

He Didn't Have to Be

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Summary: Martha and her beau find something unexpected on their drive home one night.

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Author's Notes:

This was also published as Clark's paper in "On the Other Hand." However, it can stand alone. For the purposes of this story, I changed the dates to the ones based on show canon.

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May 1966
Martha

We were in the beat-up truck on our way home when we saw something flash across the sky. Curious, we waited to see if anything else was going to happen and when nothing did, we climbed the gate into Shuster's Field.

"What do you think it was?" I asked in excited, but hushed, tones.

He shook his head. "Beats me."

We hurried to the furrow whatever it was had dug into the earth.

There we found something we hadn't expected.

A tiny capsule lay there, and when I reached out to touch it, one side fell off. He reached towards the other side and the same thing happened, causing the top to lift with a hiss.

I gasped then whispered, "It's a baby."

He looked around furtively. "Well, we can't leave it here."

"This is not an 'it'," I said sternly.

"Well, can you tell if that's a boy or a girl through that plastic?"

"Well, no, but until we know for sure, we're going with 'he'."

"Fine. We can't leave him here."

"You're right. We'll take him with us."

"And do what with him?" he asked. "We can't leave him here, but which of us would take him home? And who would let either of us keep him?"

I sighed, tears welling up in my eyes. "I know. We're not married. They'd come and take him away and we'd never see him again. If anyone knew how we really found him, the government would lock him up and..." I choked up.

"...dissect him like a frog," he finished grimly.

"So what're we going to do?"

"Marry me."

"What?" I stared at him.

"You've been my best girl since we were five. We've talked about it; we just hadn't made it official yet. So let's do it. Oklahoma doesn't have a waiting period. We could run down there and get married this evening. By the time we get back, there won't be any reason for anyone to take him away from us. Unless his birth parents show up, and somehow I don't see that happening."

I bit my bottom lip and thought for a minute before I nodded. "Okay. Let's do it."

He hurried off and backed the truck into the field. Together, we managed to load the tiny craft into the bed and then covered it with a tarp, securing it as we went.

"Let's drop this off at the farm before we go. We'll go in the back way so no one will see us."

I nodded and climbed in beside him, still holding the tiny infant. "Let's go."

Several hours later, we stood in front of a judge in a small town just across the Oklahoma-Kansas border. We'd had to urge him away from his favorite prime time comedy, but managed to convince him that a dear friend had died that day and wanted to leave her baby with us, but since we weren't yet married, we were afraid that the Kansas Division of Child Services would take him away.

We'd planned on marrying, we said, just not this quickly. And that was the truth.

Reluctantly he'd agreed and we exchanged vows. It had happened too quickly to have rings to exchange as well, but he promised as soon as we got home, he'd break out the engagement ring he'd kept hidden for the last six months and we'd go to town to get wedding bands tomorrow.

"By the power vested in me by the state of Oklahoma, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You are now Mr. and Mrs. Christopher and Martha Davis."

I held the baby while he sucked hungrily on another bottle of formula. When we'd stopped at the house to hide the ship, I'd fixed a bottle from the supplies my now sister-in-law left at the house for their bi-weekly visits. I'd guessed he was about three months old and had fixed him a six ounce bottle. He'd finished it in no time flat and it had taken another eight ounces to fill him up. Space travel must have left him hungry.

Chris sat beside me on the couch and wrapped one arm around me pulling me and the baby close to him.

"What should we name him?" he asked softly.

"I don't know. What do you think?" I turned slightly and kissed his jaw.

He swallowed hard. "None of that until that little guy's in bed and then there's going to be some time for me and my bride." He pulled us a little closer.

"You better believe there is." I knew my eyes twinkled at him. "So what do you want to name him?"

"How about after your family?"

"Like what?"

"Clark."

"My maiden name," I said slowly then grinned. "My *maiden* name. It's not my name anymore."

"Nope. You're a Davis now."

"I like it." I gently stroked the tiny cheek still working vigorously on the bottle. "Clark Davis."

"What about a middle name?"

"Jerome," I said without hesitation.

"After my dad?" Tears filled his eyes.

"Yeah," I answered quietly. "He would have loved to see his new grandson."

"That he would have. He never quite forgave Jenny for having girls. Of course, he was wrapped completely around their little fingers from about two minutes after they were born."

"He loved them, but you have four sisters. He wanted another little boy in the family."

"We'll have to get Doc Johnson to help get a birth certificate and stuff. What's our official story going to be?"

"An old friend of mine from college dropped him off on your doorstep. I saw her earlier today but had no idea what she was planning on doing. There were a couple of strangers in town today so no one should question it. She left a note, asking us to protect her identity and take care of her baby. We went to

Oklahoma and got married. Everyone knows we've always planned to so... But, for some reason, she didn't explain in the note, she didn't have a birth certificate or anything for him." I'd thought about it a lot on the way to Oklahoma — even working out the wording of the note in my head. I'd have to write it soon, disguising my handwriting as I did, of course.

"That works." He watched as I gently extracted the now empty bottle from the mouth of his now sleeping *son*. I lifted him to my shoulder and gently patted his back until he burped.

"Will you get that laundry basket? I put an old, flat pillow in the bottom of it and it'll work for a bassinet until we can get some real furniture."

He nodded and moved to get the basket off of *our* bed.

A few minutes later, little Clark was sound asleep, one fist in his mouth, still wearing only a diaper we'd absconded from Chris's sister's stash. "We need to get him some clothes," he whispered as I set the basket in the living room, near the door to the room we would now share. He glanced at the clock. "It's eleven o'clock. Do you need to call home?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to deal with my parents right now." I rested a hand lightly on his chest. "Right now, I want to get to know my new husband better." I smiled shyly at him.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"I've been ready since the first time you kissed me when I was sixteen." I moved closer to him and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Make me your wife in every sense, Chris," I whispered.

We lay in our newly shared bed, resting quietly in the afterglow of something magical when the loud clanging of a bell halfway across town shook us from our quiet reflection. I fingered the engagement ring he'd slid onto my finger just before we'd made love for the first time.

He jumped from the bed and pulled on his jeans. "I gotta go, honey."

"I know."

Chris was a part of the volunteer fire brigade and when the bell rang — no matter the time of day or night — they had to go. He leaned over and gave me a long, lingering kiss. "Take care of that boy of mine while I'm gone." He winked at me and moved to the phone. He picked it up to hear Rob Miller and Darren Johnson already on the party line. He confirmed the location then kissed me — his new bride — again. "It's out at the Irig place. It'll probably be light before I get back."

"Okay."

He kissed me again. "I love you, Martha Davis."

"I love you, too."

There was a knock on the door as I fried an egg. Clark had woken up not long after Chris left and taken another big bottle. We'd slept for a little over four hours after that. The sunlight streaming in the window had kept me from sleeping much longer. I rarely slept late, but after the unusual exertions of the day before — finding a baby and hiding a spaceship and a trip to Oklahoma and becoming man and wife — I could have slept for a couple more hours without much trouble, but Clark decided it was time to play for a bit after his seven am bottle. I wrote that note and decided it was time to eat while I waited for Chris to come back.

Clark was lying on the floor on a quilt Chris' grandmother had made for us, knowing we'd marry someday but that she wouldn't likely be around to see it.

I smiled at him as he studied his fingers intently and then moved to the door.

I opened it to find a very somber Wayne Irig standing there with his hat in his hand.

My hand went immediately to my stomach and I stumbled

backwards. I'd seen that look too many times.

"No," I whispered.

"I'm so sorry, Martha. He told us that you two had run off and got married yesterday and that he'd tell us the rest of the story later." He twisted the hat he held in his hands. "He saved Josh." His voice broke. "He saved my son. He made it to the back bedroom and threw a sheet down to us. He managed to wrap Josh in another sheet and lower him far enough out the window that he could drop him onto the sheet he'd tossed to us. Josh is going to be fine, but the ceiling collapsed before..." He couldn't go on.

I had backed away from Wayne as he spoke until I collapsed into the chair in the living room. A small cry from the baby on the floor gave me something else to focus my attention on. "Oh, Clark," I cried. "Your daddy..." I clutched the baby to me and rocked back and forth.

"Joe took the liberty of calling on your folks to tell them and Darren was heading over to Jenny's house — Chris said his mom was over there last night. I'd imagine they'll be here soon." He looked at the ground. "I gotta get back to my Maggie and Josh, but if you need anything, Martha, please call us. We owe Chris so much and if there's anything..."

I nodded, unable to find the words.

As Wayne turned to leave, I stopped him. "Wayne, would you have Doc Johnson stop by if you see him? I need to have him look at Clark here."

Wayne nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'll go find him before I head home."

"Thank you."

My parents arrived not long after Wayne left and found me still sitting in the chair rocking baby Clark. I refused to explain until Chris's family arrived. When they did a few minutes later, I managed, between tears and refusals to let go of the baby, to tell them the story we'd concocted about a friend of mine from college in Oklahoma. The marriage itself wasn't a surprise to anyone, only the suddenness of it.

Over the next few days, the house was packed up — I knew I couldn't stay there by myself, not with a baby to care for. And Chris' mom and sister, Deborah, and her husband still lived in the bigger house across the farmyard so the farm would be taken care of. I'd agonized over what to do with the spaceship we'd found Clark in, but finally decided that Wayne owed us. I'd covered it completely with tarps and called Wayne over. He'd built a big crate around it and hid it on his farm, never asking for more information than I was willing to give him.

I moved back into the room on my parents' farm that I'd abandoned for only a few days. I spent most of my time with Clark, rarely venturing out except to shop with my mother for necessities for him and church on Sundays. The active social life Chris and I had enjoyed disappeared and my world revolved around the tiny baby that had literally fallen from the sky.

September 1970

"Clark Jerome Davis! Get back in here!" I hollered out the door.

The dark haired four-year-old trudged silently in from the barn.

"What do you think you're doing, young man?"

He hung his head. "Sorry, Mama."

"You're a mess. I don't have time to give you another bath before I leave, which means that Nana is going to do it."

"Aw, Mama, you give better baths." He frowned.

"Well, I gave you one earlier. You know better than to go play in the barn after you've had a bath."

He scuffed a well-worn shoe against the wood of the porch. "Sorry, Mama."

I smiled. "It's okay, Clark. Come here." I pulled him close to

my leg as he wrapped his arms around it and rested his head on my hip. "But it means that Nana is going to have to give you another bath and you need to be good for her."

"She doesn't let me play battleships," he pouted.

"I know, but that's because she doesn't have the energy to keep up with a four-year-old at bath time anymore."

Clark sighed. "Where're you goin', Mama? Why can't you stay with me? You can be my best girl."

I squatted down until I was at eye level with him. "I'll always be your best girl, son, but tonight, that nice Mr. Smith from the next county asked your Mama to go to a movie with him."

"Can I go? Please, Mama." His large brown eyes pleaded with me. "I'll be good. I promise."

I smiled at him. "Not tonight. Maybe another time."

He glared at me and stomped off to his room.

My mother sat in her rocking chair next to the open window in the living room. I knew she'd heard every word.

"I'm sorry you're going to have to give him another bath, but he can't go to church in the morning looking like that," I told her.

"I know, dear. Me and my arthritis might even let him play battleships for a while, if he's good between now and then."

Mom smiled at me. "So, tell me about Mr. Smith."

"His first name is Andrew and he seems like a nice man."

"Is he picking you up?"

I shook my head. "I'm meeting him at Maisie's. Maisie's picking me up here in a little while and we're going to the movies with her and Joe."

"Is he going to bring you home?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"You didn't tell him about Clark yet, did you?" my mother asked gently.

I sighed. "No. I didn't. Most everyone from around here knows about him, but Andrew isn't from here. He's from far enough away that he doesn't know our story." I didn't wilt under my mother's disapproving stare. "I will tell him. There's no point in a second date if he's not willing to even consider raising another man's son."

We turned as we heard a car coming up the road.

"That's Maisie. I'll be home later. Thanks, Mom." I kissed her forehead. "Clark!" I called. "I'm leaving. Come here."

Clark came running down the stairs. "Don't go, Mama." He buried his head in my leg. "I promise; I won't play in the barn anymore."

I knelt down on the floor. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Please don't go. I'll be a good boy." His bottom lip quivered.

I tipped his chin up with her finger. "You are a good boy. You're my best boy. And I'll be home tonight. You'll be asleep, but I'll be home *long* before you wake up, okay?"

Clark nodded.

"You be good for Nana, okay?"

Clark nodded again then wrapped his arms around my neck. "I love you, Mama."

"I love you, too." I returned the hug and gave him a big kiss before straightening up and heading for the door.

Clark

I watched as Mama climbed into the truck with Miss Maisie. I'd heard what she said to Nana. Why was she going out with this Mr. Smith if she didn't think he'd want to... what was it she'd said? Raise another man's son. Why wouldn't Mr. Smith want to help take care of me? I was a good boy, even if I did forget and play in the barn sometimes when I wasn't supposed to.

Pete had a daddy. They ran the grocery store in town. So did Lana — her daddy was the mayor and Rachel's daddy was the sheriff. Josh's daddy was a farmer like Pop Pop was. And Pop Pop was Mama's daddy, but I didn't have a daddy. Well, Mama

said my daddy died a very long time ago when I was too little to remember it but that he'd loved me very much.

I was a good boy and my Nana let me play battleships for a few minutes in the bathtub. I was sound asleep when a noise woke me up.

Mama's laughter wafted up from the porch and through my open window. A man's voice joined hers. That must be the nice Mr. Smith. I wanted to meet him.

I climbed out of bed and walked quietly down the stairs. I reached the open screen door and pushed on it.

"Mama, can I sit with you for a little while?" I asked rubbing my eyes.

"Clark," she exclaimed. "What are you doing up? You're supposed to be in bed, young man."

I shuffled to her side. "I'm sorry, Mama. I heard you laughing and wanted to come sit with you is all."

She smiled and held out her arm. I walked readily into her embrace. "Andrew, this is my son, Clark. Clark, this is Mr. Smith."

I held out a small hand. "It's my pleasure to meet you, Mr. Smith." Just like I'd been taught.

"It's nice to meet you, Clark."

Martha smoothed my hair back out of my face. "Why don't you run on upstairs and I'll tuck you in when I come up?"

"Okay." I moved back inside and climbed back in bed. Voices came through the window but I couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

A few minutes later, Mama was sitting on the side of my bed as the sound of gravel indicated that Mr. Smith was leaving.

"Did you have fun, Mama?" I asked with a yawn.

"I had a nice time." She pushed that one lock of hair back off my forehead.

"Are you going to see him again?"

"Oh, I don't know. He lives awfully far away from your Nana's house so I don't know that things would work with him."

"What kind of work? Like on a farm?"

"Yes, he works on a farm, but it's a long ways from here."

"Oh."

"Get some sleep, little man."

"Good night, Mama."

"Good night, Clark." She pulled the blanket up around me and pressed a kiss to my forehead before leaving.

Martha

After church the day after my date with Andrew Smith, Clark was lying in his bed playing with his toy cars. He was really supposed to be napping but as long as he was quiet I didn't mind.

I closed the door and went downstairs to sit on the couch. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

"How was your evening, dear?"

"You don't waste any time, do you, Mom?"

"No. Life's too short to waste time."

"Yeah," I said softly, thinking of the time Chris and I had wasted. We should have gotten married the minute I got home from college in December instead of waiting another six months after that. "That it is."

"So?"

"The evening was very nice until we were chatting on the porch and Clark came out."

"He was up?"

I nodded. "Yeah. He heard us laughing and came down."

"Had you told him about Clark yet?"

"No."

"How'd he take it?"

I sighed. "Not well. He made some... derogatory remarks about Clark and his father. I told him that it was none of his business at this point and if he stuck around long enough and I

thought it might be going somewhere, he'd get the whole story but not until then. I only told him that I'd been married to a wonderful man who died saving a little boy's life. He made another rude comment and I told him he'd better leave before he found himself walking funny for the next week."

"I'm so sorry, dear."

I shrugged. "If someone isn't willing to accept my son, he's not worth my time." We sat for another minute before I continued. "You know, in some ways it was more like a job interview than a date. He may not have realized that but it was — an interview for the job as Clark's dad. If he isn't willing and able to that job, there's no way he's going to end up being my husband."

"There's someone out there for you, dear. I know there is."

"Maybe. But maybe Chris was it. I'd rather have Clark any day of the week than someone who doesn't understand that it's possible to love someone else's child as though he were your own. Clark wasn't Chris' son either — and he's not mine, biologically — but that doesn't matter to me and it didn't matter to Chris."

"Mama?"

My eyes grew suddenly wide. "Clark? You're supposed to be lying down."

"I know but I need some water. What do you mean I'm not Chris's son? I thought Chris was my daddy and you're my Mama." His lower lip quivered and the big brown eyes filled with tears.

"Come sit with me." I patted the couch next to me. When he was curled up next to me, I continued. "Clark, sometimes when a mom and dad have a baby, they can't take care of him well enough and so they give him to someone else who can take care of him. One day, when you were very little, your mom and dad realized that they couldn't take care of you and so they gave you to me and Chris because they knew how much we would love you and how well we could take care of you."

"But Chris went away." His voice still trembled.

"You know your friend Josh?"

He nodded.

"Well, one night — the same night you came to live with us — Chris had to go help fight a fire at Josh's house. Josh was just a tiny baby, like you were at the time. Chris went into the house even though it was on fire and he saved baby Josh."

"Why didn't he get out?"

I shook my head. "There wasn't time. He saved Josh, but he couldn't save himself. He loved you and he loved me very much, but he had to leave us."

"What about my other mom and dad?"

"They loved you very much, but for some reason, they couldn't take care of you and they wanted to make sure that you were taken care of so they sent you to us."

"Will you always take care of me, Mama? Or are you going to send me away too?"

I hugged him a little tighter. "I'm always going to take care of you. I'm not ever going to send you away."

"Not even if you can't find someone who wants to live with us and be my daddy? You won't send me away so you can find a grown up man?"

I turned his head until he looked me in the eye. "Clark, if a grown up man doesn't want to be your daddy, then he's not man enough to live with us. Ever. I wouldn't ever marry someone who doesn't love you as much as I do and if I never find someone like that, I have you and that's more important. I love you more than I love the idea of being married again."

"You were married to my daddy?"

"Yes, I was, sweetheart."

"And you loved him?"

"Very much."

"Do you think there's another man out there who would love both of us?"

"I don't know, sweetie. But until we find one, it's you and me okay?"

He nodded. "And Nana and Pop Pop."

I laughed. "And Nana and Pop Pop."

June 1971

Clark

I met the man I call my Dad when I was five-years-old.

"You have a date tonight, Mama?" I asked.

"I do." She hunted through her jewelry box looking for her other earring.

"Is he going to be mean like that Mr. Smith was last year?"

"I hope not."

"Is he going to be nice like Mr. Johnson?"

Mama laughed. "Mr. Johnson is nice, Clark." I knew Mr. Johnson was nearing eighty, but said he loved me like his own grandson and even let me call him Pop sometimes.

"Is he going to be nice like my daddy was?" I asked quietly.

"I don't know. He seems like a nice man, but I don't know if he's going to be as nice as your daddy until I've talked to him a while."

"Does he know about me?" I didn't look at her as I spoke.

"Yes, he knows about you." Finding the earring at last, she slid it into her ear and fastened it.

"What's his name?"

"His name is Mr. Kent. He lives over on the farm by Josh. He's been in the Navy and just came home to help his mama take care of their farm since his brother is moving to Arkansas."

"That's nice of him."

"That's very nice of him." She found her watch and put it on.

"And he doesn't live far away like Mr. Smith did."

"No," Mama said slowly. "He doesn't."

"So if he does turn out to be nice like my daddy, we wouldn't have to be far from Nana and Pop Pop."

"No, we wouldn't, but Clark?"

"Yes, Mama?"

"Even if things go well with him tonight, and I decide to see him again, that doesn't mean we're going to get married. It might be a long time before we decide to get married, even if he does turn out to be a nice man." She looked me in the eyes. "And I don't want you saying anything to him about it, okay?"

"Okay."

I hid at the top of the stairs when I heard the knock on the door. This Mr. Kent better treat Mama right or I would have something to say about it. I wasn't sure what that meant but Pop Pop had said it once so I thought it.

Mama opened the door and I heard them saying something I couldn't quite make out, but I guessed they were saying hello.

"Clark?" Mama called.

"Yes, Mama?" I called back.

"Can you come here please?"

I hesitated, afraid I was going to be in trouble for sitting there, and then made my way slowly down the stairs.

"Come here, son." Mama smiled at me and held out her arm. I practically ran to her, almost hiding behind her leg. "Mr. Kent wanted to meet you before we left."

I looked up. "Hi, Mr. Kent."

The larger man knelt down so that we were eye to eye. "You know, Clark, I don't think I'd like it too much if some strange man came to my house and took my mama out to dinner and a movie without knowing something about him first."

"Yes, sir." I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I'd found it was always best to agree with grown-ups.

"So, what if you came with us? I wouldn't want you to stay

up worrying about your mama.”

I looked up with wide eyes at Mama. “Can I, Mama? Can I come?”

A single tear streaked down Mama’s face. “Of course you can. If Mr. Kent wants you to come, then that would be wonderful. You know I always love spending time with you.”

My small hand reached up and brushed away the tear. “Then why are you crying?”

“No reason,” she smiled. “So what do you say? Are you going to come with us?”

A wide grin split my face and I let go of her leg to jump up and down. “Yes!” I quickly tamped down my excitement. “I’m in my pajamas. I can’t go to town in my pajamas.”

“Well, we better get you changed. Come on.” Martha pushed me towards the stairs. She turned to the other man before she followed. “We’ll be right back.” I knew she was almost crying again. “Thank you,” she said quietly. I wasn’t sure what she was thanking him for.

He smiled at Mama. “I’ll be waiting.”

I sat by the window in the old pickup truck. I knew it had been washed that afternoon. Mama sat between me and Mr. Kent. I liked Mr. Kent. I bet Mr. Kent was trying to impress Mama with the clean truck. A clean truck probably would impress her — clean little boys sure did.

We went to Maisie’s Diner for dinner. I got to have a cheeseburger and fries *and* a milkshake. Mama always made me get water on the rare occasions we went out to eat. I’d dutifully ordered water just as usual, but Mr. Kent had been the one to suggest a milkshake.

After dinner, a drive by the movie theater showed the only choices were a girly princess movie or something Mama and Mr. Kent had indicated was for ‘grown ups’.

Instead, Mr. Kent suggested we go for a drive and watch the stars for a while. Before long, the truck was parked on the little road near Shuster’s Field. The three of us climbed in the back of the truck and Mr. Kent spread a blanket out for us to sit on.

I talked for a while about my friends and the frog I’d found the day before and how my Mama was much nicer about frogs than most other mamas. Nana was, too. Grandma Davis would never, ever let a frog in the house and neither would aunts Jenny or Deborah. Aunt Dorrie might but she lived a long ways away.

There was a slightly weird feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I decided it was because I’d never been on a real date before. Before long, I dozed off, my head resting on Mr. Kent’s shoulder as they continued to talk quietly. Well, I guess they did. I was asleep. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been asleep when I suddenly jerked awake.

“Mama, I think I’m gonna be sick.” The words barely made it out of my mouth, when my dinner followed — all over the nice Mr. Kent.

Mama helped me to the side of the truck where the rest of my dinner found its way onto the ground. I could hear Mr. Kent moving around behind me. When I thought I was done, I sat back in Mama’s arms.

“Here,” said Mr. Kent, holding out a Thermos of water. “Take a sip and swish it around then spit it out.”

I nodded and did as I was told. Mama held me close to her and pushed my hair back out of my face. “Are you okay, Clark?”

“I dunno. My tummy still hurts.”

She looked at Mr. Kent. “I’m so sorry, Jonathan. He’s never sick.”

He smiled back at her. “It’s okay. It’s just one of those things, but I think we better get this little guy home.”

Mama nodded. “That’s probably best.” She helped me climb down and into the cab, keeping me close to her the whole time.

Mr. Kent changed shirts, I noticed. He must have kept

another one in the truck just in case a five-year-old threw up on him or something.

I knew Mama had loved Chris, but I’d never thrown up on him. If Mr. Kent still wanted to be part of our lives after I threw up all over him, maybe he was a good guy after all.

September 1971

I was lying in bed a few months later, when I heard Mama and Mr. Kent talking on the porch and I wanted to go sit with them. I remembered the night I’d gone out there when she was talking to Mr. Smith and that hadn’t turned out so well. Maybe going down there wasn’t such a good idea after all.

But this was Mr. Kent. He liked me, even though I’d thrown up all over him. He’d even taken me fishing a couple of times. I loved to fish but Pop Pop couldn’t fish much anymore because of his roomba something that made his knees hurt. And Grandpa Jerome had died before I came to live with Mama and my Daddy Chris. That’s why my middle name was Jerome. Mama was the only one who ever used it though and then only when I was in trouble.

I hated getting middle named.

Would she middle name me if I went down to sit with them a bit tonight? I hadn’t seen Mr. Kent in nearly a week because he’d been busy on his farm.

Finally, I decided it was worth the risk.

I went downstairs and pushed the screen door open. “Mama, can I sit with you for a little while?”

Mama smiled at me. “If it’s okay with Mr. Kent.”

I looked at him hopefully and he smiled at me, too. “Of course. Come on, Clark. Come sit over here.”

I climbed between them and rested my head on Mama as she wrapped her arm around me.

“You know,” Mr. Kent said seriously. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask your mama and I think it’s only right that I ask her with you here too, because it affects you.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. It sounded like grown-up decisions and I didn’t get to help with grown-up decisions. Getting to help with this one made me feel very grown-up indeed.

He cleared his throat and then stood up and wandered around the porch for a minute looking kinda nervous. I knew he’d been really nice when I’d thrown up on him, but I didn’t know if I could be as nice as he was if he threw up all over Mama. And he looked a little green around the gills, as Nana might say.

After a minute, he came back and bent down in front of us, putting one knee on the ground. He pulled a box out of his pocket and opened it.

It was a pretty ring. It wasn’t like the one Mama wore on her right hand. She said she wore it on the right because she was a widow. A widow was a lady whose husband had died, she’d told me. This was like the one Nana wore with the ring that was like the one Mama had. She wore them on her left hand because Pop Pop was alive.

She gasped. “Jonathan!”

“Martha Clark Davis, will you marry me?”

Marry him? He wanted to marry Mama? “Does that mean you’ll be my Daddy?” I asked, not noticing I’d interrupted them.

He looked at me very seriously. “I’d like to be your Daddy. I’d like to be your Mama’s husband. I love both of you very much and I want to help take care of you.”

I stood up and looked at him carefully then knelt down next to him. “Mama, will you marry Mr. Kent?”

She wiped the tears from her face as she nodded. “Of course I will.” She reached out and touched Mr. Kent’s face. “I love you too, Jonathan.”

He took the ring out of the box and looked at it closely. “I know this isn’t an engagement ring, and if you want me to get

you one I will — gladly. But I was thinking. Chris was a big part of your life for a very long time and he is always going to be a part of your heart and part of Clark's, too. Would it be okay with you if you still wore Chris's engagement ring with my wedding band?"

I didn't understand Mama's tears as she took the ring off her right hand. Mr. Kent stuck the other ring back in the box and took the one my Daddy Chris had given her.

He put the ring on her left hand and she kissed him. That was yucky and I couldn't help but make a disgusting noise.

Jonathan laughed and stood up and swung me around. "We're gonna be a family, son."

It was the first time he'd called me son. I thought he almost had a few times before, but he'd stopped himself.

He was right. Mama and I were a great family. And we had Nana and Pop Pop but Mama's brother, Jerry, was talking about wanting to move here and help with the farm and it would be a tight fit for all of us. He was married with three little girls of his own and I would have to share my room with a girl. No, thank you.

Was that why Mama was going to marry Mr. Kent? He was still holding me and Mama had come to stand next to him and his arm was around her. "Mama?" I asked.

"Yes?" Her eyes were still bright with tears, but her smile was bright, too.

"Are you marrying Mr. Kent because Uncle Jerry is moving here and there's not enough room?"

"No! Clark, I love Mr. Kent and I'd marry him whether Uncle Jerry was moving in or not."

"Good." That was settled.

Martha

Jonathan had asked me to marry him. He was a dear, wonderful man, but I knew before we could actually get married, I needed to tell him about Clark. The whole truth about Clark.

The next day, I called Wayne Irig up and asked him to deliver the crate that he'd been keeping for me since Chris died to the Kent farm. A couple days after that, he did.

Then Jonathan called. "Martha, do you know anything about this crate Wayne just dropped off?"

I sighed. I hadn't known when Wayne would get around to it. "Yes, I do," I said softly. "Instead of going to dinner in town tonight, can we stay at your house and I'll tell you all about it?"

"Of course. Can you tell me what it's about?"

"Clark." That was all I would say. "Please don't ask anymore right now."

"Okay," he replied simply. "I'll pick you up around six?"

"No, that's okay. I'll drive over." I thought he'd understand, but on the off chance that things went terribly wrong, I would have a way home.

"I'll see you then."

I was nervous when I got there. Jonathan asked if I wanted to eat first. He wasn't the world's greatest cook, but he made a mean barbeque sauce and knew his way around a grill.

His mom had moved into the little house on the other side of the farmyard a few weeks earlier. I thought she knew Jonathan was going to propose to me and didn't want me to feel like she was part of the package. She was, of course, but that wouldn't have stopped me from marrying him. She made the world's best potato salad and had brought some over soon after I arrived then retreated to her own house.

I only picked at my dinner and Jonathan picked up on it immediately.

He finally set his fork down. "What is it, Martha? Are you having second thoughts about marrying me?"

Tears filled my eyes. "No. I want to marry you very badly.

But I have something to show you, something to tell you and after that, you may not want to marry me."

"What is it?"

I wiped my mouth on my napkin even though I hadn't eaten a bite in over ten minutes. "Where did Wayne put that crate?"

"In the barn, like you asked him to."

"Well, let's go."

We walked to the barn and I had him pry the top off, but told him to leave the tarps in place. They were more worn than I remembered, but it had been five years.

"I haven't told you the whole truth about some things," I finally said, sitting on one of the milking stools. "I'm sorry if that hurts you, but I had to be sure before I told anyone else about this. Chris was the only one who knew. Even Wayne only knows that he's been keeping a crate for me."

Jonathan pulled up another stool and sat down near me.

"Well, I can't say that I'm happy that you've kept something from me, but you must have had your reasons."

"I did," I said softly, still refusing to look at him.

"And I can't imagine what it might be that you're about to tell me that would make me not want to marry you."

"Before I tell you the rest of the story, how much do you know about me and Chris and Clark?"

He shrugged. "I remember you and Chris being inseparable since kindergarten. I wasn't surprised to hear you'd gotten married. Other than that, I know you weren't married very long but that you had Clark."

"Clark isn't my biological son," I said quietly. "He wasn't Chris' either."

Jonathan nodded slowly. "I'd heard that he was the son of an old friend of yours or something."

I chuckled wryly. "Try or something."

He looked at me, puzzled, but didn't say anything.

"One night, we found Clark, abandoned. We weren't married yet and knew that no one would let us keep him if we weren't so we went to Oklahoma and got married that night. We told everyone an old friend from college had contacted me and her dying wish was for us to raise her son. We drove back up here and fed him and put him to bed and then..." Even though I knew I'd been married to Chris and Jonathan knew I'd been married to Chris, it was still a little weird to talk about. I took a deep breath. "We made love for the first time — the only time — and then he was called to the Irig's. He saved Josh, but the ceiling collapsed on him."

"Oh, Martha. I had no idea that you were only married that long."

I wiped the tears away. "It's okay. We had a wonderful few hours together and if I could have Chris back but Josh would die instead... Well, I wouldn't do that. Wayne came by the next morning and told me what happened and told me to call him if I needed anything. I called him a few days later and had him build a crate around something wrapped in tarps and asked him to store it for me indefinitely without asking any questions about it. And he did. He has. When I called him the other day, it was the first time we've talked about it in five years."

"Well, I haven't heard anything so far that's going to make me not want to marry you."

"I'm getting there. I haven't told you how we found Clark.

We were driving near Shuster's Field and we saw a light in the sky. We pulled over and investigated. There was something in the field and it was Clark."

"What was it?"

I pointed to the crate, but didn't say anything.

"Can I look now?"

"Brace yourself."

He looked oddly at me, but nodded then moved to the side of the crate. He pulled the tarps off then gasped. "What's this?"

"A spaceship of some kind," I whispered. "Clark was in it."
"Is he..." Jonathan hesitated. "Is he an alien?"

I shrugged. "We didn't know. All we knew was a little baby had literally dropped in our laps and we weren't about to tell anyone. Chris was afraid someone would take him from us and dissect him like a frog. We didn't know if he was from another planet or an experiment from the Soviet Union or even from our own government. We went to Oklahoma and got married. We were planning on it and Chris had bought the engagement ring six months earlier but hadn't actually asked yet."

"So when do we get to the part where I don't want to marry you?"

I smiled through my tears. "Well, if I haven't scared you off yet..."

He sat back down and took my hand. "You haven't."

"We wondered — if he was an alien — if he would be different from us when he grew up. Or — if he was an experiment — if he'd been genetically enhanced. I'm sure you've noticed things about him. He sees a little better than most kids. He's faster than the first graders even though he's only going into kindergarten. He's stronger than other little boys and he hears a lot better too. Except for the time he threw up all over you, he's never been sick — not even an ear infection. I don't know what that means for him growing up, but I have a feeling that he could be challenging. Not because he's not a good boy, he is, but because of his heritage — whatever that is."

Jonathan nodded slowly. "I can see how that might be, but I still don't see why I wouldn't want to marry you."

"It's one thing to ask you to raise another man's son. It's another to ask you to raise a little boy who could very well be an alien."

"You and Chris didn't turn away a little boy who needed you, why would I?"

I squeezed his hand a little tighter. "I didn't think you would, but you never know." I stared at our joined hands. "Do you understand why I couldn't tell you until I was sure?"

He smiled at me and tugged on my hand until I moved to sit on his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me gently. "I do."

"Remember those words, Mr. Kent. I hope you're going to need them."

"I am," he said softly and kissed me again.

October 1971

Clark

Two weeks later, Pop Pop walked Mama down the aisle. Mama and Mr. Kent had decided they didn't want to wait and that two weeks was more time to plan than Mama had had for her wedding to Daddy Chris. I stood there next to Mr. Kent in my best Sunday suit and tried not to tug at the neck. My shoes were too tight and I couldn't breathe right but it was hard not to squirm even though Nana had just reminded me not to a few minutes earlier.

Preacher Rob, Maisie's husband who'd been there the night Daddy Chris had saved Josh, said some stuff I didn't really understand. Something about deers and loving. I loved deer. It was good and Mr. Kent knew how to make it right — just like Pop Pop did. Then he said something about holding peas but I didn't have any so I stuck my hands in my pockets. Then Mama and Mr. Kent said some stuff to each other about loving cherries. I think I was hungry. Everything had to do with food and Nana had made cherry pie for later.

Then Mr. Kent put the ring on Mama's finger and Mama put one on his. Then Preacher Rob said Mr. Kent could kiss Mama so he did. It was yucky, but they were both smiling when they were done. I figured I'd have a lot of that to look forward to in the future. Them kissing that was.

Mama was moving into Mr. Kent's — I mean Daddy's — house that night. She'd already taken all of our things over there. Well, he'd helped and I had my own room over there, but they told me I had to stay with Nana and Pop Pop one more night. Lana said something about them wanting to be alone to fight over who got which side of the bed since they'd sleep in the same bed now and they wouldn't want to fight over it in front of me. I didn't see what the big deal was, but I didn't understand grown-ups. I'd tried kissing Lana and didn't see why they wanted to do that all the time. She'd pushed me down and told me to not ever do that again.

We had dinner in the church rec room and I got to eat cherry pie *and* cake. Two pieces of each. And a piece of pecan pie that Rachel's mama brought. And my new Granny Kent had made her famous potato salad so I had some of that too. My tummy didn't feel good after that, but I didn't throw up on Mr. Kent — Daddy — this time. Grandma Davis was there, of course, and happy for Mama and Daddy, but she didn't cook much anymore or I would have had to eat some of her fruitcake. I didn't like it but Mama would want me to eat some, to be polite.

Daddy and Mama danced then asked if I'd like to dance with them. I said I would but I didn't think I wanted to dance with any other little girls. I'd tried dancing with Lana while they were dancing by themselves, but she pushed me down again. Daddy laughed and said that someday I would. I told him he was wrong.

He picked me up in one arm and wrapped the other around Mama. The three of us just kind rocked a bit, but I guessed that was dancing.

There with Mama and Daddy, we'd gone from something's missing to a family.

Looking back, all I can say about all the things he did for me...

I can only hope that I'm at least half the dad that he didn't have to be.

THE END