

The following days Lou kept busy around the house, trying to get everything ready for their friends' visit. She wanted her house to look impeccable and had been spring-cleaning all the rooms with renewed energy. She was really excited to see them all again after such a long time and, as Kid had rightly said, to relive old good times. Unfortunately, she and Kid didn't have enough room at their house to take everybody in; there was only Theresa's old room, which hardly was big or comfortable enough for a single grown-up man. The couple had been talking about extending their house by adding a few more rooms since when the boys grew older, they would need a bedroom each and also the couple would like to have a place to accommodate their visiting friends. Yet, so far they hadn't been able to do any of that since they couldn't afford the project right now. Rachel had offered the extra rooms in her house to accommodate Emma and her family, but the men would have to take rooms in the local hotel.

As she had feared, after having that conversation with Kid about her 'not feeling well', she could tell that he was beside himself with worry. He constantly kept a vigilant eye on her, watching her like a hawk and asking her dozens of times a day how she was feeling. Of course Lou always replied with a 'pretty good' but she knew that Kid could read through her lies. What she really regretted was babbling about her mother and the implications behind those words. Anyone could have understood what she had tried to imply and Kid was definitely no fool. No wonder he looked so tense and glum lately. Louise still wondered what had prompted her to talk like that; she hadn't planned it, that was for sure. She didn't know if it had been her fears seeping through her or simply if her sense of righteousness had taken over. In a way, she felt she somehow had to let Kid be aware of what was happening to her. If worst came to worst, she'd want him to gradually digest on his mind what might probably be for them around the corner. It was crystal clear that their conversation hadn't left him indifferent at all. Kid was fussing over her more than usual if that was really possible. Despite the reasons behind his behavior, somehow she was enjoying the extra attention he was paying her. Any other time she would have been annoyed by his excessive concern, but lately she was feeling very vulnerable and in need of being pampered and cared for. What really irritated her was that every single day he kept bugging her about going to the doctor, but still she refused to do so, which was really sending him over the edge. It wouldn't surprise her at all if he decided to hogtie and drag her to the doctor's surgery himself. Lou knew that he was right, but she needed to wait just a little more time. She hated to see her husband looking so down and she wished she could talk to him and erase his fears. Yet, there was nothing she could really tell him because she didn't know anything. Luckily, Emma and the boys would be arriving soon and Louise was sure they would definitely be a distraction for him.

Wednesday came bright and shining. This was the day that all their friends would supposedly be arriving. Lou had woken up a bit earlier than usual and started to prepare the special dinner that everybody would sit down to eat tonight. For some reason it was very important to her to have everything perfect for this day; she didn't know if it was because she wanted to prove to herself and her friends that she was a capable woman and wife. She still remembered how prior to their marriage their fellow riders had continually joked about poor Kid starving to death. It was true that her cooking skills weren't nothing to brag about back then and even though her abilities in the kitchen had improved considerably in the last years, most of the time she limited herself to prepare plain and uncomplicated dishes. However today she wanted to stretch her capabilities. Following a recipe from Rachel she was going to cook roast chicken and even had the intention to bake a cake following a new recipe, which Rachel had given her. It was going to be a special occasion and she hoped her food would taste as good as the day presented itself. Right now the chicken was in the oven and Louise was sitting at the table peeling and slicing some apples and pears she needed for the cake.

Kid slipped into the kitchen and as soon as she saw him, a wide smile appeared on her face. Rising to her feet, Louise came close to him and gave him a soft, lingering kiss. Lately she

had the need to feel and touch him even more than usual and when she broke the kiss, Lou didn't let go of him, instead snuggling against his shoulder with a placid smile and breathing in his fresh smell. Shortly after finishing working in the stables, Kid had a bath and changed into new clothes and Lou relished in the aroma of the soap on his skin. Yet, the moment was annoyingly broken as he asked for the third time that morning, "How are you feeling, Lou?"

Louise disengaged herself from his hold and taking her seat at the table again, she replied wearily, "I'm fine." It was basically the truth. Right now she was feeling perfectly all right. However, she knew that didn't mean anything. Sometimes she had lured herself into believing that nothing was wrong when she felt as well as now, but then all the discomfort and subsequent worries started again.

"Sure?" Kid insisted, watching her warily.

"I'm fine!" she replied loudly and a bit too harshly. Realizing that she was being unfair when he was just showing his concern, she looked at him, an apology in her eyes.

Kid simply smiled, without saying a word. Peering at her carefully, he noticed that she was looking especially lovely today. Not that her appearance had changed lately at all; sometimes her face showed signs of tiredness but other than that he couldn't say she looked any thinner or paler. And today she had a special way about her; her cheeks were flushing, there was a distinctive glow in her eyes and something else that Kid couldn't actually put his finger on. Maybe it was all the excitement of the day or simply, Kid hoped, she was truly feeling better. "I'm off to town now," he said. Yesterday they got a wire from their three friends, stating that they would be arriving in Rock Creek mid-morning and since they didn't know where Kid and Lou's place was exactly, he had agreed to go and meet them in town.

Louise nodded and asked, "Could you get me a couple of things from Tompkins while you're there? I need some sugar and corn flour."

"Sure," Kid replied and coming closer to her, he cupped her face in his hands and added, "You take care of yourself, all right?" Lou had the urge to laugh at hearing his words as if he was about to start a very long trip whereas he was just off to town for a short while, but noticing the seriousness of his countenance, she just nodded and getting a quick kiss from her husband, she saw him turn silently and walk out of the room.

In town Kid stopped his horse in front of the marshal's office and sliding off, he tethered his beloved mare to the hitching post. The young man plodded towards the building housing the jail and let himself in, but barely a few minutes later he was out of it again. Teaspoon wasn't in his office today either. It had been four days since they last saw him and apparently his two deputies didn't have a clue where he had gone either. The marshal had just told them that he had some matter to see to and asked the two men to take care of the town while he was away. Seemingly Teaspoon had ridden off that same day and nobody knew where to. Kid thought ruefully that Lou would be so disappointed if he happened to miss their little family reunion. Emma and the boys would stay in Rock Creek for a few days and he hoped that the marshal would be back in the meanwhile. It intrigued the Southerner the way Teaspoon had so mysteriously left without telling a single soul. He wondered what could possibly be so urgent for the marshal to leave like that and he hoped that whatever he had got himself into, he was fine.

Kid stood in the street outside Teaspoon's office, his hands resting on his hips and deep in thought while he pondered about the whereabouts of the marshal. He was so lost in thought that he never heard or saw the horses till they were almost bumping into him. Startled Kid looked up and his mouth broke into a big smile as he caught sight of three very familiar faces, grinning at him.

"Some things definitely never change. Still daydreaming about Lou, Kid?" Cody quipped

while his two companions snickered bemusedly.

“Oh don't start, Cody!” Kid replied teasingly. The three men dismounted and one by one joined in a heart-felt embrace with the friend they hadn't seen in such a long time.

“This place stirs so many memories,” Buck muttered when all the greetings were over. His tone was melancholic and gloomy. After all, Rock Creek was the place where Ike and Noah had died, and the pain still clung to his heart.

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed, understanding the meaning behind Buck's words. He could really sympathize with his Indian friend. Even though his time working for the Pony Express had been full of good and memorable moments, there were things he'd rather forget. Maybe that was the reason why it had taken so long to come back. It really felt strange to be in the place after all these years. “So what are you up to, Kid?” he asked, trying to change the direction of his own thoughts. “Problems with the marshal?” he asked again, raising an eyebrow teasingly and pointing at the afore-mentioned office with his thumb.

Kid grinned widely and shaking his head, he added, “I ain't working for him anymore. Hung my guns up a few months ago.”

“How's he anyway?” Buck asked.

“Fine... I guess,” Kid replied uncertainly. “He's out of town God knows where.”

“Same old Teaspoon,” Cody let out with a bemused smirk.

“So here we are, finally,” Jimmy began after a silent lapse.

“Yeah, here you are,” Kid repeatedly as if not really believing that his friends were actually before them.

“How's Lou, Kid?” Buck asked, his voice tinged with certain wariness. He had learnt through Jimmy that Louise was going through a rough patch or at least that was what Kid had told him. That was the last news they'd really got. Even though the three of them had wanted to answer their friend's plead of help and come home, once again life had got on the way. Cody's regiment had been summoned to attend some Indian issue and Buck had also been required to help, a mission which had taken them months to complete. Buck still was uncertain whether his resolution to help the army was the right one. It was really heart-breaking to contemplate the situation his own people were coming across, but he knew they couldn't fight this huge power that the American nation was. In a way, he had the conviction that he was helping his people if he could prevent any more killings, but he was also aware that he was seen as a traitor in his brothers' eyes. Long ago he had learnt that no matter what he did, he would never be able to fit in one world completely and even though guilt nagged him more often than he wished, Buck knew that there was no way back. As for Lou, that encounter between Jimmy and Kid was all they knew. Cody still wrote to Rachel and Louise regularly but the young woman had stopped her letters months ago and Rachel never mentioned there being anything wrong with Lou at all.

“She's fine,” Kid replied to Buck's question hurriedly, not wanting to give too many details yet. “You'll see her now. She's waiting at our place. Shall we go?”

“Hey, Kid, hold on there,” Cody piped in as Kid was already by Katy and ready to mount and ride off. “My throat's on fire from the dust we've been picking up on the trail. I could really do with some good refreshment right now. What you say, boys?”

The two men by his side nodded their heads in agreement but Kid wasn't into the idea at all. He just wanted to go home as soon as possible. “You'll get your refreshment or anything you

want at our ranch. It's not far."

Cody walked to the Southerner and grabbing him by the shoulders he said, "Kid, my friend, if I didn't know better, I'd say that you still hold to the Pony Express' alcohol ban, even at your place, ain't I right?"

Kid didn't like the patronizing tone in Cody's voice or the badly-hidden amusement in the other two men's countenances and with a set jaw, he said, "We do have sherry for Teaspoon or when somebody comes visiting."

The three men burst out laughing regardless of their friend's unhappy face and without even trying to convince a reluctant Kid, Cody simply said, "Let's go and get something to drink," while he dragged his friend along towards the local saloon. The Southerner knew it was in vain to try to protest and he let himself be steered towards the establishment. His only thought went out to Lou, who was in their house on her own, something which he wasn't very pleased about, since he knew that she still wasn't feeling very well. Kid hated leaving her by herself but hopefully, that refreshment Cody wanted wouldn't take them very long. He didn't say anything as they continued their way down the street. All his thoughts were focused on his wife as this new development had him on tenterhooks. He didn't know what was wrong with her and to top it off, Lou was in her usual stubbornness and continued refusing to see the doctor, which was driving him crazy with worry. The notion that something might happen to her was so devastatingly scary that he didn't even dare to think about it. Kid tried over and over again to believe what she had said, that she was coming down with some kind of flu, but the thing was that her reluctance to see a doctor was telling him a different story. At night sleep didn't come easily as all the worries surged through his mind while he lay in the bed he shared with Lou. In the darkness he could make out his wife's figure peacefully sleeping by his side; apparently she had no problem in falling asleep as she was dozing in no time, which really was unusual for her. Lou usually turned and tossed in bed for a bit before she was finally able to crash, but now she was sound asleep before he blew out the lights. Kid just lay by her side every night watching her in silence; his arm around her waist in a strong hold, his eyes traveling all over her and gradually hours later he was overcome by sleep. All these thoughts were running through his mind so intensely that Kid hardly realized that they had reached the saloon till Cody gave him a strong push that almost made him stumble over his own feet as they made their way inside. 'Lou's not gonna like this,' was his last thought as he crossed the length of the place and joined his friends at the counter.

A couple of hours afterwards the group of men rode towards the ranch. It was much later than Kid had anticipated he'd be in town. He had to admit that he had enjoyed catching up with the lives of his friends even though most of the time it had been Cody who had monopolized the conversation, tirelessly talking about his apparently great adventures and deeds serving in the army. Kid had listened to him amusedly, knowing that most of his account was an exaggerated version of the actual reality. Cody was the same histrionic character as always and he would definitely never change. However, Kid could see that there were unquestionably some differences in all his friends. He supposed that he'd also changed. The years had left their visible mark and there was no doubt that they weren't those young boys hired by the Pony Express any more. The boys had turned into grown-up men and even though on the surface they could seem to show the almost identical traces than years ago, Kid knew that things weren't the same. The glass of whisky before the three men was just a clear indication of those differences. Not that seeing them drink bothered Kid any; they had stopped being youngsters or working for the Pony Express long ago and there was nothing wrong in changing some habits in the natural process of getting older. However, Kid had opted long ago to keep away from the bottle as much as he could; he knew what alcohol could turn a man into and now he had a family to think of. Sometimes he thought that maybe there was something of his father left in him and what could mean just a drink for others might begin something that Kid would rather not try. He would want to be dead if he let himself turn into a man like his father or Robert Martin.

The four men dismounted as soon as they reached the ranch and led the horses to the

stables where they took good care of the animals after the hard and long ride. "It is a fine place you have here, Kid," Buck said as they casually dawdled out of the stables.

"Thanks," Kid replied absently, while his attention was drawn to his house. It surprised him that Lou hadn't shown up as soon as they had ridden in. She couldn't have missed hearing the sounds of the four horses, especially when the silence was almost complete in the property. 'Maybe she's having a bath,' Kid pondered comfortingly, '... or resting.' The last part of his thought didn't come up so at ease after the way she was feeling lately. He knew that his wife struggled to reach the end of the day; she never complained or talked openly about it to him, but he could see the signs of weariness she tried to hide and even he had caught her a couple of times sprawled on their sofa in the middle of the day. It was almost unbelievable to imagine that from her when Lou had always been such an incredible tireless worker. Definitely something was the matter with her and the thought scared him to death. Faintly he heard Jimmy say something next to him and Kid turned to him with a clueless expression, letting out an unintelligible word, "Uh?"

Jimmy laughed at Kid's obvious absentmindedness and repeated his question; "I was asking you if you'd show us around your place."

"Oh, sure," he replied promptly, "but first let me check on Lou and tell her we're here."

Kid began silently walking towards his house, followed by his three friends. At a certain distance suddenly one of the windows opened raucously and Lou stuck her head out. On seeing her, Kid smiled relieved, but as soon as she spoke, he knew that she wasn't happy at all. "Kid," she let out in a shrill voice, "where is the sugar and the corn flour?" For a moment Kid stood motionless, staring at her clueless as if she was speaking another language and then he remembered about those things he was supposed to get from Tompkins and never did. Hitting his forehead with his right palm, he began clumsily, "Sorry, honey, I..." The window was slammed shut again before he had time to finish his sentence, "...forgot."

"Nice to see you, Lou!" Jimmy called loudly after her but she didn't reappear as Kid knew she wouldn't.

"What the hell was that about?" Cody asked, baffled at her nasty manners when they had just barely arrived.

"She's just mad at me," Kid simply said. He knew what was eating her; she didn't particularly care about him forgetting to get those things from the store, but she was surely angry because they hadn't come back to the ranch straightaway. He had been in town for two hours and Lou surely knew that they had been hanging around together while, as she put it, she had been cooped up in the house. She had never liked being left out and this time was no different.

"Is this what you told me about in Denver?" Jimmy questioned warily, remembering how Kid had told him that he and Lou weren't fine. Those had been his exact words but he hadn't elaborated what exactly was wrong back then and for months Jimmy had wondered what the problem could be. He wasn't sure if Lou had some problem or if it was that things between the couple weren't as bright as he had thought they would be.

"Oh no!" Kid exclaimed. "Everything's fine now, almost perfect. It's almost as if we were honeymooning again. Lou ... we had some very hard months for a while but all that is behind us now."

None of his friends dared to ask what had happened to have "those hard months", feeling that Kid would tell them when and only if he wanted to. They knew that their fellow friend was reserved, had always been, for his privacy and matters between husband and wife were too delicate and personal for anybody to stick their noses in.

"I'm really glad to hear that," Jimmy said sincerely, slapping him on the shoulder in a friendly fashion. Riding to Rock Creek he had feared what he might find. They had got that letter from Kid a few weeks ago, asking them to spend some days with them but he hadn't said much further. He had mentioned Lou in his letter, so Jimmy knew that at least the couple was still together but he had wondered how things were between them. Now hearing Kid say that there were no problems ahead had really made his day.

"Well, Kid, my friend," Cody began immediately after Hickock, "I ain't no expert, but I would go and apologize to your wife for whatever it is you have done. By the sound of her, I'd say she's planning for you to keep Katy company tonight."

Kid let out a peal of laughter at Cody's comment and added, "Yeah, I guess." Turning his attention to the three men he asked, his head gesturing at his house, "Come with me?"

Cody was about to make a sarcastic quip when they heard the sounds of a wagon approaching. The four men turned round and squinted their eyes against the blinding afternoon sun to see who was coming. When the carriage was closer and they could clearly make out the figures inside the buckboard, they automatically broke into a smile. It was Emma and Sam; the red-haired lady had a small child sitting on her lap while another sat between her and the marshal on the wagon seat. On catching sight of the men standing in the middle of the yard, Emma lifted her arm and waved at them enthusiastically. The four friends returned the greeting and as the carriage came to a halt not far from them, they approached it.

Emma handed the toddler to Buck while Jimmy stretched his hand to help the lady get off from the wagon. Her face was split by the ample smile she was wearing and once her feet touched the secure ground, she exclaimed gaily, "How are my boys?" Kid and the others grinned to hear being called 'boys' and one by one they gave the woman a hug and greeted Sam in an affectionate way.

"And these little people you carry along?" Cody asked, while exaggeratedly pulling faces to the young girl still in Buck's hold, who pouted unhappily at the man playing clown before her. It was clear that the two children were the couple's own offspring. Both of them had fine fair hair and pale blue eyes, incredibly resembling Sam.

"These are our two children, Cody," Emma replied with a placid smile. "My beautiful baby, Sarah, and my big man Jonathan, who's five."

"Almost six!" the boy protested with a frown, his arms folding across his chest.

"That's right, my love," Emma added, running her fingers through her son's soft hair while she shared an amused look with the former riders.

"They may look like you, Sam," Cody remarked with a smirk, "but they sure have their mother's personality."

"Don't I know it!" the marshal quipped with a crooked smile, which sent everybody chortling.

Little Sarah missing to be in her mother's hold let out a loud wail, stretching her chubby arms towards Emma. The woman retrieved the child from Buck and as soon as the toddler felt her mama's arms around her, she quieted and cuddled against her chest, licking her thumb happily.

"You're definitely not a lady's man, Buck," Cody said, snickering at his own joke.

"Can't you just be quiet for once, Cody?" the Indian ordered, tired of his friend's teasing remarks. Cody hadn't stopped gabbling for a second in the ride coming from Denver, which was driving Buck nuts. He still didn't know how he managed to work along with Cody and keep a cold face. He was a good friend but his jokes and wisecracks were a bit too much sometimes. Buck admitted that he should be used to him by now but the thing was that it was often almost unbearable to hear all that constant babbling.

"So Kid," Emma began, addressing the quiet man, "where's ...?" She didn't finish her question as a loud voice piercing the air and calling her name reached their ears. They turned to the sound and saw Lou, running wildly towards them, laughing happily. As soon as she reached the group, she threw herself to Emma's arms, hugging her tightly and in the process squeezing little Sarah, who grumbled her protests loudly. When they pulled away, Emma exclaimed, "Look at you, young lady. You've really bloomed since the last time I saw you. I gather your husband here has something to do with it."

Lou blushed at the older woman's compliment, sharing a sideways look with Kid, who was grinning proudly. It was then that she heard Cody talking behind her. "I see where you wife's esteem lies, Kid. Almost squeezed the air out of poor Emma while all we got was a deafening angry shout, which wasn't even meant for us."

Louise turned around to the three men and looked at their blonde friend straight in the eyes. "Stop moaning, Cody, and come here, you fool!" she exclaimed as she stretched her arms towards him. Cody gave her a hug and before pulling away, he said sarcastically, "You really have put on more flesh on the right places, Lou, but you have the same 'sweet' character as always." He scurried away, hooting with laughter before she could react to his words. Louise glared at him but softened when Jimmy, Buck and Sam came to greet her warmly.

"I'm so glad to see you, Lou," Jimmy said as he gave her a close hug, which brought a smile to her lips. "Me too. I'm really happy to see you all, even Cody," she said, looking at the blonde man purposefully, who stood at the other end from her. Then turning to Emma again, she directed all her attention to the toddler in her hands. "Goodness me, Sarah, you've grown into such a big girl. Last time I saw you, you were nothing but a little weenie pea," Lou exclaimed, which made the little girl giggle contentedly. "And you young man, don't you look handsome!" she added, addressing Emma and Sam's eldest child.

"I am," little Jonathan stated without hesitation and with a proud stance.

The group laughed at the boy's remark and Buck said, "Seems we have here a small version of Cody. Beware, Emma, he might grow into a specimen like this one."

While Cody looked daggers to his friend, Emma smiled amusedly, relishing on the sensation of being back to old times. Despite being a different time and location, everything clearly had an air of yesteryear. These now grown-up men were bickering as they used to years before but above all Emma could feel the respect and mutual love they had for each other. Turning her attention back to Louise, Emma asked, "So, Loulabelle, where are those boys of yours?"

Lou smiled warmly as she thought of her two lovely children, and replied, "At school. Well, Tommy's still too young for schooling, but Rachel's having her natural history class in the little forest near the creek and she offered to take him with her."

"You have children?" Jimmy asked, really surprised at this piece of information. This was the first news they had that their friends had become parents. Nobody had mentioned any of that and knowing Cody's big mouth, he would have heard of it by now if Rachel or Lou had said anything about it in their letters to their blonde friend.

“Yes, we have. Two boys,” Kid replied with a proud smile.

“How old are they?” Buck asked, also curious about their friend’s new parenthood.

“Well,” Lou began, feeling pleasantly proud to talk about their two boys, “Jack’s seven and Tommy’s just four.”

Like usual, Cody couldn’t keep quiet and working out the numbers in his head, the comment was out of his mouth before he had the sense to stop and think things over. “One moment, Lou. You’re pulling our legs, right? I was with you seven years ago and you were as thin as a rake. Where did you hide the kid, and for once I don’t mean your husband?” Cody asked with a snicker, still clueless tonwhat he was actually asking.

Kid saw her body stiffen as soon as he heard Cody and before the Southerner could do anything to avoid what he knew was coming, Lou turned her head to her friend in a flash and with her arms folded over her chest she barked loudly, her face flushed red, “For your information, Cody, I can’t have babies. Do I need to draw you a sketch with the full details or maybe you’d rather have word with my doctor?”

For once in his life Cody was speechless and couldn’t find his own tongue. “I... I...I...,” he tried several times but nothing came out of his mouth. Fortunately, Kid saved him from further awkwardness as he hurriedly came to his wife and putting his finger under her chin, he turned her head towards him. “Hey, hey, Lou, what was that?” he said softly.

Hearing Kid’s voice and feeling his touch was enough to snap her out of her mood and make her realize what she was doing. It still hurt too much to talk about that tender matter that Cody had just mentioned, but she had been good lately at controlling her sometimes uncontrollable feelings. It had been a while since she had felt that blinding rage within her, but when Cody had joked about what hurt her most in her life, something inside her had snapped and the nasty comment was out of her mouth before she was fully aware of her actions.

Louise sobered at once and looking around she saw everybody staring at her with strange expressions. “Uh...” she started awkwardly, “forgive me, Cody. I...I...” Her voice trailed off as she couldn’t find the words to explain herself, so plastering a smile on her face instead, Lou turned to Emma. “You must all be tired and hungry after the long journey here. Come to the house with me and you can wash up and have something to eat.”

“That sounds really nice, Lou,” Sam replied, taking a squirming little Sarah from her mother’s arms. Emma smiled sweetly at her younger friend and passed a comforting arm over her shoulders. Both women walked to the house silently, followed by Sam and the children. The older woman was aware of Lou’s predication in the last months; the letters had stopped arriving at her house and she’d driven Sam crazy as she poured all her worries over Louise to him. She knew something was bound to have happened to her young friend; Lou had been writing to her regularly for years now and never ever had her letters stopped, but for months she hadn’t even replied to her constant letters asking after her. So Emma had decided to write to Rachel and the lady had explained to her the terrible blow Kid and Lou had received and how badly the petite woman was taking it in those days. Emma’s heart went out for the young couple, especially for Louise. Being a mother herself she could understand how Lou must have been hurting and her first impulse had been to drop everything and run to her friend’s side. However, Sam had convinced her that the couple needed to solve their problems on their own and she would just be in the middle of it. Emma guessed that he had been right as months later a letter from Lou was awaiting her at the post office. The young woman explained in it everything that Rachel had previously told her and also announced how things between her and Kid were on the mend and how the two boys had become part of their life. Emma couldn’t have felt happier for them as she had read the letter, but now she could understand why Lou had reacted in the way she had after that inopportune comment from Cody.



bright with excitement as his avid curiosity was satisfied, especially by Cody's grotesque and exaggerated tales. On the contrary, Tommy had clung to Lou's skirt the rest of the afternoon and evening as he fearfully stared at all these new people invading his place. As much as Kid and Lou had patiently tried to talk him into not being afraid or bashful, nothing worked and the boy kept his face hidden behind Lou's body. At least, he had finally joined Jack and Emma's son in their games while the adults had a respite.

All day long Louise had whined out of disappointment about Teaspoon not being with them as Kid had told her that the marshal wasn't back yet. However, right now Lou couldn't care less if there was not a single soul in the room; actually that was what she most wished at this exact moment. All she wanted was to run upstairs, get under the covers in her bed and lay in complete silence and darkness. She was feeling more and more awful by the minute and couldn't really come to enjoy the company of her friends. She knew that Kid was watching her carefully and for that reason she forced a smile on her face, occasionally meeting his eyes across the table as if nothing was going on. Other than that, she kept her attention focused on her plate with roast chicken, which everybody seemed to be enjoying greatly. Louise struggled to eat bite by bite, trying not to draw her husband's attention if she didn't eat. Yet, she was aware that he was no longer buying her 'I'm fine', which she kept repeating every day, and she imagined that soon everybody else would be wondering why she was so quiet tonight. Lou just felt unable to join the conversation. How could she when every time she lifted her eyes from the plate, the room was spinning around her? Her forehead was bright with sweat, her temples were throbbing, and to top it all, the food voluntarily forced into her stomach was making her nauseous. The voices and laughter reached her ears like deafening sounds but she didn't have the power or the energy to make out their words.

A pull at her sleeve made her turn slowly to her side, where Tommy was sitting. Lou lowered her head to the boy's eye level and he whispered into her ear, "I wanna water, ma." She squinted her eyes and caught sight of the empty glass jug. Feeling this interruption like a blessing excuse to leave the table without being bugged by Kid's enquiring eyes, she said, "I'll get it." Grabbing the jug, she stood up as steadily as she could without giving herself away. Lou never looked at anybody as she crossed the length of the room to the kitchen. She didn't know how she managed to reach it without staggering and falling flat on her face, but as soon as she stepped inside, she closed the door and dropped onto a chair heavily. Resting her elbows on the kitchen table, Lou closed her eyes as she massaged her temples with her thumbs as a way to relieve all the pressure in her head. Kid usually did the same thing whenever she complained of a bad headache and she wished she could really feel his soft fingers on her now. He just had the knack to make her relax and Lou eventually fell asleep. Right now she couldn't tell him any of this, though. All she would manage to do was to worry him more and for once he really needed a break and some problem-relief. Lou felt terrible, thinking that since he had come back from fighting in the east, he hadn't had it easy at all. It had been a dreadful year and it just wasn't fair. Kid was the best man... the best person she had ever met and he really deserved something good in his life for once and all. It seemed that problems followed them no matter what they did like a bad omen. *It isn't fair*, she repeated silently as two heavy teardrops trickled down from her closed eyes.

Suddenly, a voice resounded in the silence of the room. "Lou, you all right?" Her eyes popped open instantly and met the worried faces of Rachel and Emma. Behind them, Louise spied the open door through which she could hear the men's voices and catch a glimpse of them still sitting around the table. She rose to her feet, glad that the walls and the furniture had finally stopped dancing around her and walking to the door, she closed it. "Lou?" Rachel insisted as the young woman wasn't speaking. Louise turned round to face her two friends and resting her back against the door, she said, "No, I ain't feeling all right at all. Actually, I haven't felt fine since that incident with the boys' real father."

"Are you in pain, Louise?" Emma asked with an evidently concerned visage.

“Not really in pain,” she replied while she walked a few steps forward and sat down again. “I feel completely drained most of the time, without a single ounce of strength left in my body and ... and... I dunno ... I just feel strangely sick.”

Rachel and Emma had taken seats around the table across from Louise and after sharing a look with each other, they silently watched their friend. She kept her eyes downcast as she ran her index finger through the pattern of the tablecloth. None of the ladies said anything as they knew that Lou wasn't through talking yet. They were right as shortly afterwards she lifted her eyes to them hesitantly and blurted out in a soft voice, “It's ...it's like when my mother got sick ... before she died.”

The shock was evident in the countenances of the two women, but after overcoming that first natural reaction, disbelief followed in their expressions.

“You can't be serious!” Rachel exclaimed, horrified at what Louise was hinting at.

“Honey, I don't believe you can remember much of what happened to your ma,” Emma added, her insides in turmoil for what her dear friend had just said.

“I remember enough, Emma,” Louise insisted stubbornly. “I wasn't that young and these things kind of get stuck in your mind for ever. Maybe she had one of those things passing from parents to children.”

“Louise, sweetheart, you can't just jump to conclusions like that,” Emma continued, unwilling to believe what the petite woman was revealing. “I felt very weak myself both times I was pregnant.”

“Not a very suitable comparison here, don't you think?” Lou replied sharply, immediately afterwards cursing herself for talking to Emma so nastily.

“What Emma is trying to say, Lou, is that it could be anything. It doesn't necessarily have to mean that you're ...” Rachel's voice trailed off, reaching this point of the sentence.

“Dying?” Louise finished for her, not even flinching at uttering that dreaded word while her two friends clearly stiffened uncomfortably. Sighing she rose to her feet again and while she shuffled her legs aimlessly, she muttered, “I dunno. It's the only logical thing to happen after what I did.”

The two women looked at each other with confused expressions. “What are you talking about, Lou?”

Louise sighed deeply and folding her arms over her chest she added, “This feels like retribution time. Somehow it's as though I'll have to pay for how nastily and horribly I behaved for months. It scares me to think that I might lose what I love most in this world, my family.”

Emma stood up and came closer to the young woman. Getting hold of Lou's crossed arms, she said, “Honey, you can't seriously believe all that you're babbling about. For one, you don't look that sick to me, but rather the contrary, and I don't think you have to pay for anything.”

“I was so mean and cruel, especially to Kid.”

Unable to keep quiet any longer, Rachel jumped to her feet and exclaimed, “For goodness' sake, Lou, you were just understandably distraught, nothing punishable.”

“I knew what I was doing all the time,” the young woman admitted sadly. Even though most of the time she hadn't understood why she behaved so outrageously, she was aware the

entire time that her actions and words were hurting Kid savagely and she hadn't cared at all.

"Louise, you had to deal with a difficult blow," Emma added. "It's really admirable the way you finally pulled through."

"I didn't do anything," the petite woman said in a weak voice, "It was all Kid's doing."

"Honey, what you have to do is go to the local doctor and clear all your doubts," Emma continued, wanting to believe that her friend was just overreacting and scared.

Louise nodded forlornly and muttered, "I was waiting to have you and the boys here before taking that step. I don't want Kid to be alone in case we ... get bad news. He'll need the family."

"Lou, if, God forbid, something might happen to you, nothing in this world would comfort your husband," Rachel said.

"I know," Louise admitted and pausing a brief moment, she added with a sigh, "I never thought somebody could love me this much. It's scary."

Rachel and Emma shared a sweet smile and the red-headed woman remarked, "I'm sure I wouldn't be wrong if I said it goes both ways, doesn't it?"

Louise looked up at the two women, with a grin on her lips and her eyes bright with unshed tears. In that moment the kitchen door opened and Kid stepped in. Immediately he noticed his wife's sad countenance and plodding across the kitchen, he stood before her with a worried expression on his face, "Hey, what's wrong, Lou?"

Louise placed her hands on his shoulders, which she noticed were tense, and said, "Nothing, Kid. You know us women get too sentimental." The man's face relaxed into a smile and standing on tiptoe she planted a sweet kiss on his lips while Rachel and Emma exchanged a confidential look.

"Goodness me!" a loud voice resounded behind them and pulling away, the couple turned round to see Cody at the door. "I thought marriage would have cooled you down and we wouldn't have to bear the sight of all that mushy stuff, but obviously I was wrong."

"Oh shut up, Cody," Louise ordered annoyed by the interruption, and getting over her forlorn state a few seconds ago, she hooked her arm around Kid's and added, "This is my husband, Mr. Cody and I'll kiss him wherever and whenever I want to." And to prove her point she gave him a quick peck on the cheek and then turning to her friend again she asked, "And what is it you want now?"

"Are we getting some dessert any time soon, Lou, cause I'm starving?" he said in his usual exaggerated mannerism.

"You and your stomach, Cody!" Rachel exclaimed among giggles as she and Emma steered him out of the kitchen.

"I'll bring it in right now," she called after them with an amused expression. Casting a look at her husband, Louise saw him staring at her seriously.

"You all right, Lou?" he asked, even though he knew what she'd say. Kid had been watching her all night long as she ate like a bird and kept unusually quiet. He could see she was pulling a strong face for his sake but she just couldn't fool him anymore.



bed while this thing clings to me.” She tried to joke about the matter, disregarding the seriousness in it and praying that Kid couldn’t hear the fear in her voice. Lou lifted her eyes to her husband and added, in a desperate attempt to change the subject. “Have I told you how handsome you look in your new shirt?”

“Not that I recall,” Kid teased along, knowing what she was trying to do. He laughed as her fingers fumbled to undo the buttons in the aforementioned shirt.

“You’d better take it off. We don’t want it to get ruined, do we?” she added in a seducing voice as she brushed her face against his alluringly. Helping him out of the garment, Louise threw it off onto the floor carelessly and placed herself on his lap. She kissed him passionately and he responded with the same intensity. When they finally broke the kiss breathlessly, Kid peered in her eyes and asked, “You sure you’re up to it, Lou?”

Louise smiled at hearing the concern in his voice and she simply said, “Course I’m sure.” Continuing in the same teasing tone, she added, “I’ve been neglecting my marital duties lately, haven’t I?” She started kissing his neck while he muttered, enjoying her caresses with a big smile, “You just needed your rest, honey.”

Lifting her eyes to him, Louise exclaimed, “Will you stop the chit-chat, Kid? All I need now is to be kissed by my husband but he seems reluctant to comply.”

Kid laughed at her remark and without further ado, he kissed her waiting lips softly while wrapping his arms around her petite body. After the long kiss they pulled apart slightly and gazing at her eyes with all the intensity and heart he could put into it, he whispered, his lips brushing against hers as he talked, “I love you so much, Louise McCloud.” Her face lit up happily and she drew him to her arms, hugging him tightly against her and unbeknownst to her, Kid mouthed silently against her neck, ‘Please never leave me.’