

It had been the longest night of his life. Kid hadn't been able to sleep a wink; his mind kept going back to his conversation with Lou the day before. Did this mean the end of everything? He felt scared out of his wits just thinking that he was on the way to losing Lou permanently. She had been serious this time, he was sure. What would happen to them from now on if they parted ways? They had built a life here in Rock Creek; that's where they had begun their ranch, their plans, where their friends were. All his dreams would shatter if Lou left him. They'd possibly have to sell their ranch and then what? All he could see ahead of him was darkness and uncertainty. Kid had always pictured his life together with Lou and he couldn't begin to imagine anything different. He didn't want to imagine anything different because she was all he had ever wanted. He couldn't see the sense of her reasoning, and just for her stubbornness they were going to lose everything. They could be so happy because there were more than enough reasons to share a fulfilled life. He loved her deeply and would even die to make sure she was happy. He could also bet that her feelings for him were as strong but she didn't want to admit it. The rest didn't really matter. He didn't care if they couldn't have children; she was all his family and as he had told her over and over again he'd be happy just with her. That was the reason why he had married her in the first place: to live his life together with her. Of course they had dreams and plans, but nothing was more important than to be married to Lou.

Kid felt like crying in frustration. He had been so patient in these long months, hoping that Lou would eventually overcome her problems. He hadn't pushed or crowded her; he had tried to give her the space and time she needed and naively he had hoped against hope that his wife would come out of that vicious circle she was immersed. Kid even believed that there was still some hope, especially after witnessing the latest changes in her. He was sure that if Lou made just a little effort, they could go back to the way they had been. But the thing was that she didn't want to. That ridiculous idea of hers about him starting a family somewhere else with somebody else had got stuck in her mind and knowing how stubborn she could be Kid reckoned that she wouldn't be convinced in any other direction. Her attitude infuriated him and he felt so powerless and frustrated. It seemed that she had already made a decision and nobody would be able to change her mind.

Kid wondered if she had really given any thought to what lay before her. He was actually at a loss and he suspected that Lou was as clueless. She would be all on her own again and he wouldn't be there for her. It scared him to think what might happen to her. The Southerner knew that she was more than able to take care of herself and live without him; actually she had been doing it while he was away during the war. However, now it would be different if she'd carried out her threats. Kid wondered if she'd stay in Rock Creek or move out of town. He knew that seeing her every day with the knowledge that she wasn't his any more would be a torture for his soul. However, the notion of not laying eyes on her daily filled him with utter dread. Anyway, where could she possibly go? He didn't think she would be willing to go with Theresa; the girl was working for that lady in St Joseph and she and Lou hadn't parted in good terms the last time they had seen each other. Jeremiah was out of the question as well; he was a restless soul and though he was now in Canada and apparently in love, there was no saying how long he'd stay there. Moreover, Kid couldn't picture Lou traveling all that way to be with her younger brother. No, he was sure that Lou'd stay in Rock creek. That way he could be near and keep an eye on her. Maybe she could move in with Rachel even though things between the two women weren't at their best at the moment. And... His train of thought stopped suddenly. This was so wrong. He didn't want to think of Lou's plans without him. He just couldn't accept that everything was lost because in his heart it wasn't. No matter what she said, he'd fight her and cling to this marriage come hell or high water. He couldn't give up now. He was sure he'd win her back eventually. He needed to believe that and keep his faith in their love alive.

With that resolution in mind Kid greeted a new day forlornly. Breakfast was a pitiful occurrence. He and Lou barely said a word or looked at each other whereas the two boys

babbled on oblivious to the two adults' mood. Kid felt somehow pleased with their presence because he didn't know what he could possibly tell Lou right now. It was a nice change to hear laughter and gay voices in this house again. Jack didn't stop talking for one second and, since he had spoken for the first time yesterday, Tommy, though a bit shyer, kept up with his brother's chatter. They were a lovely pair of children and Kid would be sorry when they would be gone in just three days. He had got used to having them around in just this short time. Lou had said that when the boys went, she would do what needed doing. Kid wondered what she had meant by that. Would she go to a lawyer and file for a divorce? Or would she move out of their house? In any case it would be a bitter piece to accept. But he had decided to try and stop her intentions whatever it took. He'd show her that he hadn't changed his mind and could be as stubborn as her.

After breakfast Kid got ready to go to town like every day. He and Louise hadn't exchanged one single word so far and, as he was leaving, he came closer to her and awkwardly muttered his plans for the day. Probably he'd stay out longer than usual as they would be working with that army unit. His voice was low and cracked, and he hardly had the courage to face her. Lou just nodded and kept her eyes downcast, and when he said 'take care of yourself' on his way out, she didn't return the gesture.

Later Kid was inside the marshal's office all on his own while Teaspoon was sitting outside, watching the people aimlessly. The young man welcomed the solitude and mulled over his situation with his wife repeatedly. There had to be something he could do to change her mind, but so far Kid had no clue whatsoever. He felt as though he was in a race against time and his legs wouldn't respond to him. Frustration coursed all over him and his chest physically felt the pressure of his own thoughts. At least Teaspoon hadn't inquired much about the situation at home as he usually did. Kid really didn't feel like talking about it, not even with the old marshal.

He didn't know how long he had been pondering his present situation over and over again and in the same spot when the door opened noisily and Teaspoon came in followed by the army Captain. Kid stood up and both men exchanged greetings with serious countenances.

"So are you positive, Captain?" Teaspoon asked without explaining himself to Kid.

The officer nodded and said, "My scout spotted them this morning. We've been following them all this time and for one reason or another they had always slipped through our fingers. They're very clever, yeah, very clever indeed. We know all the usual places they choose to hide, but this time it's most strange. Never before had they looked for some kind of shelter in a private property. Maybe one of them is wounded."

Kid listened to the man carefully but hadn't managed to grasp the gist of the whole thing. He was surely talking about the band they were after, but other than that he could only guess. "You might be right," Teaspoon conceded. "That would be to our advantage, but we need to be very careful. There're lives at stake and any false step could be fatal."

"I know," Captain Graham agreed.

Kid wasn't in the mood to patiently wait till the two men stopped talking in riddles and asked, "Would anyone care to explain to me what's going on?" He knew he sounded a bit too snappy and hoarse, but his nerves were on edge since the previous night and he couldn't help reacting as he had done.

Teaspoon turned to his deputy and said, "That band's been spotted in Widow Spencer's property. About a dozen men."

Kid's face registered the alarm at the piece of news. "Widow Spencer? She's just a poor woman with three little children. You know if they're all right?" He imagined his property invaded

by a bunch of thugs and Lou all on her own and he felt sick to his stomach thinking of what those men might do to her.

“My men aren’t sure; they couldn’t see them,” the captain answered.

“They could be hurt or worse,” Kid insisted through gritted teeth.

“I know,” the captain simply said, apparently unmoved by the seriousness of the situation. “That’s why we need to set off at once. The longer we take, the more likely it is they escape once more or that family will get hurt.” He turned to Teaspoon now and added, “We are in need of you and your deputies in this matter, Marshal Hunter.”

“No problem,” Teaspoon agreed as he fastened the buckle of his holster round his waist. “My men and I will be more than willing to help.”

“We’d better have Doctor Logan tag along,” Kid suggested; his main concern was the safety of the family. “Mrs. Spencer or one of her children might be hurt.”

“It’s all right,” the captain said. “Our own doctor will join us today. Your local people wouldn’t appreciate the army leaving them without a doctor.”

Few minutes later the group of men rode their horses out of Rock Creek towards the property. There were about twenty of them; Teaspoon, Kid and two more deputies had joined the unit as the marshal had previously promised the captain. The Spencers’ hut was about a twenty minutes’ ride and the men tried to push their horses as fast as they could. Their plan was to split up a few miles before reaching the place. They needed to act stealthily if they wanted to catch that band off guard. A big group of riders, especially men in uniform, was likely to be spotted straightaway and there was no saying what those men could do to the Spencers if they felt threatened. Kid looked at Teaspoon who was riding by his side. The old man’s stance was calm and resolute. They had ridden so many times together in the past and Kid had always looked up to the older marshal for his insight and the way he dealt with these matters. He never lost his composure in any kind of situation. Kid would have never believed that when he had first met Teaspoon so many years ago he would turn out to be the person he actually was. He remembered the first image of him: a man having a bath in a horse trough. Kid had thought back then that his new boss was probably an eccentric or a madman. Now it sounded ridiculous to have had those thoughts, but in those moments Kid had to admit that he had been concerned at thinking that the man would be the one training them to face danger every day. The Southerner suspected that the feeling had been similar in his fellow riders, but eventually they had learnt that appearances could be deceptive. They really were. Kid could really tell a thing or two about deceptive appearances. Who would have thought that he’d meet his future wife among a bunch of boys? Kid remembered how he had watched in amazement how Lou maneuvered her horse with extraordinary skill to show Teaspoon that she could really do the job. In those times he hadn’t been especially interested in befriending anyone; he had been on his own for a long time and he had figured that things would stay pretty much the same. Kid just needed the job and the money. When they had filed by the fence at the station, he had heard the exchange between Teaspoon and the others half-heartedly, but his interest had suddenly perked when Lou had shown her abilities with horses before them all. Back then Kid had wondered where a young scrawny boy, like he had thought she was, had learnt to ride so expertly and he had noticed that she had attracted the interest and admiration of the other riders as well. For Kid and the rest Lou was just a young boy, apparently a bit younger. So he had got the surprise of his life when he had accidentally discovered her true gender. The discovery had left him speechless for a while but soon afterwards his sense had come back to him. Of course he hadn’t thought it right for her to work in such a dangerous position, but, he still didn’t know why, he had eventually agreed to keep her secret. Admittedly, Lou had really made an impact on him. She wasn’t the kind of woman that he’d been used to, and he had admired her courage and strength from the first moment. It was admirable how, though wounded, she had kept up with the rest when they had

gone after that band of outlaws. Kid admitted that he had fallen for her in that run-down hut where he had taken care of her wound. For the first time he had really seen her and wondered how he or anybody else could possibly have taken her for a boy. Despite her short hair, the masculine clothes or the dust picked up on the trail, she was beautiful and today he couldn't thank heaven enough for letting him be the one to make that discovery. It had really been his lucky day, because from then on they had developed a friendship that led to something deeper. However, now all those memories were too painful to linger on, regarding the situation they were in. It wasn't fair. They were meant to be together; all their ups and downs in their relationship proved just that. They could really get over anything if they tried; he only had to convince Louise about it.

An unexpected holler to halt the horses snapped Kid out of his reverie. He had to pull Katy's reins strongly to stop just in time because in his absent-mindedness he had let the horse trot a few more steps after the order. Teaspoon looked at him with a frown and the Southerner made a rueful gesture in his direction, trying to convey a silent apology.

"The Spencers' property is barely a few miles away," the captain was explaining to his men. "We will split up in groups here and remember to act carefully. There's a family whose lives depend on it. Don't open fire till you receive the order."

As soon as the men were divided into groups, they set out for the place through different directions. Being familiar with the area, Kid was to lead the men in his group. He tried to overlook the wary glances passing between the soldiers; it was no secret that he had been a confederate soldier and he could feel the mistrust of these men. Not a very encouraging position if he was supposed to rely on these men in the dangerous situation they were about to get into. Teaspoon and the other two deputies were likewise leading the rest of the men towards the place. Kid knew that they had to act very carefully. The property was sheltered by a copse of trees, which made it almost imperceptible to any passerby. It was no wonder that those outlaws had burst into the homestead and taken refuge there. It was the ideal hideout, but luckily the army scouts had been able to spot them.

Just at a safe distance from the property the group led by Kid stopped. After dismounting the horses and tying them securely, the men slowly approached their way to the homestead. There were about a dozen horses tethered in front of the hut and a couple of wagons. Kid spotted the other soldiers coming from different directions. Captain Graham was visible from his position and he was signing orders to his men. A few minutes passed and no movement or sound seemed to be perceived from the house. Apart from the horses anybody would say that the place was actually deserted. Kid could feel the tension mounting in the air; everybody held their breaths and refrained to move a single muscle; all waiting for the captain's orders. Above in the sky black clouds covered the azure ceiling like a blanket, darkening the whole area below. A gentle wind was blowing, making the trees and their branches creak and the leaves rustle ominously. Apart from the faint sounds of nature and the neighing of the horses, the place was creepily silent. Suddenly, the captain stood up from his crouching position and called, "This is Captain Graham from the 5th cavalry division of the army of the United States of America. The property is surrounded. Surrender the guns at once and come out peacefully."

The place remained in complete silence and for one moment it seemed as if nobody had heard the captain. Kid held his breath expecting shooting to break out at any moment; his gun ready in his hand. Yet, minutes went by and nothing happened. It was as though nobody was actually inside the house. The men exchanged wary looks, clueless to what was happening. The captain began gesturing his soldiers to advance towards the house and one by one, all the men left the safety of their positions and crept towards the cottage. Hardly had they walked a few meters that the first shots were heard and a few men fell dead onto the ground. "Retreat to safe positions!!!" the captain hollered above the noise of the bullets. The soldiers dashed to find some shelter nearby. Their situation was very vulnerable and defenseless in comparison with the band's one, who were safely cocooned inside the house. Kid managed to find a safe place

behind some rocks while bullets dangerously whizzed by. He began shooting but it was impossible to tell whether they were hitting any of the men inside the house. It was kind of burlesque to think that barely months ago he had been in the same side of those men he was now shooting and fighting those he was now siding with. Yet, the situation was quite different. These men were criminals and no matter what people believed in, there was a limit to everything. The war was finished and the country needed to become one again. Kid believed that the south had to accept their defeat and begin working for some peace in a changing world.

Trying to find Teaspoon Kid finally spotted him on the other side, behind one of the wagons and in a much better or rather riskier position than the Southerner himself had. The noise of the bullets was deafening and the smoke made it difficult to see clearly. It had been ages since Kid had been in a situation like this. Memories of other times inevitably came to his mind; they had lived dangerously and faced many a few fixes. He still had the reminders marked on his skin, but despite everything, things had been so different. He knew that he could blindly trust those men who he had come to consider like brothers and the feeling was shared by all of them. Never before had Kid felt so close to a group of people before. It had seemed as though there had been a very strong current linking them together like a real family. Maybe that out-of-ordinary connection had made them come out safely from more than one situation. It had been their strength but unfortunately, those times were long gone and right now there was only Teaspoon who he could really trust with his life in this fix.

Realizing that the marshal was in a delicate position all by himself, Kid dared to leave the safety of his shelter and dash towards him. He miraculously managed to dodge the bullets whizzing past and reached Teaspoon who was crouched behind the wagon. The marshal didn't sound very happy with the progress of the shooting. "Those are tough nuts to crack. They know what they're doin'," he was muttering to himself while he kept shooting. "Damn, there's nothing worse than people blinded by ideals. They won't care much about their lives or safety as long as their beliefs are preserved." Kid had to admit that Teaspoon was right like usual. These men weren't common criminals, but men who had sworn to defend their homeland in a war. Kid knew that kind of men; ready to die for their cause rather than be subjugated to the north. They'd fight tooth and nail till the end. The feeling emanating within him was one of absolute aversion. He was tired of all this fighting. He had more than enough in the war and all he wanted was some peace for him and Lou. Yet, here he was in the middle of a terrible shooting.

Looking at Teaspoon sideways Kid noticed that the marshal was bleeding. "Are you all right, Teaspoon?" he managed to lift his voice over the noise of the bullets. "They hit you on the arm." The marshal looked at his left arm as if he had only noticed the wound just now. "It's only a graze. I've had worse," he answered without averting his attention from the house.

After a while the shoots coming from the cottage became less and less. It was clear to everybody that some of the men inside the house had been shot down. Watching some of the soldiers wounded or lying dead on the ground Kid prayed that all this bloodshed would finish soon. They were running out of ammunition and with any luck the band would be under similar circumstances. "They're ebbing away!" Kid heard somebody say not far from where he was, but still the bullets kept whistling around dangerously. Suddenly, the cottage door opened and a woman's piercing shriek was heard. A fear-stricken Mrs. Spencer was pushed forward by a stout man, who held her strongly against his body and pointed a gun to the lady's white neck. As soon as the captain laid eyes on them, he urged his men to cease fire. "Very well, boys," the man clasping Mrs. Spencer said, "Drop your guns now and you are going to let me and my men pull out of here. Otherwise, this fine lady won't see another day." The woman screamed and squirmed in his hold, but the man delved his gun in her neck and she froze instantly. After them, six men followed them out of the house, holding their guns menacingly.

Kid watched the whole scene develop with sheer anger. These men were just a bunch of cowards hidden behind a woman. The sound of the soldiers' guns being dropped onto the ground reached his ears, but he held his in a tight grip. The position behind the wagon had the

better vision of the house and at the same time it gave him and Teaspoon enough cover without being noticed. The marshal tapped Kid on the shoulder to catch his attention and then he whispered, "Son, you think you could hit that fella from here when he shows?"

The Southerner looked at the marshal with big eyes. "Teaspoon, it's too dangerous." He knew that they had to do something but what the marshal was suggesting was too risky. He didn't want the responsibility to fall on his shoulders; if he failed the shoot, Mrs. Spencer was a dead woman.

"Not more than lettin' those men have their way," the marshal insisted. "We ain't been spotted and surprise is the best attack."

Kid wasn't convinced with Teaspoon's plan but he finally relented. It was the only option they had. The notion of Mrs. Spencer in those rogues' clutch was eating him as he imagined Lou in the same situation. Thinking that anybody could terrify and harm his wife filled him with utter terror. They'd get a good view and angle as soon as that man walked a few more steps. They had a cover and Kid prayed that he could hit him from his position.

"You're one of the best shooters, Kid," Teaspoon insisted with a lopsided smile and the young man just nodded his agreement with a serious countenance. He just hoped that the marshal's trust in him would pay off. Teaspoon didn't say anything else and looked at his deputy with encouragement.

The man kept uttering threats as he moved forward with Mrs. Spencer in his grip. Kid and Teaspoon couldn't see him as they remained crouched behind the wagon, not daring to peek for fear of being discovered. They both had grave expressions as the minutes felt like hours. Their foreheads shone with sweat as tension mounted. In an attempt to be almost invisible both Kid and Teaspoon leaned their bodies against the wagon frame and tried to remain as motionless as they could possibly be. A single movement would give them away and their plan of action would go out of the window. The man holding the lady advanced and came into full sight as he passed, leaving the wagon behind. Kid contained his breath; one look in their direction and he and Teaspoon would be spotted straightaway. He could see the man from behind and ever so slowly Kid lifted his gun to him, trying to keep a steady arm. Cocking the hammer silently the Southerner aimed his gun to the man and hesitated briefly. This was it. Breathing in deeply he focused all his attention in his aim and finally with an anguished heart Kid pulled the trigger and fired. At the sound of the shot the man tried to locate the source of the shot but before he knew what had hit them, the bullet entered his body and sent him onto the ground dragging the woman with him. It was then that all hell broke loose and the shooting began again. The soldiers dashed to grab their weapons and began firing to the men in the middle of the yard, who rushed to find safe positions. Likewise Kid and Teaspoon were shooting; it wouldn't be long before they could beat those men. Suddenly, Kid's eyes fell on the lady in the middle of the yard. The bullets whizzed by closely and she lay curled up on the hard ground; her head ducked protectively under her arms. Without thinking about it twice the Southerner dashed towards the woman recklessly. "Kid!!!!" Teaspoon called after him but the sandy-haired man never heard him and the marshal tried to cover him as best as he could. Kid had reached the woman and crouching before her he called her name, at the same time avoiding the bullets whistling over his head. "Mrs. Spencer! It's Kid McCloud. We need to get you out of here." The woman directed her anguished gaze to him and exclaimed, "Oh please!" Kid carefully helped her to her feet and asked, "Your children, Mrs. Spencer?" The contorted face of the lady relaxed at the mention of her three little children. "They're fine. Spending some days with my sister in Seneca." Kid simply nodded, relieved at the news and without any more delay the lady dashed towards where Teaspoon was while the young man followed behind. The sound of the shots was diminishing and it was obvious that the band wouldn't resist much more, which Kid was really thankful for.

Just reaching the safety of the wagon Kid noticed a bullet pass by really close and turning round he fired in the direction of the shot. Oblivious to him, however, the man who had

