

Save a Slice of Pie for Me

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Summary: Eight-year-old Jon Kent's life has been pretty normal, really — growing up on his grandparents' farm in Smallville, Kansas, his mom raising him while his dad, whom he's never even met, is off on some long undercover assignment overseas. But things change pretty quickly one afternoon when he discovers a unique and disconcerting new ability. As he adjusts to being able to “hear” the thoughts of those around him, another voice reaches out to him from somewhere far away ... a voice he's been waiting his whole life to hear.

Story Size: 15,745 words (85Kb as text)

Author's note: This WIP had been sitting for a while with just the first two chapters written. A sudden burst of inspiration helped me finish it all in just the last couple days. Thank you so much to KSaraSara (and my wonderful daughter!) for a quick BR and readthrough. Hope y'all enjoy!

The story is fifteen (short!) chapters, and I'm planning to post one per day!

1

The early summer Sun felt warm on the boy's back as he shuffled down the long dirt road toward home. His mom had always told him not to kick up the dust with his shoes. She said to pick up his feet when he walked. She said not to make a mess. And he usually listened to her. He usually followed the rules and did as he was told and didn't make a fuss.

However, today, the boy didn't feel like picking up his feet. Even if his mother had been right there with him, scolding him for dragging along, he still might not listen. He might even have been more defiant and told her exactly what he was thinking. He might have said, “You've been lying to me since I was born, so why should I listen to you?” And then, he imagined, he might have taken off sprinting toward the house, leaving her behind.

Because today, he'd made a startling discovery. More than one, actually. And he wasn't sure which one he was more scared of — the fact that he could apparently read people's minds, or the fact that, according to the private thoughts of his second-grade teacher, Mrs. Jameson, his dad wasn't just away overseas on a very, very long

undercover assignment. No, according to Mrs. Jameson, Jon's dad had left Earth with Superman nearly nine years ago. According to Mrs. Jameson, it was a darn shame Jon had to grow up with no father, and it was a darn shame the poor boy didn't even know that his father, who had traveled light-years away to be witness to a civil war on an alien planet, was probably never coming home.

Jon kicked the dirt hard, his shoe digging a rut into the ground, and he then stopped and stared down the road toward the farmhouse that had been his home for as long as he could remember.

He didn't understand why his mother would lie to him. Not only his mother, actually. His grandparents too. They'd lied to him. The whole world had lied, it seemed. He was the only one being kept in the dark. He'd found that out at lunch time, as he'd sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria, trying to block out the thoughts swarming around him, attacking him from all directions. Classmates complaining inwardly about how they didn't like the lunches their parents had packed them or how it wasn't fair that Marnie Allen always got one of her mom's chocolate chip cookies as dessert in her lunch or how they wouldn't get enough time at recess. Cafeteria staff silently wondering whether they'd remembered to check the expiration dates on the milk cartons that morning. And the principal Mr. Evans actually counting down the minutes in his head until the bell rang so he could leave to go on his own lunch break and sneak that one cigarette he allowed himself every day that no one knew about.

Jon had covered his ears, as though that would somehow help silence the sounds and pictures inserting themselves directly into his head, and then one voice had come through louder than all the others — the thoughts of a new female teacher whom he didn't know, but whom he somehow immediately identified as Ms. Jeanette Severs, who'd moved to Smallville from Maybury, Indiana. Her words hung with him, even now.

<<*That poor child. He doesn't even know.*>>

Those words had come through perfectly clearly, as though she'd been speaking directly to him. The next thoughts had been just as clear but came to him as a series of phrases and images rather than well-formed, complete sentences. Clark Kent — a tall, handsome man with dark hair and glasses, standing next to Superman, whose face appeared just a little fuzzy and out of focus. <<*So far away.*>> A spaceship, and the two men inside the ship. And the ship leaving Earth, flying through space. <<*New Krypton.*>> A sense of curiosity and wonder at what might have happened. And then, a decisive conclusion, once again formed in complete sentences. <<*That poor child. He'll probably never meet his father. And he doesn't even know.*>>

“Well, I know now, Ms. Severs!” Jon cried as he stubbed his foot into the ground again.

His shoes were now covered in dust. His mother was going to be so mad at him. He could almost hear her, sighing as she’d say, “Jon, how many times do I have to tell you to pick up your feet when you walk?!”

<<Where is he? He should be home by now. He’s never this late.>>

Jon raised his eyes sharply as he heard his mother’s voice clear as day in his head. No, he realized, not her voice. *Her inner voice.* Her thoughts. Then, he saw her car turn out of the driveway down the road, the tires of the small dark blue sedan kicking up dust as she accelerated toward him. And again, her voice popped into his head.

<<Oh thank God. There he is.>>

Her thoughts then did that thing that Ms. Severs’s thoughts had done, switching from clear sentences to images, feelings, and fragments. And he stumbled and fell to the ground as he felt the weight of his mother’s love hit him all at once. Love and relief. His hands and knees hit the hard packed dirt of the road, and he winced in pain. Tears welled up in his eyes, and although he tried to hold them back, the burden he’d carried with him all day suddenly became too much. He pushed himself over and up into a sitting position, buried his face in his hands, and cried.

2

As it turned out, his mother didn’t scold him for dirtying his shoes. She just parked her car alongside the edge of the road, climbed out, and hurried over to where he sat on the dusty ground. Then, as he sniffled and wiped away the tears from his cheeks, she bent over and lifted him into her arms, cradling him close to her.

He couldn’t hear her thoughts now — the ability seemed to have shut itself off somehow — but he still felt her love as she carried him to the car, murmuring quietly and rocking him in her arms. She set him down on his feet and then opened the back door for him to get in. So he did. And then he curled up into a ball in the backseat and closed his eyes as she shut the door and climbed into the driver’s seat a moment later.

“Jon, sweetie, what’s bothering you? Do you want to talk about it?”

He didn’t open his eyes. He didn’t need to. He could feel his mother watching him from the front seat. She always watched him. She thought he didn’t know, but he knew. He felt her watching him all the time. And as his new ability suddenly chose that moment to switch back on, he realized he could now *hear* her watching him.

<<I hope he didn’t... Please don’t let it be that. I’m not ready to deal with that.>> And then, an image of

Superman popped into her head before his ability shut itself off again.

He was so confused. She hoped he didn’t what? And what did Superman have to do with anything?

“Jon?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it!” he shouted, conscious that the volume of his voice was much too high for the close quarters of the small sedan. He then turned over so that his back was to her, wrapped his arms around himself, and screwed his eyes shut tighter.

His mom didn’t say another word. Instead, Jon heard the car’s engine roar to life and felt as the car turned around and started back down the long dirt road toward the farmhouse.

Random words and fragments of thoughts jumped into his mind. <<My fault. I should have... He should know. We should have told him. What if it’s... He won’t understand. He... God, Clark, why did you have to leave? What will I... Oh shoot, the cornbread. Left the oven on again. Dammit.>>

He winced and covered his ears again, barely stopping himself from blurting out, “That’s a bad word, Mom! Don’t say that!” He wanted to turn it off — this weird ability. He just wanted it to go away. He just wanted to go back to the way things were...when he knew that his dad was just out of the country on an undercover assignment. When he knew that, any day now, his dad would come walking right in through the front door of the Kents’ farmhouse and smile and hug him and tell him how sorry he was to have been gone for so long but that he was glad to finally be home. When he knew that someday they would finally meet. That he would finally meet his father.

Jon blinked back tears as the car stopped abruptly, and he quickly sat up, pushed the door open, and sprinted toward the house, ignoring his mother’s surprised “Hey, Jon, where are you going?” He didn’t bother to remove his shoes at the front door like he was supposed to. And when his grandma greeted him from the kitchen, where she appeared to be taking a blackened dish of cornbread out of the oven, he didn’t acknowledge her. After all, his grandparents knew, too. They’d been part of the Big Lie. Them and everyone else.

Did his classmates know? He didn’t have many friends, but the few he did have — did they know? Will and Taylor and Kara — did they know? And if so, why hadn’t they told him? Why hadn’t anyone just told him?!

He ran up the stairs and straight into his bedroom and then slammed the door behind him. His backpack slid off his shoulders and fell to the floor, and he kicked his shoes off, absently noting that he’d left dusty footprints on the hardwood floor. Then he dove into his bed, crawled under the covers, and buried his head into his pillow.

Let them get mad at me. I don't care, Jon thought. But he knew he did care. Deep down, he cared a whole lot. Everything made him feel a lot. All the time. He wanted to shut that off too, along with this new mind-reading trick. He wanted to shut them both off so he didn't hear and didn't feel.

It was all just too much.

More tears came, and he allowed them. He didn't even stop crying when he heard his bedroom door open and felt the bed compress next to him. He just pushed the pillow up against his face harder to muffle his sniffles and sobs. And then when his mom's hand touched his back gently, the thoughts started up again — a loud cacophony of fully formed sentences, fragmented words, feelings, pictures.

<<God, what do I say to him? I've never been good at this. I should have sent Martha up here... If Clark were here, he would know...>> A man, tall and with dark hair and brown eyes and a kind smile. It was his father, he knew, and in the image, the man nodded reassuringly, and his smile left Jon feeling better, comfortable, loved. The image then faded away into a swath of red material, and he was overcome by a deep, overpowering sorrow fueled by loneliness. *<<God, I'm no good at this.>>*

His mother stretched out on the bed behind him and pulled him into her arms, once again holding him tightly.

<<God, Jon, I love you so much. I wish I knew... Please talk to me.>> Love again. So much love.

He squirmed around in her arms until he faced her and then wrapped his arms around her neck and cried into her shoulder. He felt her kiss the top of his head.

"Jon, sweetie, did something happen at school today?"

He wanted to lie to her, but he knew that was wrong. He wanted to tell her that he was fine and that everything was okay, but he knew that was wrong too. He wasn't fine, and everything wasn't okay. And so, he just nodded instead.

He pulled one hand away from her and swiped it across his face, brushing away his tears. And then, sniffing, he mumbled, "I had a bad day, Mom."

<<Something more. Please tell me.>> Love again. It crushed him, pressed into him, suffocated him.

He sat up, shaking his head, and covered his ears as he scooted away from her. He needed to breathe, and yet even the simple act of filling his lungs with air seemed difficult right now. He found himself gasping suddenly.

"Jon?"

Her arms were around him again, and he finally inhaled a shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

"Mom, I..."

"Shhh, sweetie. Everything will be okay."

<<God, I hope I'm right. The way he covered his ears... Martha should be up here. We have to tell him...

>> The tall, dark-haired man again, his father. The man stepping closer. A hug. Then again, Superman, his face slightly out of focus, smiling and turning away and floating up until he disappeared.

Jon shook his head, and the thoughts and images faded from his mind. A dull hum of sorts persisted, but he could deal with that. He felt his mother's arms tighten again, and the embrace comforted him.

"I'm sorry I got my shoes dirty, Mom. I shouldn't have kicked up the dust. I know you don't like that. I'm sorry."

"Oh, sweetie, it's okay," she murmured. She rocked him gently, back and forth, and his breathing steadied out a bit. "But you are going to have to help me clean up. You tracked dirt in the house, all the way from the front door. You know how your grandma likes things to be kept — "

"Neat and clean. I know." Jon finished her sentence, not because he could read her thoughts, just because she'd said that particular phrase to him so many times by now that it was ingrained in him.

He felt her place another kiss on the top of his head.

"Come on, kiddo. You grab the broom, and I'll get the dustpan."

His mother stood, and he followed her out of the room and downstairs, thankful that, at least for the moment, the only thoughts he could hear in his head were his own.

3

<<Clark, I think it's happening. Jon, he's like you. He's...changing.>> Uncertainty, almost overwhelming. And then a profound sadness. *<<I thought you'd be home by now. I thought...I thought it would be you telling him. Not me. Not...not like this.>>*

Jon turned over in bed, pulling the covers up over his head in a futile attempt to block both the morning sunlight streaming through the curtains and the rambling thoughts of his mother.

He'd hardly slept all night as thoughts had accosted him, randomly and sometimes all at once. He'd heard his grandpa mentally listing off the chores he had to do over the weekend and then felt an intense exhaustion and an aching deep in his bones. And he'd heard his grandma's silent fretting over Grandpa Jonathan's health... Something about an appointment next week with a specialist in Wichita because Grandpa's heart was weak. And he'd felt her fear; he'd felt her heart racing and then her resolve not to let anyone know how scared she actually was.

And then Jon had lain in bed for some time, shaking with fear of his own. No one had told him that either — that his grandpa was sick. He'd had no idea.

What else had they been keeping from him?

He'd finally slept some, but only after everyone else went to bed. Apparently, his new mind-reading trick didn't include being able to hear and see people's dreams.

But his own dreams had been filled with things he couldn't entirely explain. His dad dressed as Superman, the bright red cape billowing out behind him. A soft voice telling him, "You can control it. You just have to practice, kiddo." Then his dad, whom he'd never even met, lifting him up effortlessly and flying them towards a bright yellow sun. Approaching the brilliant star together, energy filling him. But then, a sudden darkness, black and stifling and lonely, consuming him. Thoughts — terrible thoughts of grief and sadness and anger and hate — all pounding against him all at once. His dad's hand taking his. "You can control it, Jon. Push it all away. Focus on one thing. One sound. One thought — your own thought. Hear that and nothing else. Or, you can focus on my love for you. Feel that and nothing else." And then, the darkness brightening, and his dad standing in front of him once again, now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and with his familiar black-rimmed glasses covering his eyes. His dad, again...kneeling down in front of him, setting both of his hands on Jon's shoulders, and grinning. "See, you can control it. I love you, kiddo."

Now, as he sat up slowly, his mother's thoughts still jumbling around in his head, Jon tried to remember the feeling of the deafening blackness brightening into a calm quiet. He focused on that image of his father, kneeling in front of him, smiling.

And then, an even weirder thing happened.

His mother's thoughts faded. And in their place, he felt impatience and frustration and anticipation. And he heard different words, a voice that he didn't really recognize but that he inherently knew. The voice from his dream.

<<Four days to home.>> A pain in his left shoulder, aching, from an old injury. <<Hope the Sun heals this. But I don't even... I just want to be home.>> An image of his mother with a huge, bright smile and much shorter hair. And feelings of love and longing and sadness. <<God, Lois, I miss you so much. I'm almost home, my love.>>

Jon tensed up as he heard the words echo in his head. Lois. That was his mom. And...and...

He screwed his eyes shut, and with all of his concentration, he focused on the image of his father again, with his kind smile full of love and pride. Almost immediately, Jon felt an overwhelming sadness, and he inhaled sharply and clutched at his chest as the unfamiliar feeling assaulted him.

<<Lois, my love... I hope... God, I hope you're still waiting for me. What...what if — >>

The thoughts stopped abruptly, as did the powerful emotions that he'd been feeling, and instead, he was

surrounded by a silence broken only by the sound of his own ragged breathing.

Jon quickly opened his eyes as tears rolled down his cheeks, and he closed them again, desperation overcoming him as he tried one more time to reach out. He wanted — no, needed to find the voice again. His father's voice. His father's thoughts.

He lifted his hands up and scrubbed the tears from his cheeks.

"Dad... Please..." he whispered aloud, and he lowered his head into his hands as he tried to picture his father. But the image had faded now, fuzzy and out of focus, and the calm quiet he'd found before seemed out of reach, thoughts of the other occupants of the house invading his mind again.

<<Jon should be up by now. I need to sit him down. Tell him everything.>> Worry and love.

<<Rain next week will be good for the corn. But this darn heat. Ugh, my back...>> Aching and exhaustion. Worry and more love. <<Martha, what are we going to do? I can't keep this up.>>

<<There's not enough eggs. Maybe Jon can — >>

"Jon, dear?" his grandma's voice called out from downstairs.

Shaking himself, he jumped up out of bed, hurried over, and pulled open the door to his bedroom. "Yes, Grandma! Sorry I slept in! I'll go get the eggs for you!"

After just a moment's pause, he heard his grandma's voice again. "Thank you, dear." And then, as he threw on some clean clothes and padded down the stairs, he felt her silent wonder.

<<It's almost like he read my mind. Huh.>>

4

Saturday was usually one of Jon's favorite days of the week because it meant ice cream at Maisie's Diner with Grandma Martha and Grandpa Jonathan while his mom had her weekly work phone call with Uncle Perry. Today, however, as he climbed into the backseat of his grandparents' old pickup truck, he found himself scared — terrified, really, and he quickly strapped himself in, pulled his knees up to his chest, and closed his eyes.

Going into town meant being near more people. And more people meant more voices, more thoughts, more feelings needling into his mind. He wasn't sure he would be able to handle it all.

He felt the truck back up and then start off down the long driveway toward the main road, but he kept his head buried in his knees.

"Maisie said she's got a new flavor this week — chocolate fudge brownie. We should probably plan to bring some home for your mom."

Reluctantly, Jon raised his eyes and saw his grandma turned around, smiling at him from the passenger seat. But her thoughts betrayed the smile on her face.

<<I don't think ice cream is going to cheer him up today. Lois had better talk to him soon. I bet he heard something from the kids at school. We should have...>>
 Regret and sadness. And a mental image of Jon's father, tinged with overwhelming grief.

He felt tears in his eyes as he nodded and forced a smile. "That sounds really good, Grandma."

<<Gosh, he's so much like Clark. Like he knows...>>
<<Damn pothole.>>

Jon's eyes darted to his grandpa in the driver's seat just before the truck swerved slightly.

"Sorry about that, Martha. I'll fill that hole up when we get back. Been meaning to."

<<I've got too much to do already. Shouldn't put things off so long. Not even sure I can do it, or should. Damn heart problems. Maybe I can hire the Peterson boy to come out and fill it for me.>>

Jon blinked and shook his head. "I can help, Grandpa. I'm strong. I'll do it when we get home. You shouldn't..." He trailed off and looked down at his knees again. He wasn't supposed to know about his grandpa's poor health. It was one of the Other Lies. Not as big as the Big Lie, but close enough. Screwing his eyes shut again, he tried to backtrack a bit. "I mean, I can help you and...well, because I bet it's hard work, and..."

He didn't hear their thoughts then, but he felt waves of love from both of them. The feeling pushed away all of his fears and anxieties, even if just for a moment, and he felt a small smile growing as his eyes caught a glance from his grandpa in the rearview mirror.

"You know, Jon, that would be great. Very helpful."

And for just a few minutes, everything became quieter as the three of them rode along in the old pickup toward town. The closer they got, however, the more nervous Jon began to feel and the louder everything became. Random thoughts from voices he didn't know seemed to slam into him, an incoherent mixture of emotions and ideas bouncing around with no apparent rhyme or reason.

<<Black is a good color. For my fingernails. Mom will hate it. Perfect.>>

<<Told the mayor he should have the gazebo painted. But blue? Why blue?>>

<<Hurry, hurry. Gotta hurry.>>

<<Ew, that's disgusting. Who would leave a banana peel sitting here? And why? Ugh.>>

<<Beautiful day. Sun is shining. What the — >>

<<Twinkle, twinkle little star!>>

By the time his grandpa finally pulled the truck up in front of Maisie's, Jon had covered his ears with his hands

again and was nearly shaking. He wanted the quiet back; he wanted the normal back. He heard himself sobbing and then his grandma's voice, out loud this time.

"Jon, sweetie, are you okay?"

Overwhelming worry, fear. An image of a boy, just a little older than him, but with the same dark hair and brown eyes...sitting in the corner of his bedroom, his hands clapped over his ears, tears rolling down his cheeks. A memory of the boy's words, his voice low and trembling. *<<"It's so loud, Mom. Make it stop. Please.">>*

<<It's just like Clark. The darn superhearing was the first thing. We should have known it would happen soon.>>

"Jonathan, I think Lois was right. Maybe we should head back home —"

"It's not superhearing, Grandma!" Jon shouted, unable to hold himself back any longer.

Why would she think he'd have superhearing? He didn't understand. His dad was Clark Kent. Not Superman. So why would this be superhearing? And why would...? Her thoughts made no sense to him and only confused him more. He needed to get away.

Now.

It was too loud, their voices, everyone's voices. And the feelings — all the confusion and worry and sadness. And a sharp pain in his chest. Not his pain. Someone else's.

It was just too much.

The tears started again, rolling down his cheeks, falling in big, fat plops onto his jeans. He unbuckled his seatbelt, and, without hesitating or even considering where he might go, Jon pushed the door open and leapt out of the truck, taking off at a sprint down the sidewalk, his hands still covering his ears.

5

Jon rounded the corner past Maisie's and ran down the street, heading in the general direction of his school. He didn't want to go there, but he didn't know where else to go. He needed somewhere quiet, where he could be alone. Where he could think without having to hear everyone else think. He needed to figure out what his grandmother had meant. And he needed to know why they'd told him the Big Lie...and why the whole town seemed to be in on it.

Ahead of him, at the base of the library steps, his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Ross, stood and chatted amicably with an older man Jon hadn't met before. He stopped, frowning, as their thoughts jumped into his head.

<<Kirk just doesn't get it. We don't have enough money to fund anything next year, least of all a pay increase for teachers. The mayor really needs to prioritize

and figure things out. Or else...>>

<<When will she stop talking? I've got things to do.>> Annoyance. Hidden behind a fake smile.

Jon's frown turned into a scowl. Why didn't people just tell the truth and say what they meant? He closed his eyes for a moment, trying his best to concentrate, and blocked out their mishmash of thoughts. It somehow worked, and everything went quiet again. When he opened his eyes, the two had started moving off down the street, still chatting with their fake smiles and false words.

He shook his head and then glanced at the library. Maybe...it would be quiet in there. Maybe. And then, maybe...

Jon broke into a jog, took the steps two at a time, and pulled open the door.

It was indeed quiet. He saw only one other person, and that was the librarian, Mrs. Meeks. Her bright blue eyes sparkled as she saw Jon, and she smiled genuinely at him. He felt a wave of pride and joy, but also a tinge of concern.

"Jon, what brings you in today? Don't you usually go to Maisie's with your grandparents on Saturdays?" she asked kindly. And thankfully, he heard nothing of her inner thoughts.

He swallowed hard and nodded.

"Y-yes. Usually. But, um...I needed to...look something up, and so I came here. They are probably on their way, I think," he fumbled. It was all true. Sort of.

Mrs. Meeks just smiled at him again and nodded politely. "If there's anything I can do to help, let me know..." Her voice trailed off as her smile faded a tiny bit. "Your mother doesn't like you using the computers unsupervised."

"Oh, I know. I was going to find some old newspapers, actually. I...remember she said...she wrote something for the *Smallville Press* a while ago. I wanted to read it," he said. And he mentally kicked himself. He did want to read his mom's story. But not right now. So that was only a half lie, right?

And with his hesitation and uncertainty, he lost his concentration. And he heard it again.

<<Poor boy.>>

The two words that had started all of this yesterday. Followed quickly by a slew of other words, not all of which made sense.

<<Supported it at first, but now... He's eight years old. Probably never going to happen. They should be honest with him. I should talk to Martha. Hurting all of us to have to see this.>>

He shook his head and turned toward the back of the library, where he knew the newspapers were kept. "I'm just going to go...to look up that article."

"Wait, Jon. Can I...show you something?" Mrs. Meeks

stood from her desk and moved toward him with another of her gentle smiles.

<<Kiddo should know his father. At least a bit.>>

Tears sprang to his eyes, but he managed to hold them back.

"O-okay," he agreed, and he followed as the older librarian led the way down the wide middle aisle, toward where Jon had been planning to go anyways.

He felt an emotion he couldn't quite identify — some sort of sadness but mixed with hope and joy maybe — as Mrs. Meeks began to speak in a quiet voice.

"When your father was about your age, he used to come here after school almost every day," she started. They turned at the end of the aisle. "He would grab a book and sit here, all the way in the corner."

She stopped then and knelt down next to Jon.

"He would sit here and read and read and read. And when he'd finish one book, he'd grab another. Almost every single day until he was in high school. Then your grandpa needed his help at the farm, and he couldn't come in quite as often." She paused then, and he felt another wave of emotion. An image of a young boy — again, looking startlingly like him — popped into his head, and he heard Mrs. Meeks laugh softly. "I think he read nearly every book in this place. Anyways, when he was in high school, the library had some funding problems. We needed more money for renovations and such. And your dad..." <<Gosh, what a kid. I miss him. Wish things had turned out differently.>> "...your dad wrote an article for the school newspaper. It ended up getting picked up by the *Wichita Post* and reprinted by the *Kansas City Star*. And that article helped to bring in more than twice the money we needed to keep this place up and running and make the repairs and... He was a wonderful man, your father. I just...thought you should hear that."

She stepped away from Jon then and toward the back wall, where a framed article was mounted. Carefully lifting the frame, she smiled again and then handed it to him.

"I know this isn't what you came in here for today, but maybe you should read it," she said. And with a final nod, accompanied by a wave of gratitude and sadness, she added, "If you need help finding anything, I'll be at my desk. Remember we close at three today, so you've got... about two hours."

Then, she was gone, and he was left alone, holding a framed article his father had written twenty-five years ago. He sunk down into the chair in the corner, where his dad apparently used to sit and read for hours. And as he stared at the picture accompanying the article — a picture he'd seen on the wall in the hallway at home of a young Clark Kent, grinning, his eyes bright and hopeful behind his glasses — Jon heard a voice again.

The voice.

His father.

<<Who is this? And how are you contacting me?>>

6

<<Who is this? And how are you contacting me?>>

The words were filled with a sort of confusion, although any underlying meaning seemed to be deliberately hidden from him. But unlike every other thought he'd heard so far, this was...somehow directed at him; he could feel the intention behind it. And the connection was...fuzzy almost. Like when his mom had him try to make a phone call from her cell phone when they'd been up in the mountains skiing last winter. Muffled, statically.

Jon closed his eyes. <<I...>>

<<Your name is Jon?>>

He stifled a sob, clapping his hand over his mouth to stop the sound from escaping. Instead, he nodded. <<Yes. I'm Jon... Jonathan Jerome Kent.>>

A wave of surprise, followed by understanding and then overwhelming grief hit him then, and he gasped at the mixture of strong emotions that were clearly not his, both hands now reaching up to cover his mouth.

Suddenly, the connection severed again, and he was left with an almost deafening quiet, an emptiness inside of him. And that hurt almost more than the grief he'd felt just a moment ago.

<<Dad?>>

Nothing.

<<Dad? Please... Tell me what's happening to me. And tell me when you're coming home. I need you, and I'm...scared.>>

Commotion from the front of the library distracted him, and he hopped up from his chair, still gripping the framed article from Mrs. Meeks, as he heard voices approaching.

"He told me he wanted to look up an old article Lois wrote, not that...not that he'd run off. I'm so sorry, Martha, Jonathan. I had no idea. He should still be back here."

A moment later, his grandparents rounded the corner, hurrying toward him. His grandma knelt down next to him and wrapped her arms around him, and he felt all her love and relief and fear as she clung to him.

<<Oh thank God.>>

"Jonathan Jerome Kent, if you ever take off like that again —"

"Now, now... Martha..."

"I'm sorry, Grandma. I just..."

He couldn't tell them the truth then, and so he just let her hug him, his tears falling yet again as he buried his head into her shoulder. Gentle whispers soothed him, and

he felt his grandpa's hand, strong and solid, set on his back. Muffled voices that he was somehow able to choose not to hear faded into the background as the frame was taken from his hands and he was guided slowly out of the building and down the street.

And everything remained normal and silent. No thoughts, no feelings. Just good old sounds of birds chirping and kids playing on the playground and passersby chatting about nothing important.

His grandma kept Jon's hand secured tightly in hers, and his grandpa didn't let his hand leave Jon's shoulder until they arrived back at the truck. Grandpa Jonathan then reached out ahead of them and opened up the door to the backseat.

"Kiddo, we're gonna get you home and have a chat with your mom. There's some things we should have told you a long time ago," his grandpa said gently, and when Jon looked up, he saw his grandpa's eyes filled with regret and resolve.

A sharp pain in his chest. And a flicker of fear. <<Maybe Martha should drive home. Never been this bad before. That little run around the block to the library. Ugh.>>

His grandpa grimaced but then quickly hid the pain behind a smile. "Let's go buddy. We'll get ice cream later. After we talk."

But Jon hesitated. The reminder that his grandpa was sick and that he didn't even really understand the extent of all their lies angered him suddenly, and he shook his head.

"You really shouldn't be driving, Grandpa," he said. And with his words, he felt his own guilt crash down on him.

He'd taken off.

He'd caused them to worry.

He'd caused his grandpa to have to run after him, even though he'd known his grandpa was sick.

And the pain in his grandpa's chest was now his fault.

"I — I'm so sorry," he blurted out, and he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around his grandpa's waist. "I'm so sorry I ran away like that. I don't want you to be sick. I'm sorry, Grandpa."

And the cacophony started up again. Random thoughts and emotions — sad, happy, confused, angry, nervous, joyful, relaxed, scared — hitting him from all sides and all at once.

"Make it stop. Please."

He felt two strong arms lift him up, and then next thing he knew, they were rumbling back down the road toward home, the voices fading to just a muffled jumble of words and feelings and then eventually to nothing as his grandma's quiet humming of "You Are My Sunshine" filled his ears.

He almost cried with relief.

“I — I love that song, Grandma. Th-thank you.”

She paused only briefly. “Your father did too,” she said softly. And then she continued where she’d left off.

7

<<Jon?>>

His father’s voice echoed in his head again, and Jon straightened up suddenly as the pickup truck turned into their driveway, bumping along the uneven dirt road. Ahead of them, he could see his mom standing on the porch, her arms crossed over her chest and a worried expression on her face. He closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see her.

He’d worried her too.

He’d worried all of them and made his grandpa feel worse.

And all because... Anger filled him.

<<This is your fault.>>

<<I... What?>>

<<Mom is sad, and Grandpa is sick, and Grandma is worried. And it’s all your fault. They’re all sad because you left.>>

It was wrong of him to lash out like that, and he immediately felt guilty, his own regret mixing with a set of complex emotions he somehow felt from his father.

<<Jon, I — >>

“I don’t want to hear it! Leave me alone!” he yelled out loud. “Leave me alone! You’re not here! You’ve never been here!”

The truck stopped rather abruptly after his outburst, and he covered his face with his hands. He wouldn’t cry again. He’d cried too much already. And he was going to hurt them more if he kept this up. Just like his dad had.

He pushed away his anger. “Sorry. I’m sorry, Grandpa. I’m sorry, Grandma. I shouldn’t have yelled like that. I thought I... I thought...” He heard his own voice shaking now, and a moment later, the truck’s door opened and his mother crawled into the backseat with him and wrapped her arms around him.

“Jon, sweetie,” she murmured. He returned her embrace, hugging her tightly. She was warm, and her hug comforted him, like it always did.

<<God, Clark. Wish you were here. You could explain so much better.>> Some emotion — uncertainty and... inadequacy. <<No good at this. Never have been. Never meant for this...>>

He shook his head. “You’re the best mom, and I — I love you,” he murmured against her. He heard her inhale sharply, and her arms tightened around him again. His own tears threatened, pricking at the corners of his eyes. “... Just — just tell me, please, Mom. Just tell me the truth. No

more...no more lies. Please, Mom.”

“Okay, sweetie. But not here. Can we go inside?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he just pulled away from her, climbed out of the truck, and headed toward the house ahead of her, his hands clenched into fists. It was all so confusing. He’d been mad at her yesterday for lying to him. Mad at her and Grandma and Grandpa and everyone else. But now...now he felt something different altogether.

Abandoned.

He’d been abandoned.

He knew the word because it was one of the special challenge words his teacher had given him to learn last week. It meant he’d been left. Alone. Without care or concern.

And not just him. His dad had abandoned all of them.

His mom and his grandma and his grandpa.

They’d needed him. And he’d left them all to fend for themselves. Sad and alone. He’d left them, for what? A story? Work? And it made Jon feel so incredibly sad. And angry. Not at his mom and his grandparents, but at his father.

The voice came again then. Filled with concern and a genuine regret and sadness he could feel deeply. But he ignored it. It was too late, and he really didn’t want to hear it.

<<Jon, please talk to me, kiddo.>>

He hopped up the front porch steps, tugged the door open, and then, at the last second, remembered his manners enough to hold the door for his mother.

“Here, Mom,” he said quietly.

“Thank you, sweetie.”

His mom gave him a small, sad smile, and his anger flared. His mom being sad...it was his dad’s fault.

<<Jon, I didn’t know. Honestly. And I’m...I’m on my way home now. I — >>

The door shut loudly behind him and his mom as they entered the house together, and his mom’s arm wrapped around him. He leaned into her for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut.

<<Four days, Jon. I’ll be there. I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have left. I swear, kiddo.>>

The anger bubbled up inside of him again, but he pushed it down and refused to answer.

“We have cookies left over from last night. Chocolate chip. Did you want one, sweetie?”

Shaking, he nodded and looked up at his mother. “Yes, please, Mom.”

She leaned over and kissed the top of his head, and he felt all of her love again, so much love, overpowering everything else he felt in that moment. Even his anger was able to fade. He smiled at her as she straightened back up, and with a sob, he jumped up and wrapped his arms

around her neck.

“I love you, Mom,” he whispered, burying his head into her neck. He felt her trembling, and then she let out a long, deep breath.

“Oh, sweetheart, I love you too. More than you’ll ever know.”

But he did know. He felt it, still.

And amidst it all, the voice that he’d wanted out of his head, that he’d tried unsuccessfully to banish away, seemed to quake with guilt and regret and sadness and a deep, almost unbearable longing.

<<God, she’s just as beautiful as ever. Lois, I’m so sorry I hurt you. I didn’t know, my love. And Jon, God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I didn’t know.>>

And Jon let himself cry again, feeling a swath of emotions that were both his and not his, as his mother carried him over to the kitchen table, sat him down, and began telling him a story he hadn’t been expecting. A long story about how his father had been born on the planet Krypton, sent to Earth as a baby, and then called back to help his people fight a war against an evil dictator on another planet light-years away.

When his mom finished, he leaned against her again, settling deep into the comfort of her embrace as he tried to wrap his head around the truth. The truth...and the reason behind the Big Lie... The reason his grandma had assumed his odd behavior was explained by superhearing... The reason he’d never met his dad.

And that reason was that his dad...his dad was Superman.

8

Jon sat alone in a chair on the front porch, staring out toward the vast cornfields in the distance. It was getting late; the Sun was already making its final descent, turning the sky varying shades of orange and pink and yellow. But he hadn’t been called back inside for dinner yet, and so he just sat there, as he had for the better part of the last hour, watching the light breeze ruffle the cornstalks and trying to keep his mind clear.

Although he could still hear the quiet voices of his mom and grandparents from inside the house, he’d been successful at blocking their thoughts as long as he concentrated.

The other voice, however — his dad’s voice — he hadn’t been able to block that, even when he’d been trying. It had come and gone all afternoon. Quietly and undemanding. Just...there. And always with a sadness and regret to it. An apology, even if the words weren’t clear or obvious. The intent of an apology, really. And an intense love rivaling that he felt from his mom.

Jon really did understand a lot more now. But that

didn’t necessarily make any of this easier.

His mom had explained everything to him. She’d told him how difficult the decision had been, but that ultimately, his father — Clark Kent, AKA Superman — had left with the New Kryptonians almost nine years ago...how he’d felt an obligation to help stop a war and save his people. And she’d told him how they’d expected him to be gone for weeks or months, maybe. Not years. He’d felt her pain and sadness and a certainty, which she nevertheless shrouded in a hope that she was wrong, that his father would not be returning...that if he’d been able to return, he would have already done so. Her pain had consumed him, to the point where he’d felt a physical aching in his chest. However, he’d managed to stay quiet, clinging to her tightly while she’d continued. She’d then told him about how she’d found out she was pregnant, and how it had been the best day of her life when he’d been born. And she’d told him how sorry she was that they hadn’t told him the truth sooner.

And, as she did every day, all the time, she’d reminded him how much he was loved.

He closed his eyes for a minute as he heard her words again. “I promise you, Jon, Clark — your father — he had no idea. Neither of us knew. He...wouldn’t have left if he’d known. He wouldn’t even have considered leaving. You...my perfect little boy...you’re our miracle child. God, Jon, he would have loved you. So much.”

And he’d felt her tears mingle with his own as she’d kissed his cheeks and hugged him even tighter.

He didn’t know how he felt now, really. He still felt the anger; it was still there, in the back of his mind. And when he felt the little persistent presence of his father’s thoughts — *<<I’m sorry, Jon.>>* *<<Three hours closer now, buddy.>>* *<<I can’t wait to meet you.>>* *<<I love you, kiddo.>>* — he wasn’t sure whether to be excited or to be upset.

He needed to tell his mom and grandparents. But he was terrified of that too. What if...what if his mind was tricking him? What if the voice in his head wasn’t really his dad’s? How much would that hurt...if he told them, “Hey, Dad’s gonna be home in four days!” and then...he didn’t show up?

So, he’d done what he’d been so angry at them for doing. He’d not been completely honest. Although he hadn’t exactly confirmed it, he certainly hadn’t denied it when his mom had asked him if he’d been “hearing” things. He sort of had been... But he’d known his mom had meant really hearing things. And that was not what was happening.

<<Another hour closer. I wish I could make this little ship fly faster.>> A pause, filled with hope and sadness together. *<<I have to try to get some sleep now. I love*

you, Jon.>>

Jon squeezed his eyes shut again and pulled his knees up to his chest. He would not cry again. And he would not answer the voice. Not until he was ready. And he wasn't quite ready yet. He wasn't. He was sure of it.

But as he felt his father's presence drift away, leaving only an empty silence surrounding him, something inside him shook loose, and he suddenly reached out with a desperation he'd never known before, clinging onto the last tendrils of his father's final thoughts.

<<*I love you, too, Dad.*>>

Almost immediately, he felt a smile. Bright and warm, like the Sun. And this time, when his father's thoughts faded from his mind, the emptiness didn't feel quite so lonely.

9

The early morning sunlight warmed the two Kents as they sat on the lowered tailgate of the old pickup truck, overlooking the farm from the slight rise at the edge of the cornfields. Jon felt his grandpa's hand on his shoulder, a slight tremor in his grip. And yet, as the older man cleared his throat to speak, Jon heard only certainty and love and pride in his voice and from his thoughts.

"When your dad was just a little older than you, I brought him out here. We sat here and talked for a long time. He told me he'd been able to hear things he shouldn't have for a while. I remember..." His grandpa trailed off for a minute, and Jon closed his eyes and focused for a second, reaching out with his mind.

<<...*miss that boy so much. Never thought we'd have to be getting by without him. God, why didn't we make him stay?*>> Sadness and regret and guilt.

Without a second thought, Jon leaned over and wrapped his arms around his grandpa. The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. "It's not your fault, Grandpa. Don't be sad."

And his grandpa's arms enveloped him in a huge hug. "I know, Jon. It still hurts though."

They stayed that way for a few minutes, and gradually, Jon felt his grandpa's sadness replaced by curiosity. However, he deliberately didn't listen in this time to his grandpa's thoughts. He shouldn't have earlier. In fact, he was pretty sure that had been the whole reason his grandpa had brought him out here — to talk about how he shouldn't "listen in" on things he wasn't supposed to hear.

No, he didn't have superhearing. But the same thing applied to his mind-reading trick, didn't it?

He lowered his head and frowned as his grandpa released him from the embrace. He still hadn't told them. He'd had plenty of opportunity the night before, at dinner or during game night. But he hadn't. And he wasn't

entirely sure why.

He also hadn't told them about hearing his dad's voice. Which...maybe was a good choice because he hadn't heard anything but silence since the evening before. So his dad was either taking the longest nap ever, or...it hadn't been real after all.

A tear slid down his cheek.

"Grandpa, yesterday, I..."

He looked up and met his grandfather's gaze — intelligent gray-blue eyes hidden behind the thick lenses of his glasses. And he immediately looked away, unable to continue his sentence. Instead, he just leaned onto his grandpa again and listened quietly.

"I know this is confusing to you, Jon. I remember how tough it was for your dad. Tough and scary sometimes too. What helped him was to focus on —"

"— one thing at a time. One sound or one thought," Jon cut in, his voice tentative.

His grandpa hesitated and then nodded. "Yes, that's exactly it. He'd put on some music sometimes or ask your grandma to hum. He liked that tune she was humming yesterday on our way back from town. Or he'd even just tap his fingers on his desk. Anything that he could focus intently on, he said it helped him to block everything else out. And then..."

Jon felt his grandpa's arm tighten around his shoulders now. But the silence grew around them for a few minutes, and Jon almost felt tempted to pry into his grandpa's thoughts again to see what was bothering him. However, when he did open himself up a bit, it wasn't his grandpa's thoughts he heard.

<<*Fifteen hours closer now, kiddo.*>>

The voice sounded tired, and Jon felt an aching and stiffness in his shoulder, accompanied by exhaustion and hunger and a tiny bit of fear.

<<*Dad? You're...okay, right?*>> Jon jumped up from the bed of the truck, vaguely aware of his grandfather's surprise, and he looked upwards, toward the Sun rising in the distance. He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, finding his father almost immediately. <<*Dad?*>>

He felt a tiny bit of push back, and all the feelings of exhaustion and achiness disappeared as though his dad had dropped a curtain down to shield him from anything negative. <<*I am fine, kiddo. I promise. Tired, but fine. This is not...the most comfortable way to travel. But it will be worth it when I get to meet you. Just three days, kiddo. Seventy...seventy-four hours now.*>>

"Jon? Is everything alright?"

Jon spun back around to face his grandfather, who now stood but leaned heavily on the truck. He quickly nodded. "Yes, Grandpa. I'm sorry. I just...thought I..."

When he couldn't come up with a suitable non-lie to

tell his grandpa, he frowned and shrugged. And his grandpa just chuckled.

“Here, Jon, sit back down. And let me tell you some of the ground rules we set for your dad. I think the same will apply for you. And it’s important — very important — that you follow them. Understand?”

“Yessir,” Jon answered quickly, and he stepped back over to the truck and sat down again, a couple feet from his grandpa this time.

“So, the first rule is this: don’t eavesdrop on other people’s private conversations...”

10

Jon settled into the backseat of his mom’s car, and soon, they were on the road, headed into town. Just him and his mom. He did love Saturdays with his grandparents, but he loved Sundays with his mom even more. It was almost silly actually, because it was mostly just errands. They had a list, even. Every week, they’d drop off packages to be mailed, stop at Maisie’s to leave the few dozen extra eggs his grandma had collected during the week, head to the library to exchange his books, and go grocery shopping. Sometimes, like today, they’d also plan a stop at the bakery.

And the bakery was his favorite because his mom would always let him pick out an extra treat for them to share.

His grandma baked all the time. However, she mostly made cakes and pies and cookies. Not the chocolate croissants or strawberry turnovers or blueberry banana muffins that Patty did.

He heard his mom sigh quietly as she turned onto Main Street. And then he felt a sort of strain. Holding back tears. Sadness and uncertainty.

He shook his head to block her feelings from reaching him. He’d promised his grandpa not to eavesdrop. And even though his grandpa hadn’t known exactly what that meant, he intended to do his best to keep that promise.

“Are we going to go to Patty’s first today, Mom? I thought we’d get a chocolate croissant. Those are your favorite, right?”

A soft laugh from the front seat was followed by muffled sniffing, and he frowned.

“Yes, sweetie. That sounds great. Let’s do that,” his mom said, and she turned right at the next stop sign and pulled up in front of a colorful store with a large pink and white sign that read, “Patty’s Pastries.”

He hopped out of the car as soon as it stopped and then did what he’d always seen his grandpa do for his grandma — he hurried around to the front driver’s side and opened up the door for his mom. Her smile when their eyes met filled him with happiness, and he reached out and grasped

her hand.

“Come on, Mom,” he said, tugging her along with him. And she laughed and followed as he led the way to the bakery.

Twenty minutes later, full from chocolate croissants and freshly baked cookies thanks to a new recipe Patty was trying out, the two gathered Jon’s library books from the car and then started off down the sidewalk toward the library to check off their other errands.

“You know your dad told me he read every book in this library. Twice,” his mom said as they started up the steps.

<<If only he were here to see you right now, Jon. He would be so proud of you. So happy. He’d love you, so much.>>

He hadn’t meant to hear it, but he’d stopped concentrating for just long enough that her words slipped through. A painful aching built up in his chest, and his shoes scuffed loudly into the concrete as he stopped suddenly and screwed his eyes shut. Unlike the night before, however, this time, he couldn’t just banish the pain because the pain wasn’t his mom’s. It was his.

He reached out to the voice that had been drifting through the day with him and almost immediately heard it. Quiet now, and more exhausted than before.

<<I’m so sorry, kiddo. I hate that I’ve caused you and your mom all this pain. I heard her, and she’s right. I do love you.>> Strong waves of love and pride washed over him, and he almost sobbed again at the intensity of the emotions.

Slowly, he raised his eyes up to see his mom, and he shook his head and blinked back tears.

<<Oh Jon. I’m so sorry, sweetie.>>

“I’m so sorry, sweetie.” Her words echoed her thoughts, and he quickly closed the distance between them, shifted the books he held to one arm, and then wrapped his other arm around her waist. “I didn’t mean to upset you, sweetie. But I... Well, sometimes it helps to talk about him, and...”

“It’s okay, Mom. I...like to hear about him. It’s just...”

“It’s hard today?”

He nodded as he stepped away from her and took her hand again. Together, they began walking up the stairs leading to the library, his mom’s hand firmly gripping his. And he had to remind himself to concentrate so that he wasn’t overwhelmed by her thoughts. Even still, he could feel her mind racing. A sort of thrum in his head that wouldn’t go away.

And he still felt his dad’s presence, although it seemed to be flickering in and out now.

<<Soon, kiddo.>> A weight pressing down on his chest, and his shoulder aching. And so tired and stiff.

<<God, I can’t wait to meet you.>>

<<I...want to tell her, Dad.>> Jon let go of his mom's hand and reached forward to open up the door for her. She smiled at him as she entered the library ahead of him, murmuring a quick, "Thank you." But he saw the sadness in her dark eyes and the tension in her shoulders, and he struggled to smile back. <<I want to tell her. I want to... believe this is real. But I'm...scared. I'm scared it's not. And I'm scared to tell her.>>

He didn't get a response, and when he stopped and closed his eyes for a minute, reaching out as he'd learned to do over the last day and a half, he felt...nothing. Emptiness. Silence. And that didn't help make him any less scared. He swallowed hard.

"Jon? Everything okay, sweetie?"

His mom's kind voice was filled with concern, and he hated that he'd made her worry. Again. She'd worried enough. Really. And so, with a deep breath, he forced the smile on his face and opened his eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine, Mom. I was just...thinking. Can you help me pick out some new books to read? I think I want... sci-fi this time!"

He hurried back to her side and took her hand again, and she squeezed him gently.

"Sure, sweetie. Let's see if Mrs. Meeks has any recommendations."

And together, the two continued toward the librarian's desk to check the next item off their list of errands.

11

Monday morning came both too soon and not soon enough. Monday meant one day closer to Wednesday morning, when his dad had said he would be home. However, Monday also meant school, and try as he might, he couldn't convince his mom to let him stay home.

"What if I can't control it, Mom?" he argued, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his eyebrows at her as they waited together at the end of the driveway, where the school bus picked him up. "There's so many people and so many sounds. It was terrible on Friday."

He thought he'd sounded pretty convincing. But he felt her push back against the idea even before she spoke up, and he knew there was no way he was going to win this argument.

"It was terrible on Friday, I know. But Jon, you have several strategies to help you now. And you got a lot of practice over the weekend," she said.

She was right. His mom was always right.

<<Ha, glad you learned that early on. It took me...a while.>> The heavy weight again, pressing down on him. Pain in his right knee this time. And the same overwhelming exhaustion.

<<How much longer, Dad? Why is it taking so long

for you to get here? And you're hurting more. Why?>>

He looked down and shook his head as the school bus approached, not expecting an answer from his father. Responses had been getting fewer and farther between. And every time he heard his dad's voice in his mind, it was quieter, harder to understand. Sometimes the emotions were overpowering still, but the words tended to be jumbled, fuzzy, and unclear. Or like now, simply nonexistent.

He glanced back up at his mom, trying not to look as sad as he felt. "Okay, but..."

"If it gets really bad, have Mrs. Jameson call me."

With a nod, he wrapped his arms around his mom's waist again in a brief embrace and then climbed up the steps onto the school bus. He turned around and waved at her, doing his best to give her a big smile, and he felt her spirits lift just a little as she grinned back at him.

"I love you, Mom!"

"I love you too, sweetie. Have a good day!"

The bus door closed, and Jon turned to greet the bus driver, Mr. McKinnon, before heading down the aisle toward the back. His stop was one of the first on the route, and so the bus was fairly empty still. The only other passenger was Raegan Martin, a fifth grader who wasn't known for being one of the nice kids at school. She scowled at him as he passed by but then quickly dipped her head.

<<Leave me alone. Please. Just wanna be alone.>> Feelings of sadness and despair. Raw and deep and painful.

Unprepared for the intensity of her feelings, Jon almost stumbled. He grabbed onto one of the seats to steady himself and then shook his head as he quickly slid into the seat behind Raegan.

<<The whole bus, and he had to sit so close by.>>

Jon swallowed and glanced out the window. His mom still stood there, watching him. She waved again, mouthed "I love you," and smiled. <<Love you so much, kiddo.>>

I love you too, Mom, he thought. He wished she could hear him, but he knew that for some reason, his ability didn't quite work that way, not like how it did with his dad. And so, he just grinned at her again and waved back.

From the seat in front of him, a wave of jealousy was followed by more sadness and longing and then an intense loneliness. Jon tried to block the thoughts, but they came anyways.

<<His dad might be gone, but at least his mom loves him. My mom...>> An image of a woman about as old as his mom but with scraggly blonde hair and sunken blue eyes filled with anger. Yelling. <<"Don't you talk to me like that! Why you little — ">> Fear, cowering. A stinging pain on his right cheek.

He heard sniffing, quiet and muffled. And he lowered his head into his hands for a moment, trying to understand what he'd heard and seen and felt. A profound sadness gripped him then. His own sadness. Carefully, he slipped out of his seat and into the seat in front of him, settling himself close to the edge so there was still a lot of space between him and Raegan. She'd huddled up against the window, her forehead resting against the glass.

"I...know you want to be alone," he started, his voice low.

Raegan just sniffled and mumbled, "Yep." But he heard the words she didn't say too. <<*I don't really. I wish I didn't feel so alone all the time. I wish...*>>

Jon's heart ached again, and he felt tears in his eyes.

"Can I sit here with you? It can be...hard sometimes...to be alone. And maybe...maybe this would be better," he ventured, keeping his voice quiet still.

Raegan didn't answer right away, and Jon focused all of his energy to block her thoughts. It was wrong of him to have heard her in the first place. But despite his efforts, as the bus pulled up to the next stop and two other kids got on, taking their seats near the front of the bus, he felt a barrage of mixed emotions — anger, sadness, and annoyance...but then just a tiny shred of hope and relief.

"You can sit here. Just...don't talk."

A small smile formed on his lips, and he turned to face the front of the bus.

"K, I can do that," he said, still smiling. And then, as he realized he'd just talked when she said not to, he grimaced, quickly adding, "Oops, sorry. I mean...I shouldn't have... Yeah, I'll — I'll be quiet now... Sorry."

And then he heard a sound that made his heart feel just a little lighter. He heard Raegan let out a short, breathy laugh.

"Apology accepted, kid."

12

Tuesday afternoon was bright and sunny, and Jon hopped off the school bus and launched himself into a sprint down the long driveway to his house, tilting his head back slightly to soak up more of the sunlight.

<<*It feels good, doesn't it?*>>

<<*It's warm! And makes me feel... Oh! Oh, wait!*>>

Jon stopped suddenly and closed his eyes.

The Sun.

Superman got his powers from the Sun. At least... that's what he remembered reading.

<<*Is it true? It's the Sun? Your powers?*>>

Silence.

<<*Dad?*>>

He wanted to cry. But he held back, lowering his head and starting off toward the house again, this time at a walk.

But he made sure not to drag his feet. Because his mom didn't like him to get his shoes all dusty, and his grandma really liked to keep the house neat.

Nineteen more hours. At least, if he was doing the math right. And...if his mind wasn't just playing the most awful trick ever on him.

He'd gone back and forth in his mind all day, trying to decide how to convince his mom he needed to stay home from school tomorrow. But, short of telling her the truth, which he'd already decided wasn't an option, he hadn't been able to come up with anything he knew would work.

He adjusted his backpack and glanced up toward the house as he approached. His mom sat on the bench on the front porch, her laptop open and her fingers flying over the keyboard. She paused and smiled when she saw him, and then she patted the seat next to her in invitation. He jogged up the front steps and dropped his backpack on the ground before settling onto the bench and scooting up next to her.

Her arm immediately wrapped around his shoulders, and she pulled him a little closer and kissed the top of his head.

"Your grandparents are gone for the afternoon," she said. "So it's just you and me and your dreaded math homework."

He stifled a laugh and shook his head. "I think I'll take my chances and wait for Grandpa to get home."

Her arm tightened around him again as she also laughed. "Have it your way," she teased. "Grandpa said you wanted to help out with some of his chores, is that right? Well, how about we get those done together, and then have dessert *before* dinner tonight? Just you and me. Your grandma did make an apple pie for us, and there's ice cream in the freezer."

<<*Mom's apple pie was my favorite. Save me a slice, would you, kiddo?*>>

All the breath left him then as he nodded into his mom's embrace. <<*Yes. I will.*>>

"That — that sounds great, Mom."

<<*Eighteen hours now, kiddo. Almost...home.*>>

<<*It feels like forever.*>>

"Okay, what should we do first? Feed the horses? Or sweep the barn, maybe?" His mom stood and pulled him up with her, and together they started out toward the barn.

<<*Can't...sweep the barn first... That...has to be... last.*>>

Jon stopped walking, his knees wobbling as he felt his dad's overwhelming exhaustion again.

"Jon?"

<<*Dad?*>>

<<*Sorry, kiddo. I...*>>

"Jon, are you okay, sweetie?"

<<*...should...try to sleep again... Just tired is all. I'm*>>

almost home, I promise. I love you. I can't...can't wait to meet you.>>

Jon felt his mom's hands on his shoulders, squeezing gently, and when he opened his eyes, tears now streaming down his cheeks, he saw her expression filled with love and concern. He shook his head.

<<Dad? I'm — I'm not okay. Dad? Please still be there.>>

<<Hmm?>>

<<I don't want you to go, Dad. Please stay awake just a little longer. Please.>>

<<I wish I could, pal... I really, really wish I...>>

The connection faded before he could hear the rest, and he was left with just a weak whisper of words that he couldn't interpret. He screwed his eyes shut and tried again to reach his dad, screaming silently with all of his focus and intention.

But all he could feel was silence and a terribly empty darkness.

"Jon, you're scaring me. What's wrong, sweetie? Please talk to me," his mom pleaded, a note of desperation in her voice now.

"He's gone again," Jon blurted out, his eyes flying open as he looked up at her. Hot tears still rolled down his cheeks, and he shook his head and brushed them away. "He's..."

His mom's beautiful eyes stared back at him, still full of concern, and he frowned. He hated to see her worrying, and yet, he kept giving her reason to worry.

He needed to do better.

He would do better.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he quickly shook his head, straightened up, and then took her hand again as he began walking, with a bit more intention this time, in the direction of the barn.

"Sorry, Mom. I'm okay, really. I just...thought I heard something. But it's gone now. All quiet again. And I'm okay. We should — we should get going on those chores, right? But...but I think it might be better if we feed the horses and cows first and then — then we can sweep the barn. 'Cause the barn should be swept last. At least, that's what... I mean, I think that's what we should do."

"Sure, sweetie," his mom said quietly, and she let go of his hand and put her arm around his shoulders, squeezing him to her gently.

He felt the thrum of her mind racing again, a mix of emotions and feelings and rambling thoughts, but he didn't let himself listen, and he tried to block it as best he could. There was a sadness surrounding her, however, and despite his best efforts, he couldn't *not* feel that.

He only hoped that her sadness would be gone after tomorrow. That what he'd been hearing and feeling from

this voice he'd identified as his father's...that it was all real. That tomorrow, at around ten in the morning, his dad would show up and make everything all better.

And in the meantime, he would do the best he could to cheer her up.

"Mom, guess what we did at school today?"

He pushed away all of his own sadness and plastered the biggest smile he could on his face. Then he looked up at her as they entered the barn together.

She shrugged, her expression curious. "I don't know. What did you do?"

"We got to write a paragraph about our favorite famous person! Wanna hear mine?"

Her eyes narrowed, and with a small half-smile, she nodded. "You have the paper with you?"

"Nope. But I remember it."

"Word for word?"

She sounded surprised, like that was not...normal. But he'd always had a good memory. So it was normal for him, and he decided he wouldn't allow himself to react. Instead, he grinned up at her again.

"Yup! It started like this: 'The most famous person I know, who also happens to be my favorite famous person, is my mom. Her name is Lois Lane, and she is an award-winning journalist who works for the Daily Planet...'"

<<You really are the best. My perfect little boy. How is it that you just know?>>

Her half-smile turned into a full smile, and he felt some of her sadness fade, replaced by love and joy and pride. He continued, his heart feeling just a little bit lighter.

"My mom was the youngest journalist ever to receive a Kerth Award, but that's not what makes her special. What makes her special to me is how much she cares about the world and about those around her. She works every day to help others, and..."

13

He hadn't slept at all. He'd lain awake all night long, listening for his dad. Sometimes there'd been snippets of thoughts or feelings, but mostly...just a quiet. Not the empty quiet, though. Not that terrible, dark, empty silence. Something different, like a gentle presence surrounding him, accompanying him.

And an anticipation. Like how he felt too.

Toward morning, as he could see light begin to filter in through the curtains in his bedroom, the presence began to grow. And finally, by the time his mom knocked on his door to wake him up at seven, he felt a strange energy that he hadn't felt before, and the words started to become much stronger, more clear, and without the heavy exhaustion that had always shrouded them before.

<<I can see the Sun, kiddo. And it's so wonderful...

because that means I'm almost home.>>

Tears sprang to his eyes as he sat up in bed.

<<You...you're really almost here? I...>>

He reached up and wiped the tears off his cheeks just as his mom poked her head in the room. Her tired smile and slight darkening under her eyes reminded him that she'd been up most of the night too, and he felt his stomach drop. He had felt her awake, unsettled; on occasion, he'd even "heard" her crying softly. But he'd tried very hard not to pry.

And now, he just wanted to take away her sorrow and pain. He smiled as big as he could for her.

"Good morning, Mom," he said. Her smile seemed to grow more genuine as their eyes met, and he felt her love hit him like a bright burst of sunshine, followed almost immediately by a wave of love from his dad.

<<So beautiful. Your mother is amazing, Jon.>>

<<She is. And she's the best mom ever.>>

<<I always knew she would be.>>

"Time to get up, sweetie. Your grandma is making blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Hurry so you have enough time to eat before the bus arrives."

Jon nodded. "Okay, Mom. I'll be down in just a few minutes."

He dressed quickly in shorts and a T-shirt, hurried through brushing his teeth, and trotted down the stairs, all the while feeling that same energy and warmth from his dad.

<<Three hours?>>

<<Two hours, forty-one minutes, sixteen seconds.>>

He glanced at the clock on the wall as he slid into his seat at the kitchen table, grinning from ear to ear, and his grandma almost immediately set a plate in front of him piled high with pancakes and eggs and sausage. She smiled back at him and leaned over to kiss the top of his head.

An intense ache from his father was accompanied by a single-word message. *<<Mom...>>*

"Boy, you're in a good mood this morning, dear. Is something exciting happening at school today?"

And it was like she'd splashed a bucket of cold water on him.

School.

Right.

"N-no, Grandma. Actually, I..." He turned toward where his mom now stood at the counter, sipping her coffee while eating a piece of toast and flipping through the morning newspaper. "I can't go to school today. I... need to...stay home today, actually."

Surprise jumped at him from both of the women in the room, and at the same time, he felt confusion from his father, although the voice in his head stayed quiet.

"You can't go to school?" his mother asked, her

eyebrows raised. "You *need* to stay home?"

He nodded and lowered his gaze. He had no plan, no idea what he was going to say or tell them. He felt a strong emotion from his dad, which he somehow quickly identified as uncertainty.

<<I have to be home when you get here.>> Jon argued silently. And he felt agreement, but with a twinge of reluctance.

"I'm gonna need a bit more than that, Jon."

He looked up from his pancakes, which still sat untouched on his plate. His mother had set down her newspaper and coffee and stood with her arms crossed over her chest, shaking her head slightly. He bit his lip and looked away again.

"I... It's just that..."

<<Tell her the truth, kiddo.>> It was just a gentle nudge, and he felt all of his father's love surround him. He closed his eyes. He wanted to tell her. He did. But... *<<I thought... I thought she knew already.>>*

He shook his head. "No, I..."

<<No, I didn't tell her. I...can't tell her. I... What if you're not real? I mean, I think you're real, and I hope... But if I tell her, and then you're not actually real, it would — >>

He stopped abruptly as his mom sat down next to him at the table, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

"Jon, you have to go to school, sweetie," she said softly. "I know it's been a rough week, with everything that happened over the weekend. But...school is really very important, and unless you're not feeling well, you're gonna need to go to school."

"I can't," he argued feebly. "I really need to be home when..." He felt tears in his eyes again, along with another gentle nudge from his father.

<<You can tell her, kiddo. I'm real, I promise.>>

<<That's exactly what someone who's not real would say!>>

<<Ha, well, I guess I can't really argue with that.>>

"When what, Jon?" There was an exasperation to her tone, and when he looked up at her again, he saw and felt how unbelievably tired she was. *<<I don't have the energy to argue today... Please, Jon.>>* A deep sigh, accompanied by a sharp pain in his head.

He frowned, jumped up out of his chair, and reached out to hug her. "I'm sorry, Mom. I just...don't want to leave you today. I want to be home with you today. It's... important to me."

"Oh, Jon."

Her arms wrapped around him, returning the embrace, comforting him. And with a twinge of guilt, he ignored the voice in his head telling him, *<<The truth, kiddo,>>* and instead, he held her tighter and exhaled a shuddering

breath.

“Please, Mom. Please let me stay home with you today. Just today. Please.”

Maybe it wasn’t fair to her that he beg like he was. But he really, really needed to stay home. And...if the voice in his head really was his dad’s, then in less than three hours, she would know the truth, and she’d understand.

He pulled out of her embrace and sniffled for good measure. “Please, Mom.”

<<That’s laying it on real thick there, kiddo. You could just tell her the truth you know.>>

<<You don’t know how much she’s been hurting!>>
The words burst from him in anger, and he buried his head back in his mom’s shoulder as he pulled himself into her embrace again. <<She’s...so sad. All the time. I...can feel it. I can’t tell her. I can’t.>>

His dad didn’t respond, and a silence settled over the room again. He felt his grandma come up and kneel down next to them, her hand setting on his back. And his mom trembled as she let out a measured breath.

“Sweetheart...I’m sorry, but you really do have to go to school today. But how about I’ll pick you up after school, and we’ll go to the park for a bit. You can play at the playground. And we’ll grab smoothies from Mrs. Ellison’s shop. The weather is supposed to be — ”

He shook his head. “No. No, I can’t — I won’t go today. I — I’m sorry, Mom.” Then he pulled away and took off across the room and out the front door, not bothering to put his shoes on.

<<Jon, what are you doing, kiddo?>>

But Jon didn’t answer. He was too busy wiping the tears from his eyes as he ran down the dirt path toward the cornfields.

14

There was a river at the back of the property. His grandpa used to bring him out there, and they’d skip rocks and talk. Or sometimes not talk. His grandpa didn’t always feel like talking, really.

But that’s where he decided to go. They hadn’t been there in a long time, not since the previous fall, he thought. So he hoped no one would come looking for him there. That is, at least not for another two hours and some minutes...

And so, blocking out all thoughts, even those of his dad, he ran and ran and ran until he made it through the maze of corn, out the other side of the field, and then down the slight embankment to the very edge of the river. Panting, he dropped to the ground, pulled his legs up to his chest, and buried his head in his knees. His lungs burned from the effort, and his feet ached. And he was cold too, he realized. The morning was chilly, especially for early June,

and he shivered as he gripped his knees and tried to stop crying.

In the distance, he heard his mom’s panicked voice calling his name, and guilt bubbled up inside of him.

What was he doing? And, which was worse? This — this making her chase after him, frantically looking for him, worrying and calling his name...? Or possibly giving her false hope — telling her he’d been hearing his dad’s voice, hearing his dad tell him he was on his way home...?

Maybe...maybe this was worse. Maybe he was making everything worse. He stifled a sob and shook his head. *I’m sorry, Mom. I —*

<<Kiddo, I’m almost there, really. Please, go back inside. You shouldn’t — >>

<<Leave me alone! I can’t... I don’t know if I can trust you! What if...what if you’re not real?!>>

He didn’t want to hear an answer. And so, he screwed his eyes shut and pushed hard against his dad’s presence, imagining a wall surrounding him, blocking out everything. The empty silence returned then, although it seemed to press down on him, straining against the weight of the sounds trying to invade his mind.

And it was hard — to keep the wall up. It took all of his concentration, all of his focus. But it helped him, at least for a while, to ignore the voices — the actual voices — calling his name. And it helped him to forget how cold he was and how hungry he was and...and all the guilt.

However, after some time — he really had no idea how much time had passed or how long he’d been sitting in the same position — it got to be too difficult to keep up the wall, to block everything out, and he dropped his guard a bit.

Immediately, he felt his father’s presence again — a rush of worry and love and fear.

<<Jon, kiddo, are you okay?>>

He shook his head in response.

<<Not okay. No. Nothing is okay. Not until you’re home. When will you get here?>>

Before his father could answer, he heard his mom and his grandma and his grandpa, all calling him. He felt their fear and his mom’s panic. And he heard her words, repeating over and over in her mind, reaching out to him. <<God, Jon, where are you? Please, baby, please come back to me.>>

Guilt hit him again. Why was he doing this?

His father seemed close to panic now too, and Jon felt him reach out again, his voice measured and gentle but also with a hint of fear. <<I’m so close, buddy. Only an hour now. Please, kiddo. Your mom is so scared. She needs you.>>

She did. She did need him. He knew it. He could feel it.

But he couldn't bring himself to move.

Instead, he pressed his face to his knees harder and cried. Everything around him swirled. The voices, the thoughts, the feelings all became one single haze, and he could no longer tell everything apart. All he knew was that *he* hurt too. And *he* was scared too. And *he* needed to know for sure.

<<Tell me again, Dad. Tell me. How...how long until you get here? Please.>>

The response was immediate and clear. <<Forty-nine minutes, kiddo.>>

<<I can't wait that long. I need you now.>>

<<You can. I promise. I'm almost there.>>

"No! I can't! I need you now!" He heard himself sobbing, the sound echoing out across the cornfields behind him.

"Jon?! Oh my God, Jon! Martha, Jonathan, he's over here!"

A wave of relief — his mom's relief — overwhelmed him, and when his mom dropped down onto the damp soil next to him, her arms pulling him against her into a tighter hug than he thought he'd ever felt before, he let himself cry into her. And he clung to her again.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry. I'm..."

"Shh, sweetie. Shh, it's okay. It's — it's okay. Everything is fine. You're okay. You're okay."

<<Forty-six minutes, kiddo.>>

"He's almost here, Mom. But I'm so scared it's not real. I'm so scared, Mom. Please tell me it's real," Jon wept, no longer able to hold it in.

Her voice was kind and soothing as she answered. "Shh, sweetie. Let's go inside now. Everything is going to be okay. Shh."

And she lifted him up gently as he continued to cling to her, his eyes shut tightly and his crying muffled into her shoulder. She carried him back to the house, continuing to whisper softly to him the whole way, even as she shook with both fear and relief.

15

They tried to get him to talk beyond just saying, "I'm sorry."

But he found he couldn't.

Just like how he suddenly couldn't feel their emotions or hear their thoughts or sense his dad's presence.

Maybe it had all been one Even Bigger Lie. Maybe he'd been telling himself this Even Bigger Lie ever since Friday, since he'd learned — or thought he'd learned — about their Big Lie.

Maybe *he'd* been the one making it all up.

Jon curled up in his mom's arms, completely exhausted and numb. His grandma covered them both with a heavy

blanket, and some of the warmth slowly returned to his hands and feet. And his mom continued to rock them slowly back and forth, murmuring to him quietly, her cheek pressed up against the top of his head.

"I'm sorry," he said again, his voice shaking. "I'm sorry. I..."

His mom sniffled and shook her head. "No, sweetie. I'm sorry. You tried to tell me something. You tried to tell me you needed to stay home today, and I should have listened. I know that sometimes..." She paused, and her arms tightened around him. "...sometimes things can get overwhelming, and...you've had a whole lot going on this last week. And I should have listened."

He couldn't argue with her there. He really had had a lot going on the last week, although she didn't know exactly what all that was. And now...now seemed like a good time to tell her the truth.

He snuggled up against her more, sucking in a deep breath, and then he opened up his mind and reached out, focusing with all of his concentration.

A heart racing. Then relief and love. <<God, kiddo, there you are. I lost you for a bit. Are you safe? Are you okay? Only... God, only seven minutes, pal. I'm... I can see the farm. I can see it.>>

Tears came to his eyes, and he started crying again. <<I'm...inside. With Mom. And...and Grandma and Grandpa. S-seven minutes?>>

<<Six minutes, twenty-nine seconds until landing.>>

"He's almost here. He's almost here, Mom." He opened his eyes and leaned back to look up at her. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "He says..." Jon paused and looked across the room to where his grandparents sat at the table. He felt another rush of emotion from his dad. "He says he can see the farm now. He says he's..."

<<Five minutes, forty-five seconds.>>

"...he's almost here."

Jon buried his head back into his mom and cried again, clinging to her, his arms wrapping up and around her neck. He felt her confusion, and when she spoke, he could tell she chose her words carefully.

"And when you say, 'he,' you mean...?"

"D-dad," Jon blurted out. "I mean Dad. I can hear him. His voice in my head. Just like..."

"Just like you could hear us thinking?" His grandma's soft voice rose from across the room, and Jon lifted up his head again and nodded.

"Martha, what are you talking about?" his mother asked, her arms still holding him tightly as she shifted them a bit on the couch.

And then all the voices did that thing again where they swirled around him, everything becoming indistinct. He heard his grandma's voice, but he only managed to catch

some of the words. Something about eggs and superhearing. And something about his grandpa's illness. Then his grandpa's voice saying something about telepathy and about Jon being half-Kryptonian.

But he stopped trying to make sense of it, stopped trying to pay attention. Because at that moment, he heard a quiet sound from outside — the creak of the top step on the front porch — and he felt a now-familiar presence surrounding him with love and hope and anticipation.

He sat upright, startling his mom, and his eyes shot to the front door.

The knock was quiet, hesitant almost. But it was...real. It was real and tangible and he'd heard it.

He'd really heard it.

Without waiting for anyone else to move first, he leapt up out of his mom's arms, covered the distance to the door in only a few strides, and reached out to yank the door open.

Sunlight and warmth burst into the room, and in front of him, just on the other side of the threshold, stood a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair and kind eyes, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt.

All of the air rushed out of his lungs, and tears began falling down his cheeks as the man knelt down to Jon's level. And then, blinking back tears, the man said in a trembling voice, "Hey, kiddo. I made it. Sorry it took so long. I —"

Jon lunged forward into his father's arms and was instantly enveloped in the best hug he'd ever had. The best hug ever.

"You're here, and you're real. You're really real," Jon mumbled.

"I promised you I was," his dad said quietly, and a gentle kiss pressed against the top of his head. Then, with a long sigh, his father stood, lifting Jon with strong arms, and more overwhelming emotions — not just his dad's — flooded him.

Jon soon felt himself surrounded by his family — his mom and grandma and grandpa all joining in for a big group hug. And there were tears. Lots of tears. And murmurs of, "I love you." And lots of, "I'm so sorry," mostly from his dad, followed quickly by more tears.

Finally, Jon pulled back a bit, and he shook his head as his eyes met his dad's, an intense wave of wonder and love and regret filling him.

"Jon, I'm —"

<<*We saved a slice of pie for you.*>>

The interruption seemed to surprise his dad, but only briefly. Then a small smile formed on his dad's lips, and the older man chuckled. <<*The apple pie? I was...I was just joking, you know.*>>

"Well, but it's your favorite, right?"

And a single tear slid down his dad's cheek as he nodded, closed his eyes, and pulled Jon back in for another hug.

<<*It is my favorite. Thank you, kiddo.*>>

Jon shook his head and held onto his dad tighter, fully intending to never let him go. And as they walked together over to the kitchen table and his grandma hurried to get the rest of the apple pie out of the fridge, Jon closed his eyes again.

<<*Thank you, Dad. Thank you for being real.*>>

THE END