

All night long Lou had been turning and tossing, unable to sleep peacefully. She had been plagued by disturbing thoughts and dreams which had kept her awake. Repeatedly the same haunting image had invaded her mind; the boys' big brown eyes appeared clearly before her and gradually they became dimmer and dimmer till they disappeared from her sight despite her struggling efforts to stretch her arms and reach for them. More than once she had woken up suddenly, her lips mouthing 'no' in a muffled shout. Her heart had been beating wildly, her breathing coming in raspy puffs and her body completely covered in a cold sweat. Fortunately, her restless state and recurrent nightmares hadn't disturbed Kid sleeping by her side. She knew that the day hadn't left her husband indifferent either and she could feel that he wasn't having a quiet night like usual. When they had gone to bed, on hearing his breathing, Lou could tell that it had taken him a while to finally fall asleep. Usually sleep came very easy to Kid and normally they had hardly kissed good-night before he was fast asleep wasting no time. Lou continually teased him about it, telling him that she wouldn't be surprised if one day she found him dozing while standing up. Yet, last night it had taken him much longer than usual to finally get his rest. She could hear his tense air intakes by her side and his hand was clasped round her waist tighter than usual, which told her that he was still awake. Clearly the out-of-the-blue appearance of the boys' father had already disturbed their household in more than one sense.

Lou tried to convince herself that she should stop her negativity from influencing her so much. Kid might be right and Mr. Robert Martin probably had no interest in taking the boys back into his family. Obviously he wasn't the kind of man fitting the description of a full-time father. Maybe he had been a family man once years ago when his wife was alive but it was clear that the man they met last night had drifted away from that image. He didn't even have a permanent home so it would just be surreal if he intended to lead that family life roaming from town to town. Louise was almost convinced that she had nothing to fear when an idea stuck in her mind and ruined all her optimism. The image of her father appeared suddenly and she remembered how he had tracked down her siblings and taken them out of the orphanage. Boggs had been out of their lives for ten long years when their mother had taken them out of his control, and to Lou's utter surprise he had appeared suddenly with the intention to keep her siblings with him. Louise realized that men had this uprooted sense of pride in their heritage and apparently the idea of passing that from father to son was very strongly linked to them. It was that sense what had impelled her father to look for them after such a long time but actually he was only interested in Jeremiah as he was his only son. With these memories on her mind, Louise couldn't help but wonder if Mr. Martin shared the same ideas. Probably this was the case; Jack and Tommy were his sons, his own flesh and blood and she was sure that the man wouldn't renounce them so easily. As much as she tried to convince her otherwise, she knew that the moment Robert Martin had made his appearance, they had started to lose the boys. Maybe it wouldn't happen today or tomorrow, but sooner or later he'd claim what was rightly his by law and blood, and they wouldn't be able to do anything to prevent it.

Unable to stay in bed with these thoughts any more, Louise got up as quietly as she could. She'd hate to wake Kid when he could still rest for a couple more hours. As soon as she straightened up to a standing position, she instantly noticed the effects of a nearly sleepless night in her body. She felt light-headed and had to grab the metal bedpost to stop her legs from staggering. She always felt this wretched whenever she had a bad night, but at least the splitting headache that inevitably made its appearance in similar circumstances was luckily missing. Standing in front of the dresser she splashed some fresh water from the washbowl over her face and she began feeling much better. Now all she needed was to have a bite of something and she'd be as good as new. While she was drying her face on a towel, a voice sounded in the silent room, startling her momentarily. "Lou?" She turned to the sound of her name being called and to her chagrin all her precautions had been in vain since Kid was looking at her fully awake. "Can't sleep?" he asked in a husky sleepy voice.



“Victor Reese and Jack Martin!” she called and when the boys turned to look at their teacher, she asked teasingly, “You, boys, feel like having a few more extra hours at school?”

“No, Ma’am,” the boys replied in chorus as they began shoving his books and pencils in their linen bags.

“Jack, your father’s waiting for you,” Rachel said while handing the last reading books to the stragglers.

“My father!!!” Jack exclaimed, his mouth splitting in a bright smile and hurried to pick up the last of his things and dashed towards the door in a flash. “Bye Victor, Mrs. Dunne!!!” He was about to step out of the building when Rachel grabbed him by the shoulders and stopped him. “One moment, young man. Don’t forget your book.”

The boy stopped just long enough to take the reading book from Rachel which he accepted with a long face. “See you tomorrow, Mrs. Dunne,” he exclaimed and whizzed past her and out of the school. He craned his neck to locate the person he was expecting to see at any minute, but when his eyes caught sight of Kid and Tommy, his face fell and his steps slowed down considerably. “He’s not my father,” he grumbled under his breath, keeping his eyes downcast as he reached the pair.

“Hey, buddy,” Kid greeted the boy cheerfully, noticing his change of demeanor and the reason behind it. “Had a good day at school?”

Jack shrugged his shoulders indifferently and asked in a morose voice, “What are you doing here?”

“Well,” Kid began, “I promised you a while ago that one day we’d go riding in the open and today I have some free time, so why not?” In the last few weeks he had been teaching Jack how to ride, mainly practicing in the corral on the ranch. Kid had used a tame mare that they had for a while to teach the boy. Jack was a quick learner and soon he got bored with leading the horse round the corral and began bugging Kid to let him ride in the open without any restrictions.

On hearing Kid, the boy’s face lit up with obvious enthusiasm and lifting his eyes to him he asked, “Really?”

“Really,” Kid replied with a smile.

“Will you let me ride Katy?” Jack asked again.

“We’ll see.”

The boy clapped his hands, thrilled at the prospect of riding a horse like a grown-up. He really enjoyed spending time with horses and would like to ride as expertly as Kid and Lou did. He loved listening to them when they told him and his brother stories from their days in the Pony Express and one day Jack intended to be working with horses like Kid did.

Kid took the boys to a small area that he knew was usually quiet and not many people used to go through. They spent half of the afternoon there and he was glad that he had come up with the idea this morning. He would like to spend much more time with his family than what he managed to do now, but sometimes work wouldn’t allow him to have that much free time. Yesterday when the boys’ father had appeared something inside had stirred and somehow he regretted not having more moments with the two brothers. The boys really seemed to be enjoying themselves. Jack rode the same mare that he had used to learn on the ranch while Kid rode with Tommy astride in front of him. The four-year-old was still too young to be left on a horse by himself, but someday he will teach Tommy in the same way he was doing with Jack. “If

he's still with us," Kid thought ruefully but tried to shush the idea away from his mind. At the end of the day, he let Jack ride Katy and the boy couldn't look prouder than at the moment he was on Kid's faithful mare. Kid kept watching closely since Katy was a much stronger and bigger animal than the mare he had chosen for Jack to ride. Even though she was very tame, it sometimes required greater strength to control her, but to Kid's surprise Jack managed to ride her without any problem at all.

The boys and Kid had stopped for a break to let the horses drink from the creek while they were eating the sandwiches Lou had made for them. Jack was standing while stroking Katy's mane with his free hand and munching the cheese sandwich in his other one. "I love riding, Kid," Jack exclaimed. "I could spend all day on a horse and I would never be tired."

"Me too!" Tommy piped in absently from his sitting position on the ground. The younger boy had no more than three bites of the sandwich and now he was crumbling the bread in tiny pieces and feeding the ants.

"I know you do," Kid said with a smile while grabbing the half-eaten sandwich from Tommy's hand and lifting him to his feet when he noticed the ants were beginning to crawl up the boy's leg. Tommy squirmed in his hold but with a warning look the young man managed to finally calm him down.

"My father's also a good rider," Jack said after a while.

The smile that had been permanent on Kid during the afternoon vanished as soon as the boy mentioned his father. "Is he?" he asked coldly.

Jack nodded energetically. "He was the best and had the most beautiful horse in town. He also loves horses and that's why I love them too. I got that from him."

"I see," Kid muttered.

"Did you hear him telling about all those places he's seen, Kid? Even New York!" Jack exclaimed with obvious enthusiasm. "Have you been to New York, Kid?"

"No," the young man replied curtly.

Jack hardly heard Kid's answer and continued talking in the same eager tone. "One day I'll go to those places, to all of them." He paused for a moment and then he added. "When I grow up, I want to be like my father. I want to be like him. He's my father." Kid nodded silently realizing that they had definitely lost Jack to Robert Martin in just the few hours the man had turned up. There was obviously nothing he or Lou could do to prevent it; that was as clear as water. No treats like today's would change what the boy felt. Kid just hoped that Robert Martin was the father that the boy expected and didn't break his heart again. "Did you?" Kid heard Jack saying, but he had been so immersed in his own thoughts that he hadn't caught the rest of his words.

"Did I what, Jack?"

The boy made a gesture of impatience and repeated his question, "When you were a child, did you want to be like your Pa?"

At his words Kid's face hardened and his whole body stiffened. "No," he simply said.

Jack looked at him with a frown but Kid had turned his attention to Katy, patting her back. He hated to talk or be questioned about his father and didn't want to show that side to the boy. Yet, Jack's interest had been woken and Kid's indifference didn't deter him from asking. "No?" the Southerner simply shook his head imperceptibly and the boy asked again, "Why?"



the certainty that the man wasn't for her. Lou suspected that the same would happen with this new love of hers but she didn't voice her opinion. The younger lady found it curious that Rachel came to her with her love heartaches when it had always been her who had looked out for the former station mistress's advice. Back then she hadn't been completely sure of finally being with Kid completely. All their past problems had weighed on her mind but also she had been reluctant to lose her so loved independence. Now looking back at those moments, Louise realized that she had been a fool not to have foreseen the happy life she would have with Kid, but as soon as they married, her doubts had gradually disappeared. Of course, they had their problems, the last of which had dangerously threatened their marriage, but right now all she knew was that marrying Kid had been the best decision of her life. Poor Rachel was reluctant to leave her loneliness as a single woman and stick to the idea of finding a man like her late husband, but Lou knew that would never happen.

Apart from discussing Rachel's love life, Louise had the opportunity to tell her friend of the "surprise" they had the day before when they had unexpectedly bumped into the boys' father. Lou told her about her fears that the man decided to claim their sons from them. Despite the fact that the matter was painful, Lou found it somehow calming to pour all her worries to somebody like Rachel, who wasn't directly involved. Rachel had practically said the same as Kid about them not knowing for sure that the man would really like to take the boys back. She had also advised her to go and ask Teaspoon even though the law wouldn't back them in case their fears got confirmed. It was true that the marshal had always come up with wise tips for his riders and maybe he could shed some light in this matter. After their talk, Lou had to admit that maybe Rachel and Kid were right and maybe things weren't as bleak as she thought.

A couple of hours later Rachel realized it was time for her to go and she left after spending a delightful afternoon. Lou decided to do some cleaning and start dinner before Kid and the boys got back, which she guessed wouldn't be long. So she headed for the kitchen and began peeling the vegetables she had put aside for tonight's dinner. The house was uncomfortably silent and Louise hoped that Kid and the boys hurried up because she was feeling very lonely in the house without them around. The thought brought about the feared image that had haunted her all night long, but she stubbornly resisted giving way to her pessimism. As luck would have it, she faintly heard a horse neighing very near and her face lit up, glad that they were already back. She jumped to her feet, leaving the bowl with the vegetables on the kitchen table, and quickly dashed to the front door. Lou opened it with a bright smile expecting to lay eyes on Kid and the children, but her smile froze instantly as she found herself face to face with Robert Martin. "Oh it's you," she let out, unable to hide her disappointment from her voice.

"Mrs. McCloud," the man greeted, tilting his head to her politely. His voice was steady but Lou could smell the alcohol on his breath from her position.

"Uh... Mr. Martin, the boys ain't here," she explained awkwardly. "They've gone riding with my husband."

"I see," the man replied indifferently. "I guess you wouldn't mind if I wait for them." Without any indication from Louise the man went past her into the house and to her utter indignation he dropped onto her couch and planted his muddy boots on her tea table, leaving its surface covered in stains. Louise was speechless at seeing the nerve of the man to trample shamelessly over her house. In any other case, she would have given him a piece of her mind, but she remembered Kid's warning words this morning and decided to hold her tongue. Lou stood awkwardly in the middle of her lounge as she watched the man sprawled on her couch. "Uh... if you'll excuse me, I was in the middle of fixing dinner."

"Go on, go on," Robert Martin replied, gesturing at her with his hand to leave.

Lou smiled tersely, annoyed at his attitude, acting as if he were bossing her around, as if she were a servant to his service in her own house. She plodded towards the kitchen, grumbling

silently and once she was inside, she felt relief flood through her for escaping the presence of the man. Through the crack at the door she could see the man and his image made her face crunch in disgust. Louise hated feeling intimidated in her own house and she tried to relax and forget about the man in her lounge, so she concentrated all her attention on the vegetables she wanted to fix for dinner tonight. After she finished peeling and dicing them, she took the bowl to the sink and started to wash them. While she was draining the water from the bowl, the sound of a door closing behind her brought her back to reality. She turned around and saw Robert Martin in the middle of the kitchen, a smile plastered on his face and the door shut behind him. "Can I possibly have a glass of water, Mrs. McCloud? I'm thirsty."

"Uh... sure," she muttered and filled a glass with fresh water and as she handed it to the man, his hand came over hers. Louise pulled her hand away forcefully as if scalded, cursing silently for acting like a scared cat and showing it in front of him. The man cast her a crooked smile while she kept a long face. She could be civil to him but she wasn't ready to smile and laugh as if she were delighted. Robert Martin brought the glass to his lips and gulped the water down while his eyes looked Lou up and down sharply. Noticing his indiscrete gaze upon her she felt increasingly uncomfortable and subconsciously backed away till her back was against the glass cabinet and folded her arms over her chest.

"My sons really seem happy here," Robert Martin began when he finished up the water and placed the glass in the sink.

Lou smiled briefly at the mention of the two brothers but she didn't dare to move, and added, "They're good boys."

"It's really no wonder they look over the moon having the attention of such a beautiful lady," he said, still watching her intently, but Lou didn't make the least attempt to acknowledge his compliment, so he added, "Your husband sure is a lucky man."

"I'm the lucky one," Lou muttered sincerely.

For a moment they remained silent; Louise kept her eyes downcast, praying that he turned round and left, but to her chagrin the man didn't make the slightest attempt to move and instead he blurted out, "So why is it you don't have children of your own and instead take the kids of others?"

Lou shot him a furious glance and muttered in a very cold voice, "That's none of your business."

The man advanced a few steps closer to her. "Tell me something, Mrs. McCloud. Is Kid just a name or is your husband also a kid in other senses?"

His words sparked her fury uncontrollably. "How dare you?" she bellowed, her eyes bright with sheer anger. "You know nothing of my husband and you have no right to judge us!" She was beside herself with anger; Kid was the best thing that had happened to her. He was her whole life and she would still be lost if it weren't for her sweet husband. She wasn't going to allow anybody, least of all a good-for-nothing like Robert Martin to talk about him like that.

"Maybe you need a real man to make you feel like a real woman," the man let out maliciously as he advanced towards her. His leering eyes traveled from her angry eyes to her mouth and finally lingered on her bosom. "Stand back!" she cried, pointing a finger at him menacingly but the man didn't even seem to hear her. She tried to find a way out of this. The door was shut at the other end and in a daring movement she tried to make a go for it but Robert Martin was quick and grabbed her and threw her against the wall forcefully. He pinned her hands to her sides on the wall while his body hovered over hers. Lou prayed silently that she was in the middle of a nightmare and soon she'd wake up. "You touch me and I'll kill you," she cried

threateningly squirming in his hold. The man let out a malicious guffaw and kept ogling her while he licked his lips suggestively, which made her thrash with more insistence but the man had a strong hold on her. "But Louise," he wheezed hardening his clutch on her, his mouth merely inches from her face, "That's no way to treat a gentleman like me. You need to learn to behave more kindly. After all, we're kind of family, aren't we?" Louise wanted the earth to open up and to be swallowed completely. She could feel his foul breath over her face and she felt like throwing up in disgust. Suddenly, he just lowered his head towards her and began moving his mouth all over her neck. "No!!!" she cried frantically. *'This can't be happening. Not again!'* Her mind was reeling in desperation as she felt the man's disgusting mouth on her skin. "No!" she repeated again in a shrill voice as a sob escaped her lips. As if to block what was happening, she closed her eyes tightly while repeating the same word over and over again.

Suddenly, she felt a strong tug and the pressure of his body against hers lifted at the same time she heard a loud crash. Shooting her eyes open she saw Robert Martin thrown against the glass cabinet while Kid grabbed him by the collar unkindly. He silently began delivering powerful punches on the man's face. Lou was shaking like a leaf and as relief flooded throughout her, her back slid down the wall and she rested her body on the floor. Kid's face was contorted in anger in a way that Lou had never seen before as he kept throwing blow after blow at the man. Robert Martin wasn't a match for Kid's strength, especially in that uncontrollable mood he was in, and after the first couple of punches the man couldn't hold up for himself but the Southerner kept hitting him repeatedly and with increasing strength. From her position on the floor, Lou realized that if her husband continued like that, he was going to kill the man, and even though she couldn't say that she would be sorry in that case, she knew that she couldn't allow him to do that. Kid wasn't thinking sensibly right now but they needed to consider that pitiful excuse for a man was the boys' father after all. Slowly she stood up on her trembling legs and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. He stopped instantly and looked at her with agonic eyes. "Please, Kid. Let him go. He's not worth it."

The Southerner looked down scornfully at the man curled on the floor with his hands covering his face in a protective fashion and grabbing him by the collar he lifted him to his angry eyes. "Get the hell out of my house and stay away from my family, understood?" Kid barked furiously, throwing him against the wall strongly. In that moment, Jack appeared at the door and seeing the state in which his father was, he turned two accusing eyes in Kid's direction. "You hit my father!" His little face was red in obvious anger and he repeated, "You hit my father!"

Robert Martin stumbled to his feet, pressing a hand against his face. He really was a pitiful sight to watch; his upper lip was split in different segments, his nose seemed to have broken and all his face was bleeding profusely and bruised. "Come on, son. Help your old man get out of here."

"Yes, Pa," the boy said, still glaring at Kid, and instantly turned to the man and let him rest his hand on his shoulders for support as they walked towards the front door.

"Jack!!!" Kid called after him, but the boy never turned his head. He called him several times with the same result and then Lou whispered his name by his side. He looked at her and she just shook his head, implying to let the boy alone for the moment.

Kid sighed and walked the few steps separating them, so they were face to face. "How are you?" he asked as he stroked her face tenderly.

"I dunno," she muttered and closed her eyes, tears welling up, as the reality of what had happened, of what might have happened sank in. Kid wrapped his arms around her small frame and silently cursed Robert Martin as he noticed her body trembling. Lou hugged him tightly as images of the incident kept replaying in her mind. "Oh Kid, if you hadn't shown up, that man..." she cried, but her voice trailed off, unable to finish the terrible thought. She was so angry with herself for finding herself in the middle of that situation once again. The moment Robert Martin



The young boy stopped his games and cast a shy look at his father, but straightaway he turned around and began walking to the house decidedly. Jack angrily watched his brother's reaction to their father's summon, not understanding what was wrong with him. He knew that Tommy was timid and reserved with people he met for the first time, but this was their father. Tommy was actually being rude and practically refusing to have anything to do with him. "Tommy!" Jack called after his brother and dashed to catch up with him. "Tommy, didn't you hear Pa? Come here with us."

"I don't wanna," the younger boy exclaimed stubbornly.

"Oh come on, Tommy," Jack insisted, taking the younger boy's hand and trying to steer him towards where Robert Martin was sitting, but he pushed him away.

"I'm going with ma and daddy!!!" the young boy exclaimed, trying to continue his way to the house, but Jack got a strong grip on his shoulder.

"They're not your parents, Tommy!!!" Jack cried angrily.

"Yes, they are!" Tommy insisted and hitting his brother on the belly, he managed to break free and made a run for the house. Jack was about to follow him, but hearing his name being called, he turned around and saw his father beckoning him to come to his side.

"Leave the boy alone, son," the man said when Jack reached him and sat on a bale of hay next to him. "I gather it's quite easy to buy a child's affection," he muttered sharply. Jack listened to his father, not really understanding his words. The man studied the boy carefully and added, "These are nice clothes you have on. I guess the McClouds bought them for you?" The boy nodded silently and Robert Martin asked again, "I bet they buy you and your brother lots of nice things, don't they?" Jack nodded again and the man smiled brightly at him, with a weird shine in his eyes. "It's quite obvious from just looking around that they have good money."

Jack shrugged his shoulders indifferently, not really interested in the conversation and muttered breezily, "Kid says business is going well."

The man nodded and they stayed in silence for a while. "Things ain't going that good for your old man, Jack," Robert Martin began. "Actually your Pa's in a rough spot right now and in very much need of money." The boy listened to him intently, looking with his big brown eyes. "I tried to ask for a loan from the bank, but the bastards didn't even listen to me!" Jack's eyes flew wide open at hearing the language his father had used and smiled shrewdly. He knew that he wasn't allowed to use those words at all; Lou would have his hide if he even dared to think in those terms. Not even Kid was allowed to talk like that, but his father didn't seem to mind it at all. "I thought I could borrow the money from Mr. McCloud but you see we haven't really hit it off," the man added exaggeratedly pointing at his bruised face, which provoked a giggle from the boy. "You being a clever boy, I'm sure you know where they keep the money and could get it for your old man."

The boy's smile froze instantly and staring at him with a frown he exclaimed, "I can't do that!"

"Sure you can, Jack."

The boy shook his head energetically, "Stealing is a sin," Jack said in a soft voice.

"Jack, Jack, Jack," Robert Martin let out with an ample smile, "Who said anything about stealing? I told you I just want to borrow the money for a while."

"I like Kid and Lou. They're nice to us," Jack insisted.

"I know you do, son. But I'm your father and I need to solve a few matters, that's all," Robert Martin continued, using all his resorts to convince the boy. If he pulled the right strings, he could really get hold of some needed money.

"I don't know," Jack muttered, still unconvinced by his father's arguments. In his view if he took the money without telling Kid or Lou, there wasn't much difference from stealing.

"You know, we could get a place of our own and live like a family again," the man added, smiling as he saw the boy's interest perking at once.

"You mean me and Tommy?" Jack asked.

"That's right. You, me and Thomas. Together again," Robert Martin added, his eyes meeting his son's intently.

"You really mean that, Pa?" The boy asked excitedly again and the man nodded convincingly but suddenly a thought crossed Jack's mind suddenly. "But what about Kid and Lou?"

"Well, son, we can't have everything in life and I am your father, nobody else," he paused for a beat and noticing still a slight hesitation in the boy's demure he added, "You don't want to be called an orphan all your life, do you, Jack?" At his words the boy's eyes shone proudly and instantly Robert Martin knew that he had given the last push to finally convince the boy. "So you'll do that for your father, won't you?" The boy nodded imperceptibly and Robert Martin exclaimed happily, "That's my boy!" Jack smiled but still something inside bugged him. He wasn't really convinced that his father's request was completely right, but he wanted to be with him and have a real family once again. Nobody would then say he was an orphan because he'd have his Pa now. He knew he'd miss being with Kid and Lou, but he needed to be with his father. That was the way it was supposed to be.

A voice resounded in the yard calling Jack's name and turning his head, the boy saw Kid standing on the porch, a hand resting against a wooden beam. "Come back inside, Jack!"

Without saying a single word, the boy rose to his feet and walked to the house with slow steps. When he was in the middle of the yard, his father called him again. Jack turned around and looked at him quizzically. "Don't forget what we've talked about, son," the man said with a wink and emphasizing purposefully the word 'son' while Kid stared with glaring eyes from his position on the porch. The boy nodded slowly and continued towards the house till he disappeared inside. Kid stayed on the porch, looking daggers and when he was sure that the boy was out of earshot, he barked angrily. "Get the hell out of my place, Martin. Consider yourself lucky I'm not going to report you to the marshal for attacking my wife, but God protect you if I see you near my family again!"

Robert Martin sniggered raucously as he shuffled towards his horse. "Don't get all so riled up, Kid, my friend," he said with a smirk when he was on the horse. "Since you have something that belongs to me, I thought I'd have a taste of something truly yours. But I'll tell you what. You really cut a better deal."

"Get out!" Kid bellowed furiously, aiming his gun at him, his eyes almost popping out in sheer anger. He had half a mind in finishing what he had started in his house. If the man weren't the boys' father, he wouldn't have so many scruples to do just that, especially when he had attacked and abused Lou so shamelessly. He had to make a superhuman effort to control his blinding rage and not emptying his six-shooter on him. Robert Martin guffawed maliciously as he spurred his horse off the property. Kid kept staring after the man till he disappeared in the distance. He didn't know why but he had the terrible hunch that this wasn't the last they would be

seeing of the man at all.