

Kid couldn't say that things had really changed between him and Louise. She still tried to avoid any contact with him and most of the time her countenance showed the same desperation and sadness. Yet, there was definitely something different. Now Lou seemed to open up a bit when he talked to her. Her answers were still short and curt, but at least she was talking, which filled Kid with hope. He couldn't rightly tell whether Teaspoon's talk had any impact on her or whether she had realized that her jealousy of Amanda Davies was ungrounded. Either way the fact was that there was a slight difference now and even though it could be almost imperceptible, for Kid it was like a gigantic step forward.

Today the peace and calmness that he enjoyed during his daily duties as Teaspoon's deputy had been broken. Somebody reached the small jailhouse, announcing that a big fight had just broken out in the saloon. So Kid and Teaspoon had instantly dashed towards the place. When they got there, absolute chaos reigned; chairs crashing against the walls, bottles and glasses flying over their heads and every single soul giving and receiving clouts in abundance. The noise and the shouts didn't allow Teaspoon's voice to impose his authority over the fighting mob. The marshal signaled Kid to try and stop the brawling going around a stout man who seemed to have been the initiator of the quarrel. The deputy plodded towards the man and as he grabbed him by the arm, the big fella swirled around and came face to face with Kid. The first punch hit him straight on the face and his body staggered slightly, but the second one directed to his left eye made Kid fall backwards on the hard floor heavily. He strained to rise to his feet and then suddenly a shot was heard, which stopped all the noise and fighting. Total silence ensued and when Kid directed his only intact eye towards the source of the shot, he saw Teaspoon lowering his smoking gun and his voice boomed over the now silent saloon.

That afternoon they arrested a bunch of people and the usually quiet marshal's office immersed in a whirl of grunts and protests, which were really trying Teaspoon's patience. While the marshal tried to re-establish order in his office, Kid sat on a chair dejectedly, pressing a wet cloth against his sore face. He was feeling dreadful; his lower lip was split and bleeding profusely as well as his left eyebrow and on top, his eye was beginning to turn a purplish color and swell. The marshal came to him and said, "Son, you look terrible."

"Really?" the deputy asked ironically. Trying to smile his face contorted in pain instead as the smallest facial movement made him ache all over.

"Why don't you go home, Kid?" Teaspoon offered. "Go freshen up and get yourself patched up." Kid just nodded, trying to keep as still as possible and without waiting for anything further he tottered out of the office. "Take the rest of the day off," the marshal called after him and from his position at the door he watched Kid's sluggish figure mount his horse clumsily and ride off. He shook his head wryly and before re-entering his office he let out, "These boys!"

The ride to his ranch seemed interminable today as all his body was protesting in pain at the continuous bouncing over the horse. It was now that he realized that his fall after the brawler's punches had left his body sore and achy. Kid chided himself for being caught off guard in the saloon and now his entire body was suffering the consequences of his clumsiness. He should have learnt by now what to expect in a brawl like the one in the saloon, but he had been slow and instead of striking the first blow, he had been on the receiving part. When his place finally came into sight, Kid couldn't help but smile as broadly as his damaged lip let him. Easing off Katy as awkwardly as he had first got on her he plodded into the house; his whole body aching from the ride. No sooner had he stepped into his place than Louise appeared and taking in his appearance she asked, "What happened?"

"Usual stuff," Kid answered. "A brawl in the saloon. Seems those fellas have little or none

respect for a man behind a badge.”

Lou shook her head and kept a serious expression. She had always feared what could come upon her husband in his chosen profession. That was why she had been so against it since the beginning, but now she didn't say a word. Walking the few steps between them Louise took a closer look at his face. She cringed at the state of his face, realizing how painful his wounds must feel. Without changing her stiff expression she grabbed his arm and pushed him towards the kitchen a bit too roughly. Kid let himself be dragged along amusedly. “Sit,” she ordered without much ceremony and as he did so, she filled a bowl with water and took a cloth and some ointment from a drawer. Lou came closer to him, her petite figure hovering at mere inches over Kid. They hadn't been so physically close in months and her proximity was driving Kid crazy. He wanted to reach for her and his fingers hurt longing for her touch. The need was so strong that in a daring movement he lightly rested his hand on the small of her back but Lou swatted it off instantly. Sadly Kid was used to her reaction and this one didn't really upset him.

Tilting his head towards her Louise began washing his wounds with steady movements and a firm hand. “Keep still,” she said with a neutral voice; her eyes intent on avoiding his. Kid looked at her in awe and used the opportunity to take in every detail of her beautiful face. It had been so long since he had been able to do something as simple as to gaze at his wife's face. His eyes traveled from her downcast eyes, past her tiny nose to her mouth. Kid gulped nervously when he fixed his gaze on her sweet mouth. His heart was racing wildly and her intoxicating smell and the softness of her hand on his face were pushing him to the limit of his control. He needed to find a distraction; her appeal was so strong but finally a question came into his mind. “What are you doing so early at home?” he managed to ask in a husky voice and suddenly worry took over. “Are you feeling all right?”

Lou took her time answering because right now she didn't trust her own voice. Despite her cold exterior his closeness was affecting her in such a powerful way that the sensations coursing all over her left her stunned. Lately she had felt so empty and cold that she had even believed that the capacity to feel anything other than pain had been seared from her. Her love for her husband had never diminished, but the feelings of a woman for a man had been non-existent for months. Now they seemed to resurface, but Lou knew that she needed to suppress them. However devastating it was, she had to remind herself that she couldn't make him happy, that she was barren and dry. She felt she was like an arid desert; no good could come from her. Even with these destructive thoughts she felt her body tremble at his proximity and when he had barely rested his hand on her back, she had to jerk it off as if his touch burned her. She didn't want him to notice how much he still affected her; she just couldn't encourage him any. It wouldn't be fair for him.

It took her a few seconds to compose herself and she finally answered his question curtly, “I've been fired.”

Kid turned two surprised eyes towards hers but she looked away. “What? Why?” he asked completely flabbergasted at her news.

By now Lou had finished seeing to his wounds. She turned from him and simply shrugged her shoulders as her answer. She busied herself by putting away everything she had used for patching Kid up and tried to show as much indifference about the issue as possible. However, Kid was really interested in knowing what might have happened resulting in his wife losing her job. “What explanation did they give you?” Kid asked, annoyed with the thought that Mr. Faber had treated Louise unfairly. By experience he knew that his wife was the most committed and hard-working person he had ever met. While they were employed by the Pony Express, she had been relentless in her daily duties and Teaspoon and the rest had always been full of admiration for her.

Lou turned around so that she could see him and leaned her hips on a cabinet. With her



hesitation he marched towards the building decidedly. He was still annoyed at the notion that Lou had been treated most unfairly by her employer, so he was now going to demand an explanation.

As soon as Kid stepped into the hotel, he spotted Mr. Faber, the owner, behind the reception counter in an animated conversation with Sally Douglas. He came to them and it was the man who first noticed his presence. "Mr. McCloud, how good to see you around these parts," Mr. Faber greeted. Kid took off his hat and tipped his head to the man and the lady, "Mr. Faber, Sally."

"Hello, Kid," the young lady returned the greeting with a nervous smile. "How are you?"

Kid just nodded his response with a serious countenance, realizing that neither had asked him after Lou. Not wanting to beat around the bush he bluntly asked the man what he had come for, "Mr. Faber, my wife told me that she was dismissed yesterday and I feel that you haven't played it right with her." His voice was tinged with annoyance which he didn't bother to hide.

The man looked at Kid impassively for a few seconds and finally said, "I'm afraid I had no alternative. You have to admit that there were strong reasons for it."

"What reasons?" Kid asked again. Lou had never given him any kind of explanation and he wanted to hear what this man had to say. It really infuriated him to think that Louise had to go through the humiliation of being fired.

"I'm really sorry to say this, Mr. McCloud," the hotel owner answered. "Your wife is a fine lady and she's been an excellent employee for years. But lately her behavior had been improper and rude towards the customers to the extreme. We've had more complaints in these last months than in all the years this hotel had been running. I've given Louise warnings all this time and advised her time and time again to change her attitude but I'm afraid she just decided to ignore my words. And yesterday things went too far when she hit a customer."

"Oh God," Kid sighed, closing his eyes briefly. "I had no idea." He had really been in the dark about his wife's doings outside their home. Teaspoon and Rachel had told him that Lou had the same cold attitude towards them as she had for her husband. Yet, Kid had thought that she was coping with her job successfully and now he realized that he had been so worried about their problems at home that he hadn't given a thought that Lou's condition was affecting all her contexts.

"I know of your wife's problems," the man continued, "and I've tried to be understanding. But this is a business after all. I can't have customers being scared away like that; otherwise, I'll end up closing down the whole establishment."

Kid listened to Mr. Faber with a desolate expression and with each piece of news he learned his mood sank deeper and deeper. He sadly realized that Lou was actually in worse condition than he had been aware of. It wasn't only a matter of marital problems, but it was affecting her in all directions and Kid feared that the whole thing would seriously harm her in the long run. Lou was isolating herself from everybody and everything, and as Teaspoon had rightly said, by doing that she was trying to punish herself. The Southerner didn't know what sin she thought to have committed as to believe that she deserved some kind of purge.

"I'm so sorry," Kid finally managed to say, but couldn't utter anything else.

Mr. Faber nodded in understanding and added, "Maybe this time at home could do her some good and I'll be happy to reemploy her once she's sorted out her problems. As I told you, she was my best employee."



While he was cutting some carrots and tomatoes for a salad, Louise came next to him and washed her hands in the sink. For a few moments she watched her husband's neat movements with the sharp knife and then she said bluntly, "I don't know why you had to invite them."

Kid turned to look at her, surprised that she had actually talked on her own initiative, but at the same time he was beginning to get annoyed. Nothing he did seemed to feel right to her and he was getting tired that his attempts to help her weren't appreciated by her. "I thought Sally was your friend," he replied in a curt tone.

Lou didn't say anything straightaway, but took her time as she dried her hands in the apron she was wearing. "She is," Lou finally stated matter-of-factly, strangely feeling the need to defend her friendship to Sally Douglas even though she hadn't much cared about it lately. "But I don't like her husband. He's a moron."

Kid turned his irritated gaze to her. "Why Louise? Because he's too nice?" he asked sarcastically, using her own words when she had first met Doctor Logan that fateful day. Kid had teased her about her remark, but now his tone was far from pleasant. Lou glared at him silently and he added, "I often wonder how on earth you accepted to be my wife. Am I just nice enough for your liking or am I that nasty?" He swirled around and stormed out of the kitchen, cursing himself for getting riled up so easily. He knew that at least one of them had to keep a cool head, and it was no good to get in a snappy mood. He was aware that the whole situation at home was already affecting him, but for both their sakes he needed to be the strong one.

Later that evening Sally and her husband arrived just at the time Kid had told her. Even though Kid had tried his best to show all his kindness to the couple, Lou's cold welcome was clearly making Sally very uncomfortable. During dinner the blonde lady tried to engage Lou in conversation, praising the food, talking about the weather, and even bringing up some of the town's gossip, but Louise just answered with cold monosyllables, and eventually Sally gave up. The women at the table remained in awkward silence while John Douglas kept babbling on in a monologue about himself and his farm. It was the first time that Kid met the man, and he had to admit that Lou had somehow been right in her opinion about Sally's husband. Clearly he was full of himself and when there was nothing left to say related to his farm and himself, he began talking about the wonders of his wife and the blissful life they had together. Kid heard the man with half-heart; somehow his words were upsetting him a great deal. John Douglas talked as if he was the expert in marriage and women, and he babbled about his wife as if she were a model of perfection. Kid wanted to shut him up and let him know about the wonderful relationship he and Lou had, but unfortunately, he couldn't do so. Their life together was far from blissful and the man's words were making Kid even more aware of their lacks in their marriage.

All night John had directed all his interminable monologues to Kid, but suddenly at some point during the conversation he addressed Lou. "I heard that old fox of Faber gave you the sack," he began and at his words Louise turned her gaze at him with a neutral expression. Despite his wife's protest of his choice of words, John continued impassively. "Let me tell you something, Louise. That's not the most suitable place to work for two lovely women. You definitely are better off at home being a full-time wife."

Kid feared that John's words would spark Lou's well-known fury. The man sure didn't know a bit about Louise McCloud if he talked about the job at the hotel as an unsuitable activity for women. Considering her old job as a Pony Express rider, Kid thought the man's remark extremely ridiculous to his own ears. He expected Lou to snap with one of her caustic comments; if Louise hated something, it was to be told what she could or couldn't do. However, to Kid's utter surprise, she just looked at the man impassively and forced a wry smile on her face. The man continued talking and again his attention turned to Kid while Louise hardly heard what he was saying. She thought that John was a conceited and fastidious man who bossed his wife around like a puppet on a string. She had never liked him but for Sally's sake she hadn't voiced her real opinion about her husband. Now in her present situation Lou just didn't feel the

need to pretend to be interested in him or his boring conversation.

"I keep telling Sally to quit," John continued. "After all, we don't really need the money. The farm's doing so superbly that we have more than what we actually need. But now she's going to humor her old husband and leave that job. In her present condition she has to take extra care of herself and it won't be long she'd finally hand in her notice." As he talked, the man grinned broadly and brushed his hand on his wife's face tenderly.

Kid kept looking at John, not really understanding what he was talking about. However, this time the words registered on Lou's mind instantly and all of a sudden she turned her attention to Sally. "You are pregnant?" it was more a statement than a question.

"I..." Sally tried to utter something but nothing suitable came to her mind. She kept looking from Louise to the two men, but nobody seemed eager to talk.

"And you never told me!!!" Louise said, anger evident in her voice. At John's words something had snapped inside her and the jealousy she felt for her friend's lucky condition turned into fury towards her.

"I..." the blonde lady tried again. She had kept her pregnancy a secret from Louise because she feared that the matter wouldn't sit well with her friend. She was always in a sulky mood and Sally hadn't had the nerve to talk to her about her good news when she knew that it was a delicate issue for her. Now she cursed John's clumsiness for bringing the matter into the open and caught her unaware. "I... I was just waiting for the right time."

Her words managed to infuriate Lou even more. "The right time!!! The right time!!!" she exclaimed at the top of her voice as she jumped to her feet.

"Lou!" Kid tried to calm her down and as he reached to grab her arm, she pushed him away roughly. Louise glared down at Sally for a few seconds; her face contorted in anger. After several brief moments of silence she blurted out loudly, "Out of my house!!!"

"Wh... What?" Sally let out in a nervous stammer.

"Lou please," Kid tried again but to no avail. Louise didn't seem to hear anybody.

"Out... of... my... house!" she repeated, uttering every word very slowly but still in the same angered tone. "I don't need your cheap compassion or your pity! If you want to practice charity, go to church!!!"

At Lou's outburst Sally was too shaken and baffled to react or say anything at all. Her husband, though, turned to Kid and said in an annoyed tone, "Kid tell your wife to take it easy. You should teach her some manners, my friend."

Kid didn't even try to speak and briefly closing his eyes he just braced himself for what he feared was coming. And he was right this time because Louise turned her full attention to the man and looked at him as if she was about to eat him alive. "Excuse me?" she barked cockily, "Let me tell you something, you brainless oaf. I'm not like your silly wife and nobody... nobody orders me around in my house ... understood?" she stopped momentarily but continued straightaway. "And now out!!!"

"Let's go, Sally. We don't need to stay where we're not wanted," John said coldly as he helped his wife to her feet. The lady hadn't said one word and seemed too overwhelmed with the situation to react.

"Did it take you so long to learn that?" Lou wheezed sarcastically, letting out a mocking

guffaw.

“Louise please!” Kid hissed, unable to keep quiet any longer. The situation was going too far and his wife seemed out of control. He just couldn’t understand how the night had turned into this chaos. Lou was being bafflingly rude and her attitude made him feel very annoyed. His scolding gained him a glare from her before she turned and stormed up the stairs without saying a single word.

The couple were already at the door and Kid rushed to reach them before they left. They were in the middle of the hall and their expressions were understandably far from pleased. “I’m so terribly sorry,” Kid began in an apologetic tone. “I don’t know what came over her and ...”

“It’s all right.” Sally talked for the first time after Lou’s outburst. She was very upset and hurt by her friend’s words but somehow her reaction hadn’t really surprised her. “We understand...” she tried to say but her husband cut her off mid-sentence. “I’m not all right and I don’t understand,” John said in a very irritated tone. “I have never felt so insulted in my whole life.” He paused briefly and watching Kid’s bitter expression the man hurried to add, “I really pity you, Kid. You’re an honest fella and don’t deserve somebody like her. But I guess not everybody can be so lucky to be married to someone as wonderful as Sally.”

The moment his words were spoken, Kid was fuming. He felt the urge to punch this man hard in the face. How did he dare to talk about Lou like that? His wife was an exceptional woman and no one had the right to demean her with their words. Lou wasn’t fine at the moment and Kid wasn’t going to allow anybody, least of all John Douglas, make light or fun of her problems. Nobody had the slightest idea what she was going through and they had no right to judge her.

Kid silently glared at the man for a few minutes and finally said in an obvious angered mood, “As my wife rightly said, you should leave now. Don’t forget to close the door behind you.” With this said, Kid swirled around and plodded towards the staircase, leaving the couple alone in the middle of his hall. He climbed the stairs two steps at a time and headed straight to the main bedroom. The door was shut and he opened it tentatively. The room was in total darkness and Kid strained his eyes to locate his wife. Finally, he could make out her figure lying on the bed. Walking a few steps forward Kid could see her more clearly; her face was buried in the pillow and her body was curled up in a ball. He dared walk a few more steps and called her name softly, “Lou?” When she didn’t answer, he tried another approach, “Lou, you were right. He’s an idiot. Next time I’ll ask you first before inviting anybody.” As he talked, he advanced slowly towards the bed. When he finally came next to her, his heart almost broke as he noticed her shoulders shaking and heard her muffled sobs. “Oh Louise,” he whispered sadly and sitting down on the bed he rested a comforting hand on her back. “Tell me. How can I help you, Lou? Why don’t you let me, my love?” He asked the questions almost in a lament, never feeling as useless and powerless as right now. Her next reaction didn’t surprise him; Louise turned from him and his touch and covering her head with the pillow she cried, “Leave me alone! Just leave me alone!” Kid just nodded somberly even though she couldn’t see him and without uttering a single word he rose to his feet and left the bedroom.