Chapter 1

The ring tone was a different one than she was used to. Yet still, she reached out in order to pick up the receiver but the phone wasn't on its accustomed place either. The insistent tone, however, suddenly stopped and a deep voice right next to her said quietly, "Thanks, Maude."

Coming up from the soundest sleep she had experienced in years, Michaela tried to get her bearings. All she was able to remember was the desperate feeling of a final loss and a safety she had never known before. Suddenly, the mattress moved and a strong arm pulled her against a broad chest.

At this moment, it was all coming back. Her father was gone. He had asked her to come to Boston, realizing after a heart attack that it was only stupid pride that kept him away from the daughter he loved. Yet reuniting, they lost each other for good because of an infection that couldn't be stopped. But there was something else. In the middle of her sadness she had found the confidence to finally trust the man who was lying next to her with every fiber of her being. His hand lay on her stomach, covering almost all area between her navel and breasts. The warmth of his body seeped into hers and contently letting her lids droop again, she snuggled her back even closer to him.

Sully smiled. When Michaela invited him last night to share her hotel room with her he knew that she was ready to do the still missing last step in their relationship. Their first time together had been incredible and if he could have his way, he would stay with her in bed all day. Yet he couldn't. Nuzzling the soft, coppery hair he whispered into her ear, "Mornin'."

His breath moved some of the fine wisps on Michaela's temple. They tickled his nose and he pressed his face deeper into the silky mass as to chase away the sensation, even though it was a funny one. Feeling her move deeper into his embrace, he secretly sighed. Feeling her skin on his, smelling her unique scent almost drove him crazy. How he wished he could give in to his desires, making her cry out his name again! Yet clearing his throat, he informed her casually, "The kids wanna wake us."

When she only nodded he grinned, waiting for his words to sink in. As they at last did, Michaela sat up with a start, pulling the cover up to her chest, "Sully, we are naked!" Her voice betrayed that she was kind of horrified.

"Yeah." Sully wasn't able to suppress his amusement. Still chuckling, he added, "Maude thought so, that's why she called as to warn us."

Yet this new fact didn't lighten Michaela's embarrassment. With one hand already fishing under her pillow for her pajamas, her tone was somewhat shrill when she reiterated, clearly flustered now, "Maude thought so?"

"Michaela," Sully slid up in a sitting position as well, sobering. He reached for her arm, making her look at him. "Ya don't regret last night, do ya?"
She instantly softened. Blushing under his gaze she assured, "Of course not. It's just..."

Averting her eyes she looked at her hands that were fidgeting with the fabric of her pajamas she had just found. Taking a deep breath, her color even heightened when she searched for the right expression, "I don't know, Sully. I don't want Katie and Hannah to get confused..." Her voice trailed off again.

"They've already seen us sleepin' together," he pointed out, trying to understand her problem.

"I know." She glanced at him, giving one of her crooked smiles. "But that was different. We only slept together back then and didn't... I mean..."

Thinking he knew what she was struggling with, Sully relaxed. "They don't know what we did last night, Michaela."

"But Maude does," she blurted unhappily, yet he simply laid an arm around her shoulder, kissing the side of her head, "She's grown up. And so are we. No need to worry. Besides, I don't wanna get caught naked by the girls as well."

He had barely pulled his blue boxers on and Michaela her top and shorts when they heard the tapping of small feet before their door, accompanied by giggling.

Immediately, Sully took Michaela under the cover with him. "Let's pretend we're still asleep."

She couldn't see his mischievous grin yet she very soon realized that he didn't want to only tease their daughters. She had difficulties to breathe evenly as his hand slipped under her top, slowly wandering higher and higher, caressing her and tantalizing each pore of her skin.

Maude carefully looked into the room to see whether she could let in the little girls. She had still to get used to the sight of Dr. Mike in her daughter's place but Sully had made it clear to her that if she didn't, she couldn't participate in her granddaughter's life. Actually, the hardest part was to hear Hannah call the other woman 'Mommy' yet Maude was determined to accept it. She had already grown fond of the doctor's daughter Katie who was interrupting her musings at this moment, "Can we go in, Mrs. Bray?"

Quickly glancing in the direction of the bed again, she saw a grin tugging on Sully's lips. The older woman hoped that this was his way of telling her they were prepared for the girls to join them. Thus she simply stepped aside, making room for the children.

Although Hannah and Katie weren't related to each other, one would think they were twins despite the differences in their appearances. Similar in age, they had almost the same slender figure. Yet the blond-haired Katie had brown eyes while Hannah's were of the same blue like her father's. She had his curly hair as well, only that it was so dark that it could almost be called black. Anyway, since their first meeting at the kindergarten several months back, the little girls felt drawn to each other. The happiest day in both their short lives had been when their respective parent told them they would be real sisters soon.

Holding hands, they carefully tiptoed towards the bed. They only saw their mommy's face for their daddy lay behind her. Did she really still sleep? There, her lips twitched! The
children glanced at each other knowingly. As to suppress their own giggling, each of them covered her mouth with the free hand. Not wasting one more second, they didn't creep up anymore but rather jumped onto the mattress next to their mother. Hannah, still too shy as to shower her mommy's face with kisses as Katie was doing now, tried to tickle her on her sides instead. Yet she hadn't counted on her father who suddenly grabbed her, holding her above his head as if she were still a baby. Squealing in delight she cried, "Daddy!" until he let her down again.

The scene that played before her brought tears to Maude's eyes. Although Sully and the doctor weren't married yet it was clear that she saw a family celebrating the new day. A happy family, despite all the problems they had to solve yet.

It was Maude who gave them the first challenge of the day. As they all were gathered around the breakfast table in the hotel's dining room, she cleared her throat. "I had a call from Loren last night."

Sully nodded in understanding; he knew what was coming. Michaela, however, looked up from her plate, questioningly, "Is something wrong at home?"

"No," the older woman assured, "Loren only feels lonely." She smiled wryly.

Instantly, Michaela felt guilty. Although Sully's former mother-in-law had offered to accompany them of her own accord, she shouldn't have accepted it. After all, they were still strangers to each other. Laying down her knife and wiping her mouth with the napkin, Michaela swallowed. "Mrs. Bray, I'm very grateful that you came with me, helping with Hannah and Katie. But of course your husband needs you more."

She was already rising to her feet when she added, "I'll go to the reception as to look if they..."

Yet Maude covered Michaela's hand, which still lay on the table, in order to hold her back, "No need for that. I've already dialed them. They found a flight that leaves at half past ten. Unfortunately that does mean I have to set off really soon."

"It's alright," Sully chimed in, smiling reassuringly at Abigail's mother, "I'm here now. Thanks for bein' there for Michaela when I couldn't."

Wide-eyed, the little girls followed the conversation. "Mrs. Bray will leave?" Katie asked, insecure whether she had understood the adults right.

Hannah looked at her father hoping he would deny it. As Sully nodded in affirmation though, she instantly protested, "But we wanted to go to the zoo today!" As soon as the words were out, she glanced at her grandma, guilt written on her small face. This was supposed to be a secret.

For the children's sake, Sully tried to suppress any expression of disapproval hearing this news. He had once explained to his daughter why he didn't like places like a zoo. Realizing that he needed to talk to Maude about the principles he had for raising Hannah, he made an alternative suggestion instead, "I hoped you'd enjoy seein' the ocean, sweet girl."

Whilst father and daughter had a mute communication, the women looked at each other. They could tell that Sully was upset yet Michaela as well as Maude acknowledged that now wasn't the right time to ask questions.
As far as Katie was concerned, she was puzzled. Never before had she witnessed a disagreement between Hannah and her father. Thus she didn't know what was going on. Fortunately, her mommy's voice distracted her before she began to feel uneasy. "Sweetheart, did you already tell Hannah about the sailing ships in the harbor? Or the cruise ships that can have up to ten or even fourteen stories?"

Instantly, Michaela had Hannah's attention as well. "Fourteen?" It was obvious that the little girl thought her mommy was exaggerating.

"Yes, Katie and I have seen them," Michaela nodded. "Actually, you would do me a favor if you looked whether there is one. You could show it to me later today."

Hannah's face lit up and Michaela knew that this problem was settled for the moment. When she felt Sully's warm lips on her temple, she momentarily closed her eyes, wishing she could stay with her family all day. Yet she, too, couldn't have what she wanted.

An hour later, after she had said goodbye to Maude and Sully was on his way to the harbor with their daughters, Michaela rang the bell at the entrance of the house where she had spent her childhood and youth. Although she had only been away from this place for little more than six years, she felt like a stranger here now. Maybe it was the knowledge that this would never be her home again which added to her uneasiness.

However, when after a few moments of waiting her mother opened the door, all thoughts about herself fled. Taking in the petite figure in the doorway, the grayish complexion and the light shaking of the hands, Michaela realized for the first time that Elizabeth Quinn had grown old. "Good morning, Mom," she said softly and was surprised when she gained the attempt of a smile in response. Since Michaela had revealed that she was not only pregnant but would raise her child alone, her parents had only met her with disapproval. On her father's side it was mostly caused by disappointment about her failing yet her mother had simply and constantly been furious. Maybe they could finally make their peace as well.

Michaela had no way of knowing that they would have another confrontation only a few hours later, after the lawyer would finish reading her father's will.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Quinn smiled at Michaela because she had made up her mind. Josef forgiving their youngest daughter meant that she could do it as well. There were a few realizations and a late visitor yesterday that helped her with this decision though.

When all her family left after dinner last night, Elizabeth had tried to rest. Yet she had to realize that being on her own for the first time since Josef died was a challenge she wasn't prepared for. The house was quiet in a way that unsettled her. Although she had spent hours, even days alone before, this time she knew it was for good. The air in the empty rooms around her began to pile up and press on her chest which made it hard to breathe. That was why the doorbell's ring didn't annoy her but was a welcome distraction. She didn't recognize her visitor right away yet when he said his name, she froze on the threshold. After all, the rift between her and Michaela was partly Mr. Lewis' fault. Yet perfect gentleman manners when he offered his condolences made her step aside, letting
him in.

For an hour, he apologized for what he had done in the past, explaining his failing with the blindness of youth. He told the widow, who listened carefully, that he had already tried to right the wrong but chose an unsuccessful way to approach Michaela and his daughter. His words soothed Elizabeth’s troubled soul, making her think there was a realistic chance for all of them to correct the mistakes from the past.

Only when Mr. Lewis was gone, of course not without her inviting him to the reception after the funeral, did she remember the young man who accompanied Michaela. He had said for everyone to hear that he would move to Boston if Michaela wanted to live here. At this point, it did not matter to Elizabeth which man would be at Michaela’s side as long as she stayed. However, she needed to learn more about Mr. Sully. Remembering the book on Josef’s desk, she went down to his office as to get the copy that her husband had studied for weeks.

With something to read she felt she might be able to endure the bedroom that now belonged to only her. Yet she couldn't fall asleep after skimming over the pages. Mr. Sully wasn't a writer, only a collector. The tales were nice to read and the pictures beautiful to look at, but they were created by other persons. There was no creativity from her daughter's fiancé's side. The lack if this quality, however, hinted that there wouldn't be many more books from Mr. Sully in the future which meant he had to go back to his original profession. His biography on the cover said he worked as a waiter. A waiter for her daughter who graduated at the top of her year from Yale!

Elizabeth only fell asleep in the wee hours, making plans for how to convince Michaela that she should forgive David. One argument would be that it was always better when the real father raised the child rather than a stranger. The other one was that Michaela and David shared the same interests. What could be better than to work side by side with your husband? And she herself would watch Katie, teach her all the things a young girl should know. The way the child had spoken to her cousin at the dinner table last night couldn't be called polite.

With all those thoughts still fresh on her mind, Elizabeth welcomed her youngest almost warmly the next morning.

Michaela was the last one who arrived; the family together with the lawyer, Mr. Winterbottom, was already gathered in the living room. All her sisters had brought their husbands and she felt like an outsider once again, wishing that Sully were here. Yet she had asked him to take their daughters out, not wanting them to witness another confrontation between the adults. Fortunately, Rebecca had saved a chair next to her which brightened things up a bit.

The lawyer already had a sheet lying on the table before him and as soon as everyone sat, he started to read Josef Quinn’s last will without further ado. Knowing that the words spoke for themselves, he didn't look up from the paper even though gasps and whispers aroused very soon.

Michaela, however, was perfectly still, dumbfounded in fact. For some reason, she had anticipated that her father's wish would simply be that she led his practice, yet now she owned it. The practice was a large part of her parents' property and she had expected that all important material values, apart from some money for the daughters, would fall to her mother. She wasn't able to sort her feelings at this moment let alone respond to her
sisters. Her father wanted her to have everything: the premises, all equipment, which alone cost a fortune, and the list of patients, too. If she noticed that her mother seemed to not mind her husband's decisions, she thought nothing of it. Yet. Automatically returning Rebecca's smile she ignored her other sisters' scowls.

"Excuse me," she said, rising from her seat as if in trance. "I think I need some fresh air."

"Miss Quinn," the lawyer's voice stopped her on her way to the door, "I need you to sign some papers."

Slowly, she turned to him. "Right now?"

The man nodded, "It would save us both time."

Yet now the storm broke loose. "Mother! You can't allow that!"

"That's not fair! How can she get so much and you so little? And what about us?"

"Dad wasn't able to make decisions on his last days. He was far too sick!"

The three middle sisters continued protesting, giving each other the words. Elizabeth, however, silenced them, disapproval of their behavior audible in her tone, "First of all, your father made this decision the day Michaela graduated from medical school. Second, this practice already belonged to him before we married which means it was all his. And third, it is not up to you to judge your father's wishes."

Although Michaela heard all the arguments, they didn't reach her. She only continued looking at Mr. Winterbottom, finally responding, "Could you please give me a few minutes? I'll be right back."

Barely waiting for his nod, she hastily left the room. Her heart was pounding in her throat by now, her legs feeling weak. As a doctor she knew that the shock was setting in and she quickly sat down on the bench near the window in the hallway. Bending forward, she brought her head close to her knees, taking some deep breaths. Finally, her pulse slowed to a normal rate and she straightened, already beginning to think. Did the new facts change her mind? Well, she would find a solution. She was responsible for this practice now and she never shied away from responsibilities. Yet before she signed anything, she decided to call Matthew Cooper. He had helped her when David came to Colorado Springs and demanded to get Katie. She wanted the young man to be her adviser again, knowing she could trust him. Yet the first person she would consult was Sully. Sully... Thinking his name made her heartbeat quicken again but this time, it drummed a joyful rhythm.

It took Sully a bit of time before he eventually stood outside of the hotel as to start to the harbor with his daughters. They had left the building together with Michaela and Maude yet found that Hannah and Katie needed their cardigans because a cool breeze blowing from the ocean made them shiver. Once back inside, Sully decided to pull a sweatshirt on as well and so they went from the children's room to Michaela's. Yet now, each little girl needed to see the bathroom. They both had drunk far more than usual in the morning because they had detected a juice on the breakfast buffet which they simply loved.

However, back at this place Sully became distracted recalling the previous night. He thought nothing of it when the children didn't come back right away. After changing, he
sat down on Michaela's side of the bed. His expression became dreamy, remembering every moment of them being together. Of course making love to Abigail had always been great yet this time, he had experienced more than the union of two bodies. There had been a sense of oneness he had never felt before. He didn't know how to describe it but he knew he wanted to relive it again as soon as possible.

Beginning to make plans for the evening, he suddenly became aware that Katie and Hannah were still in the bathroom. After clearing his throat he raised his voice somewhat, "What happened in there? Has someone fallen in?"

Giggling told him that they were alright and after a short knock he opened the door. A perfume cloud was telling him what they had been doing and he disapprovingly arched his eyebrows. He didn't have to add one word; both culprits reddened and looked down at their feet.

After this, it had taken them a while until one of the receptionists had time to tell them how to get to the harbor. Eventually back outside, Sully's cell phone rang. He didn't look at the number for he was sure it was Michaela yet the voice he heard sounded unfamiliar first. However, after a few words he recognized it. His editor, Mr. Evans, was calling, telling him that he knew from Cloud Dancing that Sully was in town. "Could we meet? I have an idea I'd like to discuss," the man at last asked.

"Right away?"

"If you don't mind. I'm free till lunch."

The suggestion was tempting because it meant meeting with the editor now wouldn't shorten his time with Michaela later. But Sully still hesitated looking down at the little girls' questioning faces. "I'm on my way to the harbor with my daughters. I promised to show them the ships," he at last responded.

"I see." A short silence indicated that Mr. Evans was contemplating what to do and actually, he continued after a few moments, "Well, how about the four of us take a little harbor cruise together? There is one that lasts only forty-five minutes. The children can watch the surroundings and we can have our talk."

Mr. Evans knew Sully's financial situation and thus he quickly added, "I'll buy the tickets. They will go on my expense account."

Although Sully hadn't even thought about the money yet, the last words decided the matter.

They took the MTBA Blue line to the Aquarium and met the editor in time to go aboard right after their arrival. Since it was a usual working day, the ship was quite empty and they easily found a table next to a window. After making sure that the little girls were comfortable, Sully looked expectantly at Mr. Evans who took the hint, "Mr. Sully, I think it would be good if we changed the concept for your book." Seeing his author suspiciously frowning, he hurried to go on, "Actually, you yourself gave me the idea. You made me laugh with the comments you wrote as to explain how you found some of the stories. We know that people love to read about personal experiences rather than only dry facts."

Peter Evans could tell that he now had all the attention he needed. "That is why I want to suggest to turn the book into a report, or even better a diary."
Sully slowly nodded. He had already thought about this as well. At the book signings, people often asked him how he found the tales and how getting to know a Cheyenne medicine man influenced his life. Thus he responded, "Sounds reasonable. I'll think about it."

Knowing the man across from him a bit by now, Peter Evans smiled. His suggestion had fallen on fertile ground, and this was all he had hoped for.

While Hannah's nose almost touched the window when she excitedly watched all the ships of different sizes, Katie became more and more withdrawn. Since their arrival here, a strange feeling was growing inside of her. The way people in this town spoke the words, the smell of the air and now being on this ship made her inexplicably sad. The last time she had made a harbor cruise was when her mommy and she had celebrated both their birthdays, which were only two days apart, shortly before they moved to Colorado Springs. Although the two of them didn't have guests, it was an afternoon the little girl remembered as a very happy one. The child had never heard of a feeling called homesickness but she clearly suffered from it, suddenly yearning to be with her mommy and even growing misty-eyed.

Since the men were done with the professional talk, Mr. Evans started to explain some buildings they passed. Sully grinned hearing Hannah torturing him with all kinds of questions. Of course he noticed that Katie, who still sat with her back to him, didn't ask but he thought it was because she knew about all these things. Yet when she didn't join their laughter, he gently touched her shoulder in order to make her turn to him, wondering worriedly, "Kates, ya alright?"

Seeing the trail of a tear on Katie's cheek he didn't hesitate to lift her on his lap. Tenderly wiping the moisture from the soft skin he started rocking her, "What's wrong, sweet girl? Tell me."

Pressing her face against her daddy's strong chest, the little girl felt safe but still whispered, "Can we go to Mommy, please?"

"Sure," Sully replied, "As soon as we leave this ship. To be honest, I miss her, too."

As he gained a watery smile, he knew all was well again for his daughter.

Chapter 3

The day had taken its toll on Michaela. First, Mr. Winterbottom didn't like her decision to wait for her lawyer from Colorado Springs. He had expected to finish the business with Josef Quinn's last will quickly because there were, in his opinion, no open questions, and he wanted to go on vacation the day after tomorrow. In the end the man softened somewhat after Michaela dialed Matthew Cooper, who assured he would arrive in Boston this very evening and even promised a meeting at her hotel, coming right from the airport.

The fact that Michaela stayed in the Omni Parker House had caused the next confrontation. Elizabeth instantly insisted that she and her granddaughter move back home. When her youngest flatly refused, Elizabeth realized too late that she had made a mistake. Quickly offering a room for Mr. Sully and Hannah as well didn't improve the situation. For Michaela leaving her fiancé and other daughter out of the initial invitation
meant that her way of life was still not accepted. Her nerves were shot and it was only after Rebecca's mediation that she eventually agreed to come back for dinner with all her family.

Fortunately she could spend the afternoon with Sully and the little girls. They took a bus ride in order to see a place on the shore that had been Katie's and her favorite whenever they wanted to see the ocean. While the children cheered her up, Michaela found that Sully wasn't much help. When she asked him to contemplate with her what to do about the practice, he told her not to worry yet but rather wait for what Matthew would find out. She, however, couldn't make the wheels stop turning in her head. What should she do?

Fortunately, all her sisters were quiet about their father's will during dinner. The mood was strained though and Michaela was already on edge again knowing she would have to make a decision that might change her life completely.

It was almost midnight when she finally said goodbye to the young lawyer. He had affirmed everything Mr. Winterbottom had told her. She was the owner of her father's practice now. No one could object because it had never been a part of the marital property. The money her sisters had received could be seen as compensation for the profit he had made over the years but they wouldn't be able to lay their hands on her inheritance in any case.

Michaela was dog-tired as she climbed up the stairs to the floor where the children's and her room was.

Sully had promised to stay with the little girls until she came back. She expected to see him reading or maybe even writing yet when she carefully opened the door, the room was dark. The lights from outside made it bright enough for her to not bump into the furniture though. Thus she tiptoed to the huge double bed with her daughters. They lay in peaceful slumber and Michaela smiled at the sight. A move from behind made her turn, and there in the other bed lay Sully, sound asleep, too.

Somewhat forlornly, Michaela stood between the two beds. The children were safe with Sully here and she could go to her own room. She didn't want to though. Of course she knew that nothing would happen between her and Sully with their daughters right next to them but she needed to feel his arms around her.

And then she saw them, neatly folded lying on the chair: her pajamas. For the first time that day, a happy smile crossed her face. Sully wanted her to stay...

Only a few minutes later, Michaela tentatively lifted the cover and climbed in the bed. Although he wasn't awake, Sully shifted as to pull her close so that her back was spooned against his chest. Their bodies fit together as if they were one: he was the protecting shell around her vulnerability. Engulfed by his arms and the warmth of his love, she finally relaxed falling asleep almost immediately.

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"I ain't lettin' ya go through this alone." Sully bent towards Michaela, covering her hand on the table with his. He was making use of the fact that their daughters had just left in order to get some more juice from the breakfast buffet. They started discussing the subject when they woke up, still in a lovers' embrace. Every time the children were out of earshot, each insisted on only wanting the best.
"Sully, I considered it thoroughly. I don't want Katie and Hannah to come to the funeral, and you are the only one I can ask to look after them." Although her tone betrayed some impatience, her gaze was soft as she searched his eyes.

Sully sighed audibly; he was in a quandary. Whilst silently admitting that Michaela was right about the kids he knew by judging her pale face that she needed someone at her side today. Frowning he contemplated again what to do as two young voices squealing in delight distracted him.

Michaela and he instantly turned as to learn what their daughters were cheering at. In total surprise they saw Hannah and Katie clinging to Colleen Cooper, the nurse who worked with Michaela at the hospital in Colorado Springs. Jumping with joy the little girls dragged her to their table. Michaela's puzzlement even grew when she found the young woman's expression showing some sense of guilt. Yet before she could say anything, Colleen anticipated her, "Good morning, Dr. Mike, Sully. I'm sorry, I should have told you..." She blushed as her voice trailed off for a moment.

"Tell me what?" Michaela encouraged her to go on, still bewildered though.

"I came with Matthew last night but I asked him to not tell you that this trip had been planned for a while." Now, that she had started, the words came easier. "Andrew and I will have our engagement party this weekend."

Somewhat anxious, the young woman watched how her boss took this news.

"That's wonderful, congratulations!" Michaela's tone was sincere but revealed her surprise that this was a secret.

Sully was faster in realizing what it was that unnerved Colleen. "You're gonna move here?" he asked and finally Michaela understood, too. She might lose her best nurse.

"Oh, we don't know yet," Colleen hastily assured. "Andrew wouldn't mind coming to Colorado either."

Hannah, tired of listening to the adult's talk, tugged at her big friend's sleeve to get her attention, "Ya stay with us today?"

"Or we could go to the playground at the Common. Can we, Mommy, please?" Katie pleaded.

Michaela was too relieved about this sudden solution of their problem as to amend her daughter's choice of words. "Of course, Sweetheart," she agreed and, looking up at Colleen, added, "Thank you, so much."

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The day was an especially beautiful one as if to mock the mourners that were gathered at
the gravesite. At least Elizabeth saw it this way. If it had rained, she could have hidden under a black umbrella. But now she had to sit under a high blue sky, feeling exposed to everyone's eyes. She desperately tried to focus on the words that were spoken, hoping to make herself forget the emptiness she felt. It should have been a consolation to have all her daughters sitting beside her, yet now it wasn't. She wasn't a mother at this moment but a woman who had lost the only constant in her life. Although it sometimes had been as if Josef spent more time with his patients than with her, he would eventually return to their home. From now on he wouldn't. There was no reason anymore to take care whether there were enough clean white coats in his wardrobe. Never again would she make sure that he took a meal at least after work; during work he easily forgot to eat. She would stop studying advertisements for Josef, the ones where they offered old books because her husband collected first editions of classical authors. There was no husband anymore.

Suddenly a movement at the end of the row of chairs, which had been put next to the grave for her and her daughters, caught Elizabeth's attention. While all her sons-in-law stood in an appropriate distance from the chair of their wives, Mr. Sully had just stepped forward, laying his hands on Michaela's shoulders. At this sight, Elizabeth finally found the distraction she had hoped for. How could she convince Michaela that Dr. Lewis was the better choice for all of them?

Sully had seen to it that Michaela knew she wasn't alone. All the time during the service at church he held her hand. When they had to walk, he offered his arm. At the gravesite, however, he followed the other men's example, standing behind his fiancée's chair at a distance. Every family had its rules and he didn't know the Quinn's well enough yet as to disturb their habits. But his eyes never left Michaela. Although he only saw her back he could tell that she was upset. She looked so fragile in her black costume that his throat constricted and he swallowed hard. When she at last lifted her hand as to wipe at her cheek, Sully just had to make her feel his presence again. He didn't care about what the others might think but stepped forward, covering Michaela's shoulders with his palms. As she leaned back in his touch he could breathe easier again.

Michaela instantly felt as if connected with a new source of power. Since she had opened her eyes in the morning, her thoughts revolved around the decision she had to make. The speeches that were held in the memory of her father didn't make things easier. Everyone praised him, but she couldn't do that. He had supported her as long as she could think and she adored him in return. When the letter arrived that she was accepted as medical student, her father called her into his office and they had made a pact. She had promised to study as hard as she could as to become a good doctor, and her dad had promised to make her his partner after she graduated. He had shown her the paragraph about his practice that would be added to his will. When they celebrated the finishing of her first year, he showed her the copy of the certified document. She didn't know why her mother had told her sisters otherwise yesterday. Fact was, that the knowledge that her father believed in her abilities had helped her through the hard times of her study. Yet when she needed his support the most, he demanded the impossible. She couldn't abandon her child and thus he disowned her. She had forgiven him, but she could never forget.

So what should she do with her inheritance? Actually, her first thought had been to simply disclaim it. Yet now she wasn't so sure anymore. Her father never changing his testament, even not when he refused to talk to her, could only mean he trusted her professional abilities. Feeling Sully's mute support she suddenly knew what to do. She was a doctor and there was a practice with patients. She wouldn't leave them in the lurch. Her first step would be to sign the papers in the afternoon.
It wasn't a long way from the Central Boston Common Cemetery to the Quinn residence. That was why family and friends simply walked the distance, taking the opportunity to breathe deeply. Michaela felt both, relief because she had made a decision and the burden that came with it. Sully had only asked her earlier whether she was alright and simply offered his arm for her to hold on it when she said yes. Yet with every step they took she felt that she needed to share her thoughts and thus she slowed down her pace somewhat. Sully took the hint, looking at her questioningly.

"I will sign the papers," she told him quietly, searching his eyes for any reaction.

Sully nodded in response, he hadn't anticipated her to do otherwise. Yet he felt an unexpected sudden pang of sadness realizing he would actually have to leave his hometown.

Michaela, however, continued, "I'm still considering though what to do with the practice. As far as I can see, I have three options..."

"Michaela!" It was her mother's voice. "Are you coming?"

Without noticing it, they had fallen behind quite a bit. That was why they couldn't see the man waiting in front of the house yet. But as soon as they were close enough Michaela recognized him. Not caring about the looks she received from the others, she exclaimed, "David! What are you doing here?"

Not only Sully heard the mix of terror and annoyance in her voice.

Chapter 4

For Michaela it was as if suddenly all people around her vanished and the picture was reduced to just her and David having a confrontation again. She very well remembered their last encounter. He had suddenly shown up in Colorado Springs, claiming he was ready for family life. Of course she refused to resume their relationship, and she wouldn’t have done it even if she hadn’t met Sully. She had made a clean break with Katie's biological father years ago - the moment he left her after learning about her pregnancy. When she continued resisting his plans only a few months ago, David had eventually dropped his friendly attitude and demanded to get his daughter. He actually went to court and only gave in as he realized that he would have to pay a fortune before the law would allow him to make the first step into Katie's life.

Michaela wasn’t afraid of David but she feared what his presence might do to her little girl. She was glad that the children weren’t here yet and her only hope was to get rid of this man before they came back from the playground. Her stomach churned as he was now greeting her in a pleasant tone, "Hello, Michaela. It's nice to see you."

She instantly recognized the smile he gave her as a false one. Realizing that this was a new attempt to approach her, Michaela’s annoyance gained the upper hand. She glared at David who kept standing next to the entrance, waiting for her to step closer. She knew she couldn’t start a discussion in front of all the guests and thus she stayed silent for the moment. Only after the others had entered the house did she reiterate, addressing David angrily, "What are you doing here?"
"Michaela!" Elizabeth had heard her and came back, setting her daughter straight in a stern tone, "Dr. Lewis is here because I invited him. After all, he has a connection to our family."

Feeling reprimanded as if she were a child again, Michaela reddened. Yet she instantly caught herself. There was no reason for her to feel embarrassed. She was a grown woman who had built her own life. David didn't belong there anymore even though her mother seemed to have other wishes. Raising her chin, Michaela glanced at her, "Well, he certainly doesn't have a connection to me anymore." Turning to David she added in an icy tone, "I hope you haven't already forgotten about our agreement."

"Michaela," Elizabeth sighed exasperatedly, "Please do me the favor and don't start a quarrel now. Not today."

Knowing that her arguments would remain unheard anyway, Michaela nodded. She would have liked to simply turn around and leave this place, yet she couldn't. She needed to sign the papers, and it had to be done now. She didn't want to cause Mr. Winterbottom more distress than she already had; she shouldn't delay things again.

And there was something else: Sully and she had walked arm in arm. The moment they spotted David, Sully's hand covered hers on his forearm. Looking up at him now, his eyes reassured her that they would manage the situation. Feeling him gently squeezing her fingers, she instantly calmed down, a short smile crossing her face. Deciding to disregard David's presence, Michaela turned as to enter the house. However, unbeknownst to her, Sully flashed a warning gaze at the other man before he followed suit.

The catering service had prepared a buffet in the dining room. The connecting door to the living room was open and the guests wandered around or stood in small groups, eating tidbits from the plates they carried, talking quietly.

Michaela was with Mr. Winterbottom in her father's office in order to finish the formalities which left Sully alone among strangers. He didn't mind though; he was here as to support the woman he loved. Yet the more minutes passed, the more uncomfortable he felt. He did his best as to ignore the glances cast in his direction or the scraps of conversation that reached his ears. It was obvious that most of those present thought him a man who simply wanted to marry well. Although these whispered remarks shouldn't affect him, they did. Self doubts he thought left behind crawled out from the back of his mind. It was not only the fancy Quinn residence that reminded him Michaela grew up in a family that could be called rich. As the owner of her father's practice she was wealthy herself now. He would never be able to earn enough money to match this. From the outside, he didn't differ from the men around him yet he was suddenly acutely aware of the fact that he hadn't paid for the suit he wore. Beginning to feel like an alien at this place, Sully decided to rather wait for Michaela outside.

Yet David had secretly watched the man who stood between him and his goal. He usually was a good judge of the human nature; Michaela was one of the very few exceptions where he had failed. However, this time he was sure that he read Mr. Sully right. He still knew Michaela well enough as to notice that something had changed for the couple since his visit in Colorado Springs. Grinning to himself knowingly, he already knew how to bring the fiancé out of his shell.
Seeing Sully start towards the door he went in the same direction, waylaying him as if purely by chance. Putting on a faked smile he started the game he knew he would win. If someone would happen to watch their conversation he would swear later that Dr. Lewis had done nothing as to provoke Sully.

"You aren't leaving already, are you?" David began, sounding astonished.

Sully, still caught in his own thoughts, was stunned for a moment. What did this guy want from him? He didn't have time to respond for David already continued, "You shouldn't be intimidated by this surrounding or the fact that almost everyone in this room has a university degree."

Realizing that David wanted to provoke him, Sully tried to calm his rising temper. It was a complete mystery to him how Michaela could have ever fallen for this man. Deciding to not reply he resumed walking out of the room. Yet he didn't get far because David stepped in his way again, grinning confidently, "You ought to use this opportunity and introduce yourself, make first contacts to the people you will meet more often from now on. But you are right to rather leave. If you tell them that you are a waiter you might be asked to serve the drinks."

Although David could see that his words were working, he didn't gain the wished reaction yet. Thus he went on, scrutinizing Sully from top to toe, "I admit that Michaela still has taste but I think you know by now that she has certain expectations..."

"Ya sure didn't meet them," Sully cut him off, louder than he intended though. Until now, no one had paid attention to the two of them but upon his angry tone the first heads turned in their direction.

That was what David had waited for; his voice was still low when he capped it all, "But obviously I can handle her better than you. I didn't have to propose as to get her into my bed."

This did it. Seeing red, Sully grabbed the collar of David's jacket, pulling him close so that their faces were only inches away from each other. Hissing through clenched teeth he threatened, "Ya stay away from her or I..."

"Mr. Sully!" Elizabeth sounded horrified. "I beg your pardon!"

As if wakening, Sully looked around finding all eyes on them. Seeing not only disapproval but also disgust he realized that he had walked right into the other man's trap. Letting out a long breath, he loosened his grip yet not without shoving David, who dramatically stumbled backwards, away. Without saying one word, Sully stormed out of the room. He didn't stop in the hallway as to wait for Michaela though. Frustrated mostly with himself because he had lost his temper, he left the house, needing fresh air and some solitude as to catch himself and contemplate the situation. What if David wouldn't give up trying to push his way back into Michaela's life? After all, he was Katie's father. What about Mrs. Quinn? She seemed to be willing to get back in her daughter's life as well. With her own practice, Michaela would have to work even longer now; what would this do to their relationship?

Suddenly, he wished he could turn and look at Pike's Peak. This mountain, as old as life itself, always soothed him in a strange way because it reminded him that he was only a tiny piece of nature and instantly the importance of his problems dwindled as well. Would
he ever be able to cope with living in Boston?

Half an hour after Sully left the Quinn residence, Michaela and the lawyer were done. They made sure one last time that everything was settled and then they joined the others. When Michaela was about to enter the room, Elizabeth rushed towards her. Grabbing her youngest’ arm, she instantly led her out again. Yet Michaela resisted, "Mother, what are you doing?"

Elizabeth, however, only responded as they were out of earshot, her indignation audible, "Your Mr. Sully owes Dr. Lewis an apology. He attacked him in front of all guests!"

"Attacked?" Incredulously, Michaela looked at her mother. "How? Why?"

"I simply gave him some pointers on how to make himself fit into the Boston society."

Without them noticing it, David had been following the two women, surprising them now with his explanation.

Instantly, Michaela leapt to her fiancé's defense, glaring at David, "I don't even have to learn what pointers you gave as to know that Sully had every right to get angry."

"Michaela!" Elizabeth looked at her in disbelief, "Do you actually think that a man who attacks another one physically is the right choice for you? And as to Dr. Lewis, we all make mistakes and he assured me that he regrets his. Shouldn't you consider forgiving him? He is a good man and..."

"He's a bastard."

Startled by the calmly but sarcastically spoken remark everyone jumped, turning as to look at the speaker.

It wasn't so that Marjorie Quinn saw any reason for supporting her little sister yet she had heard the exchange between the two men before Mr. Sully flipped out. Actually, men in general were in her bad books today. She learned in the morning that Everett, despite his promises that he wouldn't do it again, still betrayed her. He wasn't able to deny it after she found a restaurant bill in his suit, a bill that was evidence that he hadn't spent his evenings at the office as he had assured her.

That was why she took this opportunity as to pay at least one man back. Spitefully, she informed her mother, "First this guy here suggested to Mr. Sully that he should serve the drinks rather than to try and have a conversation with anyone in the room. Right after that, he declared himself the winner in the race of who was faster as to get Michaela in his bed." Marjorie snorted in disgust. Crossing her arms before her chest she turned as to look out of the window again, adding cynically, "Finding out who is the better seducer obviously is an important competition for men."

A stunned silence followed this revelation. Incredulously, Elizabeth looked at David. For a split second, he didn't have his expression under control. This short moment, however, was enough for Elizabeth as to realize that Marjorie had spoken the truth. This man didn't want to be a good husband and father; he had simply seen that Michaela was a good match with the practice she owned now. As hard as it was, she had to admit that she had been fooled.
"You better leave," Elizabeth said quietly to Dr. David Lewis and her tone made it clear that she didn't want to see him again, ever.

Chapter 5

Michaela didn't wait until her mother was done with David. Carefully she approached her sister, tentatively touching her arm as to get her attention before she asked, "Do you know where Sully is now?"

Marjorie's mood hadn't improved in the least and thus she replied indignantly, "I thought you were omniscient. He's a man, Michaela! He took off; that's what they always do."

Sighing, Michaela acknowledged that Marjorie wouldn't be a help and decided to first search for Sully in front of the house. Yet there was no sign of him as she stepped out, looking around. Instinctively, her hand went to her jacket pocket. As she, however, pulled out the cell phone in order to see whether he had sent a message, her gaze only met a black screen. Remembering that they turned off their mobiles before the service in the morning, she hastily typed her code as to bring it to life again. Yet neither a text waited for her nor a missed call was reported. As she dialed his number she was informed that no one was available at the moment. Thus she fished in her pocket again, this time for the calling card of the hotel. Yet he wasn't there either.

While her concern slowly turned into frustration, she contemplated what to do. Looking for him would be useless; she had no idea where to even start. It seemed to be the only solution to simply wait for his return. Yet would he come back here? Or rather go to the hotel? What should she tell their daughters?

As if the little girls had heard her thinking of them, their boisterous giggles startled Michaela out of her troubled thoughts.

Turning, she saw them approaching but they didn't simply walk. Obviously, they had made a new friend at the playground who was trying to catch at least one of them, running around Colleen while doing so. Yet every time he came close to one of the girls, the other one distracted him by calling his name so that he changed his direction. Indulgently, Michaela shook her head while her eyes lit up. Silently, she admired Colleen for her tolerance. The young woman only stopped in her tracks now and then as to avoid stumbling over the children, but a soft smile never left her face. However, Michaela was sure that a big part of the reason for Colleen's patience was that her hand was firmly clasped into Dr. Andrew Cook's.

Michaela couldn't help it; the corners of her mouth turned up at this sight. Looking at her feet as to not miss the steps down onto the sidewalk, she started towards the group yet a frantic cry made her head jerk up again.

As if time had jumped ahead, the picture before Michaela's eyes had changed dramatically. The little boy lay curled up on his side on the ground, pulling his knee against his chest with both hands, blood seeping through his fingers. Hannah and Katie stood hand in hand, watching in helpless horror while Colleen, Andrew and a young woman crouched down next to the whimpering child.

"Pete," the woman tried to soothe her son, brushing his hair from his brow, "Mommy is here. I'll take you to doc Quinn, we are right before his house. He'll help you." Looking at Andrew she pleaded, "Could you please carry him; it's right over there."
The young doctor glanced at Colleen, unsure about how to reply yet now Michaela was there as well. She had heard every word and quickly reacted, "I’m Dr. Michaela Quinn and this is Dr. Cook. We will take care of your son."

As they entered her father’s examination room, Michaela felt as if it was six years earlier. Everything was still on its usual place which, of course, made things easier now. Being used to emergencies, she had immediately analyzed the situation. Obviously, the little boy had skidded on some pieces of broken glass from a shattered streetlamp. The thin fabric of his trousers was torn and not only scratches were to be seen but a deep, heavily bleeding cut under his kneecap as well. As to avoid serious blood loss she knew they had to act quickly.

In a calm voice she gave instructions to everyone, already handing Dr. Cook a pair of scissors. "Please remove the trousers," she said before she turned to the child's mother, "If you want to stay, please sit down next to the table. It would be good if you talked to your son. Colleen," she continued without wasting one breath, "Please go to the house phone next to the door to the office over there. Press zero and when someone answers, ask for my mother to come. I need her to take care of my daughters."

"Sure," Colleen instantly ushered the little girls towards the other side of the room. Seeing their distress, she hurried to dial.

For about twenty minutes Michaela and the young couple worked like a well-established team. When they cleaned up afterwards, waiting for the boy's father to come and take his family home, Michaela had the distinct feeling that the solution for her problem was already with her in this room.

Sully strolled along unknown streets, yet not caring for his surrounding anyway. He had ruined it. Once again he got carried away. It didn't matter that he had been provoked. He simply didn't belong here. However, this wasn't about him but Michaela; she could finally live her dream, working in the rooms that were meant to be hers for ages. Now she actually owned them; he would be selfish if he would ask her to go back home with him. And there was more. Remembering the happy expression on her face when they were on the shore of the ocean, something in his chest tightened. For her this view promised freedom yet he had rather felt lost at the sight of the vast water desert.

But he had promised... and he could do it because worse than the thought of living among those people, in this place where he felt he didn't belong, was the prospect of making Michaela unhappy or, and this was the most horrifying scenario he could think of, losing her.

Since she stepped into his life, everything had changed. For five years, he lived with Hannah like a hermit; they only had each other. He worked at the café, and his daughter went to the kindergarten. Their free time they spent together. It was a simple and quiet life; they both were content with it. And then, one day not even six months ago, Michaela sat before him, ordering a whole-meal muffin and a large coffee. When she glanced up and their eyes locked for this tiny moment, he instantly saw it and knew she felt it, too - the inexplicable bond that pulled them together. But it wasn't only about him, for Hannah
life was enriched in a way he had never dreamed of. She had a mother of flesh and blood now and even gained a sister.

So he would do it; he would leave Colorado. He wasn’t bound to a certain place in order to write his book. When he wanted to see the mountains, he could visit Cloud Dancing. He had to do this anyway; he couldn’t write a diary without living the things he told the readers. And he would keep his place in Colorado Springs; a small house for them to spend holidays arose before his eyes... There was a reasonable solution for the problems he would face living in Boston, everything would work out just fine. But why didn’t this knowledge make him feel better?

As his thoughts wandered in circles, his feet simply moved. Yet the longer he walked, the more the pressure on his temples increased. The sunlight began to sting his eyes and he eventually looked up as to find out where he was. To his surprise, he was across from the hotel and without thinking he crossed the street. Not even screeching brakes brought him fully to his senses for now he began to feel sick. When he at last entered the foyer and the receptionist called in his direction that there was a message for him, he didn’t react but went straight to the stairs. He couldn’t remember ever experiencing a headache like the one that tortured him now, and all he wanted was to lie down, close his eyes and stop thinking.

…………………………………………………

"Mom, can we talk?" Michaela knew that she had to tell her mother about her decision as soon as possible even though she hadn’t spoken with Dr. Cook yet. She had made up her mind, and if the young man would reject her offer, she would look for someone else to take it. Meeting her mother alone in the hallway gave her the opportunity to have the conversation right now.

Elizabeth looked warily at her youngest. She knew that tone; it meant Michaela wasn’t open to persuasion. They had been through this before. Sighing, she nodded but as to stall for time, she started talking about the little girls while she preceded her daughter towards the room that Josef had called his library. "You’ve brought up Katie and Hannah well, Michaela. I’m sure they are no angels but their good behavior is remarkable."

"Thank you, Mom, but the credit for Hannah goes to Sully." Michaela wanted her mother to acknowledge this truth. "I met her only half a year ago." Gaining no response she tried to keep her tone light, "By the way, what are the children doing?"

"They are drawing pictures for your room." Elizabeth was glad that she didn’t have to talk about Mr. Sully yet. Since she had only concentrated on Dr. Lewis as a suitable husband, she couldn’t present a new candidate right away.

Only when they sat across from each other in the large wingback chairs, did she continue, "They seem to like this room. We can make it theirs and..."

"Mom," Michaela bent forward, touching her mother’s lightly shaking hands she held clasped on her lap for a moment, patiently waiting until their eyes finally met. "I won’t move back to Boston."

Although she already knew that it was useless, Elizabeth protested. "But you have to! You agreed to take your father’s practice. You can’t manage it living in Colorado. Even your Mr. Sully could see that and told you in front of all of us that he will come here with..."
"Of course he said so; he loves me. But I love him, too, and I know that he is..." She hesitated, searching for the right expression. Finding it at last, her eyes sparkled as she continued, "... a mountain man rather than a sailor. He could never be happy here."

Instantly, Elizabeth's temper rose. "So this is all because of a man again? Haven't you learned yet? And where is your Mr. Sully anyway?"

"I didn't have time to contact him yet," Michaela lied as to avoid discussing his disappearance. But to herself she admitted that his running away began to annoy her. "I will do it as soon as I told you what I'm planning to do.

"First of all," she continued, "I'm doing this only for myself and not for anyone else. This is the lesson life taught me, Mom, to never make important decisions because you want to please other people, fulfill their expectations rather than your own." Seeing that her mother understood, she softened. "I am the assistant medical director of the pediatric ward of the Colorado Community Hospital, and that's exactly the job I want to do. I will rent Dad's practice, this way it will still belong to the family."

"But..." Elizabeth tried to object. Michaela, however, went on, "I might already have found the right doctor... even though that will cost me our best nurse."

"But..." Elizabeth tried again yet her youngest was determined, "I know that you feel uncomfortable with the imagination that you have to share the house with strangers. That is why I thought we could simply close the door to Dad's office for good; all the other rooms are in the extension of the house. This way, no one can disturb your privacy here. What do you think?"

Sinking against the back of her chair, Elizabeth closed her eyes. She was touched that Michaela had kept her welfare in mind when she had made her decision. Yet all she replied was, "I will be all alone here then."

Trying to ignore the rising feeling of guilt Michaela responded, "Rebecca is back in town for good. I'm sure she would love to have your assistance with her new aid project. Maybe she even needs an office... And I will stop by here, too. After all, I will have to look after my practice."

Seeing her mother relax somewhat, she at last straightened, "If you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make."

Not gaining a reply, she left the library anyway, her cellphone already in her hand. Stopping in front of the window in the hallway, she dialed Sully's number only learning that he still wasn't available. With her frustration slowly turning into anger, she pressed the keys again, waiting for the hotel to answer. Yet when the receptionist told her that Mr. Sully hadn't taken her message but looked as if he didn't feel well, her attitude instantly changed. "I'm coming," she responded, worry now audible in her voice.

Chapter 6

Michaela carefully ventured deeper into the almost dark room. As soon as she spotted Sully on the bed, she turned and went back to the worried looking receptionist, speaking
quietly, "Thank you for opening the door. I'll take care of Mr. Sully now."

Yet the young man knew his duties. Seeing the tightly closed curtains and remembering Mr. Sully's pale expression he decided, "I'd rather see which physician is on call and..."

Michaela smiled and lifting her medical bag in order to prove her words right she replied, "Thank you for your concern, but the doctor is already here."

Although Sully heard people talking, he didn't budge. He was sure that he would feel sick again as soon as he moved. The bathroom seemed to be miles away at the moment and he wasn't sure whether he would make it there if necessary. Suddenly feeling a hand on his forehead he flinched, groaning.

"Shh," Michaela soothed, "Can you tell me how you're feeling?"

Recognizing her voice, he was relieved yet only momentarily. There was something he needed to tell her but he simply couldn't remember what it was. All he knew was that it was important...

"Sully?" Gently stroking his hair, Michaela tried again, seeing that he was in pain, "Where does it hurt?"

"Uh... my head..." he at last responded, keeping his eyes closed. Yet when he sensed that she was about to take her hand away, he grasped it clutching her fingers, "Don't go..."

"I won't," she promised, "But please, let me examine you."

"Uhuh," he moaned his agreement and slowly rolled on his back. If he could only remember what he wanted to tell her...

As Michaela opened one of the curtains so she could see better, the light penetrated his lids as if it was made of daggers and he instantly pressed his hand over his eyes. Seeing his reaction, she quickly covered the window with the fabric again, asking, "Have you ever had a migraine before?"

A migraine? The word sounded familiar. When he was still a little boy a doctor had used this term... A doctor... He didn't know why, but at this moment it all was coming back to him: He needed to assure Michaela that he would move with her to Boston. It was, however, difficult to speak; every muscle protested against his intention to use it.

Noticing his struggling, Michaela rushed back to his side. Sitting down on the edge of the bed she bent over him, brushing his hair back from his brow. "Sully, I have to know..."

"I'll go with ya, no matter where," he finally managed, misinterpreting her line.

For a moment puzzled, she regarded his face that was contorted in pain. Yet then she understood.

"Oh Sully," she breathed. "I haven't had time to tell you yet. There is no need to move. We will live in Colorado Springs, just like we've planned." In order to emphasize her statement, she tenderly kissed his forehead.

It took a few seconds until her words reached Sully's troubled mind. As they did,
calmness started to fill his being and the pressure on his temples lightened somewhat. "Ya sure?" He didn't dare to believe yet.

Knowing that a migraine was often caused by emotional stress, Michaela hoped that she might have already given him the best medicine. "I am," she assured him, touching his brow with her lips again. "I think some sleep is in order," she advised, straightening. "Doctor's orders."

Sully could hear the smile in her voice. He wanted to see it and opened his eyes. Meeting her loving gaze he gripped her arm, pleading, "Stay with me."

His voice was still strained and knowing that her presence could help him relax, Michaela nodded in agreement.

"Thanks," he murmured, closing his eyes again, not loosening his grasp on her though.

That was why Michaela decided to lie down a bit as well. As soon as Sully felt her body next to him, he shifted, placing his head on her shoulder. Feeling her arms cradling him, he at last drifted off.

"Mommy!" the little girls cried in unison when Michaela opened the door to her old room. They couldn't get up quick enough from their chairs at her desk and rush towards their mother, clinging to her waist when they at last reached her.

Gently cupping her daughters' heads against her sides, Michaela chuckled, "Does that mean you two missed me?"

Both nodded eagerly, never loosening their grip on her though. "Uhuh." Hannah didn't only sound like her father but also asked for him, "Where's Daddy?"

Michaela sighed, "Come here." Taking the children's hands, she led them to her bed, making them sit on its edge.

Taking a seat next to them she started explaining, "Your Dad isn't feeling well..."

Instantly, Hannah rose to her feet, "We gotta help him!" she demanded.

Gently holding her back, Michaela assured, "I already did. He's at the hotel now, sleeping. He needs some rest."

"What's wrong with him?" Reluctantly, Hannah sat down again.

"He's suffering from a migraine." Seeing the puzzled looks, Michaela instantly clarified, "A severe headache. He'll be fine, don't worry."

In order to distract the little girls, she quickly continued, raising her eyebrows at them, "So, what did you two do all afternoon?"

The children glanced at each other and then slid down from the bed. "We made pictures for your walls here," Katie informed her mother, grasping her hand so as to drag her towards the desk.
There lay two sheets of paper, one showing a plane, drawn with just a pencil and the other one covered with bright colors representing a mountain range. "They are beautiful," Michaela admired her daughters' artwork, "I'm sure we will find a proper place so everyone can see them once you're done."

Hannah and Katie beamed hearing this praise; grinning at each other. They knew that now was the right moment to tell their mother a wish. As smart as they both were, they had already figured out that it was better when Hannah made the request and so she did. "Mommy, can't we stay here tonight? Katie and I'd like to sleep in your bed. And Grandma Quinn said there's one room for you and one for Daddy here, too."

"Grandma Quinn?" It was difficult for Michaela to digest everything with two pairs of eyes, full of expectation, directed on hers. Thus she tried to stall but Elizabeth, who suddenly appeared on the threshold, prevented further consideration.

"Well, that's what I am and that's what I should be called."

Although Michaela suspected that her mother still only pursued a certain goal, she smiled at her appreciatively. "Thank you," she mouthed and continued out loud looking at her daughters again, "I don't mind your sleeping here, but I believe it won't be a good idea for your father to leave his bed before tomorrow morning. And I'd like to keep an eye on him; so I fear..."

Seeing the little faces fall, she glanced at her mother who nodded encouragingly. "Well, you could still spend the night here. I have some things to do tonight anyway, apart from looking after your dad, and this way I know that you'll be safe when I'm in town."

Katie sought reassurance though; although Mrs. Quinn tried to be nice, the little girl didn't feel completely comfortable with her yet, "You'll tuck us in? And wake us in the morning?"

Hannah, who was already looking forward to sleeping in this large bed, added imploringly, "Please, Mommy?"

"If you are really sure you want this..."

Grasping Katie's hand, squeezing it so as to show her sister that there was no reason not to enjoy this opportunity, Hannah nodded fiercely, "Yep, we are."

Only when a smile appeared on Katie's face as well, Michaela agreed, "Alright then..."

When Michaela opened the door to the hotel room at night, she was worn out but happy at the same time. Over the last few hours she had had several conversations: one very long one with her mother, one with Matthew Cooper, after this another one with her mother and now she was returning from a meeting with Dr. Cook and Colleen. Not to forget that she had looked in on Sully twice in between and even taken the time to read their daughters a bedtime story.

Not hearing a sound or seeing light, Michaela tiptoed when she went deeper into the room in order to not wake Sully. He, however, sat propped against the bedhead and
turned the beside lamp on as soon as he could make out her figure.

"Sully," she gently chastised, "You should be sleeping."

Yet Sully only gave the hint of a shrug. He was better but still groggy and rather preferred to avoid unnecessary moves or words. He knew he couldn't go back to sleep without learning about the decisions she had made in the afternoon.

Taking his appearance in, Michaela softly asked, "Do you want me to order a tea or even something to eat?"

"Nah," he still didn't budge, knowing he couldn't manage to shake his head yet. "I'd just like to know how everythin' turned out." As he smiled, his face contorted in pain again and Michaela hurried to get to the bed.

"I'll tell you," she promised, "but you should lay down."

Sully, however, insisted, "Only if ya stay." Seeing her expression he could tell that as the doctor, Michaela thought it more reasonable that he had an undisturbed night, sleeping alone. Yet he, of course, knew better. Challenging as well as imploring, he returned her gaze.

Michaela did in fact contemplate whether she should actually give in. She had intended to sleep in the other room, looking in on Sully only in the morning again, before she left. Yet she didn't want to risk him getting worked up because of a disagreement that was an unimportant one. That was why she let him have his wish.

Ten minutes later, after visiting the bathroom and setting the alarm clock, she was at his side, wearing her pajamas. She had helped him change earlier in the afternoon and thus they were lying together like the night before. However, knowing that he still was in pain, Michaela tried to chase away the still unfamiliar but pleasant feelings that arose inside of her when his arms lovingly enclosed her in his embrace. In contrast to earlier, her head lay on his shoulder this time. His bare skin was soft and warm... and if she didn't instantly start talking to him, she would lose herself.

"Sully," she at last whispered, "Are you still awake?"

"Yeah," he replied, "Go ahead."

As she nodded, Sully felt her soft hair caressing his chest and he bit his lower lip. He knew he couldn't do yet what he wanted so desperately to and tried hard to concentrate on her words. "... I had to acknowledge that my mother was right. I talked it through with Matthew and he agreed that renting the practice wouldn't be a good solution."

Feeling Sully tense, she lifted her head, trying to make out his features. "Don't worry," she slid higher, gently kissing his cheek, "I hired Andrew. He agreed to work as my employee. Instead of him giving me a leasing rate, I will pay him and Colleen. We will see if they are as successful as my father was. If so, I will make them participate in the profit. This way the money won't cause any problems."

Thoughtfully, she paused for a moment, remembering her mother's reaction to this news. "And I admit that I'm glad my Mom likes it this way at least a bit, because it means I will have to stop by in Boston now and then..."
Of course Michaela knew that things with her family could still get difficult and weren't really settled at all; for the moment this was the best she could do though. She needed to get back to Colorado Springs; on Monday she had the late shift...

Eventually, the day's events took their toll on her and before she knew it, Michaela fell asleep.

Sully didn't. He wasn't sure yet whether he liked this development. Michaela would have her job at home and now she needed to take care of her practice in Boston as well. He still hadn't told her about his own plans; it could become difficult to coordinate their schedules... However, he didn't want to think about this yet. For now, he held the woman he loved. She lay against his body in trusting vulnerability and he would do anything to keep her away from harm. As she slightly moved, Sully felt his body react. Yet now wasn't the right time.

He was sure though he would feel much better in the morning. Knowing that she would be still at his side then, he allowed his thoughts to wander... Smiling impishly, he carefully shifted, reaching for her cell phone so as to change the alarm clock.

Chapter 7

Michaela wished she could wake up this way every morning. Her back was still spooned against Sully's chest as something incredibly soft touched her eyelids. The next thing she felt was his breath, caressing her cheeks as his lips traveled along them, down to the spot under her ear that was especially sensitive. At the same time, his hands sneaked under the fabric of her pajamas, one wandering upwards as to find her breasts. The other one was even more forward, going south. However, she didn't wait until it reached its goal. A fire already consumed her body and knowing that there was only one way to put it out, she turned in his arms, pressing herself against him. Sully instantly welcomed her in his embrace, heightening the heat between them, in them, around them, while she reciprocated his caresses. She barely noticed when he united them, any thoughts having left her mind the moment he started kissing her anyway. Afterwards they still clung to each other and she was amazed how Sully could make her lose herself but feel safe at the same time.

However, this incredible love making in the morning happened on Saturday and all she could do this Tuesday morning was relive the memory. Yet as she felt the soft movement next to her, she was instantly back in reality.

While Katie's bad dreams hadn't occurred for a while, it was now Hannah who wasn't sleeping well. When Michaela told Sully that she suspected his continued absence to be the reason, he had replied that she was exaggerating. Obviously her arguments set him thinking though which led to a private conversation between him and Hannah. The little girl seemed settled then yet only until her father left.

Michaela could tell that Sully was startled seeing his daughter's tears, but he wasn't able to change his plans. Everything was organized for him at the reservation; they were waiting for him. Since he had already disturbed Cloud Dancing's plans before, he didn't want to do it again. He had to go some time anyway and he intended to do it now rather than later.

This had been her and the children's first night alone and Michaela had heard soft crying
in the wee hours. The offer to sleep on her dad's side of the large bed in her mother's room had silenced Hannah's sobs and now the little girl was about to wake up. Michaela bent towards her, gently brushing some wisps of the dark hair from the small brow.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," she said, smiling as her daughter opened her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

Hannah frowned, trying to remember why she had struggled to leave the dream she was having only moments before. Then she remembered, she had been standing on her daddy's meadow outside of town and no one else was there. She wanted to scream out for someone to come and take her home but she couldn't open her mouth. Looking at her mommy's face, seeing the worry in her eyes, she threw her little arms around her neck, squeezing her as tightly as she could. As she finally loosened her grip, she whispered against the hair that covered Michaela's ear, "Ya don't go away, right?"

Michaela closed her eyes momentarily, taking in a deep breath. Composed enough to give the five-year-old the feeling of safety she needed, she slid upwards until she leant against the headboard, lifting Hannah on her lap so she could face her. Contemplating how much to say, Michaela decided that right now was not the time to point out that she couldn't give this promise considering plane crashes, car accidents or criminals shooting on the streets. Stroking the sleep-disheveled dark locks, Michaela simply assured, "No, I won't go away; and your dad will come back, too. You know that, don't you?"

Hannah nodded hesitantly, "But he said we can not talk for a while..."

"Well, you can talk to me," Michaela offered, hoping this would be of help.

"Not when ya are at the hospital," the little girl whispered, averting her eyes.

At this moment the psychological trained doctor in Michaela acknowledged that she had to make an exception so the child could feel the connection to at least one parent. "You know what?" she said, smiling at her vis-à-vis, "I have a suggestion." Hannah's head jerked up, her eyes full of hope. "I will show you how to dial me from the phone here at home." Seeing the little girl relax, Michaela knew she had made the right decision. "But I have a request. Please only call in the case..."

"Course, Mommy. I know you're busy with all the sick kids," Hannah responded immediately. She knew that her Mommy's job was important. However, if necessary, she could call her now. With this knowledge, her light-hearted nature took over again and she grinned at Michaela, her eyes growing wide as she whispered conspiratorially, "How 'bout we go and tickle Katie till she wakes up?"

Michaela couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Sure," she agreed, "I'd like that."

Half an hour later everyone had taken a shower and the three of them were in the kitchen preparing breakfast as the doorbell rang. Frowning, because she didn't expect anyone, Michaela told the children to finish setting the table while she went to the entrance, opening it.

Two men were standing there, seemingly stunned by her appearance. Since neither spoke, she grew uncomfortable and started to close the door again. Her action brought the taller one to life though. Giving her a grin, he asked in a deep, drawling tone, "Ya Michaela?"
Now it was her who was momentarily speechless; no stranger had ever addressed her this way. Her reaction obviously amused the man who had even longer hair than Sully. He radiated the kind of self-confidence that wasn't threatening but instantly challenged Michaela. Raising her chin, she replied, "That depends... Usually I'm Dr. Quinn."

Without taking his eyes from her, the second man, who had an appearance one could easily forget because it was so common, chuckled, giving his companion a little prod with his shoulder, explaining, "We're from Lawson & Slicker..."

The longhaired rolled his eyes, amending, "We are Lawson and Slicker."

Michaela smiled. She had relaxed the moment she heard the family names. Sully had warned her that they might show up as soon as he was out of reach. Shaking hands with both, she nodded, "You can call me Dr. Mike."

The little girls had eavesdropped from behind the kitchen door. Recognizing in their mother's tone that there was no danger, curiosity won the upper hand and they ventured into the hallway. Hank spotted them, looking over Michaela's shoulder, "Look, who's there. Sully sure is a lucky guy, two more pretty ladies!"

Hannah and Katie giggled; no one had ever called them a lady. This man seemed to be funny and they hoped he would stay.

Seeing her daughters' expectant looks, Michaela glanced at her watch. They had still an hour and thus she stepped aside allowing the men entrance, knowing from Sully that Hank wouldn't simply leave anyway. They men were friends since school and still saw each other occasionally. Now Hank and Jake were building the house that Sully had planned but they hadn't met Michaela yet. Michaela was sure that this was the only reason why they were here and secretly wondered when they would come up with the excuse for their presence. She didn't have to wait long.

Once everyone was seated at the kitchen table, the adults provided with coffee and the children with cereal, Jake glanced at his partner. Hank took the cue, looking at Michaela. "Well, we thought it'd be best ta talk to you about the kitchen. We have our experiences, ya know? Men look at this room with different eyes, but the wife spends a lot of time there... What?"

Michaela laughed openly. "I'm sure you know from Sully that he will be the chef in our household."

They did; Jake instantly reddened but Hank lifted his hands in mock surrender, "Okay, okay. I hope ya ain't takin' offence that we wanted to meet the woman Sully is hiding from us. After all, we're workin' for you, too."

He didn't look embarrassed in the least. The fact that Michaela had recognized their little lie rather seemed to amuse him. "Now that this is out in the open, how 'bout Jake and me takin' you three ladies out this weekend? We can't leave ya feelin' lonely."

Michaela hesitated; she thought that this went a bit too far. Hank instantly reacted, knowing how to get to her. Turning to the little girls he raised his eyebrows, cajoling
them, "I've heard ya love horses. We have a friend at the God's park; we built new stables there. I'm sure Robert E.'ll allow ya to get closer to the horses than normal visitors."

Seeing the little faces light up, he knew he had won. Turning to Michaela again, he didn't talk but waited for her decision, a mock sparkle never leaving his eyes.

Michaela at last sighed yet she wanted to make sure that her actions wouldn't be misinterpreted, "As long as you keep in mind that I am an engaged woman..."

"Hey," Hank interrupted her, "No need to worry. We know that Sully's comin' back and we don't wanna lose our contract. We only thought it could be fun to spend some free time together." Hannah and Katie nodded eagerly; they really liked this man.

Knowing he had the children's support, Hank added cheekily, "And we always do better when we know for whom we're workin'!"

Disarmed, Michaela sighed. "Alright," she gave in, "Actually, I like the idea of meeting Robert E. again."

For the first time, Hank showed that it was possible to astonish him, too. Yet Michaela didn't do him the favor to explain her remark, enjoying the fact that she had stunned him if only for a moment. "Let's talk about the time," she said instead.

Sully had slept on his flight to Tulsa where he picked up is van that he had left there before he went to Boston. On his drive to Concho, however, he had time to think. Michaela's words still echoed through his head and he wondered if she really already knew his daughter better than he. Yet after considering all their time together, he dismissed this thought. He was the one who had been at Hannah's side all her life: he had taught her to speak, how to use a fork and tie up her shoes. He consoled her when she fell and scratched her knees; he told her every story he could get hold of. Since she went to the kindergarten, she told him about her day in every detail she could remember. Well, it had become less lately, since she met Katie. In his opinion it meant that she was growing up. This was what children did, becoming more and more independent from their parents. Not too much yet, of course; he still would carefully watch her life.

However, something about Hannah's tears when he said goodbye had been different. Michaela was right, they had never been apart from each other for so long before. And his little girl's bad dreams worried him as well... dreams... Suddenly angry with himself because he didn't have the idea that just occurred to him earlier, he hit the steering wheel with his right hand. As soon as he arrived in Concho, he would write a letter to his daughter, hoping he might have found a way as to help her through the time without him.

This had been five days ago yet for Sully it felt as if ages lay between him and the world he used to live in. In contrast to his first time out in the woods, he not only had already experienced the silence, or better said sounds, of pure nature around him but also looked forward to it. He was even more attentive, knowing he wanted to transport his feelings to the people who would read his book. As day after day passed, he felt as if he turned into one of his ancestors, the one that had been called mountain man and lived in Colorado more than hundred years ago. In a way he began to wish he could be him. Nothing distracted him here from the true feeling of being alive. He remembered the words he once read by Walt Whitman, "Healthy, free, the world before me, the long brown path
before me leading wherever I choose... Now I see the secret of making the best person: -it is to grow in the open air and to eat and to sleep with the earth..."

Sully had never known that he would have the opportunity to really understand these lines. He had to think about this; maybe he should change some things in his life...

Chapter 8

It had been a hard week and Michaela knew she wouldn't have been able to manage it without Mrs. Bray's help. The older woman had insisted on looking after the girls when school was out but Michaela still had to work. The children warmed to Hannah's grandmother more and more and Michaela couldn't help but feel a bit of both, jealousy and guilt. Anyway, she couldn't change the facts; all she could do was use her free time with the children as effectively as possible. Chores were only done when Hannah and Katie either were at school or slept which of course cut into her own sleeping time. Adding to the normal daily stress was that she couldn't talk to Sully let alone get his help with anything. Only now did she notice how close she had grown to this man; she missed his smile, his never wavering trust in her.

The only one who didn't feel his absence as much was Katie. For her, things had still improved. She was used to her mother being at the hospital a lot, but now she had even gained a sister. Although she loved the idea of having a daddy, their real life together hadn't started yet.

However, the situation was really hard for Hannah. Although she bravely tried to not show it, Michaela knew. Fortunately, Sully had sent a letter to his daughter, suggesting that the dream catcher and the story about it could help her sleep better. Of course Michaela hadn't hesitated to get the item from Sully's apartment as soon as possible. From that evening on, it had always been only one bedtime story the little girl wanted to hear. On the third night, Katie had begun to complain but a look from her mother silenced her immediately. Afterwards, Michaela had taken her daughter aside, trying to make her understand. "Sweetheart, can you imagine how you would feel if I had to leave you for a while? All you knew would be that I'm somewhere in the woods, climbing mountains. Even if you wanted, you couldn't talk to me..."

While she spoke, Katie's eyes had grown wide. Seeing fear creeping into them, Michaela caught herself. "What I wanted to say is, this story helps Hannah to feel her father close and that's why..."

Her daughter's arms flew around her neck, squeezing her tightly and muffled her next words. From this evening on, Katie listened patiently, although she already knew the little story by heart.

This weekend, however, would give neither of them much time to dwell on Sully's absence because both days were full of events. Saturday would be mostly spent at the God's Park and tomorrow they all were invited to Mr. and Mrs. Bray.

As Michaela turned into the parking lot at the entrance of the park shortly before noon, she spotted the two men waiting for her and her daughters. The taller one was leaning against the railings, arms crossed before his chest, watching his partner pacing before him. Again, she wondered about the true motive which had led to the suggestion to spend the day together here. It hadn't taken her long as to grow suspicious after the men left on Tuesday morning. Her mind had started to work; there must be something more serious
than curiosity and the wish to get to know her.

Hank raised an eyebrow acknowledging when he saw the doctor get out of the BMW; she
sure knew how to make life comfortable. Hopefully he could make her trust him enough
so she would help him and Jake out of their dilemma. As she closed the distance between
them, one girl on each hand, he straightened and put a smile on his face which wasn’t
hard to do though, seeing the three of them.

"Mornin’," he greeted, a twinkle in his eyes, "Ya ready for some fun?" The last words were
directed at the little girls that responded with eager nodding yet still clutched their
mother’s hand.

They both had brought the backpacks from their first visit with five dollars for each of
them again. This place held only good memories for Katie and Hannah and thus they
liked the prospect of spending time here. Some added fun they saw as an extra gift and
couldn’t wait to finally enter the park.

They didn’t have to pay at the ticket window. Mr. Lawson and Mr. Slicker were allowed to
go in free because of their last job they did here and could even bring guests for the rest of
the month. When Michaela felt uncomfortable about this, it became even worse at lunch.
They had a nice time until then, seeing the Red Rocks again. Hank showed the little girls
even more funny formations than they’d already seen and so he was the children’s hero.
Mr. Slicker was quiet most of the time, only casting furtive glances in Michaela’s direction
now and then. His eyes held a dull expression though and she was wondering whether he
was fighting the remnants of a hangover.

However, when they all were seated at the table on the terrace of the restaurant for lunch,
Jake tried his best to make a good impression. All went well till Hank insisted on paying
for everyone. Michaela instantly protested, "Hank, I don't feel right about this. I'd
rather..."

"Ya worry too much," he cut her off, "It's not me payin' but our company. It goes to the
expense account, helps us to reduce our taxes."

Although Michaela was puzzled about the look both men exchanged, she consented in the
end, still feeling uncomfortable though.

When she came back with her daughters from the bathroom a bit later, Jake announced
that he would stay behind and not accompany them to the horses. Already suspicious,
Michaela would have left immediately, but she couldn't do that to Hannah and Katie.
Noticing that Hank carried a briefcase now, she knew that she didn’t have to wait long
until she knew what was really going on here.

On their way to the stables, however, the little girls distracted her. Katie hopped rather
than walked and Hannah, contrary to the last time they were here, followed her suit.
Since they constantly changed their pace, Michaela had her hands full with observing
them, always fearing that one of them could fall. As soon as they reached the area with the
horses, the children ran to the fence as to watch the animals.

Alone with the doctor for a moment, Hank took the opportunity to ask her, "Can I talk ta
ya when the kids are ridin'? Robert E. said he’d have an eye on them."

They simultaneously halted in their tracks and turned as to face each other. Michaela had
to bend her neck in order to look up at the man's face. For the first time, she saw a complete serious expression there and thus she nodded slowly. "Of course. But there was no need for an invitation to the park; you could have talked to me when you first visited me at my apartment."

Her words brought the mock smile back in his eyes. "But this way it's more fun," he said winking at her. Seeing how instantly her temper rose, he quickly added, "Well, we wanted ya ta see the things we built here."

These words calmed her somewhat and she refrained from replying because now her daughters joined them, begging to hurry so Katie could finally ride.

As they rounded the corner, the front of the new building lay before them and Michaela acknowledged without hesitation, "That's beautiful, Hank!" which brought a pleased grin to his face.

The house was made out of natural stone, combined with dark wood beams. The material that filled the interstices between the stones was painted white and made everything look like a picture rather than something real. The little girls didn't have eyes for the beauty of the building though; all they were interested in was the African American who emerged in the entrance, looking in their direction.

The adults did the children the favor and stopped talking for now but hurried to close the distance between them and the groom.

"I remember ya two and your mommy," Robert E. said, offering his hand to Katie and Hannah, pleased to see the excited sparkle in their eyes. "I heard ya wanna ride a bit..."

While her sister eagerly nodded, Hannah corrected with her eyes still shining, "Katie will ride, I wanna watch her."

"Uh," Robert E. responded, smiling. "Right, I remember that, too. But I have a surprise for you. Wanna see it?"

Glancing at Katie in order to see if she would mind, the little girl hesitated. Yet Michaela's daughter had learned the lesson about staying back sometimes and only wondered, looking up at the nice man, "Can... may I come, too?"

"Course," Robert E. nodded, "If your mommy don't mind."

"It's alright," Michaela assured, "Mr. Lawson and I have something to talk about anyway. We'll wait here for you."

After being rewarded with a hug from each daughter, she watched them walking towards the stables. The smile vanished from her face when she turned as to look at Hank, her expression making clear that she expected an explanation.

And she got it. Sitting on a bench next to each other, the briefcase between them, Hank shifted on his seat as to face the doctor. "Our company is in trouble. Last month we got a letter from the internal revenue service, presenting our tax assessment. We have to pay more than expected and a revenue officer showed up on Monday as ta tell us we gotta do it now. But we're hard up for money at the moment." He paused for a second, trying to gauge her reaction. Her expression was unreadable yet she listened attentively. Thus he
continued, "The problem is, that we need to buy more supplies for your building site but we got an agreement with Sully that he only pays after he got the money for his book. Wouldn't have been a problem without the tax, but now it is and Sully's not even here so we..."

"I understand." To his surprise, Michaela interrupted him sparing him to ask the question, "How much do you need?"

As if new life awoke in him, Hank opened the briefcase taking some sheets out. "It would help if ya pay the bills for the things we already bought. Here we have the..."

"Hank," Michaela laid her hand on his forearm as to still his nervous movements, "As I said, I understand. You trusted Sully that he would pay later because he is your friend. But friendship always goes both ways; now you need the money and so you will get it. After all, this will be my house, too." This thought brought a wide smile on her face and she added, "So it's only fair that I contribute to it as well. How much?"

She was barely done signing the check when the children appeared again, shouting from the distance already, "Mommy, Mommy! Guess what?"

Hank, relieved from his problem, was back to his old self, smirking at the doctor, "They always have such great timing? Makes some things easier."

Michaela instantly blushed but fortunately the little girls had already reached them, tugging at her hands as to get her up from the bench. Interrupting each other, they reported, "A baby pony..."

"... his fur looks golden..."

"... really soft..."

"... when it's grown..."

"... we can ride it!"

Michaela halted in her tracks abruptly, "We can?" she wondered, looking at Hannah.

"Uhuh," the little girl affirmed nodding exuberantly, making her dark locks jump, "Mr. Robert says, I can see how it grows up and we will get to know each other and no one has to be afraid."

Michaela crouched down as to be on eye level with her daughter, "I think that's an excellent plan. And I have a suggestion for today: how about we both ride a horse together? Would you like that?"

Putting her forefinger against her lower lip, Hannah contemplated what to do. Her Mommy would be with her, which meant there was nothing to fear. And she could tell her Daddy that she had really been riding! The last thought did it and with her eyes lighting up she agreed, replying in her father's dialect, "Yeah, I would."

More than thousand miles away in the mountains of the Osage Reservation, away from
any civilization, Sully sat cross-legged by a fire. His hands were wrapped around a coffee mug, trying to catch some warmth from the hot drink. Cloud Dancing sat across from him, not disturbing the silence that had fallen between them. The Cheyenne knew that his white friend had a lot to think about and thus he closed his eyes, withdrawing into himself.

The lectures he had learned over the last days made Sully rethink his rhythm of traveling. Initially, he had wanted to stay in Oklahoma for around two weeks and then go home for a week or so and then do the same – two weeks here, one week at home until his research was done. Yet now he doubted that this was a good idea; this way he would have to travel a lot which would get expensive. His financial situation wasn't the best without working at the café to earn some regular money at the moment. Maybe he should stay here a month, maybe this way he could work more effectively. Yet on the other hand he didn't only feel bad about leaving Michaela and the kids alone for so long, the truth was that he wasn't sure if he was able to endure the separation for another three weeks...

Chapter 9

Michaela had only taken Maud Bray's invitation because she knew she couldn't expect the older woman to spend the night at her apartment. Since Sully was away longer than just a few days, she wasn't able to avoid late or even night shifts during his absence, which meant she needed someone who watched her daughters when they slept. Finding a good babysitter for such unusual hours wasn't easy and thus she had no choice but followed Maud's suggestion that the children sleep at her and Loren's home the few times she would have to work late. Yet for that, Hannah and Katie needed to feel comfortable with Abigail's parents. That was why they were standing before their house now.

Michaela was nervous, wondering how Mr. Bray would take her presence in Sully and Hannah's life. Adding to her anxiety was that Maude had warned her and the little girls to be prepared that her husband might look a bit grumpy. She had assured though that behind his gruff exterior he was really very kind-hearted.

"Shall we?" Michaela asked her daughters who looked up at her expectantly.

"Yep," Hannah was sincere and Katie nodded affirmatively. They had talked it through before they fell asleep last night. They had liked the grandpa they met in Boston and were sad that they had lost him so quickly. However, they looked forward to get to know the new one, determined to like him, too, no matter what.

Loren Bray had never known his wife to be adamant about anything. Of course he had the say at their store and thus he simply wasn't used to giving much of Maude's opinion. He was convinced that he knew what was right for his family and saw no need to discuss his decisions. Everything went well until his daughter met this man who ruined their life.

Loren had been devastated when Abigail died but of course never showed it, not even to his wife. Initially he even blamed the child for his terrible loss; that was why he refused to see the little girl and forbade Maude to visit her, too. Anyway, the first years he coped quite well, keeping himself busy with working at the drugstore even more than before. Yet he eventually had to acknowledge that he wasn't the youngest anymore, especially when he couldn't sleep because his back hurt too much. That was why he listened to his wife for the first time in his life when it came to something essential and agreed to retire.

Yet ever since they sold the drugstore, Loren felt quite useless and didn't know what to do
with himself. Maude on the other hand seemed to blossom and he wasn't sure whether he liked that. But at least it brought some change to his daily grind. Preparing the room for the girls had been fun although he still didn't see the point why they had to include a strange child in their actions. He was, however, curious to meet the doctor, clearly remembering how upset Maude had first been after she met her.

The doorbell rang and interrupted his musing. Sighing, he left the room where he spent most of his day, watching TV, in order to join the others. Descending the stairs he heard the women talking and the clear voices of the children as well. Only at this moment did he realize that he would meet Abigail's daughter any moment and his heart made a curious jump. He took the last steps down slowly, still unnoticed though.

Katie was the first one who spotted the man, tugging at Hannah's hand instantly, making her turn towards him as well.

No one needed to tell Loren which of the girls was his grandchild. The resemblance to her mother when she was at the same age was striking and took his breath away for a moment. For a split second it was as if his little sunshine had never left him at all. Yet then he saw her eyes that were of a shining blue and he felt himself thrown back to reality. Feeling the absence of his Abigail even more painful now, tears were rising. Horrified that the others might notice, he grumbled, "It's about time that ya finally came. I bet the cocoa's already cold."

Not waiting for any response or introduction, he turned in order to enter the living room. His wife, however, held him back. She knew that Dr. Mike would only leave the children in her care when she would be sure they were welcome, both of them. "Loren," she said sternly, "Don't ya want to say hello to our guests?"

"Suppose so," he muttered, shuffling back to them. Without looking anyone in the eye, he proffered his hand first to Michaela, then to Katie murmuring, "Nice t' meet ya." Only when he took Hannah's hand he glanced at the small face, again overwhelmed by memories. "Hey," was all he said before he turned to finally go to the living room.

Maude looked at her guests apologetically, shrugging. "Sorry, but as I told you..."

"It's alright, don't worry," Michaela tried to soothe her, suddenly unsure again if it had been a good idea to come here at all.

The little girls, however, seemed to be undeterred, and not only because they were still determined to gain a new grandfather. They had seen that the eyes of the old man had brimmed with tears and their compassionate hearts instantly felt sorry for him. They glanced at each other before rushing after him. As they caught up, Hannah softly touched his hand. "Are ya hurt? Our Mommy can fix ya, she's a real good doctor."

Feeling the small fingers and hearing his granddaughter refer to a stranger as her mother, Loren almost lost it. "Nah," he mumbled, "I'm fine. Just a bit sentimental, I guess."

However, sitting at the table he caught himself, getting used to the sight of Hannah. Actually, seeing her made him dream that it would be possible to get some happy times back in his life. Thus he finally started asking her about what she liked to do, growing a bit unnerved though when every other sentence included either the name Katie or the word Mommy. Obviously Maude had been right about Hannah seeing them as her family. Yet now that he had met his granddaughter, all he could think was that he didn't want her
to vanish from his life again. Silently admitting this to himself he realized that whether he liked it or not, he had to get along with the other child as well. Finally deigning Katie more than a glance he was ashamed, seeing the innocence and eagerness to get to know him on her face. When she gave him a tentative smile, his heart melted and the adult women ceased to exist for now.

While listening to Maude, Michaela worriedly watched the scene at the other end of the table. She couldn’t allow that her daughters would be treated differently. Only when she saw that Katie was finally included in the conversation did she relax somewhat. Thinking that it might be too soon to let the little girls spend the night with the Bray's, she considered other options. She still had two days to organize something else.

Knowing Dr. Mike a bit by now, Maude sensed her thoughts. In order to prevent the doctor from saying them out loud, she cheerfully addressed the little girls, "Would you like to see the house... and your room?"

Before they replied, both their eyes flew in their mother's direction. Seeing her smile and nod, they quickly slid from their chairs, eager to explore the surroundings.

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Sully had decided to go home earlier rather than later as he had planned. The reason was a picture he found one evening when he looked for a warm sweater in his bag. It was only a small piece of paper with a pencil drawing yet it showed something so precious to him that he wondered what had gotten to him that he contemplated prolonging his absence from home. Hannah had drawn a family: a mother and a father with two little girls between them and everyone was smiling. A strange pull on his heart made him gasp and Cloud Dancing, who was sitting with him by a fire like on the last ten nights, slowly nodded, stating, "You should go where you belong, my friend. The important part of your learning here is done."

As much as Sully had enjoyed the time alone with Cloud Dancing, living without the boundaries of civilization, as sincere he was about where he wanted to be. Of course the Cheyenne understood, and they talked about the next steps of their work together on their way back to Concho.

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Sully grinned to himself; although he was kind of dead after driving almost twenty hours with barely a break, he couldn't wait to see Michaela and the kids again. The closer he came to Colorado Springs, the more his anticipation grew. He hadn't called; being due in only two more days he wanted to surprise everyone. Actually, he had intended to go straight to Michaela's apartment yet passing his own on the way there, he changed the plan. Suddenly feeling the need for a shower and fresh clothes, he turned the van back.

Catherine was desperate. Everything went fine till five minutes before. The table was set for two, she wore the black dress that emphasized her body at the right places and made her look stunning. The food was prepared and there was only this dirty spot on the kitchen table she hadn't seen right away. Wanting to wet the dishcloth, she turned on the faucet at the sink. And then it happened. Without a warning she suddenly held the upper part of the faucet in her hand and the water shot out of the pipe as if she had hit an oil well. The untamed jet instantly soaked her and the only thing she could think of right now was to press her hand against the opening. Frantically looking around, hoping to find a...
solution for her misery, her devastation grew realizing that she had no idea what to do. Finally she bent forward as to look out of the window in front of her. Maybe Marc had already arrived, although this would mean he would be half an hour too early. She closed her eyes tightly with the childlike wish that when she opened them, he might hear her silent plea for him to appear.

As she allowed herself to look again, she knew that despite of her mishap, this was her lucky day. Spotting Sully approaching the entrance of their house, she knocked against the windowpane as to gain his attention. When he finally looked up, alerted by the noise, she gestured for him to come to her door.

First Sully frowned, seeing Catherine waving for him until he noticed that she was obviously in need for help. Not thinking twice, he hurried up the stairs, ringing at her door not even a minute later. As if she had waited behind her entrance, she threw it open. Without greeting him, she pulled on his arm, dragging him to the kitchen. "Ya gotta help me, Sully!" she blurted, forgetting to pay attention to her accent.

Taking in the mess in the room, Sully didn't waste time but rushed to the sink already giving orders, "In my right jeans pocket is my key. Go over to me and get my toolbox; it's right inside of the bathroom."

Calming down for she knew that Sully would take care of things, Catherine found some of her usual boldness when she fished in his pocket for the key, "Ya sure the doc doesn't mind that you let me so close to you?"

Yet Sully didn't think it funny. Glaring at her he growled, "Ya better hurry or ya can see how ya manage things here alone."

Rolling her eyes, Catherine still grinned but her tone was normal when she asked, "Can I first get rid of my wet dress?"

Seeing the state Catherine was in Sully responded raising his eyebrows, "Sure. As long as ya hurry and pull on somethin' else..."

..........................

Michaela felt bad about leaving her daughters with the Bray’s tonight, but she didn't have a choice. She had tried to exchange shifts yet since half of the staff was sick with the flu it had been impossible. She was seriously worried about Hannah; the normally cheerful child had grown unusually quiet. It wasn't because she and Katie were to sleep with her grandparents for the first time. Michaela was sure of that. The girls had a cell phone now so they could reach her anytime; if not herself right away because she might be at the operating room, a nurse would answer the call and inform her as soon as possible. Since tonight the nurse would be Becky, who had replaced Colleen, the children didn't mind sleeping in their new room. They had been delighted when they saw the bunk beds during their first visit and couldn't wait to try it. Actually, this was one of the rare occasions when the sisters couldn't find an agreement because each wanted to sleep on the top bed. In the end, they decided by lot. Much to Michaela's relief Hannah won and fortunately Katie didn't pout. However, Michaela knew that Sully's absence grew harder on Hannah with every new day.

As she helped the children to change for the night, Michaela finally had an idea. She excused herself, promising she would be back in time for the bedtime story. A memory
had come back to her: when she was still a little girl, her father had once to leave town for several days. As to help her over the time without him, he gave her one of his old shirts, suggesting she wear it as a nightgown as to feel him close. She had done it and clearly remembered the comfort she felt every night, smelling his scent that lingered on the soft fabric.

Michaela hoped for Hannah it would work, too. That was why she had driven to Sully's house: to get one of his T-shirts. Putting the key into the lock she jumped though when suddenly the door was opened from inside of his apartment. Speechless, she stared at the person that was revealed to her, and Catherine looked back, equally startled. "Dr. Quinn... uh Michaela... I only... I'll be right back," she finally stuttered and hurried towards her own rooms.

Only now did Michaela notice that the blond-haired wore nothing else but a bathrobe. Yet she was more disturbed by the thought that the other woman still had a key to Sully's apartment, and she decided to ask him for the reason when he was back. Catching herself, she quickly went to Sully's bedroom, taking a T-shirt from his wardrobe and was about to leave when Catherine came hurrying back.

"Dr. Mike, there is an easy explanation..." she began but was interrupted.

"Catherine, first look in my bedroom!" a male voice shouted.

Michaela didn't dare to believe her ears. "Sully?" She was in total bewilderment yet her heart already started to race with joy. "He's back?"

"Uuhh," Catherine affirmed, turning as to get what Sully had asked for. "He's in my kitchen."

Without hesitation, Michaela went to the other woman's apartment as to welcome her fiancé. Yet she stopped dead in her tracks at the picture before her. Sully's was stepping out of a room, his upper body naked. His head was buried under a towel and while rubbing his hair dry, he yelled, without seeing Michaela, "And get me a fresh shirt, too!"

Michaela's eyes grew wide because she was seeing something else behind Sully now. The door to the living room stood open and revealed a festive laid table for two. This was too much for her to take. She pivoted and left as if on the run.

Chapter 10

When Michaela sat in the BMW again, her pulse was racing. Clenching the steering wheel and pressing her brow against it, she tried to calm down. She didn't succeed though her heart refused to believe what her mind suggested. She desperately looked for a simple explanation for Sully being half naked in this woman's apartment. And now she remembered that Catherine only wore a bathrobe as well. And what about the table? It hadn't been set for a simple meal but an intimate dinner, with candles and roses on it. But the most disturbing question for Michaela was why Sully was spending time with Miss Miller when she herself didn't even know that he was back. Had she been blind once again and not seen what was right under her nose all the time?

Yet at this point, her heart overruled her mind and made her stop following this line of thought. She couldn't spend her life doubting, and deep inside she knew that Sully would never cheat on her; they had already been through too much together for that. He was the
most honorable man she’d ever met and she trusted him with all her being.

As her hands finally ceased to tremble, she started the car. She had to hurry if she didn't want to be late at the hospital. Yet one question stayed and continued to distract her: why hadn't he called yet?

When she drove into the parking space before the Bray's house, curiosity and the remnants of insecurity got the better of her. Pulling out her cell phone, she dialed his number. She needed to hear his voice again but she waited for it in vain. He didn't take her call. Frowning, she stared at the mute item in her hand. If there weren't two little girls waiting for their bedtime story and her shift due to start in forty minutes, she would turn right back to Sully's apartment without thinking twice and find out what was going on there.

After he finished fixing the faucet in Catherine's kitchen, Sully didn't take more time than was necessary to get showered and pull on fresh clothes. It was quite late and he feared that his little girls would already be asleep when he arrived at Michaela's, but at least he could see them. And then he would tend to Michaela...

The dreamy look in his eyes vanished though as he pulled the van to halt and noticed that her windows were dark. Maybe Michaela had had a hard day as well and was asleep, too. Well, then at least he could snuggle close to her, hold her...

Sully only took every second step as he rushed up to her apartment. As quietly as possible he unlocked the door and crept into the narrow hallway. Yet a strange silence engulfed him as he stood there and listened. Even before he opened the children's door he knew that the room would be empty.

For a moment he lost the ability to think clearly. What if Michaela had grown tired of waiting for him and had gone back to Boston? After all, she hadn't heard anything from him for ten days. Hesitantly, he eventually turned on the light, his heart thumping heavily against his ribs. Yet as soon as he could see his surroundings, Sully calmed down. This apartment hadn't been abandoned, not for longer than a few hours anyway. The children's shoes were still there and they didn't exactly stand neatly in a row. Michaela's favorite cardigan lay over the small table by the wall and the kitchen door was wide open. Sighing in relief, the smile returned to Sully's face. He was home.

Now he only had to figure out where his three favorite women were. Knowing that Hannah had a hard time missing him, Michaela could have decided to sleep in his apartment tonight. Maybe they had passed each other on the road without knowing it.

Determined to call his own number, he entered the living room, striding straight to the phone. Grinning with anticipation, he pushed the numbers but only to hear the beep-beep of an empty line.

At a loss for what to do now, Sully let himself fall on the couch. With his thoughts still at his apartment, the first idea that came to his mind was to call Catherine. Maybe she had seen Michaela and the kids.

He had to wait a while until she picked up. She sounded annoyed when she mumbled, "Hello?"
"It's me," Sully simply replied. "Are Michaela and the kids at my apartment?"

The time Catherine needed for her response was too long for his liking and thus he went on, more urgently now, "What's wrong? Somethin' happened?"

Before he could get worked up even more, Catherine finally spoke, "If she's mad I'll talk to her, if you want me to. I'll explain that she has nothing to fear from my side..."

"What the hell are ya talkin' about?" Sully cut her off, in complete bewilderment. "What has this got to do with you?"

At the other end of the line Catherine realized that there was obviously trouble in paradise. Completely forgetting Marc's presence, she prepared herself for playing the role of the understanding friend. "I'm so sorry, Sully. If she knew you as well I do, she would know that she can trust you..."

"Catherine!" Sully was almost yelling now, "What have ya done?"

"Nothing," she replied, sounding indignant now. "It's not my fault if she draws the wrong conclusions."

Letting out a long breath, Sully took the receiver from his ear, gripping it tightly. Closing his eyes he tried to get his rising temper under control, reminding himself that he wouldn't find out anything if he kept screaming.

When he finally spoke again, he sounded somewhat composed. "Catherine, I need to know what happened."

Now it was Catherine's part to be puzzled until it finally dawned on her. "She didn't talk to you?"

"'Bout what?" Sully's impatience was shining through again, "Ya ain't makin' sense!"

Catherine audibly enjoyed the situation as she explained, "Well, I guess your fiancée wasn't happy to find you in my apartment, wearing nothing but your jeans." And saucily she added, "You were a nice sight, by the way." She was laughing openly now.

Sully, however, didn't go along with her. He still tried to digest the news, "Michaela was there?"

"Yes, she came when I was about to leave your apartment and when I went there the second time, she heard you call for me. That was when I told her to feel free to meet you in my kitchen. I'm coming!" Obviously the last words were directed at her guest for she continued, "I gotta go, Sully. Good luck!"

Sully heard her still laughing when she put the phone down. Stunned, he looked at the receiver, trying to picture the situation Michaela had seen. He had been shirtless and Catherine only wore a bathrobe. But that wasn't all; he was in her apartment and since he had seen the table set for two, Michaela had seen it as well.

Panic began to rise inside of him. Sure, Michaela should trust him but he knew about her past with David. She was still vulnerable...
Knowing that he had to find her as quickly as possible he considered where she could be. Deciding to first call the hospital, he eventually hung up before he dialed again.

"Pediatric ward, Nurse Becky. What can I..."

"Becky," Sully cut her off, "Thank God it's you. Is Mi... Dr. Quinn there?"

"Mr. Sully?" The young nurse sounded insecure.

"Yeah, it's me. Sorry for bein' rude but I'm desperately lookin' for Michaela. Do ya know..." he asked almost breathlessly.

"Dr. Mike is here; she's on the night shift." Noticing how upset Mr. Sully was, Becky's professional instinct made her say exactly the words that were needed so as to calm the man down. "She said you might call, and she asked me to tell you that Katie and Hannah are staying with the Brays."

This was news Sully hadn't expected. Taken aback, he needed a minute to sort his thoughts. Becky waited patiently to find out whether there was something else he wanted to know and at last he spoke again, "Did she say when she'll be back home?"

He heard the smile in the nurse's tone when she replied, "In case you asked, I am to tell you she hopes to talk to you in the morning." Anticipating his next question she added, "If there is no emergency, she should leave here around six."

...............................

Sully had called Maude to ask if he could come over in order to see Hannah and Katie, but she had talked him out of it. Waking up the little girls in the middle of the night was not such a good idea. Abigail's mother even asked him not to show up in the morning for the children would be torn about what to do. On the one hand they would want to stay at home with Sully but on the other hand they had looked forward to the day at the kindergarten for a photographer was due to come. In the end they agreed that Maude would take the girls to school, keeping his presence a secret, and Sully would just fetch them early.

After the discussion with Maude, all adrenaline suddenly left Sully's body and tiredness overwhelmed him. Thus he went to Michaela's bedroom. On his way there he pulled his shirt over his head. He barely noticed how he, once sitting on the bed, automatically got rid of all the other clothes as well, apart from his boxer shorts. He was already asleep before he even laid his head on the pillow.

When Michaela came home, she found him still in her bed. She had called Maude before she left the hospital and learned about the agreement with Sully as well as getting a moment to say hello to her daughters. Hannah and Katie didn't mind that Grandma Bray would take them to the kindergarten; they were already excited about the photographs. These wouldn't be the usual ones, with each child sitting on a chair. The pictures were to be taken for a brochure about the school and of course the little girls hoped to be in the pictures that would be chosen.

Remaining on the threshold of her room, Michaela considered whether to let Sully sleep and take a nap herself. Yet she knew she wouldn't be able to rest and relax without
hearing an explanation. That was why she eventually decided to make herself a coffee and 
wake him after she drank it.

She had barely stepped into the hallway when she heard his voice, "Wait!"

As she pivoted around, he already stood across from her. It was obvious that he had just 
risen from a sound sleep. He couldn't really focus yet and ran his hand through his hair as 
to brush it out of his face. "Michaela," he instantly began though, fearing she would leave 
before he had the opportunity to explain himself, "What ya saw last night.... It's not what 
yya thought." She didn't budge but waited for him to go on. "When I got there she needed 
my help. The faucet of her kitchen sink was broken and the water jet was soakin' the room 
and her... and then me, too."

Sully paused for a moment to see whether he was getting through to her. She still refused 
to meet his gaze, yet at least she slowly nodded.

His words made sense to her. However, there was still the dinner for two...

As if reading her mind, he gave the explanation, "She was waitin' for her new boyfriend, 
Marc, but he wasn't there yet. I couldn't deny her my help, Michaela."

He waited again, knowing that their relationship had to pass this test. If not, they were in 
serious trouble. Would she trust him?

Before the silence grew too long as to separate them, Michaela lifted her head. Everything 
sounded logical and all the pieces had fallen in place. Yet one question still remained and 
she needed to see his expression when she asked it. "Why haven't you called me?" she 
finally whispered.

"Wanted to surprise ya," he simply replied, holding her gaze.

Seeing it in her eyes that she believed him, his face broke into a wide smile as he raised an 
eyebrow, announcing cheekily, "Surprise!"

"Oh Sully!" Michaela threw her arms around his neck, and he didn't hesitate to hold her 
as close as possible.

While the uncomfortable tension between them had dissipated, another one was building 
up.

Michaela only now became aware that he wore close to nothing. His body still radiated 
the warmth of sleep and again she marveled at the strong muscles under his skin and 
softness of the fine curls on his chest. She noticed the change of his heartbeat and felt her 
own starting to speed up as well.

Sully wasn't sure whether he could do what he wanted the most: just scoop her into his 
arms and then carry her to the bed. Trying to maintain some composure for her sake, he 
loosened his embrace and brought some distance between their bodies. Clearing his 
throat he wondered, "Where were ya headin'?"

Yet Michaela had enough room now to see the full length of his body and was distracted 
when she replied, "The kitchen."
And then she couldn't help herself. She had never believed that she would once have the nerve to give a saucy comment but now she did. After considering his boxer shorts she gave him a playful smile, "After Katie slept over at yours for the first time, she told me that you had Snoopy shorts. It's nice to finally meet them; they suit you."

However, as soon as the words were spoken, she blushed heavily. Yet Sully didn't give her time to go back to her old, rather shy self. Without warning he whisked her off her feet and took her to the bed, already starting to place light kisses wherever her skin was exposed to him.

Feeling his warm lips was Michaela’s undoing. Desire skittered through her stomach making her stop thinking. She helped him to get rid of her clothes and when they both wore nothing but their skin, their bodies united almost immediately. Their movements held an urgency that would have frightened her if she had noticed it. But she didn’t; rather she craved for more. He did, too.

Neither could tell afterwards how much time was gone, but they didn't care anyway. They had sealed their pact of love again, that was all that counted. Contented, they lay in each other’s arms, simply savoring their being together again.

Although Michaela had been exhausted when she had entered her apartment, she didn't feel like sleeping at all now. Still glowing in the aftermath of their encounter, she snuggled even closer to Sully yet to her surprise he shifted so that he hovered over her again. The way he peered into her eyes made her heart race again. He gave her his special smile when he asked, "Ya ready?"

Somewhat puzzled she asked, her shyness shining through again, "Ready for what?"

Sully raised an eyebrow as to playfully indicate that he had to wonder about this reply and explained, "Ta welcome me back home."

The heat of anticipation already started to consume her body again, but she was still bewildered, "I thought I just did."

Sully grinned openly now. "Nah, that was the makin' up."

"Oh," was all Michaela could manage for she already felt his lips on her skin again, only torturing slowly this time. They first lingered on the crook of her neck, then wandered down to the soft mounds of her breasts and even further to her navel and then beyond it…

"Oh, Sully," she whispered, burying her hands in his hair, guiding him...

Chapter 11

Sully couldn't stop smiling. He held a little girl on each hand and was heading home with them. Home to Michaela; how he loved the sound of this line! Happy to have him back, his daughters didn't stop chattering. It sounded as if they wanted to tell him about their days without him all in one go.

"And Grandpa Bray'll take us to the baby pony tomorrow. Will ya come, too?"
It was too late for Sully to suppress a frown. He didn't know yet that Loren had met the rest of the family. Remembering how the man had treated him all through his relationship with Abigail and that it had been because of Loren that Hannah had never met her grandparents before, Sully wasn't sure whether he wanted him so close to his daughter. Seeing Hannah's face cloud over however, he caught himself. Forcing a smile he asked, "Grandpa Bray, huh?"

"Uhuh," Katie chimed in repeating Maude's words in her own way, "He's grumpy on the outside but nice in his heart."

Sully couldn't help but chuckle. "So ya like him?"

"Yep." Hannah nodded eagerly still insecure though about her father's former reaction. "But Mr. Hank was funnier."

"Hank?" Sully didn't dare believe his ears but was more careful with his reaction this time. "How did ya meet Hank?"

"He invited us to God's Park." Hannah carefully watched her daddy's face. Would he be angry again?

His daughter's fear was clearly recognizable on her face and thus Sully stopped in his tracks. Crouching down so as to be on the same level with her, he briefly stroked Katie's blond locks, asking her mutely for understanding. Only after he gained a smile from her, did he turn towards Hannah.

"Listen to me, sweet girl. I know I've been away for a while and even might be again, but that doesn't mean that anything'll change between us. Ya can always tell me what ya think and I promise I'll never be mad at ya."

Throwing her arms around her father's neck rather than replying, the little girl tightly pressed her eyelids together. Of course she had taken in all his words but only four mattered to her. He said he might be away again.

As far as Sully was concerned, he thought that the problem was solved. So as to show Hannah how much she meant to him, he held her tight, soothingly rubbing her back.

When they were at last continuing on their way home, he carried one daughter while the other one carelessly strolled along beside him.

Of course Sully didn't want to hide his friends from Michaela but he would have preferred to introduce them himself. Aside from that, he was sure that Hank had a reason for showing up at Michaela's door. He couldn't think of any he liked.

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Although he thoroughly enjoyed having lunch together with his family and playing cards with the little girls and Michaela, Sully grew more and more restless. He was waiting for a chance to talk to Michaela in private yet this took quite a while. Caught up in his own thoughts, he didn't notice that Hannah grew quieter with every new minute; yet Michaela did. And she recognized Sully's expression; something was troubling him. Thus she took the first opportunity to suggest that the children draw in their room for a bit while Mommy and Daddy tidied up the kitchen.
Of course Hannah and Katie didn't mind although they were usually eager to help. But they still had to finish a picture for their daddy and so they happily scurried out of the room. As soon as the door was shut behind them, Michaela turned to Sully who already stood at the sink, averting his eyes from her.

"What's wrong?" she probed gently, approaching him.

Without taking the time to think why she asked he blurted out, slowly turning to face her, "What did Hank want?"

Taken aback by his tone which she recognized from earlier confrontations, she frowned. Was he upset because she had accepted his friend's invitation? Well, he would have to live with that. "He offered to take us to the park where he had arranged for the children to meet Robert E. and..."

Too impatient to wait till she came to the only point that counted for him, he cut her off, emphasizing every single word, "What - did – Hank - want?"

As often when she felt her temper rise, Michaela appeared all the calmer on the outside the more worked up she became. Crossing her arms before her chest as if to protect herself against the angry flashes of his eyes, she simply said, "He needed us to pay some bills."

Sully couldn't tell what it was that bothered him more at the moment – the fact that Hank hadn't stood by their agreement that he would pay him later or that he had asked Michaela. "Us?" he finally managed, his voice strained.

"Well, you weren't here and they needed the money immediately. So I paid the bills he showed me as well as the next ones that are going to be due soon."

Quietly she watched the emotions crossing his face. She didn't like what she saw, yet she still didn't show her annoyance.

"Ya shouldn't have done it," he eventually replied angrily.

"Why not?" Michaela knew they had to get to the bottom of this problem or it would only grow.

"'Cause that's my business, not yours," he shot back, incredulous that she even asked.

She didn't like that she had assumed right about the reason for his anger but didn't avoid the argument.

"Why? Because you are the man? The future husband?" Her own anger began to shine through. "Tell me Sully, have you planned this to be your house or will it be ours?"

"'Couse it'll be ours, but it's supposed to be my gift to the family, and you know that!" His voice rose a notch.

Dropping her arms, Michaela turned to make sure that the door was really closed. It was, yet she still feared the girls might hear them fighting. Looking back at him, she lifted her hand to silence him, "Not so loud, the children!"
Considering him for a moment she at last asked, "Do you really think I could enjoy a gift when I know you can't afford it, at least not right now?"

Of course he knew that she was right in a way, yet his pride was only hurt more by her words, "No need to point out that ya got more money than me," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Now it was Michaela's turn to look incredulous. "That's not what I wanted to say, Sully. And that is something you should know!"

The hurt on her face turned into daggers that pierced his heart but he simply wasn't able to catch himself. All he could do was leave this place and calm down. Thus he started passing her, seething with frustration.

"Where are you going?" Michaela couldn't believe that he was just leaving in the middle of a discussion.

"I need to think," was all he replied and with that, he was already out of the door.

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Michaela was so angry with Sully that she was glad he wasn't there, although of course his vanishing was the reason for her being upset. It wasn't because of their argument; in a way she acknowledged that this problem was partly her fault. They should have talked about how to handle money affairs sooner. Yet she was still taken aback that he insisted on the traditional male-female roles. She had been convinced that he was above that.

However, something else was the real reason that she was mad at him. When their daughters had come back to present him with their picture, he hadn't been there and she hadn't been able to make up a reasonable excuse for his sudden absence. While Katie was simply puzzled, Hannah's eyes instantly filled with tears. That was why Michaela decided to give her part of the truth. Sitting down on a kitchen chair, she took the little girl on her knee. Gently turning the sad face to her so as to look into the child's eyes, she explained, "Your daddy and I had a misunderstanding. He was angry and left to 'work off some steam', as men like to say." Michaela tried to keep her tone light in order to take some of Hannah's anxiety away. That she didn't succeed though showed in the little girl's reaction, "He said he would go away again and..."

Hannah wasn't able to continue speaking. Throwing her arms around Michaela's neck she started to cry. Katie had only watched the scene but now she stepped closer, rubbing her friend's back the way she had seen Sully doing it. Wide-eyed, she gazed at her mother, silently begging her to make her sister's tears stop.

Michaela bent back a bit so she could see Hannah's face again. Lovingly, she brushed a dark lock from her brow. "He'll always come back to you, Sweetheart. You know that, don't you?"

Hannah intently looked at the woman she called her Mommy now. Since she had met her, she had been there whenever she needed her. She had even given her a cell phone so she could talk to her any time when she felt alone. Her dad, however, had already said he would leave, so she needed to be absolutely sure that at least her new mother wouldn't do the same. "Ya stay with me?" she asked in a small voice.
Michaela smiled reassuringly in response before she hugged the child again, "I promise."

Roaming the woods with Cloud Dancing for more than a week had taught Sully that walking helped him to sort through his thoughts. This time he didn't succeed though; he wasn't able to shake off that feeling of deception. When he finally stopped in his tracks and perceived his surroundings again, he was taken aback. To his astonishment, his feet had carried him to the place where he and Abigail had had their first apartment. Not understanding what it was that led him to this place, he stared at the windows. He had so often seen Abby's face there when he came home that he almost expected it to appear there any moment. A sudden pang of grief pulled at his heart, making his knees weaken. Yet a boy chasing after his friend suddenly bumped into Sully, giving him a rude awakening.

Abby was gone, and he had closed this chapter of his life. There was no use dwelling on the past. He had loved being Abigail's husband; for the first time in his life he had taken responsibility for someone else. In a way one could say that his wife had kind of depended on him. He was the one who had provided for the family; he had even given up his studies to be able to do that. And he had never ever regretted it, not for one single moment. It had felt good to be needed. When he came to his senses after Abigail's death, he had taken care of their daughter in the same way. He had denied his own wishes and dreams, determined to make Hannah's life as good as possible.

This thought, however, brought him completely back to reality. What must she be thinking right now – he had left again, without so much as an explanation! Glancing at his watch he realized that Michaela would have to leave for the hospital soon. He instantly reached for his cell phone in his pocket so as to call her. He wanted to tell her that he would be back in time only to realize that he had stormed out of her apartment without his jacket. Thus without money, too, he had no choice. All he could do was run as fast as he could in order to get back to his family. At this point it hit him.

His new family was different from his former one. He was still needed but in another way. Not as the provider but as the one person they could trust and rely on. Well, at the moment, he was doing a lousy job.

As he hurried along the main road which crossed over by Michaela's side street, several things happened simultaneously. A few hundred yards before him, he saw the BMW slowly roll towards the main street. He was already close enough to recognize Michaela behind the steering wheel and the children in the backseat. At the same time, he heard a hot pursuit from behind. Turning, Sully saw a white Saturn racing in his direction, followed by a police car with wailing sirens. In helpless horror, he watched the chased car trying to turn into the side street. Of course its speed was far too high to take the narrow bend. For a split second, time stood still before the tone of screeching brakes mingled with the horrible sound of metal crashing into metal.

Chapter 12

Sully begged his heart to beat again so that he could finally move. He needed to get to his family yet his legs simply didn't obey his command. It was as if he saw a movie playing on a large screen before him and he was the onlooker who was condemned to inactivity. His paralyzed state seemed to last an eternity yet in fact it only took a split second till he
started to run.

The police car had just come to a halt. One of the cops already called the ambulance and the other one had begun taking stock of things at the scene of accident. A van had sneaked between the BMW and the chased Saturn because it intended to drive straight ahead whilst Michaela wanted to turn right. Thus this third car had taken most of the impact.

Later Michaela would wonder how her instincts could have worked so precisely. As if she possessed the gift of foresight, she had forcefully turned the steering wheel right as soon as she sensed that the chased car would change its direction. The rest had been sheer fortune for her and the children. Michaela knew that without the van, they wouldn't have had the tiniest chance. Yet of course she didn't waste any thought on that now; her first concern was for the little girls. Getting out of the car and instantly walking around to the passenger's side, she realized she wouldn't be able to open the door on Katie's side for the van's fender blocked it. As she pulled open the other door, Katie looked at her with large, startled eyes whilst Hannah hung limply in her seatbelt. Michaela instantly started talking to Katie whilst she carefully examined her other daughter. Feeling for Hannah's pulse and finding it softly thumping against her fingertips, she asked her blonde little girl, "Are you in pain, Sweetheart?"

Yet Katie only continued staring. Recognizing that she was in shock, Michaela kept speaking to her soothingly, "Don't worry, everything will be alright, Sweetheart. I'll take Hannah out first and then I will help you, alright?"

At that moment, Hannah opened her eyes, groaning softly. Immediately, Michaela took the opportunity to ask the most important questions so she could be sure she wouldn't do further damage to the little body.

"Hannah, can you move your feet for me?" When the child did so, the doctor added, "And your fingers, can you move them, too?" Hannah could and Michaela sent a silent thanks to whoever had watched over them that it seemed she needn't fear a spinal injury.

Sully reached them when Michaela had, with the help of a kindly passer by who had stopped to offer assistance, carefully transferred Hannah onto her suit jacket which she had spread over the stones of the sidewalk. Seeing his daughter lying there listlessly and white as a sheet, eyes closed, Sully fell on his knees next to her. The outside world ceased to exist as he was overcome by fear of losing his only child. He didn't dare to touch her, not knowing if he would make things worse. "Hey, sweet girl," he finally managed in a hoarse voice, "Can ya hear me? It's me, Daddy."

A small sound escaped Hannah's mouth that encouraged Sully to bend closer to her. Carefully, so as not to hurt her, stroking the dark locks, he reassured again, "I'm here, sweet girl. It's Daddy."

Again, the little girl tried to speak and Sully brought his ear close to her mouth to be able to hear the mumbled words.

"Want... my... Mommy," he at last discerned and froze in place. For Sully, the world only consisted of two people at that moment, him and this child, his own flesh and blood whose posture reminded him so much of Abigail shortly before she had died. That was why he thought their daughter was calling for her.
"But Hannah, your Mommy is..."

A soft but determined pressure on his shoulder cut him off. Looking up to see who was disturbing possibly his last conversation with his little girl, he met Michaela’s gaze. Immediately feeling ashamed that he had not only forgotten to look after her but Katie as well, words failed him. Michaela, however, didn’t seem to notice his inner turmoil, simply saying, "She's asking for me."

Disregarding his presence, she crouched down, only caring for the welfare of the small child. "I'm here, Sweetheart. Soon the ambulance will arrive and take us to the hospital, alright?"

Wearily, Hannah nodded, while tears started running down her cheeks, "Ya stay with me?"

"I promise. I will take you to my ward and..."
"Hey lady, what do ya think you are doin'?" One of the cops had made his way over to them and grabbed Michaela's arm in order to hinder her from further actions. "Ya can't move a victim..."

"Take your hands off of her," Sully growled, his temper instantly rising, "She's a doctor!"

"Oh," the young man immediately loosened his grip and took a step back, "Sorry, I couldn't know that. Maybe ya can take a look at the other victims too, although I don't think they'll be needin’ a doc anymore."

"I'm coming," Michaela said but before she left, she squatted down again, "Sweetheart, I'll be right back." Seeing fear returning to Hannah’s eyes, she explained, "I'm not leaving, I only have to see whether the people in the other cars need my help. I'll be back before you know, I promise." Looking over at Katie who sat leaning against the rear wheel, awkwardly holding her left arm, she reiterated, "I'll be right back, Sweetheart."

Both the other cars were write-offs and as the cop had assumed, both drivers were beyond help: the Saturn’s front had crashed into the van’s driver side at full speed which hadn't left much hope of survival for the passengers. Fortunately no more people had been involved in the accident and thus Michaela hurried back to her family, already hearing the wailing of the ambulance’s sirens.

The paramedics had been willing to follow Michaela instructions as soon as one of the men recognized her as Dr. Quinn from previous encounters. They had even made room at her request so that Sully didn’t have to leave his daughter’s side and could sit next to Michaela opposite of the stretchers with the little girls. Whilst the ambulance roared away to the hospital, Michaela felt a sudden fit of white, hot ire at him though. If he hadn't run away like a sulking child... Glancing at his face however she instantly caught herself. She had often seen parents in shock after an accident, especially when only the child was injured. Self-reproach and feelings of guilt hindered them from thinking clearly and thus they couldn't provide the support the child needed. Realizing that her being in shock as a mother too had caused her thinking of only moments ago, she lightly touched his hand so as to gain his attention.

Although he felt her fingers on his skin, Sully didn't look up. All he could think was it was
his fault that the little girls were in pain, and he didn't even dare to think about what Michaela might be hiding from him and everyone else. The only thing he had been able to do while the paramedics carefully prepared the children for the transport was just stand there and watch. Thus he had seen how Michaela had sometimes had to steady herself, and he had noticed her pale complexion. She never met his gaze though, fixated on her task as the doctor. What if she was injured, too and was making things worse for herself by acting as if nothing had happened?

He didn't know yet that he could feel even much worse than he already did, that to his feeling of guilt would be added the one of deep shame. "Sully," he heard her soft, reassuring voice, "As far as I can judge it, Hannah will be alright very soon. She might have a concussion; we will check that as soon as we are at the hospital. I couldn't detect any fractures but we will of course give her a thorough examination. She will be fine."

No word about Katie's or her condition which meant she had realized that he had forgotten them when he saw Hannah lying on the ground. Now she obviously thought they didn't matter to him. "Michaela," he raised his head to capture her gaze yet at that moment the ambulance came to a halt. As soon as the doors of the car were opened, a well-coordinated procedure started which didn't give him the opportunity to talk to her again before both girls began to be treated.

They had reached the hospital at the time when her shift started and Michaela was thankful that it was Dr. Burke and not Dr. Cassidy she had had to take over from. For her younger colleague, it went without saying that he would stay to help with the emergency. However, although William knew that Dr. Quinn was engaged, he still had a soft spot for her. Watching her more keenly than a normal colleague would do, he realized that she wasn't as alright as she claimed to be. They had a heated discussion about her needing an examination as well until he mentioned that she couldn't work if she was injured. Since Michaela wasn't able to refute this last argument, she finally gave in. However, she didn't leave her daughter's side until they could be taken to the room which they would occupy for that night. Both children had been examined and X-rayed to make sure that they didn't have more injuries apart from some bruises and small cuts caused by the glass of the windowpane that had burst when the van crashed into the BMW.

It turned out that Michaela had been right about Hannah who suffered from a light concussion and the aftermaths of shock. Katie's wrist had been put in a plaster for it was broken, but fortunately it was a simple fracture. However, Katie's emotions were still raw as well and when Michaela announced that she needed to go down to the emergency room again, both little girls begged her to stay. This was the point when Sully felt he could finally be useful again. The only thing he had done so far was to call Maude to tell her what had happened and reassure her that things were not so bad that she had to come down to the hospital, especially now that bedtime was approaching.

He was sitting on a chair between the children's beds, quietly following the conversation between mother and daughters. It still disturbed him that it had been the other physician who managed to make Michaela agree that she would see a doctor herself. For him, the man's motivation was as clear as if it was written in huge letters across his brow: Dr. Burke was sweet on Michaela. However, this was something he could deal later with; now he had to make sure that his family was united once again.

Clearing his throat, he gained the three women's attention. Bending forward on his chair, he let his gaze wander between the little girls as he talked to them, "Kates, Hannah, your Mommy will come right back. But she was in that car, too and someone has to make sure
that she is alright. So how 'bout we let her see a doc and I'll tell ya a story till she gets back?"

Instantly, the girl's demeanor changed. Forgetting their own pains and troubled thoughts, they sat up simultaneously and looked at their mother. "We'll be good, Mommy," Hannah assured.

"Uhuh," Katie affirmed, nodding.

"Ya see?" Sully searched for Michaela's gaze, trying to hold it, "Everythin's under control here. Our daughters and I'll have a good time."

For a moment he succeeded in locking eyes with her. The smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth, however, didn't reach her own yet.

Her colleague on the first floor only allowed her to work under the condition that she wore a neck brace all night. Of course Michaela agreed, not wanting to stay away from her job again. No matter how a good doctor she was, the hospital couldn't afford to pay a medical assistant director that was more at home than on the ward.

When she entered her daughters' room again, she found the little girls still awake, waiting for her. Before they could ask, she quickly explained, "I'm fine. This strange neck decoration," she lightly tapped her fingers against the stiff material, "is only a precaution, no need to worry."

While the children were satisfied hearing this news, Sully kept looking at Michaela and thus she added, "Only a touch of whiplash, really. I wouldn't stay here if I weren't sure I could carry on working."

Knowing how serious she was about her job, Sully slowly nodded. Not taking his eyes from her he asked, "Can ya stay with us for a bit? If ya have to go back to work, we understand though."

Seeing the sleepy expression on the little faces and knowing that she wasn't needed outside of this room at the moment, Michaela agreed. "Just sitting down for a few minutes would be nice."

Satisfied, Hannah and Katie snuggled deeper into their beds, already closing their eyes. For now, the world was alright. Mommy and Daddy were with them and Mommy had promised they would soon feel better. It didn't take longer than a few minutes and the children were sound asleep.

As far as Sully was concerned, he felt a little piece of hope return to his heart when Michaela didn't pull her hand away from his grasp. As soon as possible he would explain his reaction to her; that he had simply been in a panic, not able to think. She and Katie were his family as much as Hannah and he would make sure that she never doubted that again.

Feeling Sully's touch, his thumb tenderly stroking the back of her hand as she sat on the chair next to him, appeared to become too much for Michaela. This was the first time since the accident that she had been left alone with her thoughts. Only now did she have
time to think about what had almost happened. The plain truth was that if the van hadn’t appeared at the exact moment that it had, she and the children wouldn’t have survived. This thought made her shudder and she felt the urge to get to her feet and run.

She hadn’t been aware that she had actually straightened from her seat; only when Sully pulled her in a comforting embrace did she struggle back to reality. He had risen as well, holding her close to reassure her of his presence. Michaela understood his intention, knowing she could tell him what devastated her at this moment. "We could have been killed out there," she whispered, choking back an involuntary sob.

"I know," he responded, framing her face with his hands and tenderly kissing her eyelids, "That would have killed me, too."

Of course Michaela knew they still had a lot to talk about, but in comparison to what had almost happened tonight, their problems didn’t seem to matter so much at the moment. All that she wanted was to feel the promise of safety which the arms of the man she loved offered her. The rest could wait.

Chapter 13

Michaela had seen to it that a cot had been put into the children’s room so Sully could spend the night there. She herself did her job as usual; fortunately her shift went by without an emergency. Now and then she had made sure that her family was fine. Much to her relief the little girls’ sleep was rather peaceful. Yet every time she looked into the room, Sully lay on his back with his hands under his head, staring at the ceiling. It was already far after midnight when Michaela crouched down next to his makeshift bed. Tenderly brushing some stray hairs from his brow she whispered, "Sully, I want you to stop reproaching yourself. I know we have to talk but for now I need you to sleep. We can’t send Katie and Hannah to the kindergarten tomorrow and one of us has to be awake enough to watch them. I..."

Turning his head Sully searched for her gaze, causing her to stop speaking. Some of the light from the hallway fell through the transom so he could discern Michaela’s features. The dark circles under her eyes spoke their own language and he knew they were partly his fault. Swallowing hard, he took her hand, pressing his lips against the soft skin of her palm before he assured, "I’ll do anything for ya and the kids, I promise."

Feeling something melt inside of her by his tender touch, Michaela couldn’t help but smile, "Sleep would do it for now." She quickly bent forward, kissing him softly.

He wanted to hold her close but before he was able to move she had straightened to her feet already. All he could do was watch her step to each little girl’s bed, carefully assuring that everything was alright with them. And the next moment she was out of the room. Touching his lips where hers had lingered only seconds before, he finally relaxed and drifted off immediately.

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"Michaela," he yelled, knocking at the bathroom door. He could hear her taking a shower but needed to get her attention. For some reason it didn’t occur to him to simply enter the room but he knocked and yelled again instead, "Michaela, the hospital’s ringin’!"

After his second word the drumming of the water stopped and he lowered his tone.
"Could you bring me the phone in here, please?" Michaela called back and as he opened the door she was about to wrap herself into a large towel.

Only having eyes for the receiver he held out for her, Michaela missed Sully's expression. He didn't look at her with desire though. His face only mirrored horror after he caught a glimpse of a purple-blue bruise running across her chest. Michaela, however, didn't notice because she concentrated on the caller. Holding the ends of the towel tightly together she looked down at her toes while she was speaking. Her voice was calm when she replied to another torrent of words, "Dr. Cassidy, I checked the case and I share Dr. Burke's opinion."

Then she waited as to listen again, lifting her head now, her eyes still unseeing though. Her tone didn't change when she responded again yet Sully could tell that she was deeply annoyed. "Dr. Cassidy, I wouldn't have stayed last night if I hadn't been capable of doing my job. If you doubt that, feel free to bring a complaint about me. But you will follow Dr. Burke's orders. If you have questions, contact him. I will be back in time to start my next shift tonight. Good day, Dr. Cassidy." With that, she pushed the key, finishing the call without further ado.

Focusing on Sully she recognized that he was upset. Believing it was because of the conversation he had witnessed she assured, "No need to worry, Sully. I would have been concerned if he hadn't tried to interfere. That's just the way he is." Since Sully didn't budge, she added with a small smile, "Every single member of the staff is waiting for the day when he will finally retire. I think we will throw the biggest party ever then. Sully?"

Her tone changed and she stepped towards him, touching his upper arm. "What's wrong?"

He wasn't able to look into her eyes as he said in a hoarse voice, "That's all my fault. I don't know how ya can ever forgive me...." His voice trailed off because he was choking on a large lump in his throat.

"But Sully, how can you think... oh..." Following his gaze she realized that he was talking about the accident. His eyes were fixed on the small part of the bruise that was showing beyond the towel. With one hand tightening her grip on the fabric, she raised the other one as to touch his cheek. "Sully, look at me," she said softly and waited until he shifted so she could see his eyes. "Nothing of what happened on the street was your fault. But we do have to talk."

With her palm still on his skin she waited until she felt the tiniest nod. Smiling she suggested, "I think I'll need a tea first. Would you please...?"

"Sure," Sully was glad he could finally do something for her. "I'll be right back."

The children had made themselves at home in the living room. Their mommy had said they both still needed to rest, Hannah even to lie down but they didn't have to sleep all day. They all agreed that in this case the best way to spend the time was watching movies. There was no question which one they chose first. As soon as the familiar title 'The Little Mermaid' appeared on the screen, Sully knew he didn't have to worry about the little girls for the next hour. After making sure once again that Hannah's pillow under her head was
fluffy enough so she could easily see the TV he turned to Katie who sat in Michaela's large leather chair, her arm resting in a sling her mother had made for her. Crouching down next to her he watched her face asking, "Ya want somethin' for the pain, Kates?"

"Nope," she replied absentmindedly, her eyes already fixed on the moving pictures.

"Good," Sully had to chuckle. If Michaela had heard this reply she would have instantly corrected her daughter. Yet he just went on, "Your ma and me are in her bedroom. If ya need somethin', just holler."

Realizing that the girls were already lost in the world of the mermaid, he shook his head leaving them, still smiling to himself.

As he entered the bedroom Michaela stood at the window, looking down on the street. A glance at her nightstand showed him that she'd already drunk her tea and thus he approached her. Laying his hands on her shoulders from behind he asked quietly, "What are ya watchin'?"

"Nothing," she replied, "Just thinking."

When she didn't explain more, he tenderly probed stepping still closer, "bout what?"

"It's so nice and peaceful here. I wished..." her voice trailed off. Yet then she took a deep breath and pivoted as to face him. "Sully, I know that you've been married before and are the one with experience. I just... I have this imagination of marriage in my mind that it is about two people living together as equal partners. I never wanted the kind of relationship where you always insist on what is yours and what mine. I hoped it would be 'us' and 'ours'."

Michaela looked at him fully now, her eyes showing her insecurity for she couldn't read his expression.

Sully swallowed hard. He felt terrible, having expected that she was angry with him, giving him a piece of her mind rather than trying to explain herself. But now her eyes held a sadness that made it impossible for him to speak. Feelings of guilt and unworthiness consumed him and he simply didn't know what to say.

As the silence between them stretched Michaela resigned. She was tired, a dull ache throbbed along her chest and all she wanted at this moment was to curl up under her covers. However, when Sully realized that she gave up on him he suddenly came to life again.

"Michaela," he said, wanting to pull her into his arms but feared to hurt her even more, "I'm sorry."

He ran his hand down her arm till he reached her hand. Grasping it he squeezed it tentatively. "It's just... I took care of my family before and I wanna take care of ours, too."

Michaela sighed. "I understand, I really do." Searching for his gaze she looked up at him again. "But taking care of us doesn't have to mean that you will be our provider. All we want for us is that you are a part of our life and that we belong to yours."

"I couldn't live without you anymore." His response came immediately and his voice
cracked.

"Well," Michaela smiled, "Then we should talk. But I admit that my legs are growing tired..."

Her last word wasn’t out yet when Sully lifted her as to carry her to the bed. He did it with a tenderness that told more of his love for her than any words could ever do.

They talked for half an hour, Michaela lying on her back with her head on Sully's shoulder so that her injury didn't bother her too much. They spoke about fears and hopes both still had but never voiced before. Each had lived without depending on anyone over the last years, and they admitted that they still had a way to go until old habits would be quenched.

As their discussion drew to the end, their tone was much lighter than in the beginning. Sully, however, still stewed on the fact that Hank had just shown up at Michaela’s door to take her out. Although he had agreed that Michaela would pay the bills until he would get the next installment from his publisher, there was still one question left.

Michaela felt the tension in his body. Yet encouraged by their open conversation they just had, she assured snuggling closer to him, "You can ask me anything, Sully."

Absentmindedly running his hand up and down her arm he at last got it off his chest, "Did Hank try anythin'?"

He couldn't see the smile that lit her face but he heard it in her voice as she responded, "Why, Mr. Sully, you sound as if you are jealous."

But he was too impatient to know as to follow her light mood, "Did he?" he insisted.

Carefully turning in his arms, always being aware of the bruise, Michaela shifted so she could see his face. Drawing up herself a bit she softly kissed his lips before she replied, "Let me ask you: Do you think I would let him? Because that's the only important question."

As he considered her words he realized that she was right. Breaking into a wide smile he beamed at her, "Course ya wouldn't."

Yet then he grew serious again. "You and me, Michaela – we've already been through so much. Ain't always been easy, but we always make it work. You and me."

As she nodded, he carefully maneuvered their bodies so she was comfortable on her back again and he hovered over her. Looking into her eyes he whispered, "I can't wait till we get married."

His voice and gaze held an intensity that made her blush. "Me neither, Sully." She held her tone low as well. "But there are still so many preparations to do and..."

"Shh," he closed her mouth with his lips. They were so soft and warm that Michaela stopped thinking and only reveled in the feelings his tender touches awoke inside of her. As he lifted his head again he advised, "No need to fret. Just get some sleep now. I'll wake ya for lunch, alright?"
"Thank you, Sully," she nodded and closed her eyes, leaning her cheek deeper against his palm that cupped her face.

Sully didn't budge until he was sure that she had fallen asleep.

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It was only three hours later when the doorbell rang rather insistently. Silently cursing Sully hurried to the entrance, wondering who dared to disturb their peaceful morning. The little girls had moved down onto the carpet with their pillows and blankets as to enjoy the already third rerun of the mermaid movie and he had just decided to start lunch. As he opened the door he was momentarily speechless. A blond-haired young woman, flanked by two cops, held a tiny, very official looking card right before his face, snapping, "Louise Chambers, Social Services. We are here as to take Hannah Sully with us. Please bring her out or we will be forced to take her with force."

Since Sully didn't react, far too stunned as to do so, Miss Chambers explained, without changing her tone though, "We have reason to believe that the child has been neglected and we suspect emotional abuse as well."

"But who would say somethin' like that?" was all Sully could manage.

"The child's grandfather. Mister Loren Bray."

Chapter 14

"Michaela!"

Sully's urgent cry woke her instantly. Believing that something was wrong with one of the little girls, she rushed out of her bedroom without caring what she wore. Only when she saw the gathering at the entrance, did she turn back and grab her robe. As she passed the living room door, Katie poked her head out and Michaela quietly but determinedly advised, "You both stay in there, Sweetheart. Only open the door when I tell you, alright?"

Katie nodded, recognizing by her mother's tone that this was serious. Michaela waited until the door had clicked shut and then hurried to find out what the commotion at the entrance was about.

Her mind was still somewhat fuzzy and she couldn't think of a reason why a strange woman standing before her apartment was glaring at Sully. However, seeing the cops she assumed they had come to talk about the accident again. Yet Sully informed her with his voice cracking, "They wanna take Hannah with them."

Michaela instantly replied, looking back and forth between the young officers, "That's out of the question."

"And I'd say that's not your business," Miss Chambers snapped, looking at her in disgust.

Michaela was only momentarily puzzled but then she read the young woman's thoughts. Disregarding the rude tone she proffered her hand introducing herself, "I'm Dr. Quinn. I was working last night and so I slept in this morning."

The cops who hadn't said one word until now, glanced at each other before they looked
back at Michaela and the older one of them asked, "Are ya the one from Wasson Park? Five victims, two killed and three injured?"

"Yes, I am. I thought that is why you're here?" In bewilderment, Michaela looked up at Sully.

Only now did she see the desperation on his face. "What's wrong?" she wondered, touching his arm.

Louise Chambers didn't like that her presence was being so easily dismissed and thus she chimed in. "I think that's enough small talk. It's better for everyone if you just bring the girl out here at once, or the officers will have to go in and..."

"I beg your pardon?" Michaela didn't dare believe her ears. Incredulously, she gazed at the woman across from her. "No one will enter my apartment without my permission."

"Well, we won't ask you since we have every reason to suspect a case of neglect and emotional abuse here. Mr. Bray informed our office this morning that the girl's life was even put in danger yesterday and she had to spend the night at the hospital." Miss Chambers looked at Michaela triumphantly, thinking she had played the trump card.

"That's ridiculous," Sully exclaimed, "she was there because of the accident!"

For the first time, Miss Chambers' self-confidence seemed to momentarily crumble, all the more so as the older policeman turned to her and added, "You said you needed support in a case of a child that is the victim of physical abuse. Having a car accident doesn't cover such a charge."

"Well," the young social worker wasn't one that gave up easily although she silently admitted that things looked somewhat different now. However, she took her job very seriously and they had orders to act immediately when a case of physical violence was reported. "As long as the treating doctor from the hospital doesn't affirm this fact, we have to assume..."

Michaela, worried that the little girls might eavesdrop, grew impatient, "Well, I was Hannah's doctor last night and I still am. She is suffering from a mild concussion as a result of hitting her head on the back of the seat in front of her when the van crashed into my BMW. She stayed at the hospital last night so I could monitor her and react quickly in case her condition deteriorated."

Her eyes were flashing an angry fire by now yet Miss Chambers continued, still undeterred, "As I said, as long as I don't have any proof of that, I will follow the instructions and assume the worst. Not to forget that there is still the accusation of neglect and emotional abuse that forces us to act."

Michaela had fought with a social worker before and it had only been the medical facts that kept the woman from taking a little boy with her back then. She knew that all they could do was play for time and try to clear up the situation. Sensing that Sully would lose control any moment, she stepped between him and Miss Chambers starting to speak, "I suggest that you send one of your officers to the hospital to have a look Hannah's chart and talk to one of my colleagues there. Then you will have the proof you need."

When the social worker was about to start protesting, Michaela went on, "Or would you
rather risk doing further damage to the girl’s health? You can be sure that this wouldn’t
 go on without consequences for you and your office."

Louise Chambers could tell that this wasn’t a hollow threat. The doctor before her had the
expression of someone who knew that she was in the right. Being sued was the last thing
the office needed. It couldn’t hurt to accept this suggestion; in the end she would get the
child out of here anyway.

Michaela was torn; she didn’t know what to do first. She needed to make sure that the
children were alright and she had to dress. But this would mean leaving Sully alone with
this woman and the officer. She wasn’t sure whether she could do so, fearing that he, as
upset as he was, might do or say something that would break the fragile truce they had
just gained. As she turned and looked up at him, his strained features told her that he was
having a hard time keeping his emotions in check. Reaching for his hands she felt his icy
fingers tremble. Squeezing them softly, she locked her eyes with his. Mutely she implored
him not to make things worse and then she decided to opt for the lesser of two evils; to
keep the social worker away from the children. "Sully," she asked him calmly, not
loosening her grip on his hands yet, "Would you please take Miss Chambers and the
officer to the kitchen and offer them something to drink? I’ll look after our daughters, get
dressed and then I will join you."

Sully slowly nodded. He felt as if he was caught in a nightmare and all he wanted was to
wake up from it. For a split second he wished he had his old life back, the quiet one that
only consisted of him and his daughter. No one had ever disturbed their peace; they’d had
everything they wanted. Yet then he felt Michaela’s fingers gently pressing his, and he
knew that he was fooling himself. This woman and her daughter had been the best that
had ever happened to his small family. Now he ran the risk of losing his daughter because
of the grudge that Loren still held against him. As mad as he was at the old man, Sully
realized that the only way to solve this situation was to talk to him.

"Sully?" he heard Michaela repeat his name and as he found his way back to reality, he
nodded again, "Alright."

Louise Chambers watched Mr. Sully pace restlessly before the kitchen window while he
waited for the water to boil. Now and then he ran his hand through his hair as if to brush
it away from his face although it didn’t cover his brow. He had only spoken when he had
asked whether they preferred coffee or tea. She didn’t like that she was condemned to
idleness and decided to at least start an interview. Maybe she could make this man lose
his temper and then no one would ask if Hannah Sully was sick or not; she and the officer
would just get her out of a violent father's reach. Determined, she lifted her bag on her
lap, opened it and took out a form.

"Mr. Sully," she began, "I need to know some things about the child’s mother. When did
she die and why?"

Jolting around, Sully stared at her in disbelief; this was the last question he had expected.
He had already opened his mouth to reply that this wasn’t her business at all when out of
the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of bright red. It came from the picture on the
refrigerator which the little girls had painted to welcome him home. He had to be strong
for them and stay calm, he reminded himself. If he lost Hannah he wouldn’t know how to
go on. That was why he straightened and responded in a non-committal tone, "My wife
died giving birth to Hannah. The doctors at the hospital weren't able to stop her from
bleeding out."
This was news to Louise Chambers; she had understood from Mr. Bray's report that Mr. Sully had been involved in her death. Surprised, she looked up meeting his gaze. Maybe he had taken his wife there too late...

Sully, however, recognized the doubt on the social worker's face and added, "If ya don't believe me, call his colleague." He pointed with his head in the cop's direction. "It happened at the same hospital. I'm sure they still have the chart there."

For once, Michaela was glad that German architects had planned the house and a door closed every room from the corridor. This way nothing of what was spoken in the kitchen could be heard in the living room and their daughters hadn't learnt what all the commotion was about. Hannah had fallen asleep on the floor, lying with her upper body on a large pillow and covered by a soft blanket and Katie was satisfied with her Mommy's explanation that all the people had come because of the accident. The little girl was occupied with watching the third rerun of The Little Mermaid and was waiting for her favorite scene to come.

Michaela's mind had been racing all the time, looking for a solution to this dilemma. The best would be to ask Mr. Bray to come over and explain himself but she feared that a loud confrontation between him and Sully couldn't be avoided, and she didn't want their daughters to be witnesses to a heated discussion, let alone Miss Chambers. Thus she simply joined the others in the kitchen, catching Sully's last words.

"What chart?" she wondered, growing instantly concerned upon seeing his expression. As calm as his voice was, his features were equally strained so she strode over to stand close to him, wanting him to feel her support.

"Abigail's," he choked out and took in a labored breath, looking at her like an animal caught in a trap.

"What for?" Michaela was puzzled.

"We need to investigate Mr. Sully's character," Louise said sternly, "And for that we need to know under what circumstances Mrs. Sully died."

It rarely happened but this reply made Michaela momentarily speechless. Only when Sully made a strange sound next to her and started to growl, "I'll tell ya the circumstances. She..." did she catch herself.

Pulling out a chair for her fiancé, she quietly advised, "Sit down, Sully, please. I'll make you a tea." Gently urging him to take a seat, she started to speak as if reading from a paper, "When Mrs. Abigail Sully arrived at the hospital, the first examination didn't hint at any complications. Yet then suddenly the blood pressure shot up and after further examinations it became obvious that this was a case of pre-eclampsia: Mrs. Sully was instantly taken to the operating theatre where a Caesarian was performed. This way the baby survived yet despite all efforts Mrs. Sully's life couldn't be saved. If you think you have to know more," her eyes shot angry daggers at the social worker now, "You will need a court order to take a look at the chart. There you will find reported every medicine that was administered including the times when every intervention was performed. But I assure you that you won't find Mr. Sully's name in this chart. And if you think someone can cause pre-eclampsia, then I'd suggest you take some medical classes. Any more questions?"
All the while as she spoke Michaela was busy making tea. With her last words it was done and she put the filled cup on the table before Sully. Seeing his astonished gaze, she blushed but didn't explain yet how she knew all these facts.

Much to her relief, Miss Chambers' cell phone started ringing. The young woman silently listened and when she finished the one-sided conversation, she looked at Michaela. "Dr. Cassidy didn't let Officer White take a look at the chart." As if hoping that the doctor before her would break down at this news, she paused dramatically. Gaining no reaction though she continued, "But he affirmed everything you said."

Michaela simply raised an eyebrow knowing that it wasn't over yet. And in fact, the social worker went on, "Before I make a decision I demand to see the child."

The response came instantly, "Only if you guarantee that you won't wake her. She fell asleep, and sleep is the best medicine for her right now."

Louise Chambers considered the doctor for a moment. She knew that she might have lost this battle and she couldn't afford to make a bad impression at the office again. Her boss had criticized her only recently, calling her actions too strict. It couldn't hurt to give in now, but if she spotted the tiniest shred of evidence that the girl was in danger, she would get her out of here.

Pushing the chair back she straightened to her feet, looking at the young cop, "I need you as a witness."

Wordlessly, the man rose as well. Michaela, however, stood in the doorway, her arms crossed before her chest. Her body language spoke volumes and Miss Chambers eventually said, "Alright, I won't wake her."

Only then did Michaela turn to Sully who didn't budge, promising softly, "We'll be right back."

And so they were: it didn't even take a minute until Miss Chambers appeared on the threshold again, saying in a threatening tone, "This time you were lucky that the child can't be moved. But this case isn't closed. I'll be back."

Chapter 15

The moment the social worker and the policeman were out of the apartment, Sully snatched up his jacket from the chair. As he donned it while storming towards the hallway, Michaela grabbed for his sleeve. Clutching it tightly, she made him stop momentarily. "Wait," she demanded, "We have to talk..."

With an impatient jolt Sully freed his arm, "Talk?" he growled, "I'll go to Loren, make him come to his senses..."

"Sully!" Michaela's voice held a tone that burned him like red-hot steel, startling him. Momentarily surprised, he stared at her. Seeing that she had his attention at least for a minute, Michaela softened continuing, "Don't you see that you will only make things worse? We have to first..."

"How can it get worse?" he demanded, his voice growing louder yet Michaela cut him off
"They could come back and then we won't be able to hinder them from taking Hannah."
Of course Michaela understood the uproar of his feelings, but she needed him to see reason. Holding his gaze she waited for her words to sink in. When they did, Sully shrugged his jacket off again, throwing it angrily onto the chair in the small corridor. His moving, however, was too harsh and thus the cloth brushed Michaela's bunch of keys onto the floor.

Katie had heard the strangers leave and thought she was allowed to come out of the living room again. She already had her hand on the doorknob when she heard the voices of her parents. Something in their tone scared her, made her staying inside. However, when she heard the loud sound she opened the door, calling anxiously, "Mommy?"

Seeing the fear in the little girl's eyes, Sully instantly sobered. Reacting faster than Michaela, he crouched down before his daughter, tenderly stroking her hair, "Everythin' is fine, Kates. I just threw the keys down."

Yet Katie wasn't fooled. Tears brimmed in her eyes when she shook her head, knowing it better, "You yelled."

Squatting down as well, Michaela opened her arms for Katie to step into her embrace. "Come here, Sweetheart."

Complying, Katie threw her healthy arm around her mother's neck. As she buried her face in her Mommy's shoulder, the tears broke free. Michaela knew that they came only partly because of the argument she had overheard. As a doctor, she had already expected this reaction last night. It was hard to imagine what the little girl must have felt when the van crashed into their BMW right next to her. "Shh," Michaela soothed gently rubbing her daughter's back, "It's alright. Just let it out, Sweetheart."

Only when the sobs subsided, she explained, "What you just heard... Daddy and I only had a misunderstanding..."

"You yelled," Katie insisted, wiping the tears away with her free hand.

Sully watched mother and daughter and he could tell that Michaela was in pain. She held Katie close to her chest and remembering the glimpse of the bruise he had gotten in the bathroom he knew that it must hurt badly. The familiar feelings of guilt arose inside of him but this time he didn't allow them to overwhelm him. His help was needed and so he sprang into action.

Laying his hand against their daughter's back he assured, "Kates, we didn't mean to upset you. We won't be so loud again..."

"Promise?" Katie asked quickly, looking at him expectantly.

"Promise," he confirmed and rose to his feet, lifting the little girl into his arms, adding, "How 'bout we look after Hannah..."

"I'm tired, too," Katie yawned. "Can I also sleep on the floor?"

"May I," Michaela automatically amended exchanging a look with Sully. Although it
would soon be time for lunch it was more important that the children got the sleep that would help their healing plus she and Sully desperately needed to talk. Thus she agreed with a simple nod.

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Sully had been glad to see Hannah still with her eyes closed. With both little girls taking a nap, Michaela and he could make plans how to get out of this hopeless situation. As he entered her bedroom he froze on the threshold though.

Michaela sat on the edge of her bed with her blouse unbuttoned. She didn't even notice his presence because she was applying some ointment with the utmost caution onto the bruise. Seeing the dark band across her chest fully for the first time Sully clenched his teeth. The blue and purple stood out against the white of her skin like a mark made by a branding iron. It was hard to imagine that it would ever vanish again. "I'm so sorry," he said hoarsely, making her gaze fly to him.

For a moment she was embarrassed feeling his eyes on her bare chest. Yet she instantly read his thoughts and assured, "It's not your fault, Sully."

However, he didn't budge and so she asked for his help, "Could you please bring me a tissue from over there? I forgot to take one but I need it to wipe my fingers before I can do up the buttons."

She barely had spoken the words when he was already at her side. "Here," he handed her the soft material, kneeling down before her, "Let me."

Starting with the lowest, he slowly and methodically closed one button after another, his fingers never touching her though. Only when he was almost done, he bent his head forward, softly putting his lips right above the bruise.

Michaela closed her eyes, relishing his tenderness. How she wished she could simply throw her arms around his neck, holding him tight... Yet she couldn't. It wasn't only that it would cause too much pain at the moment; they had more important things to do.

"Sully," she whispered taking his head between her hands and making him look up at her. "The accident wasn't your fault but you have to stop running away every time we disagree."

As he tried to avoid her eyes, she quickly shifted and placed a tender kiss on his lips. When she came up again, she gave him one of her crooked smiles, "If you don't, you might be outside of this apartment more than in it because I'm stubborn, too."

Seeing the sparkle return to his eyes she knew he had gotten her point. She grew serious again though, knowing they might have not much time. "I think we should first..." Eager to help, Sully chimed in, "We gotta talk to Loren, makin' him take back the things he said."

Michaela nodded, "Right. But first we should try to find out where Maude stands in this matter." She hesitated.

"What?" Sully wondered, straightening in order to sit down next to her on the bed. "I think that's a good idea."
Yet Michaela shook her head, "What if they say later we have forced them to take back their statements? The youth welfare office could think we intimidated them... Oh, I have an idea! We should call..."

The moment she said the words the phone began to ring. As she reached for it she groaned softly and Sully instantly was on his feet. Laying his hand on her shoulder he gently made her sit down again and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he asked and then he silently listened to the torrent of words coming from the other end of the wire.

Michaela looked at him questioningly yet he only ran his hand up and down her arm absentmindedly, staring at the floor.

"Thanks, we really appreciate that. Dr. Quinn is right next to me, I'll tell her. Bye."

Slowly laying the phone down, he eventually looked at Michaela, "That was the kindergarten. Miss Chambers was there, asking questions about all four of us."


"It was the principal herself. She said that both, she and our kids' teacher set Miss Chambers straight that neither Hannah nor Katie are a case for a social worker. That they are happy little girls, not in any possible way abused and that they had never seen Mr. Bray taking care of the kids. They would confirm that wherever and whenever it might be needed."

Michaela sighed, "I wonder if Mr. Bray knows what he has started." Yet then she straightened determinedly, "Anyway, I think we should call Matthew Cooper and ask for his advice."

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The first thing Matthew had told them was to wait for his call before they talked to the Brays. Sully had a hard time accepting this yet Michaela convinced him to comply. He was in the kitchen distracting himself with preparing lunch when the phone rang. Hearing the sound he quickly turned the heat down, making sure that he could leave the room for a few minutes.

Michaela had stretched out on the bed again, trying to relax. As Sully approached her, she had sat up though speaking into the mouthpiece, "I assure you the children are fine."

As she saw his questioning gaze she mouthed, "Maude." Then she listened again before she replied, "No, Mrs. Bray, I'm afraid you can't."

Maude took the receiver from her ear, looking at it in puzzlement. Dr. Mike's voice sounded strained yet her words bewildered Hannah's grandmother even more. Maybe the doctor didn't feel well but this was only more reason for herself to go over there. She hadn't seen her husband all morning but for lunch he would be back for sure and thus she made a decision. "Dr. Mike," her tone was stern, "I know you only ask for help when you need it but sometimes you should just accept it when it's offered. I'll come right after lunch..."
"No!" Michaela instantly interrupted her and Maude was taken aback by this strange behavior. Last night she understood the reason when they were asked to stay away from the little girls. Although, it needed a big deal of her powers of persuasion as to convince Loren that they could trust Dr. Mike’s word. Yet now she grew suspicious as well. Clearing her throat she frowned, asking slowly, "Could you please tell me, why?"

The longer she listened to Michaela’s response, the more her jaw dropped. In the end, she was only able to whisper, "Oh my God."

For a few moments both women stayed silent until Maude regained her composure. Hearing the entrance opening, she said resolutely, "Dr. Mike, don't worry. I'll have a word with Loren right away. And please tell Sully that I'm terribly sorry. I promise I'll wait till your lawyer talked to us before I contact you again."

Still trying to digest all information she'd just learned, Maude put the receiver down. Looking up, she met her husband's eyes as he entered the room. "Loren Bray," rising to her feet from the chair she instantly attacked him, "What, in Heaven's name, have you done?"

Gaping at his wife in disbelief, the old man didn't immediately respond. Never had she dared to talk to him in such a tone. Although he of course knew the answer, he pretended ignorance, "What the hell are ya talkin' about? Is that a way to welcome your husband?"

"Loren!" Maude was beside herself with anger, "Where have you been all morning? They wanted to take Hannah away from Sully and Dr. Mike!"

"So fast?" Loren was incredulous. From his experience, authorities worked rather slowly. "The woman in the office said they would investigate the case."

Stepping closer to her husband, Maude reiterated, "What have you done?"

"Aw Maude," he rolled his eyes, "C'mon, ya said yourself it's Sully's fault that the girl had this accident. This time I won't just sit and watch as he kills our granddaughter, too."

Seeing that his wife wanted to protest he raised his hand as to stop her. "Hannah can live with us. She already has a room here and we have enough time." Puzzled he watched Maude shaking her head and added, "I thought ya love the girl..."

"Loren," Maude sighed and went back to her armchair because she felt her knees weaken. Sitting down, she leaned against the back and closed her eyes for a moment. Eventually she went on searching her husband's eyes, "Yes, I love our granddaughter and that's why I know that you can't do anything worse to her than to take her away from her father and the others. Now tell me, what have you done?"

Eying his wife Loren tried to find out how serious she was. Her trembling hands on her lap and the heightened color of her cheeks gave him the answer and thus he decided that he should give in. Maude had a bad heart and he didn't want to risk her to get an attack. Taking a seat on a chair across from her he reported, "I went to the youth welfare office after breakfast and asked who could tell me what we had to do if we wanted to raise our granddaughter. There was a very eager social worker that took me to her office and asked for our reason. So I told her that Sully is away a lot and the doctor rather works than care for the kids and that Hannah was almost killed last night because of Sully."

"I see," Maude sighed. After learning about the consequences of Loren’s activities from
doctor Mike she knew there was only one solution. Looking at him she told him, "We'll go to the office and you take back what you said there. Now."

Straightening to her feet she expected Loren to do the same yet he only protested, "What about lunch? I'm hungry..."

Hearing this Maude lost it, "You stubborn old man! You ruin Hannah's life and think about food? Do you really think they would give her to us? We are far too old in the eyes of the law. They will take her to strangers and we might never see her again!"

She had to pause, gasping for breath. Glaring at her husband she waited for him to contemplate her words. He did so and realized that Maude could be right. When he had first met the little girl she won his heart right away. He loved spending time with her and the thought of never seeing her again was pure torture. Thus he finally grumbled, "Alright, you win. Let's go."

Chapter 16

"Hannah Sully? I will look, just give me a moment." Irene Gibb gestured for Maude and Loren to sit down next to her desk while she opened a program on her computer. "Ah, here she is... Emotional as well as physical abuse, neglect... reported this morning." Turning back to the couple the social worker assured, "Don't worry, in such a serious case we act immediately. Actually, the child should already be under our protection. Our psychologist will talk to her and then..." Her voice trailed off; puzzled she saw Mrs. Bray glaring at her husband. "What's wrong?" she wondered.

Yet Maude kept her eyes on Loren who tried to look as if he didn't feel that he was in any way to blame. His wife saw right through him though. Her voice was accusing when she started to speak, "I thought Dr. Mike exaggerated but it is really as bad as she said. I want you to get it straight why you really came here."

Loren, not wanting to look like a fool, didn't admit yet that he had made a mistake, "Awe, that's not my words. I only said that Hannah got hurt and that I don't wanna see that he ruins her life as he did with Abigail's..."

"Our daughter's death wasn't Sully's fault and you know that," Maude huffed but was stopped by Mrs. Gibb clearing her throat.

The social worker had seen that this was Mrs. Chamber's case and knowing that she didn't always handle her cases the right way, she decided to ask for the facts that had led to the charge. "Mrs. Bray," she began, "We see it quite often that someone reports abuse and then takes it back, often out of fear of the alleged offender. That is why I'd like to ask your husband some question as to judge the case myself. Are you alright with that?"

Maude nodded slowly. The woman across from her made the impression as if she knew what she did. If not, Maude would still be here to interpose.

Irene Gibb directed her gaze at the man. Seeing him shift on his chair, every fiber in her body told her that he had a bad conscience but would be stubborn nevertheless. "Mr. Bray," she began, sounding very official now, "When did you notice bruises or other evidence of physical abuse on your granddaughter the first time?"

"Well..." Loren nervously ran his hand over his head as if his hair needed to be brushed
back and hesitated. The social worker from this morning hadn't asked so directly but rather helped to find the right words in order to have a reason for going after Sully. However, feeling his wife's angry gaze he shut his mouth again.

For over twenty years Irene Gibb had held this position and knew there were two possibilities; either the man was too afraid to talk with his wife next to him or he held a grudge against the father of the child. As to avoid the little girl getting hurt, she had to find out as quickly as possible what was going on here. Only little people answered a direct question with a lie and thus she asked, "Have you ever witnessed Mr. Sully beating his daughter?"

Maude couldn't believe that her husband didn't reply instantly. That was why she forgot that she was supposed to stay silent and chimed in, "Of course not! He hasn't seen Sully since the day Abigail left our home! He just..."

Startled, Maude stopped. Mrs. Gibb had risen from her chair abruptly shouting across the large office, "Jeff! I need you here!"

Immediately, a man in his twenties who wore his long hair bound in a ponytail emerged as if out of nowhere, expectantly looking at his older colleague. "Please offer Mrs. Bray a cup of tea or coffee or whatever she wants," Irene said, "I need some moments alone with her husband."

It sounded odd, but Michaela was glad that the little girls were distracted by not feeling well. This way they didn't notice how nervous their parents were. She didn't want to add to their physical discomfort. If they ever learned that there was a real chance that Hannah could be taken away from the family, it might haunt them for a very long time.

At the kitchen table it had been unusually quiet yet no one seemed to mind. Hannah and Katie even suggested of their own accord to lie down again after lunch. Some of their old spirits shone through though when they, simultaneously, requested to sleep on the floor of the living room. Gaining permission, Katie even ventured further, asking whether they could get their stuffed lions as to cuddle with them. The children had just made themselves comfortable when the doorbell rang again.

Still crouched down next to their daughters, Michaela and Sully looked at each other, worry and strain visibly showing on their faces. As Sully started to rise to his feet, Michaela touched his arm, holding him back. "Let me," she said, "Since this is my apartment it could be someone who wants to see me. And..." she raised her eyebrows for him to understand the underlying meaning, "if you just stay inside here..."

"Alright," Sully conceded although he didn't like that Michaela would have to deal alone with the social worker. He was sure Miss Chambers was back. He silently watched Michaela straightening, squaring her shoulders and leaving the room.

Irene Gibb waited patiently for her ringing to be answered. She had drawn her conclusions from Mr. Bray's answers and even the more from what she had learned about the conversation at the kindergarten. Mrs. Bray had at last confirmed her surmise but since the case was already on file, she needed more as to close it. That was why she was here.
When the entrance finally opened, Irene showed her identification card introducing herself, "I'm Irene Gibb from the youth welfare office." After putting her card back into her jacket pocket, she proffered her hand, "Mrs. Quinn, I assume."

"It's either Miss or Dr. Quinn," Michaela replied. Although she shook the offered hand she didn't budge as to give the entrance free.

Irene considered the woman before her for a minute. She never paid attention to what people wore or what furniture they had; she had seen abuse not only in the poor parts of town but in the richest as well. There were other signs that told her what she needed to know. "Dr. Quinn," she eventually went on purposefully addressing her this way, "We both know that I can't simply drop a case once it is reported. I need good reason to do it and for this, you have to let me in."

Knowing that the social worker was right, Michaela nodded and stepped aside, giving the entrance free. The fact that there weren't policemen with Mrs. Gibb gave her a first ray of hope that this nightmare could be over soon.

Sully held his ear close to the door panel in order to discern as much as possible of what was going on out there. Both little girls had rolled over so they lay on their stomachs right now, watching him. They had never thought that their daddy could be so curious that he would eavesdrop. Glancing at each other, they started to giggle. Sully, unaware of the effect he had on his daughters, instantly hushed them without turning towards them though, "Shh..."

While Katie continued grinning behind her hand that covered her moth now, Hannah instantly grew serious. She knew her father well enough as to realize that something was wrong. With her headache suddenly returning, a light moan escaped her and she shifted as to lie on her back again.

Sully was sure that only one person talked and followed her inside. Relieved hearing that the steps didn't lead the stranger to the living room but to the kitchen, he turned. He did it in time to hear the sound of pain Hannah made and was instantly on his knees next to her, "Ya want me to get Mommy here?" he asked, tenderly stroking the pale brow.

The little girl, however, didn't want her daddy to leave her, "Can ya stay?" she pleaded and smiled a bit upon seeing him nod in agreement. Sully moved as to sit cross-legged and taking his daughter's hand he advised, "Close your eyes, sweet girl."

When she did so, he started to quietly tell the story about how the rabbit lost his tail.

Irene Gibb had heard and seen enough. Of course she knew that Dr. Quinn was prejudiced; after all she was Mr. Sully's fiancée. However, it was obvious that little children were an integral part of the life in this apartment. Brightly colored pictures made by small hands covered most of the free places on the walls and the refrigerator. Children that were unhappy, even if only secretly, didn't paint this kind of pictures. Learning more about the history of the Sully/Bray family confirmed what the experienced social worker had already concluded: that Mr. Bray was a bitter man who wanted to take his chance not only to make his granddaughter live with him but also Mr. Sully feel the pain of losing his little daughter. There was only one step left for her to do; she had to see the child and the father as well.

Katie had grown suspicious the moment her daddy turned away from the door for she had
seen his face then. Something was going on outside of the living room that worried him and it must have to do with her best friend, her sister. Maybe it was about the accident again, like in the morning and she decided to make sure that no one would disturb Hannah’s rest. That was why she only half-heartedly listened to the story but rather concentrated on the sounds from the hallway. As she heard steps approaching, she straightened to her feet. As soon as the door opened and revealed a stranger next to her mommy, she started to talk to her in a resolute tone, "Hannah hasn't seen anything, the van hit us on my side. You can ask me 'cause my sister has a headache and needs to sleep."

While Michaela looked somewhat embarrassed about her daughter's rude behavior, Sully couldn't suppress a grin. He had relaxed the moment he saw Michaela's expression that told him they were out of danger of losing his little girl. That was why he was able to enjoy watching Katie as the small replica of her mother.

Irene Gibb smiled openly, "Well, that's very brave of you. But actually I'm only here to see how you both are doing." She carefully stepped around the makeshift beds on the floor. Taking a seat on the couch, she looked down at Hannah asking softly, "So, how are you?"

"I'm fine. Thank you Ma'am," the child replied, trying to sound sincere. She wanted to be brave as well.

"I see," Mrs. Gibb nodded. It was obvious that the girl was in pain. Not wanting to add to her discomfort she decided to leave her alone and only requested, "May I borrow your dad for some minutes?"

Before Hannah agreed, she looked at her father. Sully recognized the worry in her eyes when she asked, "You be back?"

Thus he bent down and after placing a peck on her forehead he looked straight into her blue eyes assuring, "I promise, sweet girl."

Half an hour later the little family was alone again. With their daughters napping Sully was able to convince Michaela to get some rest, too. She didn't really resist his suggestion, feeling that the events of the day had taken their toll on her. The dull, softly throbbing ache on her chest reminded her that she had to be careful to not overdo it if she wanted to be back at work at night. As she made herself comfortable, snuggled up to Sully she chuckled, remembering that the little girls were lying almost in the same way, only that they were holding onto a stuffed lion.

"What?" Sully wondered, his deep voice next to her ear as comforting as his arms around her.

"Nothing," she replied, thinking it foolish to tell him that she had just compared him with a stuffed lion. "I'm just happy that this nightmare is over."

"Yeah," he quietly agreed, "But I gotta have a word with Loren."

Michaela instantly reacted. She started to sit up as to have a better look at his face yet Sully pulled her back into his embrace, "Don't worry, I ain't doin' somethin' stupid."

"Good," was all Michaela responded, feeling too exhausted as to discuss anything right now. Closing her eyes she sighed reiterating, "Good."
Hearing her breathing becoming more even and deep Sully eventually relaxed somewhat as well. He was fully aware that without Michaela by his side, he might have lost Hannah today. He wracked his brain for an idea how to show her what she meant to him. As an idea hit him he grinned, satisfied.

Chapter 17

Sully hadn't felt right about Michaela going to work a couple hours ago. He knew she was still in a great deal of pain yet of course she insisted, bringing the old argument of her needing to show up at the hospital now and then since she had some responsibilities there. Her words had been accompanied by a playful smile but he could tell that she was serious.

Fortunately, their daughters had fallen asleep quite quickly and so Sully had time to finally settle down as well. Letting the last forty-eight hours pass in review he was again struck by how close he had come to losing his entire family. Michaela could say what she wanted; he still knew that the accident was his fault. They had been on the street because of him. Looking at it from a distance, he wondered why he had run away at all. It appeared foolish now; he simply had to get used to the idea that his former main problem of how to earn enough money to provide for his family didn't exist anymore. The hard part about accepting this was that it was not thanks to him but Michaela. This thought reminded him that he still needed to speak with Hank...

Sully was about to drift off as the doorbell rang. He wasn't even sure whether he had heard it at all. Not wanting the children to wake though, he quickly rose and hurried to the entrance. Peering through the peephole he froze. His heart started to race and he literally saw red. Yet there was no way of avoiding this confrontation forever. Closing his eyes, Sully drew in a deep breath. Letting it out ever so slowly he told himself to stay calm. For his family's sake, he had to stay calm.

Maude had purposefully chosen this time for her and Loren to come to talk to Sully. The girls would be asleep which meant the men couldn't yell at each other. That Dr. Mike was at the hospital didn't hurt either. On one point she agreed with her husband: this was a family affair and it was better when they handled it in private.

Maude had heard Sully approaching the entrance and gathered he had seen them. Knowing a bit about his temper she pleaded, "Sully, please open up. Do it for Hannah."

She had barely spoken the words as the door opened. Not deigning them a look, Sully stepped aside. "Kitchen," was all he said and after another moment that he still needed to gain his composure, he followed them into the small room.

Too worked up as to sit with his former parents-in-law at the table, he rather leaned
against the kitchen sink, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. Clenching his fists inside of them he waited.

Maude looked at her husband, exhorting him to finally grumble without looking at Sully but rather stubbornly returning his wife's gaze, "Awe... alright. I'm sorry."

They had had a vehement argument earlier. Loren still couldn't believe how much his quiet wife had changed since she first met their granddaughter. However, Maude had made it absolutely clear that she would never forgive him if Hannah would vanish from their life. Thus he had conceded and promised to apologize. To be honest, after this Miss Gibb had talked to him he was somewhat startled. His showing up at the youth welfare office could have had severe consequences for Hannah. She could have got lost in the system; that's how the social worker phrased it. Well, in the end things had worked out fine. All he had to do was to eat crow and that was why he was able to get the words out.

For Sully, who felt as if he had gone through hell since the moment Miss Chambers rang at the door, Loren's meager four words sounded like mocking rather than an apology. Maude could easily recognize that because she had watched his face carefully from under her lids. Sully's blue eyes were ablaze with anger and the color of his cheeks had heightened.

"Sully," she quickly spoke up as to correct the impression her husband had made, "Loren didn't think. He was angry that we weren't allowed to see Hannah at the hospital. He felt as if you forbade us to see her..." Sully's complexion was going back to normal and thus encouraged, Maude continued, "It's inexcusable what he did but he did it out of fear. Now that we've gotten to know Hannah we don't want to lose her again. And we want you with us too, so the family can be together again. Right, Loren?"

Expectantly she looked at her partner who affirmed although only grudgingly, "Yeah."

Sully didn't react to this statement nor did the wrinkle on his brow vanish. Yet the anger at Loren was replaced by a deep disappointment.

"I thought you'd understood," he at last addressed Maude. Not giving her time to reply he went on, "What about Michaela and Katie?"

Maude's heart skipped a beat. Sometimes it still hurt that Sully fell in love again after Abigail died. Yet after getting to know Dr. Mike and seeing how good she and her daughter were for Hannah, she embraced the thought of her marrying into the family. "They will always be welcome in our home," she quickly assured, nodding. Again seeking for her husband's affirmation she reiterated the words from earlier, "Right, Loren?"

As her husband finally responded, he looked up at Sully, "Yeah, I don't mind them bein' with you now. They're quite nice." Admitting this openly wasn't easy for him.

Sully, however, shook his head. Running both hands through his hair and staring at his feet, he exhaled exasperatedly. He hadn't met his former father-in-law for about a decade and was somewhat startled seeing what the years had done to him. It wasn't only that his hair had turned almost white but the deep lines on his face made him look much older than he actually was. Yet Sully couldn't feel pity; this man had almost ruined his daughter's, better said all his family's life. It was the same selfish reason that had made Abigail unhappy: like her, Loren simply wanted Hannah for himself. But Maude
disturbed him even more. After her initial problems with another woman in his life, something he actually understood, he had gained the impression that she not only accepted Michaela and Katie but had grown fond of them. He had never expected for her to see Michaela a necessary evil she had to take when she wanted Hannah.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Sully at last stepped to the table. Supporting his hands on the top of it he bent towards Abigail's parents setting them straight, "Ya kicked me out of your family a long time ago. Although fact is, ya never took me in. I built my own life, first with Abigail, then with Hannah and now with Michaela and the kids. I understand that ya wanna have a connection to your daughter's daughter but for that ya gotta accept that she is mine, too. I'm her father and I'm responsible. Ya two have no right to meddle in her life. Ya wanna be a part of it? Fine, but only on my terms. That's it."

Although Maude had already had a few serious conversations with Sully, it was this speech that opened her eyes, cut her to the quick. She needed two days to be ready to acknowledge that he was right. Actually, thinking about her true motives for being there for the children, even though she hadn't been aware of them, made her feel incredibly bad. While she simply tolerated Dr. Mike and Katie in the beginning, she had grown very fond of them. Now she felt as if she had betrayed their confidence. Yet she knew what to do.

Sully, however, never told Michaela the exact words that had been spoken that night. He didn't want to spoil her relief that was palpable when she learned that the Brays had been at her apartment to offer a truce. Thus Michaela's smile was open and wide when she opened the entrance in order to let Maude in a few days later. "It is good to see you," Michaela greeted the older woman, "But unfortunately I have to leave for work. I'm sure though that Sully will appreciate some company."

Yet Maude's intention was to apologize. "Dr. Mike," she began, venturing into the hallway, "I'm so sorry that I..."

"That's alright," Sully chimed in, looking over Michaela's shoulder. He was holding the jacket for her to shrug into it. "Welcome back." His gaze at Maude didn't hold any anger. For him Maude's coming meant that she accepted his conditions. That was all he needed as to go on.

After Michaela had bid her goodbye to everyone, including the little girls who greeted Hannah's grandmother enthusiastically, Sully only asked his former mother-in-law in order to be on the safe side, "Ya sure ya want it my way?"

"I am," Maude nodded, tears in her eyes.

"Good." Sully didn't dwell on it but rather said, "I could use your help."

As soon as the little girls were out of earshot again, he let her in on his secret plan.

Katie's arm healed well, and Hannah was back to her old self a few days after the accident. No one told the little girls what all the strangers in their apartment had really wanted. So the only remnants of this dreadful day for Hannah and Katie were occasional bad dreams that were immediately soothed by either their mommy or daddy. Soon they went back to the kindergarten and were even stable enough that Sully could dare to leave
for Boston overnight. He didn't like to go away, not even for a couple of days, but he had things to do. That was why a second number was programmed to the children’s cell phone and Hannah could reach her father when she felt the urge to hear his voice.

Thus everything was back to normal and Sully's preparations for his surprise went on without Michaela noticing it. Only once he had to fear she might find out what he was doing when she suggested that they all go to Boston on her next free weekend so she could look after her practice. Fortunately she listened to him when he pointed out that she could call Dr. Cook and ask him to send the records via Internet. His hint that she could use a break decided the issue. It had turned out that not only the seatbelt had caused a bruise but the steering wheel as well. The result of the latter was a contusion on her lower ribs which still hurt.

Anyway, three days before the weekend that was meant to be special everything was prepared. Already home from her day shift, Michaela made coffee while the girls were watching Shrek and Sully cleaned the kitchen.

As the doorbell rang, Michaela went as to answer it. Since the incident with Miss Chambers she acquired the habit of first peering through the peephole before she opened the entrance. As she did it now, she was stunned for a moment. She had never expected to see this woman here.

However, her smile didn't give away her astonishment when she opened the door. "Hello Miss Miller, what can I do for you?"

Yet Catherine hadn't come to exchange courtesies, "I need you to talk some sense into Sully. He will miss his best chance ever to get to be known country-wide because of you."

It didn't even occur to Michaela to ask the young woman into her apartment. All she could muster was, "I beg your pardon?"

"We invited two other writers and him to a symposium but he says he can't come because he has other plans for the weekend. Plans with you! If you really care for him you tell him..."

"Tell me what?" Sully demanded, joining them. "Is this still about the reading?"

Glaring at him Catherine affirmed his suspicion, "Yes, it is. And it's not just a reading. I won't leave before you tell me that you'll come."

Glancing up at Sully Michaela suggested, "Maybe we should discuss this inside."

Yet Sully refused, "Nope. No need. I already told her I ain't coming. We have other things to do."

Inwardly, he was cursing. How dared this woman show up here after he made it clear that there was no way to change his decision? She would ruin everything! Seeing Michaela's expression he knew she would support Catherine and thus he quickly considered how much to give away. "I prepared our housewarming party," he eventually revealed to Michaela, holding her gaze.

"You did?" she whispered in amazement. For a moment, Michaela forgot that they weren't alone. Throwing her arms around his neck she exclaimed, "That's wonderful,
Yet it only needed another minute for her to sober again. It wasn't because of the dull ache on her ribs from her pressing herself against him but the embarrassment that she only thought of herself at this moment. She was fully aware of the importance of being invited to a symposium. Slowly, she lowered her arms. "We can have the party another time," she hesitantly admitted.

Sully sighed; he should have known it. He scowled at Catherine for her interfering, making him reveal even more of his surprise. "Michaela," he said softly, turning back to her, "It has to be this weekend and it will. Your family from Boston is coming."

Chapter 18

"My family? My... my mother will come?" Michaela still tried to digest the information, looking up at Sully's face attempting to find out if this was only an excuse meant for the ears of Miss Miller. Yet there was no trace of a secret smile in his eyes but only disappointment because she knew now.

Sully carefully watched Michaela's expression, hoping he didn't have to reveal even more. However, the main reason for his worrying was that he feared her reaction as soon as his words would sink in. As he saw panic creeping onto her features he knew that he was right about being concerned. "Oh Sully," she breathed, "There is so much to prepare! We need..."

"I took care of everythin'," he quickly assured, smiling at her, "No need to fret."

"Ahem," clearing her throat, Catherine made her presence known again, "I hope you two don't mind my interrupting you... but Sully, you could still come to the symposium and join the party later." She sounded almost desperate now.

Yet Sully didn't feel pity for her. "Look," he said turning towards her but keeping Michaela's hand clasped in his, "I told ya before that I'm busy this Saturday. It's not my fault that ya never listen."

Too distracted by the news she had just learned, Michaela didn't pay attention to the discussion anymore and thus Sully could at last get rid of Catherine. Yet as soon as she was gone, he had to face the true challenge – Michaela's urge to control everything. On Wednesday evening, she was content with his assurance that she didn't have to do anything. Thursday went over without her trying to ask too much as well for she had a long day at the hospital.

Friday, however, was really hard for Sully. It was the first of her four free days and she started to pester him for more information as soon as she opened her eyes in the morning. She did so, of course, under the pretence that she wanted to help. Sully knew though that in reality, she feared he might have forgotten something that her mother could use against her. Somehow he survived the morning yet it became really hard when she realized that their children knew more about the event that he had planned for tomorrow than her.

As they sat around the kitchen table for lunch, it took Michaela all her willpower to not start and trick the little girls into telling her what she wanted to know. Sully, however, noticed her fidgeting and thought it better to take the offensive. He lightly bent forward, looking back and forth between their daughters, raising his eyebrows conspiratorially when he told them, "Ya know, your Mommy has figured out that we three have a secret.
And now she wants to know it. But we won't tell her, right?"

Both girls started to giggle and shook their heads no before they turned as to look at Michaela. As an exact replica of Sully Hannah set her straight, using the words her father had told them every night since they knew what would happen tomorrow, "A surprise only works when it stays one."

And Katie added, "We are big girls. We know how to keep a secret."

Lifting her hands in order to admit her defeat, Michaela couldn't help but laugh, "Alright, I'll be good." Yet after she gave them a moment as to enjoy their victory, she pleaded, "But couldn't you at least...?"

A triple "No!" cut her off and this time she really surrendered.

…………………………………………………

On Saturday morning she woke up to the feeling of Sully's warm and soft lips on her temple. Enclosed in his arms she snuggled her back against his chest, still too drowsy as to open her eyes already. Yet then she suddenly remembered; this was the day of the housewarming party! Sully had managed to keep her away from the building site over the last few weeks, always finding new excuses. Well, now she knew why. She smiled widely and wanted to turn in his embrace in order to look at his face but to her astonishment, he tightened his grip so she couldn't move. Becoming aware of the tension in his body she grew concerned, "Sully, is something wrong?" she wondered, whispering.

Sully didn't respond right away. He had lain awake most of the night, listening to Michaela's breathing, watching her features. He had been confident that his plan was a great one since the day it had formed in his head. Yet now that the moment for it to come true was so close, he started doubting. Not his love for the woman in his arms, of this he was sincere. But what if she found out that she had made the biggest mistake of her life once she lived with him in their new house? This first 'what if' was followed by many others, preventing him from sleeping. Anyway, hearing her worried tone he decided to offer the opportunity to rethink her choice.

As he loosened his embrace, Michaela shifted inside of his arms, and he waited until she faced him.

"Ya still wanna marry me?" he at last asked almost timidly.

Momentarily puzzled, Michaela considered him. Was it possible that he had second thoughts? When she didn't reply immediately she recognized anxiety in his expression and instantly put him at ease, "Well, Mr. Sully, if you hoped I'd say 'no', then I have to disappoint you."

Her tone was teasing and had the desired effect. Breathing a sigh of relief, Sully pulled her close, nuzzling her hair. "Good," he murmured into her ear. Picking up her light tone he continued, bending back so he could see her face again, "I thought maybe after yesterday ya'd changed your mind."

Returning his smile it was her who became shy now. Blushing she admitted, "I'm sorry, Sully. It's just... I can't bear to not know, feel left out."
He lovingly ran the back of his forefinger down her cheek. "Yeah, I know."

However, he had won his confidence back and it was time. After pressing a sweet kiss to her lips he peered into her eyes when he asked, "So ya wouldn't mind if we did it today?"

"Did what?" Her questioning look revealed that she didn't understand yet.

"Gettin' married," he explained patiently.

Michaela smiled at this suggestion, thinking he was joking. His unwavering gaze, however, told her that he was serious. And suddenly, everything fell into place. "Oh my God," she breathed and her heart started to race, "You prepared our wedding for today?"

Sully had steeled himself for every possible reaction. Seeing a wide smile enlighten her features, all nervousness left him and he was his old self again.

"Yep," he simply replied and pulled her against his chest again. "I hope ya don't mind."

"Oh Sully, of course not," was all Michaela could muster with too many thoughts already swirling through her mind.

Feeling her lips moving against his collarbone while she spoke, Sully became acutely aware of how close he held her body. They hadn't made love since the accident because Michaela had been in pain since then but right now he could hardly control his desire. However he had to, knowing that there was still a lot to do before they would take their vows in the afternoon. Apart from that, he had heard little feet padding along the hallway when he woke Michaela. He could swear that the little girls were pressing their ears against the door panel, waiting for him to call them in. He had promised to do so as soon as he would have told their mommy about the wedding. Knowing they finally wanted to share their joy with her, he gave Michaela free.

"Come in, sweet girls," he called and had barely spoken the words when the door flew open.

Michaela was still in the bathroom when the doorbell rang. As Sully opened the entrance he met Elizabeth Quinn's glare and was greeted with, "Does she finally know?"

He wasn't offended though. He had learned during his visit in Boston a few weeks ago from whom Michaela inherited her temper and the urge of controlling everything. Smiling, he replied, "Yeah, she does."

These words seemed to lift a heavy burden from Elizabeth's shoulder. "Thank God," she murmured which made Rebecca and Marjorie who stood behind her exchange a relieved glance. "Now, young man," Elizabeth was determined, "You are not supposed to see the bride before the ceremony again. I hope you are prepared to leave."

"Yeah," Sully chuckled, "Maude warned me you'd throw me out. The kids are in the kitchen and Michaela..."

"Mr. Sully," Elizabeth said sternly, "Leave them to us; we will manage. You better go now."
Rebecca was embarrassed by her mother's behavior and looked at Sully apologetically, "Don't worry. If we have a question, we will call you."

He nodded in response and while Elizabeth and Marjorie hurried past him into the apartment he said, "Maude should be here any moment. She knows where you gotta go."

When Michaela opened the kitchen door as to join her family, her jaw dropped. She had expected to see Sully and their daughters at the breakfast table and was prepared to ask them all sort of questions. The sight before her stunned her momentarily though and gave her a brief impression of how this day would carry on. The small room wasn't only crowded with her mother, Rebecca and Marjorie, Maude and her daughters, but Sully's friend from the café, Charlie, was there as well. The adults were involved in a discussion but the little girls spotted her immediately. "Mommy," they cried in unison, quickly sliding down from their chairs rushing towards her. Throwing her arms around Michaela's waist, Katie said excitedly, "Look who's all here!"

Encircling Michaela's waist from the other side, Hannah beamed up at her as well, "We'll be flower girls today!"

Panic threatened to overwhelm Michaela. While she had taken a quick shower, she wasn't able to think straight. There were so many things that were needed for a wedding and while she didn't doubt Sully's best of intentions she wasn't so sure whether he, a man, would have thought of everything. However, for her daughters' sake, she produced a smile, "That's wonderful, Sweetheart."

Where would they get dresses for them, for the bridesmaids and... for her? And as for Sully, where was he?

Elizabeth's mood hadn't improved yet. She thought all this secretiveness during the run-up to a wedding ridiculous. However, recognizing her youngest daughter's expression as pure panic as she stood on the threshold, clinging to the children as if she would break down without leaning on them, Elizabeth calmed down from one moment to the other. "Alright, everybody," she clapped her hands in order to get everyone's attention, "Let's get started with filling Michaela in so she can relax. We don't have enough time to waste it."

Hannah and Katie couldn't be happier than watching their mommy try the wedding dress on. They were incredibly proud of themselves because if it hadn't been for them, the beautiful dress might already be sold. When their daddy had asked for their help, they all too willingly had dragged their mother to the different bridal shops in town, watching her carefully for which dresses she liked. Usually there wasn't much of a reaction to witness but when she saw this special one in the window, her face had grown dreamy. She even had told them that this was exactly the dress she would like to wear on the big day. Of course they had instantly told their father and he had driven to the shop right after their report.

Michaela still couldn't believe it; this was exactly the dress she had dreamed of. It had enchanted her the first moment she saw it. Made of pure cream silk it fell smoothly down along her body. The long skirt barely touched her instep which meant it had the right length. The low neckline showed just the amount of her skin that wouldn't make her feel uncomfortable. Even around her waist the dress fit snugly.
her, she shifted in front of the floor-length mirror as to judge herself from all sides.

The shop assistant's voice brought her back to reality at last. "Fits like a glove. It's really seldom that no alterations are needed," the young woman stated. Suddenly being aware of everyone's eyes on her, Michaela blushed, admitting, "I really like it."

"Well, that's settled then." Elizabeth had honestly doubted that they were able to find the right outfit for her daughter but she had to acknowledge that Mr. Sully had been very good in his choice. "We should part now as planned," she suggested and everyone nodded in agreement. Only Michaela didn't move. It was as if it only at this moment dawned on her that she would get married that day. Looking at Rebecca's reflection in the mirror next to her own she whispered, "It's really happening. Can you believe it?"

Laying her arm around Michaela's shoulder, the older sister affirmed smiling, "I can, Mike. I'm so happy for you."

Chapter 19

Katie and Hannah moved closer together, searching for the other one's hand. They rarely questioned instructions but this time they knew in mute agreement that they were asked for too much. "We wanna stay with Mommy," Hannah insisted and Katie affirmed decidedly nodding, "Uh huh."

"Children," Elizabeth's tone was stern. "There is still so much to do. Buying the wedding dress was only the start; we don't have any other accessories yet. Then your mother's hair has to be done and she needs make-up. I have no idea what your father was thinking..."

At this point Maude chimed in, casting a glare at the other woman before she bent down laying one hand of every little girl's shoulder. Searching for their gazes she suggested, "How 'bout we go to your father's apartment and see if more guests arrived already?"

This time Katie voiced their contradiction shaking her head, "Daddy said when the secret is out we can stay with Mommy and tell her about all our plans."

Seeing the pleading looks on the small faces, Maude swallowed hard. This was more difficult than anticipated. Secretly she agreed with Mrs. Quinn; Sully's idea of surprising Dr. Mike with her own wedding was, at best, foolish. Which bride wanted to miss all the things before the big day like deciding for the right location or having a bridal shower? However, it was her task to keep the girls busy until the ceremony would begin in the afternoon. Straightening, she explained, "Well, your Daddy didn't know how much there is still to do. And you don't want to be in Dr. Mike's way today, do you?"

This had obviously been the wrong approach to the problem. Both pairs of eyes clouded over and tears threatened to fall. Of course Hannah and Katie didn't want to be a bother for their Mommy, but they had so looked forward to spend this day with her that it was difficult for them to give up this dream.

Before one of the older women could try to reason with the children again, Michaela with Rebecca and Charlie in tow joined the group. The dress would be delivered to the new house later so they didn't have to take care of that right now.

"What's wrong?" was Michaela's instant question, seeing everyone's strained expression. Since both, her mother and Mrs. Bray hesitated to reply, Michaela hoped for an
explanation from Marjorie. She, however, continued keeping her distance to all the commotion about the wedding she wasn't interested in even the least. Gaining only a shrug in response, Michaela turned to the little girls reiterating, "What's wrong, Sweethearts?"

Elizabeth didn't give the children time to respond but retorted herself instead, "They were about to leave with Hannah's grandmother right now." The stress on the last couple of words wasn't lost on Michaela.

"Oh," she finally understood. However, she didn't want for anyone to be unhappy today. "But they can't leave because I will need their help."

Instantly, the children's faces lit up and Michaela added, ignoring her mother's scowl, "So, where will we go next?"

If someone would ask Michaela later how she had spent the hours before the ceremony, she would barely be able to recall them. She went from being excited beyond all measures to being horrified that this was all a big misunderstanding. After all, much more belonged to a wedding than a dress. It wasn't that she doubted Sully's organizational talent or his good intentions. She knew though that she had to sign at least one paper so that the ceremony would be acknowledged by the law later, and she was sure that she had never done it.

However, the longer the day went on, the more she pushed this thought away. Of course it helped that her mother couldn't feed her doubts much longer because Elizabeth and Marjorie soon went their separate ways. Maude volunteered to show them to the place where the reception would be held because Mrs. Quinn didn't stop worrying out loud whether her orders, which she had given on the phone the day before, would be followed properly.

When their group had melted down to only Katie, Hannah, Rebecca, Charlie and herself, Michaela's first decision was to shorten the stay at the hairdresser's considerably, insisting on her own imagination of how she wanted to wear her hair. Her mother had already come to an arrangement at this shop though and the owner was first hesitant about following Michaela's wishes because it was the other lady that would pay. However, Michaela had the ability of persuasion as well and it helped that Sully, who had made this appointment in the first place, had asked them to follow the bride's wishes. Secretly hoping Michaela would want to wear her hair down because she knew how much he loved that, he had suggested to have some fresh flowers in store, just in case. So it came that in the end Michaela and the little girls didn't have the complicated hairstyles Mrs. Quinn had ordered for them but the long hair now fell in easy waves down their backs. The strands on the sides of their heads were pinned up with the pins being hidden under intertwined flowers which had, very much to Hannah's delight, the color of soft pink.

The relative calm Michaela had mustered so far gave way to a sudden nervousness as soon as they left the hairdresser's shop. "What about Katie's and Hannah's dresses?" she wondered, turning to Charlie. "Are you sure they will fit to... I'm sorry," Michaela caught herself, blushing in embarrassment.

Yet Charlie wasn't offended in the least but chuckled, "It's alright, Dr. Mike." Sully had warned her that keeping his bride calm might become a challenge, but she really didn't
mind taking care of Michaela until they would drive to the new house.

Charlie had already been fond of the new woman in her friend’s life when she hadn't even seen her yet. Noticing the sparkle return into Sully’s eyes she knew that the doctor must be someone special. Her assumption had already been proved right during their very first meeting when Michaela came to the café to look for Sully and he wasn’t there. She had seen a bit of the doctor's temper then... However, she was prepared to distract her now and suggested with a smile, "Well, next we were to go to Sully’s apartment anyway and pick up the dresses so you can see yourself." Addressing the little girls that jumped with joy hearing this news she added winking at them mysteriously, "And I know that there will be a surprise for you two."

Excitedly, the children wanted to know more but Charlie made it a game on their way so that the time went by faster. She would allow them to ask her questions that she only answered with 'yes' or 'no'.

With the three of them being occupied on the backseats, Rebecca took the opportunity to talk to her little sister whose brow was furrowed again, "Mike, if you don’t feel ready for a wedding I’m sure Mr. Sully will understand."

"Oh, it's not that," Michaela instantly replied. "It's just... I feel so useless. I'd like to do something but I don't know what. I'm not used to..."

"Being treated like kind of a princess?" Rebecca completed the line, grinning in understanding.

"I guess that's it," Michaela whispered, glancing at her oldest sister. "I'm used to take care of everything myself..." Her tone trailed off again.

"Well," Rebecca straightened in her seat, "I think you can do something, too. Have you already thought about what you will tell your groom during the ceremony?"

Rebecca's question had ceased any other thoughts from Michaela's mind for quite a while as she tried to come up with the words that were able to translate her feelings for the man that would be her husband in only a few hours. She was distracted though when she saw his surprise for their daughters. As to not make it too difficult for them to spend the night apart from their parents, Sully had asked Cloud Dancing to prepare a special treat: in the middle of his living room the Cheyenne and his wife had built a small teepee for Hannah and Katie to spend the night. The children were enthralled.

Even more Michaela marveled at the dresses Sully had chosen for the little flower girls. They were absolutely lovely. Their color didn't only match the one of her dress but considered each child's fondness as well: while Hannah's satin string leading around her waist to be bound on her back in a big bow was of a shiny pink, Katie's was pastel green. The tiny flowers that were embroidered along the hem of the floor-length skirts and the necklines were made of pink and pastel green threads, too. One couldn’t buy such dresses and Michaela looked up at Charlie who had watched her intently, explaining now, "Sully had asked for my advice and I suggested hiring my friend Emma. She has a little shop down-town and was happy to help."

Michaela nodded in appreciation, "I'll go there and thank her next week. Actually, I think
I will become her constant customer."

Charlie beamed, knowing her friend could use even the tiniest order. However, glancing at the living room clock, she suggested, "We should leave now. It's only two more hours."

Instantly, the butterflies in Michaela's stomach were alive again.

When they arrived at the new homestead, Michaela didn't have time to take in her surroundings. Her mother, impatiently pacing in front of the house, instantly rushed toward her when she had barely opened the door on her side of the car. "Michaela," Elizabeth was exasperated, "Where have you been so long? We will never manage to get you prepared for the ceremony."

Michaela and Rebecca knew better than to interrupt their mother's flow of words when she was as worked up as she was right now. Charlie, however, didn't have any experience with her yet and tried to come to the bride's defense, "Sully said it would be alright to..."

The young woman fell silent again under Mrs. Quinn's glare, somewhat taken aback by the older woman's huff, "Well, your Mr. Sully isn't even here and I really start to wonder whether this wasn't a big mistake to have him in charge for everything. I should have come here a week ago and..."

"Mom," Rebecca softly chimed in knowing there was only one way to stop this tirade, "Shouldn't we rather go in and get everyone dressed?"

Catching herself, Elizabeth turned briskly as to lead them into the house. The sisters exchanged a look with Charlie, asking her silently for her forgiveness and in mute understanding they all at last followed the bride's mother.

Katie and Hannah's future room on the first floor had been prepared for the women to change. Entering it now, Michaela noticed much to her delight that Colleen was there, too. She already wore a bridesmaid dress and beamed when she saw the joy on Dr. Mike's face at her presence. They weren't able to talk though because Marjorie stepped in their way, showing the same impatient expression like her mother when she reached for Michaela's arm in order to lead her to a chair, "C'mon, little sister. We don't have time to waist now. You can chat afterwards. If you ask me, marrying is a stupid idea anyway. Trusting any man is a stupid idea in the first place."

"That's enough." This was Elizabeth's voice again yet she was interrupted by a knock. Frowning, she turned as to answer the demanding sound. Seeing a man in the doorway she immediately snapped, "No men before the wedding. We should keep at least a few traditions." With that, she shut the door dismissing the male's presence.

She didn't have time to return to her daughters though because a new knock made her halt in her tracks. Pivoting, she stared at the entrance in disbelief. When the sound of knuckles against wood reverberated through the room again, she threw the door open. "Young man," she said sternly, "There is nothing that can't wait until after the ceremony. I ask you a last time..."

Although the young man didn't look like the brightest one and was obviously embarrassed beyond all measures, he didn't give in but stood his ground. His eyes looked as if they would pop out any moment as he insisted, "I... I'm sorry Ma'am, but I need to talk to Miss Quinn." Seeing the annoyance on his vis-à-vis' face deepen he hastily added. "I'm Horace Bing from the Clerk's Office, Ma'am, and I need to talk to Miss Quinn."

"Ma'am," he corrected himself, "I... I'm sorry again, Ma'am, but I need to talk to Miss Quinn."

"I'm Horace Bing from the Clerk's Office, Ma'am, and I need to talk to Miss Quinn."
because of the wedding license."

Instantly, all anger left Elizabeth. Like her daughter she had wondered all day how there could be a wedding without a license which Sully couldn't have yet because both, groom and bride, had to apply for it. Now, that this problem was obviously resolved, she finally allowed herself to believe that her youngest daughter would actually get married in not even a couple of hours. Now only the groom had to join the party.

Chapter 20

Michaela knew she should hurry as to avoid another outburst from her mother. However, leading the young man from the Clerk's office to the small room which didn't yet have a purpose, curiosity got the better of her. "Mr. Bing," she began tentatively, not wanting to pry, "How come you are here? I know that your office is closed today..." Her voice trailed off when she opened the door as to show him in.

Horace, even more self-conscious than usual in the presence of this beautiful woman, only replied when they both sat across from each other at a small table before the window. "I owe Sully," was all he mumbled while he pulled some papers out of his black briefcase.

For the first time that day Michaela felt uneasy. Although she couldn't imagine it, this sounded as if Sully had forced the young man to do something illegal. As Horace looked at the bride in order to explain the procedure, he noticed her strained expression. It took him only a moment to realize that she had gotten his statement wrong. "Oh," he hurried to explain, stumbling over his words, "It's... it's not what ya think. Sully's the only... I mean when we were still kids; he was the only one who treated me as if I were equal. I'll never forget that, for it helped me survive schooldays with Hank and Jake in the same class."

A shy smile lit his face and Michaela relaxed when he went on, more sincere now, "Sully came to me some weeks ago and asked me if there was a way to get the wedding license without telling you. We figured out that if he already showed me all the necessary things like your social security card and his own papers, it would be alright if we did your ID only now. So I'm here."

Michaela nodded in understanding and even had to smile a bit. She had kind of played the opportunity for Sully to be able to prepare the wedding secretly into his hands. After the accident she had shown him, despite his protest, where all her documents lay, just in case.

However, it didn't even take them a minute as to finish this official part. When they were done they rose simultaneously. "Sully is a lucky man that he found you," Horace said, proffering his hand, "I wish ya both all the best."

"Why don't you stay?" Michaela spontaneously suggested. Yet before she could go on, Horace lifted his hand as to stop her, "I really appreciate the offer but I can't. Hank and Jake'll be here and today Sully has better things to do than protect me from them."

"I see," Michaela sighed wistfully, "It's a pity though." Remembering her mother waiting for her she grew nervous again, "Mr. Bing, would you mind finding your way out on your own? I really have to change now."
"'Course not." Horace's smile grew wider. He was relieved that now everything was the way it should be. After all, he had taken an oath to always accept and act according to the law. "Oh, please wait," he suddenly exclaimed when Michaela already hurried along the hallway, preceding him. As she turned back he fumbled in his briefcase, "Sully asked me to leave his papers with you. It's his passport and his deceased wife's death certificate. Here ya go."

Horace, eager now to leave before he ran into Hank or Jake who still loved to tease him, didn't notice the bride's startled eyes when he handed her the documents. "Good bye, Miss Quinn. I gotta show the license to the priest," was all he added and then he was gone.

Momentarily frozen, Michaela stared at the name Abigail Sully, written in bold letters on the document. She wondered what Sully had felt when he had to pull out this certificate again and her heart went out to him. Yet it was something else that deepened the lines on her brow. They had never talked about what name she would have after they were married. Did Sully simply assume she would want to be called Michaela Sully? Did she want that?

"Michaela!"

Her mother's impatient voice made her move again. Only a bit more than an hour and she would be Sully's wife...

Without a warning her heart started thumping with excitement, realizing that a dream she hadn't dared to dream for a very long time was coming true. "I'm on my way!" she called back and rushed towards Katie's room.

It was as if something like time didn't exist anymore for suddenly it was forty minutes later. The giggles and chatter never ceased while everyone changed, apart from Elizabeth who already wore her best dress made out of dark green satin. Hannah and Katie agreed that if Mrs. Quinn would wear a crown, she would look like a fairy tale queen. The little girls only couldn't decide yet whether it was a good or a rather bad one.

However, it wasn't much longer than a quarter before the ceremony would start when at last everyone was ready. The room fell silent when Michaela rose from her chair as to look at herself in the large mirror. Seeing herself, a strange sense of unreality made her wonder if she would wake up any moment. Her reflection showed the perfect image of a bride meant to be on the cover of a wedding magazine. Hearing the admiring sighs of the other women her excitement returned with full force. However, before she could grow nervous again, Rebecca approached her from behind, looking at her reflection. "You look great, little sister," she said to Michaela's mirror image, "But there's still something missing. Come, sit down again."

The little girls instantly edged closer while each woman craned her neck to get a better view on the small black box that suddenly appeared in Rebecca's hands. The oldest sister opened it, revealing a silver necklace. As she took it out, everyone could see the ornately made pendant with a blue gem in the middle. Michaela's gaze was instantly drawn to the stone; it looked strangely familiar. Before she could explore this feeling further though, her mother quietly explained. "The sapphire is supposed to represent the blue and the old. I took it from your father's signet ring."
Michaela's eyes flew up to her mother. Elizabeth smiled tentatively, seeing that her youngest recognized the significance of this gesture. Holding her daughter's gaze, she continued, "Josef always said that blue stays for loyalty, an open mind and the sense of responsibility. Even though I rarely say it, I know that you preserve all those qualities."

Seeing her daughter's eyes brimming with tears, Elizabeth had difficulties to keep her own ones in check. Squaring her shoulders, she went on, "The setting is new. I asked Fredman's to make it."

In the background, Marjorie rolled her eyes. Determined to end all this sentimentality, she stepped forward, taking the necklace from Rebecca. Placing the delicate item around Michaela's neck she added in a tone that was supposed to be gruff but sounded rather hoarse with emotion, "And the borrowed thing is from me. It's my chain and I want it back."

"Darn, Sully," Hank growled good-naturally, "Now ya've ruined my bet. I was sure you'd run off."

Yet Sully, still somewhat out of breath, only glowered at his old school mate, taking his place next to his best man Cloud Dancing.

"What took you so long?" the Cheyenne asked quietly, visibly relieved that his white friend was back.

"Made a detour to the graveyard," Sully replied absentmindedly while his eyes roamed the site, making sure everything was prepared.

As he had asked them to do, the guests formed kind of an aisle for Michaela to walk down. The cars were lined up in the background, ready to take them to the reception right after the official part. Even the sun cooperated; otherwise they would have had to take their vows inside; yet this way it was much better. All he could do now was hope that Michaela would like his arrangements. Taking in a ragged breath, he glanced at the reverend, nodding lightly.

As the churchman gestured towards Maude, giving her the sign that the ceremony could start, Sully sensed the Indians intent gaze on him. Turning, he noticed the worry in the dark brown eyes and Sully was momentarily puzzled. Yet he quickly realized that his mentioning the graveyard was the cause for this concern and he quickly assured, "I'm alright. Only needed to fully close a chapter before I can start a new one."

When the smile returned to Cloud Dancing's face, both men shifted as to watch the bridesmaids approaching them.

Michaela nervously brushed an invisible wisp from her brow. She stood on the threshold of the entrance of their new house, with her eyes following Rebecca, Marjorie and Colleen who all looked beautiful in the blue of the bridesmaid dresses. Yet then her gaze flew over their heads along the way she would start to take any second. Holding her breath in awe for a moment, she took in the gorgeous picture she saw; it would be burnt into her memory as long as she lived. At the end of the small path that was leading up a soft hill, Sully was waiting for her under the copper beech. A warm breeze made the dark red
colored leaves rustle softly. The sunbeams that found its way through the majestic treetop cast quickly moving speckles over the scene, enlightening it even more. The green of the meadow she would cross was still lush, only subtly hinting that it was already autumn.

It wasn't the beautiful set though that mesmerized her but the longing she recognized in Sully's gaze even over the distance that still separated them. She didn't notice how Charlie bent down to Katie and Hannah, who still stood in front of her, as to give them last instructions before she told them encouragingly, "Now it's time. Nice and slowly, alright?"

Then the young woman straightened, turning to the bride, "You can follow them now, Dr. Mike."

Although Michaela didn't even hear the words she started moving down the makeshift aisle, following Sully's mutely calling out for her. Only when her mother stepped beside her, offering her arm was the spell broken and Michaela became aware of her surroundings again, hearing the tone of a flute playing the bridal march.

Seeing the three most important persons in his life approaching him, Sully's heart burst into a sprint. Hannah and Katie's grace, as they carefully dropped the white and red petals, perfectly matched Michaela's who held the bridal bouquet, made out of pink roses, close to her chest while she slowly walked towards him. Hearing Charlie's brother's camera click behind him his smile broadened: this would be a picture he would be able to look at as often as he wanted.

And then they were there. The little girls beamed at him and he couldn't resist but bend down, giving both a quick hug and a whispered, "You were great, sweet girls."

However, after this his attention was only focused on Michaela. Her beauty took his breath away, and it wasn't only the silky dress that perfectly fit to her perfect figure or the long coppery hair that fell down her back in soft waves. It was also the shyness that tinged her cheeks with pink and the joy that sparkled in her eyes.

Like Sully, Michaela barely registered when Reverend Johnson started his speech. First her mother had stunned her because she wasn't only here but was even willing to give her away. Then she had recognized the pastor next to her groom; she had met him several times at the hospital but never expected to see him here. Cloud Dancing she had met already but with his beautiful decorated long ocher leather shirt and proud pose he had an almost intimidating effect on her.

Yet she didn't follow this thought, the only person that mattered at this moment was Sully. His warm smile instantly put her at ease and recognizing his excitement, the blush on her cheeks deepened. She had seen him in a suit twice before. The first time had been when they attended an official dinner which he insisted on calling their first date. On the day they buried her father it had been the second time and despite the sad occasion, Michaela had registered back then what she admired now as well. Used to seeing him with jeans and a simple T-shirt, his appearance in the black suit combined with a snow-white shirt and a tie of a color that matched the soft pink of the flowers in both, her hair and bouquet was simply stunning. All thoughts about handsomeness were wiped from her mind though when she met his gaze. She had never seen anyone look with so much love at her. Still not used to this, she felt her knees grow weak under the emotion that enveloped her. Sully instantly noticed yet Michaela caught herself. She wouldn't ruin one of the happiest days in her life by fainting.
Fortunately, the reverend was almost done with his speech and coming to the most important part of the ceremony after asking the audience if there were anyone who had a reason to object that the couple would be married.

Of course no one did and so the reverend went on, "The groom asked me to allow him to say some words of his own." Timothy Johnson nodded to Sully encouragingly, taking a step aside.

Both, Michaela and Sully shifted so they faced each other fully. "Michaela," Sully began yet his voice cracked with emotion. Simultaneously, they reached for the other one’s hands and as soon as the connection was made, he was able to go on. "When I saw ya for the very first time I instantly knew that ya were special. I had no idea though how much ya would change my life. Although in fact there wasn't much of a life. I only existed for Hannah's sake. But you made my heart beat again and that’s why I'm givin' it to you now. It will belong to ya as long as I live and I promise ya here in front of your family and friends that I will do everythin' in my power to make ya as happy as ya made me."

He was beaming by now and Michaela's face reflected the same happiness when she responded, "As much as you think I did for you, you gave me even more. I thought I’d never trust anyone again until I met you. You are my safe harbor, my home where I can be who I am. I promise to be this kind of family for you as well, as long as I live."

Absorbed in each other they simply stood, holding the other one's gaze. When the reverend realized that it was his turn again, he stepped forward, clearing his throat before he directed his words to the groom, "Do you, Sully, take Michaela to be your wife..."

Sully had a hard time until the official part was over for all he wanted was to envelop Michaela with his arms, feeling that this wasn't a dream; that it was real.

As he finally heard the words, "You may now kiss the bride," he instantly pulled her close.

Tilting her head so she could look up at his face, Michaela recognized the desire burning in Sully's blue eyes. She wasn't aware that the smile she gave him in response was an odd mix of shyness and excitement which made him wish it were already night. At the same time though he felt so much tenderness for this woman before him that he placed his lips softly onto hers, moving them only slightly. It was the gentlest kiss Michaela had ever experienced. Overwhelmed by the knowledge that this incredible man was her husband from now on and for ever, her heart started to race again. Feeling her tremble in his arms, Sully was instantly concerned, "Ya alright?" he whispered against her lips, leaning his brow against hers.

Smiling under tears Michaela assured, "I am. I wish I could always be so happy."

"Ya will," Sully renewed his vow, "That's what I promised a few minutes ago, remember?"

"I do." Contentedly sighing, Michaela buried her head in Sully's comfortingly broad shoulder until two very young voices brought them back to earth, "Mommy, Daddy, are we a real family now?"

"Yeah," Sully stooped down to pick up their daughters. As he held one on each arm he grinned widely, "We are."

Chapter 21
Marjorie took the new family to the restaurant, insisting on her driving. Her argument was that having had no choice but to allow herself to be dragged away from civilization for the wedding, she should at least have the pleasure of driving a fancy car. Sully had actually convinced the mechanics at the garage to restore the BMW rather than to scrap it. Seeing Michaela's joy when she realized she had her own car back instead of a substitute was all the reward he needed.

Hannah and Katie didn't protest when they were told that they wouldn't be driving with their parents but Michaela couldn't take the sad expression on their little faces. She looked up at Sully who held the door open for her and didn't need to say a word.

"Alright." He winked at Michaela and gave her a quick kiss. Then he turned to their daughters who stood hand in hand next to his new mother-in-law. So as to take the wind out of Elizabeth's sails right from the start he chose his words carefully. Bending down to the children he explained, "Ya remember that I told ya this is an important day for your Mommy and me?"

Insecure about what their Daddy was getting at, the little girls glanced at each other but Sully was already continuing.

"Well, it means that everyone should fulfill our wishes today. And I wanna have all my three woman in the backseat of that car." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at the BMW.

Of course Elizabeth knew that it was impossible now for her to object. Apart from which she was still moved from the ceremony. She hadn't expected it to be so emotional, being held out in the open and not in a church. Seeing the little girls' pleading looks she gave her approval with a nod.

Hannah and Katie didn't need anything more. Quick as the wind they rushed to their Mommy while Sully smiled at Elizabeth, "It's just like you said: not proper at all."

Growing serious he added, "All I want for them is to be happy. The kids have been great in keeping my secret preparations from Michaela. It's their day as much as it's ours."

Sighing, Elizabeth relaxed and agreed, "I think you're right. But now we better hurry or we'll be late."

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Charlie proved herself to be irreplaceable that day. Not only had she coordinated everything before the ceremony but she also made sure that afterwards everybody found a seat in one of the cars. Leading the small caravan to the restaurant was her next task which she managed magnificently. As they arrived before the building, she arranged the guests so that Michaela and Sully with their daughters had to walk through a kind of "guard of honor" in order to reach the entrance. Everyone was clapping and Hank even let out a loud whistle. Actually it was this sound that changed the still somewhat solemn mood into a cheery one as Sully called over his shoulder, "Hey Hank, no need to exhaust yourself! We got real music inside."

The room which was prepared for them was of a size that made everyone feel comfortable right away. The table had been set along the wall across from one that consisted of floor length windows, allowing the sunlight to flood the room. Two glass doors, equally large,
led to a terrace that was decorated with all kinds of pot plants, including a huge date palm.

Yet inside was a lot of green as well which contrasted beautifully with the dark red of the curtains and the light brown of the wooden wall panelling.

However, barely anyone paid attention to the beautifully decorated room because all eyes were on Michaela and Sully as the restaurant owner greeted them, smiling widely, "Welcome to Grace's."

The African American gestured for two waitresses to prepare to bring in the trays of champagne before she directed her words at the couple again, "It's a pleasure to have ya here. We've prepared the table there in the corner to put the presents on. Although," raising her eyebrows her expression turned into an almost mysterious grin, "I know there will be at least one that won't be fittin' there."

Michaela glanced at Sully, wondering whether this was another of his surprises but he seemed to be as much in the dark about this remark as she was. There wasn't time to dwell on this though because now their guests started to present them with their gifts which they had obviously already stashed at the restaurant before the ceremony. None of the packages was of an unusual large size though. Even the last congratulators, Cloud Dancing and Snowbird, proffered just a box that looked like a simple picnic hamper. The medicine man had to suppress a mischievous grin though when he suggested, "You should open this present really soon. It'd be better for everyone. Oh," he gently touched Michaela's arm when she reached for the basket, "I hope you don't mind Dr. Mike, but Sully should take care of this. As soon as you see the gift, you'll understand."

It was obvious that the Cheyenne enjoyed the situation and while his wife gave the bride a heartfelt hug in order to congratulate her again, he watched his white friend's reaction as he opened the lid. Hearing Sully's chuckle Cloud Dancing knew that they had chosen the right gift.

Hannah and Katie, standing with Colleen and Charlie a few yards away, curiously craned their necks so as to cast a peek at the contents that were still hidden. Their father, however, instantly called for them, "Hey, sweet girls! Come here, ya have to see this!"

The children didn't need any further invitation and were instantly at his side. As he carefully put the basket on the floor, they crouched down so as to get a better look. The initial gasps of surprise were quickly replaced by squeals of delight. "He's so cute!" Katie exclaimed and Hannah asked wide-eyed, "Is that a wolf, Daddy?"

Cloud Dancing smiled indulgently. "That's an Alaskan Malamute," he explained, crouching down as well. "But he will look like a wolf once he's grown. In the old times, a few hundred years ago, wolves were the Cheyenne's best friends. To honor them and your father's work for all Indians this is our gift for your family. We hope you all like it."

Speaking the last words, he rose to his feet, looking at Michaela. Everyone could tell that the children were delighted; they were already carefully patting the pup's head. Sully's eyes shone as well, and it was only Dr. Mike's reaction that Cloud Dancing wasn't sure of.

Like Snowbird had foreseen, a hundred worries instantly crossed Michaela's mind yet seeing Sully's expression she didn't voice even one of them. They could discuss later where to put a growing dog in her tiny apartment yet she already knew the solution.
"Well," she said giving Sully a playful look, "Of course this dog is adorable but I guess that means someone should hurry up so we can move into the new house really soon."

Grace had placed her son's old playpen on the terrace and only after the pup had been put into it, everyone had taken their seats, a few toasts and the new husband's words of thanks had been spoken, did Sully see an opportunity to finally talk to Michaela without being the center of attention. He kept his voice low as he asked, bending towards her, "Ya didn't take a peek into our new bedroom earlier, did ya?"

Full of questions of her own, Michaela hadn't expected this one at all. "Sully, there wasn't time to look anywhere," she replied puzzled, wondering what he was getting at.

"Good." Smugly grinning Sully laid his arm around her shoulder, squeezing her lovingly.

However, Michaela's curiosity was woken now. "Why are you asking?"

"It's a surprise," was all he gave away, never losing his satisfied expression.

"Another one, Mr. Sully?" Michaela asked, clearly enjoying the conversation yet Elizabeth, sitting right next to her youngest daughter, interrupted their little banter, "I don't want to interfere but I think at this point it is my turn to offer a surprise. I booked a room at the Antlers Hilton for you to spend your wedding night."

Astonished, Michaela shifted so she could look at her mother. This way she missed the change of Sully's expression. Elizabeth, however, didn't and assured him, holding his gaze, "You won't regret it, Mr. Sully. Trust me, you'll love it there."

Yet Sully had his reason for wanting to spend the first night as Michaela's husband in their new house. If he gave it away though, the surprise would be gone. But seeing Michaela torn between him and her mother, he quickly decided to give in. His secret would survive for another day unrevealed and he didn't want Michaela's day to be spoiled by decisions that were hard on her. Thus he at last nodded, "Alright. Thank you, Mrs. Quinn."

After a delicious dinner, the reception went on in a mix of excited chatter, laughter and dancing. Jake had offered to be the disc jockey although he hadn't brought any discs but instead his laptop where he had saved more than ten thousand songs. At least that was what he claimed. However, anyone could make his or her wishes and of course Sully had had a special request. He'd never really cared for music nor was he much of a dancer yet he knew some songs that he liked and were even slow enough so that he wouldn't stumble over his feet. In the end he had chosen a song by Aerosmith for his first dance with Michaela as husband and wife.

As he at last began to move with her in tune to the music, holding her close he whispered some of the singer's lines in Michaela's ear, "Every moment spent with you is a moment I treasure... I don't want to miss one smile, I don't want to miss one kiss, I just want to be with you right here with you, just like this... I just want to hold you close, feel your heart so close to mine and just stay here in this moment for all the rest of time..."
After this dance, it had taken all their willpower to stay with their guests. If it hadn't been for their daughters they would have left for the hotel that instant. Michaela already knew that they wouldn't go on a honeymoon right after the reception. This had been her first question as soon as Marjorie had started the car. Knowing that she couldn't afford to be away from work for longer than her regular free days, this was the only thing that had worried her about Sully's secretly planned wedding. He, however, put her instantly at ease, promising they would go at a time that was convenient for her.

As the next song started, Katie and Hannah's giggles distracted Michaela and Sully from focusing solely on each other. They started dancing first with their daughters and then with other guests. Michaela could barely take a break for every male in the room wanted to take the opportunity to hold her in his arms even if it was for a dance.

It was already quite late in the evening when her happy smile was briefly replaced by astonishment though.

"Mr. Bray," she breathed as she rose from her chair, taken completely by surprise. She had to struggle for words momentarily until she said sincerely, "It's wonderful that you came."

"Awe, ain't nothing," Loren mumbled, offering his arm to lead her to the other couples, "Couldn't ask Maude to get home in the middle of the night on her own."

"Right," Michaela nodded in understanding. They didn't speak again until he thanked her for the dance when the music ended. They both knew though that they had just started over.

Two hours before midnight Michaela and Sully were finally on their way to the hotel. They had left the reception together with Cloud Dancing and Snowbird who took their daughters to Sully's apartment. The little girls didn't have problems with that like Maude had predicted when they discussed the sleeping arrangements during their planning. Actually, since the minute Katie and Hannah realized that they were allowed to have the pup sleeping with them in the teepee they had looked forward to turning in.

After the noisy party it was strangely quiet in the car as they drove along the dark, deserted streets. Sully had known right from the start that Michaela would have some more queries as soon as she wasn't distracted anymore. Glancing at her, he could tell that he was right. Looking back at the road he chuckled. Sensing her astonished gaze he said, "Ask away."

Michaela hesitated, not knowing how Sully would take her question. She didn't want to ruin this day and possibly offend him. Yet then she screwed up the courage, knowing that they would have to talk about it eventually, "What name will I take from now on?"

Sully grinned openly. He had known that it was this what worried her the most. "I told Horace we would let him know 'bout that as soon as ya made your decision."

Astonished, Michaela turned in her seat so she was able to see him better. The relief was audible in her voice as she responded, "That's wonderful, Sully. You really thought of everything. Thank you." Her eyes sparkled with love for him and Sully pushed the gas pedal somewhat harder in order to get to the hotel sooner. He still wished though that
Elizabeth hadn't meddled with his plans for his last surprise couldn't work now. However, he didn't dwell on this.

Not even ten minutes later Sully opened the door to their room. "Wait," he said, touching Michaela's arm as she started to walk in. He put down the bag with their things in and whisked her into his arms, "Gotta carry ya over the threshold."

"Sully," she giggled wrapping her arms around his neck, "This isn't even our home."

"I don't care," he replied, distracted by her face only inches away from his. "Gotta take care of my wife." He had sworn to himself to take it nice and easy yet as he watched her blushing he couldn't resist claiming her lips with his. The kiss instantly deepend but someone clearing their throat broke them apart. Continuing holding Michaela in his arms, Sully turned and noticed that the door was still open. Michaela's cheeks were scarlet by now and he quickly put her down.

As he strode to the door, he heard her exclaiming, "Oh Sully, look at this! Isn't it beautiful?"

He hastily shut the door and hurried back to her, wondering what it was that excited her so. After all, she had been in fancy hotel rooms before. Yet when he saw what she was looking at his eyes grew wide as well. Still occupied with the sight before her, Michaela didn't see his expression and went on, "What a beautiful bed! It's so large! And look at those carvings on the headboard; aren't they beautiful?"

"Yeah," was all Sully could muster, still stunned. Only when she turned her now worried look at him, a wide grin lit his face. "Actually, it's ours. It seems your mother made sure that we had it here."

Now it was Michaela's turn to be taken by surprise. "Ours? Where did you get it?"

"It's an old family heirloom. The story is that the first Sully who came to Colorado Springs made it himself. Some grandaunt bequeathed it to me."

"It's beautiful," she reiterated, whispering now.

As Sully caught her shy look he understood the change in her tone. They both knew that this bed wasn't only meant for sleeping comfortably in. Growing absolutely serious for a few moments, he held her gaze, showing her that he was as vulnerable as she was. She understood.

No further words were needed as their souls reached out for each other. The very last barrier between them was gone now and as one helped the other to shed their clothes, their mutual desire to lie skin to skin grew almost unbearable. Uniting their bodies came as easily as breathing to them and their rhythm of moving together as naturally as the ocean's waves rolling over the shore. Like the tide coming and going they loved each other again and again and even sleep couldn't part them. Melding their forms they both dreamed the same dream, that of a couple growing old together. They would keep this promise.