

## Chapter 1

The afternoon rays filtered through the window, falling over her figure behind the counter. It was a beautiful day with a blue sky and a bright sun; one to be out in the open and not confined between four walls. Louise, though, had to miss this warm summer day in the same place she had been going to every day for the last four years. She really didn't mind it much as she felt she couldn't enjoy herself right now anyway.

Like every Sunday afternoon the place was quiet and almost empty. There were always the few customers who usually hung about but other than that there wasn't much activity going on. Lou leaned over the wooden counter and drummed her fingers on the surface out of boredom. She hated days like this when there was nothing to do and her mind tended to wander to the darkest corners of her soul. She cast a glimpse through the window by her side and noticed that the town streets were as deserted as the place before her eyes. In that moment her attention got caught by the image of a lady with her little daughter walking up Rock Creek's main street. The mother was talking to the girl who was looking at her mama with eyes full of wonder as she tasted a big lollipop. They stopped their walking and turned their attention to something behind them. They had smiles on their faces as a man joined them and kissed the lady and scooped the little girl in his arms. Lou stared at the family intently till they disappeared from her sight and let out an audible sigh. She diverted her eyes from the window as nothing else could catch her interest. A few people were strolling about but other than that the street was deserted. Louise had heard that the Hendersons were holding a barn-raising today, so almost everyone in Rock Creek was spending the Sunday on the family's farm.

Tired of her position over the counter and in an attempt to entertain her mind with something else, Louise grabbed a feather-duster and began dusting the little reception. It was the third time that she repeated the action and there was not a single speck of dust in sight, but anyway she kept flipping the duster over the counter and the pigeon-holes behind it. As a matter of fact, Louise couldn't complain about her job being dull or uninteresting. She kind of enjoyed working in the hotel. It was a place where she got to know lots of interesting people and the pay wasn't too bad. It gave her a decent income to make a living and keep her house. When the new hotel had been built in Rock Creek, she hadn't hesitated to accept the job offered. The owner, Mr. Faber, was a businessman full of new and modern ideas. It was his opinion that the hotel would attract more customers if the first thing to meet them was a beautiful smiling face. Louise wasn't sure about Mr. Faber's ideas but she knew that he had employed her because she had an amiable nature and, unlike many girls, she wasn't prone to accept any too friendly propositions from the brasher customers. Obviously, she had to face many of those creeps, but she knew how

to give them a piece of her mind without losing her composure.

Lou was intent in dusting the pigeon holes where the customers' messages and letters were placed; her mind now focused on the task at hand. Her back was towards the lobby, so she didn't notice the person's presence till she heard somebody clearing their throat behind her. Immediately Lou turned round and as soon as she spotted the person, her serious countenance turned into a big smile.

"My, if it's none other than the honeymooner," Lou quipped. The other woman grinned at the remark. She was a bit younger than Louise, with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. "So did you have a good time, Sally, uh... pardon me, ... Mrs. Douglas?"

Sally's eyes shone with apparent delight and she arched her eyebrows mischievously without saying a word. Louise giggled, feeling happy for her friend but at the same time a twinge of jealousy seemed to surface over her. Sally had been her friend since they both began working in the hotel reception almost four years ago. She was a pleasant girl and Lou had instantly forged a strong bond with her. It was really welcoming to have a friend of her age who she could trust. It helped her to find each passing day a bit more bearable. Her friend had married a couple of weeks ago and had been away on her honeymoon since then. Lou had witnessed how Sally had fallen hard for John Douglas, a farmer that had settled down in Rock Creek a few months ago. The feeling had turned out to be mutual and soon John was courting Sally, and not much later he had proposed to her and she had accepted without a single hesitation. Despite her lately constant worries Louise had attended her friend's wedding and had tried to pretend that the whole thing didn't add up to her already troubled mind.

"I brought you a present," Sally said, snapping Lou from her reverie. She handed Louise a little parcel and the brown-haired woman accepted it with a smile. "So how's work been?" Sally asked.

"As usual, same old stuff," Lou answered without much enthusiasm. "You're crazy to start work on a Sunday after your holidays."

"Well, it's kinda quiet to start off again," Sally said.

"Rather kinda boring," Lou quipped as she took her hat from the hanger and placed it on her head. "But I won't discuss that. Now I'm out of here and you have fun." She rounded the little counter and as she passed by her friend Lou added, "And thank you for the gift." She was about to leave when Sally grabbed her by the arm and called her name, "Louise." Lou looked at her questioningly and the blonde lady asked, "Any news?"

Louise looked down and shook her head ruefully. Mentally she cursed Sally for bringing up the subject. Not that she didn't think about it constantly, but

she hated to show it in front of people. She didn't need anybody butting in her matters; she just wanted to be alone fighting her own demons. It was too hurtful to talk about it, especially to somebody whose demeanor seemed to be chanting the wonders of married life.

"Don't you worry none, Louise. It's going to be all right and ..." Sally began but Lou cut her off in mid-sentence. "Oh sure," she exclaimed, plastering a smile on her face, trying to look detached and indifferent. "See you tomorrow," she finally said before stepping out of the building without looking back once. She hated being patronized and feeling pitiful looks on her. Sally was a good friend but sometimes she seemed a bit too dense to understand Lou. Louise didn't have any need for empty meaningless words of comfort even though she knew that Sally was good-intentioned.

Lou walked along Rock Creek's main street and like every day she headed straight for the small building which housed the telegraph and the post office. Mrs. Peterson, the lady running the place, was at the door, sweeping the walkway before the small office. Lou thought ruefully that life in this town had really changed since the war broke out. When the men had gone to fight, many women had to take over their men's jobs and responsibilities. Now that the fighting had ceased, the differences could still be spotted. Mrs. Peterson's husband had been killed in a skirmish three years ago. She had two small kids to raise on her own, so she didn't have any other option than to work long hours in the small office that had previously been run by her husband. That seemed to be the common destiny of many women in the city, whose husbands hadn't come back and never would. Lou wondered if she'd have to share the fate of those women. Her husband's last letter had reached her three months ago, a month before the war finished. Since then she hadn't heard anything from him and worry was eating her. It scared her to think that Kid might have been wounded or worse in the last months. Lou couldn't even think or talk about what might have happened to him. Maybe he was badly injured in a hospital all alone, while she was thousands of miles away. If she could just know something. His last letter had been filled with sorrow and hope at the same time. He wrote that he knew that the south was inevitably condemned to a defeat and it wouldn't be long for the war to finally end. He sounded so excited with the prospect of coming home to her after those long, lonely years. That letter had warmed Lou's heart and she had felt happy and hopeful for the first time. When news of the end of the war had come through, she had begun dreaming about Kid's return every day. Unfortunately, so far it was still only a dream. The days had turned into weeks and the weeks into months, and Kid didn't seem any closer to returning than during the war. Lou knew that it would take him a while to reach her; she couldn't imagine what the situation down in the south was like, but things sure wouldn't be easy after the long war. What she didn't understand was why Kid hadn't sent word through so far. He knew that she would be worried if she didn't hear from him; that was why Lou feared that something terrible must have happened to him.

As Lou made her way towards the post office, Mrs. Peterson saw her and from her position at the door she gestured 'no' with her head to Lou and voiced a silent 'sorry'. Louise stopped dead in her tracks, knowing that today would be another barren day, there would be no news from her husband. There wasn't a day that she didn't visit the office hoping to find a stray letter or a telegram, so Mrs. Peterson knew all along without asking what the young lady came for every day. At times Lou had felt uneasy around the older lady, knowing that her husband had served for the north and had been killed in service. She had first thought that her daily asking about Kid's letters wouldn't sit well with the woman, after all Kid was a southern soldier fighting for the side which had killed her husband. However, Mrs. Peterson had never had a nasty attitude towards Louise, but rather the opposite. Even on one occasion, feeling Lou's uneasiness the woman had voiced her opinions openly. 'In this damned war there are no good or bad sides. It just means death and destruction. Men are silly enough to get themselves killed for some stupid sense of honor and pride. And it's us women who end up suffering for it. So it's in times like these when we should stick together.' Louise really felt great respect for the lady. She wasn't sure whether she would be able to react as detached and strong as Mrs. Peterson. If something were to happen to Kid, Lou knew that she would sure hate the guts of whoever could hurt her husband even indirectly.

Lou voiced a silent 'thank you' to Mrs. Peterson from across the street. She knew that she should be used to the disappointments by now. Every day it was the same, but Lou couldn't help but hope that one day a letter or telegram would be waiting for her telling her that Kid was on his way to her, or at least that he was fine. These three months were proving to be worse than through the whole war. At least then she had known where Kid was and even though it was scarce and far in between, his letters had always reached her. But this not knowing was driving her crazy.

Lou began walking slowly towards the stables where she had left her wagon. Once again she'd have another miserable evening; she would lock herself up in her bedroom, in the bedroom that she had barely shared with Kid, and she would give her restrained tears free rein then. It was too hard to carry on every day and smile as if everything was fine. It surprised her how she had changed in these last years. Not long ago she wouldn't have been able to pretend like she could now. She really felt able to control herself more easily even though some days her mood got the better of herself and she could be snappy and grumpy for the smallest thing.

She was walking with her head hung low and without really looking where she was going. So Lou didn't see him till she had bumped straight into him. She looked up and met the smiling face of the old marshal. "Why, if it's none other than Louise McCloud," Teaspoon exclaimed, ceremoniously tipping his hat to the woman. "And here I thought you had moved out of town."

Lou looked mortified by Teaspoon's words. She hadn't visited him for

weeks, but she hadn't really felt like being social lately. She was aware that she had purposely avoided Teaspoon and Rachel. They had been her only support in all these years, but right now seeing them brought her back memories of better times, memories which were too painful right now. "Teaspoon, I've been too busy with my job," Lou mumbled, feeling the color reach her cheeks.

"Honey, you've been working in that hotel for years now and it has never prevented you from visiting this old marshal's office," Teaspoon said with a half smile.

"Well, it's not only my job, I've been quite busy cleaning the house and all the chores I have," Lou excused herself again.

"Louise, you live in that house all on your own and last time I checked it was the cleanest place this side of Nebraska, you could even eat off that floor of yours," the marshal added. Lou looked at him with hurtful eyes and Teaspoon didn't miss her pained expression. He had talked without thinking and mentioning her being alone wasn't one of his smartest moves. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," the marshal hurried to apologize, "I understand what you're going through but you don't do yourself any favors if you stay away from your family. And we miss you, Louise."

Lou smiled at his words gratefully and felt tears taking over. Lately she was an emotional wreck and she hated it. She had never been one to cry easily or to crumble down, but now it seemed that the smallest thing left her in tears. "Where is he, Teaspoon?" she almost cried.

The marshal took her hand in his and patted it affectionately. "I don't know, honey, but you have to keep your faith."

"That's all I have right now," Lou said bitterly. "But we should have heard from him by now, Teaspoon. It's not like him at all. What if...?" her voice faltered.

"Don't even think it," Teaspoon chided. "He'll come back, Lou, but I'll tell you what, if we don't hear from that husband of yours in two weeks, we'll leave and find him."

Louise nodded silently. She had entertained the thought for a while now, but her hopes for his return had prevented her from riding out. On top of it all, she wouldn't know where to begin looking. In these four years Kid had moved so much. Yeah, she knew where he was last when he wrote that letter, but he might be anywhere now. Knowing that Teaspoon would be with her in the search made her feel more secure. "Thank you, Teaspoon."

The old marshal beamed happily and added, "That's what family's for." In that moment in the deserted street the stagecoach made its entrance in town at

breakneck speed, leaving clouds of dust behind it. Teaspoon followed it with his eyes as the coach stopped just in front of the hotel and the driver called, "Rock Creek, ladies and gentlemen!" The marshal turned his attention back to the young lady and clearing his throat he added, "Uh, Lou, I'm afraid that I need to be on my way. I have to meet the new doctor who must be getting off that stage at this very moment."

"A new doctor?" Something happened to Doctor Bailey?" Lou asked.

"The usual stuff. He got old and his time for retirement came," Teaspoon answered with a sigh. "This new doctor seems to be well recommended by the high powers in the territory."

"Really?" Lou asked surprised. "And with those contacts he has chosen a place like Rock Creek?"

"I guess the folk's got his reasons," Teaspoon said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, I'd better head for home now," Louise mumbled. "Thank you for ... you know."

Teaspoon tipped his hat again and bidding her good-bye he began making his way towards where the stagecoach had stopped. He hadn't taken but a few steps in that direction when he heard his name being called behind him. He turned around and realized it was Louise. He looked at her questioningly and the petite woman said, "Why don't you and Rachel come to my place for dinner tonight?"

"That would be just splendid," Teaspoon accepted with a grin.

Louise giggled happily. "I'll see you at six then," she added and scampered towards the stables. Teaspoon kept looking after her thoughtfully. He just hoped that his words to Lou didn't prove him wrong. He knew how hard all this waiting had been for her and he'd hate that after all these years she'd have to face a bleak reality. Teaspoon prayed every day that Kid would be safe and sound somewhere and he was on his way back home to his wife. The marshal had grown very attached to the petite girl, who admittedly wasn't a girl any more. From those days of the Express, Louise and Rachel were the only ones that had remained with him. His boys had all gone their different ways when the Pony Express had shut down. Cody had joined the army even before the runs had stopped. Jimmy had left shortly after. Teaspoon knew that he had been on the move for a while and then he had followed Cody in joining the army. A few months after their wedding Kid had left a shattered Lou to join the conflict in the south. The marshal knew that he had done everything to leave Lou well cared for in the hope that the war would be over in months. Unfortunately, the war had stretched for four long years and the money Louise and he had saved when

working for the Express had eventually run out and Lou had to look for a job. Teaspoon knew how Kid must have felt about his wife having to support herself. Kid had a strong sense of pride and he must have felt that he had failed Lou even though he was aware that she was able to take care of herself. What Lou needed now was her husband's presence, Teaspoon thought as he walked slowly along the main street. His mind returned to those troubled times of the end of the Express. Buck had been the last one to leave and for a time Teaspoon had entertained the idea that Buck would stay, but after a few months he had also gone his way, without even saying good-bye. It was like Buck not wanting to make so much of his departure. They had all gone and only the girls had stayed. Teaspoon had never admitted how much importance those boys, now men, had played in that time of his life and it pained him to think that he knew almost nothing of where their fates had taken them. He just hoped that now that the war had finished, his boys would find the way to return home.



Louise drove her wagon toward her property. Before Kid had left for the war, they had bought the place together with a million dreams. The first time they had seen the homestead they had both instantly fallen in love with it. It was just exactly where they would want to build up their dreams and raise a family. The property had a spacious house that, although it had been in need of repair, had a homely and welcoming air to it. The barn had been in perfect state and although it wasn't very big, it had the potential of being extended in the future. At the far end of the property there was a little copse of fir trees with a little creek running through it, where Lou usually visited on those hot days in the summer.

Kid had worked so hard in the place before leaving. He had wanted to make sure the house was as comfortable as possible for Lou when he wasn't around. She knew that his decision of leaving for the war had broken him inside, but she was aware that it was something he had to do and she hadn't wanted to stand in his way of his ideals. Louise never doubted for one second that her husband loved her immensely, but there were moments in the life of a man where he had to follow a lead stronger than his heart. Lou never completely understood what could be so strong to risk your life for, but she had accepted his decision however painfully it had been.

She stopped the wagon in front of the house and looked around. Kid had so many dreams about this place; he had always wanted to own a horse ranch and make a living out of it. He was so good with horses that Lou couldn't imagine him doing anything else. *This is where our ranch will be*, Lou thought proudly. She knew that she would have been more than able to begin Kid's plans for a ranch on her own while he was away. But it was Kid's dream, their dream, and they'd do it together if he came finally. 'If he came home...' Louise cringed at her own thoughts and felt like crying as she realized that she was already losing her hopes. She chided herself for betraying herself. She needed

to be strong and believe that Kid would come to her. Only two months had gone by since the war had finished and many things might have happened to delay him. But Kid would come back, yes. They would begin their ranch and they'd have babies, a big family. The thought of having children of their own had always scared Lou, but something had changed. She longed to be a mother; she didn't know if it was because she missed Kid so much during all these years that she'd have wished to have a part of him with her. Her brother and sister had been with her for a few years and she'd been happy with their presence. Now they were in their teens and they had left home to carry on with their own lives. Theresa had been employed as a companion of a wealthy lady from Saint Joseph and seemed to be having the time of her life. The lady traveled quite a lot, New York, the big cities and even Europe, so Theresa was happy to have to put up with the lady's funny mood just for the enjoyment of that. Jeremiah had always been a restless soul and had always resented the fact that he had to be scooped up with two girls. The fact that despite being the man of the family he had to be under his eldest sister's will had never agreed with him. He had been a bit like Jesse, who had wanted to grow up too quickly. Jeremiah, though, had been happy with his two sisters for a while, but when he was old enough, he had gone his own way. Now he was eighteen and was living in Canada last time Lou had heard from him. She wished he'd come home once Kid returned but she feared that her little brother was too much of a wild soul to settle down in one place.

The truth was that Lou felt terribly lonely in this big and now cold house. These last two months had been the longest and saddest of her existence. Every day seemed endless and sometimes she felt that it would be like that for the rest of her life: the silence from Kid and her not knowing made her see no light at the end of the tunnel. Louise sighed and shook her head trying to shush away those negative thoughts stumbling into her mind. She realized that she was still sitting on the wagon seat and couldn't tell how long she had been like that. Quickly she jumped off the buckboard and tied the horse to the hitching post. Like every day she'd get changed into an older blouse and skirt before seeing to the animal.

Opening her front door she stepped in the lounge. She looked around and thought how proud she felt of her home. Kid would be so surprised if ... no ... when he came back. When he had gone, the house had been sparingly furnished, but along the years Louise had managed to make her house have that homely atmosphere. Even though she felt very lonely here lately, she had to admit that the house was very special for her. This was the first place that she could call her own. When she had been a kid, she couldn't rightly remember the feeling of being home. She didn't have many recollections of living together with her parents, and when her ma had left her father, they hadn't stayed in one place for long. Lou knew that her mother had always feared that he'd find them and what he might do to them. When she died, Louise and her siblings had been sent to the orphanage, a place she had never felt comfortable in and which she could barely call home. After she escaped the place, she had been roaming till

she met Kid when riding for the Express. On those days she had felt that she had found her place for the first time after so many years, but all in all, the bunkhouse was far off from the place she had dreamed to be her home someday. Even though she loved the boys dearly, it had hardly been comfortable to sleep in the same place as a bunch of boys and she had hardly had any privacy. It was after marrying Kid and getting the homestead that she had felt that the place was truly her home.

Lou removed her jacket and placed her on the peg next to the door. As she was about to climb the stairs to her bedroom, she cast a look at the lounge and suddenly she realized that somebody had been or was in her house. The framed picture of her and her siblings that she had on the mantelpiece had been moved from its usual position and the cushions on the settee looked as if somebody had been sitting on them. Nobody had come and seen her for ages and lately she didn't stay much in the room, basically she just tidied up the place every day as she had done that very morning. Her heart began beating wildly and her breathing came in uneven puffs. What if somebody was in her place? She remembered how Rachel had found a man inside her house one day and he had tried to attack her. Fortunately, Teaspoon had appeared like a blessing and thankfully, he had stopped the man's intentions.

"Hello?" Lou called faintly and fearfully, but nobody answered. Maybe whoever had trespassed on her property had already left, she thought hopefully. However, in that instant she heard a faint noise coming from upstairs and she realized that she wasn't alone. Her first thought was running out for help, but she feared there was a burglar and they might steal her dear belongings. Not that she had anything really valuable in the house, but she had some small tokens that had been presents from Kid and she'd hate to lose the only things she kept from him. No, she had no other alternative than face whoever had the nerve to enter her house. Louise took a deep breath and grabbing the shotgun she usually hid under the stairs she began to climb the stairs stealthily. "God help us," she whispered as her wobbly legs led her closer to danger.