

Born Broken

AN ADOPTIVE JOURNEY



Kristin Berry

What others are saying . . .

Kristin weaves threads of hope and humor throughout an authentic representation of the challenges endured on her adoption journey. Kristin's writing is a perfect blend of authenticity and hope wrapped refreshingly in humor.

— Michele Schneider, Pastor of Orphan Care,
Overlake Christian Church

Born Broken is an invaluable resource for anyone who is caring for a child who comes from a traumatic background. Kristin's real-life examples, heart-felt stories, and practical advice are the perfect recipe for hope on this journey.

— Ira J. Chasnoff, MD, President, NTI Upstream

Once I started reading *Born Broken*, I couldn't put it down. I felt I was walking through Kristin's story, and in some small way, she was walking through mine. Kristin would understand my family like very few people can. Kristin weaves a beautiful tapestry of honesty, raw emotion, and hope into a single book. I highly recommend *Born Broken* to everyone parenting a child with a history of trauma and to anyone walking alongside them.

— Lisa Qualls, Mom by birth, adoption, and foster care
Writer/Speaker/Encourager at onethankfulmom.com

Riveting and heartfelt, Kristin Berry's *Born Broken* is a must-read for adoptive and foster families and the people who support them. With a spirit of vulnerability and well-written prose, Kristin boldly shares the ups and downs of the Berry's journey to becoming the family God had always planned. Don't miss the beautiful honesty and encouragement of this book!

— Cherie Lowe, author of *Slaying the Debt Dragon:
How One Family Conquered Their Money Monster
and Found an Inspired Happily Ever After*

I couldn't put this book down. I felt her pain, crying when she talked about lying in bed with her son before they had to take him to residential. I thought about my children as babies and what it would be like to make that kind of decision. So much pain and loneliness. She helps you see the love she has for her son, and it broke my heart when he began to hurt her. I never once felt anger toward her son. My heart hurt for him too because I could understand that this was not her son, but his disability. I knew this story and lived through it all as her best friend, never truly understanding or feeling her pain like I did when I read this book. The love and hope she has for Alex is what every mother feels.

— Nicole Goerges, wife and mother of five

As an adult adoptee, and a person with a vested interest in adoption and foster care, I can say that Kristin's words on the subject of trauma are powerful, true, and healing. This is a must-read if you're on the adoption journey, or simply a parent who is raising a child from a traumatic past.

— Tony Wolf, author, speaker, and comedian

Born Broken

AN ADOPTIVE JOURNEY

Kristin Berry

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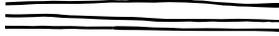


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Preface



This book was written with permission from my son. I wrote this book hesitantly, afraid that I would hurt my son with my words, always afraid that I would not protect my son's dignity. Each word was written with his blessing. When the story was too hard to write he urged me to keep writing, and his wish is this:

Mom, you need to write the truth. It is hard to live with FASD. I hate that I have hurt people. I hate that school is hard. I hate that I always make the wrong choice. I hate living like this. People need to know what this is like. People need to know that drinking while they are pregnant is never okay. People need to know.

This book is dedicated to my son. He is the strongest person I know.

CHAPTER 1

Heartbeat

His heart is beating — just a flutter really. Undetectable, unseen, growing each day. She doesn't know he's there yet. She suspects though. Each time she comes down from her euphoric high, the reality lingers at the fringe of her consciousness. She pops the tab on one more can of beer and dulls the reality. She's going to be a mother.

An Ill-Prepared Life

The first time I knew of him, it was Christmastime. He was just barely realized, not yet born, with a fate that lay undecided. His mom knew he was coming and raced against the clock to find enough money for an abortion. She hesitated though each time she spoke of the possibility. Haltingly, she weighed the choice that lay before her. I too laid awake at night thinking about her choice. Something about this unborn child filled my heart with the deepest love and longing. I prayed each day for his safe arrival. In the end, she chose life but not sobriety. The following spring, she gave birth to a 4 lb. 2 oz. baby boy. Relief washed over me when I learned of his birth. He had an uphill battle but he was already a fighter. He clawed his way out of the NICU and into the arms of a mother who wasn't quite ready.

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They left the hospital and returned to the women's shelter. She had the gifts of strangers to rely on to care for her child. The other women patted his head and took turns holding him. She was appreciative of their attention, but as she returned to the room she shared with three other women, she knew she was ultimately alone. With a premature son and a preschool daughter at her side, she knew she had to start thinking of the future. She laid the child to sleep in his borrowed crib and wondered about what the future held. She was nearing her 30-day limit at the shelter. Her time there had been extended, but soon she would have to find a place for them to stay. She knew the father of her children was not the best choice for any of them. He was a kind person at heart who was caught in the same cycle of sobriety and relapse as she. It was dangerous to go back. She knew this, even as she lay down beside her little ones. Placing a pillow over her ears to drown out the constant murmur of the crowded building, she fell asleep with her new plan confirmed. In the morning she would return to him.

I knew of his story through a mutual friend, and I thought of him often that first year of his life. The first time I saw him he was six months old, just a tiny little ball of energy. His mom and I talked about the weather and our two daughters. We compared their spunky laughs and the colors of their hair. My daughter's deep black against her daughter's honey-colored highlights. She told me she once lived in a little Ohio town. I shared that it was just a few miles from where I had grown up. We each smiled with the joy of someone finding a connection. Sometimes it's the most trivial things that bind us to others. In one such meeting, we shared the usual small exchanges. Without cause and without much thought she blurted out a secret. "I think it's nice that your daughter is adopted. I grew up in 13 foster homes, but my mom would never let me go. I always wished I had a family." I could think of nothing more profound, so uttered a soft, "Oh." We changed topics and eventually waved goodbye as

acquaintances often do. She had no reason to think often of me, but I thought of her story and her son each day.

Our paths didn't cross again for the rest of the year. A mutual friend and I would meet each Sunday for a time of prayer. It was during that time that I learned that the baby who had grabbed my heart was once again facing uncertainty. His mom had found herself in trouble again and was at risk of losing both of her children.

The week she took the pregnancy test, she also failed a random drug screen. She and her baby's father would lose their transitional housing within the week. She would once again wait to be admitted to the shelter. They would require sobriety too, and the fear of a day without using gripped her heart. Pressing on her shoulders was also the thought of sleeping outside in the winter with two small children. She tried to stay clean through the rest of the week and so did the father. They were agitated and restless. One night as she fixed a tuna sandwich for her little girl and a bottle for her son, the tension snapped. The baby was on a blanket on the floor screaming wildly, the preschool daughter was pacing in the kitchen waiting on her meal. The father cupped his hands over his ears and yelled at the mother. She dropped the sandwich and pushed him yelling at him to get out. He reached over and grabbed the baby from his blanket as the pitch of his yelps reached painful heights. Realizing the danger, she tried to lower her own voice and reach the baby. It was too late. Her son was tossed against the nearest wall with a sickening thud. The little girl stood in the kitchen wide-eyed with hands over her ears. The next hour was a flurry of police, paramedics, and caseworkers. The little boy sustained nothing but a bruise; the little girl lost her will to talk. The father spent the night in jail, the mother was once again on the radar of child protective services, and none of them ever stepped foot in that home again.

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Two Stories Become One

That same January, I was sitting at my kitchen table, watching the snow pile into thick mounds along the gravel driveway. I pondered the difficulty of getting my car out of the driveway for a quick trip to the grocery store. A cardinal, perched on the stark, leafless tree caught my attention. I clasped the hand of my tiny daughter, Joelle, and pointed her finger toward it. “Oh,” she exclaimed, “pretty.”

Just then, the phone rang, breaking that morning’s silence. I picked up on the third ring, perplexed at the number I saw on the ID. It was the little boy’s mother. Why was she calling me? We really weren’t that close. “Hello,” I said, a little too loudly. Quietly, she mispronounced my name. I sensed her mustering up the courage to say something difficult. And then she did. “Um, I’m pregnant . . . again. . . and I know your daughter is adopted. I was just wondering, you know, um, would you consider adopting my baby?” I sucked in a quick breath. *Calm down*, I told myself, *I know you’re eager but don’t be too eager*. I longed for another baby; my heart was pounding so loudly I thought she must hear it over the phone. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on,” I said in my best calm-voice. She spent the next 30 minutes telling me about being homeless, her baby’s father, and her struggle to provide for her other two children. “I just can’t do it again,” she sobbed.

“I understand,” I whispered. I didn’t really, but I could feel the hurt in her words. I looked at my toddler and thought about toting her into a homeless shelter. I imagined us begging for food or a warm place to sleep. “I will do what I can to help,” I promised as I hung up the phone.

I spent the next few minutes mesmerized by the falling snow. Feelings so raw, they were too difficult to feel. I gave into numbness. My daughter seemed to sense this need for silence as she sat perched in her high chair, examining the bright red cardinal and his counterpart searching the lawn for the seed we had scattered.

A knock at the door, snapped me back into reality. I rose to answer it, remembering I had agreed to watch my neighbor’s son.

She stood at the bottom of my porch steps next to her son's wheelchair. As I helped her carry him through the front door, I blurted out, "Someone just asked me to adopt a baby." Hands frozen from the cold, heart frozen from the reality, I couldn't get either to work as I fumbled with the tie to her son's knit hat.

"What?" she said. "Are you serious?" I could always count on this friend to bring a proper amount of emotion to the craziness of this life. She slipped off her son's coat, unbuckled him from the wheelchair, and sat down on my couch. I gathered my daughter from her high chair, and plopped her next to her little friend as I sat on the chair facing my friend. As a fellow adoptive mom, I knew I had a safe place to share, and I did. Abruptly, in the middle of our conversation, she stopped and prayed over this hurting mother. She prayed over me. And she prayed over the three children whose lives lay in the balance of this one important decision. Before she got up to go she fished the number of an adoption lawyer from the bottom of her large purse. I tucked it into my pocket as I waved goodbye.

For the rest of that chilly day, I watched two precious babies play together and imagined a tiny baby beside them. At naptime, I wandered through the house and envisioned a new little one. *Here is where I'll put the rocking chair. Here is where the crib will go.* My thoughts were of nothing else. I knew it was a long shot. Babies don't just fall in your lap. I couldn't help it though. My arms longed to hold this new baby. My heart still ached for the little boy and his sister in peril, wandering in the cold.

My husband, Mike, arrived home that night and scooped up his baby girl. Tossing her in the air, Joelle giggled and smiled. I couldn't quite find the words to describe what had happened that day. We continued our evening without so much as a word of that day's events. Sometimes I find that when I have the most to say, I simply can't say a thing. That night as I folded my jeans neatly on my dresser, the piece of paper slipped out. "You'll never guess who called today," I began. "Remember my friend? You know, the one with the little girl and the little boy. She is pregnant again and wants

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to talk to us about adopting the baby.” I couldn’t quite gauge his reaction at first. He had a lot of questions and listened carefully to the story. In the end he agreed that it would be a good idea to meet with her and with the lawyer to see if this was even a possibility for our family.

We spent the next few weeks updating our home study. We met with the lawyer and formulated a hypothetical plan. As things began to fall into place we became cautiously hopeful. When she called to tell us that the baby was a girl, we really began to believe that this might happen. We knew that this was such a tough decision and a sacrifice for our friend. We settled on the name *Zoe*. *Zoe* means *life*, and we referred to her as “Zoe” in our own conversations. We felt that despite her uncertain future, *Zoe* was a name that honored her life as well as her birth mother.

My dreams were filled with visions of the little boy and his big sister. My heart was brimming with the hope of another new life.

CHAPTER 2

Bad News

In early March, I was curled up on my favorite oversized chair. I wrapped the worn quilt tighter around my shoulders to brace against the late winter chill. The sound of rain tapped against the glass directly behind my head as the theme to the late night show played softly on the TV. My eyes were heavy with impending sleep. I vowed not to nod off on the couch, but with each passing moment the lull of the rain overtook my resolve. As my eyes began to submit, I was jolted awake by the shrill ring of the telephone. Noting the time, I answered with concern in my voice. The sound on the other end was a near hysterical wailing. “They took them! They took them!” I sat up straight, my blanket falling to the floor.

“Who? Who took them? What did they take?” I couldn’t understand anything that was happening. I bolted to the caller ID. It was the little boy’s mom. “Oh no! Okay, take a deep breath and tell me what’s going on. Is it the kids? Are you okay? Is the baby okay?” I forced myself to take a deep breath as well and allowed her to share her story.

She and the children had returned to the shelter when they exhausted the kindness of family and friends. The shelter required random drug screens, and she had failed another one earlier that afternoon. The staff could no longer give extra chances and had to file a report. Child Services had been at the shelter that day. It was the final straw for them and the children had been deemed CHINS (child in need of services). A new case would be opened. All she

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knew was that the little girl had gone to emergency shelter care, and the little boy would spend the first part of this process in a foster home. “Please, will you please take them? I know it’s a lot to ask, but I can’t have them with strangers.”

I took one more deep breath and responded with what I knew was right in my heart. “Yes, of course we will. Try to get some rest. We’ll figure all of this out.” I hung up the phone and tiptoed into my bedroom. I crawled silently between the sheets to find that my husband was wide awake.

“What was that all about?” he asked. He stayed awake to hear the whole story. As we fell asleep that night, we were in agreement. We needed to help.

The following morning, we set out to call the Department of Child Services. I had the name of the caseworker along with every hurried detail I had gathered from the night before. I was a woman on a mission. As it turned out, DCS didn’t care about my mission. I couldn’t even get past the front desk receptionist without security clearance on the level of the FBI. When I began crying about the children being separated and all alone, she hung up on me. I spent the rest of the day chasing my tail. I contacted the foster care licensing agency, left an email for the caseworker, called the little boy’s mother, and finally called my own mother. I spilled my every frustration to her. She listened intently to the story and then said, “I’ve been praying the whole time you were talking. I don’t know what you are supposed to do, but have you talked to your sister yet?” I practically smacked myself in the forehead. My sister was a caseworker for DCS in a county in northern Ohio. She wouldn’t know the laws specific to my state, but she would have a better idea of how the system works. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of that.

After a long conversation with my sister, and another page filled with directions, I felt armed to face the situation again. I made more headway the second time around. I learned how to get our license. I signed up for classes and even found a sympathetic license worker who fast-tracked our home study. I was on a roll again. Within

the week we were well on our way to meeting the requirements to become a foster home. We were proud and surprised about our progress, but even as we moved forward, each new day began with the stark reminder that the little boy was in a foster home far away from his mom, dad, and big sister.

Four weeks later, we were in the thick of transforming our home. We had been a family of three for the past two years, and within weeks we hoped to become a family of six. We couldn't afford to wait. We moved bedrooms around, borrowed a crib and a toddler bed from a friend, and even updated the paint for the new baby's nursery. We spent every waking moment working on preparing for our new arrivals. I gave extra special care to the little boy's room. He had been growing in my heart since before he was born. I was thankful to be needed, but I couldn't have known how badly he would need me.

More Bad News

Not only were we planning for the little boy and his big sister, we were preparing for an adoption as well. I cautiously set up the crib next to my side of the bed. I wanted to be the one to pat her sweet forehead if she fussed. I envisioned myself lifting her carefully from her bassinette and shuffling to the kitchen to warm a bottle. My arms longed to hold her. My fingers ached to run through her soft fine hair. We knew that so many things were uncertain, but still we hoped that we would soon be holding our new baby girl. Each day we navigated through the murky waters of foster parenting, we clung to the hope that we would be present at our newest daughter's birth. According to her mom and dad, we were to come straight to the hospital when she was born. They wanted us to hold her as soon as possible. We were so grateful to be included in the birth plan with such a sense of familial warmth. As our cautious hope grew, our ever-growing knowledge of the foster care system dampened our spirits only a bit. Our lawyer began writing up plans that went with each possible scenario. The unknown was nearly maddening.

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To keep myself busy, I gathered every piece of information I could find about children from the foster care system. I learned as much as I could about cocaine and marijuana exposure. I talked with all the family members I knew and kept records of everything I learned. I began gathering all the known medical information. I knew the baby was drug exposed, but every professional we contacted assured us that there was really no long-term risk involved. We knew the baby might be born premature. She might have a higher risk of stillbirth. She may have learning delays. We discussed each new piece of information in the evenings when my husband returned from work. I felt that we could handle anything. Foolishly I believed I could wish the baby into health. I would love her unconditionally, and I believed that love would always be enough.

As it would turn out, the undetermined future was a lot less frightening than the reality we were about to face. On April 4, 2004, the phone rang again. I had just returned home from church, ready to do the last bit of packing. We had planned one final vacation as a family of three. The vacation fell at just the right time for us to take a break from the waiting game. As I walked through the front door toting my daughter, I happily called out to my husband, "Are you ready to go to the beach?" He rounded the corner with the phone still in his hand. His face was colorless and blank. "What is it?" I asked nervously.

"Um, Kristin, I don't know how to say this." He glanced down at his feet. I placed our daughter on the carpet and began removing her shoes. I didn't want to hear his words. I resisted the urge to open the front door and run. "The baby was born this morning. She was early. There wasn't anything they could do. She didn't make it." My breath caught and the room started spinning. "No." I whispered. The shoe slipped out of my hand as I stood and walked out of the room.

"We have to get to the airport. We're going to be late." I could hear the words tumble out, but they felt hollow. I mindlessly walked to my bedroom and grabbed the suitcase. Mechanically, I opened drawers and placed each item inside the bag. My fingers brushed the

bassinet. Out of habit, I placed my hand on the quilt that lay inside. I began to pray for the unborn daughter. I froze, my heart constricting with the realization of my mistake. My chest felt so heavy I thought I might crush beneath the burden. One tear fell and then another. I fell to my knees, hands grasping at the emptiness around me. With each heaving breath, sadness spilled from me. “No, no, no, no, nooooo.” My hand rested on the eyelet hem of her bed. The fabric felt as cold and empty as my heart. When I had no tears left, I rose again, zipped the suitcase, and left for the airport. I wouldn’t talk of her again for days.

I spent a perfectly miserable four days on the beach before I was forced to talk about the baby. Mike recognized my need for space and didn’t push. Finally, he pulled a beach towel up to mine and sat down next to me. Our daughter slept peacefully beside us, shaded from the sun, unaware of the conversation that was about to take place. He linked fingers with mine, and for a while we sat silently. Waves lapped at the shore. I breathed deeply the smell of salt water in the breeze.

With eyes closed I allowed myself to hear him. “I’ve been asked to officiate the funeral. They don’t know anyone else?” It wasn’t a statement, more of a question. I left it unanswered while I envisioned what that meant. I hadn’t allowed myself to even think of her burial until that moment. Always the pastor’s family first, we would be there to offer comfort, not receive it. “Of course,” I said flatly, “it makes sense. Let them know we’ll be there.”

The day of the funeral was bitter cold, one of those leftover winter days that creeps unwelcomed into spring. I dressed in black and pinned my hair in loops low on my neck. I shrugged my daughter’s tiny arms into her coat and pulled her braids neatly beneath her hood. We made the trip in silence and arrived faster than I would have liked. Mike shook hands and stood bravely to say kind words. I passed out tissues and tried not to think about the lifeless body at the front of the room. As the funeral began, her mother took the seat closest to the casket and motioned in my direction to do the same. I looked behind me before realizing she wanted me to sit beside her. I

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did, and placed my little girl on my lap. I wrapped my arms tightly around my daughter as I felt the weight of this other mother's loss. She held no one. Her children were gone, all of them — the youngest tiny child present in body but absent in soul. I placed my hand on her knee and she placed her hand on mine. When it was time to close the casket, we said our goodbyes. I stood for a moment in front of the baby, pondering the perfectly formed lips. The tiny nose, nostrils forming a flawless figure 8, just like her big sister, just like her big brother, just like her momma. Dainty eyelashes curled up toward heaven. My breath caught and I turned away.

The wind bit at us as we stood over the miniature gravesite. She would be buried among other children in a patch of cemetery called the Children's Garden. I wrapped my daughter's fingers in mine to keep them warm. *She'll be cold in that ground*, I thought. I couldn't stop thinking that. *She's going to be cold. She's going to be alone. They didn't put enough blankets on her.* My irrational thoughts never met my lips, just lurked beneath the surface, biting at my mind. I can't remember how I got back to the car or who buckled our daughter into her car seat. I traced that figure 8 onto the foggy window as we drove away. That perfect figure 8, also the symbol for infinity. The tie from mother to daughter and from one generation to the next. Broken.

Just as we approached the exit of the cemetery, I grabbed the door handle and pulled. My feet hit the frozen grass and I started running. My steps were wobbly at first, one high-healed shoe slipped off and then another. I darted through grave stones. In and out. Ragged breaths giving way to heaving wails. *I want to quit. This hurts too much. I don't want to do this anymore. Why, God? Why her? Why us?* My breaths slowed as my mind cleared. I had a beautiful daughter waiting for me in the car. The little boy and his sister were waiting for me too. With their precious faces fixed in my mind, I realized I couldn't quit now. My toes were turning numb as I walked briskly back to the car where Mike and Joelle were waiting patiently for me to come to my senses. I had begun to think clearly and had a renewed sense of purpose.

CHAPTER 3

Missed Birthday

Another month passed and I missed the little boy's birthday. I spent the day dreaming of him. I wondered what he was doing. I tried to picture him a little bigger, a little chubbier. Did his cheeks finally fill out? Did he miss his mom and his big sister? I talked to his mom on that day. She confessed that she had missed a visit the day before. She told me she didn't have bus fare. The excuse felt lame and without conviction. I wondered what it had been like for the little boy to know she was absent. Did he realize it was his birthday? Did he know she wasn't there? My tone was flat as I told her goodbye.

The little boy learned to walk at ten months old. His foster mom witnessed the event. She was the mother of many, the grandmother of many more, and the foster mother of hundreds. She captured the moment on her instamatic. She carefully documented the little boy's likes and dislikes. She made careful records of his doctor's visits and waited patiently to hear his first words. The day before the little boy's birthday, she buckled him safely into his car seat and drove the hour-long drive to the visitation center.

They checked in 15 minutes early and shuffled to the waiting room. Her bones were aching and she wondered how much longer she could care for these tiny children. She hoisted him onto her lap and wiped his face with a baby

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wipe. The little boy's big sister came tumbling into the room with a brood of foster sisters and their foster mom. The little girls chattered happily as they went straight for the toy bin. Not the big sister. Her eyes remained wide with an uncertainty hidden behind them. The two foster mothers struck up their weekly conversation while the little boy wiggled off the lap and began to explore the room. The big sister followed closely behind him. Protectively she placed her arms out when he lost balance. Knowingly, she put smaller toys out of reach on an end table. At three and a half she hovered over her charge like a tiny little mother.

The two families waited the obligatory 30 minutes before the supervisor released them to go home. The little boy reached his arms toward his foster mom and allowed himself to be carried out of the room. The big sister stood frozen with her lower jaw jutted out. She refused to budge. Eventually her foster mother gathered the other little girls, scooped up the big sister, and turned her flailing body away from her own as she navigated the three flights of stairs down to the parking lot.

I cried at the thought of the children waiting alone at the visitation center. I cried for their loss, their hurt, and their worry.

We continued to work toward our license and moved at a speed that we would find out later was unheard of. In June, our license was complete. I gripped the piece of paper as if my life depended on it. We had spent the past month trying to get Child Services to even speak with us. The children's mother was insisting that we be allowed to take them, but she was losing her credibility quickly among her caseworkers.

Finally, one day I appealed to my sister. She said, "Okay, let me give it a try." She called the caseworker and simply stated, "Hello, this is Rebecca from Franklin County, I'm calling about the Marks children. Please get back to me at your earliest convenience." That

was all it took, a little bit of authority and a lot of self-confidence. The caseworker called back the next day. My sister gave them our phone number and told the caseworker that we were friends of the birth family and we were willing to keep the siblings together for as long as it would take. Those were the magic words, and the wheels started turning.

The First Day Together

Within two weeks, we were connected with the little boy's foster mother. She was so happy to hear from us and set up an appointment to meet in two days. I couldn't believe that this was finally happening. I hung up the phone and called the big sister's foster mother. She got choked up on the phone and asked if it would be okay to wait one more day so that the girls could have a little going-away party. I was anxious to get my own new life started, but both conversations were humbling. I was not the only one whose life was about to be changed. Each and every one of us was about to experience loss and gain, certainty and uncertainty.

Mike was out of town the day I went to get the little boy. I buckled Joelle and two extra car seats into the car. A teenager from our church named Rachel was living with us at the time and she jumped at the chance to go along on the adventure. We chatted happily for the first 45 minutes of the drive. As we wound around country roads, passing the newly planted cornfields, the car got quieter. Even my daughter sensed the nervous silence that had begun to fill the car. I glanced at her in the rearview mirror. She had her pacifier between her teeth and was watching thoughtfully as the clouds, cornfields, and soybeans rolled by.

My hands began to sweat as I smoothed my handwritten directions along the top of the steering wheel. Old grain bins stood abandoned directly at the edge of town. Everything about this tired, Indiana town looked just as I had expected. I took a left at the single blinking light. One more block and I turned right. My stomach was a lump in my throat and my hands began to shake. We had

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worked for months to get to this moment, and I had begun to lose my nerve. “Look! It’s right there!” Rachel exclaimed. I could see the house just as she had described it. A forest green minivan was parked a little to the left of the driveway. Two wheels touched the grass as if making way for my arrival. I parked carefully behind the rusted bumper. The three of us walked up to the door together.

The woman who answered was in her early 60s. She welcomed us into her cramped kitchen like we were old friends. Sitting in the high chair with the curliest head of hair I’ve ever seen, was the little boy I’d dreamed of. I passed Joelle to Rachel and crouched to eye level with the little boy. I smiled. “Meet Alexander,” his foster mother said sweetly. “Hi Alexander,” I returned. She began to explain all of her documents to me. She had pages and pages of observations and details written into a spiral notebook. When she finished, my head was spinning. She slipped the notebook inside of a bright red folder. On the cover, written in blue ink was “Alexander.”

His foster mother produced two grocery sacks filled with his clothes and a small drawstring bag that contained all he had brought with him into care. I opened the bag to find a baby bottle crusted with Kool-Aid and a pair of footed pajamas with the toes long since worn through. My naivety shown then. “This is all he came with? Did his mom bring him anything else when she came to the visits?”

She shook her head, “This really isn’t unusual. I’ve been a foster mom for decades. He came to me better than most.” I forced myself to smile and thanked her for keeping everything for him. Alexander was wiggling in the high chair, searching for an escape route. “Go ahead.” She motioned to me. I unbuckled him and lifted his tiny body effortlessly to the floor. He and Joelle played quietly for a few minutes observing one another.

Rachel and I gathered his things and carried them to the car. It only took one trip. I was becoming afraid to take him from such a happy home and found myself shuffling back to the front door. I talked to his foster mom for a few more minutes when she asked, “Are you going to adopt him?” The question caught me by surprise

and I actually choked. She grabbed me a cup of water and as I regained control, I answered, "I'm just going to keep the kids until their mother gets all of this worked out."

She actually looked sad for me. "Of course, of course. Reunification is always what we hope for." Her voice trailed off and I could tell she knew more. I didn't dare to ask what her undertone meant.

"Are you sure I should be taking him from you?" I couldn't believe I had said the words that were plaguing my mind.

"Oh, honey, I'm getting to be an old lady. I only take the little ones and I only take them until they find exactly the right home. I can tell you are the right person for Alexander." I wiped away a tear and hugged her. Rachel gathered Joelle, and I gingerly picked Alexander up. We said our last goodbyes, and as the door closed, Alexander screamed.

He continued to scream while we buckled him. He wailed as we pulled out of the neighborhood. He sniffled as we passed the corn and soybeans. He began to calm as we pulled into the McDonalds parking lot conveniently situated at the halfway point between our two homes. He gave a small smile as I fed him small bites of chicken nuggets. Joelle handed him a French fry and then squeezed his tiny hand. Rachel and I exhaled for the first time in over an hour. Just then we saw a rainbow-colored hot air balloon floating just above the car. We decided to follow it. We trailed along behind the balloon for miles. Joelle squealed as we got closer and closer. As it finally began to dip toward the earth, we parked alongside a ditch and opened the sliding van door to allow the kids to get a better look. They waved and smiled while the balloon landed with a swoosh. For a few minutes we all smiled. We traveled the rest of the way home with a peaceful happiness.

Our first night at home was exhausting. Joelle clung to me as I kissed her goodnight. Alexander proved to have more energy than I thought possible. He raced through the house exploring each corner with distracted curiosity. When it was time to put him in his bed, he clawed at my face with frantic fear. I prayed over him and kissed

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him goodnight, but before I made it to the top of the stairs I heard a thud. He had worked his way completely out of the crib. I opened the door to survey the scene. He was flat on his back looking frustrated. “Oh no, buddy, what happened?” I said softly. I scooped him up and placed him back in his crib. We repeated this dance a handful of times before I decide to pull the rocking chair up next to the crib and try something else. For a while he resisted the rocking. He grabbed fistfuls of my hair, and each time I moved his arms back to his side, he snarled at me in frustration. His eyes darted around the room wildly. We rocked for over an hour before his body became tired and limp. I didn’t dare move. I continued rocking long after he fell asleep.

When I finally placed him in the crib, I tiptoed down the stairs trying to avoid the creaky stair. Rachel and her friends were in the middle of a Harry Potter marathon. “I’m going to sleep on the floor next to the crib. Will you keep your ear out for Joelle?” I whispered.

“Sure, of course. How is he doing?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. This is so much harder than I thought it would be,” I continued to whisper. She nodded and I returned to the tiny attic room with a blanket and a pillow. I spent most of the night staring at the slowly moving ceiling fan. How could helping another person feel so sad? I would have to repeat this experience again tomorrow. The last words on my lips were a prayer for the big sister who was about to come home to a place she’d never known and once again lose a part of herself.