

The house was in complete silence and the night spread everything with its dark cloak as almost inaudible steps advanced down the stairs. There was a full moon tonight and its faint light flashed in through the few windows whose thick curtains didn't prevent it from flowing inside. It was in this weak light that Jack stealthily reached the bottom of the staircase. His heart was pounding wildly in his chest and he wondered if its fast beating wouldn't resound in the silent house, waking everybody up. His legs were trembling like jelly as he stood before the studio. Jack drew in a deep intake of air before putting his hand on the door handle and twisting it. For one moment he thought hopefully that the door was locked and in that case he'd have an excuse for not carrying out his father's request. Yet, the lock clicked and the door opened with a faint creak, which made Jack cringe in fear.

The boy stood motionless at the threshold for a moment, studying the room carefully. He clearly remembered how Kid had put away the money from selling the horses into the desk drawer a few weeks ago. Jack stepped into the studio and headed straightaway for the table in the far end. Climbing onto a chair he reached for the small vase on the shelf behind the desk, where he had seen Kid hide the drawer key. The bronze vase slid from his hands and clattered onto the hard floor. On hearing the noise which to Jack's ears sounded too loud in the house, the boy jumped off the chair and crouched to hide under the desk, shaking in fear of being discovered. When after a few minutes nothing happened, Jack crawled from below the table and looking around in the dim light from the moon, he luckily spotted the fallen key next to a chair leg. The boy grabbed the tiny metal key in his hand and rose slowly to his feet. His hands seemed to be made out of butter and it took him three attempts to finally stick the key in the lock and open the drawer. Taking the wooden box out, the boy placed it on the desk and his eyes grew wide when lifting the lid, he saw the stack of banknotes neatly sticking out. He had never thought there was so much when he had got a peek that night a few weeks ago. A smile twitched in his mouth as he ran a finger on the money. This would make it possible for him to have a family again, a real family. While he stared bedazzled at the neat banknotes, dozens of images kept playing in his mind; him and his father playing in a cozy lounge like the one in this house, riding a horse like Katy, going fishing, swimming..., all those things that he enjoyed deeply and had done with Kid, but he told himself that it would be much better now because he'd be with his father ...forever.

Suddenly, the boy froze as a sound inside the room reached his ears; he lifted his gaze fearfully and he released his breath as his eyes fell on the puppy at the door of the studio. "Gosh, Blacky, you scared me!" Jack exclaimed in a whisper while the dog watched him intently as if really interested. "Come on, go to sleep!" the boy said in an urgent voice, "Go away!" To his dismay the puppy didn't move an inch and instead he rested his body on the wooden floor and scratched his ears with his left paw. Jack made a gesture of impatience and before wasting more time, he began taking out the money from the wooden box, but he stopped as Blacky let out a soft whimper and Jack could swear that the dog was staring at him with accusing eyes. "Don't look at me like that!" Jack continued in the same soft voice. "My father needs the money and we'll pay it back soon. I just need to do this for my family." These last words were uttered in an almost inaudible whisper as if the boy still tried to convince himself that he was doing the right thing. Jack held the stack of notes in his little hand for a moment and after a few seconds he put them inside his small school bag. After giving a push to the drawer without closing it properly, he lifted his eyes to find that the dog was still at the threshold and looking at him with doe eyes. "Go away, Blacky!" he exclaimed not caring to lower his voice and, grabbing a pencil from the top of the desk he hurled it to the dog. The puppy let out a sharp yelp and hurried to hide in his usual spot next to the fireplace. Suddenly steps were heard coming from upstairs and Lou's voice sounded clear. Jack panicked and running out of the studio, he closed the door behind him. His mind was reeling as Lou's steps could be heard closer as she walked down the stairs. The boy looked around the lounge, finding a place to hide the little bag with the money. He knew that Lou wouldn't be very happy if she caught him trying to help his father. She wouldn't understand and

what was worse, he'd let his father down if he didn't get him the money and that's the last thing Jack would want to do.

Before Lou could see what he had in his hand, Jack hid the bag under a cushion on the couch. "Who's there?" he could hear Lou asking and now with the money safely hidden, he stood uneasily at the bottom of the stairs. He saw the lady who had been caring for him appear in her dressing gown and holding a lamp to light her way in the darkness. As soon as she lay eyes on the boy she asked, "Jack, what on earth are you doing up at this time of night?" She had been restless in bed as the day's incident had left her more shaken than what she was ready to admit to Kid. She just didn't want him to worry more than he usually did and had pretended that the man's aggression hadn't affected her so much. Actually, she couldn't stop thinking about it the rest of the day and when she heard the dog yelping, her heart had leapt in alarm, fearing that he was back. Without waking Kid, she had purposefully plodded down the stairs. She wasn't going to allow anybody or anything to intimidate her any longer; she needed to prove herself that she hadn't turned into a weakling, that she was still the same Louise McCloud. Yet, when she saw Jack at the bottom of the stairs, she let out the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"I want some water," the boy answered her question awkwardly, keeping his eyes downcast.

Louise reached to his side and clasping his shoulders with both her hands, she steered him towards the kitchen. "Should've called me, young man. We don't want you to stumble down the stairs in the dark."

The boy didn't say anything and let Lou push him to the kitchen and sit him at the table. She poured a big glass of water for Jack and another for herself as she sat down next to him. They stayed in silence; both sipping their drinks apparently deep in thought. Lou kept casting furtive looks at the boy who obviously tried to avoid her gaze at all costs. She knew that he was sore at them, especially at Kid, after witnessing the condition Robert Martin was left in because of his confrontation with her husband. Last night contrary to his chatty character, Jack had hardly said a word during dinner and Louise knew that Kid was hurting because of the boy's silent treatment. She wanted to put in a good word for her husband because first and foremost, he didn't deserve that cold reception. It was really complicated and she didn't know how to begin explaining to the boy what had happened between his father and Kid without touching a too delicate matter for young ears. Lou cursed Robert Martin for causing this havoc in her family. Fear still gripped her heart as there was no clear idea of what the man's intentions were but after what had happened that afternoon, she swore to herself that she wouldn't let the boys go with that kind of man unwillingly. She might not be their mother but she would fight tooth and nail for them because they had gotten under her skin and they were part of her as if they were her own flesh and blood.

"You still mad at Kid?" Louise asked after a while. The boy shrugged his shoulders indifferently and gripping his little hand in hers, Lou added, "Honey, you know Kid cares about you."

"But he hit my father," Jack muttered stubbornly, keeping his eyes downcast.

Talking about Robert Martin wasn't her cup of tea right now and Lou had to purposely control herself to keep from calling the man a few names of her collection. She knew that couldn't be her best move and now it was important for her to show Jack another side of the truth. "Well, Jack, he had his reasons," she said, ducking her head to catch his eyes.

"What reasons?" the boy asked in a soft voice.

"You know that it's not so uncommon to get into a fight," Louise explained, trying not to be too specific in her answer. "You remember when you and Bradley Williams exchanged a few





pleasant for Robert Martin but he had never had the slightest intention to act as a father again. He just took advantage of the opportunity to his benefit but he just didn't want to earn an extra burden from this adventure. However, the man knew that as soon as the McClouds found the money was missing, they'd send the law after him. It was now that it dawned on him that he really needed a safeguard and as long as he had the boy with him, he'd be safe since the McClouds wouldn't allow any harm to befall on Jack. After he made sure there was no danger lurking, he'd leave the boy behind again; after all Jack was his son and he could do with him whatever he felt like. He belonged to him; he was his property in every sense. After that Jack would have to find his way on his own; it wouldn't be the first boy who had to struggle to survive after all. 'I had a tough time myself while growing up,' Robert Martin thought while he flashed his brightest smile at his son.

"What about now?" he suggested.

Jack furrowed his brow. "Now? Right now?"

"Yeah," the man replied. "Why not?"

The boy shuffled his feet and lowered his gaze to the ground. "I'm in the middle of school."

"Don't tell me that a big boy like you cares about those things, uh?" Robert Martin remarked maliciously.

Jack shook his head slowly, blushing violently. Sometimes he felt kind of weird around his father and he ended up saying the wrong thing. However, there was something bugging him that didn't let him go with his father's plan so easily. "What about Kid and Lou?" he asked awkwardly, his attention focused on the toes of his boots.

"What about them?"

"Well... shouldn't we tell them?" The boy's voice was soft and strained. He really felt that his father wasn't very keen on talking about the couple, but Jack didn't think it right to disappear just like that. Kid and Lou had been the kindest people he had ever met and even though he knew that he needed to be with his father, Jack couldn't help but feel hurt thinking that he would never see them again, or at least in a long time.

"Jack, you told your brother they weren't your parents, didn't you?" Robert Martin asked in a loud voice and at the boy's nod he continued, "You need to make a choice here. You can stay with your new ma and daddy," he talked in a mimicking childish way, "Or you come with me with your real and only father. What's it gonna be? I don't have much time for your doubts." The boy looked at him with bright eyes and at his hesitation Robert Martin pretended that he had had enough and was leaving. "All right, Jack. I'll go now." The boy quickly reached for him and exclaimed, "Please Pa, don't go. I want to stay with you!"

Robert Martin snickered, gloating to himself for his shrewd skills with children. He couldn't brag about being the best father in the world but he really was a sweet-talker. Women were an easy prey for him and it seemed it wasn't much different in the case of children. "Good," the man exclaimed, "let's go then."

Both man and boy walked side by side as they headed for the blacksmith where Robert had left his horse for shoeing. Jack remained silent as they left the school behind. Finally the moment he had dreamed about every single day that he had spent at the orphanage had come; his father was here and they'd be a family, a real family again. That was all he had ever wished and now his dream came true. He was happy, but why was it that this funny sensation kept bugging him and making him uneasy?

Unbeknownst to Jack, Victor watched the pair walking away. The child had got bored of playing with the other boys; it wasn't much fun when the others were older and bigger than him and especially when Jack wasn't playing. So Victor had sat down on the bench running on the school façade and begun eating his lunch quietly. His interest had perked as soon as he saw Jack going in the other direction with that man he had been talking with. The boy tried to call his friend several times, but Jack was already too far to hear him. As he stared after the retreating pair, he remembered what Jack had told him about his father turning up. So his first impulse to go and tell Mrs. Dunne died away, since he thought that Jack had just been picked up by his father a bit earlier for some reason, so he continued eating his sandwiches as if nothing had happened.

A few minutes later the bell announcing that the break was over resounded across the yard and with unhappy faces the children went back inside the schoolhouse and sat back at their respective seats. Rachel was unsuccessfully trying to keep the class quiet when her eyes fell on Jack's empty seat.

"Where's Jack, Victor?" she asked.

"He went with a man, Mrs. Dunne," the boy replied matter-of-factly.

"A man?" Rachel repeated, her face clearly expressing concern. "You mean Mr. McCloud?"

Victor shook his head while he said, "No, another man." He was sure that he was Jack's father but he wouldn't say anything as his friend had told him in secrecy.

"What other man?" Rachel asked again, beginning to panic. "Somebody from Rock Creek?"

The boy shook his head again. "Never seen him before," he muttered.

Rachel approached the boy, fear taking grip of her very soul and asked, "Where were Jack and that man going?" As Victor didn't respond, she took him by the shoulders a bit too strongly. "Victor, this is very serious. Where were they going?" Noticing the boy's confused look at her outburst, she released her grip on the boy and repeated the question in a softer tone.

"I don't know, Mrs. Dunne. I just saw them going to town."

Instantly Rachel spurred into action when she heard the boy's scanty account. Maybe there was no cause to worry and there was actually a reason for Jack going with that man, who Rachel strongly suspected was the boy's estranged father. When the blonde lady had visited Louise in her home, she had told him everything about the man and her fears. She had also expressed her doubts about the so-called Robert Martin, but Rachel had disregarded her words because she knew that Lou had a suspicious nature from the start. Now the blonde teacher wondered if Lou had been right to distrust the man; it was quite odd for the man to appear and take the boy who-knows-where without even telling her. Louise hadn't mentioned anything about the man picking up Jack this morning when she had brought the boy to the school and after their conversation the other day Rachel knew that her friend wouldn't easily let that man be alone with Jack if she had any say in it. So logically Rachel was getting more and more alarmed by the minute. "Jessica," she addressed the oldest and best of her pupils, "please take care of the class for me. I need to go out. Won't be long."

"Yes, Mrs. Dunne," the girl replied as Rachel dashed out of the schoolhouse. As she plodded along Rock Creek's main street, the woman scanned around, hopefully trying to catch sight of Jack, but there was no trace of him. Nothing like this had ever happened to any of her pupils and she cursed herself for not keeping an eye on the children. If that man had really taken





Teaspoon just shook his head, hating his job in cases like this. Working as a marshal made him the bearer of bad news more often than he'd like. Not even did time make the task any easier and in those moments the thought of hanging his guns up forever crossed his mind more than once. Yet, he loved to be a marshal after all, however insane it sounded, but when he had to bring that bad news to the people he considered his family, the tempting thought managed to lure him closely.

Kid remained quiet for a while and as frustration got hold of him, he banged his fist loudly on the kitchen top while he exclaimed, "Damn him!" Lou stared at him but said nothing. She knew what was going through her husband's mind as she was feeling practically the same. Even though she had feared all along that Robert Martin would try to take the boys from them, she had never imagined that he'd do something so low. She still couldn't believe that Jack was out there, with that man and the notion that they would never see him again filled her with terrible dread.

Kid ran his hand through his already tousled hair nervously and said, "I don't know what we're still doing here. We should already be on our way after that snake."

"Now Kid," Teaspoon piped in, "I can understand what you're goin' through, but don't get all fired up."

"All fired up?" the Southerner repeated in a barking voice, "How the hell do you think I can feel when that man's taken my son?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Kid," Teaspoon replied, steeling himself for the couple's reaction, "but he's not your son, not legally anyway, but this Robert Martin is Jack's father whether you like it or not." The young man glared at him dangerously but the marshal continued regardless. "What do you honestly plan to do? Be like Solomon and have the boy split into two halves? Or barge against the boy's own father, guns ablaze and administer justice like God Almighty?"

Kid silently kept glaring at the marshal and mumbled in a grave voice after a beat, "You don't need to help me, Teaspoon, but I just can't stay idle while that man has Jack."

"It ain't I don't wanna help you, Kid," Teaspoon explained patiently. "Although his ways weren't correct at all, this man's done nothing wrong to the eyes of the law." He paused to let his words sink in, but watching the couple's faces he knew that they were adamant, so sighing deeply he added, "I'm just sayin', let's calm down and think things through before doing something reckless and stupid."

"I can't," Kid simply said.

"Kid's right, Teaspoon," Lou, who had remained quiet in all this exchange, spoke up, "The more we wait, the farther they will be. There's no say where that good-for-nothing is taking our boy and under which conditions, and we're not gonna keep going as if nothing's happened."

"I ain't saying you do that, Lou," Teaspoon replied, running out of patience with those two. "All I'm sayin' is I can't send the law after somebody who's done nothin'."

"Abducting a child ain't nothing?" Kid barked furiously.

"There's no abduction here. That child is his child," The marshal retorted, keeping his frayed nerves in control.

"You don't know what he's like or able to do, Teaspoon. He's nothing but a criminal," Lou insisted, shivering as thoughts of the previous day sneaked in her mind.

"Is he?" the marshal let out wearily.

"He attacked Lou!" Kid bellowed before his mind registered what he was saying. Even though he had wanted to report Robert Martin, Lou had managed to convince him otherwise. The man would sure have gotten away with just a few days in jail and Kid knew that Lou'd have to bear people's curiosity when the incident became public knowledge. Moreover, there were the two children to think of, so unwillingly Kid had agreed with her.

Teaspoon turned two surprised eyes to Louise and asked, "Is that true?" Lou simply nodded and the marshal questioned again, "What happened?"

Louise kept her eyes downcast, feeling too embarrassed to talk about something like that to Teaspoon, a man she basically considered as a father. She had never had the nerve to mention to him what Wicks had done to her so many years ago. It had already been too hard to talk to Rachel and Kid about it, and when the episode with Charlotte was forgotten, Lou just never thought to bring up the matter again. Now she had almost got over it and Louise reasoned there was no reason to talk about something which nobody could do anything about and which made her and everybody feel too uncomfortable. "Nothing really," Louise muttered awkwardly. "Kid luckily showed up at the right time."

"Honey, it hurts me to say this, but I just can't go chasin' that man if, thankfully, nothin' happened," Teaspoon drawled in a soft voice.

Kid had enough of all this talking and seeing as their words were going to waste, he said in a very solemn voice, "I'm sick and tired of this discussion. Excuse me, but I have a son to find." With these words Kid swirled around and plodded out of the room, without a backward look to the two people in the kitchen. Lou knew that he was over the edge and could understand his attitude perfectly. She was going through the same herself and the sensation of frustration and powerlessness were too much to bear, especially since nobody seemed eager to help them.

"Teaspoon, you know Kid's right," Louise added after a while. "If I didn't have to look after Tommy, I'd be getting ready to join him. It's our son we're talking about and you know better than anybody that family means more than blood."

"Lou, I know all that," Teaspoon began, "I ain't sayin' I ain't gonna help you track this man. All I'm sayin' is that I can't do anything as a marshal, but your husband won't be there alone. What's family for then?" he finished with a wink.

Lou's eyes filled with unshed tears, the day was proving too hard and she was doing her best to stay strong. Fighting the tears struggling to run free Louise breathed in deeply. She didn't want to cry and bring about a bad omen to the already bleak situation. Biting her lower lip in a futile attempt to hold back her threatening tears, she muttered in a cracked voice as she stood up, "I'm so scared." A shiver ran through all her body and automatically Louise wrapped her arms around herself. "It scares me to death to think that we might have lost him." Her voice trailed off as the reality of what was happening sank in.

Teaspoon rose to his feet and coming to her side, he drew her into a close embrace. "Louise, you can't despair like that," the marshal tried to soothe her. "It's too soon to know anything and Jack's probably fine." Lou let herself lean on Teaspoon and her now weak will gave way to the threatening tears as she heard the marshal coo her as if she were a small child.

In that moment footsteps were heard in the kitchen and pulling away from Teaspoon's hug, Lou wiped the remainder of her tears with the back of her hand and turned around. Kid stood before them with an awkward expression and she asked, her voice husky from all the crying, "What's wrong, Kid?"

The Southerner looked at her as if bedazzled and simply muttered, "The money. It's gone."

Louise sent him a confused glance and asked again, "What are you talking about?"

Kid struggled to find his own voice since right now he was speechless. After leaving Lou and Teaspoon in the kitchen, he had plodded towards his studio, where he kept his gun safely. Now that he didn't work for the marshal, he hardly got to wear it around the ranch. There was no need for it at all. Yet, he always kept it close by in case it came in handy like yesterday when that man had attacked Lou. Kid usually had his gun in a locked drawer in the studio desk and when he leaned over it to retrieve the weapon, he noticed that the top drawer wasn't closed properly. With a frown Kid had opened it and got the shock of his life when the money they had for the coming winter was nowhere to be seen.

"Kid?" Lou called, bringing him back to reality.

"The money from the horses we sold," he explained in a strained voice, "It's all gone."

"What do you mean?" Lou asked again, unsure of what her husband was trying to tell them. Surely he couldn't mean what she was thinking.

"What do you think I mean?" he retorted sarcastically, regretting his rough manners as soon as the words left his mouth. He was feeling on the verge of bursting and the smallest thing managed to rile him up, but he admitted that he just couldn't vent his frustration on Lou.

When it dawned on her what had happened, she simply hung her head ruefully and added, "Oh God." It was then that she knew with certainty that Jack had taken that money. She had almost caught him in the middle of his mishap and that was why he had been acting so weirdly. Lou was getting furious at the thought that Robert Martin had taken advantage of Jack's naiveté and used tricks to engage the boy in his foul plans. Louise had no doubt whatsoever about it. "That bastard lured Jack into stealing our money," Lou stated with a firm voice.

"You sure?" Teaspoon asked after remaining quiet all this time as he had been listening to the couple.

Louise simply nodded and added, "I saw him last night down in the lounge and acting all strange." Kid sighed wearily and asked in a serious voice, "Do you still think there's not enough reasons for our law to go chasing after him, Teaspoon?"

The marshal gazed at him for a brief moment and after a beat he simply asked, "You have a fresh horse I can use?"