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Sam Keller climbed into the car with his caseworker, Jamie, as his anger gave way to fear and panic, which had nothing to do with the thunder and lightning in the not-so-distant sky. His hands shook, and his heart raced as he fumbled with his seatbelt. How many more times would he have to endure a caseworker dropping him off at yet another foster home?

“You okay, Sam?” Jamie glanced over at him before she pulled out of the Department of Social Services parking lot onto the wet, dimly lit street.

“Yeah.” The lie rolled off Sam’s tongue, but he didn’t care, and he certainly didn’t want to talk. Instead, he stared out the window into the blackness of the night. Car lights and streetlights blurred together, partly from their reflection on the wet pavement but mostly from the tears of anger that burned his eyes. He refused to let them fall.

The light rain subsided as they made their way through the stoplights of Franklin on the southern outskirts of Nashville, but the respite was brief. Gigantic, random raindrops splattered the windshield, and then, without warning, the sky opened, and torrential rain poured. The huge drops pounded the car’s roof as if the deluge desired to drown out his thoughts.

This is fitting. The perfect backdrop for this dismal night. If his life were a book, the first line would read *it was a dark and stormy night*. Thunder rumbled, low and constant, and lightning lit up the sky to provide glimpses of the black clouds that were otherwise unseen under the night sky.

Much like himself. Unseen and unnoticed in his dark world until abuse or neglect lit up his existence and allowed cops and social workers a small window into his bleak life as they whisked him away. But that small window only allowed them a glimpse—Sam never allowed anyone access to his entire story.

“I hope this heavy rain stops before we have to get out of the car.” Jamie increased the speed of the windshield wipers and slowed the car to navigate the downpour. “We’re almost there.”

Almost there. The knots in his stomach tightened their grip. *Don't think about it. Just breathe.* He focused his thoughts on pleasant things, like his best friend, Lauren—the only one who befriended him when he was the new kid in junior high—or the classic books he devoured or the country music he loved to listen to, but it was no use. He couldn't concentrate on anything except the situation that lay before him and the memories of every horrendous thing he'd gone through in his sixteen years. It all flashed through his mind like scenes in a bad movie.

Out of nowhere, his stomach dropped, and panic of a different kind hit him. Where had the picture of his mom gone? He snatched his frayed backpack from the floorboard beneath his feet and ransacked it, the only light coming from the car's dashboard. Oh, no, it must be here! Did he pack it before leaving his father's apartment?

“Is something wrong?” Jamie asked.

Her eyes were on him, and he didn't blame her. At that moment, he probably looked like a madman. “Just looking for something,” he mumbled.

His heartbeat thudded in his ears, and panic threatened to overtake him as he grabbed his tattered journal, opened it, and the worn, creased picture of his mom fell out. He let out a huge

sigh and positioned the picture carefully and tightly into the middle of his journal, closed it, and returned it to his backpack.

Of course, he'd grabbed it. He packed without thinking. Packing was second nature to him since he'd moved so many times. He always grabbed his backpack, his journal, his only picture of his mom, and whatever book he was reading at the time. Those were the only objects that even mattered.

Sam ran his hands through his longish hair out of habit and laid his head back against the headrest as he thought of his mother. How different would his life be if she hadn't died? Perhaps he wouldn't have had to move from one foster home to another because his dad—

"Here we are." Jamie interrupted his thoughts before the simmering anger toward his father boiled to the surface. "And thankfully, the rain stopped."

Even in the darkness, he could see the home was at least three times the size of any other he'd been in. He was awestruck for a moment until he realized he'd have to stay in it with the people who lived here.

Sweat broke out on his forehead as he imagined walking into another unfamiliar home to live with people he didn't know. The fear he'd been suppressing took over. He couldn't catch his breath, and he grew lightheaded.

"I can't... I can't do this again," he uttered, his voice barely above a whisper. How could he? He'd seldom lived in a foster home that turned out okay. In the best-case scenario, the foster family left him alone, and he merely survived day to day, with no plans, no dreams, no real life of his own. He simply existed on the fringes of someone else's life. He quickly shut down thoughts of the worst-case scenario.

"It's okay. Try to relax." His long-time caseworker put the car in park and looked at him. "I know this is hard, but I came to know this couple well during their training, and they are genuine, good people, who just want to help."

Sam fought the urge to yell at her and ask her if that's what

she believed about all the foster parents she'd worked with, even the ones who proved abusive or neglectful. More than anything, he wanted to ask her if she realized this was his 3,304th day in foster care. Without warning, the tears of anger he'd held in all night escaped and slid down his face.

"I'm sorry," he said, more to himself than to her. He quickly swiped the tears away with the back of his hand and took several deep breaths.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Sam. You're exhausted, and once you get a shower and a good night's sleep, you'll feel better," Jamie said gently.

Yeah, then tomorrow morning I'll wake up in a strange house with people I don't know. He needed to get a grip. None of this was her fault, and she couldn't comprehend what his life was like. His gut told him Jamie tried her best and cared about what happened to him.

They sat in the car for a few minutes so he could compose himself. The lightning and thunder had moved beyond them, and the rain had dwindled to a light drizzle. He had no choice but to go into the house, so he drew one more big breath to prepare himself for whatever was to come.

"Okay, I guess I'm ready."

He was certain Jamie had no idea what number today was.