

About half an hour later Kid and Teaspoon were ready to bid them goodbye and ride after Robert Martin. Rachel had arrived a few minutes ago and both ladies and Tommy stood in the yard of the ranch to see the two men off. Kid approached his wife and stroking her face softly, he kept glancing at her with troubled eyes. "I'll bring Jack home, Lou. I promise." Louise just nodded slightly before her lips were captured in his in a brief but intense kiss. Then Kid turned to the young boy next to Lou and ruffling his hair tenderly, he said, "You take care of Lou, all right?" Tommy, who wasn't really sure what was happening, nodded his head energetically and instead of the constant smile he usually had on his face, he looked at him with a glum expression. Louise had clumsily tried to explain the situation to the boy, but didn't know how much he had understood from her scanty account.

Casting a last brief glance at Lou, Kid turned to get on Katy. Teaspoon was already on the horse and said, "You three take care of yourselves."

"And you ride safe and bring that child home," Rachel added.

As a common routine since Express times, both men lifted their right hands in good-bye and turning their horses they began riding away from the property. Lou stood there motionless, intently staring at the retreating figures of the two men while Tommy waved his hand at them tirelessly. When both riders couldn't be seen any more on the afternoon horizon, Louise suddenly swirled around and in a flash she dashed to the house. Rachel didn't have the opportunity to react at all and turning to the boy she asked, "What about you and me go and see where Lou's gone?"

Tommy nodded and taking hold of Rachel's bigger hand, he let the lady steer him towards the house. As they were climbing the few steps to the porch, the boy looked up at the woman's face and blurted out, "She's my ma!"

Rachel smiled sweetly and said, "I know, Tommy." When they finally stepped into the house, Rachel could hear Louise in the kitchen, and by the sounds of it, it seemed she was emptying her stomach violently.

"Honey, why don't you play with your toys while I talk to your ma?" the lady asked the boy.

"Yes, Auntie Rachel," Tommy replied and instantly scurried to the spot in the lounge where his toy set of wooden animals lay and began playing with them.

When Rachel slid into the kitchen, Louise was washing her face in the sink. "You all right?" the blonde woman asked and turning her head to her friend, Lou simply nodded. "Nerves can be quite tricky and cause more havoc in your body than we believe," Rachel added.

Louise turned around and folding her arms over her chest she sighed wearily. "My stomach's been in a knot since this ... this... this man popped up unexpectedly," Lou said through gritted teeth. "I knew that he'd be trouble from the start and in just three days he's turned my home upside down."

Rachel came closer to her friend and tapping her back in a friendly gesture she added, "My mother used to say that children give mothers worries from the moment they're just thought of." Louise just nodded and the older lady muttered after a while, "I'm really sorry, Lou, so sorry."

Louise turned her confused eyes to her friend and asked with a frown, "What are you talking about?"

"Somehow I feel responsible for what's happened," she replied, her eyes downcast in

shame. "If I had kept an eye on Jack and the other children, he wouldn't..." Her voice trailed off as she felt unable to continue.

"Don't be silly, Rachel," Lou exclaimed, feeling the anger rise within her, realizing that the man was causing more trouble than she thought. "The only one responsible here is Mr. Robert Martin. He'd planned all this, I'm sure and if not in your school, he'd have waited for the perfect moment to snatch Jack like that." Louise sighed deeply and dropped heavily into a chair. Resting her elbows on the table, she buried her face in her hands.

Rachel sat down next to her and stroked her back softly. "Kid and Teaspoon are gonna bring him back, you'll see," the woman whispered even though she knew that Louise could notice the doubt in her voice.

Louise lifted her troubled eyes to her and muttered in a strained voice, "What if they don't? They could be anywhere by now. What if I don't see my boy anymore?"

"Lou," Rachel let out in a warning voice, "you have to begin thinking positively. You know, Kid won't rest till he has found Jack and brings him back safely to you."

Louise smiled briefly, knowing that her friend was talking the truth. Kid would do everything possible to find Jack and she knew that it would kill him if he didn't. Lou wished she could be out there with him because the uncertainty was really unbearable, but she couldn't just leave Tommy alone or even with Rachel. In that case, worry wouldn't stop bugging her either, thinking that Robert Martin might be expecting the right opportunity and grab the younger boy as well. It was a possibility that she and Kid had talked about before he rode off and she really needed to keep a vigilant eye on Tommy, just in case. Before leaving Kid had cleaned and loaded the shotgun for Louise in case something unexpected happened and she had to make use of it. After all, they were clueless about what the man's plans or intentions were so far.

Louise was feeling the beginning of a splitting headache and used her finger to massage her temples. It was going to be a nerve-wrecking wait and in frustration a curse left her mouth, "That bastard!" It was then that she saw Tommy at the door, looking at her with those big eyes of his. "Hey, Tommy boy," she called with an embarrassed smile for her foul language. "Tired of playing already?"

The boy didn't say anything, but walking towards her he struggled to perch on Lou's lap as it was his custom. Her hands reached to help him and prevent him from falling down onto the hard floor. As soon as Tommy was comfortably sitting on her lap, he snuggled closer and rested his head on Lou's chest. Louise wrapped her right hand around the boy's small body comfortingly as she shared a knowing smile with Rachel. "When's Jack coming back? I miss him," he whined while his tiny index finger played with the buttons of Lou's blouse.

"I don't know, honey," Lou muttered, and tilting her head so that she could catch the boy's eyes, she added, "You remember what I told you before about your brother?"

"Jack went with that man?" Tommy asked.

"Uh huh," Lou nodded uneasily.

"And Daddy's gone to bring him back?" the boy asked again.

"That's right."

Tommy remained quiet while his attention kept focused on the buttons of Lou's blouse. Suddenly, his lips pursed into a pout and he blurted out unexpectedly, "I don't wanna go with that man! I wanna stay with you! Please say I can."

The boy was getting more and more upset as he talked. Lou shifted him so that they were at eye level and looking intently in his eyes she said, "Tommy, nobody's gonna take you away. I'm not gonna allow it."

"Really?" the boy hiccupped with tears in his eyes.

"Really," Lou assured him, praying that she was really telling the truth. "We're safe here and Auntie Rachel's gonna stay with us."

"Are you?" the boy asked, excited at the prospect. He really liked Auntie Rachel; she was kind, smelled nice and always gave him a sweet when she came visiting at the ranch.

"Yes, sweetie," Rachel replied with a smile.

"And Jack will soon be home," Lou added, trying to calm Tommy's fears and anxiety.

"And Daddy?"

"Yeah, and Daddy as well," Lou answered with a placid smile. It still felt strange to hear the boy referring to Kid or herself as Daddy and Ma. It really filled her soul with warmth that spread all over her. This small boy had stolen her heart completely with his sweet ways, but right now all her self went out for his brother. Jack had been so pleased to be living with them till that man had shown up. It was normal for a boy like Jack to feel excited about the possibility of having his father back. Lou was sure that the seven-year-old boy had gone with that man willingly and she wondered what would happen when Kid found them. Would Jack refuse to come back with Kid? If the boy was adamant to stick with Robert Martin, they couldn't possibly force him to live with them, could they? They knew for sure that Robert Martin wouldn't do any good in the boy's life, but the truth wouldn't have much worth if Jack's eyes and heart told him otherwise. Louise remembered when they had rescued her siblings from Boggs. Jeremiah had put up a fight and wanted to stay with the man. Yet, Lou had turned a deaf ear to his protests, feeling that she had to take her brother out of the place at all costs. In her heart she had done what her late mother had asked her to on her death bed, and Lou never regretted her decision. Now the situation here was practically identical, but somehow it was completely different. Teaspoon was right; they had no voice to rule Jack's life under the present conditions and despite everything, Robert Martin was his father for better or worse. The boy was too young and naïve to know what he really wanted, but if his will was to stay with his father, nothing she or Kid could say or do would change that. The thought filled her with terrible anxiety and only Tommy's voice calling her snapped her back to reality.

"Yes, honey?" Lou asked.

"That man isn't my father; I don't like him," the boy stated, his stance stubborn and his eyes shining with hope.

With those words Lou felt as if she had stepped back seven years in time and young Theresa was practically asking the same thing. On that occasion she had lied to her, and even though years later they hadn't mentioned that incident with Boggs ever again, she was sure that her siblings were aware that he was their father. In that time the decision had been easy to make; her mother hadn't wanted her two younger children to know what kind of man their father was and Lou had merely respected her ma's wish. Yet, now it was somehow different; she had no right to lie to Tommy but he was almost pleading with his bright eyes that she should do so. He didn't want to acknowledge Robert Martin as his father and on his child's mind it would be easier to have the assurance that the man was basically a stranger.

Lou stared at him for a few minutes, debating what the right thing to do was. Finally, there





"What's this?" the boy asked in a thin voice, fearing to spark his father's anger even more.

"Beans," the man replied with a steady voice and noticing his son's expression he added sarcastically, "Don't expect my cooking to meet the standards of your precious Louise."

Jack didn't say anything and turned his attention to the beans. He started to move the fork around the mixture, trying to find what would seem safe to eat. Spearing a single bean, Jack brought it to his mouth and as soon as he felt the taste, his expression turned to one of absolute disgust.

Robert Martin had been watching him and tired of the boy's silly mannerisms, he barked, "What the hell are you doing, boy? Eat up your food!"

"I don't like it," Jack said, not daring to look at his father.

"Very well then, the man boomed and gruffly snatching the plate from the boy's hands, he hurled it away. "No food for you tonight."

"But I'm hungry, Pa," Jack protested weakly.

Robert Martin forcefully grabbed him by the shirt collar and brought the boy closer to him till their heads were inches apart. "Listen, boy, it's beans or nothing, and you already had your pick!" the man said in a menacing voice and gave Jack a push away from him which almost made him fall backwards. "You and your brother are nothing but two sissies, and I don't want softies around me!"

Jack lowered his eyes, feeling tears prick in his eyes, but he fought the urge to cry. He felt tired and hungry and, imagining that right now Lou would be serving beautiful food at their table at home brought a terrible longing in the boy. He always enjoyed meals at the ranch because the couple always told him and his brother good stories and there was always a laugh while they shared the good food. Feeling his stomach grumble in protest, Jack ruefully thought that right now even Lou's onion soup would taste simply scrumptious.

"When are we gonna go and get Tommy?" Jack asked after a while.

Robert Martin looked at the boy over his plate of beans and let out a raucous guffaw. "You stupid or what?" the man asked unkindly. "We can't go back there. You took that money, remember?"

"You told me we should borrow it," the boy replied indignantly.

"Well, that's another way of putting it," Robert Martin added with a malicious snicker, which clearly left his intentions in the open. Surprise, anger and betrayal registered in the boy's expression at once. "You are stupider than I thought if you believed that crap about borrowing the money? Deep down you knew that it was stealing, didn't you, Jack?" Watching the boy's expression of utter horror, Robert Martin broke into a raucous laughter. "I guess your Daddy and Ma have sent the law after us."

The boy's hand formed into fists as he heard his father talk. He wanted to cry and shout at him to shut up. Somehow Jack had known all along that he'd been doing wrong with Kid and Lou, but the certainty of it brought a searing pain throughout him. He understood that the reason for his action was a right one, but still stealing was definitely a sin and a crime, especially if done to the two people who had cared for him so deeply. His heart filled with shame thinking how his actions would look to the couple's eyes. Jack wished he could talk to them and explain himself. The image of their disappointed expressions directed to him crossed the boy's mind, filling him

with a deep desire to cry, and for a fleeting instant his original idea of him and his father together didn't seem so appealing under the present circumstances. And what about Tommy? Did that mean that they would never see each other again and have to grow apart? He couldn't accept that; they were supposed to be together as their mother had wanted them to be.

"But..." Jack was about to protest when the sound of rustling reached their ears and Robert Martin instantly gestured him to keep quiet. The man unholstered the gun and pulled its hammer while he intently looked at the direction the faint noises were coming from. Jack opened his eyes wide in horror as two fierce-looking men appeared out of the darkness. They advanced towards them briskly, with no hesitation whatsoever, and as Jack cast a sideways glance at his father, he saw that the man stood there doing nothing. To the boy's utter shock, his father lowered his gun and exclaimed, "Why, it was high time you showed up!"

The two other men stomped into the camp and dropping his heavy saddle onto the ground, one of them, who had a long and black moustache, replied, "This idiot's horse lost a shoe and we had to start off later."

The other man, who had fair long hair, simply guffawed raucously as he crouched before the fire. Noticing the boy's presence for the first time, he asked, "And who's this little fella, Martin?"

Robert Martin came to sit on the same spot as he had previously been, and furrowing his brow in annoyance, he muttered unwillingly, "He's my son, Larry."

The two other men exchanged an amused look and burst out laughing. "You sure are full of surprises. Is this gonna be your new occupation, to baby-sit little brats?"

"Shut up, Mick," the boy's father ordered gruffly. He wouldn't have liked to mix his past life with his present one. Even though he had been hanging around these two men for a long time now, Robert Martin had never talked or even felt like talking about any too personal details of his. They really couldn't be called friends of his and he still didn't know why he stuck to these two fools, since he'd probably do much better without them. Admittedly, they were a good laugh as drinking companions, but most of the time their stupid and senseless remarks drove Robert crazy. They weren't even too brilliant at cheating in their poker games and all they managed to get was barely enough for a few drinks and a warm bed.

"Don't get all so riled up, Martin," the one called Mick said, "We were just pulling your leg. How you doing, sonny?" he asked, turning to Jack. The boy stared at him with serious eyes but never said a word.

"Leave him alone!" Robert Martin barked angrily and his mate simply shrugged his shoulders indifferently and didn't say anything further.

The two men settled comfortably around the fire and in turns they both took swigs from the bottle Robert Martin handed to them. Jack quietly watched the two men, not daring to move an inch. He didn't like the way they talked, the way they laughed or the way they looked. They were horrible but it seemed that his father liked them well enough to have them around. This wasn't what the young boy had expected at all; he was to spend this time with his father alone and not in the company of a couple of nasty men. Yet, at least the presence of the pair had distracted Robert Martin's attention and Jack was thankful that he wasn't at the receiving end of his father's fury any more. The day hadn't turned out as he had thought at all, and his mind was still struggling with the remorseful thought that came rushing.

After a while Larry turned to his mate and asked, "Did you take care of that little business you told us about, Martin?"

The man flashed a satisfactory smile and added, "You kidding? When have you known I'd fail?" He chuckled as he pounded his palm on the bulge showing the money securely hidden in his inner pocket. The two men joined in his mirth, cheering at him loudly since they knew that when a stroke of good luck hit Robert Martin, they could enjoy some of it themselves.

Jack shifted from his position uncomfortably at the way the three men were behaving and talking lightly about the money that shouldn't probably be in his father's possession in the first place. That money belonged to Kid and Lou, and the boy strongly felt that someday they needed to return it to them. "But you'd invite these two old friends of yours to share your good fortune?" Mick remarked boldly.

Robert Martin didn't say anything, but listened to him with a pleasant expression. "Make it last this time, Martin," Larry piped in jokingly.

"Make it last? This one?" the other man exclaimed in mocking shock. "Mr. Martin and money ain't a good combination, that's for sure. If I don't know better, he'll get though it with good whiskey and better women before you can say Jack Robinson."

"There's nothing wrong in enjoying life's little pleasures," Robert Martin admitted and the three men burst out laughing hysterically.

On hearing their words, Jack sprang to his feet and said angrily, "That money's for a place for Tommy and us, Pa!"

The two men laughed even harder at the boy's comment and Mick offered teasingly, "You became a little family man all of a sudden, Martin?"

Robert snickered at his friend's comment at how ridiculous it sounded to his own ears, but Jack kept a serious face. His father's attitude was unnerving him more and more by the minute. "You promised!" the boy exclaimed stubbornly. "You promised, Pa!"

Without even looking at his son or maybe not daring to meet his eye, Robert Martin grumbled under his breath and barked, "Sit down and shut up, boy!"

"No!" Jack protested energetically. In his heart all he wanted was to hear from his father's lips that those men were lying and their plans hadn't changed a bit. He just needed to believe that his father couldn't deceive him like that.

Robert Martin slowly rose to his feet and his imposing figure stood before the boy threateningly. Jack was almost begging him with his eyes to tell him what he was longing to hear, but the man repeated the same words, this time more loudly, "Shut up!"

Frustration hit Jack hard and in that moment he understood that the reality he was living was nothing of what he had been dreaming about. The man who stood before him wasn't the person he had believed he was and disappointment filled his heart to the brim. "You lied to me!" Jack shouted, his face red with irritation and his little hands balled in fists.

Robert Martin gave him a push that made the boy stagger a few steps backwards while he growled furiously, "Stop pestering me and go to sleep!"

Jack stood his ground, glaring at his father with angry eyes as he exclaimed, "You're a bad person! A very bad person!"

The man had already had enough and without hesitation he lifted his arm and slapped Jack hard on the face. The boy brought his hand to touch his sore cheek while he stared at his father with hard accusing eyes. Robert Martin didn't pay him any heed and grabbing his son by

the collar, he hurled him to the hard ground. "Go to sleep, damn it!" he barked and without further ado he turned around and sat down next to the other impassive two men to continue his particular reunion.

Tears were rolling down Jack's cheeks as he slowly crawled towards the bedroll that Robert Martin had previously laid on the ground. He turned his back to the three men while his eyes were tightly shut to deafen the raucous laughter and nasty comments from the party behind him. The crying grew more intense but Jack covered his mouth with one hand to muffle his racking sobs, not wanting to be heard by his father while he covered his ear with the other one, trying to deafen the men's voices behind him. Thousands of images flooded through his mind as he felt utterly miserable like never before. Faintly he remembered his mother and those nights she crawled into his bed and spent the night with him. With reassuring words she always tried to disregard her actions but Jack couldn't forget her tears, her shaking body and those shouts reaching his young ears that now echoed the voice of his father.

A light breeze was blowing and, even though it was the end of May, nights still tended to be quite cool. Feeling the coldness in his body, Jack curled up, trying in vain to keep the warmth in his small body. The tears had finally subsided but the sadness was still strong in his heart. In the middle of the coldest night of his life in all senses, he couldn't help but long for the place he had come to consider his home for the last two months. Every single night he put up a fight wanting to stay up longer although he knew that all his efforts were in vain. Lou patiently listened to his excuses but nothing worked. Kid always hugged the pair of brothers before they filed up to bed. In the room, Lou always brought him and Tommy a nice glass of hot milk with honey. "To sleep well," Lou always said, and the sweet taste of the milk in his mouth was deliciously special on those nights. Then as he laid in his bed, Jack liked to hear the sound of her voice as she told Tommy a fairy tale, which the older boy always pretended not to be interested in listening to, whereas actually he enjoyed it as much as his younger brother. There was not a single night that went by that Lou didn't tuck in the sheets around them comfortably or kiss them good-night. Jack knew that later when the couple went to bed, Kid always checked on them and sometimes he brought them some water or rearranged the bedding around them. Jack always pretended to be asleep and didn't even stir when the man planted a kiss on his forehead. The boy felt his tears reappear painfully as the smiling faces of Kid and Lou shone before his eyes and a terrible longing surged throughout his heart. After everything that had happened in such a short time, there was a thing that he had definitely learned: he wanted to go home to Rock Creek.