

The morning had made its appearance with a bright sun and a beautiful blue sky. Winter days were giving way to the long awaited spring and the air seemed to carry the aromas of the fields in bloom. Like every day Kid rode his faithful mare to town for his daily duties as a deputy marshal. Last night he hardly got any shut eye again and he didn't feel like eating much either. Louise had left three days ago and he couldn't stop thinking about her all the time.

The incident with Sally and her husband had never been mentioned again and in the following weeks Lou had taken over working around the ranch with boundless energy. He had to admit that her dismissal from the hotel had brought about some improvement in their life together. So far Louise had shown little or no interest in the ranch, the dream that they had talked so much about and now was a reality. However, since she was home all the time and reasoning that she needed to earn her keep, the ranch had been a linking element between the couple. Lou genuinely devoted a great deal of her days to her work around the property. There was a lot to do every single day but she never seemed to get tired. She didn't care whether she had to muck out stalls, feed and clean the animals, or exercise the horses. She did everything without a single complaint. Kid knew that she had always loved to work with horses and that love was now visible in her daily duties. Kid was happy that finally something had somehow brought them together and now he had an excuse to talk to her without having to touch any delicate matters like their marital problems. Lou still was as passive in their conversations as she has been in all these long months, but at least she seemed interested in what he had to tell her relating the ranch.

Kid couldn't help but look up at his wife with awe. He didn't know how, but she managed to have the house in perfect condition, have the meals ready at the exact times to eat and still finish all her chores around the ranch. To Kid's delight she had even begun riding again and some days she spent hours on her horse. When Kid had returned from the war, he cherished some good memories from the dozens of times they had gone riding together. They had always enjoyed those moments and riding had been a constant element in their awkward courtship years ago. However, since the day all their problems had begun, Lou had stopped riding altogether and the only horse she came near was the one she hitched to the wagon when going to town. It was as if she had denied herself everything that formed an intrinsic part of herself and that included her passion for riding and horses. So in all these long months Kid had taken care of Lightning for her and it had also been him who rode the beautiful black mare regularly. In a way, being near the horse Louise loved most dearly made him feel closer to her, but now that she had begun riding again, he had left the task to her gladly. Although he couldn't share these rides with her as they used to, Kid felt happy that she had opened the door separating her from everything just a crack, enough to let something fill some of her lonely world. Many times Kid had felt tempted to join her in one of those rides, but he hadn't even dared to ask her. He was afraid to do something that could break the streak. In all these months he had learned that she couldn't be rushed to do anything. Every time he had tried to do something to help her, the results had been just the opposite of what he had intended. So after his multiple failures he had learnt that he had to wait patiently and hopefully Louise would get over this present situation. She should be the one to take the first step towards her recovery and nobody else.

It had been three days ago that she had literally shocked him. Kid had returned from town that day at the usual time and not seeing her around, he had begun looking for her. Normally she was either finishing the last chores on the ranch or fixing dinner in the kitchen, so it had surprised him not to catch sight of her in those usual spots. Kid had headed for the master bedroom straightaway and as soon as the room came into sight, he had stopped dead in his tracks. The image welcoming him had made fear creep into his very soul. Dressed in her old clothes from her days in the Pony Express, Louise was folding some of her clothes neatly and shoved them in a carpet bag placed on top of the big bed. She had begun wearing her old pants and hat since she had started working on the ranch or riding her horse, so it wasn't such a

surprise for Kid to see her in that attire, but obviously she was now going somewhere other than for a simple ride. The first thought in Kid's mind had been that she was finally going to carry out her threats and this was actually the end of them. The notion sent a stabbing pain to his heart and he felt unable to move, talk or even breathe.

Sensing somebody in the room, Lou looked up to find her husband's figure at the door, his eyes staring at her, but she didn't say a word and continued her packing silently. It took Kid some minutes to get over the impression of the image and finally he walked into the room and asked almost in a stammer, "Wh... where are you going, Lou?"

She hadn't stopped the task at hand and without looking at him she answered without much enthusiasm, "Off to Saint Jo to see my sister. She arrived a couple of days ago and wants to see me. Got the letter today."

At her words Kid had felt an immense sensation of relief and let out the breath that he hadn't been aware he'd been holding. Smiling broadly he added, "I'd love to see little Theresa; it's been so long. Why can't she make it to Rock Creek?"

"Dunno," she simply said.

"Are you riding all the way to Saint Joseph?" he had asked and Lou just nodded. Kid didn't really warm to the idea of his wife riding so far on her own. Although in the past she had ridden hundreds of miles on a daily basis, and still now she was more than capable to do that, Kid couldn't help but worry. Even in her old riding clothes she couldn't hide the fact that she was a woman and the thought of somebody hurting her scared him to death. However, he decided not to voice his opinion and instead he had asked again, "When will you be coming back?"

Lou had finished packing the bag and now was busy fastening its straps. She hadn't bothered to answer her husband and carried on with what she was doing. Her silence unnerved him and he tried once more, "Lou?" As she remained silent, Kid grabbed her by the arm and repeated the question in a tense voice. "You are coming back, are you?" Lou instantly yanked her arm free and finally answered his question, feeling annoyed at his inquisitiveness, "I don't know. In a week, I guess, all right?"

Louise had left that day and not many words had been exchanged between husband and wife in their good-byes. Kid had stood on the porch, watching her get ready and when it had been the time, Lou had approached him. To his utter surprise she had gazed at his eyes just for a brief second and said in a very soft voice, "Take care, Kid." He had looked at her with a baffled expression, trying to find something else behind her words. He couldn't erase the fear that she might leave for good, but at that moment he found her eyes showed a calmness that they hadn't had for a long time. Just for a moment he didn't see anything else but softness and in that instant he knew that despite everything and his fears, she would be coming back. Lou had looked away from him and his scrutinizing eyes and hurried to mount her horse. Without even a last look at her husband she had turned the horse and ridden off. Kid remained on the porch watching her figure become smaller and smaller till his eyes couldn't see her anymore; he was still there when only a cloud of dust was visible from his position and even when the dust had settled and there was nothing in sight, Kid stood there; his eyes fixed on the horizon. He didn't know how long he had stayed in the same position. He wished that all those days she'd be away would pass as quickly as possible. Barely a few minutes had gone by since her departure and he was already missing her. It would be a very long week and Kid had known then and there that he would hate every second of it. He had been right. These three days had felt like weeks and he couldn't wait for her return. The house seemed bigger and colder, and despite their present problems, he now realized how much he needed his wife in his life. She might not talk, smile or even look at him, but Kid missed her presence terribly. He was used to seeing her every day and really loved to watch her in her daily routine. She brought some kind of peace to his mind and at the same time it disturbed him so much to have her so near and to feel her so far. Kid wished he

could let her know how much she meant in his life. Maybe if she knew that all he cared about was to be with her, Lou would realize that there was no sense in denying themselves a future together. But how to make her see? Kid wondered as he rode his horse along Rock Creek's main street. Every day he came up with the same question, but the answer to this seemed difficult and almost impossible to grasp.

Kid stopped Katy just outside the marshal's office and eased off the horse skillfully. After securely tethering it to the usual post, he headed for the jailhouse and before actually stepping inside, the upset voice of a woman reached his ears. "Criminals. That's what they are. Some criminals!" When Kid finally reached the premises, his eyes fell on Teaspoon's standing figure; his hands resting on his sides and his expression showing that he was far from pleased. He was having an apparently heated conversation with a middle-aged lady, who Kid recognized as Mrs. Burrows. The woman was reputed to be a popular busy-body in Rock Creek and Kid knew from Lou that she was a very particular character in the town and only a few were ready to befriend her. The lady was a widow and had no children of her own; so she lived in a farm not far from town all by herself. In the few seconds before his presence was noticed by the two others, Kid attentively studied the lady's profile. Her face and the rest of her feature were extremely thin, as if all of her was just skin and bones. Her hair tied up taut in a bun made her peculiar visage more evident to the onlooker; her sinister eyes, her tight mouth and her general sour expression. Teaspoon seemed to be running out of patience and he began a bit too strong, "What the h....," he cleared his throat as a way to cover his blunder and after a beat he continued, "What on earth do you expect me to do, Ma'am?"

"You're the law here and responsible for this town," the woman spoke in a very high-pitched tone. "I already explained the situation to you!!!"

Kid walked in the small office and as his steps resounded inside the building, Teaspoon turned his eyes to him and the young man could bet that the marshal had never looked so happy to see him. "Mrs. Burrows, do you know my deputy?"

The lady studied Kid with her scrutinizing eyes and said in a cold tone, "Of course I do. How are you, Mr. McCloud?"

Kid tipped his head to the woman in greeting. "Ma'am" The lady instantly turned her attention to Teaspoon once again and fixed her icy eyes on the marshal.

Teaspoon coughed nervously, trying to hide his annoyance with the lady and addressed his next words to Kid. "Mrs. Burrows here's having a small problem with ..."

The lady didn't let the marshal finish his explanation as she exclaimed visibly irritated. "Small!!! You call having my house vandalized a small problem!!! A poor lonely woman like myself doesn't deserve such hideous treatment. It's absolutely outrageous."

"With all my respects, Mrs. Burrows, I don't think..." Teaspoon tried to speak but the lady seemed not to hear him or just opted not to, and instead continued in the same shrill and dramatic tone.

"They destroyed all my plants in the orchard, set the animals loose and I even had to put out the beginning of a fire in the barn. Do you call that small? They're nothing but criminals!!!"

The woman's words hooked Kid's attention at once. Even though he couldn't say that he liked the woman, she really seemed to be in the middle of an undesirable situation. Considering the woman's reputation for creating enemies among the population of Rock Creek it wasn't really surprising if some of her neighbors might be performing the deeds out of revenge or spite. What Kid did find strange was that Teaspoon didn't seem to take the matter very seriously. Whatever the lady's character was, the marshal as representative of the law in the town should do

something about it and punish that kind of barbaric acts.

“Do you happen to know who did all that, Ma’am?” Kid asked.

“Of course I know,” she answered matter-of-factly. “Them.” The woman pointed to the corner in the opposite end of the room and Kid’s eyes followed the direction. Then he saw them, sitting shyly very close to each other and looking at the three other people with big eyes. There were two little boys; the eldest, Kid imagined, couldn’t be more than eight years old and as he scrutinized them, they stared at him intently and with curiosity. Kid knew that the boys weren’t from Rock Creek. This was a small town; everybody knew everybody and he had never seen them before. The eldest boy was holding the other child’s hand in a protective manner. Both of them had chestnut hair and big brown eyes which instantly reminded Kid of Louise. Their appearance was clean and tidy, but their clothes were old and worn, which gave them an air of complete defencelessness. Teaspoon’s voice resounded in the building and brought Kid back to reality. “Mrs. Burrows here intended to adopt these children but...”

“I don’t want them!” the lady’s high-pitched voice interrupted the marshal’s account as she had been doing the entire conversation. “They’re nothing but a couple of savages!!! I’ve always been a God-fearing woman and now I tried to give these uprooted children a good Christian home. And how do they repay me? With nothing but ungratefulness. That will show me to be so soft-hearted!”

Kid listened to the lady’s outburst patiently. At Teaspoon’s words about the woman adopting the two boys, his first thought had been one of pity for the two children. Living with Mrs. Burrows was an experience that he wouldn’t want to experiment for anything in the world. What the Southerner didn’t understand was why the woman and the children were in Teaspoon’s office. Mrs. Burrows could be a quite peculiar character, to say the least, but surely she couldn’t be thinking of reporting them for just children’s mischief.

“I told you over and over again,” Teaspoon said, trying to control his irritation, “that a domestic matter like this doesn’t concern the local authorities.”

“Well, it doesn’t concern me anymore,” the lady insisted. “The fella from the orphanage, one Mr. Ferguson, will be coming to collect them on Saturday.” She talked about the boys as if they were some kind of unwanted merchandise and now Kid understood why she was so loathed in Rock Creek. “I don’t care what you do with them but I won’t have them in my house one more minute.”

“But...” Teaspoon tried once more but the lady didn’t give him a chance. “Good day. Marshal Hunter. Mr. McCloud.” With those words the woman swirled around and dashed out of the office despite Teaspoon’s weak attempts to stop her.

“Mrs. Burrows!” the marshal called after her. “Mrs. Burrows!” He tried to catch up with her but the lady seemed to have turned a deaf ear to anything he had to say and she had already crossed the street on her way to retrieve her wagon from the stables. Teaspoon stood on the threshold of his office, his arms rested on his hips, looking at the woman’s retreating figure with an annoyed expression. After a while he went back inside, shaking his head at the woman’s sudden flit and wondering what he was supposed to do with two small children.

“Seems you find yourself in the middle of a situation, Teaspoon,” Kid said from his perched position on the marshal’s desk, trying in vain to hide his amusement.

The marshal looked at him with a miffed expression. “You always been that sharp, Kid?” he asked sarcastically and without waiting for his deputy’s reply, he approached the two boys, who were still on the same spot and position since Mrs. Burrows had left them half an hour ago. “Uh...” Teaspoon began awkwardly, not sure how to talk to two small kids. “What are your

names, boys?" he finally managed to ask.

"Are you gonna lock us up, Marshal?" the eldest boy asked instead of answering the question; his voice expressing a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

"Well," Teaspoon began, casting a sideways look at Kid, who had positioned himself next to him. "We'll have to see about that later. But first things first. You know, it's polite to make an introduction when you meet somebody for the first time." The boy furrowed his brow in confusion and the marshal hurried to explain himself better. "I'm Marshal Teaspoon Hunter and this one here is my deputy. What are your names, son?"

"I'm Jack Martin and this is my brother Tommy," he said with a soft voice, as if he were telling a well-hidden secret. "Are you gonna put us in jail, Marshal Hunter?" Jack asked again, watching Teaspoon with big eyes.

The old marshal cleared his throat and added with a fake serious expression. "I'll overlook the matter this time if you give me your solemn word that you'll be good boys from now." Both brothers bobbed their heads up and down in unison and Teaspoon smiled amused. Throwing a worried look at Kid he continued awkwardly, "Uh... Mrs. Burrows is... uh... she's ... something unexpected, I'm afraid, has come up and she'll be unable to take care of you two as she first intended."

"She doesn't want us," Jack stated, showing no indication that the notion upset him in any way. "She told us."

"Well, uh..." Teaspoon continued in the same awkward manner. He didn't find words to ease the circumstances for the two boys. Inwardly he was cursing Mrs. Burrows for putting him in this fix without asking for it. He had never been around children very much, and in this rare occasion he didn't know how to handle the situation. "The thing is that you're stuck with me till this Mr. Ferguson comes."

The children didn't say anything and then Teaspoon felt somebody knocking on his shoulder. He turned to see Kid, who was gesturing to talk to him aside. They moved away from the two boys and when they were out of earshot, Teaspoon asked, "What now, Kid?" Despite having dealt with lawless and more than despicable people a great part of his life and being able to control any dangerous situation with an admirable calmness, the old marshal now felt that his nerves were on edge with this matter.

"Teaspoon, you surely won't be considering to have the boys here?" Kid asked in a whisper. "Where will they be sleeping tonight? In one of your cells with the local drunkards as neighbors?"

Teaspoon didn't like the chiding tone in Kid's voice. He hadn't asked for the present situation and hadn't even had the time to think about it carefully. The problem had fallen on his hands unexpectedly and for the moment he didn't have many options. When young Jesse had happened to stay with him, he had willingly accepted to make the jailhouse his place of residence. Maybe it was different with two small kids, but there was nothing else he could offer. His own lodgings above the marshal's office were too small and unsuitable even for Teaspoon himself. He had never been too fussy about the place where he spent his nights as long as it was warm and cosy. "What would you like me to do, Kid? It's not like I have many options," he said annoyed.

"They can stay at my place. You know I have more than enough room and they'll feel much more comfortable than here," Kid offered.

Teaspoon looked at him with a serious expression for a few moments. "Now Kid," he

began, "I don't think that's a smart move on your part."

"Why?" Kid asked perplexed.

"Have you given a thought to your wife?" the marshal asked. "You know how sensitive she is about stuff like babies or anything related. Don't you remember what happened when Sally Douglas told her she was pregnant?"

Kid pressed his lips together in a bitter gesture. Although Teaspoon had reasons for that opinion, Kid couldn't help but feel annoyed. "Lou's in St Joseph, Teaspoon, and won't be back for a few days. And even if she wasn't away, I'm sure she wouldn't mind." He stopped for a brief moment and then he added, "She's not the nasty woman that you all seem to think."

"I didn't say she was, Kid!" the marshal retorted hurt.

"Lou's just going through a bad spell at the moment," Kid insisted. Lately he found himself in the need to defend his wife even though he really couldn't understand what was wrong with her most of the time.

"I know that. I just don't want you to add a new reason for problems between you two," Teaspoon said, slapping Kid on the back encouragingly. "You wouldn't want these two young children to be in the middle of warfare."

"Things couldn't get worse between us than they are," Kid muttered morosely. "But I assure you that everything will be all right. By the time Lou comes back, the boys will already have gone."

Teaspoon looked at him briefly and watching his former rider's confident stance he had to finally give in. "All right, Kid. But don't come to me with regrets later. I wouldn't be smiling if these two are really like Mrs. Burrows said. Lou will literally kill you if she doesn't have a house to come home to," Teaspoon said teasingly and Kid let out a brief laugh. They approached the two children again and the marshal talked to them. "Boys, change of plans. As we're a bit short of space here, you know, we need the cells to lock up real bandits." He stopped for a second, enjoying the sheer attention these young boys were paying him. "So Mr. McCloud here thinks you can stay with him in his house. It's a nice ranch with lots of horses and space to play in."

Kid furrowed his brow at the marshal's words. Things were running smoothly for him now but he was far from having 'lots' of horses. Teaspoon always had a tendency to go over the top in his accounts and in a way that made him the peculiar character he was. The young man crouched before the boys and asked, "So what do you think?"

Jack looked at his brother for an instant and then he turned his attention back to Kid. "Will you let us ride a real horse?"

"Well, we could see to that," he answered and the boys' faces lit with a big smile. "So what do you say?" Kid repeated and the two children nodded their heads simultaneously. "Good," Kid let out with a grin, "As soon as I finish my day here, we'll go, all right?" Both brothers bobbed their heads again in unison.

Later that day Kid and the two children were getting ready to head for the ranch. He had hired a wagon from the livery and had tied Katy on the back of the carriage. In all the hours the boys had stayed in Teaspoon's office, they had been on their best behavior. Kid was beginning to doubt that Mrs. Burrows' story was completely true, or at least she had surely exaggerated her account. As the three of them left the jailhouse and reached the buckboard, Jack kept staring wide-eyed at the mare tied behind the carriage. Kid had helped Tommy onto the wagon and smiled at seeing the elder boy's starry gaze.

"Is this horse yours, Sir?" Jack asked.

"Uh huh," Kid nodded and rounding the wagon, he patted his mare on the neck affectionately. "This is Katy, my favorite girl. So I gather you like her, eh?"

The boy nodded vigorously and asked, "Will you let me ride her, Mr. McCloud?"

Kid approached the child and lifted him onto the wagon seat and for a few moments he remained silent. "We'll see," Kid finally said. "Katy's not any horse. She's pretty special and not everybody gets to ride her. If you're a good boy, I'll think about it."

"I will be, I promise," Jack stated without the slightest doubt. "Good," Kid replied and couldn't help but smile. He sat on the wagon's seat and taking the reins he drove off towards his ranch. Kid breathed deeply as the horse moved to a canter. He hadn't really given any thought to what he was getting into when he had offered to take care of the two boys by himself. He really didn't know the first thing about looking after children and he wasn't really sure if Lou being away was a blessing or a real drawback. He missed her and really needed her now with the boys. Maybe she wouldn't appreciate him inviting two strange children to stay in their house, and with all probably she would feel this as an intrusion and attack from his part. Despite his words to Teaspoon, Kid knew that the marshal was mainly right but his sense of pride had won over his common sense. Anyway, Lou wouldn't come back till the boys were gone, so she needn't know about them at all. The thought about her was making him feel very sad all of a sudden, so he tried to fix his attention on something else. He turned to the boys, who had been silent all this time, and asked, "How old are you, Jack?"

"I'm seven," the boy replied proudly.

"And you, Tommy?"

The younger brother looked at him seriously but didn't try to talk. "He's four, sir," Jack answered for him.

"Let your brother do the talking," Kid said softly. The small boy hadn't said a single word since he had met him. Kid imagined that he must be scared and confused after the episode with Mrs. Burrows.

"He's shy and doesn't talk to strangers," Jack explained.

"Is that so, Tommy?" Kid asked and the younger boy nodded. "That's a sensible thing to do, but, Tommy, if you're gonna stay in my house, I'm hardly a stranger."

The boy smiled as Kid ruffled his hair. "We stayed in that woman's house and he didn't talk to her either," Jack said matter-of-factly.

"Did you stay with her for long?" Kid asked again.

"Oh yes, sir," the boy answered, stretching every vowel comically. "Very, very looong. Twooo whooole days."

Kid tried to hide a smile at the boys' answer. He'd also think it very long if he had to bear the lady's presence more than five minutes. "And is it true what she was saying about you two, Jack? Did you do all that?" The boy pulled a serious face and didn't seem eager to answer. "You can talk to me. I won't tell the marshal. It will be our little secret."

The boy nodded and added with a scowl, "She was very mean."

“Well, you weren’t very nice to her either,” Kid said, trying to let them know that he didn’t condone that kind of behavior. He still couldn’t believe that a couple of young children could cause so much havoc.

“She wanted us to call her mother!!!” Jack continued, “She doesn’t look or smell like a ma. Could you call her mother, Mr. McCloud?”

“I guess not,” Kid answered, amused at the thought of him addressing the lady in that manner. “But Mrs. Burrows wanted you two to be part of her family and it’s just logical of her to want to be treated like that.”

“We didn’t want to be adopted!!!” Jack exclaimed stubbornly, “but they made us. She also wanted to change our names. We’re Martins and we already had a ma and a pa. We don’t need new ones!!!”

Kid didn’t say anything. He was really stunned by the assertiveness of the small boy. Jack talked as if he were older than his young age and Kid wondered how his life had been to make him look so grown. However, he didn’t ask him anything further. It was really strange that the boys would really prefer to live in the orphanage than be part of a family again even though that meant to live with Mrs. Burrows. He knew from Lou that life in an orphanage wasn’t really so terrible, but she had always hated it. She had told him that being there was a constant reminder that her ma was dead and nobody else cared about her and her siblings.

The rest of the journey to the ranch was done in silence except for the continuous remarks of Jack about everything. Whereas his brother didn’t utter a single word, the older boy was a chatterbox and always had something to say about anything. When they finally got to the ranch, Jack looked around bedazzled. “Oh, Mr. McCloud, your place is sooo great,” the boy exclaimed, emphasizing every word. “When I grow up, I’ll work with horses like you.”

“I’m glad you like horses,” Kid said with a smile as he helped the boys off the wagon. He led the way to the house and when they were inside, Kid mentally began asking himself what he was going to do with the two little boys the rest of the day. However, he needn’t have worried as the two children kept playing all afternoon while he went about his daily duties around the ranch. Now that Lou was away, he had to do all the chores she had taken upon herself and at the same time he tried to keep the house tidy and neat. So every day he ended up completely worn out and as soon as he got in bed, he crashed exhausted.

Later that day Kid and the two boys sat down for dinner. He had managed to fix something to eat and surprisingly it didn’t taste as bad as he thought it would. With the few things he had found in the cupboards, they could now enjoy some omelettes and roasted potatoes. As the boys seemed hesitant to dig in and eyed the food with wary eyes, he said, “It’s not so bad, boys. We’ll have something better tomorrow, but with Lou gone I haven’t had the time to go for provisions.”

Jack smelled the food on his plate and finally began eating it. Seeing his brother, Tommy followed suit. After a few bites Jack asked, “Who is Lou?”

“She’s my wife,” Kid answered softly. His voice got a tender and melancholic quality whenever he mentioned Louise. “She’s away in St Jo visiting with her sister at the moment.”

“Is she nice?” Jack asked again. “Or is she like Mrs. Burrows?”

Kid couldn’t help but burst out laughing at the boy’s comments. Clearly the lady had made quite an impact on him. Both boys looked at him with confused expressions at his sudden outburst and when he finally sobered, he said, “She’s very nice. Lou’s sweet, kind and is really

fun.” His last words came out in a sad tone as he realized that he was describing the person he had married and not the one she had become.

“Do you have children?” came Jack’s new question.

Kid just shook his head ruefully and then added, “Stop the chitchat, Jack, and eat your food like a good boy.”

“Yes, sir,” and that was the end of the conversation. The three ate in silence till Jack got bored and began his endless talk again. As a matter of fact, Kid really welcomed the two boys’ presence. He had managed to forget his problems with Lou for a few brief moments, but as soon as he had pronounced her name, the reality of their situation had rushed over him strongly. Their problems were too fresh and painful to forget for long. Anyway, the boys’ presence in the house was making the place feel alive and warm again after months of bitter coldness.

As the end of the day approached, Kid felt proud of himself for being able to deal with the two children on his own successfully. Truth to be told, they hadn’t given any problem as they had behaved perfectly well. However, that night as he showed them the rooms where they would be sleeping, he encountered the first difficulty. They were in Theresa’s old bedroom and the two boys eyed everything in the room with troubled expressions.

“Jack, you can sleep here and your brother can sleep in the one next door,” Kid was explaining, without noticing the looks passing between the two brothers.

Jack eyed the bed, the embroidered pink quilt, the flowery curtains and the dolls on top of the chest warily. “It’s a girl’s room,” he said with a scowl.

“Something wrong with that?” Kid asked.

“Mr. McCloud, it’s a girl’s room,” Jack repeated as if that explained the reason for itself. “And Tommy and I have always, always slept in the same room together.”

“So you want to sleep together?” Kid asked even though he already knew the answer. Both boys nodded and Kid sighed silently. He had the hunch that no persuasion would work with them and he’d have to find an alternative place. There was only one option and that would be to let them sleep in his and Lou’s bedroom. While he finally put the boys to sleep in the big bed, Kid felt kind of strange in the room. He hadn’t slept in it in months and ridiculously felt as if he were invading Lou’s domain. Now he was sure he wouldn’t be able to hide from her that he had guests in their house. As soon as she cast a look at the room, she would know. He would never be able to make the bed and tidy the room as neatly as she did. He just hoped that she wouldn’t jump to the wrong conclusion as the time she thought there was something fishy going on between him and Amanda Davis. He’d tell her everything straightaway and bear her reaction as good as he could. The notion of feeling apprehensive of her finding out left him with a bitter sensation. He wondered how they had reached the point that he questioned all his actions in terms of her moods.

When Kid finally made it to his now room for months, he had shushed all the negative thoughts away. He was really tired and welcomed his sleep eagerly. The boys had fallen asleep in no time, the night was peaceful and there was nothing to worry about right now. Kid brought about all these reassuring thoughts as he drifted to sleep without knowing that in just a few hours somebody would walk in his own house and interrupt his sweet dreams.