



three

Abbie went to the kitchen to make some herbal tea while John paced the floor of their great room. She'd tried to sit patiently and wait for Jamie to arrive with Sam, but anxiousness got the best of her. She hoped the tea would help calm their nerves.

The kettle whistled, and she poured the hot water over the tea bags. Her mind couldn't shake the things John had just told her about research he'd done when they went through foster care training. He'd read teenage boys like Sam, who'd been in the child welfare system for years, were almost impossible to place in foster homes because they likely had endured trauma that negatively affected their behavior.

She walked carefully from the kitchen with the two steaming mugs of tea and set them on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "I was just thinking about what you said. About the trauma these kids go through. I feel like this is where we can help and really make a difference, hon."

John sighed and stared into his wife's eyes. "It's just there are so many assumptions and "what if" scenarios surrounding these boys. Many times, they turn aggressive or even violent by the time they're Sam's age. I know it isn't fair to make blanket

assumptions, but I'm worried, especially where you're concerned."

She understood where he was coming from, and maybe she was naïve, but she didn't share his concerns. "I can't imagine what his life is like." Abbie veered the conversation in a slightly different direction. "How awful would it feel to be dropped off at a home with people you don't know, over and over again?"

John sipped his tea and sank back into the large, brown leather sectional sofa. "I can't begin to fathom it. Look at how nervous we are, and we're in our own home and have each other. How must he feel right now?"

Abbie shivered at the thought, and then the doorbell rang. Their eyes met, and Abbie summoned all the determination she could muster and prayed silently that she conveyed more confidence than she possessed.

"Here we go." Her husband extended his hand to her as she got up from the sofa. They walked to the front door together, and John opened it. There stood Jamie, and on the step below her was a blond-haired teenager with his head down, a backpack on his shoulder, and a trash bag in his hand.

"Hi, thanks for having us so late." Jamie's pleasant voice cut through the awkwardness as she smiled and made the introductions. "This is Sam Keller. Sam, this is Mr. and Mrs. Grayson."

Sam cast his eyes to the ground. The child was pale and thin, with dark circles under his eyes, and Abbie was struck by his boyish looks. He appeared much younger than sixteen. His disheveled, stringy hair fell just to his shoulders and hung in his eyes. He wore a faded flannel shirt and dingy jeans with a hole in the knee.

"Welcome, Sam. You can call me John, and this is Abbie." John smiled and ushered them into the house from their covered front porch. "Come in out of the damp air."

Again, Sam didn't smile or attempt to make eye contact with them, but he mumbled something that sort of sounded like

“Hello.” Abbie offered to take the trash bag from him, which she assumed held his clothes and belongings. What must it be like to carry all your belongings in a trash bag? Sam let go of the bag but held on to the worn, brown backpack like it contained treasure, so Abbie didn’t attempt to take it. She ached for him.

While John led them all through the foyer to the great room to get comfortable, Abbie came to the unnerving realization that their foster-care training hadn’t truly prepared them for this moment.

“Would either of you like something to drink?” Abbie asked, and John smiled at her, which immediately put her at ease. Okay, together they could do this.

“No, thanks, Abbie,” Jamie said.

Sam shook his head without looking up, his face without expression. Once they exchanged pleasantries, Jamie told them basic, practical things, such as prescription medication that Sam took for anxiety, and that he had contact lenses as well as glasses with him.

Of course, she’d be in touch when she found a home for Sam to go to for the longer term. They signed paperwork, including privacy notices and medical forms that allowed her and John to seek medical treatment for Sam if needed.

Not long ago, they’d completed more paperwork to buy a car than they had to complete to foster a child, which didn’t seem right. Once they signed the documents, Jamie gave them an envelope. Abbie had learned from their training that the envelope held additional information about Sam for them to look over later.

During the meeting, Abbie nodded in all the proper places, but she found herself only half listening. She watched Sam, who sat on the large sofa at the farthest point away from everyone else, his eyes cast down. To her, he didn’t look like the brooding, angry teen she’d expected, but more like a broken boy who wanted to disappear. What could this poor kid be thinking?

She’d never seen her own kids, Kyle and Hannah, look like

this, and for the first time, she seriously doubted their ability to handle this situation. *This is gonna be hard, Lord. Please guide us.*

“Abbie?” Jamie’s voice startled her back to the conversation, and she realized all eyes were on her.

“I’m so sorry, what did you say?” Abbie asked.

“It’s usually me who gets in trouble for not listening,” John quipped.

The heat rose in her cheeks, and she chided herself for letting her thoughts wander.

“I asked if you had any other questions for me right now,” Jamie offered politely.

“I don’t think I do,” Abbie said, and John echoed her sentiment.

“I’ll be in touch tomorrow, but in the meantime, you know how to reach me.” Jamie picked up the signed paperwork and her purse and stood to leave.

Abbie and John stood also, but Sam remained seated.

“That goes for you too, Sam,” Jamie said.

Sam mumbled “okay” but still didn’t glance up. He seemed lost as he sat with his arms crossed and stared at the floor.

The couple walked Jamie out, and she paused at the front door. Abbie had learned during training that Jamie was in her late thirties, but tonight her weariness showed, and she looked older.

“The first night is always hard,” Jamie said with a weary smile. “Give him some space tonight. It’s incredibly tough on kids when they’re dropped off at an unfamiliar home, even for the ones who’ve done it as many times as Sam has.”

Something about that statement overwhelmed Abbie, but she nodded. John told Jamie, “Thank you” and closed the door behind her. They paused, John blew out a long breath, and his eyes told her he was as anxious as she was.

The two of them headed back to the great room where Sam sat, arms still crossed with his backpack on his lap. With Jamie

gone, he appeared even more lost than before. Only minutes ago, Abbie wouldn't have thought that was possible.

"Well, uh, Sam," John stumbled over his words and then cleared his throat, his nervousness clearly showing. "Abbie and I are glad you're here. We'll show you your room and help you settle in."

The boy nodded but again didn't say anything. His face was a blank slate, holding no clue as to what he was thinking.

As an afterthought, Abbie spoke up. "Are you hungry? I'd be glad to fix you a sandwich."

Sam's "No, thank you" was barely audible.

"Okay, well, it's late, and you must be tired, so let's get you settled in your room," Abbie said.

He stood and slung his backpack over his shoulder. Abbie led the way past the kitchen and the smaller family room to the bedroom she'd transformed for their foster child. She'd painted the room a neutral light gray with white trim, and the furniture and bedding were also white and light gray so it would be appropriate for a boy or girl. It was a large bedroom, bright and inviting, filled with books and school supplies and a TV mounted on the wall.

"Here's your room. It has its own bathroom, so you don't have to share. There's a big, walk-in closet for you, and a desk, dresser, and bookshelf," Abbie said. "And our bedroom is across the hall if you need us."

Sam nodded but his eyes were vacant. She wondered if any of this was even registering with him.

"C'mon, I'll help you put your things away," Abbie said with as much cheer as she could muster in an effort to act as if she hadn't noticed the boy's lack of response.

He simply looked exhausted. Besides the weariness though, there was something else she hadn't picked up on earlier—fear. His timid demeanor and the careful, seemingly intentional way he left plenty of space between himself and her and John revealed the boy was terrified beneath the surface.

Abbie fought to keep her composure. What had he been through? A shiver went up her spine, and for the first time tonight, a certainty overwhelmed her. They were absolutely doing the right thing by offering him an emergency place to stay, no matter how hard or awkward it might be for her or John. If nothing else, they could keep him safe.

Abbie put away the clothing he'd brought with him in the trash bag, and Sam quietly followed her lead. She offered to wash the things he didn't need right away and showed him a big basket of toiletries in the matching gray and white bathroom that contained soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and anything else he might need. Then she and John left him to take a shower and go to bed while they retreated to their room across the hall.

Once in their own bedroom with the door closed, Abbie and John both sat on the bed. Her eyes filled with tears, the cheeriness in her voice from earlier completely absent. "I've never seen a child so broken, have you?"

The confidence John had exuded earlier in the presence of Sam was also completely gone, and he simply shook his head. "And to think all his belongings are in that trash bag and backpack. It's beyond sad."

This situation tore at Abbie's heart much more than she'd prepared for. "Maybe you were right, John." Panic rose within her once again. "What if we can't do this?" This rollercoaster of emotions was nothing like she'd experienced before.

"We can do this, honey," John said with a new determination. "I know we can," he said as he put his arm around her shoulders.

Abbie's eyes filled with tears. That's exactly what she needed to hear. John was with her in this one hundred percent, the way he'd always been in anything they did, and with God present at the center of it all, they wouldn't fail.

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John stretched out on their huge, king-size bed, lost in thought, while his wife brushed her teeth and got ready for bed. In their affluent existence, they'd never given much consideration to the way some kids lived. Even though they discussed this in their foster parenting classes, the reality of it never registered until tonight.

Once Abbie came to bed, they talked for a few minutes before she drifted off, but John's mind refused to shut down. He lay in the quiet darkness and stared at the ceiling, replaying the events of the night, and thinking how strange it was to have someone in their home they didn't know who was probably scared and confused.

With that thought, John got up out of bed and decided to go check on Sam to see if he was asleep, but once he crossed the hallway, he paused before going in. Should he even go in? He was unsure.

The bedroom door was half open and the light still on, and he decided to take a couple of steps in. Sam appeared to be asleep with the comforter pulled up above his chin, so John turned to walk out and switched the light off, but as soon as he did, he heard Sam stir.

"Can I please keep the light on?" Sam's quiet voice cut into the darkness.

"Of course, that's no problem." John flipped the light switch back on. "Sleep in as long as you want tomorrow. We'll be in the family room or kitchen when you get up. Until then, we'll be across the hall if you need anything," John reminded him.

"Thanks," the boy said sleepily.

John turned and left Sam's room, and it was no longer a question in his mind. He was positive Sam had gone through something horrible.

* * *

Drew sat in his jail cell and plotted his next move. He'd played it cool and pleaded his drug trafficking sentence down to possession by turning in a couple of low-level dealers. The police had busted him on a tip from someone in their apartment complex, and he figured they had no idea the magnitude of what he was doing, because if they did, he wouldn't have a future to plan for.

His pro bono lawyer had just left, and Drew thought about the details of the meeting. The attorney said with good behavior, Drew's release could come as early as October. Just five months from now. The lawyer had also talked about the steps Drew would need to take to get his kid back.

Drew chuckled just thinking about it. Frankly, he cared nothing about the kid, but being a father had always been a good cover for his drug business. Besides that, he was also able to get food stamps and public assistance he wouldn't otherwise get. And now, his developing plan included more lucrative reasons to keep the kid around.

"Hey, man, you been thinkin' about what I told ya?" Right on cue, the low-level meth-head-turned-dealer in the next cell was awake.

Ironically, Drew didn't have much patience for druggies. He didn't do drugs anymore—he was in the drug business solely for the money. No way would he live the rest of his life the way his parents had. His old man had overdosed and died when Drew was ten, and his mother was a raging alcoholic. As a result, Drew spent a good part of his childhood homeless. Now his one and only priority in life was money. Nothing, and no one else, mattered.

He would put up with the addict in the next cell because the guy intrigued him with his money-making ideas. Drew sucked in a breath. A couple of years ago, he wouldn't have dared go down this path, but now with this most recent arrest, he realized he needed to branch out to more than just drugs.

"Yeah, man," Drew answered as he walked to the front of his

cell so he could talk with the guy more easily. “You got some good ideas. I never knew so much money could be made in trafficking people.”

“I’m tellin’ ya, man, that kid of yours can really help you out too. You said he’s got the looks to lure the girls in. Somethin’ else to think about if you want to go another way, you can just sell him and keep all the profit yourself,” the dopehead said, matter-of-factly.

Drew winced. His kid didn’t mean anything to him, but he didn’t want to go that route. That went too far, even for him.

“Now tell me exactly how I would use him to lure the girls in.” Drew ignored the man’s last remark.

“First thing, man,” the guy said excitedly, “you have to threaten him good, or he won’t do it. Threaten to kill his girlfriend or somethin’. That usually does gets ’em to cooperate. Then you have to follow him to make sure he does what he’s supposed to and beat him up if he don’t do it. And get a second dude you can trust to go with him to keep him on track. They both gotta be good lookin’ to attract the young girls, ya know. And the girls gotta be twelve or thirteen, no older.” This was obviously his wheelhouse.

Drew made a mental note of the ages while the man kept talking.

“Then just send ’em out, have ’em hit on girls and invite them back to their room, or even a drink, coffee, or somethin’. Anything to get in a position where you and your crew can swoop in and grab the girls.”

Drew scratched his scruffy-bearded chin as he thought about the setup. They would go to a beach in southern Alabama that he and his associates had already scoped out for drug dealing. But this was a better idea, or maybe they could even do both.

“Huge bucks, man. Huge bucks. You do it for a year, and you’ll be set. You won’t never have to do nothin’ else again.”

The man rambled on, but Drew quit paying attention and sat back down on his cot. Could he pull this off? Could he use the

kid to lure girls in so he and his associates could auction them off to wealthy men all over the world?

Now he had something productive to do while behind bars. For the next five months, he would continue to work on his brilliant plan. Drew would be a model prisoner in order to get out of jail in October, and then he'd do whatever it took to appear to be a model parent and get that kid back.