

Louise had almost finished having dinner ready when she heard steps behind her. She turned around and sent an inquisitional look at Kid, who was walking into the kitchen. He simply shook his head and added, "He won't talk to me." He had tried any possible way to calm Jack down, but the boy wouldn't even hear him. Lou sighed morosely and asked, "Still adamant about going back to the orphanage?"

"I'm afraid so. But don't worry, Lou. Hopefully, he will cool down," Kid said, not really sure of his words. He had no previous experience with children and was clueless about how to act in cases like this.

"What if he won't, Kid?" she questioned in a loud voice. "I don't want him to leave us!"

"Neither do I, Lou. But you know we can't keep him if he doesn't want to stay. We promised him."

"I know," Lou admitted through gritted teeth. She sighed again and kept staring at her husband reluctantly. Turning around she began filling a jug with water while she said, "Kid, can you do me a favor and lay the table for dinner?"

"Sure," he replied promptly, "but where are you going?"

"I need to see to Jack's bruises," she mumbled seriously. Kid nodded and began taking everything to set the table while Lou stepped out of the kitchen, carrying the water jug, a cloth and some ointment she used when Kid had suffered some minor injuries. Quickly she climbed the stairs and when she reached the bedroom that the two brothers shared, Louise knocked once and without waiting for any indication, she let herself in. Jack was sitting forlornly on the bed and when he heard the door open and Lou's light steps, he turned his head to her. "Hello, honey," she greeted in a cheerful tone but the boy didn't answer back. Walking to the dresser she filled the washbowl with the water from the jug and suddenly Jack mumbled, "Leave me alone."

Louise turned her attention to the boy again and said, "I'm afraid I can't do that. We really need to clean those scrapes on your face." She approached the boy and placing the washbasin on the bedside table she sat down next to the brown-eyed child on the bed. "Look at me, Jack," she ordered mildly and the boy turned his head to Louise reluctantly. Wetting a cloth in the water she began wiping the bruises on his face and Jack winced in pain. "I know it hurts," Lou said. "Just try to keep as still as you can and I'll finish quicker." The boy did as he was told and Louise kept cleaning the dry blood off his face. "That boy sure beat you good," she continued, trying to make Jack speak up but he remained silent, and after a while she dared to be more direct. "You never told me what happened between the two of you."

"Why should I?" Jack suddenly said in an angered tone. "You're not my mother."

His words hit her painfully but she pulled a neutral expression and replied steadily, "I know I'm not, but I thought we were friends. You said so this morning, didn't you?" Jack shrugged his shoulders in indifference and his annoyed expression seemed to relax a bit. "Did that boy say something to anger you, honey?" Lou asked and Jack nodded forlornly.

"He was horrible," he said, clenching his fists tightly with irritation when remembering his confrontation with Bradley Williams, but he didn't make the least attempt to elaborate. He kept looking ahead; his liquid eyes bright with unshed tears.

Louise had already finished cleaning his bruises and left the cloth inside the washbasin as

she turned all her attention to Jack. Tilting her face to the boy, she tried to catch his eye while she squeezed his hand tenderly. "You know you can tell me anything, honey, anything at all."

Jack stared at her doubtfully and after a while he began telling Louise everything that had happened leading him to fight with the other boy. While he was talking, he kept his eyes fixed ahead of him. When he finished his account, he looked at Louise sideways, watching her reaction cautiously. Lou remained quiet for a few minutes, silently poring over what Jack had just said, and after a while she asked, "Do you really believe that we took you and your brother in out of pity, Jack?"

"I guess not," the boy replied warily.

"Then why do you think Kid and I offered for you to stay with us?" she asked again.

"I dunno," Jack answered truthfully, staring at her intently.

"Well, let's say that it's for the same reason that Kid took me in."

"Because he loves you," Jack stated confidently.

"That's right," Lou said, looking at the boy meaningfully and when it dawned on Jack what she was trying to say, he smiled briefly, but still his stance was rigid and cautious. "As for the other thing, I have to admit that most of what that boy said about me is basically true." Jack turned two surprised eyes to her and Louise couldn't help but grin at his reaction. "Sometimes the truth can appear in the most diverse and funny ways. For example, something that is frowned upon by the likes of Bradley and his mother is something that fills me with great pride." She stopped to check that she had the boy's full attention and then she continued, "For some of us who aren't lucky enough to have a family to lean on, there's no more option but work hard for a living. Life is really full of turnings and deviations and you never know where you will end up. Since very young, I had to work very hard and, well, for a series of reasons I ended up working as a rider for the Pony Express. It was a very hard and dangerous job, something reserved for men, but I did it with great satisfaction. No matter what everybody might say, that's something I could never be ashamed of. You understand what I'm trying to say, Jack?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the boy answered, his full attention focused on Louise.

"And yes, unfortunately it's true I was very upset when I learned I couldn't have children, even more than you after your fight with Bradley," she explained sincerely. "I'm not very proud of that, but even so, that doesn't entitle anybody to judge me or my actions, you understand?"

The boy nodded and cast her a smile. After listening to Louise, he felt he had been a fool for behaving in such a nasty way. Actually, he didn't regret getting into a fight with Bradley but Jack felt sorry for treating Kid and Lou so poorly afterwards. Louise peered at the boy seriously and asked, "You feel ashamed of being with me, Jack?"

"No, of course not!" the boy promptly exclaimed. "But I don't like anybody saying bad things about you."

Louise ruffled his hair tenderly and smiling brightly, she added, "That's sweet of you, honey. But I'd rather you don't get into fights. No matter what you do, you'll never stop people from talking. You just have to learn not to take their words to heart." The boy nodded and kept his eyes downcast, deep in thought. "Jack," Lou called, taking his hand in hers and he lifted his gaze to her, "I know it's not easy to settle in a different home and live with brand new people. It's like starting everything anew and I have to admit that it's not a piece of cake for Kid and me either but we're trying to learn as quickly as we can. Now let me tell you that all we care about is that you and Tommy are happy. We only want the best for you two. We will be very miserable if

you go, but if you feel that you will be better and happier at the orphanage, well, we are ready to respect your decision.”

“I like it here... very much indeed... honestly,” Jack was quick to answer. He realized that he had let his anger talk and made a silly comment. He had never wanted to live at the orphanage and would be a fool if he ended up there again because of the words of a stupid boy. In the couple of weeks he had been living with Kid and Lou, he had felt happier than any of the years he had spent at the orphanage.

“So you’re staying?” Lou asked, making sure he was serious.

The boy nodded energetically. “I’d love to if I can.”

“Of course you can, silly,” Louise exclaimed visibly relieved, throwing her arms around Jack and hugging him closely. “That’s my boy.” When she let go of him, she rose to her feet and began collecting everything she had brought to clean his bruises. “So apart from this unfortunate incident,” she continued, “How was school?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders in indifference and said, “Mrs. Dunne is a nice teacher.”

“She sure is,” Lou agreed.

“And I made a new friend. His name’s Victor,” the boy added proudly.

“That’s great!” she exclaimed pleased and, as she had finished picking everything up, she turned to the boy once more. “Now get changed from those torn trousers before you go down to dinner.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Louise scurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Crossing the dining room, she noticed that Kid had already set the table for dinner and, when she entered the kitchen, he stood next to the stove, keeping an eye on the stew. As he heard her steps, he turned round and sent her an inquisitional look. “So?”

“Everything’s fine,” she muttered with a wary voice.

“Good,” Kid let out with a wide smile. “I don’t know what I would do without you,” he added as he surrounded her with his arms and kissed her gently.

Lou smiled happily at his sweet gesture and when they pulled away, she began retelling him the conversation she had with Jack. “I’m damn tired of this town of prying, gossiping hypocrites!!!” she exclaimed furiously. She was so angry, not because of what people might say about her, but because all those tales had managed to disturb the stability of her family. Louise was well aware that she wasn’t very well liked by some of the local people and, even though she had never cared for their opinions, now she feared what that idle gossip would do to the children.

“I know, Lou,” Kid replied, understanding she was fuming.

“You can’t imagine how it was when you were away fighting. All those people speculating behind my back whether you would be coming back while they flashed their fake smiles before me!!!” she barked with irritation. “And now their malicious comments are repeated by their likewise children and I won’t have the boys suffer for that! It’s so pathetic!!!”

Kid patiently listened to her outburst and then he blurted out unexpectedly, “Then let’s go away, Lou.”



last gone and it was with a happy heart that Louise welcomed the idea. She wanted to restart having more moments like the married couple they were after those long months and now like a family she needed to share more special times. Strangely enough, she felt excited about the prospect of going to the social and had even bought a new dress for the occasion. For the first time in months she felt like dressing up and looking her best for her husband's eyes. They were gradually repairing the damage that her attitude had caused to her marriage and Louise now realized how much she had missed him. They were quickly trying to make up for the lost time and she felt as light-hearted as if they had just got married.

Louise just finished doing her hair and gazed at her reflection in the full-length mirror with satisfaction before stepping out of the bedroom. Kid was with the boys, helping them to get dressed and as Lou approached their bedroom, she could hear their voices.

"Will you stop squirming, Tommy?" Kid exclaimed, running out of patience as he tried to do up the shirt's top button for the boy. It had taken him more than half an hour to get him into the new clothes that Lou had bought. "I can't button up your shirt if you don't keep still."

Tommy shook Kid's hand away and scurried out of his hold. "I don't wanna," the boy muttered with a sullen voice.

"Come here, Tom!" Kid tried to catch him but the boy began running around the room, jumping over the beds, anything to slip away from Kid. Jack watched them with amusement, laughing loudly at his brother's antics and finally Kid gave up and dropped onto one of the beds heavily. Jack sat down next to him and asked, "Why do we have to wear these stiff clothes?"

Kid had to laugh when the older boy pulled a finger in his tight collar, something that he usually did himself. "I always wonder the same, Jack," he answered softly, getting a smile from the boy. "But Lou wouldn't be very happy if we didn't wear our suits."

"Stop the whining, Kid!" Louise's voice resounded in the room and in that moment the door swung open and she appeared, leaning an arm against the door frame. She had been watching the three of them through the crack at the door, bemused at Kid's futile attempts with the boys. She really loved to watch him with the two children; he had a special way with them and he was so patient and understanding that it amazed her. "Let me have a look at my three men!" she exclaimed and the boys looked at her, beaming happily. "Don't you look handsome or what!" Lou stepped in the room and approached the two boys slowly. With one swift movement she did up Tommy's top button without further protests from the boy, casting a knowing look at Kid, but he seemed oblivious to everything. Since she had appeared, Kid hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. He thought she had never looked so beautiful and kept staring at her lovely image in awe. Louise was wearing an elegant emerald dress, which perfectly fitted her slender figure. Kid gladly noticed that she was already putting on some weight. She had gotten so skinny after all those months of bleakness, but fortunately she was coming back to her old self little by little and even her body was a reflection of those changes. Kid's eyes traveled from her narrow waist, passing through her bosom and settled in her lovely face. It was then that he noticed that she was looking at him with a quizzical expression.

"Kid?" she called with a bemused smirk.

"Uh?" he let out clumsily as he rose to his feet from his position on the bed.

"I've called you three times. What has you all so wrapped up?"

Kid cupped her face in his right hand and tenderly caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Oh Lou, you look absolutely beautiful," he said huskily.

Louise smiled brightly, turning a shade of red. "Why, thank you," she exclaimed and briefly



Louise giggled at Teaspoon words and mannerisms, and then Kid asked, "By the way, where's Rachel?"

The marshal snorted indignantly and added, "Swinging around like a spinning top. Poor woman's been hogged all evening by that Ben Richards. I keep telling her that she's too soft with those men but she won't listen to me and patiently suffers their advances."

Kid and Lou turned their attention to the dancing couples and it was then that they saw Rachel dancing as Teaspoon had rightly said. Yet, she didn't seem unhappy about the company at all but rather the contrary. The woman was smiling from ear to ear as she moved at the sound of the music in the company of the aforementioned man. Ben Richards was a quite attractive man around Rachel's age who had moved to Rock Creek a few weeks ago. Lou knew that her friend attracted the interest of many men, but she had never considered any seriously. From time to time somebody caught her eye and Rachel enjoyed some days of discrete love and romance, but nobody had managed to win her heart completely. Louise wished her friend would settle down with a nice man, but she suspected that Rachel compared all men with her late husband and nobody seemed good enough to fill the gap that Henry had left in her life. Lou couldn't say that she didn't understand her. Might something happen to Kid, she would be unable to look at another man again. The thought momentarily darkened her spirits, remembering how she had almost lost her husband, but she didn't linger on the notion for long. This was a night that she intended to enjoy herself in Kid's company and she wasn't going to let any negative thoughts ruin that.

Louise turned to the marshal again and quipped sarcastically, "You're right, Teaspoon. She looks absolutely miserable."

"It's all pretence," the marshal replied with a stiff expression. "That's what it is."

Lou shared an amused look with her husband and added, amusement obvious in her voice, "You wouldn't by any chance be jealous, Teaspoon?"

The marshal adopted a rigid stance and said solemnly, "Course not!" The couple exchanged knowing glances, grinning mischievously and the older man felt irritation grow by the minute. "You two are absolutely hilarious tonight!" Teaspoon barked sarcastically. "Should be ashamed of yourselves, makin' fun of an old man like me!!! Some pair you are! You really deserve each other!" With these words Teaspoon swirled around and plodded away from the couple fuming. Kid and Lou tried to call after him but the marshal didn't even turn his head to them once.

"He's mad at you," Jack said to the two adults.

Kid ruffled the boy's hair playfully and added, "He's got a quick temper but it will blow over soon."

And he was right. The marshal didn't stay angry with them for long and spent most of the evening in the family's company. Louise felt she hadn't enjoyed herself so much in a long time as she repeatedly danced with Teaspoon and Kid; both men taking it in turns to keep an eye on Tommy in the meantime. Jack had scurried away to play with his friend Victor as soon as the boy had turned up in the hall with his parents. Lou's feet were sore of all the dancing and she decided she needed a break. Teaspoon had finally managed to snatch Rachel for a dance and they were now swinging round at the dance floor. Suddenly, Louise felt her face flushed and hot and noticing her red cheeks straightaway, Kid turned to the four-year-old boy and said, "Hey, Tommy, why don't we go and get some refreshing punch for Lou?" The boy nodded and Kid addressed his wife, "We'll be back in a minute."

"Thank you!" she exclaimed after them as they walked towards the food tables at the other end of the room. She kept staring at their retreating figures with a placid smile till they disappeared into the crowd and out of her sight. Louise remained in the middle of the room and looked around her. Her eyes lingered momentarily on the dancing couples when suddenly through a gap among the dozens of people gathering around she caught sight of Sally Douglas. She was comfortably sitting at the far end of the room, fanning herself and watching the people aimlessly. Lou kept thoughtful for a while, fighting with her mind the impulse to approach her. She hadn't seen Sally for a long time and feelings of guilt seared her remorsefully. She knew she hadn't treated her friend fairly and it was high time she offered her apologies. So with that resolution on her mind Louise plodded briskly across the room and when she noticed that Sally had spotted her, her steps slowed down and continued advancing towards her hesitatingly, her eyes seriously locked in those of the pregnant woman. Louise stood before her in silence for a few seconds and then she managed to smile awkwardly. "Hello, Sally," she muttered uncomfortably.

"Louise," the other woman simply said in a grave voice. Her stance was stiff and stilted, and Lou silently had to admit that she couldn't blame her for her attitude.

"How are you? You feeling all right with your pregnancy?" Lou asked.

"Everything's just fine," the blonde lady replied curtly and Louise knew that it was going to be harder than she had thought, but she didn't let her friend's attitude deter her from her aim.

"When's the baby due?"

"In four months."

Lou smiled at her but Sally didn't respond to the gesture and kept a long face. Louise lowered her eyes momentarily and the two women remained in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Sally didn't make the slightest attempt to speak up, so Lou began clumsily, "Uh... I know I have no right to come to you," she paused for a second to draw breath and then continued with the same shaky voice, "I really want to apologize to you and John..." But she couldn't finish uttering her sincere apologies when a booming voice interrupted her intentions.

"Leave my wife alone!" Louise turned to the source of those words and came face to face with a very angry John Douglas. She kept staring at him feeling irritated by the authoritative tone in the man. She hated to be told what she could or couldn't do, and she wasn't going to allow John Douglas least of all to do just that. "You heard me! Go away!" the man barked and in his growing anger he gave Lou a push, which made her stagger.

"John!!!" Sally exclaimed, rising to her feet, clearly shocked by the rough ways of her husband.

Not being one to be easily scared away, Lou stood her ground stubbornly and said through clenched teeth, "Stay out of this, John. This is something between Sally and me."

"Everything that concerns my wife does concern me," the man replied sharply.

"Look, I came looking for no trouble," Louise said sincerely, trying to calm down her frayed nerves. "I just wanted to offer my apologies."

"A bit late for that, don't you think?" the man retorted in the same angered tone.

"That's for your wife to say. She's my friend, not you."

The man let out a scornful laugh and glaring at the chestnut-haired lady, he said, "Listen,

Missy. I've always been a good Christian and I do believe that in His infinite wisdom God gives everybody what they rightly deserve. I lead a good and honest life, and I've deservedly been bestowed with good health, a lovely wife, friends, a nice place to live, and now a baby, my baby's on its way." He stopped for a second and then he added spitefully, "And you... you ... a woman deprived of the joys of motherhood... Do you ever wonder why?"

"John!!!" Sally exclaimed mortified, flabbergasted at her husband's remarks.

Louise remained on the same spot, unable to move or think. The man's words had left her in a daze as if she couldn't register anything any more. She just kept looking at the man wildly as the so familiar old pain swept devastatingly over her. She knew Sally was talking to her, but she couldn't make out her words. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her arm and turning her head she saw Kid by her side and in that moment all she wanted was to cry and throw herself to his arms.

"What's happening here?" he asked, noticing Louise's weird expression and the curious looks of people around them. Neither Sally nor John tried to answer his question and Kid turned to his wife, "Lou?"

"Please Kid, let's go home," she muttered with a shaky voice. "But..." he tried once more. He wasn't going to leave till he learned what had happened to make Lou look so distraught. "Please!" Louise almost shouted, turning two misty eyes to him and he had no option but nod his agreement.

Back in their home the couple was in their bedroom. The two children were already sleeping, exhausted after the excitement of the night. Lou sat forlornly on the bed, slowly peeling her stockings off while Kid paced up and down the room in a foul mood.

"How he dare? How the hell did he dare to judge you ... to judge us?" he exclaimed with deep irritation. When Lou had reluctantly told him about the incident with John Douglas, his anger had risen uncontrollably. He couldn't believe that the man had used what hurt Lou the most against her. Kid was aware that his wife was putting a lot of effort in overcoming her past problems and now that fool's big mouth could mean a setback to her progress. "You should have told me there, Lou. I sure wouldn't have let him off so easily."

Rolling the stocking around her hand, Lou kept her eyes downcast and she simply said, "Let's just forget about tonight and John Douglas. Please"

"He'd better not cross my path any time because I'd sure show him how much I don't appreciate anybody insulting and abusing my wife!" Kid bellowed with blinding rage. "He did push you, Lou, he did push you!" He couldn't believe that the man had the nerve to lay a finger on his wife. Kid felt so furious that he'd kill the man with his bare hands right now if he were before him.

Louise was already regretting telling Kid about John's rough manners with her. She knew that her husband abhorred any kind of violence inflicted to women and if she herself was involved, he turned into this uncontrollable volcano ready to erupt. Lou couldn't really say that John had hit her, but his manners towards her hadn't been proper at all. "Kid, please. It's not worth it," she tried to appease him once more.

Kid approached her and sat down next to her on the bed. Looking at her for a few moments, he ruefully noticed that sadness was back in her eyes and Kid cursed Douglas for being the cause of it all. He took her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. "Don't you see that I can't let anybody harm you? It burns my soul just to think of anybody at all hurting you."

Lou had to smile despite herself. "Kid," she said, looking fixedly in his eyes, "nobody can

harm us, but only those who we allow to. I don't care about John Douglas' opinion or anybody else's. All I care about is right here before my very eyes and in the room at the end of the hall." She had to admit that John's word had ripped her inside, but she'd be damned if she let him cause any havoc in her life.

Kid smiled for the first time and drawing her head towards him, he kissed her softly and she let herself melt in his hold. They pulled away slightly, remaining held in a tight hug and he muttered against her neck. "Oh Lou, I don't know what I have done to deserve you." Louise lifted her eyes to him and said, "Well, according to John Douglas, something really exceptional, but I still don't get what poor Sally has done to earn him." She cast an amused look at him and Kid burst out laughing, happy that she could already joke about the night's incident. Drawing her into his arms again, he rolled her onto her back on top of the bed, his figure hovering over hers, and they kept staring lovingly at each other for long minutes. At some point she brought her hand to caress his face and whispered, "Please Kid, love me tonight. Let's not allow him to ruin this too."

As soon as she had said those words, Kid lowered his face to hers and their lips met avidly and with a deep passion. They took their sweet time to explore their bodies as if it were the first time and in that moment all the John Douglas' of their lives disappeared magically and it was just the two of them and their undying love for each other.