

Sally and Lou packed a few of Sally's things and they didn't waste any more time around the farm, setting off towards Lou's home straightaway. Louise was happy that she had managed to persuade her friend to go home with her. Sally was understandably distraught after the sudden turn of events and it was in moments like these that she needed to feel that she had her friends' support. Lou knew that Sally had no relatives in Rock Creek and even though she knew many people in the town, she wasn't really close to anyone. When both ladies had been working at the hotel, they had grown quite attached, but Sally had always complained that she couldn't really get along with any of the local women. Now it seemed the situation had changed, considering her apparent flourishing friendship with Amanda Davis. Sally wasn't originally from Rock Creek and she had ended up living in this town because she had seen Mr. Faber's advertisement for the position at the hotel in a newspaper. Lou knew that her friend had an older sister in St Louis, who had practically brought her up when their parents had died. Other than that, John had been her only family and now that he had died, Lou wondered what she was going to do, especially since she was expecting a baby. It wasn't like she could work in her condition and Lou doubted that Sally had the energy or the spunk to run the farm on her own. She'd have to hire some working hands to work the land, but Lou suspected that her friend didn't know much about farming to carry on with her husband's profession. Anyway, all Sally needed right now was to be in peace and quiet to think over where life would lead her from now on.

Sally occupied Theresa's old room and took to staying in there almost all day long except for mealtimes. She made the effort to share the meals with the family out of courtesy, but she never spoke much. She spent hours long locked in that room crying bitterly or simply in a glum state. The funeral for John Douglas had taken place the day after the moving out, and there had seem to be no comfort whatsoever for Sally. Almost the whole population of Rock Creek had attended the service. Even though John hadn't been living in the town for long, he was a well-known man by the townsfolk because of the dealings in his profession. After ten days since the funeral Sally's mood hadn't changed a bit, which was beginning to worry Louise.

Louise walked slowly along the corridor on the second floor and stopped in front of the closed bedroom door. She stood there deep in thought for a few minutes, pondering whether to carry on with her original intention. Finally, her resolution won her over and she knocked on the door loudly. She heard a faint 'come in' and opened the door slowly. Her eyes fell on Sally's figure curled up on the bed. Her black dress and her vacant look made her appear much older and distant.

"Good morning," Lou greeted cheerfully but the other lady didn't even look at her. Louise had wanted to leave her space during these days to mourn her husband, but it was high time she began leaving her seclusion. It seemed that Sally was getting glummer with each passing day and today she hadn't even come down for breakfast. It was then that Lou knew she had to do something about it; Sally couldn't just stop eating when there was a baby growing in her belly. "It's such a beautiful day," Lou continued, "What about if I hitch up the wagon and we go for a nice drive?"

"No, thanks," Sally's cold voice replied.

Louise sighed warily and walked a few more steps in her direction. "Sally, don't you think it's time for you to start living again?"

At her question Sally sat up on the bed and looked at her friend with angry eyes, knowing where she was leading to. "What do you mean by that?"

"You need to start thinking about what you're gonna do with your life," Lou said patiently.



again. "You hear your brother, Jack? Just eat your soup like a good boy and stop moaning."

"Shouldn't we wait for Sally, Lou?" Kid asked.

Louise sighed deeply and muttered, "I really don't know." Since their argument that morning, she hadn't seen Sally at all, not even at lunch. She had gone upstairs to check on the lady a couple of times but she had completely ignored her calls from outside the door. Kid had been out all day, so she hadn't had the opportunity to tell him about her conversation with her friend. "I had a talk with her this morning," she simply said.

"Really? And how did it go?" Kid asked again. He knew that Lou was worried about Sally and he had also begun to see her point of view.

"How do you think?" she replied with a set face. Kid simply nodded in understanding and continued eating his soup. Lou kept looking at her husband next to her deep in thought. She couldn't help but feel a deep sense of amazement towards him. Having Sally at home had been an eye-opener for her. She could now understand the frustration that Kid had felt for those long months. He had never faltered, keeping the faith in their marriage and love despite the fact that she had behaved like a jackass. Lou kept staring at him with loving eyes, feeling as if she were the luckiest woman in the world. After a few minutes she leaned across the table and unexpectedly planted a big kiss on his cheek. Kid turned to her, surprised at this out-of-the-blue peck and asked, "What was that for?"

Louise just shrugged her shoulders, suddenly feeling her cheeks go all hot and flustered. Both husband and wife kept staring at each other lovingly till Lou heard her name being called repeatedly by the seven-year-old boy. "Yes, Jack?" she asked turning towards him.

"You ain't eating the soup either!" he was quick to protest with a frown.

Lou chuckled at the boy's remark and his eagerness to avoid eating the broth, and shared a knowing glance with Kid. "All right, all right, I'm eating now!" She said as she began spooning the soup. "Happy, young man?"

Jack just shrugged her shoulders and whispered grumbles all the time as he followed suit and began eating the hot liquid. It was then that they heard steps coming from upstairs and when the four occupants in the dining room turned to the noises, they saw Sally appear, coming down the stairs. The lady approached the table slowly and Louise stared at her curiously, wondering if she was actually going to carry out her threats to leave the house. Lou rose to her feet as she met the blonde lady's eyes. "Sally?" she let out cautiously.

Sally smiled faintly as she stood over the table and said, "I just wanted to apologize to you all for being such a nasty guest while you've been so kind as to have me under your roof and bear with my weird moods."

"There's no need to apologize, Sally," Kid replied. "You're going through a tough time right now and we're really happy to have you here, aren't we, boys?"

The two brothers nodded simultaneously and Sally smiled briefly. Then she turned her attention back to Lou. "I've been doing some thinking and you're right, Louise. I have to start considering my baby and our life from now on."

"Yes," Lou agreed with a serious expression.

"And I sure would like to make use of a friend's hand," Sally added, watching her friend warily. She hadn't been very nice to her that morning and maybe Louise had taken her words to heart and it was already too late to repair whatever rift her words had caused.



expression, Sally burst out laughing.

“Does it hurt?” Lou asked when her friend had sobered.

Sally shook her head and closing her eyes to relish on the sensations waking on her as she felt her baby moving inside her, she said, “It’s the most wonderful feeling a woman can ever have.” When she opened her eyes again, her heart went out for her friend. Lou was staring at her with eyes full of tears and her lips pursed tightly together as if trying to stifle a sob. Realizing that she had talked without thinking, Sally reached for her hand and squeezed it tightly. “Oh Louise, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed mortified. “I’ve been so stupid and insensitive to talk like that!”

“It’s all right, don’t worry,” Lou replied in a cracked voice while she wiped the unshed tears from her eyes with her hand. “I’m practically over all that now, but it’s still hard in my heart.”

Sally nodded and added, “Louise, honey, you have a wonderful family.”

“I know that, but...” her voice trailed off and she shook her head to get rid of those black clouds that were constantly threatening her peace of mind. “I love Jack and Tommy as if they were my own blood, honestly.”

“So what’s the problem?” Sally asked cautiously, not wanting to upset Louise any more with her insensitive words.

“Well...it hurts me deeply to think that there will never be a small child looking like Kid,” she whispered in a husky voice, “with his bright blue eyes, his sandy hair, his beautiful smile, his soft lips...”

“Stop it right there!” Sally cut him off with a giggle. “Kid’s not here and if you get any more heated, you’re gonna have to take a cold shower!”

“Sal!!!” Louise exclaimed, her eyes wide open in mock shock at her friend’s remark.

“Don’t come and get all prudish on me, Louise McCloud,” Sally said, “I have a quite fair idea of what married couples do behind closed doors, especially when they’ve been ogling each other all evening.”

Lou gave her a shy smile, blushing all the way to the roots of her hair. “Sorry,” she mumbled, feeling that those gestures might have pained Sally, making her more aware of what she had lost, but she felt unable to control those looks whenever Kid was in the same room as her.

“Don’t be silly!” the blonde woman replied. “It’s really refreshing to see you two so much in love.” Louise giggled in acknowledgement and both ladies kept smiling at each other.

A few minutes later Sally’s face turned from smiling to all seriousness and she called, “Louise?”

Noticing her change of demeanor, Lou looked at her with a frown. “Yes?”

“Uh... I wanted to talk to you about something,” Sally began hesitantly. “You know I got a letter from my sister this morning?” At Lou’s nod the lady continued, “She wants me to go and live with her and her family in St. Louis.”

“And you’re thinking seriously about it,” Lou said assertively.



“Good!” the boy exclaimed and dashed along the corridor without waiting for any cue.

“Where’s your brother?” Louise called after him and without stopping his quick steps or turning his head, Jack cried, “In the bedroom!”

Lou shook her head as she made her way into the bedroom. Tommy was sitting on the bed with a troubled expression as if he were deep in thought. “Hey, Tommy, we need to get going and take Auntie Sally to Rock Creek.”

The boy looked at her silently as if pondering her words but didn’t try to move or say anything. Louise walked towards him and sat down next to the four-year-old on the bed. Cupping his face in her hand, Lou gazed at his eyes fixedly and asked, “Tommy-boy, what’s wrong?”

The boy hesitated a moment and after a few seconds he blurted out, “I don’t get it.”

Louise cast a curious look at him. “What is it you don’t get, honey?”

Tommy tilted his head to one side and added, “Uh... there’s Auntie Sally, Auntie Rachel ... uh ... Uncle Teaspoon.”

“Uh huh,” Lou simply nodded, wondering what had the boy so troubled and confused.

“And ... uh ... there’s you, Auntie Lou, and Uncle Kid,” the boy continued.

“That’s right,” Lou said with a smile.

“But...” the boy began again but stopped suddenly.

“But what, honey?” she asked, tipping the boy’s head towards her so that she could look at his eyes directly.

“It’s different,” Tommy muttered softly.

Louise tried to hide a smile when it dawned on her what the boy was trying to say. “Different?” she repeated, feigning ignorance, eager to see what the boy would come up with next.

Tommy nodded vigorously and added, “You’re more.”

Lou couldn’t stifle the smile any more, feeling her heart beating wildly in her chest. “More?” she asked again.

“Like a ma,” Tommy peered at her with his liquid brown eyes. “But Jack don’t wanna...”

Lou felt her heart gave a leap and surge with love almost in the same way as when Kid had told her he loved her for the first time. As soon as Tommy uttered those words, Louise drew him to her arms and hugged him tightly. “Oh my beautiful baby boy!” she exclaimed. “I love you so much!” She knew that Jack was adamant in keeping the limits clear as if he felt it like a betrayal to his parents to start having similar feelings for Kid and her. In a way, Lou understood his attitude but she feared the boy could suffer in loneliness trying to suppress those feelings. On several occasions he had voiced his protests when somebody had referred to the couple as his parents. Surprisingly, though, the boy had started addressing Sally as Aunt while he still called Kid and Lou by their given names, which admittedly didn’t feel well with her.

At their tardiness Kid had gone up to see what was delaying Lou and Tommy so much and unbeknownst to them, he had watched the whole scene from the door with a smile on his



"It is for me, especially after the way John ... we treated you at the social and never came to apologize." Sally had been unsure during all this time how to approach the matter to Louise without touching too delicate issues and upset her friend. All she knew was that it shouldn't be left unsaid. She had been so ashamed when John had uttered those cruel words that she had given him the silent treatment for days. He had just laughed at his private joke without understanding what those remarks had done to Louise. Now that Sally was about to become a mother, she understood how that had sounded to Lou's ears and the pain it carried. She had begged her husband to go and apologize to Louise, but John had laughed at the suggestion and she had never had the nerve to approach her friend. Louise was right; since she had married John Douglas, she had become his shadow and only did what he approved.

"Well," Lou replied, "that made us even, didn't it? I didn't act like an angel to you either." Sally smiled at her words, knowing that no more needed to be said.

In that moment the stage driver announced that they should be leaving soon and Sally walked to the vehicle surrounded by the couple and the two boys. Just before getting on it, she gave Lou a warm hug and when they pulled away, the chestnut-haired woman said in a soft voice, "Send us a wire when you get to St. Louis, all right?" Sally simply nodded, unable to find her voice any more and clumsily through the tears in her eyes she dropped on her seat in the coach. She looked through the small window and her tears rolled down her cheeks as her eyes fell on the four members of the family. "I'm gonna miss you so much," she cracked almost at the same time as the stagecoach began to move.

"Let us know when the baby's born!" Louise called after her and she stood rooted on the same spot staring after the carriage which gradually became smaller and smaller as it drove away along the street to finally disappear from sight. She was still looking in that direction when she couldn't see it any more and then she felt a hand touching her arm. She turned to her side and her eyes met those of Kid's who was gazing at her quizzically. "I hate good-byes," Lou let out bitterly.

"I know," he simply said while he passed his arm over her shoulders and Lou automatically leaned her head on his chest.

"Why does everybody have to leave me?" she asked forlornly and Kid just planted a soft kiss on her temple.

"I won't leave you, never ever!" they heard Tommy exclaim by their side as he looked at her with an ample smile. The couple shared a grin and Louise squeezed the boy's shoulder affectionately while she said, "Thank you, honey. I'm glad to hear that."

"Come on, Lou," Kid talked after a while. "Let's go home."

Louise nodded and they began walking along Rock Creek's main street towards the stables where they had left their buckboard. The couple talked quietly as they dawdled along; Tommy next to them clutching Lou's hand in his small one. Jack was skipping along a few steps ahead of them, immersed in his own games. As they strolled on, they passed by Teaspoon's office. The marshal was at the door listening intently to an elegant woman of fortyish. He was looking at her with a contented smile, oblivious to anything or anybody around him. Kid and Lou shared a knowing grin; Teaspoon would never change. Despite all his well-known wisdom, he was a goner whenever a pretty lady drew his attention. Lou and Kid were still chuckling when suddenly loud guffaws reached their ears and they turned their attention to the source of that racket. Three men were leaving the saloon, obviously inebriated and stumbled towards the other side of the street. One of them raised a whisky bottle to his lips and after gulping down the rest of the liquid he hurled it against the ground, smashing it to tiny glass pieces, which sent the other two in laughing bellows.

“Jack, come here!” Kid called, seeing as the boy was too near the three rambunctious men. Jack had stopped his skipping game and was watching the three men carefully, but he didn’t try to do as Kid had told him to.

“Jack!” Lou called again after her husband, getting the same response as Kid. As they kept walking towards the boy, they watched as two of the men had already crossed the street and staggered along the walkway while the third one fell behind and stood in the middle of the street. In that moment, the boy started to run along towards the man. “Jack!!!” Lou cried and dashed after him and scooping little Tommy in his arms, Kid followed suit at a slower pace while calling the boy’s name as well. They saw how Jack stopped before the man and began talking to him. The fella laughed and touched the boy’s head while the boy was oblivious to the couple calling his name. Finally, Lou reached him breathlessly and slightly yanked the boy’s arm with the intention to steer him away from the stranger. “Jack, we’ve been calling you dozens of times,” she said in a stiff voice as the boy stubbornly wouldn’t budge from the place. They had repeatedly warned the two children against talking to strangers and it angered her that Jack had turned a deaf ear to their words, especially with the likes of the man before them. “But Lou...” Jack tried to protest but she wouldn’t hear any of his objections. “Come on, Jack, let’s go.”

“No! I won’t!” the boy cried stubbornly.

Louise sighed wearily and cast a brief glimpse at the man, who tilted his head to her. “Ma’am,” he greeted in a soberer voice than Lou had thought he could have.

Louise responded to the greeting coldly and without meeting his gaze she said, “Excuse me if the boy’s disturbing you. You know what boys are like.” In that moment Kid reached them with Tommy perched on his arms as the man replied, “No problem at all, Ma’am.” He stretched his hand to touch the younger boy’s head but Tommy backed away shyly against Kid’s chest. The man grinned and added, “Let me introduce myself. My name’s Robert Martin and ... I gather that these two children here are my sons.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Lou’s big eyes turned to the man and in a voice that she didn’t recognize as her own she simply said, “What?”