. The next thing she heard was her mother’s alarm clock a minute before 7:00 am. She jumped up, already dressed and ready to go. She threw the door open and went straight into Britt’s room to do her last check on him before she left for school. He was sleeping. She was relieved; it wouldn’t be one of those days that she had to bounce and rock him back to sleep before leaving. She left out of his room, closing the door behind her. She grabbed her book sack from the living room and could see through the crack in her mother’s bedroom door that her mother was getting up. Charles had been lying next to her in the bed. His foot moved. Tamara walked quickly toward the door. Her mother called her name as she opened the door. Tamara wished she could talk to her mom so she turned to look at her, but Charles was sitting up in the bed by then. She knew how it would go. She told her mom goodbye and went out the door, walking quickly for several minutes until she reached the bus stop at the end of the street.

The bus finally came and brought her to school. She saw her best friend, Amanda Powell, just before the bell rang for first period. She and Amanda went into the bathroom, and that’s where Tamara told her what happened the night before. Amanda told her that she had to tell her teacher. She had 4 different teachers – she could pick whichever one she wanted – but she had to tell one of them. The bell rang and they went to class.

At lunch, Tamara went to see Ms. Hanley, the guidance counselor. She told Ms. Hanley what happened the previous night with Charles. She was embarrassed and afraid, but she told her as best she could. Ms. Hanley asked her to wait in the hallway while she made a phone call, so she stood outside leaning against the wall for what felt like a really long time until Ms. Hanley opened the door and let her back in the office.

Tamara then had to tell the same story several other times. Each time, parts of it were harder to talk about, but other parts were easier to talk about. She told the lady from the state named Dora that, not only did he come in last night, but he had been coming in before that. He came in every night since he moved in that he wasn’t too drunk to make it to her room. It was hard for her to talk about. She felt like it was her fault and she should have stopped it sooner. She must have done something wrong for him to do this to her. There was no one she could talk to before. She didn’t know Ms. Hanley that well, so she had not told her about the previous nights. But talking about it with Dora felt OK. She did not tell Dora about him touching her before he moved in, though.

Tamara really wanted their old lives back, but the longer Charles stayed around, the more she just wanted to get away from both Charles and Sophia. She would have run away lots of times, but Britt would have been left behind. She couldn’t do that to him.

As nervous as she was, she was a little relieved when Dora picked her up from school and told her she wasn’t going home that night. But she was also a little angry that no one asked her whether she wanted to go home or not. Then Dora brought her to a place she didn’t know. A stranger’s house. It was close to her school. It all happened very quickly. No one really talked to her about what was about to happen. No one asked her what she wanted. What about her mom? What about Britt? What was Charles going to do to them? When would she see them again? She wanted to ask about her dad and her grandmother, but there was no time. She went inside the strangers’ house and let Dora make the introductions. The man’s name was Jay and the lady’s name was Laura. Dora got a list of everything that Tamara needed, and she told her she would either go get her stuff from her house or buy her new stuff to make sure she had everything. For now, the family she was staying with had clean toothbrushes and pajamas for that night. Dora would make sure she had what she needed by the next day. Later, after Dora left and the family had asked her if she was hungry and showed her to the room she would be sleeping in, Tamara realized she had not spoken to her grandmother yet. So she called Cathryn. She told Cathryn about what she had told the guidance counselor and Dora. She told her that she was brought to stay with a family near her school. She did not tell her about the physical abuse or how long Charles had been touching her. Tamara asked Cathryn to call Dora and see if she could stay with her. Cathryn told her she would but she didn’t know if she could get through in the evening. It might be the next day. Tamara asks Cathryn to check on Britt, and Cathryn tells her she will do her best.

After getting off the phone, she realized that the foster mom had walked into her room with a snack for Tamara since supper was still a few hours away. Ms. Laura asked who she was calling, and Tamara told her all about her grandmother and little brother. Ms. Laura was the first person to ask Tamara about her whole family, all her relatives, and what she wanted to do. She also asked about Britt. She could tell Tamara missed Britt and was worried about him, so she promised to call Dora with DCFS and talk to her about Britt to make sure he was OK. Ms. Laura also explained to Tamara that now that Dora was involved, there would be a court case. Tamara didn’t understand why they needed to go to court. Ms. Laura explained that a judge would need to hear her story and make sure she was safe and could not be hurt again. Tamara knew this should make her feel better, but she felt really scared.

The next day after school, Tamara returned to Jay and Laura’s house. When she walked in, she saw Dora was there talking to Laura, and Laura was holding Britt. Tamara dropped her book sack and ran over to Britt. They hugged each other and he even smiled at her. She asked Laura if Britt could stay, and Laura told her he could. Dora had some papers for Laura to read and sign, so Tamara took him into the other room to play. She could hear Dora tell Laura that court would be the next day and that both Tamara and Britt should be there. Laura agreed to bring them. She also told Dora about Cathryn, their grandmother, and asked Dora if Cathryn would be at court tomorrow. Tamara couldn’t hear Dora’s answer.