

Ten days went by and Kid recovered from his wound little by little. A few days later he had been able to leave the bed where he had been confined for over a week. Lou had used all her convincing powers to make him follow the doctor's instructions since he had soon tried to get up as if he hadn't been so critically injured. So with a happy heart Kid had left his bed but still he wasn't allowed to do much, but sit all day along, while Lou took care of everything around the homestead.

During this time Kid and Louise had been able to talk about the problems of the last few months. It was still a fresh wound that hurt too much, but at least now they could talk about it openly, something that Lou had been unable to do so far. However, it wasn't easy at all and for Louise it was still too soon to say that she had really come to terms with the fact that she couldn't have children. Just to say it aloud meant a heart-breaking effort, but she was beginning to realize that she didn't have to live with this pain by herself. Kid had suffered alongside her, but he had been forced to be the strong part and hide his true feelings after her falling into that deep spiral of desperation. In their now open conversations he had given vent to all he had buried within him for her sake. Lou ruefully came to see how wrong she had been and how she had never given any thought to his feelings. Unconsciously she had held a grudge against him because he was the one who, if he wanted to, could decide to have a family. However, she realized that he was somehow as "handicapped" as she was because, as he had repeatedly told her over and over again, they both were two sides of the same coin.

The two boys had definitely been like a breath of fresh air to their life. Lou thought with a smile how they had managed to get through that ice wall she had built between her and the rest of the world. Meeting them had been the beginning of her return to her old self. It had really surprised her how they had woken deep feelings in her so suddenly, and right away she had known that she didn't want to let them go. With a heavy heart she had to admit that she would never become a mother, but she already felt that the two boys had become part of herself, as if they had always been there. The children probably wouldn't now see her or Kid with parental feelings but with time she hoped that they might feel they belonged to them. Louise was just happy to have them and even though she couldn't say what it felt like to be a mother, she imagined that it couldn't differ much from the feelings the boys inspired in her. In any case, it was very different from when her siblings were living with them. Lou never tried to act as a ma for them. There had never been a doubt about it, especially with Jeremiah with whom she was just a few years apart. But now Louise really wanted to become a mother for those two boys; it was a longing that had been born strong in her and she needed to fulfill it. Besides, Kid was clearly overjoyed with the presence of the two children. Lou was sure that he would be a good father figure for them and the notion still brought some bitterness to her heart, knowing that he could really be a father for real had he married somebody else. Yet, she had learnt not to linger on her negative thoughts or what if's, and gradually she came to accept the situation as it was.

The man sent by the orphanage, one Mr. Ferguson, arrived as planned. Kid and Lou had been able to reach an agreement about the two boys and Mr. Ferguson had visibly been pleased when they had told him about their intention to adopt the two brothers. There weren't many people who were ready to accept the responsibility of two children at once. According to Mr. Ferguson, brothers and sisters usually never got the chance to be picked for adoption and in their institution they tended to keep families of siblings together. Mrs. Burrows' determination was a rare occurrence and when they received notice from her, stating that she wanted to send the children back, the news hadn't been such a surprise at all. They were living hard times and the families who chose or were forced to accept adoption usually could take care of a single child. In their orphanage they were packed with many children in the same circumstances as Jack and Tommy since the terrible war had made many orphans in its wild ripping of the country. For that reason whenever a child was adopted, it was a real blessing for the people of the orphanage. Lou was familiar with everything Mr. Ferguson was telling them, her having spent

part of her childhood in a similar institution. From the very beginning she had been pleasantly aware that nobody would be interested in adopting her since she was already quite grown-up when she had gone to live with the nuns. However, she had always feared that somebody could take either of her siblings from her. Couples usually came looking for boys or babies, and more than once a few people had shown their interest in Jeremiah and young Theresa, but fortunately, the nuns would have never allowed the three siblings to be separated.

In a matter of an hour Mr. Ferguson had left the homestead, and Kid and Louise were full of smiles with the knowledge that the boys were now part of their life. The only thing that was left to do was to sign the papers and make it completely legal. On Mr. Ferguson's advice they had begrudgingly agreed to wait a couple of months before sorting out the red tape. The man had insisted that they needed to get settled and be fully aware of the responsibilities they would be facing before they took the final step. Lou hadn't been very happy about it; she was completely sure of what she wanted and no paper would make much difference, but finally she had relented and agreed with these conditions. She knew she wouldn't regret the decision she and Kid had made. Now the boys had been with them for a fortnight and things couldn't be better.

It was the end of the day when Lou plodded down the stairs. As soon as her eyes caught sight of her husband sprawled comfortably on the sofa she smiled brightly. Hearing steps behind him, Kid turned his head and shared a piercing look with her while she walked towards him. "Finally managed to put them to bed. Jack wasn't very happy about beginning school tomorrow," she said as she dropped on the couch across him.

"I imagined he wouldn't be too excited," Kid added with a snigger.

"Figures," Lou muttered under her breath. Letting a sigh wearily, she rested her head on the back of the couch. "God, I'm exhausted," she exclaimed, suddenly feeling the day's tiredness in her body.

Kid looked at her sheepishly. "Lou, I'm really sorry that you have had to shoulder all our responsibilities on your own, the house, the ranch, the children while I haven't pulled my weight around here to help you," he said with a weak voice.

"For goodness' sake, Kid, don't start with that again," Lou protested, ready for the same conversation. Every day he had expressed his regret for the workload she had been forced to cope with because of his wound. "You know I'm more than happy to do this for us. And now I don't want to hear any more of this moaning. You need your rest and don't you dare even think of moving a finger till the doctor says otherwise. You know you can't mess up with me."

Kid chuckled and said teasingly, "I wouldn't dare contradict you." They stared at each other for a few minutes and then Kid added in a husky voice, "You're an incredible woman, Louise McCloud. You've never ceased to amaze since the very beginning." At his words she felt her cheeks go red and lowered her gaze, embarrassed. No matter how long they had been together, he still had the same effect on her. "You're pretty good as well," she managed to say and dared to fix her eyes on his. They kept staring at each other longingly for long minutes but neither dared to move. After a while Kid broke off eye contact and said, "I guess we should get going to bed." Lou simply nodded and, as he rose to his feet, suddenly his face contorted in a grimace and he pressed his hand against his lower abdomen exactly where he had been wounded. Noticing his pained expression, Lou was next to him in no time with an anxious countenance.

"What is it, Kid? Is it the wound?" she asked apprehensively. The doctor had said that his injury was healing and Kid hadn't complained in days, but Lou never stopped worrying. "What is it, Kid?" she repeated as she began unbuttoning his shirt to check his abdomen. The Southerner didn't move while she stooped before him and with a chuckle he said, "It's amazing the stunts one has to play to have your wife touching you."

“Kid!!!” she exclaimed in mocked annoyance, slapping his arm teasingly. He laughed heartily as he drew her into him and surrounding her petite frame with his strong arms, he kissed her deeply and she responded with the same passion. After a while they pulled away slightly and Kid whispered in her ear seductively, “Let’s go to bed, Lou.”

She kept looking at him longingly. “You sure, Kid?” she asked huskily. They hadn’t been on intimate terms yet since he had to be extra careful after being shot. The wait had been harder than what she had initially thought. All her womanly feelings had come back full force and she longed for him with blinding intensity. The few kisses and caresses they shared at night weren’t enough for her any more. She wanted to feel him completely as she used to.

Kid nodded at her question and added, “Doctor McNeil said it would be all right.”

Hearing his words, Lou suddenly disengaged herself from his hold and exclaimed, “Did you ask him ... that?” she blushed violently and knew she wouldn’t be able to look at the good doctor without dying of embarrassment.

“Course not!” Kid promptly replied while he drew her into his hold once again. “He just said that I could go back to my normal routine and ...” he began planting little kisses over her white neck. “I intend loving my wife to be as much part of my routine as mucking out the stables, obviously a much nicer routine.” Feeling his kisses, Lou smiled with pleasure and Kid whispered huskily, “Come on, Lou. Let’s go to bed.”

He grabbed her hand in his and they both scurried up the stairs toward their bedroom among laughs. No sooner had they stepped inside, they began kissing passionately and Kid’s hand instantly began undoing the buttons of her blouse. “Oh Lou, it’s been such a long time,” he muttered between kisses. For a moment their eyes locked hungrily, avidly and then Kid softly touched her lips with his, relishing in the softness of her mouth. But when he tried to deepen the kiss, Lou scurried away from his grasp and he found himself foolishly with his lips pouting in mid-air. “Auntie Lou?” he heard a soft voice calling behind him and when he turned around, he saw Tommy in the middle of their bedroom. Lou was already before the boy, looking visibly embarrassed and clumsily fumbling with the buttons of her open blouse. “Auntie Lou?” Tommy called again. The boy had spontaneously begun using the name for Louise and likewise he called Kid “uncle”. She knelt in front of the boy so both of them were at eye level and, stroking his hair softly, she said, “Tommy boy, why aren’t you sleeping like a good boy?”

“I’m scared,” he muttered, looking at Kid sideways with a serious expression.

“You? Scared? I can’t believe that!” Louise exclaimed exaggeratedly, sharing a knowing look with her husband.

“There’s a monster in there,” Tommy added with a shaky voice.

“My, my, then we’ll have to ask him to leave, won’t we?” she said and the boy nodded vehemently. Tommy led the way out of the bedroom and Louise followed behind him. “I won’t be long,” she told Kid with a coy wink and before stepping out of the bedroom, she turned around and whispered, “From now on we’d better make sure the door’s shut if we don’t want to be caught in the middle of something too embarrassing to explain.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Kid replied teasingly as he laughed heartily, remembering the compromising situation the boy had almost caught them in. They really needed to make a few alterations to their daily life now that they had two other people to think of apart from themselves. Kid imagined that they had a long road ahead of them and they’d have to learn by blundering more than once.

Lou followed the boy into the bedroom he shared with his brother. In the last few days she

had turned Jeremiah's old room into a nice bedroom for the two children. With some help from Teaspoon and Rachel, Louise had added another bed, changed the curtains and even had ordered a bigger wardrobe which would arrive in a few weeks. Lou was intent in making the boys feel as comfortable with them as she could. Even though she was well aware that as it was, they were already in better circumstances than what they had at the orphanage, she just wanted to give them the best she and Kid could. She planned to spare no expense with them and she had already bought more new clothes and some toys for them.

Louise opened the door for Tommy, who had fallen behind, obviously apprehensive of entering the room. "Come on, honey," she urged him in hushed tones and the boy hesitantly stepped inside. "We'd better make as little noise as possible. Your brother's asleep," she whispered as her eyes fell on Jack angelically sleeping in the other bed. Tommy nodded and got into his own bed when Lou gestured him to do so. "Let's see where that ugly monster is," she said as she lit a lamp on top of the dresser and straightaway she began opening drawers, the wardrobe and the curtains as quietly as possible, showing the boy that there was nobody else in the room. "You see, honey?" she asked him while she sat down next to him on the bed. "He must have gone, so you've got nothing to be afraid of, all right?" Tommy nodded doubtfully, still looking around him fearfully. Louise noticed his hesitation and added, "I'll tell you what. We'll leave that lamp lit and what about if I stay here till you fall asleep?" "Please," the boy answered promptly and he shifted so that Lou could lie next to him. As soon as she placed herself in the bed, Tommy snuggled closer against her and placed his head on her chest, which brought a pleasant smile to her lips.

Back in her room Kid was anxiously waiting for her return. He had stripped to his underwear and lay down on the bed while he scanned the book Lou was reading. The silence and the boredom proved to be very trying, and he had to fight the urge to fall asleep. At one point he opened his eyes suddenly, realizing that he had been dozing off. Stretching a hand to reach for Lou, he found her side of the bed untouched and cold. Furrowing his brow he clumsily rose to his feet, not sure how long he had been sleeping but he knew that Louise should have been back by now. He plodded out of his bedroom and on reaching the end of the corridor, Kid tiptoed into the boys' bedroom. Straightaway his eyes fell on Lou's figure fast asleep in Tommy's bed. The boy was hugging her tightly and Kid smiled at the sweet scene before him. Lou had a serene expression on her face and Kid pleasantly realized that she was healing as promptly as the wound on his side. He felt his body shiver at the thought that he had almost lost her in more than one sense and now that she was back to her old self, he couldn't help but think of it as some kind of miracle. The two boys had really been a blessing in their life and had been the real reason for them to go back to the way they had always been. Grabbing a blanket from a chair nearby, he covered Lou and Tommy and kissed them on the forehead tenderly. With one last look Kid walked back to his lonely bed, knowing that their night of expected passion and love would have to be called off for the moment.

Feeling the strange sensation of being watched, Kid opened his eyes suddenly and found himself staring at Lou's smiling face. She was looking down at his eyes intently; her face almost touching his. "Good morning," she whispered huskily and Kid stretched his hand and caressed her cheek. "I believe that we didn't get to finish this outstanding issue last night," she said and lowering her head towards him, she kissed him softly and the kiss became hungrier and more demanding little by little. Kid wrapped his arms around her small frame and he rolled her over on her back so that he hovered over her. They broke the kiss breathlessly and he muttered teasingly, "Why, I understand that you decided to dump me for another man, if I don't recall wrongly." Louise let out a short laugh and added in the same playful tone, "Are you jealous, Kid?" He laughed loudly as he tickled her on the waist, sending her into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. "That boy sure has you wrapped around his little finger, uh?" he whispered and she simply flashed her smile in acknowledgement. They kept staring at each other, drinking in one another's presence and after a while Lou said, "Well, Kid, we still have a few hours before we need to get up and I'm ready to comply with our pending little matter." Hardly had she finished talking when she felt Kid's lips kissing her hungrily and it didn't take her much to respond whole-

heartedly. Everything around them seemed to vanish in that moment and for the first time in many months their bodies met lovingly, releasing all the pent up emotions they had buried in the deepest corner of their hearts.

A couple of hours later a brand new day greeted them with a splendid sun and an azure sky. Kid began the morning feeling full of energy. After a long time life seemed to smile at him. Things couldn't get any better; he had a charming wife who loved him, the ranch was getting better and better every day, the children seemed to be settling down in their home, and especially he felt glad today to be back to his daily tasks. It had really been tiresome for him to stay idle for days long as he wasn't one who enjoyed hanging around without doing anything. He'd have liked to leave his inactivity sooner but Lou would have bitten his head off if he had merely hinted something around those lines. So when the doctor had told him that he could resume his daily activities, he almost jumped in joy. Early this morning he had started the day by visiting the stables and checking what needed to be done. Lou had taken upon herself to care for the ranch while he had been on the mend, but with all the work in the house and the children, she had left some of the less urgent matters on hold. Looking around the stables he couldn't help but feel really proud of her; the horses looked well-groomed and properly fed. As Kid had told her, he just couldn't understand how she had been able to see to everything; she was basically exceptional in all senses. Now he had to begin the training of the horses and have them ready for sale.

After mucking the stalls, Kid headed back to house, eager to enjoy a substantial breakfast with his family. As soon as he opened the door, the smell of coffee wafted up from the kitchen. He plodded across the lounge and as he entered the kitchen, he saw his wife sitting at the table, her attention focused on some papers before her. On seeing him appear, Louise smiled at him brightly and Kid bent over next to her and planted a sweet kiss on her cheek. Lou made a grimace and exclaimed, "Gosh, Kid, you stink of horses."

"Hello, honey. I love you too," he said teasingly as he began filling a bucket with water to wash up. Louise tittered bemused and Kid added, "I thought you liked horses."

"I do, but I don't particularly care for my husband smelling like one," she replied while Kid splashed water and soap on his face and arms.

"Are the boys up yet?" he asked as he dried his hands with a towel.

"Uh huh," she answered without much enthusiasm as she fixed her attention on the papers before her. Kid looked at her with curiosity as he sat down next to her. "What's in those papers that have you all wrapped up, Lou?"

"Uh... it's a couple of letters I've written," she muttered uncomfortably. Kid grabbed the papers from her hand and reading the names that the letters were addressed to he understood her hesitancy. "It was high time I told my brother and sister a couple of things," she added with a thin voice. "I really need to right all my wrongs once and for all."

The Southerner took her hand in his and squeezed it comfortably. "Lou, it's fine if you want to write to them," he said looking straight in her eyes, "but I don't like you sounding as if you have to purge your sins."

"Kid, I didn't act well, especially with you," she mumbled softly, lowering her gaze.

"Lou, look at me," he said, cupping her face in his hands. "I love you more than anything. You know, I'm ready to forget everything about the last months and start anew with no regrets. Can you do that too?"

"But I..." she tried to protest but Kid cut her off straightaway. "Lou..." he insisted, a warning

tinge in his voice. Louise gazed intently into his face and nodding doubtfully, she muttered, "No regrets."

"That's my girl," he exclaimed happily, teasingly kissing the tip of her nose.

"But I..." she tried once more but in that moment the sound of pattering feet reached their ears and when they turned their attention to the source of those sounds, the two boys appeared at the door. Lou rose to her feet as she said, "Come on, boys, time for breakfast." Tommy hurriedly occupied his place at the kitchen table but Jack shuffled across the room with a sullen expression. "Please, Jack, don't pull that long face to me," Louise exclaimed.

The boy sat down next to Kid, who was watching him with a bemused expression. Jack cast a sidelong glance at him and then turned his entire attention to the young man. "Do I need to go to school, Kid?" the boy asked with a hopeful expression.

"I'm afraid so, buddy," he answered ruffling Jack's hair teasingly. The boy snorted, clearly disappointed at his answer. Lou approached and placed a plate before the boy.

"But Tommy's allowed to stay here," Jack protested again while absently picking at the food in his place.

"Honey, I already told you. Your brother's still too young for school. He'll go in good time," Lou replied with a weary voice, tired of having the same conversation over and over again. At her words Tommy beamed a happy smile to his brother and Jack sent him an annoyed glare. "And now stop playing with your food and eat!"

"Jack, you know you have to go to school," Kid tried patiently. "You'll see. It isn't so bad and you'll make lots of friends."

"I already didn't like it at the orphanage," the boy retorted, "and with Tommy, you and Lou I have plenty of friends."

"Really?" Kid asked, exchanging a bemused look with his wife.

The boy nodded eagerly and added, "I'd rather stay here and help you."

"I appreciate that, Jack, but you still can help me when you come back from school, all right?" Kid replied, trying to stifle his amusement at the boy's stubbornness.

Jack folded his arms over his chest in irritation, realizing that he was clearly on a losing end. Louise came to his side and kissing the top of his head she said, "Honey, just be a good boy and stop all that whining."

Half an hour later Kid hitched up the wagon for Louise and she drove it to town. The two boys sat by her side and the entire ride to Rock Creek Jack hadn't stopped voicing his protests about going to school relentlessly. Lou ended up listening to him silently without trying to contest his arguments. Even when they got down from the buckboard and walked towards the schoolhouse, the boy desperately tried to convince Louise to let him skip school, but as the building came into sight, Jack realized that he was inevitably doomed to spending the morning inside those four walls.

Rachel was at the door and as soon as she saw Lou and the two boys, she waved eagerly at them. "Morning, Rachel," Louise greeted her friend and turning to Jack, she asked, "You remember Mrs. Dunne, don't you, honey?" The boy simply nodded and Rachel addressed the boy, "Hello, Jack. Ready to start school?" "Yes, Ma'am," he muttered with a very serious expression and the two women exchanged knowing glances. "Jack, we're leaving now, but we'll

see you in a few hours, all right?" Lou said and the boy nodded doubtfully. "That's a good boy," she exclaimed encouragingly and planted a kiss on his cheek. Jack kept staring at the two figures of Lou and Tommy walking towards the wagon and then he felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking upwards he met the smiling gaze of Rachel, who said, "Shall we go inside?" The boy shrugged his shoulders and let himself be steered towards the inside of the schoolhouse. When they stepped in the building, all the other children were already sitting nicely in their desks. Jack walked before Rachel with slow steps, warily looking around him as he advanced along towards the front of the room. The woman turned round towards the class, the boy next to her, and said, "Children, today we get to welcome a new student. This is Jack Martin. Let's all greet him warmly."

"Hello, Jack," the pupils chorused together.

Rachel scanned the room for any empty places and, as she located one, she turned to Jack. "Why don't you go and sit with Victor?" the woman asked, pointing at the empty seat in the second row.

"Yes, Mrs. Dunne," the boy muttered and, as he went to take his seat, Rachel instructed the children to open their books and read the lesson. He cast a glimpse at the boy who Rachel had called Victor. He was about the same age as Jack, with very fair hair and skinny features. As Jack sat down next to him, the other boy stared at him steadily for a few moments and then he said, "My name's Victor Reese." The two boys shook their hands ceremoniously and Victor asked, "You live with the McClouds, don't you?" Jack simply nodded his answer and the other boy added with a smile, "I'm kind of new here myself. My family moved to Rock Creek a few months ago, they own a farm in the outskirts. So if you want, we can hang out together" Jack gazed at the boy thoughtfully and began to think that maybe coming to school wasn't too bad after all. At the orphanage all the other children who attended school were older than him and apart from Tommy he had never befriended anybody else. He considered Victor's proposition seriously and realized that he wouldn't mind having a friend. Jack was about to express his agreement when Rachel's loud voice resounded in the room. "Will you be quiet, please!" the lady said, casting a warning glance at the two boys, who exchanged knowing looks and instantly turned their attention to their books.

A couple of hours later school paused for recess and all the children scampered out to the ample yard, happy to escape books and lessons for half an hour. It was lunch time and Jack shared the sandwiches Lou had prepared with Victor as he also tasted the ones Mrs. Reese had packed for her son. After that, the two boys began playing marbles, a game that Jack was particularly fond of. The two boys were crouched on the ground, all their attention focused on the movements of the small crystal balls. In that moment several legs appeared, disturbing their peaceful playtime. Jack lifted up his eyes to see four boys looking at him with crooked grins and he instantly knew that they were looking for trouble. The boy wasn't unfamiliar to this kind of scenes at the orphanage and he always tried to keep away from them. "Look who we have here," one of the four said. He was a stout boy, a few years older than Jack and it was obvious that he was in the lead of his friends. "It's the newbie, a poor lousy orphan!" Jack rose to his feet, glaring at the older boy defiantly but didn't say a word.

"Leave us alone, Bradley!!!" Victor barked, trying to push the older boy out of their way, but he was too big for his weak body, and instead he ended up on the ground with a single movement of Bradley's hand. His attention turned back to Jack and he blustered mockingly, "A pathetic, lousy orphan. That's what you are. Or are you so naïve to think that having the McClouds take pity on you means you have a family?" Jack remained silent, feeling the anger inside him, and the older boy added vociferously, "Answer me, dummy!!!"

Jack silently looked daggers at the older boy, feeling his face redden with growing irritation. "Don't pay him any heed, Jack!" Victor said and, taking hold of his arm, he tried to steer his friend away from Bradley, but Jack didn't move an inch and kept glaring at the older boy. Bradley



"He's inside," the woman answered and when Louise tried to go past her into the building, Rachel grabbed her by the hand to stop her. "One moment, Lou. I need to talk to you about something concerning Jack. Let's say there's been a little problem."

"A problem?" she repeated with a frown.

"Jack got into a fight with another boy," Rachel explained.

"Oh my God!" Louise exclaimed, visibly worried after her friend's words. "Why?"

"I can't really tell. He hasn't said a word since then," Rachel replied. "I guess something Bradley Williams told him must have upset him."

"Bradley Williams!" Lou exclaimed. "But he's older than Jack and twice his size!!!"

"I know," the older woman muttered.

"He's such a good boy, he really is," Lou responded truthfully and sighing deeply she added, "I'll go now and see him."

Rachel nodded. "Don't be too hard on him, Lou. I would stake all my bets that the blame falls entirely on the other boy. He's no angel at all. I know what I'm talking about and now I'm going to see his parents and have a little talk about the matter."

"Thanks, Rachel," Lou said and turned to enter the schoolhouse. As soon as she stepped inside, she spotted Jack straightaway sitting in the first row of seats. Lou approached him slowly, her light steps resounding in the silent room, but Jack didn't even turn his head to her. Louise rounded the small desk and stood before him. The boy hung his head morosely; his eyes were downcast and his arms protectively crossed over his chest. "Jack?" Lou called and when it was obvious that the boy wasn't too eager to talk or move, she tilted his head towards her so that she could see him clearly. She cringed as she noticed the condition of his face after the fight. His upper lip was swollen, there was a graze on his cheekbone and it was noticeable that his nose had been bleeding. "What happened, honey?" Lou asked, holding his chin in her hand. The boy didn't say anything but pulled his face away from her hold roughly and kept directing his gaze towards the other direction, trying to avoid Lou's quizzical eyes at all costs. "Are you gonna tell me what happened, Jack?" Lou asked again but as minutes went by and the boy didn't answer, she sighed and muttered, "I guess not." She kept staring down at him, racking her brains to find a way to reach him when suddenly his voice resounded clear and cold, "I want to go home."

Lou tried to catch his eye, but still the boy did everything he could to avoid meeting her gaze and even when they were already on their way to the ranch, the boy never looked in her direction once. Louise tried to engage him in conversation, talking about anything except what had happened at school, but Jack never opened his mouth.

As they reached the ranch, Kid was coming out of the house with Tommy in his tow. When both man and child saw the wagon approach, they waved at them with smiling faces. Louise stopped the buckboard just in front of the house and Kid came closer and taking the reins from her, he helped her get off. "Did you have a nice day at school, Jack?" he asked light-heartedly before Lou had time to warn him against it. The boy jumped from the wagon and ran inside the house. "Jack!" she called but the boy didn't seem eager to acknowledge her words. She sighed wearily and when Kid cast her a questioning look, she simply said, "Don't ask." Then she hurried to follow the boy, who was already reaching the stairs. In a few long strides Louise reached and grabbed him by the arm. "For goodness' sake, Jack, stop this silly game."

Kid had also entered after Lou and it was then when he noticed Jack's bruised face for the first time. "Hey, buddy, what happened to you?" The boy didn't answer but kept staring at him

with angry eyes. He squirmed, trying to break free from Lou's hold while he began repeatedly shouting, "I want to go home!!"

Louise strengthened her hold and stopped his frenetic squirming. "Will you stop it!" she said sternly. "Enough of this tantrum. You're already home, isn't it what you wanted?"

"This is not my home!!!" the boy barked at the top of his voice. "I want to go back to the orphanage! That's where I belong."

"Jack..." Kid tried to appease him but the boy wasn't any more ready to listen to him than to Lou.

"You said I could go back if I wanted to. I'm not happy here and I want to go home!" His face was red with irritation and he was on the verge of tears. "Jack please..." Lou tried once again but the boy was too upset and in a quick movement he pushed her off and ran up the stairs. She almost fell backwards but Kid was quick and caught her in his arms. "Jack!!!" Lou called after him and was about to follow him, but Kid stopped her. "Lou, let him be for now. He'll come round." She nodded wearily and let him draw her into his arms. In that moment they heard a whimper at the end of the lounge and turned to see Tommy crying. Lou threw her husband a brief glance and approached the boy. "Hey, Tommy boy, what's wrong?" she asked while she lifted the child in her arms. "I don't want to go, I want to stay with you," the boy cried and Lou hugged him tightly and tried to soothe him, "Nobody's going anywhere, honey. You'll see." While she uttered the words to Tommy, she cast a worried look at her husband, silently wondering how she was going to talk Jack into forgetting that idea about going back to the orphanage and keep her promise to Tommy.