

The Exchange

How could he say no? It's all he wanted, it's all he needed. He was a seventeen year old nobody—he was Dillon Kennedy. He came from a poor family in the small town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. No one ever noticed him. He was quiet, reserved, and unseen. He was only known for how poor he was. He never had much; barely even food. With this new opportunity in front of his underfed body, he couldn't decide what to do. Was it worth it? He knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help but think, *Yes, do it.* It would solve so many problems! He could finally be recognized, dress nicely, and no longer have to scrape crumbs from dinner plates just to satisfy himself through the long days and nights.

Winter was the worst. Food was limited, and the Kennedy family was barely able to make it through. Especially Susanna, she was just barely nine, and she was very frail. She was Dillon's younger sister. Dillon held Susanna so close; he knew this would benefit her so greatly, especially with the winter months coming up. Remembering her so weak only made him want to take the offer more. He could just imagine Susanna skipping along in a bright red dress, a smile on her face and her stomach full of good food. Dillon knew the joy that would be on both his parents' faces and Susanna's if he brought home the 25 000 dollars. But how long could it last? He thought of all that the money could do for him and them, all the recognition he could finally get with it. He could be happy.

He did it. He took his offer. Dillon crept his fingers to the envelope and tucked it into his old, torn pocket. As he left, he felt like it was all a dream. *How could I be holding*

25,000 dollars? He thought. Dillon stumbled back to his home. Tripping over rocks, his stomach sounded as if it were thundering. What pushed him to make it home was the thought of food. He would experience a full belly for once; they all could. All that was broken could be fixed! He could think about how happy Ma and Pa would be after seeing what he'd had. Dillon came up to the house and gave the door a few good nudges as it scraped the floor.

He shouted out, "Ma, Pa, get over here, you wouldn't believe it!" Mrs. Kennedy came over from the kitchen with what used to be a bright yellow, but now more pale and sad apron. Susanna came right behind.

"What is it, child?" she answered.

"You'd better take a look at what I have my hands on. I don't know how it happened, but I'm sure glad it did."

"Well.. what is it? Speak now, boy."

Dillon reached for his pocket and pulled out the now crumpled, yet sealed envelope.

He said, "It was offered to me, Ma. Take a look." He ripped the top of the envelope off, enduring a small papercut, but didn't even notice at the moment. He peeked at the top of the envelope and faced it toward Mrs Kennedy. She just stared, eyes wide, mouth open. She couldn't say a word. She tried to speak, but all that came out were small breaths.

She finally managed to get a word out, "How? How, w-where, when did ya get all of that boy? You better not've stolen it now, tell me you didn't?"

"No, no Ma!" Dillon exclaimed. "I surely didn't."

Dillon went on to explain what had happened. Mrs. Kennedy listened with her mouth closed and eyes still wild. That's when the stomping footsteps of Mr. Dale Kennedy came in.

"What's all the ruckus in here?" he asked. His eyes glanced to notice the rather thick envelope with green peering out the side. He reached towards the envelope to which his hands shook.

"How did we get all of this? Where is it from, son?" Dale asked, confused. Dillon went on to explain to his Pa about the man who had offered him the money. He told him about what he had said, how the man could help Dillon out for an exchange.

Mr. Kennedy quickly interrupted, "What exchange?" Dillon swallowed hard, he felt like he was trying to swallow a horse. His words wouldn't come out of him. He himself had not even known what the exchange was. He knew his Pa would be very disappointed if he hadn't known. After all, it could've been something bad.

He quickly explained, "Oh, it was nothing, I just have to do work for a little while. He said it was just a generous offer since he knows how our family is." Mr. Kennedy was hesitant to agree, but didn't bother to say anything because of the great amount of money in his hands.

Over the next few days, things were going very well. The rain now would fall off the house rather than in, and nights didn't feel as cold. Everyone's belly was full every night before bed. And the clothes, the old torn clothes, were no longer a thing. Dillon wore a bright blue plaid shirt with long blue jeans that actually covered his whole leg. Dillon, for once, felt comfortable. He went to town, being able to walk freely, and he held his head high and even gave many friendly smiles and waves. He was able to talk to

people. People actually spoke to him; they had noticed him. Dillon, for once, felt satisfied. As Dillon approached his home and opened the new door with such grace and ease, he came in to find his Ma sitting with her face swallowed by her hands and Pa pacing swiftly throughout the living room.

“What is it?” Dillon asked. Silence filled the room. Ma lifted her head from her hands, Dillon looked at her red eyes and heard the sounds of her sniffing.

“Tell me, what is it? Why won’t you speak?” Dillon questioned. Pa stormed out of the room with a loud bang, followed by him. Ma slowly pointed her finger at a small envelope with a baby blue ribbon tied in a bow. Dillon stood confused. He walked towards the table, reached out for the envelope and took what was inside. He pulled out a note in fine writing which read:

We have her, your sweet Susanna girl, she's with us. Meet me at the mill at 7:00 or never see her again. Only the boy is to come.

Dillon stood shocked and felt the floor shaking beneath him, only to realize it was him. Fear filled his eyes as he realized his little sister was gone. The fear she must be feeling, being taken from the only place you know as home into the arms of someone new, someone scary. Dillon knew he had to go; he had to go for Susanna.

At ten to seven, Dillon left his home and made his way back to the old mill. The last time he was here, he brought home a great fortune, but what would he bring home now? Bad news? His curiosity filled him. *Was this the exchange? Susanna for money? Surely not*, he thought. *It couldn't be, it just can't be. Has someone found out about my*

great fortune? Do they want my fortune? Many thoughts rattled his head, making it pound.

The air was cold, and each step felt heavier than the next. The sounds of the crunching gravel echoed his dread. When he reached the old building, the windows were dark and broken, and only a single lantern glowed from within.

Dillon pushed the door open. He got a whiff of dust and rot as he called out, “Susanna?” There was no answer. *How could there not be an answer? There had to be.* He thought.

“Is anyone there?” he called out. Still no reply. The room was empty. Dillon waited and waited. There was nothing. The night was cold, and not a sound was heard. There was no man, and there was no Susanna. What had he done?

Dillon’s chest sank as he dropped to his knees, the cold pressing against him. The envelope was not a gift. It was a trap. That man did not want to help; he only gave him the hope of a better life, just to have it taken away.