

The weeks that followed were very hectic especially for Kid. He had recently bought a group of horses and the extra work involved had kept him very busy. He hardly had time for anything else and he ruefully knew that he wasn't devoting as much attention to the family as he should. Some days he was lucky if he managed to get a glimpse of them at mealtimes or around the ranch, and when he went to bed at night, Lou and the children were already sleeping. His intention was to have the horses ready for sale and, if luck was on his side, he would be able to sell them through the summer. That money would afford them to live without any economic concerns the following winter. That meant a few weeks of long working days but Kid was ready to make the sacrifice for his family's sake.

Louise missed her husband as she hardly got to spend much time with him. She had known from the beginning that having their own ranch would mean working many long hours but she couldn't help but hate being without Kid. Maybe with time they could hire some helping hands, but right now they just couldn't afford it, and there wasn't much she could possibly do. Lou helped around the ranch as much as her own responsibilities in the house and with the children let her. Kid ended every day feeling completely exhausted and it was no wonder that every single night he was already asleep before he even hit the pillow. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long before he'd finish breaking and training all the horses and she'd have her husband back.

Louise drove the buckboard into her property and stopped it just in front of the house. She had just picked up Jack from school and the two boys sat by her side on the wagon seat, bickering as usual. After jumping off to the ground, she went to help the two brothers to get off the carriage. In that moment, she caught sight of Kid walking towards the stables with an unfamiliar man in tow. Louise kept staring at them till they disappeared inside the stables.

"Who is that man?" Jack asked by her side, licking a lollipop she had bought him when they had stopped at Tompkins store to purchase a few things.

Lou turned to the boy and said, "He's a buyer. He's come to see our horses."

Jack sent her a quizzical look. "You mean he wants to buy the horses?"

"That's right. I ain't sure how many, though," she replied while picking up the few provisions bought in the store from the back of the carriage.

"And he's taking them away?" Jack asked again with a puzzled expression and Lou simply nodded, not noticing the two boys' glum countenance at hearing her.

"I love our horses. I don't wanna them go," Tommy added with a miserable voice.

"But honey, that's what we do, we sell horses." Louise explained but the two boys looked at her skeptically, not very happy with this new information they had learned. Lou had to smile briefly, seeing their morose faces and she added, "Boys, they can't stay with us forever. We need to find them a new home."

"Why?" Tommy asked.

Lou gazed at the boy, a bit lost at what she should answer. "Well, honey, they need somebody to care for them ... uh ... in the same way we take care of Lightning."

"And Katy!" Tommy exclaimed loudly.

"That's right, and Katy too," Lou said with a smile, terribly relieved that her explanation

had satisfied the two brothers. She sometimes found it terribly difficult to answer their curiosity and she understood that it was natural for them to grow attached to the horses. What she wondered is what she would tell them when they start breeding and they had to sell those horses that would have been born and grown at the ranch. "And now let's get inside. I have to start dinner if we want to have something to eat tonight."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jack replied and the three of them quickly slipped inside the house.

Later in the day Louise was busy in the kitchen while the boys were playing quietly in the lounge. Suddenly, she heard the door clatter open and Kid's voice calling her. "Lou! Lou!" She could notice the urgency in his voice and hastened to see what happened. "What's wrong, Kid?" she asked alarmed but as soon as he saw her, Kid plodded towards her and taking her in his arms, he swirled her around the room. Louise laughed hysterically at his stunt while the two boys watched them, grinning bemusedly. When finally Kid stopped his frenetic spinning and put Lou back on the floor, he took her hand in his and smiling widely, he said, "We did it, Lou. We've sold them."

"What do you mean?" she asked with a frown.

"The horses I've been so busy with," Kid replied, beaming proudly.

"You mean ... all of them?" she asked again, her eyes big as saucers. Kid simply nodded and Lou seemed unable to find her own voice. "But..." she started clumsily but Kid answered before she gave voice to the question. "I know, Lou. I haven't finished with all of them, but Mr. Jones said that he'd take the ones ready now and he'll come back for the rest of them at the end of the summer."

"I can't believe it!" Lou exclaimed, knowing what that meant for their life. Kid would have more than enough time to work and train the rest of the horses and he could afford to slow down the pace of work. Now that they had ensured that money, they didn't need to rush.

"I'm just glad that I'll be able to spend more time with my family," Kid muttered sincerely.

"So am I. We've missed you terribly, haven't we, boys?" Lou said and the boys nodded their agreement eagerly. Kid smiled placidly and added, "I have to go to town now. Mr. Jones's waiting for me but I just wanted to let you know." Kid walked towards the door and, as he remembered something suddenly, he swirled around and asked, "Would it be all right if I ask Mr. Jones to have dinner with us tonight?"

"Of course, silly!" she answered promptly and for the umpteenth time that day Kid flashed his smile. He slowly turned towards the door and before stepping out of the house, he turned his head to Louise and exclaimed happily "Love you", leaving a very smiling Lou staring after him.

That evening they welcomed Mr. Jones to their home and they all sat down for dinner shortly afterwards. It had been a long time since they had guests for any meal. Lou ruefully remembered that the last time it had been when Sally and her husband had been over for dinner and the evening had finished disastrously. The memory filled her with bitterness as her mind was brought back to the incident happening at the social a few weeks ago. Since then Louise hadn't seen or heard from Sally or her husband. She didn't expect any kind of apologies from the couple as she knew that the man wasn't regretful after the nasty way he had treated her. Louise was well aware that John Douglas wouldn't let his wife come any closer to her and Sally wouldn't dare disobey him, Lou knew that much. She sadly acknowledged that the situation didn't seem to have an easy solution. Sally had been a good friend and Louise had to admit that she was the one to blame as her treatment of the couple had made them fall out.

Trying to erase those thoughts from her mind, Louise centered her attention on her family



expected to lay eyes on him and Katy riding in at any moment. Her expectations were satisfied as man and rider appeared, obviously in a frenzy to get home as fast as possible. The horse hadn't even come to a stop when Kid jumped onto the ground and ran to the porch where Lou stood. Noticing his out-of-ordinary hurry, Lou looked at him curiously. "What's wrong, Kid?"

"Didn't you hear in town?" he asked breathlessly.

"Hear what?"

"Your friend Sally ... her husband's dead," Kid said with a grave expression.

"Oh my God!" Lou exclaimed, bringing her hand to cover her mouth. "But how...?"

"I dunno," Kid replied. "Some women were talking about it in Tompkins' store and I came as quickly as I could to tell you."

"Poor Sally!" Lou muttered to herself. "They haven't even been married for a year. And now she's on her own and with a baby on its way." Kid remained silent; there was nothing he could really say. The couple stared at each other thoughtfully when Lou said, "Kid, would you mind keeping an eye on Tommy while...?" She didn't have to complete her question as he answered promptly, understanding what she meant, "No problem at all." Louise smiled her thanks and Kid said, "I'll saddle Lightning for you."

Minutes later Louise slid off her horse before Sally's house. There were several wagons around the property, which told Lou that her friend wasn't alone. Probably some of Rock Creek's families had come to present their respects to the bereaved lady and Lou suddenly felt very nervous. She didn't know how Sally would react when she saw her; after all she and John Douglas hadn't really been in the best terms. Lou wasn't sure whether her presence would upset Sally more than she supposed the lady already was. She just hoped that her friend wouldn't make a scene, especially in front of curious eyes. Louise knocked on the door tentatively and a few seconds later it swung open and Sally Douglas appeared before her; neatly dressed in black and her eyes puffy from crying. The two women stayed staring at each other for a few moments; neither saying a single word, when suddenly the blonde lady threw herself to Lou's arms, weeping bitterly. "Oh Louise!" Lou tried to calm her down, talking to her in soothing tones, while she steered the inconsolable woman to the couch and both of them sat down. She watched her friend with a sinking heart as Sally gave way to her pain. Lou felt unable to offer any words of consolation as she could well imagine how her friend felt. She had been completely shattered herself when Kid had been shot, unsure if he would be all right. Having the certainty that your husband was gone forever was something that Lou couldn't even start imagining.

Sally's tears were beginning to subside and it was then that Lou dared to speak up, "I'm really sorry, Sally."

"I know," the blonde lady simply said and they remained silent for a while. Sally sighed shakily and added, "These ladies have been really kind to keep me company this morning."

Lou turned her head and for the first time she saw the women sitting opposite them. She had focused all her attention on her friend and she hadn't noticed the ladies' presence till now. There were five women among which she ruefully recognized Amanda Davis. Their scornful looks thrown in her direction didn't go unnoticed but Lou pulled a neutral expression and nodded her greeting. "Ladies."

"Mrs. McCloud," replied one of the ladies, who Lou didn't recall ever meeting before. The lady looked her up and down stiffly, and realizing that the woman was staring at the male clothes she was wearing, Louise now understood the withering looks from the beginning. She had changed into breeches before riding here and her appearance seemed scruffy compared to the

other ladies, all of them impeccably dressed in black.

“But Sally, we’re not doing anything special, just being good neighbors in your time of need,” Amanda said, flashing her white smile. “Now that you are all alone in the world, you need all the company you can get.” Louise stared at her agape. Was that supposed to bring any comfort to her friend? Lou ruefully thought that she’d rather be completely, absolutely alone than to be with the likes of Amanda Davis.

“Honey, you’re not alone. There’s a beautiful baby, John’s baby growing inside you,” Lou reminded her, which won her a cold stare from Amanda Davis, but she decided to ignore it. This wasn’t the place or the time for that sort of thing.

“Yes,” Sally let out, a flickering smile on her lips as she stroke her growing belly tenderly.

“I guess we’d better be off now,” Amanda said coldly and all the women stood up almost at the same time like automatons and headed for the door.

“Thank you for coming,” Sally called in a tiny voice, not having even the strength to stand up and show the ladies out. The women never turned their heads or said anything at all as they filed out of the house. From inside Sally and Lou heard the wagons drive away while they remained in complete silence.

“What am I gonna do now, Louise?” Sally asked in a raspy voice after a while.

Lou looked at her with a neutral expression, not finding the words to answer her question. All she managed to do was to take her hand in hers and squeeze it encouragingly. “What happened, Sally?”

The blonde lady inhaled deeply, her lips quivering. “It was an accident,” she began in a shaky voice. “He was in the barn like every evening sharpening his tools. I don’t know how, but when he burst in the house, he had a deep gash on his left thigh.” Sally let out a miserable wail and Louise stroked her back comfortingly. Little by little Sally was able to take a grip of herself and continued her account. “I wrapped some bandages around his leg but the bleeding didn’t stop, so we rushed to town. Doctor Logan did a tourniquet to stop the blood from gushing out, but after hours of being there he ... died.” She uttered the last part in a tiny voice and she started weeping silently again.

Louise kept thoughtful as she pondered over what Sally had told her. After a while she turned to her friend and asked, “Are you telling me that’s all that happened?” She couldn’t believe John Douglas had died because he had a slash in his leg. In her life Louise had seen terrible wounds, especially when she had been riding for the Express, and she didn’t recall anybody dying so suddenly because of a simple cut. She knew that when doctors feared that there was possibility of gangrene or even death, they resorted to amputation if it was necessary. *‘Why the hell hadn’t Doctor Logan done that?’* she thought irritated.

“Doctor Logan said he bled to death. He had already lost a lot of blood when we got to town,” Sally explained in a weary voice.

Louise looked at her friend skeptically. The Douglas farm wasn’t that far from town and nobody bled to death in such a short time. She remembered when they had taken Elias Mills to hang, Kid had been shot. Initially the bleeding had been her main concern and she had persuaded Kid to ride back to Rock Creek. However, the blue-eyed rider had been forced to race after Lou and Jimmy for two days, fearing for their safety. When he’d finally found them, Kid was definitely weak but after cleaning his wound and resting for a few days he was back in good health. Louise just couldn’t believe Doctor Logan’s words that John Douglas was basically at death’s door when he had fallen into the doctor’s hands. Doctors also made mistakes and

maybe this was the case here but of course, the physician wasn't going to admit that to the man's widow. Lou didn't know how to voice her thoughts without upsetting Sally any further and she just said, "It doesn't make any sense, Sally."

"Death never makes any sense," the woman replied bitterly. "All I know is that I've lost my husband and nothing's gonna bring him back."

Louise nodded silently. Sally was right after all and it didn't really matter under which circumstances John Douglas had died. The bottom line was that he was dead and Lou felt that she hadn't the right to judge Doctor Logan's actions without actually being around at the moment. She might not like the doctor a bit but she knew that accidents happened and on many occasions people died unexpectedly and without a logical explanation and probably Sally's husband had suffered one of those unlucky deaths.

"I still can't believe he's gone," Sally whispered after a while. "I can feel his presence everywhere. Crazy, ain't it?"

"No, it's not," Lou replied. They kept silent for a few minutes and after a while Lou said, "Those ladies who were here were right in one thing. You shouldn't be on your own in these moments." Sally sighed and Louise asked, "Why don't you come and stay with us for a while?"

Sally shook her head and added, "That's awfully kind of you, but I don't want to impose my presence on you and Kid."

"You know I'm not the kind type, Sally!" Lou exclaimed. "I'm asking you because we'd be happy to have you at our home. You wouldn't be imposing, you know that."

Sally smiled at her; Louise really had a way that made everything look so easy. She realized that she had deeply missed her friend and she really welcomed her friendship right now. Sally had never felt so lonely in her life and now everything seemed so dark to her eyes. She could really use somebody's help who would lead her way in this darkness. So she met Lou's eyes hesitantly and slowly nodded her head.