

The revelation hadn't left either Kid or Lou indifferent. The shock of stumbling on the boys' estranged father had made Louise practically speechless and she had hardly said a word since then. Though disconcerted by the discovery, Kid had been able to get over the initial surprise and managed to talk to Mr. Martin in civil terms. He had introduced his wife and himself to the man and had spoken to him for a few minutes even though the situation made him feel awkward and uncomfortable. Eventually, not knowing what else to say he had uttered a clumsy invitation to the boys' new-found father to dinner, which earned him a glare from Lou and a loud cheer from Jack.

All the way to the ranch and now in the house Jack hadn't left his father's side for a single second, talking eagerly and asking him dozens of questions. The boy couldn't hide his happiness and excitement for finding his father after these years of absence. Jack had recognized the man straightaway and as soon as his eyes had fallen on him in the street, his heart had started pounding wildly in his chest. He had never forgotten his father in all this time and deep inside he had always had the yearning that he'd come for him and Tommy one day. When Robert Martin had left two years ago without even saying good-bye to his two sons, Jack had been very upset and couldn't understand why 'Pa had to go'. In his child's mind he had tried to find an explanation to this enigma and at times frustration had managed to shake the boy, leaving him full of anger towards their father. Now that he was back, all those feelings had disappeared and all Jack cared about was that his father was now before him.

When Mr. Martin had disappeared from their sons' lives, Jack had been five-years-old at the time whereas Tommy had been a two-year-old toddler who didn't have any recollections of the man at all. The young boy cautiously watched the man sitting on the couch in the house he considered his home while he clasped Kid's arm tightly. Lou had slid away into the kitchen as soon as she had stepped into the house and she hadn't left it once. Kid could understand what she must sure be thinking because it couldn't be much different from what he was feeling himself. Mr. Martin's sudden appearance came as a threat to their family stability. They hadn't talked to the man and didn't know what his intentions concerning the boys were, but Kid hoped that things stayed the same way as they had been so far and no surprises fell upon them. They didn't need any more problems after what they had to cope with for the last few months. It was high time they had a respite, but it seemed that life was ready to strike with another blow. Maybe he was overreacting, Kid silently wondered, or maybe not. He might be clueless about the man's intentions and maybe there was nothing to be afraid of, but clearly his appearance had stirred fear in their hearts.

Robert Martin was sitting on the couch just opposite Kid and Tommy, and Jack stood by his side, talking in his childish way while the man laughed heartily at the boy's exaggerated accounts. Kid watched them, feeling hurt and admittedly jealous of the attention Jack was paying him. The former rider had never openly talked about it to Lou, but he longed for the boys to see him like their father one day. It was something that he still didn't feel free to talk about. Those months in which his wife had almost lost herself were still fresh on his mind and although Lou was practically recovered, he was still wary of talking to her about certain matters. Kid feared that his wishes or words could somehow influence her in case she ended up walking that muddy path again and he'd rather die than lose her to desperation.

Unable to bear the image of Jack and his father any more, Kid rose to his feet. "Excuse me, I'm gonna see if my wife needs my help in the kitchen," he said and without waiting for the man's reply, he plodded forward, followed by Tommy in his tow. Opening the door slowly he saw her next to the stove, her back to him. By the tense position of her shoulders, he knew that she was upset, which didn't come as a surprise. Tommy passed by him and on seeing Louise, the boy barged against her and hugged her legs from behind. Lou turned her head and seeing the boy, she smiled, a smile that Kid noticed didn't reach her eyes. She lifted her gaze to her

husband and lingered there meaningfully. "Hey," Kid let out, using their usual greeting since the Express times.

"Hey there," Lou replied with a tiny voice and unsmiling eyes as she handed the boy a piece of bread, which he began absently nibbling at.

Kid walked a few steps closer and leaning his head over the boiling pot, he exclaimed, "That smells good." Lou didn't say anything and kept peeling the potato she held in her hands. Kid watched her for a few seconds and then taking another of the potatoes and a knife, he followed suit and both of them kept working on the potatoes silently. All was quiet around them but for the crunching sounds of the knives cutting through the potatoes and the boy's munching noises. "You all right, Lou?" Kid asked after a while.

"Never been better," she replied sarcastically.

"Come on, Lou. Don't use that attitude with me again," he snapped, feeling irritated that she vented her frustration on him without logical reason.

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely, silently chiding herself for taking her anger out on Kid. "But what am I supposed to feel?"

"Honey, we need to calm down," he said in a whisper, keeping his voice as low as possible so that the four-year-old didn't hear them. "He appeared by chance and that's all we know."

"I don't know, Kid," Lou muttered, "I'm scared."

"So am I, Lou," he admitted softly. "But he's the boys' father and ..."

"Father!" she exclaimed loudly, "he's just a vulgar drun..." she stopped mid-sentence as she noticed Kid's warning eyes directed towards Tommy sitting quietly at the kitchen table. The boy was looking at her curiously and Louise forced a smile on her face in his direction. Tommy grinned back and continued eating his chunk of bread quietly. She turned her apologetic eyes to Kid and he leaned over and kissing her cheek tenderly he whispered in her ear, "Don't fear, Lou. You'll see." Lou didn't say anything, knowing that he was trying to keep a strong countenance for her sake even though she was aware that he was as clueless as she was. They didn't talk any more; their attention focused on the task at hand and they remained in companionable silence till it was dinner time.

About half an hour later they all sat down to dinner. "This is delicious, Mrs. McCloud," Robert Martin exclaimed after tasting a first bite of Lou's chicken.

"Thank you," she said in a stiff voice. Kid looked at her and if the situation had been different, he would have been able to laugh and tease her. Nobody could miss that she wasn't enjoying the company at all. Lou had never been able to hide her true feelings at any moment, and Kid knew that it was one of the things he loved most in her. Yet, he admitted that right now it wasn't very clever to show so clearly that the man's presence made them uncomfortable or even scared. They didn't know the first thing about Robert Martin, only that he had abandoned his children a couple of years ago, which wasn't a good sign about the man's character to start with. Kid couldn't help but feel cautious towards him. Maybe it was because his own father had done exactly the same to him, Jed and his mother so many years ago or it was just sheer jealousy because he had hogged Jack's attention from the moment he had appeared. Either way, Kid knew that they should keep up appearances before the man; if he was a crook or wanted to benefit from this "lucky" encounter, it wouldn't help them any if he knew from the first that they had reservations or were apprehensive by his mere presence.

Louise grabbed the water jug and began filling the glasses for the boys and at some point she turned to their guest, "Some water, Mr. Martin?" she asked, her tone curt and cold.

"No, thanks," the man answered looking at her with curiosity, "but I wouldn't say no to something stronger," he added with a lopsided grin.

"We have no alcohol in this house, Sir," she replied in the same sharp tone.

"Oh I see," was all the man said, not taking his eyes off her, which was making Louise feel uncomfortable, but soon the man turned his attention to Tommy sitting opposite him. He looked at the boy with a grin and the boy lowered his eyes to his plate. "Hey, Thomas, aren't you gonna talk to your old man?" Robert Martin asked him, but the boy didn't try to talk or meet his gaze once. "Tom?" the man insisted and the child squirmed in his chair uncomfortable not enjoying being the center of attention.

Noticing the boy's discomfort, Kid was quick to add, "Tommy's a bit shy, and doesn't talk to ..." He stopped in mid-sentence as he realized that he was about to imply that the man was a stranger to his son's eyes and even though it was the truth, he felt uncomfortable uttering those words to the boys' father. Kid fumbled to finish the sentence in another way, but he couldn't come up with anything different to say. Noticing his hesitation, Lou ended it for him, not having any problems in voicing her opinion. "He doesn't talk to strangers," she said clearly.

To her chagrin Robert Martin turned his attention back to her and said in a soft voice, "I guess that's what I am to my children, a stranger, after being away so long." His tone was pitiful, even regretful, but it didn't soften or move Louise at all as she felt that the eyes looking at her were telling another story.

Jack was claiming his father's attention again. "Tell us where you've been all this time, Pa," the seven-year-old asked while Lou silently cringed at the boy's easy appellation for the man.

"Well, I've seen a bit of this country for a while..." the man began and it was practically all Lou heard as she didn't feel like paying attention to the man's ramblings. She kept casting furtive looks in his direction and the more she studied him, the less she thought of him. He was a quite young man, in his early thirties and his appearance was anything but neat. His scruffy black hair reached below his ears, his stubble was turning into an unbecoming beard and his clothes were dirty and worn. Lou wondered where the boys had gotten their looks from because fortunately they didn't look like this man at all. *'Maybe from their mother,'* Lou thought silently. She couldn't say that the man was bad-looking; he might have been fairly handsome when he was younger, but his rough and unclean appearance as well as the first impression she had got from him in town made him look ghastly to her eyes. Obviously, that was not precisely what Jack thought, she reasoned as she turned her attention to the boy and saw that he was listening to his father in obvious delight.

To her relief dinner was over soon and Louise took her time to clear the table and do the washing up. She just didn't look forward to spending time with their unexpected guest. The two men and the children had moved to the lounge where Kid tried to keep polite conversation while the boys played together. Louise really admired the way Kid was coping with the situation; he kept a cool head without losing his composure at any moment. She knew that he was finding the whole situation uncomfortable but he did manage to look laid-back and serene. Louise admitted that she just couldn't do that even though she had tried. She felt unable to pretend that all these circumstances didn't affect her when her insides were in turmoil. She was so scared that man could decide to take away the two other people, apart from Kid that meant the world to her. The mere notion was enough to make her shiver and feel sick to her stomach. She drew a deep breath to try to control her nerves that were playing havoc in her whole body and gulped down a glass of refreshing water to erase the foul taste in her mouth. She knew that they needed to stay

calm since they didn't know anything about Robert Martin's intentions as Kid had rightly told her. Obviously, he was a drifter and Lou just couldn't envision somebody like him taking upon himself the responsibility of two small children.

Drying her hands on a tea towel after doing the dishes, Louise headed to the lounge. Jack was once again next to his father, listening intently to what the man had to tell him. It was obvious that the boy looked up with adoration to this man who had left him to his luck for two long years. One look in Kid's direction and she instantly knew what he was feeling right now. It was obvious that he didn't like the attention the boy paid to his estranged father and Lou couldn't blame him for feeling like this because that was how she precisely felt.

As Lou stepped in the lounge, the two male adults and the boys turned to look at her. "Bedtime, boys," she announced in a more cheerful mood than she was feeling.

"Oh no!" Jack protested. "Please Lou, just five more minutes. Please."

Louise stood before the boy, her arms folded over her chest. "It's later than usual, Jack," Lou said, "and I don't want to hear any protests from you when I wake you up tomorrow."

The boy pouted exaggeratedly and Robert Martin talked from his position on the couch. "Come on, Jack. Do as you're told. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

At his father's words the boy didn't try to protest any further but he wasn't very happy, and nodding, he agreed reluctantly, "Fine."

"Say your good nights," Lou urged them and the two boys quickly did so. "Night, Kid," Jack said as he gave a quick hug to the former rider and turning to his father he threw himself into his arms and held to him tightly. "Good night, Pa. I'm so glad you're here with us again." The man laughed while Lou watched the exchange with a serious expression. Tommy followed his brother's example as he silently cuddled against Kid, but he didn't make the least attempt to approach his father and scurried to where Lou stood.

"Good night, Thomas," Mr. Martin said, trying to catch the boy's eye, but Tommy clutched Lou's hand in a tighter clasp and hid behind her body. The man cast a bemused glance at Louise but she didn't share the gesture. She kept silent and turning around, she headed for the stairs followed by the children.

Once in the bedroom Louise helped Tommy get into his nightclothes while Jack was still clad in his daily shirt and pants. The seven-year-old tirelessly talked about his father and Lou heard him half-heartedly while she bugged the boy to get ready for bed. After much insistence the boy sat on his bed and began undoing his shoelaces at a slow pace. "Lou?" he called as an idea came to his mind.

"Yes, Jack?" she replied as she helped Tommy into the bed and tucked him in.

"Can I not go to school tomorrow and stay with my father?" Jack asked, hope obvious in his bright eyes.

Louise turned around to him with a serious expression and said, "Of course not." The boy pulled a disappointed face and lowered his gaze to the ground. "Besides," she added, "your father must sure have matters to see to in the morning and can't spend all his time with you." She walked towards him and sat down on the bed next to him and then the boy lifted his eyes to her and muttered, "I missed him so much."

"I know," Lou said with a neutral expression and began helping him finish getting undressed. When he finally was in his nightclothes, the boy slid inside the bed and as Louise

tucked the sheets around him, he asked with a big smile, "Isn't my father great, Lou?" She didn't say anything and simply gazed at him seriously, and Jack added, "We aren't orphans any more."

"Honey, you haven't been orphans for a while now," she said softly and Jack stared at her quizzically, but she didn't care to elaborate further. She smiled briefly and bending over she planted a kiss on the boy's forehead. "Good night," she whispered and blowing out the lamp, she stepped out of the room.

Plodding down the stairs, Louise headed for the lounge where Kid was keeping company with Robert Martin. As soon as he saw her appear, his face lit with a bright smile. He had never felt happier to lay eyes on her than at this moment. Kid ruefully admitted that to stay in Mr. Martin's company wasn't an experience that he would seek out by choice. They had a conversation on the most polite terms but he felt that his curiosity was a bit disproportionate and made him extremely uncomfortable. Kid had managed to parry those questions which touched too delicate matters in his opinion, especially those concerning his interest in the reason why the couple didn't have children of their own. Kid wasn't ready to talk to practically a complete stranger about the problems he and Lou had. It was a very personal matter and Kid found the topic too painful to include it in an everyday conversation. It was nobody's concern whether Lou could or couldn't have babies, least of all the man before him. Robert Martin wasn't very happy when he noticed that Kid wasn't answering his questions, but to his relief the man didn't insist.

Louise sat down next to her husband on the couch, and placing her hand on his thigh she squeezed it tenderly. They shared a look and a smile, but when she turned towards Robert Martin and felt his scrutinizing eyes on her, the grin disappeared from her face completely. The three of them remained in awkward silence for a few minutes till Louise asked, "So Mr. Martin, you have a steady job here in Rock Creek?"

The man cleared his throat uncomfortably before answering. "I've been on the go for a while, Mrs. McCloud. In the last two years I've done a bit of everything, but nothing you could call 'steady' to your standards." Lou nodded, hardly paying any attention to his words. All she wanted to know was if he was actually going from Rock Creek and leaving them alone, but she was too afraid to ask anything more direct. "I know what you two are thinking," Robert Martin continued after a while, drawing a curious look from Louise. "How can a father just go and leave his children behind." Neither Kid nor Lou tried to deny his words. That was what they really thought among other things. There was no possible justification to that kind of behavior. The couple had experienced similar treatment from their own fathers to a lesser or greater extent, and they really could understand what abandoning a child would eventually mean in their lives. As they didn't say anything, the man continued, "I was so much in love with my Lizzie. She was the most beautiful, lovely, and sweet woman in our town. The years we were married were the happiest of my life." He paused for a minute and drew out the breath he was holding. "So when she died, I was left completely shattered," he explained in a cracked voice. "I didn't want to keep living and refused to be around anything that reminded me of her and my pain, even my own children."

Louise looked at the man impassively, not moved in the least by his regret and his felt account. She just didn't buy the tears from a man who hadn't moved a finger to look for his sons in two long years. The boys could well have been dead in all this time and he wouldn't have cared to find out. Lou admitted that pain could change a person completely, even becoming somebody else. Unfortunately, she knew that very well, but she couldn't be lenient to anybody causing that kind of disturbance in a child's life. "So you just left a baby and a young child to their own luck because you couldn't bear their presence?" It was a statement rather than a question, clearly showing her obvious opinion about the man.

"I'm not proud of what I did, Mrs. McCloud," Robert Martin replied. "Regretfully, I turned to the bottle in a moment of weakness. I wanted to blind my pain but with time it controlled my whole will and life."

"From what I've seen it still has a strong grip on you," Louise retorted coldly.

"Lou..." Kid let out, casting a warning glance in her direction. His wife was getting too heated up and he knew that it wasn't very sensible to get on bad terms with the man. He could do them a lot of harm if he put his heart to it.

Robert Martin plastered a wide smile on his face, seemingly unmoved by Lou's remarks. "I know I've been a horrible father to my sons," he added, "but now I'm back." Louise looked at him quizzically, alarm obvious in her gaze. The man cast a quick glance at the clock on the wall and exclaimed, "My, I never knew it was this late. Sorry if I outstayed my welcome." The man rose to his feet and placing his hat on his head he addressed the couple who had stood up after him. "Thank you for the lovely dinner. I guess we'll be seeing each other around." Kid mumbled a few words, which Lou never heard and in a haze she saw the man heading for the door and stepping out. As soon as the door clicked shut, she turned to Kid and asked in a very loud voice, "What did he mean, he was back? What, Kid?"

"Lou!" Kid shushed her, "he might hear you."

"I don't care!!!" she cried at the top of her voice, but she didn't protest when he steered her towards the study where he knew they couldn't be overheard if the man was still around. "Kid?" Lou insisted when they were inside the room.

"Tell me," he replied in a soft voice.

"What did he mean by that?" she repeated in a quivering voice.

"I don't know, Lou."

"He's taking the boys from us, ain't he, Kid?" she said in a strained voice.

Kid placed his hands on her upper arms tenderly and talked to her softly, trying to calm her down. "We don't know that, honey."

"I gather that he won't want us to adopt him as well!!!!!" she snapped sarcastically, which despite everything, brought a smile to his lips. The gesture didn't feel well with Louise and she quickly pulled away from his hold roughly and began pacing up and down the study. "Why? Why? Why?" she cried the word louder and louder each time she uttered it as she threw her arms to the sky in desperation.

"Why what, Lou?" he asked as he watched her restless pacing.

At his question she swirled around towards him and stopped suddenly in front of him and said in the same shrill tone, "Why... What the hell have we done to deserve this damn bad luck?" She didn't care about her foul language; she was so angry that she felt on the verge of exploding. Pausing a moment, she shook her head in disbelief and felt the urge to cry, but she held back the tears stubbornly and continued after a while. "What possibilities... Tell me, Kid, what are the possibilities that an estranged father and their children find each other after years of absence, meeting by chance in the same exact town, in the same exact place and at the same exact time?"

"Not many, I guess," Kid muttered, getting what Lou meant. It seemed as if bad luck was after them no matter what they did. Now that things seemed to smile on them, the darkest cloud appeared out of the blue, darkening the clear sight on their perspective.

"He wants to take the boys, I know he does," Louise mumbled in a very tiny voice, sighing

wearily.

“Lou, honey,” Kid said, “I’ll talk to Teaspoon tomorrow. I’m sure he will be able to tell us if this Mr. Martin can take the boys just like that. You know, Teaspoon knows more about legal matters.”

“Kid, the children aren’t even ours legally,” Lou reminded him in a pitiful voice. “We let that stupid man from the orphanage convince us to wait a while before signing the legal documents.”

Kid simply nodded wryly. They remained in complete silence for a few minutes; Lou hung her head, feeling at the lowest ebb she could feel. Kid kept staring at her with a heavy heart and unable to bear to see her looking so glum he called, “Lou?” She lifted her gaze to him wonderingly and Kid stretched his arms to her and said, “Come here.” Louise walked the few steps separating them and let herself be drawn into his inviting arms. Her hands automatically went round his torso while Kid hugged her against his chest comfortingly. “Lou, we can’t despair like this,” he began, talking softly in her ear. “He might not want to take the responsibility of looking after two young children for all we know. He has proved that by not moving a finger to find them in all these years. Why would he want to change that?”

“I dunno,” Lou whispered, feeling comforted like usual wrapped in his strong arms. “But he’s bad news.”

“I know,” he let out through gritted teeth, absently planting a tender kiss on her head.

“And he’s no good for the boys,” she added in a cracked voice. Kid put his finger under her chin and tilted her head towards him so that he could meet her eyes. “Lou,” he started looking in her eyes seriously, “I promise you that if push comes to shove, I’ll do everything in my power to keep the boys with us. I’m sure a judge wouldn’t let the children go from a secure home to an unstable life with him.”

“I don’t know,” she said sincerely, resting her head against his chest again. All she knew was that Robert Martin was the boys’ father after all while they were nothing to the eyes of the law. The children had only spent a couple of months under their care and it was obvious that Jack would go happily if he could live with his father like a family again. Lou’s only hope was that the man could get the hell out of Rock Creek and never come back, but her intuition told her that wasn’t going to happen any time soon.