

The weeks went by and Christmas time came to the McCloud's household as coldly as the weather in the severe winter of that year. Their last bitter argument about the matter of Amanda Davis had left a noticeable mark in their already wounded marriage. Lou spoke even less if that was possible and she seemed like a ghost going around in her daily chores around the house. Kid watched her with an intense longing and pain every day as things remained the same. He really missed his wife and was unable to reach her. With each passing day he had the sensation that she drifted farther and farther from him. Kid found himself fighting the feeling that he had failed and Lou, the Lou he loved, was gone forever. He just couldn't give up on her; he knew that his vibrant and sweet wife was somewhere inside that bitter woman's body that had occupied her place. Many times he had the temptation to stop his personal fight and stop all their suffering, but fortunately, he always came to his senses. If he ended up doing just that, where would that leave him? He would lose the reason why he got up and worked every day. His dreams and his plans wouldn't mean anything if she weren't in his life. Besides, the thought of something terrible happening to her still hovered in his mind, especially in her present situation. He knew that somehow she had lost all control over herself and keeping an eye on her made him feel more reassured. That was the reason why he avoided leaving the ranch and Sweetwater as much as possible. Sometimes he had been forced to be away at Teaspoon's request or because of his business and he had been sick with worry over her. He didn't know why but he couldn't help but fear for her; the sensation that Lou wasn't safe on her own scared him to death. Maybe he was overreacting, but she had never acted in this way before. Kid might know Louise McCloud perfectly well, but the woman now living under his roof was a complete mystery to him.

Kid often wondered if she was really serious about this divorce thing. After their argument over Amanda, he knew that she still cared for him and her reaction had surely been provoked by her fear of losing him. In a way that gave him hope that everything wasn't as lost as he had come to think it was. Even though from that day on she had given him an almost silent treatment, he hoped that time would heal her wounds and her icy countenance would melt eventually.

Despite the fact that today was Christmas Eve, Kid didn't feel any different. For him it could be like any other day and in fact, he'd rather forget about it and not to fuss about that day, but Rachel and Teaspoon had been adamant that they should enjoy a family dinner. Kid was sure that Lou wouldn't be too thrilled at the prospect, but their friends had stubbornly insisted that it would do Louise a whole lot of good. Kid doubted their words, but they'd managed to persuade him. A first time he had gone to Lou, repeating the invitation from Rachel. The older woman had planned to have Christmas dinner at her place. She still lived in the house where the old way station had been as she was able to purchase the property a few years ago. As Kid had predicted, Lou had flatly refused to go out that night. Kid couldn't blame her as he practically felt he had no energy to have a celebration either. Yet, he had to agree with Rachel and Teaspoon; it wouldn't do her any good if she closed herself to the world even more. She needed to be reminded that she still had a family and they cared for her as always. So with a lot of persuasion on his part Louise had finally accepted to take part in the Christmas dinner, but they'd have it at home. The idea of leaving her home and going somewhere else seemed to appall Lou even though it was her dear friend Rachel's home, a place that contained so sweet memories for both of them. So Kid suggested having dinner at their home and she nodded her approval unwillingly. Kid didn't know if she had finally accepted because his words had really convinced her or just because she had got tired of listening to his relentless arguments. Anyway, the important bit was that she had accepted and moreover, the occasion had been a perfect excuse to approach and talk to her without having her glaring eyes upon him.

Since that terrible fight in the bedroom Kid had been very wary of his wife. He still tried to keep the words going between them while they had their meals even though he was the only

one who did the talking. He knew that after that jealousy episode the gap between them had widened since she seemed in a constant foul mood. Kid had wanted to prove to her that he was a faithful husband and the likes of Amanda Davis didn't mean anything to him. The mere notion of having an affair with that woman was simply ridiculous. After that "memorable" conversation, Kid had seen Miss Davis in her true colors and he realized that it was no wonder Lou had felt a dislike towards her all along. Somehow he wished Lou had witnessed their conversation, so she'd know that her fears were completely ungrounded. However, he just couldn't tell her the details of that conversation because that would mean to reproduce that woman's horrible words about his wife. That would upset her for sure and Kid would hate to add on to her already troubled mind with the town's gossip about her problems. Therefore, he had to keep the matter to himself and bear her suspicious eyes on him all the time.

Although Kid wasn't much into the festive spirit, he wanted to make a special occasion of the season for Lou. There was a chain with a pendant in Tompkins' store, which Louise had fallen for the first time she saw it months ago. Kid had made a mental note of this and originally before all this happened, he had thought of it as the perfect gift in their first Christmas together. Lately he hadn't given much thought to the idea, but as Christmas had fallen upon him so suddenly, his original idea had seemed like a good one. After all his failed attempts to cheer her up, Kid was sure that she wouldn't be very impressed with any Christmas presents, but at least he hoped that she could see that he had remembered and how much he still cared for her.

Rachel had arrived that afternoon to fix the dinner that they'd enjoy that night. She went straight to the kitchen and Lou had followed her. From his position in the lounge, Kid could hear the older woman's voice contentedly babbling but not once had he heard Lou's. He knew that his wife hadn't limited that cold stance of hers exclusively to him, but she also kept the same attitude with their friends. Rachel had tried to come closer to Louise, but on those occasions she had practically sent her friend packing. The former station mistress didn't have the patience Kid possessed and lately she hardly visited them. Moved by curiosity Kid had sneaked outside the kitchen and unbeknownst to both women he had taken a peek inside. Rachel was talking and from time to time she cast an awkward look at Louise, who sat forlornly with the puppy on her lap. She didn't seem to pay any attention to Rachel's words or anything around her as she caressed the dog absent-mindedly. Kid wondered what was in her mind. If she could just talk to him, he was sure that they could get over any issues. Lou buried everything inside her and Kid feared that eventually all that would end up harming her. At this point Rachel had already given up her talk and focused her attention on the cooking while Lou's position hadn't changed a bit. 'It's going to be a very long night,' Kid thought ruefully before returning to the seclusion of his lounge.

Kid had been right. The situation at the dinner table didn't look very appetizing and it wasn't the food that occupied their thoughts. Teaspoon had arrived a while ago and the four of them had sat down to dine. They were a pitiful sight as Lou's cold presence made the atmosphere awkward and tense. Kid, Teaspoon and Rachel had tried to keep the conversation going at the table, but it was getting increasingly more difficult when Lou looked as if she were attending a funeral.

Kid had been hoping that his fellow riders could make it for Christmas, but Lou had been right again and they hadn't turned up. A week ago they had received a new letter from Cody; he was the only one who wrote regularly. He had sent his greetings for Christmas and said that he would be away for the next few weeks but he didn't say much about Jimmy and Buck. He mentioned Jimmy bumping into Kid a few weeks ago and expressed his concern about Lou. Kid hadn't bothered to reply to his letter and to go into detail about his and Lou's problems. It didn't feel right to write about it and he was sure that Lou wouldn't appreciate the gesture. Maybe Rachel had written to Cody updating him about the family, but he doubted that she would be more willing to talk about Lou's problems than he was. Kid felt deeply disappointed that his friends hadn't answered his call. Deep down he knew that their visit wouldn't have done much more to help Lou than what he, Rachel and Teaspoon had done so far, but he would have liked

to see them. He had selfishly thought that being with the boys would have helped to raise his spirits that lately were as low as they could possibly be.

For a moment silence settled and Kid took the time to look at his wife. She kept her eyes focused on the plate before her, picking at the food, because saying she was eating would be an overstatement. The plate and the fork seemed to be her excuse tonight to avoid the three people sharing her table. Kid studied her profile and realized that she had never looked so thin and small. It broke his heart to see her appear as lost as a small child. He cursed himself for all the times he had run out of patience and ignited by her words and attitude, he had lashed out at her. She needed his understanding and he hadn't always been able to do just that.

Kid thought that this was the worst Christmas he had ever lived. He remembered with fondness the one and only Christmas he and Lou had shared. It had been while they were still riding for the Express and he had to smile every time he thought of that kiss that Lou had managed to plant on his lips in a room full of people. Later she had shyly told him that she hadn't given much thought to whom could be watching them; she had just felt the need to kiss him and had followed her heart without thinking about the consequences. That Christmas had been pretty special and in the same way he had thought that they would have had a great celebration for this one. Kid couldn't have foreseen that the situation would be quite different and this Christmas would surely leave a very memorable mark in all of them. Even on those Christmases that he had spent during the war hadn't made him feel as negative and desperate as now. In those days he had the hope of the future moments to be spent with Lou, but today he sadly realized he felt drained of all hope.

Realizing that he was letting the negative feelings affect him he reminded himself that he should make the effort for her and keep his hopes up just for her. Today she seemed to close down even more than usual. Kid understood that celebrating the birth of the Lord was making her pain worse as she would never be celebrating the birth of a child of her own. Kid was determined to end the gloomy and awkward atmosphere reigning at the moment in the dining room; even Teaspoon seemed to have lost his well-known gift of the gab. In that moment Kid suddenly remembered the two letters that he had picked up this morning and he knew that this would necessarily get through her some. Taking them out of his jacket pocket he said, "Lou, I almost forgot to tell you," he tried to sound more enthusiastic than he felt and for once she lifted her eyes from the plate to meet him. "Mrs. Peterson gave me these letters for you. Guess from whom." She kept looking at him with a neutral expression and didn't try to talk. Kid sighed ruefully and without expecting for any further indication he opened the first letter and began reading it aloud. It was from Jeremiah, who wrote from Canada. The letter was very brief and he just wished the family a happy Christmas. It seemed that he was courting a girl over there and was spending the season with her folks.

"Good grief! Young Jeremiah with a sweetheart and all," Teaspoon exclaimed happily.

"Knowing your brother's restless and rash spirit, won't be long he proposes to her and you'll have a wedding to prepare, Lou," Rachel quipped trying to keep the jovial feeling going.

"That would be wonderful, wouldn't it, honey?" Kid added, watching his wife's reaction or lack of it carefully. She didn't seem very moved by Jeremiah's letter and Kid thought that maybe it was because she was missing her siblings on a day like this, which surely added up to her mood.

"I guess," Lou whispered so softly that the three others had difficulty in making out the words she had uttered. It was the first time she had talked all evening.

Seeing as she wasn't going to talk any more, Kid produced the letter Theresa had also sent to her sister. The girl was in San Francisco and explained that she'd be accompanying her employer to a party thrown by the city mayor on Christmas Eve. Theresa sounded very light-

hearted and wrote lengths about her daily life as a companion of the rich lady. She complained about the woman's odd moods and said that she missed Louise and Rock Creek terribly, but all in all, she sounded quite happy. Kid skillfully omitted the part where Theresa teasingly hinted that she'd love a nephew or a niece as her Christmas present. It was a good thing that he had read the letter beforehand, because in her present state Lou wouldn't welcome that kind of remark warmly. Kid knew that she had never told her siblings anything about her lack of prospects to become a mother and more than once Kid had felt tempted to do so himself. Yet, he didn't think it right to tell them without her consent; it felt as if he would be talking about her behind her back and knowing her he was fully aware that she wouldn't like that. Kid just hoped that at some point she could find the courage to explain everything to her siblings.

As with her brother's letter Lou didn't seem very moved or thrilled to hear news from Theresa. Kid sighed for the umpteenth time at seeing her look so impassive and the rest of the meal continued without much incidence. At the end of it Kid announced with much more enthusiasm than he was actually feeling that it was time to swap presents. Rachel and Teaspoon had both brought gifts for the couple and Kid went and picked up his for Louise and his two friends. Lou stared at the beautifully wrapped presents placed on the table before her but she didn't make any attempts to open them. The other three were busy unwrapping their own and at the same time Kid kept casting worried looks in Lou's direction. To everybody's surprise Louise spoke up, her eyes downcast, avoiding looking at anybody. "I didn't buy anything," she said in a whisper, feeling on the brink of tears by Kid's and her friends' thoughtfulness. She was aware that she had lately treated them outrageously and yet, they had taken the trouble to get something for her. Right now she felt like the worst scum and she wanted to shout that she didn't deserve any of this. However, she just voiced a pitiful excuse.

"That's all right, honey," Teaspoon replied. "We know you've been busy. Besides, to see your pretty face is enough present for us." Kid smiled at the old marshal, feeling grateful for his kind words to Louise. Teaspoon had the ability to make people feel better without turning to a patronizing attitude, which was something that Lou would hate.

Louise's mouth seemed to twitch in an awkward smile, but her countenance was serious and her eyes sad. She knew that all three of them were watching her constantly, watching her silences, her reactions. Her latest behavior made them wary towards her and they treated her as if she were made of porcelain and could crack at any moment. Lou hated to feel this vulnerable and for a moment the room seemed to suffocate her. "Uh..." she began awkwardly, "I'm sorry but I think I'll go to bed. My head's hurting terribly."

"Don't worry, honey," Rachel said as Lou was already on her feet and walking towards the stairs. "You get your rest."

The three other occupants of the dining room watched her as she disappeared up the stairs from their sight and they remained in silence as Louise's light steps resounded above them. When the bedroom door was faintly heard clicking shut, Kid let out his held breath. He kept thoughtful for a few moments, staring at the still wrapped-up present lying untouched on the place Lou had just occupied, but Teaspoon's voice brought him back to reality.

"Is she always like that?" the marshal asked. He knew from Kid that the situation at home was difficult, but Teaspoon hadn't witnessed his friends' reality himself till now. He had kept away, wanting to give the couple their space and intimacy. So he had really been surprised to see Lou in that mood; he hadn't thought that things would be so tense between his two young friends.

"Pretty much," Kid replied ruefully.

"I don't know how you can stand the situation so stoically, Kid," Rachel added. "You have the patience of a saint." She had tried to approach Lou all this time, but the younger lady's

rudeness and sullen mood had been too much for Rachel. She wanted to help Louise and it broke her heart to see her like that, but if Lou didn't let herself be helped, Rachel admitted that there was little that she could do about it.

"There's nothing heroic in that, Rachel," Kid answered with a wry expression. "She's my wife and I love her." Rachel smiled and squeezed the young man's hand affectionately. "But I'm at my wits' end." He let out an audible sigh and ran his fingers through his hair.

Teaspoon heard the exchange between Rachel and the former rider while absently he stroked his chin. "I've known a few people in a similar condition as our dear Lou," he finally spoke up.

"Condition? You mean unable to have babies?" Kid asked.

Teaspoon shook his head no while he said, "No. What I mean is the condition of her soul. As far as I can see, Louise is in a continuous deep state of melancholy and I imagine that right now she doesn't see much worth to fight for. She feels unworthy and as she doesn't love herself very much at the moment, she believes that nobody should love her either."

Kid listened to Teaspoon's every word and found that he might be right about Lou. "It's all so confusing. She keeps pushing me away, fighting me and yet... it's baffling the way she cares about having everything perfect for me. I just can't understand her attitude."

"She might want to make up for the deficiencies she finds she has as your wife," Teaspoon explained, "It might be contradictory but it has its logic in her mind."

Rachel had listened to the old marshal attentively and exclaimed, "Teaspoon, you never cease to amaze me. How can you be so awfully clever?"

Teaspoon smiled; somehow proud of the admiration he had gained from the lady and just added, "Life's school, Rachel. I've seen more than many and unfortunately, more than I'd have liked to. One's bound to learn something from life's tribulations."

Teaspoon's words didn't leave Kid indifferent and he knew that the marshal was right about Lou. That was exactly what was happening to his wife, but knowing the cause of her attitude didn't mean he was nearer to finding the solution to her problems. "But how can I help her, Teaspoon? I've tried every possible way but it seems that all I manage is to widen the gap between us."

"I don't know, son," the marshal admitted. "Something should eventually snap her from that mood."

"But what?" Kid asked loudly, lifting his arms in exasperation. "I just don't know what else to do."

"I think you need to prove your patience a bit more," Rachel offered.

"Just be there for her. She's bound to need your help eventually, Kid," Teaspoon added.

"I hope you're right. Seeing her like this is breaking me inside," Kid admitted. He had never voiced his own predicament and fears. He was so intent in being strong for Lou that he had overlooked what the situation was doing to him.

"Louise's a fighter. She's just in a tight spot right now, but I bet that with a little push of our part she'll be able to jump off that wild horse at some point," Teaspoon said. His heart went out for the young couple and it pained him to see them grow apart like this. He knew how deeply



asked, "How are you, Louise?"

She took the empty glass from his grasp roughly and turning her back to Teaspoon, she placed it in the sink. "Fine," she answered curtly still with her back to him.

"You might say so, but my eyes tell me a different story," the marshal remarked.

Lou swirled around and glared at him silently for a few minutes. She seemed to be on the brink of exploding with fury whenever somebody wanted to talk about "her problems". She just wanted to be left alone and was tired of every know-it-all coming to her with their worthless advice. "You finished, Teaspoon?" she asked sarcastically and without waiting for his reply, she stomped past him, eager to leave his presence, but the old marshal grabbed her by the arm and stopped her.

"I haven't finished yet," Teaspoon said, looking her in the eyes intentionally.

Louise yanked her arm free forcefully and barked furiously, "It's been a while since I stopped working for you, so stop bossing me around."

"I thought you could use a friend's shoulder," he said in a steady voice.

Lou seemed to sober some and after a few seconds she quipped in the same sarcastic tone. "I already have enough of your "clever" advice. As you once told me, we can't save people from themselves. I can't be saved and I don't want to."

"What about Kid?" he asked again, feeling that this was going to be more difficult than he had first thought. She was in a foul mood and he knew that he needed to pull those strings that could make her react.

"What about him?" she said with a neutral voice.

"Doesn't he deserve to be saved?" Teaspoon continued, using the metaphor she had mentioned. "He loves you and you know if you fall, he will fall."

Lou felt the beginning of a headache. Many other times she occasionally found it difficult to follow Teaspoon's gibberish, and now in her troubled mind the task was almost impossible. "Kid has the key to his own salvation. He can leave whenever he wants," she said in a soft voice.

"Is that what you really want?" Teaspoon asked and Lou nodded more energetically than she felt. She wanted to believe and make everybody believe that it was what she wanted, but deep down she knew that she'd die the day Kid left her side for good. "So if you're so sure," Teaspoon continued, oblivious of her internal fight, "why don't you leave?"

In his tone Louise heard the challenge and as she wasn't one to be daunted, she responded showing a resolution she didn't feel at all. "Maybe I will," she stated, not believing her own words for a moment. She knew that she'd never have the guts to leave her husband however tense the situation between them was. Lou swore that she wouldn't cause him any trouble if he decided to finish things off, but taking that step herself was something that she couldn't and didn't want to do.

That was basically the end of the conversation between Teaspoon and Louise. He left the house with a heavy heart, knowing that he hadn't managed to help his friends at all. Louise was stubborn as a mule and in her present mood Teaspoon suspected that nothing he or anybody could say would make her change her attitude.

Kid saw Teaspoon from his position at the stables door and waited for him expectantly,

but by the way the marshal walked towards him, he knew that the marshal had as little luck with Lou as he had in the last weeks. As he reached the stables, the younger man asked, "So?" Teaspoon shook his head ruefully and proceeded to fill Kid in on what had occurred between him and Louise. When the marshal finished, Kid was boiling with anger.

"You did what?" Kid exclaimed visibly annoyed, unable to believe what his boss was telling him.

"Kid..." Teaspoon tried but the sandy-haired man wouldn't let him. "You told my wife that she should leave!!! I can't believe this!" he barked.

"I was just trying to make her react," Teaspoon explained.

"I don't want her to leave me, no matter what," Kid cried, apprehension filling him completely.

"She was probably bluffing, son," the marshal said, trying to calm him down. "I wouldn't worry."

"What if she wasn't?" Kid asked in the same hectic manner.

"Well, Kid," the marshal continued warily, "you two have to begin thinking sensibly. By the way things are going between you two, maybe you should humor your wife. You two are hurting and it might help you if you stay away from each other... for some time."

Teaspoon's words were like a slap to his face and Kid kept staring at him for a few minutes as if the marshal had lost his mind. "Never!" he cried when he finally found his own voice. "No matter what she says, I'm sure she loves me and I'll be there for her come hell or high water." He sighed loudly and casting a last look at Teaspoon, he said, "Excuse me now, but I have to see my wife." With that said, he ran towards the house without even saying good-bye to the old marshal; his only thought was to unravel what Teaspoon's words might have tangled. As soon as he stepped in, he began calling her name desperately while he dashed round the house, looking for her. He found her in the bedroom, folding some of her clothes neatly over the chest of drawers. "Lou!" he called breathlessly and she looked at him quizzically. "Lou," he repeated, delighting in the sound of her name. He stared at her for a few moments and Louise looked back in curiosity. "You aren't going anywhere, are you?" Kid asked with begging eyes and as she remained in silence looking at him, he repeated even more desperately, "Are you?" Lou glanced fixedly in his eyes and watching the desperation in them she finally said in a very soft voice, "This is my home, ain't it?" He looked at her eyes and for once he could see some peace in them and he couldn't help but grin happily. Coming closer to her he took her hand and when she didn't try to pull it away, he kissed it and said, "That's good to know, Lou, really good to know."