

Chapter 2

Louise got to the top of the stairs with trembling legs. Everything was in complete silence and she had the impression that her light steps and beating heart could be heard resounding loudly in the house. She took a strong hold of the gun and began advancing along the corridor. All the doors were shut but for the one of the main bedroom, her bedroom. She was positive that she had closed it that morning before going to work. Lou had grown into a woman of fixed habits and with one look, as she had just done, she could tell that there was something different in her place. So now she was sure that somebody was in her bedroom. She gulped nervously as she slowly made her way towards the room. It had been so long since she had been in a fix like this. When riding for the Express, she had to face danger on a daily basis and used her gun more often than she'd have liked to. However, since she stopped working as a rider, Louise had led a very peaceful life and hadn't used a weapon in ages. Now it really felt strange to hold the shotgun and she hoped that she could keep a cool head in the present situation.

Breathing deeply to calm her frayed nerves Lou reached the threshold of the bedroom and from that position she could make out a man, his back to her. He was facing the window and the light coming from it made the figure appear dark and blurry for her eyes. Louise breathed deeply once more and aiming the gun to the still unsuspecting man, she talked in a threatening low tone, "Put your hands up and turn around slowly." She pulled the hammer of the shotgun and watched as the man moved from the light as he turned towards her with his hands above his head. Her heart leapt as her eyes met those she had dreamt so much about for years. "Never thought that I'd get this kind of welcome from my wife," he said with a chuckle.

The weapon fell off her hands onto the floor heavily and her eyes filled with tears. Covering her mouth with her hand she tried to stifle a sob which threatened to escape, but still she didn't move, she just kept staring with big eyes. She felt that if she even stirred the figure before her would vanish into thin air. Tears were already rolling down her cheeks as she looked at her husband intently, unable to believe her own eyes.

Kid stared at her as if she were a mirage. He had wished to see her for so long and after all these years she was now before him as beautiful as ever. It had taken him longer than he thought to get home, but finally he was here. Kid had arrived a few hours before and in a way he was glad when he found the house empty. That gave him time to wash and make himself presentable for his wife. He knew that he looked terrible with dust and grime from all those days walking and riding (he hadn't been able to get himself a horse but a couple of weeks ago) and the long beard that he had let grow gave him a somewhat scary appearance. And the last thing he wanted was for Lou to be scared of him. He wished he could look the same as the last time they had been together. Kid was aware that that wouldn't be possible; he had got too thin and all those terrible

years in the battlefield had left their unmistakable mark not only in his soul but in his whole self. So Kid had the time to have a bath and a good shave before Lou arrived. It really was good to be home again, but in a way he felt like a stranger in the dainty house that Lou had obviously taken so good care of.

After the bath he put on the new shirt and pants that he had bought in Seneca with the few dollars that he had left. He had a look at himself in the mirror and was surprised to see the image meeting him. In half an hour he seemed to win back twenty years, and even still quite worn, he looked like the young man he actually was. After that, he had wandered through the house, not being able to keep calm. He was so nervous for seeing Lou that he couldn't stop for a minute. It seemed like forever when he finally heard the wagon pull up outside the house. Kid looked out of the bedroom window and when he saw her, he felt a lump in his throat. He couldn't help but stare at her. From his position he couldn't see her very well, but her image just set his heart racing. After a while, he became worried as Louise kept sitting on the wagon, looking ahead of her. He wondered if there was something wrong with her and for a moment he had been about to jump out of the window to her. Then she saw her jump off the wagon and enter the house, and now she was before him like a divine apparition and he couldn't believe it.

They kept looking at each other, reveling in the presence of the other, but still unable to move. Kid felt his heart thumping wildly and finally managed to whisper, "Lou." Hearing her name in his voice triggered her and in a flash she ran the few steps between them and threw herself into his arms. All those years of longing and waiting were surfacing and she let all her pent-up emotions to be released. Her hands and body hurt to touch him, to feel that he was here for real. Lou was sobbing against his chest as she held him for dear life. With her face buried in his shirt she heard his clear voice cooing her as he had done so many times in the past. "Oh Lou," he whispered and kissed the top of her head. Louise looked up, peering at every single detail on his face. Kid cupped her face in his hands and dried her tears with his thumbs. He smiled at his wife and tilting her head towards him, he kissed her sweetly on the lips. She pulled away and without a word she disengaged herself from his grasp and began scanning her eyes all over his body and frantically touching him everywhere, clearly looking for any hidden wounds.

"I'm fine, Lou," Kid said but she didn't seem to hear as she continued her inspection blindly. Kid had to take her hands in his to stop her. Louise looked up at him once more and he repeated, "I'm fine, honestly."

She nodded understandingly and said in a very soft voice, "I was so worried I thought something had happened to you." Kid brushed the rear of his hand against her cheek and whispered, "I promised I would come to you, didn't I?"

Louise just smiled feebly and having her at arm's length Kid stared at his

wife with avid eyes. “You’re really a sight for sore eyes, Lou,” he said with a husky voice. “You look beautiful. You sure aren’t a scrawny little girl any more but a complete woman.” Kid ran his eyes all over her. Her hair was longer than he had ever seen it and it was neatly tied in a ponytail. Louise was dressed very elegantly; she was wearing a white lace blouse completed with a cameo brooch pinned on the collar and a very smart blue skirt. Kid wanted to imprint that image of her in his mind for all eternity. He had dreamed about her for so long that he wanted to revel in the feelings.

Lou brought her face closer to his and whispered in his ear, “I’ve always been a woman, Kid, especially when I’m with you.” She peered at his eyes seductively and that was all he needed to join his mouth with hers in a long, avid kiss. Everything around them disappeared in the moment; it was just the two of them and the world might well vanish for all they cared in that precise instant. They took their sweet time to getting reacquainted after those barren and bleak years, exploring each other nervously and shivery. The faint rays filtered through the window and fell on the couple as they became one in what had been an unforgettable Sunday afternoon.



Feeling that she was being watched, Lou opened one eye and smiled broadly at meeting those blue eyes she had been dreaming about for so long. Kid was propped on his elbow, hovering over her and watching her intently. Lou brought her hand to caress his face, irrationally fearing that he’d disappear with the slightest movement from her part. “What are you doing?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Watching my love sleep,” Kid answered with a husky voice. “I could spend my whole life just looking at you.”

Lou turned a shade of red and smiled at him timidly. She traced the outline of his jaw with her index finger and coming to the end of his neck she cupped her hand in his nape and drew him towards her. Their lips met in hunger, avidly as if there was no tomorrow. She pulled away breathlessly, her face merely inches from his and gazing deeply into his eyes she whispered, “I love you, Kid.” In that instant the sound of a stomach grumbling interrupted the romantic moment. Kid blushed embarrassed and Lou quipped amused, “I hope that’s not your declaration of love.” They laughed heartily and disengaging herself from his strong grasp Louise said, “I’ll fix us something to eat, Kid. You must be starving.” Kid protested vehemently and secured his grip round her waist. “I’m fine, Lou. Please. You’re the only food I need,” he added, nibbling at her ear. Louise whacked him on the hand to make him release her. “Young man, I plan on taking good care of you,” she said as she slowly eased off the bed. Kid exaggeratedly pouted his lips in protest and she chuckled at his gesture. “I’ll make us some dinner, silly.” At the mention of dinner she jumped up in a flash

and exclaimed, "Oh my God!" She opened the wardrobe closet and taking the first dress out of it she threw it over her carelessly. "I forgot he was coming."

Kid had also slipped out of the bed and was putting on his clothes as well. At Lou's words he stopped and asked with a frown, "Who?"

"Teaspoon ... well and Rachel, I guess," Lou answered. "I invited them over today. They'll be here any minute now." She finished dressing quickly and approached her husband, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed. Placing her hands on both sides of his face she leaned over and planted a quick kiss on his lips. "You've come back for good, haven't you?" Louise asked fearfully, gazing at his eyes intently.

Kid kept a serious stance and stated firmly, "Nothing on this earth will ever drive me away from you again." The expression on her face was one of utter delight. Louise was still feeling like she was in a haze, not completely believing that her husband was back, back for good. It seemed as if she were in a dream and in her heart she feared that she'd wake up at any moment and Kid would be nowhere to be found. She had to repeat to herself that it was real. Now everything would be all right. While Kid had been in the war, she had felt that her life had been put on hold for the whole time. Somehow she couldn't say that she had really lived in all those long years. It had practically been a vacuum in her existence, where she could only dream about what she didn't have and what her life would be like when Kid returned. Now he was back and all those plans and dreams could finally come true. They would begin their new married life, build up their ranch, have love, peace, family, children... everything. She was ready for that and more. Yeah, now everything would be all right, it had to be.

That evening Louise felt as if she was walking on the clouds. She hadn't felt so light-hearted and alive in a long time. Teaspoon and Rachel had arrived not long afterwards, and they had been as pleasantly surprised at seeing Kid as Lou had been. They had a very agreeable dinner, sharing some laughs and remembering old days. Lou had reveled in the feeling of hearing her husband's voice, his laugh, watching him. She couldn't help but stare bedazzled at him. Lou still found it hard to believe that he was there and she had kept touching him all evening to convince herself that he was there for real. The smile that had settled on her mouth since the first moment she had laid her eyes on Kid hadn't faded one bit during the evening. The feeling was so strong that it seemed to ooze through all her pores.

The conversation at the dinner table had centered on the past days of the Express. Kid hadn't made the slightest attempt to talk about his time at the war. She knew that he must have got his share of suffering and disappointment. The South being defeated had sure hurt him severely; she was well aware of her husband's deep love for the land where he was born. Lou was curious but she wouldn't press him to talk. Kid sounded like himself in this light-hearted conversation and she knew that he'd open up to her when he was ready and not

before. The only thing he had said was that it hadn't been easy to do the journey back to Rock Creek. He had hardly had any money left and he had practically made most of the way on foot. Teaspoon, though, didn't have the same reservations to talk about the terrible war. "Son, it must have been hard on you to finish those years with such an end."

Lou noticed how Kid's eyes suddenly got a cold shine like steel and his mouth stretched in a thin stiff line. "The end was the lesser of evils, after all. I've seen things in this damned war that nobody should have, things I can't even think about." Lou squeezed his hand encouragingly and feeling the warmth of her palm in his Kid's stiff stance softened and he smiled faintly at her. "Now all I want is a quiet life for me and my wife," Kid mused.

Teaspoon grinned broadly at his last words and added, "And you really deserve it, Kid. Little Louise was beside herself with worry for your return."

"I know," Kid muttered.

"And it's time you two gave us a little one to dote on," the old marshal quipped with a chuckle.

"Teaspoon!!!" Rachel chided and joined in his mirth at watching the couple's blushed expressions. "Leave the young'uns alone."

Kid chuckled, trying to conceal his own embarrassment. "We'll do everything in due time, Teaspoon. There'll be plenty of time for that and everything. We have the rest of our lives," he said, which elicited a big smile from Louise.

Rachel and Teaspoon bid them good-bye soon, not making the slightest attempt to hide the hints that they wanted to leave the couple alone in their first night together, which caused more embarrassment from the two. The rest of the evening was spent relaxed in each other's company, between kisses, caresses and laughs. The moment they had finally made it to the bedroom, Kid could barely keep his eyes open. Lou understood that he was physically drained and needed his rest. She wondered when he had last slept on a bed. It was no wonder that he crashed as soon as his head hit the pillow despite his attempts to keep awake for her. Louise was just happy to fall asleep in his arms, knowing that for once those constant nightmares wouldn't disturb her sleep. Her husband was by her side and her troubled mind had finally found its peace. Sleep came not long after and Lou drifted to sweet dreams about a blue-eyed cowboy.

The sun hadn't even risen when Lou was driven out of her sweet sleep. She didn't know whether it was the morning cold air or the faint neighing of a horse in the distance that had wakened her. Opening her eyes she realized that the arms that had wrapped her in his hold last night were gone. In the darkness she slid her hand to reach for her husband and feel him. Louise panicked as she

found his side as empty and cold as it had been in the previous four years. Her heart was racing and her mind in turmoil. Had it all been part of her dream? Lou sat up on the bed in a flash and then she saw him and she breathed out relieved. Kid was sitting on the rocking chair by the window; the full moon casting its light over his figure. His eyes were lost ahead of him and he hadn't noticed her presence yet. "Kid?" she called from her position at the edge of the bed and her voice in the silence of the night startled him.

Kid turned his attention to her at once and on seeing her he smiled. "Hey." Louise eased off the bed and coming closer to him she perched on his lap and rested her head on his shoulder. "You should be sleeping, Lou," he chided.

"I can't without you," she admitted. They stayed in that position for a while and then she asked, "What are you doing up at this time of the night, Kid?"

He didn't answer straightaway and for a moment Lou thought that he wouldn't. She closed her eyes, reveling in his proximity and warmth, breathing in his smell, and then his voice resounded strong and clear in the stillness of the room. "It's the nightmares." Lou's eyes shot open and she lifted her head from his shoulder and met his gaze. "About the war?" she asked in a soft voice.

Kid nodded ruefully and added with a stern voice, "Not only that." Louise brushed her hand against his cheek. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," she whispered. He looked at her intently and said, "I don't want to keep anything from you, Lou. You're my wife." He remained silent for some moments, just staring lovingly at her and then he spoke up. "It's the same dream over and over again." His voice was barely a whisper and he stopped for a moment to breathe in deeply. "The explosions sound very near and bullets whizzed past me inches away. There are dead bodies scattered all over the place, people keep falling at every second but that's not my worry." He paused again and gulped audibly. "I desperately look everywhere, I'm frantic scanning among the people around me and the ones on the floor but I can't find ..." His voice trailed and he couldn't continue for a while.

"Find what?" Lou asked.

"You," Kid said with a shaky voice. "I know you're there somewhere but I can't find you. And then I see you lying there on the ground, bleeding, between the lifeless bodies. I kneel before you and rock you in my arms crying for help. You look at me and try to speak, but you slip through my fingers and vanish into thin air and ... and ..." he tried to continue but the words got stuck in his throat.

"Shush, it's all right, Kid," Lou cooed as if he were a small child. "I'm fine and now we're together. It's just a dream, it doesn't mean anything."

"I'm so sorry, Lou. I should never have left you. It was the worst decision I've ever made. I was so wrong and if something had happened to you, I ..."

“Nothing happened to me, Kid,” she cut him off, unable to bear the idea of him blaming himself for nothing. “I was safe just here; you saw to it that I was safe. And I understand that you had to go, that it was something you had to do. Please don’t torture yourself like that. We have each other now and we’ll always be together.”

“Always?” he asked with a faint smile in his lips.

“Always,” Lou stated without hesitation and kissed him full on the mouth, trying to make him see that she meant every word.



The following day with a heavy heart Lou had to leave for work like every morning during the last four years. She wished she could spend every single minute with Kid now that he was back as she wanted to make up for all those long years and would have liked to have a few days off work. However, she was aware that they couldn’t afford that now; they needed the money she was making as her wages were the only income they had at present. She just couldn’t quit her job at the moment. In time they would have the ranch, their dream, running, but now they didn’t have the means for that.

Last night Louise had finally made Kid get into bed and he had fallen asleep in no time. It didn’t surprise her that he had those nightmares; she couldn’t begin imagining what he had been through in those four years of war. Knowing him as well as she did Lou was sure that it must have ripped him up inside to see so much death and destruction around him. Kid had always had problems when he had no other option than take somebody’s life whoever the person was or whatever they had done. So Lou knew that it couldn’t have been easy for him during the war despite the fact that it had been his decision and he knew what he had gotten himself into. She just hoped and prayed that his demons would eventually disappear and he could enjoy some peace.

The day dragged and Lou couldn’t wait for Sally to relieve her. She had been clumsy all day; her mind set somewhere else rather than in the hotel reception. Today she had made more mistakes and mishaps than in all the years that she had been working in the place. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be many fussy customers who would complain about her to the boss. Finally, her working day seemed to come to its end as she saw Sally come through the door. Her face lit up; she had never felt happier than today to see her friend. The blonde woman hadn’t even reached her when Lou was taking her jacket but to her chagrin, Mr. Faber, her boss, chose this very moment to have a little talk with her. He steered her to the back office behind the reception and Louise patiently listened to the man’s ramblings. Mr. Faber was a good and honest businessman, but he could have the knack to talk restlessly about the most

uninteresting topics in the worst moment.

Noticing Lou busy with Mr. Faber through the half-open door, Sally smiled at herself out of sheer relief. Luckily she didn't have to listen to one of the man's usually soporific talks as Louise seemed to be the victim today. Sally took her jacket off and placed it on the hanger on the wall. As she was scanning the registration book, she heard the door open and a man entered. As it was customary, she fixed a big smile on her face as the man approached the counter.

"Afternoon, Sir," she greeted. "Anything I can do for you?"

Kid came closer to the girl behind the counter timidly. He wanted to surprise Lou by coming and taking her home at the end of her working day. He didn't expect to find another woman instead and for a moment he thought that he had just missed his wife. However, as he came closer, he spotted her through the door behind this other woman.

"Thank you, Ma'am, but I'm just waiting for Louise ... and ..." he began but the lady cut him off in mid-sentence.

"I assure you that any inquiries you have can be dealt by any member of our staff, and that includes myself," she said with a stiff tone.

"You don't understand," Kid insisted, annoyed with this lady for not letting him explain, "It's kind of personal. Louise and I ..."

Again Sally cut him off, talking to him very coldly. "Mrs. McCloud," she said, emphasizing the title of the name, "is busy right now. So come up with whatever you need from this hotel or I'll have to ask you to leave right now."

In that instant Sally heard Lou bidding good-bye to Mr. Faber and she nodded at her boss as he slipped out of the reception towards his own office at the end of the corridor. Louise came after him and to Sally's astonishment she approached the obnoxious man who had been bothering her the last few minutes with a big smile and she planted a big kiss on his cheek. Lou turned to her friend and said, while hooking her arm in his, "Sally, this gentleman here is my husband."

The blonde woman's expression turned into one of utter delight. "Oh," she exclaimed, hurrying to shake hands with Kid, "this is really a surprise. It's a real pleasure to meet you at last and I'm sorry about my behavior before."

"It's all right," he said with a big smile, "it's good to know there's somebody keeping men off my wife."

Sally smiled and added, "I assure you that she does the job herself quite

well.” Lou pinched her husband on the arm teasingly and looking at her with eyes bright with amusement Kid said, “Oh I’m sure she does. She has a knack to keep us men on our toes.”

Sally laughed heartily and when she sobered, she remarked sincerely, “I’m really happy for you, Louise.”

“Thank you,” Lou replied, without averting her gaze from Kid.

Sally got round the little counter and coming close to the couple she said, “But I don’t know what you’re still doing here.” She began pushing them towards the door as the two of them cast her grateful and bemused looks over their shoulders. “Enjoy the rest of the afternoon for goodness’ sake. You deserve it,” she exclaimed before giving them the final push through the door with a final “Have fun”.

“See you tomorrow,” Louise called from outside but her friend was already out of earshot. She turned to her husband who was looking at her lovingly.

“She seems like a very nice lady,” Kid said.

“Yeah, she is,” Lou agreed, looking intently at her husband in the eyes. Kid took hold of her arm and hooking it around his, he steered her towards Rock Creek’s main street. They walked along silently and Kid finally said, “Let me buy you some lunch. I need to talk to you.”

“About what?” Lou asked suspiciously.

“Patience, Mrs. McCloud,” he added, touching her nose with his finger mockingly.

Lou scowled exaggeratedly. She hated it when she was kept guessing and Kid knew it. Louise tried to keep a long face but watching Kid’s amused expression she couldn’t help but chuckle despite herself. It felt so good to walk arm in arm with Kid after all that time. She had never got used to being alone and, although she had always been proud of her independence, the loneliness she had felt since Kid’s departure had been too much for her. Somehow she had become accustomed to be part of the family that the riders, Teaspoon and Rachel had been for her, and more importantly she had got used to Kid. He had always been there for her and whenever she had sought him out or needed him, he had never disappointed her. They had connected like two pieces in a jigsaw from the very beginning. That empty space that she had always been so proud to have had been filled by him, and when he had gone, the emptiness had grown and had felt lost like a child without its mama. Not even Teaspoon, Rachel or her siblings had lessened the feeling.

As they strolled leisurely along the street, Louise beamed proudly. On their

way to the restaurant they passed by the telegraph office and noticing Mrs. Peterson at the door Louise waved at her and smiled timidly. Somehow she really felt the weight of guilt pour over her for having her husband back while the woman had lost hers in the war. She had been lucky however unfair it was but the world worked that way. From her position Mrs. Peterson waved back and smiled broadly, knowing that Louise shouldn't be expecting any letters or telegrams any more.

Kid and Lou reached the restaurant and soon they were enjoying a delicious lunch. As they were tasting a beautiful pudding as dessert, at some point Kid held her hand caressing it softly with his thumb and placed a sweet kiss on it. Lou eyed him suspiciously and asked in a mocking tone, "What do you want from me, Kid?"

He cleared his throat nervously and looking at her amusedly he said, "Why do you say that?"

"I know you pretty well, I'm afraid. You turn all sweet when something's on your mind. So now speak up."

Kid smiled but didn't reply straightforward. He kept his gaze on the tablecloth pattern as he rubbed Lou's hand with his thumb absent-mindedly. "I've been talking to Teaspoon," he finally began, "and it seems he's in need of a deputy."

"So what?" Lou asked, fearing his answer already.

"Well," he answered hesitatingly, knowing that she wouldn't be too pleased with what he had to say, "the pay's not too bad and we need the money."

"Kid!" Louise protested. "You've just come back from all that fighting and you want to get involved in more? I'm sick and tired of worrying all the time!!!"

"Oh come on, Lou. You well know that Teaspoon isn't in more danger than Reverend Johnson. All the excitement he gets is to lock up the regular drunk every night." Louise kept looking at him skeptically, not liking the idea one bit. "Oh please, Lou. It will be only temporary till we get our ranch going. I don't like the idea of you working and supporting us both. I just won't sit idle while you slave away."

Louise smiled placidly at his words. She was far from slaving away at her job, rather the contrary; sometimes it was extremely boring out of inactivity. She was well aware what was bothering him, what had bothered him all along. When she had felt forced to find work, it had really meant a wound to his pride. When they had married, Kid had sworn that he'd take care of her, that he'd make sure that she lived as comfortable and problem-free as possible. However, circumstances had played against them and the war had taken longer than

everybody had first thought. Louise had hated that damned war, and, although she didn't hold a grudge against Kid and somehow she even understood his decision, she had abhorred how it had taken her husband away from her for so long. That had been her main concern, but not the hard months before getting the job, or the actual fact of having to work. She had never been afraid of hard work and after all she had lived in her tender young years, working at the hotel was nothing. Kid, though, had been terribly upset because he felt that he had failed her as a husband and his letters had been filled with regrets and apologies.

"The same old Kid," she said with a wink. She knew that he'd never change. He was always worried about her when her safety and welfare were involved. In other times his excessive protectiveness would have angered her, but now she found it very sweet and moving. For once she wanted him to fuss over her and she needed to feel protected with him. "You've already made up your mind, uh?" Lou added teasingly and Kid just smiled. She remained in silence while he stared at her with pleading eyes. "All right, all right," Louise finally conceded, "but stop looking at me with those puppy eyes."

Kid laughed and reaching over the table, he planted a soft kiss on her cheek. "You'll see that we will have our ranch running in no time and then we'll be able to chuck in everything else."

Louise leaned over closer to him and whispered in his ear, "Well, it will be sooner if you get this girl in trouble, Mister."

Kid gaped at her with big astonished eyes and Lou let out a peal of laughter. Sometimes she got as shocked with herself as Kid was at the moment. She felt that she had changed so much in the last years. She had grown into a woman with confidence and calmness. However, there was still a great deal of that shy girl who had tried to hide behind a man's appearance. She had been so wary around men that she'd never have thought that she'd ended up a married woman one day. Meeting Kid had made her ghosts fade away and now she was ready to have everything with him. Louise leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I love you," she said with a big smile.

Getting over his initial reaction Kid cupped her face in his hands and looking at her eyes intently he whispered, "We'll have everything, Lou. I promise." Louise gave him that look telling him that she trusted him and nothing would come between them now, or would it?