

# Shadow Storm

## *Mickey Zucker Reichert*

Heroes often come from the most unexpected places under the most extreme circumstances. Most children have their heroes, someone to look up to, someone to turn to for strength.

Matthew Draybin lashed his hand across his six-year-old step-daughter's face, the slap reverberating through the tiny bedroom. "*I'm your father, do you understand that?*"

Pain lanced through Stacy's head, and her vision shattered in a white flash of light. She cringed, and the next blow caught her across one ear. Tears spilled forth, unbidden.

"*I'm the one who feeds you.*" Another smack, "*I'm the one who clothes you.*" Draybin whipped his open hand across Stacy's head. "*I'm the one who has to take time off work when you're sick.*" His fingers entwined in the sandy locks. He jerked them free, tearing several hairs out at the roots. "*Don't you ever call me anything but 'Dad' again.*"

Stacy sobbed, curled in a fetal position. Her cheek and ear felt on fire, but she dared not move. She could still feel his slender body towering over

her, and the image of his drawn, angry features remained engraved on her eyes no matter how hard she tried to lose it.

Draybin prodded his stepdaughter's forehead with his shoe. "And if I ever hear you call Sean 'Dad' in front of me again, I'll kick you to death. *I'm your father. Do you understand that?*"

Stacy said nothing. She remained tightly curled, waiting for the pain and its source to go away. But the man remained, his presence like a lead weight in the air around her.

"I said, do you understand?"

"I—und—er—stand," Stacy managed.

"WHAT?" His shout ached against her eardrums.

"I—under—stand," she said again, louder, careful not to allow the volume to sound disrespectful.

"Good." Draybin turned and stalked from the room, his footsteps loud in the hallway, then thumping down the stairs.

Stacy clutched at herself, wishing she could bundle her body so small it disappeared. She could hear her mother's lighter footfalls on the landing, birdlike in their grace.

Mary Draybin stood in the doorway for several seconds before speaking. "Oh, Stacy. I'm sorry." She crossed the room, and Stacy heard the creak of her box spring as her mother took a seat on the bed. "Come here, darling."

Obediently, Stacy unfolded, rubbed at her eyes with small fists, and walked to her mother. The woman hefted the girl into her lap, cradling and cooing as if to an infant. "You have to understand, darling. Matthew is your father now. Sean is just... well... a man the law makes you visit until you're old enough to tell them no."

The closeness, the gentle touch of her mother made Stacy eager to share. "But I *want* to see him. I love him. He's my daddy."

Mary Draybin's grip tightened, and her features flushed. Her wide-eyed stare and stiff smile did not match her tone or coloring. "Not anymore."

Matthew is your daddy now."

It was a lie, and Stacy knew it. She had heard her mother and father arguing in the courthouse parking lot where they made visitation exchanges. She had sat quietly in the passenger seat of her mother's Subaru, the window left open a crack; and Mary Draybin's shouts had come clearly to her though she made no attempt to listen. "You'll sign those papers. That girl needs a family, and Matthew and I *are* that family. If you loved her at all, you'd let Matthew adopt her."

Sean Sterner's reply had sounded comparatively soft and controlled. "I will not give up my legal rights to my daughter."

Mary Draybin's voice became a shrill whine. "About her birthday visitation—forget it! And you'll never get another Father's Day. Never."

Stacy scarcely heard Sterner's response. "You can't do that."

"I can, and I will. Sue me. I'll turn around and sue you for more support. You won't be able to afford a house to take her to, and you'll never see her again."

"I won't give up my legal rights to my daughter. Do what you feel you must." Sterner had turned and walked to his battered Horizon. He spun around once to give Stacy a cheerful, parting wave. Then the motor started, and the red Horizon roared off into the darkness.

That night, and every one since, Stacy's mother had become a stranger. She ranted to Matthew Draybin, detailing horrible stories about her life with Sean Sterner that kept sleep at bay and inspired night terrors, though none of the tales were true to Stacy's memories. Late at night, Mary Draybin would slip down to the telephone and shout threats at or cajole someone who could only be Sterner.

Now, Stacy lay limp in her mother's arms, hearing but not understanding, seeking a compromise that would stop the battering and also allow her to please all of the people she loved.

Mary Draybin dumped her daughter onto the bed and gave her a playful swat on the behind, too much like punishment to soothe. "Why don't you get cleaned up, Stacy Draybin? Dinner'll be ready in a few." She whisked from the room as if nothing had happened.

Stacy *Sterner*, Stacy corrected to herself, clinging to the last vestige of her identity. If she let go, she would disappear. To admit the evils that her mother claimed against her father, she would first have to deny everything her mind and memory knew as fact and to believe that "bad blood" ran through her veins. If she lost her name, she would sacrifice all of her existence until that moment; and she would become nobody.

Stacy slid down the side of her bed, groping beneath it for the comic book secreted beneath the frame. She had seen it in her father's house, had stared at the colorful pages mesmerized, though she could not read them. And he had let her bring it back to this house. "Home," her mother called it and yet it seemed less hospitable than the series of dwindling apartments her father had had to take as he struggled to keep up with the debts Mary had dumped on him as well as the child support she demanded in larger amounts, never satisfied. Stacy had hidden the comic book, afraid of the reaction of her stepfather who saw sacrilege in any but Bible stories.

Now, at six, Stacy had studied the words and questioned enough to differentiate the sound effects: zoo-kowt, kapok, slada-slada-slada, ba-took. And she knew the hero well. Shadow Storm was his name, a massive figure in a red bodysuit that hugged his muscles like skin. The double S's of his crest could come loose from his chest and form lightning bolts or shields or assault rifles as he needed. A red mask hid every feature but his huge, brown eyes; and no one, not even the faithful readers, knew his true identity. But Stacy Sterner did. And when she spoke it, as now, he came to her:

"Sean Sterner, big as can be

As Shadow Storm, please come to me."

Light flashed, blinding in the small bedroom. Then the figure from the comic book appeared before her, large as life. He stood in the same dignified pose as on the cover, legs slightly apart, cape flapping though there was no wind, arms folded across his muscled chest. "Come here," he said.

Stacy ran to him, tears streaming down her face.

Shadow Storm held her with all the tenderness her mother could not seem to muster, his silence speaking volumes after her mother's attempts

to soothe had only made her ache with need. He smelled of the old house, where they had lived together as a family, never quite happy but familiar. She also caught the aroma of baking chocolate chip cookies and the greenery smell of the field where her father had taught her to catch a ball. Among it all, she found the faint fragrance of her father's aftershave, that which had given his identity away months ago. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," he replied.

The door rattled open, and her mother's head poked through the crack. Shadow Storm disappeared, replaced by Stacy's blanket, mashed tightly in her embrace. "Dinnertime, Stacy."

"Coming, Mom." Stacy returned the covers, knowing better than to be late.

Two days later, Stacy sat on the terrace, watching passersby from over the waist-high barrier. Though eleven floors up, she could still distinguish enough to tell men from women; and, as always, she recognized the plaid fedora well before its wearer stepped over the blocked border from the street to the sidewalk and headed in her direction. It had become a daily ritual. "Business" brought Sean Sterner past the New York skyscraper that housed his daughter every afternoon once school let out, though twenty-seven miles separated the apartment building from his place of employment. Stacy had discovered him the first time by accident, but she had never failed to wait and wave since that day.

As he came upon the layered balconies, Sean Sterner stopped and looked up.

Though Stacy could not read his expression, she waved vigorously. He returned the salute, followed by a broad circular motion that he had explained during visitation meant "I love you."

"I love you, Daddy," she whispered, returning the gesture fervently. "I love you, too."

Then he was gone, headed for whatever business he needed to attend to. Moments later, the balcony door whisked open amid the jangle of the wind chime swinging from its frame.

Stacy turned, seeing her mother framed in the entry, holding the glass door ajar with her elbow.

"Your father wants to talk to you." Mary Draybin spoke in a somber tone, her expression grave.

Stacy froze, terror sparking through her. Experience told her he would not strike her two days before visitation. Her mother and stepfather had made it abundantly clear that horrible things would happen to her and to Sean Sterner if she ever told about or showed him the results of Draybin's temper. Slowly, head sagging, she trailed her mother through the kitchen and into the living room where her stepfather waited. Her mother sat in a chair and pretended to read the newspaper.

The coiled posture and purpled features of Matthew Draybin told Stacy all she needed to know. She fled for her room in terror.

Draybin chased her. "Run from me, you little bitch, and it'll go much worse for you."

Stacy knew he spoke the truth, but fear would not allow her to return. She raced into her bedroom, slamming the door closed behind her, and huddled on her bed. She buried her face in her pillow, hoping he would choose not to follow her, wishing he would just fade away.

Draybin stomped after, screaming and swearing. Stacy covered her ears, blotting out the sound. A moment later, the door slapped open so hard that it bounced nearly closed. He crossed the room in three strides, and she heard the crackle of paper near her nose. "What's this?" he demanded.

Trembling, Stacy freed one eye to look. He held one of her first-grade papers from school. He pointed to where she had written her name: Stacy S.

"Stacy S? Stacy S!" Draybin slammed his arm into her shoulder, and she tumbled to the floor, crying, fighting not to scream. "You are not Stacy S. You are Stacy Draybin now! Stacy Dray-bin!" He kicked her in the ribs just as she took a shuddering inhale, hammering the breath from her throat. She gasped for air, but her lungs would not function. Panic descended on her, along with an air-starved dizziness that blurred the world to gray. Unable to speak, she sent a mental summons, desperate to

halt the barrage of pain and cling to the tatters of her life:

*Sean Sterner, big as can be; As Shadow Storm come to me. Quickly, please. I need you.*

He came in an instant, a sudden wall between the battering fists and Stacy. He took the blows without a cry or whimper, using his own face and body to protect her. Draybin took no notice of the superhero who answered her call. His clenched hands crashed against flesh he seemed unable to tell from hers, despite its iron hardness.

Shadow Storm tore an "S" from his chest, shaping it into an invisible barrier that fielded the attack, though Draybin seemed to have no more awareness of this than of the hero's sudden presence. Stacy caught her breath, and the pain of the first two blows ebbed and disappeared.

At length, the assault stopped. "Stacy Draybin," Matthew warned one more time. Then he stormed from the room. As always, Mary Draybin slipped in for her usual ceremony of supporting her husband and comforting her daughter, as oblivious to the superhero as Matthew Draybin had been.

Shadow Storm stepped back into his usual pose, an "S" still missing from his bodysuit, blood trickling from beneath his mask. Standing as sentinel and guardian.

The weekend passed too quickly for Stacy. She did nothing that anyone would consider special with Sean Sterner. He could not afford to take her to amusement parks or on trips, but the time spent cooking hot dogs over a grill, clambering on playground equipment, and putting together puzzles they had done a million times seemed enough. There was a quiet normalcy to her time with her father that she would not have traded for all of Disneyland. With him, she could forget the chaos and terror of her other life.

But, as always, it ended too soon; and Stacy found herself back in her normal routine, counting the days until the next visitation. She wished her father would call sometimes, but she understood why he chose silence instead. More than once, she had heard her mother claim Stacy was away while she sat next to her on the couch. Other times, Matthew Draybin slammed down the receiver without a word of explanation. The few times

Sterner got through, her mother and stepfather listened on the extensions; and Stacy feared even to call him Daddy in their presence. Sterner gave up on telephone contact, torn in another way from the daughter who loved him.

That Tuesday, as usual, Stacy headed for the balcony, the concrete wall cold and hard against her abdomen. She watched patterns of people flutter by to the music of the myriad sparrows and pigeons that roosted in the building's cracks. It seemed like an eternity before the familiar plaid hat came into view, and a second lifetime passed until Sean Sterner paused and waved.

Engrossed, Stacy did not hear the tingle of the wind chime nor notice the second presence on the terrace.

Grinning, Stacy returned a vigorous greeting. She made the circular motion, a code they alone shared. "I love you, Daddy," she whispered. For that moment, time seemed suspended.

Then, reality intruded. Fingers seized her arm, bruising, and jerked her away from the ledge. She watched in terror as Matthew Draybin leaned over the side to focus on the figure far below. Then, he stepped back, spinning Stacy to meet his hard, blue gaze. "I am your father."

Stacy struggled to break free, but his grip tightened and he seized her other arm as well. He slammed his knee into her crotch so hard that the pain made her knees buckle, and she slumped. He kicked her in the chin, and her scalp smacked against the concrete. She heard a distant, desperate shout from below. Draybin hefted his stepdaughter, pinning her against the concrete slab. "You ungrateful little bitch, I'll throw you over. I'll just goddamn throw you over!"

Terror exploded through Stacy's mind. She wrestled desperately, kicking, swinging, and writhing without conscious direction or understanding.

Then HE came without her needing to call, bringing a gust of wind so violent that the glass door to the balcony shattered, raining fragments. He clutched an "S" in each fist, muted to the shape of glowing clubs, and he charged Matthew Draybin with a bull bellow of fury.



Stacy and Shadow Storm fought together, a wild blur of fear and fury. Her fists pummeled flesh, though a red fog of need and hysteria blinded her to whose. She could hear the meaty thud of club against body. Then her mother's scream tore her attention to the broken terrace doorway. Mary Draybin stood, freeze-framed in open-mouthed horror.

In the instant that Stacy paused and looked, Matthew Draybin seized both of her flailing arms in a viselike grip. At the same time, Shadow Storm's club caught the stepfather a solid clout across the ear. Impact hurled him sideways, twisting over the concrete barrier. His hold winched tighter instinctively, and Stacy flew over the balcony wall and into oblivion.

Stacy screeched, hands clawing air in helpless desperation. Air whistled and surged around her, spinning her in a crazed circle that severed Draybin's grip. She tumbled past three balconies, the scream an unstoppable constant in her ears. Then, strong arms enwrapped her, crushing her against a massive chest covered with tautly stretched red fabric. The S's now served as hawk wings, gliding superhero and cargo gently toward the concrete sidewalk.

Stacy clung, all fear dissolving in an instant. She clung to the solid reality of her savior, knowing a strength and security she had no wish to question. The faint fragrance of his aftershave cut through the damp, smoggy air. She felt a sudden jolt as he landed, then realized that other arms held her now: still huge, though not quite so mountain-hard and clothed in a cotton button-down shirt she knew well. She huddled into Sean Sterner's grip, flinging her arms around his neck and burying her face into his shirt. He hugged her, at first with shocked hesitation, then with a vigor that all but suffocated her. They both cried.

Stacy heard Shadow Storm's whisper in her ear. "Stacy Sterner, little and free: You have no more need of me." Then, all hint of him was gone except for the tattered comic book still hidden beneath her bed.

Stacy did not look back to see him go.

Red and blue dome lights strobed across the skyscraper's brick and concrete. Stacy clutched Sean Sterner's hand, sweaty from long contact, but she would not release it. A round-faced, paunchy officer had been speaking with them for longer than half an hour. "I still don't understand."

The policeman flicked dark bangs from his eyes. "You caught her?"

"Yes."

"After she fell eleven stories?"

"Yes."

The officer glanced to the chalk outline that denoted Matthew Draybin's landing and the blood splashed in a wide circle around it. Two of his companions approached from the crowd of spectators huddled at the perimeter. "Excuse me a moment, please." He trotted over to meet them.

Stacy released Stemer's hand to catch him into an embrace. He clutched her in silence, and the hushed union seemed to Stacy to radiate love and safety.

The policemen spoke softly beneath the hubbub of the crowd, but Stacy could hear every word.

"There's a dozen witnesses say the girl and man fell together."

"All of it seemed in slow motion, least the part with the kid. He fell fast enough."

"This other guy seemed to have plenty of time to get beneath and grab her out of the air. Why they didn't both get driven ten feet under the concrete... can't explain it."

"Once heard of a baby-sitter moving a minivan to save an infant."

"Guy once flipped a Volkswagen to save his wife."

The paunchy officer finally added his piece. "Girl says some cartoon superhero carried her."

"She's hysterical."

"Ought to see her mom. Had to crate her off to Bellevue in a jacket. Kept babbling about a huge, red devil with fluorescent fists."

Stacy had heard enough. "Daddy, where'd they take Mom?"

Sean Sterner knelt to Stacy's level, concern clear in his dark eyes. "They took Mommy to a hospital. She's upset about what happened, too. We can visit her anytime you want to, okay?"

"Okay," Stacy said.

The policeman returned. "You're free to go now, Mr. Sterner." He smiled crookedly at Stacy, still clearly puzzled. "You might want to get her to a doctor. Looks like she got a bruise or two from the fall."

"Thank you." Sean Sterner took his daughter's hand and headed away from the crowd amidst a chorus of murmurs and whispered comments. "Do you hurt anywhere, Stacy?"

"Uh-uh." Stacy squeezed his three middle fingers in her small grip.

Sterner studied his daughter, worry and caring clear in his gaze. "Do you want to visit Mommy now?"

"No, Daddy." She clutched him tighter. "I want to go home." They headed toward the red Horizon.