

Chapter 7

Weeks went by and the situation at home was practically the same. Louise's cold stance hadn't changed towards Kid; she hardly talked and he was at his wits' end. He didn't know how to help her and all his attempts had failed miserably. Kid still remembered her angered expression and hard words when he had naively tried to cheer her up by bringing a puppy home. He hadn't known that she'd get so upset. His ears were still ringing with her angry shouts. "Do you think a pet can take the place of a baby??? Are you so stupid to believe that I'd forget everything just with your insensitive presents???" Kid had to admit that he had been a fool because he had never given it a thought to how she'd take his present. Not for a single moment had he intended to make light of her feelings. His only concern had been to cheer her up but it had been a terrible idea, at least initially. Kid had then been completely taken aback when she had almost bitten his head off as he had intended to take the dog back because she had really grown attached to Blacky (that was how she had dubbed the little puppy). The dog followed her everywhere around the homestead and was so protective of Lou that he barked furiously if anybody came too close to her or had unclear intentions. Kid thought ruefully that unfortunately he had no problem in that respect as now Lou never let him come too close. The only company that she accepted willingly was the puppy's and sometimes he foolishly felt jealous of the attention the little dog got from her, the attention that he wanted for himself. All contact had died between them and recently Kid had decided to sleep his nights in Jeremiah's old room, leaving the master room for her. He just couldn't stand being next to her and being unable to reach out and hold her. It was driving him crazy and with a heavy heart he had taken the decision to sleep somewhere else. Sleep, though, didn't come easily at night as he stayed awake for hours, thinking of a way to close that gap opened between them or at least helping her in any way possible. Kid was frantic with worry as days and weeks went by and his wife stayed in the same bleak mood, with no visible change.

The only thing that Kid was pleased about was that she had stopped talking about divorce. To his utter relief Lou hadn't even tried to go to a lawyer about the matter. She just never mentioned it any more. In fact, she didn't talk about anything much, only what was strictly necessary and if possible, using monosyllables. Her daily routine hadn't changed a bit; she still woke up every day to go to work and even took care of the house and the meals like the best of wives. He had a hot meal on his table at the right moment, his clothes were spotless, not a single mark or crease, and all the house looked just absolutely pristine. Kid thought that maybe Lou was simply relieving some of her frustration in her daily chores. He couldn't complain about anything in this sense, but still he felt as if she were a ghost round the house. She never smiled or laughed; she spoke even less and the only times when Kid noticed some life in her was when he, though involuntarily most of the times, managed to rile her up. Other than that, she was like a walking expressionless shadow. Every day when they sat down to eat, Louise never opened her mouth to speak once. It was Kid that

babbled on in a long monologue about his day in Teaspoon's office, the ranch or about anything that came to his mind. Kid wasn't sure if she even heard anything of what he told her, but he knew that he needed to keep that bit of contact going. If complete silence came between them, that would mean the end of everything. He just had to make sure that she knew that they were still a married couple and that she was as important to him as ever. Kid hoped that at some point she could emerge from that hole where she seemed to have buried her soul.

Even though things were bleak in his marriage, he had to admit that something was going as well as he had hoped. Kid had finished the necessary repairs and improvements around the ranch and a couple of weeks ago he had bought the first pair of horses. It had taken him all his free time to break and train them, but finally the job was done and Kid couldn't help but feel an intense sense of pride. Today he would be expecting a man who was interested in buying them. They were good horses and Kid didn't doubt that he'd close a good deal. That would mean that their dream was on its way. Kid had tried to share his enthusiasm with Lou, but she hadn't seemed to care much. She just kept the same bleak expression that Kid was now so used to seeing in her.

That morning they were finishing their breakfast and Kid had been talking about his hopes about the possible buyer as Louise silently ate her breakfast. At some point his words had run out and the only sounds in the room were the clink of the forks against the china plates. Kid sighed deeply as he watched his wife. They had talked so much about running the ranch, both full of hopes and dreams, but now that it seemed that things were going on the right track, he felt completely lonely. He had so much on his mind right now that they were taking its toll on his mood; worry over Lou didn't leave him at any moment and things in the marshal's office hadn't been easy either.

Kid reached for the coffee pot and finding it empty he offered, "I'll make some more coffee." He rose to his feet and stomped into the kitchen. Today he really needed to have good strong coffee in his body as the day was going to be long and hectic. Louise didn't say a word as usual and kept her attention focused on the plate before her. When she finished the last bite, she slowly stood up and after rubbing off the creases on her skirt she picked up her plate, but as she was about to move, something caught her eye. Next to the place where her husband had been sitting there was a stack of papers with the image of a man imprinted on them. She kept looking at them for a while and almost jumped out of her skin when Kid talked behind her. "We're going to hand them out in the city to see if we can find out something." Lou looked at him and to his surprise Kid thought that she looked genuinely interested and was listening to him. "Personally, I think that we won't get much; he must have been just passing through Rock Creek."

"Who is he? What's he done?" Lou asked to Kid's utter astonishment; that was the most she had talked in weeks.

He wanted to whoop in joy when Lou spoke those words, but he couldn't because he thought it wouldn't be a very smart movement, so he just decided to answer her question in a calmed voice. "A couple found him dead near the lake a few weeks ago. I told you about it, don't you remember?" She shook her head no and Kid continued, "A bullet was lodged in his skull. There was no sign of much violence as if he knew his murderer or was taken off guard. Now finally the printer has sent these fliers and we'll try to find out who he was, but I'm afraid it's a lost cause."

"I've seen this man," Lou stated without the slightest hesitation.

Kid turned two surprised eyes to his wife. For the last two weeks he had talked to almost every single citizen in Rock Creek and nobody seemed to know a thing and ironically his wife, the person living under his same roof was telling him that she did know something. "You sure?" Kid asked, still with a stunned expression.

Lou nodded and began describing the man physically and when she mentioned him wearing a smothering cream suit, Kid had no doubt that she was talking about the same person. When he and Teaspoon had gone to retrieve the man's body, he clearly remembered that he was wearing a cream suit, which had attracted his attention as it was a colour that wasn't really popular in Rock Creek. "Where?" Kid asked again.

Louise shrugged her shoulders in indifference and said, "In the hotel, I guess."

"Not there, Lou," Kid retorted. "Teaspoon checked the last few weeks' entries with Mr. Faber and we haven't discovered any stranger staying there who had disappeared like that."

"Then I don't know," Lou concluded and started heading for the kitchen as it had been her first intention. Kid went after her and insisted with his questions. "Did you see him in town or maybe somewhere on the road?"

"I don't remember," she muttered as she filled the bowl of water and placed it on the floor. The puppy appeared straightaway and as he drank greedily, Louise knelt next to him and patted him affectionately, forgetting Kid's presence completely.

"Was he alone or in somebody's company?" Kid asked again but she didn't say a word. Louise was beginning to get tired of all the questioning and when he insisted her quick temper made its appearance. "Lou?"

"I don't know, Kid!" she snapped in a loud voice, clearly annoyed. "I can't remember. I just know that I saw him, all right?"

Kid just nodded and opted for not pursuing the matter. She could have seen the man anywhere and it really wasn't that important when Lou didn't know anything about his identity. At least he was happy that they had their first real conversation in weeks and that gave him a little hope. It would take time but he prayed that he'd have his wife back, the old Lou and not this stranger she had become.



The rest of the day had turned out much like Kid had expected it would. All morning he had the arduous task of asking around about any possible information of the dead man. Now with a picture to go by it was easier, but still the people in Rock Creek had no recollection of seeing the fella at all, especially when the man had been dead for two weeks now. If somebody had seen him, they would probably have forgotten by now. Everybody except Lou, who was convinced to have set eyes upon the man even though she didn't remember much more. Louise had always been quite the observer and Kid clearly remembered her watchful eyes during their Express days, especially at the beginning when everybody thought she was another boy. Lou had never said much but she watched everything with those big eyes of hers and never seemed to miss a thing. They were so expressive that Kid could tell just by looking into her eyes if she was happy, sad or angry. Many times when she was just across the room from him, a look in his direction and he knew what she was thinking or trying to tell him. Unfortunately, now those eyes seemed to be dead; all their liveliness was gone.

Thinking about Lou brought a mixture of bitter-sweet feelings into his heart. Kid felt that his life had changed so much since they were together. It had been his thinking about Lou that had made him insist to continue their search of the dead man's identity. Teaspoon had wanted to drop the matter completely, stating that he was a passer-by and little would be found out, but Kid had convinced him otherwise. He had noticed the wedding band on the man's finger and knew that his wife would be waiting for him and frantic with worry. Kid remembered being told about Lou's despair when she didn't know if he'd return from the war. Now he just didn't know if Lou cared about him or anything at all. That man's wife must be going through the same state of uncertainty and the thought made him uneasy. Sadly, there was no way to make her agony end as they hadn't found out anything about the man.

Although his search for the identity of the dead man had been barren, at least his other business had turned out to be better than he had expected. As soon as the buyer had seen his horses, he hadn't hesitated in closing the deal with Kid. They had finished the whole matter in town where the man had paid good money for the horses straightaway. Kid couldn't help but beam with pride. That money would let him acquire more horses for their ranch and he could now

afford a little something to celebrate his first success with Lou, something that he had been thinking about for a while now. So without a second thought he had spent the money in the little treat that he and Lou well deserved. A hopeful Kid wished that this could help his wife to resurface from that deep hole. He hated the cold way she reserved for him; they were acting like strangers under the same roof more and more and Kid just didn't know how to talk or behave towards her any more.

It was a bit later than usual when he made his way back to his ranch. The buyer had insisted in buying him a drink, happy for the excellent horseflesh he had purchased. Kid wasn't very keen on visiting the saloon or even drinking; he just preferred the peace and quiet of his home, but he hadn't been able to resist the man's offerings. To Kid's own chagrin the fella wasn't as unscrupulous about drinking as he was, and while Kid hardly tasted the glass before him, the man had one after the other. Kid was eager to go home and see Lou, but the man didn't appear too willing to call it a day. Finally, the former rider was able to get rid of him and with utter delight he headed for his place.

Kid knew that Lou'd be waiting for him with their dinner ready. Although the situation between them was very tense, to say the least, she never missed cooking his meals, washing his clothes or simply having everything in the house perfect for him. This attitude really baffled him and he wondered what made her refuse any contact with him but at the same time be the ideal housewife.

Easing off his horse Kid rushed into his house and he saw her sitting at the dining-room table. Everything was laid for supper and she had obviously been waiting for his arrival. Lou briefly met his eyes and then turned to leave. "I'll heat up dinner," she said in a neutral voice. Kid was quicker and grabbing her by the arm he stopped her from going. "One moment, Lou. There's something I need to tell you." He really felt full of enthusiasm for his little surprise and couldn't wait to share the news with her.

Lou looked at him, curious at seeing him look so happy. She assumed that he must have made a good deal with the fella coming to buy the horses. Kid hadn't talked about anything else for days and even though she heard him with half a heart, something of this had managed to get to her. Lou had seen her husband work with those horses tirelessly and she really admired his dedication and zeal. In other moments she would have shared the same feelings, but now her mind was too jumbled for anything. She even felt jealous that he could find some happiness in that while she couldn't care less for anything.

Kid made her sit on the chair she had previously been on and approaching another next to her he sat just across from her. He leaned his elbows on his thighs and run his fingers through his hair nervously. Lou watched him with the same serious countenance. "I want to ask you something," he finally said.

"I told you I don't know anything," Louise muttered with a very calm voice.

Kid looked at her with a baffled expression, not getting what she was talking about. Then it dawned on him that she meant the matter about the dead man. "Oh nothing about that, Lou," he said smiling in her direction while she kept a bleak expression. He began telling his account about the day's good results as he had sold the horses at an excellent price. "So I thought it was high time we enjoyed a treat." Kid produced a couple of strips of paper and handed them to his wife. Lou looked at them with curiosity and finally asked, "What's this?"

"I've been thinking of going to that cattle fair in Denver for a while; it will be a good opportunity for the business," Kid explained. "So I thought we could also make an occasion for us. These are tickets for the stage to Saint Joseph and from there we can take the train, first class and all. What do you think, honey?" Kid was all smiles, which contrasted with her bitter expression and he hadn't even finished his last sentence when she blurted out unceremoniously, "No."

Kid's expression changed radically and a frown creased his face. "But, Lou, that's something we always talked of doing. I'm sure Mr Faber will let you have a few days off. We'll have the time to relax, talk, have fun, you know, treat us to one of those fancy hotels, go to see a play, anything together, like the honeymoon we never had."

"A honeymoon, pfff!" she spat the word as if it were an aberration. "By the way things are going between us, I can't believe you could even consider something like that!"

"That's precisely why we have to do this," Kid rebuked. "We need some time to ourselves, to get back to where we were."

"That's not possible," Lou stated firmly.

"Why not?" Kid insisted, hurt by her words.

"I can't be the same person to you. I'm not the same person," she muttered faintly, turning her eyes from him.

"You can't or you won't?" he asked sarcastically.

Louise glared at him silently but opted for not answering his question. Instead she said in a cold and detached voice, "If you aren't happy, you can always get out of this uncomfortable situation, you know."

Kid sighed inaudibly, inwardly cursing himself for making the dreaded issue of the divorce come up, though unwillingly. He was at a loss how something that he had thought could have brought her some joy had turned the whole situation against him. "You're right. I'm not happy but I want to be with you no matter what," he said huskily taking her hand in his.

His words reached her soul and for a brief second her icy countenance melted, and for that tiny moment Lou contemplated to close her eyes and let him lead her blindly to wherever he wanted to. However, the despairing feeling that she was lately so familiar with came full force. She yanked her hand free and stood up. "You should have asked me before squandering money like that," she said in a voice she didn't recognize as her own. Lately she felt as if somebody else had invaded her body, her mind, her whole soul, as if she had no control over herself anymore. However, she knew that it was her and only her who acted and talked in that spiteful way to everybody close, especially her husband.

Kid looked at her with a hurtful expression, unable to utter a single word. Soon the pain turned into a deep anger. He had noticed the brief hesitation and he was sure that something had clicked inside her, but again in a matter of seconds she was back to her bitterness. Kid tried not to let her words or actions affect him because he knew that she didn't really mean them. He understood that she was hurting, but now he couldn't do anything but feel deeply annoyed. He had only been thinking of her when he had bought those tickets, and she was demeaning his loving gestures with her horrible words. Every single day his only concern was her and it was only her who occupied his mind every second, but he was beginning to wonder if all his efforts to help her were really worth it. Nothing seemed to help her out of her continuous miserable mood and Kid was really getting weary.

Before leaving his presence Lou repositioned the chair where she had been sitting exactly in its former position around the table, making sure that the chair back didn't touch the edge to the table to avoid future rubbing marks. Kid stared at her without uttering a single word and, as she was about to turn, she muttered, "I'll warm up our dinner."

Kid rose to his feet and said scornfully, "Don't trouble yourself. Suddenly, I don't feel hungry anymore." He cast a last angry look at his wife and banging his hand against his chair purposely he made it crash on the floor with a loud bang. He stared at the fallen chair impassively, then without the slightest attempt to lift it up, and sighing loudly he plodded towards the stairs and his now lonely bedroom.