

# Found

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**Summary:** In Smallville, what you see is what you get. But sometimes even the most idyllic places can hold the most horrific secrets. Martha and Jonathan Kent never expected to find a little boy—especially not in the back seat of a wrecked car with his parents dead from the crash. Little Clark Peterson, now an orphan at the age of ten, seems like he’s holding on to more than one heartbreaking secret. Will Martha and Jonathan find the strength to make Clark feel safe again now that he’s been found?

**Story Size:** 41,144 words (227 kB as text)

**Author’s note:** This is Part One of a planned trilogy. The theme is a bit dark but ultimately hopeful, and as usual, though I break lots of things, I promise to put them alllllll back together! Thank you to KSaraSara for encouragement and help with the Summary and beta reading!

**Content warning:** child abuse/severe neglect, on-page death of side characters, mild cursing

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## Chapter 1

Martha Kent closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest. For once, she was glad Jonathan had come with her into town to go shopping. She’d never loved driving in inclement weather. Not that she was bad at it; no, she could handle their pickup just fine, wind or rain or snow. But driving through the torrential downpour outside, combined with the exhaustion she felt after the long week they’d just had and the headache she’d been battling most of the afternoon, would have been challenging, to say the least.

Turning her head slightly in Jonathan’s direction, she opened her eyes about halfway and then reached a hand over and set it lightly on his thigh.

“Thanks for driving home, Jonathan,” she said, and she gave him a small smile when he glanced over at her.

“Of course, Martha.” He returned her smile before quickly looking back at the road ahead of them. “I’m glad you didn’t—”

Jonathan tensed, his hands tightening on the steering wheel, and Martha whipped her head back around to look forward just as he slammed his foot on the brakes. The sound of squealing tires was drowned out by Martha’s scream as the pickup slid to a stop, throwing her forward against the shoulder strap of her seatbelt.

“Oh God, Jonathan...”

“Stay here, Martha, I’ll—”

But she’d already unlatched her seat belt, turned the door handle, pushed the door open, and started out into the pouring rain, her eyes fixed on the scene in front of them.

A dark blue sedan settled into its position upside down just off the road, not more than forty feet ahead of her. Its roof was crushed, as was the entire passenger side; glass and debris were everywhere, and smoke wafted up from the front of the vehicle.

But Martha barely registered that or the nauseating smell of burnt rubber or the rain pounding down, instantly soaking her. Her gaze remained trained on the two figures in the front seat, hanging from their seatbelts.

“Jonathan!” She glanced back over her shoulder toward their pickup just as Jonathan shut the door.

“I’m coming, Martha.”

Together, they ran through the rain, across the slick asphalt, and then into the mud and wet grass along the side of the road. And the closer they got, the more the knot in Martha’s stomach tightened.

“God, Jon...”

Martha stopped a few feet back from the flipped vehicle, her hands moving up to cover her mouth as Jonathan continued on, carefully lowering himself to the ground amidst all of the broken glass and reaching into the vehicle toward the driver.

“Martha...” Jonathan grunted as he scooted back a bit and looked at her over his shoulder. His eyes told her all she needed to know, and she felt tears mingling with the rain sliding down her cheeks. Jonathan’s voice thick with anguish, he stammered, “The backseat—check the backseat, Martha...there’s—there’s a child.”

Her heart sank, and she tore her gaze away from her husband and forced her feet to move. Within seconds,

she had knelt down next to the vehicle, and she carefully wiggled her way in through the partially shattered window, ignoring the shards of glass that sliced into her palms and knees. Ahead of her, a small child—maybe seven years old—hung upside down in the middle seat, the lap belt barely holding him in place. Blood dripped from a cut on his head and another on his arm, and his eyes were lightly closed with unconsciousness.

But as she reached up and placed a hand in front of the boy's mouth, she felt him breathing, and a wave of relief washed over her.

"He's alive, Jonathan!" she called over the din of the rain, which still pounded down outside.

"Can you get him out?"

She quickly scanned the small space around her. With the roof crushed in, the boy—even being as small as he was—was only a few inches from the ground.

"I think so," she said. Then, she twisted around as much as she could until she found Jonathan, who was leaning in watching her through the broken window.

"Be careful, Martha," he said with a small nod. "Wayne's on his way, I can see him comin' down his driveway with his truck. We should get the boy inside, call Doc McMillan."

A small moan from the child shifted Martha's focus, and she turned back toward the boy as his face tightened.

"Shh, sweetie, you're okay. I'm gonna get you outta here," she murmured quietly, although the boy didn't respond. Inching closer, she brushed some of the broken glass out from directly underneath him. The ground was wet from the rain, and she shivered as a chilly breeze swept through the vehicle. She began to ease herself onto the ground carefully, turning onto her back and then scooting just underneath the boy.

"Careful Martha, you don't know what kind of injuries he might have."

She nodded and reached up to cradle the boy's head with one hand, feeling warm blood at the back, matting his unruly black hair. With her other hand, she reached up toward the seatbelt latch. Pausing, she glanced back toward Jonathan, lifting her head off the ground a bit so she could see him. "There's a blanket behind the seat in the pickup. Can you...?"

"Got it. I'll be right back."

Still being as careful as she could, Martha pushed the button to undo the seatbelt but held the belt in her hand and then slowly let it retract. When her hand reached his midsection, she released the lap belt and shifted to support the boy with her hand just above his hips.

He weighed nearly nothing, and she was surprised when she didn't have too much trouble easing him down on top of her, his head coming to rest on her chest. Gently, she wrapped both arms around him, and she spoke quietly to him as she started to slide along the ground back out of the broken vehicle.

"Shh, I got you, sweetie. You're gonna be okay." She didn't even know if that was true, but god, she'd never hoped for anything more in her life. Voices outside the vehicle became louder as she inched her way out, feet first.

"I called the police already, but they're at least ten minutes out yet. Maybe y'all take my truck back to the house, call Doc to get out here to see to the boy."

"Good idea, Wayne. Get him inside, out of this rain. Martha...?"

"You have that blanket, Jonathan?"

"Yes, ma'am."

When she'd scooted all the way out of the car, Jonathan laid a blue and white quilt over top of the boy, and then both he and Wayne helped her to stand as she kept the child held tightly in her arms. He didn't stir again, and his breathing seemed labored.

"Here, Jonathan, take my truck," Wayne said, handing Jonathan a set of keys.

Then, together, Martha and Jonathan hurried over to Wayne's white pickup, and Jonathan opened up the passenger's side door and helped Martha in before climbing into the driver's seat.

She closed her eyes for just a few seconds and steadied herself with a few deep breaths as her husband started the truck, turned it around, and then drove as quickly as he could back down the driveway to the Irigs' home. In her arms, the boy moaned again, and she loosened her embrace just enough to shift him a bit so she could see his face.

There was a nasty cut on his cheek and then another gash just at his hairline. But they looked relatively superficial, and what she was more immediately concerned with was how pale and gaunt the boy was. She pursed her lips together and bit back a sob as she realized her earlier assessment of his age was probably wrong; the boy was likely closer to ten or maybe even eleven, she thought.

Jonathan pulled up to a stop as close to the house as he could get, and Hazel Irig, Wayne's wife, hurried out to meet them, holding up a large umbrella.

"Hazel, will you call Doc?" Jonathan asked after he helped Martha out of the car and to the front porch. "I should head back out to stay with Wayne until the police arrive."

“Yes, yes, of course,” Hazel replied with an emphatic nod. “Come on, Martha, let’s get this poor boy warmed up.”

And she followed Hazel inside, cradling the precious bundle—this beautiful, tiny child—tightly to her chest.

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Martha absently stroked the boy’s forehead, brushing his hair back for the umpteenth time, as she gazed down at him.

“Just a few more minutes, sweetie, and Doc will be here to take a look at you. You’re gonna be fine. You’re... gonna...be...”

Fresh tears slid down her cheeks, the first in the fifteen minutes since she’d sat down with the child. She quickly reached up and wiped them away as she lifted her eyes to Hazel, who sat on the sofa a few feet away holding a mug of hot tea in her hands. Martha shook her head as her gaze met her friend’s.

“He’s so tiny, Hazel. He’s...”

“He’s...not well...” Hazel said quietly. “And I don’t mean...”

“...just from the car wreck...”

Her friend nodded, and Martha lowered her eyes back to the boy. He shifted a bit in her arms, but still didn’t wake, and she continued to caress his forehead with gentle fingers. Something about him tugged at her heart...that part of her heart that she’d tried to shut down so many years ago, when she and Jonathan had found out they couldn’t have children of their own.

As she stared down at the boy’s perfect little face, marred by streaks of mud and dried blood, she couldn’t help but wonder what would happen to him now... If she’d interpreted Jonathan’s expressions correctly, the two adults in the car with the boy—presumably his parents—hadn’t survived the crash... But certainly he had relatives who would take him in...or something. Certainly he wouldn’t be without a home...

A soft knock came at the front door, and Hazel smiled gently at Martha and then stood up and disappeared out of the living room, leaving Martha alone with the boy for a moment. She stilled, not even realizing she’d been rocking him gently, and she resisted the urge to plant a kiss on his beautiful little forehead.

“Perfect little boy. Doc is here, I bet, and he’ll...make sure you’re okay,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The boy grimaced and moaned, shifting in her arms to curl up against her more. Then, as though he’d just realized

someone was holding him, his whole body stiffened, and he inhaled sharply.

Instinctively, although she couldn’t say where the instinct came from, Martha resumed her rocking and started to hum a quiet tune. And as she brushed his hair back from his face again, the child whimpered and slowly blinked open his eyes.

Her heart clenched.

Huge deep brown eyes flitted up at her very briefly—wide with curiosity and wonder for just a moment before they filled with fear. The child screwed his eyes shut and started struggling, trying to escape her embrace. And he was surprisingly strong for his small frame. However, she held him tightly and began talking to him, keeping her voice calm, gentle, kind...

“Shh, sweetie, it’s okay. You’re okay. You’re okay. Shh,” she murmured. She wasn’t entirely sure whether she was doing the right thing or saying the right thing, but the boy seemed to respond to her words—either that or he just tired fairly quickly; his writhing slowed and then stopped altogether. To her dismay, however, he then curled in on himself and started crying, his little body shaking, even though he obviously tried to hide it, as he buried his head into the blanket. Her heart twisted again, and she stroked his hair softly. “Oh, sweetie, shh, now. You’re okay. Shh.”

Quiet voices from behind them seemed to startle the child, and he stilled quite suddenly and whimpered again. Immediately, Martha held him just a little bit tighter.

“No need to worry, sweetie. That’s just Doc McMillan and Hazel. Doc is going to give you a little check up and make sure you’re alright. Is that okay with you?”

The boy shook his head almost violently and then seemed to immediately regret it, bringing both hands up to cover his eyes. Martha frowned as she continued rocking slowly.

“No?”

The boy shook his head again, although he seemed more careful about it this time.

“Can you tell me why?”

Again, he shook his head.

Martha lifted her eyes as Hazel and Doc McMillan entered the room, silent now. Doc tipped his head at her but didn’t speak or step closer. Instead, he and Hazel moved to the sofa and sat quietly. Doc gave her a small smile and a slight nod as though to encourage her, and Martha shifted her focus back to the boy again.

“Sweetie, what if...I stay with you? You can even just stay right here on my lap, right here in this chair, and I won’t let you go the whole time? Can we try that?”

When he hesitated, his eyes still scrunched closed, Martha felt her heart break even more. She cleared her throat quietly and looked up at Doc, who still watched her patiently. He gave her another nod, and she blinked back her tears as she forced a smile in return.

“How about we just try letting him listen to your heart-beat first, sweetie?” It was a guess—she didn’t know what Doc would normally check first, but something told her they needed to move slowly if they were to have the boy’s cooperation.

And when he lifted his chin ever so slightly and glanced up at her with those big brown eyes, still full of tears, she held her breath, waiting. His little jaw trembled as he seemed to study her for a moment, and she smiled at him again and tightened her arms around him ever so slightly. Finally, he closed his eyes, shivered, and mumbled a quiet “‘kay.”

“Good, good,” Martha breathed, lifting her eyes to Doc and Hazel.

Doc stood, navigated around the coffee table in the middle of the Irigs’ living room until he reached Martha, and then knelt in front of her and the boy, his movements careful and slow. He set his medical bag down on the floor next to him and then quietly cleared his throat.

The boy flinched in Martha’s arms and curled up just a little more. Her eyes caught Doc’s, and she frowned.

“Shh, sweetie, everything’s okay. You’re okay,” Martha murmured again, even as she swallowed back her worry.

“Hey buddy, my name’s Doc.” Doc rested a hand on the armrest of the chair Martha sat in to help steady himself as he settled onto his knees. Then he lifted the ear pieces of his stethoscope up to his ears. “What’s your name?”

Martha knew Doc didn’t expect an answer, and neither of them got one. Instead, the child just scrunched his eyes closed tighter. Martha stroked his forehead and tried her best to keep the smile on her face as Doc scooted himself a little closer.

“Alright, buddy, first thing I need to do is just listen to your heartbeat.”

Doc spoke quietly as he carefully pulled back the top of the blanket, and he proceeded to explain every step as he gently lifted the boy’s shirt and slid the diaphragm of the stethoscope up the boy’s chest. The boy seemed to hold his breath, his eyes squeezed shut and his jaw clenched, and Martha thought she could feel his whole body shaking as

Doc moved the stethoscope to a few different spots, listening to the boy’s heart and lungs.

Her heart started racing as she watched Doc suppress a frown, his eyes flickering up to meet hers briefly when he removed the stethoscope from under the boy’s shirt. Gently, he pulled the blanket back up over the boy, and the warm smile returned to his face.

“There we go, buddy. All finished there,” Doc said. His movements still slow and smooth, he removed his stethoscope, put it back into his medical bag, and pulled out a small, silver instrument. “And now, I’m gonna need your help just a little bit, buddy, because I need to check out your eyes next. Do you think you can help an old man out?”

Martha squeezed the boy gently as he shook his head, his eyes still shut tightly. She opened her mouth to try to convince him otherwise, but Doc cleared his throat again.

“That’s okay, buddy, I understand. I understand. You’re doing great, by the way. I know this is scary,” Doc said, his eyes meeting Martha’s with another kind smile. She could see his concern though, and she held her breath as he continued. “How about instead, you can let me check out the cuts you’ve got on your head here? Can I do that, buddy?”

And again, the boy hesitated, his body tensing in her arms. She soothed him gently, the only way she knew how, with slow, careful caresses along his forehead.

“Is that okay, sweetie? Doc just wants to take a look.”

Finally, he swallowed and nodded lightly, but then he curled up against Martha more, one of his tiny hands poking out from around the blanket to grasp her arm. She forced herself to take a measured breath as she smiled down at him.

“Good, good. Now you just focus on my voice here, while Doc takes a look, and he’ll be done before you know it,” Martha promised, hoping she was right. Her eyes darted up to Doc, but he was already sifting through his medical bag, looking for something, and she quickly focused her attention back on the boy as she started to hum quietly.

His eyes opened just a little, just enough for her to get a glimpse of their beautiful deep brown color again, before he flinched at the sound of Doc’s medical bag closing, his eyes screwing shut once more.

While Martha kept humming, Doc explained that he was going to inspect each of the cuts on the boy’s face, and the boy didn’t move, holding himself almost unnaturally still as the older man carefully wiped away the dried blood and streaks of mud, cleaning up the wounds. Gently, Martha held the boy’s hair back off his forehead as Doc cleaned the cut along the boy’s hairline, which looked a little deeper than the one on his cheek.

Doc then let out a short breath. “Okay, kiddo, I’m going to have a look here and make sure we didn’t miss anything.” He paused for a moment, then added quietly, “Martha, can we help him sit up, just a little, so I can check out the back of his head and neck?”

“Of course, Doc,” Martha said. “Okay, sweetie, did you hear that? I’m just going to shift a bit here, and you can...” Her voice trailed off as she started to move, lifting the boy up slightly. He’d tensed again, but he didn’t struggle as she propped him up a bit, resettled herself into the chair, and leaned him on her chest. And all the while, as she felt his thin frame trembling in her arms, she tried to ignore the aching in her heart telling her his behavior was...not normal. “There we go, sweetie. How’s that?” She addressed him, but glanced up at Doc, who nodded with a smile and mouthed “Perfect.”

Behind her, Martha heard the front door open and the sounds of umbrellas closing, accompanied by quiet voices she recognized as Jonathan’s and Wayne’s and another she thought might be Sheriff Harris’s. Hazel hopped up from her spot on the sofa and hurried out to meet them, presumably to steer them into the kitchen or somewhere else so the boy didn’t feel even more overwhelmed.

For his part, Doc didn’t miss a beat, explaining in his warm, gentle voice what he was going to do before he reached up and carefully parted the boy’s hair in the back, checking for other wounds. Martha kept her eyes trained on Doc’s face, and her stomach lurched as she saw him frown. At the same moment, the boy whimpered and pressed himself against her more.

“Sorry, buddy, you’ve got...” Doc frowned again and looked up at Martha. “Hold him tight, Martha. This won’t be comfortable.”

She closed her eyes and lowered her head to rest on the top of the child’s as she did exactly what Doc said, tightening her arms around the boy. He whimpered again but didn’t move, and she continued murmuring quietly to him. “Shh, sweetie. You’re okay. Hush now, everything’s going to be okay. Shh.”

He flinched, his whole body jerking slightly, as Doc used his tweezers to remove a small shard of glass from a wound on the back of the boy’s head. Then she held him even tighter, her stomach twisting in knots again, when his breaths seemed to become short and rapid and he started to cry, burying his head into her shoulder.

“Sorry about that, buddy. But that’s all done now, and I’ve just gotta finish cleaning this up here.”

Ten minutes later, Martha cradled the boy in her arms, rocking him as she hummed a soft tune. Doc McMillan

had gathered his things and stood, his expression thoughtful, and he tilted his head toward the kitchen. Martha just nodded with a small smile and closed her eyes as Doc disappeared to join the group speaking in hushed tones in the kitchen.

She could hear bits and pieces—fragments of phrases and words that didn’t make sense without context, and so, rather than try to figure it all out, she pressed a light kiss to the top of the boy’s head and let herself relax just a little into the soft cushions of the chair. And the boy seemed to relax as well, settling into her embrace and letting out a long breath.

It wasn’t much longer before she could tell he’d fallen asleep, his breathing becoming regular and deep, and she finally opened her eyes again and looked down at him, her heart clenching. God, she...didn’t want to let him go.

The thought overpowered everything else in her mind then, and with a short, shuddering breath, she placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

“Perfect little boy...”

“Martha...”

Jonathan’s low whisper from behind her startled her a bit, despite its softness, and she blinked twice before swiveling the rocking chair slowly, carefully, until she could see him. He stood in the doorway to the kitchen, the others sitting at the kitchen table behind him, still talking quietly amongst themselves. Doc had joined the group and was now writing something on a yellow notepad. She shifted her gaze back to her husband, and as their eyes met, she felt a wave of love and compassion from him. She pursed her lips and tried not to cry.

“The boy’s name is Clark Peterson,” Jonathan said, his voice quiet as he stepped closer to her.

Something inside of her shook loose, and she couldn’t stop the tears from falling then as she nodded and looked back down at the child.

Clark... His name was Clark.

“He’s ten years old. His parents...were Abigail and Jacob Peterson. They did live in Smallville—that old farmhouse off Big Creek Road—but...the sheriff says he’d only met them once before, and he’d never met Clark...”

She knew the question she needed to ask, and it was right there on the tip of her tongue, waiting... But her heart wouldn’t let her, and she just tore her gaze away from the beautiful child she held in her arms—the child who was much too small for his age and much too young to have lost his parents. As more tears slid down her cheeks, she looked up at Jonathan and shook her head slightly.

Jonathan knelt in front of her and placed a gentle hand on her knee. He didn't quite smile, but she could tell from his expression that he understood her. And he nodded.

"I'll talk to the sheriff. If nothing else, I'm sure he'll need a place to stay until...his relatives can be located."

With a weak smile and a squeeze of her knee, Jonathan stood and quietly moved back into the kitchen to speak with the sheriff, leaving her and the boy—Clark—alone again. Martha swiveled the chair back around to face away from the kitchen and lowered her eyes to the sleeping child. Slowly, she reached up and brushed back his hair.

"I've got you." He seemed to settle up against her a bit more, and she couldn't help as her heart tugged at her again. "I won't let anything happen to you. Beautiful, perfect little boy."

## Chapter 2

A comfortable warmth surrounded Clark as he drifted in and out of sleep, unable to keep his eyes open for very long. Each time he woke, it seemed he was in a new place. First, he'd woken again in the room in that dark house where the doctor had examined him. The next time he'd woken up, he'd been jostling around in the backseat of a pickup truck. And then, finally, he'd woken up in yet another house—this one with a roaring fire in the fireplace and lighter paint on the walls.

But regardless of where he was when he woke, the warmth surrounding him didn't change. And the gentleness of the woman's embrace didn't change.

He didn't know where he was, and he couldn't seem to remember much about the whole last day. All he really knew was that his head hurt. A lot. And that for some reason, this woman—whom the doctor had called Martha—had been holding him for...a while now.

As he pulled himself out of sleep again, blinking his eyes open slowly to let them adjust to the dim light of the room, he felt a hand caress his forehead. He looked up at her, letting his eyes meet hers for just half a second before he closed them again.

Her voice came then, quiet and soothing. "Shh, sweetie. You're safe here." Another soft touch on his forehead was accompanied this time by her arm tightening around him. "Are you hungry, sweetie?"

Hungry? She was...asking him if he was hungry?

Clark scrunched his eyes shut tighter as the pain in his head throbbed, and he felt himself start to tremble.

He...couldn't...

No. He shook his head. No, he wasn't hungry. He wasn't...allowed to say when he was hungry. That...wasn't a question anyone had ever asked him or a complaint he was allowed to have. He got to eat when they decided to feed him—Ma and Pa, that is. He wasn't allowed to complain about being hungry.

But even as he shook his head again, his stomach growled, and that hollow emptiness that he was so used to living with seemed to ache, making him curl up against the woman.

She caressed his forehead again, although her soft touch seemed almost uncertain to him this time.

"Jonathan is making spaghetti," she said. "He should be almost finished, I think. Do you like spaghetti, sweetie?"

The question surprised Clark, just like the last one had. But he nodded. He did like spaghetti. At least, he thought he did. Ma's spaghetti usually tasted pretty good, after all, unless she gave it to him without the yummy red sauce on it like she did sometimes when he was not well behaved. Then the noodles were just plain and didn't have much flavor. But he'd never been asked whether he liked it before, and it didn't matter. He would eat whatever he was given.

"Oh, good. Jonathan will be glad to hear that," the woman said in her quiet voice. After a moment, she continued. "He made the sauce last night. It's his own special recipe. I hope you like it, Clark."

Sauce! *It would* have sauce! His stomach growled again, almost as though it wanted its approval to be known, and he opened his eyes and looked up at the woman as she laughed lightly.

"Here, let's head into the kitchen, and we can see how close Jonathan is to being finished."

The woman stood slowly, still holding him in her arms, and Clark closed his eyes and buried his head into the blanket as she carried him. The smell of food—definitely spaghetti *with* sauce!—made his stomach growl yet again. At the same time, the temperature of the air seemed to heat up, and Clark lifted his head and swallowed as he looked around the room.

They had moved into a small kitchen where a large man with brown hair and glasses stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot. Jonathan, he assumed. Jonathan and... Martha.

Why was he here? Where were Ma and Pa? And...why did his head still hurt?

He should ask them—Jonathan and Martha. He should at least ask them where Ma and Pa were because Ma and

Pa would probably want to know if Clark was going to eat their food. And—

A sharp pain stabbed through Clark's head, and he whimpered and closed his eyes as he pulled the blanket up to his chin.

Wrong.

It was wrong.

He couldn't take someone else's food. Especially if Pa hadn't given him permission. He would get in so much trouble.

He shouldn't even be here right now. At least, he couldn't remember getting permission to be here. But then again, he couldn't remember much of anything that had happened that day. Maybe...he was supposed to be here? Maybe they'd left him with Martha and Jonathan so they could go —

Shopping! They'd...they'd taken him shopping with them in Wichita. For the first time ever. He remembered! They'd bought him a new T-shirt. A green one, with white stripes. And a pair of shoes. The blue shoes. He'd wanted the red ones, but Pa had growled at him not to be greedy when he'd reached out to touch them at the store. He'd just wanted to touch them—they looked different from the blue ones, the material smoother, maybe. And he'd just wanted to feel them.

But...but then what?

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to cry, as he realized he really couldn't remember anything after they'd left the shoe store.

Maybe...maybe Martha knew. Or Jonathan. Maybe he'd been sleeping. He did feel sleepy still. And his head hurt. So maybe Ma and Pa had left him with Martha and Jonathan when he'd been sleeping. And they'd be back soon. Or maybe they had at least told Martha and Jonathan that Clark had permission to eat their food.

"Oh, sweetie, it's okay. Shh, don't cry. It looks like dinner is ready, whenever you want to eat," Martha murmured, and she sat down at the kitchen table with him and started to rock him gently.

It helped. A little.

But he knew he couldn't eat unless he had been given permission. Unless Ma or Pa had given him permission. And he didn't want to get in trouble. He never wanted to get in trouble.

So he swallowed hard and then, without looking up, forced himself to speak.

"D-did..." The one word squeaked out of him, almost as though he hadn't used his voice in a long time, and he cleared his throat and tried again. "D-did M-Ma or—or Pa s-say I could...s-say it w-was okay?"

Not much better, really.

*"Stop that stutterin', boy! Get to the point! Or it'd be better if ya just kept yer damn mouth shut!"*

Clark felt his whole body tense, and he held his breath, waiting for a reprimand. He shouldn't have spoken out of turn. He shouldn't have said anything. He—

"Oh, sweetie..." Martha seemed to snuffle, and her arms tightened around him again, holding him snugly against her.

He risked a glance up at her, and he saw tears in her eyes. With a frown, he closed his eyes and curled up into the blanket again.

"I-it's o-okay," he said quickly, not wanting to upset her further.

"What...what's okay, Clark?"

He shook his head, unable to speak more. Obviously, Ma and Pa hadn't given him permission to eat, or Martha would have said so. And he wouldn't be sad about it. He was used to the aching in his stomach. The empty, weak feeling that just...wouldn't ever really leave. Even though he'd really been...looking forward to spaghetti...with sauce.

The tears came, even though he really, really didn't want them to, and he screwed his eyes shut tightly and choked back a sob.

He was hungry. He was *really, really* hungry. He couldn't remember if he'd eaten earlier that day, but he could remember the day before, when he hadn't eaten because Ma hadn't liked the way he'd made a little too much noise when he'd gone down the stairs. He knew to be quieter. He did. And he should have done better. And now, they hadn't given Martha and Jonathan permission to give him food, and he was going to have to be hungry...*still*.

But he couldn't cry, or he'd get in more trouble.

"Clark, sweetie, what is it?" Martha asked, and she continued to rock him slowly.

"We need to tell him, Martha. I don't think he knows." Jonathan had a deep voice, but it sounded quiet and gentle like Martha's, and Clark found that he wanted to hear it again.

He tried very hard to stop himself from crying, even as tears began to slip down his cheeks. And he managed to lift his head up a bit and turn to look toward the man's voice. As their eyes met, Jonathan gave Clark a small smile, but Clark immediately knew something wasn't right. The older man

sat down in a chair at the table and then looked at Martha, his expression sad.

Clark tensed, and before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “Tell me what?” Both pairs of eyes shifted to look at him, and he immediately buried his head back in the blanket. “S-sorry. S-sorry, I-I...” He shook his head again, wishing he could explain, apologize again.

Gosh, he’d be in so much more trouble now. Speaking up out of turn, stuttering, crying, interrupting an adult. All of that. He hadn’t meant to. He really, really hadn’t meant to. And he didn’t want anyone mad at him.

“S-sorry,” he repeated, his voice still muffled into the blanket he’d buried his face in.

He felt Martha shift him in her arms until he was sitting up in her lap, and he held himself as still as he could, even while his body shook with every sob.

One week. At least. Maybe more, since he’d misbehaved around other people, not just for Ma or Pa. They’d keep him down in the basement for at least a week because of this. Plus the incident at the shoe store. Pa had already been angry enough about that.

And it was so dark down there, in the basement. Dark and cold.

He should have known better. He should have done better.

“Clark, sweetie, you’re...you’re not in trouble.” Martha rubbed his back softly now, and she seemed to hold him just a little tighter for a second as her words hit him. He wasn’t in trouble? But... He carefully looked up at her, sniffing as he sat back a bit. Her eyes looked sad, like Jonathan’s, and he glanced sideways to where the man sat, still and quiet.

Jonathan cleared his throat and gave Clark another careful smile. But then the man took a deep breath and shook his head. “Clark, buddy, so... Do you remember the accident?”

His heart sped up a bit as he blinked and looked away from Jonathan. There had been an accident? He closed his eyes. He didn’t...remember anything after—

*“It’s a long drive. I don’t wanna hear a peep from ya, understand, boy?”*

*Clark nodded quickly and looked outside at the rain pounding down as Pa pulled the car out of the parking lot and turned right, back toward the highway.*

It had been raining when they’d left Wichita. Had there... been an accident? Where were Ma and Pa? Is that why his head hurt so much?

He reached up slowly and touched the spot on his cheek where the doctor had put a small bandage. As his fingers

came in contact with the bandage, the skin underneath stung, and he pulled his hand away.

“Wh-what...?” He shook his head and forced himself to look at Martha first and then at Jonathan. “N-no. I-I don’t...”

His stomach hurt now too. Not the aching of hunger, but something stronger, sharper, and more...dizzying. He lowered his face into his hands and shook his head again.

“There’s no easy way to say this, buddy. There was an accident, a car crash. Your parents...they didn’t survive the crash, buddy.”

Martha held him to her. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I’m so sorry.”

*“Dammit, Jake, slow down already! Why the hell are you in such a hurry?”*

*“Shut up, woman! I know how to drive.”*

*Clark swallowed hard and closed his eyes as he pulled his knees up to his chest in the backseat. He’d stopped watching outside a while ago; it was raining so hard, he really couldn’t see much past the edge of the road anyways. But he hated when they yelled at each other, and he didn’t want to do anything to upset either of them more than they were already upset now. He was already in enough trouble from the shoe store. He’d probably have to go to bed without dinner again.*

*“Jake! Watch out!”*

*“What the—”*

The memory faded with sounds of squealing tires, a curse, and then darkness. And pain. He’d...hit his head. But...

He sat up straighter, pulling away from Martha. *Didn’t survive.* What did...what did that mean? It couldn’t mean...

“N-no. No.” They couldn’t be...dead. They couldn’t be... They were his parents—okay, so they weren’t actually his parents, they’d reminded him of that all the time. But they couldn’t be...gone. They couldn’t... They’d always said... Clark shook his head. It just couldn’t be true. “N-no.”

He jumped up out of Martha’s arms, pushing away the blanket as his feet landed on the floor. Immediately, his vision swam, the lights in the room dancing around, and the pulsing pain in his head came back with a vengeance. He doubled over as he brought his hands up to his temples, and then he sank down to the ground, unable to hold himself upright.

The next thing he knew, two strong arms wrapped around him and lifted him up off the ground, and he felt himself

cradled against Jonathan's chest. Tears stung his eyes, and this time, he didn't fight it. He let himself cry, curling up and covering his face with his hands.

Voice swirled around him, but he couldn't seem to hear any actual words. Just...feelings and warmth and the same sense of gentleness he'd felt from Martha.

After a few minutes, Clark's tears slowed and then stopped, and somehow, he managed to steady his breathing. But he kept his eyes closed and his face covered. After all, he didn't want...

*"Don't no one want to be seein' you starin' at 'em. Keep yer eyes to yerself. Ya got that, boy? Don't screw this up, or you'll never get outta that house again."*

Pa had been perfectly clear just before they'd gotten out of the car that morning. And that had always been the rule anyways: don't look at people, don't look them in the eye, and definitely don't stare.

Ma and Pa had strictly enforced that rule. And although Clark had always tried his best to follow their rules, he had messed up all the time.

He tensed as he realized he'd already broken so many of their other rules, even just in the last few minutes since he'd woken up here, with Martha and Jonathan. He'd looked at both of them. And he'd spoken up, out of turn, interrupted them, cried...

*"This is yer punishment, boy! Don't you be cryin' again, ya hear? Be glad yer here with me and Ma, and be glad some o'er people didn't find ya. They wouldn't be so nice as me."*

Clark flinched as terror filled him. What...would his punishment be here? Did they have a basement they'd send him to? Or...did Jonathan have a belt like Pa's? And what if they had different rules? They hadn't told him any of their rules yet. How many had he already broken? How much had he already misbehaved?

"Clark, sweetie," Martha said, her voice coming from a few feet away, "I'm so sorry about your parents. Jonathan and I..."

He felt the arms holding him shift ever so slightly, and he screwed his eyes shut tighter, preparing himself. They'd tell him now about all the rules he'd broken and what his punishment was. And he deserved it all, he knew. Probably he deserved more.

However, when Martha spoke again, her voice was still quiet and gentle. "Jonathan and I want you to feel at home here, for however long you stay. If there's anything—anything at all—you need or want, we want you to feel comfortable speaking up. Okay, sweetie?"

Clark let out a short breath and managed to open his eyes partway, turning his head a little until he could see her. But then he remembered—gosh, why was he always so forgetful in the first place?—and twisted his head back to look away. Don't look at people. Right.

And she'd addressed him directly; it would be rude and disrespectful if he didn't answer. He didn't really remember what she'd said, so he just nodded.

"Dinner is gonna get cold. How about we eat, and then we'll get you settled in for the night? How does that sound, buddy?" Jonathan asked.

"Kay," Clark said. Slowly, he sat up, and Jonathan helped him sit in his own chair. Then, Martha scooted her chair closer to his, and he watched silently as she put a huge portion of spaghetti on a plate. His eyes widened when she set the plate in front of him and then again when Jonathan added a piece of toast and some green vegetables to his plate as well. He bit his lower lip and glanced at Martha for just a second before lowering his eyes to the table once more.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

Another direct question. And he couldn't lie—at least, not about this. He was only allowed to lie about one thing.

His voice trembled, but he answered honestly. "Th-that's...a l-lot of—of food."

It was only part of the answer, but his words didn't want to work right, and he felt his heart start to pound in his chest as he prepared himself for a reprimand. He couldn't complain about food. He wasn't allowed to complain at all. Ma hated that.

"Oh," Martha said quietly.

"You just eat what you want, buddy. You don't have to eat all of it. Okay?" Jonathan set a hand lightly on Clark's shoulder, and he flinched again, readying himself for the yelling and...worse.

But it didn't come.

That was all Jonathan had to say. The hand on his shoulder squeezed him gently and then dropped away.

"Would you like some milk, Clark? Milk is always my favorite when we're having pasta," Martha said.

Milk.

Clark swallowed hard and lifted his eyes again, looking out across the table. An empty glass sat next to his plate, and Martha had stood, holding a small pitcher of milk in one hand while reaching out toward Clark's glass with the other.

He *loved* milk. But it was...not something he'd had in a long time. Were they really going to let him have it?

With a quick nod, he looked up at Martha again, and she gave him a smile. “Perfect.” Then, she poured him about half of the glass—and it was a *big* glass!—before sitting back down.

“Why don’t we eat now?” Jonathan suggested, and as Clark watched, his hands clasped together in his lap, Martha and Jonathan picked up their forks and began to eat.

After a moment, Clark reached toward his own fork, his hand shaking ever so slightly. And when he took his first bite of the spaghetti, he closed his eyes to savor the flavor. It was so good! The sauce was so yummy. And it even had bits of meat in it! He’d never had sauce with meat in it before.

“Do you like it, sweetie?”

Clark opened his eyes and turned his head toward Martha, although he tried his best to not look directly at her. “Y-yes. Yes, I-I d-do. Th-thank you.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad to hear that.”

Clark blinked with confusion and looked back down at his plate. She sounded so...honest or...something. There was another word for it, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. He should know. Ma had always told him he should know more. But right now, he couldn’t find the word he wanted, the word that could describe how Martha seemed...like she really meant what she said. Like she really was happy to hear that he liked the food.

And he’d never...had anyone ask that or...or care.

He reached up and wiped a tear from his cheek and then took another bite of his spaghetti.

### Chapter 3

Jonathan took his time driving home from the sheriff’s station, both because the weather was still quite stormy—the rain from earlier mixed with high winds and occasional thunder and lightning—and because he needed time to process what he’d just learned.

And what the implications of that knowledge were.

And how he was going to explain it all to Martha.

The most important thing that Jonathan had learned in the last two hours he’d spent with Sheriff Harris and a social worker who’d been sent in from Emporia was that Clark Peterson had no living relatives who might be able to take him in. Abigail and Jacob Peterson had no siblings, and Clark’s only living grandparent—Abigail’s mother—was nearly ninety-five years old and living at a hospice care facility in Jackson, Mississippi.

He glanced over at the passenger seat in the front of his pickup, where a white folder with Clark’s name printed

neatly at the top, followed by the words *Foster Care Application*, sat next to an oversized duffle bag. When the opportunity had come up—when the social worker had indicated they’d follow Jonathan to his home to pick up Clark and take him to Emporia temporarily until a suitable foster home could be found—Jonathan hadn’t hesitated in the slightest. He’d immediately said he and Martha would like to foster the boy, with the intent of adopting him. And his resolve had definitely seemed to surprise both the sheriff and the social worker. Hell, it had even surprised Jonathan himself. But really, there hadn’t been any doubt in Jonathan’s mind that it was the right thing to do, that it was what needed to be done. In fact, he thought maybe he hadn’t been more sure about anything since the day he’d met Martha so many years ago.

So, he’d set up an appointment for the social worker to visit them at home mid-morning tomorrow, when she’d be able to speak with Clark and go over all of the paperwork with Jonathan and Martha. Then, Jonathan had accompanied Sheriff Harris out to the Petersons’ house...

A shiver ran through him, and he shook his head as he slowed the truck and turned off the main road and onto the long dirt driveway leading up to the farmhouse. The pickup bumped and jostled around as it splashed through mud puddles, and he frowned as he realized he’d have a lot of work to do to repair the road after all the damage the storm had caused. But that was definitely something to worry about another day. Tonight, he and Martha had some talking to do. After Clark was asleep, that is. Because Clark definitely didn’t need to hear everything they had to talk about.

Jonathan stopped the truck as close to the house as he could and then closed his eyes for a moment. He’d never seen anything quite like what he’d seen when the sheriff had escorted him through that house. They’d only intended to pick up clothes and such for Clark so he’d have something to wear, a toothbrush, and maybe school supplies or books or something. But what they’d found...

Jonathan still couldn’t believe it, and he couldn’t wrap his head around any of it.

A picture-perfect farmhouse. Spotless, inside and out. Everything neat and tidy, nothing out of place. Warm but neutral paint colors and décor. A refrigerator full of food.

And almost no evidence that a child had lived there.

Almost.

Except for what was behind the two padlocked doors—one leading to the tiny upstairs bedroom and the other leading down into the basement.

A wave of nausea hit Jonathan, and he pushed the memories away, not wanting to relive the moment Sheriff Harris

had returned from his squad car with a set of bolt cutters and then opened up the bedroom door. Instead, Jonathan grabbed the folder from the passenger's seat, stuffed it under his coat to keep it from getting wet, and then hefted the duffle bag and hurried inside the farmhouse. He'd relive it all later...when he'd have to tell Martha. And *that* was really not something he was looking forward to.

He managed to stay fairly dry as he jogged from the truck to the front porch, and he then entered the house as quietly as he could, hoping the child was already asleep. He set the duffle bag down near the front door, glanced in the living room, and, not seeing Martha, made a short detour into the kitchen to set the folder down on the table. Then, taking a deep breath to steady himself, Jonathan made his way down the hallway toward the guest bedroom.

The door was ajar just enough for a thin band of light to illuminate the hallway, and as Jonathan got closer, he heard Martha singing a soft tune that he didn't recognize. He paused just in front of the door, closing his eyes again as he listened. There was something to her voice and the words of the song that just made his heart fill with love and hope.

Slowly, he lifted one hand and pushed the door open about halfway, grateful that the hinges didn't squeak. And his heart skipped a beat as he saw her, sitting on the edge of the bed, her singing fading into even quieter humming as she rubbed gentle circles on Clark's back with one hand. When she glanced up at him, she smiled, although it was definitely tinged with sadness. As he'd expect, given... everything.

He watched, his heart still soaring with love, as Martha turned back to the small child, tucked the blanket around him a little tighter, and then leaned over and kissed his forehead ever so softly. She stood carefully to avoid waking the boy and lingered for another moment before turning toward Jonathan and making her way across the small bedroom. He opened the door enough for her to slip out, and then he shut off the light and closed the door almost all the way, leaving it cracked enough for some light to get through, just in case Clark had to get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom or...anything else.

Together, he and Martha walked out into the kitchen in silence, and when they stopped next to the kitchen table, Martha turned back toward him and looked up, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"What did..." She trailed off and shook her head, then stepped closer to him, and he immediately wrapped his arms around her. She seemed to melt into him, needing his comfort.

He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes. Part of him wanted to protect her from the truth—the house, the

padlocked doors, the...evidence of how Clark had lived. But he knew he couldn't do that. She needed to know everything he did. And she needed to know about it tonight. This wasn't something that could wait, something that they could put off and talk about later.

"It's...bad, Martha," he said, holding her just a little tighter. "I mean..."

How could he tell her? Her heart was already broken enough. And once she heard what he'd seen...

"Tell me first, Jonathan..." Martha pulled away from him and picked up the white folder he'd set on the table. "You wouldn't have brought this home if..."

With a nod, Jonathan took her hand. "Let's sit, Martha. There's a lot to talk about, and... You're right. This is the first and most important."

He led her over to the couch and got her settled, then returned to the kitchen and prepared each of them a cup of tea—Oolong, her favorite. When he eventually made his way back to the living room a few minutes later, he found her flipping through the contents of the folder, tears running down her cheeks. She glanced up at him and then back at the folder.

"He has...no one?"

"One grandparent, but she's elderly and in hospice care in Mississippi," Jonathan said quietly, sitting down on the couch and placing their tea on the coffee table in front of them. He scooted closer and wrapped one arm around Martha's shoulders, and she leaned against him as she reached up to wipe away her tears. "Sheriff Harris is still looking into things, but that much is clear."

The breath she let out then was nearly a sob as she turned another page and ran her fingers lightly over their names, which were printed at the top under the heading "Applicants."

"I'd...given up, Jonathan," she whispered.

"I know. And I know this wasn't our plan. I know you wanted a baby. But—"

"He needs us."

"Oh, Martha, you have no idea," Jonathan murmured, and he buried his head into her hair as the sting of tears threatened him. But he couldn't cry, not now. Screwing his eyes shut, he fought it, if only for her—to stay strong for her. "I don't know his whole story, Martha. Something tells me we might not ever know. But I do know one thing—this boy is going to need someone who can show him all the love and kindness he deserves. And I know of no one better to do that than you. Than both of us."

They sat there for a few minutes, Martha clinging onto him, obviously trying her best to not cry. But he felt her trembling in his arms, and he closed his eyes again. He still had so much to tell her. They still had so much to talk about. And it was late—already after midnight. Reluctantly, he straightened up a bit and cleared his throat.

“Emma Jones is the social worker who was assigned to his case. She was already here in town for personal reasons, and she was supposed to be heading home tonight, but after we spoke, she agreed to stay the night and come here first thing tomorrow morning. She has to...” Jonathan paused to take a breath and then reached forward and picked up the folder Martha had set on the table a few minutes before. He flipped it open to an informational sheet that Ms. Jones had included in the packet. “We’ll have to...take these steps here, she said. Usually this would have to be done before the child is placed in our care, but given the circumstances...”

Martha took the sheet of paper from his hands and began reading it, nodding as she went.

“She’ll do an initial home inspection tomorrow, tell us what, if anything, we need to fix up or do. She said she’d go over everything with us then—the frequency of home visits and the whole process timeline and—and other things. And she said she’ll want to talk to Clark, too.”

“He’s...scared to talk, Jonathan.” She frowned as she looked up at him. “He answers direct questions with as few words as possible, and otherwise...there’s a fear in his eyes. Like...”

The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach—the one he’d had earlier when he’d refused to let himself relive the walk through the Petersons’ home—returned then, and he shuddered as he closed the folder. “I have no doubt he is scared, Martha. I don’t know exactly... They didn’t treat him well. There was...”

“Jon...?”

He swallowed tightly and pulled her into his arms, needing her close. And then, he began to recount his trip with Sheriff Harris. The trip where they’d only intended to get him clothes and things. The trip that had instead ended with Jonathan and the sheriff calling up Sadie, who owned the general store in town, and asking whether she’d be able to let them stop in, despite the late hour, to buy a few things to get Clark through the night. Because at the Petersons’ house, there had been all of one dirty T-shirt, two pairs of pants that had to be much too small for him and were ragged and torn, and no toothbrush or books or crayons or toys. No stuffed animals or blankets or pillows. No extra shoes or clean socks. No backpack or school supplies.

Nothing.

He told her about the padlocks on the room at the top of the stairs and the door leading to the basement. And he told her how the upstairs bedroom had contained a tiny mattress, like one that would fit in a crib, but nothing else, except a used bucket in one corner. He told her how the window had been boarded up so that there was no natural light in the room. Then he described the basement, which was much the same as the upstairs bedroom, with the exception that there was no electricity or heat and that the floor had been damp, the air musty. There had been a mattress, but no blanket. No functional lights. No...

“God, Jonathan...did they...lock him down there?”

“I don’t know, Martha,” he admitted. He kissed the top of her head. “I’ve never... Er, Sheriff Harris says he’s never seen anything like it. And...though the Petersons have lived here for decades, Clark isn’t enrolled in any school in Smalville. Never has been. They’re going to see about medical records, but you heard from Doc too... He doesn’t remember Abigail at all. Never saw her while she was pregnant, or after she gave birth. Never saw any child of theirs.”

“Maybe they took him to a doctor out of town,” Martha said quietly.

All Jonathan could do was nod. And they both grew silent again. Martha was lost in her thoughts, he could tell, and that wasn’t necessarily a place he wanted her to be right then. But his own thoughts were not much better. He sighed as he rested his head against hers, a sudden weariness washing over him.

“I don’t know how we’re going to do this, Martha,” he said. “But...all the uncertainty in the world wouldn’t change my mind. We’ll take it one day, one minute at a time.”

Martha nodded into him. “We’ll show him love, Jonathan. That’s...”

“Exactly what he needs.”

“I hope so.”

After a few more minutes, Jonathan breathed another kiss into her hair. “We should try to get some sleep. Although—”

“I’ll sleep downstairs here, on the couch,” Martha said without hesitation.

He thought about protesting. After all, she’d had a headache earlier in the day, and she was probably just as tired, if not more tired, than he was. But he knew it would be futile. “Let me grab you some pillows and blankets?”

She lifted her head and looked up at him with a small smile. “Thank you.”

His heart felt just a little lighter as she leaned into him for a brief kiss, and together, they stood. Martha cleared the table and then headed upstairs to get changed and ready for bed while Jonathan snuck quietly down the hallway toward the downstairs closet. He risked a quick glance into the bedroom, propping the door open a few more inches until he could see the child, wrapped up in soft blankets and sleeping soundly.

“You’re safe now, buddy. I promise you that.”

Clark shifted a bit in the bed, but didn’t wake, and Jonathan took a deep, steadying breath, pulled the door mostly closed again—being sure to leave it open several inches—and padded the rest of the way down the hall to get Martha pillows and blankets.

## Chapter 4

A thin ray of weak light lit up a path from the doorway and across the room to the bed, where Clark lay quietly, the blanket pulled up to his chin. He was so warm, and the bed was so soft. And the night was so...not dark.

It didn’t make sense—that the door was open, even if just those few inches, just enough to let in that tiny bit of light from the hallway. Ma and Pa had always shut the door. Locked the door. Locked him in. And not only at nighttime.

Everything was different here, though. So far, nothing was like it had been at home. Clark didn’t know what to do about that. He didn’t know what to think.

So when he woke up sometime in the middle of the night to the stillness and silence of the quiet farmhouse, he just lay there, staring at the open door. In his mind, he imagined getting up out of bed, tiptoeing over to the door, and poking his head out. He wondered where Martha and Jonathan were and whether they’d know if he did that—if he got up out of bed. He even imagined sneaking quietly out of the room and down the hall to the bathroom. Martha had shown him where it was, in case he needed to use it in the middle of the night, she’d said.

And he did need to go. He should have gone before bedtime.

But he wasn’t allowed to get up in the middle of the night for any reason. That had always been a very important rule.

Maybe Martha had been trying to trick him into misbehaving. Ma and Pa had done that sometimes. Tried to test whether he remembered the rules. Tried to get him to mess up. And certainly if he got up out of bed now, and Ma and Pa found out—

He scrunched his eyes closed and buried his head under the blanket. They wouldn’t find out. They were gone. A sob

escaped him, and he turned over so his back was to the door. Then he curled up and tried not to let himself cry. But it was useless; the tears came anyway, and he couldn’t stop them.

Ma and Pa were gone. He was alone. And he didn’t know what to do. Ma and Pa had always been there to tell him what to do and what not to do. And they’d always warned him about others. Always warned him to stay away, not look people in the eye, not ever tell them about that one thing he was allowed to lie about...

...the fact that he’d arrived on Earth in a spaceship when he was just a few months old.

*“Yer lucky we found ya when yer little ship landed ‘ere, boy. Anyone else, it wouldn’t been good. They’d ‘ve caged ya up, cut ya open, dissect ya like a frog. Little alien you are. In yer weird little spaceship.”*

Pa had made sure he understood that rule—that he wasn’t allowed to tell *anyone* anything about that. *Ever*. The reminders had been harsh. But Pa had said it was necessary.

Pa had also always said how it was a good thing Clark looked human, even though he definitely wasn’t human. He wasn’t human, and he wasn’t their son, and he wasn’t...

He wasn’t...

He wasn’t...allowed to get up out of bed in the middle of the night, for any reason, even to use the bathroom. Even to use the bucket. Not until Ma or Pa gave him permission.

Although risking getting up to use the bucket was always a better choice than having an accident in bed. The punishment was much, much worse if he had an accident in bed. At least, that had been true with Ma and Pa.

He had no idea what the punishment would be with Martha and Jonathan.

*“Dammit, boy. Already five years old, and ya just don’t ever learn,” Pa snarled, grimacing with disgust as Clark cowered in the corner of the room. “Stupid boy. Clean it up, whiles I decide just how much it’s gonna take to teach ya better. Whaddya think, Abbs?”*

*Clark didn’t look up as he started crawling back toward his mattress, but he heard a grunt from the doorway and could almost feel the disgust from Ma. Why had he messed up again? Tears threatened to fall, but he blinked them back.*

*“I think the basement isn’t enough anymore. He’s either too dense to learn or needs a bigger reminder.”*

That had been the first time Pa had used the belt. And Clark had tried to learn. He’d tried so hard. But sometimes he just couldn’t.

Clark squirmed uncomfortably at the growing pain in his lower abdomen, wishing he hadn’t eaten so much at dinner.

He lifted his head up off the pillow slowly and twisted around, scanning the room. There wasn't even a bucket here to use. Which meant he *really* did have to wait until morning and until he could ask permission.

And he really, really wasn't sure he could wait that long.

Fear flared up inside of him then as he heard footsteps coming from down the hallway. He quickly closed his eyes and curled up again, facing away from the door. Then he held his breath and held himself very, very still.

Maybe whomever it was wouldn't come in or at least wouldn't realize he was awake. Please. He screwed his eyes shut tighter.

Behind him, the door made the faintest sound as it opened, and the footsteps stopped. It was Martha, he could tell. Her footsteps were lighter than Jonathan's.

A flicker of a thought crossed his mind. Maybe...he could ask for permission now. Maybe she wouldn't get mad. She had told him where the bathroom was, after all. And maybe taking the risk, asking for permission, would be better than having an accident...

But as quickly as the thought came, he dismissed it, an intense wave of dread forcing him to bury his head deeper into the pillow. No, he couldn't ask. He was supposed to be asleep. He'd get in so much more trouble.

And he wasn't allowed out of bed until morning anyways, and...

"Sweet boy, are you okay?" Martha's soft voice was close now, just at the edge of the bed, maybe, and then the bed shifted as she sat behind him.

He trembled but shook his head. He wasn't okay. He was sad and scared and...needed to use the bathroom. Maybe he'd be in less trouble if he answered her question honestly.

Martha must have been surprised by his answer, because he heard a sharp breath from her, and then a second later, he flinched away as her hand set gently on his shoulder. His heart started to race, making him feel lightheaded, and he prepared himself for what he knew had to be coming.

Whimpering, he shook his head again. "S-sorry. I-I should b-be sleeping. S-sorry. P-please d-don't—"

He stopped himself, his hand flying up to cover his mouth. What was he thinking?! Tears stung at his eyes as he started to shake. Gosh, he was in so much trouble now. He just knew it.

And it was even worse because he didn't know what to expect. Did Martha and Jonathan have a basement, like Ma and Pa? Or...did they have something worse? What if—

"Oh, my sweet boy, you're not in trouble. I promise, sweetie," Martha said, her voice soft, like her touch.

He trembled, unable to believe her words, because she must be trying to trick him. Ma had pretended like that sometimes. And he'd believe her, and then... His head started to hurt again, like it had earlier, only worse. A deep throbbing pain that made him slightly nauseous. And along with it, the uncomfortable pressure in his abdomen grew more, reminding him, yet again, that he *really* needed to use the bathroom. With shaking hands, he reached up and brushed the tears off his cheeks.

"It's okay if you're having trouble sleeping, sweetie. I know this is a new place, and everything is probably different here than what you're used to. I just want you to be comfortable. Is there...anything you need? A glass of water, or another blanket or pillow, or...?"

She was definitely trying to trick him. That was the only explanation. So he shook his head, because the answer was no to the specific things she'd listed anyway. However, the movement only made his headache worse again, and more tears came, streaking down his cheeks even as he tried his best not to let them. Martha's hand rubbed his back almost carefully, but he couldn't help as his whole body tensed at her touch. She was going to hurt him soon, he just knew it. He sucked in a short breath and suppressed a sob as he screwed his eyes shut even tighter.

But her hand just left his back then, and he heard her clear her throat quietly as the bed shifted a little. "It's okay, Clark. I just wanted to come check on you. And I also wanted to let you know that you *really* can ask if you need anything at all. I know...um..." She paused, and Clark held his breath, waiting for...something. And trying not to snifle or whimper or worse. "Did you maybe...need to use the bathroom, sweetie?" Martha asked gently.

And it was suddenly too much. With an uncontrolled sob, he nodded. "Y-yes. Yes, I-I... I'm—I'm s-sorry. I-I shouldn't..."

Instinctively, he scooted closer to the wall, away from Martha, clutching his stomach as he moved. He knew punishment was coming, but he had no idea what it would be, and that made him even more scared. He cried, unable to stop it again, and his chest felt heavy as his heart pounded with fear.

Ma had usually left the big punishments to Pa. But she also hadn't hesitated to remind him of the rules when necessary. And he'd just broken so many rules.

Yet...nothing happened.

There was just silence, broken a moment later by the sound of Martha letting out a long breath and the bed squeaking as she moved a bit.

“Sweetie, you’re...allowed to use the bathroom whenever you need to. Day or night. You don’t have to...” Her voice trailed off, but a moment later, the bed shifted again and the light turned on. “Here you go. Do you remember where the bathroom is?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good. And Jonathan got you some pajamas and some clean clothes when he was out earlier. Would you like to change while you’re in the bathroom?”

Pajamas? He turned over and risked a glance up at her through bleary eyes still filled with tears. Just a second, just a short glance. She stood there, a gentle smile on her lips and her eyes slightly crinkled at the edges with what looked like concern.

Not anger.

Not frustration or disappointment or disgust.

Maybe they had different rules here. And maybe he really wasn’t in trouble.

But just in case she was still trying to trick him, he’d better be careful. He closed his eyes again and nodded, and then, speaking very carefully to avoid stuttering, which Pa had absolutely hated, Clark said, “May I please use the bathroom and change into the pajamas?”

“Of course, sweetie,” Martha answered almost immediately. “I’ll put them in the bathroom for you, okay?”

He nodded, forcing himself to breathe slowly. And when Martha had left the room, the door still open most of the way and the light still on, he scooted to the edge of the bed, sat up, and then stood, wobbling as the pain in his head intensified. For a moment, he just stood there, trying to steady himself, and when the dizziness passed, he walked cautiously toward the door. Martha met him there, a small smile still on her face.

“The pajamas are in the bathroom for you, sweetie,” she said.

His eyes trained on the ground in front of him, he nodded. “Th-thank you.”

“If they don’t fit, we’ll get you something that’s the right size in the morning. Jonathan had to guess at what size to get you. And they’re red. I hope you like red.”

He froze with a sob and grabbed for the wall as his legs almost gave out, and a second later, he was in her arms again. She lifted him up so gently, even as he started crying again.

“Shh, oh, you sweet little boy. What’s wrong?”

But he couldn’t answer, and he just shook his head and curled up against her. If she was tricking him...this was maybe worse than any other punishment he could possibly have, because somehow her embrace made him feel better and safe... And that feeling just...

“Okay. You’re okay. Can I carry you to the bathroom, sweetie?”

Why was she being so...*nice*? It just *had* to be a trick. He cried harder but nodded in response, and he felt her start walking slowly down the hallway. A moment later, she stopped.

“I’m going to set you down now, sweetie, and you can get changed and use the bathroom. And if you want, I’ll wait right here to help you back to the bedroom when you’re finished. Is that okay?”

He nodded again and sniffled, trying to hold himself together as she shifted him in her arms and then carefully set him down. His legs didn’t hold his weight very well, and he wobbled as he tried to stand, but she was right there, keeping a gentle hold of him until he steadied himself out.

Then, he looked up at her, and when she smiled at him with a small nod, he didn’t immediately look away. “Thank you,” he said, and more tears slipped down his cheeks.

“Oh, you’re welcome, sweet boy,” Martha murmured. She blinked a few times. “I’ll be...right here. Take your time, okay?”

With another nod, he turned and stepped into the bathroom, and Martha shut the door behind him. His heart skipped a beat as he waited for the telltale sound of the lock clicking...but it didn’t come. Swallowing, he walked farther into the room. It was small, with just a toilet, sink, and bathtub, but it felt bright and warm. Quickly, he relieved himself and then washed his hands in the sink as his eyes lingered on the neatly folded red and black striped pajamas sitting on the counter.

Red was his favorite color. He didn’t know how Jonathan and Martha could have possibly known that.

But he’d also never had a pair of pajamas of his own. He’d always just slept in whatever clothes Ma and Pa had given him to wear, until they got too dirty; then he’d have to stay in his room until Ma had washed them so he could wear them again.

The clothes he had on right now were his special clothes that Ma and Pa gave him to wear only on the few occasions when he’d gotten to go outside of the house with them. He wasn’t allowed to wear the clothes any other time because they had to “look nice” for when he went out. But Ma and Pa

had complained that he'd grown too much and had needed new clothes, which was why he'd gotten to go with them to Wichita and why they'd bought him a new shirt and new shoes.

He reached out tentatively and picked up the pajama pants, which were on the top of the pile. His eyes widened as he felt the soft material, and he ran his hand over it. Even the nicest clothes he could ever remember wearing hadn't been so soft.

More tears fell, although he wasn't sure why he was crying now. He hastily swiped at his cheeks and then hurried to get changed into the pajamas and the clean underwear Martha had left for him. Just as he finished, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Are you okay in there, Clark?" Martha's voice was raised just enough for him to hear her clearly.

"Y-yes," he answered, and he quickly folded up his old clothes so he could put them back on in the morning and tucked them under one arm before reaching out to the door. He paused with his hand a few inches from the door handle. Was he allowed...? "M-may I—may I—may I—"

*"Get ahold of yerself, boy! That stutterin'! Ya broken or somethin'?"*

He dropped his hand and backed away from the door, his chest feeling tight. He almost stumbled, but he managed to catch himself.

"Clark, do you need some help, sweetie?"

Screwing his eyes shut and fighting against something inside telling him he was going to get in more trouble still, Clark nodded. "Y-yes. Yes, I-I do."

"Okay, sweetie, I'm gonna come in now. Okay?"

"Kay."

The door opened quietly, letting a rush of cooler air in, but a moment later, he felt Martha's warmth as she gently lifted him into her arms.

"Come on, sweet boy. Looks like those PJs fit you pretty well. Do you like them?"

He bit his lip and nodded.

"Oh, very good! Jonathan will be happy to hear that," Martha said as she walked them back down the hallway to the bedroom. "He bought you some more clothes too, so you'll have something to wear tomorrow while I wash these other ones for you. Is that okay, sweetie?"

He didn't know what to say, so he just nodded again as Martha's arms tightened around him a little more. He closed

his eyes lightly and leaned his head against her, wondering how it was possible that she could be so...nice.

## Chapter 5

Martha didn't sleep much, especially after 3 a.m., when she'd gotten up to check on Clark and found him huddled up in his bed, desperately trying to appear as though he was sleeping. Even now, at about 6 a.m., as she got a pot of coffee started for Jonathan and pulled out all the ingredients to make some pancakes and eggs for breakfast, her heart still broke for the child.

She couldn't be sure, of course, but it really seemed to her as though he'd been scared—terrified, actually—to get up to use the bathroom, or even to ask whether he *could* get up to use the bathroom.

After she'd helped him back to bed, tucked him in again, and assured him one more time that he was allowed to use the bathroom whenever he needed to, she'd tried to get back to sleep. But she just hadn't been able to stop herself from seeing his sad, scared little face, cheeks streaked with tears, and she'd had to check on him several more times.

Finally, at 5:30 a.m., when she knew Jonathan would be getting up soon anyways, she'd headed upstairs for a bit, taken a quick shower, changed her clothes, and headed back down to get breakfast started.

It would be a long day, she knew. The storm was still raging outside—rain pounding down—and that meant extra chores for Jonathan. Plus, Ms. Jones would be over around 9 a.m., and...

Martha shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts and stop herself from worrying. She had to believe the outcome would be what she wanted, that Clark would be able to stay with them. Because any other option...

"Good morning, love."

Startled, Martha turned around. Jonathan stood a few feet away at the kitchen table, his fingers resting on the folder that she'd moved there this morning.

He looked up at her, concern in his eyes. "How was Clark's night? I heard you up several times."

She just nodded, unable to explain right away, but when he moved to her and wrapped his arms around her, she melted into his embrace and let out a shuddering breath.

"He slept most of the night, except..." Pulling out of his arms, she shook her head, and she turned back to the counter. Quietly, she began preparing breakfast, Jonathan working alongside her, as she told him about how she'd had to reassure Clark that it was okay for him to get up to use the

bathroom and how she'd had to help him and how...scared he'd been.

They fell into silence as she finished flipping the pancakes and Jonathan cooked the scrambled eggs. When everything was ready, they moved the food to the table, and Jonathan sat and opened up the folder. Martha, however, leaned back against the counter and bit her lower lip, lost in thought again.

Every moment since she and Jonathan had happened upon the accident the day before had been filled with worry, and now that she had more knowledge, more pieces to the puzzle, she found herself unsure about their decision for the first time. She wasn't qualified to be Clark's mother. She had no idea how to handle this—how to handle the undeniable fact that something had been terribly, terribly wrong with how his parents had treated him, with how he had lived. She didn't know how to talk to him, what to do, what *not* to do. He needed...someone much, much more confident than she was.

Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she reached up and wiped them away as Jonathan looked up at her.

"Martha?" He stood, closing the folder, and stepped over to her. She reached out to him, and he embraced her again, pulling her up against his solid chest.

"Oh, Jonathan, I...I don't know how to... Can we really give Clark what he needs? I don't even know—"

"Martha," Jonathan cut in, his hand rubbing her back gently, "he needs love. And you have so much love to give. I know it'll be rough, especially at first, but Martha, I know of no one, *no one*, better to love him than you. And..." He squeezed her a little tighter. "...and me too. I...already love that boy like he was our own."

She nodded into him and wrapped her arms around his waist, letting her head settle on his shoulder. His strength gave her strength of her own, and she closed her eyes.

"You really think we can do this, Jon?"

"Oh, Martha, it's more than that. I *know* we can do this, and somehow, I know we were meant to do this." Jonathan shifted her in his arms, and she looked up at him. His eyes shone with resolve and love. "And anything we need to do, we'll do. He needs love, Martha. Love and patience."

She let out a breath and nodded slowly. "And he needs to feel safe. More than anything else."

Jonathan smiled softly at her and then brushed a kiss on her lips. "Do you want to wake him up for breakfast, or should we let him sleep?"

Martha pulled away and crossed her arms over her chest as she looked toward the hallway. If she had to guess,

as terrible as it was to think about, she suspected that he wouldn't just come out of the bedroom when he woke up, and she swallowed hard as she glanced back at Jonathan.

"I'll go wake him up and see if he's hungry. But he might still be full from dinner. I think..."

"...he ate much more than he usually would," Jonathan suggested, and she nodded. "I'll start working on these forms, then?"

"Yeah."

He placed a light kiss on her forehead and then moved back to the table as she started toward the hallway. She could see the bedroom door partway open, as she'd left it the last time she'd checked on him a little over an hour ago, and she slowed as she approached, not wanting to startle him if he was already awake. His tiny figure was curled up, the blanket pulled tight up to his chin, and his head was buried in the pillow, but he appeared relaxed with sleep, and she smiled, her heart filling with love, as she stood just inside the doorway and watched him.

His expression was so peaceful, and he looked comfortable, his dark curls falling over his forehead and his lips slightly parted as he slept.

Such a sweet child. An innocent, sweet child. Her heart wrenched almost painfully as she remembered the fear in his eyes the night before, and for a moment, she felt angry. How could those whom he was supposed to have been able to trust the most have mistreated him so? How could *anyone* mistreat *any* child?

She stepped farther into the room and then over to the bed, where she sat very slowly, trying to not disturb him still. Then, she reached over and gently brushed the hair off his forehead.

"Beautiful, perfect, sweet child," she whispered. Then she raised her voice just a little. "Clark, sweetie..."

His little body turned away from her, and he groaned as he tugged the blanket up around himself more. She started to speak again, hopefully to rouse him gently, when he stiffened and froze. Her heart ached as she saw him start to tremble, and she closed her eyes, taking a moment to reassure herself that time and love were what he needed and that she and Jonathan could give both of those things to him. She took a deep breath before she started again.

"Good morning, sweetie," she said softly. "I know it's early, and if you want to stay in bed and get some more rest, you can do that. But Jonathan and I made breakfast—pancakes and eggs—and you're welcome to come and join us if you'd like."

He didn't respond right away, choosing instead to curl up more, which shifted him a few inches farther away from her.

"It's okay if you're not ready to get up yet, sweetie. I just..." Martha paused as a rush of uncertainty hit her. Maybe she shouldn't have come in and sat down here. Maybe she should have just let him sleep. She quickly clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. No, this was the right decision. She'd just let him know of his options. And then, she'd hope—desperately—that he'd feel safe enough to come out to the kitchen when he was ready. She cleared her throat. "I just wanted to let you know, in case you were hungry. I'll be out in the kitchen, and Jonathan is out there too, and we'll be eating now. But there's plenty of food, if you want to come out later. Whenever is...fine."

He still didn't move or speak, and as she watched him carefully, she could see that he was still holding his breath, keeping himself as motionless as possible. Pursing her lips together and trying to hold her tears back, she stood, straightened out her apron, and started out of the bedroom. When she reached the door, she set her hand softly on the doorframe and turned back around.

"You can come out whenever you're ready, sweetie. There's no rush. Okay?"

She heard a muffled sound, which might have been an acknowledgement, but Clark didn't make any move to get up. Surreptitiously reaching to brush a tear from her cheek, she made sure the door stayed propped open about halfway and then walked back down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Jonathan looked up as she came in, his reading glasses falling a bit down his nose. He gave her a gentle smile as their eyes met. "Give him time, Martha," he said quietly. "There's going to be a lot we need to do to build trust."

She sniffled and nodded as she moved to sit next to him at the table. He'd prepared each of them a plate and had even topped her pancakes with powdered sugar and sliced strawberries rather than syrup, just the way she liked them. She reached over and set her hand on top of his. "Thank you, Jonathan."

"I betcha he's gonna like strawberries on his pancakes just like you, love." He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"You think—"

Her eyes darted up as she heard the old floorboards creak in the hallway, and Jonathan turned slightly in his chair so his gaze could follow hers. A tiny head of tousled black hair and huge, deep brown eyes peeked out around the corner. She smiled as warmly as she could, even as Clark's fearful gaze jumped around the room, taking everything in.

"Hey, buddy, those PJs sure look like they fit you well! How's the color? Is red okay?"

Martha wasn't sure how Jonathan seemed so much more at ease than her, but she felt the smile in his words, even though she couldn't see his face. Clark's eyes shot back toward them, and for just a second, his gaze shifted back and forth between her and Jonathan, before he ducked his chin and nodded.

"Y-yes. Y-yessir. I-I...like red. A lot," Clark stammered, and he stepped out from around the corner of the hallway, his hands clasped tightly in front of him.

"Wonderful," Jonathan declared, and he reached over and pulled out the third chair at the table, just enough to give Clark some room. "Wanna find out if you like Martha's pancakes, too?"

Clark looked up and then back down so quickly that Martha thought maybe she'd imagined the flicker of interest in his eyes. But then he nodded and started slowly toward the table, still looking down at the floor. He slid almost silently into the seat and then sat just as quietly as he stared at the plates of food. Managing a small smile, Martha stood—her movement careful and deliberate so she didn't startle him—and moved around the table closer to his chair to help serve him.

"Would you like one or two pancakes, sweetie?"

He bit his lower lip and tensed as she stopped next to him. "J-just—just one p-please." His voice trembled along with his hands, even though they remained clasped together in his lap now.

"Sure, sweetie. One sounds like just the right number," she assured him, and she used a spatula to place a medium-sized pancake on the plate in front of him. "And then, would you like it topped with syrup or strawberries? The strawberries are really sweet right now. They're my favorite."

She'd turned back to the counter for a moment to grab the bowl of cut-up strawberries Jonathan had left there, and when she turned back, Clark was staring at the bowl in her hands, his beautiful dark brown eyes wide with awe. His mouth fell open, and he looked up at her and then back at the bowl.

"I can...have...those?"

"Of course, sweetie. Do you like strawberries?"

He scrunched his eyes shut and nodded.

Martha let her gaze drift to Jonathan, who was looking at Clark, watching carefully over the top of his reading glasses. His expression tightened ever so slightly, but then softened again as he looked at her, offering her a gentle smile and nod.

“Great. Me too.” She grinned, hoping it didn’t seem too forced, and then spooned out several nice-sized heaps of strawberries on top of Clark’s pancake. “There we go!”

Cautiously, as though he wasn’t sure whether the pancake would still be there, he opened his eyes, and Martha watched, her eyes brimming with fresh tears and her heart overflowing with joy, as his expression flickered with the tiniest sparkle of light.

*Beautiful, sweet child.*

“Those are some good strawberries, buddy. I think you made the right choice,” Jonathan said, and he quietly closed the folder and reached out to pick up his coffee mug.

Clark looked up at him briefly and then glanced at Martha, although he didn’t ever really meet her gaze. He blinked and lowered his eyes to the plate in front of him. He seemed to hesitate and then said, his voice low but his words careful, “May I please eat now?”

“Of course, sweetie,” Martha answered, barely able to keep the hitch out of her voice. She smiled softly. “Would you like milk or orange juice also?”

His eyes darted up to the pitcher of orange juice on the table as he wiped a tear from his cheek. “Orange—orange juice, p-please.”

She didn’t say anything—she wasn’t sure if she could speak anyways—and instead, she just quietly poured him some juice, filling his glass to just a little more than halfway. When she was finished, she poured herself a glass as well and then sat back in her chair across from him.

Just like the night before, he was so careful, so cautious, all of his movements stiff and slow, and she could see the tension in his shoulders. Every time he made some sort of a noise—the clinking his fork made when he set it on his plate, the thump of his glass on the table, the scrape of his chair on the floor when he squirmed around a bit—he flinched, his eyes filled with fear.

At the same time, she saw it again—that little flicker of light in his eyes—when he took his first bite of strawberries and then again when he took his first sip of orange juice. Those little hints...her heart held them tightly, needing to believe they meant something and could grow into something.

When she and Jonathan were finished eating, Martha stood and began gathering their dishes, trying to pretend she didn’t notice Clark flinch again. “I hope the fixes you made to the barn roof over the summer held up. This is the biggest storm we’ve had since,” she said quietly, addressing Jonathan.

He cleared his throat and set down his coffee mug, nodding. “I’ll find out soon. I’ll just do the minimum today, though. Don’t need to be out in this weather any longer than necessary.”

“I think that’s wise.”

She glanced over at Clark, who still had at least half of his pancake to eat, and then back to Jonathan. He gave her a knowing smile.

“When the rain stops, Clark, I’d love to show you the barn,” Jonathan said. “We’ve got chickens and cows and even a horse. She’s a stubborn mare, but she’s really gentle. Have you ever ridden a horse?”

Martha set the dishes in the sink and turned back around just in time to see Clark shake his head.

Jonathan laughed lightly. “Well, maybe we’ll have to fix that sometime.” He turned to look at Martha and then stood up, his smile a little tight. “I should get moving so I have time to clean up before Ms. Jones gets here.”

“Of course.”

Then, with a nod, he promised Clark he’d be back in a while and headed out, the sound of the front door opening and closing signaling his departure a moment later. Martha occupied herself by starting to clean up the kitchen as she gave Clark time to finish eating, and by the time she was putting away the extra pancakes, he’d taken his last bite, cleaning up every crumb on his plate. She smiled and closed the refrigerator door.

“All done?”

He nodded and reached with both hands to pick up his plate. “S-sorry,” he said, his voice so quiet she almost hadn’t heard it.

“Oh, no, sweetie, it’s fine. I want you to take as much time as you need.” Her attempt at reassuring him hadn’t quite worked, and she frowned as she watched him shake his head again.

“I-I mean...s-sorry about the—the dishes.” Holding the plate, he stood and wobbled his way over toward the sink, his legs seeming like they were barely able to hold him up, just like in the middle of the night. Yet he made it all the way to the sink and then stood there for a moment, searching until he found a sponge and the dish soap.

Only then did she realize what he’d meant.

Immediately, she shook her head, and then she cautiously joined him at the sink. “I’m very happy if you want to help, sweetie, but right now, Doc says you need as much rest as you can get. That bump on your head there was pretty bad,” she said. “How about you let me finish cleaning up here, and

you can get dressed and brush your teeth? Then, maybe... Do you like to draw or color?"

She almost regretted her innocent question—that was all it was, really, an innocent question. After all, didn't most kids love to color and draw? But as soon as she asked, Clark's eyes clouded in confusion, and he stepped back from the sink as he let her take the plate from his hands.

"I-I don't...know."

His little hands had balled up into fists, and his gaze had dropped to the floor.

"Oh, well, that's okay, sweetie. I know, how about we find out together?"

"Kay."

She set the plate down in the sink and very gently placed a hand on his shoulder, trying not to react as he flinched slightly from her touch.

"Here, let's go pick out some clothes for you," she suggested. Steering him toward the living room, where the duffle bag Jonathan had brought home with him the night before still sat, Martha continued. "Jonathan got a few T-shirts and some pants for you when he was in town yesterday. And he got a toothbrush and some toothpaste too. But—here's what's really neat—they also had some crayons and this coloring book that Jonathan thought you would like. It's got dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals, and—"

Clark grasped her waist suddenly, and she turned toward him as he stumbled, shifting to support him so he didn't fall. All the color had drained from his face, and when she moved to help steady him, he felt cold and clammy. Quickly, she lifted him into her arms and carried him to the couch, murmuring quiet words to sooth him. But his breaths continued in rapid pants, and he trembled.

"S-sorry," he said between breaths, and he sagged against her as she sat on the couch, still cradling him in her arms.

"Shh, sweet boy," she murmured, holding him just a little tighter. When his breathing had leveled out, she reached up and felt his forehead, taking a moment to brush back his hair and inspect the cut along his hairline as well. It still looked clean and uninfected, although Doc hadn't been able to bandage it because of its location. And his temperature seemed to be normal again. "What happened there, sweetie? Are you...feeling better?" She tried to keep her voice soft and pleasant, but she heard the hesitation in her words.

No answer came, but Clark squeezed his eyes shut and curled up against her more, his little body still stiff and shaking. And it was somehow painful, to see him hurting so much. She closed her eyes as the aching in her heart grew.

*Beautiful, sweet child. Please talk to me.*

## Chapter 6

It was warming up outside just enough, but the rain continued, unrelenting, as Jonathan made his way back in from the barn. He jogged the short distance to the house, detouring around several larger puddles of muddy rainwater and holding his jacket up over his head.

The chores had taken him longer than he'd have wanted, but the barn had stayed dry; the spot in the roof that he'd repaired had held, and the animals seemed thankful for it—all cozy and dry in their enclosures.

As he slowed and climbed the steps to the front porch, he lowered his jacket and glanced in the window, catching a glimpse of Martha and Clark through a small crack in the curtains. He paused for another moment, his heart filling with love as he took in the sight.

Martha sat cross-legged on the floor next to the coffee table, Clark next to her. One of the coloring books Jonathan had bought in town the night before was open on the table, and Martha held a dark green crayon in one hand, her eyes bright and eager as she looked from the coloring book to Clark. Her mouth moved, and she seemed to be asking a question. Clark nodded slightly, and his little tongue darted out the side of his mouth as he dug intently through the box of crayons. A second later, he pulled out a red crayon and held it up, almost triumphantly, his expression lighting up. Martha grinned and nodded, and Jonathan could almost hear her words as she seemed to praise Clark for his effort.

He didn't want to interrupt the moment; there was something special about it, something so right, seeing Martha there with the boy. But he had a lot to do before 9 a.m., and he didn't want to be unprepared or late for the meeting with Ms. Jones. So, after one more glance through the curtains, he shook some of the rain off his coat and headed inside.

The old screen door creaked, as did the hinges to the front door, announcing his arrival. Both Martha and Clark looked up at him as he entered, though Clark didn't quite meet his gaze and seemed to shrink down a little bit as he turned back to the coloring book. Jonathan smiled at Martha and gave her a gentle nod.

"Ah, I see you found the crayons!" he said, kicking off his boots. He hung his coat up on the rack near the front door and then padded over into the living room to get a closer look.

"We did! And Clark here is quite the artist, aren't you, sweetie?"

It took everything Jonathan had to not react as Clark recoiled when Jonathan squatted down next to the coffee table. But his heart sank all the same.

“Oh, a pterodactyl! A *red* pterodactyl, even. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those,” Jonathan declared, still grinning as he watched Clark’s eyebrows scrunch together. Clark pursed his lips and looked up at Jonathan, their eyes meeting for just a second before Clark looked away again.

“Th-there’s no... You can’t have...” The boy shook his head and closed his eyes. “S-sorry. I...”

“Oh, you mean I can’t have seen a pterodactyl?” Jonathan slowly straightened back up, hoping his little joke hadn’t just upset the child. His eyes met Martha’s briefly, her concern hidden behind a kind smile, before focusing back on Clark.

The child’s face looked confused again, and he shook his head. “I-I d-don’t...think so.” He hesitated, looking back down at the coloring book. “M-Martha said...”

Jonathan swallowed hard as he watched Clark struggle. It had been a mistake to try to joke; he should have realized that already. Clark just didn’t understand and wasn’t ready for that yet, and now, the child seemed to be scared to say anything that contradicted what an adult had told him.

Thinking quickly, Jonathan leaned over and adjusted his glasses, pretending to study the coloring book again. He cleared his throat.

“Oh, you know what, Clark, you’re absolutely right. Pterodactyls are dinosaurs! They’ve been extinct for millions of years, right, Martha?”

Clark looked at Martha, waiting for her response, his fingers tightening around the red crayon he still held in his hand. Jonathan hoped Clark couldn’t see the tears at the edges of Martha’s eyes as she smiled softly and nodded.

“That’s right. And Jonathan’s not *quite* that old, is he?”

Something happened then—something unexpected and wonderful, even as fleeting as it was. The corners of Clark’s mouth turned up just a little, a tiny huff of air escaping him in what could only be a laugh. And then he blinked and looked back down at the coloring book, his mouth tightening back into a frown as he moved his hand to where he’d been working to color in the pterodactyl’s beak.

Jonathan’s heart felt all at once full of love and hope, and when his eyes met Martha’s, he knew she was feeling the same. He smiled broadly then, and with a quiet laugh, he said, “Well, this old man has gotta get cleaned up. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Clark didn’t respond, but Jonathan saw Martha glance at the clock on the wall before she nodded. Then, he turned

to head upstairs and get showered and changed before their meeting with Ms. Jones.

\* \* \*

“The paperwork all looks great. Thanks for having everything ready, Mr. Kent.”

“Please, call me Jonathan.”

Ms. Jones nodded and pulled out several of the sheets of paper from the folder. “So, I’m just going to give the house a quick inspection, looking for all of these items on the list here. And then I’ll chat with Clark a bit before we discuss next steps. How does that sound?”

Jonathan looked to Martha, who nodded in agreement. “Do you want me to show you around, Ms. Jones?” Martha asked, and she stood from her spot at the table before glancing back out to the living room, where Clark still sat, coloring.

“Sure. And normally, I’d have to inspect the barn and the rest of the property as well, but with this rain...I hope y’all don’t mind me leaving that until next time,” Ms. Jones said.

Jonathan chuckled and stood along with the two women. “I think that’s a good plan. I’ll hang out with Clark here, if that’s okay?”

Ms. Jones smiled as she turned to look to the living room. Then she lowered her voice slightly and addressed Martha. “He seems comfortable here. How was his night?”

As Martha started explaining how the evening and night had gone, keeping her voice appropriately low, the two women started off together toward the hallway. Jonathan stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled out to the living room, clearing his throat quietly as he approached so as not to startle Clark.

The child had moved on from the pterodactyl and now worked on coloring what Jonathan thought was a stegosaurus. And instead of red, now Clark had chosen a few different shades of green and brown for the dinosaur’s skin. His thick black hair tumbled down over his eyes, and he reached up and brushed it back with one hand before switching out his green crayon for a different shade.

“Hey, buddy. Do you mind if I sit here with you?”

Clark froze for a second, his hand hovering an inch or two above the coloring book. “Um...”

“Sorry, I didn’t make that question easy to answer, did I?” Jonathan tried for a quiet laugh, and he moved around the coffee table to the couch. “But, actually, there’s something I want to talk to you about, Clark. If you have a minute.”

The boy set his crayon down and then turned to face Jonathan, clasping his hands in his lap. He sat silently,

barely breathing, it seemed, and waited for Jonathan to speak. His whole body seemed tense, as though he were... waiting for something bad to happen.

With a hesitant smile, knowing he needed his voice to stay lighthearted, Jonathan began. "Martha and I would like you to stay with us. We really love having you here. But what you want matters too. Ms. Jones—Emma—she's here to check and see how you feel about that. Whether you want to stay here or go somewhere else, whether you feel comfortable here, whether you feel safe here."

At his last words, Clark flinched, his eyes closing tightly. "S-s...safe?"

"Of course, buddy," Jonathan said without hesitation. "You should always feel safe here. If Martha or I do something to make you feel unsafe, you can tell us that, and we'll change."

Clark seemed to think about that, blinking several times as he squirmed a little in his position on the floor. However, he didn't say anything else.

The voices of the two women, along with quiet laughter, echoed from down the hall, and Jonathan heard their footsteps approaching. Clark glanced up at the sound, his eyes a bit wide and his mouth set in a tight frown. Jonathan shifted in his seat on the couch until he could see Martha, and she gave him a small smile and nod.

"Clark, sweetie, Emma here is going to spend some time with you now and ask you a few questions," Martha said, walking around the couch to crouch down next to Clark. "Is that okay, sweetie?"

There was a moment where Jonathan thought Clark was actually going to say no. The boy looked directly at him, his deep brown eyes filled with fear, before he glanced at Ms. Jones. The petite redhead offered him a kind smile and stepped a little closer, opening her mouth to speak. However, Clark suddenly scooted closer to Martha and mumbled something too quiet for any of them to hear.

Martha frowned and cleared her throat. "What was that, sweetie?"

"J-Jonathan—Jonathan said I...could say..." Clark trailed off but moved even closer to Martha, scrunching his eyes shut tightly.

Martha looked up at Ms. Jones first and then at Jonathan, her eyes questioning. Jonathan frowned. "Buddy, you can say how you're feeling," Jonathan reminded him gently. "Whatever you're feeling, Martha and I want to know."

"So do I, Clark," Ms. Jones added, keeping her distance. "And I'm betting...you'd like for Martha to stay with you while we talk. Is that right?"

Clark nodded almost immediately. "S-safe."

Jonathan's eyes widened, as did Martha's, and he couldn't help the small smile that started creeping in. Martha looked up at him, the uncertainty in her eyes replaced with love and fresh tears.

"I'll stay here with you, sweetie. Would that be good?" Her voice was quiet and thick with emotion, but she hid it well. And when Clark nodded and crawled into her arms, curling up as though that was his favorite place to be, Jonathan had to wipe a tear off his own cheek.

Martha's arms tightened around the small child, and she rocked him gently as he seemed to cling to her.

"I'll just head back into the kitchen and let the three of you talk then," Jonathan said quietly, tipping his head toward the wide doorway leading into the kitchen.

He poured himself a fresh cup of coffee while he waited, trying his best not to eavesdrop, not to worry. Somehow, he already knew in his heart that this was how things were meant to be—that for whatever reason, he and Martha were meant to be a part of this boy's life, however unfortunate the circumstances that brought them together. But a whole lot of feelings he thought he'd buried had started to surface as well, and he knew he and Martha needed to talk more, at some point, because if he was feeling all of this—remnants of the sense of grief and loss he'd felt when he'd found out he and Martha couldn't have children together—he could only imagine what she might be feeling now.

It wasn't too long until Ms. Jones came back into the kitchen, a soft smile on her lips. Jonathan stood, glancing toward the living room.

"Clark is coloring again. He wanted to show Martha how much he got done on the stegosaurus," Ms. Jones explained. She set her folder on the table and then reached into her messenger bag, which hung on the back of the chair in front of her.

"Can I get you some coffee?" Jonathan offered.

"Yes, thank you."

Jonathan nodded and hurried to pour another cup of coffee. "Any cream or...?" Ms. Jones shook her head, and Jonathan brought the coffee mug to the table and handed it to her. Then they both sat down.

"I just have to say, Mr. Kent, Clark's situation here is... difficult. I've been doing this job for over ten years now, and..." She trailed off as she shook her head and then opened up the folder. "So, as we discussed with Sheriff Harris last night, Clark has no living relatives who are able to take him in. What I didn't find out until this morning, when I talked more with the sheriff and some others, is

that there's no record of Clark ever having been enrolled in school or seen by a doctor in town here or anything."

She paused and flipped through a few pages in the folder, then looked up at Jonathan.

"I know from talking very briefly with Martha and from what the sheriff told me about the Petersons' house that... something is very off about the way he was brought up and treated," she said, lowering her voice. "And I'm going to need to come back again so we can do some more evaluations, especially once he's feeling more comfortable talking."

Jonathan nodded. "We're...not sure how to—"

"You two are doing an incredible job so far, Mr. Kent," Ms. Jones cut in, looking up from her paperwork and giving Jonathan an encouraging smile. "I spoke with Doc McMillan too, and he told me about Clark's injuries and behavior from last night. And from what I've seen today, Clark is already developing a relationship with both of you, and he seems to especially trust Martha. So, whatever you two are doing, for now, keep doing it."

He blinked and lowered his eyes, feeling as though some of the weight of the situation had lifted. "Thank you, Ms. Jones."

"There are some more things we'll need to speak about in greater depth, of course. The intention to adopt is a yes, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Great. That process can take some time, as I'm sure you'd expect. But if everything goes smoothly, and because of the situation here, I'd say we're looking at three to six months, about."

Jonathan nodded again and watched silently as she filled out and signed a few of the papers in the folder, sipping her coffee occasionally. Finally, she looked back up and smiled again.

"Alright, I'm going to need both you and Martha to sign here"—she indicated to a signature line at the bottom of a page—"and then, we'll schedule a follow-up appointment for...Wednesday?"

"We can do that," Jonathan said. He reached over and slid the folder closer to him so he could sign his name on the line.

"I'd expect after that, we'll be having visits every... two weeks, maybe, until the adoption can be finalized," Ms. Jones said, tipping her head in acknowledgement as Jonathan pushed the folder back toward her. "Oh, and..."

She stood, and Jonathan copied her, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He glanced out toward the living room, but couldn't really see either Clark or Martha.

"Maybe the two of you can get more information from him, though obviously don't push," she said, her voice quiet again. "But, from what I'm guessing, and from what Martha said, he hasn't been to school or had any formal schooling at all. Combine that with just having lost his parents"—she seemed to snag a little bit on that word, as though recognizing the Petersons had been anything but caring, loving parents—"and I think it's best to not worry much about getting him enrolled in school right away. Better to wait on that, let him settle, see...where he is with everything..."

"Of course," Jonathan agreed.

Ms. Jones nodded again and gathered up the folder. "I'll just get Martha to sign these papers here, and then I'll be on my way." She started to turn toward the living room but then paused. Her expression was an odd combination of hopeful but pained. "Thank you for the kindness you've already shown him. I can tell...he's going to do well under your care, and that...reminds me of why I chose this profession in the first place."

Jonathan blinked back tears again as he nodded weakly. "We're just...just really, really...grateful..." He shook his head, unable to fully express what he wanted to—the amount of love he already felt for Clark, which was stronger than and different from anything he'd ever felt before; how much his heart filled with hope and joy seeing Martha and Clark together; how something about it all just felt so... right.

But Ms. Jones seemed to understand. She gave him another knowing smile and then turned and headed out into the living room to get Martha's signature.

## Chapter 7

Clark wasn't sure what to do. His stomach still felt full from the incredible pancake and strawberries he'd had for breakfast. Yet Martha had him sitting down at the table again while she sliced up an apple for him to have as a snack.

He took a careful sip from the cup she'd given him—more orange juice, since he'd liked it so much that morning. And just as he set the cup back down, he heard Jonathan's footsteps behind him. He turned to look at the older man, who had stopped in the entryway to the kitchen. Jonathan glanced briefly at Clark, and Clark immediately blinked and lowered his eyes...

Nothing bad happened. In fact, nothing bad had happened at all since he'd come here, despite all the rules he'd broken. Still, Clark figured it was just a matter of time. Either he'd

mess up, or they'd realize they hadn't been punishing him for all of his mistakes. And he'd made a lot of them.

Fear coursed through him. It was a familiar feeling, but one that made him slightly dizzy, and he closed his eyes and held his breath as he straightened in his chair again.

From behind him, he heard Jonathan clear his throat, and he tried his best not to flinch as Jonathan spoke.

"I'll be heading out to the grocery store and to grab those few things you wanted from Sadie's, Martha," Jonathan said. And his voice sounded...well, Clark wasn't quite sure what, but it certainly didn't sound angry. It had never sounded angry. Only ever...nice?

"Thank you," Martha said. "Oh! I think I forgot to add chocolate chips to the list. If you remember while you're out?"

Her voice was nice too. Always so nice and soft. And she was...really, really nice to him.

He opened his eyes and glanced up at Martha, who had turned to address Jonathan. Her eyes met Clark's briefly, and she smiled. He quickly dropped his eyes again to where his hands were still wrapped around his cup.

"Chocolate chip cookies are Jonathan's favorite, right Jonathan?"

"Very much so."

"Would you like to help me make them later, Clark?"

His fingers tightened around the cup as he felt a sharp pain in his chest. "I—I don't...know how."

There was a short silence, and Clark heard Martha's footsteps—soft and even—approach the table, but he didn't look up.

"Well, I'd love to teach you," Martha murmured as she set down a plate of apple slices in front of him.

He kept his eyes on his cup and willed his hands to stop their shaking. "I'm..." He screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. He didn't want to tell her. He didn't want to say it.

There was another of those short silences, and then Clark flinched as her hand settled softly on his back. He shook his head again.

"I'll be back, maybe an hour?" Jonathan said quietly, and Clark heard Martha's equally quiet reply, followed by the front door opening and closing a moment later.

"Clark...it's..."

He felt a tear slip out down his cheek, and he quickly reached up and wiped it away, his hand still trembling. Martha's hand rubbed his back gently.

"You know these cookies, they're my grandma's recipe. And she taught me how to make them when I was about your age," Martha said. "I'd really love to show you, but it doesn't have to be today, either."

More tears fell, and he didn't even know why he was crying. He brought both of his hands up to his face and scrubbed at his cheeks. He should probably tell her, so she didn't get mad later when she found out.

But the words were really hard for him to say.

"I'm...not t-too...smart. Pa says—P-Pa said I...don't know enough, and..." And he didn't want to mess up, especially if chocolate chip cookies were Jonathan's favorite. He really didn't want to mess them up. But no more words would come, and he wiped more tears off his cheeks and then clasped his hands together in his lap, waiting.

Surely, she'd be upset. Ma had always been upset. Ma and Pa both.

But Martha didn't respond right away. Her hand stopped moving on his back, and he heard her snuffle. He didn't want to look up at her, see the disappointment in her eyes, so he just stared at his hands while more stupid tears rolled down his cheeks.

*"Stupid boy, can't get anything right."*

*"Don't you ever learn! Git the hell outta here before I get real mad."*

He closed his eyes again. "I-I'm...I'm sorry. I'm real sorry."

"Oh, no, sweetie. There's no need to apologize. And I'm..." Clark heard her snuffle again, and his lower lip began to tremble. "I bet you'll make the best helper. Do you want me to show you the recipe?"

He wouldn't be the best helper. He did know anything about cooking or baking or anything, and he couldn't even read, and his hands were shaky, which probably wouldn't make anything easier. Certainly there would be much, much better helpers than him. So why did she want his help?

He'd just disappoint her.

But as she rubbed his back again softly, he found himself nodding. He was curious about the recipe. He still didn't think he could help, but maybe...

"Wonderful, sweetie. Let me just grab it, and we can read it together. Okay?"

He nodded again, and she stood and headed over toward the cupboards, returning just a moment later with a really thick red and white book.

“Here we go,” she said, sitting next to him. “These”—she set her hand on the cover of the book—“are *alllll* of my grandma’s recipes. She wrote them all down for me and gave me this book when Jonathan and I got married almost...oh, almost fifteen years ago now.”

Clark risked a quick glance up at her and saw her soft, kind smile. Then he blinked and looked back at the book. There were letters on the front cover, and he knew most of them, but he didn’t know the words they made. He swallowed hard and screwed his eyes shut.

“So, she put the cookies as the very first recipe here, because that’s what she was most known for. Everyone in the family loved her cookies. And this recipe is really special to me too. You know why?”

“Why?” he asked, and he opened his eyes again and looked up at her. She gazed back down at him, still smiling so...kindly. Her eyes were so gentle, and he didn’t immediately look away this time.

“Because this is also the very first thing I ever made for Jonathan.” Her smile brightened, and she shifted her gaze to the book as she flipped open the cover to the first page. “Here we go. Brown butter chocolate chip cookies.”

Clark sat up a little straighter so he could look at the page. It was a full page of handwritten words and some numbers. He swallowed hard again as he looked at the top. “B-brown butter?”

“Yep, so the trick is that instead of using regular butter, we cook the butter in a pan first to brown it. And that changes the flavor and makes the cookies sooooo much better.”

“Butter is yellow,” he said quietly, and he looked up at Martha, who was nodding with a big smile. “B-but if you...”

“If you cook it on high heat in a pan on the stove, it will turn brown,” she explained.

Blinking, Clark looked back at the page, but all the letters seemed to run together. He frowned and shook his head as he sat back in his chair. He felt his heart start to race.

*“Dumb, useless child. Can’t even read. Go sit in the corner. I don’t wanna hear a peep from ye.”*

“Here, sweetie, look at this.” Martha’s hand settled on his back again. “This says here that we can also add walnuts if we want. What do you think? Do you think we should add walnuts?”

She was pointing to one of the lines at the bottom of the page, marked with a little star. He stared at the words, wishing again that he could read them.

“D-does...does Jonathan l-like...them?” he asked slowly.

“Oh, that’s a great question, Clark. Actually, Jonathan prefers his cookies without nuts.”

“S-so we shouldn’t—we shouldn’t—we shouldn’t—” He scrunched his eyes shut and hit his forehead with one hand in frustration. The words stuck over and over and over. Sometimes they did that, and he couldn’t seem to keep going. He hated that. Pa hated that even more.

He hit himself again, wanting—needing—to reset his brain. But before he could do it again, Martha’s arms wrapped around him, and he felt himself pulled against her, out of his chair and into her arms. And it felt so warm and safe—as it had every time she’d held him. He curled up against her, shaking, and she rocked him gently and murmured quiet words of comfort, her voice muffled in his hair.

“Shh, sweetie, shh. It’s okay.”

When he finally stopped shaking several minutes later, she still held him tightly, rubbing his arm and rocking back and forth slowly.

“There we go, sweetie. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

“I’m sorry. P-please...please don’t be m-mad. P-please,” he stuttered, his heart still pounding. He was glad she was holding him, because he felt dizzy again, and he didn’t feel like he would be able to hold himself up.

“Oh, sweetie, no. I’m not mad. Why would...” She trailed off, and Clark buried his head into her shoulder as he started shaking again. There were a lot of reasons she should be mad.

But he didn’t say anything, and after a minute, she pushed back her chair a bit.

“Clark, sweetie, can you look at me?”

He shook his head and then choked back a sob. He was in so much trouble again.

“Okay, that’s...that’s fine. But listen, okay?” She paused for only a second before continuing. And when she did, her voice was quiet and soft, yet brimming with emotion. He thought maybe she was crying, but he didn’t look up. “Clark, I’m...not going to get mad at you or angry with you. I’m not upset, sweetie. And I won’t be. You are allowed to say what you want, what you’re feeling, what you’re thinking... Jonathan and I want to hear everything you have to say.”

Clark felt her arms tighten around him a bit, and she let out a long, shaky breath of her own.

“Maybe things were different with Ma and Pa,” she said quietly. “But...here in our house, you’re allowed all of that. Okay, sweetie?”

His jaw trembled, but he nodded.

“Good, and...it’s really very thoughtful of you to ask what Jonathan wants. But I also want to know what *you* want. Do *you* want to try nuts in your cookies? We could make half with and half without.”

“I...get to...have one?”

“If you want to, yes.”

“I...never...”

He pulled back just a little and looked up at her. She still had that kind smile, the same gentle blue eyes.

“You’ll get to today,” she said, and a wave of some strong emotion hit him as he lowered his head back against her shoulder. He felt her kiss the top of his head, and he closed his eyes. “Here, sweetie, let’s get started. We can get everything ready up until we add the chocolate chips. Then, when Jonathan gets back...”

She stood and carefully lowered him to the ground, supporting him until he got his bearings. Then, he followed as she picked up the cookbook and walked over to the counter.

“So, we’re going to need butter and eggs and...”

\* \* \*

Clark carefully poured the mixture of flour and sugar and something else he couldn’t remember into the mixer, watching as the white fluffy powder churned, combining with the eggs and butter. *Slowly*, she’d said. *Pour it in little by little, not all at once.* And so he did just that.

Turned out he wasn’t half bad as a helper, or at least that was what Martha kept telling him. She stood right next to him, one hand on his back, probably to make sure he didn’t accidentally fall off the chair he was standing on.

And she reminded him as he poured the mixture. “That’s it, nice and slow... Give it a chance to mix before you add more... Yep, there, exactly.”

And when the bowl was empty, she took it from him and set it in the sink with the other dishes they’d already dirtied, and then helped him down off the chair.

“There we go. Great job, Clark! You did a wonderful job! I’m so glad to have you as my helper!”

Something about her words—the way she said them—made him look up at her. She leaned over the mixer to peer in at the cookie dough, one hand still on his shoulder, and he saw her smile. And it was bright and warm.

“I—” Martha straightened up and looked at him as he started to talk. Their eyes met, and he saw...he wasn’t quite sure what. Some emotion—whatever that emotion had been in her voice, maybe—he could see it in her eyes now. His chest filled with...pride? Maybe. He didn’t really know, but it felt good, and he somehow managed a small smile.

And that was worth everything so far. Because it made her smile brighten even more. And that felt amazing.

He tried his words again, closing his eyes and speaking very slowly so he didn’t stutter. “I liked to help you.”

When he opened his eyes again, Martha was still watching him, still smiling so brightly at him. He tried for another smile, since that had made her happier somehow.

“I’m so glad, sweetie,” she said, and she crouched down next to him and opened up her arms in invitation.

He barely hesitated before he wrapped his arms around her neck and let her hug him.

And that also felt amazing.

## Chapter 8

By early Saturday afternoon, the storm finally subsided, and the clouds cleared up outside, the sun bringing with it a pleasant warmth.

Martha took the opportunity to coax Clark out onto the front porch, and the three of them sat outside and had a late lunch of sandwiches, strawberries, and fresh-out-of-the-oven brown butter chocolate chip cookies. Jonathan spoke quietly while they ate, telling Clark a little bit about the farm. He explained that the farm had been in Jonathan’s family for four generations and that their main crops were corn, wheat, and apples. He told Clark about the pond, how he’d love to take Clark there and show him how to fish sometime. And he explained how he’d helped his dad rebuild the barn after a fire had destroyed the original structure when he was just about Clark’s age.

Martha watched silently as Clark picked at his food, not with disinterest but with...discomfort, maybe? He kept eyeing the cookie on his plate and then attempting to take another bite of his sandwich, but he seemed...

Her eyes widened with realization, and she sighed, a little too loudly. Jonathan cut off mid-sentence, and Clark glanced up at her briefly, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

“Martha?”

“Sorry, Jonathan,” she said, forcing the smile back on her face. She looked at Clark again, who was now staring at his plate, his jaw clenched tightly. “Sweetie, hey, are you... still full from breakfast and your snack a couple hours ago?”

You don't have to eat your whole sandwich before you have your cookie."

And Clark did what he usually did when he was unsure. He closed his eyes tightly and didn't say anything, his little body tensing up as though he was preparing to... what? Get in trouble?

She frowned as she glanced up at Jonathan, who watched Clark with a soft expression.

"Hey, buddy, how about this..." Jonathan started, and he paused until Clark opened his eyes just a little and shot a careful glance Jonathan's way. Then Jonathan smiled brightly at him. "You take... one more bite of your sandwich—it's really yummy, isn't it?"

Clark nodded quickly.

"Yeah, Martha makes the best sandwiches. Anyways, you take one more good bite, and then you can have your cookie. How does that sound? Do you think you can do that?"

"Y-yes, I—I think so."

"Great! Martha, what do you think?"

The child turned to look at her, and she saw the tiniest bit of hope in his beautiful dark eyes. She really didn't want to put any stipulation on him getting to eat his cookie, but she understood why Jonathan had made the suggestion, and that broke her heart even more. So she just smiled brightly and nodded.

"I think that's a great idea. One more good bite should be plenty."

Part of it was that Clark really needed to eat. Doc McMillan had told them he was indeed severely underweight, small for his age in a way that Doc suspected had nothing to do with Clark just being a small boy.

Also—and she understood this, but again didn't really like it one bit—Clark seemed to need to have a "rule" or... something. He obviously was not used to being given options, to being given... anything. And she could easily see the uncertainty, the unease he felt whenever he was given a choice or asked some opened-ended question. She definitely didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

She also didn't want him to feel obligated to make himself uncomfortable—to make himself eat more than his body could currently handle—just to get the "reward" of being allowed to have his cookie.

And Jonathan seemed to understand her concern, even without her saying anything out loud. He gave her a tight smile and nod as though to reassure her, and her discomfort faded just a bit. She took the final bite of her own sandwich as she watched Clark pick up his sandwich with trembling

hands. He took a big bite, as though he felt that was required of him, and then ate the last strawberry on his plate, for good measure.

Then, after he swallowed, he reached for the cookie, some eagerness in his eyes and a small smile on his lips. He paused just before his fingers touched the cookie, and his face fell as he looked at Jonathan.

"Can I...?"

"Of course, buddy," Jonathan answered, sounding stoic and confident. But Martha heard the hitch in his breath as they both saw Clark's expression light up—just a little.

"Th-thank you," Clark said, and he glanced at Martha briefly before picking up the cookie and taking the tiniest of bites.

He didn't say anything, but his face told it all—his eyes closed lightly as he chewed, and his lips curled up at the corners.

"It's good, right?" Jonathan said, smiling at Clark.

Clark nodded and opened his eyes, and they flickered with a brightness, an eagerness that made Martha's heart soar.

She blinked back tears and turned her attention back to her now-empty plate in her lap. Jonathan had to go do the afternoon chores—feed the animals, milk the cows, get started on just a little bit of the cleanup he had to do after the storm. And she had some cleaning and a few other things she needed to get done. Clark was still supposed to be resting as much as possible—orders from Doc—but she was reluctant to suggest he go take a nap or to leave him on his own for any amount of time.

And she really wasn't quite sure why the reluctance. He was a ten-year-old boy. Certainly he would be used to... She closed her eyes tightly and tried to steady herself as her heart stuttered.

He wasn't a normal ten-year-old boy. He hadn't had any sort of normal childhood. She knew that, just from how he acted and what Jonathan had told her about that house he'd lived in. As far as they knew, he hadn't had any formal schooling, and she was fairly sure he didn't know how to read or write, add or subtract... She recalled too how awkward he'd looked trying to color in the dinosaur coloring book that morning—like his fingers weren't even sure how to hold the crayon. Once she'd shown him, he figured it out pretty quickly, but...

"I've gotta get out to the barn," Jonathan said, pulling Martha out of her introspection. She looked up at him and nodded. "And I spoke with Wayne this morning. The storm really tore through overnight, knocked down several trees

and part of the fence line at the back of his property, where it meets up with old Schuster's field. He asked if I might help him out to fix that up this afternoon too. Actually..." Jonathan paused, and his eyes darted briefly to his watch and then Clark. "I maybe should go do that first. But if you need me to stay close by...?"

She heard all the words he didn't say, of course. And she smiled and shook her head. "Go on over to help Wayne. Clark and I will be fine hanging out here, won't we, sweetie?"

Clark had just stuffed the last of his cookie in his mouth—having foregone his tiny bites for much larger ones, and his mouth was completely full. He stopped chewing and looked at her almost nervously, but nodded.

Jonathan grinned. "Good then. I'll be back before dark." He stood and picked up all of their plates. "Lemme take these inside for you, and then I'll head out."

"Thank you, Jonathan."

A few minutes later, she waved goodbye as Jonathan climbed into the pickup and then started it up and drove off down the driveway toward the main road. A light breeze set the wind chimes jingling, and she took a deep breath and then stood up herself, turning to Clark with a smile.

"I've got some chores of my own to do, but first..." She hesitated as she watched him bite his lower lip and drop his eyes. What was going on in that little mind of his, and how could she...make him feel better? She took another deep breath, and he looked back up at her.

God, his eyes... They were so full of so many things, and she felt a fierce protectiveness come over her like nothing she'd ever felt before. She reached out her hand. "Come on, sweetie, let's head inside and... Say, do you like Legos? Jonathan picked up a really neat rocket ship Lego set from Sadie's while he was out this morning."

Clark took her hand slowly, but his face showed confusion as he stood with her help. "I—I don't know wh-what Legos are," he said quietly. And before she could respond, he asked, "C-can you...show me?"

The question was both heartbreaking and hopeful, and fresh tears threatened as she nodded enthusiastically. "Of course! Oh my, you're in for a big treat! Legos are so fun!"

And he held onto her hand tightly as she led them back inside.

\* \* \*

"Here, now, turn the page, and let's see how it ends..."

Clark eagerly reached up and turned the final page, keeping a steady hold on the book as he leaned back against

Martha's chest. She looked over his shoulder, smiling at the familiar words. She had read this book to the first-grade class from Smallville Elementary when they had gone on a field trip to the library several weeks ago, and they'd all loved it just as much as Clark seemed to.

She tightened her arm around him in a small hug, and he pointed to the first word in the sentence, which was written in all capital letters.

"What does it say?"

"It says, "'SO, catch!'" calls the Once-ler. He lets something fall. "It's a Truffula Seed. It's the last one of all. You're in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds. And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs. Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care. Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back." "The end!"

"Oh, wow," Clark said, his voice low. He looked up at her in awe, the biggest smile she'd seen from him yet plastered on his face. His eyes almost sparkled. "The Once-ler was... not a good person, but he...changed."

Martha nodded. "Took him a little while to figure it out. He didn't care at first how his actions affected others, right?"

Clark nodded and looked back down at the book, his tiny little fingers reaching out to trace under the first few words on the last page.

"But then," she continued, "he realized how he was hurting all the animals and plants, and how damaging it was."

She watched quietly as Clark seemed to process this, and he frowned.

"But...but one little boy...isn't enough to—to change..." His voice was small, and he seemed to shrink into her a bit, closing the book.

"Oh, sweetie, no. One person, little or not, certainly can change the world. Even if that just means changing the world for one person, making one person's life better."

Clark touched the front cover of the book and then smiled a little, and Martha's breath caught. The expression—the little hint of a smile on his lips—seemed to be getting easier for him, and each time, it seemed to last a little longer.

She hugged him tighter again, her heart feeling so happy and full when he didn't tense up this time. She wanted to tell him how much he'd already changed her world—how much he'd already made her small part of the world so much better. But she held back, watching him as he traced the letters on the front of the book with one finger, his smile slowly fading.

“What are you thinking, sweet boy?” she asked quietly, and his hand stilled.

He shook his head but then mumbled, “Um, I...” and tapped his finger on the first word, “The,” at the top—a red word set in the yellow tufts of a *Truffula Tree*.

“Do you...know all the letters?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head again, and this time she did feel his body tense up. “N-no. I...I’m not...not smart, and... Pa said—”

“Do you want me to teach you, sweetie?” She hated interrupting him, but a strong wave of anger had flowed through her when he mentioned not being smart, and even though she probably needed to learn all she could about how Clark had been raised, she really had no desire to hear what Jacob Peterson had told Clark about himself. Or to have Clark have to repeat whatever those untruths had been now.

“Y-yes, p-please,” he answered, unsteadily, but with a little hope in his voice. “I know...this is—is a T.” He pointed to the first letter in “The” and then looked up at her, uncertainty in his eyes.

“That’s absolutely right. It’s the letter T. And the way it’s written there is called ‘capitalized.’ Every letter has two forms—uppercase or capitalized and lowercase.”

Clark bit his lip and lowered his eyes back to the page, moving his finger to point to the next letter. “Wh-what is this one?”

“That’s an H, but it’s lowercase, and the next letter—”

“Is an E?”

“Yes! Very good. And the letters T-H-E together spell the word ‘The,’ as in *The Lorax*.”

“T...H...E... ‘The.’” He pointed at each of the letters as he said them and then looked up at her, the hint of hope in his expression again.

With a huge smile and another nod, she brought both arms around him and hugged him gently. “Yes, sweetie, that’s so great! That’s just right.”

He let her hug him, and then quickly, as though he were worried she would soon tire of this, he pointed to the next word. “This says, ‘L-Lorax’?”

“Exactly. The letters are...”

## Chapter 9

By the time Jonathan arrived home later that evening, it was well past dark, and he was bone-tired. Not only had he gotten little sleep the night before but he’d also been going all day, and the work at Wayne’s had been strenuous.

Together, they’d chopped up an entire oak tree that had been uprooted, stacked all the wood into the back of Wayne’s pickup, and moved it to the woodshed on the side of his barn. It had taken multiple trips to get all the logs moved and stacked, and then they’d headed back out just as the sun had gone down to repair the fence so Wayne’s cattle wouldn’t escape overnight.

And even when he got home, he didn’t get to go inside right away. He still had his own chores to do before he could consider his day finished. Mentally listing everything that absolutely *had* to be done, he started with the easiest thing first: feeding all the animals. Peaches, the elderly horse he’d been given several years ago when the previous owner had passed away, was being particularly ornery, pawing at her stall door, and he muttered a few choice words under his breath while tossing her a couple of flakes of hay. Then, he fed the cows and chickens, who all seemed quite happy to still be indoors, even though the storm had passed. While they all ate, he cleaned the stalls, picking up the soiled bedding and then adding fresh straw. Then he took a few minutes to milk each of the two dairy cows and collect the eggs from the chicken coop.

By the time he finally made his way back to the house, it was quite late, and he was even more exhausted and in desperate need of a shower and a clean change of clothes. He entered the house quietly, well aware that Clark and maybe even Martha might already be sleeping. The light in the entryway was on, however, as was the light in the kitchen, and he heard sounds of dishes clinking in the sink as he removed his muddy boots and dusty coat. He padded straight into the kitchen, where Martha stood at the sink, washing dishes. She hadn’t seemed to have heard him yet; she just continued scrubbing a small pot, her shoulders tense.

He didn’t want to startle her, so he knocked lightly on the wall to announce his arrival. She paused and turned around, and he saw tears on her cheeks. He frowned.

“Martha? Is everything—”

His words cut off as she set the pot down in the sink and rushed over to him, and he immediately wrapped his arms around her as she buried her head in his chest, muffling her quiet sobs.

“Martha, what happened? Is Clark okay?” he asked, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. He glanced down the hallway toward the bedroom where he assumed Clark was sleeping and saw the light off and the door cracked open a few inches.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry, I just...” She trailed off as she pulled away from him slightly, reaching up to wipe her tears.

He shook his head and pulled her back in for another hug. “Shh, now. Here let’s sit, and you can tell me what’s going on.” He released her and pulled out a chair at the table for her to sit. Then he pulled another chair right up to hers. When he sat, he took her hands in his and squeezed them gently. “I’m sorry I was gone so long. The work at Wayne’s took longer than either of us expected, and then I had to take care of our animals when I finished. I hope that wasn’t—”

“No, no...it’s not...” She smiled, although it was accompanied by more tears, and Jonathan reached up with one hand and brushed the wetness from her cheeks. She pursed her lips and then closed her eyes for a moment, and he waited, giving her time. “We actually had a great day together, Jonathan. He’s such an incredible child. We put together that Lego set you bought him, and then I read him *The Lorax* four times. He wanted me to read it again, but I told him I had to cook dinner... So...so he...”

Jonathan noticed the book sitting on the table for the first time, and he smiled. “Ahh, I like that book. I was glad to see it at Sadie’s. He must have liked it too?”

With a short exhale, Martha nodded and wiped another tear from her cheek. “I don’t think...” She paused and met his eyes, shaking her head slowly. “I don’t think anyone ever read him a book before, Jonathan. He’s...he’s ten years old, and he’d never been read a book before today.” The frown on her face turned into a small smile then, and she blinked back tears as she glanced down the hallway.

“He’s such an incredible child,” she repeated. “While I was cooking dinner, he sat here and looked through the book again on his own. And he started picking out words he recognized from me reading it to him. And...”

Jonathan squeezed her hands again and then reached up and cupped her cheek. “I’m so glad he’s here with us, Martha. I’m sorry I missed that. I’d have loved to have seen it, to have heard him.”

She just nodded, and he knew she had more she wanted to say, but he could also tell she was exhausted. He pulled her in to brush a light kiss on her forehead and then smiled at her.

“Let me finish the dishes and clean up the kitchen, and you can go shower.” He studied her eyes for a moment and smiled again. “You’ll be sleeping out in the living room again tonight?”

Her eyes closed for a long moment, and she nodded. “I need to be close in case he needs me.”

Jonathan wasn’t about to argue with her, so he just kissed her forehead again. “Go get ready for bed, and I’ll finish the dishes for you and get the couch made up. Clark is sleeping, I assume?”

“He has been for a couple of hours now. After dinner, he was so tired... I had him take a quick bath and helped him brush his teeth, and then tucked him in. I think he fell asleep before his head hit the pillow.”

The soft smile on her lips now gave him just a little boost of energy, which he knew he needed if he were to keep moving. “Poor little guy. Was he able to eat dinner?” The two of them stood up together, and Martha hugged Jonathan again.

“Yeah. I made chicken soup. I didn’t give him too much, but he ate it all. And then another cookie,” she said.

“Good.”

She thanked him for offering to finish cleaning up and then headed up the stairs to get ready for bed, and he made his way quietly down the hall to check on their sleeping boy—their boy! he grinned at the thought—before getting started on the dishes. Just like the night before, he inched the door open carefully, light from the hallway filtering in to partially illuminate the room. Clark lay on his side, facing Jonathan, one arm hanging partway off the bed, his dark hair falling over his forehead. Jonathan stood there, mesmerized by the way the young boy’s chest rose and fell rhythmically, his mouth slightly parted. He wore the same red pajamas Jonathan had bought for him the night before.

And he looked like an angel, Jonathan thought. A perfect little angel child, who had come to them to...to fill the void, the emptiness.

They’d been perfectly happy. They’d moved on long ago, he thought—long after finding out she couldn’t have children, long after trying to navigate the complex adoption system that had dismissed them outright as potential adoptive parents because, at the time, they hadn’t had sufficient records showing they had a reliable income source in the farm. But in truth, being here now, watching this child sleep, Jonathan realized how much he’d been missing—how much he and Martha had been missing, and how much love they both had yet to give.

He smiled and carefully closed the door, all but that few inches, and then padded back out into the kitchen. Fifteen minutes later, the dishes had been washed, and all the blankets and pillows Martha needed for the night had been stacked neatly on the couch for her. Then, after his stomach growled to remind him he hadn’t yet eaten dinner, Jonathan sat and quickly downed a bowl of soup, followed by a couple of cookies.

By the time Martha came back down, dressed in her nightgown and with her hair still damp from her shower, he’d washed and dried his dishes from dinner and felt himself swaying on his feet.

Another late night. And he had another early morning tomorrow, with even more work to do. But more importantly, he wanted to be there this time.

He glanced at the book still sitting on the kitchen table and then again at Martha, who stood just at the foot of the stairs, watching him.

“I’ll go get him some more books tomorrow. Maybe from the library. Are they open on Sundays?”

Martha nodded. “Sue opens up early Sunday, but for just a couple of hours. I think eight to ten?”

“Perfect.”

With another small smile, he moved across the room toward her, his beautiful wife and now, hopefully, finally, a mother... And he gathered her up in his arms, kissed her cheek, and held her tightly.

“I love you, Martha Kent.”

“Oh, Jon, I love you too.”

He pulled back, smiling down at her. “I’ll see you in the morning, love. I’m gonna fall asleep faster than Clark tonight, I’m afraid.”

Martha nodded. “Tomorrow is French toast and eggs for breakfast.”

“Ahh, my favorite.”

He kissed her one more time, for good measure, and then shuffled up the stairs to bed.

\* \* \*

Jonathan slept soundly, but when he woke up before the sunrise the next morning, he rolled over to reach for Martha, only to find her side of the bed cold and empty. Yet he smiled, reminding himself why she wasn’t there, and hauled himself up and out of bed, the sore muscles in his arms and back complaining.

A few minutes later, he padded quietly downstairs, listening for sounds from the kitchen, but hearing none. And when he poked his head into the living room, expecting to see Martha sleeping on the couch, he again found the room empty. Curious, and just a little concerned, he headed down the hallway to the guest bedroom—now Clark’s bedroom—and peeked through the open door.

The tiny bit of morning light shining in through the curtains brightened the room just enough that he could make out the two sleeping figures in the bed—little Clark curled up in Martha’s arms. Jonathan just stared for a few moments, transfixed, as his heart filled with love.

He had no idea what had transpired overnight that had led Martha to be in bed, holding the small child. Perhaps

he’d had a nightmare and had needed comfort. Or perhaps some other reason. But he thought he’d maybe never seen anything quite as wonderful in his life.

Very quietly, he backed out of the room, closing the door almost all the way, and headed back out into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee—the minimum he needed to get his day going. Five minutes later, a thermos of hot coffee in one hand and an apple in the other, Jonathan headed out to the barn to get his morning chores started.

When he finished up about an hour and a half later, the house was still quiet, and Jonathan silently slipped off his work boots, exchanged them for a pair of regular shoes, wrote Martha a short note, and grabbed the keys to the pickup truck.

Then he headed out toward town, on a mission to get Clark some more books from the library.

## Chapter 10

There was warmth next to him. Warmth that smelled like strawberries and chocolate chip cookies, surrounding him and holding him tightly. He shifted a little and opened his eyes partway.

The room was bright, sunlight streaming in through partially opened curtains, and next to him, Martha lay there quietly, her soft, kind eyes watching him. She reached up and brushed his hair back off his forehead as she smiled at him.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” she said, still smiling.

He blinked and curled up next to her without answering, suddenly remembering the middle of the night last night when he’d woken up crying, sure a monster was after him. A big orange monster with huge red eyes and green claws that screeched as it chased him down into the basement back in his old house.

When he’d sat up in bed, terrified, Martha had been there. And he’d crawled up into her arms, and she’d rocked with him, waiting for him to calm down. Then, after his heart had stopped racing, she’d tried tucking him back in, but as soon as she’d started to leave, the fear had come back... So instead, she’d crawled into bed next to him and held him and...

“How are you feeling, sweetie?” She said this while rubbing his back, and that made all the difference.

“B-better than—better than l-last n-night,” he managed, but he hated himself for stuttering, and he screwed his eyes shut. “S-sorry.”

He meant sorry for a lot of things, especially for being such a burden. But Martha just shook her head.

“No reason to say sorry, sweetie. I’m happy to be here for you, whenever you need it. Okay?”

It still didn’t make sense to him, but he nodded anyway.

“We should probably get up though. I need to make poor Jonathan breakfast. And I bet you’re ready for something to eat too?”

He wondered if she’d just let him eat another cookie. He thought maybe cookies were his favorite food now. But he didn’t want to ask, and so he just nodded again.

“Great! Why don’t we get up now, and we can both get dressed. Do you remember where we put your clothes?”

“The—the b-bottom drawer,” he answered, looking up at her. Her eyes still sparkled, and he closed his eyes again and curled up against her. “I want…” He trailed off and shook his head. He couldn’t ask her; he shouldn’t. She’d just said she needed to get up, after all.

But he didn’t want to let go of this—this feeling of…he wasn’t even sure. But it was warm and comfortable. And he felt so…safe right here. He let out a shuddering breath, trying to hold back his tears.

It was safe to cry here. And it was safe to tell her. She wanted him to tell her. She’d said so several times. She and Jonathan both. So when her hand started to rub his back again, he nodded.

“You want to stay here for a few more minutes, sweetie?” Martha guessed.

“Y-yes. Yes, please.”

He heard a quiet laugh.

“We can do that. A few more minutes is fine.”

“Th-thank you.”

He felt her pull the blanket up around his shoulders and then kiss the top of his head, and it felt so nice, so comfortable and warm. He felt a sudden urge to tell her this—especially how much he liked the blanket. And he almost did. But then a hazy memory reminded him that nice things, including warm blankets, could be taken away as punishment, and he promptly changed his mind.

Better she not know. Just in case.

After a few more minutes, he silently sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. When he stood, his legs felt less wobbly than they had the day before, and he didn’t immediately feel dizzy. He forced his legs to move toward the dresser, and he then tugged open the bottom drawer and stared in at the neatly folded clothes. There was two more of everything—two pairs of pants, two shirts (one blue, one gray), two pairs of socks—plus a few more pairs of underwear. He glanced

over at Martha, who had just stood up and was smoothing out her nightgown. She smiled at him.

“Do you need help picking out what to wear, sweetie?” she asked.

He frowned and shook his head. He already knew he wanted to wear the blue shirt. Red was his favorite color, but he did also like blue.

“Okay. I’ll go get dressed myself, and then we can make breakfast. I could use some help again, if you’re up for it?”

“Kay,” he said, and that made her smile again.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes, okay, sweetie?”

He nodded, and after she left the room, he reached into the drawer, pulled out the shirt, a pair of pants, and a pair of underwear, and then carefully walked down the hallway and to the bathroom. A few minutes later, after he’d relieved himself, washed his hands, and changed into his clean clothes, he slowly opened the bathroom door and looked out down the hallway toward the kitchen. He could hear quiet voices—one a bit deeper than the other—and he realized Jonathan must be in there with Martha now. And they were probably waiting for him.

Quietly, he tiptoed down the hallway and then peeked around the corner into the kitchen. Martha and Jonathan stood together in the kitchen, hugging and talking quietly. He couldn’t quite hear what they were saying, but whatever it was, it sounded…serious. Sort of. They weren’t yelling or arguing, but they were talking in low voices that were…strained. He shook his head and scooted back into the hallway, his heart starting to race.

They weren’t mad at him. He wasn’t in trouble. Martha had told him that a bunch of times already. But why were they being so quiet? There was something they didn’t want him to hear.

Maybe he should just go back to bed.

He scrunched his eyes shut and slumped down against the wall, hugging his knees to his chest and fighting against the feelings in his head telling him things that didn’t make sense. Why didn’t anything make any sense? Why…hadn’t he gotten in trouble? Why…

“Hey, sweetie. Is everything okay?” Martha’s kind voice came from just in front of him, and he swallowed hard, wanting to just say he was fine. But he…really wasn’t sure.

“I-I don’t know,” he said quietly. He felt her warmth shift closer until he was sure she was sitting next to him, and he closed his eyes tighter. “I don’t know wh-why…”

“Why what, sweetie?”

He flinched slightly as her hand set lightly on his back, but then he immediately felt the same thing he'd felt so many times now since coming here to Martha and Jonathan's house—that sense of...safety? Holding his breath, he turned and leaned into her, hoping to feel it more. And he did. She slid her arm around his shoulders and gathered him up in her arms in another one of those hugs that just felt so right.

But his head hurt a little as he tried to think. Part of him—a very small part—wanted to know that big...why. He curled up against her and mustered up all the courage he possibly could.

"Why...why..." But he couldn't get the words out. They wouldn't form or...whatever it was that words did. He growled a little and brought his hands to his head, as though that would make something better. But of course it didn't.

"Sweetie, shh, it's okay," Martha murmured, so gentle and nice. She rubbed his back again as she held him, and he started crying, unable to stop himself. And maybe he didn't even want to try.

"Why are you nice to me?" he blurted out, still crying as he clung onto her. "Ma and Pa said s-said that—that—that—that—" He shook his head and buried his face into her shoulder as he got stuck on the words again. Dumb words. Dumb brain that wouldn't say what he wanted.

Dumb him. It was a bad decision, to try to ask the question anyway. Trying to ask why she and Jonathan were so nice when Ma and Pa had said no one would be nice to him. Trying to ask why there weren't any punishments for all the bad things he'd done. Trying to ask...why he hadn't been sent to his room or to the basement or...?

He should have known better. He did know better.

He sobbed, half expecting this to be it, to be when her voice would get mean and angry, and Jonathan might step in to show Clark what the consequences were for everything he'd done wrong so far.

But that didn't happen. The opposite happened. She continued to rub his back, soothing and calm, and she talked to him quietly, her words gentle and soft.

"Shh, everything's okay, sweetie. You're okay. You're okay," she said.

And when his crying slowed and then stopped, she kissed the top of his head and held him just a little tighter, which made him feel even better, somehow.

He hiccupped and wiped the tears from his cheeks, but didn't otherwise move.

"You asked me why I'm so nice to you?" she said after another moment. He nodded, and he heard her breath catch,

which only confused him more. "Oh, sweetie..." Then he heard her snuffle.

Had he made her cry again?

"Clark, sweetie, I care about you. A lot. I want to be sure that you're comfortable and feel safe and at home here. I want to be sure that you..." Martha paused, and Clark tensed up as he heard Jonathan's footsteps approach slowly. They stopped, and Martha exhaled quietly and then continued, her voice still gentle and kind. "I want to be sure you're taken care of—that you have enough to eat and good clothes to wear, and that you get enough sleep. I want you to find things that you enjoy, and I want you to grow and learn. I want you to know that you're a beautiful, wonderful, sweet child and that you deserve all of this. You deserve to be treated with kindness, sweetie."

Everything she said didn't make any sense, and his head hurt even more. But he felt a lot more comfortable in her arms than not, and so he just stayed right where he was. She didn't move either, except to start rocking him gently.

He really liked that.

After another moment, Clark heard Jonathan clear his throat quietly. "Martha, should I go start breakfast?"

"Hmm." Martha kissed the top of his head again. "Clark, sweetie, did you want to help me cook again? You were so wonderful as my helper yesterday. But if you want, we can just stay here for a bit more, and Jonathan can get breakfast cooking."

He didn't know. So he didn't move, still, and he didn't answer.

"It's okay, sweet child." She started rubbing his back again. "It's okay... Jon...?"

"French toast—my aunt Sue's recipe?"

"Yeah. All the ingredients are out on the counter already."

"Got it."

Footsteps sounded again, this time moving out of the hallway and back to the kitchen. And Clark wrapped his arms around Martha's neck and started crying again, though he really wasn't sure why.

\* \* \*

He was so full again. And he had another new favorite food—French toast topped with strawberries and something Martha had called powdered sugar. It was even more yummy than the pancake he'd had the day before. But he hadn't even been able to finish, because he'd gotten so full.

He also had two new books to read! After breakfast, Jonathan had taken him into the living room and shown

him. One was a book about a big red puppy that went on adventures with his owner, and the other was a book about dinosaurs. The dinosaur one looked like it had a lot of really big, long words in it, and Jonathan had even said it might be hard for *him* to read.

Clark sat on the couch, alternately staring at the two books in his lap and glancing out the window to see if Jonathan was headed back in from the barn yet. He'd said he had to check on something and that he'd be right back. And when he got back, he'd read the books—both of them!—to Clark.

"Hey, sweetie," Martha said from behind him, and Clark turned quickly, startled. Martha smiled when his eyes met hers. "I have a few more chores to do. Are you okay here? Just waiting for Jonathan?"

His stomach seemed to lurch a bit.

*"You know your chores. Those windows better be spotless today. Get it all done, or else!"*

Or else. Or else.

"D-do you... Can I-I h-help you?"

Martha's smile softened. "I appreciate the offer, sweetie, but I can handle everything today. I just need to sweep and vacuum and start some laundry. Then, I'm hoping maybe we can color again, or maybe play a game."

"Kay," he mumbled, turning to look at the books in his hands again. He expected Martha to leave, so he could continue waiting for Jonathan. But he heard her footsteps approach until they stopped right behind him at the couch.

"Oh, I know that book, about the puppy," she said, and she came around the side of the couch and then sat down next to him. He moved closer automatically, scooting up against her like he had yesterday when she'd been reading to him. And she settled her arm around his shoulders.

He looked up at her and smiled. Then he looked back down at the book. "I-I w-want to—to read it. But J-Jonathan said he'd be back to—to help me."

"Perfect. We can still look at it while we wait for him, though. Yeah?" Martha squeezed his shoulders gently, and the icky feeling in his stomach went away as he nodded.

"I-I think I—" He slowly reached up and pointed to the title of the book. He'd been thinking about it and trying to remember everything from the day before. And he was kinda a little sure, maybe, that he might know a few of the words.

"Do you know the words, sweetie?"

Clark pursed his lips and then glanced at her again. "M-maybe." He lowered his eyes back to the book. "I don't

know...this, um, this f-first word, but I think this is 'the Big Red Dog'?" He said the words slowly, pointing to each word as he spoke. And when he finished, he looked up at Martha, unsure what he'd find.

Her eyes were closed, but her lips still smiled, and he smiled too as he saw her nod softly. "That's absolutely right, Clark. You're—you're amazing, sweetie."

When she opened her eyes and looked down at him, a flush of warmth spread through his chest, and he smiled even bigger.

"Wh-what's the first word?" he asked. He heard the front door open, and his eyes darted up to where Jonathan entered the house, slipping off his coat.

"What do we have here? Ready to get reading, are we, Clark?" Jonathan smiled too, and that also made Clark feel...something big and bright. He nodded, a bit more enthusiastically this time.

"Yes!"

"Clark is already getting started, Jon," Martha said. "He can read most of the title already."

"Oh, is that so?" Jonathan moved across the room and then took a seat on the other side of Clark.

"I can! Except the first word, I..." Clark frowned and looked down at the book again. "C-L-I...F-F-O-R-D?"

"Yes, those are the letters. Excellent job, sweetie!" Martha beamed. "That spells Clifford. That's the dog's name—Clifford."

"Clifford the Big Red Dog?" Clark risked a quick glance up at Martha and then Jonathan, and he saw them both smiling and nodding.

"Impressive, buddy!" Jonathan scooted a little closer. "Now, should we see what wonderful adventures Clifford goes on? I don't think I've read this one before. Have you, Martha?"

"No, I don't think so."

Clark leaned into Martha a bit. "M-maybe...we can find out...together, then?" he said.

There was a very short moment of silence, and just when Clark started to worry that maybe he'd said something wrong, Jonathan answered quietly, "I think that's a really great idea, buddy."

He smiled again, feeling something he couldn't quite put words to—but whatever it was, it felt good. Then, Clark snuggled up against Martha and opened the book up to the first page.

## Chapter 11

Martha looked up from the newspaper she'd been reading as she heard the quiet creak of that loose floorboard in the hallway. Clark poked his head around the corner, as he did every morning now, and gave her a small smile when his eyes landed on hers. Her heart swelled with some quiet joy as that little sparkle she'd quickly come to know and love in the last four days brightened up his dark brown eyes. She smiled back and folded up the newspaper as she stood.

"Good morning, sweetie. How did you sleep last night?"

Clark shuffled over to the table, stopped, and set his hands on the back of the chair where he usually sat.

"Um, good. P-pretty—pretty good, I think," he answered.

"Wonderful, sweetie! Jonathan's out doing his morning chores, but I think he'll be in soon," she said. "And then, we can eat breakfast together. How does that sound?"

With a small nod, Clark glanced up at her. "Okay. And, um, E-Emma is—is coming by today? To...to, um..."

"Yes," Martha answered, picking up the pitcher of orange juice she'd set on the table earlier. She started to pour him a glass. "She's supposed to be by around eleven, so just before lunchtime."

She set the glass down in front of him, and he slipped into the seat and then eagerly reached out to pick it up. Within seconds, he'd downed half the juice, and when he looked back up at her, his eyes still had that little gleam to them. Her heart felt even fuller, and her smile softened.

"How do you feel about seeing her again and talking to her?"

Clark's smile faded as he lowered his eyes to his glass. His hesitation was brief but telling, and finally, he answered quietly. "I don't know."

"Oh, sweetie, that's okay," Martha was quick to assure him. "Remember, I can be there with you the whole time, or Jonathan. So you won't be alone. And she's just going to want to hear all about how you're doing."

Clark's little smile slowly returned and then grew, and he eventually looked up at her again, a new question in his eyes.

"Can I show her the song you taught me?" he asked, and as though he wasn't sure she'd understand, he glanced at the piano and then back at her. "I mean, Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. On the p-piano. And—and then can I—can I—can I—"

He closed his eyes suddenly, his hands tightening around his glass, and Martha immediately recognized his frustration with his stammering. Carefully, she stepped closer to

him and then crouched down beside his chair and set her hand on his shoulder, relieved when he didn't flinch away.

"Breathe, sweetie. In and out," she murmured. Trembling, he took two deep breaths and then slowly opened his eyes again. Despite his frown, she nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. "There you go. Now, what were you going to ask?"

After a moment's hesitation, Clark closed his eyes again, but lightly this time, and he spoke slowly and deliberately. "Can I also show her how I can read?"

Martha rubbed his back gently, nodding, and then she stood up again. "Ahh, yes! Of course. She's going to be just as proud of you as Jonathan and I are!"

That made him smile again, and he pushed his glass back from the edge of the table and then jumped to his feet.

"I can read her *The Lorax*! I know all the words now!" he said, and Martha grinned and laughed as he rushed off into the living room to find the book.

It was amazing what only a few days had done—how far he'd come in such a short time. He'd learned to smile and laugh, to feel excitement and enthusiasm, to read and color and play. And he'd learned it was okay to speak up, to say what he was feeling, to ask questions and tell her and Jonathan what he wanted. But it was also exhausting sometimes to watch him ping-pong back and forth between all of his big emotions, especially as he'd still fall back sometimes into that dreadful uncertainty, that deep fear that seemed so ingrained in his personality. Every moment seemed to be something new, every experience he had both exciting and scary.

She started to follow him into the living room, but before she could, Clark sped back into the kitchen, sliding to a stop at the table with the book in his hands. His grin was huge and wide, and she had to blink back another strong rush of her own emotions as she saw him.

"Can I read it to you again to practice? When will she be here? Do we have time?" He tossed all the questions out while pulling his chair away from the table to sit again. When he looked up at her, still grinning, his eyes still bright, she felt more hope and love, and she nodded.

"Of course, sweetie, we have a few hours," she said, and she took the seat next to his, pulling it close so she could watch him read. "I know she'll absolutely love to hear you read to her."

Martha sat quietly next to him, her heart soaring, as Clark smiled again and then opened up the book and began reading. He paused only once when Jonathan came in from

the barn to join them, taking his seat on the other side of Clark.

And he read the whole book. All by himself.

It was yet another thing about him that was just incredible. She admittedly hadn't spent a huge amount of time around other kids his age or those just learning to read, but she did volunteer quite often at the library and with some of the lower-grade classes at the elementary school. So she knew he was learning exceptionally fast. He was still well behind his peers and would definitely struggle if he was placed right now in a fifth-grade classroom, where he should be. However, given how quickly he was learning and how much joy he seemed to find in everything he learned, she just knew it wouldn't be too much longer until he was ready. Maybe in another couple of months, after the new year.

When he finished, he closed the book and grinned up at Jonathan and then at her.

"I did it!" he said. Then he turned to Jonathan. "Can we get new books today? I-I mean..."

He trailed off and looked down to the book in his hands as his smile faded. He seemed about to apologize or something, his eyes scrunching together and his fingers tightening around the edges of the book. But Jonathan quickly jumped in.

"Absolutely, we can," Jonathan said. "Today is Wednesday, so the library is open all day. We can even get you a library card so you can check out as many books as you like. How does that sound, buddy?"

Clark lifted his chin to look up at Jonathan again. "The library?"

Jonathan nodded. "Have you ever been to a library? It's the best place, isn't it, Martha?"

Clark's little head swung around in her direction, his expression hopeful and curious, and Martha smiled and settled her hand on his back.

"Definitely one of my favorite places. They have so many books—books about everything you can imagine!"

His eyes lit up again, and he nearly bounced out of his chair. "Can we go now? Can we, can we?" Then he sort of froze, and he closed his eyes. "I-I mean... I don't know..."

"What is it, sweetie?"

"Do—do I g-get to—to—to—" He shook his head and tried again, his voice quiet. "Do I get to...go too? I-I don't... Ma and Pa didn't let me...go places with them."

"Of course you do, buddy," Jonathan said, jumping in immediately to answer. His voice stayed calm and relaxed,

which was much more than Martha knew she'd be capable of in that moment. Jonathan glanced at her briefly, and she saw the knowing expression in his eyes. With a gentle smile, he focused on Clark again. "I think you'd love it. You can even pick out your own books and meet Ms. Sue. She's the librarian, and she's super nice."

Martha wished she could add something to reassure Clark even more, but she just sat there, trying not to let her expression show what she was actually feeling—sadness and anger and so many other things. Every time he said something like this—innocently giving them some sort of clue, some little tidbit about his life with the Petersons—the picture of how he'd lived became...darker. They'd steered away from asking him to elaborate—something she and Jonathan had talked about early that week. They didn't want him to feel any sort of shame or guilt or to have to relive anything that he'd been through. And so for now, they just let him say what came to mind.

Even with this passive approach, they'd learned a lot. And none of it had been good.

"I would like that," Clark said, and he looked from Jonathan to Martha, his grin maybe just a little subdued now. "I've never seen a library before. Is it big? Are you sure they'll have books for me? Will they—" He stopped and swallowed hard, then looked down again.

She could almost feel the moment he shut down, and her heart clenched. This happened too sometimes; it was part of that ping-ponging. Happy to sad. Excited to...closed up.

She rubbed his back gently. "The library is huge!" she told him, trying to inject as much of her own excitement into her words as possible. "And they will definitely have books for you. They have all kinds of books. They have books for kids who are just learning to read, like you, and they have books for bigger kids who have been reading for a while. They have books that tell stories, like *The Lorax* and *Clifford*, and they also have books on all sorts of topics, like dinosaurs."

Jonathan nodded. "All sorts of books. It's really amazing, buddy. Do you know what kind of book you might want?"

It was impossible to tell what was going through Clark's head then, and she watched silently, her heart aching for him, as he sat there and stared at the book in his hands. After a moment, he screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. "N-no, I...I don't know," Clark answered quietly. "I-I'm sorry. I..."

"Oh, buddy, there's nothin' to apologize for," Jonathan said. "And I just can't wait to take you. I think we do probably need to wait until after we've had breakfast and after we've met with Emma. What do you think, Martha?"

She smiled, trying to push away all her tangled up emotions so she could be what Clark needed right now. But her heart still stuttered a bit when Clark looked up at her, his big brown eyes full of uncertainty now...that little gleam gone.

"I think that's wise," she agreed, nodding gently. She glanced at the clock. "Goodness, it's already nine! I still need to make breakfast. You two must be hungry!"

Clark's eyes darted to the counter, and he bit his lip. Then, his brilliant smile returned as he giggled. "We can just have cookies! Then you don't have to cook!"

And again, her heart just nearly burst. Oh, how incredible it was to see his smile. She almost wanted to give in and just let him eat *all the cookies*. Especially when his eyes met hers and they were just filled with a sort of silly, happy laughter.

"I think I have a better idea," she said, and she stood up and pushed her chair in. "How about each of you can have *one* cookie while I make breakfast and then you can have *one more* cookie after you eat?"

"That sounds pretty darn fair to me. Clark, what do you think?" Jonathan shot her a grin, and she smiled back as they both refocused on the small boy, who now nodded vigorously.

"Two cookies? Okay!"

Delighted. And excited. And eager.

God, it was such a huge thing. She wanted to hug him and tell him just how much she loved him and just how happy she was that he was here with them. But she just steadied herself with a deep breath as she quickly retrieved two cookies—one for Clark and one for Jonathan—from the plate on the counter. Clark immediately took a huge bite, still grinning.

"So, I was thinking of making omelets. Clark, sweetie, do you know what an omelet is?"

He looked up at her, his eyebrows scrunched together in an expression that clearly showed his confusion, and he shook his head. "N-no, I've never had that before."

"Ahh, you're in for another treat, buddy," Jonathan said, and he took a small bite of his cookie and then began to explain to Clark what an omelet was as Martha moved around the kitchen, gathering all the ingredients she needed. By the time Jonathan was finished with his explanation, she had the pan heating on the stove and was mixing the eggs and milk together.

She continued cooking—melting butter in the pan and then pouring a small portion of the egg mixture in. And as she did, she heard Clark jump up from the table again and then run out into the living room. He returned a moment

later with one of the other books Jonathan had gotten him from the library on Sunday.

"I can read this one now too!" he announced as he sat at the table again. "I-I mean..."

Martha glanced sideways at him as she stirred the mixture a bit. He was staring down at the book, his teeth worrying at his lower lip. Then, with a small nod and a look of determination, he opened it up.

"I can read almost all of it," he corrected. "I think...there are a few words m-maybe that I-I still don't know. W-will you help me, Jonathan?"

"Absolutely, buddy," Jonathan said, without hesitation.

This time, a tear escaped, and she couldn't do a darn thing to stop it. She quickly wiped it away and turned back to the stove as Clark began reading, his quiet little voice becoming more and more confident with each word.

\* \* \*

"Hi, Martha, Jonathan. And Clark, wow, good to see you again! Have you grown? Already? In just a few days?" Ms. Jones took off her coat at the front door, hung it up, and then knelt down to be at eye level with Clark, smiling warmly.

Clark clung to Martha's side, partially hiding behind her, and she could feel his little body trembling just a bit. He glanced up at her, uncertainty in his eyes, and then looked back at Ms. Jones.

"I-I don't know," he said, his voice quiet and a little shaky, like the rest of him. Martha rubbed his back gently, and he rested his head against her side as he continued to cling to her.

"Oh, that's okay, kiddo," Ms. Jones said, her smile not faltering. She straightened up slowly. "It is really great to see you again, and I'd love to have a little chat with you today, if you're up to it."

There was another pause, but then Clark nodded and stepped out from behind Martha.

"Martha and Jonathan s-said... Well, I-I mean, I..."

Martha squeezed his shoulder lightly, and Clark looked up at her again, biting his lower lip. He motioned to her to come closer, and so she bent down a bit. He stretched up and whispered in her ear, "Can you tell her I can read?"

When he pulled away, shifting back enough to meet her eyes, she grinned at him and then gently brushed the hair off his forehead as she nodded. She straightened back up.

"Clark wants to show you something really, really special, Emma," she said.

“Oh, I’d love to see,” Ms. Jones said.

Next to her, Clark seemed to become a little taller, as though he was really proud of himself. “Kay. Um, I’ll—I’ll just g-go and g-get it and...”

The four of them spent the next thirty minutes in the living room, with Clark sitting on Martha’s lap while reading *The Lorax* out loud. Ms. Jones sat in one of the arm chairs, listening intently, the warm smile never leaving her face.

“The end!” Clark declared as he finished the last page. He held up the book, his eyes lit up. “See, look! The little boy has the seed that the Once-ler gave him, and he’s going to go grow his own *Truffula* tree and make everything better. And I just really, really like this story. Martha and Jonathan taught me to read b-because...” There was another sudden shift as Clark trailed off, his smile tightening. He closed the book.

“Because what, sweetie?” Martha prompted. To her relief, Clark didn’t seem to retreat right away. Instead, he looked thoughtful, and he leaned back against her, then lifted his chin just a bit and looked directly at Ms. Jones.

“Because they’re the nicest people I’ve ever met,” he said quietly.

Martha closed her eyes to hold back the tears, but as the conversation continued around her, the tears slipped out anyway...again.

“They are very nice, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Clark said, this time with a little more confidence. And then he continued, speaking quickly as though maybe he’d been rehearsing what to say and he didn’t want to forget any of it. “They’re so nice to me, and they’ve given me so many things. Cookies and orange juice and strawberries and pancakes. And a pillow and blanket. And the softest bed ever. And all the new clothes and books and Legos. And Martha taught me to read and color, and I’m almost—I can almost write my name now. Jonathan is showing me about numbers, and there’s so much to learn. And I-I know...” He slowed down, and his tone got very serious. “I know I don’t deserve any of it, especially...especially since—since—since—”

Her heart lurched as he curled up in her arms more, and he took a deep breath and started again, still slower, his voice now shaky. “M-Ma and Pa had a lot of r-rules, and I tried really hard—I did, I tried really hard. But even though I tried, s-sometimes I couldn’t... And—and—and then...”

“What kind of rules, Clark?” Ms. Jones asked softly, and when Martha finally opened her eyes again, she saw the woman’s carefully controlled expression, her eyes studying Clark but still staying warm and gentle.

Martha knew she couldn’t keep her composure in that way, but she was glad Ms. Jones seemed capable. She felt Clark shudder, and the book fell out of his hands, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

“All—all kinds of—of rules,” Clark stammered, his voice muffled against her.

“Like...that you had to help clean up and do chores?”

Clark nodded into Martha, and she wrapped her arms around him protectively. His behavior easily showed that there was much, much more to it than simply rules about him having to help clean up and do chores. And she had her own suspicions based on many of his little mannerisms and the bits of things he’d said or done the last four days. But now wasn’t the time to say anything about that. She closed her eyes again and held him tighter.

“What else, kiddo?” Ms. Jones prompted. “Did they have rules about other things?”

But he didn’t answer this time; he just whimpered slightly as he buried his head up against her.

“It’s okay, kiddo. We don’t need to talk about that. I am very, very happy to hear you like being here with Martha and Jonathan. Is that right?”

“Yes,” he said right away, without any hesitation at all. Yet he still clung to her, curled up in her arms as though her embrace could chase away everything bad—all the hurt.

She hoped with all her might that it could.

“That’s really wonderful, Clark, because you know what?”

He lifted his head from Martha’s chest and looked over across the room at Ms. Jones, tears in his eyes.

“Wh-what?”

“I think Martha and Jonathan really like having you here too, and if everything keeps going this well, I bet you can stay here with them.”

“For-forever?” he whispered. And there was so much hope in his one word that Martha had to close her eyes against the flood of emotion. She hugged him just a little more, just a little stronger, and she gently kissed the top of his head.

A quiet laugh came from the other side of the room. “I think that’s the plan, kiddo. What do you think about that?”

“I’d like that a whole lot,” Clark said, and he settled back against Martha’s chest and closed his eyes.

## Chapter 12

“Here we are. Smallville Public Library,” Jonathan announced as he shifted the pickup truck into park and then turned off the ignition. He turned around toward the backseat.

Clark sat along the passenger side, peeking out the window curiously, his brown eyes wide and full of wonder. Martha had decided to sit in the backseat as well, just in case Clark had any unexpected feelings about riding in a vehicle again for the first time since the accident. Thankfully, nothing of the sort had happened, and Clark had just spent much of the drive as he was now—staring out the window, curious at the scenery and excited to be getting out of the house.

“Is that it?” Clark asked, pointing out toward the free-standing older brick building ahead of them.

“It is,” Martha said.

“Wow. It’s red!”

Jonathan laughed as he unfastened his seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Martha and Clark followed suit, and less than a minute later, the three of them walked toward the library entrance together, Martha holding Clark’s hand. Jonathan reached out ahead of them to open the door, but then Clark hesitated, his feet seeming to stick to the ground. Martha paused next to him, shooting Jonathan a worried glance before focusing back on Clark.

“Is something wrong, sweetie?”

The child didn’t answer immediately, and his eyes just drifted downward as he stubbed his shoe into the ground. Finally, he looked back up, sort of at Jonathan, although he kept his gaze flickering from Jonathan’s eyes to some point just to the side. Jonathan kept the small smile on his face, but his stomach clenched all the same at the uncertainty that had returned to Clark’s eyes.

“I’ll be good, I promise,” Clark said quietly.

The knot in Jonathan’s stomach grew as some pieces seemed to fall into place—pieces of the puzzle that he and Martha had been collecting for the last few days.

Jonathan let the door go and stepped in front of Clark, then knelt down so he’d be closer to Clark’s height. He gave Clark a warm, gentle smile and reached out to take Clark’s free hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Buddy, you don’t need to be anything other than yourself here, okay?” When Clark’s expression didn’t change, he added, “You are a wonderful boy, Clark. You are already good. You don’t need to change a thing.”

Martha knelt down as well, and Jonathan watched silently, his stomach still twisting into knots, as she nodded.

“Jonathan’s right, sweetie. You can be you. You can be excited or nervous or happy or whatever you feel. You don’t have to try to change it or keep anything inside.”

Clark sniffled loudly and then pulled his hand out of Jonathan’s to wipe a tear from his cheek. And he shook his head. “I’m not...a good boy though. I-I always break the rules and m-mess up. Pa—Pa would t-tell me that,” Clark said, his voice becoming just barely louder than a whisper. “A-and then...”

Jonathan schooled his expression, keeping it as neutral as possible, but his mind was racing through a long list of not-so-kid-friendly words he definitely could not say out loud. Instead, he shook his head softly. He knew they’d both been trying not to make any blanket statements about the Petersons, but... His eyes darted to Martha’s briefly before he made a quick decision right there.

“Clark, buddy, sometimes...sometimes adults do things or say things that aren’t really right or that aren’t really nice.” He took Clark’s hand again, and the young boy lifted his eyes to meet Jonathan’s. It broke his heart to see the tears—both those that slid quietly down Clark’s cheeks and those still stuck at the corners of his eyes. With a gentle nod, Jonathan continued. “Sometimes, adults are just wrong. I know I’ve been wrong before, a bunch of times. But the difference, buddy, is that even when I’m wrong, I would never do something that means to make someone else feel... bad or guilty or ashamed. The difference is kindness.”

The air felt thick around them, a tension stuck in it, and Clark slowly lowered his gaze back to his shoes as more tears slipped out. Next to Jonathan, Martha cleared her throat.

“Your Ma and Pa made a bunch of different rules, is that right, sweetie?” When Clark nodded, she continued. “And I bet”—her words caught a little in her throat—“they got... upset if you didn’t follow their rules?”

Clark didn’t answer this time, but he pulled both hands away this time and scrubbed them down his cheeks. Jonathan’s heart clenched again.

“But, sweetie, I think—and I bet Jonathan will agree with me—that they were wrong when they made their rules...”

“And that they were wrong,” Jonathan added quietly, “when they got upset.”

He kept his eyes trained on Clark, watching as the boy bit his lip nervously, his shoulders tense and uncertain, but he saw as Martha nodded in agreement.

“So, sweetie, look at me,” Martha said gently, and when Clark glanced up at her, his dark brown eyes so soulful and deep, she reached up and brushed his hair off his forehead

and smiled softly. “You *are* kind and good, and you can be yourself here—especially here, at the library. And if there are any rules at all, you want to know what they are?”

Clark tensed again, but Martha shook her head and reached out to him with both arms this time. A strong rush of love hit Jonathan as he watched Clark melt into Martha’s embrace, wrapping his little arms up around her neck as he nodded.

“The only rules are that you try to be thoughtful and kind to others and to yourself. You try to be honest and caring.”

“But—but wh-what if...”

“What if you mess up?” Martha suggested. She kissed the top of his head and held him tighter. “That’s okay. It’s okay to mess up. It’s okay to make mistakes. We won’t get upset. You won’t get in trouble.”

Martha stood slowly, easily lifting the small child and his still-too-thin frame in her arms. And Jonathan moved next to her, slipping his arm over her shoulders. He desperately hoped they hadn’t made some huge mistake just now, but it had felt like the right thing to do. The three of them stood there together for several more minutes, Clark still clinging tightly to Martha and Martha leaning against Jonathan’s chest. Finally, Clark lifted his head off Martha’s shoulder and sniffled, and then he looked toward the library’s entrance.

With a voice that still trembled, still filled with uncertainty but also sounding rather brave, Jonathan thought, Clark said, “C-can we go inside now?”

\* \* \*

The library was warm and cozy and quiet. There were no other people there, which really wasn’t too surprising being that it was early afternoon on a Wednesday in Smallville. And maybe, considering that Clark obviously hadn’t been around too many strangers, that was probably a good thing.

Jonathan motioned toward a large desk, where the librarian, Sue, an older woman with short gray hair, alternately pulled books off a library cart to her left and sifted through a stack of small book borrowing cards sitting in front of her.

“So the first thing we need to do, Clark, is get you a library card so you can check out books,” Jonathan explained. He led them over toward the desk, Clark following hesitantly beside Martha, his hand gripping hers tightly. And as they approached, little twinkles of interest seemed to spark and grow in Clark’s eyes. He was barely as tall as the desk, but that didn’t seem to stop him. He stepped away from Martha and peeked up just over the top, and his eyes widened as he saw the stacks of books on Sue’s book cart.

Sue set down the book she’d grabbed from the cart. “Good afternoon, Martha, Jonathan,” she greeted, and then she softened her expression a bit as she smiled kindly at Clark. “And who do we have here?”

Jonathan stepped around to Clark’s side and put his hand gently on Clark’s back, and to his amazement and relief, the boy looked up at him with a tentative smile, his eyes still wide. Jonathan grinned back and tipped his head toward Sue.

“Do you want to introduce yourself, buddy?”

A few emotions flickered in Clark’s eyes, but he seemed to settle on some sort of resolve maybe, if Jonathan was interpreting it correctly. Clark then nodded with a small smile, and pride swelled in Jonathan’s chest. He gave Clark’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, and Clark then turned back to Sue.

“Hello, my name is C-Clark P-Peterson and—and, um, Martha and J-Jonathan brought me here to—to check out some books b-because I’m learning how to read,” he said.

His smile. The little straightening of his shoulders he did just as he said the last few words. The way he looked directly at Sue.

These little things were not really little things at all. In fact, they were huge.

Jonathan glanced at Martha, and his heart did a flip in his chest as he saw her watching their boy with so much love in her eyes. She looked over at him briefly, and their silent exchange only made his heart even happier. He mouthed, “I love you,” and then turned his attention back to little Clark.

“Oh, my, Clark, it’s so wonderful to meet you, and I think you’ve come to the right place,” Sue said jovially, her smile growing. “My name is Sue, and I’m the librarian here. We’ve got so many books here and for all levels of readers, so I’m so glad you came in today!”

Clark smiled brightly. “I am too! Jonathan said I can pick out my own books to read, and he’ll help me, and so will Martha.”

“Well, here, Clark. Why don’t you just come around over here,” Sue said as she motioned around to the far side of her desk, where there was a lower partition that Jonathan thought looked like it was built just for younger children like Clark. “The very first thing we’ll need to do is get you a library card. Did Martha and Jonathan tell you about that?”

With an eager nod, Clark hopped over to the side of the desk, while Sue gathered up a few papers, a small white card, and a pencil. Jonathan then stood back and watched, one arm wrapping lightly around his wife’s shoulders, as Sue helped Clark fill out the form to get his library card.

Clark insisted on writing his own name at the top of the form, and his eyes seemed to shine with pride when he showed Jonathan.

Several minutes later, his new library card in hand, Clark bounded off toward where the beginning reader books were, in the direction Sue had pointed him. Martha stayed back to chat with Sue for a few minutes, while Jonathan followed Clark closely, grinning as he watched Clark's excitement. The boy's eyes scanned the rows and rows of books on the shelves and displays, his mouth partway open in awe.

"There's so many!" he said as he finally stopped in about the middle of one of the rows. He'd managed to find just about the right section, the books at the easier end of beginning children's chapter books. He reached out toward one that sat on a display rack but froze just before his fingers touched the book. His eyes widened again and then darted to Jonathan.

And immediately, Jonathan smiled and nodded, not wanting Clark to even think for one second that he wasn't allowed to touch the books. Or that he had to ask first. Or that he'd get in trouble for doing either of the above.

"That looks like a good one, buddy! Go ahead, take a look." He nodded again, just for extra reassurance.

The sparkle in Clark's eyes grew even more, and he picked up the book and touched his fingers to the title on the front cover. Then he looked up at Jonathan and smiled so big before opening up the book to the first page.

## Chapter 13

Clark couldn't believe it. He'd gotten to pick out not just one book, but five! Five books to read! The librarian had been so nice and told him he had two whole weeks to read the books. But he wanted to read all of them today.

If he hadn't been so distracted by the ice cream store, he'd probably already have read at least one on the drive back to the Kents' house. But...ice cream! It was like cookies, but better and colder. And he got sprinkles on his, and those were so good.

He stared out the window for just another few seconds until the truck turned down the dirt driveway leading up to the farmhouse. Then he looked back down at the stack of books in his lap. He couldn't remember ever having been more excited about anything before. His thumb rested on top of his new library card, and he smiled as he read his name, which the librarian, Sue, had written neatly on the line at the top.

*He could read his name.*

It was something he'd wanted to learn for so long but Ma and Pa had never...

A tightness in his chest forced him to close his eyes as he remembered Martha and Jonathan's words outside the library. Had Ma and Pa really been...wrong? Had they been wrong to give him so many rules that were so impossible to follow and then...punish him when he messed up?

He sniffled quietly and then glanced at Martha, who sat just a few inches away from him in the middle of the backseat. She gave him another of her kind smiles, and he blinked and then looked back down, memories of the last few days reminding him of everything that was...different now.

The very first night he'd stayed with them, she'd told him he never had to ask to use the bathroom. They didn't...*ever* lock him in his room or in any room. There was no bucket in the corner for him to use because he was...allowed to get up and go to the bathroom when he needed it.

And he always got to eat. They fed him breakfast and lunch and dinner. Every day. And snacks. And cookies and ice cream. Gosh, the food was so, so good. They never...made him go hungry as a punishment.

And they never, never...

He held back a sob and turned to Martha, reaching for her as tears flowed down his cheeks. She immediately unstrapped him from his seat and then gathered him up in her arms, and he felt so warm and safe that he just buried his head into her shoulder and cried more.

They never, ever hurt him or yelled at him. They only ever hugged him and spoke gently to him. And they'd taught him to read and told him he was smart and wonderful and kind.

It was so different. So, so different.

He felt Martha stroking his hair, heard her murmuring to him softly.

"Shh, sweetie. You're okay. You're okay."

And that. That too. Her voice was so soothing and kind and made him feel all sorts of...better.

The truck stopped and shut off, but he didn't move from his spot in Martha's arms. And she didn't make him. She just continued to hold him and talk gently to him and make him feel so much like she cared.

Clark pulled back slightly and looked up at her through bleary eyes, his vision still blurry.

She smiled down at him, and he felt it again—this thing in his chest that just made him feel like he mattered to her. Like...whether he was okay mattered to her. Her hand came

up to carefully brush his hair off his forehead, and then she leaned down and kissed the top of his head again.

“We’re home, sweetie, but we can stay here as long as you like. Until you’re ready to go inside,” Martha said softly.

Clark just nodded and dropped his head back to her shoulder. He wanted to read the books, and Jonathan had also mentioned that he’d love to show Clark around the barn today, if he was up to it. But right now, he just wanted to stay. Right here.

\* \* \*

He woke up some time later, still in Martha’s arms, but now inside the house. Martha rocked them slowly, humming a quiet tune that Clark didn’t immediately recognize while she rubbed his back.

The light in the room was dim, and he glanced toward the window, his stomach sinking as he saw the sun was already on its way down outside.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” Martha asked.

Shaking his head, he cuddled back up against her, letting her continue to rock him slowly. But she must have known what he was thinking—she seemed to be pretty good at that, he thought—because she slowly stopped rocking them and then sat up just a bit, bringing Clark with her.

“You wanted to go out and see the barn today, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, glad that for once he didn’t stutter. That had been happening more and more now; he’d been able to talk more and more without stuttering. Although sometimes, especially when he got sad or scared, the stuttering and stammering still came back. And then he’d hear Pa’s voice, yelling at him. Angry words telling him he was stupid.

“Jonathan’s out at the barn right now. Should we go out there together and find him?”

He grinned and nodded. “Can we see Peaches?” One of the books he’d picked out at the library was about a horse, and he was really excited to see one for the first time.

“Of course! I bet we can even feed her, if Jonathan hasn’t already. She’ll love that. Eating is one of her very favorite things to do,” Martha said, and she gave him a wink.

Laughter bubbled up inside him, and he crawled off her lap as he began to giggle. “Me too, I think! Eating ice cream and—and reading!”

Martha stood up, and Clark hurried over to the front door ahead of her, eager to get going. It would be dark soon, and he didn’t want to be outside in the dark. That was scary. The

dark was scary. Martha joined him a moment later, opening up the door, and he rushed out ahead of her, jumping all the way down the porch steps in one big leap. He turned and waited for her, still grinning, and then she took his hand and pointed off to their right.

“Looks like Jonathan is out at the west cornfield. Maybe checking on the cows,” Martha explained.

Clark squinted, bringing his hand up to block the sunlight. He saw the Kents’ red pickup truck parked along a fence line way off in the distance.

“Oh, okay. Do we…” He paused, looking up at her. “Do we wait for him to get back?” he asked, managing again to keep the stutter out of his voice, even as a little tickle of anxiousness began to creep back in.

Martha shook her head and squeezed Clark’s hand. “Probably better if we don’t. I have no idea how long he’ll be out.”

Clark agreed with a nod of his head, and then he followed as Martha led him out to the barn. It was a short walk, but he somehow felt energized by it, and by the time they got to the barn, he was skipping along next to Martha, still holding her hand tightly.

The barn doors were open, letting in the afternoon light, but Martha also flipped on a switch as they entered, and several light bulbs popped to life, brightening up the space more. Clark stopped in the doorway, his eyes wide.

This was new and different too. The smells were… strong, and there was a big animal—a horse—in a stall to his left and several chickens pecking around on the ground ahead of them. A hay loft was filled with bright yellow bales of straw, stacked in neat rows up above. Tools lined the walls, and a long workbench took up half of one of the long sides.

“Wow!”

His eyes drifted to the horse. She was *huge* and the same color as the straw up in the hayloft. She had a thick mane that fell down below the bottom of her neck and long whiskers on her muzzle. He took a small step toward her.

“Is that Peaches?”

“It sure is.” Jonathan’s voice came from behind them, and Clark spun around and grinned, then launched himself toward Jonathan. He grabbed Jonathan’s hand and dragged him over toward the horse, excitement just bursting all around him.

“She’s big and so pretty and yellow! Can I pet her? Please?”

“Haha, yes, buddy, of course. But, I need to tell you something first because there *are* some rules about horses, okay?”

Clark stopped bouncing, now only a few feet from the horse’s stall, and a strange wave of...icky seemed to well up inside him. Rules wasn’t a bad word, he reminded himself. Still, his bottom lip trembled a little as he faced Jonathan and nodded. Martha stepped up beside them, and even though she didn’t say anything, her soft smile made him feel just a little less icky.

“It’s nothing bad, buddy, I promise. Just here, look. How big do you think Peaches is?” Jonathan tilted his head toward the horse, who stood in her stall with her head hanging over the half-door.

“She’s...really, really big,” Clark said quietly, his eyes darting from Jonathan to the horse and back. She wasn’t as tall as Jonathan at her shoulders, but she was still much, much bigger than Clark.

“Exactly,” Martha said. “Horses are really, really big animals.”

“Now, old Peaches here is just about as safe as they come. But she’s still a horse, and horses can be unpredictable. If they accidentally step on you or bump into you, you can get hurt without them even meaning to hurt you.”

“So,” Martha continued, “we just have a few things we always do when we’re around horses to be sure that we stay as safe as possible. A few rules.”

Clark straightened up, understanding now. “These rules help us stay safe.”

“Yep, buddy, that’s all.”

Nodding, he looked back at the horse. She was...really big. He took a step back.

Jonathan laughed lightly and reached out to pat the horse on the head. She didn’t move except to blow out a long breath.

“Peaches is what’s called a Quarter Horse. That’s just the type of horse she is. And besides being really big, you know what she is? She’s also really, really old and really, really gentle.”

Clark nodded again, and Martha took his hand and led him closer to the horse as he listened to Jonathan continue.

“One rule is that we always want to let the horse know we’re here so we don’t startle them.”

“Startle?” Clark asked, shifting his attention to Jonathan.

“Scare. Horses can get scared really easily. So, we should always talk to them when we come up, so they know we’re here. Do you think you can do that?”

“Y-yes,” Clark said quietly. “But...”

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” Martha explained, squeezing Clark’s hand. “You can tell them that the weather is warm and sunny or that you went to the library today. Or you can just say hi or good morning or good afternoon.”

“Just so they know you’re there.” Jonathan motioned for Clark to step up closer.

He let go of Martha’s hand as he moved up to the horse’s stall. “Hi, Peaches. My n-name is Clark.” She seemed even bigger the closer he got, and he swallowed nervously. “Wh-what are the other—the other r-rules?” he asked.

“Be gentle is one. Horses are kind when you’re kind to them. Especially Peaches.”

Clark nodded. He could do that too.

Jonathan picked him up then, settling Clark on his hip. “Here, she likes when you pet her forehead, right here, or her neck.”

Tentatively, Clark reached out and placed his hand in the middle of the horse’s forehead, where she had a fleck of white hairs forming a diamond shape smaller than the size of his palm. He held his breath as he let his hand stroke slowly down her face, and then he lifted his hand and pet her again. He grinned and looked up at Jonathan.

“She’s so soft,” he murmured. And he kept petting her, watching as her eyes closed lightly. His hand stilled on her forehead. “Is she sleeping?” he whispered.

“She’s just resting. But you know what that says?”

Clark pursed his lips and thought really hard, and then his eyes lit up and he smiled again. Keeping his voice low, he said, “She feels safe with me here. I didn’t scare her.”

“Exactly, buddy. Exactly.”

## Chapter 14

*Three months later . . .*

The sun hadn’t quite risen, and only a faint glow of the morning twilight lit up the very edge of the eastern horizon. It was freezing too—a stiff breeze making the January morning even more frigid.

Martha kept one arm looped tightly around Clark’s shoulders as the two stood along the road at the end of their driveway. She could feel him trembling slightly, and she hoped it was just from the cold, not something else.

“Are you excited?” she asked.

Clark didn't answer right away, but he tore his eyes away from where he'd been watching the road and looked up at her, and she had her answer. She smiled softly at him.

"You know, I was scared on my first day of school too. I think everyone is," she assured him.

But he still looked skeptical. He shook his head and then looked down at the ground, kicking at the gravel with his shoe.

"I-I don't want to go," he mumbled, although his voice was so low she barely heard him.

Her heart clenched, and she knelt down next to him, taking his hands in hers. "My sweet boy, what's wrong? You can tell me."

She knew how much he loved learning—he devoured books so quickly they usually had to make two or even three trips to the library each week, and he played games with numbers for fun now. And she'd thought he was ready and looking forward to school, which was why she and Jonathan had worked with Emma to get him enrolled. They had opted to put him in the fourth-grade class rather than the fifth-grade class, but the principal had promised he could skip ahead once he caught up academically.

But now, she wasn't so sure, and the very last thing she wanted was for him to feel scared or unsure or like he had to do something he wasn't ready for.

She reached up and touched his cheek, and he lifted his chin to look at her. "You can tell me, whatever it is, sweetie."

His little face scrunched up, and he looked down and to the side. "I don't...want to say."

"Because it's something from before?" He nodded quickly, and Martha's heart clenched. "Oh my sweet boy," she said quietly, and she opened up her arms. He came into the hug quickly, wrapping his little arms up around her neck.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled against her, and she shook her head gently.

"No, no. It's okay." She held him tightly, hoping he felt all of her love for him and that it gave him something he needed—strength, reassurance, confidence. "You don't have to tell me, but remember, sometimes it helps to talk about it, right?"

He nodded again and loosened his arms from around her. She straightened slightly but remained kneeling next to him, taking his hands in hers again. She squeezed, and he looked up at her, his eyes filled with pain and fear.

He bit his lip and then looked back down at the ground. "I'm not...smart. Pa used to tell me that. Ma, too. A-and

no one will like me. Wh-what if no one likes me? What if —" His eyes darted back up to hers, and he shook his head again. "I-I'm sorry. I know you and Jonathan are always telling me I-I'm smart. But it's hard to...remember and—and believe it."

She opened her arms again, and he stepped into the embrace, leaning into her. His arms stayed at his sides this time, though, and that also broke her heart.

It had been a difficult and gradual process—one she knew they'd be battling for a long, long time. And it was really only recently that they'd started to make progress, she thought, in changing how Clark saw himself and silencing those awful voices of his parents that he still heard much too often—those voices telling him he was worthless, stupid, in the way, badly behaved. His social worker, Emma, visited every few weeks now, and she'd been working with him on reframing the bad things—changing "I'm stupid" into "I'm smart enough to learn what I don't know." But it was hard work, especially for a traumatized ten-year-old boy, and Martha understood how the stress of worrying about his first day of school made it more difficult for Clark to do that reframing right now.

She only wished he didn't even have any reason to need to do it in the first place. But she buried that thought and hugged Clark tighter, planting a kiss into his hair.

"Sweet child," she murmured, closing her eyes as she held him. "I'm so proud of you, and so is Jonathan. And whatever happens today, I promise you, that's not going to change. You're a bright, brilliant little boy, and you're kind and caring and fun. And remember, you already have at least one friend."

"Lana?"

"Yep! Remember how nice she was when you met her last week?"

Clark nodded, and Martha pulled back out of their hug to smile at him. His little cheeks were red from the cold, but his eyes shone now, and it warmed her heart.

"Lana is going to be on the bus already, and she's going to show you around school today and introduce you to all your other classmates and everything."

Clark's eyes flickered to the ground and then scrunched closed. "I'm...scared to meet so many people. Ma and Pa said—" He cut himself off, shaking his head hard. Martha wanted to hug him again, but she waited, knowing this was often part of his process. "I'm scared to meet so many people, but I...I can do it...?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and she just smiled again and nodded and said, "You can, sweetie."

Down the road, there was the faint roar of an engine as a bright yellow school bus rounded the curve. Martha stood back up, and Clark quickly took her hand, holding on tightly. The bus started slowing as it approached, and then it stopped, the doors opening with a loud clank. Clark flinched against her side but didn't hide behind her.

She squeezed his hand and stepped forward, and he stayed at her side, clinging to her. The loud, boisterous sounds of children's voices from inside the bus probably didn't help; Clark had a hard enough time when they visited the playground and there were a lot of other children around. But when she glanced down at him, he was straining to look into the bus, curiosity sparkling in his eyes.

Martha smiled and encouraged him forward another step.

The bus driver waved Clark closer, and Martha paused as Clark took a small step away from her. "Hello there, friend," the driver said, her smile welcoming and jovial. "You must be Clark! I've heard you're going to be joining us today."

"Th-that's right, ma'am," Clark said, and he straightened up tall and squared his shoulders.

Martha's heart soared with pride.

"Wonderful. I believe Lana saved you a seat right up front, isn't that right, Lana?"

A young girl wearing a puffy, bright-pink coat and matching mittens stuck her head up over the divider in front of the first row of seats and waved. "Hi, Clark! You can sit with me!"

And somehow, that was enough.

Martha saw Clark grin—a wide, toothy grin, his eyes lighting up. Then he nodded and reached for the railing, taking the first big step up into the bus. He stopped suddenly and turned around, still holding the railing. His smile faltered for half a second, but he recovered quickly.

"Goodbye, Martha," he said. "I'll see you after school?"

Martha's heart filled with pride and joy, and she nodded. "I'll be right here when you get home. Jonathan, too."

He held her gaze for a moment, and then he spun back around and launched into her arms. She knelt down to meet him again, wrapping him up in another warm hug. He held her tightly and buried his head into her neck. Then he whispered, "I'll miss you... I love you."

Martha inhaled sharply at the deep tug in her chest. She and Jonathan had been telling him they loved him since very early on, but Clark hadn't ever said those words to her before. She didn't even have time to respond before Clark let go, jogged back to the bus and up the stairs, and found his spot in the first row next to Lana.

She straightened up, wrapped one arm around her mid-section, and wiped a tear from her cheek as the doors to the bus closed. Then Clark waved, and she waved back, glad he wouldn't see her hand shaking.

The bus pulled away and drove off, and she kept waving until it was out of sight around the next bend in the road. Just in case he was still watching.

Then she stood there for another minute or so, occasionally wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, before she turned and started back down the driveway toward the farmhouse.

## Chapter 15

Jonathan finished adding wood to the fire and then hauled himself off the floor in the family room, his knees aching from both the frigid weather and the long day's work. His morning had started much too early, when Wayne had called to let him know the cows were out thanks to a broken fence rail along the back side of the far pasture. Because of that, he'd missed dropping Clark off at the school bus with Martha for Clark's first day of school. Then, when his tractor had broken down in the early afternoon, he'd missed pickup as well.

He'd finally dragged himself inside in the late afternoon, just as the winter sun was dropping down past the horizon, only to find the fire nearly out in the fireplace and a note from Martha telling him she and Clark had gone shopping for a few extra school supplies.

He pushed away his disappointment at the fact that he'd have to wait longer still to see his family, and he headed off to the kitchen, washed up, and got started on chopping veggies to go with the pot roast Martha had cooking for dinner. He'd just finished when he heard the truck pull up outside the house.

A moment later, the front door burst open.

"Jonathan! Look! Look! I got a special ruler for school!"

Jonathan spun around just in time to see Clark bounding into the kitchen, holding up a plastic foot-long blue ruler and grinning so bright it was like the sun had come back up.

"Oh my, let me see that now," he said as Clark stopped in front of him.

"Look!" he squealed, offering Jonathan the ruler. "See right there, it's got twelve inches marked on it for a foot, just like yours in the workshop. My teacher, Mrs. Perkins, she says I need one for math so we can draw shapes and stuff. We learned what a hexagon is today! Do you know what a hexagon is?"

Clark was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his face lit up and excited. A smile tugged at Jonathan's lips, and he glanced up briefly at Martha as she entered the room before nodding and then looking back at Clark.

"I sure do. It's a shape with, oh what is it now...six sides, right?"

"Yes! Here, I'll show you!"

Jonathan chuckled at Clark's enthusiasm, his heart happy and light, and he followed as Clark took his hand and tugged him over to the kitchen table. Martha met them, and Jonathan wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they both stood and watched Clark open his new notebook up, pull a pencil out of his backpack, and give them a short lesson on all the different types of polygons he'd learned about at school. He used his new ruler to draw straight lines, his hand confident and sure as he held his pencil and traced along the edge of the ruler.

Martha's arm tightened around Jonathan's waist, and he tilted his head to look down at her. There were tears in the corners of her eyes, but she smiled at him. He bent down and kissed her forehead, and they both turned back to their boy, who was now trying to draw a circle. It ended up lopsided, though, and Clark frowned.

"Mrs. Perkins had something she used to help draw a circle, but she said we didn't need one. I can't...remember what it was."

"I think," Jonathan said, "it's called a compass."

"But a compass is for directions?" Clark's eyebrows scrunched together as he looked up at Jonathan.

"Ah, yes. But this is a different type of compass. I don't think we have one, though."

Martha shook her head. "No, I don't think so. But"—she stepped away from Jonathan and over to the nearest drawer in the kitchen—"I think I have something that might work pretty well."

The lesson with shapes continued after Martha found a paperclip and a second pencil and then showed Clark how he could draw perfect circles of different sizes without needing a compass. Then Clark had an idea of his own, and he took off around the house on a mission to find as many circular objects of different sizes as he could to trace them.

As soon as Clark disappeared down the hallway to search his room, Jonathan huffed a laugh, turned to his wife, and pulled Martha up against him. He kissed the top of her head.

"I think he had a good day at school, huh?"

"Yeah. But this morning..." Martha shook her head and straightened up. Her gentle blue eyes shone, and she blinked back a tear. "He almost didn't go."

"He was scared?"

She nodded but didn't elaborate except to say, "He's such a brave little boy. I'm proud of him." Then she leaned up against Jonathan again with a sigh. "And I'm tired. It was a long day."

"Very."

Martha chuckled and tilted her head back. "Everything okay with the cows?"

"Yup. I'll tell you all about it later. Right now, I want you to go and rest, and I'm going to get those veggies roasting and finish up dinner, while Clark—"

"I found six more! I'm going to make them look like balloons of all different sizes!" The boy hopped his way back into the kitchen, his hands full of different objects. As soon as he reached the table, everything tumbled from his hands, and he laughed. "Oops! Jonathan, look! This'll be perfect, right?"

Jonathan couldn't answer for several seconds as he stared at the boy—their perfect little boy, grinning up at him, holding what looked like a large pin-back button he'd gotten from the library. Martha set her hand on Jonathan's shoulder and squeezed it, and he knew she'd noticed too—the little moment, which, before, would have ended with Clark in tears, stuttering and apologizing for dropping all the things on the table and making a mess. Instead, Clark had laughed. Joyfully. Like a child excited about showing his parents something *should do*.

It was a little moment, but not at all small in its significance.

"That...will be pretty perfect, buddy. Just the right size for a balloon!" Jonathan agreed, barely managing to keep his voice from shaking.

God, how he loved this child.

Clark grinned again, scooted back the chair, and settled down at the table with all of his circular objects, a pencil, and his notebook. "Martha, can you help me?" He looked up at the two of them, his eyes bright and cheerful.

Martha nodded and stepped away from Jonathan, taking a seat next to Clark. And Jonathan stood there for a few more minutes to watch them before heading back to the counter to finish up dinner, his heart more happy than it had maybe ever been.

\* \* \*

Tuesday morning was calmer. No cows got loose, no tractors broke down, and although Clark had a moment where he clung to Martha at the end of the driveway before getting onto the school bus, he seemed much more confident than Martha had said he was the day before.

Jonathan stood with her at the end of the driveway, both of them waving until the bus was out of sight, and then they walked arm in arm back to the farmhouse. Martha was quiet but content; every time Jonathan glanced over at her, he saw it in her eyes and in her smile.

She positively glowed. Motherhood—something he knew she'd always, always wanted—had made her even more beautiful than the day he'd met her and the day he'd fallen in love with her and the day they'd gotten married.

"Martha Kent," he said as they stopped at the top of the porch steps together, "you look lovely today. Might I take you out for lunch, maybe to Maisie's?"

Her smile became teasing, and she stepped in front of him and slipped her arms around his waist. "Why, Jonathan, it's been a long time since we've had a date."

"Months, at least. Let me take you out?"

"I'd love that."

"Good." Jonathan leaned in and kissed her lips, and she smiled into him. When he pulled back, she was still smiling, and her eyes sparkled with happiness. He was about to lean in and steal another kiss when the telephone rang from inside the house.

Martha chuckled and shrugged, and Jonathan copied her, but then kissed her again anyway and reached ahead of them to open the door for her. The house was pleasantly warm, thanks to the fire going in the fireplace, and Jonathan quickly removed his coat before jogging over to the phone in the kitchen.

He picked up the receiver and answered with a quick, "Hello?"

"Mr. Kent, hi, it's Emma," came the voice from the other end. "Sorry for the early morning call. I've got a busy day, but I needed to check in with you and Martha and see how Clark's first day of school went."

"Ah, Emma, hi. Yes, it went well. Just one minute," Jonathan said, and he pulled the phone away from his ear and covered the receiver with his hand. "Martha, grab the upstairs phone?"

With a nod, Martha turned and headed up the stairs. A moment later, her voice came on the line. "Emma, hi, it's Martha."

"Martha, good morning," Emma greeted, and she repeated what she'd told Jonathan about needing to check in after Clark's first day.

Jonathan leaned against the counter in the kitchen as he listened to Martha and Emma chat. Overall, Emma seemed pleased to hear that although Clark's day yesterday had started out a little rocky, he'd come home excited and enthusiastic, and he had had a good day, had made new friends, and hadn't felt lost or like he didn't fit in academically.

"That's just wonderful," Emma said, a softness in her voice that hadn't been there before. Jonathan straightened up and pressed the phone to his ear as she continued. "I do have another reason for calling too, and I'm glad I have both of you on the phone. Assuming this is still what everyone wants, I'm ready to recommend we start official adoption proceedings. I believe it's in Clark's best interests, and honestly, it's been incredible to see him grow and thrive these last few months."

Jonathan heard Martha's sob through the phone, and he closed his eyes as his own emotions threatened to get the best of him. This was what they'd wanted—the call they'd been waiting for. He hadn't really known whether to expect it this soon, only three months in, but he couldn't think of any better outcome.

They'd be Clark's parents. Officially.

God, how he wanted to hug his wife right then.

Jonathan gripped the counter behind him to keep himself steady. "That's definitely good news," he managed. He cleared his throat. "Just tell us what we need to do."

"It's a pretty straightforward process, and I'll be handling most of it for you. Since I'm heading your way at the end of the week, let's touch base then," Emma suggested. "I'll need to talk to Clark, and it'll be easier to explain all the paperwork in person, I think. Does that work for you both? I think I've got you on my schedule for Friday morning at ten?"

"Y-yes, that's right," Martha cut in. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"I'm honored to be part of this with you," Emma said. She paused, and there was a sound like rustling papers. "The process can sometimes take a few months, but I'm confident it's going to be a pretty smooth adoption. You two have been so good for Clark, and every time I see him, I'm amazed at his progress. He's such a happy child now, and that's thanks to all the love you've given him."

Jonathan reached up and wiped several tears from his cheeks, shaking his head. Martha must be a blubbing mess, too. "Thank you, Emma. We're grateful. Truly."

He could hear her smile through the phone as she said goodbye, and he hung up and hurried up the stairs to the bedroom. Martha sat on the bed, a handkerchief in her hand. She wiped her eyes, but as soon as she looked up at him, she started crying again.

He closed the distance between them, sat next to her on the bed, and pulled her into an embrace.

“Oh, Jonathan, it’s really happening,” she mumbled, burying her head into the crook of his neck. He rubbed her back and nodded, then planted a light kiss in her hair.

“It is. It is.” Jonathan was crying now too, and they clung to each other, joy and elation overwhelming them both. “He’ll be our son. Our boy.”

“He’s already our boy. I feel like I knew it that very first day. He was meant to be with us, Jon.”

The memory resurfaced—Martha cradling the tiny boy in her arms, rocking him as he slept. The sight had warmed his heart then, and now that they knew Clark and had seen him come out of his shell, had been there with him as he’d grown and thrived...

“He was always meant to be our son,” Jonathan agreed.

Martha tilted her head back, and when their eyes met, Jonathan couldn’t not smile. He reached up and brushed back a stray lock of her hair.

“I love you, Martha Kent.”

“Oh, Jonathan. I love you, too,”

He kissed her forehead and then pulled her up against his chest again. And despite the mess of emotions still trying to overwhelm him, Jonathan just knew everything was finally right. Everything was finally just how it was supposed to be.

They’d found it all—happiness, contentment, fulfillment—the day they’d found Clark.

And their family was complete now. *They* were complete.

“So...still want to go out for lunch, my love?” Jonathan asked.

Martha laughed but nodded. “I’d love to.”

## Epilogue

*Four months later . . .*

“Clark, sweetie, we leave in fifteen minutes!” Martha popped her head into Clark’s room, and he looked up from where he sat on his bed, tugging at the tie around his neck. “Oh my goodness, don’t you look handsome.”

Clark frowned and shook his head. “I-I can’t—I can’t get it right. It’s—it’s crooked or something,” Clark stammered. He started unknitting the tie for what had to be the

hundredth time. Jonathan had shown him how to tie it, and they’d practiced a bunch of times. And today, Clark wanted to do it himself, because it was a very important day.

Maybe the most important day ever.

But he couldn’t seem to get it right.

He closed his eyes and dropped his hands onto the bed next to him with a heavy, frustrated sigh. A moment later, Martha’s hands settled on his knees, and when he looked up at her, she was kneeling in front of him, smiling in that way that she did when she seemed to just *know* what was going on in his head.

Only today, she couldn’t possibly know. She couldn’t possibly understand, either.

He was excited. Happy and excited and *more* than ready to officially be their son. Jonathan and Martha were the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he still couldn’t believe how wonderful living with them was—how they made him feel so good and so loved, and how nice they were, and how they took care of him every single day.

But at the same time, they still didn’t know things about him. Important things. Things that would no doubt change *everything* if they were to find out.

After all, who could possibly love a child who wasn’t even human?

He bit his lower lip as one annoying tear snuck out of the corner of his eye, followed by another and another. Sniffing, he swiped at his cheeks and shook his head.

“I-I can do it,” he said. “I’ll t-try again, and—and—and—” He groaned and shut up, now angry at himself for his stammering *and* his inability to do even the simplest thing—something he was infinitely sure every little *human* boy his age could do—knot his tie. He reached up and took both of the ends in his hands again, and Martha squeezed his knees gently.

“You can do it. There you go,” she said as he started, crossing the longer end of the tie over the front of the shorter end, just like Jonathan had shown him. She stayed there with him, praising him at each step, though she didn’t try to help him otherwise. “That’s it! There you go, Clark. I think you did it!”

He tugged the end through the top knot and pulled down with one hand while pushing the knot up and straightening it with the other. And...and it was okay this time?

Clark risked a look up at Martha, and she was nodding encouragingly, her eyes bright with whatever it was that always made him feel so good.

“It’s okay?”

"It's perfect, sweetie. Here, take a look," Martha said, and she stood and took his hand, then led him out of his bedroom and into the bathroom so he could see himself in the mirror. "See, perfect!"

Swallowing, Clark dared to look at his reflection. He stood tall and pulled back his shoulders, studying the dark-blue tie that contrasted with the bright white of his dress shirt. It was straight and neat. He *had* gotten it right. Finally.

Martha stepped behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. He met her eyes in the mirror, and she smiled, then bent down and kissed the top of his head. He thought he saw tears in her eyes, even though she smiled, and he turned around and looked up at her, frowning.

She was crying.

A sharp pain seized his stomach. "A-are you...are you sad?" he asked, his voice small and rough. Maybe she didn't want him after all. Maybe she and Jonathan weren't—

"No, no, sweetie. Not at all. I'm so happy," Martha said. Kneeling down next to him, she wiped the corner of her eye. And then she settled her hands back on his shoulders. "I'm happier than I've ever been. And it's because of you, my beautiful, beautiful boy."

Her smile wrapped around him like the warmest blanket, and he felt all of her love push away those awful doubts and fears.

She did love him.

She did want him.

She didn't know his secret, but maybe...maybe she never really had to know anyway.

"You...really want me? To be your son?" he asked slowly. His chest felt tight with worry as he stared at her, waiting for her to answer. What was probably only half a second seemed to stretch on forever and ever, and he somehow saw every flicker of emotion in her eyes in that half a second.

All of it was love.

Every single bit.

She nodded. "Of course I do, sweetie. That's—"

He didn't let her finish. He fell forward into her and wrapped both of his arms around her neck, and then he whispered, "I love you...mama."

"Oh, Clark, I love you too." She kiss his cheek and hugged him back, and even though he started crying again, it was for a different reason this time.

There was a quiet knock on the bathroom door, and Clark blinked back his tears and turned to look at Jonathan

standing in the doorway. The older man was smiling, and Clark grinned back proudly as he let go of Martha and ran a hand down the front of his tie.

"Look, I did it all by myself!" he declared. "It's good, right?"

"It's wonderful, buddy," Jonathan said.

Clark looked over his shoulder at Martha, who was now standing again, and then back at Jonathan. "Is it time to go?" he asked.

Jonathan nodded. "Yep, it's about an hour's drive to the courthouse. Emma will meet us there, and we'll talk with the judge, and—"

"—and then, you'll really be my dad?" Clark said, straightening up more. Jonathan nodded, and Clark turned back to Martha. "And you'll really be my mom?"

Martha also nodded, her eyes looking teary again. Clark knew this time that she wasn't sad, though, and so he grinned up at her and took her hand. She squeezed gently, and together, the three of them headed out to the truck, climbed in, and got on the road.

When they returned a few hours later, he would have a new name. He would be *Clark Kent*. He would be their son.

And he would do the very best he could to put everything else behind him. To be normal. To fit in. To be exactly what he looked like—a human boy.

And *no one*, not even his new parents, ever had to know anything different.

The End (To Be Continued...)