

It was in the middle of the afternoon when Kid finally headed to his ranch. Today work had been more hectic than usual and he left Teaspoon's office later than he had initially intended. The army captain had called on the jailhouse several times during the day, demanding information from the marshal and once Kid had even ridden out with the soldiers to try and locate that band of outlaws. Kid admitted that his tracking skills weren't his best asset despite having learnt quite a deal from Buck. Still he knew the area perfectly well after riding for the Pony Express. Captain Graham had been utterly convinced that they'd catch those criminals today, but he had been wrong. It seemed that this band was more slippery than he had bargained for and they sure knew how to cover their tracks. So the army tracker had been unable to find anything to guide them to locate the band. Kid had been asked to lead them as far as Elm Grove, a vast area an hour's ride away from Rock Creek, but it was crystal clear that there hadn't been any activity going on in the place for the last few weeks. Captain Graham had been in a foul mood the entire ride back, barking orders to his men unmercifully. Kid had remained quiet during all the ride back and forth from Elm Grove. He had told Lou that he was willing to help the army and he really believed that, but at the same time he couldn't help but feel uncomfortable working with them. Barely a year ago he had been in the middle of a terrible war and firing at men in those same blue uniforms. Life could be really paradoxical. Captain Graham seemed to be a good man despite his rough manners, but Kid knew that the man hadn't missed the fact that he was from the south. The officer hadn't voiced any objections when Teaspoon had offered to let his deputy ride with them, but the Southerner could feel the wary looks passing between the soldiers. It wasn't really such a surprise when even Lou had doubted his willingness to help the army, but Kid had tried to overlook all those signs and had focused his attention on the task at hand.

The ride with the army unit seemed to have no end and he almost jumped in joy when he was finally on his way home. His thoughts went back to his conversation with Teaspoon about Lou and the two boys. He had to admit that after seeing Lou with them, the notion had crossed his mind, but he knew that it was just an illusion. He wouldn't dare suggest anything along those lines to Louise. She would never accept something like that because she would see that as an attack to her person. Kid knew how sensitive his wife was about the subject of children. She was painfully aware of her inability to bear children and Kid could understand that she could feel outraged and offended if he voiced the idea on his mind. As he had told Teaspoon, they first had to straighten up their marriage. So he had to make her understand that he was perfectly happy with only her in his life; he didn't need anything else to feel complete because all he longed for was her and her alone.

The ranch came into view and Kid spurred Katy into a canter, eager to get home. As he eased off the horse just in front of the house, the two boys came up from round the house at full speed. "Mr. McCloud!!!" Jack ran to him with his brother in tow.

"Hello there!" Kid greeted with a big smile.

"I'm so glad that you're finally here!" Jack said excitedly.

"Me too," Kid admitted and asked, "So what have you been doing all day?"

"Oh!" the boy exclaimed, his eyes as big as saucers as he spoke. "We've been helping Mrs. McCloud. She let us help her to feed the horses and all!!! It was such fun! And she said that she'd take us for a horse ride one of these days." The last part lacked the excitement that the rest of his words had and Kid thought he guessed where the boy's idea lay.

"You're very lucky then," he said to the two boys. "She can sure teach you a few good things about horses."

They were now on the porch and Jack looked at the house front door sideways while he whispered, covering his mouth as if telling a secret, "But she's a girl!"

Kid had to laugh and added, "Yeah, she is, but she's also the best rider I've ever met."

"Better than you?" Jack asked with a frown, still unconvinced by the man's arguments.

Kid bent over so that his head was leveled with the two boys and he said in a whisper, "I'm afraid she is. But don't let her know I said so." The two boys giggled amusedly and ruffling their hair Kid repositioned himself and asked, "Is my wife in the house then?" The two boys nodded simultaneously and Kid led the way into the property. On hearing their raucous steps Lou appeared, coming from the kitchen and Kid smiled at her. "Hey!" Lou didn't return the greeting, but her attitude didn't dampen his spirits. Unfortunately, he was used to her usual mood and he had grown immune to it. "I'm so exhausted that I could sleep for a week!" he added, accompanied by a deep yawn.

His words made Jack look at him with a scowl. As Kid kept staring at Lou silently, the boy pulled at his jacket to attract his attention. "Mr. McCloud?" he called as Kid looked down at him. "Yes, Jack?"

"Aren't we going?" the boy questioned, fearful of what his answer could be.

Kid tried to hide a smile of amusement. He knew what was on the child's mind at this very moment but he continued to play dumb. "Going where, Jack?"

"Fishing! You said we'd go today," the boy answered in a whisper and disappointment could be heard in his voice. He hadn't been able to think about anything else since Kid had told him about going fishing. All day long Jack had kept looking at the horizon, waiting for Kid to appear and had been repeatedly bugging Lou, asking when he'd be home.

Louise noticed the disappointment in the boy and came next to him. Brushing a few strands of hair away tenderly she said, "He's just teasing you, honey. " The boy's face lit up instantly and he asked, "Really?"

Kid came closer to them and fixing his eyes on hers he said, "You mind Lou, Jack. She's a clever girl."

The boy jumped up and down and clapped his hands excitedly and his brother joined in the fun. Kid laughed heartily at the two brothers' antics and looking away from Lou's face, who kept staring at him in silence, he added, "I'll just wash up and get changed, and then we can go."

Half an hour later Kid descended the stairs after changing into fresh clothes and washing all the dust he had on him after the ride with the soldiers. The two children were already waiting at the end of the stairs; Blacky, the small puppy placed between them. "Are you ready, boys?" Kid asked as he reached them.

"Yes, sir," Jack answered and Tommy nodded his head vigorously by his side. "Can Blacky come with us?" Jack asked straightaway.

Kid nodded and smiled at the two boys' eagerness. He remembered when he had been a child himself. The situation at home could be terrible, but still little treats like going swimming or fishing could make him feel over the moon and forget his bleak reality. Life could be so wonderfully simple in your childhood whatever hard tribulations you had to endure. It was when reaching adulthood that problems became vicious and nothing life could offer seemed to help soothe the pain.



Shouts and loud voices reached her ears and she turned her attention to the source of the noises. Not far from her, Kid and the two boys were playing and splashing in the water. It was music to her ears to hear their laughter. Kid seemed like a young child himself and was having the time of his life. Lou was glad that she had eventually accepted to tag along. It seemed that all of them were enjoying the afternoon in different ways; she basking in the sun and her solitude; the children and Kid in their playing. Even Blacky seemed to enjoy the freedom of the day. Lou thought ruefully that since Kid had brought him home, the puppy hadn't left the property once. She had forced the same reclusive life into the dog that she had chosen for herself. Their ranch was of considerable size and even though the animal had more than enough space to work off its energy, it was no wonder that now he was like crazy, sniffing everything and running restlessly all over the place.

From the safety of her position on the bank Louise watched her husband with the two boys. Mixed feelings coursed all over her. She couldn't help but find the scene before her eyes amusing and tender, but at the same time pain hit her directly in the heart. Kid could be such a good father; here he was with two strange children, playing and splashing with them. He surely was tired after work, Lou knew, but still he hadn't minded spending his resting time with them. Her thoughts made her feel a terrible pressure in her chest and Lou breathed in deeply in order to overcome the disturbing feelings growing in her. This wasn't the place or the time to let pain resurface, so she tried to concentrate her attention in the bright side of the scene. "Get a grip of yourself, Louise," she muttered to herself as her eyes took in the three people in the water.

In their game the boys tried to force Kid under the water in vain and he fended off their attacks by in turn lifting them in his arms and dropping them in the water again. Among laughs the game continued on and on without any indication that the boys were getting tired. Kid continually kept an eye to check on his wife and at some point, seeing her attention fixed on the three of them, he briefly stared at her. At that moment the boys took advantage of his distraction and wrapped their arms around his neck bringing Kid back from his absent-minded moment. He laughed at being caught off-guard and rose to his feet but the boys held to him strongly and both brothers found themselves in the air, hanging from Kid's neck. Suddenly pain struck him most severely and Kid fell to his knees into the water, bringing the two boys down with him. His back was bitterly complaining about the added weight and he couldn't help but let out a faint cry of pain and the children instantly disengaged themselves from his neck. Louise, who had watched the scene in detail, cringed as she noticed his face contorted in pain. Months ago Kid had been kicked on the back by one of the new horses and unable to move the upper part of his body, he had been confined to bed for days. Even though he had recovered from that injury, he sometimes complained about pains in his back, so Lou knew how painful that must have felt.

Kid turned to the two boys and said, "Let me have a break. My back's hurting terribly right now." The two boys nodded their heads briefly and just continued playing with each other in the water. Kid looked at Lou from his position for a few seconds and then he began wading across the pond towards where she was.

"That's the most peculiar way of fishing I've ever seen," she said as he came closer.

Kid laughed at her comment and added, "They're just children and all they want is to play. I can't expect them to sit still for hours and wait for the fish to bite."

"I know," Lou muttered, watching the unused fishing rods leaning against a nearby tree. "You know, all the fishermen of the area will be really thankful to you for scaring all the fish away from the territory with all that splashing," she added ironically.

Kid chuckled and sat down next to her, careful to keep a safe distance from her so that she didn't get wet. Louise handed him a towel and as his hand reached to grab it, Kid made a wry grimace. "How's your back?" she asked as he began drying his face with slow movements.

"I'll survive," he answered and as he turned to her, he saw her intently staring at him. Embarrassed at being caught peeping she looked away quickly and felt her cheeks burning violently. The image of him soaked to the skin by her side brought dear memories to her mind. They had come to this very spot so many times in the past and enjoyed the clear and cool water around their naked bodies as they played, kissed and made love. Kid had always looked so adorable when dripping wet, even in his long johns as he was dressed now. The memory of those moments seemed like a cruel joke. It was like another lifetime, as if she were another person. She knew that she would be unable to go back to all that. Everything had changed so much.

Feeling her cheeks flushing Louise unconsciously brought her hands to cover them and silently cursed herself for the gesture. Her reaction wouldn't go unnoticed to Kid and even without looking at him she knew that he was smiling pleasantly. Lou removed her hands from her cheeks as quickly as she had brought them to her face and kept her eyes downcast, watching the shallow water as her legs aimlessly moved in circles. Despite noticing Kid's body scooting closer to her, Lou fought the urge to look up at him. The moment had turned awkward and strangely she felt very shy all of the sudden.

Oblivious to her uneasiness Kid kept staring at her like in trance. She looked absolutely breathtaking in the afternoon sun; her hair shining in a myriad of chestnut and reddish tones and the water reflecting its sparkling shadows over her face. Her so evident shyness had taken Kid back to those tender times when they have felt so awkward with the feelings waking in each other. He had always loved to notice that cute shyness in Lou, something that he knew had been only evident to him. Louise was a very strong and capable woman and she had continuously shown her toughness to everybody, but it was with him that she turned into this sweet and shy girl, sometimes even looking somehow defenseless. Maybe this side of her was what had prompted Kid to act like a smothering pest. It had always scared him to death to think that something could happen to her. Nobody had understood him back then, all knowing the strength and abilities in her but it was only him who was aware of that weak part in her.

Kid kept gazing at her for a few minutes, bedazzled by the image before him. This was his beautiful bride, his wife and despite all the problems, he still felt like the luckiest man on earth for having the honor of being by her side. Not giving a single thought to what he was doing and to his own utter surprise he blurted out, "I love you, Lou." At his words her head jerked in his direction and she looked at him with big eyes. Kid cleared his throat nervously and smiling very calmly, he hurried to speak up. "I know I've been neglecting you lately and haven't told you enough. But you know I do, don't you?"

Lou felt her throat go dry and a deep urge to let her emotions take over. He had always had that effect on her when he uttered those three magical words and neither the years nor their share of trouble had diminished it. Her cheeks were now flushing even more violently and she lowered her eyes in embarrassment. She didn't deserve his words or his apology. She was the one who had neglected him for months and she was the one who should be apologizing. Keeping her eyes fixed on her lap she stumbled to say anything at all, because the silence was killing her. "Kid, I..." Lou had barely begun uttering these clumsy words when she let out a yelp as suddenly water splashed all over her, leaving her soaked to the skin. Looking up she saw that Tommy, playfully running away from his brother, had been the one spurting water all over her. The boy stopped in his tracks as soon as he realized his mischief and noticed Lou's annoyed expression. "Oh Tommy!!!" she exclaimed a bit too roughly. "Look what you've done!!!" The boy's face crumpled as if on the verge of tears while Lou ranted on. "I'm totally drenched and ... and..." She was at a loss for words and as she looked down at her pitiful wet figure while water profusely trickled down her face, her irritation disappeared and all of a sudden she burst out laughing. She was giggling hysterically and felt unable to put a stop to it. It had been so long since she had last laughed like this and it really felt good. The boys had joined in her mirth and Kid watched her absorbed. Hearing her laugh was like music to his ears; glimpses of the old Lou

were appearing and his heart surged with hope.

“Boys, I don’t think Lou’s cool enough yet. It’s such a hot day,” he said teasingly, gesturing in an exaggerated way.

At his words she stopped laughing and lifting her index finger at the children she said, “Oh no, don’t you dare.” But her warning fell on deaf ears and as soon as Kid stood up in the water next to the children, the three of them began splashing water with their hands all over Lou. Her shouting “stop” didn’t have any effect and they continued for a few more seconds. Louise wanted to get angry, especially with Kid, who had been the one to initiate the deed, but to her astonishment all she could do was laugh and felt she was having the time of her life.

The rest of the afternoon was spent much in the same way. The boys seemed to be tireless and dragged Kid to play with them for the remaining part of the day. With all her clothes soaking wet Lou had to remove her dress and build a fire to dry herself and her dripping clothes. Even though she had been surprisingly in high spirits just minutes ago, her mood darkened once more. Her emotions seemed to be in a turmoil and Lou felt unable to have any control over them. From her safe position by the fire she kept watching Kid laughing and playing with the two boys and her heart sank to the deepest and darkest corner of her soul.

On the way back to their ranch Louise hardly said a word whereas Kid kept babbling on with a big smile on his face. His words hardly registered in her mind and she limited her answers to imperceptible nods. She just stared at him in awe as he beamed happily while driving the wagon home. After the day’s restlessness the two boys were exhausted and as they sat at the back of the carriage, they had fallen asleep. When they finally reached the ranch, Lou scurried away and got changed from her still damp clothes. Meanwhile, Kid had volunteered to put the children to bed. They hadn’t even stirred as he had tucked them up in the big bed. Kid couldn’t help but feel a great tenderness to watch them sleep so peacefully. Although he tried to deny the idea before Louise, Kid had to admit that it hurt him to think that they could never become parents. He had never hidden his wish to have a family to Lou and that was one of the reasons why they were now in this mess. It wasn’t fair. He’d love so much to see Lou blooming splendidly as their child grew inside her. The notion that image would never take place hurt him more than he was ready to admit. He really wanted children, but he’d gladly renounce his wishes for a life with Lou. The idea of being with another woman was just utterly ridiculous and he had to make his wife realize the truth. That afternoon had been like living old times. Kid had seen snippets of the old Lou and he prayed that it meant that she was on her way to healing. Hearing her laugh had been magical and there and then he had realized how much he had missed it. It was no wonder that from that moment on he hadn’t been able to stop smiling like a fool.

After briefly stopping at his room for a quick wash-up and change of clothes, Kid plodded down the stairs. He hadn’t reached the end when he saw her. Lou was leaning against the window frame in the hall and her eyes were fixed in some point outside the window. The sun was beginning to set and darkness was falling over the house. The last faint rays filtered through the window, leaving her figure dark to his eyes. Kid walked the few steps separating them slowly, relishing the image of her before his eyes. Lou heard his steps behind her and tilted her head without turning to see him and kept looking ahead.

“I’ve put the boys to sleep in our bed. They have this thing about sleeping together. I hope you don’t mind,” he said as he came next to him. Lou shook her head and cast a brief look at him. Kid noticed the sadness in her eyes straightaway and putting a finger under her chin he forced her to look at him. “What’s wrong, Lou?” he asked with a frown. She stared at him with red-rimmed eyes and gulped audibly before she could muster some courage to talk. “Do you remember when I told you I thought I was pregnant?” she asked in a cracked voice.

“For goodness’ sake, Lou,” Kid exclaimed irritably. “Don’t start with that.” He couldn’t understand why she kept torturing herself with the same over and over again. It was high time

they put all that behind and carried on with their life.

“Do you?” Lou repeated, undeterred by his words. “Tell me. Do you remember that day?”

Kid sighed heavily and muttered, “Of course I do. So what?”

Louise lowered her eyes and focused her attention on the window sill as she absently ran one finger along the dusty surface. “I’ve never seen you look as happy as you were that day. Your eyes seemed to sparkle and I swear, you couldn’t wear a bigger smile.” She paused for a moment. All she could hear was Kid’s breathing by her side and she could tell that he wasn’t pleased with the conversation. Sometimes it baffled her to realize how well she knew him. His gestures, his voice or even simply his breathing told her everything about him. “Today down at the pond you looked just the same. Glowing with happiness.” She paused a second time and breathing in to stop the threatening tears she continued, “Do you realize that staying with me means there will be no reason to smile or moments like that? I will never be able to give you any of that!”

“Could you stop that nonsense?” Kid rebuked annoyed. “Of course I was happy there!!! You know why? Because for once my wife didn’t look like a lifeless shadow!!!”

Louise turned a deaf ear to his words and carried on with her harangue. “It has no sense whatsoever to continue an uncomfortable situation for both of us. Don’t you think it’s time to let go, Kid?” Her voice was raspy with emotion and tears pricked in her eyes.

“Lou, you don’t mean that,” Kid said, grabbing her by the upper arms. “We could go back to the way we were... like this afternoon. You...”

“That was a mirage!!!” Lou exclaimed, cutting him off and pushing him away. “Nothing has changed in me. Today it was like a revelation, an eye-opener.”

Kid was getting more and more anxious by the minute. He could understand that Lou had been through hell in these long months and somehow she had lost control over her own actions. But now he could see she could overcome her problems if she put her heart to it, but she was practically refusing to do that. The notion angered him beyond control. “You told me that we would always be together, always. Was that another of your usual lies, Lou?” he asked spitefully.

Louise knew what he intended with his words. He was hurting and his reaction was just natural. For once it was her who kept in control and tried to appease his rising anger. “You don’t understand now. But one day you’ll be grateful to me for taking this step. When you sit at home surrounded by your loving family, then you will understand. And I will be happy for you, terribly happy. I know you don’t like me much right now, but someday I’m sure we’ll be able to remain friends and...”

“I don’t want to just be friends with you!!!” Kid cried almost in desperation. He didn’t know how to make her understand that all he wanted was her and her alone. He couldn’t dream of having a family if she wasn’t in his life. The notion of another woman was just unthinkable. Not even when they had split up back at the beginning of their relationship, Kid hadn’t felt very inclined to find other women rather than Lou. Only once had he turned to another lady and he knew it had been out of spite and hurt. It had been a foolish mistake because he had always known that all he wanted was Lou. “I want the whole lot,” Kid added almost in a begging fashion.

Louise didn’t seem to hear him anymore. “It’s time to break free,” she said stubbornly, fixing her eyes on Kid with determination. “It’s useless to delay the moment any longer. When the boys go, we’ll do what has to be done.”

Kid stared at her in total disbelief. She couldn't be serious; he just didn't want to believe it. "You're killing me, Lou," he finally said when he found his own voice. "Sometimes I wish I would have never come back and a stray bullet would have burst my head open. I'm sure it wouldn't have hurt as much as I'm hurting now." He turned around and left her alone on the same spot. Only a sigh escaped her lips and suddenly tears began trickling down her face, tears that nobody saw.