

#### Draft 4:

The familiar moment of turning the key in my 2016 Chevy Cruze is the best part of my day. That brief, seven-minute drive to the Denali National Park entrance has forever been a constant in my life, which is why I appreciate it so much. The drive never shifts—though everything else does.

I press the brake, shift out of park, and the car begins to roll forward—a sequence I had watched my mom do countless times as a child. I think of that time, that period when life was simpler: Sunday drives to church with my family, dark snowy mornings before school, and the blinding lights of passing semis. Those moments of calm didn't feel the same once everything began to unravel.

At 8:56 a.m. on June 23, 2023, the foundation of my existence crumbled. I was near the park entrance—that seven-minute drive away from home. I realized something was wrong when a supervisor came to relay a message from my mom, and I felt like I knew before she even said the words: my brother Sam had passed away. My entire body shut down, but somehow, my hands still found the wheel. I had to drive home—just seven minutes—but it felt like a lifetime. The silence in the car was deafening, filled with shock, anger, and sorrow. The road, once a peaceful routine, now felt unbearably heavy.

Sam wasn't just my brother. He was my protector, my role model, the person who promised to adopt me if anything ever happened to our parents. He was the one who made the world seem less frightening. In response, at only fifteen, I moved five hours away from my family. It felt like I had lost not just a person, but my very place in the world.

And yet, that road remained. It was the same through countless moments of uncertainty in my life: numerous family health diagnoses, my parents' divorce, and even joys like job offers. It showed me that there are things that stay the same in times of chaos. Even when facing grief, I am amazed at the comfort and peace I find within the consistency.

On that drive, I remember Sam. I picture us fishing together, him laughing as he helped me catch my first fish. I hear our favorite songs and sing the lyrics out loud, just like we used to. I glance in the rearview mirror, and sometimes, I see him—reflected in my eyes, in my expression, in my resilience.

And along this same road that he used to drive, experiencing these same quiet moments, I think of the last message he ever sent me: *"You're in control—even when it doesn't feel like it."*

So I grip the wheel a little tighter. I glance at the keychain he left, still hanging from the ignition. And I drive forward.

Over time, I've learned that healing doesn't mean forgetting—it means remembering differently. The grief remains, but now there's strength woven into the sorrow. I've become someone Sam would be proud of—someone who keeps going, who finds purpose in the chaos, who chooses to move forward, even when the path ahead is ever-changing.

I now understand that inconsistency is a constant in life, and rather than letting those experiences inhibit me, it can become my strength. Now, I make sure to continue showing up for and reaching out to people who I left behind when I moved away. At work, I try to serve as a point of support for coworkers during stressful times. Through my past, I have learned how to manage chaos, a skill that I used in emergency management via FEMA, and hope to apply in future professional settings.

I park the car and step out with the solemn thought that this seven-minute drive won't last forever, but there is one point of consistency that I, and those around me, can rely on: myself.