

It was a very warm day for the middle of March. The sun was shining brightly above and the shortage of rain lately made the atmosphere muggy and humid. Lou drove the wagon along Rock Creek's busy main street; the two boys sitting at her side with smiling expressions, eager to get to town. Their contented countenances contrasted with Lou's. Lately she was beginning to hate coming to town; in fact she dreaded the whole ordeal. It was weird as not long ago she used to go to town every day while she had been working at the hotel. Now if she could, she avoided leaving the ranch altogether. It was Kid who usually went to Tompkins' store for provisions. There had been a kind of silent pact between them in which she left him a note with everything she needed and he took care of going to the mercantile.

Louise stopped the wagon and helped the boys get off. After securing the carriage to a hitching post, the three of them began walking along the dusty street. "Where are we going, Mrs. McCloud?" Jack asked as he tried to keep up with her.

"To the general store," Lou said, "I've already told you several times."

The boy made a gesture of disappointment and added with a whine, "I thought we could go to the marshal's office. It was really fun yesterday."

Louise shook her head at the boy's relentlessness. The entire ride to town he had continuously bugged her about going to the jailhouse. "That's not a place to play in, Jack," Louise repeated the reason once more.

"I won't play. I'd help the marshal and Mr. McCloud," he stated with a proud stance.

"Would you?" Lou asked with a bemused expression and the boy nodded energetically. She smiled and turned to Tommy, who was walking at her other side. "Is your brother always this stubborn?" she asked teasingly and the small boy bobbed his head up and down with a big smile. "Hey!!!" Jack protested and Lou couldn't help but chuckle. She winked at him and the boy grinned sheepishly. Her attention was on Jack when she felt something touch her hand and looking down she realized that little Tommy had got hold of it as they walked. The boy looked back at her, smiling his constant smile, as if asking for her approval and Louise squeezed his little hand gently and returned the smile. The gesture had really moved her and she was stunned at the effect these two boys were having on her. She was aware that she was acting differently and couldn't help to feel awkward. Louise couldn't remember the last time she had felt like smiling or had reasons to do so. She felt bitter and miserable all the time for months now, but in the few hours she had met the two brothers she had been surprised at how easily smiling came back to her. Maybe it was just because she couldn't vent her frustration on these small children, but the fact remained that they had made her momentarily forget the reasons of her unhappiness.

The smile on her face vanished as soon as she spotted the person walking in the other direction. It was Sally. Lou hadn't seen her since she had rudely thrown her and her husband out of her house. Louise hadn't given much thought to that episode and hadn't even contemplated the possibility of going and apologizing to the couple. What was done was done and Lou couldn't say she regretted her behavior. She had felt so hurt and betrayed in her friendship that even though she admitted she had gone over the top, she had meant every word she had uttered. So far it seemed Sally hadn't spotted her and Lou kept looking at her out of curiosity. Her pregnancy was very obvious now and Lou wondered how far along she was. She was annoyed at the thought that her blond friend had hidden her state from her longer than she had initially thought. Sally was in an animated conversation with another woman and when Lou recognized the other lady, her mouth opened in utter shock and her anger increased dangerously. What was Sally doing with Amanda Davis? Lou knew that her friend didn't like that woman and now they looked

as if they were best friends. Louise had repeatedly complained to her how Amanda Davis would shamelessly flirted with her husband and humiliated her with spiteful words but apparently Sally had forgotten all those times Lou had taken her in her confidence. Admittedly, she couldn't say that they were close friends now, actually they didn't talk at all, but Lou couldn't help but see this as a new treason to her friendship. On top of it all, she couldn't forget how Sally's "wonderful" husband had spread word that she was nothing more than a crazy woman, embittered and frustrated. Not that she was concerned by what everybody thought of her, but all those things added up to her already poor opinion lately of Sally Douglas.

In that moment laughing at something that Amanda had said Sally looked ahead and her eyes fell on Lou with the two boys in tow and her mirth vanished instantly. They glanced at each other in the distance for a few seconds and Lou looked away after a while. "Boys, hurry up," she urged them not wanting to have to face the two women. She'd hate to be forced to hear snide remarks by that spiteful woman or bear pitiful looks from Sally. "Why?" Jack asked, not eager to be scooped up in the general store while he'd rather be playing.

Lou didn't answer the boy but walked faster at a pace that was hard for the boys to keep up with her. Tompkins' store wasn't too far and when they reached it, Lou felt an immense sensation of relief. She stepped inside followed by the two children. Tompkins was in his usual position behind the counter and was engaged in conversation with a few ladies. Not bothered to greet them good-morning she scurried inside and reached the end of the store without being noticed. Lou was no fool and was aware of what people thought of her. Some of the well-regarded ladies and men looked down on her on account of her past life in the Pony Express and now thanks to John Douglas' big mouth she could feel the scornful looks on her. Louise stomped towards the back of the store where the clothes racks were and began delving in the shelves. Finally, she found what she was looking for and holding a pair of trousers in front of her eyes she muttered to herself, "I think they'll fit." Turning to Jack she asked, "Do you like them?"

"Yeah," the boy replied, staring at the new crisp pants with big eyes.

"You both need a couple of these, a few shirts and, of course, new shoes," Lou said thoughtfully.

"Us?" Jack asked with a big smile. "You mean you're going to buy brand new clothes for me and Tommy?"

Lou nodded. "Yours are a bit tatty," she added softly, rummaging for more garments on the shelves. "You definitely need some more clothes while you're here."

"And can we keep them later?" Jack asked again, excited at the prospects of having new trousers and even shoes.

Lou smiled sadly and said, "Of course." She paused for a moment and then she added, "You don't get to wear nice new clothes at the orphanage, do you?"

Jack shook his head no and kept his eyes downcast. Lou put a finger under his chin and tilted his head to hers. "What's wrong?" she asked with a worried countenance. As the boy kept unusually quiet, Louise continued, "You won't be ashamed of living in an orphanage, will you?" Without meeting her gaze, the boy just shrugged his shoulders, a gesture that reminded her of Kid so much. "Look at me, Jack," she urged and the boy met her eyes timidly. "There's nothing to be ashamed of the place where one lives, honey," Louise talked in hushed tones. "You didn't choose it but one day you'll be able to decide where and with whom to live."

"How do you know?" Jack asked with a frown.

"Well, I grew up in an orphanage like you," she stated matter-of-factly.

“Really?” he let out, wondering if Lou was making up that story. In his short life he had discovered that adults were capable of lying without any obvious signs of remorse and many a time Jack had felt deeply disappointed when he had found out all those lies.

“Really,” Lou answered, looking at him straight in the eyes.

“You have no ma or pa?” Jack asked again, still unconvinced that a lady like Mrs. McCloud could be a lousy orphan like he had heard the town’s children call them. Lou shook her head sadly and the boy kept silent for a few moments. After a while he continued his questioning, feeling really intrigued and curious, “And you liked it at the orphanage?”

“Oh no, I hated it,” she exclaimed with a pretended horrified expression and both she and Jack giggled together. “And now enough talking and let’s try to find some nice trousers for you and your brother.” Lou looked to see where Tommy was and when she finally located him before the display table with the toys, she returned to the task at hand.

Tommy had got bored with all the talking between his brother and Louise, so he had wandered noiselessly around the store. Suddenly, his eyes were instantly attracted to a table full of different toys. The boy’s eyes got big as saucers as he looked at all the toys in awe. He had never seen so many together before but something in particular caught his eye. It was a miniature railway engine with bright red colors. Tommy was entranced by the image before his eyes and unable to resist the temptation, he grabbed the object in his two little hands, staring at it in wonder. However, a raucous voice coming from the other end of the store broke the magic moment and startled the boy, making him almost drop the precious object in his hold. Rough hands snatched the little train out of his and grabbed his arm forcefully. Tommy looked up and his eyes met an angry face glaring at him most scaringly. “Go play on the street, young rascal!” Tompkins barked as he began pushing the boy towards the door. Tommy let himself be dragged along and he stared at the storekeeper’s imposing figure with a terrified expression. “This isn’t the place for children’s games!!!”

The rough voice of Tompkins had drawn Lou’s attention and when she saw the man yanking Tommy like a puppet, she barged against him full force. “Excuse me!!! What the heck do you think you’re doing?” she bellowed and dashed across the room to where the storekeeper had stopped on hearing her words.

“Stay out of this, Lou,” he said in an annoyed voice.

“Mrs. McCloud to you!” she growled furiously. “Is this your new pastime now, Mr. Tompkins? You got bored with abusing poor souls and Indians and now you pick on scared little children instead? What the hell is your problem?” She was fuming and realizing that the man was still holding the boy’s little arm, she forcefully knocked Tompkins’ hand off. “Let go of him, you oaf!”

“This boy was disrupting my store, my livelihood, and it’s my problem, not yours!” Tompkins rebuked unkindly, pointing at her with a menacing finger.

“He wasn’t disrupting your damn store, just looking at the toys because it happens he’s a child!” she said at the top of her voice. She knew that everybody in the store was looking at her but she didn’t care. “This little boy’s with me and I make it my problem when grown-up men try to abuse him!”

“I... didn’t know,” Tompkins muttered, suddenly ashamed of his behavior. “I’m really sorry.” His voice was so low that Lou could hardly make his words out.

His apology didn’t manage to placate her boiling anger and Louise continued in the same

caustic tone, "You sure have reasons to be sorry, Mister!!! I won't set foot in your pathetic store again and I will spend my money somewhere else. Anywhere will be better than the ogre's cave!!! I can't well imagine what on earth made me keep coming here for so many years! Your reputation speaks for itself!!!" She stopped to catch her breath. Mr. Tompkins seemed to have lost the ability to talk and listened to her outburst imperturbably. Lou turned to the two brothers. "Let's go, boys!!!" she called as she led the way out and the two children followed her straightaway.

Once outside Lou turned to Tommy and crouching in front of him she brushed her hand over his hair as she said in a soft voice, "Hey, Tommy boy, that horrible, frumpy man didn't scare you, did he?" The boy looked at her with bright eyes, still shaken by the episode with Tompkins, but, despite everything, he shook his head no. "That's a good boy," Lou exclaimed with a smile and Tommy smiled back proudly.

"Mrs. McCloud," Jack called at her side and Lou looked up at his standing figure. When the boy saw that he had captured the woman's attention he said, "You were incredible in there. You managed to shut that nasty man up. Isn't it something?"

Louise stood up to a standing position and while she smoothed her dress from creases, she tried to hide a smirk in amusement. Looking back at the boy she said, "Well, Jack, he wasn't nice to your brother, but I have to admit I'm not very proud of myself for flying off the handle like that." She remembered her words spoken in anger and cringed as she realized that she had even cursed in front of the two children.

"Why?" Jack asked in surprise. That man in the store really deserved the earful that he had received from Mrs. McCloud after the way he had treated Tommy.

"He's an old man and we need to show respect to people of certain age. I forgot that for a moment in there."

"But he was mean!!!" Jack insisted.

"I know, but we have to respect our elders no matter what," Louise explained patiently.

"No matter what?" the boy repeated thoughtfully, not really understanding her reasoning. That man wasn't his elder for sure and he couldn't see why he had to show him respect when he had none for his brother, who was just a little boy. However, he didn't say any of this to Louise.

"Uh huh," she replied. "So let's see to it that we keep this between us three, all right?"

"You mean you can get into trouble with Mr. McCloud?" Jack asked.

"Sort of," Lou answered with a brief smile. She really wouldn't welcome to hear another lecture from Kid. She hated when he assumed that she was constantly moody to everybody or fighting like he had rightly guessed about Theresa. Lou couldn't deny that there was some or quite a lot of truth in that, but this attitude of his really annoyed her. Even though this time she had a justifiable reason to act in the way she had, she'd hate to see doubt cross his eyes.

"It will be our secret, Mrs. McCloud," Jack said in a whisper as if avoiding being overheard and stretched his arm to Lou. She had to smile and shook his hand and the boy returned the gesture seriously.

"All right, young men," Lou exclaimed, "We can't go back in there, so we'll have to find another place to finish our shopping."

A couple of years ago a new store had been opened in Rock Creek. It was much smaller

than Tompkins' one and there wasn't such a great variety of items. Another thing that put Lou off from visiting this mercantile very often was its owner. Mrs. Cooper was the biggest mouth and gossip in town. As soon as somebody appeared at her door, she bugged them with questions till she could get all the information she needed to gossip with her likewise friends later. Louise knew that after all her problems, which seemed to be public knowledge in Rock Creek, she would surely attract the interest of Mrs. Cooper, especially when she turned up with two little strange children. Lou made a mental note to try to parry all the lady's questions the best she could and over all, not to lose her temper. It wouldn't do her any good to start another scene in Mrs. Cooper's store after what had happened with Tompkins.

Half an hour later Louise and the children left the small store with their arms full of packets. Fortunately for Lou, Mrs. Cooper had the flu and was forced to stay in bed for a whole week, so it was her husband who took care of the store today. Lou had been able to make all her purchases without being bothered by the woman's avid curiosity. They walked to the wagon and placed all the parcels on the back. The children were full of smiles as they stood next to the carriage. Louise had ended up buying more than she had first intended, but she hadn't been able to resist the two little thrilled faces every time she picked something. They hadn't asked for anything, but Lou had wanted to do something for them, and had even bought them a small toy each. They reminded her of her own childhood so much, especially Jack. She had been a bit like him, protective of her siblings and fully aware of her situation at the orphanage. So doing a little something for these boys like it was to buy them just a few garments or toys felt as if she was actually doing it for herself, for the child she had been. Even though the boys would stay with them just for a few days, it really meant a lot to her; it made her feel like she was filling some holes in her soul, those holes that she never managed to fill.

Once Lou had finished placing all the parcels on the buckboard tidily, she turned to the boys and asked, "Ready to go?" Jack was about to say something, but stopped as his eyes caught a glimpse of something across the street. "It's Mr. McCloud!!!" he exclaimed excitedly and Louise turned her head to look at the direction the boy was pointing at. They were just on the other side of the street, just opposite Teaspoon's office and Kid seemed to be stretching his legs, pacing the walkway. Before Lou could say or do anything, Jack had dashed across the street, followed by his brother. "Jack!!!" Lou called as she ran after them, and her heart skipped a beat when a wagon stopped just a few inches before the boy. Jack seemed oblivious of the near miss and continued running towards the other side of the street. Lou's steps slowed down as the boys reached Kid. He was already talking to them, crouched at their side and Lou approached them slowly, suddenly wary and self-conscious. Kid's sole presence froze her and she sometimes found it so hard to face him every day. She didn't know at what point their marriage was. Lou wasn't sure why whenever they talked he managed to rile her up so much that she ended up snapping at him, sometimes for no reason at all. The only safe topic of conversation they could share without getting at each other's throats was their ranch, but other than that there was nothing much in common between them lately. Actually, nothing was going on in their marriage other than the usual fighting and long silences. He hadn't made any romantic advances to her in a long time and, even though the blame fell fully on her, she couldn't help but wonder if he'd already fallen out of love with her. Kid had repeatedly refused the idea of a divorce, but maybe he had just fallen into an easy routine, having her as a companion and housekeeper all in one. Perhaps one day he'd meet somebody new and exciting, and then he wouldn't be interested in her at all, not even as a housekeeper. The day that moment came would be soul-devastating and she'd want to die and disappear from this earth.

Lou finally reached them and her own thoughts and the boys' sudden scaring flit weren't helping any to her foul mood. Hearing her steps behind him, Kid stood up and turned round towards her. "Hey!" he greeted in a soft voice, eyeing her very carefully as a way to discover what mood she was in. With a simple look he could say that she was in her now so usual attitude. Louise didn't return the greeting and instead she turned to Jack straightaway. "Never do that again, understood?" she chided in a loud voice. "You scared me to death!!!"

The boy hung his head in shame. "Sorry," he said in an almost inaudible whisper. He felt tears pricking his eyes, surprised at the harsh tone in the lady. Looking up at Lou he asked with a saddened demure, "Are you angry with me, Mrs. McCloud?"

The expression on the boy's face disarmed Lou and she relaxed her face. "Uh ... no, of course not," she replied clumsily. "You just scared me. That wagon could have run over you or Tommy!!!"

"I'm sorry," the boy repeated and Lou patted his shoulder encouragingly. "I won't do it again, I promise."

Lou nodded and looking up from the boy she found Kid's eyes watching all the exchange with interest. She felt her cheeks go red and annoyed at her own reaction she couldn't help but snap cockily. "What?"

"Nothing." Kid was quick to look away. He was really stunned at the way Jack had managed to calm her anger down. Kid admitted that Lou had a right to react in the way she had. They were responsible for these two little boys while they stayed under their roof. He had seen Lou's temper flare after the scare with the wagon, but just a look and a few words from Jack and she had sobered instantly. Kid wished he would be able to do just that, but all he ever did every single time was to anger her even more. "It's quite warm today," Kid added. "Why don't you come inside and have a glass of water?"

"Yes!!!" Jack exclaimed, jumping in excitement, and quickly turned to Lou. "Can we, Mrs. McCloud? Say we can, please."

Lou's first instinct had been to refuse. She wasn't looking forward to seeing Teaspoon. The last time she had talked to the marshal she hadn't been very affectionate, but rather the opposite. Since then she hadn't visited him once and guilt was nagging her. Teaspoon had always treated her as though she were his kin and Louise had always seen him like the father she'd have liked to have. However, lately she hadn't behaved like a dutiful daughter but a nasty, ungrateful woman, just because he had said a couple of truths. She knew that but couldn't help the way she felt. So now she didn't warm to the thought of facing the old marshal. She'd feel uncomfortable, but the eagerness in Jack made her consent unwillingly. "All right," she said, "all right, but just a very short visit." No sooner had she uttered the words than the two boys dashed inside the marshal's office. Kid chuckled, amused by their childish antics, but his grin faded straightaway as he tried to meet Lou's eyes and all he got was a cold stare. He didn't try to hide his annoyance at her attitude and shook his head, wondering what on earth he had done this time to gain her glare, and without waiting for her, he followed the boys inside, leaving her alone behind.

Lou took his time to walk the few steps into the jailhouse. She was annoyed that her visit to town was taking longer than she had intended. First, the episode in Tompkins' store had forced her to make a detour, and now Kid's "brilliant" suggestion would delay her even more when all she wanted was to hide in the security of her house. When she stepped into the small office, Teaspoon was answering Jack's avid curiosity about everything and, as her presence became noticeable, the marshal lifted his gaze and stared at her for a few minutes. "Why, why," he began, "I wonder what noble deed I have done to be bestowed the honor of a visit from Louise McCloud?" She didn't say anything but looked at him with a very serious countenance. Teaspoon cleared his throat and added, "Kid here told me you have been real busy on the ranch, haven't you?" Lou just nodded imperceptibly and the marshal whispered in a teasing tone, trying to raise her spirits somehow, "Between you and me, honey, don't let that husband of yours make you slave away!" While he was talking, the marshal passed his arm over her shoulders in a natural gesture. His words were meaningless to Lou and she looked at him with a stunned expression. Nobody had dared to come near her or touch her in months; she had scared them away with her behavior and this simple gesture from Teaspoon, something that he

had done so many times in the past, this gesture had managed to move her deeply and she felt the urge to throw her arms to him and let him comfort her. All of a sudden, she felt very lonely and needed, and she wanted a friendly shoulder to cry on, somebody who wouldn't judge her. Oblivious to her internal thoughts Teaspoon let go of her and turned to the two boys. Unwillingly Louise felt her body tremble when his protective arm left her and she kept staring at him with a miserable expression.

"You two getting along with Louise?" the marshal asked the two boys in a fatherly fashion.

While Tommy nodded vigorously, his brother exclaimed, "Oh yeah. We're having lots of fun."

"You are, are you?" Teaspoon replied with a crooked smile.

"We went to the store and Mrs. McCloud bought us a whole lot of things!!!"

Kid and Teaspoon cast inquisitional looks at Lou and she lowered her eyes as though she were confessing a hideous crime, she muttered, "They needed some new clothes; that's all."

"And we have a secret!!!" Jack blurted out, trying to sound mysterious but loud enough for everybody in the room to hear.

"Jack! That's the way you keep a secret?" Lou chided lightly.

"I didn't say what it was!!!" Jack rebuked, a bit mortified that Louise thought he couldn't be trusted. Lou shook her head and exchanged an amused look with Tommy, who was grinning broadly. "I gave you my word of honor, Mrs. McCloud," Jack insisted, "I won't tell, not even if they torture me to death!!!"

The two men in the office were amused at the boy's obvious flamboyant gestures and while Kid served cups of cool water to the two boys, he said teasingly, "We'll have a little private conversation later, Jack."

"You see?" Lou turned to the boy, whose cheeks were flushing violently.

"I won't tell, Mr. McCloud!!!" the boy almost yelled with a serious expression. Noticing that Jack was getting upset, Kid dropped the subject and with one look at Lou he sensed that she was thinking along the same lines. The gesture surprised him; they had always had a special connection and it was as though with just one look he could tell what Lou was thinking and he was aware that the effect worked on her side as well. Yet, since Lou had fallen in this permanent glum state, that connection seemed to have disappeared and all he got from her was glares and sad eyes. However, now he had felt that bond between them again and her next words and actions confirmed his suspicions.

Louise looked away and coming closer to Jack she ran her fingers through his untamed hair in a tender gesture and added with a calm demeanor, "It's all right, honey. It's not such a big deal." The boy nodded and Louise dared a look at Kid, who was grinning broadly. For the first time in many months she managed to smile in his direction, a very faint smile, almost unnoticeable. After a while she lowered her eyes and an uneasy silence settled in the room. Kid took this as his cue to offer her the glass of water he had promised, but she declined the offering. "We really should get going," Lou said, which was followed by a wave of protests from Jack. She wanted to leave the place as soon as possible, feeling uncomfortable and suffocate all of a sudden. "Let's go, boys," she repeated, turning a deaf ear to Jack's disappointed expression.

"I'll walk you to the wagon," Kid offered and Louise didn't have the energy to refuse even

though that had been her first inclination. Her feelings seemed to be acting like in a waterwheel. Barely minutes ago she had felt high, in a smiling mood and joking with the boys, and now she was back to her misery. Why was it that she turned into this bitter self in Kid's presence? Maybe he was a reminder of everything that had gone so terribly wrong in her life. She felt unable to be correct and civil with him and it really wasn't fair. The sooner he understood that all was lost and she just couldn't overcome this situation, the better.

Louise bid the marshal a stiff good-bye and simply nodded when he reminded her to come and see him more often. The children and Kid had already exited and she followed them at her own pace, watching them from a close distance. Kid carried Tommy perched on his shoulders and Jack walked by his side. The three of them were laughing as Kid seemed to be having a very animated conversation with the two brothers. Not ready to join in their lighthearted company Louise walked after them slowly, enjoying the image before her eyes with bittersweet feelings, occasionally smiling faintly as Tommy kept turning his head to catch sight of her behind him. After a few minutes they reached the carriage and Kid had already helped the boys onto the wagon when Lou joined them. As soon as Kid's eyes met hers, the smile he had worn with the children vanished instantly and he stared at her with a troubled countenance. After a few moments she looked away, feeling flustered at his scrutiny and focused her attention on the ground at her feet. "Lou, I..." Kid began, feeling as if she were miles away. He found it so difficult to talk to her just for the sake of having a conversation and he really couldn't find the way to make them go back to that comfort they had always shared in each other's company. When he called her name, Louise looked up at him and noticed him stop in mid-sentence. She heard the noise of hooves behind her and saw Kid lift his arm in greeting. She followed the direction of his gaze and saw a group of soldiers on horse and the one who seemed to be in command was returning the greeting to Kid. Noticing her presence the soldier tilted his head to her and she nodded with cold politeness. When the group of soldiers disappeared from sight down the street, Lou turned to Kid and asked in a whisper, "What is the army doing here?"

"The usual stuff. They've tracked a band of outlaws in the area," Kid explained. "They've been stealing shipments of gold and weapons from the army. Seems that they're a group of renegades, probably Southerners. Captain Graham has required Teaspoon's cooperation and ..."

He hadn't finished talking when she cut him off with her question, "And you're willing to help?" Surprise was evident in her voice and it didn't go unnoticed to Kid.

"The war finished long ago, Lou," he retorted, visibly annoyed. "I came back without looking back and now all I want is to have peace and safety for you and me, and I'll do my best to offer you that." It hurt him to think that she believed that he would have reservations to help the army to fight that band of outlaws, whatever their beliefs or side. The fact was that those rogues were causing havoc and death for a cause that finished when the war ended. All those who had fought for the south, including Kid, had suffered a terrible blow with their defeat, but now he did believe that both south and north had to work hand in hand to bring back peace and union to a ripped country.

Lou felt his recriminatory eyes on her and she had to admit that she had been unfair in her judgment. She knew what Kid was like and she had no right to doubt his sense of honor. The past was gone and Kid would fight and work for what he believed in. And now all he cared for was right here, the place and the people that formed his real home. Louise lowered her eyes ashamed of her own thoughts and muttered, "I know, Kid. I'm sorry." She dared a look in his direction and to his utter bewilderment she didn't find recrimination or even anger; all she saw was his serene demeanor. Lou felt so ashamed of herself all of a sudden; she kept hurting him and being nasty and instead of his well-deserved scorn she got his understanding and she had the urge to throw herself against his chest and burst into tears. However, she kept a calm stance that she didn't feel and they stared at each other for long minutes. "I'm afraid I have to go," she finally said. Kid just nodded and offered her his hand to help her onto the wagon and this time

she didn't have the heart to refuse. After handing her the reins of the horse Kid turned to the two children. "Boys, if you're good, I'll take you fishing this afternoon."

Tommy and Jack exchanged enthusiastic looks and the elder boy asked with a big grin, "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh we love fishing!!!" Jack exclaimed, overly excited, "don't we, Tommy?"

His brother nodded silently, showing his usual permanent smile and, ruffling his hair teasingly, Kid simply said, "Good." Rounding the wagon he came next to Lou and looking deeply into her eyes he felt the urge to reach for her and touch her, but instead he merely muttered, "You take care, will you?"

Louise nodded imperceptibly and without uttering a single word she set the wagon in motion. The boys waved their hands at him while they rode away. Kid stayed rooted on the same spot till the carriage couldn't be seen any more. Slowly he made his way back to the jailhouse and found Teaspoon outside his office, looking in his direction. "It was a beautiful image there," the marshal said, when Kid joined him.

"What are you talking about?" Kid asked with a frown.

"You, Louise, the children... you four made a nice picture," Teaspoon explained with a lopsided smile.

"Right," the deputy replied ironically.

"Have you given a thought to..." the marshal began but Kid didn't let him continue, knowing what he was hinting at. "Teaspoon, please, don't follow that track."

"Why not?" he asked. "Those children need a home and you..."

"It's not that easy, Teaspoon," Kid cut him off, uneasy with the conversation.

"Why, Kid?" the marshal insisted. "Lou seems to get along greatly with those boys and you can't deny that she appeared less tense. Maybe that's what she needs."

Kid shook his head unconvinced by Teaspoon's words. "My marriage is in a shambles and it wouldn't be fair for those children to be dragged in the middle of it." He paused for a beat and then he added as an afterthought, "Anyway, Lou wouldn't hear of something like that, I'm sure."

"Kid..." the marshal tried again, but the younger man didn't let him. "Please, Teaspoon, don't insist! It's just too painful. All I need is to resolve things in my marriage with my wife once and for all without bringing more problems into it."

Teaspoon looked away and patting Kid on the shoulder he said, "Sorry, Kid. I just wanted to help."

"Yeah, everybody's eager to help," he muttered sarcastically, "but it's me who really knows Lou and who has to face that situation every day. And nobody's brilliant ideas are going to work magic in what I have tried for months now." Realizing that he had let his frustration talk through his mouth, he looked at the marshal apologetically and muttered a soft "sorry" before turning and leaving Teaspoon alone.

