

A brilliant sun, making the day sweltering and extremely hot, shone in the sky. It was just the beginning of June, but the weather seemed to presage a very warm summer ahead. Sore and stiff, the four ex Pony Express riders sat in the relative coolness of the barn; they had been trying to break those new horses, but the animals had proved to be more stubborn than the men themselves. So they had been more often licking the ground than on the saddle. After a few hours of hectic activity, they had decided to stop for a while and cool their dry throats. Before leaving for town, Lou had left some lemonade for her husband and friends, and it was in this moment that the men were tasting the cold drink while sitting on hay bales inside the barn.

"I almost got through to that black stallion," Cody said after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, sure," Jimmy retorted sarcastically.

"I really did," the blonde young man insisted with a serious expression.

"Come on, Cody. How long did you stay on him? Five seconds?" Buck remarked, which aroused a glare from his friend and a guffaw from the other two.

"You have to admit it," Kid added, unable to hide his amusement. "You're all out of practice."

"Look who's talking. You weren't much better yourself, Kid," Cody said, miffed to be the center of teasing once again. He was sick and tired of never being taken seriously, especially from his old friends. He was an army officer and deserved more respect than that.

"I guess," the Southerner muttered absently as he stood up and walked to the door. He hadn't been able to focus his attention on the task as his mind kept wandering somewhere else, or rather on somebody else, Lou. All morning his eyes had constantly drifted to the direction she should be coming from. He wondered what was taking her so long; it had now been hours since she had left and this wait was driving Kid literally crazy. He had tried to hide his worries from his three friends, but it hadn't really worked. They had sensed that something was the matter with him; even Jimmy had asked him directly but Kid had simply brushed him off. He knew that they wouldn't bug him with questions since it was common knowledge that he would speak up only when he felt like it. Anyway, there was nothing to say really other than his wife wasn't feeling very well at the moment. For all he knew it might just be a fleeting discomfort. Yet, he couldn't help but go nuts with worry. Not even work had taken his mind off the matter as much as he had tried. From his position at the barn door, he looked for the umpteenth time at the horizon, hoping to catch sight of Lou and Tommy on the buckboard, but everything was still and calm. He sighed morosely and his eyes shifted to his house and spotting the smoke belching out of the kitchen chimney his face crunched in a frown. "She's at home?" he whispered to himself, so quietly that none of his friends could hear him. Turning around to the trio who were engaged in idle conversation, he said, "I'll drop by the house for a second. Lou's come back and I have something to tell her."

The three men snickered as Cody quipped, "Gosh, Kid, can't you just have a break from each other? This excessive sweetness is just getting unbearable."

Kid didn't even try to retort the comment and didn't say a word as he left the three men in the barn. They really couldn't understand the way things had worked between him and Lou. He had almost lost her for one reason or another on several occasions, which had proved to him how important she was in his life. His friends could tease him mercilessly, but he just didn't care. He had learned not to take anything for granted and that every single moment was precious, so he'd make sure that there were many moments with his wife because there was no saying what tomorrow would bring.

As Kid scampered across the yard, he wondered how she hadn't let him know that she was back home. That was not like her; whenever she went on an errand to town or

somewhere else, she always searched him out to tell him that she was back. His heart began beating wildly as he thought that Lou might be upset after the visit with the doctor. What if there was bad news? He didn't want to start imagining Lou having a terrible disease or something along those lines. He just refused to even think about it. Sure, she hadn't been feeling very well, but maybe it was a temporary thing as she had said. What scared him most was that he was certain that Lou hadn't been completely honest with him. Kid could feel when she tried to hide something from him and this time he was convinced that there was more to his wife's discomforts than met the eye. Maybe she was feeling much worse than she had let on, so much worse than she had even decided to go to the doctor willingly. The thought was too scary and Kid tried to shush it away.

With his hand on the door handle, Kid took a deep inhale before sliding into his house. As he stepped inside, he could hear her in the kitchen, so he plodded across the lounge while he said in a loud voice, trying to sound casual, "Hey, honey, why didn't you let me know you were here? I could do with a cuddle." As he reached the kitchen he quieted, embarrassed, as the smiling woman looking at him wasn't the one he was expecting. "Emma," he mumbled, turning bright red.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Kid. I can give you that cuddle but I suspect that's not what you have in mind," she replied with a bemused expression at seeing Kid's flushed face. "I walked all the way here. It's a beautiful day," Emma continued in a dreaming voice. "I didn't see anybody around. So I dared to slip in and get a start with dinner. Louise might be tired when she gets back."

Kid nodded his head in agreement as he sat down at the table. "She told you, didn't she?" he asked.

"Yeah, she did," the lady answered, walking a few steps closer to him. She noticed Kid's forlorn expression and hurried to say, "She's gonna be fine. You'll see."

The young man sighed deeply, feeling all the tension building up inside his head. "I don't know, Emma. I'm so scared. Lou tries to disregard the whole thing but I know she's just pulling a strong face for my sake."

"Don't get all worked up, honey. I think you are worrying about nothing," the red-headed woman added in a soft voice.

"She should have been back by now. She knows I'm worried and if there's nothing to fear, she'd have come quick to reassure me," Kid mumbled as if speaking to himself.

"That doesn't mean anything!" Emma exclaimed. "Haven't you heard that bad news travel fast?"

"So where's she?" he asked still unconvinced by the lady's words.

"She might want to give you a surprise and is buying a little something for all the worries you two have lately had," she offered. "Or she simply got delayed and is now waiting for Jack. He leaves school around this time, doesn't he?"

"You might be right," Kid exclaimed, feeling like a fool for fretting so much. He had never given any thought to Jack. Surely Lou had preferred to stay in town and wait for the boy. So if that was true, it wouldn't be long before the three of them would be home.

"I know I am," Emma said with a firm voice. "Stop worrying so much," she repeated while she ruffled his hair as if he were a young boy.

Kid had to smile at Emma's soft ways. She had always been this maternal figure since they started working for the Pony Express. He wasn't sure whether the six of them had been there to fill a gap in the woman's life because she had definitely filled one in all of them.

When Emma married Sam and moved out of Sweetwater, she had left a vacuum behind. They all had grown more mature in just those few months after everything they had to live through back then. However, they had all missed Emma terribly, especially Lou. Then Rachel came along, and even though she was a caring and lovely friend, she never was the mother figure that Emma had been. Even now the red-headed woman treated them as if they were still those young orphans that had arrived at her home in Sweetwater all those years ago.

Pondering momentarily about Emma's words, Kid began thinking that she was most likely right. The lady was very fond of Lou and Kid knew that women had like a sixth sense for things like that. If she felt that there was nothing to worry about, it was probably true. However, Kid couldn't help but fret and wouldn't feel any relief till Lou was safely home and told him that everything was fine. So he tried to find the way to distract his troubled thoughts for a while and change the direction of the conversation. "So where are Sam and your offspring?"

"Oh, he stayed with them for a while. Today's one of those days. Drove me crazy," she explained with an exaggeratedly dismay expression.

"You mean your husband or your children?" Kid asked with a smirk.

"Both," Emma answered among giggles. "They'll come later." When she sobered, she clutched his hand in hers and said, "You really have a lovely family. I'm so happy for you both."

He nodded and added, "It hasn't been easy to get here."

"I know," the woman replied, aware of the couple's past problems.

"All we need now is some trouble-free time," he continued forlornly, considering the black clouds threatening their clear horizon.

"You will have it," Emma stated positively.

Kid smiled ruefully, wanting to believe the older woman's reassurances. "I hope you're right."

Later that day Emma and her four former riders were sitting in the lounge, enjoying a pleasant conversation. Kid had decided to leave the horse breaking for the following day, seeing as they weren't getting any results. Emma had prepared some sandwiches for the four men, half of which had been wolfed down by Cody. He had the same ravenous appetite as years before and Kid thought with a smile that some things never changed. Sam had arrived about half an hour ago with his two children in tow and now the words of Emma about 'one of those days' made perfect sense. Little Sarah was in a sensitive mood, whimpering at the drop of a hat and Jonathan couldn't keep still for one single minute. Sam was trying his best to distract them and let Emma have some relaxing moments with her Express family. Lou hadn't arrived yet and even though Kid tried to keep his attention on the conversation going on, he couldn't help but feel restless.

In that moment the door burst open and Jack whizzed in, carelessly dropping his small linen bag and books on the hall cabinet. Without acknowledging anybody else, he dashed towards Emma and asked, "Where's Jonathan, Mrs. Cain?"

The lady let out a peal of laughter and said, "In the back yard with my husband and Sarah."

Jack was about to scamper out when Kid called his attention, "Hey, buddy, where are your manners?"

"Sorry," the boy mumbled and coming closer to Kid, he gave him a hug. "May I go and play with Jonathan, daddy? Please," he asked looking at him with big puppy eyes.

“Yes, you may.” Hardly had he given his permission before Jack whizzed out of the room in the same hurry as he had first come in. Kid shook his head, sharing a grin with his friends. Jack was definitely a clever boy and knew how to pull the right strings when he wanted something.

“You and Lou have really gotten all domesticated,” Jimmy remarked teasingly.

“Anything wrong with that?” Kid retorted with a frown.

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and added, “Nothing wrong, just kind of strange.” The last time they had all been together, they were still delivering the mail. Lou had stopped working just before her wedding, but Jimmy had never seen his friends living like a married couple. Hickok had left Rock Creek shortly after Kid and Lou got hitched, so that was why it surprised him so much to see them in their now usual environment. He had never envisioned them having children, doing housework or anything along those lines. Admittedly, Jimmy hadn’t really given any thought to how their life had changed and as he had mentioned, it felt kind of strange.

Kid smiled briefly and rising to his feet from the sofa, he started walking towards the door. “If you will excuse me, I’ll go and give my wife a hand with Tommy and the wagon.” He just couldn’t wait to talk to Lou, but as he was crossing the lounge towards the front door, Rachel appeared coming from outside. “That boy of yours does make me laugh,” she said among giggles, remembering Jack’s last witty remark.

“Hi, Rachel. Where’s Lou?” he asked breezily, moving towards the door.

“I don’t know,” the woman answered.

Kid was already at the door when at her words he stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly he turned round to face Rachel, who was leaving her reticule on a peg. “What d’you mean, you don’t know?” he asked with a grave and dark expression.

“Well,” the blonde lady started hesitantly, noticing the young man’s mood, “after waiting for Louise for an hour I thought I could bring Jack back with me.”

“You’re saying that Lou never turned up to pick up Jack?” he asked in a serious voice.

“I thought she might have got waylaid,” Rachel hurried to say, watching worry take over her friend.

Kid started pacing up and down as he let out loudly, “I knew I should’ve gone with her. But she had to be her usual stubborn self.”

The three other men in the room looked at each other, surprised at Kid’s outburst. The Southerner kept grunting and mumbling to himself before the stupefied looks of his three friends. “Kid, what’s the big deal?” Cody piped in after a while. “She forgot to collect the boy. So what?”

The young man stared at his friend impassively, stopping his frantic pacing, and added, “Stay out of this Cody, will you? You have no idea what you’re talking about.” He paused momentarily and after a brief consideration he said, “I’m going after her.”

“Kid, she might be delayed for some reason,” Emma offered, trying to find a logical explanation. She could understand the young man’s reaction, but she still thought that there was no reason to get that frantic. “Maybe Louise bumped into some acquaintance and lost track of time.”

Kid shook his head and added, “She ain’t really close to anybody in town but for

Rachel and Teaspoon.”

“For goodness’ sake, Kid,” Jimmy exclaimed as he jumped to his feet and came closer to his friend with a challenging posture. “I thought you had learned not to be so damn overbearing with Lou.”

“Drop it, Jimmy, please,” he muttered in a low, warning voice as he turned away from him. He was getting close to the edge and all his friends butting in was getting in his nerves.

“No,” Hickok retorted stubbornly placing himself before his friend in a few strides. “Lou doesn’t get home at the fixed time like a good dutiful wife she should be and you get all fired up and plan to run after her like crazy. God, it must be delightful living with you!”

“Jimmy!!!” both Emma and Rachel chided in chorus while Kid glared at his friend angrily. The growing tension was palpable in the room and trying to prevent a possible confrontation between those two, Buck hurried to add, “What Jimmy’s trying to say, very clumsily by the way,” he stopped briefly to send him a warning look and then continued straightaway, “is that there’s no reason to get this edgy, Kid.”

The Indian’s words didn’t manage to calm him down and peering at him straight in the eyes, the Southerner added, “No reason you say? Well... let me tell you something. Lou didn’t go to town this morning for simple recreation, but to visit the doctor because she thinks she has the same thing her ma died from.” At his words the entire room became dead silent. The two women shared a mortified look while the three men remained speechless trying to digest what Kid had just said. “You still think there’s no reason to worry?” he asked sarcastically.

Buck rose to his feet and closing the distance between him and his sandy-haired friend, he stood in front of him, his hands resting on his hips. “You sure about that, Kid?”

The Southerner let out his held breath and muttered, “She hasn’t admitted that much, but I know that’s what she thinks.” Glancing at the two women in the room, Kid knew that by their expressions he wasn’t wrong in his assumptions. “Lou says we’re jinxed and I’m starting to believe her,” he exclaimed with a weary voice. In that moment a horse stopping outside the house was heard in the silence of the room and Kid’s sullen countenance brightened instantly. “Thank God,” he let out but he didn’t make any attempt to move as if he was frozen to the spot.

“You see? You were worrying over nothing,” Jimmy piped in cautiously. He was like in trance thinking there might be something wrong with Lou. These past months he had been intrigued by Kid’s enigmatic words. Many times Jimmy had been tempted to write them, but there was nothing much he could say. He had continually rehearsed in his mind what he wanted to tell them, but in the end he hadn’t had the guts to actually write the letter. As time had gone by, Jimmy had believed that things couldn’t be that bad since he hadn’t heard anything from his friends. Now he felt guilty for ignoring Kid’s summon and even though he had been justified, he knew that he could at least have written. All that had passed, but again now he had to blunder it with his previous insensitive words.

Kid turned to the sound of pattering feet on the porch and held his breath, waiting for the door to open. Once again the person appearing wasn’t the one he was dying to lay eyes on. Tommy dashed inside, running towards Kid’s arms straightaway while Teaspoon followed behind him at his own pace.

“My, my, what on earth is going on here?” the marshal exclaimed in his rambunctious voice with a crooked grin. “You’re all truly a sight for sore eyes!”

“We thought you had dived on us, Teaspoon,” Jimmy said as he approached the old man for a big hug. Emma and the other two men filed to greet the old marshal warmly. Kid patiently yet restlessly waited for his friend to finish getting reacquainted while he held

Little Tommy in his arms tightly.

“Where’s my wife, Teaspoon?” he finally asked, running out of patience.

The marshal hesitated to answer, noticing Kid’s stiff expression. He knew that the young man could get over the top with worry when Louise was concerned, but Teaspoon could sense that there was something else behind the young man’s obvious concern. Lou had been quite evasive about her visit to the doctor and the marshal suspected that the matter was surely linked to her husband’s stern countenance. “Left the little bird with me,” he started, gesturing to the young boy with his head, “while she went to the doctor.”

“And she never came back?” Kid asked rhetorically as he knew the answer to the question.

“I dropped by the doctor’s surgery,” Teaspoon continued. “It was really busy, but not a single trace of Lou. So I thought to bring back little Tommy.”

“Did you see her wagon?” Kid asked again.

The marshal shook his head. “It was gone.”

Struggling to keep a neutral expression Kid turned to the boy in his arms and said, “Hey, Tommy, why don’t you go and play with Jack? He’s in the back yard.”

The boy nodded energetically and no sooner had his feet touched the floor than he dashed towards the back door. As soon as Tommy was out of earshot, Kid blurted out in a strained voice, “Where the hell is she? She would never leave Tommy like that!”

“Well, Kid, she didn’t exactly leave him,” the marshal retorted, trying to calm the young man’s obvious frayed nerves. “Your little puppy was with me.”

Teaspoon’s words failed to soothe him at all. “You know it’s not like her at all,” Kid insisted and pausing momentarily he simply added, “That’s it. I’m going after her.”

“Wait for me,” Jimmy said, getting ready to go with his friend while Buck and Cody silently followed suit. However, the four men stopped dead in their tracks as the sound of a door opening reached their ears. In a flash Kid stomped towards the front of his house where he could see Lou’s figure from behind carefully closing the door.

“Lou!” he exclaimed, visibly relieved. “Where have you been?” But when she turned round towards him, worry tumbled down over him again overwhelmingly. As soon as Louise laid eyes on her husband, sobs began again, racking her petite body. She had been wandering around aimlessly for hours, trying to make out the absurdity of the last few months while she cried her eyes out. She didn’t know how she could tell him what Doctor Webb had told her. Everything seemed so senseless and Lou wasn’t sure what to believe any more. As she stood before the front door, her eyes downcast and weeping bitterly, Kid let out in a whisper standing at a few steps from her but not daring to come closer, “Lou...”

“I’m so sorry, so sorry,” Lou cried out as she shot up the stairs towards her bedroom.

Kid stood motionless in the middle of the lounge, speechless, watching her figure whiz past him and disappear upstairs. With a single look back at his friends, he noticed their grim countenances and without further ado he plodded towards where his wife had fled. He could hear her sobbing as he approached the bedroom they shared. Meanwhile, in that wretched state Louise was unbuttoning her blouse with trembling hands and sliding out of it, she hurled it onto the floor carelessly. All her clothes were dirty and stained after the fall she had taken and with all that roaming in the wagon. Clad in her camisole and skirt, Lou directed her eyes to the door as she heard some heavy steps close by. Kid stepped in and in two long strides he crossed the room and drew Louise into his arms. She wept bitterly against his chest while wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. The closer she felt him, the deeper the sobs

became. Kid tried to soothe her, even though unsure of what to say. His whole body was shivering as he kissed the top of her head tenderly and cooed her like a small child.

"Lou, you're scaring me," he finally managed to say. "What did the doctor tell you?" Kid asked cautiously, unsure whether he really wanted to know what the reason behind her tears was. All kinds of terrible thoughts were crossing his mind right now, which were making him feel like crying himself. Louise mumbled something against his chest, but her words got muffled and were incomprehensible to his ears. "Honey, what did you say? I can't hear you," Kid asked and in that moment she lifted her tear-streaked face to him. She had momentarily managed to get a grip of herself as Kid cupped her face to him and wiped the remaining tears with his thumbs. "What did he say, Lou?" he repeated in a whisper.

Louise took a deep breath and unceremoniously blurted out, "I'm pregnant." Surprise and shock instantly registered on Kid's expression and as he looked at her with wide eyes, she continued in a raspy and shaken voice. "That man was a fake doctor. He killed the real Doctor Logan and took his place. This ... this new physician said that there's nothing wrong with me ... that I was surely caused a miscarriage back then." Watching Kid's expression change from surprise and shock to anger, Lou lowered her face and started to cry bitterly again. "I almost ruined everything between us for a lie. We lost all that time and I nearly got you killed. I'm so, so sorry." She began sobbing and the rest of her words came out incomprehensibly.

"Lou, honey," Kid started, hating to see her in that state from the actions of a creep, "look at me." She sheepishly directed her gaze at him while trying to control the sobs which threatened to escape her lips. Kid placed both of his hands on her cheeks while peering in her eyes lovingly. "Please don't cry, love, and don't you dare to blame yourself. If there's somebody responsible, it's that damned Logan or whatever his name is." He paused for a moment, as he noticed his raising tone of voice at thinking of the fake doctor. Casting a smile at her Kid added, "I love you, Lou, and I don't want to think about the past."

"I was ready to finish things off with you," Louise insisted in a cracked voice, "for ever... before you got wounded."

"Do you really believe that I was ready to let you go like that back then?" Kid asked with a grin and this time Lou managed to smile faintly. "Think that if things had been different, we might not have Jack and Tommy right now."

"I know," Lou muttered in a very soft voice, "but it scares me to death to think of what might have happened to us." Kid nodded completely, understanding what she was trying to say; he slid his hands from her face to her shoulders and peering deeply into her big brown eyes he said, "Lou, honey, we're gonna have a baby!"

"A baby," Louise repeated bedazzled. She had been so wrapped-up in the tumultuous feelings coursing all over her that she hadn't given a single thought to the one and only reality. Her dream of giving Kid a baby was coming true after all. She was going to become a mother for real and the notion brought a smile to her lips, which gradually became a wide grin. "A baby," she said again, giggling happily as Kid lowered his face towards her and planted a big kiss on her lips.

"I love you," he whispered gazing in her eyes lovingly. "Did the doctor say everything was all right?" he asked as another worry took over him.

"Apparently," Lou answered, "but he wants to see us tomorrow and tell us everything we need to know." Kid nodded and Louise kept looking at him with sheer intensity.

"Come on, let's tell everybody! They must be worried," Kid said as he grabbed her hand in his and tried to move toward the door. However, Lou stopped his intentions, standing her ground in the middle of the room. "I can't go down like this, Kid!" she exclaimed loudly. Kid peered her up and down and only then he realized that she was half-dressed only in her camisole and skirt. The Southerner burst out laughing at his absent-mindedness while she

pushed him towards the door. "You go," Lou said, "I'll get changed out of these and wash my face and make myself decent again."

"All right, all right," he replied as he stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. As he slowly made his way downstairs, the reality of what was happening became somehow more real. It was as if they were now being rewarded after a year of terrible disappointments and loneliness. However incredible it sounded, it was true. Lou was expecting a child conceived of their mutual love and even though the thought of something going wrong threatened his peace of mind, he couldn't feel any happier than now. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, all his friends were waiting for him with expectant expressions. Teaspoon was the first to come forward to him and asked in a serious voice, "Son, how's Lou?"

Bedazzled by the last astonishing news as he was, Kid took his time to answer, and when he did, he could hardly utter the words clearly. "She's ... she's pregnant."

The same reaction Kid had minutes ago echoed in his friends' faces. "What did you say, Kid?" Emma asked, unsure whether she had heard him clearly.

"Lou's gonna have a baby," Kid exclaimed happily but his mood instantly darkened as he explained to everybody about Doctor Logan and Lou's till-now-unknown miscarriage. It was strange the way he felt exultant and at the same time terribly sad for that baby who hadn't been given the chance to live. Had it not been for that fake doctor, Louise and he would now be the proud parents of a baby boy or girl. "You knew about this, didn't you?" Kid asked Teaspoon, meaning the story behind Rock Creek's doctor.

The marshal nodded and added, "Actually it was your better half who supplied me with the clue to this nasty business."

"How's that?" Jimmy asked, genuinely interested by this sordid matter.

"She remembered when she saw that poor fella we found dead months ago," Teaspoon started and at Kid's nod he continued, "Seems Lou was with Doctor Logan's impersonator and the man recognized this poor fella and ... well... with all probability killed him later. He was one Thomas Edward, a friend of the Logans'. As soon as I talked to Louise, I rode to St Louis and it didn't take me long to discover the truth."

"So where's the fake doctor now?" Buck asked.

"This so-called Browne and Mrs. Logan must've sensed that I suspected something and fled like the wind a couple of days ago."

"They can't get away like that!" Kid exclaimed furiously, ready to go and find that man even if he had to dig him out of the last hole in earth.

"Hold your horses, Kid!" Teaspoon cut him off. "We know that the couple took the train from St Joseph to Fort Laramie. And my dear friend Sheriff Bradwell will be waiting for them when the train gets to its destination. They'll be up for the surprise of their lives!"

"Well done, Teaspoon," Sam remarked with a crooked smile.

"Our mayor, though, wants to keep this matter all hush-hush," the marshal added with an unhappy expression.

"The hell I will!" Kid exclaimed, boiling with anger. "People have died. Sally's husband died and Lou might have died as well. Folks need to know the truth and I won't keep it a secret!"

"I know how you feel, Kid," Teaspoon retorted, trying to calm the young man down. He wasn't happy himself with the way the mayor had taken matters in his hands but in a way he

understood that they couldn't go sparking people's fury. All they could possibly do was already done and it was senseless to bring in more unnecessary problems.

"Nobody can give us back everything we've lost this last year," Kid continued. "Lou's suffered something terrible and I can't just stay idle."

"Son, just focus on the good things, on your two lovely boys and that coming baby," the marshal said, and before Kid could reply, everybody in the room turned to the sound of light steps coming down the stairs. Louise appeared before their eyes with a much happier countenance than the one she had on arriving at the house minutes before. She had changed into a light summery dress and done her hair in a neat braid. "What was that I heard about a new baby McCloud?" Teaspoon quipped teasingly, which caused a bout of giggles from Louise, and as soon as she reached the last step of the stairs, she was engulfed in a current of hugs and congratulating words.

"Thank you," Lou replies sheepishly. All of a sudden, she felt kind of shy and embarrassed, being the center of all this attention and fuss.

"You're gonna have your hands full," Jimmy added with a crooked smile.

"Believe me, we know," Kid retorted in the same jovial tone.

The loud and cheerful voices of the adults drew the attention of the three children, who dashed into the lounge to see what was happening. Little Sarah was having her daily afternoon nap while the three boys had been playing marbles in the yard. Their eyes shining with curiosity were looking at the bunch of adults just when Cody was saying, "Lou, let's pray that baby you're expecting takes after you, because I don't know if we could stand a smaller version of Kid." Louise was laughing at the comment when a little angry voice resounded among the laughs in the room. "No!" She turned her attention to the source of that sound and saw Jack looking at her with tearful and angry eyes. "No!" he repeated, "You can't have babies, you said so!" His tone was recriminatory and before Lou could react, the boy dashed out of the house.

"Jack!!!" Kid called after him, but the seven-year-old continued his frantic running. The married couple exchanged a knowing grave look and turning to Tommy, Lou said, "Come on, Tommy-boy. Let's go find your brother." Then she directed her attention to her friends and added, "If you'll excuse us, we need to take care of this family situation."

"Go ahead, sweetheart," Teaspoon replied, voicing everybody's thoughts. "We won't go anywhere."

Louise smiled and noticing Tommy with his arms stretched towards her, she leaned to scoop the boy up in hers. Yet, she stopped in mid-way as Kid's warning voice sounded next to her, "Lou..." She glanced at him with a frown and when it dawned on her what he meant, she had to smile. Definitely she needed to start making a few alterations in her life. A baby, a tiny delicate baby, was growing inside her and from now on she had to be careful. It was obvious that Kid would fuss over her more than usual and even though any other time his excessive concern would annoy her, she found it very sweet now.

"Tommy, honey, a big boy like you needn't be carried around like a teeny weenie baby!" she exclaimed, ruffling her child's hair. The four-year-old smiled and grabbing her hand in his little one, Tommy followed Lou's lead out of the house with Kid by their side. The three crossed the yard and spotted Jack sitting against the big tree bordering the creek on their property. When they came closer, they noticed that the boy was crying and wiping his tears with the back of his sleeve furiously. Lou sat down next to him and Kid on the other side with Tommy perched on his lap. Jack kept looking ahead of him, without acknowledging his family's presence. "Hey, buddy, what's the matter?" Kid asked, squeezing the boy's shoulder encouragingly.

"Nothing," Jack replied seriously, folding his arms over his chest and lowering his

eyes.

Lou rested her hand on his thigh to draw his attention and the boy lifted his sorrowful eyes to her. "You're gonna have a baby," he muttered in a cracked voice.

"That's right," Louise replied.

"Why?" Jack asked in a recriminatory tone.

Louise turned her gaze to her husband and Kid piped in, "Jack, there's nothing wrong in that. What's worrying you?"

"My mother died when she had my baby sister," the boy let out in a whisper and looking Lou straight in the eye, he added, "I don't want you to die." At his words Tommy began to whimper and as it dawned on the couple what Jack was so afraid of, Louise said, "Honey, having a baby doesn't necessarily mean that the ma will pass away. What happened to your mother was something unexpected and unfortunate. That's not the way it's supposed to be." She paused for a second to let out a deep breath and after a beat she continued, "Look at your friend Victor. He has six brothers and sisters and his ma is just fine."

Jack nodded his head in understanding and asked, "So you're not gonna die?"

Lou smiled and after exchanging a brief look with Kid, she replied, "Honey, you know we can't control things like that, but nothing needs to happen."

"Nothing's gonna happen," Kid echoed her words, wanting to reassure the children and especially himself.

As Tommy had kept quiet during the whole exchange, Lou turned her attention to him, shifting so that she was closer to the boy, who quietly sat on Kid's legs. "You understand what we're saying Tommy-boy?" The four-year-old stared at her but didn't try to say anything. "Daddy and ma are gonna have a baby," Lou explained sweetly.

"A baby?" Tommy repeated in his soft voice.

"That's right," Kid replied. "A tiny boy or girl."

"Like little Sarah?"

"Uhuh," Lou replied with a smile, "but even smaller."

The boy kept thoughtful for a moment and suddenly he scrunched his face sadly while he muttered in a quivering voice. "Then you're not gonna love us anymore."

"Of course not, my love," Lou exclaimed as she drew Tommy into her lap. "There's nothing in this world which will make me or Kid stop loving you and your brother." She flashed her smile at the boy and he grinned coyly. "Only there will be a new little person in our family."

"And you will have to be a big brother for the new baby," Kid added, ruffling Tommy's hair.

On hearing these words the boy's mouth split into a wide smile and his eyes got big as saucers. "You mean like Jack?" he asked, excitement evident in his voice.

"Yes, honey, just like Jack," Lou replied.

Tommy clapped his hands, happy at this new piece of information while the two adults and Jack chuckled at his reaction. Then another thought struck him and he asked, "Where's he, ma?"

"Where's whom, sweetie?" Lou asked, lost at the meaning behind his words.

"The baby!"

"We don't know if it's a 'he', Tommy," Jack said, rolling his eyes at his brother's naiveté. The four-year-old stuck his tongue out at him, annoyed at his know-it-all attitude and he repeated his question, "Where's the baby, ma?"

"Here," Lou replied, resting her hand on her middle and caressing it. Tommy followed the direction of her hand with his eyes and stared at her in confusion.

"There? In your tummy?" the boy asked with a frown.

Kid and Lou shared a bemused look and as seriously as she could, the young woman tried to explain things to Tommy. "Babies grow protected inside mamas' bellies cause they're too frail and small. Then after a few months when they're stronger and bigger, they are born and only then we'll be able to see it. You understand that, Tommy?"

The boy nodded silently and after a few seconds he tilted his head, looking at Kid, and asked, "And ... and how did it get in there?"

Lou let out a peal of laughter and after shifting the boy so that he was now sitting on her husband's legs, she rose to her feet while she said with a bemused smirk, "Your turn, Kid." And stretching her arm to Jack, she urged, "Come on, honey. Let's go back to the house while these two have a chat." Jack grabbed her hand and they both began walking away from the place.

"Lou!" Kid tried to protest but the young lady turned a deaf ear to her husband while a smile danced on her face. "Lou!" he tried again but she was already out of earshot and the smile turned into a series of giggles as she could well imagine Kid's unhappy and awkward face at this very moment.