

It was still dark when Lou stopped her horse outside her homestead. She had been riding through the entire night, not wanting to spend the night in the open. Even though it was quite mild for the middle of March, she just didn't feel like sleeping on the rough ground, so she had pushed her horse hard to take her home as quickly as possible. She wondered when she had turned into such a fussy woman. Remembering how much she had loved to spend her night in the wild, the bright stars hovering over her, it was surprising to notice all these changes in herself. She just didn't know who she was anymore; she was losing herself and becoming a strange woman and the notion scared her to death.

Initially Lou had truly believed that a few days away from Rock Creek and Kid would help her to clear her mind. She was fully aware that the situation between her and her husband was out of her control and the blame fell completely on her. As soon as she had received the letter from Theresa, she hadn't hesitated to go away for a spell. However, the stay in St Joseph had been anything but pleasant to her liking. Lou had always had a soft spot for her sister, and had thought that she'd help her to ease her troubled mind somehow. Yet, from the very first moment Louise realized that being with Theresa wasn't much more different than to be with anybody else. Her mood hadn't changed and anything Theresa said would upset her and spark her dreaded anger. It really frustrated her to feel like this; she just couldn't control her own feelings and angrily wondered what kind of woman she was turning into. It was as if she were possessed by strange forces that pushed her uncontrollably, resulting in her hurting everything and everybody that stayed in her way. Louise feared that some day she would find herself all alone if she continued like this, but she was immersed in a spiral and was unable to stop.

Her visit to Theresa had been, in short, a complete disaster. Lou didn't know why, but since the first moment she had been uncomfortable in her sister's company. In a way, she felt protected in her own home in Rock Creek; it was her shelter and she found it secure in its solitude. Not even Kid's presence disturbed that atmosphere most of the time; she had come to think of him as part of the setting and only on a few occasions he managed to alter her usual apathy. Louise had always had a special chemistry with her sister. They had got on so well that when Theresa had announced her desire to leave home, Lou had been left with a broken heart. It hadn't been a surprise when she had received the letter from Theresa asking her to visit her, and Lou had genuinely looked forward to seeing her. However, things couldn't have been worse in those days spent together. Lou really didn't know what had annoyed her so much, whether it was Theresa's undying liveliness which contrasted with her now so often bleakness, her continuous chatter which drove Lou crazy or maybe it was just that she had repeatedly asked her when she and Kid would have a baby. Those questions had hurt her terribly and Louise had first tried to ignore them. In all those months she had never found the nerve to write to Theresa about her incapability to become a mother and in the few days in St Joseph she had also felt unable to speak up. The matter was just too painful and although the whole thing was continuously on her mind, Lou couldn't come to talk about it. So when Theresa had mentioned her wish for a niece or a nephew for the fourth time, Louise had barged against her like never before. Lou admitted that she had been cruel and had told her sweet little sister too painful words. Theresa was just a sixteen-year-old young lady and had just expressed her natural enthusiasm. Lou had regretted her insensitive and spiteful comments instantly but it was already too late to take them back. So she had packed her few things and left without even saying good-bye. She had ridden fast and hard as though the reality would vanish with every mile she covered between her and St Joseph.

Louise eased off her horse, glad to be home. The silence was complete and her steps seemed to sound loudly in the night. In a few hours it would be daylight and she would get a few hours' sleep before another day began. She would also welcome a hot bath; after the hard ride she was covered in dust and mud and smelt like a cowboy. Even though at this time of the night

she didn't feel like boiling water and carrying the buckets to her bathtub upstairs, she really needed a refreshing bath. She just couldn't get inside her clean bed and cover herself with her soft-smelling sheets when she smelt of horse and leather. Sighing resignedly Lou lit a lamp to see her way in the darkened house and climbed the stairs slowly. She walked along the corridor and headed directly for her bedroom. As she stepped inside, the lamp faintly lit the room and to her surprise she could make out a shape among the covers in her bed. She wondered whether Kid had taken to sleep in their bed while she was away. It was something logical as she had to admit that it was more comfortable to rest in their spacious bed than in Jeremiah's small one. However, the notion annoyed her however selfish it was and her own uncontrollable reactions made her angry with herself at the same time. Coming closer, the light fell directly on the bed and she now could clearly see who was invading her space. She couldn't be more surprised as she gazed at the sleeping figures of the two children. For a moment Lou kept transfixed looking at the angelic image before her eyes but soon her whole self reacted. Turning around in a flash and trying to make no noise she left the lamp on the dressing table and plodded along the corridor. She directed her light steps to the last room in the passageway, where she knew Kid was sleeping and on reaching it Lou slammed the door open loudly and boomed her question unceremoniously, "Who are those children sleeping in my bed???"

At the racket Kid almost jumped out of his skin and as if by impulse he reached to grab his gun. It took him a few seconds to get a grip of himself and register where he was and what was happening. The first timid rays of the morning squeezed faintly through the gap in the curtains and he could make out Lou's figure standing under the threshold. "Lou?" he asked with a rough voice while he tried to straighten his tousled hair. "When did you come back?"

Louise walked a few steps into the room and instead of answering his question she repeated, her hands resting on her hips cockily, "Who are those children, Kid?"

He stared at her, trying to discern what mood she was in. He really couldn't tell and instead of replying, he eased off the bed and began putting his trousers on. Once finished Kid turned to her and just said, "It's not a big deal, Lou." He stopped for a moment trying to find the right words to say. He had the hunch that she wouldn't be too thrilled about the whole thing no matter how he told her, but Kid just hoped that she wouldn't blow her top excessively because he didn't feel like fighting so early in the morning. "They're just gonna stay here till Saturday." He studied her expression but she didn't let on much, so he decided to continue warily. "Seems Mrs. Burrows intended to adopt the boys..." At that point Louise made a gesture of disgust and Kid had to smile. "Yeah, I thought the same myself," he said and carried on telling her about the woman leaving the two brothers in Teaspoon's office and how he had offered to take them in. "I didn't think it right to let them stay with Teaspoon while we have plenty of space here." He was trying hard to prove his point and save them another nasty fight. "You don't mind, don't you, Lou?" He looked at her nervously and braced himself for the reaction he was sure was coming. To his utter surprise Lou just shrugged her shoulders and left the bedroom without further ado.

Kid finished putting the rest of his clothes on and rushed downstairs. He found her in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee, and when she saw him, she served another cup for him. Kid sat across from her at the kitchen table and for a few minutes they remained silent, sipping their coffee. "How is it you came back now?" Kid finally asked.

"This is my home," Lou stated in a tense voice.

Kid cursed himself silently for making it all come out wrong. Astonishingly Lou didn't seem bothered by the presence of the two children as he had feared, and his clumsy mouth would manage to make her angry. "I didn't mean it like that!" he defended himself. "Of course this is your home and I've missed you something terrible." At his words she lowered her gaze at the cup of coffee before her, trying to avoid his eyes. Kid knew that it was safer for him if he didn't mention anything about their rocky relationship, but he just couldn't help it. "What I mean," he continued after a moment's pause, "is why you've returned so soon. You weren't supposed to

come back for a few days.”

Lou shrugged her shoulders for the second time that morning and just said, “I got bored.”

“You didn’t fight with Theresa, did you?” Kid asked and instantly he knew he had hit a raw nerve. Lou just glared at him but didn’t say a word. After a while she stood up and looking at her husband seriously she muttered, “I’ll see to the horse and wash up. You go back to sleep, Kid.”

He shook his head and added, “It’s almost dawn. You go and wash up. I’ll take care of Lightning for you and fix some breakfast.” He stopped for a second and hesitantly he muttered in a nervous voice, “We need to talk anyway.”

“Talk about what?” Lou asked with a frown.

“Talk about what!!!” he thought irritated and wanted to scream, “What about our busted marriage? What about the reason why we are acting like strangers more and more? And simply talk about what I could do to make a difference to you?” but instead he just said in a very calmed voice, “About the two children sleeping in our bed. You still haven’t told me how you feel about having them here.” He didn’t wait for her answer and rising to his feet he left the room.

An hour later they were sitting around the kitchen table again and while they ate the breakfast that Kid had prepared, no word was uttered by either husband or wife. Louise had discarded her dusty masculine clothes and changed into a simple cream dress. Her hair hung loose and still damp from her bath. Kid kept casting looks in her direction, looks that she never saw. Despite the silence, he found this morning strangely comforting. Here he was in the company of his lovely wife and despite all her threats and words, she had really come back to him, something that had worried him in the last few days. Kid had learnt to be thankful for small moments and snippets like this morning. Lou was really back, he repeated mentally, and her temper hadn’t exploded as he had feared, so for now that was all he cared about. He didn’t even dare to speak up for fear that he could spoil the peace of the moment with his clumsy words. Lately talking to Lou was like handling dynamite; it could explode at any moment. Kid hated to feel like that but Lou’s temper really changed so quickly and drastically in a matter of minutes that he never knew how to act or talk to her any more. It was a sad notion, but he had learnt to cherish those few moments that she didn’t look like she was on the verge of punching him hard on the face. Silence was a normal occurrence in their daily life and the fact that he was becoming to consider it as “normal” brought about a deep sadness. They had always been able to talk. Since the beginning Lou had always been his friend first and foremost. Only once Kid had suffered a silent treatment like that. Just after they broke up, the new lady teacher had caught his eye and Kid had made some unfortunate remarks that had reached Lou’s ears. Kid admitted that he had been a fool and would regret that moment forever. He had wanted to find an escape to his feelings because he hadn’t got over Lou, and he had rushed to find a substitute. He admitted he had behaved foolishly and had assumed his blame when some time later he had apologised to her. Those moments of awkward silence hadn’t been pleasant at all as Kid remembered sitting at the bunkhouse table across from her and feeling as if she were miles and miles away. However, when they managed to get over that episode, they had remained friends despite not being together. Now Kid didn’t know where he really stood. It seemed as if he had lost his wife in a true sense but what was worse was that he had also lost the best friend he had ever had. And this time it wasn’t his fault.

In that moment movement at the kitchen door caught his eye and he saw the two boys, still clad in their nightclothes, their hair tousled and their eyes puffy from sleep. “Mr. McCloud?” Jack said, rubbing his sleepy eyes with his little fist. Tommy followed behind, gripping his brother’s sleeve and looking shyly at the two adults.

Kid stood up and approached them, “Hey, boys!” he exclaimed while he looked at Lou, studying her expression. “Have you slept well?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack answered, eyeing Lou, who had remained seated and was staring at the two boys.

“Good,” Kid replied with a big smile. “Jack, Tommy, this lady here’s my wife Louise. She came back just a few hours ago.”

“How are you, Ma’am?” Jack greeted politely as Lou just nodded in acknowledgement, looking at them with an expression Kid felt unable to read.

“Boys, why don’t you go back upstairs and get dressed?” Kid asked. “I’ll make you something nice for breakfast and then we can go to town.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack replied with an ample grin and turned to leave, dragging his brother along by the hand.

Kid stared after them with a smile and when they had disappeared from their sight, he turned to his wife. “They’re such good boys, Lou,” he said as he approached the stove and poured himself another cup of coffee. “Jack’s a little chatterbox and Tommy...” He hadn’t finished his thought when Louise came next to him and cut him off in mid-sentence.

“Are you planning to take those children to Teaspoon’s office?” she asked with a disapproving tone.

Kid looked at her surprised. This was the most she had talked in all the morning and what was more, she seemed genuinely interested in what he was going to do about the two boys. “Well, Lou,” he said, “there’s not many other options.”

“That’s hardly a place for children,” Lou insisted, “You said so yourself.”

Kid eyed her curiously as he talked. “What else can I do? Maybe Rachel...”

“They can stay with me,” Lou stated firmly, cutting him off again.

Kid could have been knocked off with a feather at her words. He had been glad that she hadn’t flown into a temper about the whole matter but now her willingness to help out with the boys was just unbelievable, given her apathy for the last few months. She hadn’t cared for much and Kid had kind of got used to it. Yet, now in front of him he was seeing flashes of the old Lou resurface and his heart warmed with hope. “I took this responsibility upon myself and I don’t want to burden you,” he added, waiting to see what she’d say next.

“Well, it’s not very responsible of you to take them to a place like the jailhouse,” Lou stated, folding her arms over her chest.

Kid looked at her, still amazed at this sudden twist in her. “You sure, Lou?” He asked again. “You sure you’ll be all right with them?”

Lou glared at him, tired of his remarks and hurt that he didn’t trust her. “I won’t eat them alive, Kid!!!” she barked at the top of her voice. Lou admitted to herself that she had given him more than enough reasons for his wariness towards her. Her behaviour had been most bizarre and unstable, but the realization of it was really painful. She didn’t know why she had offered to take care of those children, and when Kid had put her capability into doubt, she just insisted as a way to win over him.

“All right, all right,” Kid said, lifting his hands as if in defense. “I didn’t mean it like that!” He wanted to punch himself hard for blundering it again. They were having a real conversation, a



Louise heard the front door bang shut and let out a silent sigh. No matter the circumstances she always ended up hurting him. She didn't know how he hadn't left her already after all these months. Lately all she managed to say was horrible and cruel words. Kid didn't deserve that treatment. He had been so patient, sweet and kind to her and it was surprising how he kept going. With each passing day Lou was more and more convinced that he should find his happiness somewhere far from her. She just felt unable to perform the role of a dutiful wife any more. Before getting married she had been plagued by doubts, unsure if she would be able to be the wife Kid deserved after the rugged life she had led. Sadly, those doubts and fears had proved to carry the truth behind them after all. Clearly Kid wasn't happy and it wasn't just that she couldn't bear children, but the whole matter was something deeper. She was basically a terrible wife and had to admit that Kid had made the worst mistake of his life by marrying her.

Louise sighed again and when she turned her eyes from the door through which Kid had left, the two boys were watching her intently. She had forgotten about them and now she was beginning to panic. What was she supposed to do with them till Kid came back? Lou wasn't sure what impulse she had that made her offer to care for them. This would only prove to her that nature had been wise to incapacitate her to have children. She really wasn't in her best mood and had no idea what to do or how to talk to two small boys. Although she had taken care of her siblings for a few years, the situation had been quite different. Theresa and Jeremiah had been older than these two children when they had come to live here with her and she hadn't had great difficulties in dealing with them. Even when she had taken care of them while her ma was sick or when in the orphanage, she had been a young girl herself and hadn't been fully aware of the responsibility towards her two siblings. Now Lou was an adult and all of a sudden, she found herself in the company of two strange children and having to look after them all morning on top of it all.

Jack was intently looking at her and smiling happily. "I do like him," the boy exclaimed and Louise gave him a faint smile. "Do you?" he asked after a beat.

"Do I what, Jack?"

"Like him!" he said matter-of-factly as if he thought her question made no sense.

Lou gazed at him for a few moments, wondering what had prompted this little boy to ask her that. "He's my husband," she simply said, as though that answered his curiosity and his question.

Jack interchanged a confused look with his brother and then glanced at Louise with a frown, "That's not what I asked."

Lou remained silent for a few seconds while the boy kept staring at her in expectation and she finally said, "Yeah, I like him, I like him very much." It was the first time she admitted her feelings to anybody or to herself in months. To her surprise saying it out loud brought about a sense of peace to her heart. All these long months she had been unable to simply talk to her husband, and here came this little boy who had made her admit something as simple as the fact that she liked him, that she liked her husband.

At her answer Jack smiled from ear to ear and surprisingly Lou felt her cheeks go red. The boy seemed to beam happily and Louise found herself smiling as well. However, her smile faded as Jack launched his next question. "Why don't you and Mr. McCloud have children?"

Louise stiffen at his words and felt her body shiver. The two boys looked at her, expecting her answer and she tried to get a grip of herself. "I ... I can't have children," she finally managed to say awkwardly. To her surprise her words didn't make her feel as bitter and angry as she had thought. It was the first time she had pronounced what was always in her mind and this time she

hadn't felt the desire to die then and there.

"Why?" Jack asked again.

"I ... don't know," Lou admitted in a soft voice. "Some people can and some can't."

The boy kept thoughtful with a serious expression for a few minutes. "Mrs. McCloud?" he called after a beat.

"Yes, Jack?"

"That's lucky," he stated to Lou's surprise.

"Oh yeah?" she let out with a neutral expression. Rachel and Teaspoon had repeatedly bugged her with the same words. She should be considered lucky to have a good husband, loyal friends and a comfortable life. In a way she knew that they were right but it was so difficult for her to be thankful for that. She wanted something more, something she couldn't have and for that reason she didn't feel fortunate at all.

"My ma died when she had my sister," the boy began almost in a whisper. "Father O'Brien said that they're happy in heaven. But... but she'd still be here with me and Tommy and pa wouldn't have left if..." The boy's voice faltered and his bright eyes stared at Lou. Louise stared back at young Jack in amazement as she saw herself mirrored in this little boy. She could fully understand him and as a little girl she had often made similar senseless reasoning. She had been barely eight years old when life had drastically changed for her. Her mother had fallen ill and a few months later she had died leaving Lou and her two younger siblings alone in the world. It had been then that Lou had suddenly found herself in a strange place and surrounded by strange people. She just couldn't understand why she had to live in the orphanage and with people that weren't her family. That wasn't her home and often she had stubbornly demanded of the nuns the reason why God had let her dear ma to die. She had wanted an explanation, a reasoning to that insane situation, but she had got none. All she had received was faint and empty words that didn't help her in her distress at all. It had angered her back then when she had felt patronized or just given the brush off. Lou had never felt more lonely and in her silly fantasies she had even dreamed that her father would come and take them away from that place. She remembered praying hard to God to let her pa become a good man and then they would be a real family again although she knew that would never happen.

Louise kept looking at Jack, not knowing what to say. She didn't have any more comforting words than the nuns had for her when she was a little girl. This boy didn't need any meaningless comments from anybody and she wouldn't be offering them. Lou had eventually learnt that sometimes life had no logic and most of the time it just didn't make sense. Jack had a right to make his illogical assumptions and hopes. He could think that she was lucky to be unable to have children since he wished that his own mother would have been barren if that meant she was still alive. It all made perfect sense to Louise and she felt a sudden affinity to the boy. She leaned in and cupping his face with her hands she smiled, this time with a genuine smile and trying to find a new direction she said in a soft voice, "Darling, be a good boy and eat your breakfast. Kid has taken the trouble to fix it and you don't want to disappoint him, don't you?"

"No, Ma'am," Jack replied, smiling as he dug in avidly. Louise cast a look at his younger brother and, Lou didn't know why, but the boy was staring at her, grinning from ear to ear. She rose to her feet and ruffling Tommy's hair teasingly, she added, "You too, young man." While she was filling two glasses with milk for the two boys, Jack called her name, "Mrs. McCloud?"

"Yes Jack?" Lou replied with a faint smile. She didn't know why but this morning she was feeling different and in a way renewed.

The boy kept silent for a moment and then whispered as if it were a secret, "You're not like Mrs. Burrows at all. You do talk and smell like a ma." At his words Louise felt her throat go dry and her eyes fill with tears and she turned round, away from the boys so that they couldn't see her this upset and just muttered, "Thank you."