

“Kid!!!” Louise shouted as she blindly ran across the yard. The rain was now falling heavily but she didn’t seem to notice. Her only concern was to reach the wagon coming towards the ranch. Teaspoon jumped off his horse at midway and stopped her frenetic running by grabbing her by the upper arms. “Teaspoon, let go of me!!!” she ordered with a cracked voice, squirming in his hold.

“You have to get a grip of yourself, Louise,” the marshal said in a firm voice.

“It’s Kid, isn’t it? Something happened to him, didn’t it? Please,” she asked even though she felt she knew the answer already.

Teaspoon simply nodded with a somber expression and added, “He’s been shot. I thought we should bring him to...” At his words Lou let out an anguished yelp and covered her mouth with her hand. Realizing how that had sounded the marshal rushed to reassure her. “Oh no, honey. I didn’t mean it like that. He’s alive...” He stopped in time and refrained from saying ‘I don’t know for how much longer.’ He was having a hard time himself under the present circumstances. To watch Kid being wounded had been quite an ordeal for the older marshal and the moment the bullet hit the young man Teaspoon had thought he was dead. Fortunately, the army doctor confirmed that he was still breathing and he needed to extract the bullet from his lower abdomen. Distraught as he was Teaspoon didn’t remember who had suggested taking Kid to his house so that the doctor could see to his wound comfortably. The marshal had dreaded the moment he had to tell Lou and he had been thinking hard about how he was going to tell her during the entire ride, but finally everything had come out wrong.

Louise kept pushing Teaspoon, trying to break free and run to see Kid. “Let me see my husband!” she ordered roughly as she saw the wagon pull over at a few meters from where they stood. Two men in uniform were driving it and jumping onto the ground, they walked towards the back of the carriage.

Teaspoon kept his firm grip on Louise and taking hold of her face he made her look at him. “Listen, Louise. I know it ain’t easy but you got to calm down. The army doctor is gonna see to that shot. If you’re gonna help Kid, go inside the house and be ready to give the doctor a hand, all right?”

Lou nodded silently. Feeling unable to speak as tears threatened to spill at any moment. Looking at the wagon once again he saw the two men busy at the back of the carriage, but she couldn’t see what they were doing. She felt frozen and incapable of moving; her eyes strained to catch a sight of Kid, to make sure he was in the state Teaspoon had told her he was but the marshal’s booming voice cut her intentions. “Go to the house, Lou. Now!” She looked at him with bleary eyes and the marshal regretted his rough reaction instantly. All he wanted was to stall her and prevent her from seeing Kid like that. His clothes were profusely drenched in blood and Teaspoon had to admit that he didn’t look very well. The doctor had assured him that being a strong man Kid could get over this but the marshal wasn’t sure himself seeing the looks of him. So that was why he tried to avoid a disagreeable shock for Louise and with a bit of luck they would be able to clean Kid before she saw him. “Come on, honey. The doctor will need some boiling water and plenty of towels,” he said and passing his arm over her shoulders the marshal steered her towards the porch. Lou let herself be dragged along and kept looking back as the men seemed ready to carry her husband on a makeshift stretcher. “He will be fine, Lou,” Teaspoon tried to assure her.

With one last look to the yard Louise finally relented and stepped inside the house with trembling legs. Wringing her hands frenetically she crossed the lounge and resisted the urge to cry. She needed to be strong for Kid’s sake; she wouldn’t be of any help if she turned into a

sniveling pitiful woman. Just before reaching the kitchen she saw the two boys quietly sitting on the sofa as they stared at her with big eyes. They sure had noticed her shaky state and had worried expressions.

"Mrs. McCloud?" Jack called in a whisper and Lou came towards them. Forcing a wry smile on her face she steered them towards the kitchen and closed the door behind. She didn't want the two boys to see Kid in that state. Crouching before them Louise absently ran her fingers through Tommy's soft hair and kept quiet for a few moments, trying to muster some strength. She could hear Teaspoon's voice among other strange ones in her lounge and knew that they were carrying her husband upstairs to their bedroom. Closing her eyes momentarily she fought the urge to dash out of the kitchen to him. Horrible images of Kid's inert and bleeding figure crossed her mind and she shuddered at her own thoughts. Teaspoon hadn't wanted her to see Kid for a reason and it frightened her to imagine what she would find. A lone tear escaped through her closed eyes and she wiped it furiously.

"Mrs. McCloud?" Jack called again.

Louise opened her eyes, suddenly aware of her surroundings and saw the two boys staring at her with strange expressions. Breathing in deeply she finally managed to find her own voice. "Boys," she said huskily, "I'm afraid... Kid's had an accident."

The two children shared a look and Jack asked again in a thin voice, "Is he gonna be all right?"

Lou let out an audible shaky sigh. "I dunno," she admitted wearily. "But the doctor's with him right now. So why don't you sit here quietly and draw him some nice pictures for when he feels better?" She tried to keep serene for the boys' sake but the task was easier said than done.

"I want him to get well soon," Tommy said, his lips pouting.

"Me too, honey," she said, stroking the boy's head absently. They remained in silence for a few minutes; Louise feeling strangely connected to these two children in her pain. Somebody clearing their throat from behind interrupted the moment. Lou looked up and saw Teaspoon's figure hovering over her. She rose to her feet and the marshal said in a serious tone, "Lou, the doctor wants all the lamps you can get hold of." Louise nodded somberly and turning to the children once more she muttered, "Now be good boys and do as I told you."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jack answered and the two boys sat at the kitchen table and taking some paper and pencils they began drawing in silence. Without delay Louise went on her way to have everything ready for the doctor. She felt as if her head had got misty and she were in the worst nightmare she could have. The rain steadily fell outside but not even the sound of it pattering on the roof could do much to calm her frayed nerves as it usually did. The words Kid had furiously told her the day before kept haunting her thoughts. "*Sometimes I wish I would have never come back and a stray bullet would have burst my head open.*" The words kept repeating on her mind over and over again. The notion that she had brought this upon him left her bitter and she wanted to cry her eyes out in a dark corner. Her whole body was trembling, but she resisted the tears threatening to spill. 'I need to be strong,' she kept mumbling to herself but her strength was faltering by the minute.

As she approached her bedroom, the place where Kid lay badly-hurt, her steps slowed down. It scared her to death to think about the state he was in. Teaspoon and one of the soldiers driving the carriage had gone before her, taking everything she had sorted out for the doctor. Lou had retrieved a couple more of lamps from her shed and now she was taking them to the doctor. The sky outside was covered with dark clouds and left the interior of the house in shadows. Reaching the bedroom Louise opened the door ever so slowly, fearing what she was going to find. Breathing in deeply in a way to muster some courage she let herself in. As soon as

she was in the room, her eyes fell on Kid's inert figure. Leaving the lamps on top of the dresser carelessly, she ran to her husband's side. Lou stroked his face tenderly and watched his pale face with a sinking heart. "His face is very cold," she cracked, not averting her eyes from his face for one second.

"All you have to care about now is that he keeps breathing." Louise heard somebody say behind her and directing her gaze to Kid's middle, relief flooded through her as his chest rose and fell steadily.

"Louise, this is Doctor McNeil," Teaspoon said and turning her eyes across the bed she saw a middle-aged man in uniform. He was grey-haired with a bushy moustache, long sideburns and his expression was stern and serious. The doctor was busy taking different medical instruments out of his bag and without stopping he said, "I'm sorry to make your acquaintance under these circumstances, Mrs. McCloud." Lou simply nodded and Doctor McNeil continued, "I'll try to dig the bullet out and hopefully it won't have harmed any vital organs." With each word Lou was beginning to feel more and more sick, but she listened to him intently. "You ready to assist me, Mrs. McCloud?" the doctor asked and she nodded again silently.

For the first time Lou had the chance to look around the room. All the lamps stood on a side table next to the bed, casting their light over Kid's figure. Other than that the room was almost dark as if it were in the middle of the night rather than in the afternoon. The rain continued falling steadfastly outside and its drumming could be heard in the silence of the room. The window at the far end was opened a crack and the curtains billowed with the wind blowing in. Her eyes traveled to the doctor and back to Kid. Her heart sank watching his unmoving figure. Somebody had removed his shirt and his chest was bare but for the quilt covering its lower part. In that moment the doctor removed the bedspread and Lou had to contain a yelp as she could clearly see the blood covering his lower abdomen. There was a pad on the wound trying to stop the bleeding but the blood continued gushing steadily covering it all.

Doctor McNeil began to clean the wound and work on it. Lou felt on the verge of breaking down but she made a conscious effort to keep a cool head. She seemed unaware of anything around her and responded to the doctor requests like an automaton. All her attention was focused on her husband. Her eyes traveled from his abdomen to his face passing through his chest. There was so much blood and his face had such a deadly pallor that Lou felt a cold sweat cover her forehead. She couldn't help but think about the day Ike had died. She had firmly believed that their friend would get over something like that. Ike had his share of trouble and wounds, but he had always managed to overcome everything. Yet, Lou had been wrong and sadly that shot killed sweet Ike. When they had entered that room where their friend laid, Louise hadn't been able to stay there and had fled to cry in solitude. She hadn't wanted to believe that their friend was gone forever and for many nights she had been haunted by the image of Ike's dying figure in that bed. It seemed like those images were before her eyes now and the story repeated itself. The same wound, that horrid pallor, that smell of medicine. The room seemed to spin around her and Louise almost staggered but managed to get a strong grip of one of the bedposts. She gasped for breath, her chest heaving.

"Are you all right, Mrs. McCloud?" she heard somebody asking, a voice she didn't recognize. She couldn't tell if it was the doctor's even though she didn't recall anybody else apart from Teaspoon being in the room with them. Louise felt unable to talk and the person insisted, "Mrs. McCloud?"

"I dunno," she finally managed to say in a whisper. The sound of a door opening and closing registered in her misty mind. An arm reached her and surrounded her shoulders. Louise looked up and saw Teaspoon by her side. "Honey, Rachel's here. Why don't ya get some rest and let her take over from you?"

She didn't know how much time had passed since Kid had been brought up. It seemed

like minutes but it could well have been hours ago. Teaspoon had apparently left and brought Rachel back with him, but she never actually noticed his absence. Her head was spinning but she said with a tiny voice, "Kid needs me. I can't leave him."

"Sweetheart, you don't look very well," Teaspoon insisted, "and you know Kid'll have our hides if he learns that we haven't taken proper care of you."

Lou stared at him for a few moments and finally nodded, letting him steer her out of the room, casting a last look at Kid. As soon as they stepped outside, she turned to the older marshal and with an annoyed expression she asked, "When did I become such a weakling, Teaspoon?"

"Honey, we all become weaklings when we see our dearest in a tight spot," the marshal responded truthfully.

Lou sighed audibly and kept her eyes downcast. "I do love him, Teaspoon," she whispered, keeping her gaze on the floor below. "I really do."

"Course you do," he exclaimed, "we all know that, honey."

"I've been a horrible wife," Louise cracked unable to meet the marshal's eyes. She felt so ashamed of herself for her behavior to Kid that it wouldn't surprise her if everybody despised her. She deserved their scorn and more.

"Don't think about that, Lou," the marshal tried to soothe her. "It's no good for ya or Kid to punish yourself with those thoughts."

Louise dared to look up at the marshal for the first time and muttered, "He can't die, Teaspoon. I can't lose him or..." Her voice trailed and she felt unable to continue. The marshal took her hands in his and said firmly, "You have to keep the faith, honey. Kid is strong and I'm sure he will fight everything to come back to his lovely wife." Teaspoon's efforts to cheer her up didn't work but had the opposite effect. She had told Kid that their marriage was over and the realization of that left her bitter and empty. Lou wanted to give way to her bitterness but instead she just nodded at Teaspoon's words.

In that moment Rachel came along the passage. As soon as she saw Lou, she drew her into her arms and Louise let herself be comforted. She wanted to cry on her friend's shoulder but she fought the tears that had threatened her all afternoon. Neither woman said anything, both knowing that any words would be meaningless. After a few seconds, Rachel pulled away and said, "I'll get you as soon as the doctor finishes. You sure you're gonna be all right?"

Lou nodded and stood on the same spot motionless while Rachel and Teaspoon disappeared into her bedroom. She stared at the closed door as if she could see through the wood. Her own weakness infuriated her and bitterness coursed over her as she realized that she had let Kid down when he needed her most.

Slowly she turned around and began plodding along the corridor. Without actually knowing where she was going, Louise directed her steps towards the end of the passage and slid inside the bedroom where Kid had spent his nights for the last few months. A cold shiver ran through her entire body and Lou crossed her arms over her chest protectively. For a moment she didn't move but stood in the middle of the room looking around aimlessly. After a few minutes she staggered across and stood before a dresser. Her wedding picture was placed on top of it and taking it in her hands Lou stared at it intently. The picture used to be in her bedroom and she wondered when Kid had moved it out of there and placed it here instead. Louise sadly realized that she had never missed it. What kind of woman was she to forget about the happiest moment in her life? She had been so horrible and selfish in all these long months, never taking

into consideration what her behavior was doing to him. Fixing her eyes on his image in the picture, Lou ran her index finger through his outline. Memories of that day came back to her full force. Kid had looked so handsome in his suit even with those grazes on his face left from his fight with Jimmy. She had only had eyes for him and nothing else. Louise hadn't thought about that day for a long time and she realized that she had let all her happy moments disappear and be replaced by anything but bitterness. Sighing deeply Lou restored the framed picture in its place on the dresser carefully and turned her attention to a small wrapped-up package by its side. She vaguely recalled that it was the gift Kid had presented her for Christmas. She had never opened it and had completely forgotten about it. Without a moment's hesitation she tore the small parcel open and seeing its contents she let out a gasp. "He remembered," she whispered as she stared at the chain with the pendant in her hold. She had to bite her lower lip to stop the wail threatening to escape. Months ago the same object she held in her hands now had caught her eye but she hadn't thought about it since. "He remembered and bought it for me," she muttered again, holding the object against her bosom, "and I never even cared to look at it." Shaking her head ruefully, Louise put the chain in her pocket with trembling hands and kept fingering it while she crossed the room as if the touch of it made her feel closer to Kid.

With unsteady legs she stumbled towards where the bed was. Louise looked down and stared at it for a few minutes. A shirt laid crumpled on it; the shirt that Kid had discarded the night before. Lou picked it up and brought it to her face. The smell of him slapped her and she couldn't control herself any longer. A wail escaped her lips and burying her face in the shirt she dropped onto the bed heavily. Sobs racked her body leaving her empty and drained. Images of better times crossed her mind and the notion of what she might be about to lose hit her terribly and the sobs increased notably. She cried for all those long months of loneliness, for being with him without being there, for her bitterness, for her rotten soul, and especially for Kid fighting for his life all by himself. It seemed so unfair to her that Kid had to go through something like that when she was the one who deserved to suffer.

Something touching her hand made her lift her head from the shirt and through her tears she saw the two boys sitting at each side of her on the bed. "Please don't cry," Tommy whispered in a soft voice.

Louise breathed in to calm the flood of tears that seemed uncontrollable and wiped them with the back of her hand. "What are you two doing here?"

For a moment both boys looked troubled and instead of answering Lou's question Jack said with great intensity and conviction, "He's gonna be fine soon, Mrs. McCloud."

"We prayed," Tommy exclaimed softly as if he was giving away a secret.

For the first time Louise managed to smile briefly at the boys' innocence and tenderness. "Have you?" she asked and the two brothers nodded their heads energetically. "Then I guess I have nothing to fear, have I?" The two children remained silent and Tommy leaned over and rested his head on Lou's shoulder, a gesture that made her smile momentarily. Lou passed her arms over the two boys' shoulders bringing them closer to her. They stayed in a close hold for several minutes; Louise strangely finding solace in the boys' presence.

Rachel opened the door quietly and stayed in the threshold, watching the scene between Lou and the children with a smile on her face. She could understand how hard her friend had it for the last few months even though she didn't completely agree with her actions. Lou and Rachel had grown further and further apart in all this time and the older lady ruefully regretted giving up on helping her so easily. Lou and she had been close for years and the older woman had really missed her friendship lately. She was the only woman Rachel could call a true friend and with a heavy heart she wondered if her stupid pride and Lou's quick temper had caused a definite rift between them.

“Louise,” Rachel called softly and Lou was on her feet in no time. She didn’t say a word but stared at her friend wonderingly with big eyes. “Doctor McNeil wants to see you, honey,” the older woman said and Lou nodded silently, folding her arms over her chest as if to protect herself. She didn’t dare ask Rachel about Kid even though she was dying to know. For a moment she didn’t move, scared of what she might find, and Rachel, noticing her hesitancy, rubbed her back encouragingly. “Go on, sweetheart.” Lou nodded but it took her a few moments to make the first move. As she began walking, Rachel caught sight of the two children standing behind Louise. “Honey, would you like me to take the children with me later? I’d be happy to do so.” Lou looked behind her and the two boys kept staring back at her with anxious eyes. “No, it’s fine. They can stay here with us,” Lou said, smiling briefly when the two boys’ tense expressions relaxed at her words. She turned her attention back to her friend and asked, “Rachel, would you mind seeing to it that they have some dinner?”

“Sure,” Rachel answered promptly and proceeded to leave the room, squeezing Lou’s arm on her way out. The young lady smiled at her thankfully and turning to the boys again she said, “Go with Rachel, boys. I got to see Kid but I’ll be with you later, all right?”

The two boys nodded silently and filed out of the bedroom following the older woman. Louise stepped out of the room straightaway after the two brothers, but for a moment she stood motionless looking at her bedroom at the end of the corridor. All of a sudden, she was feeling very scared of what the doctor had to tell her. Her body was trembling like a leaf as she began advancing along the corridor. At a certain point the door opened and Doctor McNeil came out but Lou couldn’t see his expression. She sped up and on noticing her, the doctor looked at her with a neutral expression. Louise reached him with her heart beating wildly and gazed at the man questioningly. The doctor took his time to begin and finally he said, “Well, Mrs. McCloud...”