

Epilogue

It was cozy and warm in the lounge where a good log fire was burning in the fireplace. A few minutes ago Louise had crossed the room and dropped her now heavy body on the soft sofa. The house was in complete silence, only disturbed by the crackling of the burning logs. Kid had taken the children to town and Lou welcomed the peace and quiet in this winter afternoon. As her body shifted into a comfortable position, her exhaustion got the best of her. Little by little her eyes closed and she fell into a deep slumber.

The night before Louise had had enormous difficulty in getting some rest. Heavy as she was in the last month of her new pregnancy, it was getting increasingly laborious to adopt a comfortable position in bed. On top of it all, last night she had been restless and plagued by nightmares in the brief spells of sleep she had managed to get. She always feared that something might go wrong with the baby and these last months were always the hardest ones.

As she peacefully slept on the sofa, her neck bent to one side, she never heard somebody slip inside and get closer to her. It was when a hand came to rest on her bulging middle that she suddenly woke up, startled. The image of a handsome young brown-haired lad appeared before her still blurry eyes and she smiled pleasantly.

"Sorry to wake you, Ma," Jack said. "Why don't you go and have your nap in bed? You will get all crooked sleeping like that."

Lou struggled to sit straight on the sofa and when she finally got herself comfortable, she added, "No, it's fine. I was just resting my eyes for some minutes." She kept staring at her son in silence and marveled at the handsome youngster he had grown into. He was sixteen-years-old now and it seemed it was yesterday when he and Tommy had come into their lives. Time really flew by and Lou feared the day he met a girl and wanted to start his own family away from them. Yet, she knew that Jack would never be too far from them and the ranch. Since he left school, he devoted all his time working on the ranch and helping Kid with the business. His interest in horses hadn't diminished a bit since he was a young child and as he had grown older, he seemed to love the job even more, and Kid couldn't have a keener learner than Jack.

"You came back from town real quick," Lou said after a while. "Where's your brother, then?"

"Which one?" Jack asked, even though he strongly suspected who his mother meant. He tried to hide his smile as he was aware what lay behind Lou's curiosity.

"Tommy," she answered, noticing his badly-hidden smile.

"He stayed in town; bumped into Amy Palmer and was still talking to her when we left him," Jack explained, amusement shining in his eyes.

"He was so shy when younger and now so popular with girls," Lou muttered mainly to herself. Tommy was barely thirteen but Lou had to admit it was no wonder he awakened the interest of the girls his own age. He was a handsome and sweet boy, and Lou didn't know where or how he had gotten it, but he had a special way with girls. "My Tommy-boy," she let out with a sigh, feeling somehow melancholic for how quick he had grown up. She had always had a soft spot for him and it was now difficult to accept that this boy had grown and didn't need her so much.

"You'd better not let him hear you calling him that, Ma," Jack added. "You know, he ain't very fond of it now."

Lou snorted with an unhappy expression as she shook her head. "My, my, Mr. Big Tom," she said through clenched teeth. She knew that Tommy insisted that he wasn't a young child anymore and should be called Tom from now on. However, he would always be her sweet Tommy-boy to Louise however grown-up he was. Nothing could change that.

Jack grinned at her miffed attitude and bending over he kissed her on the cheek and said. "Don't be jealous, Ma. You know you're the only important girl in my brother's heart."

The boy began walking out of the room with a snicker in his mouth as Lou called, "I'm not jealous, young man!" Her son continued walking without paying any heed to her words. "I'm not, Jack!"

It was then that Kid stepped inside and as her words reached his ears he asked, "You are not what?"

"Nothing," she grumbled, folding her arms over her now ample bosom. Kid sat down next to her on the sofa and looking at him sideways Lou asked, "Where did you leave my children?"

He discreetly chuckled at her possessiveness as if he had nothing to do with those children she mentioned. Yet, he chose not to retort as he knew that she got easily irritated in the last month of pregnancy. He couldn't blame her for her bad mood as her growing size prevented her from moving freely and for a person as active as Lou, it could be really frustrating. "They're playing in the yard, he said, answering her question." "And Tom..."

"I know where Tommy is!" she exclaimed loudly, visibly annoyed.

"All right," Kid just said. They stayed in silence for a while and placing his hand over her swollen belly, he asked after a beat, "And how's the baby?"

Louise sighed deeply and added, "Not as restless as yesterday. I bet it's getting ready to give ma another sleepless night." Kid passed his arm over her shoulders tenderly while Lou rested her head against his chest. "I'm getting too old for this," Lou muttered. "This will be the last time."

"You said the same thing when Lizzie was born," Kid added, kissing the top of her head.

"I mean it this time. We already have enough children as it is," Lou continued. This was her fifth pregnancy in nine years. This one had been a surprise as she had thought she wouldn't have any more children or at least that had been her intention. Yet, when the doctor had told her that she was expecting again, Kid and she had received the news with great joy. Who'd have thought that she'd have a big family when there was a time that she had believe she couldn't have babies? Every one of her children was like a miracle, even those two she hadn't given birth to. Thinking back to those days where she hadn't cared about anything, Lou couldn't help but marvel at the way life had evolved around her and dug her soul out of the hole where she had decided to hide it. She had refused all help and been adamant to lead a life in isolation. And then out of the blue, like magic, Jack and Tommy had appeared changing everything she had firmly believed in. It had really been a turning point that was why those two sweet boys would always be so special to her. There was no difference in her heart between them and her other four children and she knew it was the same for Kid. Soon she would be holding her new baby and even though she was now complaining, she knew that she couldn't change the experience of being a mother again for anything. Things had been smooth with this pregnancy and Lou had barely felt any normal discomforts, but now that she was in the last stage, she was suffering the effects of the extra weight on her weary body.

"All right, as you wish, honey," Kid replied and as he looked down at her, he smiled at

seeing his wife sound asleep against his chest. Not a single day passed by that he didn't pray his thanks for all the blessings that he had been bestowed over the years. He had a wonderful family, the best present that Lou could ever give him. Lou ... there were no words to express what she meant in his life. She was everything for him since the day he had found her wounded in the yard of that way station and discovered her true gender. Since that very day, everything had changed; he couldn't think of his life without thinking of Lou. They had their ups and downs, but at the end of everything she was present in his every day and most importantly she was his future... a bright promising future.