Time Out of Mind (TOOM), written from October, 1998 through December, 1999, harkens back to an earlier timeframe in the series; namely, the period immediately following the massacre of the Cheyenne at the Washita; and preceding Michaela's and Sully's wedding. This story was my attempt to address the grief suffered by Sully in the wake of the deaths of Chief Black Kettle, Cloud Dancing's wife Snowbird, and the other members of the tribe that Sully had come to regard as his "extended family." In the process of coming to terms with these losses, however, Sully—along with Michaela—must face more than one daunting obstacle.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the structure of Time Out of Mind, the story is told through the device of first-person journal entries alternating with narrative chapters. For the purposes of accessing the story from this page, the journal entries and chapters are "paired"; that is, the first journal entry is paired with Chapter One, the second entry with Chapter Two, and so on—with the exception of the final journal entry which closes out the book and stands alone.

**Time out of Mind**

**MY JOURNAL**

Tuesday, 13 March, 1870

I feel kind of peculiar, doing this. I never been much of a one for writing—or reading either, for that matter. Too busy just living and surviving, I guess. But I used to read, back when I was young, before I left school for good—adventure yarns, tales about the sea, or stories of famous explorers, like Columbus, Magellan, and Lief Erickson. I liked poetry too, though I didn't understand half of it. But the words and the rhythms pleased me—making pretty sounds that sang and whispered in my ear by turns.

I liked the way books looked and felt, too. The soft richness of the leather covers, the shiny gilt letters stamped onto the bindings, the texture of the pages—so crisp and crackling in the new volumes, like dry autumn leaves, with the print standing out boldly from the white of the background. But so much more fragile in the older books, like the velvety softness of flower petals, the ink brown and faded with age.

The books I got to read in those long ago days were very fine, indeed. From as far back as I could remember, my ma had worked for a rich family, who owned a large house—my ma called it a "mansion"—in a fashionable part of New York City. There was a library in that house—a real library!—filled floor to ceiling with books. Shelf after shelf, row upon row, what seemed like thousands of books papered the walls in a colorful jumble. To my child's eyes they appeared to go on forever, the stacks stretching up so high they seemed to disappear into the shadows. Even the grown-ups couldn't reach the books nearest the top. They had to use a peculiar sort of ladder on wheels, that hooked onto the bookcases and slid around the walls. I got to admit, I liked climbing and sliding around on that ladder almost as much as I liked looking at the books.

Sometimes, the folks my ma worked for would let her borrow a book, and she'd bring it home to share with my brother and me. Tucked up in bed, the firelight flickering across our faces, we'd listen in rapt attention as my ma read to us from KING ARTHUR, OLIVER TWIST, or maybe ROBINSON CRUSOE. As the soft rise and fall of my ma's voice fell upon my ear—the lilt of her English accent giving the words their own special melody—I'd close my eyes and let my imagination soar. In my mind's eye, I fought side by side with Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad—sunlight dazzling off our armor and swords clashing—as we battled fearsome enemies and rescued damsels in distress. Happily I joined in as a ragtag band of boy thieves—led by a cocky young boy in a battered top hat—cleverly picked the pockets of London's rich, and brought their booty home to a rascal named Fagin. And images of being a castaway on a deserted island—the sands bright and hot under a fierce tropical sun, sea foam churning on the shore and blue-green water as far as the eye could see—would lull me to sleep.

I loved those times with my ma, when her voice would carry me away to other worlds, times and places, and we left the crowded, dirty reality of New York far behind. Just as pleasurable, though, were the days that I got to spend time in that wonderful library, while my ma was busy with her duties in the household. The people she worked for were pretty kind, as rich folks go, and they never seemed to mind when I'd make a beeline for the library. Just sitting in the enormous leather chairs, surrounded by all those books, was enough to fire my imagination, and set me to wondering if I'd be rich and own a fine house like this someday, with more books that I could ever read in a lifetime.

Maybe it sounds like I envied those who had so much more than me, but I didn't. I had my ma and my brother, and the love we shared. And I had my hopes and dreams for the future. My ma had always told me I could do or be anything I wanted. I admired her so much—her delicate beauty belying how
strong she really was, supporting and raising my brother and me all on her own after my pa died. Her lot in life was a hard one, but she faced it with gumption and spirit. So when she told me to reach for the stars, and never give up, I put my faith and trust in what she said. Never dreaming how, in the end, *she* would be the one to give up, and I would lose her—I would lose everything.

But I guess I’ve gotten off-track. To be honest, I can’t figure why I started thinking of my ma after all these years. I lost her a long time ago. And though she was the first, she wasn’t the last. I lost my wife too—and our daughter. My only child . . .

I’m straying off the subject again. Got to stop that. I was told to write down my memories—as much of them as I can recall, anyhow—in this journal. But not of that far-off time of my childhood. Or even of the time I was married. The memories I’m supposed to be recalling in these pages are much more recent ones—of who and what I am now, and what my life was like before this thing happened that left such a big empty hole in my recollections.

Truth be told, I don’t really see how writing things down is going to help me remember. But the pretty lady doctor with the sunlight in her long, copper hair—the one who keeps giving me these odd, kind of sad looks—suggested I try it anyway. She thinks that the missing pieces of my past might come back to me more easily if I put it all down on paper. I never knew a lady doctor before, but she’s smart, and gentle, and she seems to know what she’s talking about. And right now, I got nothing but time—and nothing to lose either, I guess. Which is why I’m sitting here with this journal in my lap, trying my best to do what she said.

“What is the last thing you remember clearly?” she asked me this morning as she stood by my bedside, her face sort of pale and her eyes big and anxious. I wondered what it could be that would put that odd sound in her voice, and make the slender fingers of her hands twist together like fluttery, frightened birds. Some truth about me? Something about my condition she was too afraid to tell? But she said I was going to be fine. And she don’t seem like the sort to lie. It must be something else—something I’ve forgotten, that she needs me to remember. I can’t think what it might be. I’d like to ask her, but somehow, I just can’t seem to find the nerve. So I just lay here, watching and wondering, and trying to figure her out—figure it all out. It’s obvious she knows me—but for my part, when I opened my eyes a few days ago, I woke up to the face of a stranger.

Yet—I sense there’s a connection between us. I can see it—in her every look and gesture—in the things she says as well as the things she doesn’t. And I can feel it—in the way my heart speeds up, and the tingling, almost pleasurable sensation I get in the pit of my stomach when she’s near. I can’t explain, but I want to please her. To give her what she seems to want or need from me. If only I knew what that was . . .

“What is the last thing you remember clearly, Sully?” Dr. Mike asked me. A fair enough question, but I’m finding that the answer ain’t so easy. I remember that the place I’m in used to be a boardinghouse, run by the local midwife and a good friend, named Charlotte Cooper. But now the boardinghouse is a “clinic,” and Charlotte is gone . . . And I remember that last I knew, the year was 1867. But now, somehow, it’s 1870, and I’ve lost close to three whole years of my life.

I don’t understand what’s happened, or why. I only know that somewhere in that missing time is the key to what’s gone wrong in my mind. Dr. Mike is right—I need to remember. Just as important, I need to understand why I forgot—and why I get this paralyzing feeling of panic inside me every time I close my eyes and try to bring up the past.

What *is* the last thing I remember? What indeed . . .?

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER ONE

Things were not going well, this morning. Only a little past seven-thirty, and Michaela was already feeling put upon and harried.

“Ma, tell Brian to stop pesterin’ me!” Colleen implored in exasperation, coming through the curtain which divided the children’s sleeping area from the main room of the homestead. She gazed at her mother demandingly, hairbrush in hand, one booted foot tapping impatiently on the floor.
“Tell Colleen to stop hoggin’ the mirror!” Brian retorted in his turn, following her into the room. “Other people got to get ready for school, too!”

“Children, *must* you start bickering so early in the day?” Michaela responded wearily, making a half-hearted attempt to smooth and straighten the sheets and quilt on her bed. Reflexively she brushed a strand of hair off her face, feeling a headache threatening at the edges of her temples.

“I’m NOT hoggin’!” Colleen shot back. “I just got to brush out my hair and braid it—it takes time.”

“Girls take a little longer to groom and dress, Brian,” Michaela began reasonably. “And Colleen, since you’re using the wall mirror, perhaps you would let Brian have the use of the hand mirror Grandma Quinn gave you.”

“I don’t want to use her fancy old mirror!” Brian said rudely. “I’d feel like a sissy!”

“Fine with me!” Colleen snapped. “I wouldn’t let you even TOUCH my silver mirror for all the tea in China!” She flounced out of the room.

“CHILDREN—” Michaela began warningly.

“Aw—I don’t want ta brush my hair anyway,” Brian grumbled. “I’m gonna go get my books.” He disappeared through the curtain.

“Brian, Colleen—come sit down and have your breakfast!” Michaela called after them. “It’s nearly time to leave!” There was no response. Sighing, Michaela moved to the plank table across the room, setting out dishes, spoons and glasses. She placed a large bowl of oatmeal in the center of the table, along with a pitcher of milk, and a small china bowl containing brown sugar.

Brian burst back into the room. “Ma! I can’t find my essay!”

Michaela sighed again and looked at her younger son. “What essay is that, Brian?”

“You know,” he said, his tone registering his amazement that she could have forgotten. “My ESSAY. The one I been workin’ on for two weeks, about how I built and flew my flyin’ machine. The one I’m gonna be readin’ aloud this afternoon for Parent’s Day.”

“Of course,” Michaela said apologetically. “I’m sorry—I should have realized. It’s just that it’s early yet, Brian, and I—”

“But Ma, I can’t FIND it,” Brian repeated, cutting her off. “Ya gotta help me!”

“When did you see it last?” Michaela said patiently.

Brian thought for a moment. “Last night,” he said finally. “I was layin’ on my bed, lookin’ it over ‘fore I went to sleep. But when I went to get it just now, it was gone.”

“Did you look all around your bed, including underneath?” suggested his mother. “Perhaps after you were asleep, it fell on the floor and slid under your bed.”

Brian didn’t bother to answer, but turned on his heel and ducked through the curtain.

After barely a minute he was back, an embarrassed grin on his face. In his hand was the elusive essay. “You were right, Ma—thanks.”

Michaela smiled back. “I’m glad you found it,” she said. “*Now* will you sit down and eat?”

“Sure!” Brian said readily, his sunny nature apparently restored. He went to his customary chair at the table and pulled it out, the legs making an unpleasant grating sound as they scraped across the floorboards. Michaela flinched at the noise, and Brian gave her a brief look of apology. “Sorry,” he said. Seating himself, he took a large gulp of milk, then served himself a generous portion of oatmeal. He reached eagerly for the brown sugar, dusting his cereal liberally.

“Are ya comin’ today, Ma?” he asked between swallows, a milk mustache edging his upper lip.
“Coming?” Michaela echoed distractedly, as she looked through the contents of her medical bag, making sure she had all the supplies and instruments she needed. “Coming where?”

“To SCHOOL,” Brian replied patiently, as if addressing a small child, or perhaps someone who was not very bright. “To hear me read my essay. All the parents are comin’. You said you would, when I asked you last week.”

“What time will you be presenting your essay?” Michaela asked, giving him her attention.

“Sometime after lunch,” her son answered. “I’m the last one on the program.”

“Well, I have patients back-to-back till noon, but assuming there are no emergencies, I should be able to be there,” Michaela assured him.

“What about Sully?” Brian asked.

“What about him?” said Michaela, her attention drifting again.

“Well, I can’t speak for Sully, but if he told you he’d try to be there, then you know he’ll do his best to keep his word,” Michaela said.

“Yeah—Sully always keeps his promises,” Brian replied contentedly, polishing off the last of his breakfast.

“When he can, Brian,” Michaela hedged. In fact, Sully had been rather scarce of late, sometimes letting two or three days pass without an appearance. The children hadn’t commented on his absence; apparently they saw nothing unusual in the fact that Sully’s visits had become less frequent. Michaela told herself that the children were the sensible ones. All of them understood Sully’s love and kinship for the outdoors, and were accustomed to his recurring sojourns in the wilderness, hunting and trapping, or just sleeping out under the stars. And of course there were his responsibilities as Indian Agent, which took up much of his time. Last but not least were the extra hours he was putting in to complete the new homestead in time for the wedding. Any one of these things was a valid reason for him to be gone. Yet Michaela could not help wondering if there was something else keeping him away, besides the obvious.

Unbidden, an image arose in her mind’s eye of the charred remains of Black Kettle’s camp by the banks of the Washita; the slaughter rivaling that of a charnel house, smoke still drifting from the skeletons of the teepees, and bloody, broken bodies scattered across the landscape. But the memory was too painful, too raw—and instinctively she thrust it back down into the deepest recesses of her mind, before it could take shape and claim her thoughts.

With a determined effort, Michaela focused on the present. She seriously doubted that Sully would knowingly disappoint Brian, but she also knew that sometimes things happened which prevented him from doing what he meant to, despite his best intentions. It wouldn’t hurt, she felt, to prepare Brian for the possibility. But then, resolving not to borrow trouble where none yet existed, she looked toward the curtain. “Colleen, please come and eat something—it’s getting late!”

Colleen appeared after a moment, schoolbooks in hand. “Sorry, Ma, I was just gettin’ my things together.” She slipped into her seat beside Brian. As Colleen served herself a helping of oatmeal, her brother handed her the sugar bowl, their earlier tiff apparently forgotten.

“So, Colleen, I presume you will be reading an essay today as well?” asked Michaela.

“Course she will,” Brian answered for his sister before Colleen could speak. “She’s the star pupil in the class.” Michaela studied her son briefly to see if his remark sprang from jealousy, but there appeared to be no rancor in Brian’s tone or expression.

“Well in my eyes, both of you are star pupils,” she said. Turning to her daughter, she inquired, “So what did you choose to write about, Colleen?”

“I wrote about the trip we made to Washington,” Colleen said.
A slightly troubled look came into Michaela’s eyes. “Really?” she said, after a pause.

Colleen noted the expression on her mother’s face. “Don’t worry, Ma,” she said intuitively. “I didn’t write about Sully gettin’ arrested or bein’ sent to prison. Just about how we visited the White House, and met President Grant, and how I made friends with Nellie, and we attended the military ball.”

Michaela relaxed. “I think that’s wise, Colleen. What happened to Sully was very frightening and painful for him, and no doubt brought up sad memories of his first wife. I don’t know if he’d want to be reminded of those things, or have the people of the town knowing the details of his experience.”

Colleen nodded sympathetically. “I understand, Ma.”

“I don’t,” Brian spoke up. “Sully was a hero! He saved President Grant’s life, and the President honored him for it.”

“That’s true, Brian,” Michaela acknowledged. “Sully was very brave, and President Grant showed his gratitude by dropping the charges of desertion against Sully and giving him an honorable discharge from the army. But if Sully wanted the details of what happened to be made public, then I believe it would be his story to tell, not ours. Can you understand?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Brian answered. “I wouldn’t want Sully to feel bad.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” replied his mother.

“Well, gotta go,” Brian announced suddenly, shoving his chair back with another scrape and jumping to his feet. “Come on, Colleen, we’ll be late if we don’t start walkin’ now.”

“Hold on, I’m comin’!” Colleen said, taking a last swallow of milk. Just then the side door of the homestead opened and Matthew poked his head in.

“You all ready to leave?” he asked. “I gotta take the wagon into town and pick up some supplies. I can drive you.”

“I’m not quite ready to leave yet, Matthew, but I’d appreciate it if you would take Colleen and Brian and make sure they get to school on time,” Michaela said. “But don’t you want something to eat first, before you go?” she added.

“I’ll get somethin’ at Grace’s,” Matthew assured her. He glanced toward his brother and sister. “Let’s go,” he urged. “Time’s wastin’.” Brian and Colleen hurriedly shrugged into their coats and snatched up their books.

“Bye, Ma,” said Colleen and kissed her on the cheek. Brian was right behind her.

“See ya later, Ma!” he said, giving her a quick buss on the forehead. “Be sure to tell Sully!”

“As soon as I see him,” Michaela called after Brian as he followed Colleen and Matthew out the door. It slammed behind him and Michaela shook her head, smiling ruefully. After a moment, she stood up and began to gather the breakfast dishes. She had just placed the bowls in a basin of soapy water, and was turning to go back to the table, when her foot struck something soft and yielding on the floor and she tripped. Her hand shot out to grab the edge of the sink, narrowly preventing her from falling, as a yelp erupted from the vicinity of her feet.

“Pup!” she exclaimed, reflexively putting a hand to her chest and feeling the pounding of her heart. The young wolf jumped up from where he had been lying and trotted over to a corner of the room where he sat on his haunches, looking at her reproachfully.

“I’m sorry,” Michaela said apologetically, her racing pulse beginning to slow. “But you were right in my way.” She moved to the table and sank into a chair, gazing critically around the room. When had the homestead gotten so small? She and the children had been living here together for nearly three years, and had always managed to make do with the limited space. But lately, it seemed as if they were all getting in each other’s way, living in each other’s pockets.
Perhaps it was the contrast of the new homestead Sully was building for them, that made this house now seem so small and confining. She thought longingly of the spaciousness of their future home, the reddish gold of its timbered walls glowing in the sunlight which streamed in from its many windows, its large parlor and dining area separated from the kitchen by a handsome free-standing fireplace, and a room for everyone in the family. Capping it all, like the star atop a Christmas tree, was the beautiful oval window of beveled glass ornamenting the front door.

Sometimes, she was so impatient to be married and begin their lives in their handsome new home, that she could barely endure it. Yet at other times, the prospect of marriage to Sully, sharing a home with him—sharing a bed—filled her with panic. She wanted to be with him, longed to be, in fact—so much so that she hardly dared admit it to herself—but she was riddled with self-doubt. What kind of wife—what kind of partner—would she be? Would she be able to satisfy Sully? To give him what he expected and needed from her? Would she be able to perform the “wifely duties” about which her mother had warned so darkly? Elizabeth Quinn had apparently never overcome her aversion to this aspect of married life. Would her youngest daughter follow in her footsteps?

But then, as always happened when she contemplated her future marital relationship and reached this point in her ruminations, her mind rebelled. She was not her mother. She did not share Elizabeth’s philosophy of life, ideas about the proper roles of women, or distaste for the physical intimacy between a husband and wife. How could she, when Sully’s touch, his kisses—his very proximity—could elicit such a thrill of desire in her? Sully’s love had awakened a depth of passion within her that she could never have dreamed existed. Like Snow White in the fairy tale, destined to remain sleeping until her lover awakened her with a kiss, the sensual part of Michaela’s nature had lain dormant, until Sully’s ardor had ignited it and made it burn.

And Sully had made it plain that he found their kisses and embraces as pleasurable and intoxicating as she. The only problem in their relationship, if one could be said to exist, was the shyness and reserve that continued to plague Michaela during many of their physical encounters. Elizabeth had succeeded in instilling at least some of her values into her daughter during the latter’s young womanhood; most specifically that a woman did not kiss or touch a man in public—or allow him to touch her—unless or until they were engaged; that a woman never allowed a man who was not her husband to see her in any state of undress; and that a married woman did not initiate intimacy with her husband, but waited for him to take the lead, and then “submitted” to him.

Michaela smiled wryly as she thought of how shocked her mother would be to know how often—at Sully’s instigation—she had broken the first rule of this code of conduct, and how utterly scandalized Elizabeth would be if she knew that her daughter had violated the second rule as well—not once, or even twice, but at least three times. In each case, the act of disrobing had been a necessity, not a choice, and never as a precursor to intimacy: when she and Sully went to Harding’s Mill to collect water samples to test for mercury poisoning, and had been forced to escape from the men pursuing them by swimming fully-clothed across the river; when Black Kettle’s camp was infected by typhus and it was necessary that she and Sully shed their contaminated clothing and don Indian garb; and of course, when the dog soldiers abducted her and Sully was finally able to rescue her by spiriting her away across the river—as well as later, when the only thing they could do to avoid being shot by the dog soldiers, was to jump from a cliff into the river below.

It was Sully’s deliverance of her from the dog soldiers and its aftermath, however, that lingered most in Michaela’s memory, causing her heart to race and bringing a hot blush to her cheeks.

The morning after Sully had rescued her from the hostile One-Eye and his band, she had awakened on a bed of evergreen boughs, clad in nothing more than her camisole and pantaloons. Just a few feet away, Sully had stood at the edge of a cliff, wearing only his buckskin trousers. Despite being in a situation that at any other time would have been acutely embarrassing to her, Michaela’s only thought upon awakening and recalling the nightmare of her captivity, had been to reach out for Sully. Immediately he had been at her side—embracing her, kissing her, giving her comfort and tenderly assuaging her lingering fear with his love. Stripped of not only their clothing, but also all their defenses and inhibitions, in that moment Michaela’s and Sully’s hearts and souls had truly been opened to one another.

The experience had helped Michaela to recognize the foolishness and artificiality of many of the social conventions with which she’d been raised. And yet, the influence of her upbringing lingered, causing her to continue to feel uncomfortable when Sully wanted to touch or kiss in front of the children, or their friends or neighbors. And it made her wonder how she would react when the time came for her to give herself up to Sully totally—mind *and* body.
Pup suddenly lifted his head from his paws and whined deep in his throat. Seconds later a light tap on the door startled Michaela out of her reverie. Simultaneously with the knock, the door swung inward, revealing Sully, Wolf at his heels, framed in the entrance. The older wolf trotted inside and joined his offspring, the two animals nosing each other in greeting. Meanwhile, the sight of Sully made Michaela flush again, embarrassed by the erotic thoughts that had been going through her mind. Sully was so perceptive at reading her emotions; she wondered if he would notice the scarlet blush that stained her face and neck, and guess what had put it there.

“‘Mornin’,” he greeted her with an easy smile.

“Good morning!” she answered brightly, returning the smile with what she hoped was a casual one of her own.

He strode across the room and ducked his head to press his lips to hers. His long, sun-streaked hair had the fresh, clean scent of the outdoors, and his cheek as it brushed hers was cold from the outside chill. He drew back from her, still smiling, but then hesitated, peering at her closely. “What is it?” he asked.

Michaela cleared her throat. “What’s what?” she said innocently.

His eyes were warm, but puzzled. “I don’t know. You got a strange look on your face. Nervous, kinda—or maybe excited. Is somethin’ goin’ on?”

MY JOURNAL
Thursday, 15 March, 1870

Dr. Mike brought the Cooper kids to see me today. She said they’d been wanting to visit since I woke up, but she thought it was better for them to wait awhile till I got more used to things, so I wouldn’t be so shocked by the change. I think she was right. The three kids who stood before me weren’t the same children I remembered—heck, except for Brian, they weren’t children at all. And even Brian wasn’t little no more. I had to keep reminding myself that though time has stopped for me, for them and everybody else, nearly three years have gone by.

Colleen’s a pretty young lady now. And Matthew—he’s become a man. Dr. Mike said he’s even engaged to be married to one of the immigrants—a young Swedish girl named Ingrid. And Brian—he’s grown so much. No longer the tow-headed little fellow with the missing front teeth who used to beg me to play with my tomahawk.

They all seemed glad to see me. I told them how sorry I was to hear about Charlotte—and how much I’d miss her. They said they missed her too, but that Dr. Mike had given them a good home, and been a real good ma to them. Our conversation kind of dwindled after that. It seemed like there was a lot they wanted to tell me, but they were nervous—maybe even afraid. They kept looking at Dr. Mike, as if to ask her what to say. In the end, there didn’t seem to be much to talk about.

I felt bad—I didn’t want them feeling uncomfortable, or scared to be around me. But I guess when you got a part of your memories missing, people don’t know how to act or what to say in front of you.

I was depressed after they left. Dr. Mike asked again if I’d started writing down my memories, or if any of the missing pieces had started to come back. But I didn’t feel like talking.

Truth is, I don’t even feel like writing anymore . . .

* * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWO

“Nothing’s going on,” Michaela replied, and then hesitated. “Well, that’s not strictly true,” she amended. “Today is Parent’s Day at the school, and Brian was very anxious to know if you would be there to hear him read his essay.”
Sully looked startled. “That’s today?” he asked.

“Yes,” Michaela confirmed, watching him. “Is that a problem?”

“No—no problem,” he said after a fraction’s hesitation. “Just slipped my mind is all.”

“Will you be able to come?” Michaela persisted, feeling a twinge of unease.

He bit his lip, and cut his eyes away from her a moment, as if not sure how to respond. But a moment later he looked back and said, “Sure—I’ll be there.” He glanced over at the stove. “Uh, got any coffee?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get you some,” Michaela replied, starting to rise from the table, but Sully put up his hand to forestall her.

“No need to trouble yourself. I’ll fetch it,” he said. He turned his back to her and occupied himself with taking a cup from a hook on the wall and filling it from the metal pot warming on the stove. Michaela waited quietly. She was conscious of relief that Brian wouldn’t be disappointed, but overlaying that emotion was a palpable feeling of disquiet at how Sully had reacted to the question of whether he would attend Parent’s Day. Perhaps she had not been “borrowing trouble” after all. Something did seem to be on Sully’s mind. The question was whether he intended to share it with her.

He sat down opposite her with a pleasant smile, but his eyes were distracted, and she sensed that his thoughts were turned inward. A silence fell between them, and Michaela was debating whether to break it when Sully said unexpectedly, “So what’s Brian’s essay about?”

It was not like Sully to indulge in small talk, and Michaela’s disquiet increased slightly. But she decided to follow his lead for the moment.

“Brian wrote about the flying machine be built a few weeks ago,” she said. “Well perhaps I should say ‘machines’—since he actually built three.”

“Oh yeah,” Sully said. “Never could figure what it was ‘bout flyin’ that fascinates Brian so much. But it was real impressive, what he did. I’m sorry I wasn’t around when he was workin’ on it.”

“Yes, that was when you went to the army camp at Wrightwood to inform Superintendent Hazen you were resigning as Indian Agent,” Michaela recalled.

“Cept it didn’t turn out exactly like I planne d,” Sully commented, sipping his coffee and not looking at her.

“You certainly couldn’t have known that you’d encounter Loren in the woods and have to rescue him when he had the accident with his wagon and broke his leg,” Michaela noted. “But thank goodness you were there! Loren was very lucky to have you as his ‘Good Samaritan,’ Sully.”

“Anyone else woulda done the same,” said Sully uncomfortably.

“I disagree,” Michaela said. “You put aside your own concerns, treated Loren’s injury the best you could, and then transported him all the way to the surgeon at the army camp—despite the fact that it was a long, arduous and even dangerous journey.”

“You give me too much credit, Michaela,” he responded. “I was headed to Wrightwood anyway. Truth is, I was selfish. I should have brought Loren back here to you, but I was so set on seein’ Hazen, I insisted on pushin’ on to the army camp, and it caused us both a lot more trouble.” His tone had a note of finality in it, his manner suggesting that he wasn’t proud of his actions and didn’t want to pursue the topic.

 Quiet descended again. But Sully’s attitude about his rescue of Loren, and his aborted plan to quit his job as Indian Agent, nagged at Michaela. Something clearly seemed to be disturbing him. Perhaps something had occurred during the journey that he hadn’t told her—or maybe his distress had to do with the anger and frustration he’d been feeling that caused him to make the trip in the first place. Despite his apparent desire to avoid the subject, she felt compelled to question him further.

“I remember that when you returned from that trip, and ripped up your letter of resignation, you
seemed to be more content,” she ventured. “I always had the impression that Loren must have said something to you to change your mind, but you never actually told me what happened between the two of you.”

“Loren said a lot of things,” Sully replied. “So did I. Mostly what we did was argue—’bout him buyin’ the Cheyenne land, ’bout me quittin’ as Agent. But he saved my life when I slid down the hill crossin’ the washout, and then later, he said some things that made me think, and reconsider what I was doin’.

‘Course after we saw the squatters destroyin’ the Cheyenne burial ground, Loren said some other things to me that made me wanna take a swing at him,” Sully added with a slight smile, but there was no cheer in it.

(“More squatters up ahead,” he said to Loren as he led the horse pulling the travois toward the shady glen.

“How many?” Loren asked, twisting around to look from his berth on the litter.

“Looks like a married couple,” he replied.

Loren’s eyes widened. “Sully—that’s a burial ground, in’t?”

“Yep.”

“You got to *stop* those folks!” Loren told him. “They’re gonna build right on top of it!”

“So?” he answered bitterly. “You’re gonna build on the land as well.”

“But—this is *sacred* ground,” protested Loren.

Sully’s heart twisted inside him. “You don’t care about that.”


He glanced at Loren and then back at the squatters. “Like you said, Loren, if we stop ‘em somebody else will build here. Will we stop them too? And the ones that come after that? ‘Cause they’re gonna keep comin’ and there’s nothin’ we can do about it.” He stared toward the squatters, his eyes bleak. “Nothin’,” he added.

“There’s always somethin’ ta do!” exclaimed Loren. “You know that. You just ain’t got the *guts* anymore! That’s why you’re quittin’.

“You’re givin’ up,” Loren said, piercing Sully’s defenses. “Just like your pa. *And* your ma. You’re quittin’ because you’re a coward!”

Sully stared at Loren. “And you’re a fool.”

“I may be a fool,” said Loren, “but I’m tellin’ the truth. You just don’t wanna hear it.”)

He’d called Loren a fool, but he hadn’t meant it. Because Loren had been right . . .

“May I ask what?” Michaela ventured again.

“Hm?” he responded, pulling himself back to the present.

“What things did Loren say—to change your mind?”

Sully chewed on his lower lip. “Just—things,” he replied vaguely. “Not worth goin’ into.” He stood up from the table abruptly. “You ready to go to town?”

“Just about,” Michaela said, but she didn’t move from her chair. On impulse, she added, “Sully, is something wrong?”
He froze in the act of taking his cup to the sink, and turned to face her. “Why would you ask that?”

Michaela didn’t reply, but merely looked at him intently.

After a moment Sully returned slowly to the table and set his cup back down. He lowered himself into his seat and laid the palms of his hands on the tabletop. “Nothin’s wrong,” he began. “Not exactly, anyway. That is—well . . .” He trailed off, seemingly unable to find the words to articulate his feelings. “I just been thinkin’ lately, that I—” He hesitated again.

“What?” she encouraged.

“I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout Cloud Dancin’,” Sully went on after a long pause. “Wonderin’ if he’s all right—if he’s safe. I keep wishin’ I could talk to him.”

“We all miss Cloud Dancing very much,” Michaela said gently.

“I know,” Sully acknowledged. “And I appreciate how much you and the kids care about him. But for me, it’s different. Ever since—“ He paused again, as if finding it difficult to get the words out. “Ever since Washita, I feel like I can’t get things sorted out in my mind and heart, till I see Cloud Dancin’ again.”

The scene of the massacre filled Michaela’s mind, and she was conscious of a knife-like coldness cutting through her heart, as well as a flood of compassion for the pain Sully must be feeling. After Sully’s return from his trip to see Hazen, she had surmised from his demeanor that he had resolved his feelings about Washita, or at least made a kind of peace within himself about the loss of Black Kettle, Snowbird, and the other Cheyenne. But his present state of mind made it abundantly clear that he was as deeply wounded about their deaths now, as he had been at the time of the tragedy. In many ways, she realized suddenly, Sully may have been suffering more than herself, or even Cloud Dancing. At least she and the Cheyenne medicine man had been able to share their pain and feelings of guilt, and had embarked upon their path to healing, through the process of Cloud Dancing sharing the rest of his knowledge with her about Cheyenne medicine. But Sully had never really had the chance to heal. In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, he had persisted in being strong for her, supporting her as she went through her own dark night of the soul. Then, once she had begun to recover, he had almost feverishly thrown his energies back into finishing the homestead.

But the memory of Washita was always there, for both of them. Michaela knew that confronting that unspeakable evil had been hard enough for Sully to bear. But when he learned that the army had started rounding up Indians of differing tribes—many of them enemies of one another; and that these Indians would be forced to live together on a new reservation called Palmer Creek, against their will, with *him* in charge to keep the peace—his tolerance finally snapped. He’d had enough. No longer could he allow himself to be thwarted at every turn in his efforts to help and protect the Indians. No longer could he be an unwilling accomplice in the government’s mistreatment of them. He had to resign—thus washing his hands, once and for all, of the wickedness being perpetrated by the government and the army.

Michaela had exhorted him not to quit, believing that deep in his heart, he was incapable of abandoning the Indians to whatever harsh fate awaited them. Once the black cloud of Washita began to lift, she reasoned, Sully would be able to see clearly again, and find the strength and fortitude to go on. And when, a few days later, he had returned home to her with the letter of resignation still in his pocket, she had concluded that her instincts about him had been correct.

But what if she’d been wrong, she thought now. What if Sully had denied his real feelings—his inner pain—just to please her, believing this is what she wanted? Had she done Sully a great harm by urging him to tear up his letter to Hazen, inadvertently forcing him to continue in a role that was increasingly painful and odious for him?

Michaela thought now that Sully’s pain went far deeper than she had ever realized; and that instead of lessening and going away, it had simply turned inward, growing worse as time went on. He had been suffering in silence, and she had been too blind to see it.

“I wish Cloud Dancing was here, too,” she said to Sully now, covering his hands with hers. “For your sake, for his—and for mine as well. But we have to accept that he’s far away in the north. We simply have to trust that he’s safe and well with Live In Hopes and the Northern Cheyenne, and that someday, he’ll be able to find happiness again.”
“You’re right—about him bein’ happy, I mean,” Sully replied. “I want that for him too, more than anythin’. But about the other—him still bein’ in the north. That might not be true.”

“What do you mean?” asked Michaela apprehensively, fearing that something might have happened to their friend.

“I’ve—heard rumors—that he might be back,” Sully answered.

“Back?” Michaela repeated. “You mean near Colorado Springs? But Sully, it could be so dangerous for him! From what I’ve read in the Gazette and the Denver Post, Sheridan and Custer aren’t going to be content with the slaughter at Washita. They’re determined to ‘exterminate’ every Indian in the territory!”

“I know,” Sully said grimly, the brilliant blue of his eyes turning to slate. “That’s what I’m afraid of. It’s why I’ve been thinkin’—well that is, why I decided—I gotta go look for him. Fact is, I was gonna leave today—till you reminded me ‘bout Brian. I’ll hold off goin’ till after that, but then . . .” He trailed off, looking at her uneasily for her reaction.

Michaela was shocked into silence. Her compassion for Cloud Dancing and concern for his safety, was warring inwardly with her dismay that Sully had planned to just take off, without warning, and without discussing his plans with her—and that in doing so, he could be putting himself in terrible danger.

“What are you thinkin’?” Sully asked her after a moment, his eyes direct, but guarded.

“I’m—I’m not quite sure,” Michaela answered slowly, her thoughts chaotic. She tried to put her feelings in some kind of order. “I must confess that you took me by surprise,” she continued finally. “This is—not what I was expecting.”

“I know,” Sully acknowledged. “And I’m sorry for springin’ it on you, all of a sudden. I wanted to say somethin’ sooner—just could never seem to find the right moment. But Michaela, it’s somethin’ I gotta do.”

Michaela considered her words carefully. Sully studied her face, attempting to gauge her mood. But he remained silent, determined not to rush her or try to influence her opinion. Presently she took a deep breath and stared into his eyes.

“Sully, I know how worried you’ve been about Cloud Dancing,” she began. “So have I. You know I’ve come to love him dearly, as if he were my brother as well. Seeing his wife and chief and the members of his tribe—murdered—was the most heart-wrenching tragedy a soul could ever endure, and my heart breaks for him. Just as yours does. I know how much you want to protect him, and end his suffering. I would give anything if I could do the same.” She paused, feeling as if she were about to venture out onto shaky ground. Sully was hunched slightly forward, listening to her intently.

“But—is going in search of Cloud Dancing now truly wise?” she went on tentatively. “The situation with the army and the Indians is so precarious. Custer continues to lurk in the vicinity, and we know to our sorrow how arrogant and cold-blooded he is. He’s completely amoral, and capable of anything, Sully. He would arrest Cloud Dancing—perhaps even shoot him—without a second’s hesitation. And I’m dangerously afraid that he might do the same to you, if he caught you both together.”

“Cloud Dancin’ knows all there is to know ‘bout concealin’ himself from his enemies—and he taught it all to me,” Sully reminded her quietly.

“That’s true, of course,” Michaela conceded. “And I’m deeply grateful that you both possess those skills. But you’re only two, against an army. Look at the bloodshed Custer’s already caused. I just can’t help but be terribly afraid for your safety.”

“Is that the only thing botherin’ you?” Sully asked, accurately perceiving that there was more to her list of objections.

“No,” Michaela admitted after a moment’s hesitation. “I also have to question the common sense of your decision. You said you’d heard ‘rumors’ that Cloud Dancing was back, Sully. But you don’t know for sure. What if those rumors are wrong? You could waste days—perhaps weeks—looking for him.

“And what do you intend to do if you find him?” she continued. “You can’t bring him back here, and
you can’t make Custer go away.”

“I can warn him—and travel with him back to the north. Do what I can to make sure he gets there safe,” Sully said.

“Sully, that could keep you away for weeks,” she burst out. “Right at the time when I need you here most. And—”

“And what?” he said. His eyes had subtly changed expression, and he sat back in his chair, putting an uncomfortable distance between them.

“And there’s the wedding,” Michaela said reluctantly, finally voicing the thought that had been at the back of her mind from the moment Sully had declared his intention to leave town. She knew how selfish and trivial it sounded, compared to the danger Cloud Dancing was facing, but she couldn’t help it. She and Sully were to be married, in just little more than two months. The day she had been dreaming of for so long. She had so many hopes, so many plans. It was inconceivable that after all her expectations, something might happen at the last minute to imperil their wedding—perhaps even their future.

“Please understand me,” she said rapidly, as Sully’s expression grew even more remote. “I wouldn’t for a moment suggest that our wedding is more important than Cloud Dancing’s life. But—he was so happy about our union, Sully—as was Snowbird. They both wanted us to be together, and to be happy. I don’t think Cloud Dancing would want you to put our wedding in jeopardy to go in search of him. I believe he would want us to go on with our plans and celebrate our life together, after so much suffering and—and death. I know he would be with us in spirit.”

“You’re talkin’ ‘bout him like he’s dead too,” Sully said coldly.

Michaela stared at him in shock. “No!” she exclaimed. “That’s not what I meant at all! I was just trying to say—”

He sighed heavily and stood up. “I know what you meant,” he conceded. “And I understand how much the weddin’ means to you—means a lot to me, too. But I couldn’t take any joy in it if I thought I’d abandoned my brother when he needed me most.” He turned away from her and began to walk toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she said anxiously.

Sully stopped and faced her. “I got things to do,” he said shortly, then turned and reached for the door handle, letting himself out onto the porch.

“Oh will you still come this afternoon?” Michaela called to his retreating back, but received only the closing of the door in reply.

Tears stinging her eyes, she buried her face in her hands.

MY JOURNAL
Saturday, 17 March, 1870

Took a while for my depression to lift, but when I cheered up a little I got to feeling curious about what else had changed since I been “gone,” so to speak. So Dr. Mike filled me in a bit today on what’s happened with some of the friends and townspeople I remember.

Horace the telegraph operator fell in love with one of Hank’s girls—a sweet young woman named Myra. Somehow, she was able to break her contract with Hank, even though she was always his favorite—and she and Horace got married last year. They already got a baby—a little girl named Samantha. Pretty name. I wonder if she’s called after anyone special?

Robert E.’s married too. He wed Grace, the spirited woman with the snapping dark eyes who worked for Miss Olive, Loren’s sister. Dr. Mike says that awhile back, Grace opened the first café in
Colorado Springs, and that she’s the best cook in town.

Speaking of Olive, Dr. Mike gave me the sad news that she’s gone now, too—got sick and died on the trail driving her cattle from Old Mexico back to Colorado Springs. It grieved me to hear it. I liked and respected Olive. She was always good to Abagail and me—even when Loren turned his back on us both.

I was even more saddened to learn that Maude, Abagail’s ma, died too. Turns out she had a bad heart, and Dr. Mike couldn’t save her because she couldn’t get the medicine Maude needed in time.

I could tell from the sadness in Dr. Mike’s eyes when she spoke about Maude, how bad she felt that she couldn’t keep her alive. I ain’t known Dr. Mike for very long, but already I can see how passionate she is about being a doctor, and how much it grieves her if she loses a patient. She ain’t told me much about her background, but I’ve heard enough to know how hard it was for her in medical school, and after she started doctoring, facing resentment from men doctors, and folks who refused to accept a woman doing a “man’s” job. Why are people always so slow or unwilling to accept anyone who’s different?

Folks here have treated me like that for a long time—staring or pointing at my long hair and “strange” clothes, calling me “half-breed” . . . I never let it bother me, but I don’t like to think of people being cruel to Dr. Mike.

There was one other thing Dr. Mike told me that shocked me more than everything else put together. She said that Loren and me are *friends* now. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought she was joking. Loren hated me for taking Abagail away from him, and ruining his plans for her to marry another man. And then when she died—well I know he blamed me for her death. I never dreamed he’d forgive me—and I certainly never thought we could ever become friends.

I asked Dr. Mike how such a thing could have come about. She said she thought it started when she had to perform an operation on Loren, and I gave him some of my blood. Me—giving Loren blood?? When I heard that, I said that now I *knew* she must be pulling my leg. But she just smiled and said it was true.

Life surely is strange . . .

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THREE

An enthusiastic burst of applause from the students and visitors gathered in the small schoolhouse, greeted Brian as he finished reading his essay. Flushing with pleasure, he gazed at the friendly faces around the room and then looked toward the back, catching his mother’s eye and giving her a self-conscious grin. Her face glowing and tears in her eyes, Michaela returned his smile, clapping vigorously. Next to her but noticeably apart, stood Sully. He wasn’t applauding, but he regarded Brian with an expression of quiet warmth and pride. As Brian sought him out, anxiously searching Sully’s face for his reaction, he nodded slightly, and Brian beamed.

Reverend Johnson walked up the short aisle between the rows of desks to the front of the room, and put his hands on Brian’s shoulders.

“Thank you, Brian, for that very entertaining and descriptive essay,” he said, directing his remarks to everyone in the room. “I’m sure we all agree that the construction of your flying machine was a very impressive accomplishment, and we all enjoyed hearing the story of how you did it.

“And thank you also to Colleen Cooper, for your very well-written and informative essay about your trip to our nation’s capitol, and your tour of its many historical buildings and monuments. I think I speak for us all when I say that you have certainly inspired us to emulate your example and visit there someday.” Colleen ducked her head shyly, but her eyes were pleased. The Reverend looked out at the room, smiling broadly. “Thank you to *all* our talented students, for their very fine presentations. And thank you to the many parents and friends who joined us today, and helped make this event such a success.

“This concludes our program, but as you can see—“ he indicated his desk, which had been cleared of his books and materials, and bore a heaping platter of cinnamon buns, pots of coffee and pitchers of lemonade—“Grace has very generously provided some delicious refreshments for us. Please help
yourselves—but first, let’s give our children another round of applause for their wonderful efforts!” The
room rang with clapping once again, and then students and adults alike started mingling together, the
babble of their conversation filling the room as they drifted toward the front to partake of the repast.

Brian and Colleen hurried toward the back to join their family and friends. Michaela gave them each
an excited hug.

“You were wonderful! Both of you!” she exclaimed proudly.

“Nice goin’, little brother,” Matthew said to Brian, tousling Brian’s hair. “You too, Colleen.”

“Thanks!” Brian said, as Colleen smiled. Brian turned to Sully. “Did *you* like it Sully?”

Sully smiled at him, briefly draping his hand across the back of Brian’s neck. “Yeah, I did. A lot.”

Just then Robert E. and Grace came up to offer their congratulations to Brian and Colleen, and within
moments they were surrounded by a circle of friends and parents paying them compliments.

Sully used the distraction to slip out the door, and Michaela watched his departure with troubled eyes.
To his credit, he had been precisely on time, but except for a brief nod just before the festivities began, he
had not spoken to her. Reluctantly she pulled her attention away from Sully as some of the townspeople
engaged her in conversation. As soon as politeness allowed, however, she excused herself and she, too,
slipped outside.

Michaela stood on the schoolhouse steps, anxiously casting her eyes about, searching for Sully. After a
moment she spotted his distant figure across the meadow, Wolf at his heels. She gathered up her skirts
slightly and ran after him.

When she was within a few yards of him, however, she stopped abruptly, her nerve suddenly failing her.

“Sully?” she called out uncertainly.

He stopped, and turned, waiting for her, an unreadable expression on his face. Slowly she walked up
to him, feeling suddenly chilled inside her leather coat.

“I—I just wanted to thank you—for coming,” she said to him quietly. “It meant a great deal to Brian.”

“D’ja think I wouldn’t?” he said.

“No!” she said quickly, frustrated that already, she had somehow put a foot wrong. “It’s just that I
know I made you angry before, and I was afraid that—”

“That I’d take it out on Brian?” he finished for her coolly. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Michaela looked at him helplessly. This was going all wrong, and she didn’t know how to fix it.

“Please,” she said. “I don’t want us to be angry with each other. I’m very sorry that I offended you
before—it was not my intention. Can’t we please start again?”

“And say what, Michaela?” he responded distantly. “I want to go find Cloud Dancin’—you don’t want
me to go. Seems to me we’re at loggerheads.”

“But we needn’t be,” she said. “Not if we talk about it. There must be a compromise we can reach.”

“Talkin’ don’t solve everythin’,” he said shortly.

“Perhaps not,” Michaela conceded. “But it’s a beginning. Won’t you at least let me tell you how I feel?
You’ve told me over and over that I can say anything to you.”

“Yeah, I did,” Sully admitted, relenting. “And you can.” His posture relaxed slightly as he absently
reached down and scratched behind Wolf’s ears. “What’s on your mind?”
Michaela’s hands twisted together as she thought of what she wanted to say. “First, I want to apologize to you again for what I said before,” she began earnestly. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Sully—truly I didn’t. And I love Cloud Dancing with all my heart.”

“I know you do,” he interjected quietly.

“I pray for him every day,” she went on, “And I completely understand your desire to go to him. I need you to understand that.”

“I do,” he said, his expression softening.

“I just—questioned the wisdom of you making such a journey now,” she said. “Not the reasons for it. And I feared for your safety—yours and Cloud Dancing’s. I—” She swallowed. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you,” she went on, her voice not quite steady. “And I couldn’t bear to lose Cloud Dancing—not after Snowbird and Black Kettle.” Tears blurred her vision. She lifted her hand to wipe them away, but before she could, Sully reached out his hand and gently brushed a teardrop from her cheek with the ball of his thumb.

“I know how you feel about Cloud Dancin’ and the others,” he said gently. “And I know how worried you are for me. I shouldn’t have walked out like that before. But—I gotta make my own decisions ‘bout things, Michaela. I gotta follow my heart.

“You know I love you,” he went on softly. “More than anythin’ I want to marry you, and be part of your family.”

“Our family,” she said, just above a whisper.

He smiled. “You’re right—our family.” He took her hands in his. “I can’t wait for our weddin’ day. It’s gonna be the most wonderful day of my life. But as happy as you and the children make me, I can’t forget about my other family—my brother. I just can’t take my happiness at his expense. I gotta do what I can to help him—and I gotta ask you to understand and accept it. Can you?” he finished, looking searchingly into her eyes.


“What is it?” he said.

“Are you sure that all this is just about Cloud Dancing?” she said carefully. “Or is it really you who’s in trouble and needs help?”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Sully asked after a moment, his tone slightly defensive.

“You told me yourself, earlier, that you wouldn’t feel right in your mind till you could speak with Cloud Dancing again,” she explained. “I believe you need to heal, Sully, and I think that you believe only Cloud Dancing can help you to do that.”

He didn’t attempt to refute her statement. Instead he stood staring thoughtfully at the sweep of Pike’s Peak rising up in the distance. Presently he said, “Does that bother you—that maybe I might need somethin’ only Cloud Dancin’ can give?”

“Not at all,” she said sincerely. “How could it, when Cloud Dancing gave such comfort to me, despite his own heartbreak? If he can relieve your pain . . . If he can help you to—to put things in ‘balance’ again—then I must support your decision to seek him out and give you my blessing, no matter what the cost.”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she confirmed. “If I didn’t seem sympathetic before, it’s only because I couldn’t understand why you hadn’t discussed your decision with me first. I suppose—” She looked down at the ground and then back up at Sully. “I suppose I was hurt,” she admitted softly.

“I’m sorry,” Sully said, his expression genuinely remorseful. “I never meant to hurt you, Michaela.
"And you’re right," he went on.  "It was wrong not to talk to you 'bout what I was thinkin’ and feelin'. I 'spose I just ain’t used to consultin’ anyone or askin’ permission 'fore I do what I want to do."

"Sully, it's not a question of asking my permission," Michaela protested.  "I would never try to control you or order you about."

"I know that," he replied.  "That was a poor way of puttin' it, I guess."

"But I think I know what you’re saying," Michaela told him.  "You’ve been on your own a long time, as I have.  Up to now, neither of us has had to be responsible to another person for the choices we make."

"But falling in love—making a commitment to someone—changes things, Sully," she continued.  "Each of us needs to consider the other’s feelings, and think about how the things each of us does will affect the other person.  That’s part of what marriage is all about."

"It is, is it?" Sully said, a glint of humor warming his eyes.  "And how would you know that?"

Michaela blushed slightly, conceding the point.  "It’s true I’ve never been married, and I have a lot to learn," she admitted.  "But this much, I *do* know.  Once we make our vows to one another, we’ll be partners—sharing every aspect of our lives.  It may not be easy, making that adjustment, but I believe that over time, it will become natural—as natural as the love we feel for each other."

"And speaking for myself, I will do everything in my power to always be honest with you, and seek your advice and counsel."

Sully lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.  "Thank you," he said simply.  "I got to admit, I haven’t had to consider someone else’s needs and feelin’s—or share my own—for a lot of years.  I guess I got out of the habit.  And the longer time went on, the harder it was to remember what it was like."

"But there’s no one whose opinion means more to me, or whose feelin’s matter more—than you," he said softly.  "I promise to always try to be honest with you, too—and do my best to speak my feelin’s 'stead of hidin’ them inside."

"That’s all I could ever ask," she responded.

"So let me ask you one more time—are you certain you’re all right with me goin’ away?"

"I’m certain," she said.

"And the weddin’?" Sully reminded her.  "I’ll do the very best I can to come back in time, but if I’m not able—"

"The wedding will go on, whether we marry in two months or two years," Michaela assured him.  "I won’t let you go that easily."

Impulsively he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her hungrily.  As always, the feel of his mouth against hers made her nearly dizzy.  Their lips parted, and he stared deeply into her eyes.  "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you," she whispered back.

He slipped his arm around her shoulders and slowly they began to walk back in the direction of the schoolhouse.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela sat at her desk in the clinic, trying to concentrate on the patient file in front of her, but not succeeding.  All she could think about was Sully, who would be leaving momentarily.  She had given him her blessing, understanding that he needed to make this journey—both for Cloud Dancing’s sake, as well as for the sake of his own emotional and spiritual well-being.  Even the possibility of the wedding having to be postponed if his return was delayed no longer bothered her.  In her heart, she knew Sully would move heaven and earth if that’s what it took, to be by her side as soon as possible.
But she couldn’t rid herself of her worries about his safety. Before Washita, she had always believed in the essential goodness of human nature. That all men, regardless of their sins, had a spark of decency inside. When she had been abducted by One-Eye and his band after witnessing their murder of the two army soldiers, her conviction had been shaken. But in her mind she had been able to explain their actions to some degree, by considering their anger and desperation as they endured the steady erosion of their way of life and the loss of their freedom at the hands of the government and the army.

However, after being confronted by the sheer inhumanity of the massacre at Washita—the unspeakable slaughter of so many innocent men, women and children—she had been forced to come to the bitter realization that there were some men who were totally without conscience, who let themselves by ruled by greed, intolerance and hate. And men of honor and integrity, like Sully and Cloud Dancing, were at terrible risk from these monsters who masqueraded as human beings.

Thanks to the time she had shared with Cloud Dancing in the aftermath of the tragedy, she had somehow found a way to go on, to find hope within herself again. But the experience had marked her. Something inside her had profoundly changed. She had witnessed the inconceivable, and she would never be the same again.

She had to let Sully go—but she was desperately afraid for him. And even if he returned unscathed from this journey, she wondered if she would ever again be able to watch him leave her, without being haunted by the fear that he might not come back.

The door opened suddenly and Sully entered on a gust of frigid air. He was wearing his heavy, fringed leather coat, his bow and quiver of arrows slung across his shoulder. Though the calendar said it was nearly spring, winter had not yet released its hold on the community. Goosebumps erupted on Michaela’s skin under the thin layer of her blouse and she rubbed her arms, knowing that the chill she felt did not completely come from the temperature outside.

Determined not to let Sully see her apprehension, however, she summoned a smile as she looked up at him in greeting.

“Are you ready to leave?” she asked.

“Just about,” he answered, coming around behind her. He placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to kiss the side of her neck. “Gonna come outside and see me off?”

“Of course,” she said. As she rose from her chair, he went to retrieve her coat.

“Put this on,” he advised, holding it out for her. “It’s a cold one today, and it don’t look like it’s gonna get any warmer, any time soon.”

“Will *you* be warm enough, out in the woods?” she asked worriedly, as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. He pulled the edges of her coat together snuggly, then wrapped his arms around her.

“I’ve been gettin’ along out in the wilderness for a long time now,” he reminded her. “I’ll be fine—you don’t need to fret.”

She looked up at him. “I can’t help it,” she confessed. “I’m always going to worry, no matter where you go or what you do.”

Sully put his hand under her chin and smiled gently. “I’ll be fine,” he repeated. “I promise.”

A sudden thought occurred to her. “Sully—what about the Indians? How will they get along without you? Not to mention that Hazen certainly couldn’t have been happy about you suddenly leaving like this.”

“I asked the Reverend to keep an eye on things for me,” he told her. “And as far as Hazen goes, I wired him that I had some personal business to take care of.”

“Will he accept that?” she said.

“He’ll have to,” Sully replied. “And if he don’t, then so be it—let him fire me.” He didn’t sound very
distressed at the prospect. In fact, from his tone and his expression, Michaela thought he almost longed for the possibility. Pensively he stared out the window, his fingers absently stroking his medicine pouch.

“It’s a thankless job, Michaela,” he stated unexpectedly, apparently feeling the need to talk—or perhaps already endeavoring to keep his promise to her to share what was in his mind. “Grant may have meant well, and thought he was doin’ a good thing when he created his peace plan, but most of his administration is corrupt. Probably the Bureau of Indian Affairs is too—with the exception, maybe, of Ely Parker. The army don’t care—they’d happily see all the Indians killed off. It’s like Sheridan said: ‘The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.’

“The army’s ‘sposed to supply the reservations with food and supplies, but half the time they don’t come. You know about that—you’ve seen it happen, again and again. And there are corrupt agents on other reservations who double their head counts when they order their supplies and then sell off the extra, plus most of the Indians’ portion, to line their own pockets. Either way, the Indians suffer and starve.” His voice took on a faraway note, and Michaela wondered if he was still speaking strictly to her, or more to himself.

"Black Kettle, White Antelope, and the other Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe chiefs, tried so hard to sow the seeds of peace," Sully continued as she listened quietly. “But all they got for their efforts was a harvest of lies. Back in ‘Sixty-four, they sent word to the commander at Fort Lyon, Major Wynkoop, that they were willin’ to surrender some white prisoners—a woman and three children—in exchange for peace. Black Kettle didn’t even have these captives in his possession. He had to use some of his own horses to buy them from the dog soldiers. In good faith the Indians turned their captives over to Wynkoop, and then went with him to Denver to make peace with Colonel Chivington and Governor Evans. But the concessions Chivington and Evans demanded from the Indians in return for a peace agreement were so unfair, the whole thing fell apart. Wynkoop tried to help the Indians anyway—he allowed Black Kettle and the other chiefs, and all the people with them, to camp near Fort Lyon. He promised they’d be protected under the American flag. For his trouble, his superiors relieved him from his command. And then just ten days later, the new commander at Fort Lyon stopped givin’ the Indians rations and drove them from the post.

“But Black Kettle still wanted to believe that peace was possible. He had his own American flag, that the military had give him. He thought that flag was sacred—he thought it made white men his friends. But while he was holdin’ onto that flag, trustin’ that it would protect him and his people, Chivington was plottin’ their destruction.” Michaela regarded Sully with compassion, her heart heavy as she listened to him recite the army's litany of shame.

“That flag was flyin’ outside Black Kettle’s tent when Chivington and the 3rd Colorado descended on the Cheyenne/Arapahoe camp at Sand Creek,” Sully went on. “Chivington’s regiment was called the ‘Bloodless Third,’ ‘cause they’d never been in a fight. But they were the ‘Bloody Third’ by the time the attack was over,” he added darkly, anguish and anger coloring his eyes and voice. “The army struck before dawn—but by afternoon, better than six hundred Indians were dead. Two hundred Cheyenne were killed, and two-thirds of them were women and children.”

He paused for a long moment, then swallowed hard as he added, “Did I ever tell you how after the slaughter, Chivington’s men mutilated the corpses of the women and children, cuttin’ off their body parts and holdin’ ’em up like some kind of obscene trophy while they rode in triumph back to Fort Lyon?”

Michaela paled, sickened by the image Sully’s words had conjured in her mind. She knew the facts of Sand Creek—the atrocities had been widely reported in newspapers across the country—but she had never heard this part of it. She wondered if most people had. She recalled those first days after Washita, when she sometimes feared that the memory of what she’d witnessed might drive her mad. And she wondered how Sully could live with the horrific legacies of Sand Creek and Washita, and still stay sane.

“The Cheyenne were such a proud, brave people,” Sully went on quietly, reverently; his eyes staring off past her shoulder at something only he could see. “They were one of the greatest of the plains tribes. Do you know what the early white settlers and other tribes called them?” He didn’t wait for a reply, but went on to answer his own rhetorical question. “They called them ‘the beautiful people.’ And they were beautiful. The women’s faces so elegant and dignified—”

“Like Snowbird,” Michaela said softly.

“Yeah—like Snowbird,” he echoed. “And the men straight and tall—scarcely a one of ’em under six feet.
They had such great wisdom. They were fierce, and strong—the most powerful warriors on the plains. They had such a rich and sacred heritage—and now look what they been reduced to."

Lost in the mingled grief and bitterness of his memories, Sully did not immediately realize the effect of his recitation on Michaela. But when he finally noticed the stark misery in her eyes, he broke off. He took a deep breath, trying to collect himself, then did his best to assume a placid expression.

"I didn’t mean to upset you,” he apologized. “I shouldn’t have said so much. I guess once I got started, it all just kinda came pourin’ out.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Michaela told him. “Just as you claim that I can say anything to you—you can say anything to me, as well. And I’m not upset for myself. On the contrary, Sully—I’m grateful that you felt you could share those memories with me. Clearly you needed to talk about the sorrow that’s been weighing on your spirit. My heart just aches so much for you and Cloud Dancing.”

“I’m all right,” he said. “And gettin’ back to Hazen, chances are nothin’ bad will happen,” he added calmly. “He ain’t due for his quarterly visit for a while yet. And I have an idea I know where Cloud Dancin’ might be. It ain’t that far from here. I’ll probably be back long before Hazen even starts to wonder.” He opened the door, then took her hand and led her out onto the porch. His horse, covered by a colorful Indian blanket and loaded with his saddlebags, bedroll and canteen, stood tethered at the rail.

They faced each other, feeling suddenly awkward now that the moment of parting had arrived. Hearing Sully’s poignant soliliquy had made Michaela even more concerned about him—but this time, for his state of mind. She wanted so much to say something to assuage his pain, but the words wouldn’t come. And truthfully, she knew that any words she said, no matter how eloquent, would be inadequate. Even though it was contrary to what he might want or need, she was seized with an overwhelming compulsion to keep him close by, where at least he would be safe and protected. From deep inside her, a small voice cried out forlornly, “Don’t go!” For a moment she almost let the words escape her lips; but then her self-discipline took over and the sad voice of protest subsided and was still.

Sully took her chilled hands in his warm ones, chafing them tenderly. “Guess this is it,” he said reluctantly. Michaela recognized his deep regret at having to leave her, but in his eyes she could also detect a spark of anticipation that finally he was doing something to confront the pain that had made him sick at heart all these weeks. It was a spark she hadn’t seen for a long time, and she thought suddenly that any amount of worry she endured would be worth it, just to see that light in his eyes again.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” she implored, feeling slightly foolish at stating the obvious, but compelled to say the words just the same. “Promise you won’t take any unnecessary risks.”

Sully raised his hand as if he were taking an oath. “I swear,” he vowed, gazing at her lovingly.

Michaela’s eyes traveled over every inch of his face, memorizing his features as if she were an artist sculpting his image in stone or bronze, to create a monument for herself that was permanent and eternal. After a moment she freed one of her hands from his and laid it against his cheek. “I hope you find Cloud Dancing,” she whispered. “I hope this journey brings you everything you want and need.”

“Thank you,” he whispered back, bending over the hand still clasped in his and kissing it gently. “But you know, I could never say good-bye if I didn’t know that you’d be waitin’ right here for me when I come home.”

“I’ll wait for you forever,” she pledged.

Sully wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. For several seconds they embraced tightly, almost desperately. But suddenly, as they drew apart, Michaela glimpsed a sight over his shoulder that made her gasp.

“Oh, no!”

“What is it?” Sully asked her, alarmed. He started to turn, following the direction of her gaze.

“It’s Custer,” Michaela said.
Wednesday, 21 March, 1870

I ain’t been able to write for some days now. The morning after Dr. Mike told me about the changes in town, I woke up with a blinding headache—the pain so bad it seemed as if my skull would split apart. I never felt nothing like it before—even the headache I had when I first woke up couldn’t compare to this.

Dr. Mike said it was something called a “migrim”—a real bad kind of headache. She said I’d had one once before, but of course I couldn’t remember, and she wouldn’t say nothing more beyond that.

It was so bad, even the light hurt my eyes, and Dr. Mike had to draw the shades and keep my room in darkness. And I was desperately sick at my stomach. Over and over, Dr. Mike had to hold my head while I vomited, till there wasn’t nothing left to bring up but bile. But still my guts kept heaving. I hated being so weak—hated her seeing me like that. I pleaded with her to go away and leave me alone. But she wouldn’t. She said, “I’m staying with you, Sully.” When I heard that, for just an instant, there was a familiar echo in my mind, like I’d heard her say those words before. But then the pain hit again—so fierce that it blotted out everything else, till after a time all I could do was just pray for it to be over—or to die—whichever came first.

Dr. Mike promised me I wasn’t dying—she said eventually the pain and sickness would pass. But I had a hard time believing her. During the worst of it, I begged her to go for Cloud Dancing, so that he could come and perform a healing. But she said there were some problems with the army, and it wasn’t safe for him to be in town. I wanted to ask her what was wrong, and why Cloud Dancing was in danger, but I felt so sick that even that didn’t matter after a while.

I don’t know how much time passed while I was so bad off—but finally when the nausea started to ebb, and it seemed like I might be able to keep something down, Dr. Mike started giving me doses of willow bark tea. I didn’t know at first what she was giving me. Dr. Mike just handed me the cup and told me to drink it—she said it would help the pain. When I tasted it, and recognized what it was, I was shocked. I asked her where she got it from, and .how she knew about Indian medicine. That’s when she told me she knew a lot about the herbs and the cures used by the Cheyenne, because Cloud Dancing had taught her.

She told me about the first time she used the tea, during an influenza epidemic in the town. She’d used up all her own medicine on the townsfolk, so when she got sick with the grippe, there was nothing left to give her. She said that’s when I took her to Cloud Dancing, who performed a healing, and gave her the fever tea. She said he saved her life. After that, he started teaching her about the medicine, and she started using some of his remedies on her patients, and helping Cloud Dancing take care of his people.

I keep being surprised by the things she knows, but I shouldn’t be. I may have been floating in some cloudy place, trapped in the past, but the people around me have been going forward, living their lives. Reminds me of another story my ma read to me when I was young, about a man named Rip Van Winkle, who went to sleep for twenty years. When he woke up, he found that time had passed him by. It ain’t that bad for me, but still I’m shaken when I think of how much the world has moved on without me.

After I got to feeling a little better, I remembered the question I’d asked her about Cloud Dancing being in danger from the army. I put the question to her again, but she said she thought it was best to hold off on that discussion, till I was stronger and feeling more like myself.

I guess she’s got good reasons for keeping some things from me, but sometimes I can’t help resenting being treated like an invalid—or a child who’s too young to be told the truth.

I suppose I got to be patient, though it’s hard. Seems as if it’s hard for Dr. Mike, too. I feel like I’m disappointing her. She keeps looking at me with such expectation, so hopeful that I’m going to remember something from that missing time. But I got nothing new to tell her.

And so far, it seems like my writing in this journal is just a waste of effort. I’m supposed to be trying to fill in the blanks, but all I can seem to write about is how strange and peculiar everything is, now that I’m awake.

What’s happened to me?
CHAPTER FOUR

Michaela watched Sully’s face become closed and still, and his eyes turn darkly menacing as he watched Custer’s approach. The general rode toward them on horseback. Lustrous blonde hair flowed to his shoulders, and a neat, manicured goatee concealed his chin. Dominating his features was a prominent mustache, the ends meticulously waxed to wicked points. His dark, wide-brimmed hat was cocked at precisely the correct angle, his hands were encased in immaculate white gloves, and a bright red scarf flared at his throat. Michaela felt a wave of disgust course through her at Custer’s celebrated vanity, at his smug complacency. But in that moment, even more than she despised him, she feared him.

“Sully—” she whispered urgently.

“He can’t do nothin’ to us,” Sully murmured back, not taking his eyes from the military officer. “Don’t fret.”

“But what if he decides to follow you?” Michaela persisted anxiously, sweat beading her forehead and slicking her palms despite the cold.

“It’s all right—I’ll handle this,” he responded evenly.

Custer drew closer, carefully negotiating his way through the frozen ruts of mud obstructing the street. Eyes fixed on the general’s visage, Michaela was at first unaware that he was not alone. But Sully nudged her suddenly.

“Look,” he whispered, nodding toward a point beyond Custer. Michaela followed his gaze and saw that another man on horseback rode a few yards behind the flamboyant officer. With astonishment, she realized it was an Indian.

“A prisoner?” she queried Sully softly.

“No,” he replied, studying the Indian pensively. “See—his hands ain’t bound. ‘Sides, if he were a prisoner, Custer’d be draggin’ him along behind the horse, not lettin’ him ride up there in comfort.”

Recalling the many examples she’d witnessed of the army’s harsh treatment of its Indian captives, Michaela had to acknowledge the truth of this statement.

“Is he Cheyenne?” she asked.

Sully shook his head slightly. “No, not Cheyenne. Sioux, maybe,” he speculated. He sounded as perplexed as she.

Custer finally reached them, reining his horse to a stop directly in front of where they stood. In his wake, the Indian also reined in his mount a few paces beyond the general. Sully studied the Indian, trying to make eye contact. The Indian ignored his mute message, however. He sat rigidly, dark eyes staring impassively ahead. Glossy black braids framed the sharp planes of his face and hung down to his chest. His mahogany skin was ruddy from the cold, and a gray-white hawk feather anchored in his hair nodded in the stiff breeze.

Custer leaned forward in his saddle to address them. “Dr. Quinn,” he said, touching one gloved hand to the brim of his hat. “And Mr. Sully. We meet again.” He gave them a facile smile that did not reach his hooded, piercing eyes.

“General Custer,” Michaela said stiffly. Sully remained silent.

The general raised an eyebrow. “Hm—I see that your manners have not improved with time,” he observed to Sully. “But then, we must consider the source, now, mustn’t we?” he added, directing his remark to Michaela. She regarded him stonily.

“I must say that it’s quite providential to find you both here,” Custer continued pleasantly, unfazed by their hostile reception. “I was hoping our paths would cross—and here you are! Almost as if you were
“Don’t flatter yourself,” Sully said sharply.

“I can’t think what you would want from us, Mr. Custer,” Michaela remarked, hoping her haughty manner was disguising the pounding of her heart.

Custer glanced at Sully’s horse, patiently waiting with its burden of supplies. He looked back at Sully. “Going somewhere, Mr. Sully?” he inquired smoothly, ignoring Michaela’s remark.

“Where I go or what I do ain’t none of your business,” said Sully flatly.

“On the contrary,” Custer demurred. “Anything that happens within the territory under my jurisdiction is very much my business. Especially if it affects the—‘situation’—with the Indians. And we all know what a *friend* to the Indian you are, don’t we, Mr. Sully?”

“I ain’t denyin’ it,” Sully said coldly.

“Your loyalty to the red man is to be commended,” Custer said blandly. “But so unfortunate that it’s so tragically misplaced. Well, no matter. So where exactly are you headed, Mr. Sully?” he queried, his eyes studying the other man avidly.

“I don’t owe you any explanations,” Sully retorted.

“Sully—“ Michaela cautioned softly.

“There really is no need for such hostility on your part, Mr. Sully,” Custer said reasonably. “However, I should warn you that my patience has its limits. You would do well to listen to Dr. Quinn and refrain from antagonizing me. So I’ll put the question once again: what is your destination?”

“Nowhere special,” Sully replied shortly. “Just up in the hills.”

“To do what, may I ask?”

“Sully is going hunting,” Michaela interjected hastily, before Sully could speak. “He often makes such trips.”

Custer looked up at the ominous gray of the sky above, the bellies of the clouds heavy with unshed snow. “The weather seems a bit—unforgiving—for such an excursion,” he observed. “Not to mention that the likelihood of finding game seems remote, at best. Of course,” he added slyly, “I suppose it all depends on what type of ‘game’ you’re searching for.”

“There’s game to be had—if you know where to look,” Sully said, ignoring the officer’s insinuation.

“Such as?” the general said skeptically.

“Such as deer that can’t find food under the snow in the high country, and get driven down out of the mountains.”

“And are deer the *only* ‘prey’ you seek?” Custer persisted, relentlessly determined to trip Sully into some type of admission.

“I answered your question,” Sully said stubbornly. “Now you answer mine. What do you want with us, General?”

Michaela looked at Sully in alarm. He seemed determined to bait Custer, regardless of the risk. But to her surprise, Custer merely smiled.

“I admire a man who’s blunt,” he commented. “Very well—let us speak plainly. There were certain members of the Cheyenne unaccounted for after the ‘engagement’ at Washita,” he elaborated. “In particular, several dog soldiers—and your friend the medicine man, Cloud Dancing. I have reason to believe he may be back in the area. Would you have any information as to his whereabouts?”
Michaela flinched as Custer said Cloud Dancing’s name. But Sully’s expression never altered. Inwardly, she marveled at his ability not to betray—by even the merest flicker of an eyelash—any consternation at the general’s allusion to their friend.

“‘Engagement?’” Sully repeated icily. “Don’t you mean ‘slaughter’?”

“I’ll ignore that,” Custer replied coolly. He paused for a moment, his eyes penetrating, then said provocatively, “You know, despite your claims to the contrary, Mr. Sully, I just can’t rid myself of the notion that the ‘game’ you’re hunting walks on two legs. Why don’t you simplify things for both of us and tell me the truth: you intend to rendezvous with Cloud Dancing—isn’t that correct?”

“Go to hell,” Sully said clearly.

“Sully!” Michaela breathed.

But Custer only looked aggrieved, as if he’d done his best to be reasonable, but received only defiance in return.

“One thing I’ll say for you, Mr. Sully—you’re nothing, if not predictable. So be it. But if I were you,” he admonished, “I would advise Cloud Dancing to turn himself in, and makes things easier for himself. Because make no mistake,” he warned, his eyes boring into Sully’s. “I *will* find him. And I wouldn’t want to be in his position—or yours—if I am forced to hunt him down.

“Good day, Mr. Sully. And oh yes—‘happy hunting.’” He glanced toward Michaela. “Dr. Quinn,” he added politely, doffing his hat to her once more. He gathered up his horse’s reins and signaled to the Indian behind him. Slowly, they moved off down the street.

Michaela waited until they were well out of earshot, then turned to Sully. “Why would you want to provoke him that way?” she burst out fearfully. “Aren’t matters dangerous enough as it is?”

“He just brings out the worst in me,” Sully said, his expression still lethal as he stared after Custer’s retreating figure.

“I understand that,” Michaela said. “I feel the same way. But he’s a powerful man, Sully. Powerful—and dangerous. And you may have just succeeded in giving him cause to follow you. What if he does, and you lead him to Cloud Dancing? The repercussions could be devastating, for Cloud Dancing and for you!”

“Custer can do what he wants,” Sully said. “He won’t find me, and he won’t find Cloud Dancin’.”

“I wish I could be as certain of that as you are, but I can’t,” Michaela replied. “I think it’s best if you postpone your departure, until you’re not such a target of his scrutiny. After all, Custer must have other duties demanding his attention—certainly he can’t watch and wait forever. A day or two’s delay might be much safer. Please, Sully, take precautions—for *all* our sakes,” she implored.

“I understand what you’re sayin’,” he replied. “And I don’t want to be responsible for causin’ you more worry. But now that we’ve told him I’m goin’ huntin’, it would look even more suspicious if I stay here in town. But that’s not the worst of it. Even a delay of just twenty-four hours could mean the difference between Cloud Dancin’ livin’ or dyin’. If he’s out there, alone, with no way of knowin’ Custer’s after him, he can’t protect himself. At least he’ll have a fightin’ chance if I can get to him first.

“Fact is,” Sully went on thoughtfully, “I ain’t nearly so concerned ‘bout Custer trackin’ me or Cloud Dancin’, as I am ‘bout that Indian who was with him, and what it means.”

“That was very mysterious,” Michaela agreed, momentarily diverted. “Given Custer’s condemnation of the Indians, and his ‘fame’ as an Indian fighter, I find it impossible to comprehend why he would choose to have one as a companion.”

“Exactly,” Sully said.

“Perhaps Cloud Dancing will know something,” Michaela suggested.

“He might,” Sully allowed, then shrugged. “Well, there ain’t time now to worry about it—if I don’t leave immediately, I’m gonna lose the best part of the day. Look after Wolf for me?” he added.
“Of course,” she nodded.

He put his hands on her shoulders and stared deeply into her eyes. “You take care of yourself, and the kids,” he told her.

“We’ll be fine,” she replied. “It’s you who needs to take care.”

“I will,” he promised. “And I’ll be home ‘fore you know it.” He pulled her to him and kissed her hard, then stepped down from the clinic porch and in one fluid movement, vaulted onto his horse’s back. “I love you,” he added, his eyes locked with hers.

“I love you,” she answered softly, swallowing back the tears that threatened to flow.

Sully raised his hand in farewell, then turned the horse’s head toward the road out of town. The animal began to bear him away, but not before he looked back at her once more. Michaela put on a shaky smile for his benefit, hugging her arms to herself against the chill she felt inside and out. She watched his progress, feeling more bereft with every yard his horse put between them. Too soon, he rounded the saloon and disappeared from her sight.

“Please, God, keep him safe,” she prayed silently. “Keep them both safe.” Slowly, she turned and went back inside, shutting the door and drawing the curtains. Alone in the gloom of the clinic, she sank down behind her desk and surrendered to her tears.

* * * * * * * * * *

Sully made fairly good progress, his horse picking its way sure-footedly across the frost-hardened ground. Once beyond the outskirts of Colorado Springs, he encountered few people, the bitter cold apparently having driven most of the town’s inhabitants indoors. That suited him fine; the fewer people who saw him or noted the direction he was traveling, the better. Most importantly, there was no sign of Custer or any other blue-coated riders to mark his passing.

However Sully’s relief at having the landscape to himself was mingled with a persistent unease. Periodically he glanced at the lowering sky, attempting to gauge how soon the thickly banked clouds might release their burden of snow. He had to concede that Custer had at least been correct about the threatening quality of the weather—though agreeing with the general on anything filled him with disgust. Sully wasn’t concerned about being caught in a snowstorm—he knew how to find or create shelter for himself. Nor was he worried about losing his way. He knew the countryside well, even when the familiar features of the terrain were concealed beneath a layer of white.

But snow could still prove to be his undoing. Under ordinary circumstances, he could blend in with his environment, using the natural grays, browns and greens of the rocks and foliage as camouflage. But against a canvas of white, his presence would be as obvious as a solitary pea rolling around on an empty plate. And though he was well practiced at covering his tracks, there was no way to conceal the trail of horse’s hooves or footprints he would leave in his wake. Sully simply had to pray that the precipitation would hold off at least until he reached Cloud Dancing. Once they were together, there were tricks the two men could employ to confuse or deceive anyone pursuing them.

As Sully rode, he puzzled further on the enigma of Custer’s Indian companion. He had told Michaela that he thought the Indian was a Sioux, but in truth he wasn’t sure. In fact, the man seemed to defy classification. The most curious—perhaps even sinister—thing of all was his presence at Custer’s side. Try as he might, Sully could not understand why any Indian would willingly ally himself with a white man whose hands were stained with the blood of so many innocent Indian victims.

Maybe Michaela was right. Perhaps Cloud Dancing could shed some light on the mystery. Still more reason for him to get to his brother as quickly as possible. But first, he needed to find a safe and sheltered place to make camp for the night.

Sully nudged his horse’s sides and hastened his pace up into the hills.

MY JOURNAL
Saturday, 24 March, 1870
I feel like the walls are starting to close in on me. Seems like half the day I prowl back and forth, counting the number of paces from one end of the room to the other. When I ain’t doing that, I’m lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, wishing I could see through it to the sky beyond.

What I do most of all is look out the window, watching folks pass by—all of them with some destination, some purpose—while I sit here idle, feeling out of place and out of time.

I don’t belong here. I should be with Cloud Dancing, Black Kettle and the other Cheyenne—or camped at my lean-to out in the woods. I need to go back there. I want to sleep on the ground again, rolled up in the warmth of a buffalo robe and pressed close to the bosom of Mother Earth. I want to be covered by the quilt of the night sky, its velvety blackness spangled with frosty stars. I want to glimpse the face of the Great Spirit in the ivory disk of the moon.

There don’t seem to be any reason for me to linger here. The migrim is gone and I’m getting my strength back. And Dr. Mike examined my wound yesterday and said it was nearly healed. I asked her how soon I could leave, but she put me off. She’ll be bringing me my breakfast soon. When she comes, I’m going to tell her it’s time for me to go.

Evening

I ain’t sure if I can write this down—my hands are still shaking. But I owe it to my absent friends to record what happened to them. It’s the only way I have to mark their lives, till I can go out in the wilderness and make an offering to the spirits in their honor.

How could the spirits be so cruel?

* * * * * * * * * *

“You’re making a wonderful recovery, Sully,” Dr. Mike said to me this morning after gently probing my scalp and examining the stitches she’d put in.

“Good,” I replied, then got up and went to the cupboard where I knew she’d put my clothes. I took them out and stepped behind the screen in the corner, shedding the long johns she’d given me and pulling on my buckskins.

“What are you doing?” she called to me.

“Getting dressed so I can leave,” I called back, sliding my shirt over my head and tucking it in. I came back out and sat down on the bed to pull on my boots. As I finished, I glanced up at her. Her face looked pale and anxious. It was a look that was getting to be real familiar to me.

“I’m—afraid you’re not ready,” she said.

I stood up. “I feel fine,” I told her. “And you just said I’m recovered. I appreciate everything you done for me, Dr. Mike, but it’s time for me to be on my way. I ain’t used to being stuck inside four walls like this—I need to get back to the outdoors.”

I glanced around the room. “Can you tell me where you put my beads and medicine pouch?” I asked. She sat on the edge of the bed and mutely pointed to the drawer of the nightstand. I retrieved them and slipped them on, then went back to the cupboard to get my belt. I took it out, noting that the sheath for my knife and the loop for my tomahawk were empty. “What about my weapons?” I added, missing their reassuring weight against my hips as I fastened the belt around my waist.

“Sully . . . you don’t need them right now,” she said slowly. “You can’t leave yet.”

I was trying to be polite, but days of being cooped up in this room had put me on edge. I felt myself losing patience.

“What is it?” I demanded, my voice sharp. “What are you afraid of?”

“I—don’t understand what you mean,” she answered, but she didn’t meet my eyes.
“Yeah, you do,” I retorted. “You tell me I’m recovered, but then you say I can’t leave. There’s got to be a reason. You been keeping something from me since the day I came to. I want to know what it is. And if you won’t tell me, I’ll find someone who will. Robert E., maybe, or even Loren—since you claim we’re ‘friends’ now. Hopefully one of them will be willing to tell me the truth.”

I put on my coat. “You going to give me the rest of my property?” I added. But she just looked down at her lap and didn’t answer. Fine, if that was the way she wanted it. “All right, keep them,” I said. “I’ll have Robert E. make me some new ones.”

I was going to just walk out, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it after she’d been so good to me. I hesitated at the door.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful,” I told her. “You took real good care of me. Fact is, you probably saved my life. And you saw me through a real bad time,” I added, referring to the migrim. “But I can’t abide being coddled—and if you’re determined to keep things from me or treat me like a child, I got no choice but to leave.” I looked at her again. She seemed so defenseless, sitting there—delicate and vulnerable . . . and sad. I felt guilty for being harsh, but I was tired of being kept in the dark.

“Well—see you, Dr. Mike,” I said. “Say good-bye to the kids for me.”

I’d gone through the door and made it halfway down the hall when I heard her call my name.

“Sully!” she said, coming out of my room. “Please—come back.” She stood there, her hands nervously twisting her apron, a pleading look on her face. I walked back to her.

“What is it?” I said.

“There’s something I need to say to you—if you’ll listen,” she answered. After a moment, I followed her back into the recovery room.

“Does what you want to say have to do with whatever you been keeping from me?” I asked.

“In a way,” she replied.

“Dr. Mike, you don’t need to keep protecting me,” I told her. “I’m well again—you said so yourself. Whatever you got to tell me, I can take it.

“You been real kind to me,” I added sincerely. “I’ve come to feel I can trust you. Whatever’s going on, I’d like to hear it from you. But if you can’t bring yourself to tell me the truth, I got to find someone who will. I need to know, Dr. Mike.”

“I understand that, Sully, but it would be very unwise for you to ask questions of the townspeople until I’ve spoken to you first,” Dr. Mike said.

“Fair enough,” I said after a moment. “Are you willing to do that now?” After a hesitation, she inclined her head in the affirmative.

“Let’s sit down,” she suggested.

We sat—me on the edge of the bed, her in a straight chair opposite.

“Please believe that I never meant to lie to you or keep things from you,” she began. “But you were injured—you were unconscious for three days. There were other serious complications as well. And then, after you regained consciousness, there was the memory loss . . . I realized I had to be—careful—about how much information to give you, and how soon. Otherwise, I was afraid the shock would be too great. Do you recall how shaken you were when you saw how the children had changed?”

I nodded, beginning to wonder just how serious a thing it was she had to tell me.

“I know it seems as if I’ve been overprotecting you,” Dr. Mike went on. “But as a doctor, I’m responsible for your emotional health as well as your physical well-being. In my best judgement, I determined that I needed to bring you back to the present slowly, and gently. I also wanted to wait, to see if your memories would begin to come back of their own accord. It just seemed as if the more you could
recall on your own, the better it would be for your recovery in the long run. Can you understand?"

"Yeah, I can," I said after a moment. "I guess I wasn’t looking at it from your point of view. I appreciate that you were trying to help me heal, and I know you done the best job you could.

"But fact is, Dr. Mike, I still can’t remember nothing," I reminded her. "And for all we know, my memory may never come back. I can’t keep going on like this."

"What you say is true," she admitted. "And it’s why I’ve decided to tell you what you want to know. But—you must prepare yourself, Sully. Many things have—changed. What I have to say will be very difficult for you to hear, and accept."

I started to feel cold inside.

"Does it have something to do with Cloud Dancing and the army?" I asked, remembering how she shied away from answering my questions when I was sick.

"It’s—related," she answered, her voice real quiet. A moment later she said, "Are you sure you’re ready?"

I took a deep breath. "Go ahead."

She told me.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FIVE

Sully awoke to a morning as overcast as the day before, but the snow still hadn’t come, and for that he counted himself lucky. He threw off the blanket of his bedroll and emerged from the hollow in the cliff-face where he’d taken shelter—not quite a cave, but large enough to shield him from the harsh wind and accommodate his small cooking fire. He stood and stretched, clapping his hands together briskly. Despite being protected by heavy gloves, they were still stiff and aching with cold.

He studied the sky critically. If Cloud Dancing was where he suspected, and the snow continued to hold off, he would reach his brother within an hour or two. Determined not to waste a minute, he busied himself stoking up the fire, and heating water for coffee. While he waited for the water to boil, he dined on a simple breakfast of cold biscuits and dried meat.

As Sully huddled close to the heat of the campfire, he stared at the pallid landscape, taking bracing sips of the strong, hot coffee and warming his hands on the mug. Like any time he was apart from her, his thoughts inevitably turned to Michaela. Except that at this particular moment, he was thinking of himself as well, and the conversation they’d had before he left. He wondered why he’d suddenly felt the urge to talk about the atrocities at Sand Creek—a tragedy six years past. And to go on the way he had, which was surely not like him. Maybe it had been easier to speak about Sand Creek—its horrors mercifully blurred by time—than to confront the memory of Washita, which still felt like an open wound, the deaths of Black Kettle and Snowbird as raw as unhealed scars. Or maybe he had never sufficiently grieved over the legacy of Sand Creek, and was only now able to let his emotions come to the surface.

Still, it had never been his way to speak at such length about his inner feelings—or even reveal them, for that matter. Ordinarily Sully preferred to keep his deepest worries or sorrows to himself, and work them out alone. But Michaela’s question about Hazen had triggered something inside, and before he realized it, the words had come tumbling out and he seemed powerless to stop them.

Perhaps it was his feelings for Michaela that had been the key to unlocking the door he’d kept so firmly closed on his emotions. Loving her, committing to her, had given him the courage to reveal the private side of his nature, in a way he never had before—even to Abagail. He had loved his first wife dearly, but Sully had to admit that she had never truly known him. She’d never had the chance, because he hadn’t let her. He had never allowed her to see past his strong exterior—or at least what passed for strength, he thought—to the vulnerability and insecurity within.

He hadn’t dared. Abagail had given up so much to be with him—her security, her father’s love...
She'd taken the greatest gamble of her life on the promise that marriage to him would make up for losing her family, and she had counted on him to make that promise a reality. In the end, she'd lost the gamble, because he hadn't been able to keep his promise—but for the brief time they'd been together, Sully had been determined to shield her—from the harsher realities of life, and from his own weakness.

But with Michaela, it was different. From the start, she had stirred something in him he hadn't known before. It wasn't only that she was strong, or that she had fire—though she plainly did. Her determination to forge her own life and become a doctor on the frontier was proof of that. It was more that her ardent devotion to him, and her absolute honesty with him in all things, had demanded the same kind of commitment and honesty from him in return. Sully smiled slightly. Yes, she liked to talk, to analyze—maybe a little too much or too often for his tastes. But he couldn't help but be filled with admiration for her spirit, and her unflagging faith in their ability to weather whatever trouble came their way.

Sully knew that Michaela's faith had been shaken at times, and had been truly threatened after Washita. For a while, it seemed as if grief had extinguished her hope, and she was in danger of never getting it back. But somehow, even her desolation over the massacre had not succeeded in completely snuffing out the tiny flame of hope inside her. Its light continued to smolder deep at her core—and with his and Cloud Dancing's help, she had found the means within herself to make it burn again. Michaela remained convinced that together, they could do anything—overcome any challenge, endure any sorrow, and unite their two disparate souls into one. Slowly, over time, she had taught him that it was safe to let down the walls he had built around himself. She had taught him to open his heart.

Except—had he really opened his heart to her—totally, completely? Yes, he had given her his love, wholly and without hesitation. He had even managed to dismantle the barriers around his insecurities, and allow himself to be vulnerable. But there was one last obstacle he hadn't been able to overcome—one essential truth about himself he hadn't been able to share with her, or even admit to himself . . . till now.

He was scared. No—scratch that. He was terrified.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela drew back the curtain and stared out at the street. Few citizens were out and about in the severe cold, though Hank's saloon across the way still seemed quite lively. Apparently men's appetites for liquor and other "diversions" were not easily discouraged by frigid temperatures, she thought wryly. In fact, Hank would probably tell her that the cold was good for business, as it inspired his customers to seek out the dual "comforts" of both whiskey and women.

Truthfully, she didn't understand why she kept being drawn to the view outside. Sully had been gone for little more than twenty-four hours—for all she knew, he could be gone for twenty-four days. It was fruitless for her to hover by the window, searching in vain for the sight of him when she knew he couldn't possibly return so soon. But she had to acknowledge that her longing for him wasn't dictated by logic or reason. Clearly, her heart had a mind of its own.

"He only left yesterday, Dr. Mike." Guiltily she spun around to see Matthew regarding her sympathetically.

"Matthew! You surprised me—I didn't realize you were here," she said, disconcerted by Matthew's sudden appearance—not to mention his perceptiveness.

"Came in the back. Sorry—I didn't mean to startle you," her son answered. He nodded toward the window. "But like I was sayin'—staring out there ain't gonna make Sully get back any quicker. 'Sides, you know what they say about a "watched pot,"" he added kindly.

"I know," she said, giving her son a rueful smile. "I was just—checking the sky. It looks so forbidding. I'd hate to think of Sully being caught in a blizzard."

"Sully can take care of himself," Matthew reminded her. "If the snow comes, he'll find a place to hole up and ride it out."

"You're right, of course," she said. But of their own accord, her eyes strayed back to the frosted window pane.
“You know, it don’t look like you’re gonna be gettin’ any patients today,” Matthew remarked behind her. “A lot of folks in town are closin’ up early ‘cause of the cold. There ain’t nothin’ keepin’ me in town. What do you say you close up shop too and we head out to the homestead?” he suggested.

“But it’s not even lunchtime yet—I can’t leave before Colleen and Brian get out of school,” she protested.

“We can go by the school and collect ‘em,” Matthew responded. “Nearly half the day’s gone already. ‘Sides, it must be awful cold in the schoolhouse, too, with just that small wood stove to heat the place. The Reverend might be glad for the excuse to dismiss the kids early.”

“You may be right,” Michaela acknowledged.

“I know I am,” Matthew said, with an impish smile. “Come on, Dr. Mike. Like you was sayin’, the snow could come at any time, and we don’t want to be stuck here in the clinic if it does. The animals at the homestead, as well as my cattle, are gonna need tendin’, and we’ll all sleep a lot better in our own beds. Let’s get the kids and go home.”

“But it might be more prudent for me to remain here, in case there *is* a heavy snow and someone in town needs me,” Michaela said, her expression indecisive.

“If someone needs doctorin’ here at the clinic, I vow to get you here,” Matthew promised. “But for now—it’s time the doctor went home to her family.”

Michaela relented at his logic. “You’ve convinced me,” she declared. She picked up a sheaf of patient files from her desk and slipped them into a drawer, then went to get her coat. As she slipped it on she said, “How about for supper I heat up some of that wonderful stew Colleen made the other day? It should hit the spot on a cold night like this.”

“I can taste it already,” Matthew said grinning. Her wrapped Michaela’s scarf around her neck, then picked up her medical bag. As he handed it to her he added, “And how ‘bout after supper I challenge you to a game of chess?”

“That sounds like fun—but prepare to be beaten!” Michaela said archly.

“We’ll see,” Matthew chuckled. They snuffed out the lamps and left the clinic.

*S * * * * * * * * * *

Sully tried to thrust the fear back down inside where he’d kept it hidden for so long, but having finally emerged, it would not be denied. Sharp and crippling, it crashed over him, causing him to shake all over, even as sweat broke out on his forehead in defiance of the cold.

Despite his urgency to reach Cloud Dancing, he was forced to come to a stop. Sliding down from his horse’s back, Sully led the animal off to the side of the path and threaded the reins around the skeletal fingers of a tree branch. Then, spreading his arms and hugging the trunk, he pressed his forehead against the rough bark while tears of shame stung at his eyes.

What had he been thinking, proposing to Michaela, asking her for a lifetime commitment? He couldn’t marry her—he didn’t have the right. Because he was cursed. Because anyone he’d ever loved—anyone who had ever loved him—had died. His father, broken by consumption and city living, gone before he could remember. His brother, barely nine years old, killed in a riding accident as he looked on in horror and disbelief. And then finally his mother, defeated by her grief, drowning herself and leaving him an orphan at the age of ten.

And Abagail—so beautiful, sweet and delicate. So devoted and trusting. They were supposed to have a lifetime together—and instead, before they’d reached their fifth anniversary, she was gone too—perished in childbirth, their little girl with her. He had sworn to protect Abagail—to protect them both. But when the time came, they had slipped away, and he had been powerless to prevent it.

There had been the Cheyenne at Sand Creek—and then, just weeks ago, Snowbird, Black Kettle and the others of their tribe.

Nearly all the people who had been precious to him in his life—all gone. Almost since the time he’d
been born, he had left a trail of death in his wake.

Another fragment of conversation from his journey with Loren came to his mind.

(He poured some tea from the pot on the campfire and handed it to the older man.

“Drink some more tea,” he said.

Loren took a sip from the metal cup. After a moment he said somewhat gruffly, “I ’spose the Cheyenne taught you how to make this stuff, huh?”

Sully nodded. “When Dr. Mike’s patients got sick with the influenza, she wouldn’t try it either. Now she uses it all the time.”

“It works,” Loren admitted grudgingly. He looked at Sully crouched on the ground beside him. “I guess that was . . . pretty hard on you,” he said slowly.

“What’s that?”


Sully looked away. “I don’t want to talk about that,” he said quietly.

As if he hadn’t heard, Loren went on, “Now you know I ain’t never liked ‘em much, but—“

“What do you think about Brian—wantin’ to build that flying’ machine, huh?” Sully interrupted.

“Sully,” Loren remonstrated. “You can’t change what happened at Washita.”

“He’s always wanted to fly,” Sully murmured, staring off at the trees. “Can’t figure it.”

“The boy *needs* you,” Loren said. “So do the Indians.” He paused, looking at Sully earnestly, then continued, “There comes a time, when you got to open your eyes, take a deep breath, and just start *movin’*—“

“Loren, please,” he protested, looking away again.

“You got so much to look forward to,” Loren told him. “Yer gettin’ married—gonna have a whole new family.”

Sully propped his elbow on his knee and leaned his forehead against his hand. “Seems like . . . all the family I ever had, I lost,” he said softly. “My pa—tried livin’ in the city, and he just gave up. Then when I was ten, my ma drowned herself. Then I come out west, found Abagail . . .” Loren’s eyes glimmered with tears in his solemn face.

“And now the Cheyenne,” Sully finished. Loren reached out and placed his hand on Sully’s arm.

“Aw, Sully . . . I hate to see you like this,” he said.

Sully swallowed, then removed Loren’s hand.

“Drink your tea,” he said. “I’m all right.”)

But that had been a lie. He’d told Loren what the older man had wanted to hear. Perhaps he’d lied to himself, too, because he couldn’t bear to face the truth. All the people he’d loved, he’d lost. And he couldn’t let anything happen to Michaela. That would finish him—as surely as an arrow piercing him through the heart. He couldn’t lose her . . .

Why had the spirits let him fall in love with her, if he would only be forced to give her up, he thought despairingly. Why would they be so cruel? His heart weighed inside him like a stone.

Maybe it would have been better if he’d never met her at all, his thoughts continued along their desolate course. Then he never would have had to know what he’d missed. Then it wouldn’t hurt so much . . .
“Ha ho,” said a voice behind him.

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“Dead?” I whispered. “All of them?”

“Except for about forty women and children that were taken prisoner—and one baby boy, who survived because a brave child called ‘No Harm Comes to Him’— shielded the baby with his body,” Dr. Mike explained haltingly. “I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you this, Sully,” she added, her voice soft and sad.

“I remember ‘No Harm,’” I said. “His ma died at Sand Creek. But No Harm lived, because she—” My throat choked up so I couldn’t go on. Tears burned my eyes and for a moment I couldn’t see. When I was able to talk again, I said, “What—what happened to the baby?”

“Grace and Robert E. looked after him for a time,” Dr. Mike said. “They loved him as if he were their own. And when he wouldn’t take milk from a bottle, Myra nursed him.”

“That was—real good of them,” I managed.

Dr. Mike nodded in agreement. “Finally, Cloud Dancing took him to live with a band of the Northern Cheyenne in the part of Wyoming called ‘Yellowstone.’ He’ll be safe there, Sully.” She hesitated, then added, “We gave him a name. We called him, ‘Live in Hopes’—after something Black Kettle said to us about his dreams for peace—that he ‘lived in hopes.’”

I was silent, thinking of the wise, gentle man of peace with the great inner strength, who had taken me into his tribe, and become like a father to me. Then something about what she’d said pricked at my mind.

“We?” I repeated.

“You and I,” she said. I didn’t understand how it was that we would have done such a thing—or why—but I couldn’t focus on that for the moment. I was having too hard a time trying to accept the unacceptable.

“It can’t be,” I said, shaking my head in denial. “Maybe the others escaped. You weren’t there, you didn’t see—”

“But I was* there,” she interrupted in a gentle voice. “So were you—and Cloud Dancing. We were—too late to stop what happened. But we came after . . . We—we found them, Sully.

“I discovered the bodies of Black Kettle and his wife.” She didn’t say how they’d died. I don’t believe she thought I could bear it. “And you—found Snowbird.”

I looked up at her, the sheen of tears in my eyes making her face look wavery, like the view through a window pane washed with rain.

“Snowbird was still alive when we reached her,” Dr. Mike went on. “She was just able to tell us how Custer and the army rode into the camp before daybreak, so that the people had no chance to escape.”

“Did . . . she say anything else?” I whispered.

“Yes,” Dr. Mike answered, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears. “As Cloud Dancing cradled her head in his arms, she said, ‘What will Cloud Dancing do, without me?’”

I buried my face in my hands. After a moment I felt Dr. Mike’s gentle touch on my shoulders, which were shaking with silent sobs. We stayed like that for a while, but finally I tried to pull myself together,
mopping at my eyes with the handkerchief she gave me—the cloth already damp with her tears.

“How is he—Cloud Dancing?” I asked quietly.

Dr. Mike took a deep, mournful breath. “He was devastated,” she said simply. “He couldn’t forgive himself for remaining behind when Black Kettle took the rest of the tribe to Fort Cobb.”

“He thought they’d be safe there,” I said. “He couldn’t know.”

“Of course, you’re right,” she agreed. “Still, he blamed himself at first.

“But he was better when we saw him last, Sully,” she added. “He and I—both felt tremendous guilt and pain about what had happened. But then the spirits told Cloud Dancing that for us to begin to heal, he must finish teaching me about the medicine. For several days we were together, as Cloud Dancing gave up some of his power by teaching me the rest of what he knew. After that, we both were able to go on.”

“You know about that?” I asked. “About a medicine man losing his power when he shares his knowledge with others?”

She nodded. “It was you who told me.”

I was silent for a time, then said, “There’s something I don’t understand about all this. Why did you feel guilty about the massacre? For that matter, why were you with Cloud Dancing and me when we traveled to the Washita?”

It was Dr. Mike’s turn to be silent, but finally she answered, “There was something I’d done—a decision I made—that I believed helped to hasten the Cheyenne’s destruction. When Colorado Springs had the chance to get the railroad, we—you and I—were on opposite sides. You were against the coming of the railroad—you talked of how progress would spoil the land and restrict the hunting grounds, and of how the buffalo wouldn’t cross the tracks, so the Indians would be unable to hunt them and would be in danger of starvation. As it turned out, buffalo skinners hired by the railroad destroyed most of the buffalo before the first tracks were even laid,” she said bleakly.

“But despite your arguments to the contrary, I couldn’t stop thinking that with the coming of the railroad, I’d be able to get medical supplies more quickly and regularly, which could help me to save more lives,” she went on.

“And I even dreamt of building a hospital—one that would welcome Indians and Negroes,” she added. “So when the chief surveyor for the railroad line asked me my opinion—I told him I favored the railroad coming to town. Apparently what I said was the deciding factor in his decision. A day or two later, we learned that in nine months, the railroad would be here.” Shame colored her cheeks, but bravely she looked me in the eyes.

“I was wrong not to listen to you and Cloud Dancing,” she said. “I will always regret that.”

“It seems like you meant well,” I told her. “You couldn’t know the future.”

“But I had seen more than enough examples from the past,” she replied. “I should have taken a lesson from history. However—self-recrimination doesn’t change things.”

“Ain’t no point in punishing yourself for things you can’t control,” I agreed.

“As for why I was with you and Cloud Dancing—about a week after Black Kettle and the tribe had gone, Cloud Dancing got word that Black Kettle had been turned away from Fort Cobb. The agent there told Black Kettle he didn’t have the power to make peace—that Black Kettle would have to make peace with General Sheridan. That was how the tribe came to be camped on the banks of the Washita. Matthew had been at the telegraph office, and saw a telegram from General Sheridan ordering Custer south of the Arkansas. We knew that Custer hadn’t been sent there to talk peace. Cloud Dancing was determined to reach the tribe to warn them of the danger from Custer. He asked you to accompany him. And I—wanted to go along in case my skills as a doctor would be needed.”

“That’s the only reason you came?” I asked, sensing something more.
“That, and my affection for the Cheyenne,” she replied. “Those are the only reasons that are relevant right now.”

I was sure now there was something else she was holding back, but she didn’t seem willing to go on, and truthfully, I didn’t think I could listen to any more—not then.

“Are you all right?” she asked gently.


“Of course,” she said. “I’ll leave you alone, for now. Take all the time you need. But will you promise to call for me if you need anything—or if you just want to talk?”

“Yeah—thanks,” I said, barely able to muster an answer, but trying to be polite to show I was grateful for her kindness and honesty.

She looked like she wanted to comfort me, but wisely understood that the best thing she could give me then was solitude. She stood, placing her hand gently on my shoulder for a moment, then walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

I lay back on the bed, and began to mourn my lost family.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER SIX

“Cloud Dancin’!” he said, startled and yet not surprised, all at the same time. The medicine man stood a few feet away, wrapped in a long striped coat, his dark tresses streaming back in the wind and the feather that adorned them fluttering wildly. Ashamed for his friend to see his weakness, Sully dashed the tears from his cheeks and took a deep, shuddering breath.

“I was on my way to find you,” he explained unnecessarily.

“The spirits told me you were coming,” Cloud Dancing replied. “When I awoke, I felt you near, so I came to meet you.”

“Are you all right?” Sully asked, trying to suppress his own feelings in his concern for his brother.

“For the moment. The spirits do not tell me what the future will bring.”

Sully breathed deeply again, little by little attaining a measure of calm.

“That’s why I come,” he said, addressing Cloud Dancing’s last statement. “I got news about Custer.”


Sully raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“Two days ago I was near town,” Cloud Dancing elaborated. “I saw him. I know why he is here and what he is doing.”

“Then you know it ain’t safe for you,” Sully told him. “You got to go back to the North—I’ll travel with you. Two is safer than one.”

“The long-hair must travel his path, I must travel mine,” Cloud Dancing said simply.

Sully’s worry for his brother’s well-being went up several notches. “I know that’s what the spirits may tell you, Cloud Dancin’, but I talked to him. I *know.* He means to find you—and destroy you if he can.”

“If he is meant to kill me . . . “ Cloud Dancing shrugged slightly, letting his eyes say the rest.

“No!” Sully retorted sharply. “You can’t go thinkin’ like that! I won’t let you! You gotta protect
yourself Cloud Dancin’. The spirits don’t know everythin’—they can’t run all of it!”


“I don’t care!” Sully lashed out petulantly. “The spirits ain’t perfect. The way I see it, they been makin’ some terrible mistakes. How else do you explain Washita? Or Sand Creek? Or—“ He broke off, breathing heavily, not sure if the tears in his eyes were from rage, or grief, or perhaps a combination of both.

“You are in a dark place,” Cloud Dancing observed quietly, seeing past his friend’s tirade to the misery behind it.

Sully looked at him, momentarily beyond speech.

Cloud Dancing reached out to grasp Sully’s arm. “You are not to blame,” he said.

Sully’s eyes were startled. “I—I don’t understand,” he said haltingly. But the words sounded false to his ears.

“Why did you come to me?” Cloud Dancing asked quietly.

“To warn you—like I said—“

“And . . . ?” His friend’s dark eyes were penetrating.

“Cloud Dancin’, we gotta talk about Custer,” Sully protested, but without any conviction.

“That will come later. For now, something else weighs heavily on your spirit,” said his brother.

Sully stared at him for a moment, then dejectedly slid down the tree truck till he was sitting on the ground, his back resting against the tree’s broad girth. Cloud Dancing hunched down across from him, so that they were at eye level.

Sully shook his head slowly. “I can’t do it,” he whispered, defeated. “I can’t risk losin’ Michaela by lettin’ her tie herself to me. I can’t send her the way of everyone else I’ve loved.”

“We have both lost many who were dear to us in our lives,” Cloud Dancing commented, his tone grave but accepting. “That is our misfortune—but it is not our fault.”

“Not yours, no. What you suffered was the fault of the white men tryin’ to destroy your way of life, take your land and your freedom, exterminate your people . . .”

“And your suffering also was out of your hands. You could not save your brother when you were but a child, or cure the sickness in your mother’s soul. You could not stand alone against an army to stop what happened to my people.”

“Maybe not. But that don’t forgive what happened to my wife,” Sully said bleakly. “I shouldn’t have made her go against her pa. I shouldn’t have made her give up everythin’ else just to be with me. If I hadn’t asked her to marry me, she’d still be alive . . .”

“After Washita, when you brought Michaela to me, she told me of how she blamed herself for the railroad coming to town—that she believed it helped to cause the attack on my people. I told her that she could not take that entire burden onto her shoulders alone. I told her that I did not hold her to blame—and that the spirits of Snowbird and Black Kettle also would not blame her. And she said that you had told her the same.”

“That’s true,” Sully admitted.

“You joined with your wife out of love, just as she pledged herself to you. You both made that promise in joy. Just as Snowbird and I chose to become one, so long ago. The happiness two people find with one another is precious, no matter how long it may last.”

“But if I had gotten her to help more quickly—if I had been smart enough to take her to Denver before
the baby started comin', so that there woulda been a doctor close by . . .”

“You cannot know if that would have changed things,” Cloud Dancing told him. “If the Great Spirit chooses to take back one of his children, there is nothing we can do. We must learn to accept it.”

“How?” Sully burst out. “How do you accept that kind of pain and just keep goin’ on? I’ve tried to be like you Cloud Dancin’. I’ve tried, but I’ve failed. I never intended to allow myself to know love again, but when I met Michaela, I couldn’t help it. I let her into my heart. But now I’m so afraid that by lovin’ her I’ve condemned her . . .”

“Again, you presume that the feeling, that the choice, is entirely on your side,” Cloud Dancing reminded him gently. “You give no thought to Michaela’s feelings in this matter, or her love for you. Her choice to join with you is as much a part of your destiny as your own decision.”

“But she don’t understand the risk she’s takin’,” Sully persisted. “I do—it’s why it’s up to me to protect her from sacrificin’ herself. But up to now, I ain’t had the courage. And I been hurtin’ her more ’cause of my own weakness.”

“If your wife had lived, you might not have known Michaela,” Cloud Dancing pointed out. “Or if you had, you would never have allowed your feelings of love to grow. But what if that was not your destiny, Sully? What if your time with Abagail was but a stop along the path to your true destiny—a life with Michaela?

“You must accept the vision of the spirits, Sully. You must learn to give yourself over to their care, and their wisdom.”

“I—don’t think I can,” Sully whispered. “I don’t think I’m strong enough.”

“I will help you,” said his friend.

* * * * * * * * *

The children had finished their lunch and left the table, Brian going off to play with Pup outside, and Colleen seeking the seclusion of her room to read. But Michaela continued to sit as the food grew cold on her plate, her appetite nonexistent. Matthew sipped at a cup of coffee, watching her thoughtfully.

As they had approached the homestead, the wagon rattling over the ruts in the road, an inexplicable sensation of sadness had come over Michaela. Composed of equal parts melancholy and a profound sense of loss, the feeling had appeared out of nowhere to suddenly, overwhelmingly embrace her, reaching chilly fingers inside to caress her heart. She had hoped that once inside the security of the homestead, she’d feel better. But being ensconced within the comforting warmth of the cabin’s walls hadn’t caused the feeling to abate. Instead it continued to permeate her soul, keen and penetrating.

She told herself it was just a further manifestation of her loneliness for Sully, and her concern for his well-being. But in truth this was different from the anxiety she’d felt before—different and deeply troubling.

“You’ve hardly touched a bite,” Matthew observed finally, Michaela’s unease communicating itself to him. “You’re still worried about Sully, ain’t you, Dr. Mike?”

Michaela met her son’s glance, her malaise clearly mirrored in her eyes. “I’m concerned for him, yes, but—” she began, but then stopped, unable to articulate what she was feeling, or why.

“Is there somethin’ about this trip you didn’t tell us?” Matthew probed. “Is Sully in trouble?”

Michaela felt a stab of guilt. Just as she had lied to Custer, she had also led the children to believe that Sully had embarked on an innocent hunting trip. She hadn’t meant to be dishonest, but she had felt obligated to protect Sully’s privacy, and she had seen no reason to worry the children about his emotional distress.

But she was finding it harder and harder to conceal the chaos of her own emotions. Clearly Matthew
had already seen through her dissembling, and while she intended to continue to protect Colleen and Brian, she realized that to her oldest son, at least, she owed the truth.

Slowly, hesitantly, she related the events of the past two days—the conversations she’d had with Sully and her realization of the grief that continued to plague him in the wake of Washita; his decision to seek out Cloud Dancing to put his unhappiness to rest—as well as to protect his brother’s safety; and her own feelings of worry, which were growing increasingly disturbing.

Matthew listened soberly, asking a question here or there, but for the most part letting her tell her tale uninterrupted. She finished, and silence fell momentarily as Matthew mulled over what he’d heard.

“So you’re sayin’ that what you’re goin’ through now ain’ the same as what you felt before,” he said finally. “Why do you ‘spose that is?”

Michaela stood up and paced restlessly around the room. She came to a stop by the window, feeling drawn there as if by a magnet. The seconds ticked by as she stared through the panes, watching Brian romping with his pet in the yard but not really seeing them.

“I wish I knew,” she replied at length, feeling as unsatisfied by the answer as she knew Matthew must be. “I know that if anyone can help Sully through his emotional struggles, it’s Cloud Dancing. And I know that both of them have been clever and successful at eluding the army in the past, and that this time should be no exception. It’s just . . . I can’t help wondering . . . but no, it will sound too foolish.”

“Go ahead, Dr. Mike. You can tell me,” Matthew encouraged gently.

Michaela turned to face him. He sat at the table, watching her attentively. “I can’t help thinking . . . that something is happening to Sully—and that I’m *feeling* it somehow,” She ventured slowly. “I know it sounds impossible—it sounds ridiculous!—but . . .”

“What?” Matthew urged.

“I believe it’s true—because it happened once before,” she said.

* * * * * * * * * *

“I’m grateful,” Sully told his friend, after he had taken a few minutes to collect himself. “There’s nobody else I coulda gone to with this. Even Michae la gave her blessin’ to this trip ‘cause she knew you were the only one who could help me.”

“She knows of your fears about the marriage?” Cloud Dancing asked in surprise.

“No, no—she don’t have any idea about that. I’d hardly admitted it to myself, ‘fore now. Like I been tellin’ you, Cloud Dancin’, I’m a coward.”

The medicine man didn’t reply, choosing not to dignify Sully’s statement with a response. Looking a trifle ashamed at his display of self-pity, Sully went on, “Well anyway, Michaela thinks this is all about my grief over losin’ so many people I cared about at Washita and Sand Creek, and my worries about you. And most of it is,” he added earnestly, unwilling to have Cloud Dancing think that he was too wrapped up in his own trouble to care about the martyrdom of the Cheyenne, or his brother’s safety. Even as the words left his lips, however, he knew that he didn’t need to explain, because Cloud Dancing could always read what was in his heart.

“I will be all right, but Michaela was wise to see that you needed help to heal,” Cloud Dancing commented, confirming Sully’s instincts about him.

“Yeah. She cares so much, always tryin’ to do what’s best for me, always puttin’ my needs before her own . . .” Sully said softly.

“Because she loves you—and she needs you,” his friend said significantly.

Sully felt renewed guilt over how he was hurting the woman who had so willingly given him her love, innocently trusting him with her future. But he also realized that as desperately as he needed his brother’s
assistance to deal with his own unhappiness, Cloud Dancing’s peril was more immediate and more important.

“I appreciate your help, Cloud Dancing—more than I can say. But right now, you’re the one who’s in danger, and we gotta deal with it,” he said.

“We need to talk,” Cloud Dancing agreed, wisely deciding not to force the issue of Sully’s crisis of the spirit. His brother would open the rest of his heart to him when he was able. In the meantime . . . The medicine man lifted his head slightly, breathing deeply of the frigid air and gauging the strength and direction of the wind.

“The wind has changed, and the temperature is dropping,” he announced. “You need food and warmth. Let us return to my camp. We can talk on the way.”

Sully nodded in assent. He freed his horse’s reins from their tether, and led the animal back onto the path, following his friend’s lead as they moved along the trail deeper into the mountains.

* * * * * * * * * *

“This will sound hard to believe,” Michaela began uncertainly, concerned that Matthew might question her sanity, especially in view of her current distress.

“Tell me,” he repeated, his expression supportive.

“Well, you recall how when I was abducted by the dog soldiers, Sully searched for me so tirelessly?” Michaela began.

“Course I remember,” Matthew said readily. “He wouldn’t give up. He woulda fought every Indian in One-Eye’s band to get you back, if that’s what it took.”

“Yes, I believe he would have,” Michaela said softly, a glow of joy suffusing her briefly at the thought of being so cherished by Sully that he would go to any lengths to save her. It was an uplifting yet humbling feeling, and for a few precious moments, it blotted out the darker fear that had claimed her.

Reluctantly refocusing on the present, she continued, “At one point Cloud Dancing’s son, Walks on Clouds, tried to help me escape—”

“I know,” Matthew interjected. “And got killed for it by One-Eye.”

Michaela nodded. “I’ll never forget his courage—or his sacrifice,” she said reverently. She sighed deeply, then went on, “Unfortunately, I didn’t get far before One-Eye found me. After knocking me senseless, he determined to punish me for attempting to get away—and he intended to take no chance that I would try again. So he took my shoes and had his men drag me barefoot wherever we traveled from then on.”

“If I’da been there, I woulda killed him for that,” Matthew said, his expression thunderous. “I’m glad Sully did the job.”

“Thank you, Matthew,” Michaela said quietly. “But killing—except in self-defense, which is what Sully did to One-Eye—is never a solution. Shortly before Black Kettle took the tribe to Fort Cobb, which led to the massacre at Washita, Snowbird said to me that she had never found killing to be a path to peace—and she was right.”

“I know, Dr. Mike—but One-Eye hurt you, and I can’t forgive that. I know Sully wouldn’t either.”

“Fortunately Sully found me,” Michaela reminded him. “That’s all that matters now. But it was *how* he found me that was so remarkable.”

She paused momentarily, remembering, then said, “We had stopped for a few minutes, to rest and water the horses, and I was sitting on a log, staring out at the valley, when suddenly a feeling came over me—one I couldn’t explain. But it was almost as if Sully were right there beside me. I could *feel* his presence so strongly, and I could hear him—calling to me—asking me to tell him where I was. And I *knew*—I just knew he was nearby. So when the opportunity arose, I created a diversion and started to
run, calling out to him. I was recaptured immediately, but somehow, I was sure he’d heard me. And then later, Sully told me that when I cried out his name, he heard it, clearly, as if I were by his side. That was the turning point of his search. From then on, he knew where we were and was able to keep us in sight until he could finally sneak into One-Eye’s camp and rescue me.”

Michaela paused again, then looked at Matthew with a somewhat sheepish smile. “I told you it would sound foolish,” she said.

“No, not really,” Matthew responded, surprising her. “I’ve seen the way the two of you look at each other, Dr. Mike. I’ve seen the bond you have between you. Almost as if you were one person, divided in two, and you can only be whole when you’re together. Don’t seem like such a stretch of the imagination to think that you can hear and feel each other when you’re apart. Fact is,” he admitted, coloring a little, “I like to think that Ingrid and I have that too—a little bit, anyway. Leastways I know that I never really feel ‘complete’ ‘less I’m with her.”

“You do understand,” Michaela said gratefully.

“Yeah, think I do,” said Matthew, rising from his seat and coming over to join her. He put his hand comfortingly on her shoulder. “And now you think you can feel Sully again, but what you’re gettin’ from him this time has you worried?”

Michaela stared out at the bleak landscape. “It’s more than that Matthew,” she whispered. “It has me frightened.”

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She tapped on my door the following morning, while I sat in the dark, the shade pulled down to the sill to shut out the light. When I didn’t answer, I heard the handle turn as she eased the door open. I watched the crack of light from the hallway become a stripe, then a bar, and finally broaden into a fan spreading out across the floor.

She was still for a few moments, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom. She must have thought I was sleeping, because she jumped when I spoke.

“It’s all right—I ain’t asleep,” I said out of the shadows.

“Sully?” she said, taking a tentative step into the room. “Are you all right?” A pause—then, anxiously, “Do you have another migrim?”

She stood silhouetted in the doorway, the light from behind framing her like a halo and throwing her features into shadow. Though I couldn’t make out her face, I could feel the worry coming off her.

“No,” I said.

She took another ginger step forward. “Then why are you sitting in the dark?” she asked.

“Why not?”

Her voice when it came again was cautious. “It’s rather hard for me to see you,“ she said. “Would you be willing to raise the shade?”

“I’d just as soon not,” I answered. There was a brief silence.

“Well then—perhaps we could light the lamp?” she spoke again. “We don’t have to turn it up high—just enough so that we can make out each other’s faces. Would that be acceptable?”

I considered it for a moment. “All right,” I assented.
I watched the dark shape of her move carefully across the room to the nightstand. A second later there was a hiss as a match erupted into flame. The small, intense light threw jumbled shadows on the walls and turned her eyes to black against her pale cheeks.

She lifted the globe of the lamp, and touched the match to the wick, then replaced the glass as she shook out the match and turned down the flame to a soft glow.

I saw for the first time that she was dressed sort of fancy, and it took a moment before I realized it was Sunday.

“You been to church?” I asked.

“Yes—we just returned,” she said. “We thought perhaps—you’d like to join us for Sunday dinner. I know how much you’ve been wanting to get out of the clinic. The fresh air would do you good, and you might enjoy a change of scene.”

“I—ain’t hungry,” I answered. “Thanks all the same.”

“You need to eat,” she said. “And sitting here alone isn’t good for you.”

“It’s all I’m good for,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Cloud Dancin’s in hidin’, the Cheyenne are gone—and not only couldn’t I help them, I can’t even remember what happened to them!” I burst out. “All I can do is sit here, useless.”

She stared at me. “Sully, that’s not true! You were injured trying to help Cloud Dancing.”

“Did him a lot of good, didn’t I?”

“He’s alive,” she said strongly.

“Well, that makes one of us,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice tense and alarm touching her eyes.

“I ain’t feeling very ‘alive’ right now, Dr. Mike—and I don’t feel very much like talking either, if it’s all the same to you.”

She came over and sat beside me on the bed. “Sully, listen to me. I know you’re deeply sad right now. You’re grieving for your family. It’s only natural that you’re melancholy. But it will get better—I promise. In time—”

“In time?” I repeated. “Time’s got no meaning for me, Dr. Mike. I’m a man *out* of time. I lost part of my past and I ain’t got no future. Time’s passed me by.”

“Sully, it isn’t like you to indulge in self-pity,” she began.

“No?” I said, looking her in the eyes. “Well, what *is* ‘like me,’ Dr. Mike? You seem to know everything, have all the answers.”

“Sully, I never claimed to know everything—“

“Well you know a lot more than me,” I interrupted. “Course that ain’t such a trick—*everybody* knows more than me. Still, you’re the only one here. So you tell me—what happens now?”

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

As they moved along, Sully tried to speak to Cloud Dancing. But the wind assaulting their faces made
speech impossible, stripping his words away the instant they left his lips. He finally contented himself with toiling along behind his friend, waiting till an opportunity presented itself for them to talk.

After they had been walking for about a half hour, Cloud Dancing signaled him to stop.

“We will rest for a moment,” he called, looking back over his shoulder.

Sully nodded in relief, feeling unaccustomedly winded for the amount of time they had been traveling. He followed the medicine man over to a copse of trees, where he tied up his horse and then dug into his saddle bag, bringing out a sack of oats. He filled a feedbag and slipped it over the horse’s nose.

The two men huddled together next to the horse, using the animal’s bulk as a barrier against the wind. Cloud Dancing’s hands were concealed within the folds of his sleeves. Sully wrapped his arms around his chest, secreting his gloved hands in his armpits.

“Cloud Dancin’—about Custer,” he said.

“Uh hunh,” his friend replied.

“You said you saw him in town. Did you see another man with him—an Indian? Looked like maybe a Sioux?”

“Yes,” Cloud Dancing confirmed.

“Do you know anythin’ about him? Who he is, or what he’s doin’ with Custer?”

“I do not know him, but I know of him,” his friend answered. “He is called ‘Bloody Knife.’ He is part Hunkpapa Sioux, part Arikara—or Sahnish, which is what the Arikara call themselves. But he claims his Sahnish blood. He comes from the northern Dakota territory, near the upper banks of the river called the Missouri.”

“What’s he doin’ ridin’ with Custer?” Sully asked.

“He scouts for the army, like many other Arikara and Crow,” Cloud Dancing replied.

“I never could figure why some Indians choose to be scouts. Why would an Indian join with men who are exterminatin’ his people?” Sully asked, confounded by the idea of such a bizarre alliance.

Cloud Dancing shrugged slightly. “Each man has his own reasons,” he said. “But many join with the army to gain the freedom to hunt and move on the plains without fear of being attacked and killed by other tribes. Many Sahnish enlisted in the army, and were valued because of their skill as warriors.

“It is said that at one time, the Sahnish nation was so large and fierce that other tribes moved out of their way when they moved across the prairie,” he went on. “When the whites first came, many of the tribes of the Upper Missouri welcomed them and accepted their trinkets. But the Sahnish were hostile to the whites. Soon, the whites began to blame the Sahnish for all Indian attacks and raids.”

“All the more reason for the Sahnish to hate them,” said Sully.

Cloud Dancing nodded in acknowledgement. “The Sahnish repaid the hate of the whites with vengeance, and tried to wipe out all white men from their homeland. Until they were struck down by many of the white man’s diseases. The worst of these was the sickness you call smallpox.

“Soon, only three villages of the Sahnish nation were left. They joined with the people who remained of the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes, to protect themselves against stronger tribes who had escaped the smallpox and preyed on their weaker brothers, stealing their food and horses.

“But then they fell victim to the same false promises from your government that destroyed my people. The treaties they signed with the government took away their weapons. In return, the government promised them food and protection. But the government agents stole the food from the mouths of the people. Many women and children starved.”

Sully’s expression was grim as he listened to the sad, familiar story. “It just don’t make sense,” he
argued. “White men nearly destroyed the Sahnish with their diseases, and the government starved their people by not honoring its treaties. Yet warriors like Bloody Knife were still willin' to scout for the army.”

“I cannot speak for all such scouts, but it is said that Bloody Knife saw his brothers murdered by other tribes, and determined to become a superior warrior to survive,” said Cloud Dancing. “And he hated being confined to the reservation. He believed the army would give him the freedom he sought. So he learned the military skills of the army and became a scout for the 7th Cavalry.”

“Custer’s unit,” Sully said darkly. “So that’s how they got together.”

The medicine man nodded again. “Bloody Knife soon earned the long-hair’s admiration. He became known as Custer’s ‘favorite scout.”’

“Even so, I don’t see how Bloody Knife could make a friend of a white man who murdered so many Indians,” Sully maintained.

“Bloody Knife admired the long-hair’s fighting skills, as Custer admired his. They formed a special bond,” Cloud Dancing replied.

Sully was silent for a few moments. “Should we be worried about him?” he asked finally.

Cloud Dancing nodded. “He can be a dangerous enemy.”

“More dangerous than Custer?”

The medicine man nodded again. “He knows things the yellow-hair does not. How to read signs and track his enemies. He is Custer’s ‘eyes and ears.’ And he will not be fooled by the tricks we use against the whites.”

“All the more reason, then, for us to get you back to the North,” Sully urged. Suddenly, without warning, he began to cough, the effort doubling him over slightly and leaving him breathless.

Cloud Dancing studied his friend’s face keenly. There was a distinct bluish tinge around Sully’s lips, contrasting with the tightly drawn skin over his cheekbones, which was parchment white. Dark smudges of fatigue ringed his eyes.

“We cannot linger here,” Cloud Dancing told him. “We must get you to where it’s warm.”

“You w-worry t-too much,” Sully said, his teeth starting to chatter. “J-just like—Michaela.”

“It is—‘part of the job’,” Cloud Dancing replied with a small smile. But the smile vanished and his eyes darkened with concern as Sully started coughing again.

“We must go,” he insisted. He grasped the horse’s reins and led the way as they turned their faces into the wind and started walking once more.

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Matthew took Michaela’s hand and led her back to the table.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You need to relax,” he said, pulling out her chair. She sat, as he moved to the stove and fetched the coffeepot. He brought it to the table and refilled her cup. “Drink some,” he urged.

After a moment Michaela complied, taking a small sip. Matthew seated himself across from her.

“Do you want me to go after him, Dr. Mike?” he asked.

Michaela looked up at him, startled. “After Sully?” she said.
“Yeah,” Matthew replied. “It’s true he’s got a day’s head start on me, but I’m willin’ to try to find him if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Absolutely not,” Michaela declared.

“Dr. Mike—“

“Matthew, it’s bad enough that Sully and Cloud Dancing are in danger,” she interrupted him. “I won’t risk you, too.”

“But Dr. Mike, I ain’t never seen you like this before—I’m worried about you,” he said.

“I’m sorry I troubled you,” she said.

“No need for apologies, Dr. Mike,” he told her. “We’re family—you can tell me anythin’. And if you need somethin’, all you gotta do is ask.”

“I’m grateful for that,” Michaela said, tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes. “You don’t know how much. But I would be far more distressed if I had to worry about all three of you out there in the wilderness.”

“If you’re sure,” Matthew said reluctantly.

“I am,” Michaela replied, putting her hand over his and summoning a small smile.

“Well—is there anythin’ else I can do for you?” Matthew asked.

Michaela nodded. “Yes,” she said, a catch in her throat. “You can pray.”

* * * * * * * * * *

The water was bubbling furiously in the small pot over Cloud Dancing’s cooking fire. Sully huddled as close to the flames as he dared, a blanket from his bedroll wrapped around him over his coat. Despite his proximity to the heat, his teeth continued to chatter, and he was seized by intermittent fits of coughing.

From a medium leather drawstring bag, Cloud Dancing withdrew an even smaller fringed pouch. He reached inside, grasping a handful of herbs, and crumbled them into a metal cup. Wrapping a cloth around the handle of the pot, he took it gingerly off the flame, then poured the boiling water over the cup’s contents. A cloud of steam arose, bringing with it a pungent, slightly medicinal aroma.

“W-what is it?” Sully asked, nodding toward his friend’s concoction.

“Something to help the cough,” Cloud Dancing replied, taking yet another pouch from his bag and adding some of its contents to the brew.

“W-what else are you p-puttin’ in there?”

Cloud Dancing looked up at Sully’s drawn face, his cheekbones now flushed with ruddy spots of color. “Willow bark—for your fever,” he said quietly.

“You don’t g-gotta go to so much t-trouble,” Sully protested. “I j-just got a t-touch of somethin’—I’ll be f-fine.”

“You will not be if you remain in this cold,” Cloud Dancing warned, handing him the cup. “We must get you back to town.”

“I ain’t goin’ b-back,” Sully said, the liquid in the cup sloshing slightly in his trembling hands. “I ain’t l-leavin’ you, Cloud Dancin’.”

“Michaela would never forgive me if I allowed you to make yourself sicker by continuing to travel with me,” his friend noted.

“A l-little of your m-medicine will fix me right up,” Sully answered. “And M-Michaela don’t n-never
need to know.” He took a swallow of the tea defiantly.

“I am sorry, my brother,” Cloud Dancing told him regretfully. “But your journey with me ends here. Tomorrow I will take you back to Colorado Springs.”

“C-Cloud Dancin’—“

“It is decided,” the medicine man said firmly. “Drink the tea and then try to sleep. I will stand watch.”

Sully stared at him in frustration, but decided not to argue any more—at least for the moment. The truth was, he didn’t really feel up to it. His head was starting to ache, and he was becoming aware of a scratchy soreness in his throat. A steadily increasing sensation of heat inside him also confirmed Cloud Dancing’s observation—he did have a fever, and it was climbing.

Why did this have to happen, he thought, filled with self-loathing. Why now, when his brother needed him most? Weren’t things bad enough without him getting sick and jeopardizing Cloud Dancing’s safety even further? Well, he’d simply have to get better, and prove to his friend that he was well enough to keep going.

I’ll be all right tomorrow, he thought. He surrendered to his weakness and exhaustion, lowering himself to the ground and curling up by the fire. His body continued to shiver beneath the blanket.

Tomorrow, he thought again. After he’d had a little rest . . . He closed his eyes.

* * * * * * * * * *

Brian opened the side door and came into the cabin, looking wan.

Michaela and Matthew glanced up sharply as he appeared, hastily plastering casual expressions on their faces.

“Pup finally wear you out, little brother?” teased Matthew, smiling at him.

Brian shook his head. “Nah. I just wasn’t feelin’ so good, so I came in.”

Michaela’s eyes kindled with concern. “What is it, Brian?”

Brian came over to her. “My throat feels kinda sore, and my head hurts a little,” he said. “I’m kinda hot, too.”

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling well, Sweetheart,” Michaela said sympathetically. “Let’s have a look, and see what’s wrong.” She glanced toward her older son. “Matthew, would you bring the lamp over please?”

“Sure,” said Matthew, jumping up to fetch an oil lamp from a nearby table. He brought it to Michaela, who turned up the flame more brightly.

“Can you hold it up for me, just like this?” she asked.

Matthew nodded, holding the lamp steady as Michaela drew Brian closer to her. She gently probed the glands on either side of his throat, then laid her hand on his forehead.

“You do feel a little warm,” she commented. “Now open your mouth, Brian, as wide as you can, and say ‘ah,’” she instructed.

“A-h-h-h,” Brian repeated. Michaela peered into the recesses of his throat.

“Your throat is definitely red,” she confirmed, after examining him carefully. “It appears as if you’re coming down with a slight catarrh.”

“Is it bad?” the child asked anxiously.

His mother smiled reassuringly. “No, Sweetheart, it’s not too serious. You’ll probably feel a little
uncomfortable for a day or two until the catarrh has run its course, but with some medicine and bed rest, you'll soon be as good as new."

“Do I get to miss school?” Brian said hopefully. Matthew chuckled and Michaela had to smile, as well.

“Well, if this cold snap we’re having keeps up, it looks as if everyone might be missing school,” she said. “However, until you’re recovered, you won’t be able to attend school, no.”

“Great!” Brian exclaimed. Then, hastily adopting a more solemn expression, he added, “I mean, that’s too bad.”

“Try not to be *too* depressed about it,” Matthew said drily.

“I won’t,” Brian answered, missing the sarcasm, and Matthew shook his head, grinning.

“I want you to put on your nightshirt and climb into bed,” Michaela said. “After you’re tucked in, I’ll bring you some of Cloud Dancing’s fever tea, with some nice honey for your throat. How does that sound?”

“Good,” Brian answered. He looked up at his brother. “Will you read to me, Matthew?”

“I guess I could be persuaded,” Matthew allowed, rumpling Brian’s hair. “Now go on and get into bed.”

“All right,” Brian agreed.

“Brian—don’t get too near Colleen,” Michaela cautioned. “We don’t want this to spread, if we can prevent it.”

“Okay, Ma,” the boy replied and disappeared through the curtain.

“How are you feeling, Matthew? Is there any sign that you might be catching this as well?” Michaela asked, studying him critically. Matthew shrugged and shook his head.

“Nope—I feel fine,” he answered.

“That’s a relief,” his mother sighed. “I’d better check Colleen, however. Even though I told Brian to keep his distance, it may already be too late. She’s been exposed to him, so she could also come down with this at any time. Unfortunately, once a catarrh strikes one person in a family, it often goes through everyone before running its course.”

“Never rains but it pours,” Matthew said.

“So it would seem,” Michaela replied.

“Are you all right, Dr. Mike—what with Sully and all, and now Brian gettin’ sick?” Matthew asked, his eyes tinged with concern.

Michaela nodded. “I hate to see Brian ill, but actually, tending to him will help to keep my mind off my worries about Sully,” she admitted.

“I’d better start brewing the fever tea,” she added. “And I believe Brian is waiting for you to read him a story.” She raised her eyebrows at Matthew, giving him a little smile.

“On my way,” her son replied. Unexpectedly he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

Michaela raised her hand to the spot and looked at him gratefully. “Thank you, Matthew,” she said softly.

“No charge,” he said.

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“Are you saying, ‘Where do you go from here?’” she asked me calmly, refusing to take offense at my tone.

“Something like that,” I allowed.

“Well of course that must be your decision, Sully, but you certainly have options,” she said. “I promise you that things are not as hopeless as they seem. It’s true that you’ve lost a piece of your past, but it may yet come back to you. And I can assure you that you are *not,* as you claim, a man without a future.”

“You couldn’t prove it by me,” I maintained stubbornly, still awash in self-pity. “All my friends—all my family—are gone. I got no home left with them. And if you’re going to suggest I settle in town, then you don’t know me like you claim—I left town living behind a long time ago. I ain’t cut out for that kind of life no more.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that,” she said mildly.

“Then what?” I challenged her. “I used to be a silver miner, but I’ll never do that again. I suppose I could go back to living alone in the woods, like I done when my wife died, but that would be cold comfort after the life I had with the Cheyenne.

“I got no work, and no skills—besides what I know about the land, and hunting and trapping. Plus a little talent I got for carpentry.”

“Hardly a ‘little’ talent,” she said.

“That’s nice of you to say, but you ain’t no expert on carpentry—*are* you?” I added, thinking that I wouldn’t put it past her to know as much about that as anything else. There seemed to be no end to the talents of the uncommon woman who sat before me.

But she only chuckled. “No, I’m afraid I can’t count the art of carpentry among my gifts. But I *can* recognize something that’s handsome or beautiful. I’ve seen your work, Sully. Some rather—extraordinary examples, in fact.”

“So you’re saying I should become a carpenter?” I asked.

“Only if that’s your wish,” she replied.

“It ain’t,” I said bluntly. “I mean, I like working with my hands and all, and it’s a good way to bring in a few dollars from time to time, but it ain’t what I want to do with my life.

“The way I see it, Dr. Mike, that don’t leave much else for me—except maybe to just pull up stakes and move on. Ain’t nothing keeping me here—not any more.”

“I realize it may appear that way, Sully, but it’s not true,” she told me. “You *do* have a job here—and people that need you and depend on you.”

“I can’t figure what job you could mean,” I said. “And there’s nobody in this town who needs me.” I sounded harsh, but I couldn’t help it. With Cloud Dancing gone and all the Cheyenne dead, I couldn’t see the point to anything.

“Well first of all, there are the children,” she reminded me. “They love you very much. Brian has always looked up to you, and you’ve been a mentor to Matthew, and a friend to Colleen . . .”

“I—care about them too,” I admitted, feeling slightly ashamed. “A lot. But I can’t build a life around just being their friend, Dr. Mike.”

“I understand that, Sully. But the children aren’t the only people who need you. There are others who need your care and attention as well,” she said.

“Who?” I asked, genuinely puzzled.
She cleared her throat. “Well, that’s a bit of a long story,” she replied.

“Appears like I got plenty of time,” I said. “But—I guess you don’t. I know the children are waiting on you.”

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” she said unexpectedly.

“Yeah—I guess,” I said uncertainly.

“I’ll be right back,” she promised, and left the room. She returned less than five minutes later.

“Now we can talk,” she said.

“What about the kids?” I asked.

“I told them to go on without me,” she answered, removing her coat and settling herself in the chair by the bed.

“But your plans—for dinner—“

“I said I’d be there later—and that hopefully, you would be joining me.”

“Dr. Mike, I know you mean well, and I’m obliged—but like I said, I ain’t really hungry and I ain’t much in the mood to be with people right now.”

“Perhaps you’ll change your mind,” she said, undeterred by my objections.

She reached up and took off her hat, laying it aside. Then she removed the hairpins from the shining coil of her hair, so that it tumbled down over her shoulders. She tossed her head, shaking the tresses loose so that they flowed down her back.

I couldn’t take my eyes from the glorious sight of that hair, gleaming copper in the lamplight. Any other time I’d seen her, it had always been confined—twisted up on her head or pulled back from her face. This was the first time I’d ever seen it cascading free. And I felt like all the breath had been knocked out of me by the force of its beauty—of her beauty.

“That’s better,” she said contentedly. She adjusted her position in her chair, making herself comfortable. “Now, where were we?”

I must have been staring, because she leaned forward and looked at me closely. “Sully? Are you all right?” she asked in concern.

I started, and dropped my eyes. “Yeah,” I answered after a moment, when I could breathe again. “I, uh—I must have been wool-gathering.” I cleared my throat, stalling for time while I tried to compose myself. Finally I was able to look at her without gawking like some kind of nervous suitor. “So—you say I already got a job?” I asked casually—or what I hoped was casual, anyway.

I guess I fooled her, because she relaxed and sat back. “Yes, you do,” she replied. “An important job. At least I think it’s important, and so do some very special people who rely on you for your help.”

I waited.

“You’re an Indian Agent, Sully,” she said.

* * * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sully slept fitfully, rousing from time to time, though he couldn’t have said whether he was awake or dreaming. Sometimes he saw the comforting face and penetrating eyes of Cloud Dancing leaning over him. But other times it seemed that it was Michaela’s face he saw, reaching out to lay a cool and gentle
hand on his fevered brow. She was speaking to him—he could see her lips moving, but he couldn’t hear her voice.

“What is it?” he croaked, forcing the words out of his sore and swollen throat. “What are you tryin’ to tell me?” Suddenly her image began to recede, and a crushing feeling of loss crashed over him as she was pulled from his reach. “No—don’t go!” he implored, shiny tracks of tears on his flushed face. “Michaela, come back!”

Cloud Dancing sat close by his friend, watching gravely as Sully’s head tossed from side to side and he muttered to people only he could see. Though he couldn’t make out most of the words, he could discern Michaela’s name clearly.

He ardently wished she were here now. He was racked with indecision about what to do for his desperately ill brother. He had done what he could for Sully’s fever, but it continued to climb and he feared he would be unable to stop it. Sully needed Michaela’s medicine. He needed Michaela.

Yet again Cloud Dancing debated within himself the wisdom of passing the night here in camp, till the morning light made it safer to travel; or leaving immediately to get Sully to Michaela as soon as possible. Sully was already very sick—Cloud Dancing believed that the time he had spent in the harsh cold had already harmed him. Several more hours of exposure to the freezing nighttime temperatures in the mountains could kill him. But if he attempted to take Sully back by night—the darkness shrouding any possible danger—and they were ambushed... His friend could be just as dead.

The medicine man thought of a conversation he’d had with Michaela shortly before he embarked on his vision quest to the Black Hills to make peace with his son’s death.

(Michaela knelt on the ground, inhaling the fragrance of a tiny plant in her hands. She stood, and they began to stroll along together.

“What do you when one of your plants doesn’t work?” she asked him. “When it doesn’t cure the person?”

“That tells you things are out of balance,” he replied. He gestured with his hands. “You need to heal the whole person.”

“How do you do that?”

“Call on the spirits,” he said.

“I don’t know how to call on the spirits,” replied Michaela. “And truthfully I’m not sure that I believe they exist,” she confessed.

“You believe that prayers can heal,” he stated.

“Well, yes.”

“And you believe that—love can heal,” he added significantly.

“Well, I certainly believe that,” she admitted, her eyes slightly bashful.

“There is love in your eyes right now,” he told her.)

Cloud Dancing had been calling on the spirits, but he was beginning to wonder if Sully, in his anger, had been right—that the spirits had forsaken them. And he had to admit that the love he bore for his brother would not be enough to save him. Only one person’s love could do that—and right now she was far away.

Sully began to cough again, and Cloud Dancing quickly rolled him onto his side so that he wouldn’t choke. He held onto his brother tightly as the cough and chills racked his body again and again. Finally, when Sully’s paroxysm of coughing had spent itself, Cloud Dancing gently returned him to his former position, tucking the blanket firmly around him. He rose and went to Sully’s horse, pulling the Indian blanket from its back. Quickly he folded and rolled the blanket into a cylinder, then slipped it beneath Sully’s neck to elevate his head and upper body.
The movement caused Sully to open his eyes, but they were clouded and unfocused, and Cloud Dancing knew that his friend was not truly conscious.

“Thirsty,” Sully rasped, barely above a whisper. Cloud Dancing held Sully’s canteen to his mouth, allowing a tiny rivulet of water to dribble over his parched lips. A painful grimace crossed Sully’s face as he swallowed, then he fell back, exhausted, his eyes closing again.

Cloud Dancing placed his hand on Sully’s forehead, feeling the heat radiating from him. He had to make a choice, and Sully’s life depended on whether he made the right one.

He would wait a little longer, he decided—to give Sully more time to rest, and to see if the bark tea would finally begin to work and lower his fever. But then, no matter what happened, he would take his brother back to the only person who could help him now.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela stood by the window, watching as dusk leeched the light from the day. In her mind, she tried to picture Sully’s face, thinking that if she could only see him clearly, she might be able to tell where he was and what was happening to him. But for some reason, his features eluded her. Only her worry remained. Tending to Brian had helped a little, keeping her dark feelings at bay for a short while. But her anxiety hadn’t departed. If anything, it was even more ominous and cloying than before.

“Can you hear me, Sully?” she thought. “Oh please—please hear me. Tell me where you are—tell me you’re all right, and that I’m being foolish.” But the only sound she heard was the ticking of the clock on a nearby shelf. She scrubbed at her face with her hands.

Footsteps sounded behind her and she turned to see Matthew coming through the curtain.

“How’s Brian?” she asked, assuming what she hoped was a serene expression.

“He fell asleep durin’ the third chapter,” Matthew replied. “Colleen’s sittin’ with him for a bit.”

“Is she feeling all right?” Michaela inquired.

“Says she’s fine,” Matthew said. He crossed the room to stand beside her. “More to the point, how are you?” he asked. “You feelin’ any better?”

“Not really, no,” Michaela confessed.

“He’ll be all right, Dr. Mike—you gotta believe that,” Matthew told her earnestly.

“I’m trying to, Matthew—I truly am.”

“I can still go after him,” her son offered again. “It’s too late to start out now, but I can leave first thing in the mornin’—all you gotta do is say the word.”

But Michaela shook her head. “No, Matthew. I won’t risk your safety. And Sully wouldn’t want you to put yourself in danger trying to find him.

“Besides—I need you,” she said haltingly. “As long as you’re here, I feel like I can find the courage to deal with all this. If I were alone, I’m—not sure what I would do.”

“You’d be strong,” Matthew assured her gently. “Just like you always been. And who knows—maybe Sully can feel your strength, and that’s what’s gonna keep him safe and bring him back to you.”

“Do you really believe that?” Michaela asked him, her green-gold eyes looking pleadingly into his.

“I believe in you,” he said.
The light was nearly gone, and with it Cloud Dancing's hopes that Sully's condition would start to improve. He was certain now that Sully, burning with fever, was too weak to withstand a night's exposure to the frigid temperatures here in the higher elevations. Regardless of the limited visibility and the possible danger, they would have to risk starting back to Colorado Springs now, if there was to be any hope of Michaela helping Sully.

Cloud Dancing's thoughts chased each other around and around in his mind. His concern was not limited only to Sully's condition. He also had grave worries about Sully being able to withstand the trip itself. It would be slow and arduous going, with Sully's horse being forced to bear the double weight of both Sully and himself. Clearly, Sully was too ill to sit a horse on his own, which meant that Cloud Dancing would need to ride behind him, holding him upright—at least until they came down out of the mountains, when he would be able to construct a travois to bear Sully the rest of the way. Cloud Dancing recognized one important advantage to riding double; by riding together the two men would be able to share their body heat—not necessary for his own survival, but possibly vital to Sully's.

However the medicine man was concerned about keeping Sully astride the horse. Cloud Dancing was strong, and he had borne Sully's weight in the past—most notably when Sully had been nearly beaten to death by the buffalo skinner Rankin. He could do it again—he *would* do it again—or anything else in his power to save his brother.

But they faced several long hours of travel over rough terrain, in severe cold. There was the very real possibility of frostbite. Cloud Dancing had to consider what might happen if the cold began to affect his senses—or worse, if his strength were to give out, from trying to support the heavier weight of Sully's unconscious body. Either development could have disastrous consequences for them both.

And Sully had been drifting in and out of consciousness. What if he finally lost consciousness and didn’t wake up? There were many miles to cover before they reached home. And the longer that Sully was exposed to the numbing cold, the less he would be able to fight against the sickness that ravaged him.

The medicine man could see only one solution. It would do nothing to cure Sully's illness, but it might keep him alive long enough to reach their destination.

Cloud Dancing had to try to rouse him—to get Sully conscious enough that he could help to maintain his own balance as they rode, thus taking some of the physical burden off himself. And if Cloud Dancing could keep Sully awake—even just semi-conscious—the danger would be lessened that his friend might sink into a sleep from which he'd never awaken.

The medicine man busied himself with packing up his few supplies. He waited to extinguish the campfire, using its heat till the last moment to keep Sully warm.

Cloud Dancing leaned over Sully, placing one hand on his baking forehead while using the other to gently shake his brother's fitfully sleeping form.

"Sully," he said softly. "Sully, you must wake up now. It is time for us to go."

There was no response. Sully's delirious mutterings seemed to have subsided for the moment, but Cloud Dancing could see his eyes continue to dart back and forth beneath his closed eyelids as he remained trapped within his fever dreams.

"Sully!" Cloud Dancing said more sharply. "Sully—wake up!"

Still his friend did not respond. Cloud Dancing felt a stab of fear, wondering if Sully had already traveled beyond his reach. Would his younger brother join the spirits before he even had the chance to bring him home to Michaela?

Not if he could prevent it, he determined grimly. Sully was young and strong, and had everything to live for. Even if, right now, his spirit—like his body—was weak. Cloud Dancing refused to accept that his brother was ready to let go of life—there must still be some fight left in him.

The medicine man took a deep breath, then looked up at the rapidly darkening sky, asking forgiveness from the spirits—and from Sully—for what he was about to do.
He leaned over Sully once more. “Sully, wake up,” he repeated. “Michaela needs you! Sully—Michaela is in danger! She needs you!”

Sully stirred slightly, but didn’t open his eyes.

“Wake up, Sully!” Cloud Dancing spoke again, nearly shouting in his brother’s ear. “Michaela is in danger—she needs you! YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN SAVE HER!” Cloud Dancing stared into Sully’s face, searching desperately for a sign that his words were penetrating his brother’s delirium.

(Sully moved through a gray and featureless landscape—with no color, form or landmark to guide his steps. Nothing but nebulous clouds that billowed and twisted about him in ever changing and shifting patterns.

Slowly he revolved in a circle, straining his eyes for a glimpse of some sign that would show him where to go, or lead him out of this dreamy nothingness. But the roiling grayness shrouded him on all sides, keeping its secrets.

With no trail to follow, Sully could only move forward, extending his hand before him as if reaching out for something—what, he couldn’t say.

Time, distance—neither had meaning here. He didn’t know how long he journeyed through this murky landscape, his destination—and his purpose—a mystery.

Gradually a sound began to come to his ears; and with it, the sight of a vague shape somewhere far ahead. The sound grew, increasing from the faintest of whispers to a steadily increasing rumble. Simultaneously the shape began to resolve itself from a smoky shadow into something—someone—familiar.

He recognized Cloud Dancing. The medicine man’s form was hazy and indistinct, but as he watched, it began to solidify, assuming depth and proportion. His friend and mentor waited for him, his hand stretching forth as if to lead Sully out of this mysterious wilderness. Cloud Dancing’s lips slowly moved, and in that instant Sully became aware that the sound echoing hugely all about him was his brother’s voice, the words reverberating in his ears like thunder.

Sully struggled to comprehend Cloud Dancing’s message—the words rolling toward him steadily like waves on the ocean, booming and crashing as they reached the shore. But only one sound—one word—made sense.

MICHAELA. Like a magnet, the sound of her name pulled him forward. The shifting clouds began to flow together, spreading rapidly up, down and all around as a pattern began to emerge from their depths. Michaela’s face filled his vision—ghostly, transparent—and frightened.

SULLY, she beckoned to him. SULLY, I love you. SULLY!—I NEED you. Help me . . .

“Michaela,” he muttered, becoming agitated as Cloud Dancing watched. And then again, with a mournful longing, “Michaela . . .”

“That is right,” Cloud Dancing told him. “You must help Michaela. You must go to her. I will take you to her, but first you must wake up. Wake up now, Sully. Wake up!”

(Cloud Dancing seized Sully’s hand and pulled him violently forward. The features of Michaela’s face flew apart as the medicine man punched a hole in the grayness and pushed Sully through.)

He lay in a cold, dark place, alternately shivering and burning as he was wracked by chills and seared by fever. But he was alive—and he needed to reach Michaela. He struggled to open his eyes, the lids feeling as heavy as iron.

“Yes!” Cloud Dancing encouraged him, chafing his hands. “You can do it, Sully! Open your eyes. Open your eyes and speak to me.”

Slowly, arduously, Sully complied. For a moment his eyes wandered, unfocused, as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings. But finally his eyes found Cloud Dancing’s, locking with his as if holding onto a lifeline.
“Cloud Dancin’,” he whispered, convulsively squeezing the hand that clung to his.

“Yes, my brother. I am here,” Cloud Dancing told him, gripping Sully’s hand tightly, as if to infuse all his strength into the sick man’s body.

“Michaela,” Sully managed over the pain of his swollen vocal chords. “She . . . she needs me.”

“We all need you, Sully,” Cloud Dancing told him. “That is why you must try your best to get up, so we can leave this place.”

Sully nodded weakly. “Yeah. I got—to get to Michaela. Help me up.”

The medicine man slipped his arm around Sully’s back and lifted him slowly to a sitting position. Sully braced himself against Cloud Dancing as a wave of dizziness washed over him. His head swam and buzzed with fever, and he clung to Cloud Dancing’s supportive arms as he waited for the vertigo to pass.

Finally his head began to clear. Cloud Dancing held his canteen to his lips, and Sully gratefully partook of the cool water, even as the act of swallowing made him groan softly.

“I know there is much pain, but you must drink as much as you can,” the medicine man told him, offering the canteen to him again. Sully nodded, and forced himself to swallow a second time, then a third. Mercifully, the pain in his throat began to dull, anesthetized by the water’s soothing balm.

Cloud Dancing wrapped Sully’s blanket firmly around him, then held out the cup containing his medicinal tea. “Try to drink some more of this,” he urged. “We must try to bring your fever down as much as possible.”

Sully nodded again, and sipped carefully from the cup. He still felt chills, but they were not so overwhelming as before. His cough had quieted for the moment as well, though there was a heaviness in his chest that secretly worried him. However, he could not think of that for now.

As his disorientation began to abate, his confusion increased. What could have happened to Michaela? And how did Cloud Dancing know she was in trouble? Had he received a vision from the spirits?

“Cloud Dancin’,” he spoke with difficulty. “Tell me . . . ‘bout Michaela.”

His friend’s eyes were somber. “My brother—forgive me,” he said penitently. “For the first time, I have lied to you.”

“What do you mean?” Sully asked, his voice low and rasping, his eyes bewildered.

“Nothing has happened to Michaela,” Cloud Dancing confessed. “What I said about her being in danger was false. It was the only way I could think of to reach you, and pull you from the arms of the sickness that threatened to take you away.”

“S—She’s all right?” Sully managed. “There’s no danger?”

“Not to Michaela. But there is great danger to you,” Cloud Dancing said gravely. “You must gather all your strength for the journey home, Sully. You need Michaela’s medicine. It is the only thing that can help you.”

“I don’t—understand what happened,” Sully said. “How I got so sick . . .”

“You must have carried the sickness with you when you came to me,” Cloud Dancing told him. “Two days travel in the cold weakened you, so that you could not fight it off.”

“Cloud Dancin’—I . . . don’t know . . . if I can make it,” Sully ventured slowly, feeling his mahta’sooma—his shadow—looming very close.

“You will make it,” his brother told him, his eyes steely and determined. “Do not fear, my brother. We will ride together. I will get you home.”
“The Son of the Morning Star said you would be hard to find, and harder to kill,” spoke a cynical voice from out of the darkness. “He was wrong. You are no challenge.”

Into the glow of the campfire stepped Bloody Knife.

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“Beg your pardon?” I said, thinking I must have misheard.

“You are an Indian Agent, Sully,” Dr. Mike repeated. “By special appointment of President Grant.”

I started to chuckle. “Sure,” I said, shaking my head at the absurdity of it. “And who’s joining us for supper today—Queen Victoria?”

“That’s quite humorous,” Dr. Mike said drily.

I flashed her a look of apology. “Sorry,” I said. “No offense meant. Fact is, you spin a good yarn, Dr. Mike. But with all due respect, I’d never work for the army.”

“Indeed?” she replied. “But in fact, isn’t that what you were doing when you were a sniper in Georgia?”

My head snapped up in shock. “How do you know about that?” I demanded sharply.

Her expression immediately turned remorseful. “I apologize, Sully. I know that was cruel. I simply wished to prove to you that I was not—‘spinning a yarn’—as you put it.”

“I ain’t never told anyone about that—except for Cloud Dancing,” I said coldly, still unsettled at what she’d said, and unwilling to be placated.

“But you *did* tell me, Sully,” Dr. Mike said quietly. “You had no choice. I needed to know the truth so that I could help you when you were—arrested for desertion.”

I stared at her in silence. After a long moment I managed to speak.

“I think you’d better tell me everything you know,” I said.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER NINE

(Michaela drifted through a gray, featureless void, surrounded by tattered remnants of cloud that constantly flowed and shifted about her. What was this place, she thought, straining to see to the horizon. Except there was no horizon. Only endless gray, stretching as far as her sight could reach.

Then slowly, out of the pale mist, darker images began to appear. Indistinct at first, they slowly sharpened and solidified, till she could see the silhouettes of three men in the distance, one apart from the others.

The two men standing together were familiar. Sully! she thought joyfully. And Cloud Dancing! Oh thank God, I found you!

But who was the other figure? And why did she suddenly feel such a sensation of menace as she looked at him?

Michaela glided forward, feeling an intense compulsion to reach Sully and warn him—but of what, she couldn’t say. She only knew there was danger here, and that he and Cloud Dancing were the targets.

With excruciating slowness, she approached the three men. As she drew closer, she became aware
that something was wrong with Sully. Like Cloud Dancing and their adversary, he stood upright. But he was not so much standing as swaying on his feet, as if he would collapse at any moment. In shock and dismay, she realized he was deathly ill.

Cloud Dancing and the stranger were speaking. She could see their lips move, but no sound reached her ears. As she watched, she became aware that the unknown man was familiar after all. She had seen him somewhere before.

Just then, the stranger raised his arms. In his hands, he held a rifle.

She looked on in horror as he pointed it toward Sully. Suddenly Sully attacked him, bringing up his own arm to knock the rifle from the other man’s grasp. But his adversary resisted, his strength easily overpowering Sully’s. They grappled together, each with his hands on the rifle’s stock. Suddenly, with a blinding flash, the rifle exploded.

Sully dropped like a stone, as blood appeared in his blonde-brown hair.

NOOOOOO! she screamed.

“No!” Michaela screamed, bolting upright in the rocker by the fireplace. The afghan which had been covering her slid to the floor as she clutched the arms of the chair convulsively.

Matthew and Colleen jumped up from where they’d been sitting at the dining table and rushed to her.

“What is it, Dr. Mike?” Matthew said urgently, as Colleen knelt beside Michaela’s chair and took her hand. “Did you have a nightmare?”

The color had drained from Michaela’s face, and her heart thundered in her chest. Rigidly she stared into the flames as Colleen gently stroked the hair off her brow.

“It’s Sully,” Michaela said woodenly after a moment. “I finally know what’s happened to him.”

“We have no quarrel with you. Why would you wish to harm us?” Cloud Dancing said calmly, refusing to show fear, though inwardly his gut clenched at the sudden appearance of the army scout. Feverishly he tried to think of a way out of their dilemma, which had so radically changed from dangerous to desperate—even as he was filled with shame and anger at his failure to keep watch and protect Sully and himself.

“The enemy of my friend is my enemy,” Bloody Knife stated. Shadows leaped and capered across his face in the firelight, transforming his eyes into dark, bottomless pits. His hair, unfettered, fell past his shoulders, as dark and glossy as a raven’s wing.

“The long-hair is not your friend,” Cloud Dancing told him gravely. “He uses you for his own ends, to hurt your own kind.”

“He honors my skill as a warrior,” said Bloody Knife.

“He flatters you,” Cloud Dancing said. “He tells you what you want to hear so that you will do his evil work for him.”

“You are smug and filled with pride,” Bloody Knife retorted. “You accuse me of hurting my people, but you show no remorse for the blood on your own hands.”

“Cloud Dancin’ wouldn’t hurt no one,” Sully rasped, speaking up for the first time. “He’s a man of peace.”

The scout’s menacing eyes fell on him. “Where was this ‘man of peace’ when Custer fought the Cheyenne at the Washita?” he asked. “Did he stand with his people? No—he was nowhere to be found! He is a coward.”

“Cloud Dancin’s the bravest man I’ve ever known!” Sully exclaimed, insensitive for the moment to the
dizziness and fever that sought to overcome him. “It’s the ‘men of peace’ that have the greatest
courage—like Cloud Dancin’ and Black Kettle. Not like Custer, who builds his reputation on the murder of
innocent people!”

“He is weak,” Bloody Knife maintained, ignoring Sully’s protest. “He could not even protect himself,
or you.”

“He’s worth a hundred of you!” Sully spat, then doubled over as a violent fit of coughing shook his
frame.

Cloud Dancing’s eyes went to him in alarm. “Do not harm yourself further defending me, my
brother,” he implored. “Save your strength.”

“Do not worry,” Bloody Knife spoke again. “He will not need his strength for long. Nor will you.”
From behind his back he withdrew a rifle. Slowly and deliberately, he raised and aimed it at the medicine
man.

* * * * * * * * * *

“What is it, Ma?” Colleen asked softly, continuing to gently stroke her mother’s hair. “What’s wrong
with Sully?”

Michaela started, and looked guiltily into the innocent face of her daughter, belatedly recalling that
she’d withheld the truth from Colleen about Sully’s crisis.

“Oh—Colleen—“ she began in confusion, still affected by the lingering remnants of her dream.

“It’s all right, Dr. Mike,” Matthew spoke up from the opposite side of her chair where he hovered
solicitously. “I told Colleen the truth—while you were sleepin’. I figured—she had a right to know.”

“But not Brian?” Michaela said, looking up at him anxiously.

“No, not Brian,” Matthew repeated soothingly. “No need to upset him sooner than we have to.”

“It may be much sooner than we thought,” Michaela said bleakly.

“What is it, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked again, watching her soberly. “What did you see?”

“In a moment,” Michaela forestalled him. She turned back to her daughter, reaching out to lay her
hand on Colleen’s arm.

“Colleen—I owe you an apology. I suppose I thought I was protecting you, but I should have been
truthful with you from the beginning. You’ve always been a tower of strength to Sully and me. I should
have realized that this time would be no exception.”

“It’s all right, Ma,” Colleen told her, placing her hand over Michaela’s. “Sully’s the only thing that’s
important.”

“Dr. Mike—can you tell us now about Sully?” Matthew asked quietly. Michaela was silent for a long
moment.

“It was the Indian—the one I told you about, who we saw with Custer,” she said finally. “He followed
them. He had a rifle—“

“I know what a scary thing that must have been for you to see,” Matthew interjected gently. “But
Sully’s strong, and he’s smart. You know that, Dr. Mike. He can defend himself—just like he’s done a
dozen times before.”

“But that wasn’t all,” Michaela whispered. “He was ill, Matthew. Desperately ill. It resembled the
catarrh that Brian contracted—but so much worse, like a virulent case of influenza.” A vision of Sully’s
fever-wracked face arose in her mind’s eye. “He was standing, but he looked on the point of collapse. And
then—” She broke off, seeing the blinding flash of the rifle as it discharged, then Sully’s lifeless body falling
as blood darkened the blonde of his hair.
“What?” Matthew urged softly.

“What happened to him?” Matthew asked, squeezing her shoulder sympathetically. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Michaela replied, trying to compose herself. “I didn’t get the chance to see.”

“Of course,” Colleen answered. “I’ll take good care of him, Ma—I promise.”

“I know you will,” Michaela said, managing to summon a watery smile of thanks. “But I don’t want the two of you out here all alone. We’ll take you to the clinic before we leave, and I’ll ask Grace and Robert E. if they can look after you both until we return. I’ll need extra medical supplies anyway.”

“Makes sense,” Matthew concurred.

“Ma—I know how real this—vision—must have seemed to you,” Colleen said hesitantly. “But—couldn’t it have just been a dream?”

“I would give anything to believe that, Colleen, but I can’t. Somehow . . . I’ve been allowed to see what’s happened to Sully,” Michaela replied. “And I know in my heart that everything I witnessed was true.”

“Do you have any idea where he is, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked.

Michaela shook her head. “But I know some of Cloud Dancing’s special places,” she said. “We’ll try them all, if we have to.”

“Whatever it takes,” Matthew agreed. “I hesitated a moment, then added, “You think there’s any chance it ain’t happened yet—Sully getting shot, I mean? You think we got a chance to stop it?”

“I hope so,” she whispered.

“On your feet,” Bloody Knife commanded, gesturing toward Cloud Dancing with the barrel of the rifle, which he held loosely clasped in his hands. The medicine man carefully stood.

“And you,” the scout added, pointing the rifle at Sully. The barrel snaked across his palms like some kind of poisonous reptile.

“My brother is very sick,” Cloud Dancing objected. “He is no threat to you. Spare him, and I will do whatever you ask. I will trade my life for his. It is me that Custer wants.”

“You are a fool, as well as a coward,” Bloody Knife told him, smiling thinly. “The Son of the Morning Star wants you both. In fact, I believe that he wants *this* one even more.” He jerked his head toward Sully. “Get up!” he ordered.

“No!” Cloud Dancing snapped, unleashing his anger for the first time.

“You are still alive,” Matthew corrected, his voice steady against the prelude of Sully’s death. “Cloud Dancin’—it’s all right,” Matthew managed. Somehow finding the strength within himself for Cloud Dancing’s sake, he laboriously got to his feet, staggering as an intense wave of vertigo washed over
“Sully is too ill to stand alone,” Cloud Dancing objected. “Since you mean to kill us both, let me at least support my brother.”

“So that you can attempt some trick? I do not think so,” Bloody Knife answered. “However, if you are so worried about him, I will put him out of his misery.” He raised the rifle once again.

Another fit of coughing took Sully, and he stumbled to one knee. Startled, Bloody Knife’s finger squeezed convulsively on the trigger and the rifle fired, the shot going wild. Instantly, Sully was on his feet, rushing toward the Indian. Caught off balance, Bloody Knife stumbled backward, unable to get off another shot before Sully reached him and struck outward, trying to knock the rifle from the Indian’s grasp.

But with no strength behind it, Sully’s blow landed harmlessly. Instinctively his hands shot out, grabbing for the weapon, even as black spots pinwheeled across his vision and he felt his senses begin to desert him.

Desperately Sully held onto the shreds of his consciousness as he grappled with Bloody Knife. But the Indian’s superior strength overwhelmed him almost immediately. Sully could feel himself losing the struggle, and he made one last violent effort to yank the rifle away.

There was a flash as the rifle discharged again, and a booming report that echoed and re-echoed in Cloud Dancing’s ears. Sully sank to the ground, blood glistening darkly on his scalp as Cloud Dancing looked on in horror.

With a bellow of rage, the medicine man leaped at Bloody Knife, his leg kicking out instinctively toward the Indian’s jaw. He felt the shock vibrate through his frame as the blow solidly connected, instantly driving his enemy to his knees. Cloud Dancing locked his hands together and brought them down sharply on the back of Bloody Knife’s neck. The scout collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

Cloud Dancing spared a moment to ensure that Bloody Knife was no longer a threat—at least for the moment—and to hurl the rifle away into the darkness. Then he dropped to his knees beside Sully’s body, frantically feeling for his brother’s pulse. He couldn’t find it, and a grief akin to that which he’d felt at Snowbird’s death engulfed him.

Sully had been right. The spirits had forsaken them.

MY JOURNAL
Sunday 25 March, 1870

For the next half hour I sat and listened to Dr. Mike tell a story that I would have sworn was a fairytale—if it weren’t for what she knew about the shameful crime I committed years ago, and my desertion from the army—two ugly pieces of my past I couldn’t deny.

Her description of our trip to Washington—meeting General Parker, and the testimony she gave on behalf of the Cheyenne, which led to us being invited to the White House—gradually made the fantastic notion of me being appointed to a job by the President seem to make more sense.

But even though Dr. Mike’s story had a “happy ending” of sorts—we accomplished what we’d set out to do, and I was pardoned by the President—still, the whole time she talked I couldn’t bring myself to meet her eyes. I was too ashamed, too guilty, thinking of the man I’d killed during the war, and the pain I’d brought to his wife and his children. Knowing I was set up—and even learning that I’d finally been able to prove it—did nothing to help my guilt. An innocent man had still died, by my hand. Nothing could ever erase that fact, or wipe the stain of blood from my conscience, or my heart.

I’d blocked out that part of my life for a long time—I guess through a kind of “amnesia” of my own making. There was a bitter sort of irony in that. But Dr. Mike’s words brought it all flooding back. I saw myself again as I has been on that horrible day, crouched behind a rise overlooking the army camp with the scope of my rifle trained on my target. I remembered how I watched and waited, as the man I believed to be a confederate criminal innocently shaved outside his tent, never dreaming that these would be his last
seconds on earth. My mind recoiled in guilt and pain as I saw him fall, and then heard the copious weeping from his heartbroken wife and children as they fell on his lifeless body.

I had sought to bury that memory forever—but inevitably it had come out, as all lies are wont to do in the end. But it wasn’t just the disgrace of my crime made public, that hurt so bad. It was knowing how much I’d disappointed the people I cared about most, that was the worst. Dr. Mike had told me earlier how the Cooper kids had always looked up to me—especially Brian—and my gut twisted as I thought of what a hollow example I had turned out to be. She told me too, that Brian thought I was a hero for saving President Grant—but I couldn’t stand to hear it. There was nothing brave or noble about me. This so-called “hero” had feet of clay. I was just a coward who’d made a terrible mistake in his past and hadn’t had the guts to own up to it.

I still had no recollection of my friendship with Dr. Mike; but discovering that she knew all about my sin bothered me too, deep inside—in a way I couldn’t begin to fathom or describe. Thinking that once I might have had her respect—and that I might have lost it forever—gave me a strange and overwhelming sense of loss. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering about us—how we came to be friends, and why it was that each of us seemed to be such an important part of the other’s life. On some level in my mind, I knew that there was more to our relationship than met the eye—an important unspoken truth I had yet to learn. But as soon as the thought came to me, I found myself shying away from it—as an animal in the wild shies from a human touch. I wanted to know—I was afraid to know. It made no sense, and as her story came to an end, I felt more confused than ever.

“I . . . guess you don’t think much of me, after finding out what I done,” I said finally, grateful for the shadows in the room that hid the stain of mortification I wore on my face like a sign proclaiming my guilt.

“On the contrary, Sully,” she said, her voice compassionate. “What you did was not your fault. You were tricked, and used—and as a lieutenant in the army, you were forced to obey orders, or risk being court-martialed on charges of insubordination.”

“Better that, than what actually happened,” I said bitterly. “I KILLED a man, Dr. Mike. There ain’t no getting around that, no matter how bad I might want to. Worse, I didn’t have the courage to answer for what I done. I ran away, and tried to pretend it never happened. I can’t defend that, and neither can you—kind as you are to try.”

“You—you love me?” I repeated, seizing on her unexpected use of the word—not just in relation to the children, but to herself.

She drew back from me suddenly, trying to make it appear as if she was just shifting position in her chair. But she couldn’t quite disguise the startled, even guilty look in her eyes. She made a business of arranging her skirts, and brushing her hair back over her shoulders so that she’d have an excuse not to look at me. But finally she seemed to recognize that she owed me an answer of some kind.

“Of course we love you,” she said at last, drawing a protective mask over her features. “You’ve been a wonderful friend to us all, Sully. Even more than that, you’ve come to be like family. We would always care about you and support you, no matter what happened.”

I felt unsure of myself then, thinking that maybe I’d misunderstood what I thought I saw, or read more into her reactions than what was actually there. But a moment later, when she didn’t realize I was looking, I caught a different expression in her eyes—a deep, nearly mournful longing—that suddenly made me feel as if she had reached inside me and squeezed my heart. I gazed at the beautiful green-gold of her eyes, dusted by thick dark lashes, then followed the graceful curve of her lips and the long, delicate line of her throat. My pulse quickened and my heart started to race as my eyes continued their journey, traveling down the length of her hair, then moving slowly across the lush swell and shadowy valley of her breasts, the gleaming gold of an antique broach nestled seductively within.

I had a sudden, overpowering urge to take her in my arms and kiss her—knowing with an instinctive certainty just how her lips would feel against mine—soft, warm, yet excitingly firm. I knew that the taste of
her skin would be sweet, and that her hair would have the faint scent of lilacs—intoxicating and thrilling my senses. I wanted to mold her body next to mine, and bury my face in her hair, running my fingertips down the sensuous length of her back. I wanted . . . oh, I wanted . . .

“I believe we’ve talked enough about the past for now,” Dr. Mike said suddenly, breaking in on my amorous thoughts, and I felt a hot blush burning my face and neck—but this time it wasn’t shame about my past that had put it there.

I simply nodded, temporarily incapable of coherent speech. Uncomfortably I shifted on the edge of the bed, hands squeezed into fists and nails biting into my palms as I tried to discourage the physical reaction she had brought out in me. I could only imagine how horrified she would have been to see the outward manifestation of my secretly passionate thoughts.

Finally, when I thought I could speak normally again, I thanked her for spending time with me, telling me more of the truth about my past and trying to help me deal with it.

“I’m glad to help you, Sully,” she said sincerely. “I can’t begin to imagine what it must feel like to lose a part of your life—but it takes a very special sort of courage to accept what’s happened to you and somehow learn to move on. I admire you—more than you could possibly know.”

“I hope I can continue to earn your admiration,” I said shyly. “A lot more and a lot better than I done before. I—I hope I won’t disappoint you again.”

“You’ve never disappointed me,” she said softly.

We stared at each other, our eyes locked together; and for an instant, I felt like I was balanced just on the edge of everything finally becoming clear—that knowledge was about to burst upon me in a blinding flash of clarity.

But then she dropped her eyes, and the moment was gone.

“Will you reconsider your decision about joining us for dinner?” she asked persuasively after a pause.

The corner of my mouth tugged upward in a small smile. “Yeah, all right,” I agreed. “I think—I’d like that after all.”

“Good,” she said.

* * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TEN

Michaela’s head rested against the back of the rocker. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn’t sleeping—not this time. She couldn’t—she wouldn’t—sleep again until they finally found Sully and brought him home. Alive, or . . . A look of exquisite pain crossed her features, and a few errant tears escaped from beneath her closed eyelids to slip down her cheeks.

She and Matthew had done everything they could here at the homestead to prepare for their imminent journey. With the coming of dawn, the four of them would ride into town, and Michaela would pack their saddlebags to overflowing with medical supplies, and then solicit Grace’s and Robert E.’s help to look after Colleen and the ailing Brian.

At Michaela’s insistence, Matthew had gone to bed a short time before, to get some much needed rest in anticipation of the rigors of their search. She had promised him that she would do the same, but for the second time that day, she had been guilty of bending the truth with one of her children.

Now that she knew of Sully’s desperate condition, Michaela could not afford to sleep. She needed to be awake and aware, so that she could try to touch Sully with her thoughts, and send him the healing strength and power of her love. If mentally she could just help him hang on, sustaining him somehow until they could reach him . . . Perhaps—perhaps there was a chance.

Michaela recognized the absurdity—the irrationality—of her belief. But was it any more absurd than
the reality of what had already happened? A vision in a dream which had revealed to her with absolute certainty the knowledge of Sully’s mortal peril? She and Sully shared a bond—mysterious, inexplicable—yet completely undeniable. Regardless of how foolish it might seem to anyone else, Michaela would trust her instincts.

“Ma?” said a voice by her ear, startling her so that she jerked in her chair. Michaela’s eyes flew open to reveal Brian standing next to her, clad only in his nightshirt, his legs and feet bare.

“Brian! What are you doing up?” she exclaimed softly. “You’re sick—you should be in bed, Sweetheart. And the floor is far too cold for you to be pattering about in bare feet.” Michaela laid her hand on his brow, checking for fever, and studied him for other signs of illness. But though his face was flushed from sleep, Brian’s skin was cool to the touch and his eyes were clear. She breathed a small sigh of relief.

“I woke up, but then I couldn’t get back to sleep,” Brian told her.

“Is your throat sore?” Michaela asked sympathetically, taking the afghan from her lap and wrapping it around him.

“A little, but that ain’t why,” he answered.

“Does something else hurt, Sweetheart?” she inquired in concern.

“No,” he replied. “It’s just—I heard you and Matthew talkin’ before—‘bout Sully.”

Michaela looked at Brian apprehensively. “You heard what we were saying?” she asked.

“I couldn’t make it out, but I heard ya say Sully’s name, and ya sounded real sad,” Brian explained. “Matthew, too. I got to thinkin’ about Sully and missin’ him. I s o m e t h i n ’ w r o n g w i t h S u l l y, M a ? ” he asked. ‘Is that why you’re worried’?

“You’re a very perceptive young man, Brian,” Michaela answered, trying to give him an optimistic smile. “Yes, I confess that I am rather concerned for Sully. I was planning to tell you in the morning, but I suppose we should talk about it now.” She opened her arms. “Why don’t you sit here in my lap?” she suggested.

Brian regarded her doubtfully. “Ain’t I too old for that now?” he asked a trifle regretfully.

Michaela smiled at him again. “Perhaps—but it can be our secret,” she said. “No one else needs to know. Besides, I need a hug!” she added truthfully. Brian climbed carefully onto her lap and wrapped his arms around her. Michaela held him close, her chin resting on his head.

“Why are ya worried about Sully, Ma?” Brian asked again, his cheek pillowed on her shoulder.

“Well, it all started with a conversation Sully and I had the other day, when he told me that he missed Cloud Dancing and wanted to find him,” she began quietly. The soft murmur of Michaela’s voice rose and fell as she gently told Brian about Sully, trying as tenderly as possible to prepare her child in case the worst happened.

“He ain’t gonna die, is he, Ma?” Brian asked fearfully, when she’d finished.

“I’m sure he’s fighting as hard as he can to stay with us,” she told him, stroking his tousled hair. “I’m going to fight too. I won’t give up, Brian. I promise you that,” she vowed, gazing into his eyes. Brian returned her gaze, reassured.

“You can save him, Ma—I know ya can,” her son said confidently. Michaela hugged him tightly, praying that Brian’s faith in her was justified.

“Back to bed now,” Michaela told him at last, giving him a kiss. “You need your rest to get well, and we have a very early start in the morning.”

Brian stretched and yawned. “All right, Ma,” he assented, his eyelids heavy. He stood up and
crossed the room to the sleeping alcove, but then stopped and faced her as he reached the curtain.

“I’m gonna pray for Sully—ask God to keep him safe and help him get well,” he told her. “Do ya want me to say a prayer for you, too?”

“Yes, Brian—I would appreciate that very much,” Michaela answered, swallowing over the lump in her throat as she regarded the precious face of her youngest son. He disappeared through the curtain, and Michaela leaned back in her chair once more to await the dawn.

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Cloud Dancing gently placed his hand on Sully’s chest, prostrated by grief and barely able to accept the evidence before him—that his closest friend and the brother of his heart, was dead.

For the first time since the medicine man had encountered him on the trail, Sully’s face wore a look of peace. But Cloud Dancing could take no comfort in Sully joining the spirits. He had been too young, with too bright a future, and too many people who loved and needed him.

Cloud Dancing had preached acceptance to Sully when the younger man had questioned the fairness of the Great Spirit taking back one of His own. But now the medicine man realized that “he” was the one who questioned. He couldn’t rid himself of the conviction that it hadn’t been Sully’s time—that there had been no excuse for this to happen. But his lack of acceptance made no difference. His brother was gone, and no amount of rage or lamentation would bring him back.

Slowly, deliberately, Cloud Dancing reached inside his coat and withdrew his knife. He pushed back his coat sleeves, preparing to rip the sleeves of his tunic and use his blade to symbolically slash his arms in the Cheyenne ritual of mourning.

Tears coursing silently down his cheeks, he was about to begin chanting the mourning dirge when his eye caught a movement that made his heart lurch in his chest. Doubting the evidence of his eyes—almost certain that it had only been a trick of light and shadow—Cloud Dancing nevertheless stared desperately at Sully’s hand resting on the ground beside his lifeless form. Sully’s body doubled, then trebled in his sight as tears distorted his vision. Impatiently he scrubbed his hand across his eyes, then intently stared again, praying with all his might. For several long seconds there was nothing, and the hope which had flared inside the medicine man plummeted to black despair. And then he saw it. Sully’s fingers twitched—once, twice, a third time.

Nearly faint with relief and gratitude, Cloud Dancing leaned over his friend and pressed his ear to Sully’s chest. A moment later he was rewarded with the faint sound of a heartbeat. There was no doubt. Sully was still alive.

Cloud Dancing resheathed his knife and moved quickly around to Sully’s head. He slid his hands under the unconscious man’s armpits, and dragged him gingerly across the ground closer to the fire, taking care to move his head as little as possible.

Once in the illumination of the firelight, Cloud Dancing took the cloth he had used to protect his hands from the heat of the cooking pot, and dampened it with water from Sully’s canteen. Gently he began to sponge the blood from Sully’s scalp, his heart in his throat as he gradually revealed the head wound. A few seconds later, weak with thanks, he determined that the bullet had not penetrated Sully’s skull, but only grazed it. The bleeding had already stopped and the wound had begun to clot. Still, the track of the bullet’s passing was raw and ugly, and would require stitches. Cloud Dancing knew that he could utilize a strand of horse tail to sew the wound himself, but it would be clumsy, and he preferred not to make the attempt under these frigid and primitive conditions. It would be much better to simply pack and bandage the wound until he could get Sully to Michaela, who possessed the sanitary conditions, fine silk thread and delicate skill necessary for such a procedure.

He took some yarrow root from his leather bag and gently packed it into the bullet wound. Then, extracting his knife once again, he slit the hem of his tunic and tore off a wide strip, pressing it over the wound and around Sully’s head.

Several minutes had elapsed as Cloud Dancing tended to Sully’s injury, but now he glanced over at Bloody Knife’s body, realizing that the scout could awaken at any time. The medicine man covered Sully with the blanket, then picked up his medicine bag, and yanked the rawhide drawstring free. He crossed the clearing to where Bloody Knife still lay face-down on the ground. Drawing the Indian’s wrists together
behind his back, Cloud Dancing bound them tightly with the rawhide. He stood, intending to return to Sully, but then stopped, staring down at the senseless scout. Cold fury raged in the medicine man, and unconsciously his hands balled into fists at his sides. He thought how easy it would be to slit Bloody Knife’s throat as he lay there, helpless. He could hide the body where it would never be found. No one would ever know what had happened, or who was responsible. Custer would suspect—in fact he would be certain—but he wouldn’t be able to prove it. And even if he could, it would be worth the sacrifice of Cloud Dancing’s own life, to punish the man who had come so close to taking the life of his brother. Who might still be responsible for Sully’s death. His brother was deathly ill and now further crippled by a gunshot wound—there was no guarantee that he would even live to see home.

Cloud Dancing walked over to the campfire and picked up his knife from where it lay on the ground. He held the weapon aloft, watching in fascination as the firelight played across the gleaming, razor-sharp surface. Then he lowered the knife and stroked the flat of the blade across his palm.

Cloud Dancing retraced his steps to the unconscious Indian. His hand clenched around the handle of the knife as anger hummed and vibrated through him. Speculatively, he stared down at the body of his enemy.

* * * * * * * * * *

The house had never been so quiet, nor Michaela’s feelings of loneliness more palpable, than during those long hours before they could leave on their mission of rescue. In the pre-dawn silence, she padded from one of her sleeping children to the next—tucking in their blankets and softly stroking their hair, reassuring herself that with her sons and daughter at least, all was well.

Her restless steps finally and inevitably took her to the window. She stared out at the blackness, unable to detect anything but her own haggard reflection gazing back at her, her eyes like dark pits in the pale oval of her face. She reached out and pressed her hand against the frigid cold of the window pane, wishing she could physically reach Sully with her touch, even as she mentally sought to reach him with her mind.

But there was no reply to her probing thoughts—no indication that Sully might somehow be hearing her across the vast stretch of distance that separated them. She wondered if Cloud Dancing’s spirits were watching over him. Her own God was silent, either deaf or immune to her prayers.

As she turned from the window at last, a movement outside caught the corner of her eye. She hurriedly moved to the oil lamp behind her, turning down the flame to a tiny glimmer to reduce the reflection in the glass. Then she returned to the window, peering out at the night. Large, soft flakes of snow dipped and swooped outside, carried on the whims of the wind. Few and intermittent at first, they quickly multiplied to a thick and steady curtain as she anxiously watched.

The snow which had been threatening since before Sully left—that she had tentatively begun to hope would pass them by—had finally fulfilled its promise. Only to Michaela, it was a curse. What more could happen, she thought dismally. How much more danger would Sully—would they all!--have to endure before they could bring him safely home again?

Her heart accelerating in her chest, Michaela hastily went to rouse Matthew.

* * * * * * * * * *

For the rest of his life, whenever he thought back to this defining moment, Cloud Dancing would always wonder what would have happened next had fate not intervened to take the decision out of his hands. As he raised the knife over the neck of his unconscious captive, something cold and wet brushed his cheek, as gentle and delicate as a lover’s kiss. He raised his free hand to his face, as he stared upwards toward the dark and menacing sky. Flat, fluffy flakes of snow whirled and capered above him, as if dancing to a tune from an invisible flute. Rapidly they increased, falling softly but continuously toward earth.

Abruptly waking from the murderous trance that had consumed him, Cloud Dancing slowly put his knife away, then went to his small collection of belongings. He hesitated briefly, then withdrew one of his own extra blankets. He carried it back to Bloody Knife, reluctantly draping it over the Indian’s body.

He hastened to Sully’s horse, readying the animal for the arduous journey to come. Gone were Cloud
Dancing’s worries about cold, frostbite, or keeping Sully astride their mount. Only one goal remained for him now—to somehow get them both safely out of the mountains and the rest of the way to the homestead ahead of the snow, which would pursue them relentlessly every step of the way.

The medicine man completed his preparations, then extinguished the campfire, kicking dirt over the last glowing embers. In the sudden and absolute darkness, he leaned over Sully’s still form.

“It is time, my brother,” Cloud Dancing whispered, sliding his arms under Sully’s body and lifting him as tenderly as if he were a child. “We are finally going home.”

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MY JOURNAL
Monday, 26 March, 1870

It’s three o’clock in the morning, but my mind is filled with thoughts of my evening with Dr. Mike—and how it ended—so that I can’t sleep.

It was a strange sensation, being in the homestead after so long. Well, that ain’t quite right. As far as I could recollect, I hadn’t set foot across the threshold of the place since I left it for the last time after Abagail died. But according to Dr. Mike and the kids, I’d been a frequent visitor ever since I offered to let it to her for a dollar a month when she first arrived in town.

(It’s confusing, sometimes, keeping track of “her” time and “mine.” I wonder if the day will ever come when it finally becomes “our” time?)

Anyway, I wasn’t sure how I’d feel, seeing it again, being reminded of all the memories with Abagail . . . Dr. Mike knew without my saying it what I was thinking—(I still can’t get over how she does that)—and she asked me if I was sure about this visit as we were leaving the clinic.

“If it helps, Sully, the homestead is much changed,” she said, leading me to her wagon. “All of your—former belongings—have been moved out to the barn, and of course the children and I have added our own personal touches. And over a year ago, you also expanded part of the structure to give us more room. Hopefully the changes will make things easier for you.”

“That’s—thoughtful of you,” I replied after a moment. “I appreciate it.” She started to get into the wagon, and without thinking, I put my hand under her arm and lifted her up. She gave me a quick glance, her cheeks sort of pink, then looked away, focusing her eyes straight ahead. “Thank you,” she said politely.

She reached for the reins, but I stretched out my hand to stop her. “I’ll drive,” I said. “After all—“ I gave her a crooked smile—“I know the way.”

“Oh—of course,” she said, favoring me with a small smile in return. She slid over on the seat and I climbed up and settled myself, intensely aware of the feel of her body pressed against mine. She seemed to notice it too, and slid over a little further, putting a small space between us.

We headed out, both of us feeling awkward outside the familiarity of the clinic. Suddenly, we weren’t “doctor and patient” any more, but something else. What, I couldn’t be sure. I gripped the reins, glad of the excuse to watch the road so that I wouldn’t have to meet her eyes.

As we left the outskirts of town and the road opened up before us, I searched around in my mind for something to talk about.

“How did the kids get home?” I asked finally, unable to come up with anything better.

“They walked,” she answered. “They often do, after church. And the weather has been so mild since that cold snap finally broke—“ She stopped suddenly, then awkwardly resumed, “That is, it seems as if we’re going to have a warm spring after all.”

“What cold snap?” I asked.
A few weeks ago, the weather was unusually bitter,” she answered after a pause. “The, uh, the ‘last
gasp’ of winter, I suppose you would say.” Her tone sounded odd, and I wondered what it was about a
spell of cold weather that would disturb her. It seemed like I was always wondering, these days, about the
“hidden meanings” of things. Over and over, it appeared to me like she would say one thing, while really
talking about another. I felt like I always had to be alert and listening to figure out what she truly meant.

“Was there a blizzard?” I asked curiously. “Did folks get hurt?”

“No, nothing like that,” Dr. Mike answered. “It’s just—well, you wouldn’t recall, and we didn’t
mention it to you, but you were exposed to the severe cold when you went to the mountains in search of
Cloud Dancing. Apparently you had contracted what should have been a mild catarrh, from Brian. You
didn’t begin to exhibit symptoms until after you’d reached Cloud Dancing. Unfortunately by then, your
exposure to the elements had already reduced your resistance, allowing the infection to grow out of control,
making you gravely ill. It’s what complicated your recovery from the bullet wound.”

“I . . . don’t remember nothing about those first few days, it’s true,” I acknowledged.

“You were unconscious through the worst of it,” Dr. Mike confirmed. “Perhaps that was a blessing.
By the time you regained your senses, the fever had broken and the infection was starting to abate.”

“You got me to feeling better real quick,” I told her. “I’m grateful, Dr. Mike.”

“My skill really had very little to do with it, Sully,” she said. “Fortunately you’re young and strong,
with a powerful constitution, and an equally powerful will to live. Those were the elements that were truly
responsible for your recovery.”

“That may be so, but I also had a good doctor,” I said, turning to deliberately look her in the eyes. “I
know how bad it was, Dr. Mike. Cloud Dancing told me what I went through. Truth is, he said I probably
wouldn’t have made it, except for you.”

She looked at me in startled surprise. “You saw Cloud Dancing?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It was sometime during the night after I first woke up in the clinic. I was pretty
groggy when he came, and I didn’t have a real clear sense of time. But I know it was late, so you were
probably sleeping. Anyway, Cloud Dancing said the spirits told him I’d come around, and he wanted to see
how I was. He didn’t stay but a few minutes, but he was there long enough to tell me that I’d been real
sick—that I nearly died.”

"Did you tell Cloud Dancing of your memory loss?” she asked curiously.

“To be honest, I ain’t sure,” I replied. “Like I said, things were still hazy for me. I don’t recall much of
our conversation. All I can really remember is that it was good to see the face of my friend, and that he
promised me I was going to be all right.”

“Of course he didn’t tell you of the danger he was in,” Dr. Mike surmised.

“You’re right about that,” I confirmed. “He’d never say or do nothing to make me worry about him.
He just told me that I was in good hands, and that I owed my life to you.” I stole a glance at her.

“Cloud Dancing is very generous,” she said, the rosy color in her cheeks deepening to scarlet. She
looked down at her lap.

“Cloud Dancing always tells the truth,” I said clearly.

Our eyes met again, and a strange sort of energy seemed to pass between us. My senses were
humming, like the vibration of a telegraph wire. I could tell she felt it too. This time the decision to turn
away was mutual, as if neither of us was ready to take the moment to its conclusion, whatever that might be
.

I cleared my throat. “So, you told me how I got appointed as Indian Agent, but not much else,” I
said, trying to turn the conversation to something less awkward. “I risked another glance at her. “Have I
done a good job?”
She looked relieved at the change of subject, and then her eyes warmed even more. “Oh yes,” she said with conviction. “You’ve done a wonderful job, Sully. Despite a host of problems—unreasonable rules, lack of cooperation from the army, broken promises from the government . . . You did everything in your power to make the lives of the Cheyenne easier while you had the chance. And now, with this new reservation at Palmer Creek—”

“New reservation?” I interrupted.

“Yes,” she said after a short hesitation. “After—Washita—the government chose to round up Indians of differing tribes and put them all together on one reservation. You were assigned to be the agent.”

“But many of the tribes are enemies!” I protested, angrily wondering how much further the government would go to destroy the Indians’ way of life.

“Yes, that’s true,” she acknowledged. “That was your argument when you first heard of the government plan. You felt so strongly that you threatened to resign your post.”

“What happened?” I asked. “Did I go through with it?”

“You went so far as to travel to the army camp at Wrightwood with your letter of resignation,” she replied. “But during the course of your journey, something apparently changed your mind.”

“What?” I said, finding it hard to believe I’d go back on my decision.

“I’m not quite sure,” she said after another hesitation. “You—didn’t speak to me about it at length—at least not at the time.”

“But I told you later?” I persisted.

The landscape had been growing more and more familiar as we drew closer to our destination. Just as she seemed to be debating how to answer, we rounded a bend in the road, and the homestead emerged from a screen of trees, nestled at the base of a gentle hill.

“Look!” Dr. Mike said quickly. “We’re here.”

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

(Sully paced back and forth in the dusty earth of the yard, retracing his steps over and over along the length of the building. Several feet away, scrupulously keeping his distance, stood Loren, accompanied by Maude.

Why was it taking so long? he thought for perhaps the hundredth time. It had been hours since Charlotte had arrived to take control of things.

“I’ve never known it to fail,” she’d said as he helped her down from her wagon. “Give babies a choice of comin’ at a civilized hour, or waitin’ till everyone’s sound asleep, and they’ll pick the middle of the night every time.” She smiled. “Least they could let a body get a good night’s rest first.”

Sully gave her a sickly smile. “She’s right in there,” he said nervously, pointing unnecessarily at the cabin.

Charlotte glanced at the building. “I sorta figured that,” she said indulgently.

“Oh—yeah,” Sully responded, embarrassed.

The midwife peered up into his face. “What’s the matter, Sully?” she asked, her eyes twinkling. “You’re lookin’ kinda peaked.”

“Just a little nervous, I guess,” he confessed, his stomach doing flip-flops. “Do Loren and Maude
“They were right behind me—they should be pullin’ in any time,” Charlotte told him. She gazed at him admiringly. “That was a real clever thing you did, sendin’ that pet wolf of yours into town with a note for me. As soon as he started barkin’, Brian woke up. He and the other kids are lookin’ after him now. Brian surely loves playin’ with that animal,” she added.

“Wolf loves him too,” Sully said. “I knew if I gave him somethin’ with Brian’s scent on it, he’d head straight to you,” he explained.

“Lucky you had Brian’s bandanna,” Charlotte remarked.

“A shreek suddenly issued from the house, and Sully blanched. Charlotte patted him on the shoulder. “Guess I’d better get in there,” she said. He nodded emphatically, his face greenish-white. Charlotte smiled again. “Don’t you worry now,” she told him soothingly. “Women been givin’ birth since time immemorial. “Fore you know it, that baby’s gonna be pokin’ its nose out at the world.”

Another yell came from within the cabin. Charlotte squeezed his shoulder and hastened up the steps and inside the house.

Sully agitatedly brushed the hair back from his forehead and began to move restlessly around the yard, praying that at any moment he would hear the welcome, blessed sound of a baby’s cry.

Yet a third hour ticked by, and still there was no word from Charlotte. Even more ominously, for the past ten minutes or so there had been no sound at all—neither cries of pain, nor the sound of a baby’s wail. Sully stared fixedly at the front door of the homestead, his face growing more and more haunted.

Suddenly the door opened, bathing the porch in a pool of warm lamplight. Charlotte stepped outside and moved toward the steps, as Sully hastened across the yard to meet her. He felt rather than heard Loren and Maude come up behind him. Sully waited at the base of the steps, his eyes watching Charlotte nakedly as she descended.

“Is it here?” he said rapidly. “Is it born? I didn’t hear no baby’s cry.”

Charlotte reached him. There were streaks of blood on her hands. Compulsively she wiped her hands on her apron as she regarded Sully, her eyes dark with pain.

“Sully—” she began, her voice low and heartbroken.

He stumbled back a step, the blood roaring in his ears. “No—“ he whispered.

Charlotte glanced compassionately at the shocked faces of Loren and Maude, then stepped off the bottom step and approached Sully. She gripped his arms and looked up into his ashen face.

“Sully, you gotta listen to me now,” she said gently. “The baby . . . She—she didn’t make it. Her color was blue when she came out. I tried the best I could, but I was never able to get her to take a breath.”

“I’m so sorry,” Charlotte told him softly, tears glimmering in her eyes as she looked at each of their faces.

A freezing coldness reached icy fingers inside him as he stared at Charlotte’s sorrowful features.

“Abagail?” he whispered.
Charlotte swallowed hard. She reached up to lay a gentle hand on his cheek. “She started bleedin’,” she said with difficulty. “I think—maybe somethin’ got torn inside. I did all I could, but...” She bit her lip. “If we’d only had a doctor—then... maybe...” Her words dwindled away.

“No!” Maude gasped, breaking down into tears.

“Is she gone?” he asked dully, the iciness inside spreading out to numb him all over.

“She’s still alive,” Charlotte managed. “But—you better go to her now... Better hurry.”

Sully brushed past her and started mechanically up the steps.

“You!” Loren shouted behind him. “You caused this!”

“Loren, don’t!” Maude implored in mingled grief and horror. Her husband ignored her.

“Ya stole my baby from me—my little girl—but that wasn’t good enough for ya!” he raged. “Ya wouldn’t be happy till ya took her away from me forever! You’re responsible! You killed her!”

Sully heard Loren’s hateful words but they washed over him, unheeded.

“Loren, hush!” Charlotte urged him gently. “You’re in shock—you don’t know what you’re sayin’—“

“I know,” Loren muttered bitterly, his voice thick with tears. “I know.”

Sully opened the door of the homestead and stepped inside. Slowly he approached the bed where she lay, his legs trembling as if they would no longer support him. He fell down on his knees at her bedside. Her face was turned away from him, and his eyes fastened on the pale curve of her cheek. He reached out shaking fingers to take her hand, which lay limply on the coverlet.

“Sweetheart—can you hear me?” he choked in a desolate whisper. “I’m here now. I’m with you. You’re—you’re gonna be f-fine...”

Her head turned slowly. Sully recoiled in horror as he saw Michaela’s eyes looking up at him.

“No!” he cried out in wretched anguish. As he watched, her eyes fluttered shut as her hand slipped from his grasp.

“No!” he repeated frantically, taking her lifeless body in his arms and hugging her to his chest. He rocked back and forth, his tears falling on her face like rain.

“Don’t leave me, Michaela,” he whispered, intoning the words like a litany. “Oh God, please don’t leave me. Don’t leave me...”

The light began to dim, and with it his awareness—shrinking down, down... dwindling to the tiniest pinpoint... till finally, there was nothing left at all.)

* * * * * * * * * *

“It ain’t a good idea, Dr. Mike,” Matthew said. He raked his hand through his hair, his fatigue-shadowed eyes regarding her soberly.

Michaela froze in the act of pulling on her boots. She stared up at him with a stunned expression. “What are you talking about?” she exclaimed. “It was you who was so intent on going in search of him, Matthew! Are you backing out of your commitment now?”

“’Course not,” he said quietly. “I have every intention of goin’ after Sully soon as it’s safe to travel. But it ain’t safe now, Dr. Mike.” He walked over to the window and gestured toward the glass. Large, soft flakes of snow fell in a dense, steady screen. “Look at it out there,” he said. “Visibility’s gettin’ worse. And there’s already an inch or two on the ground, coverin’ up the landmarks.
“If we start out now, while it’s still dark, we won’t be able to see a foot in front of our faces,” he went on. “Findin’ our way will be rough—if not downright impossible. If we lose the trail, or our sense of direction gets turned around—well, the consequences could be real serious.

“Dr. Mike—we won’t do Sully any good if we get lost, or one of us gets hurt,” he concluded gravely.

“Then what’s to be done?” Michaela entreated him, her eyes stricken. “We have to help him, Matthew!”

“And we will,” her son promised, hunkering down in front of her and taking her hand in his. “It’s only another hour or so till dawn. I swear, Dr. Mike—soon as it’s light, we’ll leave.”

“But by then twice as much snow could be on the ground,” she protested. “Won’t that make traveling just as difficult—if not worse?”

“It’s still better than stumblin’ around in the dark,” he maintained. “Least we’ll have the light. And who knows—this may let up by mornin’.”

“But time is of the essence, Matthew,” she said desperately. “Sully was shot in my dream. And he was already deathly ill. For all we know, even as we speak, he—he could be dying . . .”

“Don’t let yourself think like that,” Matthew urged her. “Sides, I don’t believe it. Sully’s strong—even sick and hurt like he is now. He ain’t done yet. I’d be willin’ to stake my life on it.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “It’s gonna be all right, Ma,” he said softly.

Michaela clutched Matthew’s hand tightly, praying that this time, her son’s instincts were better than her own.

* * * * * * * * * *

The first fingers of dawn were stretching across the sky as Cloud Dancing guided the horse carefully through the soft drifts, the animal’s hooves kicking up small bursts of powder as it moved along. Sully sat in front of him, his head and torso slumped over the horse’s neck. Cloud Dancing’s arms were wrapped around his friend, holding onto the reins. A deep and persistent ache had settled into the medicine man’s limbs, the muscles taut and sore from the strain of supporting Sully’s unconscious weight over the many miles of their journey. Even after descending out of the mountains, Cloud Dancing had chosen not to waste time by stopping to construct a travois. Speed had been of the essence, despite the fact that the use of a litter would have relieved his burden. All that mattered had been getting Sully to Michaela, regardless of the physical cost to himself.

Thankfully, Cloud Dancing realized, their arduous journey was nearly at an end. Dimly through the swirling screen of snow, he could make out the clump of trees ahead that signaled the final bend in the road before they reached the homestead. He pressed his heels into the horse’s sides, urging the tired animal forward as they covered the last quarter mile to their destination.

A few minutes later, they rounded the turn and the homestead was revealed, its facade shrouded by a lacy curtain of white. The cabin seemed to slumber in its niche at the base of the snow-covered hill, the only outward sign of life a wisp of smoke curling up from the chimney. In spite of his exhaustion, and his persistent fear for Sully, Cloud Dancing was conscious of a feeling of relief—even optimism—that they had reached their goal in the face of such daunting odds. He leaned forward, his mouth near Sully’s ear.

“We are here, my brother,” he said. “We are here.” Spurring the horse yet again, Cloud Dancing rode the final few yards to the homestead.

* * * * * * * * * *

“Brian, be sure to bundle up,” Michaela instructed, slipping on her coat and covering her head with a wide-brimmed hat. “Colleen, could you help him please? And then would you bank the fires in the stove and hearth, and put out the lamps?”

“Sure, Ma,” Colleen answered, hastening to fulfill her mother’s request.

“Matthew, did you load the saddle-bags?” Michaela asked anxiously.
“Everythin’s packed up and ready to go,” her son assured her, the crown of his hat and shoulders of his coat dusted by a powder of snow from his preparations outside.

Michaela checked Brian critically to ensure that he was bundled to her satisfaction. A stocking cap was pulled down low on his head, and his features barely protruded from the thick scarf wrapped about his neck. A heavy coat, thick gloves and rugged boots completed his costume. Colleen was similarly attired.

“Can we go now, Ma?” Brian asked eagerly, his concern about Sully somewhat blunted by his anticipation of an adventure in the snow—even if it was just a trip to the clinic.

“Well, if everything is ready, then yes, it’s time to leave,” his mother answered, gazing around her anxiously to see if she had forgotten anything.

Matthew noted her anxiety and the reason for it. “You thought of everythin’, Dr. Mike,” he assured her again. “Let’s get started.”

Michaela nodded. “You’re right,” she agreed. “Matthew, please bring the horses from the barn.”

“I’ll come with ya!” Brian offered.

“All right,” his big brother agreed. Brian ran ahead of him to open the door. He stopped stock still in the doorway. “Hey,” he exclaimed. “Somebody’s comin’!”

Michaela looked toward him sharply, unable to imagine who could be abroad at this hour and in such inclement weather. Not some medical emergency, she prayed. Not now! How she could turn away a patient who needed her?

She hurried to the open doorway, followed by Matthew and Colleen. They watched as the visitor approached, unable to discern anything beyond the vague, dark shape of a horse and rider. But wait—were there *two* riders astride the horse? Michaela strained her eyes to see more clearly.

Suddenly a faint, trilling sound reached them. A familiar sound, like the call of a mockingbird . . .

“Oh my God!” Michaela gasped, her hand going to her throat.

“Cloud Dancin’!” Matthew said at the same moment. In a flash he was out of the house and bounding down the steps to the yard. Michaela watched as he ran to meet the rider, his boots kicking up sprays of snow in his wake.

Michaela stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. Her entire body shook. She hardly dared to hope that Cloud Dancing had been able to make it home, and that he’d brought Sully to her.

But a moment later, her eyes confirmed what her heart and mind had been afraid to believe. Matthew was standing by the horse, his arms outstretched to receive the slumped body of one of the riders as the other swung his leg over the horse’s back and jumped to the ground. They were close enough now that Michaela could plainly see Cloud Dancing’s black hair blowing in the wind, and Sully’s blonde-brown hair, partially obscured by the bandage wrapped around his head. Together, Cloud Dancing and Matthew carefully bore Sully to the house, his unconscious body supported between them.

Her paralysis breaking at last, Michaela backed away from the door to allow them room to enter. As she got her first sight of Sully’s face, his eyes closed and his skin bleached to a deathly pallor, her heart plummeted in despair. Was he even alive?

“Sully is badly hurt and sick—he needs you,” Cloud Dancing greeted her breathlessly.

“I know,” she said softly. The medicine man accepted her statement, showing no sign of surprise at her knowledge.

Michaela followed her son and friend as they carried Sully to the bed and gently laid him down.

“My medical bag, Matthew,” Michaela said briefly, dropping onto the bed and leaning over Sully. Matthew snatched it up from where it rested on the dining table and brought it to her. Michaela hurriedly
unfastened Sully’s coat and ripped the edges of his shirt apart. She fumbled with the clasp of her bag, her trembling hands feeling large and clumsy. After a moment she managed to open the bag and withdraw her stethoscope. She put the instrument to her ears and placed the bell over Sully’s chest. The shallow sound of a heartbeat came to her. Quickly she placed her fingers on his throat, searching for his pulse. A second later she felt its weak, rapid rhythm.

Michaela’s eyes went to the bandage on Sully’s head. “How bad?” she asked, looking quickly up at Cloud Dancing.

“The bullet did not pierce the skull,” he told her. “He was lucky.”

Michaela’s eyes closed briefly as she breathed a deep sigh of relief and gratitude.

“The bleeding stopped on its own,” Cloud Dancing elaborated further. “But the wound will need to be sewn. I thought it was safer to wait and bring him to you, rather than do it myself. I packed the wound with yarrow root.”

“You did exactly what I would have,” Michaela told him. “Thank you.” She took a small pair of scissors out of her bag and gingerly cut through the clumsy, slightly blood-stained bandage, easing the cloth away from the wound. She studied the injury, carefully pushing Sully’s hair aside to probe gently around the edges. As Cloud Dancing had reported, it was not life-threatening, and inwardly she thanked God once again. Deciding the head wound could wait while she ascertained Sully’s other symptoms, Michaela picked up the bell of her stethoscope again and pressed it to the quadrants of Sully’s chest. Her face paled as she listened. She kept her eyes averted from the faces of her children anxiously watching, so they would not see how frightened she was.

Michaela placed her hand on Sully’s forehead, nearly recoiling in shock as she felt the extreme heat radiating from his skin. His fever was dangerously high. In dismay, she realized that every aspect of her vision had come true.

“How is he?” Cloud Dancing asked quietly.

Michaela looked up at him briefly, cutting her eyes to Brian and shaking her head slightly. Almost imperceptibly, the medicine man nodded.

“Brian, I could use your help,” she said calmly.

“Sure,” he answered with alacrity. He had shed his coat, scarf and hat while she attended to Sully, and now he joined her by the bed. “What can I do, Ma?” he asked solemnly.

“Take one of these cloths, and dampen it in the water, then bathe Sully’s face, neck and chest,” Michaela instructed. “We need to get his fever down.” She stood up from her place on the bed and pulled the quilt over Sully’s body up to the chest. Then she stood back to allow Brian to take her place.

Brian nodded, and carefully sat down beside Sully. He wet a cloth and gently began to press it to Sully’s skin, treating his responsibility with the utmost gravity.

Michaela moved away from the bed, gesturing to the others to join her across the room. The four of them gathered in the corner, positioned so that they could keep an eye on Sully as they talked.

“How is he, Ma?” asked Colleen, echoing Cloud Dancing. “Is the bullet wound bad?”
“Ironically, that may be the least of his problems,” Michaela replied, her eyes haunted as she stared at the man she loved. “As Cloud Dancing told us, the bullet merely grazed the scalp. I could detect no visible sign of compression in the brain, though I won’t know for sure until he regains consciousness. I’ll need to monitor him carefully. However, Cloud Dancing did an excellent job of cleaning and packing the wound to survive the journey. I should be able to stitch it without difficulty.” She paused. The others watched her soberly.

“It’s his other symptoms that have me worried,” she confessed finally. “There’s the fever, which is extremely high. I can give him bark tea for that—”

“I tried,” Cloud Dancing told her. “It did not work.”

“The infection was probably too severe,” Michaela surmised. “I’ll try quinine instead—it should help. But—” She broke off.

“What is it, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked.

Michaela sighed heavily. “His lungs are congested,” she said.

“Consumption?” asked Cloud Dancing, no stranger to this white man’s disease that—along with many other such illnesses—had decimated so many Indian populations.

“No, not consumption,” Michaela replied. “It’s true, consumption also infects the lungs. But I’m afraid that what Sully is suffering from is pneumonia.” At her mention of the word, the expressions of her children and friend grew even graver.

“Ordinarily, I would be optimistic that Sully’s youth and vitality would help him overcome the infection,” she went on, her voice not quite steady. “But he’s been so weakened by his ordeal, and his body is under such assault—” She swallowed, her eyes dark with despair.

“I’m afraid . . . he may lose the battle.”

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The homestead was familiar, and I felt a pang inside at my first sight of it. But true to Dr. Mike’s promise, there had been enough changes that I didn’t feel as strange or melancholy as I might have. Plus it was kind of hard to be sad when I was greeted by not one, but *two* wolves as I walked through the door! I didn’t realize how much I’d missed my old friend till I had my arms around him, rubbing his thick fur and scratching behind his ears. He seemed to feel the same way, because he nearly knocked me flat the moment he saw me, jumping up to put his paws on my chest and licking me up and down. The younger wolf seemed to know me too, crowding in to get a good whiff of me and then licking me on the hand.

“Who’s this?” I asked Brian, regarding the young one with interest.

“He’s mine,” Brian said proudly. “Wolf is his pa. You gave him to me as a Christmas present two years ago when he was just a pup. So that’s what I called him.”

I smiled, rubbing the young one’s muzzle. “Hey, Pup,” I said. “You’re a handsome fella—a real credit to your pa.” Brian and I played with the animals a few more minutes, and then Dr. Mike suggested that Brian and Matthew take them out to the barn and feed them before we sat down to eat.

While Dr. Mike and Colleen got supper on the table, I wandered around the room, looking at the pictures on the walls and the knick-knacks scattered about, and trailing my hand over the dark, solid furniture—most of which I’d built myself. I had a painful moment when I caught sight of the rocker by the fireplace. I’d made that for Abagail when she was big with child—wanting to give her a special chair all her own where she could sit and nurse our baby, or just rock her to sleep. Though it hurt to look at it now, I was glad that it had gotten some use after all.

It wasn’t long, though, before the mouth-watering aroma of fried chicken and home-made biscuits drew me to the table. It turned out to be even better than I’d imagined, and I had at least two helpings of everything. After biting into my third biscuit, relishing the way it melted in my mouth, I said, “You sure
are a good cook, Dr. Mike. That's one hidden talent of yours you didn’t tell me about.”

Dr. Mike and Colleen eyed each other, Matthew tried to smother a grin, and Brian giggled outright.

“Did I say something funny?” I asked, not taking offense, but curious at their reaction. Dr. Mike gave me a slightly embarrassed smile, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

“The children are simply amused at your praise of my cooking skills,” she explained wryly. “I’m afraid my so-called ‘talent’ is so deeply hidden, that it’s nearly non-existent.

“No, the credit for this meal—and most of our others—goes to Colleen,” she added, looking at her daughter fondly. “She’s the cook in this family.”

“It’s real good, Colleen,” I told her. “Charlotte taught you well.”

Colleen colored shyly, dropping her eyes, but a moment later she looked up at me.

“Dr. Mike’s too modest,” she said, glancing warmly at her adopted mother. “It’s true she didn’t know a lot when she first came here, but she’s gotten lots better.”

“That don’t surprise me,” I said, replying to Colleen, but feeling my eyes drawn to Dr. Mike. “I’m sure your ma can do anything she puts her mind to.”

“She sure can,” Brian chimed in. “Ma’s the smartest, prettiest lady in town!”

“Brian—” said Dr. Mike, blushing.

“It’s true, Ma,” Colleen echoed. “You’re a great doctor, you’re on the town council . . . Ma even ran against Mr. Slicker for mayor once,” she told me.

“That a fact?” I said.

“It’s true,” confirmed Matthew. “I gotta admit, I was against it at first—thought it was a man’s job. But Dr. Mike proved me wrong.”

“You won?” I said to Dr. Mike in surprise.

“No, I lost,” she replied, still blushing a little. “But as a result of my candidacy, and a rather clever plan of yours, we managed to secure the vote for the women of the town.”

“Sounds like an interesting story,” I commented. “Tell me more.”

We lingered around the table as the four of them related the tale of Dr. Mike’s famous political campaign, and my small but significant part in it. Frequently they interrupted each other in their eagerness to tell me of some funny or memorable incident; and there was a lot of joking and laughter.

I felt good—best I’d felt since I woke up, in fact. And the feeling appeared to be contagious. Everyone seemed relaxed and happy. The kids didn’t seem nearly so nervous this time—I got no sense that they felt like they had to “walk on egg shells” around me. I suppose Dr. Mike had told them how she’d started filling in the blanks for me concerning the time I’d lost, so they weren’t so afraid of saying the wrong thing. Whatever the reason for the change in them, I was glad. I think they were too.

Colleen finally got up to begin clearing the dishes, but Dr. Mike stopped her. “You cooked a wonderful meal,” she said. “Now I want you to run off and have some fun. I’ll clean up.”

“And I’ll help,” I added. “Least I can do to thank you for the great food and kind hospitality.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Colleen exclaimed, impulsively hugging Dr. Mike. “You too, Sully,” she added to me. She paused a moment, giving the two of us a kind of knowing look, then glanced over at Matthew with a mischievous little smile on her lips. He returned the look with a similar expression of his own.

“I guess I’ll go over to Becky’s,” she announced a moment later. “I’ll be home before dark,” she promised.
“Have a good time!” Dr. Mike said cheerfully, looking up from the table where she was stacking the dirty plates. Colleen snatched a shawl from a hook on the wall, and went out the door.

Matthew cleared his throat. “Wood box could stand to be filled,” he said casually. “Think I’ll head outside and take care of that.”

“Brian,” he added, staring hard at his little brother. “How ’bout comin’ with me and givin’ me a hand?”

Brian looked up from where he sat on the floor by the fireplace, playing with the cars of a carved wooden train. “You never let me chop wood before,” he protested innocently.

Matthew shot an awkward glance at me, then turned back to his brother. “So—come out and watch,” he said. “When I’m done, maybe we can head down to the creek and do a little fishin’.”

“Sure!” said Brian, jumping up from the floor, his train forgotten. “See ya later, Ma, Sully,” he added.

“Later,” Matthew echoed.

“Be careful,” Dr. Mike cautioned, giving Brian a quick kiss. “Matthew, be sure to watch out for him.”

“You know I will,” Matthew assured her. He put on his hat and pushed Brian gently out the door ahead of him.

Just that quick, the two of us were alone.

“What was that all about?” I said to Dr. Mike, helping her carry the dishes to the sink.

“I really don’t know,” she said lightly. “I suppose they thought we’d like some private time to talk.”

But I noticed she didn’t look me in the eyes as she spoke.

In truth, I had an idea what the kids had been up to, though I didn’t know why they thought they should treat Dr. Mike and me like we were a couple. Maybe they had been hoping Dr. Mike would find somebody to keep company with, and they figured I might be a good choice. Fact is, now that I thought about it, I realized she had never mentioned anything to me about having a man in her life. It seemed hard to believe, beautiful as she was, that men weren’t beating down her door. But maybe she figured her life was full enough with three children and a medical practice, and she didn’t need anything—or anyone—else. Somehow, the idea of that caused another little pang inside me, though I didn’t understand why. Or maybe I did—but I didn’t want to pursue the thought. It appeared like Dr. Mike didn’t want to either, from the way she kept her face carefully averted from me as she filled a wash basin with warm water from the kettle on the stove.

“You wash, I’ll dry,” I offered, and she did glance at me then, seeming to relax a little.

We busied ourselves with the task at hand, making short work of the dishes. I helped her put them away, then she wiped down the surface of the table with a damp rag, hanging it over the pump to dry. Cleaning chores done, she looked a little uncertain, like she wasn’t sure what to do next, but then she favored me with a smile.

“Would you like some coffee?” she offered. “I can brew a fresh pot.”

“Sounds good,” I replied politely. She busied herself with the preparations as I strolled around the room once again, looking at all the homey little touches she’d added to brighten up the place. I stopped before a shelf on the wall that held a small collection of books. It was an interesting assortment: Goethe rubbed shoulders with Walt Whitman’s LEAVES OF GRASS. There was also a collection of essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I took down the copy of Whitman, paging idly through it.

“You enjoy poetry?” I asked.

She looked at the title of the book I held, then quickly glanced away, her blush returning. “Yes, I do,” she replied after a moment. “Though I don’t get very much time to read, what with my practice and the
children."

“I got to say, I’m kind of surprised to see this particular poet,” I remarked. “A lot of folks think he’s got a reputation for being a little, uh, ‘frank.’”

“You disapprove?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” I replied. “I admire Whitman. And I admire you for appreciating what he’s got to say.”

“Well actually, those books were my father’s,” Dr. Mike explained, bringing the coffeepot to the table and filling two Wedgewood cups. “A few months ago my mother sent them to me, as well as the rest of his extensive collection. She knew how much I’d treasured them growing up, and thought I’d like to have them.”

“Where are the rest?” I asked.

“I used them to open the town’s first library,” she told me as we sat down.

“That was a generous thing to do,” I commented.

“One would have thought so—but I’m afraid there was quite a bit of trouble in the beginning, when certain townspeople objected to the contents of some of the books and decided to exercise their own version of censorship,” she said.

“Such as?”

“They began by closing down the library,” she sighed. “Then they engaged in some nocturnal incidents of confiscation—by going from door to door and demanding the return of all the books they found objectionable.”

“Folks never stop being afraid of anything that’s different,” I said, resentful but unsurprised at the townspeople’s rigid and narrow-minded attitudes.

“I finally determined to take back the books, and lend them out myself to those who wanted them,” Dr. Mike continued. “However this angered my—opponents—so much, that they decided the only way to ‘stamp out’ this threat, was to burn all the books in my father’s collection.”

“You’re jokin’,” I said, shocked.

“I’m afraid not,” she answered. “Fortunately we were able to put out the fire before all the books were destroyed, but most of the volumes were badly damaged—many beyond repair.”

“That must have hurt you real bad,” I ventured sympathetically.

“Yes,” she admitted. “It felt as if a piece of my father had been torn from me. However, at least one good thing came out of it. When they realized that one of the ‘dangerous’ books they’d burned was a copy of the Holy Bible—they finally came to their senses. They reopened the library, and from that time onward, they no longer attempted to dictate what books were, or were not, acceptable.”

“I’m glad for your sake that things turned out all right in the end—but I’m sorry for your loss,” I told her.

“Thank-you,” she said to me sincerely.

My fingers caressed the leather binding covering the copy of Whitman. “So have you actually read this?” I asked curiously. “I mean—being it was your father’s, and considering its reputation—I thought maybe you just kept it for sentimental reasons.”

Her blush deepened, but she met my eyes. “Well, I’m ashamed to confess that at first, I felt much the same as the more—conservative—members of the town did... about that *particular* book anyway,” she admitted. “That must sound hard to believe, in view of what I just told you, doesn’t it? All I can say in my defense is that in some ways, I’m still very much a product of my strict upbringing. But fortunately, a—a friend—helped me to see the beauty in Whitman’s words, and taught me that I needn’t be embarrassed or
afraid to read them.”

“Sounds like a good friend,” I commented, returning her glance.

“Yes—a very good friend,” she said softly.

That same sensation of energy flowing back and forth between us, came over me again. It was so powerful, I could almost see a flash of sparks—as if I was the steel and she was the flint—and together we created a combustible combination.

My eyes dropped to the cover of the book, as I tried to slow the rapid beating of my heart. Finally, though, I looked back up at her. “Would you like to hear me read something from this?” I asked a little shyly.

She met my eyes again. “I’d like that,” she said.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Michaela scrubbed the tears from her cheeks and drew herself up to her full height of five feet, two inches. She did not have the luxury of time to indulge in worry and weeping. She had only one job now—to remain clear-eyed and focused on the goal of giving Sully the treatment he desperately needed to survive. Besides, she had promised Brian that she would fight for Sully, and she had never broken her word to her children. She would do everything in her power to keep this most important of promises—if it took every last breath in her body.

As the others observed the air of determination that had come over Michaela, her petite figure seemed to grow taller. Even Colleen, with her specialized knowledge of Sully’s critical condition, felt herself growing more confident about his chances as she watched her mother assume the familiar and reassuring mantle of doctor.

“What can we do, Dr. Mike?” asked Matthew.

“The first order of business is to reduce Sully’s fever,” Michaela responded. “Right now, it’s as if there’s a furnace burning within his body, consuming him from the inside out. We have to cool him down,” she stressed.

“I’ll start by administering the quinine,” she continued. “With luck, the medication—coupled with cool sponge baths—will reduce his temperature. If that doesn’t work, we’ll resort to using ice. This snowfall may actually prove to be a blessing if we need to go to those extreme measures,” she added.

“But don’t you need to stitch his head wound first?” Colleen asked.

“Stitching the wound is vital, of course,” Michaela agreed. “But I would rather not give Sully chloroform or attempt any surgery while his fever remains so high. His chances of withstanding even a minor procedure will be much better if we can lower his fever.”

“What about the pneumonia?” her daughter inquired further.

A shadow crossed Michaela’s face. “That will be more of a challenge,” she conceded. “If necessary, I can drain the fluid from his lungs. Apart from that, however, there’s not much we can do except to treat the fever and keep a kettle of boiling hot water continuously by his bed. The steam will humidify the air and aid in reducing his congestion.”

“I’ll heat the water,” Colleen offered.

“Thank you, Colleen,” Michaela said gratefully, as her daughter moved quickly to the stove. She turned to her son. “Matthew, I’ll need you to go to the clinic and bring me additional supplies. I have a limited supply of quinine in my bag, but I’m afraid there won’t be enough to see Sully through this.”

“Sure—just tell me everything you need,” Matthew said.
“I’ll make a list,” Michaela told him.

“What can I do?” Cloud Dancing asked quietly.

“You’ve already done more than I could ever ask,” Michaela told him. “You kept Sully alive and brought him home to me.”

“Still, I want to help,” he told her.

“You once told me that prayers can heal,” Michaela recalled. “Sully can use all your prayers now.”

The medicine man nodded. “I will call on the spirits to help you both,” he said.

The two of them looked across the room to where Brian faithfully continued to sponge Sully’s feverish skin.

“The spirits may be all that can truly help him now,” Michaela said with a catch in her voice, momentarily surrendering to her fear.

“The spirits will help, but *you* are the one who will make him well,” Cloud Dancing said.

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“There,” Michaela said, as she suctioned the last of the fluid from Sully’s lungs. She expelled the contents of the syringe into an adjacent pan, then put her stethoscope to her ears and listened to his chest once more. “He’s breathing easier now,” she added after a moment, laying the instrument aside. She took her watch from the pocket of her apron and studied it as she grasped his wrist. Finally, she gently lifted the bandage she had recently applied and examined her sutures, then checked the pupils of his eyes.

“How’s he doin’, Ma?” Colleen asked, staring solicitously down at Sully from where she stood by her mother’s shoulder.

“Marginally better,” Michaela replied. “He doesn’t seem to have suffered any adverse effects from my putting in the stitches. The pupils of his eyes appear normal, and there’s still no sign of any cranial swelling or compression. His pulse is stronger, and—for the moment at least—his lungs are clear.”

“What about the fever?” Colleen said.

“It’s one hundred and two, the same as when I began the procedure,” Michaela answered.

“That’s good,” Colleen commented. “It’s down nearly two degrees since Cloud Dancin’ brought Sully home, and it didn’t go up after you stitched the wound—the quinine must be workin’.”

“It seems to be,” Michaela acknowledged cautiously, afraid of getting her hopes up too soon. “However, his temperature is still more elevated than I’d like. I wish I could have further reduced his fever before subjecting him to a surgical procedure, but I just couldn’t wait any longer.” She hovered over Sully broodingly, gently stroking the hair from his hot, dry brow.

“You did what you had to do, Ma. And Sully came through it fine. He’ll get better, the longer he’s on the quinine. It’s only been a few hours,” Colleen told her encouragingly.

“You’re right, I’m sure,” Michaela responded, trying to convince herself as much as her daughter. She stretched, then scrubbed her face with her hands, her features pale and drawn and her eyes dark with fatigue. Then, noting the time as she slipped her watch back into her pocket she added, “He’s due for another dose, and he needs to be sponged down again.” She reached for the bottle of quinine on the nightstand, but Colleen put her hand on her mother’s arm.

“I’ll do it,” she offered. “You’re exhausted, Ma—you need to lay down and rest for a while.”

“I am tired,” Michaela admitted. “But I don’t think I can sleep, Colleen. I feel as if I need to stay by Sully’s bedside, in case there’s any change . . .” Her eyes pored over his features, hungry for the even the slightest indication of improvement.
“You know I’ll wake you if anythin’ happens,” Her daughter assured her. “Look,” she added, moving to the rocker by the fireplace and sliding it over close by the bed. “You can sit and nap right here. Then you’ll be near Sully and you can still get some rest.”

Michaela gave her a small but grateful smile. “That’s a good idea—thank you Colleen.” But a moment later her eyes had strayed back to where Sully lay white and still, his features almost marble-like in repose.

“He’s been unconscious for so long,” she murmured. “I had thought he would start to come around by now.”

d said yourself his body has been through a trauma,” Colleen reminded her. “Maybe this is his body’s way of helpin’ him build up his strength, to fight off the infection.”

Michaela regarded Colleen with approval and admiration. “The pupil instructs the teacher,” she said. Colleen blushed, but looked pleased.

“I’m only tellin’ you what you’d tell me, if I was in your place—if it were the man I loved that was sick,” she said.

“You’re right again, Colleen,” Michaela acknowledged, impressed by her daughter’s perceptiveness. “I’m afraid my personal feelings are affecting me. I have to try harder to remain detached. I can’t let my emotions distract me or affect my judgement.”

“You’re only human, Ma,” Colleen said gently. “You can’t help loving Sully, or bein’ scared for him.”

“But right now, he needs my strength and my professional expertise, more than he needs my affection,” Michaela replied. His eyes went to Sully’s face again.

“He needs your skill, and your love,” Cloud Dancing said softly, coming up behind her. “It is your love for each other that kept him alive long enough for you to help him.”

Michaela nodded, feeling humbled by the medicine man’s wisdom—as well as her daughter’s.

“I’m very grateful to have both you and Colleen here, to help me see clearly,” she told him. She slipped one arm around Colleen’s waist, and stretched out her other hand to grasp Cloud Dancing’s. “I’m grateful for all my loved ones being with me,” she said sincerely. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” As she spoke she looked over to where Brian lay with Pup on the rug before the fireplace. The boy was asleep, one arm flung across his pet. Pup slept as well, his head pillowed on his paws. The young wolf’s sire, however, lay firmly planted at the foot of Sully’s bed. He had moved to the spot as soon as Sully had been brought in, and hadn’t moved since. Michaela marveled at Wolf’s instincts and devotion.

“We need you too, Ma,” Colleen said to her mother. “That’s why you’ve got to rest for a while, and let us help you.”

“Colleen is right,” Cloud Dancing agreed. “You must renew your strength, for your sake and for Sully’s.”

“You’re both right,” Michaela conceded. “Doctors who let themselves become exhausted run the risk of making mistakes. I can’t let that happen. Not with Sully relying on me. And he could be facing a long siege. I need to be clear-headed in order to make the best, most informed decisions regarding his care.”

“I could never imagine you makin’ a mistake, Ma—especially where Sully’s concerned,” said Colleen. “But we don’t want to see you runnin’ yourself ragged, and maybe fallin’ sick yourself. Please take advantage of us bein’ here. We’ll help you with anythin’ Sully needs—all you got to do is ask.”

“You flatter me, Colleen—but I can assure you that I’m far from perfect. I’m just as fallible as anyone else. However, your good sense has convinced me. Perhaps now a good time for me to take a brief rest,” Michaela agreed.

“You’ll administer the quinine, and bathe Sully?” she added.

“Consider it done,” Colleen told her. “And I want *you* to sit here in this chair, put your head back
and close your eyes. Most of all, try not to worry.”

“The part about not worrying will be difficult,” Michaela admitted, “but I can certainly obey your other instructions. You’re going to be a fine and sensitive doctor, Colleen,” she added.

“I’m learnin’ from the best,” Colleen told her mother.

Michaela settled herself in the rocking chair, as Colleen solicitously covered her with the afghan. “Sleep well, Ma,” she said softly.

“We will watch over Sully,” Cloud Dancing assured her.

Michaela nodded, finally allowing her tired eyes to close. Cloud Dancing quietly moved to the nightstand. He dipped a cloth in the water basin and gently began sponging his brother’s neck and chest, as Colleen poured a dose of the quinine and spooned it between Sully’s fever parched lips. Then she dampened a second cloth and began helping Cloud Dancing in the task of cooling Sully’s hot skin.

The side door opened suddenly, banging against the wall as it was buffeted by a stiff gust of wind. Matthew entered, amidst a swirl of snowflakes. The noise of his entrance startled Colleen and Cloud Dancing, and caused Michaela and Brian, as well as the two wolves, to jerk awake.

“Sorry!” Matthew apologized, forcing the door closed behind him. “Didn’t mean to scare you all. Wind’s so strong the door got away from me.” He set down the box of supplies he’d been carrying and took off his hat, beating it against his side to shake off the snow. He stamped more snow free from his boots, then took them off by the entryway so as not to make wet tracks through the cabin.

“It’s all right, Matthew,” Michaela told him, rubbing her burning eyes. “Did you bring all the items I wrote down?”

“Everythin’ on the list,” her son answered. He shrugged off his coat and hung it on a nail, then brought the box to the table as Michaela rose from her chair and came over to check the contents.

“Ma, you should sleep—I can do this,” Colleen said.

“Thank you, Colleen, but I need to go through it all myself, to ensure that everything is correct—with all respect to you, Matthew,” she added.

“It’s all right. I understand, Dr. Mike,” he said.

“How was travelin’?” Colleen asked her brother. “Is the snow gettin’ worse?”

“Fact is, it wasn’t too bad,” Matthew responded, going to the stove and pouring himself a cup of coffee. “There ain’t as much on the ground as we thought, and it looks like it might be startin’ to let up.”

“That’s a relief,” Michaela commented, studying the label of a bottle she held in her hand. She glanced up at Matthew. “Are people in town weathering the storm all right?” she added.

“Seem to be,” Matthew answered. “The café’s closed, and the school—” Brian’s face broke into a big smile at this news—“but Loren’s store is open and Dorothy’s puttin’ out the Gazette. And there’s the saloon, of course,” he added with a little grin.

“Of course,” Michaela echoed wryly.

“I ran into the Widow Farnsworth when I was fixin’ to come home,” Matthew went on. “She wanted to know if you’ll be back in the clinic tomorrow. Said she had an appointment for you to treat her neuralgia.”

“Oh dear, that’s right,” Michaela exclaimed, distressed. “And Horace’s gout is acting up again—he asked me a few days ago if I could take a look at it. I’m sure there will be other patients as well who’ll be needing my services. I’m afraid I’ve been so preoccupied with Sully that I didn’t think about anyone else.”

“That’s understandable, Dr. Mike,” Matthew remarked reasonably. “Sully’s gotta be your first priority now. Sides, it didn’t appear to me like there were any emergencies. I’m sure everyone will understand
and be willin’ to wait a few days till Sully’s doin’ better.”

“*If* he’s doing better,” Michaela qualified. “And I’m sure you’re right about my other patients. Nonetheless, I’m this town’s only doctor, and I owe it to the people who rely on me to be available if I’m needed.”

“Seems like there’s a simple solution to that,” Matthew responded. “We’ll just move Sully to the clinic. Then you’ll be able to tend to him and still see anybody else who comes in.”

“Under ordinary circumstances, that would be the logical thing to do,” Michaela said. “But while Sully’s fever is elevated and he’s still so weak, I feel it would be too dangerous to expose him to the elements. I believe we need to wait at least another twenty-four hours, and give this storm time to blow over. Hopefully by then Sully will have responded more fully to the quinine and will be able to withstand the trip to the clinic.”

“Whatever you think is best,” Matthew said.

“Ma, *please* go back and try to rest now,” Colleen urged.

“Colleen’s right, Dr. Mike—get some rest,” Matthew agreed.

Michaela took a last look at the collection of medical supplies, and then nodded. “Very well,” she conceded. She returned to Sully’s bedside and laid her hand gently on his forehead, gazing at him yearningly, then resumed her seat in the rocker, leaning back with a sigh. She closed her eyes once again, and sooner than she would have imagined possible, she slept.

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 26 March, 1870

I rifled through the pages, not looking for anything in particular, just letting myself skim each poem till I found something that struck my fancy.

My eye caught sight of an old favorite, and I stopped. I glanced up at Dr. Mike. She looked back at me expectantly.

“This is one that always makes me think of Brian,” I said by way of preamble. I cleared my throat, then somewhat self-consciously I added, “It’s called, ‘There Was a Child Went Forth.’” Her eyes kindled in recognition and she looked pleased. Buoyed by her approval, with more self-assurance I read,

“‘There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs and the sow’s pink-faint litter,
and the mare’s foal and the cow’s calf,
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pond-side, . . .’”

I continued on through the stanzas, feeling the richness and strength of Whitman’s words filling up the air around us. I reached the last few lines and concluded,

“‘Shadows, aureola and mist, the light falling on roofs and gables of white or brown two miles off,
The schooner near by sleepily dropping down the tide, the little boat slack-tow’d astern,

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The hurrying, tumbling waves, quick-broken crests, slapping,
The strata of color’d clouds, the long bar of maroon-tint away
solitary by itself, the spread of purity it lies
motionless in,
The horizon’s edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt
marsh and shore mud,
These became part of that child who went forth every day,
and who now goes, and will always go forth
every day.”

I finished, and shyly observed her for her reaction.

“I’ve always loved that one,” she said smiling.  “It reminds me of Brian, as well.”  She reached out her
hand.  “May I?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said readily, handing her the book.  She turned the pages for a few seconds, then found what
she was looking for.  She gave me a warm glance, then read,

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be
blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves
off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the
deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter
singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the
morning, or at noon intermission or at sun-
down,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at
work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong, melodious songs.’”

Now she was the one shyly regarding me.

“That’s the first poem of Whitman’s I ever read,” I told her.  “I couldn’t get over how much the lines
sounded like music.”

“Then by all means, make some more music,” she replied, handing the volume back to me.

I nodded in assent, glad that my suggestion to read Whitman’s poetry had found so much favor with
her, then occupied myself with scanning the leaves of the book.  Soon I came to another familiar ballad.
“First time I heard this, it made me think of myself when I was ten years old and I decided to strike out
west,” I explained.  I cleared my throat again and began,

“Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road.
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need
nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road. . . .”

It was a long poem, and it took me several minutes to finish.  Reaching the final stanza at last I read,

“Camerado, I give you my hand!”
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?”

There was a silence, and then Dr. Mike said softly, almost as if she were talking to herself more than me, “Do you suppose Whitman had someone special in mind when he wrote that?”

“Probably,” I answered after a moment. “Someone he was close to—somebody who meant a lot to him.”

“Have you ever had a—a ‘camerado’—a companion, Sully?” she asked unexpectedly.

I stared into her eyes, and in their depths I caught a glimpse of that longing expression I’d seen every so often. Maybe she’d been disappointed in love, I thought suddenly. Maybe she’d cared for someone, and he’d left her, for whatever reason. I couldn’t imagine any man voluntarily giving up a woman like Dr. Mike, but there was no accounting for some men’s foolishness.

“I had a best friend and companion,” I replied to her question at last. “His name was Daniel. We went west together. But—I don’t *believe* that’s what Whitman was talking about,” I added with a little grin.

“No, I don’t suppose that it was,” she agreed, returning my smile—but that hint of melancholy still lurked behind her eyes.

“I guess the only other person in my life who would have fit that description was my wife,” I added, to completely respond to her query.

“Oh yes—of course,” she said quickly, and looked away.

“Do you want me to stop reading?” I asked, afraid that somehow I’d offended her.

She turned back to me, summoning a gentle smile. “No, please don’t,” she said. “I enjoy the sound of your voice.”

“If you’re sure . . .?”

She nodded, and reassured, I again gazed down at the pages before me. A few seconds elapsed and then I said, “How about this one?

“I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul. . . .”

My voice grew stronger as I warmed to the words, and several minutes later I finished with a flourish,

“‘O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul!’”

Lost as I was in the mesmerizing power of the lyrics, I was unconscious of Dr. Mike’s reaction till I heard a slight sound, like that of a breath hitching in the throat, and I looked up to see tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said rapidly, feeling startled and then ashamed for apparently having upset her. “Maybe that was—inappropriate. I apologize if I embarrassed you.”

She quickly brushed away the tears. “No, it’s all right,” she assured me. “It’s just that—it reminded me . . .” She trailed off.

“Of that ‘friend’ you spoke of?” I finished for her.
“Yes,” she admitted after a moment, but didn’t volunteer any more information.

“Can I ask—“ I began hesitantly, then resolutely went on, “whether it was a man or a woman?”

“It . . . was a man,” she answered after a pause, looking away from me again.

“What happened to him?” I asked, studying her carefully.

“He . . . went away,” she said softly, the expression on her face wistful, her eyes fastened on something only she could see.

I was momentarily silent, but for some reason I had to know. I swallowed. “For good?” I asked.

Our glances met. “I don’t know,” she said. Her eyes held an expression of infinite sadness.

Again I was quiet, wondering who he’d been—this “friend” of hers. This man she seemed to care about so much, but who had so obviously hurt her. Inexplicably, I found myself feeling anger toward him, even though I had no idea who he had been and no knowledge of the circumstances of their parting. And that wasn’t all. I was jealous—of whoever the man was who could put that look in her eyes.

I gathered my courage. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Of course,” she replied.

I stared into her eyes. “Have you ever been in love, Dr. Mike?”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The morning dawned bright and clear, the winter blue of the sky diamond hard, and the sun dazzling brilliantly off the crystalline surface of the snow. As Michaela gazed out across the pristine white of the hills, she could almost believe that the snowstorm of the past twenty-four hours, and the tragic event it had accompanied, had been nothing more than a dark dream. However, she had only to turn around and see Sully lying pale and still behind her, to be reminded that both occurrences had been all too real.

The temperature hovered just above freezing, but Michaela knew it would begin to rise as the sun’s rays gradually warmed the landscape. Already she could hear a chuckling sound in the rain gutter as it channeled the snowmelt from the roof into the rain barrel beneath the window.

She tried to find some hope within herself that things would take a turn for the better now—that the change in the weather was a good omen. But it was difficult, as Sully continued to run a fever, and showed no signs of waking.

According to Cloud Dancing, Sully had been delirious from fever, drifting in and out of consciousness even before being shot. After he had been wounded, he had remained senseless all through their long night’s journey home, and there had been no change even though she had treated his injury and succeeded in lowering his fever to a less dangerous degree.

She continued to detect congestion in his lungs, and had drained the fluid from them a second time during the night; but even that aspect of his condition was improving, and she thought that from now on, the humidity from the steam and regular doses of quinine would be sufficient to clear up the remaining infection.

There was also no sign of infection with the head wound, and she had cleaned and dressed it again just a short time ago.

All these things taken into consideration, and based on what she could outwardly observe of his condition, Sully *should* have started coming around by now. The fact that he slept on, oblivious to his surroundings and everyone about him, both alarmed and worried her.

She left the window and returned to Sully’s bedside, sitting down beside him and lifting his eyelids to
examine his pupils yet again. They remained normal, with no evidence of dilation, and thus no indication of compression from his head injury. It made no sense, she thought in frustration. There was no sign of internal bleeding, and yet there seemed to be no other cause which could account for his unnatural slumber. Mentally she reviewed her knowledge of the symptoms associated with head injuries, desperately trying to recall if there was anything she could have missed. But nothing came to her. Soberly, Michaela acknowledged that she might be forced to operate on Sully again, either to discover and correct the unknown cause of his condition, or to relieve pressure in his brain from undetected bleeding. And if she was forced to take that step, it was vital that she perform the procedure in the clinic, where she had access to all her instruments and equipment.

“How’s he doin’, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked from behind her.

“The congestion in his lungs is somewhat improved, and his fever is down another degree,” Michaela replied, pulling her eyes from Sully with an effort and looking up at her son.

“That’s good news, ain’t it?” Matthew said, puzzled by the solemn look in his mother’s eyes.

“It should be, but I’m growing increasingly concerned that he isn’t waking up,” Michaela admitted. “Based on what Cloud Dancing told us, it’s been at least thirty-six hours, perhaps longer, that Sully’s been unconscious. I can’t find any outward cause, but there must be a reason. And I may seriously have to consider performing exploratory surgery to determine what that reason is.”

Matthew looked sober, but then he said encouragingly, “I know that’s a difficult operation, Dr. Mike, but you done it before—on both Brian and Hank. And if Dr. Cassidy hadn’t stopped you, you woulda performed it on that cowboy who was gonna ride his horse Destiny in the Colorado Sweepstakes. Brian and Hank came through their operations just fine—you saved their lives! And I bet you woulda been able to save that other fella’s life if you’d had the chance.

“I know if you need to operate on Sully, he’ll be all right,” he added to her sincerely.

“Thank you for your confidence, Matthew,” Michaela said quietly, touched by his faith in her. But she couldn’t dismiss the persistent fear that whatever was wrong with Sully was much different than what she had encountered before.

“Only thing is—and don’t get me wrong, ‘cause I believe you can do anything you got to—is it a good idea doin’ that kind of operation here at the homestead, bein’ so far from the clinic and all?” asked Matthew hesitantly, not wanting her to think he doubted her skills.

“No, it isn’t,” Michaela said promptly. “And you needn’t be afraid of offending me, because you’ve put your finger precisely on my other problem, Matthew. I’d be taking a terrible risk attempting such a procedure in these remote surroundings. If it’s at all possible, we need to get Sully to the clinic for me to operate.”

“Well on that score, at least, things look good,” Matthew said positively. “Storm’s gone, sky’s clear, and the sun’s already startin’ to melt the snow. We shouldn’t have any trouble gettin’ to town on the horses, and with luck, we might even be able to transport Sully in the wagon.

“I can go out now and scout the road, see if we’ll be able to get a wagon through,” he offered. “If we know the conditions, we can be prepared.”

“That sounds very promising,” Michaela replied, with the first glimmer of optimism she’d felt since this nightmare began. “Only—don’t be gone too long, Matthew,” she added more softly, her eyes holding his for a moment before she turned back to gaze at Sully. Matthew’s eyes followed hers to the face of the man who had been not only his friend and his protector, but had often seemed like an older brother—even, sometimes, like a father. He felt a chill pass over him—as if, according to the old superstition, someone was walking across his grave. Only in this case, he thought dismally, maybe it was Sully’s grave.

He wouldn’t let that happen, Matthew resolved to himself. Sully was too precious to his mother, and too important to all of them, for them to let him slip away without doing everything in their power to prevent it. He alone owed Sully so much. Sully had been a friend to his family when his father, Ethan, had deserted them. Sully had supported him when he wanted to marry Ingrid, and had saved his life when he was trapped in the mine cave-in. He had helped him on the cattle drive, and had fought alongside Dr. Mike when Ethan tried to get custody of Colleen and Brian from her and take them away. Sully had helped
Matthew keep the promise he’d made to Charlotte—and to himself—to keep their family together. Now it was his turn to help keep Sully alive, and he would do it, or die trying.

“I’ll leave right away, and be back soon as I can,” Matthew pledged to his mother now. He reached down and squeezed her hand. She looked up at him gratefully. Matthew lingered one more moment to reach out and gently brush Sully’s shoulder with his fingertips. He leaned over the unconscious man’s face. “Keep fightin’, Sully—for Dr. Mike,” he whispered in Sully’s ear, then swallowed. “For all of us. We need you.” He gave Michaela one last encouraging look, then quickly went to get his coat and hat. Within moments, he was on his way to the barn to fetch his horse.

* * * * * * * * * *

Cloud Dancing awakened at the sound of the door closing behind Matthew. Instantly alert, he rose from his pallet on the floor by the fireplace, in time to look out the window and see Matthew go into the barn. A few minutes later, the young man emerged from the building, leading his horse. Within seconds, he was astride the animal and headed down the road away from the homestead.

The medicine man stretched, grimacing at the soreness of the muscles in his arms and back. Then, the stiffness in his body forgotten, he crossed the room to where Michaela sat by Sully. One glance at his brother’s face told him that there had been no appreciable change.

“Good morning,” he greeted Michaela.

“Cloud Dancing—I’m sorry if we disturbed you,” she apologized softly. “You must still be very tired.”

“Do not concern yourself about me—I am well,” he told her. “Where is Matthew going?” he added curiously.

“He believes that it may be possible to use the wagon to take Sully to the clinic,” Michaela explained. “He’s gone to scout the condition of the road into town.”

Cloud Dancing nodded. “That is wise.” He turned his attention to Sully, laying his hand on his friend’s forehead. The skin was warm, but not nearly as hot to the touch as it had been before. “My brother’s fever is better,” he commented.

“Yes,” Michaela confirmed, but her brief and muted response did not inspire Cloud Dancing with confidence. He studied her keenly.

“What are you thinking?” she asked finally. “Do you have another idea—another method to help him?”

Still Cloud Dancing didn’t speak. He seemed to be debating something within himself. Michaela began to feel slightly alarmed.

“Is there something you know that you haven’t told me?” she asked. “Please, Cloud Dancing—if there’s something you know about Sully’s condition—something that could help him—you must tell me what it is!” Her friend appeared to come to a decision. “Do you remember our talk before I left to go on my vision quest to the Black Hills?” she asked suddenly.

Michaela was caught off-guard, not expecting this reference to a minor occurrence a year in the past.
Except—perhaps it was not so minor. Cloud Dancing’s words were always significant, many times containing a wealth of meaning. If he was bringing up this long-ago conversation now, he must have a purpose.

“Yes,” she said slowly, reaching back in her memory for the words they had exchanged that day.

“You asked me what I did when one of my plants did not cure a person,” he prompted her.

Michaela’s eyes widened as recollection dawned. “And you said that it meant that things were ‘out of balance’—that you need to heal the whole person,” she responded. She began to get a glimpse of the direction this was heading. “What is it, Cloud Dancing?” she asked more quietly. “What do I need to know to heal *all* of Sully?”

“I should not betray Sully’s confidence,” Cloud Dancing said gravely. “But the spirits tell me that now I must put his life even before our friendship.” He hesitated, then went on slowly, “You cannot cure Sully because there is a piece of the puzzle missing. The whole picture cannot become clear—you cannot put things back in balance—without it. I have this missing piece. Even though I risk earning Sully’s anger, I must give it to you.”

“Sully could never be angry with you,” Michaela said fervently.

The medicine man raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps. But I could lose his trust, which would be even worse. Still, I am not ready to see him join the spirits. He has too much to live for, too much left to do.”

“Yes,” Michaela whispered tremulously.

“Sully came to me because he was in a dark place,” Cloud Dancing began. “You know about this—because we were in this place also.”

Michaela nodded, staring at him intently.

“But there was more troubling his spirit than the loss of my people,” he went on. “Something that was so painful he hid it from himself for a long time. Something—” he gazed darkly into her eyes, “he was too ashamed to tell you.”

* * * * * * * * * *

“He truly believes that?” Michaela said in shock when Cloud Dancing had finished speaking. “He believes he’s cursed—that he’ll lose me if we marry?” The medicine man looked into her stunned and disbelieving eyes.

“To us it may not make sense,” he conceded. “But to Sully the fear is very real. He has lost many of the people he cared about in his life. It is not so difficult to understand his belief that history will repeat itself.”

Michaela looked down at Sully, tears welling in her eyes as she tenderly stroked a lock of hair from his forehead. “No, I suppose it isn’t,” she whispered, her heart aching as she thought of the emotional suffering he had been going through—his guilt over those he’d lost, coupled with his desperate fear of losing her and his shame that he couldn’t admit the truth of that fear to her.

“I do not question your skill or the power of your medicine,” Cloud Dancing went on. “But I do not believe that an injury to his brain is keeping Sully from waking. I believe that the injury is to his spirit. His mind and heart will not let him wake because he is afraid. If he wakes, he must face the memory of the people he has lost. Most of all, he must face his fear of losing you.”

“Then how do I reach him?” Michaela asked helplessly. “How do I reassure him that it’s—it’s ‘safe’—to come back?”

“Be with him, touch him, talk to him,” the medicine man advised. “Treat his spirit as well as his body.”

“But how do I know he can hear me?” she persisted.
“Sully’s spirit will hear and feel the love that comes from your heart,” Cloud Dancing told her. “A
strong bond connects you. It will not break simply because Sully has retreated into himself.”

“I want to believe that . . .” Michaela whispered fervently, but still she looked worried and
unconvinced.

“Remember—it was this bond that led Sully to you when you were taken by One-Eye,” Cloud Dancing
reminded her. “And it sent you a vision that Sully was hurt by Bloody Knife. You were about to
go in search of Sully based on the power of this vision alone. Your knowledge was not logical—but still, you
knew it to be true.

“Just because we cannot see or explain a thing, does not mean it does not exist,” he finished, gazing at
her significantly.

“I appreciate your wisdom,” Michaela said after a pause. “And I’ll try very hard to do what you
suggest. But I still believe it would be a safe precaution to take Sully to the clinic. His illness and the
injury to his body are very real, and require careful treatment and continuous observation.”

“I agree,” Cloud Dancing confirmed. “It is wise to take precautions. I did not mean to suggest that
you should ignore the weakness in his body—only that you should treat the weakness in his spirit as well.

“However, when you take Sully to the clinic, I will not be able to follow,” he added.

“I’ll miss you,” Michaela said sincerely. “Sully will too. If he can feel me, then I’m certain he can
feel your presence as well. We’ll both be praying for your safety.”

“I will be all right. And I will stay close by,” Cloud Dancing promised. “If you or Sully need me, I will
find a way to come to you.” He grasped her hand and held it tightly, and Michaela felt a rush of warmth
and reassurance flood through her. Then he turned to gaze at Sully, laying his other hand on his brother’s
forehead as if in benediction.

“Sully *will* return to us,” he said.

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“That’s . . . a very personal question,” Dr. Mike said evasively.

“I know—and maybe I don’t got the right to ask it,” I said boldly. “But you seemed so sad just now, I
couldn’t help thinking . . .

“Well, it’s just that you know all these personal things about me—I guess I kind of feel at a
disadvantage,” I added a little defensively. “Still, I don’t mean to pry.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘prying,’” she said more reasonably. “You’re understandably curious, Sully—not just
about me, I’m sure, but about everything. After all, you’ve lost a significant portion of your memory. And
it must seem a bit unfair that I know so much about you, but you know so little about me. It’s simply that
the facts of your life, and your memories—or lack of them—are what’s at issue right now. As your doctor,
those are the things I’ve had to focus on.”

Her explanation made sense, but I couldn’t help noticing that she was still avoiding my question. And
being the stubborn type, I couldn’t let it drop.

“So are you saying that you’d rather not tell me?” I pursued.

She didn’t need to ask what I meant. “Every question deserves an answer,” she conceded after a
moment. “Very well, since you want to know. I was engaged while I lived in Boston. His name was
David Lewis. He was a doctor.”
My eyes went to the fourth finger of her left hand, but it was bare.

She noticed me looking, and anticipated my next question.

“He enlisted in the army,” she volunteered, her tone flat and unemotional. “Later we were informed that he’d been killed in the war.”

I immediately regretted my curiosity, intruding as it did on her bereavement. “I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I didn’t realize.”

“Thank you, but there’s no need for apologies,” she said. “As it turned out, he wasn’t killed after all—which I learned seven years later when he came here to Colorado Springs, very much alive.”

I wasn’t expecting this turn of events, and I guess my expression betrayed my surprise.

“At first I didn’t recognize him,” Dr. Mike went on. “He’d sustained severe injuries, which required years of convalescence, and which drastically altered his appearance. Even his voice was changed, because of a shrapnel wound to his throat. He had taken a new name and occupation, and he maintained this deception when we met for fear of shocking me too greatly. However, certain things about him—his mannerisms, things that he said—gave me clues as to his true identity, and eventually I realized the truth.”

“But you still must have been shocked,” I ventured.

“Yes—enormously. But I was also thrilled and grateful that he had survived.”

“Well . . . weren’t you happy then, being reunited?” I asked. “I mean, you could just pick up from where you’d left off.”

“It . . . wasn’t that easy,” Dr. Mike said reluctantly. “Things were—complicated.”

“Was there somebody else?” I asked. “For him . . . or for you?”

She shot a quick look at me, her face flushing, and I saw I’d touched a nerve. Trouble was, I didn’t know which she was reacting to: my suggestion that he’d found another woman—or that she had feelings for another man.

From her expression, I got the feeling she wasn’t going to tell me, either—and I was right.

“Suffice it to say that that things didn’t work out, but that we parted as friends,” she said briefly.

“You don’t want to talk about it,” I stated.

She shook her head. “I’d rather not.”

“I won’t press you,” I said respectfully. I was intensely curious, but I knew not to push her.

“I appreciate that,” she said. After a pause she added, “Shall we resume the poetry?”

She was being polite, but the easy camaraderie of the past several minutes had passed, and we both knew it.

“Maybe another time,” I responded. She nodded, then stood, picking up our empty cups and taking them to the sink. I stood as well, meaning to return the copy of Whitman to its place on the shelf. But suddenly the book slid from my grasp and fell to the floor. As it landed, a singly folded sheet of paper shot out from between the pages and slid under the table. “Sorry!” I said quickly, when she reacted to the noise. “Guess I got butterfingers today.” She smiled, and went back to washing the cups. She hadn’t noticed the paper, and impulsively I snatched it up and slipped it inside my shirt before she could see.

I replaced the book on the shelf and then asked casually, “Mind if I step outside and get a breath of air?”
She turned to me again. “Of course not,” she replied. “I’ll join you in a moment.”

“Sounds good,” I said, and headed for the door. Out on the porch, with just the two wolves for company, I hastily pulled the paper from my shirt. Feeling like a thief, but compelled to look nonetheless, I opened it. A quick glance told me it was a telegram, sent from Denver, dated February 12th. There was no time then to read the contents, but my eyes automatically noted the salutation, “Dear Michaela.”

And the signature—“All my love, S.”

There *had* been another man.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The wagon rolled to a stop in front of the clinic and Matthew quickly set the brake, then jumped to the ground. He helped Colleen down from the bench. Behind them, Brian rode up on Taffy and dismounted, then wound the reins around the hitching post. Across the way, Hank and a handful of his customers looked on curiously. Matthew caught the saloon-keeper’s eye.

“Hank!” he called. “I need a hand here!” He circled around to the rear of the wagon, where Sully lay covered by a thick layer of quilts, his head pillowed in Michaela’s lap. The tall barkeep, wavy blonde hair flying, closed the distance between them in a few long strides.

“What happened!” he queried Matthew as the two men maneuvered Sully’s body carefully out of the wagon.

“Got shot,” Matthew responded shortly, having insufficient breath for more detailed explanations at that moment.

“Try not to jar him,” Michaela cautioned as she slipped down from the bed of the wagon. Hank’s eyes registered the bandage around Sully’s head.

“He gonna make it?” he said soberly to Michaela as he and Matthew gently carried Sully to the entrance of the clinic. Michaela had gone ahead to open the door for them. “I don’t know,” she said briefly over her shoulder.

They entered the examination room.

“Where do you want him, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked.

“Bring him in here,” Michaela instructed, opening the inner door giving on the hallway and crossing to the open door of the recovery room opposite. She preceded them into the room, hastily turning down the covers of the bed and plumping the pillows in preparation for them to lay Sully down. A few moments later she had him securely tucked into bed, and she was taking her stethoscope from her medical bag to check his vital signs.

Matthew and Hank watched from the doorway. “How’d he get hit?” Hank asked in a low voice.

“Custer sent one of his Indian scouts—called Bloody Knife—after him,” Matthew whispered back. “Bloody Knife attacked Sully with a rifle. They struggled over the gun, and Sully got shot when it went off.”

“I know that Injun,” Hank commented. “Saw him in town with Custer the other day. I hear tell he’s real brave. Sully musta been up to somethin’ for Custer to send one of his best scouts after him like that.” His eyes were cynical.

“Sully wasn’t up to nothin’!” Matthew retorted hotly, forgetting himself and raising his voice.

“He certainly wasn’t, Hank,” Michaela echoed as she performed her ministrations. “In fact, Sully was desperately ill—he could barely stand up. He was totally defenseless.”

“Oh yeah?” said Hank. “Well, where’s Bloody Knife now?”
"Last we knew, out cold somewhere up in the mountains," Matthew said. He eyed Hank dourly. "Sully didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re thinkin’.

Hank lounged against the doorframe, an unlit cigar dangling from his lips. "So Sully got shot in the head, *and* he was sick, but he still managed to knock out an Injun with twice his strength. And all this happened in the mountains," he said, his tone disdainful. "How’d he get home then, on his own? Some "good fairy' pick him and carry him back to town?" he added contumuously.

"'Course not!" Matthew snapped, afraid that he and Michaela had inadvertently betrayed too much of the circumstances of the shooting. He knew that Sully would tell him to say whatever he had to—even lie, if necessary—to keep Cloud Dancing’s name out of it.

"Sully couldn’t come to us—we went lookin’ for him," Matthew went on. "We found him night ‘fore last, and brought him home. Since then Dr. Mike’s been carin’ for him at the homestead till the storm blew over and he was strong enough for the trip into town."

Hank continued to eye him derisively. "Nice try, Matthew, but it don’t wash. Truth is, Sully wasn’t out there alone, was he? He had a friend to fight his battles for him, ain’t that right? Maybe a certain *medicine man” wanted by Custer?"

Matthew stared back at him and didn’t answer. Heart hammering, Michaela rose from the bed and came over to the two men. She looked penetratingly at Hank.

"Hank, I can’t prevent you from thinking what you please," she said quietly. "But what purpose can be served by trying to implicate Cloud Dancing? His wife and his chief are dead—his people gone, or scattered. He’s no harm to anyone. Hasn’t he suffered enough?"

"He’s a leader, Michaela," Hank responded flatly. "And there’s plenty of dog soldiers still on the loose. What’s to stop ‘em from rallyin’ to Cloud Dancin’ and startin’ up the raids all over again?"

"That won’t happen," she said strongly, then added more softly, "And what of Sully, Hank? He’s fighting for his life. Are you so hard-hearted that you’d rob him of his closest friend as well?"

"Hank, we’ve had our differences, but I don’t believe you’re a malicious person," she continued. "There’s no proof that Sully and Cloud Dancing were together—or even that Cloud Dancing was anywhere in the vicinity. I’m asking you to let it drop." She stared at him intently. "Will you?" she challenged.

The saloon-keeper was silent for several moments. "I got no reason to go around spreadin’ tales ‘bout what happened,” he acknowledged finally. "But if the army asks me any questions—"

"We’ll deal with that if and when it happens,” Michaela told him.

Hank shrugged, and took a match from his pocket. He struck it on the sole of his boot, and casually lit his cigar, then shook out the flame. He puffed silently for a few moments, as a wreath of aromatic blue smoke encircled their heads. Finally he removed the cigar from his mouth, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

"You won’t get any trouble from me—least for the time bein’,” he said, turning to leave. He hesitated for a moment, sparing a final glance for Sully. "Hope he makes it," he allowed.

"Thank you," Michaela said, then she and Matthew watched as the barkeep retraced his steps across the hall and exited through the examination room.

Michaela bit her lip and gazed soberly at her son. "We were careless, Matthew," she said.

Matthew nodded. "We shoulda had some story prepared,” he agreed. "But with all the worry over Sully . . ."

His mother sighed. "Well, the damage is done. All we can hope is that Hank has a spark of compassion and keeps his word not to reveal any knowledge of Cloud Dancing."

Matthew looked skeptical. "Dr. Mike, we’re talkin’ ‘bout *Hank*, here. The same fella who joined in
with Jake and went on and on 'bout what a hero Custer was after Washita—just to mock you. What makes you think he's suddenly gonna protect any Indian—even Cloud Dancin'?

“But because I need to have hope,” she said simply. “For Sully—and for Cloud Dancing, as well.” In unison, they turned to look at Sully's still form, as he continued his slumber, far beyond their reach.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela entered the examination room where Colleen and Brian waited.

“How is he, Ma?” asked Colleen. “Any sign that—”

But Michaela was already shaking her head. “He's resting comfortably,” she replied. “But no, there’s no indication that he's regaining consciousness.”

“Why ain't Sully wakin' up, Ma?” Brian said, his face solemn.

His mother approached him and laid her hand comfortingly on his shoulder. “I'm not quite sure, Brian,” she said gently, but honestly. “I think perhaps it's nature's way of helping him heal from his wound and fight off his illness. When he's strong enough, I'm sure Sully will awaken.” Impulsively she drew Brian to her in a hug. Her son clung to her.

As they drew apart, Michaela summoned a smile. “Cloud Dancing said that we need to be with Sully and talk to him—let him know that we're here,” she said. “He believes that Sully can hear us and feel our presence, even though he appears to be asleep. I think it would be an excellent idea if you were to sit with Sully for a while. Perhaps you could read him a story. There are one or two books on the shelf in his room. Would you like to do that?” she asked.

“I'll do anything to help Sully, Ma,” Brian said gravely.

“Your love is the best medicine he could receive,” his mother assured him. She hugged him again, then Brian disappeared through the door leading to Sully's room.

“Do you really think that will work, Ma?” Colleen asked doubtfully. “I know you wanted to keep Brian's spirits up, but . . .” Her words trailed off.

“Cloud Dancing believes that there are things troubling Sully—melancholy over Washita, as well as other sorrows—which are causing him to resist waking,” Michaela explained. “He feels that Sully needs to feel our love and reassurance, so that he'll have the courage to come back to us.

“I've always been able to trust Cloud Dancing's wisdom,” she told her daughter. “If he recommends that this is what we do, then I feel safe in following his instincts.” She squeezed Colleen's hand.

As they had been speaking, Michaela had become aware of several voices outside. The outer door opened suddenly, and Matthew entered, followed by Dorothy. Beyond them, Michaela could see a knot of townspeople gathered on the porch. Through the window she spotted still more people clustered in the street.

“What’s going on?” she asked Matthew quickly.

“Word about Sully bein’ hurt got around pretty fast,” he answered. “Everyone's hangin' around, waitin' to see how he is.”

“Michaela,” Dorothy said sympathetically, crossing to her friend and gathering Michaela into her arms. “I'm so sorry about Sully—is he gonna be all right?” Her blue eyes were compassionate.

Michaela clung to Dorothy for a moment, drawing comfort from her friend. “I hope so,” she said softly.

“How could this have happened?” Dorothy asked in dismay.

Michaela stared levelly into her friend's eyes. “Dorothy, can I trust you?” she asked. “If I confide in
you, can I count on you keeping this just between us?"

"I swear," Dorothy vowed. "I know you had reason to doubt me before Washita, the way I criticized you for defendin’ the dog soldiers, and for not wantin’ to attend General Custer’s dinner. But after he attacked and killed the Indians, and I saw what it did to you . . . and then when you came to me that night and told me about Black Kettle and the Cheyenne Nation . . . " Her eyes were heartfelt as she gazed at Michaela. "Well, you made me see the truth," she finished. "I promise, Michaela—whatever you tell me won’t go any farther."

"I believe you," Michaela said, satisfied. She proceeded to tell Dorothy an abbreviated version of the past days' events, minimizing the role of her “vision”—if that’s what it had been—in her description of what had happened. Nonetheless, Dorothy’s eyes widened in shock as she listened.

"Poor Sully!" she exclaimed softly as she learned of what he’d been through. And then unexpectedly she added, “Thank the Almighty Cloud Dancin’ was there to take care of him.”

"Yes," Michaela agreed. "I’m certain that Sully wouldn’t—“ Her voice caught for a moment. “That he wouldn’t have survived, without him.” Dorothy reached out and squeezed her hand.

"You’ll get him through this Michaela,” she avowed. “I’m sure of it.”

Michaela gave her a grateful look. “Thank you, Dorothy. But Sully can still use all your prayers.”

“He has them,” Dorothy declared. “You both do.” She hugged Michaela again. They parted, and Dorothy gazed at her earnestly. “Now, tell me what I can do to help,” she said. “All of us are here for you Michaela—Loren, Grace, Robert E., the Reverend . . . Just tell us what you need.”

Michaela looked back at the face of her friend, and felt a tiny blossom of hope begin to unfurl inside her. Perhaps, with the love and support of all their family and friends, they would get through this, after all.

* * * * * * * * * *

A clock in the examination room of the clinic struck midnight. Still wide-awake, Michaela dimly heard the chimes from her chair by Sully’s bed. She knew she should be resting—as she had noted to Colleen back at the homestead, a doctor who was exhausted was a doctor who could make mistakes. But she couldn’t bring herself to leave Sully’s side. Not just because of Cloud Dancing’s advice to be with Sully and talk to him as much as possible. Not even because she was compelled to keep watching for any change in Sully’s condition, no matter how subtle. But because she needed to be with him, for her own sake. She needed to see his face and hold his hand. To watch his chest rise and fall as he breathed. To be as physically close to him as she was able, and reassure herself that he was still alive. Because deep in her heart, she didn’t know how much longer she would have the chance. She hadn’t voiced her secret fear to her children, or to Cloud Dancing. But the painful truth was that Sully could still leave them—could leave her—at any time. And if somehow her presence by his side could forestall or prevent that tragedy, she would go without sleep forever, if that’s what it took.

She held Sully’s hand between both her own, gently stroking his skin over and over. After a moment, she pressed his hand to her cheek and closed her eyes.

“Please,” she prayed aloud. “Please, Sully, please wake up. I understand now what’s been troubling you so deeply. I understand the torment in your heart and your soul. But I swear that you won’t lose me, as you lost the Cheyenne and so many others that you loved . . . as you lost Abagail. I swear that nothing will happen to part us if we marry. Please don’t be afraid to waken—to come back to me. I know how badly you’ve suffered—how you’re still suffering. But I promise that you’ll get through the pain—that we both will, together. I’ll help you through it, and so will Cloud Dancing. You have all my love, and the love of Cloud Dancing and the children. And you have the affection and friendship of so many friends and neighbors. Please let this love—let MY love!—give you the courage to face the future again. I’m begging you—don’t give up on yourself, or on us. We’ve been through so much together. We’ve faced so many challenges and dangers—and we’ve suffered more than our share of heartbreak. But somehow, we’ve always survived. Because we love each other! And because together, we’re stronger than each of us is alone.

“Don’t let this defeat you!” she implored, opening her eyes and gazing at him yearningly. “Don’t give
up now—not now, when we’re so close to having the happiness we’ve looked forward to for so long. I love
you so much! And I need you—more desperately than I could ever put into words . . .” Her voice faltered.
She lay his hand back down on the coverlet, then leaned over his sleeping form, cradling him in her arms
and laying her head on his chest. Her tears came in a flood, soaking the cloth of his nightshirt. “Don’t
leave me,” she whispered, her voice aching as grief poured out of her like a dam breaking. “Please, please
don’t leave me. What will I do without you?” She clung to him, as if the strength of her arms alone could
keep him from slipping into that long dark night that had no end.

Eventually, exhausted by her vigil and her tears, she slept.

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 26 March, 1870

Moments later, she joined me on the porch. I was standing with my back to the door when I heard it
open, and hastily I stuffed the telegram back inside my shirt.

The mood between us was cordial, as we watched the setting sun splash the sky with a glorious riot of
red, orange and gold. But by unspoken agreement, we also knew that our day together had come to an
end.

I offered to walk back to town, to save her the trouble of having to drive me. Fact is, I was anxious to
get away from her. I didn’t think I could hide my shame over taking the telegram, and that somehow,
she’d see the truth in my face. But she wouldn’t hear of me going on foot. She said I was recovering well,
but not strong enough yet for a walk of that distance. I figured it was best not to argue with her, and draw
her attention to my unease. So a short time later we were back in the driver’s box of the wagon, the trip
into town much quieter and seeming a whole lot longer than the one we’d taken to the homestead just a few
hours before.

All the way back, my mind was fixed on that stolen piece of paper, my guilt making it feel like a searing
hot coal as it rested against my skin. Irrationally, I halfway feared that it would burn a hole clear through
my shirt. But as ashamed as I was for having taken it, I was equally compelled to read it at my first
opportunity. I wasn’t sure why I felt so driven to know its contents. I could tell myself that it was a way of
learning more about Dr. Mike, but that was an excuse and a lie. The unpleasant truth was that the
jealousy I’d felt when she talked about her “friend” was still lurking inside me, and I just had to find out
more about him—since I was all but certain that he had been the author of the telegram.

Preoccupied as I was with my own thoughts, I didn’t immediately notice that Dr. Mike was being
unnaturally quiet as well. Perhaps, like me, her mind was equally filled by this mysterious stranger who had suddenly become such a
large and invisible obstacle between us. Whatever her thoughts, I think she was as relieved as I was not to
have to make conversation.

The trip finally came to an end, as we pulled up outside the clinic. Darkness had fallen, its dusky
curtain serving to conceal our features from one another. I was grateful for the anonymity of the night,
fearing that by now my guilt must be shining from my face like a beacon. I put up the reins and climbed
quickly down from the wagon.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said. “And for supper—it was real fine.”

“You’re welcome,” she responded politely. “But I wasn’t going to leave just yet. I wanted to examine
you again, to make sure our excursion didn’t affect you adversely. After all, this was your first trip outside
the clinic since you fell ill and were injured.”

“It ain’t necessary, Dr. Mike,” I told her, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. “The fresh air did
me good, just like you said it would. And the time I spent with you all was real nice. I’m all right—you
don’t need to fret no more. Besides, I don’t want it getting too late before you drive back. Go on, and I’ll
see you in the morning.”

“If you’re sure . . .” she said uncertainly.
“Go ahead,” I repeated.

“Very well,” she agreed reluctantly. “Get a good night’s rest, and I’ll check on you first thing tomorrow.” She picked up the reins, as I moved to the door of the clinic. I put my hand on the knob, and then—I just couldn’t go through with it. Much as I wanted to see what was in that wire, I couldn’t bring myself to lie to her any more.

The wagon started to move, as I quickly turned and ran back across the porch and into the street.

“Dr. Mike!” I called from behind her. “Wait!”

* * * * * * * * * *

She jerked on the reins, bringing the horse and wagon to an abrupt stop. Twisting around on the bench to look back at me, she said in concern, “What is it Sully? Are you ill?”

“No, nothing like that,” I answered, looking up at her. Slowly I walked toward the wagon, uncomfortably aware of the handful of customers on the porch of the saloon watching us with undisguised interest. I reached her, and said in a lower voice, “There’s something I need to tell you—but I’d rather not do it in front of an audience.” I inclined my eyes toward the saloon, and she nodded in understanding.

She started to climb down, and of their own accord my hands reached up to encircle her waist and lift her gently to the ground. We stood facing each other for a few seconds, my hands lingering at her waist until I suddenly realized what I was doing and dropped them awkwardly to my sides.

“Shall we go in?” she suggested, and I nodded, dreading the next few minutes—yet still anticipating the chance to spend a little more time alone with her. I couldn’t believe that I was having those thoughts, even while I was feeling so guilty for having deceived her—but there it was.

I followed her into the main room of the clinic and waited nervously while she moved around the room, igniting the lamps. She finished, then turned to face me, the glow of the lamplight putting a soft blush in her cheeks, and reflecting warmly from her eyes.

“What is it, Sully?” she asked. “Is something troubling you?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah,” I said reluctantly. “That’s exactly right—something *is* troubling me.” Slowly I reached into my shirt and withdrew the telegram. “Before, at the homestead . . . when I dropped the book, this fell out . . . I took it,” I admitted, holding it out to her. She looked at me, puzzled, as she accepted the paper, then unfolded it and glanced quickly at the contents. A moment later, she looked back up at me, all trace of warmth gone from her eyes, replaced by an expression of resentment and betrayal.

“You took this?” she repeated, and her voice was tight with anger. “Why?”

I swallowed. “I ain’t sure,” I said honestly. “I guess . . . I just had to know—”

“Know what?” she interrupted sharply. “About my personal affairs? This was private Sully. You had no right!”

“I know—I’m sorry—“ I tried to say, but it was as if she hadn’t heard me.

“Well, are you satisfied?” she demanded, her face white with fury—and something else. Was it—could it—be fear? “Is your curiosity finally assuaged now? Or do you perhaps have other questions you’d like to ask?” she added sarcastically.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “It was wrong, I know that. That’s why I had to tell you—why I’m giving it back.” I hesitated. “I didn’t read it.”

“Oh, come now,” she said coldly. “After all the trouble you took to take and conceal it from me?”

“I deserve that,” I said. “But I’m telling you the truth. I saw it was addressed to you, and I saw the signature. But I didn’t read the rest—I swear.”

“Because you didn’t have the time!” she lashed out, nailing me with the truth.
“Partly,” I said after a pause. “But mostly because I knew it was wrong and I couldn’t lie to you no more.”

She was silent for several moments, staring down at the telegram crumpled in her hands. Finally she looked up at me, her eyes wintry and remote.

“Why?” she asked me again. “Why would you want to hurt me this way?”

“I didn’t!” I exclaimed, stricken. “I’d never deliberately hurt you, Dr. Mike. It’s just—something come over me when I saw it. Suddenly I just had to read it—I had to know . . .”

“Know what?” she repeated. “You keep saying that. What did you *have* to know, Sully, that you couldn’t simply ask me?”

I took a deep breath. “About him,” I said.

“My fiancé?” she asked. “I told you. His name was David Lewis. He was a doctor, then a captain in the Union army. We were engaged, but decided not to marry after all—“

“No, not him,” I interrupted.

She stared at me, angry and confused. “Well then, who—?” she began.

“The other one,” I said. “The man you gave him up for.”

The silence between us was thick and heavy, as her face paled even more. The only sound in the room was the nearby clock, loudly and relentlessly ticking off the seconds.

“I have nothing more to say to you,” she said at last.

“Dr. Mike—“

“I’ll check on you in the morning, as I promised,” she said shortly, and walked out, the door closing with finality behind her.

Dejectedly I dropped into a chair, leaning my head back and staring hopelessly at the ceiling. I would get no sleep tonight.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Colleen and the Reverend found Michaela in an exhausted slumber, her head still pillowed on Sully’s chest, the following morning.

“Ma?” Colleen said softly, gently shaking her mother awake.

Michaela opened her eyes with a start, looking a trifle disoriented as she sat up, yawning. A moment or two passed as she made sense of her surroundings, and her eyes cleared.

“Ma, have you been here all night?” Colleen asked, her voice reproving but her expression compassionate and concerned.

“Oh—Colleen,” Michaela said, automatically looking first at Sully, and then up at her daughter. “I suppose I fell asleep.” Her eyes caught sight of Reverend Johnson. “Good morning, Reverend,” she added, surprised to see him there. “Can I help you?”

“Good morning, Dr. Mike,” the Reverend responded. “And thank you for your kindness, but I’m not the one who needs help. On the contrary, I came to see how Sully was, and to offer my services to you to come and sit with him after school. Colleen told me how many hours you’ve put in, tending to Sully, with very little rest. Several of us here in town would like to volunteer to spend time with Sully so that you can
“That’s very kind of you, Reverend—” Michaela began politely.

“Ma, please let us help you,” Colleen broke in, anticipating what her mother was about to say. “You can’t keep pushin’ yourself so hard. Look at last night. I bet you hardly got any sleep at all. You need to go over to Grace’s and eat somethin’ nourishin’, then come back here and take a nap. I’ll take care of Sully.”

“Colleen, your offer is so kind and unselfish, but you can’t—you have school,” Michaela protested.

“The Reverend says I can miss a day or two,” Colleen told her, glancing at the minister for confirmation.

“That’s right,” Reverend Johnson echoed. “It won’t do Colleen any harm to miss a few days. She’s far beyond anyone else in class. And I can easily prepare some assignments for her. She can work on them right here in the clinic. And once she does return to school, your friends and neighbors will happily take turns watching Sully so that you can rest and regain your strength.”

Michaela was touched that so many people were concerned for Sully and herself, and so willing to rally to their side. But as much as she appreciated their generosity, it was clear they didn’t understand how precarious Sully’s condition was, and how necessary it was that she be the one to nurse and watch over him.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am to all of you for your thoughtfulness,” she ventured again. “But I’m afraid Sully’s condition is still very serious, and it requires that I—”

“Ma,” Colleen said suddenly, her voice queerly excited. Michaela’s eyes flew to her daughter’s face. Colleen was gazing raptly at Sully. Michaela followed Colleen’s glance. For several seconds she stared fixedly at Sully, then reached out a shaking hand and placed it on his forehead.

“Oh my,” she gasped softly.

“What is it?” asked the Reverend urgently, unable to tell if the news was good or bad.

Michaela didn’t answer immediately, preoccupied with stroking the damp hair off Sully’s sweaty forehead. Finally she responded, her voice shaking a little, “The fever flush is gone, and his skin is damp and cool. The fever’s broken.”

“Thank the Lord!” the Reverend declared.

“Oh, Ma—I’m so happy!” Colleen exclaimed softly, hugging her mother tightly. Michaela gladly returned the embrace, then fumbled in her apron pocket for her stethoscope. Quickly she pressed the bell to Sully’s chest. After a few moments, she moved the stethoscope to other locations, listening carefully for sounds in his lungs. Finally she laid the instrument aside and sat back, holding tightly to Sully’s hand.

“His heartbeat and pulse are strong and regular, and he’s breathing much more easily. The congestion in his lungs is greatly diminished,” she said aloud, hardly daring to believe the evidence before her eyes. “He’s overcoming the infection. I believe—he’s going to be all right.” Tears sprang to her eyes, and she raised her hand to her mouth to stifle a sob. Colleen wrapped her arms around Michaela’s shoulders and pressed her cheek to her mother’s. “I knew it!” she whispered joyfully. “I knew you’d pull him through, Ma.”

“This is wonderful news!” Reverend Johnson chimed in. “The Lord has answered our prayers.”

Briefly Michaela let herself bask in joy and relief that Sully had overcome one of the dangerous hurdles to his recovery. But immediately crowding in on her happiness was the dark realization that he still had another, and very different, hurdle to face. One, perhaps, that was even more serious.

“You’re right, Reverend, this is very good news,” she acknowledged, scrubbing the tears from her cheeks and attempting to collect herself. “But Sully isn’t out of the woods yet. He has yet to regain consciousness—and the more time that passes that he doesn’t awaken, the more there’s cause for concern.”
"Ma, now that the fever’s broken, I’m sure Sully will be wakin’ up any time,” Colleen said confidently.

“I agree with Colleen,” said the Reverend. “This is surely a sign from the Lord that Sully’s turned the corner. I’m certain that in no time at all, he’ll be back among us again.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right,” Michaela said, trying to sound cheerful for their sakes. But she kept remembering Cloud Dancing’s explanation of Sully’s torment—of the fear that had made him retreat so deeply into himself. Quinine or willow bark tea wouldn’t cure a sickness of the spirit, and she wondered how—or if—he could recover from a broken heart.

Colleen was speaking to her again, and Michaela turned her attention to her daughter with an effort.

“Now that Sully’s doin’ better, you’ve got to take some time for yourself, Ma,” Colleen was saying. “Please go get some breakfast at Grace’s, and then come back here and rest. I’ll make up one of the recovery rooms for you.”

“And I’ll remain here with Colleen until you return,” the Reverend promised. “I can start school a little late today.”

“You’re both so kind—but I can’t leave now,” Michaela told them.

"’Why?’ Colleen asked, clearly perplexed.

“If Sully is, indeed, close to regaining consciousness, I need to be here with him when he does,” Michaela explained.

“I understand how you feel, Ma, but that could be hours from now. And you know I’d wake you if anythin’ happened. Please, Ma—you need food, and rest,” Colleen said unhappily, worried for her mother.

“Perhaps you could bring me something from Grace’s,” Michaela suggested. “I promise to eat it. And I’ll even rest here in Sully’s room, if you would be so kind as to bring in the cot from the examination room, Reverend?” she added.

“Of course,” the minister said, immediately exiting through the door.

“Ma, are you sure?” Colleen persisted.

Michaela stared into her daughter’s eyes. “I need to be here, Colleen,” she said quietly. “When Sully awakens, I want it to be my face that he sees—and my hand holding his that he feels. I need to do this—for Sully, and for myself. Can you understand?”

Colleen nodded. “Cause you love him,” she said simply.

“Yes,” her mother answered, her eyes going back to the precious face on the pillow. “Because I love him.”

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Michaela sat on Sully’s bed, continuing her faithful vigil. Nearby was a tray containing the remains of the breakfast she had dutifully eaten under Colleen’s watchful eye. She had even reclined on the cot, allowing her daughter to solicitously tuck her in before going off to clean the instruments in the examination room, as the Reverend and Brian left for the schoolhouse.

However as soon as she heard her son and the Reverend depart, and the muffled sounds of Colleen beginning her chores, Michaela had thrown off the covers, arising from the cot and reclaiming her spot next to Sully. She gazed down at him now, one of his hands in hers as the fingertips of her other hand rhythmically stroked his hair.

“Is it true?” she asked him softly. “Were Colleen and the Reverend right? Have you turned a corner at last, Sully? Are you coming back to me?”

There was no response—not that she truly expected any. Sully’s face looked peaceful in repose, but he
continued to sleep.

“You promised me you’d come back for the wedding,” she said to him. “I know I told you I’d wait two years if I had to—but I’ve changed my mind. I want to be married on May 20th, Sully—just as we planned. Just as Cloud Dancing said. Remember how he received a sign that this was the date we should be joined? We have to listen to the spirits, Sully. We can’t ignore their wisdom. You have to wake up, so we can fulfill the spirits’ prophecy for us. They said we’d be happy, Sully. Cloud Dancing promised—and you know he never breaks his promises.

“Just as you never break yours,” she whispered. “You promised to marry me on May 20th, Sully, and I’m holding you to it. Do you hear me? Nothing is going to keep us from being together. Not Custer, or his henchmen, or illness—or fear. Especially not fear.

“I will not leave you, Byron Sully!” she said passionately. “Don’t you dare leave me!”

Bereft of her defenses, she wept—her tears falling over his hand that she cradled within her own.

“Don’t you leave me,” she repeated brokenly. Gradually her weeping diminished, and she sat quietly, Sully’s hand resting in her lap, still loosely clasped between hers. The long minutes passed, and finally her eyelids began to droop. Eventually, they closed. Her head fell forward on her chest, and she slept.

Michaela didn’t know how much time passed as she dozed, sitting upright on the bed. The craving of her mind and body for rest, blotted out any discomfort she might have felt. For an unknown time, she blessedly escaped into oblivion.

Suddenly, however, she came awake, not precisely sure what had roused her. The clinic was quiet, the streets sounds muffled and remote. She didn’t even detect a sound from Colleen. Her ears continued to strain for some noise that might have awakened her, but none was forthcoming.

Her glance went to Sully’s face, but his eyes remained closed. There was no change that she could see.

Sighing inwardly, she wearily brushed the hair back from her face as she continued to clasp Sully’s fingers. Arching her back, grimacing, she started to release his hand so that she could rise and stretch her aching muscles.

And then she felt it. With a shock, she looked down to see Sully’s fingers tightening around her own. Her heart began to race as she squeezed his hand in return. She raised her head to look into Sully’s face, and saw his blue eyes staring back at hers.

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 27 March, 1870

I waited till I saw the kids leave the homestead—Colleen and Brian on their way to school and Matthew presumably off to tend the cattle Olive had left him—before I emerged from the concealment of the bushes and climbed the steps to the front porch.

As my knuckles were poised to rap on the weathered surface of the door, I had second thoughts. Dr. Mike had been powerfully angry with me when we parted. Perhaps it was too soon for me to approach her again. Maybe I needed her more time to cool off before I tried to ask for her forgiveness. And when you got right down to it, what obligation did she have to forgive me at all? From the stories she had told me, and the other clues I’d gleaned, it was clear that we had a friendship. Maybe even a strong one. But how did I know it was strong enough to withstand the shame of my deceit? Truth is, I didn’t. I had no way of knowing how deep her anger went, or how long she would carry that hurt and resentment around inside her. Like Shakespeare had said, “Hell hath no fury...”

These thoughts going through my mind, I silently backed away from the door and turned to leave—but then I hesitated. I knew I didn’t have the right to expect forgiveness—at least not right away—but I wanted her to know how sorry I was. After all, someone had to make the first move, and as the one who had
wronged her, that responsibility fell to me. No amount of healing could take place—and we would never resolve our differences—if we didn’t start talking. Besides, my coming to her so soon after our confrontation would convince her more completely of how I truly regretted what I’d done. At least I hoped so.

Taking a deep breath, I faced the door once again and this time I knocked decisively on the panel. My heart was galloping in my chest, but I stood my ground. After a long delay the door opened, and we were facing each other once again.

She didn’t look surprised to see me—fact is, she didn’t look like anything at all. Her face was devoid of expression. It was not a state of affairs to inspire confidence, but I resolved not to lose my nerve.

Agonizing seconds passed while we stared at one another. Finally she broke the uncomfortable silence.

“I said I’d see you in town,” she said neutrally. “Unless there’s some physical problem you have, or some other emergency that’s brought you here?” Her eyes, skeptical bordering on hostile as she observed how obviously healthy I was, showed how much credence she gave that notion.

“As you can see, I’m fine,” I said quietly. “And there ain’t no emergencies that I know of. I came out here because I did something very wrong, and I wanted to apologize. I invaded your privacy, and then lied about it. I hurt you, and I damaged our relationship—maybe beyond repair, though I hope that won’t be the case. I had no right to do what I did—especially after you’ve done so much for me and been so honest with me—the best you could be, anyway, considering my condition.”

A strange look passed across her face at my last statement. It was momentary, and gone in an instant—almost making me question whether I’d seen it at all. Yet I had the strongest feeling that something more was going on between us than just my transgression against her.

“I really don’t know what to say to you, Sully,” she responded briefly, her posture stiff and her eyes remote.

“Don’t you?” I asked, growing a little braver. “Come on, Dr. Mike—there’s a lot of anger inside you, and you need to get it out. Yell at me—I know you want to. Tell me what you think of me for prying like I did—it’s no less than I deserve. You shouldn’t keep your feelings bottled up, Dr. Mike. I confess it will be hard to hear, but at least we’ll be talking—and, maybe, that will lead to forgiveness—or at least understanding. We can’t fix what’s wrong between us if we shut ourselves off from each other.”

“What makes you think I want to fix it?” she said coldly.

“If you really feel like that, I’ll go away, and never bother you again,” I promised, desperately afraid that she’d take me up on it. “But—I don’t think that’s what you truly want. I think that there was something special between us, and I don’t believe you’re ready to throw it away because of what I did—hurtful and thoughtless though it was. I was hoping—I hesitated, then went on, “I’m hoping we can talk it through, and then find a way to move on.” I hesitated again, looking at her earnestly, and then added, “Are you willing?”

“You expect a great deal of me, Sully,” she demurred. “Perhaps more than I’m able to give.”

“Maybe so,” I replied. “But then again—maybe not.” I continued to watch her carefully. It might have been wishful thinking on my part, but I sensed that she was beginning to weaken. “Can I come in, at least?” I ventured.

There was another long pause, but then she stood back from the door to allow me to enter. Mentally giving thanks for this first—if minor—victory, I stepped inside.

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“I presume you haven’t eaten,” she said as I entered the house. “There are some eggs left over from breakfast—I can heat them up,” she added diffidently.

“You don’t got to feed me,” I said.
“You’re still recovering Sully. You need proper nutrition,” she replied, unable to keep from being a doctor, even while she was angry with me.

“I’m fine,” I told her firmly. More softly I added, “I didn’t come here for you to wait on me, Dr. Mike. Besides, I ain’t exactly an invited guest.”

“Very well,” she agreed. She stood stiffly in the middle of the room, arms wrapped around herself like a barricade. I could see how uncomfortable I was making her, which hadn’t been my intention. Then again, what else could I expect under the circumstances?

“Maybe we could sit down?” I suggested after an uneasy pause.

She nodded, and moved to the table. I followed her, meaning to pull out her chair, but she walked around to the opposite side, putting the barrier of the table between us. I understood that she needed to keep me distant from her—at least for now—and I waited respectfully till she sat down, then lowered myself into the chair across from her.

“I really don’t know what you expect of me, Sully,” she said almost at once, echoing her statement to me out on the porch.

“I don’t expect nothing from you,” I replied. “Except, hopefully, to listen. I’m the one who wronged you, and it’s up to me to try to put things right.”

“If you think that my feelings have changed from last night, then I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed,” she said coolly.

“I don’t think that,” I told her. “I know you’re angry, and I know you’re hurt. You got a right to be. I don’t expect you to overlook what I did—only try to understand why I did it.”

That look of betrayal came into her eyes again, but this time it was mixed with pain instead of anger. “That’s precisely what I don’t understand!” she exclaimed. “What would possess you to do such a thing?”

I was silent for a long time. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I knew the truth would sound like a lie. Because I honestly didn’t know why I’d done it. Whether or not she was engaged, whether she’d broken things off with her fiancé because she had feelings for another man—none of that was any of my business. She was my doctor—I was her patient. And, from the conversations we’d had, I knew that we had also been friends. But that didn’t give me the right to pry into her affairs. Besides, why should I care so much? Why was the hint of a mysterious man in her life driving me to distraction? There was no logical reason. Unless . . . unless there had been something between us. Something more than friendship.

“I don’t know why I did it,” I said honestly. “It was an impulse—and after I’d given in to it, I regretted it. But it was too late to take it back.”

“So I’m expected to forgive you because you had a moment’s remorse?” she asked.

“No,” I said patiently. “I’m just trying to explain—“

“Perhaps I’m missing something, but you just said you didn’t know why you did it. How do you intend to explain things to me if you can’t explain them to yourself?”

“I suppose I wasn’t very clear,” I conceded. “I guess a better way of saying it is that I don’t understand the feelings I had that made me take the telegram.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t know what you mean,” she said, regarding me disparagingly.

I was silent again, wondering if I had the courage to be totally honest with her. So much was riding on this moment. I didn’t want to frighten her off, but at the same time, I knew that she would see through a lie. More important, I knew she’d never forgive another deception on top of the first.

“When we spoke yesterday, I got the feeling that this David wasn’t the only man in your life,” I said at last. “It got me to wondering if there was someone else you cared for—someone who was important to you. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. And then, when I saw the telegram, something just told me to take it. I guess deep in my mind there was this notion that reading it would give me a clue about who he was, or how
you felt about him.”

She was listening to me, pale and silent. After a long, uncertain pause she replied, “Assuming there even *was* such a person, why would you possibly care?”

I looked her in the eyes. “Because I was jealous,” I said.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

For what seemed like an eternal moment suspended in time, Michaela didn’t react. Neither did Sully. For her part, the glimpse of his crystal blue eyes—their hue reminiscent of the clear, luminous sky at dawn—was so welcome and familiar, that she could almost forget how she had been robbed of the sight of them for several agonizing days. As far as Sully was concerned, however, there was no way to know what thoughts lay behind his eyes as he gazed back at her.

It suddenly occurred to Michaela that perhaps he was not truly awake; that the opening of his eyes—like his squeezing of her hand—were merely reflexes without any significance. The rush of joy that had infused her just seconds before was momentarily dashed, and she felt her heart constrict inside her.

But then mentally she rebuked herself. There was no way to be sure, one way or the other, of his condition until she examined him further. She told herself not to rush to judgement, or draw any conclusions until she was absolutely certain.

“Sully?” she said softly, almost fearfully. She leaned closer to him and was instantly rewarded by the sight of his eyes tracking her movement. “So you are awake!” she exclaimed in relief, muting her voice so as not to startle him. He continued to watch her, but didn’t speak.

“Can you hear me?” Michaela asked him gently. “Do you understand what I’m saying?” There was a long pause, and then he moved his head on the pillow in a slight nod. Thank God! she exulted in her mind. “You must be so thirsty,” she spoke again, compassionately noting how badly his lips had been parched by fever. “Would you like some water?”

Again he nodded, a bit more strongly this time. Michaela rose from the bed and moved to the pitcher on the nightstand. She picked it up and poured water into a glass with hands that shook slightly, then returned to her position on the bed. Carefully she slipped her hand under his head to elevate it while she held the glass to his lips. She allowed him a few swallows, admonishing him to drink slowly, then lowered his head to the pillow again.

“You’ve been through a terrible ordeal, but you’re going to be all right,” she said softly, her eyes tender and nuturing as she gazed at him. “How do you feel?” There was another pause, as he attempted to utter his first sound since he’d been wounded.

“My head,” he finally managed, his voice nearly a croak from disuse, and the infection of his vocal chords. “Hurts.”

Michaela nodded in understanding. “Your head was grazed by a bullet, but thankfully the wound appears to have been superficial,” she told him. “However it’s quite natural that you should have a headache. Now that you’re awake, I can give you something for the pain. Does anything else hurt you?”

He shook his head slightly.

“Do you remember what happened to you—how you were injured?” she added.

After another hesitation, his eyes somewhat confused, he shook his head again.

“That’s normal as well, after such a trauma,” Michaela assured him. “It may or may not come back to you, but it’s nothing to be concerned about. Mercifully, you’ve come through the worst of your ordeal. After some time to rest and regain your strength, I believe you’ll be as good as new,” she added, her voice cheerful and her expression optimistic as her own confidence began to be restored.
Sully started to speak again, the effort costing him, and she put her hand over his. “There’s no need for you to try to talk now,” she said. “There will be plenty of time for conversation later, when you’re stronger.” But plainly her advice was unsatisfactory to him, as relentlessly he tried again.

“Why—“ He stopped, then made another attempt. “Why . . . am I in—the boardin’ house?” he asked.

Startled by his question, Michaela’s eyes regarded him sharply. However a moment later she relaxed, realizing that any trauma to the skull, regardless of how minor, was bound to result in a certain amount of confusion. When the element of the high fever he had suffered was added into the equation, Sully’s disorientation made even more sense.

“This isn’t the boardinghouse, Sully,” she told him kindly. “You’re in one of the recovery rooms of the clinic.”

“Clinic?” he repeated doubtfully. Carefully he moved his head, his eyes slowly traveling around the room, taking in the features of his surroundings.

“Yes, the clinic,” Michaela said. “We kept you at the homestead at first, until your condition improved enough that I thought it was safe for you to travel. Then we brought you here.”

Her explanation didn’t seem to enlighten him, however. His eyes, as they fastened on hers, continued to look confused and uncertain.

“What is it?” Michaela asked him gently, sensing that something still troubled him.

Sully gazed around the walls of the room again, then his eyes returned to her face. He swallowed with difficulty, and Michaela hastened to offer him another sip of water. Gratefully he drank, then his head fell back on the pillow. He took a breath, then spoke again.

“I’m sorry—have we met?” he asked hoarsely. “I—I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

Stunned, Michaela stared at him, momentarily doubting the evidence of her senses. After a long and painful pause she said haltingly, “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “But—I don’t remember you.”

Michaela could barely hear him for the thundering of her heart. Her thoughts were panicked and chaotic. A certain amount of memory loss was understandable, given the severity of his illness and the fact of his head wound. Many people who suffered traumatic injuries had no recollection of them afterward, just as she had explained to Sully moments before. But the extent of amnesia his first words had revealed was something very different, and potentially far more serious. If he truly didn’t recognize her—if he honestly had no recollection of their relationship, or even their acquaintance—then that meant he had lost as much as three of the past years of his life.

She was trembling all over, but knew that somehow she must conceal her shock and anxiety from him. And she owed him an answer to his question.

“My name is Dr. Michaela Quinn,” she told him carefully. “Most people here in Colorado Springs call me ‘Dr. Mike.’”

“A—lady doctor?” he asked, his eyes disbelieving. “But—there ain’t no doctor in town. Just Jake, the barber. And Charlotte Cooper, the midwife.”

“That’s true—Jake and Charlotte took care of the people in town before I came,” Michaela acknowledged, her heart sinking still further as the extent of his mental deficit became more evident. “However, people in need of medical treatment come to me now.”

“I don’t—don’t recall you comin’ to town,” he said, his eyes growing more frightened. “I don’t understand. What’s—what’s wrong with me?”

Michaela’s need to assuage his anxiety overcame her own shock and worry. “Try to stay calm,” she
told him soothingly.

“But—“

“Please, Sully, try not to upset yourself,” she repeated. “Your confusion may simply be the result of your injury, as I told you before. I’m going to ask you a few questions, so that I can get a clearer idea of what’s troubling you. Just try to relax and answer my questions as well as you’re able.”

Her calm and professional manner seemed to reassure him somewhat, and he waited patiently for her to put her questions.

“Do you know who the President is?” she asked.

“Johnson,” he replied, causing her heart to skip a beat.

“And the year?” she added, attempting to keep the nervous quaver out of her voice.

“Eight—eighteen-sixty-seven,” he said.

His words gave her the confirmation she was dreading. Hard as it was to believe, or accept, apparently his memories of the past three years—as well as his memories of her—had been wiped clean. So this was how his mind and heart had resolved the emotional dilemma that had been tormenting him—by completely obliterating all recollection of his suffering.

Though it cost nearly all her effort, somehow she managed to maintain a placid expression. Blandly she continued, “You mentioned Jake and Charlotte. Can you tell me the names of some other friends or townspeople you remember?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly after a moment. “There’s . . . Charlotte’s kids—Matthew, Colleen and little Brian. And Loren Bray, who owns the general store. Hank Lawson, who runs the saloon, and Robert E.—he owns the livery. And the Cheyenne—Chief Black Kettle, and my blood brother Cloud Dancin’.”

“That’s very good,” Michaela said, with a brightness she didn’t feel. “So it’s not your memory of people that’s been affected, as much as your recollection of time.”

“What—do you mean?” he asked.

Michaela gazed at him with as reassuring an expression as she could muster. “Your answers to my questions seem to indicate that you’ve lost some time,” she said carefully. “Johnson is no longer in office—Ulysses S. Grant is President now. And—I’m afraid that the year is not 1867. It’s—” she hesitated, concerned about the effect it might have on him, but obligated to tell him the truth. “It’s 1870, Sully,” she finished gently.

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“That can’t be!” he exclaimed in panic, rising up from the bed in his agitation, then groaning as the pain in his head and accompanying dizziness drove him back against the pillow.

“Sully, please! You must lie still!” Michaela cautioned him strongly, pressing her hand on his chest to immobilize him.

“But—this is crazy!” he persisted, his face ashen and pain-wracked, his eyes stricken. “You’re sayin’—I forgot three whole years?! How could that happen?”

Pain lanced Michaela’s heart as she watched the new and wrenching torment in his face. How desperately she wanted to take him in her arms and hold him close, lovingly whispering words of comfort and reassurance in his ear. But the reality of his amnesia stood between them—an insurmountable gulf which she wondered if she would ever be able to cross. And in the meantime, somehow she must sit back and pretend to be objective—pretend to be a stranger—as his amnesia rendered the memories of their relationship sterile and void.

But her heartbreak was not the issue now. Only Sully’s needs were important. She knew she had to put her pain aside, as if laying it on a shelf, not to be taken down and examined until she had the privacy,
and the luxury, of surrendering to her feelings.

“I know how upsetting this must be for you, Sully,” she said compassionately now, her hands tightly covering his. “But you must try to stay quiet. You’re still very weak, you must give yourself time to heal.”

“How—do you expect me to do that—after what you told me?” he said, breath rapid and heart still pounding from shock and exertion.

“I’ll help you,” Michaela pledged, a slight quiver in her voice betraying her depth of emotion. “I’m going to take good care of you Sully—I promise.”

“Please—” he implored, clutching at her hand, the desperation in his eyes nearly tearing her heart from her chest. “You gotta fix this. Please, Dr. Mike—you gotta help me remember.”

“I’m going to do everything I can,” she promised him again, wondering how she could reassure him when she could barely hold the threads of her own self-control together. “Starting with giving you something to ease your pain, and help you rest. Things will look more positive when you’re stronger, Sully.”

“I’m afraid,” he whispered.

“Afraid of what?” she asked gently, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes.

“I’m afraid—to sleep,” he confessed, his voice low and harsh. “What if—I lose more time?”

“That won’t happen,” she told him softly.

“How—do you know?” he asked, not daring to trust her words.

“Because—I won’t let it.”

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She flinched, as if I’d slapped her. I could see her drawing more tightly into herself.

“I think you’d better leave now,” she said distantly. She started to rise from her chair, as if to dismiss me.

“Don’t!” I begged, putting out my hand and brushing at her sleeve. “Please don’t. Don’t push me away, Dr. Mike . . . Michaela.” She froze, then slowly sank down onto the chair. She seemed to hover there, as if poised to take flight any minute. Her arms were wrapped around herself again. She looked vulnerable and fragile—like she’d break into a thousand pieces if I touched her. My heart felt like somebody’d squeezed it, and all I wanted was to take her in my arms, and comfort her and keep her safe.

“I—I don’t think I can have this conversation with you, Sully,” she said, her voice low. She was looking down, not meeting my eyes.

“I know what I did was wrong . . . Michaela,“ I said, stumbling over the name a little. It felt strange to say, but it sounded right. “And I know I hurt you. But do you really despise me that much?”

I stared at her, willing her to raise her eyes to meet mine. After a moment, she did.

“No,” she said, her voice so soft it was nearly a whisper. “I could never despise you.”

“Then please . . .” I implored. She was silent, but she didn’t move.

“You don’t got to tell me anything,” I added quickly. “You don’t got to say anything at all. Just—let me talk. All right?”

She raised her chin. “All right,” she said quietly.
I placed my palms on the table, and looked at her squarely. “It’s true,” I began. “I—I’m attracted to you. It ain’t so hard to understand. Any man would be.” She averted her eyes from me, her cheeks flushing, as if she was unused to receiving compliments about herself. That was equally hard for me to fathom—she must have had so many in her life, beautiful as she was.

“From the first moment I saw you . . .” I swallowed, then pushed on. “Well, you were one of the loveliest sights I ever laid eyes on.”

“The first time you saw me?” she echoed.

“Yeah—the first time I opened my eyes in the clinic,” I elaborated.

“Oh—I see,” she said quietly. I wondered a little at her reaction, trying to figure what else she thought I could have meant. Then I realized—maybe she thought I’d been referring to the *real* first time we’d met—the meeting I didn’t remember.

“I’m sorry, Michaela,” I apologized. “I still have no memory of our original meeting. All I can do is tell you how I’ve felt these last few weeks since I woke up.”

She nodded, her expression resigned. “I understand,” she said. “And I’m flattered that you think I’m—I’m attractive. But physical attraction alone is hardly the basis for a relationship, Sully.”

“It wasn’t only that,” I told her. “If all I cared about was looks, I could take my pick of Hank’s girls. Your beauty ain’t only on the outside, Michaela. It fills you up inside and spills out to touch everyone around you. You’re loving and tender, and passionate. You care so much about people, and you’re totally devoted to Charlotte’s children. I’ve seen how much they love you and depend on you.

“You’re kind and gentle with your patients, too—just like you were with me. You saved my life! You didn’t give up, even when all the odds were stacked against me. How do I begin to thank you for that?”

“Patients who’ve gone through a crisis like yours often develop a strong attachment to their doctor,” she said neutrally. “They confuse gratitude with affection.”

“It ain’t ‘gratitude’ that I feel, Michaela.” I looked at her levelly.

“Sully, you just said you were grateful to me,” she demurred. “It’s all right—it’s perfectly natural for you to have those feelings. Just—don’t mistake them for . . . something else.”

“I know the difference between being thankful to somebody—and having feelings for her,” I maintained. “I can’t tell you exactly when it began—when my feelings of friendship started to change to something else. Truth is, I think I surprised myself more than you when I took that telegram. Maybe it was the thought of you—loving somebody else—that made me realize the truth.

“Point is, I care for you,” I went on, staring at her earnestly. “Which makes what I did all the more wrong. But I did it *because* I care. If that makes any sense at all.

“I don’t expect nothing from you,” I said. “I realize that your heart may be with another man, and I accept that. If friendship is all you can offer me, I’ll be grateful and honored to have it. I just hope I haven’t damaged our—relationship—beyond repair.” I paused, taking a deep breath. “I guess it’s in your hands now,” I concluded.

I sat back, and waited for her to decide my fate.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Almost like a sleepwalker, Michaela wandered from the clinic over to the café, and took a table alone in a far corner. Busy with the height of the lunch rush, Grace didn’t immediately notice her presence, which suited Michaela fine. Grace would only ask her about Sully, and Michaela would be at a loss as to what to say.
In truth, she was at a loss as to what to feel. Sully was awake, finally. And she was certain now that his physical recovery would be complete. Both outcomes were what she’d prayed for. She should have been filled with joy at this moment—giddy with relief and gratitude, and finally able to look toward the future. Instead, she felt like many of the shell-shocked soldiers she and her father had seen and treated during the war, their hollow eyes haunted by the memories of horrors she couldn’t begin to imagine.

She had prayed that Sully would come back to her, but only a part of him had returned. The most important part—his essence—was missing, locked deep within the recesses of his mind. Michaela wondered how—or if—she would ever be able to reach into that part of his mind and turn it outward, restoring the missing portion of his life. That Sully’s conscious mind had gone to such great lengths to erect a defense against his memories, could only mean that the pain of those memories must have been very severe, indeed. Perhaps too severe for Sully to ever recover that part of his past.

Which meant he might never recover his memory of *their* past. Of their friendship, which had turned to love. Of their commitment to one another.

As she considered the possibility of such an outcome, Michaela’s own mind shut down in protest. It may have been unrealistic—even cowardly—but she could not accept that in Sully’s mind, he had permanently erased all trace of her existence. There must be a way to bring those memories back—to help Sully become emotionally strong enough again to face his demons, and work through them. But how? What was the safest, gentlest way to aid him to recover? The mind was such a fragile thing, such an unknown quantity. How could she know that whatever course she pursued would be the right one? That she wouldn’t damage his psyche still further in her ignorance?

And there was something else. A question that had tormented her, since the moment she realized that Sully didn’t know who she was. Why had Sully wiped his memories of her from his mind? What was it that had been so unbearable his mind had felt compelled to block it out? Was it as simple as Cloud Dancing’s theory—that Sully couldn’t face the thought of losing her? Or did it go even further—that deep in his heart, Sully wasn’t ready to commit to her? Or even worse, that he didn’t *want* to commit to her? Was this his mind’s way of saving him from having to admit the truth to her—that he wanted to end their relationship?

Relentlessly Michaela’s mind worried at the problem. How could she know what was in Sully’s heart? How could she know what was safe to do? Should she fill in the missing pieces of the past three years for him, hoping that would stimulate his mind to remember? Or should she sit back and do nothing, hoping and trusting in nature to take its course and heal him?

And what of the facts of their relationship? Instinctively Michaela knew that here, she treaded on the most dangerous of ground. Even if there weren’t a question of Sully’s readiness for a commitment, how could she tell him what they had been to each other? What could she say? “Sully, you’ve lost the last three years of your life and you don’t even know me—but by the way, we’re to be married in two months!”? Wearily Michaela dropped her head into her hands.

“Dr. Mike!” said Grace’s voice at her side. “It’s good to see you out again! Does this mean there’s good news about Sully?”

Michaela pinned on an obligatory smile and looked up at Grace. “Well, yes,” she said. “Sully’s awake.”

“Praise be!” Grace exclaimed, pressing her clasped hands to her breast. “Oh, Dr. Mike—you must be so happy!”

“Yes—yes I’m very relieved,” Michaela replied, hoping Grace wouldn’t notice the lack of enthusiasm in her tone.

“What’s that? Ya say Sully’s come around?” called Loren from a nearby table where he sat with Hank and Jake. He cackled. “I knew nothin’ could keep him down for long!” He left his chair and came over to Michaela, grinning. Jake followed, but Hank remained in his seat. “So how soon’s he gonna be outta there, Dr. Mike?” Loren asked eagerly.

“Yes, is he up for visitors yet?” Grace chimed in.
“Well, he’s still very weak—” Michaela began.

“’Course he is, after everythin’ he’s been through,” Grace interrupted.

“That’s right,” Michaela said, taking advantage of the opening Grace gave her. “And I’m afraid he woke with rather a severe headache—from the head injury,” she added. “I’ve given him some laudanum, so he’s sleeping now. Colleen is with him. Under the circumstances, I think it would be better if Sully has some time to regain his strength before he starts having visitors.”

“Well, sure,” Loren agreed. He cleared his throat. “Listen, Dr. Mike—I’m sorry I ain’t had a chance to get over to the clinic ‘fore now and see how he’s doin’. With all these new folks settlin’ in town ’cause of the train, the store’s busy from mornin’ till night.”

“That’s what ya wanted, Loren,” Jake said caustically.

“Well, ’course it is!” Loren said. “It’s just that I ain’t hardly had a chance to breathe, what with customers comin’ in every time I turn around.”

“Better get used to it, old man,” Hank remarked with a lazy grin. “Once the train gets here, we’re all gonna be up to our eyeballs in new business.” His elbow rested on the table, one of his ubiquitous cigars propped between his fingers. Languidly he took a puff.

Jake raised an eyebrow at Loren. “If you’re so all-fired busy, what are ya doin’ *here*?” he asked dourly.

Loren looked offended. “Well a body’s gotta eat,” he said.

Grace rolled her eyes at them, then turned her attention back to Michaela. “I’m gonna start cookin’ up all Sully’s favorites,” she said excitedly, ticking them off on her fingers. “Fried chicken, cornbread, apple pie—”

“That’s very kind of you, Grace,” Michaela said hastily. “But I’m afraid Sully can only tolerate a bland diet for the time being.”

“Don’t you worry ‘bout a thing, Dr. Mike,” Grace said. “My chicken soup will be good for whatever ails him. And I make a blancmange that goes down smooth as silk.”

“Blah—WHAT?” Jake repeated.


“Why didn’t ya just say so?” Loren grumbled.

Grace shook her head, then lifted her chin regally, clearly despairing of these ignorant rustics.

“That sounds lovely, Grace,” Michaela hastened to say. “I’m sure Sully will enjoy it.”

“I’m gonna get started right away, soon’s I get Robert E. to fetch me some ingredients from the store,” Grace told her, eagerly starting to plan. “Loren, do you have any—” She broke off suddenly. “Robert E!” she exclaimed. “I gotta tell him ‘bout Sully! He’s gonna be so excited! ROBERT E.!” she called toward the livery in a voice that penetrated clear across the café.

“Grace, there’s really no need to make a fuss—” Michaela tried to say, but her words were drowned out.

Just then Dorothy rounded the corner of the telegraph office. Immediately her eyes fell on the knot of people clustered around Michaela. She hurried over. “Michaela—is there any news?” she asked excitedly.

“Sure is,” Loren said before Michaela could reply. “Sully’s come to—he’s gonna be fine!”

“That right?” said Robert E., jogging up to them, a grin breaking out on his face. “I just knew Sully’d beat this thing!” He hugged Grace.
Dorothy’s hands went to her mouth. “Is it true? Oh, Michaela! Oh, that’s wonderful” She leaned over and hugged her friend tightly, then drew back to look into her face. “When did it happen?” she said. “How is he? Is he talkin’—” She stopped abruptly as she caught sight of Michaela’s expression. Michaela’s eyes looked into hers, mutely sending her a message. Dorothy stared at her closely for a moment, then drew herself up.

“I think everyone should clear out and let Michaela eat her lunch in peace,” she said clearly. “She’s tired—she’s been through a lot.”

“Seems like Sully’s—been through a lot’ too,” Hank said archly. Michaela shot him a swift glance. He looked back at her mockingly, but said nothing else.

“Of course he has,” Dorothy said strongly, giving Hank a poisonous stare. “And Michaela’s worn out with lookin’ after him.”

“Dorothy’s right,” Grace said. “Dr. Mike, I’m gonna fix you a plate right now.”

“I’m really not that hungry, Grace,” Michaela protested. “Just some cider will be fine.” But Dorothy nodded at Grace over her head.

“Bring the food, Grace,” she said. She sat down across from Michaela and took her hand, as the others began to disperse—Loren and Jake somewhat reluctantly.

“What is it?” Dorothy asked in a low voice. “I can see it in your eyes, Michaela. What’s wrong?” There was a long silence, then Michaela spoke, her eyes dark with misery.

“He doesn’t know me, Dorothy,” she said.

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“I can’t stay very long,” Michaela added, before Dorothy could speak. “I need to get back to Sully before he wakes up. But—I have to confide in someone, Dorothy.” She huddled forlornly in her chair.

Dorothy continued to hold her friend’s hand, her eyes supportive but confused. “Why are you in such a rush to get back, Michaela? Colleen’s lookin’ after Sully—ain’t that right?”

“Yes, she is,” Michaela confirmed. “But I can’t let Sully see her yet. I can’t let him see anyone yet—except for me.”

Dorothy stared at her intently. “Michaela—*what* is goin’ on? And what did you mean before when you said that Sully didn’t ‘know’ you?”

They were interrupted momentarily as Grace appeared with a steaming plate of her famous meatloaf, and a glass of sweet cider. She set them down in front of Michaela.

“Now you eat, Dr. Mike,” she instructed, squeezing Michaela’s shoulder. Michaela gave her a brief smile of thanks, and picked up her fork as Grace nodded approvingly, then went off to tend to her other customers. However as soon as she left, Michaela laid the fork down next to her plate, unable to summon any appetite for Grace’s cooking, tempting though it was.

“So what’s this about Sully?” Dorothy asked, bringing Michaela back to her earlier question. Michaela hesitated, sighing dispiritedly.

“When Sully woke up, he was confused,” she said finally.

“Well that’s natural, ain’t it?” Dorothy asked. “After all, he has a head wound—he’s gotta have some kind of after-effect from that, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, a certain amount of confusion and disorientation is normal,” Michaela confirmed. “But it was more than that.” She hesitated again—so long that Dorothy began to think she wasn’t going to say any more. But finally she resumed. “When Sully first spoke, he said something very odd to me. He asked what he was doing in the ‘boardinghouse.’”
“Oh, well,” Dorothy said. “He was just a little confused about his surroundin’s. That’s understandable—”

“But that’s just it, Dorothy,” Michaela interrupted. “He wasn’t confused—he knew precisely where he was. Because the last that he knew, the clinic *was* a boardinghouse.” She stared into Dorothy’s eyes.

“Michaela, what exactly are you sayin’?” her friend asked softly and slowly. She reached out and took Michaela’s hand again, grasping it reassuringly.

“Three years ago the clinic *was* Charlotte’s boardinghouse,” Michaela stated. “In Sully’s mind, it *is* nearly three years ago, Dorothy. He’s lost his memory of that entire time—and his memories of me.” Her eyes were hollow.

“Oh, Michaela!” Dorothy exclaimed softly. “But that can’t be! He simply musta been a little out of his head. After all, he’s been runnin’ a high fever—"

“His fever broke early this morning,” Michaela interrupted. “When he awoke, he was confused, and in pain, but he wasn’t delirious. He was in possession of his faculties.”

“But Sully *loves* you!” Dorothy insisted. “How could he not know you? Michaela, you must be mistaken.”

“I wish I were . . .” Michaela said quietly.

Dorothy watched her in concern. “Michaela, you’re exhausted and over-wrought. This whole thing has been nearly as hard on you as it’s been on Sully. You’ve barely eaten, you haven’t slept—that’s gotta be affectin’ how you’re thinkin’—”

Michaela looked at her levelly. “He stared straight into my eyes and asked me who I was, Dorothy. He didn’t recognize me.

“I couldn’t believe it myself, at first,” she went on. “I asked him some questions to try to determine what he remembered. He—he thought Johnson was President, and that the year was 1867.” Tears gathered in her eyes and she lifted her free hand to wipe them away. “As far as Sully knows, the past three years never happened,” she finished dully.

Finally convinced, Dorothy sat back in her chair, overwhelmed by what Michaela had told her. It was her turn to be silent, as she tried to think of something reassuring to say.

“I’m sure it’s only temporary,” she offered helpfully at last. “In a day or two, when his head is clear, I’m sure everythin’ will come back to him.”

“I wish I could be as sure,” Michaela said bleakly. “Certainly it’s a possibility—one that I’m praying for. But—something tells me it’s not going to be that simple.”

Dorothy stared at her compassionately, at a loss as to how to comfort her friend. “What are you gonna do?” she asked finally.

Michaela sighed heavily. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “There’s so little literature available on the workings of the mind—so much that we don’t yet understand. I’ve read a small amount of research that suggests that amnesia patients should be allowed to recover their memories on their own, without overt intervention—“ She broke off as she noted the puzzled expression in Dorothy’s eyes. “That is, I should refrain from telling Sully anything of the time he’s lost, but instead allow his memories to come back naturally.”

Dorothy shrugged slightly. “That seems to make sense . . .” she ventured.

“Intellectually, yes,” Michaela agreed. “The theory seems to be that it’s dangerous to tell a patient too much too soon, for fear of the shock complicating his recovery even further—if not jeopardizing it completely. But I can’t shield Sully forever, Dorothy. Sooner or later he’s going to have to leave the clinic and be confronted by the changes in his life. He’s going to have to face some very painful realities, such as the deaths of the Cheyenne at Washita . . . and—and other things. What if he were to learn of these things
accidentally, from someone else? I can ask our family and friends to be circumspect with him, but I can’t control the entire town. Just one unfortunate slip from someone would be enough to devastate him, if he’s not prepared emotionally. There won’t be any easy way to tell him the truth about the things he’s forgotten, but at least if I’m the one to tell him, I can give him the facts slowly and carefully, a little at a time.”

“But how will you know when the time is right?” Dorothy asked.

It was Michaela’s turn to shrug. “I suppose all I can do is take my cues from Sully himself,” she said. “Just wait and watch, and let him indicate to me when he’s ready—if that time comes,” she added.

“Michaela, those ‘other things’ you mentioned—you were talkin’ about yourself, weren’t you—about you and Sully bein’ in love and gettin’ married?” Dorothy said intuitively.

Reluctantly Michaela nodded.

Dorothy’s eyes were dark with sympathy. “But Michaela—bein’ with Sully every day, unable to tell him how you feel or what you mean to each other . . . just waitin’ and hopin’ that he’ll remember your engagement . . . How will you endure it?”

Michaela’s eyes were haunted. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. “Truthfully, Dorothy, it may be the most difficult thing I’ve ever done.”

Dorothy looked deeply into her friend’s eyes. “Whatever you have to do, Michaela, it’s all gonna work out—I know it. That man loves you. Those feelin’s are still inside him, and they’re gonna come out, whether he remembers your courtship or not. Even if he never gets back the time he lost, you’ll still be together in the end. You’ll just make new memories, to replace the old.”

Michaela knew Dorothy meant well, and part of her desperately wanted to take comfort in the positive future Dorothy painted. But Dorothy couldn’t know of the deep-seated problems that had stolen Sully’s memories in the first place.

“Sully’s love for me may still be inside,” Michaela conceded. “And he may learn to have those feelings for me again. But I have good reason to believe that Sully had some very deep fears about our relationship that caused him to bury his recollections of it—and of me. Would it be right—would it be fair—to let Sully fall in love with me again only to have that love built on a lie? Deep in his heart, Dorothy, Sully may not yet be ready to make a permanent commitment to me. Perhaps he never will be. I can’t take advantage of his memory loss to plan a future with him that he doesn’t truly want.

“What if he were to remember it all someday, and end up hating me for not being truthful with him from the beginning?” she added, her eyes stark with despair.

“I don’t know anythin’ about Sully bein’ afraid to marry you, and honestly, I can’t imagine it,” Dorothy said. “And I’m certain he could never hate you, no matter what happens. But if you truly believe it would be wrong to keep the truth from him about your relationship, then be honest. Tell him about your history—how you came to know and love each other. Maybe hearin’ the words from you will bring it all back to him. At the very least, I think he’d be glad to know that you love him, if his feelin’s for you are as strong as I believe they are.”

“It’s so confusing,” Michaela sighed helplessly. “I’ve never felt so unsure of myself—so afraid of making the wrong choice.”

“Give yourself some time,” Dorothy advised. “You still don’t know what the comin’ days and weeks will bring. But one thing I’m sure of, Michaela, and that is that you and Sully were made for each other. You’ve always made your relationship work. Somehow, you’ll make it work this time, too.”

“I hope you’re right, Dorothy,” Michaela said softly. “How I hope that you’re right.”
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The time spun out as I waited for her to speak. I didn’t want to push her—we were on shaky enough ground as it was, and I knew if I pressured her any more it could all collapse from beneath us. But finally I had to ask again.

“So—do we still have a friendship, Michaela?” I ventured.

Instead of answering, she stood up and moved away from the table, pacing restlessly across the room, her arms still clutched about her. My eyes followed her, noting the grace of her movement, and the way the sun slanting through the windows lovingly played over the gleaming curtain of her hair.

She stopped in front of the window, her back to me, staring out at the road leading away from the homestead. I continued to wait, my unease increasing as the silence stretched between us.

Inexorably the seconds ticked by, making me more and more certain I wasn’t going to get the ‘happy ending’ from her I’d hoped for. A mantle of disappointment and despair descended to wrap itself around me. The feeling reached inside, coming to settle like a lead ball in the pit of my stomach.

I started to rise, preparing to leave her, like I figured she wanted. I wondered if it would be for good.

And then suddenly she turned, and spoke.

“I’ve been both expecting—and dreading—this day for a long time now,” she said, catching me completely unawares with her unexpected statement. Her voice was subdued, but her eyes were clear and forthright as they looked into mine. “Contrary to what you may believe, Sully, I’ve been aware of your—interest—in me for quite a while. I knew that it was only a matter of time before you decided to declare your feelings.”

Slowly I sat again, my mind a bit stunned by what I’d heard. But somehow, my heart wasn’t surprised. I knew she’d felt that strange, exhilarating energy between us, just like I had. Even now, my heart was racing and my skin prickled with the charged atmosphere in the room. Still, I was shocked that she’d finally said it straight out, after all the times she’d seemed to shy away or put me off.

“You knew?” I managed, my mouth suddenly dry even as sweat oiled my palms.

“Yes,” she admitted. After a moment she added, “You couldn’t tell? Not even a little?”

She’d read my mind again. “Well, maybe I could, at that,” I allowed. “A little.”

I expected her to elaborate on what she’d just said, but instead she took off on a different tack.

“I know you thought my anger at you stemmed from your violation of my privacy,” she said, bringing me back abruptly to the focus of our dispute. “And much of it did,” she added. “I feel compelled to be honest with you about that. But there was another reason I was upset,” she went on, a note of apprehension creeping into her voice. “I was afraid—that your desire to read the telegram meant that you were . . . getting too close.”

She paused. I stared at her, perplexed, my mind drawing a blank as to where this was headed.

“Too close to what? You’ve—you’ve lost me, Michaela,” was all I could say.

“After I got over my initial anger, I began to realize that given your feelings for me, your curiosity about the telegram—even your taking it without my knowledge—was understandable—perhaps even defensible,” she said. “It didn’t take that much effort for me to forgive you.”

Stunned again, I managed to utter, “But then why—“

“Didn’t I tell you?” she finished.

I nodded.

“Because as long as you thought I was angry, I could keep you at a distance,” she said, looking into my
bewildered eyes. “Because it wasn’t a question of me forgiving you—but rather, whether you could forgive me.”

Totally at a loss, I could only watch as she turned and went to the nightstand by her bed. She took something from a drawer, then returned to stand in front of me, holding out her hand. I recognized the telegram, no longer crumpled, but lovingly smoothed and folded.

“I want you to read this,” she said. “Afterwards, if you’re still willing—we’ll talk.”

“But Michaela—”

“Read it,” she repeated. “Please.”

I glanced at her once more for confirmation, and her eyes were determined and steady. Slowly I unfolded the paper, feeling a sense of deja vu wash over me. Dropping my eyes to the page, I began to read.

“Dear Michaela,

I’m so sorry I had to be gone for Valentine’s Day, after we’d made all our plans. But I thank you for understanding that this was important, and that I never would have left you if Cloud Dancing hadn’t asked me to be at this Indian conference. I promise I’ll make it up to you. As soon as I come home, we’ll have our picnic in the woods, and we’ll exchange our gifts of love for one another.

We may not have “Romeo and Juliet” to watch afterwards, but what do we need with Shakespeare, when our own love story is more romantic than any tale of love dreamed up by a writer hundreds of years in the past?

I miss you more than I can put into words, and I’ll return to you as soon as I can.

All my love,

S.”

The room was unnaturally silent. I kept staring down at the words, the characters blurring as I tried to make sense of what I’d read. The truth was spelled out before me on the page, and in her eyes as she watched me anxiously—but I couldn’t seem to grasp it. Slowly my eyes met hers.

“Do you understand now?” she asked softly. “There was no other man, Sully—at least not the way you think. You weren’t competing with anyone else for my affection.

“You’re the man I love, Sully. You’re the reason I couldn’t marry David,” she said.

* * * * * * * * * *

As she stopped speaking, a rush of images cascaded through my mind. I saw her, clad in a fancy traveling dress, laying face-down in the mud of the main street of town . . . I saw the two of us together in the woods, her sitting on the ground, face streaked with dust, and me kneeling behind her, drawing a brush through the silky mass of her hair . . . I saw us sitting at a table in some elegant restaurant—her exquisitely beautiful in a gown of black and silver lace, me nearly unrecognizable in a stylish dark suit—our eyes locked together as we sipped wine from delicate, long-stemmed glasses . . . and I saw us huddled together in a teepee, her hands clasped in mine as I gazed at her, my whole heart and soul in my eyes.

There were no words to go with the pictures, yet the feelings they evoked in me were so strong, I could almost hear our hearts speaking to one another.

But as vivid as the images were, they went by so fast it was impossible to tell if they were actual memories, or just my mind playing tricks. Instinctively, however, I suspected the former—and a giddy sort of excitement momentarily seized me.
But then another set of images came on the heels of the first. I saw all the times we’d been together since I woke up—all the chances she’d had to tell me the truth—but didn’t. When she told me about the changes with the townspeople. When she had to break the news to me about the Cheyenne at the Washita. When I came right out and asked her if she’d ever been in love. Hell, when I’d opened my eyes in the clinic for the first time! So many opportunities, and she’d squandered them all.

And what about me? The truth had been right in front of me the whole time, and I had been too blind—too stupid—to see it.

She had been watching me closely. “You’ve remembered something haven’t you?” she asked.

I looked at her, so confident and superior, so sure of her facts . . . knowing everything about me—about us—while she kept me in the dark. Manipulating my reactions like I was some kind of puppet dangling from the strings she wielded.

“No,” I said coldly. Again she recoiled as if I’d struck her. I suppose, in a way, I had. The hateful part of me—the part that felt betrayed, took a cruel satisfaction in wounding her, the way I felt wounded. Even as the rest of me flooded with shame at deliberately hurting her. But at that moment, I couldn’t harness my anger. The truth was, at my core, I didn’t want to.

“I’m a fool,” I said, giving her a bitter smile. I looked down at the telegram. “*All my love, *S.*,” I read aloud, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “S!” I repeated. “It was right under my nose, but I didn’t see it.” I stared at her. She was like a statue, white and still—but awash as I was in my anger, the sight of her vulnerable figure had no power to move me. “You must have had some laugh at my expense,” I went on, not caring that each word I spoke to her was like a lash. “You and everyone else in town. Poor, pathetic Sully—too dumb to figure out that the woman doctor taking care of him is the woman who loves him. No—the woman who’s been *lying* to him,” I added brutally.

The moment the words were out of my mouth, part of me wanted to take them back. But I couldn’t do it. Instead I turned my face away from the sight of the pain in her eyes. The pain I’d put there.

As much as I’d hurt her, she still had the strength to face me. “Please don’t say those things about yourself,” she implored softly. “They’re not true. I swear to you, Sully, that’s not how it was.” She reached out a trembling hand toward me, but I pulled away.

“I think maybe its me who can’t talk to you no more,” I said, brushing by her as I headed to the door. I looked back at her once. She almost seemed to crumple, like the wilted petals of a dying flower. A dart of guilt stabbed painfully inside me, but I ignored it. Deliberately, I dropped the telegram to the floor. Then, leaving her standing bereft and alone, I opened the door and stepped outside, closing it behind me.

* * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Michaela returned to the clinic she found all three of her children waiting for her.

“Sully?” she asked Colleen automatically the moment she came in the door.

“Still sleepin’, Ma,” Colleen assured her. Michaela nodded, then turned to her youngest son.

“Brian! What are you doing out of school?”

“I stopped into the clinic after you left,” Matthew answered for his little brother. “Colleen told me about Sully finally comin’ around, so I went over to the school to tell Brian. The Reverend said that under the circumstances, Brian could leave for the day so that he could be with Sully.”

“That was very generous of the Reverend,” Michaela began uncomfortably. “But I’m afraid Sully isn’t ready to have visitors yet, Matthew—even family,” she added.

“Why?” Matthew asked, the baffled look on his face mirrored in his brother’s and sister’s expressions.
“Dr. Mike, we been helpin’ you tend to Sully ever since Cloud Dancin’ brought him to us,” Colleen chimed in. “You asked me to stay with him after he fell asleep. Why can’t we see him now?”

“I know that what I said doesn’t make much sense to you, and that you all must be confused,” Michaela acknowledged. “But there are important reasons why I can’t allow Sully to see anyone besides myself—at least for a few days.”

“Don’t Sully want ta see us, Ma?” asked Brian, his usually cheerful face shadowed with disappointment.

Michaela felt a pang of guilt. Already it was obvious that the effects of Sully’s amnesia would reach beyond just their own relationship, to touch the lives of her children as well. She sat down in the chair by her desk, and drew Brian to her. “Of course he wants to see you, Sweetheart,” she said. “At least he would, if he were able. But I’m afraid that now that Sully’s regained consciousness, it’s become apparent that there’s another problem with his recovery—one that will require very special, and careful treatment.”

“I thought somethin’ was wrong when you left for the café,” Colleen spoke up. “You were so quiet.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you anything at the time, Colleen,” Michaela apologized to her daughter. “I’m afraid I wasn’t quite ready then to discuss Sully’s condition. And I wanted to explain it to all of you together.”

“What’s wrong with Sully, Dr. Mike?” Matthew asked directly.

Michaela’s eyes rested on the faces of each of her children in turn. They were all regarding her with concerned and sober expressions. “It appears that Sully has suffered some memory loss,” she said carefully. “He’s missing a rather significant period of time—specifically, the past three years.”

“He’s forgotten the last three years?” Matthew exclaimed.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Michaela confirmed.

“Did he forget about me, Ma?” Brian asked, looking bereft. Michaela hugged him reassuringly.

“No, Brian, he hasn’t forgotten you—or Matthew or Colleen. He remembers everything and everyone he knew up until three years ago, but I’m afraid everything after that is a blank for him. Which means—that he doesn’t remember me,” she added, the words still causing her pain.

“Oh, Ma!” Colleen said softly.

“But Dr. Mike—how could Sully forget you? He loves you,” Matthew protested.

“It’s very hard to understand, I know,” Michaela agreed. “But we have to accept it, and find a way to deal with it.”

“Was it his head injury, Ma? Is that what caused it?” Colleen asked.

“Possibly,” her mother replied. “There may have been some undetected bleeding that applied pressure to that part of his brain. Or it may have been the result of a concussion. However, there is also a possibility that the cause of Sully’s amnesia is not physical, but psychological.”

“Psych-psycho—” Brian tried to say.

“Psychological,” Michaela repeated. “It means that Sully may have had some emotional problems that were so painful to him, that his mind sought to escape his troubles by blocking his memories of them.”

“You mean like Washita?” Colleen said insightfully.

“Yes, exactly,” Michaela replied. “Sometimes, when people go through a terrible experience, or they’re very unhappy, their minds protect them from their sadness by erasing their memories of it.”

“How do you fix it?” asked Matthew.
“Well, unfortunately it’s not like treating a catarrh, or setting a broken bone—I can’t give Sully a special medicine that will magically cure him in a few days,” Michaela explained. “Also, unfortunately, there’s very little in my medical texts or journals regarding the treatment of mental problems. I intend to wire some of my father’s colleagues in Boston, who specialize in the treatment of brain maladies—hopefully they’ll be able to advise me. But for now, there’s very little for me to do but wait and hope that Sully’s memories begin to come back on their own.”

“But I still don’t get it, Ma,” Brian said. “If Sully ain’t forgot about Matthew, Colleen and me, how come we can’t see him?”

“I promise that you *will* be able to visit Sully very soon,” his mother said. “But Sully experienced a great shock when he realized that he’d lost part of his memory. It’s going to take time for him to adjust to that loss—as well as to adjust to everything that’s happened to him in the past three years. I believe it’s best for Sully to learn about these things slowly, a little at a time, so that he won’t have to go through such a shock again.

“The first, and most important thing, is for Sully to rest and regain his strength,” Michaela stressed. “Then I’ll try to begin preparing him for all the changes he’s going to encounter when he recovers and leaves the clinic. And that includes the changes in all of you. You’ve all grown so much—you’re not the young children Sully remembers anymore.”

“But if Sully knows he’s missin’ three years, then he must know we’re that much older,” Matthew pointed out.

“That’s true, Matthew. But knowing something intellectually, and being confronted by the reality of it, can often be two very different things,” Michaela said. “As much as I can, I want to minimize the shock to Sully of the changes in his life—big and small,” she added.

“So what do we do?” Matthew asked. “How can we help you?”

“Well, I suppose we’ll all need to—‘turn the clock back,’ so to speak, and pretend it’s three years ago,” Michaela replied. “We need to avoid talking about currents events, or recent events in Sully’s life such as Washita—at least for a while, as we wait to see if Sully recalls these things on his own. If Sully doesn’t recover his memories, of course he’ll need to be told eventually. But we’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it.”

There was a silence, as her children absorbed what they’d heard. Michaela saw that Colleen, in particular, looked extremely thoughtful. Presently Colleen looked up at her.

“What about you and Sully, Ma? Are you gonna tell him—’bout the two of you courtin’ and gettin’ married?”

“I don’t know, Colleen,” Michaela answered honestly. “Sully’s feelings about our relationship are—complicated—and may even be connected to his loss of memory. Again, all I can do is wait, observe his progress, and hope that his reactions will tell me what I need to do.”

“Waitin’ to see if Sully remembers ain’t gonna be easy on you,” Colleen said softly, echoing Dorothy.

“That’s true,” Michaela admitted. “But nothing worth having ever comes easily. I’ll do whatever I must—no matter how difficult—to help restore Sully’s memories and bring him back to us.”

“Is he gonna get well, Ma?” Brian asked quietly, suddenly looking much older than his ten years.

Michaela hugged him to her. “If it’s within my power, Brian,” she vowed softly. “If it’s within my power.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

Sully’s head stirred on the pillow and he opened his eyes. His vision was momentarily blurred, but after a few moments it cleared. The first thing he was aware of was the lady doctor sitting beside him. The second was the cool, gentle feel of her hand as she grasped his wrist. In her other hand she held a pocket watch. Her eyes followed the sweep of the second hand as she measured the rate of his pulse. A few moments elapsed, then she slipped the watch back into her pocket. Her eyes met his, and a warm
expression lit her features as she realized he was awake.

“Welcome back,” she said, giving him a kind smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but better,” he said after a brief pause. “The headache’s gone back some.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Michaela said. “Your voice is stronger, too. Do you have any pain in your chest?” she asked.

“Not really,” he responded.

“That’s very encouraging,” she said. “What about your throat? Is it sore?”

He swallowed experimentally. “No—but I am awful dry,” he confessed.

“Of course,” Michaela replied, immediately reaching for the water pitcher. She poured some into a glass. “Would you like to try to sit up a little and drink this?” she suggested.

“Yeah,” Sully said readily, already feeling uncomfortable at being an invalid. He started to push himself up but Michaela stopped him.

“Easy does it,” she cautioned. “Let me help you.”

“I can do it,” he protested.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But you’re weaker than you realize, Sully. You need to take things slowly.” She stood and slipped her arm under his back, supporting him as he pulled himself into more of a sitting position. He felt a sudden wave of dizziness, but it dissipated quickly. However Michaela’s sharp eyes noted his expression change as the vertigo touched him.

“Are you dizzy?” she said quickly.

“A little—but it’s already goin’ away,” he answered.

“Are you sure?” Michaela persisted. “Do you want to lay back down?”

“No,” Sully said immediately. “I’m all right.”

Michaela studied him critically a moment longer, but then, satisfied that he was being truthful, she held the glass to his lips.

Gratefully Sully drank, the cool water tasting indescribably delicious as it bathed his dry throat. Michaela allowed him to drink his fill, cautioning him to go slowly. Finally, he leaned back against his pillows.

“Thanks,” he said, sighing. “That hit the spot.”

Michaela smiled at him. “You’re looking much better,” she told him. “Your color’s coming back. Your vital signs are much improved as well. Both your pulse and heartbeat are strong and regular, and your lungs are much clearer.”

“So I’m gonna live?” Sully asked, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. Seeing a trace of his old familiar humor caused Michaela to feel a pang inside, but she tried to ignore it and focus on the moment.

“Yes, I believe you’re going to pull through,” she answered lightly.

“Well, you know what they say—only the good die young,” he said drily.

Her expression was reproving.

“Sorry,” he added. “Bad joke, I guess.”

“I’m glad that you’re feeling well enough to make jokes,” Michaela told him. “But that particular
saying is not one of my favorites.”

“Guess not, in your line of work,” Sully said. She raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement.

“So—what exactly happened to me?” Sully asked her curiously. “I don’t mean just losin’ my memory, but the rest of it. How did I get shot? And this sickness I have—it couldn’t have come from the gunshot wound, could it?”

“Well, put simply, you were injured trying to protect Cloud Dancing, when both of you were attacked in the mountains,” Michaela replied. “And your illness resulted from a respiratory infection that turned into pneumonia. Unfortunately you became ill shortly before you were hurt.”

“You know Cloud Dancin’?” Sully said, surprised.

“Yes, I do,” said Michaela. “It was Cloud Dancing who brought you to me.”

“Who attacked us?” he asked.

“According to Cloud Dancing, it was an Indian scout who worked for General Custer,” Michaela told him.

“Custer,” Sully said thoughtfully. “I’ve heard of him, but . . .” His voice trailed off, and Michaela was reminded that Sully’s previous confrontations with Custer had all occurred after the point at which his memories stopped. “Why would Custer be after us?” he added after a moment.

Michaela debated whether she should go into involved explanations now. But then, noting his drawn features, she decided against it.

“Sully, I understand you have many questions, but I think the details of your experience can wait until you’re stronger,” Michaela advised. “Right now, I want you to concentrate only on getting plenty of rest. Everything else will come in time.”

“I guess you’re right,” he conceded. “Just sittin’ up is takin’ more out of me than I expected. Truth is, I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

“Sleep is the best medicine for you,” Michaela confirmed. “Give yourself all the time you need to rest and recover. I’ll be here when you awaken, and we’ll talk more.”

Mollified for the moment, Sully nodded, then allowed his eyes to close. Michaela watched as his breathing slowed and deepened, indicating that he slept.

Michaela moved from the bed and seated herself in a chair nearby. She leaned back wearily, and began to think about what she would say to Sully when he questioned her again.

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I stepped down off the porch, and stood indecisively in the yard, unsure what to do, and even more unsure what to feel. It seemed as if a hundred different emotions were warring inside me—shock at what she’d told me, anger that she’d kept it a secret for so long, shame at my own stupidity for not recognizing the truth about our relationship . . . and love. Despite what she’d done—despite how she’d betrayed me—God help me I still felt an overpowering attraction to her. Fact is, my feelings were even stronger than they’d been before, now that I understood where they’d come from.

But the lie. I couldn’t get past it. Looking back, it seemed that every time I’d asked her for information about my past, it had been like pulling teeth to get her to answer. I wondered if even now, there were still things I didn’t know. I suppose she would have told me during our confrontation in the homestead if I’d given her the chance—but not because she wanted to. Because she would have been forced to.

The question that kept echoing in my mind over and over, was “why?” Why did she keep the truth
about us hidden? What had she been so afraid of? If she loved me, like she claimed, it seemed like she would have wanted me to know we had feelings for each other. Instead, she had apparently done everything in her power to keep me from finding out. What kind of love was that?

A thought occurred to me. Maybe I’d done something to hurt her or make her angry, in that unknown time before my accident. Maybe she’d lied to pay me back, somehow. Yet even as the idea entered my mind, I rejected it. It didn’t “feel” like the truth. She’d made a show of being angry with me over the telegram, but she’d admitted flat out that her behavior had been mostly a pose, to discourage me from getting too close to her. Besides, when she’d finally said the words—when she’d finally looked me in the eyes and told me she loved me—there’d been no anger there; no evidence of hurt feelings or resentment. In that moment, I’d believed her.

Which brought me right back to where I’d started. She had claimed to love me, but she’d kept the most important part of my missing life—of our lives together—a secret. No matter how I looked at it, it made no sense.

The thoughts kept spinning around and around in my head like a dog chasing its tail, yielding the same unsatisfactory results. And the more I tried to reason things out, the more hurt and frustrated I became. My heart felt like a lump of iron in Robert E.’s forge—seared by pain; then stretched, pounded, and twisted out of all tolerance or recognition.

With no idea beforehand of what I was about to do, I started to run. I had no goal in mind, no destination. I just wanted to run, as hard and as fast as I could, trying to outstrip the emotions that whirled inside me like a cyclone.

Blood pumping, heart pounding, wind whistling in my ears and the hair streaming back from my face, I sprinted across the fields, leaping over small obstacles in my path and feeling at moments almost as if I could fly. For that brief space of time, I left my hurt and anger behind, and simply took pleasure in being alive, and free—and at one with nature again.

All too soon, though, the reality of my situation caught up with me. Not the chaos of emotions assailing my mind this time, but the weakness assailing my body. Dr. Mike had cautioned me the night before that I still wasn’t up to walking the distance between the town and the homestead. She’d been wrong about that—I’d covered the few miles earlier that morning without difficulty. But the demands I’d put on myself just now as I’d streaked through the woods and fields like all the demons in Hell were after me—that was a different story.

The muscles in my calves cramping in protest, and my lungs burning, I was forced to come to a stop. I bent over, hands on my knees, trying to get my breath as the blood rushed to my head, making it swim. My heart continued to gallop in my chest, beginning to slow only after several long minutes. I was stunned by how out of shape I’d become, after all those days of being bedridden and then confined to the clinic. And yet, despite the pain of my outraged muscles and my shortness of breath, I still felt better than I’d had before I started running, as I drew a measure of comfort simply from being in the wilderness.

When I’d finally rested enough—the tension in my muscles eased, and my heart back to its normal rhythm—I began to walk, idly following the course of the road as it unwound before me.

My thoughts were quiet. Mercifully, it seemed my run had been beneficial after all, numbing my emotions the way Michaela used laudanum or morphine to numb a patient’s pain. I moved leisurely, filling all my senses with the beauty of the soft spring day.

I paid little attention to the passage of time, though I could approximate the hour by the position of the sun overhead. The morning moved steadily toward noon, taking me with it.

I had just begun to think about foraging for something to eat, when an odd sensation of “familiarity” came over me. I stopped and gazed at my surroundings, trying to recall if this particular stretch of landscape should have any meaning for me. It was a pretty spot, with a spectacular view of the valley and the mountains beyond—exceptionally pleasing to my eyes, but giving no clue as to its significance, if any, in my life. Still, I couldn’t rid myself of the notion that not only had I been here before, but that somehow, I *belonged* here.

I started walking again, feeling more strongly with each step that I took that I was being drawn toward something. Like an iron filing being pulled toward a magnet, my feet unerringly carried me forward.
I reached a fork in the road, and without hesitation, I bore to the left. Gradually the screen of trees began to thin out. Moments later, a long dirt track leading to a house and barn appeared, and I knew I’d reached the source of the mysterious attraction.

Wonderingly, I turned in and began to move up the dusty drive.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sully’s eyes snapped open suddenly. He lay rigidly in bed, momentarily unsure about where he was and what had awakened him. Only his eyes moved, slowly surveying what little he could discern of the dimly lit room, its sole illumination the soft glimmer of an oil lamp turned down low. A mass of shadows, like lacy black cobwebs, shrouded the walls and clung to the ceiling. Beyond the foot of his bed, a chiffonier stood in one corner, its bulk seeming to loom over him in the darkness. A folding screen appeared to perch in the opposite corner, its panels spread like the wings of some large and malevolent bird.

Gradually the recollection of his “awakening”—with its shocking revelation from Dr. Mike about his memory loss—came back to him. But the knowledge of his condition, as well as what it might mean to his future—was a reality still too frightening to contemplate, and he pushed the thought away.

He had only the vaguest sense of time. The curtains and shade of his window were drawn, affording him no glimpse of the night sky. However, the clinic had a quiet, slumbering “feel” to it, leading him to conclude that the hour was very late.

There was no sign of Dr. Mike. For the first time since he had regained consciousness, he was alone. Or so it appeared. But as Sully’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, he began to sense another presence nearby. Unlike the sinister aspect of his room, however, the emanations he received from his unknown visitor were definitely benign.

Sully closed his eyes and lay quietly, calmly waiting to see what would happen next. Within a few moments his patience was rewarded as the door of his room noiselessly opened and a dark shape silently entered.

Making no sound, the mysterious figure approached Sully’s bed and moved into the small pool of light cast by his bedside lamp. Sully opened his eyes, and saw the face of Cloud Dancing looking down at him.

* * * * * * *

The medicine man saw that Sully was awake, and grasped his friend’s arm. “Ha Ho—it is good to see you again,” he whispered, his eyes alight with pleasure at their reunion.

“I’m glad to see you,” Sully answered, equally moved. “I’ve missed my brother.”

“And I, you,” Cloud Dancing replied. “It has been many days since I have heard your voice. As soon as the spirits told me you had ‘returned,’ I knew I must come and welcome you back.”

“Returned?” Sully repeated.

“From that dark place between this world and the next. You hovered there for a long while. For a time, I thought that you would cross over to join the spirits,” Cloud Dancing told him. “I am grateful your journey brought you back, instead of taking you away forever.”

"Was it really as bad as that?" Sully asked him, truly beginning to understand for the first time how close he had come to losing his life. "I knew I was sick, and shot . . ."

“Sickness and fever were consuming you,” Cloud Dancing said gravely. “Though I called on the spirits and did my best, my medicine did not work. And then, when you were struck by the bullet, my heart grieved because I thought at first that you had been killed. Fortunately the spirits spared you. But you were close to death. I knew I needed to get you to Dr. Mike—that only she could help you. She saved
“Sounds like you both did,” Sully said, staring into his eyes. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“There is no need. You saved my life first. I would not be here, if not for you,” his brother and mentor said solemnly.

“I don’t know how I did that,” Sully said. “Judgin’ from what you and Dr. Mike have told me, I wasn’t in much shape to help anyone. And I still don’t understand what happened, or why. Dr. Mike told me a little, but—”

“You do not remember the attack?” Cloud Dancing asked.

Sully shook his head. “There’s—a lot I don’t remember,” he said softly.

“It is understandable,” Cloud Dancing noted. “You have had a great shock.”

“Dr. Mike said the same,” Sully replied. He was about to tell his brother that the shock had stolen far more than just his memories of their experience, but then suddenly winced as pain flared in his head. His eyes closed and his body tensed. He raised his hand to his temple as a soft moan escaped him.

Cloud Dancing’s expression darkened with concern. “Shall I fetch Dr. Mike?” he asked quickly.

“No—no don’t,” Sully told him, even though his head still throbbed. “I’m all right. ‘Sides, you still ain’t told me what happened to us—”

“We will talk another time. You are still weak and in pain—you must rest now. I will return when you are stronger,” he said.

“You’re—you’re leavin’?” Sully managed after a moment.

“I am afraid I cannot linger,” the medicine man said regretfully.

“Cloud Dancin’—are you all right? Did you put yourself in danger comin’ here?” Sully asked, his headache momentarily forgotten at the ominous inference of his brother’s statement.

“Save your strength—do not worry about me,” his friend instructed.

“But—”

“Rest now,” Cloud Dancing told him, overriding Sully’s protests. “We will speak again.” He reached for Sully’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

“I’m—I’m glad you came,” Sully told him sincerely. But then a shadow crossed his face. “I just—” He broke off.

“What is it?” Cloud Dancing asked softly.

“I know it’s selfish, but—I wish you could stay,” Sully confessed after a moment. He was ashamed of his weakness, but he couldn’t help it. “Your presence—gives me courage.”

“Your courage comes from within,” the medicine man assured him. “Look into your heart, and you will find the strength you need.”

“I—ain’t so sure about that,” Sully said.

“I am,” Cloud Dancing stated confidently. “I would not leave you if I was not certain of this. Dr. Mike will take good care of you,” he added. “You are in good hands.” He rose to leave.

“Take care of yourself,” Sully cautioned him.

“And you, also,” Cloud Dancing replied. “Be well, my brother.” He grasped Sully’s hand once more, and a sensation of warmth seemed to emanate from his touch. A moment later, he was gone.
Sully felt his heart constrict with sorrow at his mentor’s departure. But amazingly, the pain in his head had vanished. He had a moment of wonderment at the medicine man’s power of healing, but his fatigue would not be denied, and he gave himself over to it. Soon, he was asleep.

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Sully awoke the following morning more fully rested and gratifyingly free of pain. He didn’t quite trust this state of affairs, however, having started to become accustomed to attacks of pain or dizziness assailing him without warning. Warily he lifted his head, then gingerly pulled himself into a sitting position, fully expecting his headache or vertigo to recur at any moment. Neither did, however, and after a few moments of waiting, he relaxed.

As his apprehension over his physical condition waned, he began to be aware of another sensation—an unexpected yet pervasive feeling of well-being that blossomed at his core and spread outward to encompass his mind and body. The feeling surprised him at first, being in such contradiction to the anxiety and disorientation he had experienced the day before. But then he remembered his encounter with Cloud Dancing, and he could only conclude that his new-found serenity must be a residual effect of his brother’s visit.

Except—had he actually been visited by the medicine man? His recollection of their conversation had the rather vague, unreal quality of a dream. But whether their meeting had been real, or only a figment of his imagination—still he felt instinctively that his blood brother was thinking of him, and sending positive, healing powers his way.

There was a light tap on the door, and a moment later it opened to reveal Dr. Mike. In her hands she carried a tray, which bore a bowl of what appeared to be oatmeal, as well as a cup and saucer and a small metal pot with steam issuing from its spout. She set the tray down on the foot of his bed.

“Good morning,” she greeted him.

“Mornin’,” he answered readily, feeling a sudden, but not unpleasant flutter in the pit of his stomach at the sight of her.

“How are you feeling today?” she asked.

“Lots better,” he replied truthfully. She scrutinized him carefully, and her expression brightened, obviously pleased by what she saw.

“I can tell,” she said. “And I’m delighted to see it.” She perched by his side on the bed, taking her watch from her pocket as she placed her fingertips on his wrist.

“Your pulse is strong, but a trifle rapid,” she remarked presently. Sully shrugged, as if to indicate that he didn’t know the cause, but inwardly he was not surprised. “I don’t believe there’s any need for concern, however,” Dr. Mike added after a moment. “It’s well within normal.”

“Good,” he said rather awkwardly.

“Can you open your shirt for me?” Dr. Mike asked. He nodded, and unfastened the first few buttons, his fingers feeling slightly clumsy. A stethoscope dangled from her neck, and she raised it to her ears.

“This may feel a little cold,” she warned, as she placed the bell against his chest. He nodded again, then watched her face as she listened. He became aware of a sensation of warmth rising upward to bathe his face and neck, and realized to his embarrassment that he was blushing. Fortunately, absorbed in her examination, she didn’t appear to notice.

“Excellent,” she remarked after several seconds had elapsed. “Your heart is strong and there’s no detectable congestion in your lungs.”

“Guess I owe that to you,” Sully said.

“Thank you,” she replied smiling, looking a trifle shy herself. “However, you mustn’t discount your own recuperative powers, which appear to be quite amazing, Sully.
“I’d like to check your head wound now,” she added. She stood up and leaned over, carefully lifting his bandage and gently probing his scalp with a touch that was feather-soft. Her torso was just inches from his face, and Sully felt his heart accelerate in his chest, and the warmth in his face and neck increase.

“I’ll need to change your dressing, but it can wait until after you’ve eaten,” Dr. Mike told him as she drew away from him a few moments later. “I believe you’re ready to take solid nourishment now.”

“I *am* hungry,” he admitted.

“And no wonder,” she agreed. She placed the tray across his lap. “I’d like you to consume as much as you’re able, but don’t be surprised if you can’t finish,” she said, pouring tea from the pot into his cup. “Your capacity and your appetite will no doubt be diminished, but it will only be temporary.”

A knock on the door caused them both to look up. Dr. Mike glanced at him quickly, an unreadable expression on her face. “Excuse me for a moment,” she said briefly. She went to the door, which stood slightly ajar. Sully tried to look past her to see who was outside, but her figure blocked his view. A moment later she slipped out and closed the door behind her. Sighing, he picked up a spoon from the tray and dipped it into the oatmeal.

Out in the hall, apprehension laid clammy hands upon Michaela as she regarded the sober eyes of her son. “What is it, Matthew?” she asked.

“It’s Custer,” Matthew told her grimly. “He’s here and he’s askin’ to see you.”

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**MY JOURNAL**

Tuesday, 27 March, 1870

The house sat on a gentle rise, the barn and corral slightly below, nearer the main road. A board fence lined the drive, and my hand trailed along it as I approached the buildings.

Even from a distance, I could tell that house was newly built, its chinked walls of knotty pine gleaming like spun gold in the noonday sun. The foundation was of stone, as were the two chimneys, one stretching up the right side of the house, the other slightly to the left of the center of the roof. Fronting the building was a wide timbered porch, cleaved in the center by steps leading to the entrance. Casement windows bracketed the front door, matching twin dormer windows which accented the roof. It was a simple design, but clean and pleasing to the eye in its symmetry. The most remarkable feature was the front door, which boasted an oval window of beveled glass. No doubt that window had cost the builder a pretty penny, but I couldn’t deny that it gave the house an elegant character all its own.

Despite the fact that the construction was obviously new, the place had a deserted feel about it. There were no horses in the corral, no chickens scratching in the dirt, no sign of a cow. And though I didn’t bother to look in the barn, I instinctively knew that it, too, would be empty.

The house appeared uninhabited as well. I saw no smoke rising from the chimneys, no clothesline with washing hung out in the sunshine and fresh air to dry. There was room for a garden at the side of the house, but one hadn’t been put in.

As I approached the steps, I wondered what had caused the owner to neglect the property. Maybe he’d run out of money before he could finish. Or maybe he’d built it with the intention of selling it to somebody else. Then again, perhaps the owners just weren’t ready to move in yet.

I climbed the steps to the porch, and stretched out my hand to touch the panel of leaded glass, admiring its delicate beauty. Someone had clearly put a great deal of loving care into the creation of this house. I had a moment of envy for the family who would inhabit such a warm and handsome dwelling.

Even though all my senses told me I was alone here—still, out of formality, I knocked on the door. As I’d expected, there was no answer. I knew that technically, I was trespassing. But I couldn’t contain my
curiosity. The odd attraction that had drawn me here was still tugging on me—compelling me to go inside.

I tried the door knob, and it turned easily. The door swung inward, and tentatively, I took a step across the threshold.

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I stopped short inside the doorway as a sudden and powerful wave of deja vu washed over me. I had never been here before—as far as I knew anyway—but before I even laid eyes on the interior of the house, I knew with absolute certainty exactly how it would look. How was that possible? Goose bumps erupted on my arms as I felt a sudden chill.

Immediately I chided myself. There was no “mystery” here. The obvious explanation was that I must have visited this place before, even though I had no conscious recollection of it, and that’s why it was familiar. Besides, with the experience I’d had in building my own homestead, it wasn’t that much of a challenge for me to envision the inner layout of the house, given the design of the exterior. But even as I made sensible excuses to myself for my uncanny knowledge of my surroundings, something deep inside told me there was much more to it than that. As I stood in the entryway, I realized that not only could I predict the features of the house and their arrangement—but that I *knew* them, right down to the smallest detail.

The large room was empty of furniture or rugs, and my footsteps echoed as I moved further inside. Bright bars of sunlight slanting through the windows striped the walls and floor, minute motes of dust captured in their depths. I strolled through alternating bands of sun and shadow, the light caressing me as it did the honey gold of the walls, bringing them alive.

Directly ahead and to the left, a large freestanding fireplace dominated the space before me, neatly dividing the kitchen on the left from what presumably would be the sitting room on the right. The hearth of the fireplace faced the kitchen, providing a ready source of warmth, as well as an additional cooking area. I gazed at it with approval, admiring its aesthetic, yet practical design. The kitchen was bright and inviting, light pouring in from windows above the counter. I lingered there briefly, picturing the cupboards filled with supplies, dishes on the shelves, and food cooking merrily on the stove that had yet to be installed.

From there I circled the fireplace into the sitting room beyond, passing a staircase leading to the upper story. The wall to the right of the front door boasted yet another fireplace. As I moved closer, I saw that something dangled from the mantle. I approached to get a better look, then froze in shock as I recognized the item—a delicate arrangement of white feathers that had adorned the lodge of Cloud Dancing and Snowbird. My heart started to pound. What was it doing here, of all places? More importantly, what did it mean? I reached out to touch it, then snatched my hand back, losing my nerve.

My goose bumps had returned. Slowly I backed away, my consternation growing with every moment. Almost fearfully, I approached and ascended the stairs.

Four doors opened off the upper hallway. Unerringly, my footsteps carried me to the door at the far end. I turned the knob with a trembling hand, and stepped inside.

And stopped dead on the threshold, the strength running out of my legs as I saw what the room contained. Against the wall by the door stood a hand-hewn bedstead, with an intricately carved design of feathers decorating the headboard. I stared at it in disbelief, unable for several moments to comprehend the implication of what I was seeing. But there was no denying the evidence before me. Like a person recognizing his own handwriting, I now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the identity of the person who had crafted the bed, and built this house. And the knowledge was shattering.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

“Tell him to wait,” Michaela instructed calmly, her outward demeanor disguising the anxiety that had suddenly gripped her. Matthew nodded, and strode down the hall toward the examination room. Michaela paused for a moment outside Sully’s door, trying to arrange her features into as placid an expression as she could manage, even as perspiration beaded her palms and she wiped them on her apron.
When she thought she had herself under control, she opened the door and stepped back inside.

Sully looked up at her entrance, a curious expression on his face.

“I apologize for the interruption,” Michaela said.

“No need. Everythin’ all right?” he asked, detecting something in her manner, despite her casual tone.

“Yes—everything’s fine,” Michaela lied, slightly unnerved by his perception. “However—something has come up that requires my attention. It shouldn’t take long, then I’ll return and change your dressing. You can finish your breakfast in the meantime.”


Michaela gave him a perfunctory smile in return. She reached for the door handle, about to let herself out, when Sully spoke again.

“It ain’t none of my business, but—are you sure you’re all right, Dr. Mike?” he asked, his eyes regarding her shrewdly.

She faced him again. “You’re very kind to inquire, but I assure you I’m quite well,” she answered, somewhat taken aback, but also touched by his concern. “I—simply have a visitor I don’t particularly wish to see,” she explained. Sully’s brows drew together at her statement.

“Want me to send him packin’?” he offered.

“That’s not necessary, Sully,” Michaela said quickly. “You’re a patient here. It’s not your responsibility to protect me—not to mention that you’re hardly in any physical condition to do so.”

“I may not be a hundred percent, but if you need me, I can manage. ’Sides, there’s nothin’ wrong with my voice,” Sully reminded her.

“That’s very noble, but I’m afraid your doctor doesn’t think you’re quite up to confrontations just yet,” Michaela said.

“I admire your gumption, Dr. Mike, but it’s clear this person makes you uncomfortable,” Sully argued. He hesitated, then added, “Is he causin’ you some kinda trouble?”

“Truly, Sully, I can handle the situation,” Michaela insisted, perhaps a little more strongly than she had intended. But then her features softened. “I *do* appreciate your concern. But really, there’s no need to worry.

“I’ll return shortly,” she added, then exited the room before Sully could prolong the conversation further.

A few moments later she entered the examination room of the clinic. Custer sat in the chair behind her desk as Matthew stood sentinel, watching him balefully. At her appearance, the army officer rose with alacrity.

“Dr. Quinn,” he greeted her with his customary unctuousness. “A pleasure, as always.” Michaela’s skin crawled with distaste.

“I think not,” she said coolly. The general’s expression was regretful.

“Despite what you may believe, Doctor, I find this enmity between us truly distressing,” he claimed. “Regardless of the state of affairs between Mr. Sully and myself, I genuinely bear you no ill will. In fact, I have nothing but the highest respect for you.”

“If that is truly the case, General, then you should know that my head will not be turned by empty flattery,” Michaela countered. “The simple fact is that as long as you continue to bear hostile intentions toward Sully, this ‘enmity between us’—as you characterize it—will continue to exist.
“And now, since I haven’t much time, I would appreciate it if you would get to the reason for your visit,” she said pointedly. Custer’s expression altered slightly, his eyes taking on a pugnacious cast that revealed his true state of mind.

“Very well,” he said smoothly, casting aside his ingratiating manner as if it were a coat he could slip on or take off at will. His eyes drilled into her. “I was in the mercantile just now, and heard a most disturbing piece of news—namely, that Mr. Sully had been shot, and that you’re treating him here at the clinic.”

“That’s true,” she confirmed briefly.

“I would like to hear everything you can tell me about this incident,” he said.

“I can tell you nothing,” Michaela replied. “I was not present when Sully was injured.”

“But surely Mr. Sully related the details of his experience to you,” the officer persisted.

“No, he did not,” Michaela stated, boldly meeting the officer’s eyes. Custer regarded her skeptically.

“Come now, Doctor—I’m well aware of how close you are to Mr. Sully. You’re to be married, after all. In whom else would Mr. Sully confide, if not you?”

“Nonetheless, General, I am being quite truthful with you. There was no question of Sully confiding in me, because he was unconscious—suffering not only from a bullet wound, but from a severe case of pneumonia. It nearly killed him.”

“But I understand he survived the crisis and is awake now,” Custer noted.

“Yes, I’m thankful to say that he did survive,” Michaela acknowledged.

“Then if you cannot tell me what I wish to know, I would like to question him directly,” Custer said, causing her heart to skip a beat.

“I’m afraid it would do you no good,” she said blandly.

“And why not?”

“Because he has no memory of the incident,” she replied. “It’s quite common after suffering a severe trauma.”

“I find that rather hard to believe,” Custer said derisively.

“Believe what you choose,” Michaela said cuttingly. “But the fact remains that it’s the truth.”

“Very well,” said Custer. “But certainly he can tell me what he was doing prior to the incident. The details could provide a clue as to how he was shot.”

“Again, I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Michaela insisted.

“And why is that?” he asked, a warning note of impatience creeping into his tone.

“Because Sully’s memory loss is not confined solely to the circumstances of his injury,” she replied. “Unfortunately, he has suffered a profound loss of memory. Specifically, he is unable to recall the past three years of his life.”

Custer stared at her. For a few seconds there was silence. Then without warning, he began to laugh. Michaela stared back, astounded at his callousness.

“Do you always take such pleasure in the misfortunes of others, Mr. Custer?” she asked coldly.

The officer shook his head, a few chuckles continuing to escape him. Finally, wiping his eyes, he brought himself under control.
“My apologies, Madam,” he managed at last. “I thought at first that you must be joking. Now I see that you’re simply gullible or misguided.”

“I beg your pardon!” Michaela snapped. Her eyes were livid.

“Please—do not take offense,” Custer exhorted. “I’m sure that you have the best of intentions, Dr. Quinn. I’m even willing to accept that you genuinely believe in this extraordinary claim of Mr. Sully’s. But come now—‘amnesia’? How incredibly convenient. Not only can Mr. Sully lie with impunity, but there is absolutely no way to prove whether he’s telling the truth.”

“Your cynicism does not surprise me, Mr. Custer. It’s no more than I would expect, given your animosity toward Sully,” she said flatly. “However, Sully doesn’t need to prove anything. And I do not need to justify my diagnosis. I have examined him, and I am completely satisfied that his memory loss is genuine.”

Custer’s expression grew sinister. “Well I am not,” he said. “I wish to speak to Mr. Sully now.”

“No,” she said.

“Dr. Quinn, I am not in the habit of being rude to the ‘fairer sex’—but you are sorely trying my patience,” he said ominously. Michaela’s hands curled into fist at her sides, but somehow she managed to hold onto the shreds of her self-control.

“Your ‘manners’—or lack of them—are not at issue here,” she said icily. “My only concern is the good of my patient, and I will not have you upsetting him or jeopardizing his recovery.”

“I don’t need your permission!” Custer retorted, raising his voice.

“On the contrary,” she said. “Sully is my patient, and if it’s my determination that your questions will do him harm, I am completely within my purview to forbid you to see him.”

“And if I determine that the information Mr. Sully can provide is vital to a military investigation, I have the right to override your authority,” Custer responded.

“What ‘investigation?’” Michaela challenged. “Sully is an innocent victim. He is not under arrest, nor has he been accused of any crime.”

“Mr. Sully’s alleged ‘innocence’ is broadly open to question,” the officer said flatly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Michaela maintained. “I will simply remind you, Mr. Custer, that this is my property, and I can choose to have you removed if I deem it necessary.”

“And precisely who will remove me?” Custer asked. “There is no sheriff or other legal authority in this town.”

“I will,” said Matthew sharply. Custer glanced at him deprecatingly, his expression indicating what he thought of that notion. His gaze returned to Michaela.

“I intend to get to the bottom of this incident, and I will do whatever I must toward that end,” he threatened. Michaela finally lost patience.

“Mr. Custer, the only way you will get to Sully is to arrest me and drag me away!” she said hotly. She stared at him, challenging him to do his worst.

“That’s an interesting idea,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll do precisely that.”

“Not without cause, you won’t,” Matthew spoke up again, stepping between his mother and the army officer. “And if you try it, I’ll contact your superiors, and tell them how you intimidated and imprisoned an innocent and defenseless woman. Not only that, but I’ll make sure the story reaches every newspaper in the country. We’ll see what’s left of your ‘reputation’ after that,” he finished mockingly.

The silence spun out as Matthew and Custer glared at one another. But finally, Custer dropped his eyes, and Michaela and Matthew knew that they had won—this round, at least.
“This is not over,” Custer told them after a moment. “I have reason to believe that Sully was with the Indian, Cloud Dancing—who is a wanted man. Not only that, but one of my best scouts is missing. He was last known to have been in the same vicinity as Mr. Sully a few days ago. If I learn that Sully and his Indian friend had something to do with his disappearance—”

“We don’t know nothin’ about that,” Matthew interrupted. “And now, far as I can see, you’ve overstayed your welcome.” He cut his eyes to the door. “There’s the way out,” he added.

“You may have won this battle—but the war is far from over,” Custer said chillingly, his eyes boring into them both. Turning on his heel, he left the clinic.

Michaela let out her breath. “Thank you, Matthew,” she said gratefully. “For a moment, I thought Custer might actually arrest me.”

“He was just blowin’ smoke,” Matthew answered. “He knows he ain’t got no proof that Sully did anythin’—and he sure as heck knows he’s got no legal cause to arrest you. ‘Sides, if he tries to accuse Sully or Cloud Dancin’ of doin’ somethin’ to Bloody Knife, then he’s gotta explain what his scout was doin’ there in the first place. Custer ain’t about to admit that he ordered Bloody Knife to commit murder.”

“I know you’re tryin’ to put a positive face on things, but I’m afraid it’s not that simple, Matthew,” Michaela said soberly. “Unfortunately, Cloud Dancing *is* a wanted man. Custer could always claim that he sent his scout on a legitimate mission to search out and apprehend a fugitive from justice. Sully’s amnesia prevents him from testifying otherwise. Cloud Dancing can’t dispute Custer’s claim for fear of being arrested. And even if Cloud Dancing chose to risk arrest by coming forward, Custer would only say that it’s Cloud Dancing’s word against his. Not that he’d probably give any credence to what Cloud Dancing says anyway, given his bias toward Indians.”

“But it ain’t like Sully or Cloud Dancin’ killed Bloody Knife,” Matthew objected. “All Cloud Dancin’ did was knock him out in self-defense.”

“I’m afraid we don’t even know that to be the case,” Michaela pointed out reluctantly. “It’s true, when Cloud Dancing last saw Bloody Knife, he was merely unconscious. But Bloody Knife would have been exposed to the elements for an unknown period of time. We have no way of being sure that the cold didn’t ultimately kill him. And if he did survive, he could return and claim that Sully and Cloud Dancing attempted to kill him. He could testify that it was *he* who acted in self-defense. And how could we prove otherwise?” She sighed heavily. “The long and the short of it, is that Custer’s extremely dangerous, Matthew. We dare not underestimate him.”

“I admit things look bad right now, Ma, but it’ll all work out somehow,” Matthew asserted. “Custer ain’t gonna get to Sully—or Cloud Dancin’. We won’t let him. Just have faith.”

“From your mouth to God’s ear . . .” said Michaela softly.

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 27 March, 1870

For several long moments, shock rooted me to the spot where I stood. I found it difficult even to think coherently, but finally my chaotic thoughts began to slowly resolve themselves into something resembling reason.

So much made sense now. The mysterious force that had drawn me here, the uncanny familiarity of my surroundings, the pervasive feeling that the instincts of the “unknown” builder had so closely mirrored my own.

It wasn’t so much the realization that I had built this house and outbuildings—as I’d told Michaela, I had experience with carpentry, which I’d put to use from time to time in the past to earn extra money. And of course, I’d built the homestead for Abagail and myself, where Michaela and the children now resided.

The question was *why* I’d built this house. Who had I built it for? Who was going to live here? I could make the argument that someone—whose identity I couldn’t remember—had contracted with me to
build them a homestead. But the assumption that I'd merely performed a service for some unknown individual, didn't explain the talisman belonging to Cloud Dancing and Snowbird, which I'd found hanging from the mantle of the fireplace downstairs. Or the bedstead standing before me, with its symbolic carving of feathers. I couldn't imagine any of the townspeople requesting that I make them a bed adorned in that manner, or even understanding its significance. And I could come up with no rationale to explain the presence of a charm so special, and sacred, to my blood brother and his late wife.

Had Cloud Dancing made a gift to me of the talisman that had hung over the door of his lodge for so many years? It was possible, I supposed. Perhaps the charm had been too painful a reminder of Snowbird, so he had chosen to give it to me, knowing that I would cherish it and treat it with the reverence it deserved. But then why had I left it here? The charm had a special meaning—it was designed to bless and protect the dwelling of its owner. If Cloud Dancing had given it into my keeping, then logically I would have placed it over the entrance to my own lodge—even if that “lodge” was nothing more than a lean-to out in the woods.

I couldn't see myself so cavalierly leaving it behind in this place. It just didn’t make sense. Unless—

Was it possible—could I have built this homestead for myself? No, surely not. I didn’t need a large, fancy house to live in. Maybe once I could have settled in such a place, before I’d gone to live with the Cheyenne—but no more. My time with them had taught me to love living in the outdoors, craving the freedom of a home without walls, and with the glorious expanse of the sky as my roof. I couldn’t accept that I might have willingly built and chosen to live within such a structure—regardless of how spacious and airy it was.

Besides, it was too big. What could I possibly need with four bedrooms, or a barn large enough to shelter a cow, and stable at least three or four horses?

And there was something else. The bedstead before me was large, easily wide enough for two people to sleep in. Two people who were—

Sweat broke out on my forehead. A bed big enough for two, a house large enough for an entire family—perhaps a family with three children . . .

The implication of my thoughts staggered me yet again. So much so that the faint ring of hoof beats approaching up the drive didn’t immediately register in my ears or on my consciousness. But a moment later, the sound of a horse’s whinny broke in on my thoughts and drew me to the window. I unfastened the latch and opened the casement doors, leaning out to get a glimpse of the rider—and received yet another shock as I saw the visitor’s identity.

A few seconds elapsed, then I heard the front door open below me, and the echo of boot heels moving across the floorboards.

Quietly I left the bedroom and moved down the hall to the stairway. Noiselessly I eased down the steps, then watched as the visitor, back to me, took Cloud Dancing’s talisman down from the mantle. The faint sound of quiet weeping reached my ears.

I left the stairs, and took a couple of steps into the room. The squeak of a floorboard betrayed my presence, and the visitor whirled around.

“Hello, Michaela,” I said.

* * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE


“No, I’m fine,” he replied, watching as she gathered up her instruments and turned away to replace them in her medical bag. “Actually,” he added a little hesitantly, while her back was still turned, “I was kinda wonderin’ if we could talk a little. There are some things I’d like to ask you about—if you got the time, that is,” he added.
Michaela closed her eyes momentarily, her heart accelerating. So it had started already. Sully was curious, expecting answers to his questions. She prayed briefly that she would be able to handle whatever challenge he threw her way. She took a breath to compose herself, then faced him.

“Yes, I have the time,” she said kindly. She drew a chair over to his bedside, then seated herself, folding her hands in her lap and meeting his eyes. “What would you like to know?”

He returned her gaze. “Well first, did everythin’ go all right with that person who came to see you?” Michaela sighed inwardly. She should have realized he wouldn’t have forgotten their earlier exchange, given his sensitivity and protective instincts.

“Sully, as I told you before, there’s no need for you to trouble yourself. The fault is mine. I shouldn’t have said anything to you about this person. I wouldn’t have, if I’d known it would cause you concern. At any rate, he’s gone now.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Sully said firmly. “And maybe I overreacted,” he allowed after a moment. “I realize I don’t know nothin’ about what’s goin’ on. I guess it’s just that I don’t cotton to people botherin’ beau—“ He broke off and cleared his throat. “Botherin’ women,” he finished awkwardly.

Michaela pretended not to notice what he’d nearly said. “Well, as you can see, I’m just fine,” she assured him. “And I’d far rather talk about something other than annoying visitors.” She regarded him encouragingly. “What else would you like to ask me?”

He was briefly silent, as if trying to select one question from the undoubtedly numerous ones that were crowding his mind. After a moment he responded, “Well, I been wonderin’ how you ended up here in Charlotte’s boardin’ house. Did she sell it to you?”

A shadow crossed her face, a look of sympathy touching her eyes. He noticed the change in her expression.

“What?” he asked.

“No, Charlotte didn’t sell the boardinghouse to me,” Michaela began gently. “I—I’m afraid Charlotte is gone, Sully. She was bitten by a rattlesnake a few months after I came here. I tried to save her, but . . . I’m so sorry, Sully. I know she was a good friend of yours.”

Gone?” he repeated softly, his eyes grieved.

Michaela nodded, and after a fraction’s hesitation, she reached out to cover his hand with her own. “I share your sorrow,” she said compassionately. “Charlotte was a good friend to me as well—the first real friend I ever had. I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t taken me under her wing when I arrived. All the people in town were so resistant to the idea of a woman doctor, and I was so ‘green’ . . . I came from a rather privileged background in Boston, and had only the vaguest notions of how to survive on my own—managing a household, milking a cow, riding a horse . . . Even cooking a simple meal was a challenge. Charlotte taught me so much—I’ll forever be indebted to her, and will always cherish her memory.”

“That’s the kind of woman Charlotte was,” Sully agreed quietly. “But what about her kids?” he added abruptly. “What happened to them?”

“That was Charlotte’s greatest gift to me,” Michaela said reverently. “On her deathbed, she asked me to look after her children. Initially, I thought she’d made a grave mistake, entrusting them to my care. I had no experience at child-rearing. Even in my own family, I was the youngest of five girls, so I’d never had to look out for younger siblings. But Charlotte was quite definite about what she wanted, and later I came to thank her from the bottom of my heart for bringing us together. Matthew, Colleen and Brian have proven to be the joy of my life.”

“So you’re their ma, now?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, her eyes full of quiet pride. “I love them dearly. And I’m proud and grateful to say that they love me as well. It didn’t happen overnight, but eventually we grew close and became a family.”
“Do you all live here?” Sully asked, after he’d spent a few moments assimilating what she’d told him.

Michaela felt a pang of apprehension. She wondered how he’d react to the news that they were occupying the homestead he’d shared with Abagail. However she reminded herself that he had willingly let the homestead to her, despite the fact that at the time he didn’t yet know her, or have any reason to trust her.

“Actually, we live outside of town,” she said slowly. “A day or two after I arrived, I was in search of a place where I could live and maintain my practice. You—you saw the notice I put up in the general store, and you offered to rent your old homestead to me. It’s been our home ever since.”

There was a silence, and Michaela’s apprehension increased. Maybe she should have deflected his question after all. Perhaps he wasn’t yet ready to hear that particular truth. “Does that bother you—that I’m living in the home you—shared with your late wife?” she asked hesitantly. Her eyes were anxious.

“No,” he admitted after a pause. “Wasn’t doin’ nobody any good, just sittin’ there goin’ to ruin. I wasn’t about to live in it again. I’m glad that somebody’s gettin’ some use out of it.”

Michaela let out her breath. “I’m relieved you feel that way,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to upset you.”

“You didn’t upset me,” he told her. “I was a little surprised, but like I said, it makes sense. And I musta wanted you to take it—else I never woulda offered.” There was another small silence, and then he added, “So how’d you wind up turnin’ the boardin’ house into a clinic?”

Relieved that Sully’s next question had directed the conversation away from personal matters to a more general topic, Michaela embarked on a brief explanation of how the occurrence of an influenza epidemic in town had necessitated that she find a place which she could convert into a temporary hospital. She related how the reverend had offered her the use of the church, but that she’d had to reject that building as unsuitable, because it didn’t allow for her to isolate patients at differing stages of the illness, thereby minimizing contagion.

“It quickly became obvious that only Charlotte’s boardinghouse had enough space, and enough rooms, to meet the need,” she said. “Unfortunately, when Charlotte died, she left behind many unpaid bills, which resulted in the bank foreclosing on the mortgage. The building was boarded up and standing unused, awaiting a buyer.

“I had no choice but to open the boardinghouse, despite the fact that I had no legal right to it. Several people in town tried to prevent me from using it, but you—stood with me. You pulled down the boards nailed to the door so that I could gain access, and dared anyone to stop me.” She smiled briefly. “No one tried.

“Using the boardinghouse enabled me to save many of the sick, and also helped me to win over several people who had been resisting the idea of being treated by a woman doctor,” she went on. “Once the epidemic had passed, we kept the building open and I continued to treat patients there. This state of affairs continued until a representative from the Bank of Denver came to town and told me that I could no longer maintain a clinic on the premises unless I bought the building myself.”

“So you bought it,” Sully said.

“Eventually,” she responded. “But it wasn’t easy. I had received a bequest upon my father’s death, but what I had left was insufficient to cover the down payment on a purchase of the property, and the bank was unwilling to grant a mortgage to an ‘unmarried’ woman.’ I confess I was somewhat at my wit’s end—but then my mother came to town. Ultimately, she gave me the money that I needed, and the bank grudgingly gave me the mortgage.”

“You were lucky to have your ma in your corner,” Sully remarked. Michaela smiled wryly.

“I was lucky that she gave me the money,” she acknowledged. “But I’m afraid that she was far from ‘in my corner.’ You see, my mother never supported my becoming a doctor. Essentially, she was no different from most of the people here in town who were against women physicians, or those in Boston who abandoned me after I took over my father’s practice upon his death. She felt that medicine was a highly
inappropriate occupation for a woman. She’d always wanted me to emulate my sisters, by marrying well and becoming a society matron. And needless to say, she was appalled when I chose to come west and establish a new practice, after I lost my father’s patients and the doors of Boston’s hospitals were closed to me.”

“So your pa was a doctor too?” Sully said.

“Yes—one of Boston’s finest and most respected physicians,” Michaela replied, her eyes softening as she remembered the father she’d adored. “From the time I was a small child, I wanted to follow in his footsteps, and he encouraged me every step of the way. He taught me, discussed his cases with me, allowed me to accompany him on his rounds—and when I received my degree from the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, he took me into his practice as his partner. He was my mentor, my advocate—my best friend. It was because of his patronage and intercession that his patients allowed me to treat them. But once he was gone . . .” Her voice drifted off.

“That musta been hard for you—losin’ him and your practice, all at once,” Sully said, his eyes compassionate, and his voice gentle.

“Yes, it was very painful,” she admitted. “But I knew that he would want me to go on. He had always fought for me. And I determined that the best way for me to honor his memory would be to fight for myself and fulfill my destiny. I *would* be a doctor—somewhere. So when I saw a notice in the Boston Globe petitioning for a doctor in a town on the Colorado frontier, it seemed as if it was meant to be. Ignoring my mother’s protests, I answered the advertisement, and—well, here I am.” She smiled.

“For a society lady from Boston, you got a lot of grit, Dr. Mike,” Sully remarked.

Michaela blushed slightly. “That’s quite generous, Sully. But if I do, it’s because my father instilled that quality in me,” she said quietly.

But Sully was shaking his head. “No—I don’t think so,” he answered matter-of-factly. “Your pa sounds like he was a real special man, and I’m sure he inspired you. But you’re your own person. What you done since he’s been gone, you done on your own. And though I didn’t know him, I’m bettin’ he’d be the first to say so.”

Moved, Michaela felt tears blossom at the corners of her eyes. She brushed at them with the back of her hand, and then said impulsively, “You remind me of him, in many ways. Your kindness, and integrity—the way you care for others and help those in need, or fight for the rights of those who can’t fight for themselves—” She broke off suddenly, overcome with alarm that perhaps she’d been too outspoken, or betrayed too much of her inner feelings. Not trusting her eyes, she rose and walked a few steps away, her face averted from him. “I’m sorry,” she apologized after a moment. “I’m afraid that talking of my father has made me rather—sentimental.”

“There’s no need,” Sully told her. His words caused her to look back at him. Though his eyes reflected his surprise at her unexpected praise of him, she could see that he was deeply flattered as well. “It’s only natural that you miss your pa. Fact is, I’m honored that I remind you of him, seein’ as how you hold him in such high esteem. I’m sure I ain’t near the man he was, but—it’s nice to hear that you think we’re cut from the same cloth.”

Michaela was feeling more emotional by the second, and she knew that she dare not let this conversation continue, for fear that she would break down completely. Remembering her father had made her vulnerable, and Sully’s innocent tenderness as he sought to support and comfort her had been her undoing. Every fiber of her being cried out in need for him. Her body actually ached for the feel of his arms around her, his lips on hers. Grief inwardly assailed her, as she wondered how long she would be forced to endure the agony of hiding her love and her desire for him. And on the heels of her impotent longing was fear—that she wouldn’t be strong enough to resist temptation.

With all the strength of will she could summon, Michaela pushed the pain back down inside. Just let me escape this room without losing control in front of Sully, she prayed. Once I’m by myself, then . . .

“I appreciate your kindness,” she said aloud, somehow managing to keep her voice steady. “And for my part, I hope I’ve helped to assuage your curiosity—a little, at least. But—” She cleared her throat. “You’re looking tired, Sully. Despite the fact that you’re recovering so well, you still need a great deal of
rest. We can continue our discussion at some later time."

Startled, Sully’s face wore a look of disappointment. But then, possibly assuming that her reminiscences about her father were responsible for her melancholy, his eyes took on an expression of compassion.

“I guess I *am* tired, at that,” he said, watching her carefully. “I ’spose a nap would be a good idea.” He hesitated, then added, “I want to thank you for spendin’ this time with me, Dr. Mike. I’m obliged.”

“And I’m—*obliged* to you,” Michaela said softly. She moved to the door. “I’ll see you later,” she promised. “Sleep well, Sully.”

He watched her leave, then leaned back against his pillows. He didn’t know how well he would sleep, but he thought he knew who might appear in his dreams.

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She was stunned. The color drained from her face as the delicate feathered charm slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor. “How did you . . . Who told . . . W-what are you doing here?” she stammered in her shock and confusion.

I took a couple of steps closer and leaned down to pick up the talisman. Her eyes followed my movements. She stared at the feathers dangling from my hand, then glanced up at my face, reading in my expression that I recognized the charm and understood what it meant. Her eyes dropped.

“Nobody told me,” I said. “I found my way here on my own.” I held the talisman out to her. “Looks like you didn’t tell me quite everything,” I said evenly.

“You didn’t give me the chance,” she answered, her voice so low I could barely hear it.

“You’re right, I didn’t,” I acknowledged after a moment. When she made no effort to take the charm from me, I moved past her and hung it back on the mantle. I turned and faced her. “That probably wasn’t very fair of me,” I went on. “But you’ve had plenty of other chances in the last few weeks, haven’t you? And for some reason I can’t begin to fathom, you kept the truth to yourself. The most important thing in my life—in our lives—and you didn’t see fit to tell me. I don’t get it, Michaela. I’ve tried, but it don’t make sense. How could you claim to love me—how could you agree to share my life and let me build a home for us—and then be willing to hurt me this way? What could I have done to you to make you that spiteful or angry?”

“You’ve done nothing,” she said after a long pause. “And I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I’ve been doing everything in my power to help you.”

“You picked a strange way of showing it,” I said coldly.

“I know that’s how it seems to you, Sully, but there were reasons—important reasons—why I didn’t—why I thought I couldn’t—tell you the truth. But hurting you was never one of them.” She looked into my eyes beseechingly. “I know you don’t remember what we had—what there was between us . . . before,” she continued. “But after the time we’ve spent together these last weeks—after the feelings that have grown between us—do you really believe I could be capable of wanting to hurt you the way you suggest?”

“No—I didn’t think it was possible,” I admitted after a pause. “I thought you cared for me, and I know how deeply I felt about you. But the proof is all around us, Michaela. In the telegram. In this house we’re standing in. In that bed I carved sitting upstairs.

“I’m right, ain’t I?” I persisted. “We were going to be married. This was going to be our home.” I waited, carefully watching her face to see the effect my words had on her.

A tear made its way down the curve of her cheek as she silently nodded. Slowly she reached up and slipped her fingers inside her collar. She withdrew a fine gold chain. Hanging from it was a diamond engagement ring. She cradled the ring in her hand, holding it out toward me.
“You gave it to me on Valentine’s Day,” she said quietly. “You felt so badly that you had to attend the Indian conference, and cancel our plans to be together, that you left early to return and be with me.”

“But that ain’t when I proposed to you,” I said intuitively.

“That’s correct,” she said, surprised. “How did you know?”

“Because I must have started building this house months ago,” I said. “And I never would have had reason without your promise to marry me.”

“You’re right, of course,” she confirmed after a moment. “We became engaged nearly a year ago, shortly after—” She hesitated. “After David came to town. But before we knew his true identity.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, guess I should consider myself lucky that you picked me over him—and that you were still willing to marry me, once you knew who he really was.”

“I loved you, Sully,” she said strongly. “I loved you then, and I love you now—with all my heart!”

I shrugged. “But you must have loved David too, right? Else why would you have agreed to marry him? Or are you in the habit of getting engaged to men and then turning around and betraying them? Tell me, did you throw over some other man when you took up with David?”

“That’s cruel,” she whispered.

“Is it?” I asked. “I don’t know. Lies are cruel, Michaela. They hurt people. And sometimes they can even destroy their lives.”

A spark of anger finally flared in her eyes. “Perhaps,” she lashed out passionately. “But sometimes they’re necessary, to protect—”

“Protect?” I cut her off. “Protect who? Seems like the only person you been worried about protecting here is yourself.”

“You have no idea what you’re saying,” she said dully, her anger deserting her as quickly as it had come. Her eyes looked defeated.

“Then tell me,” I challenged. “It’s all out in the open now—no more need to keep secrets. You explain to me what possible reason you could have had for not telling me we loved each other.”

“I—I can’t,” she said, her voice halting.

“Beg your pardon?” I said incredulously, astounded that she still seemed determined to keep up the charade.

Her eyes were pleading. “Sully, I’ll tell you every detail of our courtship and engagement,” she said. “I’ll describe every minute of every day we’ve been together, if that’s what you want. But—I can’t explain why I didn’t tell you before—at least, not yet.”

“Just how long do you plan on keeping it to yourself?” I said sharply.

“Till—till your memories come back,” she said slowly.

“That right?” I responded. “Well, the trouble with that plan, Michaela, is that I may never get my memories back. What do you plan to do if that happens—take your secret with you to the grave?”

She flinched, but didn’t look away. “It’s—because of your health,” she said softly, the admission clearly difficult for her.

“My health? Since when is loving someone or being loved in return harmful to my health?” I demanded.

She stared at me imploringly. “Please don’t push me on this,” she begged. “I’m asking you to trust
me, Sully—trust that I have your best interests at heart.”

I looked away from her and gently fingered the silky white feathers of the talisman. The seconds passed. Then I turned back and met her eyes.

“I’d like to believe that, Michaela,” I said at last. “But it seems ‘trust’ is in real short supply right about now. Fact is, I don’t know if I can ever trust you again.”

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A short while later Colleen found Michaela huddled on the edge of a bed in an empty recovery room, her face bleached to a milky paleness and her eyes reddened from crying.

“Ma, what is it?” she exclaimed in alarm. “Did Sully take a turn for the worse?”

Michaela sighed heavily and dabbed at her swollen eyes with the tail of her apron. “No, Colleen, Sully’s all right—doing very well, in fact. I suppose I’m the one who has—’taken a turn for the worse,’ as you say.”

“This is what I was afraid of,” Colleen asserted, concern for her mother flooding through her. “You’ve pushed yourself too hard and made yourself sick.” She sat down next to Michaela and put her arm around her mother’s shoulders. “Ma, you *got* to let me help you with Sully. I know you said he wasn’t ready to see me yet, or Matthew or Brian—but you can’t keep goin’ on like this, tryin’ to care for Sully all alone.”

Michaela managed a watery smile, and lifted her hand to touch her daughter’s cheek. “Forgive me, Colleen—I had no right to frighten you. I’m not ill. A bit tired, perhaps, but that’s all. I suppose I’m just feeling a little sick at heart right now.”

“Because Sully doesn’t remember you—or . . . or anythin’?” Colleen said gently.

Her mother nodded. “I try to be strong—to hope for the best,” she said. “It’s just that—some times are harder than others, and my resolve seems to weaken.”

“I know the feeling will pass,” she added, trying to assuage Colleen’s anxiety. “You simply caught me at a rather low point, I’m afraid.”

“Did Sully say somethin’ to make you feel this way?” her daughter asked compassionately.

“Yes, but not in the way you think,” her mother said. “Actually, he was being extraordinarily kind. He couldn’t know the effect it would have on me.” She reached out and squeezed Colleen’s hand.

“I had to tell him about your mother today,” she said gently. “He was curious about how Charlotte’s boardinghouse had come to be transformed into the clinic. As I anticipated, he was deeply saddened to hear that your mother had left us. It pained me to have to give him that news, and of course reliving Charlotte’s death was hard for me, as well.” She and Colleen shared a look of mutual sorrow, then Michaela continued, “Explaining to Sully how I bought the boardinghouse, led to me telling him something of my parents. How my father always supported and encouraged my dream of being a doctor, even though my mother was so opposed to my choice of career.

“Talking of my father brought back so many memories, and reminded me again of what an emptiness it left in my life when I lost him,” she went on softly. “And it reminded me that many of the qualities in Sully that I admire most, are those that I loved in my father, as well. I realized that loving Sully, and being loved by him—had helped to fill that void inside me. And it just made me miss our relationship so much—” She broke off, and wiped her eyes again. Colleen clung tightly to her other hand, watching her sympathetically.

“I’m afraid that in a moment of weakness, I confessed to Sully how much he reminded me of my father,” Michaela continued quietly. “I was afraid that I’d been too outspoken—that I’d let on too much to him of what I was truly feeling. Fortunately he assumed that my melancholy simply sprang from my sorrow over my father, and he tried to comfort me. But I’m afraid that just made me love and miss him
all the more! In the past when I was troubled, I could always turn to Sully for love and comfort, but now . . .” Her voice trailed away, an expression of stark sadness and longing in her eyes.

“I wish there was somethin’ I could say to comfort you,” Colleen told her, her heart aching for her mother.

“Thank you, Sweetheart,” Michaela said gratefully. “But I’m afraid there’s really nothing you can say. The situation is what it is—I simply have to find a way to accept it.

“And you *do* comfort me,” she added earnestly. “Being able to talk to you helps me more than you could possibly know.” She sighed. “It—just hasn’t been a very good day, that’s all. Earlier, even before Sully and I talked, General Custer showed up here—”

“Matthew told me,” Colleen interjected.

“Then you can no doubt understand that my frame of mind wasn’t the best when I spoke with Sully,” her mother said. “I probably should have waited to see him until I was feeling less anxious about Custer, but foolishly I didn’t, to my own detriment.”

“You’re only human, Ma,” Colleen reminded her. “You can’t keep punishin’ yourself for Sully’s condition, or carryin’ the burden of his troubles with the army all by yourself. None of that is your fault. Here you are, feelin’ guilty for everythin’s that happened, and I can’t believe how strong and brave you’ve been through all this. Livin’ with this kind of sadness and worry would have broken most people, but you keep findin’ a way to go on—to keep helpin’ Sully, no matter what it’s doin’ to you inside.”

“I’m afraid I don’t feel very brave,” Michaela confessed. “And I’m far from being as noble as you paint me, Colleen. It’s painful, knowing that Sully remembers nothing of our love for one another—but it makes me angry, too. Sometimes—” She stopped abruptly.

“What?” Colleen encouraged gently.

“Sometimes I want to rant and rave—to scream at him—to say, ‘How can you forget me? Forget us?!’ To ask him why he’s so ready to give up on our love, our future . . .” Her voice dwindled, as she looked down at her lap, ashamed.

“Is that what you think he’s doin’?” asked Colleen softly.

“Yes . . . no . . . I don’t know,” her mother said wearily. “But I get frightened sometimes—that Sully doesn’t truly want a commitment to me—that his fears for the future will prevent his memory from ever coming back. That he’ll never have the same feelings for me again. And if that happens . . .”

“You think you’ll lose him,” Colleen finished.

Michaela nodded again, unable for the moment to speak. More tears trickled down her cheeks, and gently Colleen dabbed at them with the edge of her own apron.

“Ma,” she began after a moment. “If it helps, I don’t believe that could happen. Even if Sully can’t ever remember what you had between you before, he still loves you. It may take some time for him to find those feelin’s again, but I know he has them inside. The love you got for each other—it’s like seeing a comet—it’s once in a lifetime.”

“I appreciate that, Colleen,” Michaela managed. “But that’s just it—Sully and I found each other once, and it *was* like a miracle—just as the appearance of a comet in the sky seems like a miracle. But perhaps—one chance is all we get. I may be living in a fool’s paradise to hope that lightening will strike twice.

“And everything that’s happened has made me realize that there are some things I need to do,” she went on, her tone dispirited and resigned. “Starting with this.” She looked down at her left hand, and the engagement ring that sparkled on her fourth finger. Slowly she slid it off. Her throat tightened with pain, as she slipped it into her pocket, unable to bear the sight of it.

“Ma—you’re not givin’ up—you can’t!” Colleen implored.
“No,” her mother responded after a long pause. “I’m not giving up—not yet, anyway. But the sight of my ring could lead to questions from Sully that I can’t yet answer. Up to now, Sully hasn’t noticed it—or if he has, he’s given no sign. Sooner or later, however, he would be bound to ask—perhaps long before he’s ready to hear the truth. I can’t take that risk.”

“Does that mean—that is, are you thinkin’ of cancillin’ the weddin’?” Colleen said reluctantly, hating to cause her mother more pain. “I’m sorry,” she added quickly. “I don’t mean to make you feel worse.”

“It’s all right,” Michaela told her. “That’s a logical question, and one that I’ve pondered over and over. I’m not quite ready to cancel the wedding altogether, but—I feel I have no choice but to postpone it. There’s still time left—time for Sully to regain his memories—but I can’t count on that. And if it’s true that Sully isn’t ready for a commitment—well, then going through with the marriage is out of the question. But I suppose all I can do is wait to see what the coming days and weeks will bring, and hope that I’ll be guided in deciding what to do about the future.

“However, with everything so indefinite, I feel the time has come to telegraph my mother and tell her that we’ve—put things off for now. I doubt that she’ll be very disappointed,” Michaela added, a touch of bitterness in her eyes.

“Oh, Ma,” Colleen said softly. “But Grandma likes Sully—I know she does.”

“Perhaps,” Michaela conceded. “But she’s never believed that he was a suitable choice for a husband. I’m afraid that all this will simply convince her that her instincts were right.”

“I wish there was somethin’ I could do for you,” Colleen said, feeling helpless.

Her daughter’s obvious anguish on her behalf lanced at Michaela’s heart. “I’m sorry, Sweetheart,” she said apologetically. “I’ve let all my negative feelings get the best of me, and burdened you in the process.” She drew herself up. “I don’t want you to worry,” she added firmly. “As long as I have you and your brothers at my side, I can find the strength to endure.” She hugged Colleen tightly.

“You got us, Ma—always,” Colleen pledged. “We’ll be here for you—for Sully, too.”

“I know,” Michaela said, regarding her daughter tenderly. “The three of you keep me going.” They hugged again.

After a few moments elapsed in which they both tried to compose themselves, Colleen said hesitantly, “Ma, when do you think Sully will be ready to see us?”

“Soon,” her mother promised. “I have an idea of something Sully can do that might help him to retrieve his memories, and I plan to speak with him about it. Then I intend to explain to him about some of the changes that have occurred during the time that he’s lost, starting with the three of you. After that, I feel he’ll be ready for a visit from you all.”

“What do you plan to do to help Sully remember?” Colleen asked curiously.

“It’s a method one of my father’s colleagues suggested to me,” Michaela replied. “Apparently he’s had some success with it in the treatment of his own patients. I wired him yesterday, and received his reply from Horace early this morning.

“He advised that I encourage Sully to begin a journal,” she went on. “This doctor claims that writing down his thoughts can sometimes spur a patient to remember things from his past.”

“I never thought of Sully as a writer,” Colleen said doubtfully.

Michaela smiled. “I suppose that’s true,” she said. “But one needn’t be a writer to keep a diary of his thoughts or feelings. If Sully is willing, it may help him. Certainly it can’t do any harm.”

“That makes sense,” Colleen conceded.

“It’s worth a try,” Michaela agreed. “And now,” she added, rising to her feet. “I suppose I have a wire to send to Boston.” Colleen rose as well. Slipping their arms around one another’s waists, the two women walked out of the room together.
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“I can’t believe that you mean that,” she said.

“I can’t believe it either,” I said reluctantly. “But you’ve given me no cause to feel otherwise, Michaela.”

“I’ve ‘given you no cause to feel otherwise,’” she repeated quietly. She lifted her chin and stared at me. “Yes, it’s all about you, isn’t it Sully? How *you* feel. Your illness, your injury, your fight to live—your anguish and fear when you awakened and discovered that part of your memory was gone. And your anger when you learned that I’d kept the truth from you about our relationship.

“But that’s all right. That’s as it should be. You were the innocent victim. You were the one who was critically ill and hurt—barely clinging to life. My feelings were unimportant. All that mattered was pulling you through your crisis, keeping you alive, bringing you back—regardless of how it affected me. Regardless of how I had to sit by in torment, desperately afraid that I could lose you at any moment.

“And you were within your right to be angry at me for not being truthful with you,” she went on. “I know what I did seems inexplicable to you. You told me once that people in love shouldn’t keep secrets. Perhaps you’re right about that. Perhaps I should have subscribed to that belief, regardless of the circumstances—or the consequences. Even if learning this particular secret could hurt you far more than it could ever help you.

“But tell me this,” she challenged. “In the midst of all your self-righteous anger at me, did you never once—not once—think about what I might be going through?”

I swallowed, stunned for own part, as I realized that she was right. Wrapped up in my own anger and hurt—so resentful of the injury she’d done me that I couldn’t see past the rage . . . And even before the truth came out, when I was still recovering, lucky to be alive yet knowing I could have died if not for Michaela . . . not once had I considered what all this might have done to her.

But she wasn’t finished. Far from it.

“I was the one who nursed you, Sully. I was the one who somehow kept you alive, against the odds, when by all rights you should have died. I was the one who sat by your bedside day and night, treating your fever, holding your hand and talking to you and begging you to come back to me.

“And I was the one whose heart felt like it had been ripped into pieces when you finally awakened, and looked at me as if I were a stranger. I was the one who had to pretend to be only your doctor, only a friend—when inside it was tearing me apart that I couldn’t tell you how much I loved you, how much I needed you.

“I was the one who saw you through the migrim, Sully—the one who held you while you retched and placed cool compresses on your brow as you lay white and trembling, sweating with pain and nausea. I was the one who wouldn’t leave you, even though you begged me to go away so I wouldn’t have to see you so weak and defenseless.”
“But—you were a doctor . . .” I said haltingly, shame reducing my voice to a harsh whisper.

“Yes, I was your doctor—and I was also a woman—with feelings, just like yours,” she said, her eyes dark and wounded. “Feelings that could be hurt. Still, I held those feelings inside as you flung hateful words at me—even though each one was like a knife stabbing at my heart. Because I knew I had wronged you, I knew I had hurt you. Never matter about the hurt you were causing me.”

She stopped speaking, her face pale and her body shaking with the power of the pain pouring out of her.

“I’m sorry,” I managed at last. “I had no idea . . .”

“I know,” she said. “And it’s because I understood that you didn’t realize what you were doing to me—because I loved you so much!—that I could forgive the cruel words and the anger. That I even felt I deserved them.

“It’s just a pity that forgiveness doesn’t come so easily to you,” she finished at last.

I stood silent, devastated at the agony I’d caused her—the magnitude of the pain so much greater than I could have ever dreamed.

She reached up and slipped her fingers beneath the shining mantle of hair falling over her neck. After a moment her hands reappeared, holding the two ends of the gold chain. She cupped one hand as she allowed the engagement ring to slide off the chain into her palm. Then she held it out to me.

“You’ll be wanting this back,” she said.

I stared at the ring, gleaming dully in the shadow cast by the fireplace, then looked up at her. Instinctively I stepped back.

“I didn’t say that,” I managed after a long, painful pause.

“Yes you did,” she said. “When you said you could never trust me again. You’re right, Sully—without trust we have nothing.”

“Michaela—“

“Take it,” she insisted.

“No . . . Michaela, I don’t want it back . . .”

“Suit yourself,” she replied, and laid it on the mantle. She looked at me once more, her eyes deep wells of pain and defeat. Then she turned and went to the half-open door. She walked out of the house, and—just maybe—out of my life.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“It’s truly quite remarkable, Sully,” Michaela commented as she took the bell of her stethoscope from his back and lowered the instrument to hang around her neck. “To listen to your lungs now, one would never have known that just a short time ago you were suffering from pneumonia.”

“I’m feelin’ a lot better,” Sully noted from where he sat on the edge of the bed. The buttons of his long johns were unfastened to the waist, revealing a triangular view of his tanned chest with its fuzz of crisp, gold-brown hairs that gleamed in the morning light. “It’s good to be able to get up and move around again without feelin’ light-headed. I’m still pretty weak, though,” he added. “When will that go away?”

“The weakness is a natural consequence of your convalescence,” Michaela told him. “It will pass as you continue to regain your strength.” She averted her eyes slightly from the sight of his muscular torso. “You can fasten your shirt again,” she added a bit awkwardly.
“Oh—yeah,” Sully acknowledged, somewhat awkward in his turn, and began to do up the lower buttons. For some reason they seemed to keep eluding his fingers, however, and it took him twice as long as it should have to complete the simple task.

“So Dr. Mike—how much longer do you think I gotta stay here?” he asked after a few moments.

“It’s hard to say,” Michaela ventured. “As you yourself indicated, you still need to build up your strength. And I’ll want to continue to monitor your head wound for a while longer—though it’s healing well enough now that I think as of today we can dispense with the bandage. It won’t be long before I can remove the stitches.”

“Sounds good,” Sully said. He swiveled around so that his back was pressed against the pillows, then pulled up his legs and crossed them, reflexively pulling the sheet over his lap for modesty’s sake.

Michaela finished straightening up from her ministrations, then came over to stand at his bedside.

“I wondered if we might talk for a moment,” she said, her hands clasped in front of her.

“Sure,” Sully said readily, his piercing blue eyes looking expectantly into hers. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Well, I’ve noticed that except for the curiosity you expressed about the boardinghouse, you seem rather disinterested to learn more about the time you’ve lost,” Michaela began. “I would have thought that you’d have many questions—but you haven’t asked a single one.

“Are you all right?” she inquired. “That is, does it bother you to discuss your condition?”

Sully looked slightly abashed. “I’m fine,” he said quickly, then hesitated. “It’s just—well, I’ve been a little scared to find out what I’ve missed,” he admitted. “It’s an eerie feelin’—knowin’ that for three years life was goin’ on—I was here, I was part of it—but I just can’t remember. If you were to tell me everythin’ I did durin’ that time, it would feel like you were tellin’ me a story about somebody else.” He paused again.

“And I guess I’ve been afraid to think about what this is gonna mean to my future, if I can’t get those memories back,” he confessed finally.

“Your anxiety is natural, Sully,” Michaela told him. “Such a large gap in one’s memory would be enough to make anyone feel uneasy and disoriented. Everything must seem so uncertain to you. It’s as if your amnesia is a mystery to be solved, but we have yet to find the right key.”

“Do you think there is such a key?” Sully asked, looking at her soberly.

“I’m certainly optimistic,” Michaela replied. “I’ve consulted a specialist in maladies such as yours, and he’s given me a suggestion for a method we can try which might stimulate your memory.

“However, if this is too much for you to consider right now—if you feel you’re not ready and would rather wait, we can have this discussion later, when you’ve had more time to adjust,” she added.

“No, it’s all right,” he confirmed after a moment, resisting the powerful urge to put off his confrontation of the unknown. “I gotta start facin’ things sooner or later—else I’m never gonna get back to what I was.”

“Well that’s not necessarily true,” Michaela pointed out. “Your memories could come back totally on their own, with no intervention of any kind. Perhaps all at once, or a little at a time. However, I don’t believe it would be amiss to try some methods that might help things along a bit.”

“If you think it’s best, then I’m willin’,” Sully indicated. His expression was sincere, but Michaela could detect the tension in his posture, the muscle ticking erratically in his jaw. “Will it hurt?” he added after a moment, only half-joking.

“Practically painless,” Michaela reassured him kindly.

“So—what does this doctor say we should do?” Sully asked.

“He suggests that you keep a journal,” Michaela replied.
“Yeah—right,” Sully said.

“I assure you, Sully, I’m quite serious,” Michaela said, raising her eyebrows reprovingly.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Mike, but—you want me to write a *book*?” Sully said incredulously.

“Not a ‘book,’ per se, Sully—a *journal.* A diary, in which you record your thoughts, and your feelings.”

“Dr. Mike, I ain’t no writer . . .” Sully resisted.

“You needn’t be,” Michaela told him, warming to her subject. “Not to write down your private thoughts. Besides, you may surprise yourself,” she added.

“Not very likely,” Sully replied. “Maybe I never told you this, Dr. Mike, but I ain’ had much formal schoolin’. I took off on my own when I was just a kid.”

“I’m—aware of your background,” Michaela answered carefully. “But a person need not be formally educated to be intelligent and sensitive, Sully—and you are certainly both of those things. And it’s not as if I were going to act as a schoolteacher, reading and correcting what you write,” she sought to further reassure him. “This would be a private record, for no one’s eyes but your own.”

“Then what’s the point?” Sully persisted. “I can’t remember nothin’—whether I’m talkin’ about it or writin’ it down.”

“But that’s where you may be wrong,” Michaela asserted. “Dr. Fletcher claims that writing down your thoughts, seeing them in black and white, can sometimes be a catalyst to retrieving elusive memories. He doesn’t promise that it will happen all at once, or even that you will be consciously aware of your memories—at least initially. But over time, something you write may lead to a memory coming back Memories might even emerge in your dreams,” she added.

“I still ain’t sure about this,” Sully confessed.

“Sully, there’s no need to be embarrassed. No one else will read what you write. I promise you that. However, if something comes to you as a result of keeping the journal, then you and I can talk about it.

“You said you were willing to try,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, I did,” Sully conceded. “All right, Dr. Mike—I’ll take a crack at it, if that’s what you want—but I ain’t promisin’ much.”

“Sully there’s no one you need to impress—no one you need to please, except yourself,” Michaela pointed out. She excused herself and left the room momentarily. A minute or two later she returned with a large pad of buff-colored paper anchored to a board with string, and a small handful of pencils. She handed the writing implements to Sully. “This should get you started,” she said.

Sully looked down at the pad of paper in his lap, somewhat at a loss. After a moment he glanced back up at her.

“I ain’t sure where to begin,” he said.

“How about: what is the last thing that you remember clearly?” she suggested. She regarded Sully calmly, but he could see her eyes widen with a kind of anxious expectation, and of their own accord, her fingers twisted together restlessly.

“Don’t try to answer me now,” she added quickly. “Don’t even try to write anything down yet. Just try to relax, and let yourself think about the question for a time. Then, when it feels right, you can begin
putting down your thoughts.”

“All right,” Sully agreed, relieved that she wasn’t going to pressure him for results. Yet everything about her manner suggested that she was indeed very anxious for him to produce a recollection. He found himself wishing that he could give her what she wanted, but at the present moment, he hadn’t the faintest notion what that might be.

“I’ll leave you to yourself in a moment,” Michaela added. “However, if you don’t mind, there was one other matter I wanted to bring up with you.”

“Tell me,” he said.

“Well, the children—Matthew, Colleen and Brian—have been very anxious to visit you,” Michaela told him. “I know you’ve always been fond of them, and they feel very close to you, as well. Do you think you would feel up to seeing them?” she asked.

“Yeah—I’d like that,” Sully answered, his face brightening. “They’re good kids. I always had a soft spot for little Brian,” he added, then grinned. “I remember Colleen used to call him ‘Cheyenne crazy.’”

Michaela smiled back. “He still is,” she confirmed fondly. “But Sully—before the children visit, I need to prepare you somewhat. The children are older now, and you may be surprised—perhaps even a little shocked—at the change in their appearance. In fact, the term ‘children’ is no longer truly accurate. Matthew has grown into quite the young man—in fact, he’s even engaged to be married, to a young immigrant girl named Ingrid. Colleen is a young lady of fifteen now—and even Brian isn’t very little anymore.”

Sully nodded. “Kids change so fast . . .” he murmured.


“I hope I didn’t distress you. I just didn’t want you to feel too startled or uncomfortable,” she added.

“I’m obliged—but I think I can handle it,” Sully said.

“Good,” she replied. “I know the children will be delighted. I’ll bring them by this afternoon. But for now, I’ll give you your solitude,” she said.

“All right,” he agreed. He watched her move to the door, then spoke again.

“Dr. Mike—I want to thank you—for everythin’ you’re tryin’ to do,” he said shyly. “I’m grateful.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Sully,” she said, a slight wistfulness in her eyes. “I want you to get well as much as you do, and I’ll do everything in my power to help you.”

“You’re—an exceptional woman, Dr. Mike,” he said.

“And you’re quite an exceptional man, Sully,” she responded softly, then stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her.

* * * * * * * * * *

“Sorry, Dr. Mike,” Matthew said as the four of them filed dispiritedly into the examination room. “Guess that didn’t go so well.”

“It’s all right, Matthew,” Michaela replied, trying to sound cheerful, even though she was as disappointed as any of them over their less than successful visit with Sully. “You were Sully’s first visitors since he’s awakened—things were bound to be a bit awkward under the circumstances—for Sully as well as for all of you.”

“It was just—so hard to know what to say,” Matthew berated himself. “I kept thinkin’—what if I say the wrong thing? I didn’t want to make Sully feel bad, but I’m afraid I did,” he added regretfully.
"You ain't the only one," Colleen chimed in. "It was the same for me. I was nervous, and I'm sure Sully could tell. I had to keep stoppin' to think every time I went to open my mouth."

Brian was nodding in agreement with his brother and sister.

"None of you have anything to apologize for," Michaela told them. "The fault was mine. I was so concerned with preparing Sully for the changes in all of you, that I failed to consider that I should prepare the three of you for the change in Sully. But at least the ice has been broken now," she went on more optimistically. "And remember that all along I'll be working with Sully—helping him to fill in some of the missing pieces of his memory. Future encounters will be better—there shouldn't be as much awkwardness between you."

"What about you, Ma?" Colleen asked, remembering their conversation from the day before. "How are you holdin' up?"

"I'm all right, Colleen," Michaela said. "I'm going to focus on the positive, and try not to allow myself to become discouraged. We have no guarantees, but there's every reason to hope that keeping a journal—a record of his thoughts—may help Sully to remember. And we'll all help him as well."

"You're so brave . . ." Colleen said softly.

Michaela reached out and gently stroked a lock of her daughter's hair. "Not brave, Colleen. But I need to have hope. And if 'wishing makes it so . . .'' She smiled.

"Then I'm gonna start wishin' right now," Brian announced. Michaela looked fondly at her son. "And I'll be wishing right along with you," she said.

"What is it, Ma?" Colleen asked, noting her mother's preoccupied expression.

Michaela's eyes cleared and she gave Colleen her attention. "I suppose the time has come to explain to our friends and neighbors about what's happened to Sully," she replied to her daughter's question. "No doubt they're becoming curious as why I've isolated Sully from them for so long. I need to help them understand his condition, as well as to caution them about not being too forthright with Sully too soon." She turned to her older son. "Matthew, could you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Sure, anythin'," her son said.

"Would you go to the Reverend, and ask him if I can have the use of the church this evening?"

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Tuesday, 27 March, 1870

Evening

I couldn't go back to the clinic. Truth is, I was afraid to even show my face in town for fear that we'd run into each other. But if I was going to go back to camping out in the woods, I needed supplies.

I had no idea what remained of the lean-to where I'd spent so many nights lying under the stars. I realized I must have only been away from it for a matter of weeks, instead of the three years that it felt like to me. But it was a fragile structure, vulnerable to the whims of wind, weather, and animals foraging for food. And there was that snow storm awhile back that Michaela had mentioned . . .

A picture of her face, and the look in her eyes when I'd last seen her, arose in my mind's eye, making my gut twist with loss and shame. I thought of the harsh words we'd said to one another, and it was agony. It hurt so much—more than the headache I'd had when I woke up—more even than the brutal pain of the migrim that I'd suffered. It dawned on me that apart from losing Abagail and our baby, nothing had ever caused me as much desolation as the knowledge that things had come to an end between Michaela and me. Could it have only been this morning that I'd gone so innocently to the homestead, meaning to apologize to her for invading her privacy? It seemed like a lifetime ago. Yet in a few short hours, everything had
changed. I could hardly believe it, let alone accept it. For the first time, my thoughts about the future had nothing to do with my amnesia. All I could think about was how I was going to go on without her in my life.

But brooding helplessly over losing Michaela was doing me no good. There would be plenty of time in the long, empty weeks and months ahead for me to ruminate on what I’d lost—before I’d even truly known what I had. Before I’d had the chance to remember what it felt like to love again—and be loved in return. For now, I needed to somehow try to push her out of my mind, and focus on the business at hand.

There was no guarantee that the lean-to would be livable when I got back—fact is, I anticipated that I’d probably have to rebuild it. I also had no idea whether my bedroll would still be there, or my blankets—as well as the skins I’d tanned, and my few clothes and cooking utensils. Best to replace what I could. I needed some staples, too—like coffee, sugar, and some dried meat to tide me over till I could go hunting and set out my traps.

There was only one place I could go to get what I needed, but visiting the general store posed a problem. I had no money. Fact is, I was flat broke. I’d never bought anything on credit—I didn’t like owing anybody, and Loren hadn’t been about to let me charge anything, back when we’d been enemies—but now I realized that if he was willing to sell to me, I’d have to ask him to trust me for the money till I could get some work to earn enough to pay him back. “If” he’d be willing to extend me credit at all—I still had trouble believing that we’d become friendly, or that he trusted me.

I had another problem too. My tomahawk and my knife were still somewhere in the clinic. Michaela hadn’t gotten around to giving them back to me, and I didn’t think I could bring myself to go ask her for them. Maybe I could get hold of Matthew, and ask him to bring my weapons to me. Or maybe it would just be simpler to go to Robert E. and ask him to make me new ones. Of course then I’d owe him too—but chances were good that he might have some extra work at the livery for me so I could work off my debt to him.

The day wasn’t getting any younger—I needed to head to town, if I was going to have any hope of procuring my supplies and getting back out to the woods in time to work on the lean-to before sundown. Yet I lingered in the new homestead, wishing with all my heart that I could remember the joy of anticipation I must have felt, as I carefully crafted this beautiful new home to share with my future wife—and with our children. I’d come here a stranger, never dreaming that it had been my hands that had created this place—and then I’d been shocked to the core, not only to discover that I had been the one to build it—but why. Yet despite all the staggering revelations I’d had this day, I had quickly gone from shock at the truth, to a powerful feeling of need and possessiveness—not just for this house, but for everything it represented. I could have had it all—everything I’d ever wanted: a real family; with a beautiful, extraordinary woman to love and who loved me, wonderful children, and perhaps even a baby of our own someday. But I had allowed my anger to cause it all to slip through my fingers. Self-loathing washed through me at my selfishness and stupidity.

What did it really matter that she hadn’t told me the truth about us sooner? She’d claimed she had good reasons for what she’d done, and I should have been willing to accept that. Hadn’t she proved her devotion to me over and over, even if she hadn’t been able to say the words? The way she’d taken such loving care of me, watching over me day and night, using up every last drop of her own strength and energy for my sake. Her gentleness and compassion as she’d told me of the deaths of my friends, and her kindness as she tried to comfort me in my grief. Even the way she’d kept me from learning too much about events that had transpired during my “missing” time. I understood now that she hadn’t been trying to lie to me, or treat me like child. She’d been trying to take it ever so easy—to protect me—the best and only way she knew how. But had I tried to see things from her perspective? Had I shown even one ounce of sensitivity for her suffering? No. Instead, I’d lashed out at her, trying to hurt her—accusing her of all sorts of cruel and hateful things. I’d thought of her as selfish, when in fact it was me who’d been the selfish one—more so than she ever could have been.

I took down the ring from the mantle, holding it in my palm as I stared at it in anguish. Suddenly a tear fell onto the stone, the shivering droplet magnifying the brilliance of the diamond as it trembled in my hand—and I realized I was crying.

I fell down on my knees as if in penance, closing my hand over the ring and pressing it to my chest. “I’m sorry Michaela,” I said, my voice harsh and broken in the emptiness. “Oh God, I’m so sorry . . .”

* * * * * * * * * *
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“The floor is yours, Dr. Mike,” said the Reverend from his place at the lectern. Michaela left her seat in one of the front pews of the church, and ascended the altar, taking Reverend Johnson’s place as she moved aside to make room for her. The minister stepped down from the dais and took her empty seat. He looked up at her expectantly, his expression matching those of the other friends and neighbors who had gathered here this evening at her request. Clearly everyone present was curious as to why she’d called this unexpected meeting—the only exceptions being her children, and Dorothy—the sole friend she had taken into her confidence regarding Sully’s condition.

Michaela rested her folded hands on the pulpit, letting her eyes travel over the familiar faces of her fellow townspeople. It touched her that they had been willing to come together on such short notice, both for Sully’s sake and her own. She realized that not everyone assembled here had such altruistic motives—like Hank, for instance. His expression as he caught her eye was more prurient than sympathetic. However she knew that if she were to have any success in treating Sully—not to mention protecting him—the people in town who cared for him most or knew him best, needed to understand his condition and the necessity of guarding their speech around him—at least for a while.

“I want to thank you all for taking time out of your evening to come here,” she began. “I won’t keep you long. I simply wanted to tell you a bit about Sully’s condition—and enlist your aid in helping me with his recovery.” Her remark had the desired effect—everyone was watching her avidly.

“First I wanted to say that Sully will be fine—his physical recovery is progressing very well,” she continued. She noted the happy and relieved expressions on the faces of their closest friends—Dorothy, Robert E. and Grace, Horace and Myra, the Reverend, and—gratifyingly—Loren. “However,” she went on a bit more reluctantly after a moment, “there is a problem—an obstacle—to Sully becoming completely well, that I need to explain to you. It—has to do with his mind.” She hesitated.

“What are ya tryin’ to say Michaela—that he’s lost all his marbles?” Hank spoke up, flashing her one of his sardonic grins.

“Hank!” Dorothy exclaimed sharply.

Jake leaned toward Hank. “Seems to me he never had a full load to start with,” he quipped, sotto voce. Hank grinned.

“You’re both disgraceful,” Dorothy rebuked them. She glanced toward Michaela, shrugging slightly and raising her eyebrows as if to say, what can you expect? “You should be ashamed,” she added to the barkeep and the barber.

“Dorothy’s right,” Loren said unexpectedly.

“What’s wrong, old man?” Hank inquired. “Goin’ soft?”

“It just ain’t right,” Loren maintained stubbornly. “Sully and me—we ain’t always seen eye to eye, but he’s a good man. Gonna be a good husband for Dr. Mike—a good Pa for Brian, here, too. ‘Cordin’ to Dr. Mike, he come close to dyin’ a few days ago. I just think—there ain’t no call to be makin’ fun of him.” He folded his arms across his chest, his face set.

Dorothy reached over and patted his shoulder. “Thank you, Loren,” she said. “We’re listenin’, Michaela,” she added clearly, swiveling around to stare hard at Hank and Jake, then turning back to her friend. “ALL of us. Go on with what you were sayin’.”

“Thank you, Dorothy, Loren,” Michaela acknowledged gratefully, then looked out toward the assembled group.

“Sully has not—‘lost all his marbles’—as you so colorfully put it, Hank,” she remarked drily. The saloon keeper ducked his eyes, but couldn’t quite wipe the smug little smile from his face.

“So what’s ailin’ Sully, Dr. Mike?” Robert E. asked.
“I’m afraid that Sully is suffering from amnesia,” Michaela answered.

“Amnesia?” Horace repeated. “You mean—Sully don’t know who he is?”

Michaela smiled kindly. “No, Horace, it’s not as bad as that. Though you’re right—some patients with amnesia do forget their identities. Fortunately, however, that’s not the case with Sully. His memory loss has to do with time. He knows who he is, where he is, and he remembers everyone he knew prior to three years ago. But apparently that’s where his memories stop. He has no recollection of the past three years—not the events that occurred, or—anyone he may have met during that time.”

“What caused it, Dr. Mike?” Grace asked.

“I’m not precisely sure,” Michaela admitted. “But I believe it may have been a combination of factors—the head injury he received, as well as his sorrow over the massacre at Washita, which he took very hard—” Her glance went reflexively to Loren. His eyes met hers, and they shared a moment of silent understanding. Then Loren looked down, his brow creased in sympathy.

“I’m doing my best to discover the cause of Sully’s trauma, and help him work through it so that he can retrieve his memories,” Michaela went on. “But it’s a delicate process, which takes time. Sully has had a great shock, and I believe that if he’s told too quickly of the things he’s forgotten—especially the things that are painful—that the shock to his mind could be even worse.

“That’s why I’m asking for your help,” she said. “Slowly and surely, I intend to help Sully fill in the missing pieces of his past—but for a time, I need all of you to be careful of what you say when you’re around him. I know it will be awkward, but if you could just refrain from bringing up recent events, like Washita...” She was silent for a long moment. “I also need all of you to refrain from mentioning Sully’s and my courtship, and engagement,” she added finally.

“Why would you need to—” Grace started to say, and then stopped, her eyes widening. “Dr. Mike—you came to town durin’ the last three years... Are ya sayin’—Sully don’t remember *you*?”

“I’m afraid that’s true, Grace,” Michaela confirmed quietly.

“Oh Dr. Mike—I’m sorry,” Grace said softly.

“What about... your weddin’, Dr. Mike?” Myra spoke up shyly, her eyes compassionate.

Michaela tried to smile. “I’m not quite sure, Myra. I suppose we’ll have to wait and see. I’m optimistic that Sully will recover his memory eventually, but there’s no way to tell how long it will take. A wedding—at least a wedding when we originally planned it—might be out of the question.”

“Odds just went *way* up in the marriage sweepstakes, folks,” Hank announced. “An’ here I thought all he’d do is back out.”

“Talk about cold feet,” Jake said jeeringly. “Some fellas’ll do anthin’ to get out of tyin’ the knot.”

“I think you’re both terrible for gettin’ pleasure out of Michaela’s misery,” Dorothy chided them.

“Just bein’ realistic, Dorothy,” Hank said reasonably. “Sully ain’t never liked bein’ tied down—no reason to think he’s gonna change now.”

“He’s gonna change because he loves Michaela!” Dorothy insisted.

But Hank was shaking his head. “Mark my words,” he said. “The writin’s on the wall.”

“Don’t pay them any mind, Michaela,” Dorothy said to her friend hastily. “They don’t know what they’re talkin’ about.”

“It’s all right, Dorothy,” Michaela said quietly, trying not to acknowledge to herself how deeply she feared that Hank might be right. “Hank and Jake are free to think what they please. All I ask is that they—and all the rest of you—help me to protect Sully until he becomes more adjusted to his circumstances—or until his memories start to return.”
“You can count on all of us, Dr. Mike,” the Reverend said firmly, rising to his feet and gazing meaningfully at the assemblage. “You take the lead, and we’ll follow.” He took Michaela’s hand in his. “And I’ll be praying for both you and Sully—that you can make him well, and that your wedding will go off, just as you planned.”

“Thank you, Reverend,” she said softly, then turned and faced the others. “Thank you all,” she added. “Sully and I are very lucky to have you as our friends.”

“You’ll get Sully through this, Dr. Mike,” Robert E. spoke up confidently.

“And he’s gonna keep right on lovin’ you,” Dorothy whispered to her.

Michaela didn’t dare to speculate on Dorothy’s prediction. All she knew for sure was that she would never stop loving Sully—and that she would never give up on him.

Sully reread the lines he’d written; then, with a look of disgust, he ripped the sheet from the pad and crumpled it, tossing it to the floor. It joined a small but steadily increasing pile of similarly crumpled and rejected pages.

With a groan of impatience, he put the pad aside and got up from the bed. He moved restlessly over to the window, and looked out at the night sky.

He was no good at this. The harder he tried to pull a clear memory from the recesses of his mind, the more his mind seemed to fight him. Harder still was trying to write it down. No matter what he tried to say or how he tried to say it, it sounded like drivel. He knew that no one would read his words, yet he still felt a compulsion to do the best job he could, to please Dr. Mike. She seemed to be counting so much on this working.

But every time he attempted to isolate the last hazy memories that lingered in his mind, he seemed to come up against a blank wall. More and more, he doubted that writing in a journal would provide the key to opening a door in that wall and seeing what was on the other side. He found himself futilely wondering yet again what had caused him to block out so much of his past. He wanted to believe that it was simply the result of being shot, and perhaps his illness as well—but something deep inside made him suspect that the cause wasn’t that simple—or that obvious.

He returned to the bed and looked down at the pad. It’s blank pages silently rebuked him. What was he going to do? Sooner or later Dr. Mike would ask if he was making progress—how could he admit to her that he hadn’t even succeeded in putting one word down on paper?

Maybe he was trying too hard, he thought suddenly. Maybe it was like having a word on the tip of your tongue, but the harder you tried to remember it, the more it eluded you. However, if you put your mind on something else, more often than not, the word would come to you when you least expected it.

Maybe that’s what he needed to do here. Maybe instead of trying to begin with what he remembered last, he should go back farther—to when his memories were whole and clear. Maybe by starting at the beginning, and working his way forward, the things he’d forgotten would start to come back to him.

Filled with more of a sense of purpose, he curled up on the bed and took the pad back into his lap. He picked up a pencil, letting it hover over the page as he thought for a few seconds. Then, lowering the pencil to the blank sheet before him, he began to write.

“I feel kind of peculiar, doing this. I never been much of a one for writing—or reading either, for that matter. Too busy just living and surviving, I guess...”

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 27 March, 1870
Evening

I hesitated on the porch of the mercantile, still unsure and a little nervous about the reception I’d get from Loren. Despite all Michaela had said about me and Loren forming a friendship, all I could think of was how, last I remembered, Loren wouldn’t even give me the time of day. Still, I had to see him sometime.

A tall, slender woman with curly flame-colored hair and china blue eyes, was standing immediately inside the door. Her eyes lit up as she caught sight of me.

“Sully! It’s so good to see you up and around again. You look fine! How are you feeling?”

I smiled at her politely. She looked familiar, but . . . “Uh, fine thanks—Ma’am,” I said.

At my response she looked startled, then embarrassed. “I’m sorry! We met a while back, but you probably don’t remember me,” she said apologetically. “My name is Dorothy Jennings. Maude was my sister.”

Now I realized. “Right—Miss Dorothy,” I said. “I remember. Dr. Mike told me you’d moved to town and started a newspaper. It’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you, Sully. Michaela’s a real good friend of mine,” Dorothy commented. “She’s been keeping us informed of how you were doing. We’re all so glad you’re recovering so well.”

“I’m obliged,” I said.

Dorothy looked a little hesitant, then said, “Michaela also told us about how you—lost a little bit of your memory,” she said. “I know that must be so difficult for you.”


She nodded approvingly. “You just keep your spirits up,” she said. “I know Michaela’s working real hard to help you get your memories back. I’m sure everything’s going to work out.”

“Thanks—I hope so too,” I said, trying to hide the pang I felt every time she uttered Michaela’s name.

“I was thinking though—if Michaela says it’s all right, I’d be happy to give you some back issues of the Gazette—that’s my paper—so you can kind of get caught up,” she suggested.

“That sounds good,” I told her. “I’m anxious to read it. Michaela—“ I stopped, and then amended, “Dr. Mike—told me you’re a good writer.”

Dorothy raised an eyebrow at my accidental use of Michaela’s first name, and it occurred to me that if she and Michaela were as close as she claimed, then she probably knew all about our relationship—both before, and after, my memory loss. I felt kind of exposed, as if my life were an open book to everyone but me. But I also realized that Dorothy meant well, and her remarks were only out of kindness.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” she said now. “Whenever you want to look at the Gazette, you just let me know. I live upstairs, and I put out the paper here, so you’ll always know where to find me.”

“I’ll remember that. Thanks, Miss Dorothy. Uh—is Loren here?” I added.

“Right inside,” she said. I nodded, and stepped across the threshold. It was shadowy inside the store after the brightness of the outdoors, and I had to pause a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dimness.

“Sully!” I heard a familiar voice exclaim behind me. I turned, and Loren and I were face to face. He looked somewhat grayer than when I’d seen him last, with a few more lines about his face and mouth, but otherwise he appeared much the same. The biggest difference was that where I used to get no more than a scowl or taciturn stare from him—now he was regarding me with a broad smile.

“Look at you!” he was saying. “You’re looking fit as a fiddle. You’d never know anything had happened to you.”
“Good to see you again, Loren,” I said a little formally. “How have you been?”

“Can’t complain,” the storekeeper replied. “Business is good, with the railroad coming—“ He broke off. “Did you hear about that?” he added quickly, as if concerned he’d misspoken.

“Dr. Mike told me,” I answered, and he relaxed. “She’s pretty much brought me up to date on most of the things that have happened since—well, you know.”

“Sure,” Loren said, a little gruffly. “So, how are you feeling?” he asked kindly after a moment.

“I’m all right,” I replied. “Dr. Mike—took good care of me.” I swallowed over the painful lump in my throat.

“She sure is a wonder,” Loren said expansively.

“She is that,” I agreed quietly.

“So what can I do for you?” Loren inquired, moving on to business.

“I need some supplies,” I began. “Food, blankets and such.”

“Well, I got everything you could possibly want right here,” Loren assured me.

“That’s good,” I said. “Uh—my problem is—I ain’t got any money right now. I don’t like to ask, but I was wondering if you could sell me a few things on credit. I’m good for it,” I added hastily. “Soon as I find some work, I’ll be able to get the money to pay you.”

Loren looked slightly surprised. “Ain’t no problem—you already got an account here from building your homestead—” He broke off suddenly, apparently afraid that he’d inadvertently let another cat out of the bag. “You remember about your homestead?” he asked cautiously.

“I *know* about it,” I said. “I been there.”

“Oh, well, that’s alright then,” Loren said, looking relieved. He continued, “Anyway, I know you’ll pay me soon as you can. But—if you don’t mind my asking—what about the salary you get from your job on the reservation? You use all that up already?”

“My job on the—“ I echoed, then stared at him, thunderstruck. I had completely forgotten about my post as Indian Agent. And I hadn’t even bothered to check through my pockets, just assuming that they would be empty.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” I said to Loren now. “Dr. Mike told me about me being the Indian Agent, but I ain’t been to the reservation since I got hurt.” Curiously I reached into the outer pockets of my coat. There was nothing in the left-hand side, but when my fingers reached into my right pocket, they closed around a sheaf of soft, folded bills. I withdrew the money from my coat and saw that I was holding better than fifty dollars in my hand.

“What do you know,” I said, marveling. Loren nodded sagely. From the waistband of my buckskins I pulled out a list of supplies I had made. Handing the list and the money to Loren, I asked, “Is it enough?”

Loren scanned the list briefly. “Oh yeah,” he confirmed. “With some to spare.”

“That’s good—thanks,” I told him.

“It’ll take a few minutes to put the order together,” Loren said.

“That’s all right,” I replied. “I got some other things I need to do. I’ll come back for all this.”

Loren nodded again. “Good to have you back, Sully,” he said warmly.

I gave him a small smile. “Good to be back, Loren.”

I turned aside to head for the door—and narrowly missed bumping into Michaela coming the other
“Sully,” she said, startled.

“Dr. Mike,” I responded. We stared at each other, both of us painfully aware of the strain between us.

“Hey, Dr. Mike,” Loren greeted her, oblivious to the tension in the air. “I was just telling Sully here how good he looks—you done a great job.”

Michaela gave him a weak smile. “That’s very kind, Loren.” Her eyes turned back to me. “But Sully is—very strong,” she added softly. “That’s what really helped him to recover.”

“Modest as always,” Loren commented placidly.

Neither of us was listening. Our eyes were locked on each other. For some inexplicable reason, it seemed that this day, we were destined to keep finding each other. I gazed into her amber-green eyes, thinking how much I wanted to say to her. Trouble was, I didn’t know where to begin. Or whether it would even be any use. And certainly there was no time or opportunity now for private conversations.

The hurt was filling me up inside, seeming to steal my breath away. I knew I had to get out of there, before the pain stole my voice, and my control, completely.

“I’ll see you, Loren,” I said to the storekeeper over my shoulder. My eyes went back to Michaela’s face. I could see the pain I was feeling reflected in her eyes. “Michaela,” I said softly—then gently brushed past her and went out the door.

From inside I heard Loren ask, “What can I get you, Dr. Mike?” And then I heard her voice as she made a hasty excuse, and the sound of hurrying footsteps. A moment later she was calling to me as I stepped into the street.

“Sully! Don’t leave!” she said.

I stopped and waited for her to reach me, wondering if I could summon the strength to talk to her, when just the nearness of her was tearing me up inside.

“Are you all right?” she asked as she came up to me.

“No,” I said honestly.

Her eyes widened in concern, and I marveled that she could still worry about me.

“No more ‘all right’ than you are,” I added gently.

Her eyes registered her comprehension. She was silent a moment, then said, “You didn’t return to the clinic.”

“I—couldn’t, Michaela. Not after . . .”

“I know,” she answered, her voice nearly a whisper. There was a pause, and then in a slightly stronger voice she asked, “Where are you staying?”

“Going back to my old spot,” I answered. “I came to town to stock up on supplies. I’ve neglected the lean-to for a long time,” I went on. “Fact is, I figure I’m going to have to rebuild most of it from scratch. But I don’t got much time, if I’m going to get out there and get any work done before the light’s gone,” I added, moving to leave. Her face was troubled.

“Sully—the nights are still cold,” she began half-heartedly, as if already aware that her words would be useless. “And you’ve only just recovered from pneumonia. The exposure—it could be dangerous . . .”
“We both know I’m well now,” I told her quietly. “You don’t got to worry about me anymore. You—”
My throat tightened. “You take care of yourself—and the kids,” I added. “Good-bye, Michaela.”

“Sully—please,” she said quickly. “Please wait a moment.”

“Michaela—” I said, gazing at her helplessly. She had to know how it was tormenting me, being with
her like this. I could see in her eyes that she felt the same way.

“I know how—difficult this is . . . for both of us,” she said haltingly. “But I need to talk to you,
Sully—it’s a medical reason.”

“What?” I asked.

“Your stitches,” she answered. “With everything that’s—that’s happened, I haven’t had the chance to
remove them. They need to come out, Sully. It will only take a few minutes. You could accompany me
to the clinic now.”

“I’d forgotten about the stitches,” I admitted.

“Will you come with me?” she asked. “Once I’ve performed this final procedure, I won’t need to . . .
trouble you again,” she promised quietly.

“All right,” I agreed after a moment. “Actually, I guess I can kill two birds with one stone. I was
going to ask you for my knife and tomahawk—you still have them in the clinic.”

“Yes, that’s right,” she recalled. “I can return them to you as soon as I’m done. So you’ll come?” she
added.

“I’ll come,” I said.

* * * * * * * * * *

“You’ll feel some tugging, and it may hurt slightly, but the discomfort will be momentary,” she said.

I nodded, then sat quietly on the examination table as she worked behind me. I could feel her gentle
touch as she carefully parted my hair and set to work.

“Finished,” she said presently. She came around the table to face me. “The wound looks excellent,”
she said. “Almost completely healed. Once your hair grows out a little more, you’ll never know anything
happened.”

“Good—thanks,” I said. “Can I have my weapons now?”

“Of course,” she replied. She went to a cabinet where she kept most of her medicines. Sliding open a
drawer, she took out my knife and tomahawk and brought them to me. I stood up, and slipped the knife
into its sheath on my belt, then hefted the tomahawk, spinning and catching it again.

“Feels good to have these back,” I said, sliding the handle of the tomahawk home. I hesitated, deeply
uncomfortable about what I had to say next. “Michaela—I know I owe you—for everything you done for
me,” I began awkwardly. “I’ve got some change coming from what I paid Loren for my supplies. I don’t
know if it will be enough to cover my debt to you, but I promise that when I get my next month’s salary, I’ll
pay you in full.”

Immediately I could see how my words had wounded her. “Sully, I could never accept money from
you. It would be like—like charging my own children! Sully—everything I did for you, I did out of love,”
she finished quietly.

“I understand that,” I said, hating that I’d hurt her yet again, but not knowing what else to do.
“But—the way things stand between us now . . . well, it just don’t seem right for me to take
advantage . . .”

“I can’t accept money,” she repeated. “I can’t. Please—don’t ask me.”
“All right,” I agreed. “I don’t want to be the cause of making you feel worse. I know I hurt you enough as it is.” She dropped her eyes and didn’t answer.

“Guess I’d better be on my way—Loren probably has my order ready by now,” I added.

“Sully,” she said suddenly, taking me unawares. “Why don’t you stay at the new homestead?”

I felt another pang inside. “Michaela—” I began reluctantly.

“It’s a perfect solution,” she went on. “It’s yours, Sully. You built it. It belongs to you.”

“It belonged to us,” I said quietly.

She didn’t seem to have the words to respond. Instead, after a brief silence she said, “Sully, you built a beautiful house. You deserve to reap the benefits of all your hard labor.”

I had been looking down, finding it hard to meet her eyes, but finally I lifted my head. “We both know I don’t remember building the house,” I said. “But one thing I *do* know—I didn’t build it to live there alone.” I could feel tears threatening at the corners of my eyes, and I could see a glimmer in her eyes as well. “I’m sorry Michaela—I just can’t stay there. It would be . . . too hard.”

After a moment she said quietly, “I—respect your feelings.”

“I really should be going now,” I ventured again. I slipped on my coat, but then instead of moving to the door, I just stood there. I wondered if I was saying good-bye to her for the last time. Well of course it wouldn’t *really* be the last time. We’d continue to see each other in town. We’d nod and we’d smile—maybe even exchange a polite word or two. But whatever there’d been between us—whatever there *could* have been . . . I knew I was being forced to say good-bye to all that. Trouble was, I didn’t know how I could ever do it.

Michaela was speaking again. With an effort I focused on what she was saying.

“If you feel you need to return to the woods, I won’t try to stop you,” she said. “But would you at least let me help you transport your supplies out there? We can take the wagon.”

“That ain’t such a good idea, Michaela—” I resisted.

“You’ll get there much sooner than if you tried to go on foot,” she pointed out logically. “You said time is of the essence . . .”

“That’s true,” I allowed, still reluctant.

“Please,” she insisted gently. “We needn’t see each other afterwards. But—it would make me feel better—to know you reached the campsite safely.” She watched me, waiting for my decision.

“It would* be quicker than walking,” I acknowledged finally, weakening. “All right,” I gave in. “I’m grateful for your help.”

She looked relieved. “I’ll get the wagon from the livery and meet you at Loren’s,” she said.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Michaela approached Sully’s half-open door, bearing a generously laden dinner tray. With her hands full, she was forced to use her foot to nudge the door open further as she awkwardly maneuvered the tray through the entrance.

“Grace has fixed a wonderful supper for you,” she said as she entered the room. “She said she included all your favorites, to celebrate your being able to eat ‘real’ food again—”

Michaela broke off as she realized that he wasn’t there. She set the tray down on the bed, pivoting
around to survey the entire room. “Sully?” she said, feeling instantly foolish since it was patently obvious he was nowhere in evidence. Even the screen in the corner was angled in such a way that she could tell there was no one behind it.

She retraced her steps, crossing the hall and glancing briefly into the examination room, but it was empty. Back in the hall again, trying to ignore the mild thread of anxiety that was beginning to wend its way through her, she went toward the rear of the clinic and opened the door which backed onto the café. Her eyes traveled over the scene, registering the faces of all the customers gathered there for supper. No sign of him.

Where was he, she thought, her anxiety increasing. Had he decided to leave the clinic and wander around town? Even now, was he speaking to someone who didn’t know or understand his condition? Someone who might innocently reveal information to Sully about the time he had lost—information that could disturb him, perhaps even harm him?

“Sully?” she repeated more loudly. “Sully!”

“Here,” she heard a muffled voice issuing from upstairs. Heart hammering with relief, Michaela leaned against the wall momentarily, trying to calm herself. When she felt she had achieved a measure of control, she climbed the stairs to the upper story and made her way to the recovery room which opened onto the balcony.

Sure enough, she could see him through the open French doors, reclining in one of the weathered rocking chairs. She crossed the room and emerged onto the balcony, coming to stand next to him.

“’Evenin’,” he said, giving her a casual smile. He was tilted slightly back in the chair, one foot braced against the balustrade, hands loosely clasped across his chest. “Thought I’d come up here and watch the sunset.”

“Good evening,” she replied, her voice sounding slightly high and tense to her ears. “I was looking for you. I have to confess—I was a little concerned when I couldn’t find you.”

Sully immediately lowered his foot and put his hands on the arms of the chair, pulling himself up a little straighter. “Sorry,” he said, his expression apologetic. “I didn’t mean to alarm you. It just gets a little—close—in that room, you know? I felt like gettin’ some air.”

“That’s all right,” Michaela said, significantly calmer now. She turned slightly and rested her hands on the railing. “It *is* a beautiful sunset, isn’t it?” she agreed.

Sully stood up and took a step forward so that he was standing close beside her. He stared out over the roof of the saloon opposite, to the misty purple of the hills beyond, their peaks mantled with a fiery veil of orange and red. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s my favorite time of day. No matter where I am or what I’m doin’, I always try to stop and give thanks to the spirits for this gift of beauty.”

“There’s a place I go sometimes,” he went on quietly, staring dreamily toward the mountains. “When I have a problem, or I just need to think . . . It’s like I’m standin’ on the top of the world. It’s quiet there, and peaceful. And the sunset is so grand, and so glorious, I feel like I could reach out and touch it. “I always thought—heaven would look a lot like that,” he finished.

Michaela stared up at him, moved by this glimpse into the sensitive, poetic side of Sully’s nature. It was not a part of himself he showed often, or freely. And she recognized the place he was describing, and recalled how honored she’d felt when he had chosen to show it to her after they began courting. He’d said at the time that he was ready to show her all of his world, and he’d kept his promise by bringing her to the private, cherished spot he’d never shared with anyone else.

A dart of pain lanced inside her as she was reminded that he had no memory now of their visit there, just as he had no memory of anything else they’d done together. But perhaps she could help him rediscover the memory. Or perhaps, one day, he would choose to take her back there again.

“It must be wonderful to have a place like that—a retreat all your own where you can—renew your spirit,” she remarked.
“That’s it, exactly!” Sully responded. He turned to her, his face animated. “I go there when my spirit is low. But then, the beauty, the serenity—it fills me up. My senses, my spirit—feel rejuvenated again, and I’m ready to go on.”

“Perhaps, you should think about returning there once you’ve recovered,” Michaela suggested.

“Maybe I should,” he agreed thoughtfully. After a moment he added, “So—you were lookin’ for me?”

“Oh, yes,” Michaela said, realizing suddenly that she’d completely forgotten her reason for coming to see him in the first place. “I brought your dinner tray. Grace went all out, to celebrate your ‘graduation’ to real food.” She smiled.

“That’s real kind,” Sully said gratefully. “I’m lookin’ forward to it. From what I hear about Grace’s cookin’, I’m in for a treat.”

“Absolutely,” Michaela assured him. “Would you like me to bring your tray up here?” she suggested after a pause. “You might find it pleasant to dine ‘alfresco’—as we do in the café.”

“That would be nice,” Sully answered readily, the prospect of eating in the fresh air obviously pleasing to him. “But I don’t want to put you to extra trouble, carryin’ it up here. I can get it myself,” he offered.

“It’s hardly ‘extra trouble’ to carry a tray upstairs, Sully,” Michaela told him. “Besides, you’re the patient here. You deserve to be a bit ‘pampered.’ Enjoy it while you have the opportunity,” she added, her eyes twinkling.

“A little pamperin’ . . . would be nice,” Sully said shyly, his eyes meeting hers.

“Good,” Michaela said approvingly, feeling a trifle shy herself.

A short time later, the dinner tray, stacked with empty dishes, sat on the floor of the balcony and Sully and Michaela were sipping coffee from the pot Grace had thoughtfully provided. Even as he’d taken obvious relish in the meal Grace had prepared, Michaela had noted how Sully’s attention was captured by the comings and goings of the people in the street down below. She found herself suspecting that a desire to witness the sunset hadn’t been Sully’s entire motivation for coming out here.

“So how does it look to you?” she asked him after they’d shared a companionable silence.

He glanced at her quickly, apparently surprised by her insight.

“Pretty much the same,” he admitted after a moment, looking slightly sheepish. “Not too many changes that I can see, ‘cept for the depot, of course.”

Michaela nodded. “Did you see anyone you recognize?” she inquired further.

“I saw Horace come out of the telegraph,” Sully replied. “And I spotted Hank and Jake in front of the saloon. I got a glimpse of Loren in the doorway of the general store, too, but he was too far away for me to see him real clear.”

Michaela studied him, recognizing in his expression the natural curiosity that he couldn’t hide. She tried to imagine how he must feel—a part of the town, yet a stranger to it all at the same time.

“Would you like me to tell you a bit about the people you remember?” she ventured. “Sort of—bring you up to date on what’s happened with everyone?”

“I have been wonderin’,” Sully confessed to her. “That would be kind of you—if I’m not takin’ you away from anythin’,” he added.

“Nothing more important than spending time with you,” Michaela answered. She noted his look of innocent gratitude, and felt guilty. Oh, Sully—if you only knew how much *I* need our time together—perhaps even more than you, she thought. If you only knew how truly selfish I am.

But to Sully she simply said, “I’m happy to help you any way I can.” She paused briefly, then resumed, “You mentioned Horace, so I’ll tell you about him first. There actually have been some rather exciting
changes in Horace’s life these past few years . . ."

She went on to talk about Horace’s courtship of Myra and their subsequent marriage, and the birth of their daughter, Samantha. She then discussed the lives of Sully’s other friends and acquaintances, describing both triumphs and sorrows, such as the passing of Maude Bray and Loren’s sister, Miss Olive. She was gratified to see that though saddened, Sully took the news of their deaths well. With each day that passed, he seemed to be growing stronger emotionally, as well as physically. Perhaps it wouldn’t be that long after all until his recollections started to return—or at least until she could share with him the more painful occurrences in his life, like Washita—or the complexities of their relationship, and his response to it.

Michaela was amused, when she got to the subject of Loren, at how incredulous Sully was at the news that he and Loren had ended their mutual animosity and formed a friendship.

“Come on, Dr. Mike—you must be jokin’,” he said to her after she described the emergency hernia surgery she’d had to perform on Loren, and his subsequent need for a blood transfusion, for which Sully had volunteered to be the donor. “Me—givin’ blood to *Loren*? Knowin’ how he felt about me, I’m surprised he didn’t think it was poison.”

“But it's true, Sully,” she reiterated. “And actually, Loren reacted quite well to the idea of you donating your blood to him. I truly believe the experience was the catalyst to the two of you finally putting aside your differences.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” Sully finally conceded. “But it’s still hard to believe,” he added doubtfully.

In the time they had talked, dusk had moved in to displace the sunset, and Michaela began to be aware of the evening’s encroaching chill.

“I’ve enjoyed our discussion, but I believe it’s time you were returning to your room,” she said to Sully finally.

“Spose you’re right,” he acknowledged, seemingly as reluctant as she to draw their visit to a close. His eyes regarded her admiringly. “You really look out for your patients, don’t you?” he said unexpectedly. “You’re carin’ and protective . . . You got a good ‘bedside manner,’ Dr. Mike.”

“Thank you, Sully,” Michaela replied, feeling a trace of guilt once again, aware that her attentions to Sully were understandably more personal than those she afforded her other patients. Not that she would neglect anyone in her care—but her emotional connection to Sully made the usual medical detachment she tried to maintain difficult in the extreme.

“I’ll walk with you to your room,” she added, anxious to change the subject. He nodded, and they left the balcony, making their way to his room below.

They stopped outside his door, facing each other rather awkwardly.

“Can I get you anything, or do anything for you?” Michaela asked. He shook his head.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Go spend some time with the children. I feel bad about takin’ you away from them.”

“Please don’t,” she told him. “The children are as anxious as I am for you to recover, and they understand and accept that I’ve had to devote time to your treatment.”

“I’m obliged, nonetheless,” Sully said. “I hope you’ll tell them for me—and let them know I won’t be stealin’ their ma from them for much longer.” He gave her a small grin.

“I’ll be sure to deliver the message,” Michaela promised, smiling back. “As for you, my usual instructions apply—get a good night’s rest.”

That’s one order that’s easy for me to follow,” Sully told her.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Michaela said. She took a step as if to leave.

“Sleep sweet, Dr. Mike,” he said unexpectedly. Touched, Michaela turned back to him.
“Sleep sweet, Sully,” she said softly.

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“Yeah—I’ll see you there directly. There’s just one more thing I need to get,” I told Michaela. She looked curious, but didn’t ask. I heard her leave the clinic as I headed for my room.

A few minutes later, I joined her by the wagon. Loren had loaded the whole order, leaving me with nothing to do but collect my change from him. I took Michaela’s arm and helped her up onto the bench, acutely aware of the warmth of her skin beneath my fingers. I willed myself not to notice, but it was like telling myself not to breathe.

Before I joined her, though, I went to the back of the wagon and tucked the object I’d brought with me between some folded blankets. Michaela watched me. As I climbed up beside her and took the reins, she said, “You’re still writing in your journal? I thought, perhaps—you might have given it up.”

We began to move down the street.

“No—no I’m keeping it up,” I admitted. “Fact is—” I paused, embarrassed. “I kind of like it. I don’t know if it’s helping me to remember or not—but it—it clears my head, to write about the things that happen to me—how I feel about them . . .” I drifted off.

“Have . . . you written about me?” Michaela said after a pause.

I looked her in the eyes. “Yes,” I said.

My eyes held hers for a brief moment, then she turned her face away, gazing off toward the hills.

The rest of the trip in the wagon passed in silence. After a time, I pulled off to the side of the road.

“We’ll have to leave the wagon here,” I announced. “The rest of the way we go on foot.”

“But what about all these supplies?” Michaela asked. “We can’t possibly carry them all.”

“We’ll just take the basics with us for now,” I said. “Blankets, saddle bags, canteens . . . I’ll come back for the rest later.” She nodded, then followed my lead as I retrieved the various items I wanted to take from the wagon bed. A few minutes later, ready to set off, I said, “It ain’t that far—maybe ten, fifteen minutes walk.”

“I remember,” she said promptly, then looked at me, startled. “I’ve—been here before,” she added quietly.

“Sure,” I said politely. “That makes sense.” Then, not knowing what else to say, I started walking toward the woods. After a short pause I heard her following me.

“Watch your step through here,” I cautioned a few minutes later. “There are a lot of exposed roots in
these old trees. Not good footing."

‘I’m managing all right,” she said behind me, sounding a little out of breath. I glanced around. Her cheeks were pink from exertion, and her hair was starting to slip free of that knot she’d had it twisted in. She looked hot, and sweaty—and beautiful.

I pulled my eyes away abruptly. “Never hurts to be careful,” I said, looking straight ahead. “And those shoes of yours ain’t exactly made for traipsing through the woods—"

Simultaneously I heard a thump, and her voice crying out. I whirled around, to see her huddled on the ground grasping her ankle, her face twisted in pain.

“What is it?” I said, instantly on my knees beside her.

“My ankle,” she said through gritted teeth. Her face had gone pale, drained of all its color.

“You think it’s broke?” I said in concern, reaching out to touch it gently.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure,” she managed.

“Try to move it,” I told her. Gingerly she revolved her foot. The movement made her gasp softly with pain, but it was clear she could manipulate her ankle. “I think—it’s just a sprain,” she said after a moment. "But it needs to be wrapped."

“Sure,” I said. I reached for her bag, which she’d dropped when she fell.

“It’s all right, Sully, I can do it,” she said. I met her eyes.

“No you can’t,” I said reasonably. “And even if you could, I wouldn’t let you. You’re hurt, Michaela. Let someone help you for a change.” I leaned closer to her. “You don’t always got to be so strong,” I added softly.

She looked apologetic. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Old habit, I suppose.”

“Give it up,” I said. We stared at each other.

“Sully . . .” she began, then stopped.

“I’ve said that to you before, haven’t I?” I asked, with a feeling of certainty.

“Do you remember?” Michaela asked, her eyes locked on me and her voice shaking slightly. I closed my eyes briefly and tried to concentrate.

“Not exactly,” I said slowly after a pause. “It’s not so much that I remember saying it—but that there’s something that’s familiar about it.”

“Well that could be the beginning!” she said excitedly. “Perhaps that’s how your memory will return—by starting as a familiar feeling, and then becoming specific.”

“Maybe so,” I acknowledged, a little nervous about getting my hopes up, yet unable to deny a spark of excitement inside myself. “But we can worry about that later. Right now, we got to take care of you. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

She nodded, still in obvious pain. As carefully as I could, I untied and removed her shoe. Then, following her instructions, I took a rolled bandage from her medical bag, unwinding it slowly as I gently wrapped it around her foot and ankle. Finally I finished and looked up at her.

“How does that feel?” I asked.

She moved her leg experimentally. “Fine—“ she started to say, then winced.

”Too tight?” I said quickly.
“No,” she replied. “It’s my knee. I think I must have cut it.”

“All right, let’s take a look,” I answered, starting to reach for the hem of her skirt.

“Sully!” she said, drawing away from me slightly, her cheeks flushing.

I looked her in the eyes again. “Michaela,” I said, “I been married. I’ve seen a woman’s—’limbs’—before. I’m willing to wager I’ve even seen yours before,” I added.

She didn’t answer, but looking a trifle abashed, she extended her leg toward me. Carefully I eased the material up, revealing her knee. There was a large rent in her stocking, and blood glistened darkly beneath.

“You’re bleeding,” I said. Gently, tentatively, I rolled her stocking down, taking special care to ease it away from the wound. I reached for another roll of bandages, using Michaela’s scissors to cut off a length of material. I pressed it gingerly to the wound, gently applying pressure. After a few moments I lifted the compress away. Red flared against the white of the bandage. Something twisted inside me at the sight of her blood on the cloth, and seeing her so vulnerable and in pain. I wanted to protect her, and take the pain away.

“You’ll need chlorine water to clean and disinfect the wound,” Michaela said, interrupting my thoughts. I nodded, and found the bottle, pouring a small amount on another length of bandage and dabbing carefully at her knee. She winced again, and I felt a stab of remorse at having to hurt her, even though I knew it was necessary. Ever so softly, I blew on the wound, to cool the fire. Then, finally, I wrapped her knee and knotted the bandage.

Though I’d completed the task, my hands lingered on her leg. She was watching me, but didn’t speak. More important, she didn’t try to move away. I looked into her eyes and lost myself in them, all trace of coherent thought vanishing from my mind. After a long moment I dropped my eyes to her knee again, gently tracing its curve with my fingertip. I bent over it, tenderly pressing my lips to the soft skin above the bandage. Then I laid my head on her lap, my cheek pillowed gently on her knee.

I felt her fingertips lightly touch my hair. “Oh, Sully,” she whispered.

I looked up at her, and could barely see the tears glistening in her eyes for the ones that shimmered in my own.

“Forgive me, Michaela,” I said softly, not stopping to think, just letting the words come straight from my heart. “I’m so sorry for hurting you. I’m so sorry for the terrible things I said. I didn’t mean them—I swear I didn’t. Especially what I said about trust. I trust you Michaela—I never stopped. I trust you with my life, and I trust you with my heart. And it’s tearing me apart that I was so cruel to you. Even while I was saying all those awful things, part of me hated myself, but I couldn’t seem to stop.

“I’m so sorry for letting my anger blot out my reason and compassion,” I went on. “You tried to explain to me—you tried to make me understand how hard you were trying to help me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

“You listened,” she said softly.

“No,” I said. “I attacked. I accused. I didn’t let myself hear what you were saying—because I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted to wallow in my anger, and so what if I hurt you in the process?”

“Sully, don’t punish yourself so much—you had a right to be hurt, to feel betrayed,” she said gently. “I lied to you—I kept a very important truth from you, and refused to tell you why.”

“Sometimes it’s the things a person doesn’t say that are most important,” I answered, refusing to let her make excuses for me. “In every way you could, short of saying it outright, you tried to show me how much you loved me—how much you cared. You were trying to speak to me from your heart but I couldn’t listen. I closed my heart to you.

“But my heart’s not closed anymore, Michaela,” I told her, my voice breaking a little with the depth of my emotion. “It’s open and overflowing with love. I’m offering my love—and my heart—to you now.” She stared at me, all her defenses gone, the emotion naked on her face.
“I love you,” I whispered. “I love you with all my heart and soul.” I cupped her face in my hands and began to kiss her—and was overjoyed a moment later to feel her return the kiss, as hungry for my lips as I was for hers. My hands found her hair as I breathed in its delicate lilac scent. I felt her fingers knot themselves in my hair as well, as we pressed ourselves to one another. It felt as if we were fused together, so that we couldn’t tell where one of us ended and the other began.

After what seemed an eternity, we broke the kiss.

“You’re trembling,” she whispered.

“So are you,” I whispered back, unable to keep my fingers from continuing to caress her face, her hair . . . I felt like I was drowning in her eyes.

But then her expression became troubled, and she started to draw away. I sensed that she was afraid of what she was feeling, and I held onto her, determined that *this* time, I wasn’t going to let her go.

“It don’t matter why you didn’t tell me everything,” I said, my voice hoarse with love and longing for her. “None of that matters anymore. I understand that you did it because you were trying to take care of me, and that’s all I’ve got to know.”

“But Sully—“

“It don’t matter whether I get my memory back or not,” I went on, ignoring her protest, holding her eyes captive. “I loved you before and I love you now. I need you, Michaela,” I said passionately. I folded her hands within mine and brought them to my lips, kissing them tenderly. “I want to be with you—to share our lives. I don’t want to live without you. I . . . don’t think I ever could.” I gazed at her, praying that she felt the same. Praying that it wasn’t too late.

“Marry me,” I said.

*** *** *** *** ***

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Michaela slumped over her desk, her head pillowed on her folded arms. Her eyes were closed but she wasn’t asleep. In truth, she felt too exhausted to sleep, her mind and body drained by hours of tending Sully through his agonizing siege. In the recovery room nearby, Sully slept at last, finally achieving a measure of surcease from the brutal ordeal he had suffered throughout the day. Unfortunately, unlike Sully, who had managed to escape into oblivion, Michaela’s thoughts would not let her rest.

Was it only twenty-four hours ago that she’d had the arrogance to think that Sully’s recovery might be not be as difficult as she’d anticipated—that he might calmly weather the emotional challenge of recovering the memories that had been so painful for him?

She knew better now. The nearly crippling migrim that had incapacitated him for the past several hours was ample proof that his mental and emotional state were still very much “out of balance.” It was almost as if his mind was fighting him, throwing up obstacles in his path to prevent him from breaking through the wall he’d erected to conceal his memories. She knew it didn’t make sense—that any of her medical colleagues would scoff or jeer at her diagnosis—but in her heart she believed that the origin of Sully’s migrim had been emotional, not physical. And she wondered if she had been the one responsible for bringing it on.

Had she been guilty of telling Sully too much, too soon? She hadn’t intended to overwhelm him; in fact, she had honestly believed that bringing him up to date on the lives of his friends, would make him more comfortable and better able to adjust to his altered condition. But what if his mind had perceived the information as a threat? What if something she’d innocently said had triggered his mind’s defenses? Cloud Dancing had told her to treat the whole person. To recognize that the mind and body were inextricably linked—whatever affected one part, affected the other.

Wearily Michaela thought again about how much she didn’t know. She was venturing into a dark and unfamiliar terrain, without so much as a candle to light her way or guide her steps. She had to rely on
instinct alone, and that instinct was far from reliable. Sully’s migrim was the proof. She had wandered off down the wrong path, and now she had to retrace her steps and start over again. Only this time, she must be even more cautious, if such a thing were even possible.

She glanced up at the clock ticking on the wall. It had been a hour since she’d looked in on Sully—she should check on him again.

Slowly she pushed back her chair and stood up, putting her hands to the small of her aching back and stretching to relieve the tension. Her fatigue—both physical and mental—seemed overwhelming; but she had only to recall the ordeal of pain and nausea Sully had endured throughout the day, to realize that her physical and emotional complaints were trivial in comparison.

She had reached the hall when she heard a knock on the outer door. Sighing, she retraced her steps and went to answer.

A man of medium stature, with dark hair going to gray at the temples, stood on the threshold. He was dressed smartly, in a stylish hat, coat and vest; but the subtle presence of broken blood vessels in his reddened nose was evidence to her that this was a man long accustomed to drink. As if in confirmation of that fact, Michaela’s eyes detected the glint of a silver flask peeking out from one of his coat pockets.

Superintendent Hazen!” Michaela said, startled. However she quickly composed her features into a polite mask. “Won’t you come in?” she said more graciously, stepping back.

“Dr. Quinn,” said the government official, touching the brim of his hat to her as he entered. “So nice to see you again.”

“I wasn’t aware you had come to town,” Michaela said carefully.

“Some urgent reservation business in the north required my attention,” Hazen explained. “So I thought I may as well combine it with my regularly scheduled visit to Palmer Creek. I just arrived this afternoon, and I was shocked to learn from Reverend Johnson about Agent Sully. I had to come here and see for myself how he’s doing. Is it true he nearly passed on?”

“His condition was very critical for some days, yes,” Michaela confirmed. Hazen shook his head. “I’m sorry to hear it,” he said solemnly. “I have quite a fondness for Agent Sully—he’s a man of principle and integrity, unlike most of his fellow agents. It’s true he has a bit of trouble with authority from time to time, but I admire his passion. He’s a true friend to the Indian.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hazen—that’s very kind of you to say,” Michaela replied.

“The Reverend also told me that Agent Sully is doing better now—I hope that’s still the case,” Hazen added.

Michaela nodded. “I’m happy to say that he overcame the pneumonia, and is healing from his head injury,” she said.

“Oh, well—that’s splendid news,” said Hazen. “How did such a thing happen?” he added after a pause.

“I’m afraid—we’re not really sure,” Michaela said innocently. “The details are—sketchy. Sully had no recollection of the incident after regaining consciousness, so he can’t shed any light on the matter.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Hazen remarked. “Whoever is responsible for this vile deed should be brought to justice.”

“Yes, indeed,” she said, but then added quickly, “However I’m just grateful to have him alive and home, and on the road to recovery.”

“Of course,” Hazen agreed. “As you should be.”

“Can I do something for you, Mr. Hazen?” Michaela asked, trying to discover if the purpose of his visit was simply a courtesy call—or whether he had more serious intentions.
“I had hoped to pay my respects to Agent Sully,” Hazen told her. “Is he up for having a visitor?”

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” Michaela flattered him. “However I’m afraid Sully still needs a great deal of rest to regain his strength. He had a particularly difficult time today,” she added truthfully. “I had to give him medication to help him sleep. I’m afraid it’s quite impossible for him to receive visitors tonight.”

“I understand,” the official replied. “How soon do you think I might be able to see him? Unfortunately I have only a couple of days here before I have to continue on with my tour of the reservations.”

“I wish I could tell you, but Sully is still quite weak—I’m afraid I can’t predict when his condition will permit visitors,” Michaela hedged. “However, if there’s a message you wish to give Sully, I’ll be sure that he gets it,” she offered.

“I only wanted to give him my best wishes,” Hazen replied. “However, Dr. Quinn, I *am* a bit concerned about how long Agent Sully’s convalescence will keep him from his duties. The Reverend is doing his best, but managing affairs on the reservation really isn’t his responsibility, is it?—and I’m afraid I can’t leave things untended indefinitely. I’m wondering whether I need to appoint someone to take Agent Sully’s place?” he finished.

Michaela stared at Hazen, debating how she should respond. Sully didn’t even recall his post as Indian Agent, and she had no idea how soon she would be able to tell him. She also remembered very well the ambivalence toward his position that Sully had revealed before leaving on his fateful journey. Perhaps now would be the perfect opportunity for him to extricate himself from this responsibility. She had no doubt but that if she were to tell Hazen about Sully’s memory loss, the government official would question Sully’s ability to continue doing his job, and might dismiss him on the spot.

However, did she have the right to make Sully’s decisions for him? She could argue that his present condition made it difficult—if not impossible—for him to make these decisions on his own. But his condition could change—tomorrow, the next day, or even a few months into the future. She also had no way of being certain that he was still unhappy in his role as Indian Agent. It was conceivable that he might have changed his mind in the interval since they’d talked, and he might very well come to resent her later if she were responsible—even inadvertently—for having him removed from his post. If Sully *were* to resign his position, she realized, it had to be his choice, and his alone. Making her decision, she looked at Hazen squarely.

“As you said, Mr. Hazen, Sully cares deeply for the Indians, and tries to do everything in his power to make their lives easier,” she began. “I believe he wants to continue doing this work, and hopes to return to the reservation as soon as possible. While I can’t predict with absolute certainty when he’ll be fully recovered, I can estimate that it should just be a matter of weeks. Would it be possible to replace him temporarily, while still keeping his position open for him until he’s able to return?”

“I’m sure that Sully would consider it a great favor,” she added persuasively.

A few moments elapsed while Michaela awaited Hazen’s answer. He looked thoughtful, apparently weighing the advantages and disadvantages of retaining Sully, or releasing him from his post. Finally he said, “Well sure, and it’s not his fault that he was hurt. I suppose it would be unfair to snatch his job out from under him while he’s laid up.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he added, leaning closer to her so that Michaela could smell the whiskey on the breath. “I’ll keep Agent Sully’s job open for a month, and appoint someone to substitute in the meantime. However, I can’t wait any longer than that. If Agent Sully can’t resume his duties by the time the month is out, I’m afraid I’ll have to replace him permanently.”

“That’s very generous and fair,” Michaela said readily, inwardly relieved to have bought Sully—and herself—some time. “I’m certain that a month will be ample time for Sully to recover and return to his duties—at least on a limited basis.”

“So we’re agreed, then. Splendid,” Hazen replied, offering her his hand. She shook it briefly, then followed him as he took a few steps toward the door. “I hope you’ll give Agent Sully my best regards,” he added. “Tell him he’s definitely missed on the reservation.”

“I certainly will,” Michaela promised. “Thank you for your concern, Mr. Hazen.”
“My pleasure, Dr. Quinn,” the superintendent answered. “Good day to you now.” He touched his hat once more and went outside. As Michaela started to close the door after him, she saw him stop on the porch and remove the flask from his pocket, screwing off the cap and taking a long pull of the contents. Shaking her head, she pushed the door closed. She wondered who really had the greater problem—Sully with his amnesia, or Hazen with his alcoholism. She suspected that she knew who would be the first to succumb to his demons, however.

Breathing a sigh of relief that she had been successful in putting off the reservation official, she scrubbed her face, smoothed back her hair, and went in to see Sully.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela gently bathed Sully’s forehead with a damp compress as he lay with his eyes closed.

“How’s that?” she asked softly.

“Mmm,” he murmured. “Feels good.”

“I think you’re over the worst of it now,” Michaela added encouragingly. He stirred and opened his eyes, looking up at her in the dimness of the room. “Thanks to you,” he said. Michaela felt a blush stain her cheeks, and was grateful for the concealment of shadows.

“Try to take a little more tea,” she suggested, gently lifting his head and holding a cup to his lips. He took a few sips, then relaxed against the pillows.

“You must be gettin’ awful tired of this by now,” he commented.

“What?” she asked.

“Tendin’ to me like this—nursin’ me through one crisis after another,” Sully answered, his drawn features obvious even in the limited light. “I’m sorry for what I put you through today,” he added.

“Sully, there’s no need to apologize. You were the one suffering. You needed my help—I wasn’t about to let you go through this alone,” she admonished him.

“I wish you had,” he said in a low voice. “I—hated you havin’ to see me like that.”

“Illness is not a sign of weakness, Sully,” she told him. “You mustn’t equate the two.”

He shrugged. “Maybe so. But bein’ sick makes me dependent—and I guess I ain’t used to that feelin’.”

“I understand,” Michaela said. “I don’t like being dependent upon others myself. But sometimes we need our friends to help us through a difficult time. That’s what I did for you, Sully. I’m your doctor, but more importantly, I’m your friend. I could never watch you go through pain without doing everything in my power to help you, and heal you.”

“You’ve certainly proved that over and over, the way you’ve taken care of me,” said Sully. He hesitated. “I wish—I could recall our friendship, Dr. Mike. I have a feelin’ that you’ve done me a lot of kindnesses since we’ve known each other, and I feel bad that I can’t remember.”

“You’ve done me many kindnesses as well, Sully,” Michaela told him. “Do you recall the influenza epidemic I spoke of earlier, when I first used Cloud Dancing’s fever tea?” He nodded. “Well, if it weren’t for you taking me to Cloud Dancing when I collapsed, so that he could give me the tea and perform a healing, I would have died. You saved my life, Sully—and not just then, but several times over.”

“Really?” he said, genuinely surprised.

“Really, truly,” Michaela said, smiling. “We’ve had our share of adventures since we met—some rather dangerous—but you’ve always been there to protect me, or the children. We’ve come to rely a great deal on you.”
“I’m glad if I’ve been able to help you,” he said a little shyly. “You know I’m fond of the kids. And I truly admire and respect you, Dr. Mike.”

“That’s a lovely compliment,” Michaela responded. “Thank you, Sully.”

He was silent for a few moments, his eyes thoughtful. Presently he said, “You know, Dr. Mike, you never did tell me why it wasn’t safe for Cloud Dancin’ to be in town. Does it have somethin’ to do with the man who attacked us?”

“Partially,” Michaela admitted, feeling a thread of disquiet at Sully’s question. Obviously he was curious and concerned about Cloud Dancing, and she didn’t want to put him through more worry. But Sully’s migrim had been a warning sign to her that she must proceed very slowly and carefully when it came to giving him information—particularly if that information could cause him emotional stress. And right now, she felt that both of them had been through more than enough stress for one day.

“I understand that you still have many questions, Sully,” she said. “But I don’t think that now is the time to go into all that. You went through a grueling ordeal. Mercifully, your migrim seems to have run its course, but now you need to rest and recoup your strength. We’ll have many chances to talk again.”

“You don’t need to protect me, Dr. Mike,” he noted.

“I think we all need protecting sometimes, Sully,” she countered. “And as a doctor, I suppose I’m inclined to do that more than most.”

“You always seem to know me a little better than I know myself,” Sully admitted after a moment. “Fact is, I guess I’m not as up to talkin’ as I thought I was.”

“Understandably,” she said. “But you will be soon.”

“And then—you promise we’ll talk about all this?” he added, his eyes fastened on hers.

Michaela felt another quiver of worry inside, but her expression as she returned his gaze was calm. “I promise,” she said.

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“Sully,” she whispered. “I—don’t know what to say . . .”

“Say ‘yes,’” I answered with a crooked smile, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“I want to—” she began softly, but then broke off. I could see that she wanted me—her eyes were filled with longing, and the love I’d been praying for. But there was fear in them too. I wished I could think of the right words to take her fear away.

Don’t be afraid,” I implored her. “I told you, Michaela, I don’t care that you kept our relationship from me at first. I don’t care about anything, except loving you and spending my life with you.” I ducked my head and looked searchingly into her eyes. “I think you feel the same way,” I added softly.

“I do,” she admitted after a pause. “Hiding my feelings from you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, Sully. But there are things you don’t know—”

Michaela, after all we’ve been through, I don’t think there’s anything else you could tell me that could keep us apart,” I reasoned. “I caught pneumonia, I got shot, I nearly died—and when I finally came to, I had no idea who you were, or that we loved each other. But despite all that, the love I had for you was always there inside me, just waiting to come out.” I took both her hands in mine.

“Don’t you see?” I went on. “Our love couldn’t be denied. It was meant to be. And I know we can face anything, Michaela,” I added. “As long as we’re together.”
“I’ve always believed that,” she conceded. “But Sully, if I were to accept your proposal now, I’d feel as if—I were marrying you under false pretenses.”


Her mouth twitched even as she rolled her eyes at me. “Sully, I’m trying to be serious,” she protested.

“And I’m trying not to be,” I answered. “I think we’ve had way too much of being serious lately, Michaela. It’s time to stop worrying about the past and think about the future. It’s time to let ourselves be happy.” I gazed at her intently. “I think we have that right—I think we’ve earned it,” I told her.

“There’s nothing I want more than to say yes—” she ventured.

“But you can’t—until you free your mind of what’s troubling you,” I finished for her, reading her mind for once.

“Yes,” she admitted. “But that’s not all of it. I’m afraid that even telling you could be a grave mistake—that I could hurt you, or—cause you damage. I’m so frightened of doing the wrong thing, Sully,” she confessed in a whisper.

“That’s what’s been scaring you since the beginning, ain’t it?” I asked gently. “You needed to tell me something about myself, but you were afraid I couldn’t handle it—that maybe I still can’t.” Unable to speak, she merely nodded, looking down at the ground. I reached out and cupped her chin in my hand, raising her eyes to mine. “I understand,” I said softly. “And I’m sorry for putting you through so much agony on my behalf. I was so blind for so long—and I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you if that’s what it takes.

“I respect your feelings,” I went on sincerely. “And fact is, I think maybe you were right—in the beginning, I may not have been able to handle the truth—whatever it is—about what’s wrong with me.

“But things have changed, Michaela,” I said. “We have each other now. I know that I love you, and I know that you love me. I can hold onto that, no matter what you have to tell me about myself.”

“Even if—what I have to tell you is that you don’t *truly* want to marry me?” she said quietly, finally articulating the anguish she’d been carrying inside for so long.

I stared at her in amazement. “Impossible,” I said promptly.

“Sully, don’t toss this off,” she warned. “It may sound improbable to you right now—but there were things you said to Cloud Dancing when the two of you were together in the mountains—fears that you expressed to him—that seemed to indicate that you had grave worries about our future together.” Her eyes were dark in her pale face.

“Go on,” I said, still unable to believe what she was saying, but understanding her need to free her mind and heart.

“Sully, I’m sure you’ve spent countless hours wondering what caused you to block out your memories,” she continued slowly. “But have you ever wondered why you erased your memories of me? Did it ever occur to you that a commitment to me may have been so troubling or frightening to you, that your mind would choose to block it out completely, rather than allow you to confront or admit your fears?”

“No, I never thought of that,” I admitted honestly. “Because I can’t conceive of it, Michaela. There are plenty of things to be scared of in this world, but loving and marrying you ain’t one of them.”

“But it could be—if you believed that you would lose me if we married,” she burst out unhappily. “The way you lost Abagail—the way you lost your family before that, and then the Cheyenne later on . . . All the people you cared about, Sully—your real family, your adopted family; and the wife and child that you loved.” Her face was naked with emotion. “What if you thought you were cursed—and that it would be kinder—safer—to break things off between us, rather than risk losing me as you lost everyone else?”
She finished speaking, her words echoing in the stillness. I stared at her, and an image came unbidden to my mind—Abagail as I’d last seen her, the life draining out of her as I wept at her bedside. Except, as she turned her face to mine, it was Michaela that I saw—the light going out of her eyes as she left me forever.

The impact of the vision left me gasping. Stunned, I sat back on the ground.

“Are you all right?” Michaela asked me quickly. “Sully!” she repeated when I didn’t answer. “What is it? Please, tell me what you’re thinking—have you remembered something?”

“I had a dream,” I said slowly. “I was with Abagail as she was dying—except—when she looked at me, it wasn’t Abagail. It was you.” I stared at her. “Oh my God,” I whispered.

“When did you have the dream?” she asked softly.

“I ain’t exactly sure—but I think it was after I was shot,” I said haltingly. “I know I blacked out when I was hit, but—I remember coming to a little later—enough so that I knew I was on a horse with Cloud Dancing. I must have drifted off and slept—and I had that dream. I don’t remember anything after that.”

“Can you remember anything else before the dream?” she said.

I closed my eyes and searched my mind. “Bits and pieces,” I said at last. “Nothing real clear. But I think—maybe it will start to come back to me.”

“This may truly be the beginning,” Michaela said tremulously. “Oh, Sully, I’m so glad for you! But—“ She broke off, her face anxious and wary. Then hesitantly she resumed, “How do you feel about what I told you? Do you—remember those feelings? Do you remember being afraid to marry me?”

“I’m starting to,” I admitted after a long moment. “I can remember feeling scared, and guilty—and thinking that I didn’t have the right to marry you.

“But I don’t understand why I suddenly got terrified like that, out of the blue—or why I wasn’t worried about marrying you all along,” I confessed.

“I believe it was Washita,” Michaela ventured. “I think—seeing the Cheyenne so brutally murdered was the—the straw that broke the camel’s back. Or to put it another way, I think the loss of the people you loved was a catalyst to releasing the fear about me that you’d been carrying deep inside yourself. And the pain of their deaths, as well as the intensity of your fear, was too great a burden for your mind to endure—so you blocked it out . . . blocked me out.”

“I’m sorry . . .” I managed, hearing how inadequate the word sounded.

“You mustn’t be sorry!” she said earnestly. “Sully, you had no control over what happened to you. You were grieving—not just for the Cheyenne, but for everyone you’d ever loved who’d left you. Grief affects people in different ways—but no matter how one expresses grief, its effects can be devastating.

“The question now is . . . what are you feeling?” she added tentatively, her eyes solemn. “What do you want, Sully—now that you know the truth?” Silence spun out between us as she waited for my reply.

I took a deep breath, and got up on my knees, so that we were at eye level. I grasped my medicine pouch, loosening the drawstring and reaching inside. My fingers closed over something hard and round, and I pulled it out. I took her left hand in mine, and slid the diamond in its circle of gold onto her fourth finger.

“I want you,” I said, kissing her hand and gazing into her eyes. “I want to marry you—now more than ever. I love you, Michaela.”

“But—are you sure?” she whispered. “Your fears about us were disturbing enough to you that you lost your memory because of them. Sully, are you sure you can let go of your fear, and face the future?”

“I know I’d fear the future more if I didn’t have you,” I told her softly. “Truth is, I wouldn’t want a future without you, Michaela. I know there ain’t no guarantees—but nobody gets guarantees in this life.
And if you’re lucky enough to find your true love—then you need to hold on tight and love each other—and never let each other go.

“Please,” I whispered, reaching out my hand to caress her cheek. “Please marry me, Michaela.”

She stared into my eyes, and I saw the last of her hesitation drop away.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “Yes, Sully, I’ll marry you.”

The tears running unchecked down my face, I took her in my arms.

* * * * * * * * * *

“What are you doing?” she asked me later, awaking from a brief nap induced by the laudanum I’d given her earlier for her ankle. I looked up from the page in front of me, my pencil stopping in mid-sentence.

“Writing in my journal,” I said, leaning over to kiss her.

“And what are you writing?” she asked, smiling as she slid closer to me. I wrapped my arm around her and drew her to me snugly as the light from the campfire flickered over our faces.

“I’m writing about how the most beautiful, wonderful woman in the world agreed to be my wife,” I said. She glowed at my words.

“Be sure to mention that I’m marrying the most wonderful man in the world,” she said, kissing me back.

“I suppose I could add a line or two about how lucky you are,” I teased.

“Just as long as you remember how lucky *you* are,” she bantered back.

“I’ve never forgotten that,” I told her passionately, and kissed her deeply. After a long while, we drew apart. “Time to be getting you back to town,” I said, getting to my feet. “Your ankle needs rest.”

“I don’t think I can walk,” she demurred.

“No problem there,” I said. “I’ll carry you—it ain’t that far to the wagon.”

“Sully, are you still planning to stay out here in the woods?” she asked after a moment.

“Nope,” I said, extinguishing the campfire and kicking dirt over the coals. “I’m coming back to take care of you.”

“Sully, you don’t have to do that—it’s only a sprain—“ she began.

I hunched down and faced her. “Do you really think I could ever leave you now?” I said softly. She smiled and shook her head.

“I could never leave you either,” she said.

“Well that’s good,” I told her. “Because I expect to see you around the homestead for the next—oh, fifty or sixty years.” I grinned at her, and then, with a dramatic flourish, I swept her up in my arms. “Let’s go home, ‘Mrs. Sully-to-be,’” I said.

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As we pulled up in front of the clinic, we saw Matthew standing outside. I jumped down from the buckboard, then held my hands up to Michaela, taking her into my arms.

“Dr. Mike, what happened?” Matthew asked quickly, his face registering concern as he saw the bandage on Michaela’s foot.
“Just a sprain, Matthew—I’m fine,” Michaela told him hastily. He looked relieved.

“But this lady needs some pampering,” I added, addressing my remark to Matthew even as my eyes clung to Michaela’s. We smiled at each other.

“We’ll be sure to help out any way we can,” Matthew said, then added, “Dr Mike—“

“Matthew, could you get my medical bag from the wagon?” Michaela interrupted.

“Sure,” he answered. “But Dr. Mike—“

“I’m going to take your ma into the clinic and get her settled,” I said to Matthew, carrying Michaela up onto the porch. “Could you round up Colleen and Brian for us? We all got a lot to talk about.” My eyes found hers again.

“Yeah, I’ll do that—but Dr. Mike, there’s something you should know,” Matthew insisted. The odd tone in his voice finally got our attention.

“What is it, Matthew?” Michaela asked.

Before he could speak, the clinic door opened, and a handsome, elegantly dressed woman stepped out. She looked vaguely familiar, and I suddenly realized there was a resemblance between her and Michaela.

“Michaela!” the woman exclaimed, staring at Michaela cradled in my arms with something akin to shock.

“Mother!” Michaela exclaimed at the same instant. Her eyes were stunned. “What—what are you doing here?” she stammered after a moment.

“Well I came in response to your telegram,” Mrs. Quinn answered. “I wanted to see for myself why you were considering postponing the wedding. Your wire was less than forthcoming,” she added pointedly.

“I never expected—that is, you could simply have written,” Michaela protested. “I intended to write a longer explanation to you soon—it’s just that I’ve been so busy—“

“So it would seem,” Mrs. Quinn noted, regarding us with rather a jaundiced eye.

“Mother, I sprained my ankle—I couldn’t walk, so Sully was carrying me,” Michaela explained.

“Are you all right?” her mother asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Michaela assured her. “But Mother, it really wasn’t necessary for you to come all the way out here—“

“And an arduous journey it was,” Mrs. Quinn confirmed drily. “But fortunately, I didn’t need to make it alone.” She turned toward the doorway behind her as a tall man with dark hair and clear, blue-green eyes appeared in the entrance. Mrs. Quinn extended her hand toward the stranger, and with a polite smile, he stepped forward to join her.

“Michaela, Mr. Sully—may I present Mr. Brendan Burke,” she said.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Despite the lateness of the hour, Michaela lay wide-awake, prevented from sleep as the events of the day replayed themselves over and over in her mind. For perhaps the twentieth time, she berated herself for not choosing to stay the night in the clinic, where she would be nearby if Sully needed her. She wanted to believe that emotionally he was strong enough to endure what she’d been forced to tell him earlier in the day—that though he was understandably desolate, he was too sensible and resilient to consider doing something foolish as a result of his grief. But he had been so shattered when she left him. She hadn’t
wanted to go—she hadn’t wanted to leave him in solitude with the overwhelming burden of his sorrow—but he had specifically asked to be left alone, and she had been obligated to respect his wishes.

Now, however, she found herself regretting that decision. Sully was strong and resilient under ordinary circumstances, but the circumstances of his life now were far from ordinary, and realistically he couldn’t be expected to react in his customary way. Yet again, Michaela pictured his devastated expression as she’d given him the bitter news. She had seen the deaths of his friends in Sully’s tortured eyes, and it had been like losing Snowbird, Black Kettle and the others all over again. In a sense, it was like the Cheyenne had “died” a second time, since for Sully the massacre was as real and immediate as if it had just happened. When a person was in mourning, his loved ones didn’t leave him alone to grieve. Why had she believed it was safe to let Sully go through this painful process by himself?

Because that’s what he wanted, said a voice in her mind. Michaela realized that much as she might want to, she couldn’t protect Sully forever, or shield him indefinitely from the realities of his life, painful or otherwise. She had to allow him the dignity of his feelings, and respect his need to work through his grief on his own. Nonetheless, she couldn’t rid herself of the persistent feeling that though consciously Sully might desire solitude; on a deeper, more vulnerable level, he needed the presence and the comfort of someone who understood. Someone who loved him—even if, as yet, he was unable to recognize or reciprocate that love.

Finally giving up on sleep, Michaela threw back the covers and got up. She took the extra quilt from the foot of the bed and shook it out, wrapping it around herself. She didn’t bother lighting a lamp, relying instead on the illumination of the glowing embers in the fireplace as she settled herself in the adjacent rocker.

She wondered, not for the first time, if she should dress and go to him. She wouldn’t need to disturb him if he was sleeping. She wouldn’t need to disturb him if he was sleeping. She could simply look in on him, putting her mind at ease that he was all right. And if he *was* troubled, she could be there for him, to give him what comfort she could, if he was willing to accept it.

But what if he wasn’t, her mind countered again. What if he were to regard her presence as an intrusion? She had to remind herself again that the Sully grieving in the clinic was not the Sully she knew—the man with whom she’d shared a unique and devoted friendship; the man with whom she’d fallen in love, and who had come to love her; the man who had asked her to be his wife. That Sully would welcome her love and sympathy—it would be to her that he reached out for comfort.

But this Sully—the man who seemed so much like his old self on the surface, but who was so emotionally damaged within—didn’t know her. There was no foundation of affection and trust between them which would prompt him to seek solace from her. Which essentially left her helpless.

Michaela rubbed at her temples, her inner turmoil outwardly manifesting itself in the stirrings of a dull headache. Despite her best efforts to manage Sully’s treatment—despite the exceptional care she had taken to withhold the more painful facts about his memory loss until she felt he was ready to accept them—he had taken her unawares. One moment, she had been examining him and telling him how well he was healing—the next, he had been putting on his clothes, announcing to her that he was leaving the clinic.

She hadn’t been prepared for Sully’s announcement—or for the impatience bordering on anger he had displayed when she had disagreed with his desire to leave and refused to give him his weapons. She couldn’t blame him for his reaction—he had been cooped up within the four walls of his room for days, and she knew how alien and restrictive that was for him. To complicate things further, she had resisted being honest with him at first, despite his demands to the contrary. Even worse, because she hadn’t been expecting this development, she had carelessly allowed Sully to see her panic, which had distressed and alarmed him still further.

But he would have had to find out sooner or later, the voice inside her playing devil’s advocate argued. It hadn’t been the way she’d planned (an assertion, she thought wryly, that assumed she’d even *had* a plan—which, if she were to honestly examine her heart, was not necessarily the case). But in spite of the unorthodox way she had finally broken the news to Sully, she had still tried to be as careful—as gentle—as possible.

She wasn’t perfect—far from it. Being a doctor didn’t make her omnipotent—able to cure any ill, physical or emotional. On the contrary, she was very human, and all too painfully aware of her limitations. But she had done the best she could. As she intended to go on doing; feeling her way and
even stumbling from time to time, on this mysterious—even perilous—journey.

Michaela resisted the impulse one last time to go to Sully’s side, promising herself that she would see him first thing after church in the morning. Somehow, she had to make herself trust that the same indomitable spirit that had kept him alive when he was at his lowest ebb, would be there to serve him now as he endured his dark crisis of the spirit.

Reaching up and curling her fingers around the engagement ring which rested on its chain in the hollow of her throat, Michaela finally closed her eyes and slept.

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Michaela came out of the clinic and walked over to where Matthew, Colleen and Brian waited in the wagon.

“Ready to go?” Matthew asked her from his seat on the bench. Colleen and Brian gazed at her over his shoulders from where they perched in the wagon bed. Michaela looked up at them.

“I want the three of you to go on without me,” she said. “Get dinner started, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I thought Sully was ‘sposed to be comin’,” Matthew remarked.

“I said I would ask him—and I did,” Michaela replied. “But I’m afraid that Sully is not much in the mood to be with people right now. In fact, I found him with the shades drawn, sitting in the dark,” she added softly. Her children’s expressions were compassionate, reflecting the hurt they felt for the man they loved and admired so much.

“Sully’s takin’ it real hard, ain’t he, Ma?” Colleen asked quietly.

Michaela nodded. “The Cheyenne were his family, every bit as much as his parents and his brother,” she said. “Every bit as much as we are—which I pray Sully will be able to remember one day. But for now, however, he’s in mourning—and though he expressed a wish to be alone last night, I don’t think he should be left by himself. I believe he needs someone to be with him—to listen if he wants to talk, or just to be there to provide companionship and support.”

“So you’re gonna stay with him?” Matthew asked.

“Sully actually expressed a willingness to talk to me, which is a hopeful sign,” Michaela answered. “At least he’s not resisting all my attempts to help him.”

“You’ll make Sully feel better, Ma,” Brian spoke up. “You always make me feel better when I’m sad.” Michaela smiled up at him gratefully. “Thank you, Sweetheart. I hope I *can* help Sully to feel better. I’m certainly going to try.

“And I haven’t even given up on persuading Sully to join us for supper,” she added, trying to sound cheerful. “Perhaps I can help him to see that sometimes, the comfort of friends and loved ones is the best medicine.”

“If Sully “does” come, we’ll do better than we did last time, Ma,” Colleen said. “We’ll make things nice for him.”

“Yeah,” Matthew agreed. “No hemmin’ and havin’ around, or bein’ nervous. We were foolish to act that way before. After all, it’s still Sully—even if there *are* things he can’t remember.”

“I don’t care that Sully can’t remember things,” Brian echoed. “I still love him just the same.”

Michaela stared at Brian. From the mouths of babes . . . Her eyes moved to encompass the cherished faces of all her children as she marveled at their caring and insight.

“You’re absolutely right, Matthew,” she said decisively. “It *is* still Sully—the same man we’ve always known and loved. And you’re right, Brian—our love for Sully certainly doesn’t change just because he’s not quite himself right now. You all just keep right on giving him your love and loyalty as you always have.”

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she told them. “I can think of no better medicine for Sully—and no better way to show him that he still has a family who will always be here to love and support him.”

“Dr. Mike—do you think Sully *will* remember one day?” Matthew asked after a moment.

“All I can say, Matthew, is that I intend to do everything in my power to help him,” Michaela answered. “But if his memories are gone, then we’ll simply have to help Sully in every way we can to build a new life. And we’ll do everything we can to make it a good life. Agreed?” she asked.

“Agreed,” they chorused.

Michaela stretched up to kiss each of them in turn, then watched as they departed, the wagon moving slowly down the street. She raised her hand in farewell as they rounded the corner, suddenly feeling a bit bereft without the comforting reassurance of their presence. However a moment later she drew herself up, taking a calming breath. She could do this—she *would* do this—for the man she loved.

Turning, Michaela went back into the clinic.

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Evening

Mr. Burke removed his hat, and started to extend his hand to Michaela, then hesitated, apparently unsure of the proper etiquette for shaking the hand of a woman being held in the arms of another man. He finally solved the dilemma by nodding to us instead. Michaela looked embarrassed.

“Sully, you should put me down,” she hissed in my ear.

“You can’t stand,” I protested.

“I can lean on you,” she whispered back. Mr. Burke stood by pleasantly, politely trying not to notice our conversation.

“I’m going to take you inside,” I announced. “That’s where you should be, anyway.”

“An inspired suggestion,” Mrs. Quinn stated. “I’m sure we needn’t put on a display for the benefit of the townspeople, Michaela.”

“Mother, we’re hardly—“ Michaela began irritably.

“Let’s go inside,” I said hastily. I carried her through the door, and sat her gently on the examination table. Mrs. Quinn and Matthew followed us in, with Mr. Burke bringing up the rear.

“Perhaps we can attempt these introductions again,” suggested Michaela, her cheeks slightly red. “I apologize for my unorthodox arrival, Mr. Burke—as well as my disheveled appearance. I’m afraid I turned my ankle when Sully and I were out in the woods—“

“Please, think nothing of it,” Mr. Burke said quickly. His smile was infectious. “I’ve never been one to ‘stand’ on ceremony—if you’ll pardon an atrocious pun,” he added, his eyes twinkling. Michaela smiled back at him, and I had to grin as well.

“Well, Mr. Burke, as you’ve certainly gathered by now, I’m Michaela Quinn—and this is Mr. Byron Sully,” Michaela said.

“Brendan Burke—pleasure,” he said, turning to me and shaking my hand.

“Call me Sully,” I responded.

“And please, call me Brendan,” he replied, glancing at Michaela to include her in his request. “Dr. Quinn, it’s a privilege to meet you,” he addressed her, his eyes cordial. “Mrs. Quinn has been singing your
praises ever since we left Boston.”

“That must have grown immensely tedious for you all those days crossing the prairie,” Michaela said wryly. Brendan smiled again.

“I managed to get through it,” he said. “But now, having met you, I find I have a bone to pick with my brother. In all his most lyrical and flattering descriptions of you, he never managed to do you justice.”

“I think you must be of Irish descent, Mr.—Brendan,” Michaela commented. “You certainly seem well acquainted with the ‘Blarney stone’.”

“Just what my mother always used to say,” he remarked.

Just then Michaela’s eyes widened and she gaped at Brendan. “Wait—your brother?” she repeated. “Not—William Burke?”

Brendan nodded, still smiling. “One and the same,” he said. “And I was given strict instructions to present his compliments to you, and give you his warmest regards.”

“I can’t believe it!” Michaela marveled, her expression surprised and delighted. “William once mentioned his family to me, but he never said anything about brothers and sisters.”

“No sisters, unfortunately, but two more brothers—our middle brother, Hugh, and myself, the youngest of the family.”

“How is William?” Michaela asked eagerly.

“He’s doing very well—his practice is thriving, and he’s beginning to make quite a name for himself in Boston medical circles,” Brendan replied.

“I’m so happy to hear it,” she said. “Did—he ever take a partner?” she added, an odd note in her voice.

Brendan’s eyes looked knowing. “No, he never did,” he said after a moment. “He always claimed that after you, no one else could measure up.” Michaela blushed again.

“William was always so generous,” she said, looking embarrassed. “But I think our—friendship—made it difficult for him to be objective.”

“That may be so, but one of his favorite stories to tell was the way you cured your mother’s illness with the application of an Indian remedy,” Brendan remarked. “And I know first hand from your mother that you were responsible for saving her life.” He glanced at Mrs. Quinn.

“Absolutely true,” Mrs. Quinn said firmly. “But if it weren’t for William defying Dr. Hansen, Michaela wouldn’t have been able to help me. He’s the only man who believed in Michaela and respected her abilities,” she added.

“The only man besides Sully, Mother,” Michaela pointed out clearly.

Mrs. Quinn glanced at me. “Oh—yes,” she said vaguely. “Forgive me, Mr. Sully—I know you hold my daughter in high esteem.”

“Yes, I do, Ma’am—Mrs. Quinn,” I spoke up, beginning to get the distinct impression that I was not Mrs. Quinn’s favorite person—at least when it came to my place in Michaela’s life. But that wasn’t what was foremost on my mind as I listened to the conversation. I was developing a powerful and ever increasing curiosity about the absent—but most definitely not forgotten—William Burke.

“I’m so sorry about your injury, Dr. Quinn,” Brendan was saying, perhaps feeling that it would be politic to change the subject. “I don’t wish to intrude on you now, when you must obviously need rest. If you could direct me to the hotel in town, I’ll take my leave, and perhaps see you again tomorrow, when you’re more up to receiving visitors.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I spoke up again, earning another cool look from Michaela’s ma. “Michaela took a bad spill—she needs to rest and elevate her ankle. As far as a hotel, we ain’t got one—but
there are rooms for rent at the saloon across the way, or I can take you over to the boardinghouse.”

“I think we can do better than that, Sully,” Michaela contradicted me. “There are no other patients staying here in the clinic right now, and I intend to have Mother stay here anyway. Certainly we can extend our hospitality to include Mr. Burke.”

“I really don’t wish to intrude,” Brendan said again, with a side-long glance at me.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Quinn said flatly. “You did me the great favor of accompanying me all across the country, Brendan. I’m hardly about to abandon you to your own devices now—and obviously Michaela concurs with me. As I’m sure Mr. Sully does, as well?” she said pointedly, staring straight at me.

“Sure,” I replied half-heartedly after a pause. “Michaela and her ma are right. There’s plenty of room here.”

“Well, if you’re certain—then I accept with pleasure,” Brendan said.

“Of course,” Brendan spoke up in her stead. “Tell me, can we bring you anything?” he offered to Michaela.

“Thanks—but I’ll see that Michaela gets what she needs,” I said smoothly. A moment later, realizing that I’d no doubt sounded rude, I softened my remark by adding, “You must be tired and hungry. That trip by stagecoach ain’t easy.”

“I’ve had worse,” Brendan said briefly, not elaborating. “But you’re right—a hot meal would be very welcome about now.”

“That reminds me, Brendan—you never mentioned your occupation. Are you a physician like your brother?” Michaela asked.

He shook his head, his eyes rueful even as his mouth curved into a smile. “I’m afraid I was never attracted to the medical arts,” he replied. “Fortunately, in William my mother got the doctor in the family that she’d always wanted, and my brother Hugh made my father happy by following him into the family business. Which left me free to be the ‘black sheep’ of the clan.”

“That sounds quite intriguing,” Michaela commented. “I’d love to hear more.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ll be happy to tell you—but I think that’s a conversation best left for another time,” said Brendan.

“I’ll look forward to it—when you join us for dinner at the homestead tomorrow evening,” Michaela told him. He looked as if he were about to protest, but before he could she added, “My ankle will be much improved by tomorrow, and my daughter Colleen is also a wonderful cook. We insist—don’t we, Sully? Mother?” she said, glancing at each of us.

“Yes indeed,” said Mrs. Quinn, looking noticeably more pleased.

“What a Michaela says,” I concurred after a pause.

“Well, if you’re absolutely certain I’d be no trouble . . .” Brendan said slowly. “Then I accept, with thanks.”

“I’ll take you over to the café, and then go fetch Colleen and Brian,” Matthew offered. After a few more parting words and then a flurry of good-byes, the three of them finally left, and Michaela and I were alone again.
“I’ll get you settled in bed, and then get your supper from Grace’s,” I said.

“What’s wrong, Sully?” Michaela asked, fixing me with her eyes as if I were a butterfly stuck on the head on a pin.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I said quickly, looking away.

“Are we going to resume our engagement with a lie?” she said softly.

I bit my lip, ashamed of the thread of jealousy I was feeling, but not quite able to let it go. I looked her in the eyes.

“Who’s William Burke?” I said finally. “And what’s he got to do with you?”

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Michaela came outside, somehow having the presence of mind not to slam the door behind her, and then stumbled off the porch, blindly making her way to the wagon as hot tears welled in her eyes. Shrouded in her misery and vision obscured, she didn’t notice the dark form which detached itself from the shadowy recesses of the saloon porch. With a few long strides, the tall figure stepped into the street and moved to intercept her. Michaela nearly collided with him as he emerged into the pool of light cast by the lanterns outside the clinic.

“Trouble in paradise, Michaela?” Hank said, looking down at her impudently.

Startled, Michaela swallowed hard and hastily brushed a hand across her eyes. “It’s late, Hank and I’m tired. I really don’t have the strength to deal with your barbs this evening,” she said, trying to step around him. The cocky expression vanished from Hank’s face and he peered at her more closely. Simultaneously he gripped her arm.

“Hold on—not so fast,” he told her. “What’s the matter?”

“Please—just let me go,” Michaela protested, not meeting his eyes.

“In the state you’re in? I don’t think so,” the saloon-keeper replied. “You’d probably run your wagon right off the road.”

“I assure you I’m fine, and perfectly capable of making my way home—” Michaela began haughtily, and then broke off as a fresh wave of tears scalded her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. Hank gazed at her with something approaching sympathy.

“Yeah, I can see that,” he said. He released her arm, then untied the bandanna from around his neck and offered it to her. She hesitated a moment, then accepted it and dabbed at her eyes.

“Somethin’ happen with Sully?” he asked after a pause.

“I really can’t go into it,” she resisted, trying to bring herself under control.

“Come on, Michaela,” Hank countered. “It’s obvious somethin’s botherin’ ya. I saw you and Sully together a few minutes ago and he looked fine, so it must be somethin’ else. You’ll feel better if ya talk about it.”

“To you?” Michaela asked, regarding him with a jaundiced eye.

Hank had the grace to look slightly abashed. “All right, I know I ain’t your favorite person, and I been givin’ ya kind of a hard time lately about Sully. But I can be a good listener, too. Why don’t ya give me a try?”

Despite her mood, Michaela was almost tempted to laugh at the thought of telling her troubles to
Hank, of all people. “Of the many ways our relationship could be characterized, Hank, being ‘confidantes’ is not the description I would pick,” she said flatly.

“Maybe not, but I don’t see anyone else here,” Hank pointed out. “Ya know what they say—any port in a storm. Hey,” he added in a more gentle tone, peering into her face. “Ya need to talk about it, Michaela. Keepin’ it all inside don’t do ya no good.” He reached out and took her arm again. “Come on,” he said, starting to lead her across the street.

“Hank! What are you doing?” she protested, pulling back. “Just for once will ya go along without arguin’ or askin’ a whole lotta questions?” he said as they headed toward the saloon.

“Hank, I have no intention of going into the saloon—” Michaela tried again, but broke off as he guided her around the porch of the building and toward the rear.

“Calm down,” he placated her. “Nobody’s gonna see ya.” He led her to a back entrance wreathed in shadows. They entered, and Michaela found herself in a dimly lit hallway, with doors opening off to either side. Hank opened one of the doors, and they stepped into a small room, sparsely furnished with an iron bedstead, a washstand, a bureau that had seen better days, and a single chair against the wall. The only attempt at decoration was a pencil drawing of a beautiful, raven-haired woman that hung above the bed. Michaela recognized it as the sketch Hank’s son Zack had drawn of his late mother Clarice. With a start, she realized that she’d never been in Hank’s room before, and that she really knew very little of him beyond the sardonic mask he always presented to the world. Only once had she seen behind the cockiness and the bluff—when he had reacted so violently to the idea of Myra marrying Horace, getting drunk and accosting Myra with a gun so that Sully had been forced to knock him out to prevent a possible tragedy.

Hank’s head wound had been more serious than anyone realized, made worse by the fact that he had refused to allow Michaela to examine and treat him. Instead, he had spewed harsh words at her, and she had responded in kind, disturbed to the core that somehow Hank had seen through her defenses to the insecurities within. But it wasn’t till Hank had lapsed into a coma, and she had feared that he might die, that she had been able to be open with him and confess her failings—as well as admitting to him that there were things about his character which she admired, most notably his uncompromising honesty. And when, defying the odds, Hank had awakened at last, Michaela had been shocked to discover that not only was she profoundly relieved, but that she actually felt a genuine affection for the rangy saloon owner.

the aftermath of that incident, she and Hank had seemed to establish an understanding—if not precisely friendship, at least a mutual acceptance and respect for one another.

As she stood in Hank’s room now, the sight of the drawing was both a testament and a reminder to her of the more vulnerable part of Hank’s nature, which he so skillfully concealed most of the time, but which he had revealed to her in those unguarded moments after his injury. She found her attitude softening toward him, and she allowed herself to relax slightly.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Hank said, gesturing toward the bed. Michaela looked at him askance. “I ain’t gonna accost ya, if that’s what you’re thinkin’,” he said, noting her expression. He shrugged. “I just meant—take a load off.”

“I know,” Michaela said. “It’s just that—it’s not exactly proper.”

Hank eyed her. “Michaela, in ‘spite o’ all your fancy Boston ways and talk, the one thing you *ain’t*—is ‘proper.’” To his surprise, instead of looking offended, she appeared amused.

“Strangely enough, I believe you mean that as a compliment, Hank,” she remarked. “So I’ll take it as such.” The corners of Hank’s eyes crinkled as he grinned.

“See—we understand each other better than ya thought.” Michaela allowed herself a small, answering smile, and then, a trifle self-consciously, she seated herself on the edge of the bed.

“Wasn’t so hard, was it?” Hank said. He reached into a box sitting on a shelf above the washstand and withdrew a cigar, lighting it with a match from a smaller adjacent box. Taking the chair from the wall, he turned it so it faced toward him. He seated himself, wrapping his long legs around the legs of the chair and resting his arms on the backrest. “So what’s the trouble?” he asked, looking at her disconcertingly, the cigar propped between his fingers.
Michaela’s momentarily benign feeling promptly fled, as she was reminded of her confrontation with Sully. Looking down at her lap, she suddenly realized that she still held the telegram crumpled in one hand, along with Hank’s soggy bandanna. As she thought again of how Sully had taken the telegram from the homestead, and how close he had come to learning the truth, a shiver inadvertently escaped her. Hank took it in.

“Yer shakin’,” he said.

“It’s—chilly in here,” Michaela said unconvincingly.

“It ain’t that cold,” Hank stated. He clenched the cigar between his teeth, then stood up and went to the bureau in the corner. Sliding open the bottom drawer, he withdrew a bottle. From the top of the chest he took a glass, giving it a cursory swipe with a washrag. He set the glass down, then uncorked the bottle and upended it, filling the glass nearly to the rim.

e walked over to her, holding out the double shot of whiskey. “Drink it,” he said.

“Hank—” Michaela protested, shaking her head.

“Go on,” he insisted. “It’ll make ya feel better.” Michaela eyed the amber liquid in the glass warily. “Drink it,” Hank repeated more softly. After a moment, she took the glass with her free hand, her nose wrinkling slightly at the pungent aroma. Tentatively she took a sip, coughing and gasping a moment later as the potent liquor burned her throat. She could see Hank grinning through the tears in her eyes.

Drink all of it—down the hatch,” he said. “Pretend it’s medicine.” Michaela stared at him incredulously; then, without letting herself think, she took a deep breath and drained the glass. A column of liquid fire slid down her throat, and for a moment she thought she was in danger of bringing it right back up. Then, as the liquor slowly settled, she was conscious of a strong sensation of warmth spreading through her, starting in the pit of her stomach and flowing upward through her torso and then out along her limbs to the tips of her fingers and toes. She felt the tension in her body ebb and her depression recede as she was bathed in a mild alcoholic haze.

Hank watched Michaela visibly relax as the liquor took hold. “Better?” he said after a moment.

“I—can’t believe I’m saying this—but yes,” she admitted.

“Not all cures come out of a pill bottle,” Hank observed.

“So it would seem,” she answered, enjoying the fuzzy, disembodied feeling that had started to come over her. “Is there any more of this?” she asked, holding out her glass. Hank refilled it without comment, then puffed quietly on his cigar as she sipped the smoky liquid.

“You feel like talkin’ now?” he asked finally.

“There’s nothing I can say,” she answered after a pause. “I can’t discuss Sully’s condition. It’s confidential—between doctor and patient.” She took another swallow of the whiskey. Hank’s face seemed to float in front of her eyes, his features slightly blurry. She squinted to bring him into focus.

“I don’t think it’s Sully’s ‘condition’ that’s got your knickers in a twist,” Hank commented.

"Hank," she said reprovingly, mildly startled by his use of vernacular.

“All I meant was, it ain’t Sully gettin’ shot and all that’s got ya so upset,” Hank explained. “It’s got somethin’ to do with that memory thing of his, don’t it?” he added. “Somethin’ happened between the two o’ ya that’s eatin’ ya up inside.”

Michaela tried to keep a clear head and resist Hank’s questions, but the glow of the alcohol was making it increasingly difficult. With a concerted effort, she attempted to shake off the influence of the whiskey.

“What happens between Sully and myself—should be private,” she said.
“I ain’t askin’ ya to give away any secrets—I’m just offerin’ to listen if ya want to get somethin’ off your chest,” Hank told her.

Michaela studied Hank through the liquor-induced haze that surrounded her. He seemed sincere, but she retained just enough self-possession to recognize how easy it would be to let the alcohol loosen her tongue. As shocked and angry as she was at Sully for what he’d done—and as apprehensive as she was that he was on the verge of learning the truth—still, she could not betray his confidence, even to gain a measure of consolation for herself.

“Let’s just say—Sully did something that distressed me, and he came very close to learning something about his memory loss which I’d been keeping from him,” she said at last.

“Ya mean you been lyin’ to him?” Hank asked. He didn’t sound judgmental—only curious.

“Not precisely,” Michaela answered, looking down at the crumpled telegram in her hand. She set her glass aside, then slowly she pulled the paper open, laying it flat on her lap and smoothing out the wrinkles as best she could. She folded it carefully, then looked up at the saloon keeper. “Anything I’ve kept from Sully has been for his own good,” she went on, realizing that she was trying to convince herself as much as Hank. “There are—certain things—that he’s just not ready to hear, for many reasons. If—he learns these things too soon—I’m afraid it could do him damage. I just can’t risk that, Hank. And this—particular thing that he nearly found out—might do the worst damage of all.”

Hank puffed in silence, a ribbon of blue smoke from his cigar spiraling lazily up to the ceiling. Presently he said, “I’m guessin’ he read somethin’ he wasn’t ‘sposed to?” He nodded toward the telegram.

“He—found something he wasn’t supposed to see,” she clarified. “He was tempted to read it, but at the last moment, his integrity wouldn’t allow him to violate my privacy, and he gave it back.”

“Were ya mad that he took it?” Hank said perceptively.

“Yes,” she admitted after a pause. “I couldn’t understand what would possess him to do such a thing.” She reached for her glass again, draining the contents.

“Spose I can see that,” Hank allowed. “But—would ya have been as mad if it were just a shoppin’ list or somethin’—stead o’ somethin’ that could cause trouble?”

“Well, stealing is never right,” Michaela declared.

“That’s easy to say—but there are all kinds of reasons why people do the things they do,” Hank commented. “Remember when Matthew helped that brother of Ingrid’s steal Olive’s cow? We were ready to string the kid up, but you defended him. Ya said he was desperate—that he stole to feed his family. Ya didn’t think stealin’ was wrong then.”

“That’s true,” Michaela acknowledged. “But those were very different circumstances.”

“Maybe—maybe not,” said Hank. “Maybe Sully thought he had a good reason too, for doin’ what he did. Or it could be that gettin’ shot did more than just affect his memory. Maybe it shook him up in other ways, too, so he wasn’t thinkin’ clear when he took that paper from you.”

Michaela had to acknowledge that there was merit in what Hank said. Though she believed she had observed Sully long enough to conclude that his ordeal hadn’t altered his personality or his moral code, she couldn’t say with absolute certainty that it might not have affected his judgement—if only temporarily.

However, though she couldn’t say it aloud to Hank, deep inside she thought she already knew what Sully’s motivation had been. With each successive time they were together, it was increasingly obvious to Michaela that Sully was developing stirrings of feelings for her. It wasn’t anything to do with the way he conducted himself around her—in fact, his behavior had always been scrupulously polite and proper. Yet the emotional connection between them left no doubt in Michaela’s mind that the attraction was there, and real. In several unguarded moments, she had caught him looking at her in a way that was decidedly *not* casual. And the conversation they’d had after reading poetry to one another had been even more of an indication of his feelings. Sully had expressed great curiosity about David, and had even gone so far as to ask her if she’d ever been in love. The strongest and most shocking proof, however, had been Sully’s words to her just before she’d fled. Not only had he deduced that there had been another man in her life—but
he’d managed to infer that she’d chosen this unknown man over David. The only thing Sully had yet to realize was that *he* was the man. And it was very clear to her now that he was on the cusp of learning the truth.

Michaela also knew in her heart that it was just a matter of time before Sully was compelled to articulate his attraction for her. She just didn’t know what she would do when that moment finally arrived.

Hank was watching her. “Maybe—ya ain’t so much mad, as scared,” he said unexpectedly, startling her with his insight. “Maybe you’re afraid of how Sully’ll react if he finds out the truth, whatever it is—specially if he finds out some other way than from you.”

“I—hate keeping things from Sully,” Michaela said slowly after a moment. “You have no idea how hard it’s been, protecting him, pretending . . .”

“That ya don’t love him?” Hank finished.

Her head snapped up.

“Relax,” Hank added hastily. “I ain’t gonna give ya away. But looks to me like you gotta make a decision—whether holdin’ back from Sully is really gonna help him in the long run—or whether it would be better to just tell him the truth—all of it—and go on from there. Maybe you should just get it over with, Michaela. It’s clear ya ain’t gonna be happy till ya work through this thing one way or the other.”

“I—don’t know—I’m not sure . . .” she ventured, suddenly feeling very weary—and not entirely from the effects of the whiskey.

“Well, you think about it,” Hank advised. He dropped the butt of his cigar to the floor, pulverizing it beneath his heel.

“Did you mean it?” Michaela asked suddenly, commanding his attention.

“What?” he said, disconcerted by the intense expression in her eyes.

“What you said at the meeting the other night—about Sully not being able to settle down?”

Hank felt a rush of regret at taunting her the way he had. “Michaela, I was just havin’ fun—I didn’t mean nothin’ by it . . .”

“No, I think you were serious,” she persisted. “And why not? Sully’s been on his own for a long time. Perhaps—it’s asking too much for him to give all that up and change his entire way of life . . .” Her voice drifted off, but then her eyes sought Hank’s again.

“Did you mean it?” she repeated more softly.

Hank stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. “I don’t know, Michaela—and that’s the truth. Maybe you’re right—maybe Sully ain’t the type to settle down no more.

“But I’ll say this,” he added. “If there’s anyone Sully’d be willin’ to change his whole life around for—it’d be you.”

“Thank you, Hank,” she said quietly. “That was kind.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let it get around that I’m such a ‘prince’ of a fella,” he said. “ Wouldn’t want to ruin my reputation.”

“I’ll keep your secret—if you keep mine,” Michaela told him, smiling slightly.

“Deal,” Hank agreed, cocking an eyebrow and regarding her approvingly. “For now, though, guess I’d better be gettin’ ya home.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Michaela protested. “I can—make it back on my own.” Her words were beginning to sound the slightest bit slurried.
“Sure ya can,” Hank said knowingly. “But I’m gonna drive ya anyway.” He reached out his hand to her to help her up.

“How will—you get home?” Michaela asked, blinking at him as he lifted her to her feet. Had the light suddenly become much brighter in here, she thought vaguely.

“I’ll walk back—a’in’t far—“ Hank began, then grabbed her as she suddenly swayed. She stumbled and fell against him. “Whoa—easy does it!” he cautioned, holding her upright. Michaela put a hand to her forehead.

“My head is spinning,” she gasped. Hank put his arm around her back, supporting her.

“Yer all right,” he said mildly. “Just take a few deep breaths. You’ll feel better once ya get some fresh air.” Moving slowly, Michaela clinging heavily to him, Hank guided them both out of the saloon. They made their way to the wagon, and Hank lifted her up onto the bench. He joined her on the driver’s box, taking the reins.

“I have to be getting home—the children will be wondering . . .” Michaela murmured, then promptly passed out, her head on Hank’s shoulder. He grinned into the darkness as they headed out of town.

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Evening

As soon as I asked, I thought better of it. “I’m sorry,” I said. “That came out all wrong. I sounded like I didn’t trust you, and that’s not what I meant, Michaela—I swear.” I took her hand in mine and kissed it gently.

“I know,” she said softly.

“I just—I couldn’t help being curious, hearing about this William Burke person . . .” I looked at her sheepishly.

She gazed back at me sympathetically. “It’s all right,” she said. “In fact, I rather enjoy you being a little jealous.” Her eyes twinkled, but then turned earnest. “But truly, Sully, I understand how you must have felt, being left out of the conversation, and I’m sorry for my part in that.”

I shrugged. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You were just—reminiscing—about an old friend.” I hesitated, then added, “He *was* just a friend—right?” Her eyes were clear and forthright as they looked into mine.

“Yes, he was a friend,” she told me. “I confess that things between us reached a point where he wanted it to be more—but I turned him down. I cared for William very much, but I didn’t love him—at least, not in the way he wanted. Because it was my relationship with William that made me realize *you* were the man I loved, Sully—and after that I knew there could never be another man in my heart but you.”

“Really?” I said, my heart swelling with love for her.

“Really, truly,” she repeated softly, giving me a golden smile that seemed to light up the room.

“Well, then, that’s good enough for me,” I declared, feeling weak-kneed with relief that I didn’t have any competition from this unexpected source.

“That’s very generous of you,” Michaela replied. “But you certainly deserve an explanation of my relationship with William, and I’ll gladly tell you everything—if you want to hear it,” she added.

“Well . . .” I allowed, wanting to be noble, but finding it hard to resist the temptation to know.
Michaela squeezed my hand. “It’s all right,” she said. “I want to tell you. What happened back then lead to a very important turning point in our relationship. I want to help you remember, because it was such a special milestone for us.”

“Then I want to hear it,” I said. “And anything else you’re willing to tell me. I want to know every precious moment I’ve had with you, whether I remember it myself, or relive it through your words.” I pressed my lips to her hand again. “I’m selfish, Michaela,” I went on softly, looking up into her eyes. “I want to build a lifetime of new memories with you, but I don’t want to lose any of what we had before. I want us to share it all.”

“I’ve been praying for nothing else since you awakened and we realized your memory was gone,” she confirmed, her eyes shining with the hint of tears. “Every moment we were together I had to fight the urge to tell you how we felt about one another . . . how we became close and fell in love . . . all the wonderful and courageous things you’ve done for me and for the children since we’ve met . . .”

“Not half as much as you’ve done for me,” I said. “I may not remember it—yet—but it’s something I know in my heart. I thought I’d never love anyone again after Abagail—I thought I never could—but you changed all that, Michaela. You helped me to open my heart again—and then you moved into my heart to stay.”

“You’ll forever be in my heart, as well,” she said, her fingertips caressing my cheek. I drew her face toward mine and kissed her, overwhelmed with emotion. We clung to each other for several moments, our foreheads pressed together, then finally drew apart.

“Shall I tell you about William now?” she asked, brushing the hair back from my temple with a feather-soft touch.

“I want to hear it, but first I’m going to get you settled in bed and bring back some food from Grace’s,” I told her. “We’ll have supper together—just the two of us. I think I can even arrange for some candlelight.” I smiled at her. “Then we’ll have a nice, long talk.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said, smiling back.

I slipped my arms around her and lifted her into my embrace, feeling how perfectly—how naturally—her head fit into the niche between my head and shoulder. Feeling how she was made for me—how we were made for each other. Suddenly thoughts of William Burke or anyone else seemed very far away indeed.

“One romantic evening coming up,” I whispered, hugging her close. As she wrapped her arms around me tightly, I bore her away.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Supper finished, I stacked the dishes on the tray and set it outside the door. Michaela had eaten very little—just picking at her food for the most part—causing me to notice the lack of color in her cheeks and the shadows beneath her eyes. But when I asked if she was feeling poorly, or if she was in pain, she made light of her lack of appetite, blaming it on her happiness at the two of us being back together again. It still bothered me that she looked so peaked, but she seemed sincere in her assurances that she was all right, so I tried to put my concern aside.

I returned to Michaela’s bedside and looked down at her reclining figure, her back cushioned against the headboard and her bandaged ankle propped on a folded pillow.

“Room in there for two?” I asked, raising my eyebrows suggestively and giving her a meaningful smile.

Her answering smile was like a beacon meant just for me. “Absolutely,” she said in a low, throaty voice that sent my senses reeling. She patted the mattress next to her, her eyes lit with a sensual fire. In a heartbeat, I was stretching myself out alongside her, taking care not to jar her injured ankle. I slipped my arms around her so that her back was cradled against my chest, her head tucked beneath my chin. She leaned back in contentment, seeming to melt into my embrace.

“This is where I long to be,” she breathed.
“It’s where you’re going to be from now on,” I murmured back, my breath gently stirring a shining strand of her hair. I kissed the top of her head.

“So,” I added after a moment, running my fingers lightly up and down her arms. “You ready to take a walk down ‘memory lane?’” She half-twisted around so that she could see my face.

“If you’re ready to come with me,” she answered, smiling.

“I’d follow you anywhere,” I declared, ducking my head to steal a kiss. Had any woman’s lips ever been so soft and sweet, I thought to myself. Surely not. I felt sorry for every man who’d come before me, and all those who would come after, that they would never be lucky enough to have a woman like Michaela. Most of all, I was grateful that despite the fact she’d obviously had other men in her life—in the end, by some miracle, she had picked me.

I hardly felt deserving, after the way I’d treated her and the things I’d said. But somehow, she had been able to forgive me, and I swore I’d make myself worthy of her love and forgiveness, if it took the rest of my life.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, noting my bemused expression. I smiled and kissed her again.

“I’m just thinking how much I love you, and how lucky I am,” I said.

“Lucky?” she repeated.

“That you still want me, and that you’re in my arms right now and not somebody else’s,” I told her.

“I feel just as lucky—that you could forgive me and still want me after I kept the truth from you, and then broke things off between us,” she responded softly.

“I think we both said and did things we regret,” I said. “Me especially. I guess we should just be thankful that we found our way back to each other, and that no amount of arguing or misunderstandings could stand in the way of our love.”

“It simply proves how strong our bond truly is, that it could survive all the stress of everything we’ve been through these last weeks,” Michaela agreed.

“A bond that’ll last forever,” I declared, my arms tightening around her. My lips sought hers, and several rapturous moments passed as we found joy in one another. But finally, reluctantly, we parted.

After a few deep breaths to slow my racing pulse and clear my head, I looked down at her.

“So,” I said. “Let’s hear about William.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Michaela awakened in her own bed sometime later, with only the vaguest notion of how she’d got there. However a moment later her confusion was forgotten as her outraged stomach roiled and rebelled against the whiskey, compelling her to make an emergency dash to the privy. She spent the balance of the night wearing a path between her bed to the privy and back again, until by dawn she felt as limp, wrung-out and faded as an old dishrag. And she looked even worse, she thought to herself grimly, catching sight of her chalk-white face in the mirror.

Moving slowly, she brewed herself a cup of willow bark tea, then sat carefully at the table, taking small, ginger sips against the pain of the headache that drilled into her temples like twin ice picks.

So this was what it felt like to get drunk and pay the price. She wondered if everyone who drank to excess felt so terrible afterward. If so, she marveled that anyone ever became a drunkard. And yet, many did, like Jake—or like some of the Cheyenne in Black Kettle’s tribe. Apparently certain people—like Jake and the Indians—were more susceptible to the effects of alcoholic addiction than others—despite the unpleasant after-effects. While she couldn’t explain it, she at least knew for a certainty that she would never become one of them.
Michaela flinched and slitted her eyes as the strengthening rays of the rising sun penetrated around the edges of the curtains, bathing the cabin in increasingly brighter light. Tiredly she massaged her temples, wondering how she was going to get through the day.

“Mornin’, Ma,” said Colleen, rising first as she always did to help Michaela prepare breakfast.

Eyes closed, Michaela didn’t see Colleen approach, and she jumped at the sound of her daughter’s voice.

“Sorry, Ma—I didn’t mean to scare you,” Colleen apologized quickly.

“It’s all right, Colleen. I just didn’t hear you come in,” Michaela replied, trying to act normal yet suspecting that she was failing dismally.

Colleen glanced at her, then looked again. “Ma—you look terrible—you’re so pale!” she exclaimed softly. “Are you sick?”

“I’m—all right, Colleen. Please don’t be concerned,” Michaela answered, feeling embarrassed and ashamed for her daughter to see her like this. What had she been thinking, allowing Hank to get her drunk that way? But the truth was, it hadn’t been Hank’s fault. He had only offered; she had been the one to make the choice. She couldn’t assign the blame for her condition to anyone but herself.

“You’re not all right, Ma!” Colleen protested. “You’re pale as a ghost and you’re sweatin’—do you have a fever?”

“Truly, Colleen, I’ll be all right. I just need some rest, and quiet—”

“Well I’ll see that you get them,” her daughter replied. “I’ll stay home from school today and take care of you.”

“No,” Michaela said promptly. “Absolutely not, Colleen. I don’t want you missing any more school on my account—and especially not because of this.”

“But—"

“Sit down for a moment,” Michaela told her. Colleen complied, continuing to regard her with concern.

“What’s wrong, Ma?” she asked worriedly. “Is it some kind of cataarh—like what Brian and Sully had?”

Michaela shook her head, wincing slightly at the movement. “No, Colleen, it’s nothing like that. I’m—I’m ashamed to admit that—well, that I drank whiskey last night, and I’m feeling the after-effects this morning.” Colleen gawked at her.

“You—drank whiskey?” she echoed. “But how—"

“How did it happen?” Michaela finished for her. “That’s a very good question, but I’m afraid I can’t give you an answer that makes much sense—nor can I defend my actions.” She sighed.

“To put it briefly, something happened between Sully and me last night when we returned to the clinic. Something which upset me. Unbeknownst to me, Sully had taken something from the homestead—a telegram, that he had sent me from Denver when he attended that Indian conference before Valentine’s Day. Though it was only signed with an initial and not his full name, the telegram was written in such a way that Sully would instantly have known about our relationship, had he read it.”

“You mean he didn’t read it?” Colleen asked.

“Only the salutation and the signature,” Michaela replied. “However, he felt guilty for what he’d done, and was compelled to admit his transgression to me. He returned the telegram to me without reading it.”

“Why would he do something like that?” Colleen said, surprised and perplexed.
not quite sure, but I suspect—it has to do with the feelings he’s developing for me,” Michaela speculated.

“Feelin’s?” Colleen repeated. “You mean, Sully’s fallin’ in love with you again?” Her eyes were excited.

"It appears that way," Michaela said cautiously. “But there are still all sorts of unresolved problems, Colleen. Remember—Sully still has no recollection of the emotional trauma which caused him to block out his memories—and much of that trauma may be related to our relationship. I’m afraid that even if Sully *does* believe that he loves me, we can’t simply pick up from where we left off as if nothing’s happened.”

“I understand that,” Colleen conceded. “But it’s clear you were meant for each other, Ma. I’m sure somehow you and Sully will be able to work things out.”

“I pray that will be the case, eventually,” her mother said. “But for right now I’m still struggling with the thought that Sully could have learned the truth before he was ready to hear it. I’ve been trying so hard to manage the amount of information Sully receives, and how soon he receives it. What nearly happened with the telegram was a development I didn’t foresee, and for which I was unprepared. It—unnerved me.”

“Is that why you . . .” Colleen began hesitantly.

“I didn’t set out to seek consolation in a bottle,” Michaela said wryly. “However, after I lashed out at Sully, Hank saw me leaving the clinic. He could tell I was upset, and he insisted on taking me back to his room to talk. When he recognized how shaken I was, he offered me some whiskey to calm my nerves. I resisted at first—but then I thought, well, a few sips wouldn’t do any harm. However Hank insisted that I empty the glass—he claimed that it would be more effective that way. Unfortunately I believed him, which was my undoing.”

“Oh, Ma,” Colleen said sympathetically, reaching out to take her mother’s hand. However, she couldn’t quite conceal the small smile that hovered about her mouth. A moment later, despite her best efforts to smother it, a giggle escaped her. “I’m sorry, Ma,” she said apologetically again. “It ain’t funny, but I just got a picture of you and Hank drinkin’ together—”

“You needn’t apologize, Colleen,” Michaela told her. “I suppose it *would* be amusing, if it weren’t so ludicrous—and if I weren’t so ashamed of my behavior.”

“Don’t feel bad, Ma—you’re only human—and you’ve been pushed to the breakin’ point since Sully got hurt,” Colleen said. “No one can blame you if you needed a little—help—to feel better.”

“The problem with *that* kind of ‘help,’ Colleen, is that it’s only temporary, and one feels even worse, afterward. As I can unfortunately testify.” She sighed again, pressing her fingers to her throbbing temples.


“I—don’t know,” Michaela replied soberly. “I’m afraid I was quite angry at him, and didn’t give him much of a chance to explain before I walked out. I have no idea what he must be thinking of me now.”

“Well, try not to worry about it,” Colleen said kindly. “Right now, just concentrate on restin’ till you feel better. I’ll make breakfast for all of us and get Brian and me off to school. And Matthew will be leavin’ early to go tend to his cattle, so there won’t be anythin’ to disturb you.”

“Thank you, Colleen,” Michaela said gratefully. “I don’t deserve your kindness, but I appreciate it.”

“Please don’t be so hard on yourself, Ma,” Colleen implored. Michaela gave her a half-hearted smile.

“I’ll try,” she said. “But Colleen—“

“Yes?” her daughter said.

“Could we—keep this between the two of us? I feel badly enough that you had to learn of my foolishness—I’d rather that Brian and Matthew didn’t have to know.”
“It’ll be our secret,” Colleen promised, giving her a gentle hug. “After all, we women got to stick together,” she added, smiling.

“And you are every inch a wonderful young woman,” Michaela told her. “Thank you, Sweetheart.”

“You just get some rest,” Colleen urged her. “When you’re feelin’ yourself again, everythin’ will look better.”

“I hope so,” Michaela sighed.

* * * * * * * * * *

Two hours later, the willow bark tea had tamed Michaela’s headache, reducing it to a dull echo of its former intensity. She had also dosed herself with paregoric when she thought she could keep it down, and it had helped to settle her stomach somewhat, though she still had no desire for food.

However, refreshed by a sponge bath and change of clothes, and soaking in the soothing peace and quiet that had descended on the homestead after the children’s departure, Michaela began to think that perhaps she could face this day after all. Though she had to admit to herself that she hoped no medical emergencies would arise demanding her attention—not only because she was indisposed, but because her mind still felt fuzzy and disconnected, and she didn’t want to risk her skill or concentration being diminished when a patient needed her most. If she could just have a few hours rest and solitude, she believed she would feel more like herself again, able to resume her normal activities.

Besides craving the chance to rest undisturbed, Michaela also needed some quiet time to think about what had happened with Sully, and what she was going to do about it. Though much of her recollection of the previous evening was hazy, the comments Hank had made about Sully, and the advice he’d given her to tell Sully the truth and “get it over with,” stuck in her mind. Did Hank have the right idea after all? Would it be better for her to be totally honest with Sully, telling him the entire truth about their relationship, their plans to marry—and his crippling, deep-seated fear of losing her as a result—and let the chips fall where they may? Part of her longed for the relief of having it all out in the open, so that she could lay down this burden at last. So that she would no longer have to pretend not to have feelings for Sully, or deny the feelings that it was increasingly apparent he had for her.

Michaela realized that in large part, she had already forgiven Sully for taking the telegram. Hank may well have been correct—perhaps Sully hadn’t been “thinkin’ clear” when he took it—but not because of his injury. Because he was a man feeling the first stirrings of love—and people in love often did not act rationally. She herself was a perfect example of that axiom, she thought dourly. She had been so upset over Sully that she had actually allowed herself to turn to alcohol to dull her pain and confusion. Sully wasn’t perfect, but obviously neither was she. She even had to wonder what she would have done, had she been in Sully’s place—starting to fall in love with him, but suspecting that there was another woman who might already have claimed his heart. Would she have been above trying to discover this woman’s identity and learn about her relationship with Sully?

Michaela honestly couldn’t answer that question. However she *did know that she would have been jealous, because she’d been jealous in the past. Of Dorothy, when it seemed that she and Sully had developed a special “friendship”—when in fact Dorothy had been trying to do her a kindness by giving Sully dancing lessons so he could surprise her at the Sweetheart’s Dance. And of Katharine, the white woman who had been “rescued” by an army patrol in the wake of their massacre of the tribe with which she lived. Taken by the Indians as a child, Katharine had grown up believing she was a member of the tribe. They had even given her a new name, “Shivering Deer,” because of the strange “spells” she suffered from periodically—which Michaela diagnosed as episodes of epilepsy.

Katharine had witnessed the murder of her Indian husband and all the people she thought of as family in the army massacre, which had won her the sympathy of Michaela, Sully and the children. In particular, Sully had been drawn to Katharine because of their similar backgrounds. Each of them had lived with the Indians and adopted their customs, and each knew how it felt to be an “outsider”—not completely Indian, not completely white, but with emotional ties to both cultures. Sully had also sympathized with Katharine over her fear and confusion at suddenly being thrust into a town of white people she didn’t know, with customs she barely remembered or understood. Surrounded by strangers, many of whom vilified her for having taken a “red” man as a husband, Katharine had naturally turned to Sully as the one familiar reminder of the life she’d lived before—the one person who understood what she had lost.
Michaela had empathized with Katharine as well, until it became evident that Katharine’s feelings for Sully had grown beyond friendship and become something more. And when it seemed as if Sully returned Katharine’s feelings, Michaela had felt both hurt and betrayed. Sully had sworn to her that he didn’t care for Katharine in that way—that Michaela was the only woman he loved. He claimed he simply felt sorry for Katharine, because he understood what she’d been through, and Michaela was finally able to accept that he was sincere. But it had taken time for Michaela to rebuild her trust and confidence in their relationship—to feel safe again. They had found their way back to one another, but both had suffered an emotional cost.

As Michaela thought back to that period of their relationship, and the pain it had caused her, she could well imagine Sully feeling threatened by the idea that she cared for someone else. Viewed in that light, his action didn’t seem quite so indefensible. She could almost understand it. And in the end, his honorable nature had won out and he had confessed his transgression to her.

He wanted to tell him she forgave him. That she knew he regretted his mistake and had tried to put it right. But if she relented—if she let Sully get close to her—where would it lead? He was on the verge of telling her his feelings now—she could sense it. But were those feelings based on a false foundation? Sully might believe right now that he cared for her, but he had no recollection of the emotional upheaval he’d suffered before his accident. Did she have the right to encourage Sully’s attentions to her now, knowing that his original fear of commitment still lurked deep within his mind? Wouldn’t she be guilty of taking selfish advantage of him in his condition?

Michaela desperately wanted them to be together. She knew that consciously, Sully wanted them to be together. But she had to take into account that in his heart, Sully’s true wishes might be very different.

Hank might have been right about telling the truth, she thought—the truth, after all, was supposed to set you free. But sometimes, the truth could hurt. And in Sully’s case, Michaela couldn’t let go of the fear that the truth might do great harm.

Until she could be sure that the time was right, she needed to keep Sully at a distance, Michaela woreily concluded. And if keeping him at a distance meant that she had to pretend to be angry with him, then so be it. She had done many difficult things since this ordeal began—this would simply be one more. She felt guilty about perpetuating the lie, but she was far more frightened of hurting him irremediably with the truth. Somehow, someday, it would all come out—she knew that. And when that time came, she would somehow have a way to prove to Sully that she had acted out of love. She could only pray that he would understand.

A knock on the door made her start violently. Slowly she rose from the table and moved to one of the front windows, easing back the curtain. She drew in her breath sharply and her heart started to pound as she saw Sully standing on the porch.

Why did he come, she thought in a panic. I’m not ready to see him yet. He’s going to ask questions and I don’t know what I’ll say!

Michaela drew back from the window, pressing herself against the wall. Maybe he’ll go away, she thought. He’ll assume I’ve already gone to the clinic and he’ll leave.

But the seconds passed and he didn’t move. Michaela realized with a sinking feeling that he was determined to see her, and intended to wait as long as necessary. Some kind of confrontation was going to happen between them, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

With a shuddering sigh, Michaela answered the door.

MY JOURNAL
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Evening

She settled back in my arms. “It all started a year and a half ago, a few weeks before Thanksgiving, when I received a telegram from my oldest sister Rebecca stating that my mother was gravely ill,” she began.
“I’m sorry, Michaela,” I said sympathetically. “That must have been real upsetting for you.”

“Upsetting, yes—and shocking,” she replied. “My mother had always been so strong, so resilient. I suppose I’d come to believe that she was invulnerable. Hearing that she was ill—perhaps dying—well, I confess it turned my world upside down.”

“I can understand that,” I said, thinking of Michaela’s ma—the society woman with the core of iron sheathed beneath a silken veneer. I barely knew her, yet it was hard to imagine anything getting the best of that implacable will.

“Naturally I made immediate plans to travel to Boston,” Michaela went on.

“Of course,” I said. “Did you take the kids?”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Though Matthew, in particular, expressed reluctance to go. Not that he didn’t care about Mother—he just didn’t want to leave Ingrid,” she explained.

“I can sympathize with him there,” I commented. “If it had been me, I wouldn’t have wanted to leave you, either.”

“I sympathized with him as well, but I wanted my family to meet my children,” Michaela said. “And—I needed the children with me—for emotional support.”

“Sure you did,” I said softly, lifting her hand to my lips and kissing the palm.

“The children were very concerned about Mother, as well,” she added. “They had come to know and love her when she visited here shortly after the influenza epidemic. In fact it was Matthew, fearing the worst, who had wired her when I became ill. Of course by the time she arrived, I had long since recovered.”

“I’m surely glad about that,” I said softly, kissing her temple. She smiled up at me.

“It was only thanks to you and Cloud Dancing that I *did* get well,” she said earnestly.

“And it was thanks to you and Cloud Dancing that *I* got well,” I countered. “Guess that makes us even.”

“And we both owe a great debt to Cloud Dancing,” she said.

I nodded in agreement, then added after a moment, “Go on with your story.” She took up the thread again.

“I confess Mother’s illness had shaken me, so I wasn’t thinking very clearly before we left,” she said. “In fact, at one point, I broke down. But that’s when you came to my rescue.”

“Me?” I asked in surprise. “What did I do?” She gave me a loving smile.

“You comforted me,” she said softly. “You reminded me that I’d had the fortitude to come west all alone to forge a new life and build my own practice. You seemed convinced that the same courage which had served me on that journey, would serve me again in facing my mother’s illness.”

“And I bet I was right,” I said, gazing at her with admiration. She blushed slightly.

“I don’t know about that, but you have no idea how much your faith meant to me—how much it helped me,” she said.

“Really?” I said, moved.

“Really,” she repeated. “And there was something else about our conversation that touched me as well.”

“What’s that?” I asked, smiling down at her.
“You told me about your past,” she said quietly. “How you were born on board a ship bound from England to America . . . And how you—lost your parents later, and came out west on your own while just a child . . . I knew what a private person you were—that it wasn’t easy for you to talk about yourself. So I felt even more honored that you were willing to share that part of yourself with me.”

“I wasn’t able to open up to many people, that’s true,” I said. “Especially after Abagail died. I didn’t want to talk to people—I didn’t want to be with anyone. Then Cloud Dancing and the Cheyenne took me in. They managed to break through the wall I’d built up around myself. They made me feel safe. But they were the only people I trusted—till you came along.” I looked at her meaningfully.

“Do you remember our conversation before I left for Boston—or possibly something else about us?” she asked quickly.

“I don’t recall that particular talk you’re describing,” I said. “But the rest of it—you and me . . .” My voice drifted off for a moment, but then I took a deep breath.

“I got a confession to make, Michaela,” I said, feeling ashamed but forcing myself to look her in the eyes. “When I first read the telegram, and realized that I was the man you loved, something happened. I—saw something. I ain’t sure if what I had was a vision—or whether it was actual memories of the two of us. But I had the feeling that I was remembering times that we’d spent together.”

“Yes, I recall,” she said, her eyes kindling in recognition. “I could see in your eyes that something had happened, and I asked you whether you’d remembered something—“

“And I lied to you,” I finished. “I’m sorry, Michaela. That was wrong. More than that, it was cruel.”

“You were shocked, and you were angry,” she said quietly. “I don’t hold you to blame for your reaction, Sully. Besides, we’ve put all that behind us now. Please don’t continue to punish yourself by dwelling on it.”

“I’m grateful you’ve forgiven me,” I told her. “But it’s going to take a little longer for me to forgive myself.”

“As long as you know that as far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing left to forgive,” she said, kissing me gently.

I returned the kiss. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“Can you tell me exactly what it was you saw?” she asked, bringing me back to the memories that had flickered through my mind in the aftermath of her revelation.

I closed my eyes, replaying the pictures in my mind. The passage of several hours hadn’t dimmed my recollection of them—on the contrary, each image seemed to burst upon my consciousness with intense vividness and clarity.

“First, I saw you,” I began slowly. “It was kind of a funny sight, actually. It looked like you were in the street outside, and you were wearing a fancy violet dress, but—you were laying face down in the mud, like maybe you took a spill—“ I broke off as I heard a soft chuckle escape her. “What?” I said.

“That was the first day I arrived in Colorado Springs—and the first time we ever saw one another,” she replied, half in embarrassment, half in delight. “Well, actually, to be more precise, it was the first time you saw me. The Reverend was in shock that I wasn’t a man, and I was busy trying to convince him that he shouldn’t ship me back to Boston on the first stagecoach going east, and—just as you said—I slipped in the mud and fell flat on my face!”

“Did you get hurt?” I asked. She smiled ruefully.

“Only my dignity,” she answered. “Unfortunately, though I didn’t know it at the time, you were watching me from the meadow, along with Black Kettle and several of the Cheyenne. I can only imagine what you must have thought.”

“That you were a ‘crazy white woman?’” I said. She looked at me sharply. “When we laid eyes on you
that first time, I don’t believe Black Kettle knew what to think. I suppose I wasn’t entirely sure myself—least at first.” I grinned a little. “Then the next day, Charlotte brought you to Loren’s store to post your notice advertising for lodgings. When I offered to rent you the homestead, I learned you were the new doctor. The following Sunday when you came into town for church, Black Kettle and me saw you again, and he asked me who you were. I said you were a medicine woman from the east,” I went on, the recollection becoming clear in my mind even as I spoke. “He said among the whites, only men made medicine—so that must mean you were a ‘crazy white woman.’

“But I didn’t think you were crazy—I thought you were beautiful,” I added softly, staring deeply into her eyes.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “You *do* remember, don’t you?”

“I didn’t—at least not really—until you mentioned how Black Kettle and me were watching you,” I responded. “Then I heard his voice in my mind, and—it all came back.” I shrugged, as full of wonderment at this turn of events as she.

“What about the rest—the other things you saw?” she asked eagerly.

“Well . . . I saw us together, in some fancy place—a restaurant, I think,” I replied. “Surely not a place I was accustomed to being in. You were so lovely, so elegant. You were wearing this delicate gown of silver and black lace, and there were feathers in your hair . . . And I was wearing a fancy suit, of all things. I don’t know where I got it—I never owned anything like that. We were sipping wine—no, champagne—and we were looking into each other’s eyes . . .” I shook my head. “I must have imagined it,” I said. “I know it don’t make no sense—there ain’t no place around here like that . . .”

“You didn’t imagine it, Sully,” Michaela told me. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were brimming with suppressed excitement. “We *did* share that evening together—in Boston.”

“Boston?” I repeated. “But I thought you said only you and the children went to Boston.”

“That’s correct,” she replied. “You didn’t accompany us on the journey—in fact, you offered to look after the homestead for us until we returned. But roughly two weeks after we arrived, you suddenly turned up on my mother’s doorstep—just as my entire family was sitting down to a dinner party to celebrate Mother’s recovery. You told me privately later that you came because you were worried—that we’d been gone so long, you feared something might have happened. But I had the impression that there was more to it than that—“

Her voice receded as I saw myself sitting by a campfire in the darkness, a cup cradled in my hands. Cloud Dancing sat next to me. We were sipping tea and looking at the stars.

(“What troubles you, Sully?” asked Cloud Dancing.


“Dreams are the spirits telling us of the past, or of the future,” my brother explained.

“I dream that I’m in Boston,” I said quietly, staring off into the dark.

“Where Dr. Mike is,” said Cloud Dancing.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“You have never been there?”

“Never.”

“Then it is a dream of the future.”)

“Next morning, I flagged down the stagecoach, got on board, and followed you east,” I said to Michaela, feeling a strange sense of peacefulness steal over me as the memory came back so clear it was as if I’d never lost it.

“I can’t believe it!” Michaela said tremulously. “Your memories—they’re returning, Sully! This is it—I
can feel it.”

“I—think maybe you’re right,” I agreed. “It’s just bits and pieces so far, but if you keep helping me—prompting me—I think maybe I’ll get it all back eventually.”

“Of course I’ll help you!” she exclaimed joyously. “And it *will* all come back to you—every moment you lost. You’ve reached a turning point, Sully, and now you’re going to get well—truly, completely well. Just as when your fever finally broke during your bout with pneumonia, and I knew you would recover.”

“It’s hard to believe,” I ventured. “After all these weeks of not being able to remember anything . . . After feeling so—cut off—from everything and everyone around me . . . I didn’t expect it to be like this—that the memories would come back so easy. Makes me wonder why it took so long.”

“I’m not precisely sure,” Michaela said. “But I believe it’s because in your mind and your heart, you finally feel that it’s ‘safe’ to remember. In the beginning, you believed yourself to be alone, with no one to whom you could turn for comfort and support. But now that you know we love each other—and that you can always rely upon that love—I think you’ve found the courage to confront your past.”

“So it all goes back to us loving each other and looking out for one another,” I said. “It’s like I said earlier, Michaela—as long as I can hold onto that, I can face anything.” We embraced again.

“Did you see anything else?” she asked after a few moments, eager to continue the revelations that were coming to me with ever-increasing frequency.

“Yeah,” I said. “I saw us in the woods.” I gave her an impish grin. “You were sitting on the ground, and you looked kind of dirty . . . And your hair was tangled, falling down . . . I was brushing it out. And—” I stared off into space, picturing it. “you’d—you’d hurt yourself—kind of like what happened today.”

She was nodding again. “My wrist,” she confirmed. “When people in town started getting sick from an unknown cause, we discovered that one of the gold mining operations on Willow Creek was contaminating the water supply by dumping mercury into the stream. We asked the owner, Mr. Harding, to cease operations but he refused to cooperate. So you and I went on an expedition to obtain samples of the tainted water to use as proof to shut him down. You didn’t want me to go along on the trip because it was dangerous—“

“And I thought you’d slow me down,” I finished. Her smile was like a sudden, bright ray of sunshine.

“That’s right. Which made me all the more determined to show you that I could do whatever you could—“

“But then you fell and broke your wrist!” I said triumphantly. “You didn’t want me to take care of you, because you didn’t want to admit you needed help—and that’s when I told you to give up old habits.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “But not before I saved you from the rattlesnake with—“

mirror,” I said, grinning broadly. “‘A handy little piece of junk’ is what I believe you called it.”

“Oh, Sully!” she burst out rapturously, wrapping her arms around my neck. I hugged her close. As she drew back she said, “I’m so full of joy right now I don’t know if I could hold another drop—but is there anything else that you remember?”

“One more thing,” I said. “And it’s something you don’t got to tell me about.” I cupped her face in my hands. “I remember you and me, in the sweat lodge. I remember asking you to marry me. I remember you saying ‘yes’—the most beautiful word in the whole English language, after the word ‘love.’ And I had them both—I *have* them both,” I amended. “I’ve got your love, and I’ve got your promise to marry me—which makes me the richest man in the world.” Tears were running down her cheeks and I kissed them away. “I love you Michaela,” I whispered.

“I love you,” she whispered back, and then there was silence between us for a long while.

Finally we parted, but then a dart of worry stabbed at me as I noted how tired and pinched her face looked. Her cheeks were still pale and there were lines of pain in her forehead.
“Michaela,” I reproached her gently. “You were hurting and you didn’t tell me.”

“I’m all right—it’s not that bad,” she said quickly. “I’d much rather keep talking. It’s so exciting, all the memories that you’re recalling—“

“Yeah, it’s exciting, but you’re more important right now,” I broke in. “You’re in pain, and you’re worn out. You, your ankle *and* your knee—” I bent to kiss it again. “all need to rest.” I smiled at her. “We got time for the rest of it—sharing more memories, talking about William . . .

“Michaela, we got all the time in the world.”

* * * * * * * * * *

I just checked on her—she’s still sleeping, looking as peaceful as an angel. Me, I can’t sleep. Too much has happened—too much is still happening. My mind feels like somebody primed the pump and now the thoughts, the memories are flooding out.

Maybe this journal is helping me after all. But it’s not what saved me.

Michaela did that.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY

Shock rooted Michaela to the spot as the door closed behind Sully. She felt numb all over—unable to move, to speak—even to think. A small part of her was dimly grateful that her senses were deadened; she knew that when the numbness wore off, bitter pain would flood in to take its place.

After what seemed an eternity, she forced herself to move. She took a few steps forward and bent down to pick up the telegram Sully had callously cast to the floor. As she held it in her trembling hand, tears slipping down her cheeks fell on the page, blurring and nearly obliterating Sully’s message. The smears of ink reproached her, seeming like a chilling metaphor of their relationship. Just as her tears had washed away the written evidence of Sully’s love for her, it seemed that her decision to allow Sully to learn the truth had completely erased the bond between them.

Michaela had known it wouldn’t be easy to have this conversation with Sully—to admit that she’d been holding things back from him. She had resolved to wait until conditions seemed more favorable to tell him the truth, and she had intended to stick to that resolution. But when Sully confessed his attraction to her—when he admitted that the thought of another man competing for her affection had made him realize that he loved her—Michaela’s determination to remain silent had crumbled. She didn’t have the heart to keep the truth from Sully any longer. More, she didn’t think she could go through another day of pretending. She wanted—she needed—Sully to know about their love, as much as she believed he deserved to know. Hank’s advice to make a clean breast of things also kept echoing in her mind, seeming to gain more validity the more she thought about it. And so, finally, she had given the telegram to Sully—insisting that he read it, and praying that he would understand that her actions had been in his best interest, and not an attempt to deceive him.

As much as Michaela had hoped for Sully’s understanding and forgiveness, realistically she expected that he might be shocked, or even resentful, to learn that she’d been hiding the truth from him about their love. Still, she hadn’t been prepared for the extremity of his anger, the venom of his response. Over and over, his words replayed themselves in her mind, clanging and echoing like a gong reverberating atonally through her skull: “I’m a fool . . . You must have had some laugh at my expense . . . Poor, pathetic Sully—too dumb to figure out that the woman doctor takin’ care of him is the woman who loves him. No—the woman who’s been lyin’ to him . . . I’m a fool . . . You must have had some laugh . . . the woman who’s been lyin’ to him . . . lyin’ to him . . . lyin’ to him . . .” Relentlessly the words repeated, drilling into her mind and heart with a pain that totally eclipsed the throb of her headache and the queasiness in her stomach. For a brief moment, she had an intense desire for the anesthesia of whiskey once again—anything to blot out the torment she was feeling. And on the heels of that thought was relief—that there was no liquor in the house, and thus no way that she could give in to such a destructive impulse a second time.
Michaela sank down at the table, burying her face in her hands. What was she to do now? How did she go about mending the terrible rift between Sully and herself? She would jump on Flash and go in search of Sully in a heartbeat, throwing herself on his mercy if that was what it took—if she thought he would be willing to listen. But his words had been ominously clear as he’d left her: “I think maybe it’s me who can’t talk to you no more,” he’d said, the expression in his eyes as frigid, as wintry, as the snowstorm that had raged the day Cloud Dancing brought him back here to the homestead.

She realized it was possible that Sully’s anger and resentment had been just his immediate response—a gut reaction to the shock of her revelation. Given time, hopefully his temper would cool and he would be more receptive to working out their conflict. At least, he might be willing for her to approach him again to talk about their problems.

After all, Sully had been hurt and angry before—such as when he’d overheard William Burke propose to her in Boston and demanded to know whether she intended to accept—but she had refused to tell him, claiming it was “none of his business.” Sully had stalked away from her then, going straight back to her mother’s house to pack his things and then head to the train to return to Colorado Springs. She had been forced to go after him, finding him in his berth just as the train was about to depart. They’d had it out, in a sharp exchange of words—but then miraculously, their confrontation had resulted in Sully admitting, for the first time, that he loved her. She hadn’t been able to respond because the train started to leave and she’d had to hastily disembark. But later, upon her arrival in Colorado Springs, all their previous discord had been forgotten as she’d run into his waiting arms, declaring that she loved him, too.

Sully also had reacted negatively when her former fiance David had returned, and Michaela had been put in the agonizing position of being forced to choose between two men she loved. In the year that had passed, Michaela knew that she had convinced Sully that her heart belonged solely to him. But at the time, the anger and betrayal he’d felt when she’d asked David not to leave, had been very real indeed. Yet somehow, she and Sully had managed to work through this conflict as well. Because in the end, Sully had wanted her to be happy—even if that meant her finding happiness with someone else. Sully’s willingness to sacrifice his happiness for her sake, had convinced Michaela that their love was genuine and true, and not the pale echo of a former affection, which was all that remained of her past with David.

The rancor that had existed between Sully and herself during each of these occasions had been acutely painful to them both. And Michaela had spent more than one sleepless night in each case wondering whether she and Sully would be able to work out their differences. But even when she’d been at her lowest point, she had never had the sense, as she ominously had now, of things falling so completely apart—slipping through her fingers like sand drizzling through an hour-glass, each grain a moment of time escaping, never to be recaptured.

She had always been able to go to Sully before—to express her feelings and opinions, even when she thought he would disagree. And he had always been willing to listen. But this time . . . Michaela didn’t know if she could find the words, or even the courage, to try to fix what was wrong between them. Perhaps Sully’s ordeal had harmed more than this mind—perhaps it had also damaged their relationship too severely for it to ever be rebuilt. But if that was true, how would she endure it? How would she keep going on, getting up every day and putting one foot in front of the other? Somehow, for the children’s sake, she would have to find a way. But it would mean learning to live without a heart, because hers would be crushed beyond repair.

Michaela stood up suddenly, flinching as her headache flared from the sharp movement. She needed fresh air—she needed to get away from this place, where the memory of her bitter exchange with Sully was still so immediate and piercing.

She would ride to the new homestead. Sully didn’t know of its existence; therefore it would be a place of refuge for her. Another thread of disquiet went through her, as she was reminded that she had yet to tell Sully of their engagement, or that he had built a new home for them. At some point, she would have to tell him all of it.

But for now, her overtaxed mind couldn’t take on the burden of worrying about his reaction to the rest of the truth. She needed comfort and solitude to rest and to think. The new homestead would provide that for her. Its spaciousness and beauty lifted her spirits, and gave her a sense of peace. Standing inside the house was like being embraced in Sully’s arms, since he had put so much of himself—his entire heart and soul—into its creation. It had never been just a place to live, but a testament to their love, and a promise for their future. That promise was in jeopardy now, but Michaela hoped that she could still
recapture a shred of the serenity that had always been the homestead’s gift to her.

Perhaps the ride would help to clear her head. And being at the homestead might even give her inspiration for a way to reach Sully, and win his forgiveness.

Resolved, Michaela made ready to leave.

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She found herself outside without quite knowing how she’d got there. All she could see in her mind’s eye was the glimmer of her engagement ring as she’d slipped it off the chain and thrust it at Sully, insisting that he take it. And his stunned and ashen expression as he’d resisted her gesture, stammering that he didn’t want it back. She’d come very close in that moment to confessing how she truly felt—that it was breaking her heart to end the engagement—that she would do anything rather than leave him.

But she was haunted by the words he’d flung at her shortly after he’d shocked and surprised her at the homestead—that he didn’t know if he could ever trust her again. And despite his apparent remorse after she’d finally given vent to all the misery that had been building up inside her for so long—still, Michaela couldn’t accept that he was sincere. Sully had raised the issue of doubt. He had questioned her veracity, and her motives. And once he’d expressed those feelings, she could not dismiss them—even though he appeared to regret his words afterward, looking as if he wished he could take them back.

For so long Michaela had lived with the fear that it would be Sully’s inability to remember their relationship which would finally lead to its collapse. But she had never expected—never even considered—that it would be her own reluctance to commit to Sully, for fear of taking advantage of his condition, which would ultimately be their undoing.

She had won the battle, but lost the war. She had succeeded in making Sully physically well, but her attempts to heal his damaged memory had been a disaster. And both of them had been the losers.

Michaela untied Flash’s reins from the hitching post and boosted herself into the saddle. Slowly she guided the spirited little horse down the drive away from the homestead, her eyes blind to the scenery around her; her mind and ears filled solely with the sight and sound of Sully’s face and voice as he’d hurled rancorous words toward her.

(“I don’t get it, Michaela...How could you claim to love me—how could you agree to share my life and let me build a home for us—and then be willin’ to hurt me this way?...You must have loved David too...Or are you in the habit of gettin’ engaged to men and then turnin’ around and betrayin’ them?...Did you throw over some other man when you took up with David?...Lies are cruel, Michaela. They hurt people. And sometimes they destroy their lives... Seems like the only person you been worried about keepin’ is yourself...”)

Nothing she’d tried to say in her own defense had made any difference. She had committed the unpardonable sin—she had breached his trust. A trust that was still new and fragile—at least from Sully’s perspective. But a trust that was no less valid simply because it was a product of their altered friendship. Michaela knew that to Sully, the virtues of honor, integrity and honesty mattered above all else. He tried to live his life according to these precepts, and he had always respected her for attempting to do the same. But she had disappointed him. She had tarnished the image he had of her, and she wondered if she would ever be able to return to her original shining brightness in his eyes.

Michaela’s headache suddenly throbbed with a vengeance, and simultaneously her stomach lurchcd. She had just enough time to dismount and stumble into the bushes beside the road before bringing up the remains of the willow bark tea which had rested so fitfully inside her. Almost immediately her stomach was empty, but she continued to retch, as if her body were punishing her as much as her mind. Finally, exhausted, she crawled over to the base of a tree and braced herself against it, blotting at the sweat on her face and neck with the hem of her skirt.

Something told her that this time, her nausea hadn’t been the result of her foolish consumption of whiskey. This time, she knew, her illness resulted from a much sadder cause. She was sick with grief. And desolately, she wondered if she would ever recover.

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Michaela fell into an uneasy doze, but the shadows passing over her face as the sun moved across the sky soon roused her. It was already early afternoon; somehow she had to pull herself together and go to the clinic. Perhaps if she could throw herself into work, she could manage to put her heartbreak over Sully out of her mind temporarily. At the very least, maybe she could improve the quality of someone else’s life, even if her own was in tatters.

She wondered if Sully had returned to the clinic—instinctively she doubted that he would. Or that if he did, it would only be to collect his few belongings and then be on his way—to where, or what, she had no idea. For her part, she didn’t know how she was going to face him again. And she suspected that he felt the same.

Yet Michaela had to acknowledge that they were bound to run into each other frequently. It was a small town. Avoiding one another would be difficult, if not impossible. Somehow they would have to find a way to live with each other’s existence, and their inevitable periodic encounters. However as Michaela pictured the days and weeks to come, the thought of the two of them treating each other like strangers—or at best, polite acquaintances—was even more depressing to contemplate than the prospect of not seeing him at all.

But huddling against a tree and brooding, served no purpose and solved nothing. She needed to get to work, where perhaps she had a hope of accomplishing something worthwhile.

Gingerly Michaela rose to her feet, her hand against the tree trunk, fully expecting to be seized by another attack of nausea. Apparently, however, it had run its course. She felt weak and wrung-out, but her stomach was quiet, and the relentless pain in her head had subsided to a dull, intermittent throb. She went to Flash, who waited patiently, and pulled herself up into the saddle. Nudging her heels into the horse’s sides, she began walking the animal down the road. After a few moments, she tentatively increased the pace, risking a sedate trot. Trying to empty her mind of everything but work, Michaela made her way to town.

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She was coiling the reins around the rail outside the clinic when Hank came up to her.

“Afternoon,” he said.

“Hank!” she said, startled. After a moment she added, “I—I want to thank you for seeing that I got home last night. I’m afraid I don’t remember much about the ride to the homestead . . .”

“Yeah, you were pretty much out cold,” Hank confirmed. “No thanks necessary—all I did was drive ya out there, then I carried ya inside, laid ya on the bed and covered ya with a quilt. Ya don’t gotta worry ‘bout anybody seein’ ya—everybody was asleep,” he added. Michaela breathed a sigh of relief. She had managed to avoid seeing Matthew and Brian this morning by crawling back into bed and pretending to be asleep. It was bad enough that Colleen had learned of her foolishness—she would have been totally chagrined for Brian or Matthew to find out as well. Hank studied her.

“So—gettin’ kind of a late start today, ain’t ya?” he asked, his expression amused, and a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Michaela turned flint-colored eyes on him. “Thanks to you,” she responded tartly, then her tone softened. “No—thanks to myself,” she corrected, shamefaced. “Hank, what on earth did you give me?”

"Just a taste of my private stock," he said innocently. "I oly share it with--special friends," he added, her eyes regarding her suggestively.

“Trouble holdin’ your liquor, Michaela?” Hank asked, unable to resist one more gentle barb. She gave him a baleful stare. He returned her gaze, noting the unmistakable signs of a hangover in her pale cheeks, and the tiny beads of sweat that dotted her hairline. “Not feelin’ too good?” he spoke again, his tone and expression more sympathetic this time.

“Only terrible,” she said.
Hank couldn’t hold back another grin, but his eyes were kind. “Sorry,” he said. “It can be kinda rough, first time out. I didn’t mean no harm—I just thought ya needed somethin’ to relax ya and take away your worries for a little while.”

“I know you meant well,” Michaela said, recognizing his sincerity. “The truth is, I can’t blame you for my own indiscretion. I chose to drink, and now I’m paying the price.”

“I got a cure, if you’re interested,” Hank offered.

“Are you teasing me again?” she asked skeptically.

“No—I mean it,” he answered.

She sighed again. “Well I’ve tried willow bark tea, and paregoric—nothing seems to help very much.”

“Aw, those ain’t no good,” he said dismissively. “What you need is a touch of the ‘hair of the dog.’”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You need to take a little of what got ya this way in the first place,” Hank explained. “Only thing guaranteed to make ya feel like yourself again.”

Michaela’s brief hope for a ‘miracle’ cure promptly vanished. “Well, if that’s my only choice, I’m afraid I’m destined to feel this way until the effects finally wear off,” she told him. “I won’t make the mistake of drinking again, Hank.”

“Ya shouldn’t rule it out so quick, Michaela,” he countered. “I’m tellin’ ya, it’s the only sure-fire cure for a hangover. If you’re scared that you’re gonna turn into a drunk or somethin’—”

“Hardly,” she said acidly.

“My point exactly,” Hank said smoothly. “Just like I said last night, you should think of it like medicine.”

“There’s such a thing as the wrong medicine,” Michaela said. “Thank you, Hank, but I’ll get through this on my own.”

Hank shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He brushed a lock of his long, wavy hair back behind his ear. “So how ya doin’ otherwise?” he asked after a pause. “You and Sully work things out?”

Though the sun was shining, the light seemed to go out of the day as Hank reminded her again about Sully. “We spoke,” she said quietly. “Actually—we fought.”

“Ya told him,” Hank guessed.

She nodded. “And—it’s over,” she said simply. Hank’s expression was startled.

“Sully broke things off with ya?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“No,” she said. “I ended it. I gave him back his ring.”

“‘Cause he took a piece o’ paper from ya?” Hank said disbelievingly. “You’re gonna throw away a whole life together over that?”

“Of course not,” she said.

“Then what coulda possessed ya?” Hank persisted, clearly stymied at her behavior.

“The situation is very complicated, Hank,” Michaela told him. “There’s far more to it than I told you.”

“Do ya love him?” he said suddenly, apparently unimpressed by her justification. The question startled and disturbed her, and she was silent for several moments before answering.
“Yes,” she whispered finally.

“Then don’t let what happened between ya ruin it,” he advised soberly. “Sully and me got our differences, but one thing I know for sure is that he loves ya. The two o’ ya belong together. There’s gonna be bumps along the road your whole life long, Michaela—some of ’em might even seem like mountains. But ya just gotta find a way to get over the hurdles, and keep your eyes on what really counts.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “Don’t let Sully become a regret,” he added softly.

He cocked an eyebrow at her, then turned and strolled away, leaving her staring after him.

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Hank’s words seemed to linger in the air as he walked away from her. Certainly, he had given her food for thought. The saloon keeper could be blunt—even coarse—but he also seemed to possess a generous measure of common sense. Perhaps she had been too quick to dismiss his advice earlier. It was true that being honest with Sully had not yielded the outcome that Hank had predicted, or that she had prayed for. But perhaps the saloon owner had a clearer view of the situation than Michaela herself, even though she had only shared a small fraction of it with him. Perhaps he was right—that she was giving up too soon, abandoning a future that might still be possible.

She needed more time to think. But it would certainly help if she could finally rid herself of this persistent headache. Some chamomile tea might help—it was soothing to the stomach and relaxing for the nerves. Unfortunately, she didn’t have any in the clinic.

She would get some at Loren’s, Michaela decided. Still thinking about what Hank had said, she headed toward the mercantile.

MY JOURNAL
Wednesday, 28 March, 1870

Too restless to remain in bed, I rose early, dressing and making my way silently through the clinic to the examination room. The building was quiet—both Michaela’s ma and Brendan apparently still asleep. It didn’t surprise me—I figured society folks like that rarely—if ever—saw a sunrise; no doubt being used to laying in bed till half the day was gone.

There was no sound from Michaela’s room either, but I was glad about that. Hopefully she was getting the rest she needed. A ghost of concern still lingered in my mind at how unwell she had looked the night before. I wondered if possibly she was coming down with something, apart from her injured ankle or the cut on her knee. Well, if that was the case, then she’d have her own devoted ‘nurse’ right here. I would pamper her, spoil her, do whatever I could to make sure she knew how much she was loved and cherished.

The first thing I intended to do was make sure she ate something nourishing, to build up her strength. She’d barely touched her supper the previous evening, and I had no idea when she’d eaten last. I would fetch breakfast for her from Grace’s, then watch her like a hawk to make certain she ate every bite. I didn’t want to treat her like a child, but I had to be firm. I might not have recovered all my memories of the past, but there was one thing about Michaela I knew all too well: she would work her fingers to the bone taking care of her loved ones or her patients, but when it came to her own needs, more often that not, she would neglect herself. But not this time, if I had anything to do with it. She was going to take it easy, if I had to strap her to the bed to make sure she got her rest.

Twenty minutes later I returned to the clinic with her breakfast tray. I carried it to her door and raised my hand to knock, then thought better of it, not wanting to disturb her if she was still sleeping. She needed the rest as much as she needed food. Instead, I eased open the door and stepped inside.

I caught sight of her—coppery hair scattered over the pillow, and her lashes thick and smoky against her pale cheeks—and all the breath seemed to go out of me. Her beauty was enough to stop my heart. She looked so delicate, so fragile—arousing all my most protective instincts. I thought of all the hours and days
she had tirelessly spent taking care of me without complaint, and I wanted to do the same for her. I wanted to shower her with the same love and tenderness that she’d given me in such abundance—not just now, but for the rest of my life. I just thanked God and the spirits that I would have the chance.

I set the tray outside, then returned to the bed, hunching down so that my face was close to hers. I reached out and gently stroked her hair. My touch was enough to rouse her, and she stirred and yawned, finally opening those amazing green and amber eyes. It took a moment for her vision to clear and focus; then she saw my face and smiled.

“Sully,” she said softly, lifting her hand to caress my cheek. I laced my fingers through hers.

“Morning,” I said, returning her smile. “How’s your ankle feel?” With my other hand I reached down to gently caress her leg through the blanket.

Experimentally she moved her foot beneath my hand, wincing just a little. “It still aches, but it’s better, I think,” she said.

“Good,” I replied. “And I’m here to make sure you get plenty of rest, so it keeps on getting better.”

“I’m really fine, Sully—you needn’t fuss,” she demurred, pulling herself up into a sitting position with my help. I plumped up her pillows and tucked in the blanket around her.

“You going to spoil my fun?” I asked indulgently. “Here I was looking forward to pampering you within an inch of your life.”

She looked back at me impishly. “Well, far be it from me to deprive you of that pleasure,” she said.

“It’s a tough job, but somebody’s got to do it,” I teased back. I stood up, and went out in the hall to get her tray. “I brought your breakfast,” I said as I carried it inside. “Grace really outdid herself. There’s eggs, sausage, hot biscuits with apply jelly, and coffee—or I can make you tea, if you’d rather,” I added. I was about to lay the tray across her lap, but stopped when I saw her face. The slight color had vanished from her cheeks, and her pallor had a greenish tinge to it.

“What is it, Michaela?” I asked quickly. She’d started sweating, and she averted her face from the tray as if the odor of the food bothered her.

“I’m sorry, Sully,” she said faintly after a moment. “I’m afraid I’m not very hungry. Could—could you take it away, please?” She was looking greener by the second and I hastily put the tray outside. Quickly I went to the washstand and poured cool water from the ewer into the china basin, then brought the basin and a washcloth to Michaela’s bedside. Dampening the cloth in the water, I knelt down beside her and gently sponged her face.

“I was afraid maybe you were getting sick, when you wouldn’t eat last night,” I said softly. I pressed my lips to her forehead, and was relieved to find it cool. “No fever,” I said. “Does anything else hurt you, or is it just an upset stomach?”

She gave me a weak smile. “No pain—just some nausea. It’s already starting to go away.”

“Good,” I said, kissing her cheek.

“How did you know what was wrong with me?” she added after a moment.

“Well,” I said, continuing to blot her face with the cloth. “You couldn’t stand the smell of food, you’re white as a sheet, and you’re sweating. I’ve been on the other side of that green face—it ain’t hard to read the signs.” I smiled at her sympathetically.

“I really am all right—I don’t want you to worry,” Michaela tried to protest.

“Michaela, it’s all right to admit you’re sick. You don’t got to put on an act for my sake. Don’t you know that all I want to do is take care of you?”

She attempted to smile again, but her eyes were shadowed with guilt. “Sully—you’re being so kind, but I truly don’t deserve it.”
“What are you talking about? Of course you deserve it,” I said.

“No,” she insisted. “I don’t.”

“Michaela, will you please stop trying to be so brave? I know you’re used to being the doctor, but you’re only human, just like the rest of us, and sometimes you get sick. Let me take care of you for once.”

“It’s not that,” she ventured, unconsciously wadding the edge of the sheet in her fingers.

“Then what?” I asked.

She looked down at her lap, as if embarrassed to meet my eyes. “Sully I’m so ashamed,” she said, her voice nearly inaudible.

“Michaela, I don’t understand. What could you possibly have to be ashamed about?”

She finally lifted her chin and looked at me. “Remember last night, when you made your ‘confession’ to me?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said slowly, having no idea what she could be getting at.

“Well, I have a confession to make too,” she admitted reluctantly. “I’m not sick—at least not the way you think. I—I’m—suffering what seem to be the lingering effects of—a hangover.”

“ Beg your pardon?” I said, convinced I must not have heard her right.

“I have a hangover—or what’s left of one,” she repeated, a flush of embarrassment putting some color back in her pale cheeks. “The night before last, after I left you in the clinic, I ran into Hank. He saw I was upset, and he persuaded me to go back to his room with him to talk.”

“ His room?” I repeated ominously.

“It was entirely innocent,” she said hastily. “Hank was just trying to make me feel better, and spare me the embarrassment of being seen in the saloon. He was genuinely trying to help, Sully,” she added earnestly. “Unfortunately, he thought the way to do that was to offer me whiskey.”

“He got you drunk?!” I said sharply, anger uncoiling inside me.

“Sully, please—don’t be angry at Hank,” she said anxiously. “I was responsible. It was my choice to drink.”

“Maybe so, Michaela, but Hank took advantage. He saw you were vulnerable and he used that,” I argued. “I’m going to have it out with him right now.” I started to get to my feet.

“Sully, don’t!” she pleaded, putting out her hand to grasp my sleeve. “It wasn’t like that. Hank’s methods may have been misguided, but he meant well. He was a gentleman.”

“A ‘gentleman?’” I echoed cynically. She dropped her eyes briefly, conceding the point.

“Well—he did nothing inappropriate,” she modified her statement. “Actually, he was very kind—for Hank,” she added. “He didn’t pry, but he offered to listen if I wanted to talk.”

“And what exactly did you tell him?” I asked.

“Nothing specific, Sully—I promise you,” she answered. “You know I’d never violate your confidence—even intoxicated as I was. I simply said that you’d seen something you weren’t meant to, which nearly resulted in you learning something about your condition that I’d been keeping from you, out of concern for your health.”

“Actually, you may be interested to know that Hank spoke up on your behalf,” she added. “More than that, he advised that I be honest with you. It was partly due to Hank that I finally decided to have you read
the telegram, so that you’d know the truth about us.”

Though a small core of anger still smoldered inside me—I wasn’t completely convinced that Hank’s intentions had been on the up and up—I slowly began to relax. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I could see how absurd it was. My correct and proper Michaela, respected town doctor, hoisting drinks with the owner and proprietor of the local saloon and brothel! The irony of Hank giving advice on love and relationships, also didn’t escape me. My lips twitched as I tried to suppress a grin.

“So I got Hank Lawson to thank for us getting back together?” I said, attempting to look severe, but not succeeding.

Michaela raised her eyebrows at me. “I think you know better than that,” she said.

I leaned over and kissed her deeply. “I guess I do,” I whispered, smiling at her gently as I drew away. “So,” I added after a pause, feeling a little devilish. “What was it like, knocking back a few with Hank?”

“Oh, Sully, don’t tease me—I feel mortified enough as it is,” she implored.

“No need,” I said, my eyes softening as I gazed at her. “You been through so much, Michaela, because of me—no wonder you were looking for something to take away the pain. I’m just sorry you had to turn to Hank because I upset you.”

She reached out to stroke my cheek again, staring intently into my eyes. “Sully, we said we were going to put all that behind us. I don’t want you brooding about it anymore.”

“I know what we said,” I acknowledged. “But it’s because of me you’re lying here sick, it because of me you fell and sprained your ankle…”

“Well?” she said.

“Well, what?” I asked, caught off-guard.

“Aren’t you going to take the blame for contracting pneumonia and getting shot, as well?” she said. “Since you seem to be assuming the responsibility for everything that’s gone wrong since all of this began.” Her tone was reproving, but there was more than a hint of humor and even mischief in her eyes.

“You’re saying I’m being foolish,” I said sheepishly.

“A bit,” she replied, toying with a lock of my hair.

“Point taken,” I conceded. “It’s just—I hate to see you hurting or sick, Michaela.”

“I know,” she said softly. “And I love you for it. But I brought this on myself, Sully. Suffering the unpleasant after-effects will be a potent reminder to me never to make the same mistake again.”

“Maybe so,” I acknowledged. “But you still wouldn’t be in this fix if I hadn’t—“

“Sully,” she broke in, putting her fingers to my lips. “Hush.”

I took advantage of the opportunity to kiss her fingers. “I can do that,” I said as she smiled at me. But then I looked at her soberly.

“There’s something else bothering me, though,” I said. “I’m worried about you, Michaela. You said you were drinking with Hank night before last, but you’re still feeling the effects. A hangover shouldn’t last this long. I’m afraid you might really be sick. I wish we had another doctor in town who could take a look at you,” I added, my brow furrowed with worry.

“Sully, it’s true that I’ve never had—this type of problem before,” she said. “But I can assure you that nothing else is wrong with me. I’m sure it’s just that I didn’t have the chance to rest and recover yesterday, so the effects have lingered.

“I’ll be all right,” she repeated persuasively. “After all, we have guests coming for dinner tonight. I certainly expect to be recovered by then.”
“Speaking of that,” I said as she reminded me. “I don’t want you pushing yourself, Michaela. I think it’s too soon for you to be entertaining people—even if one of them is your ma. I’m sure she’d agree with me. You need more rest, and you need to get something in your stomach. I know it will be hard to keep it down,” I added as I saw her wary expression. “But you got to eat, Sweetheart, if you’re going to get stronger and feel like yourself again.”

“I’m so touched by how you worry about me, Sully,” she said, her eyes gentle. “Very well. I’ll do my best to eat a little—for you. But something light to start with, please—such as tea and toast?”

“Your wish is my command,” I said, giving her a kiss.

“And then perhaps we can finish our conversation from last night?” she suggested.

“It’s a deal,” I said, sealing it with another kiss. “Back in a flash,” I promised, then headed out for my second trip to Grace’s.

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Sometime later, she was making fairly good progress with her tea, and accepting small bites of toast that I’d break off and feed to her. I interspersed each morsel with a kiss or two, which slowed things down quite a bit, but neither of us minded.

Finally she indicated that she didn’t want any more, and I was satisfied that she’d eaten enough, at least for now. I cleared things away, adding her plate and cup to the dishes on the tray outside. Then I returned and climbed into bed beside her.

“You know, we never settled the question of supper tonight,” I reminded her, slipping my arm around her shoulders. “I still believe that you need to give yourself another day of rest before you wear yourself out entertaining folks. I’m sure your ma wouldn’t want you overdoing if you were feeling poorly. And neither would Brendan, if he’s any kind of a gentleman.”

“He appears to be very much a gentleman,” Michaela commented. “And you’re correct—Mother wouldn’t expect me to entertain if were ill. But I’m feeling better now, Sully. You’re were right—the tea and toast did help.

“And I want to do this,” she added. “For one thing, I need to have a long talk with Mother—about us and about the wedding. But I also want to make Brendan feel welcome. After all, he’s the brother of a dear friend, and he did my mother a great kindness by accompanying her on her journey out here. He’s certainly entitled to our hospitality, Sully.”

“Well, you know how you feel, and you know your own mind,” I said reluctantly. “And I know that once that mind of yours is set, there ain’t no changing it. But if I see you looking peaked again, or in pain, I’m going to end the evening and send everybody back to the clinic,” I added firmly. “I ain’t giving in on that, Michaela.”

“Agreed,” she said. We lay quietly together for a bit, then she said, “Shall I resume where I left off about William?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “But first, Michaela, there’s something I got to know.”

“Of course,” she said.

“What does your ma have against me?” I asked. “I mean, she didn’t come right out and say it, but I got a pretty clear feeling that she doesn’t have the highest opinion of me. And that she would have been a lot happier if you’d picked William.”

I could see by her expression that she recognized what I was talking about, and felt bad about it.

“I’m sorry, Sully—my mother is not the most tactful person,” she apologized. “In fact, she’s always been quite outspoken about her opinions, and her preferences,” she added. “It’s true—my mother was quite fond of William,” she admitted. “In large measure, I’m sure, because he respected and supported me in my treatment of her illness. And I suppose she also felt that since we were both physicians, and came
“A lot better match than tying yourself to somebody like me,” I said.

“Only because she didn’t truly understand you,” Michaela hastened to say, anxious not to hurt me or make me feel inadequate. “Your background, your way of life—it was alien to her. She had nothing in her experience with which to compare it.

“But that doesn’t mean she didn’t like you,” she added. “On the contrary, Sully—Mother recognized that you cared a great deal for me—you proved that to her by crossing the country to come after me. She knows the countless things you’ve done for me, the times you’ve saved my life... And she knows that you’ve always respected me—as a woman and as a doctor.”

“She’d just prefer it if I wore a suit and went to work in an office every day,” I said drily.

“Frankly, yes,” Michaela admitted. “And it wouldn’t hurt if we chose to live in Boston, either. But none of that makes any difference, Sully,” she added earnestly. “I’m not my mother. I don’t share her views, and I certainly don’t intend to follow any blueprint she may have drawn up for my life.

“I love you, I love the children, and I love Colorado Springs,” she said passionately. “You’re the man I’m going to marry, and this beautiful land is where we’re going to live and raise our children. Mother will have to accept that.”

“And if she doesn’t?” I asked.

“Then it will be her loss,” Michaela whispered, kissing me tenderly. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me, Mr. Sully, come what may.”

“Thank God,” I said huskily, and took her into my arms.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Michaela ascended the porch of the mercantile and stepped through the entryway into the dimmer interior of the store.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to her shadowy surroundings after the brightness outside, and in those fleeting seconds she nearly collided with Sully, who was headed out. Stunned, Michaela stood rooted to the floor. She had known it was highly likely that she would encounter Sully in town at some point; however, she hadn’t dreamed it would be so soon, or in this place. For some reason, the last place she had expected to find Sully was in the mercantile.

But why shouldn’t he be here, said a voice in her mind. She herself had told Sully that he and Loren were friends now. The news had obviously served to lessen or eliminate any awkwardness or discomfort Sully might have felt in encountering Loren again—thus explaining his presence.

All these thoughts flitted through Michaela’s mind in a fraction of an instant, even as she was startled into speaking Sully’s name as she suddenly came face to face with him.

Sully looked equally stupefied to see her, but he recovered himself quickly.

“Dr. Mike,” he said politely, his eyes remote.

Loren was making some remark to Michaela, but his words were muffled by the thick tension filling the air between Sully and herself. She stared at him, mesmerized by the blue of his eyes—their color a deep and dramatic sapphire today, reminding her of the dark, white-capped sea off the coast of Maine. A sea that was wild and untamed, much as she suspected Sully’s spirit to be—yearning to soar, unfettered by the trappings of civilization—or domestication. Even if this terrible rift didn’t already exist between them, Michaela suddenly wondered if she had the right to clip Sully’s wings—to force him into the cage of a quiet, domestic life. Perhaps that was part of the reason why he’d erased his memory of her—because he saw her as the “jailer” who would lock him into a life he didn’t want or couldn’t accept.
Belatedly Michaela became aware that Loren was looking at her expectantly, awaiting a response to his comment. With an effort, she replayed his words in her mind.

(“Hey, Dr. Mike,” Loren had said. “I was just telling Sully here how good he looks—you done a great job.”)

The last thing Michaela wanted to hear was Loren flattering her about how well she’d taken care of Sully, since she had failed so dismally in her attempts to help him regain his past. She looked away uncomfortably. She was sure that Loren’s words of praise for her sounded equally bitter to Sully’s ears. Nonetheless, Loren—ignorant of the emotional turmoil between them—was expecting her to say something. She managed to summon a facsimile of a smile.

“That’s very kind, Loren.” Her eyes were drawn back to Sully. “But Sully is—very strong,” she added softly. “That’s what really helped him to recover.”

Loren said something else, but it was lost on Michaela. She stared at Sully, every fiber of her being yearning to touch him—to be touched by him. She wanted with all her heart to beg him to take her back—to tell him she had been wrong to return his ring, and that she would spend her entire life making it up to him if he would only give her another chance.

But he had said he couldn’t trust her. And without trust, love could not flourish, but only wither and die. To make a commitment to one another and then see that relationship turn to ashes, would be worse than never having loved at all. If that was the only future she and Sully could hope for, then truly, all was lost.

Michaela could feel Sully’s discomfort as palpably as she could her own, and thus it was no surprise when he suddenly said good-bye to Loren. He looked at her once more and she could see her pain reflected in his eyes.

“Michaela,” he said quietly, softly brushing by her as he went out the door.

Michaela’s crestfallen eyes followed his retreating figure as he crossed the porch.

“What can I get you, Dr. Mike?” she dimly heard Loren ask. She pulled her gaze from Sully, trying to recall what had brought her here, and was unsurprised to discover it had gone completely out of her head.

(“DON’T LET SULLY BECOME A REGRET,”) Hank’s parting words echoed suddenly in her mind, refusing to be denied. She hesitated for a fraction of an instant, then mumbled an excuse to Loren and ran outside just as Sully was stepping into the street.

“Sully! Don’t leave!” she said.

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The adrenaline that had fueled her impulsive act drained out of her suddenly, and Michaela approached Sully much more slowly and hesitantly. He was watching her, his face a neutral mask revealing nothing of what he was feeling. For a moment her mind was a blank, and her lips felt numb, unable to form words. She feared that she would make a fool of herself in front of him, in addition to everything else she’d done wrong. But what did she have left to lose?

“Are you all right?” she managed after a moment.

“No,” he said frankly. Instantly her eyes were alert, studying him for signs of illness. But in the next breath he added, “No more ‘all right’ than you are.” And she understood. However his eyes and tone had softened slightly, and she realized that whatever else he might be feeling, at least he didn’t appear to be angry any more.

Scraping up her courage, she said, “You didn’t return to the clinic.” And she listened in resignation as she heard his answer.

“I—couldn’t, Michaela. Not after…”
“I know.” Her whispered assent told him she understood this as well. However, in a slightly stronger voice she added, “Where are you staying?”

Briefly he explained his intention to rebuild his lean-to, and his need for supplies to perform the task and set up camp, which had brought him to the general store. Michaela thought about him being back out in the wilderness, sleeping in the cold again after having become accustomed to the warmth and comfort of the clinic. She didn’t truly believe that exposure to the elements would be harmful to him at this stage of his recovery—nonetheless her oath as a doctor compelled her to say something, even if the chances of Sully suffering a relapse were infinitesimal. She also recognized that it was a transparent attempt to keep him from leaving, but if it allowed her to talk to him a little longer, it was worth a try. She started to caution him about his recent recovery from pneumonia, but he cut her off.

“We both know I’m well now,” he said quietly, unfazed and unfooled by her attempt to waylay him. “You—” He hesitated. “You take care of yourself—and the kids. Good-bye, Michaela.”

(“Don’t let Sully become a regret,”) Hank whispered in her ear.

“Sully, please!” she said hastily. “Please wait a moment.”

Everything about him—his expression, the tension in his posture—told her of the torment she was inflicting on him by prolonging their encounter. Though it wasn’t necessary for her to read his emotions—the same pain was coursing through her at the alienation between them.

“Michaela—” he ventured, his eyes almost pleading with her to release them both from this confrontation. Part of her wanted to comply—to run away from the hurt that suffused her mind and heart. But a greater, even stronger part of her was determined to try once more to reach Sully. It might very well be too late, but she no longer cared about that. Her pride had crumbled—there was nothing left to lose and nothing to stand in her way—except Sully himself.

And suddenly she thought of a legitimate excuse she could offer to ask him to come with her to the clinic.

“I know how—difficult this is . . . for both of us,” she ventured hesitantly. “But I need to talk to you, Sully—it’s a medical reason.”

She saw she had captured his attention, if only momentarily, and she went on to explain the necessity of removing his stitches. “Once I’ve performed this final procedure, I won’t need to . . . trouble you again,” she added, to prove to him that she had no further designs on him—or expectations. In response, Sully confided that he had intended to ask her for his weapon and tomahawk, and she readily offered to return them, sensing that he was weakening. A moment later he reluctantly agreed to accompany her, and they made their way to the clinic.

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Michaela worked quietly and efficiently. Before she knew it, she was extracting the last stitch and the simple medical procedure was completed.

She had hoped to open some kind of dialogue with Sully as she tended to him, but inspiration hadn’t come. Now he was about to leave again, with nothing more settled between them than when they had encountered each other at Loren’s. Michaela felt a stab of desperation. How did she begin to tell him what was in her heart? Even more, how did she know that he would even be willing to listen?

(“There’s gonna be bumps along the road your whole life long, Michaela . . . But ya just gotta find a way to get over the hurdles, and keep your eyes on what really counts . . .”)

Hank had been right. It wasn’t the harsh words that had passed between them—or even the doubts about trust—that were important. All that mattered, in the end, was the love. If somehow she and Sully could find that love again, despite all the difficulties and complications from his loss of memory . . . But clearly, it was up to her to take the first step.

“Finished,” she said, coming around the examination table to face Sully. “The wound looks excellent,” she added. “Almost completely healed. Once your hair grows out a little more, you’ll never know anything happened.”
“Good—thanks,” he responded, regarding her politely. “Can I have my weapons now?”

“Of course,” she replied, moving to fetch them from her medicine cabinet, even as she frantically wondered what she could say to Sully to stall him a little longer.

He accepted the knife and tomahawk from her. “Feels good to have these back,” he said. She watched as he sheathed the knife, then spun and caught the tomahawk with one practiced flick of his wrist. The sight was so familiar to her—so quintessentially “Sully”—that she could almost forget for a moment that he wasn’t his old self; that they weren’t the same two people they’d been merely weeks ago.

But she was reminded all too acutely of how much everything had changed by his next words.

“Michaela—I know I owe you—for everything you done for me,” he said, the words plainly difficult for him. “I’ve got some change comin’ from what I paid Loren for my supplies. I don’t know if it will be enough to cover my debt to you, but I promise that when I get my next month’s salary, I’ll pay you in full.”

He had been looking away from her, unconsciously toying with the fringe of his buckskin coat, which he’d tossed across the examination table. However as he finished speaking, he stole a glance at her face. Guilt immediately shadowed his features as he saw the expression of hurt in her eyes.

Michaela felt as if he’d struck her. How could he, she thought. How could he suggest paying her, as if they were strangers to one another—as if what was between them amounted to nothing more than a business arrangement? Surely he must know how much that hurt her. Perhaps it was too late for them after all, she concluded dully. Hank had also talked about the “writing on the wall . . .” Perhaps Sully was telling her that the time had come to accept the inevitable.

She turned pained eyes on him. “Sully, I could never accept money from you,” she said, her heart constricting as she spoke the words. “It would be like—like charging my own children!” She took a breath. “Sully—everything I did for you, I did out of love.”

His eyes darkened still more with remorse. “I understand that,” he said quietly. “But—the way things stand between us now . . . well, it just don’t seem right for me to take advantage . . .”

STOP! she wanted to scream at him. Stop talking about us as if we don’t matter to one another—as if we don’t love each other! I can’t bear it . . . But aloud, all she could manage was, “I can’t accept money. I can’t. Please—don’t ask me.”

“All right,” he said after a long hesitation. “I don’t want to be the cause of makin’ you feel worse. I know I hurt you enough as it is.”

Pain flooded through her again at his answer. She was silent.

“Guess I’d better be on my way—Loren probably has my order ready by now,” Sully added awkwardly after a moment, looking desperate to bring this painful interview to a close. Dashed by their exchange over money, Michaela was inclined to agree that perhaps it was best if he did leave, after all. Prolonging this discussion could do no good—all they would accomplish would be to hurt each other more.

But even as she started to concede defeat, a stubborn voice inside her shouted, NO! You can’t give up! Not yet. Not if you love him . . .

She thought again of Sully out in the wilderness, sleeping under the coldly flickering stars. She saw him lying alone in his bedroll, and thought of how she would never know what it felt like to be “loved” by him—soul *and* body . . . that they would never experience the ultimate joy that came of consummating their union. Never would they share a bed, a life . . .

Without even knowing where the thought had come from, Michaela said suddenly, “Sully—why don’t you stay at the new homestead?”

He looked sober. “Michaela—“

“It’s a perfect solution,” she spoke again, before he could continue. “It’s yours, Sully. It belongs to you.” If they couldn’t be together, at least she would know that he was warm, and safe.

“It belonged to us,” he said quietly.
A dart of pain lanced her anew. This time she had been the one guilty of unconsciously hurting him. After a long hesitation she said, “Sully, you built a beautiful house. You deserve to reap the benefits of all your hard labor.”

He had been looking down, but now he lifted his head. His face wore an expression of infinite sorrow. “We both know I don’t remember buildin’ the house,” he said slowly. “But one thing I *do* know—I didn’t build it to live there alone.” Michaela looked into the depths of his eyes and caught a shimmer of tears, even as she was barely able to refrain from weeping herself. “I’m sorry, Michaela—I just can’t stay there. It would be . . . too hard,” he added.

She swallowed over the lump in her throat. “I—respect your feelings,” she managed.

He took a deep breath. “I really should be going now,” he repeated. He drew on his coat, but then remained standing by the examination table, as if there was something he’d left unfinished. A weak ray of hope blossomed in Michaela’s heart. Perhaps he wasn’t quite ready to give up on them either. If they just had a little more time together, perhaps Sully would open his heart to her, and allow her to express her feelings of love for him . . .

“If you feel you need to return to the woods, I won’t try to stop you,” she said, recklessly taking one more chance, one more gamble. “But would you at least let me help you transport your supplies out there? We can take the wagon.”

She saw his apprehension. “That ain’t such a good idea, Michaela—“

“You’ll get there much sooner than if you tried to go on foot,” she rushed to point out. “You said time is of the essence . . .”

“That’s true,” he admitted.

“Please,” she insisted, daring to push a little harder. “We needn’t see each other afterwards. But—it would make me feel better—to know you reached the campsite safely.”

Even before Sully agreed, she sensed that she had persuaded him.

“It *would* be quicker than walking,” he conceded. “All right,” he gave in. “I’m grateful for your help.”

Michaela breathed an inward sigh of relief. “I’ll get the wagon from the livery and meet you at Loren’s,” she said.

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“We keep meaning to talk about William and then getting distracted,” I observed presently.

“So it seems,” Michaela acknowledged, smiling up at me from her place in the circle of my arm. “Perhaps it’s because I’d far rather talk about us,” she added in a low, intimate voice.

I could feel my pulse quicken. “I’d just as soon not even talk,” I said, my voice hoarse with desire. Unable to resist the invitation of her soft, sensual lips, I covered her mouth with mine. However, as I reluctantly pulled myself away from her several moments later I added, “I guess we should talk about this, though. Get it all out in the open and then put it aside forever.”

A hint of concern touched her eyes. “Sully—you’re not still bothered by the fact that I had a friendship with William, are you?” she asked. “I promise you—there’s no need to be.”

“Maybe not on your end—but from what Brendan said yesterday, it sounds like maybe his brother is still carrying a torch for you,” I remarked.
“I seriously doubt that,” said Michaela. “We haven’t seen each other in nearly two years, nor has there been any communication between us.”

A man in love don’t need much encouragement,” I pointed out. “Just because you chose to go back to Colorado, don’t mean that he hasn’t been dreaming of you since—maybe even hoping he’s still got a chance.”

“Then his hopes would be futile,” she said calmly. “Sully, when I said good-bye to William, it was for good. He understood that. And to his credit, he accepted defeat very gracefully. He wouldn’t even let me explain my reasons—he simply wished me well.”

“Sounds honorable enough,” I allowed.

“But you still feel uneasy,” she surmised.

I sighed. “A little, yeah,” I admitted. “Maybe it would help if I understood better what happened between the two of you.”

“As well as what happened between the two of us,” she reminded me. “The—transformation of our relationship was an equally important part of the events that transpired in Boston.”

“You don’t mind—helping me recall it?” I asked hesitantly.

“Oh course not,” she said immediately. “All I want is to help you, Sully. You already have a few bits and pieces—and I’ll gladly fill in the rest.”

“Thanks for putting up with me,” I told her, grateful that she understood my need for reassurance.

“There’s no need for thanks,” she said softly. “I love you—and I intend to keep reminding you of that every day for the rest of our lives. And I’ll tell you whatever I can to help you to restore the missing pieces of your past.

“Sully, I’ll do whatever is necessary for you to feel secure and confident again,” she vowed to me earnestly. “You have only to ask.”

“Thanks,” I said softly, kissing her again. After a pause I said kind of sheepishly, “I guess—I’m asking.”

I could read the message of love in her eyes, and she clasped her hand tightly over mine.

“Where did I leave off?” she said.

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“Come on, Michaela—you’re making that up,” I said, convinced that she’d slipped a little fib in with the truth just to keep things lively or make sure I was paying attention.

Her eyes were amused. “I swear to you that I’m not,” she said innocently.

“You and me—ate *snails?*” I repeated. “Michaela, that’s more preposterous than the thought of you drinking with Hank!”

“Perhaps,” she acknowledged. “Nonetheless, Sully, escargot is considered a great delicacy—and I have to admit, I’m quite fond of them.”

I shook my head, marveling. “Rich people paying to eat snails,” I mused, incredulous. “And your ma thinks *I’m* strange.”

She chuckled. “Absurd as it sounds, dining and dancing at an elegant restaurant, my favorite hors d’oeuvres and champagne . . . it was all part of the children’s master plan for you to court me and win my heart. Of course, you already had my heart,” she added softly. “I just needed assistance to see clearly. I owe the children a debt of gratitude for helping you to show me the truth.”
“And I owe them for showing me how to behave with society folks,” I said. “I can tell you for a fact that I never would have been willing to put on a fancy suit, or learn to waltz—or eat snails!—if it weren’t for me wanting to please you.”

“You certainly did that,” she said. “I’ll never forget the evening at my mother’s house when you suddenly appeared for dinner dressed so elegantly. You were so handsome and impressive!” Her eyes glowed with the memory.

“I was, was I?” I asked, coloring a little.

“Oh yes,” Michaela said emphatically. “Mother was impressed as well, after she got over her initial shock. Particularly when you quoted the adage, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ As I was helping her upstairs later, she told me she had no idea you were so well-versed in ancient proverbs.”

Again I had the sensation of a memory emerging full-blown into my mind. “I got another confession to make about that,” I admitted. “The night those friends of your ma’s threw that ball for her birthday, your ma brought me a tuxedo of your pa’s that she’d had altered for me. She convinced me that I should be thinking of you, instead of myself—that it wasn’t fair for me to embarrass you by my appearance.”

“Mother!” Michaela fumed.

“Don’t be angry at her, Michaela,” I said. “She was right. I was in a different world, with different rules. It was your ma who said it: ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’”

“I might have known there was more to it,” Michaela remarked drily. “Don’t misunderstand me, Sully—I’m thrilled that you’re recalling these events, but I’m still very sorry that my mother put you in such an awkward position.”

“She was looking out for you,” I said. “I can’t fault her for that. Fact is, I admire her for speaking up. Least I know where you get your stubbornness from,” I added slyly.

Michaela raised her eyebrows. “Stubbornness?” she repeated archly.

“That’s better,” she said.

“I’m still a little hazy about what else happened back then,” I said after a moment. “Did we do other things together?”

“Yes indeed,” she answered. “You took me to the opera, and we also attended some lectures of the Boston Medical Society.”

“Sounds romantic,” I remarked.

“Yes, the opera was very romantic,” she began.

“I meant the lectures,” I said, winking at her.

Her lips twitched. “I certainly realized that a medical lecture wasn’t your favorite way of spending time, but I felt we owed it to William after he’d been so kind to me and so helpful to Mother. I also respected him as a physician, and I confess that I wanted to hear him speak.”

“I understand that,” I said.

“The first time we attended, William lectured. However the second time, William was scheduled to address the gathering, but at the last minute, he yielded the floor to me so that I could present my article on dandelion root tea as a treatment for hepatitis, and how it cured my mother.”

“The article I sent you by telegraph,” I spoke up, as the memory came to me.

“Exactly,” Michaela said.
The recollection of that particular day was growing clearer in my mind. “I recall that a lot of the doctors in that meeting weren’t too happy about attending a lecture given by a woman doctor,” I said.

She nodded in acknowledgement. “A common reaction, and one with which I’d become all too familiar,” she noted. “Many of the physicians present immediately walked out in protest, and I imagine that even the ones who remained were skeptical.”

“But I bet you convinced them,” I said confidently.

“Well, perhaps I changed one or two minds,” she allowed. “At the very least, it was very exhilarating for me to address such an august gathering.”

“They were lucky to have you,” I told her firmly.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at me gently. “I treasure the compliment, even if you are a bit prejudiced. William was very complimentary as well,” she added after a pause. “However—“ She broke off, glancing at me guiltily.

“Tell me,” I encouraged.

She looked reluctant, but finally she continued, “Both William and I were feeling excited and triumphant afterwards—”

“That’s natural,” I said.

She still looked uncomfortable. “Yes, well . . . We were very excited, as I said. And in the exhilaration of the moment, William—“

“Proposed to you,” I finished.

“You remember?” she said quickly.

“It’s starting to come back to me,” I replied. Actually, that wasn’t the whole truth—or even half of it. I remembered now—all too clearly. How I went to join Michaela after she left the stage, and came upon her and William standing together in the wings. As soon as I realized I was eavesdropping on a private moment, I knew I should leave. But I couldn’t make myself move. I heard it all.

(“You were splendid!” he said. “I’m so proud of you.” Michaela stared up at him, eyes shining.

“Since my father died, I haven’t had anyone believe in me the way you do,” she said. “Except Sully.”

“Do you love him?” William asked, staring into her eyes.

“Oh, William,” she breathed.

“Has he asked for your hand?” William persisted.

“William, really—“ Michaela said, trying to maintain propriety.

“Because I love you and I *am* asking for your hand!” he declared.

“Oh, William!” she repeated. “But I have a whole life waiting for me in Colorado—“

“You have a whole life waiting for you here in Boston!” he said passionately. “We could be partners in every sense of the word—in work, in love—*true* partners!—do you love me?”

Michaela’s eyes were locked on his. “There were moments when I thought it—moments when I was sure of it—and moments I wasn’t sure of anything at all, such as this one . . .” Her voice trailed away.

“Take all the time that you need,” he said gently. “To be sure. My proposal stands. My vow . . . is forever.”

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As Michaela gazed at him, I slowly walked away.)

“I was waiting for you when you and William came outside,” I said, picking up the thread of the story. “I got to confess, I wasn’t too polite.”

“You were upset,” she said softly.

(“There you are,” she said as I approached them.

“Wasn’t she grand?” William said to me. I put my hand on Michaela’s arm.

“Excuse us,” I said brusquely. I drew her away and fixed my eyes on her. “You going to marry him?” I said without preamble.

“I beg your pardon!” she said.

“No begging necessary—just the truth,” I demanded.

“You’ve obviously been eavesdropping,” she accused.

“JUST the truth,” I insisted.

“Well it’s none of your business,” she said petulantly.

I stared at her. “Is that right?” I managed after a moment.

“That’s right!” she snapped.

I stared at her a moment longer, but there was nothing left to say—least as far as I could see. Finally I strode away, stripping off the hated suit coat as I went.)

“When I returned home a short while later, Mother and the children were waiting for me,” Michaela said quietly. “The children’s eyes looked so accusing. I knew without them saying anything that you’d been there.”

(“Hello, Mother,” Michaela said.

Elizabeth’s eyes were mild. “Hello, Dear,” she said, her arms around Brian and Colleen.

Michaela directed her gaze toward the children. “Hello,” she ventured. They looked away and didn’t speak. She sighed in resignation. “All right, where’s Sully?” she asked.

“He’s gone,” Matthew said flatly, from where he stood on the staircase.

Michaela looked up at him. “Did he say when he’d return?”

“Never,” said Brian.

“What?” she said quickly.

“He went home,” said Colleen.

“To Colorado?” Michaela asked.

“Yeah,” said Matthew coldly. “You remember Colorado?”

“When did he leave?” Michaela said swiftly.

“Michaela—“ her mother began in a discouraging tone.

“When?” she insisted.

“About an hour ago,” Colleen said quietly. Michaela gathered up her skirts and hastened out the
door, even as her mother tried to call her back.)

“The children were so angry with me,” Michaela said softly. “I suppose I couldn’t blame them. In their eyes, I was the cause of you leaving. They felt I drove you away.”

“I’m sorry I turned the kids against you,” I said. “I didn’t mean to. It’s just—I thought it was too late—that I’d lost you.”

“I confess I was put out with you,” Michaela said. “I thought you were running away, refusing to face me.”

“It just seemed like—you’d already made your mind up,” I confessed. “There didn’t seem no point to me staying . . .”

“I knew that as well, in my heart,” Michaela confessed in her turn. “And though I was annoyed with you, I was far more frightened of something else.”

“What’s that?” I asked softly.

“That I’d lost you,” she whispered.

(Michaela moved along the narrow aisle of the train, peering into each compartment and earning a few startled looks from other passengers as she searched for Sully. Without warning she came upon him, curled into a corner of the berth, the shade pulled down over one of the windows. As she appeared in the entry of the compartment, he sat up abruptly.

“What are you doing?” she said breathlessly.

“That’s pretty clear,” he answered.

“You’re just leaving?” she said accusingly.

“There’s nothing to stay for,” he countered.

“Without even saying good-bye?”

“Good-bye,” he said coldly.

“Why did you even *come* here?” she demanded.

“I told you.”

“Well, what’s the *real* reason?” she persisted.

“What do you care?” he shot back.

“I care!” she insisted.

He jumped to his feet. “Well, you sure didn’t look like it back there at that meeting!” he exclaimed, gesturing out the window.

“I’m asking you a question!” she pressed him.

“Why did I come?” he repeated.

“Yes, why?”

“Because,” he said.

“Because . . .?”

“Because I love you!” he burst out as the train lurched and she was driven into his arms. They stared at each other in shock for an instant, then she pulled away from him and fled down the aisle as he looked
after her helplessly.)

“Oh, Sully—I can only imagine how you must have felt on that long trip back to Colorado alone,” Michaela said gently.

“It seemed like a much longer trip going back than it did coming,” I admitted. “But I know it must have been hard for you, too.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I felt guilty and confused . . . And then, when I returned to the house, I had a conversation with Mother about you and William,” she added.

“I can just guess what she had to say,” I commented drily.

“It’s true that she praised William, and pointed out his many attributes,” Michaela conceded. “But . . .”

(“William’s a good man, Michaela,” said Elizabeth.

“Yes, he is,” she answered softly.

“And he respects you—both as a woman, and a professional.”

“Yes, he does.”

“What other man can you say that about?” her mother asked.

Michaela gazed at her. “Sully,” she said.

“He can’t give you a *complete* life,” Elizabeth objected.

“What do you mean by ‘complete?’” Michaela sighed.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” her mother retorted. “I mean a *life*—here in Boston—where you can be a doctor, and you can—”

“There are plenty of doctors in Boston, Mother!” Michaela protested.

“*And,*” her mother continued. “Where you can raise your children *properly.*”

“Well that depends on how you wish to define ‘properly,’” Michaela snapped.

“Michaela,” her mother said more reasonably. “I have nothing against your little town, your patients, your Indian friends . . .”

“I don’t love William, Mother!” she burst out.

“Love?” Elizabeth repeated skeptically. “Well, that never used to be an issue. When it came to making such important decisions—”

“As who I spend the rest of my life with?” Michaela cut in.

“Well, you may think that sounds callous,” her mother said. “I was taught that a good match—was more enduring than love.”

“Didn’t you love Father?” Michaela asked.

“Of course I loved your father,” Elizabeth said immediately. She paused. “But I had to choose from a . . . a small selection of men, at a . . . very specific time in my life. And that was Beacon Hill to Back Bay. Not Boston . . . to Colorado.

“I was twenty years old,” she went on, her eyes and voice softening. “Not a mature woman. Who knows her own mind . . .” She regarded Michaela tenderly.
“Will you visit again?” she asked. “Soon?”

Tears glimmered in Michaela’s eyes as she reached out to clasp her mother’s hand.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Soon.”

“I guess your ma understood a lot more than I gave her credit for,” I said respectfully.

“Yes, she did,” Michaela agreed fondly. “She couldn’t help but be influenced by her own upbringing and experience—but in the end, she realized that you were the only man who could make me happy.”

“I’m starting to like your ma,” I said. “And I think maybe her daughter is a lot more like her than she knows.”

“I know,” Michaela said softly. “I know.” She took a deep breath and brushed at the tears which had gathered in her eyes, then said, “My last duty—was to see William . . .”

(Michaela knocked on the door of William’s office and heard his voice bidding her to enter. She opened the door and crossed the threshold. William’s face brightened at her appearance. But as he caught sight of her expression, he slowly rose to his feet, the light going out of his eyes as resignation replaced his joy and expectation.

“When do you leave?” he asked quietly, without preamble.

“The next train leaves tomorrow morning,” Michaela said. She hesitated. “I feel I owe you an explanation . . .”

“No,” he answered. “There is no explanation for such matters. At least—none that I need to hear.”

Michaela extended her hand encased in a black lace glove. He stared down at it for a moment, then grasped it in both his own.

“Thank you,” she said tremulously. “For so many things . . .”

“I think—maybe I misjudged William, too,” I admitted. “Fact is, he was a good man.”

“Yes he was,” Michaela agreed. “The best. But—he wasn’t the man I loved.” She gazed at me passionately, tears still shimmering in her eyes. I reached out and softly caressed her cheek.

“What happened after that?” I asked after a pause.

“There’s not much left to tell,” Michaela replied, trying to collect herself. “The next day we caught the train to St. Louis, then three days after that, the stage to Colorado Springs. It was—a very long trip for me, as well,” she said. “I was so afraid that you wouldn’t be waiting for me when the journey reached its end . . .”

I swallowed over a lump in my throat.

“When the stage pulled into town, and we disembarked, you were nowhere to be seen,” she went on. “I was certain that my worst fear had come to pass—that you didn’t want me. And then, I felt Colleen’s hand on my back and I turned around—”

“And I was standing there, watching you,” I continued, as moved as Michaela by the recollection. “I was so relieved to see you—but terrified too. I’d been so scared that you’d never come back. Or that if you did, it would only be to pack up your things and go back to Boston for good.” I bit my lip. “I waited—to see what you would do. You started walking toward me—”

"And then you smiled at me,” she chimed in.

“You started to run, one hand holding that silly hat on your head . . .” I was grinning at her through the tears that had come to my own eyes.
“Then you swept me into your outstretched arms and spun me around,” Michaela said joyfully.

“And you said you loved me too,” I choked.

“And then we kissed,” she added, her voice low.

“Like this,” I answered huskily, my fingers gently gripping her shoulders as I pressed my lips to hers.

“I do love you, Sully—with all my heart!” she said a moment later, her voice breaking.

“I love you, too,” I vowed.

There was no further need for words. I drew her into my arms, and proved my adoration.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sully set a brisk but reasonable pace as they made their way into the woods. Ordinarily Michaela would have had little trouble keeping up with him, but the lingering effects of her hangover had sapped her energy. The lowering rays of the setting sun stabbed into her eyes, rekindling her headache, and her debilitated condition almost immediately caused her to tire and fall behind. Her face and neck were slick with perspiration, and her hair was slipping free of its pins—lank, oily strands sticking to her sweaty skin.

Yet she would have sooner died rather than confess her infirmity—and the reason for it—to Sully. Not only because of her embarrassment and shame at having allowed herself to fall into such a state, but because this expedition to Sully’s campsite was only happening due to her insistence. After pushing him to allow her to come along, she could hardly admit to him now that she was unequal to the demands of the journey.

Making a concerted effort to ignore her physical ailments, Michaela put her entire concentration into following Sully. Unable to lift her eyes to the punishing sun, she focused her gaze on the ground, glancing swiftly upward every so often to keep Sully in sight.

Infrequently Sully glanced behind him to ensure that she was keeping up. However, he didn’t let his eyes linger on her, for which Michaela was grateful. Not only was she embarrassed by her sweaty, disheveled state, but she didn’t want to give Sully any inkling of the hangover which still mortified her.

After an unknown length of time, which was probably only minutes but which felt infinitely longer to Michaela, Sully spoke.

“Watch your step through here,” he cautioned her. “There are a lotta exposed roots in these old trees. Not good footin’.”

Michaela noted Sully’s admonition, but didn’t feel particularly concerned. Forced to shield her sensitive eyes from the sun, she had been looking almost steadily downward, and was satisfied that she was taking sufficient care as she made her way along the rough path.

A few moments later, she had reason to rue her over-confidence.

“I’m managing all right,” she replied somewhat breathlessly to Sully’s warning. He turned to glance at her. It was difficult for her to read his expression, separated as they were by several yards. However she thought she could detect a look of longing in his eyes—maybe even affection. However in the next moment she berated herself, recognizing that she was no doubt attributing emotions to him that he didn’t truly feel. Just because she had convinced him to allow her to accompany him to the woods—just because she wanted his love and forgiveness so desperately—didn’t mean that he would comply. Michaela reminded herself that she couldn’t hope for too much—that she didn’t have a right to any expectations. And yet deep in her heart, she knew that she was still stubbornly praying for a reconciliation between them—despite all the evidence to the contrary.

She and Sully stared at each other for a brief instant, then he swiftly turned away, training his eyes
ahead of him again. No doubt it was because he found it painful even to look at her; however, Michaela couldn’t help wondering if in fact he was afraid to face her, for fear of revealing too much of his emotions.

Michaela’s preoccupation with this startling thought momentarily distracted her from concentrating on her footing. Then Sully spoke again, causing her to focus her eyes on him, rather than on where she was walking.

“Never hurts to be careful,” he said in response to her statement. “And those shoes of yours ain’t exactly made for traipsin’ in the woods—”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth, then Michaela stumbled over a thick root protruding from the ground. Instantly she went down, feeling her ankle twist sickeningly as she fell. She was vaguely aware of a second dart of pain as her knee made sharp contact with a twig laying on the ground, but that discomfort was quickly muted by the overwhelming pain of her other injury.

She wasn’t aware of crying out, but apparently she must have made some sound, because Sully whirled to face her. He closed the yards between them in a heartbeat, kneeling at her side and regarding her with concern.

“What is it?” he asked quickly.

“My ankle,” Michaela gasped, gritting her teeth against the waves of pain that throbbed in time to her pulse.

“You think it’s broke?” he asked solicitously, reaching out to gently touch her leg.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure,” she said, her voice weak.

“Try to move it,” he advised. She was afraid to comply, for fear of making the pain worse, but she knew he was right—they needed to establish the extent of her injury, so that they could treat it appropriately. Warily she revolved her foot, the resultant throb making her groan softly. But the movement was enough to confirm to her that her ankle wasn’t broken but merely sprained—and for that she silently gave thanks.

“I think—it’s just a sprain,” Michaela managed, as the pain slowly leveled off from the movement of her ankle. “But it needs to be wrapped.”

“Sure,” he said. He reached for her medical bag, which had skittered away from her when she fell.

Outwardly Michaela was trying to gather the shreds of her self-possession and maintain a dignified facade, but inwardly, she was racked with guilt. She had insisted on coming along with Sully on this trip, even though he had resisted the idea. Granted, she’d had an ulterior motive—the hope that this extra time they spent together would provide the opportunity for more discussion between them—and, perhaps, even a resolution to their conflict. (Well, if she were going to dream, then she may as well reach for the moon *and* the stars, Michaela thought.) But she’d also wanted to join Sully out of a genuine desire to help him. Certainly she hadn’t wanted to lay still another problem at his doorstep. But she’d also wanted to join Sully out of a genuine desire to help him. Certainly she hadn’t wanted to lay still another problem at his doorstep. Yet that’s exactly what she’d done, despite her ardent desire to the contrary. Thanks to her clumsiness, not only was she incapable of being of assistance to him now, but he would be forced to tend to her and take her back to Colorado Springs, thus aborting the plans he’d made to construct his shelter. She could hardly blame him if he were angry or disgusted with her. She had given him little reason to feel otherwise, by adding to his problems yet again.

She found herself thinking back to another time they had made a foray into the woods together—when she’d needed to obtain samples of tainted water from Willow Creek, to use as proof against the owner of a local gold mining operation who had contaminated the water supply by dumping mercury into the stream. Sully hadn’t wanted her to come along at that time either—he had protested that the circumstances were too dangerous, and that she would slow him down. She had argued that her presence was necessary—that there were certain chemical tests she needed to perform to prove the presence of mercury in the water—and reluctantly, he had finally given in to her stubborn insistence to accompany him. But he hadn’t been happy about it; and sure enough, his dire prediction that she would be more of a hindrance than a help, had come true in short order when she fell and broke her wrist.

She knew that presently, Sully didn’t remember that earlier trip. But if he were to recover that
memory sometime in the future, she wondered if he would think that she made a habit of injuring herself on these excursions, just to bid for his sympathy and attention. Certainly she couldn’t fault him if he came to that conclusion.

Having no other choice, she had been forced to let Sully take care of her on that former occasion, but she had hated being helpless—and worse, proving him right. Now she was back in the same predicament again, but this time, she had to find a way to manage on her own. She wouldn’t let history repeat itself, and become a burden to him a second time.

As she watched him retrieve her medical bag, intending to bandage her ankle, she spoke hastily. “It’s all right, Sully—I can do it.”

He looked up at her, his eyes mild. “No you can’t,” he said matter-of-factly. “And even if you could, I wouldn’t let you. You’re hurt, Michaela. Let someone help you for a change.” He leaned more closely to her. “You don’t always got to be so strong,” he added quietly.

Michaela felt a shiver go through her as his comment eerily echoed the words he’d said to her on that previous occasion. Was it a coincidence that they seemed to be reenacting that scene now—especially at the precise moment she had been thinking of it? Or was there something more going on between them? She didn’t know, but the circumstances were uncannily familiar. And almost reflexively, she responded to him in the same manner as she had once before.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Old habit, I suppose.”

“Give it up,” he told her. Michaela’s head snapped up in shock. Belatedly, she realized he was regarding her the same way.

“Sully . . .” she began, then broke off—not sure if she should tell him the significance of his remark or not. But he settled the matter for her with his next words.

“I’ve said that to you before, haven’t I?” he asked.

Michaela started to tremble as the import of his statement registered on her senses. Her eyes were fastened on his. Unable to keep the tremor out of her voice, she said, “Do you remember?”

He closed his eyes briefly, concentrating. “Not exactly,” he said slowly after a few seconds had passed. “It’s not so much that I remember sayin’ it—but that there’s somethin’ familiar about it.”

Excitement momentarily pushed Michaela’s other concerns out of her mind. “Well, that could be the beginning!” she exclaimed. “Perhaps that’s how your memory will return—by starting as a familiar feeling, and then becoming specific.”

“Maybe so,” he acknowledged, sounding as if he were afraid to get up his hopes too much—yet unable to deny a tiny spark of anticipation within himself. “But we can worry about that later,” he added. “Right now, we got to take care of you. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

Feeling suddenly more optimistic, and unable to deny Sully’s logic or the pain of her ankle, Michaela nodded. She pressed her lips together tightly, suppressing a moan as he untied and gently removed her shoe. Then he took a rolled bandage from her bag, and she instructed him on how to unwind and wrap the linen snugly around her foot and ankle.

Sully finished the task in short order and looked up at her for her reaction.

“How does that feel?” he asked.

Michaela gingerly moved her foot. Her ankle still ached, but felt stronger with the support of the bandage. “Fine,” she said, and then winced as a needle of pain reminded her of the second injury to her knee.

“Too tight?” Sully said immediately.

“No,” she answered. “It’s my knee. I think I must have cut it.”

“All right,” he said readily. “Let’s take a look.” He stretched out his hand toward the hem of her skirt
“Sully!” she said. For a moment she didn’t understand why she had shied away from him. Sully had seen her legs before. In fact, there had been more than one occasion when she had been far more scantily clad in his presence. But all that had been before his injury. The Sully who knelt before her now didn’t possess those memories—at least not yet. From his point of view, this was the most intimate contact they’d ever had. Considering this, Michaela couldn’t help but be self-conscious.

Sully didn’t seem to share her discomfort, however. On the contrary, he looked mildly amused.

“Michaela,” he said. “I been married. I’ve seen a woman’s—limbs—before. I’m even willin’ to wager I’ve seen yours before.” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

His relaxed and tolerant reaction served to diffuse some of her tension and shyness. Feeling slightly foolish, Michaela extended her leg so that Sully could inspect her injury.

He carefully lifted her skirt away from her knee. There was a rip in her stocking, and she could see blood pooling from the gash.

“You’re bleeding,” Sully said softly, his voice sounding oddly vulnerable. Carefully he rolled her stocking down, his fingers trembling slightly. She watched as he took another length of bandage and cut off a strip, then pressed the material to the wound.

After a few moments he lifted the compress away. She saw him hesitate for an instant, as if transfixed by the sight of her blood vividly staining the white of the bandage.

“You’ll need chlorine water to clean and disinfect the wound,” she offered helpfully, and Sully shook his head slightly and refocused his attention on her. He found the bottle of chlorine solution in her bag, then dampened a clean length of bandage and began to blot the cut. Michaela flinched at the fiery sting and Sully glanced at her swiftly, his eyes remorseful. He finished cleansing the wound as quickly as possible, then leaned close to her and blew softly on her knee, his breath cool and soothing. Michaela felt a swell of love for him at the thoughtfulness of his act.

Finally he wrapped her knee, his touch gentle. He tied off the bandage, but instead of drawing away, he allowed his hands to linger on her leg.

Michaela stared at him, feeling the emotional atmosphere between them intensify—as if there were a portent of something powerful yet to come. She sat very still, with no thought of moving away from his touch. Their eyes met, and raptly they gazed at one another.

Seconds passed. Then Sully dropped his eyes, his fingertip gently tracing the curve of her knee. After a moment, he lowered his head and tenderly kissed the exposed skin above the bandage. Michaela felt a deep shiver go through her, and her heart constricted as tears filled her eyes. Then Sully laid his head in her lap, his cheek carefully pillowed on her knee, and Michaela’s tears spilled over.

“Oh, Sully,” she whispered, her hand reaching out to stroke his hair.

At the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand, he looked up at her. Shimmering tears turned the blue of his eyes to indigo, and she felt as if she were being drawn into their passionate depths. He spoke without warning, his eyes locked with hers, all pretense—all artifice—stripped away.

“Forgive me, Michaela,” he said, the words seeming to tumble from his lips as if a floodgate had opened. “I’m so sorry for hurtin’ you. I’m so sorry for the terrible things I said. I didn’t mean them—I swear I didn’t. ‘Specially what I said about trust. I trust you, Michaela—I never stopped. I trust you with my life and I trust you with my heart. And it’s tearin’ me apart that I was so cruel to you. Even while I was sayin’ all those awful things, part of me hated myself, but I couldn’t seem to stop.

“I’m so sorry for lettin’ my anger blot out my reason and compassion,” he went on, barely pausing for breath. “You tried to explain to me—you tried to make me understand how hard you were tryin’ to help me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

Michaela was mesmerized, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing. Finally, in Sully’s eyes, she could see all the love and devotion she had been praying for. Fleetingly she wondered if she had hit her
head and lost consciousness when she fell, and this was all some incredible, extraordinary dream.

But no—the pain in her ankle and knee was sharp and real. And the feel of his touch against her skin was firing all her senses, making her heart pound and her blood race. Not a dream, she thought. Oh, thank God, not a dream.

“You listened,” she finally managed, almost too overcome to speak.

Sully’s eyes, shadowed with guilt, stared into hers. “No,” he disagreed, in response to her quiet remark. “I attacked. I accused. I didn’t let myself hear what you were sayin’—’cause I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted to wallow in my anger, and so what if I hurt you in the process?” Shame made him turn his face away.

But she couldn’t let him take the blame for something that was equally her fault—perhaps more than equally. “Sully, don’t punish yourself so much—you had a right to feel betrayed,” she said gently. “I lied to you. I kept a very important truth from you, and refused to tell you why.”

But his expression continued to be haunted by remorse. “Sometimes it’s the things a person doesn’t say, that are most important,” he declared. “In every way you could, short of sayin’ it outright, you tried to show me how much you loved me—how much you cared. You were tryin’ to speak to me from your heart but I couldn’t listen.” I closed my heart to you.

“But my heart’s not closed anymore, Michaela,” he vowed, his voice catching as he spoke her name. His eyes were deep wells of emotion. “It’s open and overflowin’ with love. I’m offerin’ my love—and my heart—to you now.”

He was staring at her nakedly, his emotions no longer concealed behind a neutral mask. As Michaela gazed back at him, she could feel all her defenses slipping away.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I love you with all my heart and soul.” Suddenly he was cupping her face in his hands and kissing her. Michaela’s senses exploded with desire, and without conscious thought, she hungrily returned the kiss. As their mutual ardor fed the flame of their passion, the explosive energy between them grew to a fever pitch. They pressed close, their questing hands stroking and caressing one another. Sully buried his face in her hair and she ran her fingers through his. Michaela reveled in the nearness of him. The taste and feel of his lips, enhanced by the faint, yet intoxicating scent of him, combined to transport her senses to dizzying heights. She could feel Sully’s heart pounding, and it’s thunderous rhythm seemed to match the pace of her own.

Finally, summoning all the will at their command, they drew apart. Michaela’s skin tingled all over and she realized she was shaking. A moment later she saw that Sully was equally affected.

“You’re trembling,” she whispered.

“So are you,” he answered. Their hands continued to seek one another, craving the feel of each other’s bodies, just as their hearts craved to be fused into one.

But suddenly Michaela realized what she was doing. As desperately as she wanted him—as impossible as she thought it would be to push him away—still she couldn’t allow Sully to offer himself to her with such total abandon, as long as he was still ignorant of the emotional crisis that had precipitated his troubles. Even if it meant losing him—even if it proved to be her last act of love for Sully, she must tell him the truth.

But in that instant before she pulled away, Sully seemed to read her mind. His fingers tightened on her arms as his eyes probed deeply into hers.

“It don’t matter that you didn’t tell me everythin,’” he said rapidly, his voice husky with emotion. “None of that matters anymore. I understand that you did it because you were tryin’ to take care of me, and that’s all I gotta know.”

“But Sully—” she began, her resolve to be strong melting away in the heat of his gaze.

“I don’t matter whether I get my memory back or not,” he continued over her weak protest, his eyes dark and compelling, holding her riveted. “I loved you before and I love you now. I need you, Michaela,”
he implored. He captured her hands within his own and kissed them, the feel of his lips as delicate as a butterfly’s wing. “I want to be with you—to share our lives,” he whispered huskily. “I don’t want to live without you. I . . .” his voice choked. “I don’t think I ever could.”

The blue of Sully’s eyes seemed to expand in her vision until Michaela felt she was drifting on an azure sea, cradled and rocked in it billowy depths. All she wanted was to float in this ocean of love forever. As she took a shuddering breath, Sully spoke again.

“Marry me,” he said.

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“As much as I’d love to linger here, I need to bathe and dress,” Michaela announced all too soon, leaning over to kiss me. “Mother will be waking shortly if she hasn’t already, and since I have no idea of Brendan’s habits, I need to be prepared and presentable.”

I sighed, unwilling to release her from my arms and burst the perfect bubble we’d been floating in for the past hour or so. Real life waited outside, but I wanted the exquisite dream I was living with Michaela—the fairy tale where the adoring prince slays the dragon and wins the hand of his beautiful princess.

The only dragon—the only demon—I’d slain was the one within myself: the dark and loathsome creature deep inside that had caused me to say such hurtful things to Michaela . . . that had blocked my memories of the most beautiful, tender and loving woman in the world. When I thought of how close I’d come to letting my demon take control and ruin my life, I physically cringed—almost as if I could feel the flick of its repellent tongue on my skin, its breath dank and foul upon my neck.

Suddenly I realized Michaela was staring at me in concern.

“Sully, all you all right?” she was saying. “You became so quiet all of a sudden, and your eyes looked so strange . . .”

I took a deep breath, and tried to shake off the cloying, gloomy thoughts. “I’m all right,” I told her, plastering on a smile. “My mind just started wandering . . . I’ve got a powerful imagination and sometimes it goes galloping off on its own before I can stop it.”

“It appears as if this time, it took you where you didn’t want to go,” Michaela commented solicitously, her eyes still troubled by my abrupt change of mood.

“Don’t worry about me,” I told her, kissing her swiftly. “I just got started thinking how close I came to losing you, and it shook me for a moment. But I know I don’t got to worry about that any more,” I added, my somber mood dissolving in the glow of her presence. A nimbus of radiance seemed to surround her, as if she lived in light. A part of me knew that the vision existed in my mind alone; but still, I felt an overpowering sense of awe. Michaela had brought her incandescence into my life, illuminating all the dark corners of my mind and heart. And I knew that having once been gilded by her light, I could never return to existing in the shadows.

I felt her touch on my arm. “You were drifting away again,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I start thinking of you, and it takes my breath away.” I smiled at her. “My concentration too, I guess. But I’m back with you now, a hundred percent.”
“Sully, are you sure that you have no more doubts—about us?” Michaela asked suddenly. “If something still bothers you, please tell me what it is, so that I can allay your fears. Now that we’ve found each other again, I don’t want any old grievances from the past lingering to mar our happiness. I want to exorcise all the ghosts, and lay them to rest.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we already have. No more doubts, no more fears, no more worries. Just joy,” I told her softly.

“For me, as well,” she whispered back, lifting my hand and pressing it to her cheek. “I love you so much, Sully!”

“Not half as much as I love you,” I declared. Several moments passed as we embraced once again, defying the minutes that were ticking away, stealing what little remained of our private time together.

Michaela was the first of us to be sensible. “I really must get dressed now, Sully,” she insisted finally, glancing uneasily at the clock.

I sat up and swung my legs around to the side of the bed, rising to my feet. “Are you *sure* you want to go ahead with having your ma and Brendan over for supper tonight?” I asked, looking down at her doubtfully. “I still think you need another day of rest, Michaela.”

“I’m feeling better and stronger by the moment,” she assured me. “But I’ll never be ready in time if I don’t get out of this bed now!”

I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest. “All right, you win,” I conceded. I stood in front of her, waiting.

She looked up at me quizzically, a touch of impatience in her eyes. “Well?” she said after a moment.

I looked back at her, puzzled. “Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to leave?” she asked. “I can hardly disrobe and perform my other—ablutions—with you here in the room, Sully.”

“I was going to stay here and help you,” I answered, surprised that she hadn’t understood my intentions. “How are you going to manage, when you probably can’t even put weight on your foot, Michaela?”

She regarded me wryly. “I thought I’d hop,” she said.

“Ha, ha,” I replied.

“I’m sorry—I couldn’t resist,” she said. “But actually, Sully, there are a few sets of crutches that I keep here in the clinic for the use of my patients. They’re stacked in a corner of the examination room. I’m sure there must be a pair that are the right size for me—if you would be kind enough to fetch them,” she added.

“Of course,” I said. “But—”

Michaela raised an eyebrow in a silent query.

“Well, crutches are all well and fine for helping you to get around,” I conceded. “But what about other things—like—?” I cleared my throat, feeling a blush rising in my face. “Putting on your, uh, unmentionables, or fastening up your dress in the back—things like that?” I finished awkwardly.

Michaela was eyeing me with amusement. “That’s very—noble—of you to want to remain and help me with my ‘unmentionables,’” she said, not quite able to smother a small snort of laughter. “But I can manage better than you might think, Sully. And if I *do* have any difficulty with my—‘fastenings’—I can always ask Mother,” she reminded me.

I grinned in embarrassment, having temporarily forgotten about Michaela’s ma. “Oh yeah—right,” I said, abashed. After a moment I added, “Want me to fetch her for you?”
“It’s not necessary,” Michaela replied. “I’m sure she’ll be coming to my room any time now. However, if you see Brendan, you might offer to take him to the café for breakfast,” she suggested.

“If you want me to,” I responded, less than enthusiastic about the prospect.

“It would be the polite thing to do, Sully,” Michaela pointed out.

“Yeah, I suppose,” I said. “But I’d much rather stay here with you.”

“We’ll be together again soon enough,” she promised. “However I really need some time alone with Mother, Sully. There are many things we need to discuss.”

“Speaking of which,” I said. “I was wondering . . .”

“Yes?” she encouraged, sensing my hesitation.

“Did you tell your ma about me?” I asked finally. “I mean about the shooting and all, and me losing my memory? I kind of got the feeling you didn’t, from the way she reacted when she saw us. And there was that remark she made about you postponing the wedding . . .?”

She looked uncomfortable, as if afraid I’d be mad at her answer.

“You can tell me, Michaela,” I added. She sighed, but looked at me levelly.

“No, I didn’t tell her,” she said honestly. “I simply said that a rather serious matter had arisen which might necessitate the postponement of the wedding. At the time I sent the telegram, you hadn’t yet exhibited any sign of recovering your memories, Sully. I had no idea when your memories would return, or to what extent—or even if they’d return at all. I felt I had no choice but to prepare for the possibility that our wedding might need to be delayed—even that it might never take place.

“It was such a complicated situation, Sully—impossible to discuss in a wire,” she went on earnestly, as if anxious to make me understand her motives. “I had intended to write Mother a long letter of explanation, but I was so preoccupied by events happening here that it slipped my mind. I simply never dreamed that she would take it into her mind to come all the way out here—particularly knowing how much she abhors the journey.”

“She was worried about you,” I said. “Enough that she had to travel across country to make sure you were all right. Just like I had to come to Boston to make sure nothing bad had happened to you.”

“As I recall, that wasn’t your primary reason for coming,” Michaela said provocatively.

“Well, no,” I conceded, meeting her sultry look with one of my own. “I had—other things on my mind, I admit. But I was still worried about you, Michaela. Coming to Boston and seeing you for myself eased my mind. I figure your ma decided to visit you for the same reason.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Michaela acknowledged. “Still, I wish Mother would finally realize that I’m a grown woman who can make her own decisions and conduct her own life, without her parent constantly looking over her shoulder.”

“Maybe she’s tried to influence your decisions—and even tried to tell you how to live your life—in the past,” I said. “But this time, I think she was just trying to protect you, Michaela.”

“But that’s precisely the point,” Michaela argued. “I just can’t seem to convince Mother that there’s nothing and no one here I need protection from.”

“Except me,” I said quietly.

Her eyes were startled. “What are you talking about?”

Now it was my turn to fix her with a level stare. “You know the answer to that, Michaela,” I replied.

Her expression altered as she absorbed the implication of my statement. “Sully—you don’t think that I withheld the news from Mother about your loss of memory because I was ashamed—about you, or about
us?  Please tell me you don’t believe that!” she said anxiously.

“Of course not,” I assured her.  “I know you ain’t got it in you to feel that way.  But even so—maybe
you shouldn’t tell her.”  I regarded her soberly.

“What would make you say that?” she asked.

“Come on, Michaela—we both know I already got enough strikes against me as far as your ma’s
concerned,” I said bluntly.  “The way I look, how I live, my lack of schooling, and money . . .  I’m surely
not the husband she must have pictured for you.”

“But Sully—”

I put up my hand.  “No—hear me out,” I said, and she subsided.  After a pause I went on, “I don’t
blame your ma for how she thinks.  She can’t help how she was raised, or those fancy Boston manners she
was taught . . .  Or that she wants the very best for you.  Even if the two of you disagree about what that is.
And I even know that despite having her doubts about me, she’s still willing to accept me, for your sake.  At
least she was,” I added.

“But if you tell her what happened to me—which I lost my memory, and why . . . well, she might think I’m
‘damaged goods’—not stable or steady enough to be a good husband to you or a good father to our kids.

“Telling her the truth about me—well, it might just give her more ammunition to use against our getting
married,” I finished soberly.

“I understand your concerns,” she said kindly.  “But there is no way that Mother will ever dissuade me
from marrying you, Sully—and I believe that she finally knows not to try.  Even more importantly,
however, I believe that Mother would be much more sympathetic about your circumstances than you
expect.  Remember, Sully—she was a doctor’s wife.  Over the years she observed my father treating a wide
variety of maladies, and she was his closest confidante when he discussed his cases.”

“More than you?” I asked in surprise.  She shrugged slightly.

“Well, perhaps not after I was older and seriously began to study medicine, or when I graduated
medical school and joined him in his practice,” she conceded.  “But for many years prior to that, Mother
was the first person in the family to whom Father turned—when he wanted to discuss a diagnosis that was
troubling him, or to celebrate his successful treatment of a patient . . . or for consolation, when despite all
his efforts, a patient died.

“Mother does have a tender side,” Michaela added.  “Granted, she conceals it well!  But it *does* exist,
and I know it sustained my father on many occasions.”

“She’s a strong woman—that’s clear,” I agreed.  “And it’s obvious where you get your backbone from.
And maybe you’re right—maybe she’ll be more understanding than I’m giving her credit for.

“But don’t be surprised if things turn out different than you expect,” I warned.  Somehow, I couldn’t
shake the feeling that Michaela’s ma wasn’t going to take the news about me very well.

No, not very well at all.

* * * * * * * *

“Sully,” Michaela said.  “I don’t mean to be a nuisance, but—my crutches, please?’

“Oh yeah, sure—I’m sorry,” I said quickly, abruptly startled out of my pessimistic thoughts.  I took a
step toward the door.  “Back in a moment,” I added.

Our eyes met briefly.  I fancied I was concealing my uneasy feelings, but she must have detected
something in my face before I turned away.

“Sully,” she repeated.  I faced her again.  She was looking at me steadily.  “You’re going to marry
me—not my mother,” she said quietly, but firmly.  “Whatever she thinks about us—for good or ill—makes
no difference.
“All that matters is what we feel,” she added even more softly. “That we love each other, and that we’re going to keep on loving each other all of our days.”

I crossed back over to the bed and knelt in front of her. “Count on it.” I whispered, cupping her face in my hands and pressing my lips to hers. The kiss strengthened and deepened, and before we knew it our hands were seeking each other again, touching and exploring as our mouths tasted hungrily of one another. For a few precious minutes we hung suspended in our own private world of passion and sensation. My whole universe consisted of her eyes and nose and mouth; the scent and silkiness of her hair and the velvety softness of her skin. It took every bit of my strength to pull away from her at last. Only the thought that her ma could walk in on us at any moment was enough to douse my passion—well, diminish it a little, anyway.

I gave her one last kiss and stood, then backed slowly to the door, unwilling to take my eyes off her. “I’ll be right back with your crutches,” I said, turning away from her at last as I twisted the knob and pulled the door open.

And found myself face to face with Mrs. Quinn.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sully gazed at her intensely, his entire heart and soul mirrored in his eyes. She knew that the future of their love—of their very lives—rested on what she said next.

Michaela felt nearly crushed under the weight of the awesome responsibility she bore. Mutely Sully implored her to put the pain of the past twenty-four hours behind them, by giving him the answer he so desperately sought. And how desperately she wanted to give him that answer—to turn back the clock and pretend that this nightmare had never happened.

But she didn’t dare. Because it *had* happened. It was still happening. Granted, Sully appeared to have made a breakthrough when he recalled his words to her during their trip to Harding’s Mill—which seemed to indicate that he was beginning to recover his memories. But he was still a long way from being the same man as before his accident, his mind and memories intact. There was no guarantee that he would get back all that he had lost.

There were other issues to deal with as well. Vital matters she hadn’t had the chance to explain or discuss with Sully as yet. Such as the deadline Hazen had imposed for Sully to resume his job on the reservation. While she was satisfied that physically Sully was recovered enough to perform his duties, she still had no idea whether emotionally he was ready—or willing—to go back.

But by far, the more sinister concern to Michaela was the continuing threat of Custer. Mercifully, there’d been no recurrence of the army officer’s visit to the clinic, during which he’d tried to threaten and intimidate her into letting him see Sully. But she knew their adversary still lurked in the vicinity. More importantly, she knew Custer wouldn’t rest until he’d carried out his vendetta against Sully and Cloud Dancing. There was still no word on the fate of Bloody Knife, but if he turned up dead—or even if he simply remained missing—Michaela feared that Custer would make Cloud Dancing and Sully pay with their lives.

Michaela’s gravest worry, however, was the emotional crisis Sully had suffered prior to his injury—the dark cloud that relentlessly hovered over them. As much as Michaela wanted to pledge herself to Sully, she couldn’t forget what had caused his amnesia. Sully’s emotional difficulties continued to cast a pall over their future, and she knew that they would never be able to move forward unless she was honest with him at last—regardless of what it might cost them.

But how did she begin? Oh God, how did she begin?

“Sully,” she finally whispered. “I—don’t know what to say . . .”

His gaze was riveted on her face. “Say ‘yes,’” he answered with a lop-sided smile, the pleading expression in his eyes belying the lightness of his remark.
“I want to...” she ventured hesitantly. Every nerve ending in her body burned for his touch, as her overwhelming love and need for him swelled inside her and begged for release.

“Don’t be afraid,” Sully implored her. “I told you, Michaela, I don’t care that you kept our relationship from me at first. I don’t care about anythin’, ‘cept lovin’ you and spendin’ my life with you.” He lowered his head and gazed searchingly into her eyes. “I think you feel the same way,” he added softly.

“I do,” Michaela admitted after a long hesitation, unable to keep her emotions in check any longer. “Hiding my feelings from you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, Sully. But there are things you don’t know—”

Heartened by her confession, Sully spoke again. “Michaela, after all we been through, I don’t think there’s anythin’ else you could tell me that could keep us apart,” he said. “I caught pneumonia, I got shot, I nearly died—and when I finally came to, I had no idea who you were, or that we loved each other. But despite all that, the love I had for you was always there inside me, just waitin’ to come out.” He took her hands in his.

“Don’t you see?” he went on eagerly. “Our love couldn’t be denied. It was meant to be. And I know we can face anythin’, Michaela—as long as we’re together.”

“I’ve always believed that,” she said slowly. “But Sully, if I were to accept your proposal now, I’d feel as if—I were marrying you under false pretenses.” There—she’d said it. She’d finally admitted that their relationship was based on a lie. Michaela could barely bring herself to look at him, but finally she forced her eyes to meet his. And saw to her shock that he was smiling.

“False pretenses?” he echoed. “Like what?” He regarded her roguishly. “Are you sayin’ you got a husband stashed away somewhere? Or maybe you’re not really Michaela Quinn at all, but a mysterious imposter in disguise,” he intoned dramatically. “That actually sounds kinda excitin’,” he teased. His grin was provocative.

Michaela couldn’t resist a momentary smile, even as she remonstrated with him. “Sully, I’m trying to be serious.”

“And I’m tryin’ not to be,” he said immediately, discarding his irreverent manner and gazing at her earnestly. “I think we’ve had way too much of being serious lately, Michaela. It’s time to stop worryin’ about the past and think about the future. It’s time to let ourselves be happy.” His eyes were fastened on hers. “I think we have that right—I think we earned it,” he said.

Michaela felt a pang inside. Sully made it all sound so simple... “There’s nothing I want more than to say yes...” she faltered.

“But you can’t,” he anticipated her. “Until you free your mind of what’s troublin’ you.”

Once again, in his uncanny way, Sully had read her thoughts. His ordeal may have stolen his memories; but somehow, the mysterious, intangible bond which had always connected them had survived.

“Yes,” she admitted softly after a pause. “But that’s not all of it. I’m afraid that even telling you could be a grave mistake—that I could hurt you, or—cause you damage.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m so frightened of doing the wrong thing, Sully.” As she spoke, she couldn’t suppress a slight shiver. Sully’s eyes softened even more with love and compassion.

“That’s what’s been scarin’ you since the beginnin’, ain’t it?” he said gently. “You needed to tell me somethin’ about myself, but you were afraid I couldn’t handle it—that maybe I still can’t.” Michaela nodded silently, her eyes cast downward. Suddenly, however, she felt Sully’s hand cupping her chin. Tenderly he raised her face to his so that he could look into her eyes. “I understand,” he went on softly. “And I’m sorry for puttin’ you through so much agony on my behalf. I was so blind for so long—and I’ll spend the rest of my life makin’ it up to you if that’s what it takes.” Michaela felt tears prick behind her eyes. Sully was being so kind—so understanding. So much more than she felt she deserved.

“I respect your feelin’s,” he was saying as she refocused her attention on him. “And fact is, I think maybe you were right. In the beginnin’, I may not have been able to handle the truth—whatever it
is—about what’s wrong with me.

“But things have changed, Michaela,” he said. “We have each other now. I know that I love you, and I know that you love me. I can hold onto that, no matter what you have to tell me about myself.”

Michaela’s tears threatened more strongly. Sully was trying so hard to reassure her, innocently trusting that the truth she had to impart couldn’t possibly be as bad as she feared. But he didn’t understand. He had no inkling of how shattering this particular knowledge might be.

Suddenly, she couldn’t bear it any longer. She had to say the words, despite how much it might hurt them both. “Even if—what I have to tell you is that you don’t *truly* want to marry me?” she said just above a whisper, her quiet misery lending even more poignancy to her words.

Immediately she could see that he didn’t believe her.

“Impossible,” he responded.

Now that she’d managed to get the first words out, Michaela was able to summon the strength to continue her confession. “Sully, don’t toss this off,” she cautioned soberly. “It may sound improbable to you right now—but there were things you said to Cloud Dancing when the two of you were together in the mountains—fears that you expressed to him—that seemed to indicate that you had grave worries about our future together.” Her face was pale but her eyes were determined as she gazed at him.

“Go on,” Sully said after a moment. She could see that he remained unconvinced, but that he was respectful of her need to purge herself of her own fears.

With an effort she continued, “Sully, I’m sure you’ve spent countless hours wondering what caused you to block out your memories. But have you ever wondered why you erased your memories of me? Did it ever occur to you that a commitment to me may have been so troubling or frightening to you, that your mind would choose to block it out completely, rather than allow you to confront or admit your fears?”

Michaela was almost afraid to look into Sully’s eyes, for fear of what she would find there. Now that he was finally hearing the truth about himself, she couldn’t help but believe that he would be irrevocably changed by the knowledge. But as she reluctantly stole a glance at him, she saw that Sully’s eyes were clear and serene; and—miraculously—still full of love.

“No, I never thought of that,” he responded now to her painful query. “Because I can’t conceive of it, Michaela. There are plenty of things to be scared of in this world, but lovin’ and marryin’ you ain’t one of them.”

As much as Michaela wanted to draw comfort from Sully’s words, she couldn’t let him blindly dismiss the problem without knowing what was at stake.

“But it could be—if you believed you would lose me if we married!” she said suddenly, forcing out the words and revealing the bitter heart of Sully’s struggle at last. Swallowing with difficulty she went on, “The way you lost Abagail—the way you lost your family before that, and then the Cheyenne later on . . . All the people you cared about, Sully—your real family, your adopted family, and the wife and child that you loved.” Her face was strained as she looked at him. “What if you thought you were cursed—and that it would be kinder—safer—to break things off between us, rather than risk losing me as you lost everyone else?”

Her words hung in the air in the sudden silence. A paralyzing wave of fear washed over Michaela briefly, as she realized that she had crossed the last boundary. There was no going back now.

She turned anxious eyes to Sully, and was immediately alarmed. He was staring at some point past her shoulder, but she knew that his inner eyes were looking at another landscape. Shock had leached the color from his face, and even as she watched, she saw a sheen of sweat break out on his waxy brow.

Suddenly he fell back on the ground, gasping. Even from a few feet away, Michaela could see the pulse leaping in his throat. She wanted to jump up and go to him, but all she could do was sit and watch him helplessly.

“Are you all right?” she asked him frantically. His breath continued to come in shuddering gasps, and
he didn’t answer. Michaela’s alarm turned to icy fear. “Sully!” she repeated, desperate to elicit a response from him. “What is it? Please tell me what you’re thinking! Have you remembered something?”

Michaela’s heart was thundering in her chest. What had she done? Oh God, what had she done?!

And then he spoke.

“I had a dream,” he said, his voice initially faint, but slowly gathering strength as he continued speaking. “I was with Abagail as she was dyin’—cept—when she looked at me, it wasn’t Abagail.” He raised tortured eyes to her. “It was you.” He stared at her, appalled. A moment later he whispered, “Oh, my God.”

Immediately Michaela understood the significance of the dream—the transference in Sully’s mind between Abagail and herself, as a way for his subconscious to express his deep-rooted fear that she would die, too—just as Abagail had. Michaela suspected that an additional fear tormented Sully as well: that he wouldn’t be able to save her—any more than he had been able to prevent Abagail’s fate.

Michaela noted Sully’s color returning slightly as he haltingly described his nightmare—as if the act of articulating his anxiety was bringing him a slight measure of calm. She felt a brief surge of hope. Perhaps if she encouraged Sully to continue talking about the fears represented by his dream, they would lose their power to terrify.

“When did you have the dream?” she asked softly. She could see the uncertainty in his eyes as his mind strained to remember.

“I ain’t exactly sure—but I think it was after I was shot,” he said after a pause. “I know I blacked out when I was hit—but I remember comin’ a little later—enough so that I knew I was on a horse with Cloud Dancin’. I must have drifted off and slept—and I had that dream. I don’t remember anythin’ after that.”

“Can you remember anything before the dream?” she prompted gently.

Briefly he closed his eyes, then opened them again and sought hers. “Bits and pieces,” he said after a moment. “Nothin’ real clear. But I think—maybe it will start to come back to me.”

Michaela felt a fleeting rush of joy sweep in to displace some of her worry. “This may truly be the beginning!” she said tremulously. “Oh, Sully, I’m so glad for you! But—“ She broke off raggedly as she realized that Sully had yet to express his reaction to the revelations of his dream—and her words. Summoning her courage, she added tentatively, “How do you feel about what I told you? Do you—remember those feelings?” She swallowed. “Do you remember being afraid to marry me?”

He hesitated for another long moment, then spoke. “I’m startin’ to. I can remember . . . feelin’ scared, and guilty—and thinkin’ . . . I didn’t have the right to marry you.” He turned confused eyes on her. “But I don’t understand why I suddenly got terrified like that, out of the blue—or why I wasn’t worried about marryin’ you all along,” he confessed.

It was Michaela’s turn to be momentarily silent as she sought to explain Sully’s emotional reactions.

“I believe it was Washita,” she gently ventured at last. “I think—seeing the Cheyenne so brutally murdered was the—the straw that broke the camel’s back. Or to put it another way, I think the loss of the people you loved was a catalyst to releasing the fear about me that you’d been carrying deep inside yourself. And the pain of their deaths, as well as the intensity of your fear, was too great a burden for your mind to endure—so you blocked it out . . . blocked me out,” she added quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Sully said, the words catching in his throat, as he looked at her with infinite remorse.

His guilt tore at Michaela’s heart. “You mustn’t be sorry!” she exhorted him. “Sully, you had no control over what happened to you. You were grieving—not just for the Cheyenne, but for everyone you’d ever loved who’d left you. Grief affects people in different ways—but no matter how one expresses grief, its effects can be devastating.” She paused, feeling her heart begin to pound at what she needed to say next. Finally she resumed, “The question now is . . . what are you feeling? What do you want, Sully—now that you know the truth?” Silence stretched between them as she awaited his reply.

Sully got up on his knees, so that his eyes were level with hers. Michaela watched as his hands went
to his medicine pouch. He loosened the drawstring, then reached inside and withdrew a small object. His hand was closed around it, concealing it from her eyes. But a moment later his fingers opened like the petals of a flower, to reveal her engagement ring. The diamond flashed brilliantly as it caught the dying light of the setting sun. Sully took her left hand in his, and tenderly slid the circlet of gold onto her fourth finger.

“I want you,” Sully said softly, as he kissed her hand. “I want to marry you—now more than ever. I love you, Michaela.”

Michaela gazed into the sapphire depths of his eyes—the eyes that she loved so dearly. The word Sully was aching to hear trembled on her lips, but she didn’t dare to utter it without making one last attempt to ensure that Sully knew his own mind—and his own heart. That he was truly and finally ready to commit himself to her.

“But—are you sure?” she said, her voice hushed. “Your fears about us were disturbing enough to you that you lost your memory because of them.” She took a deep breath. “Sully, are you sure you can let go of your fear, and face the future?” Her body was rigid with tension as she waited anxiously for his reply, but Sully’s eyes as he gazed at her were calm and clear.

“I know I’d fear the future more if I didn’t have you,” he told her gently. “Truth is, I wouldn’t want a future without you, Michaela. I know there ain’t no guarantees—but nobody gets guarantees in this life. And if you’re lucky enough to find your true love—then you need to hold on tight and love each other—and never let each other go.” Sully’s voice dropped to a whisper as he raised one hand to caress her cheek. “Please,” he beseeched her. “Please marry me, Michaela.”

Michaela felt as if a sad and ponderous burden was slipping from her shoulders at last. Suddenly her heart and her spirit felt light and free. Perhaps, at last, it was safe for her to surrender to her heart’s desire.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “Yes, Sully, I’ll marry you.”

Joyfully Sully drew her into his arms, and she kissed away his tears.

* * * * * * * * * *

The ride back into town ended too quickly. Reluctantly Michaela roused herself from the delightful reverie she’d been having in which she replayed Sully’s proposal over and over—as well as the joy of awakening from her brief nap by the campfire to find his beautiful smile and strong arms waiting for her. She recalled his promise to stay with her in the clinic and take care of her (“Do you really think I could ever leave you now?”)—and she felt as if she were wrapped in a blanket woven of Sully’s love.

She sighed. It was going to be very hard to return to an ordinary routine after the extraordinary events that had transpired this day, she thought.

They saw Matthew waiting on the porch as they pulled up before the clinic. The young man watched with startled eyes as Sully jumped lightly down from the driver’s box and reached up to lift Michaela into his arms.

“Dr. Mike, what happened?” Matthew asked quickly.

“Just a sprain, Matthew—I’m fine,” she hastily reassured him.

“But this lady needs some pamperin’,” Sully spoke up, his eyes resting on hers. They smiled at one another.

“We’ll be sure to help out any way we can,” Matthew pledged, then added, “Dr. Mike—“

“Matthew, could you get my medical bag out of the wagon?” Michaela broke in.

“Sure,” he replied. “But Dr. Mike—“

“I’m goin’ to take your ma into the clinic and get her settled,” Sully announced to Matthew as he carried Michaela up onto the porch. “Could you round up Colleen and Brian for us?” he added. “We all got a lot to talk about.” He favored Michaela with another intimate smile.
“Yeah, I’ll do that,” Matthew was saying. “But Dr. Mike, there’s somethin’ you should know.” The insistent tone in his voice finally seized Michaela’s attention.

“What is it, Matthew?” she asked curiously.

But her son was saved from answering as the clinic door opened and Michaela’s mother stepped across the threshold.

“Michaela!” exclaimed Elizabeth, astonished, as she caught sight of her youngest daughter ensconced in Sully’s arms.

“Mother!” Michaela burst out at the same instant, her expression equally shocked. “What—what are you doing here?” she managed to stammer after a moment.

“Well I came in response to your telegram,” Elizabeth replied. “I wanted to see for myself why you were considering postponing the wedding.” She continued to regard them askance. “Your wire was less than forthcoming,” she added bluntly.

“I never expected—that is, you could simply have written,” Michaela faltered. “I intended to write a longer explanation to you soon—it’s just that I’ve been so busy—“ She trailed off, flustered.

“So it would seem,” Elizabeth said acidly.

“Mother, I sprained my ankle—I couldn’t walk, so Sully was carrying me,” Michaela said quickly, resenting the insinuation.

“Are you all right?” he mother asked belatedly.

“I’ll be fine,” her daughter answered. “But Mother, it really wasn’t necessary for you to come all the way out here—“

“And an arduous journey it was,” Elizabeth said with familiar distaste. “But fortunately, I didn’t need to make it alone.” She turned toward the doorway behind her as a tall figure appeared in the entrance, then stepped out onto the porch.

Michaela saw a strikingly handsome man, perhaps in his early thirties, with medium-length dark hair parted in the middle and falling in sleek waves at his temples. Though his height and stunning good looks attracted the attention of more than one female passerby, it was his eyes that most captured Michaela’s imagination. At first glance, they appeared to be a clear, crystal blue—their shade reminding Michaela of a winter sky reflected in an icy pond. However as the visitor moved out of the shadow and into the light, the color of his eyes seemed to subtly change, until Michaela would have sworn that they were a translucent sea-green. Their illusory quality was compelling, and she was momentarily fascinated.

Elizabeth stretched out her hand toward the stranger. He stepped forward to join her, and Michaela glimpsed the flicker of a dimple as he flashed then a charismatic smile.

“Michaela, Mr. Sully—may I present Brendan Burke,” she said.

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**MY JOURNAL**

Wednesday, 28 March, 1870

Remembering my manners after a moment’s startled hesitation, I said politely, “Morning, Ma’am—uh, Mrs. Quinn.”

She nodded graciously. “Good Morning, Mr. Sully.”
Without being aware I’d moved, instinctively I backed up a step or two and got out of her way. She strolled regally into the room, looking every inch the queen of Boston society I figured her to be. I watched her in fascination. She was barely taller than my shoulder, yet she seemed to fill up the very space around her. I’d never met a woman with such a forceful presence before. Even Michaela—as beautiful as she was—didn’t have the power to bring all activity to a standstill, just by walking into a room. Then again, I mused . . . Michaela was Elizabeth Quinn’s daughter. Perhaps she hadn’t quite come into her full glory and power yet—but if she had anything of her ma’s fire in her (and it was clear she already possessed Elizabeth’s stubbornness in abundance)—she would be truly spectacular one day . . . I felt giddy just thinking about it.

“Isn’t it a bit early for morning calls, Mr. Sully?” Mrs. Quinn asked, interrupting my pleasurable thoughts. I cleared my throat to answer but Michaela beat me to it.

“There’s nothing inappropriate about Sully’s visit, Mother,” she said. “He simply came to check on me and bring me my breakfast.”

“Which your daughter didn’t eat because she ain’t feeling well,” I told Mrs. Quinn impulsively. Michaela’s eyes widened in dismay. “Michaela didn’t want you to know because she didn’t want any fuss—but I think she’s worn herself out and needs to take it easy,” I added, throwing caution aside.


“What’s wrong, Dear?” Mrs. Quinn asked in concern.

Michaela gave me another caustic stare, then turned to her ma. “Nothing’s wrong, Mother,” she said clearly. “I was simply a little—indisposed. Sully worries far too much,” she added for my benefit.

“Sully’s just trying to look out for your welfare, since you ain’t been doing too good a job of it yourself,” I said pointedly.

Mrs. Quinn favored me with an unexpected look of approval. “Thank you, Mr. Sully,” she said. “I’ve always been concerned about Michaela’s penchant for overwork, and her compulsion to drive herself too hard. Though I shouldn’t be surprised—her father was the same way,” she noted. “However, I’m gratified to know that *someone* here is making sure she behaves sensibly—”

Begging your pardon, Ma’am,” I spoke up hastily as I saw the thunderheads forming in Michaela’s eyes. “I’d do anything for your daughter, and I’ll always be here if she needs me—but as for telling her what to do or how to live—well, that ain’t my place, or my right. Michaela’s her own woman—she makes her own decisions.

“Besides,” I added slyly, “You of all people must know what a stubborn streak your daughter has. If I tried to tell her what to do—do you really think she’d stand for it?” I risked a slight smile.

A touch of warmth thawed the chilly blue of Mrs. Quinn’s eyes, and I could tell I’d struck a chord.

“She never has,” Mrs. Quinn observed, giving me a look of commiseration.

“My point exactly,” I replied, trying to ignore the scathing looks that Michaela was sending me. I knew I’d pay for this later—oh, how I’d pay!—but I was determined that Michaela was going to get the rest she needed whether she liked it or not. She had been pushing herself to the breaking point for weeks because of me—but now it was my turn to take care of her, and I was bound to do it, come hell or high water. If I could make her ma into my ally—well, all the better for Michaela. And if I managed to impress Mrs. Quinn a little in the process, what would be the harm?

Michaela finally got fed up with being talked about like she wasn’t in the room.

“Sully,” she said, fixing me with a hard stare, “You were on your way to get my crutches?” She glanced toward the door, eyebrows raised.

“Right,” I said promptly, just as glad to postpone the lambasting I was expecting from her the moment she got the chance. The legendary Mt. Vesuvius had nothing on the force of nature that was Michaela Quinn, when she got her dander up. But if a few barbs from Michaela were the price I had to pay to make
sure she took it easy—then far as I was concerned, it was a bargain.

I slipped out of the room and went in search of the crutches. When I returned with a pair a few minutes later, I heard Mrs. Quinn mentioning Brendan’s name. I sighed as I was reminded of my promise to Michaela to take him over to the café. For some reason I couldn’t put my finger on, I couldn’t work up much interest in getting to know the man better. True, I had nothing solid to base my feelings on—he seemed agreeable enough. Maybe it was just his connection to William Burke that bothered me—and I surely couldn’t fault him for that. After all, none of us got to pick our relatives. I resolved to give him a fair chance, if only for Michaela’s sake. I didn’t want to make things difficult or awkward for her, in front of her ma.

“Do you know if Brendan is up and about yet, Ma’am?” I asked pleasantly as I entered the room. “I thought I’d invite him over to Grace’s for breakfast—then maybe show him around town.” Fleetingly I caught Michaela’s glance of gratitude and approval. Perhaps she wouldn’t be so mad at me after all, I thought with relief.

“Oh, but he isn’t here,” Mrs. Quinn replied. “Before we retired last night, he told me not to expect him for breakfast. He planned to rise at dawn, so that he could get an early start. I imagine he’s been gone for hours,” she added.

“Early start?” Michaela repeated, taking the words out of my mouth. Our eyes met.

“Yes—to go exploring,” her mother answered.

“Why would Brendan be going exploring?” Michaela asked.

Mrs. Quinn noted our blank expressions. “Well it’s part of his work, of course,” she said.

It was my turn. “His work?”

“Surely Brendan mentioned his profession?” Mrs. Quinn said. Michaela shook her head.

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “But I’m very curious to know. Exactly what *does* Brendan do for a living?”

* * * * * * * * * *

Well, she got her way—(had there ever been any doubt?) Come evening, we were all gathered around the table in the homestead for the welcome dinner Michaela had promised Brendan and her ma. Though I hadn’t been able to talk her out of entertaining company, at least I’d succeeded in persuading her to take it easy and let us do the work. At my insistence, Michaela had spent the afternoon napping and resting her ankle. Meanwhile, the boys and I had busied ourselves cleaning up the homestead while Colleen prepared a special supper.

Once Michaela was awake, I was gratified to see that she looked much better. Most of her color had come back, and the shadows had vanished from beneath her eyes. She quickly got the hang of hobbling around on crutches as well, though she had a tendency to cheat and use only one whenever she thought we weren’t paying attention.

As sunset gilded the mountain peaks, Matthew took the wagon into town to fetch Brendan and Mrs. Quinn. They arrived before long, and minutes later Colleen announced that supper was ready.

We took our seats, and Michaela asked Matthew to give the blessing. As we all took hands and the others bowed their heads, I surreptitiously studied Brendan.

He was imposing—his height outstripping mine by at least three inches. He was broad-shouldered too, and well-muscled—with hands that were strong and calloused from performing some kind of physical labor—unlike the soft hands of his brother William, who’d probably never picked up anything heavier than a scalpel his entire life. Not that I was disparaging William—doctoring was a noble profession, and Michaela had said he was a good one. And I admit that I admired him for taking time from his regular practice to treat poor folks who couldn’t pay—Michaela had said it was something called “pro bono” work. But despite all that, I could never forget, looking at William, that he came from quality. With Brendan, it wasn’t so obvious. Though one thing was clear about the youngest of the Burke brothers—with the
contrast of his dark hair and startling clear blue eyes, Brendan Burke was striking—I suppose a woman might even say ‘handsome.’ And there was a definite magnetism or charm about him that I figured most women would find equally irresistible—I had to confess that even I felt it, to a degree.

Like I said before, Brendan’s background wasn’t so clear. Fact is, he was something of a puzzle. The strapping build, rough hands, even the clothes he wore—none of it seemed to fit his status as the member of a rich, society family from the east. Unlike his brother, who’d never worn anything but stylish, expensive suits any time I’d seen him, Brendan affected a much more casual—one could even say rougher—style of dress: a bleached muslin shirt which he wore open at the throat, pants made of some kind of light-weight but sturdy looking fabric, and a belted coat of the same material. A white scarf knotted around his neck and a tan, slouch-brimmed hat completed his costume. I suddenly remembered that I’d seen clothing like that before—in a stereopticon picture taken by a famous photographer who’d come to Colorado Springs two years earlier. In the picture, the man wearing the unusual outfit had been sitting astride an absurd-looking creature called a camel. I recalled that Mr. Watkins, the photographer, said that he’d taken the picture in Egypt. As I made the connection in my mind, it made me all the more curious about what line of work Brendan could be in.

Michaela and I still didn’t know what Brendan’s occupation was, just as we didn’t know what he’d been looking for on his early morning expedition. Though we’d asked Mrs. Quinn about Brendan’s job, we’d never had the chance to hear her answer. Before she’d had a chance to reply, Colleen had come running in to tell us that Jake was in the clinic downstairs, bleeding from a gash in his hand. A slip of the razor while he was barbering, no doubt.

From Colleen’s description, Michaela figured that Jake would need stitches, so while her ma helped her to dress, Colleen prepared for the minor surgical procedure while I kept pressure on Jake’s wound to control the bleeding. Once Michaela was ready to come down, Colleen took over for me with Jake, while I went upstairs to fetch Michaela. She hadn’t had a chance yet to practice with the crutches, and I surely didn’t want her risking the stairs if her balance was shaky, so I carried her down to the clinic. Once there, she was able to prop herself on the crutches and lean against the examination table to work on Jake, and she stitched up his hand with her usual skill. But it was draining for her, and that’s when I had insisted on taking her back to the homestead where she could rest uninterrupted. I knew that Michaela had been intending to speak to her ma about us—and about me—but under the circumstances, I felt that discussion could hold for a spell—and for once, she agreed with me. But with the distraction of Jake’s injury, and then our departure for the homestead, we never did get back to the subject of Brendan’s background.

And so, as Matthew finished reciting the blessing and we all started on the meal Colleen had prepared, Brendan’s story remained a mystery. But I knew it wouldn’t be for long. Like me, Michaela hadn’t forgotten her curiosity about Brendan, and almost immediately she was reminding him of his promise to tell us about himself.

“Brendan, I must confess that you piqued my curiosity yesterday regarding your occupation,” she said. “I hope you won’t think me too forward if I ask you again to enlighten us?”

“Not at all,” Brendan said comfortably. “Though I fear you’ll be disappointed by my answer. The truth is that I suppose I’d have to characterize myself as a ‘jack of all trades, master of none.’” He smiled easily.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Quinn said promptly. “Brendan, you mustn’t hide your light beneath a bushel.” She turned to us. “Brendan graduated with honors from Harvard, and holds a degree in Ancient Civilizations and Antiquities,” she noted.

“Really?” said Michaela, regarding Brendan with undisguised admiration.

“Not only that, but he recently published a book of photographs culled from his explorations and travels,” her mother added.

Michaela’s eyes grew more fascinated. “How very impressive! Then you’re a photographer?” she asked Brendan.

“It’s part of my work, but it’s not my profession—nor am I that accomplished,” he replied modestly, clearly uncomfortable with the accolades being heaped on him by Michaela’s ma. “I was required to learn about photography out of necessity, as a way of making a visual record of our surveys and discoveries. A learned colleague taught me all I know, and provided invaluable assistance to me in the writing and
“Pardon me for asking, but if you say you ain’t a photographer—then what exactly is it that you do?” I spoke up at last.

“Forgive me,” Brendan said immediately. “I didn’t mean to be cryptic. I’m what’s known as an ‘antiquarian,’” he said.

“What’s that?” Brian asked, clearly confused by the term. I had to confess to being in the dark about it myself.

“An antiquarian is someone who studies written records and relics of the distant past to learn about the ages of man’s history upon the earth,” Brendan explained. “In many cases, we have written or pictorial evidence to give us insights into the past. But when we study societies that were pre-literate—that is, people who had no written language—we rely on other sources to give us the answers to our questions. Sometimes we gain information through excavations of burial sites, or sites where legendary cities were rumored to have once existed. The artifacts that we find tell us a story about extinct civilizations or cultures.”

“Artifacts?” repeated Brian.

“The things people left behind,” Brendan rephrased. “The buildings they created, the tombs they used to bury their dead—as well as objects they used in their daily life, like tools, cooking utensils or weapons. Sometimes our clues come from human remains—fragments of skull or bone, or sometimes—if we’re very lucky—entire skeletons. Some antiquarians have found paintings on cave walls, in which our ancient forbears depicted events in their lives, such as hunting for food, religious rituals or burial practices. In Egypt, we’ve found extensive evidence of a sophisticated form of pictorial writing called hieroglyphics—in which the ancient Egyptians depicted every aspect of their lives.

“All these things combine to give us a window into the past. It’s rather like a mystery, and the antiquarian is the detective who must solve it, using all the clues at his disposal,” Brendan added, expressing his occupation in a way that Brian could understand.

“Another term for someone in my profession would be ‘archaeologist,’” he added.

“I know that word,” Brian said, his eyes lighting in recognition.

“I’m sure you do,” Brendan replied, smiling at him. “And now you know a little of what an archaeologist or antiquarian does.”

“But ain’t it kind of—disrespectful—touching all those bones and skeletons?” Brian asked him, his eyes troubled. “I mean—ain’t it like digging up bodies in a cemetery?”

“Brian!” Michaela chided—but I understood what he meant. Brendan himself had said that digging into tombs was part of his work. It sounded to me like what he did wasn’t so different from the white homesteaders who’d been destroying Cheyenne burial sites as they rushed to buy up the Cheyenne land being sold off by the government since Washita.

I glanced quickly at Brendan, wondering if he was uncomfortable or offended by Brian’s statement. But he didn’t seem to be. Instead, he was looking at Brian sympathetically.

“I understand that’s how it might appear to you, Brian,” he said kindly. “But I can assure you—we treat any remains that we find with the greatest care. Our goal is to preserve, not destroy.”

“Fact remains, though, that you’re still violating sacred burial sites, ain’t that right?” I spoke up. “When these ancient people laid their dead to rest, I’m sure they weren’t planning for someone to come along later and dig them up.”

“Sully—” Michaela said waringly.

Brendan raised his hand. “No, that’s all right, Dr. Quinn,” he said mildly. He paused, looking at me speculatively, then continued, “First of all, we don’t so much ‘dig up’ the artifacts we excavate, as ‘uncover’ them—through a long, pain-staking process,” he said. “You must understand that over vast amounts of
time, many of these ancient sites have been buried under sand or soil—even water. Through very careful
effort, we reveal the glories of the past that have been hidden from us for thousands of years.”

“But what do you do with these artifacts and remains after you find them?” I challenged.

“Those things that can be safely removed from the site are treated with the utmost reverence, carefully
restored, then often put on display in museums for the education and enrichment of the public,” he said.

“But no matter how careful or “reverent” you are, you’re still violating the sanctity of a burial
ground—not to mention moving the earthly remains from their final resting place,” I maintained
stubbornly.

“Sully!” Michaela said uncomfortably. She turned to Brendan. “My mother may have told you of
Sully’s—attachment—to the Cheyenne Indians,” she began carefully. “Recently, the Cheyenne suffered a
particularly brutal massacre at the hands of General Custer and the army. Some very dear friends of
Sully’s—and of mine—perished in the attack.” She glanced at me briefly, her eyes soft with sympathy.
And yet, she still seemed to feel the need to apologize for my remarks. The combination didn’t sit very well
with me. I leaned back, my eyes narrowing as I glanced from her to Brendan and back again.

“That would be the attack at the Washita River?” Brendan asked. “I read of it in the papers. Tragic.”

“Yeah,” I said shortly.

Michaela flashed me another uneasy glance. “It was very painful for all of us to bear,” she responded
to Brendan. “And to make matters worse, since then the army has been selling off the Cheyenne land to
the public. The people settling here have been destroying Cheyenne burial sites as they clear the land for
homesteading. Witnessing this has been very difficult for Sully.”

“I understand,” said Brendan. “My sympathies to you,” he added, looking at me.

“Thanks,” I said, hard-put to keep the grudging tone out of my voice.

“There’s no excuse for that kind of heartless, willful destruction,” Brendan went on, “I agree—your
anger is entirely justified. But there’s a compelling difference between the callous razing of burial sites
that you describe, and the precautions that we take with the artifacts we find. When we remove human
remains or other relics from a site, we do so out of necessity.”

“Necessity?” I repeated skeptically.

“To guard them from the corrosive effects of the elements,” Brendan explained. “In Egypt, for
example, the sealed crypts and hot, arid climate naturally combined to preserve these remains, keeping
them as pristine now as when they were interred thousands of years ago.

“However, once these sealed rooms are open to the air, their contents immediately became vulnerable
to deterioration,” he added.

“Maybe you should just leave them alone, then,” I observed—rather obviously, I thought.

“Perhaps,” Brendan said, “But then a significant portion of man’s history would be lost forever.
Knowledge of our past enlightens and shapes us,” he argued. “Only by learning where we come from, can
we know where we’re going,” he finished, sounding like he was quoting from a book.

“I would love to hear about some of your expeditions,” Michaela spoke up suddenly, apparently
deciding that the current thread of discussion could only lead to more friction between us. Brendan turned
his gaze to her with relief.

“Well, most recently I participated in an excavation of the Valley of the Kings in Egypt,” he answered.
“Our goal was to locate the tomb of the legendary boy king Tutankhamen, but we had no success. Even
more frustrating, however, was the fact that of the tombs we *did* uncover, all had been ransacked by
grave robbers long before we got there.

“Grave robbers?” Brian said excitedly, his eyes growing round.
“Unfortunately yes,” Brendan confirmed. He glanced at me. “Contrary to your earlier assumption, Mr. Sully, the ancient Egyptian kings were well aware that their tombs—and all the riches interred within them—were at constant risk from grave robbers, which is why they built elaborate constructions like the pyramids, and secreted their burial vaults deep inside. However, no matter how carefully they concealed the entrances to the pyramids, or with what complexity they designed the maze of passages and rooms within these structures, grave robbers continually managed to find their way inside and loot the crypts of every last bit of their contents.”

“Well if everything’s gone, then why keep looking?” I asked. “Seems to me you’d be smart enough to know when to give up.” I knew my words bordered on rudeness—if I hadn’t crossed the line completely. The expression in Michaela’s eyes was enough to tell me that. But I couldn’t seem to help myself.

Brendan shrugged. “You may have a point,” he said neutrally. “But just because we hadn’t been successful so far, didn’t mean that there wasn’t the promise of a great discovery in the offing.

“More often than not, archaeologists must operate on faith,” he asserted. “Despite the evidence to the contrary, we had to persist in believing that not every tomb had been violated. Sooner or later, we reasoned, we were bound to find a tomb—perhaps more than one—that was still intact.

“But our efforts continued to be fruitless,” he admitted. “And I confess that after several months, I had become very discouraged. I was seriously considering accepting an invitation by the noted antiquarian Heinrich Schliemann, to join him on an excavation he’s conducting off the coast of Asia Minor to locate the legendary city of Troy.”

“How exciting!” Michaela commented.

Brendan nodded. “The prospect was certainly intriguing,” he agreed. “However I was prevented from taking advantage of the opportunity when I—suffered an accident.”

“Accident?” Michaela echoed, her doctor’s instincts instantly alerted. “What happened?”

“Oddly enough, I myself was the victim of a grave robber,” Brendan explained with a somewhat cynical smile. “I surprised him lurking about our camp one night, and he shot at me.”

“You were shot?” Michaela exclaimed.

“By a great stroke of luck, the bullet missed,” Brendan answered. “However in the act of diving for cover, I fell down a set of terraced steps leading to the bottom of the excavation and broke my leg—a rather bad break, I’m afraid.

“We had no doctor on site,” he went on. “Only a man who had done some battlefield nursing during the war. Unfortunately, his skills were rudimentary at best, and he set my leg improperly. Before long, infection set in.”

“Gangrene?” questioned Michaela.

Brendan nodded. “I presume. I developed a fever, and was out of my head for some time,” he said. “I probably would have died, if not for the fact that one of my colleagues on the dig went to the nearest telegraph office in Cairo and wired my family as soon as I was injured. The moment William learned of my condition, he traveled to Egypt as quickly as he was able. By the time he reached me, I was close to death, but somehow he managed to stop the progress of the infection before it proved fatal.”

“William is a skilled physician,” Michaela said.

Brendan nodded again. “I owe him my life,” he said. “However even though I had the advantage of William’s superior medical skills, it was obvious that there was no question of my remaining in Egypt. We traveled back to America together, and I embarked on a long convalescence at my brother’s home in Boston.”

“You seem to have made a remarkable recovery,” Michaela observed. “I didn’t even detect a limp.”

Brendan smiled at her. “It aches quite a bit when it rains, and I’m unable to get around as well,” he conceded. “But when I consider the alternative . . .” His eyebrows raised, and he and Michaela shared a
look of commiseration.

“Certainly a small price to pay,” she agreed.

As I watched them together, it unexpectedly struck me how alike they were. Not in looks, certainly, but in every other little way that counted. The way they spoke, and carried themselves. And the invisible air of breeding that surrounded them both, which had been bred into them from infancy.

("Like turns to like,") spoke my mother’s voice suddenly from the dim recesses of my childhood. She’d made that comment more than once when I was growing up. I hadn’t understood it then, but I did now. “Like turns to like,” my ma had said, but what she’d really meant was, “Class turns to class.” She’d been saying that folks in the same station in life always knew one of their own. The Cheyenne had another way of putting it: that every man recognized a member of his own tribe. But it all meant the same thing, in the end.

As I recalled my mother’s words, I realized how ironic it was that she had been the one to speak them. She may have been called a governess, but truth was, my ma had been a servant in that mansion on Washington Square. And yet in my eyes, she had been the equal—if not the superior—of anyone in that house. In the soft and cultured way she spoke, her quiet but elegant demeanor . . . Of course I’d only been a small boy, no doubt viewing her through the rose-colored glasses of my child’s adoration. Still, as I watched Michaela, and thought of my ma as I remembered her, I couldn’t help but think that they would have understood one another, and been friends.

“Was it during your convalescence that you came to know my mother?” Michaela was asking as I pulled myself back from my reverie with an effort and refocused on the conversation.

Mrs. Quinn spoke before Brendan could answer. “Precisely! Having come to know William so well during my the course of my own illness, I confess that I enjoyed his society,” she went on. “So much so, that even after you returned to Colorado Springs, Michaela, I continued to offer him my hospitality. William was frequently at the house for tea, and attended several of my dinner parties.

“William’s journey to Egypt when he learned of Brendan’s accident, and his subsequent treatment of Brendan’s injuries once they returned to the States, kept William occupied for a prolonged period of time,” she explained. “But once Brendan was ambulatory, William often brought him along on his visits. I found him to be just as charming as his brother,” she added, favoring Brendan with an approving smile.

“Your mother was very gracious to me,” Brendan agreed, though once again he looked uncomfortable at Mrs. Quinn’s effusive praise.

“And so you offered to accompany my mother on her trip to Colorado Springs as an—expression of your gratitude?” Michaela asked, trying to get a better sense of her ma’s and Brendan’s relationship.

“That was certainly part of it,” Brendan confirmed. “But I must confess that my motives were not entirely altruistic,” he added.

“I find that hard to believe,” Michaela responded, regarding him admiringly

Brendan colored slightly. “I thank you for the compliment—but in truth, it was actually my work which brought me out here. The fact that I was also able to do your mother a service was simply a happy coincidence.”

“And what kind of work—exactly—did you come out here to do?” I asked somewhat pointedly.

“Sully!” Michaela spoke again uncomfortably, cutting her eyes to Brendan and then back to me. “Your tone—it’s so challenging. Surely it’s not your intention to put Brendan on the spot?” She stared at me, silently pleading for me to be polite.

I’d promised myself earlier I’d be nice to him, for her sake. It occurred to me I hadn’t been doing a very good job of living up to my word. “Sorry,” I said to him perfunctorily. “I didn’t mean nothing by it.” I directed my gaze back to Michaela. “It’s just—Brendan’s been telling such—*colorful*—stories. I was just curious, is all.” Michaela looked at me coldly. The slight hint of sarcasm that colored my statement hadn’t been lost on her. Brendan either, it turned out.

“I appreciate the ‘interest,’” he said politely, but I could detect the faint hostility behind his words.
His expression was cool as he looked at me. A moment later, his eyes strayed back to Michaela, as if seeking his ally. “To answer Mr. Sully’s question, I traveled west at the invitation of another friend and colleague, William Henry Jackson, a very gifted photographer. He recently joined the Geographic Survey of the Territories being conducted by Ferdinand V. Hayden—an expedition to explore and map the terrain and natural wonders of the West.”

“I’ve heard of Jackson—Hayden, too,” I noted.

“So have I,” Michaela echoed. “Didn’t Dr. Hayden recently complete a geographic survey of Nebraska?”

Brendan nodded. “That’s correct. But now his survey has spread out to encompass Wyoming and Colorado. In the next stage of his survey, Hayden intends to explore the Rocky Mountains, as well as to map the area of Wyoming known as ‘Yellowstone.’ William Jackson invited me to join the expedition.”

“What a marvelous opportunity!” Michaela commented. “But—Dr. Hayden is more of a naturalist and geologist than an archaeologist, is he not?”

“That’s true,” Brendan confirmed. “But in the course of outfitting the expedition in Denver, Jackson heard a tale about abandoned cliff houses in the canyon country of southwestern Colorado. He was intrigued and traveled to the site to investigate the claims.

“A few evenings later, Jackson and his group were camped in lower Mancos Canyon, in the area known as Mesa Verde. Jackson was feeling quite discouraged, since their arduous travels hadn’t yet confirmed the story he’d heard. Suddenly, one of his men looked up and spotted something that he said looked very much like a house. The next day, they climbed up to the ruins, and Jackson made the first photograph of a Mesa Verde cliff dwelling. He’s named the site, ‘Two Story Cliff Dwelling.’

“Knowing how fascinated I’d be by such a find, he wrote to me and urged me to join him in his further explorations of the site.”

“Mesa Verde—that’s Ute land,” I said coolly.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Brendan confirmed, his eyes slightly wary at my tone. “What of it?”

“The Utes are enemies of the Cheyenne—enemies of other tribes, too,” I pointed out. “Since the army’s forced so many different tribes to live together at Palmer Creek, it’s been all I can do to keep the Utes separate from the others, to stop them from fighting and maintain the peace.” Michaela looked a little startled at my statement. I guess she hadn’t realized my memories of my work as Indian Agent had started to come back to me. Fact is, I was surprised myself. Lots of memories had been creeping back into my mind almost without my being aware of it.

“Sully is the Indian Agent for Palmer Creek Reservation,” Michaela explained to Brendan.

“I see,” he said. “Well, the fighting between the Utes and other tribes is unfortunate, I agree—but I really don’t see what that has to do with my interest in exploring Mesa Verde.”

“There ain’t no connection, I guess,” I conceded reluctantly, not quite sure why the idea bothered me so much. Maybe I was just thinking of Cloud Dancing, and what he’d suffered at the hands of the army, and the trouble he’d surely encounter from the Utes if he wound up living at Palmer Creek. That is, if Custer didn’t find him first . . . I felt a brief, but icy chill. “I suppose—it’s a good opportunity for you,” I allowed after a moment. “How soon do you leave?”

Michaela’s eyes as she looked into mine were dark with anger. I knew I’d completely blotted my copybook as far as she was concerned, and it pained me that the intimacy we’d shared such a short time ago, was at risk now because of my behavior. But I couldn’t help it. As much as I tried to tell myself that our relationship was strong—that we were together now for good—still I couldn’t stop feeling that Brendan was somehow a threat. The ugly truth was that I was jealous—again.

“Well I, for one, certainly hope that Brendan needn’t leave right away,” Michaela said clearly, staring at me challengingly. Then her expression and demeanor softened as she turned to Brendan. “I would very much like the opportunity to spend more time with you and hear of your other explorations,” she added to him, smiling.
“That’s very gracious of you,” he replied, returning her smile and rather obviously ignoring me. “Actually, there’s no rush for me to go—Jackson and his group will be there for quite some time. There are numerous dwellings they haven’t yet begun to explore. And quite truthfully, I had hoped to investigate some of the Cheyenne burial sites I’d heard about, since I’m in this vicinity.”

“Weren’t you listening before? It’s too late for that,” I said darkly.

“Possibly,” he acknowledged. “But I sincerely hope not.”

"Was that the reason for your early morning excursion?" Michaela interjected hastily.

He nodded. “Though I was unsuccessful in locating any,” he admitted.

“Just like I been saying,” I spoke again, unable to resist saying ‘I told you so.’ “If I were you, I wouldn’t waste my time. I think you’ll have lots better luck sticking to your original plan.”

“The most important element in my line of work is patience,” Brendan commented. “It can take months—sometimes years—to make a find.

“And it is, after all, *my* time to waste,” he added, regarding me levelly.

“I should get these dishes cleared,” Colleen spoke up suddenly, trying to diffuse the tension between us.

“I’ll help you,” Matthew offered quickly.

“Me too,” said Brian, equally aware of the discord in the room, young as he was.

Belatedly I saw that Mrs. Quinn was staring at Michaela. “You’re quite pale, my dear—are you all right?” she asked in concern.

I looked at Michaela sharply. Her ma was right—she’d grown paler, and I could detect faint lines of pain in her face. I’d been so wrapped up in my resentment of the brilliant and talented Brendan Burke, that I hadn’t even noticed. Regret and guilt washed through me. Quickly I stood and came over to her chair. Kneeling beside her, I took one of her hands in mine, and lifted my other hand to her cheek, stroking it gently.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. Her eyes softened slightly. More loudly I said, “Your ankle’s paining you again, isn’t it?” To her credit, she didn’t try to deny it.

“Yes, a bit,” she conceded.

“How about your stomach—that bothering you too?” I asked a little softer. She shook her head.

“No, only my ankle,” she replied quietly.

I got to my feet. “Evening’s over, folks,” I announced. “I made Michaela promise that if she started feeling poorly, we’d bring the festivities to an end.”

"Of course," Brendan said readily, also rising to his feet. “I hope my presence here hasn’t been too great a strain on you, Dr. Quinn,” he added solicitously.

“Not at all,” Michaela answered, looking up at him. “And please, Brendan—won’t you call me ‘Michaela’—or perhaps ‘Dr. Mike,’ which is what the majority of the townspeople call me?”

Brendan glanced quickly at me. My gaze was steely as I regarded them both.

“'Dr. Mike’—how charming,” he answered, turning back to her again after a moment. “I’ll—call you that, if I may.”

“Of course,” Michaela said.
Matthew went out to get the wagon ready to take Mrs. Quinn and Brendan back to town, and then there was the usual slew of good-byes. Eventually, after about ten minutes or so, they took their leave. Colleen and Brian finished cleaning up hastily, eager to remove themselves from the tense silence between Michaela and me, which seemed even louder than words.

Finally, we were alone. Michaela’s eyes were like stilettos as they stabbed into me.

“Just what,” she began icily, “did you think you were doing?”

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Well, “this” is awkward, Michaela thought, as she registered the astonishment rapidly turning to disapproval in her mother’s expression, and then the polite but hesitant mien of the tall, attractive man standing before her. Mr. Burke had removed his hat, and it dangled from one hand as he started to reach out his other hand toward her in greeting. Suddenly he froze, and Michaela saw him glance swiftly at Sully, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed. She felt a flash of empathy for the dark-haired stranger. As far as she knew, there were no rules of etiquette for how a gentleman should behave when he was attempting to shake the hand of a woman being carried in another man’s arms. The absurdity of the situation impressed itself on her, and Michaela felt an embarrassed blush stain her cheeks. She inclined her head toward Sully’s, her lips close to his ear.

“Sully, you should put me down,” she hissed.

“You can’t stand,” Sully said promptly in a normal tone of voice, effectively spoiling her attempt to be subtle.

“I can lean on you,” she whispered back, acutely conscious of Mr. Burke standing by, pretending he couldn’t hear their conversation.

“I’m gonna take you inside,” Sully replied, apparently unfazed by her discomfort. “That’s where you should be, anyway.”

“An inspired suggestion,” her mother remarked coolly. “I’m sure we needn’t put on a display for the benefit of the townspeople, Michaela.”

Michaela felt a surge of the old, familiar resentment her mother could so easily evoke in her. “Mother, we’re hardly—” she began heatedly, but Sully cut her off.

“Let’s go inside,” he said quickly, then strode past their unexpected visitors, bearing her into the clinic. Sully set her down carefully on the examination table, as the others followed them inside. Michaela brushed self-consciously at her tangled hair. She could only imagine how dirty and disheveled she must look. But there was no help for it. All she could do was try to make the best of a preposterous situation.

“Perhaps we can attempt these introductions again,” she said lightly, aware that she was still blushing, but hoping Mr. Burke wouldn’t notice. “I apologize for my unorthodox arrival, Mr. Burke—as well as my disheveled appearance. I’m afraid I turned my ankle when Sully and I were out in the woods—“

“Please, think nothing of it,” Mr. Burke said swiftly. He smiled at her warmly, putting her at her ease. “I’ve never been one to ‘stand’ on ceremony—if you’ll pardon an atrocious pun,” he added. Spontaneously Michaela smiled back at him, as much in gratitude for his kindness as in response to his mild jest. Sully looked amused as well.

“Well, Mr. Burke, as you’ve certainly gathered by now, I’m Michaela Quinn—and this is Mr. Byron Sully,” she said.

“Brendan Burke—pleasure,” their visitor said, shaking Sully’s hand.

“Call me Sully,” Sully responded.

"And please, call me Brendan,” Mr. Burke urged them both. “Dr. Quinn, it’s a pleasure to meet you,”
he went on. “Mrs. Quinn has been singing your praises ever since we left Boston.”

Michaela groaned inwardly. What had her mother been telling this poor man? Had Elizabeth managed to embarrass her without her even knowing it? In response to Brendan’s compliment she said self-deprecatingly, “That must have grown immensely tedious for you all those days crossing the prairie.”

The corners of Brendan’s eyes crinkled as he grinned. “I managed to get through it,” he asserted, then added unexpectedly, “But now, having met you, I find I have a bone to pick with my brother. In all his most lyrical and flattering descriptions of you, he never managed to do you justice.”

Somewhat blinded as she was by the force of Brendan’s charm, the inference of his statement didn’t immediately register in Michaela’s mind. “I think you must be of Irish descent, Mr.—‘Brendan,’” she amended. “You certainly seem well acquainted with the ‘Blarney stone.’”

“Just what my mother always used to say,” he replied.

And then it struck her. Brendan’s last name was Burke, and he’d mentioned a brother—one whom she allegedly knew . . . She stared at him, stunned. “Wait—your brother?” she said rapidly.

“Not—William Burke?”

“One and the same,” Brendan confirmed. “And I was given strict instructions to present his compliments to you, and give you his warmest regards.”

Michaela was shaking her head in amazement. “I can’t believe it,” she marveled. “William once mentioned his family to me, but he never said anything about brothers and sisters.”

“No sisters, unfortunately, but two more brothers,” he replied. “Our middle brother, Hugh, and myself—the youngest of the family.”

Michaela couldn’t deny her pleasure at receiving news of the kind and gentle physician she remembered with such fondness. “How is William?” she asked.

“He’s doing very well—his practice is thriving, and he’s beginning to make quite a name for himself in Boston medical circles,” Brendan told her.

“I’m so happy to hear it,” Michaela said with genuine warmth. She hesitated a moment, somewhat nervous about asking the question, then added tentatively, “Did—he ever take a partner?”

Brendan’s clear eyes, fraught with knowledge, looked steadily into hers. “No, he never did,” he responded mildly after a pause. “He always claimed that after you, no one else could measure up.”

The annoying, almost school-girl blush that had bloomed on Michaela’s cheeks since their arrival, now returned with a vengeance—heating her face and neck and turning her skin a fiery crimson.

“William was always so generous,” she managed after a moment, her words sounding awkward and clumsy to her ears. “But I think our—friendship—made it difficult for him to be objective.”

Beside her, Michaela felt Sully stiffen. Slightly appalled, she belatedly realized that for a few brief moments, she had forgotten his presence. She gazed side-long at him, wondering if he knew. The sudden tension in his posture certainly seemed to indicate that he detected something. Suddenly he turned and their eyes met. She saw him note the tell-tale blush on her face, then a mask slipped smoothly over his features. His eyes became neutral, revealing nothing.

Brendan was responding to her remark, and with an effort Michaela tried to pick up the thread of what he was saying.

“That may be so, but one of his favorite stories to tell was the way you cured your mother’s illness with the application of an Indian remedy,” Brendan stated. “And I know first hand from your mother that you were responsible for saving her life.” He looked toward Elizabeth.

Michaela cringed inwardly. She hardly felt in a condition at the moment to accept Brendan’s praise for her medical skills, and she strongly suspected that Sully was less than pleased to hear glowing allusions to a man who had once been his rival—whether or not he remembered him. She wanted to change the subject, but her mind felt fuzzy, as if her head had been stuffed with cotton, and she couldn’t immediately
“Absolutely true,” her mother agreed with Brendan before Michaela could speak, increasing her discomfiture still more. Would this embarrassing and ludicrous interview never end? she wondered. She sighed deeply as she heard her mother continue, “But if it weren’t for William defying Dr. Hansen, Michaela wouldn’t have been able to help me. He’s the only man who believed in Michaela and respected her abilities,” her mother said emphatically.

Michaela stole another glance at Sully. He was watching her mother now, his features quiet but remote. While she couldn’t read his thoughts, Michaela couldn’t help but think that he must be hurt, or at least offended, by her mother’s tactless remark. In her mind, she heaped curses on Elizabeth for her insensitivity.

“The only man besides Sully, Mother,” Michaela said in a ringing tone. Clearly unrepentant, her mother glanced perfunctorily at Sully.

“Oh—yes,” Elizabeth said after a moment, deigning to notice his existence—or at least, that’s how it seemed to her daughter. “Forgive me, Mr. Sully. I—know you hold my daughter in high esteem.”

“Yes I do, Ma’am—Mrs. Quinn,” Sully spoke finally, his tone polite but cool.

“I’m so sorry about your injury, Dr. Quinn,” Brendan said hastily on the heels of Sully’s comment. “I don’t wish to intrude on you now, when you must obviously need rest. If you could direct me to the hotel in town, I’ll take my leave, and perhaps see you again tomorrow, when you’re more up to receiving visitors.”

It occurred to Michaela that Brendan was equally aware of the tension in the room, and she regretted anew the unfortunate and uncomfortable circumstances of their initial meeting—not to mention what must seem like her appalling lack of hospitality. Just then Sully startled her by responding to Brendan’s statement.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he said clearly. Elizabeth gave him a baleful glance and Michaela’s cheeks burned again. “Michaela took a bad spill—she needs to rest and elevate her ankle,” Sully went on, either oblivious to Michaela’s embarrassment, or choosing to disregard it. His eyes were fixed on Brendan. “As far as a hotel, we ain’t got one,” he said bluntly. “But there are rooms for rent at the saloon across the way, or I can take you over to the boardin’ house.”

Michaela wondered if there was any way to rescue the situation at this point; but gamely, she decided all she could do was try.

“Oh, I think we can do better than that, Sully,” she said carefully, causing him to look at her sharply. She knew she must have shocked or at least offended Sully by contradicting him, but she silently pleaded with him to understand that she was only doing what was appropriate under the circumstances. “There are no other patients staying here at the clinic right now,” she continued after a pause. “And I intend to have Mother stay here anyway. Certainly we can extend our hospitality to include Mr. Burke.”

“I don’t wish to intrude,” Brendan reiterated, casting a wary glance at Sully.

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth said firmly, quashing his weak objection. “You did me the great favor of accompanying me all across the country, Brendan. I’m hardly about to abandon you to your own devices now—and obviously Michaela concurs with me,” she stated confidently. “As I’m sure Mr. Sully does, as well?” she added slyly, effectively putting Sully on the spot.

Again Michaela fumed inwardly at her mother’s gall. Rude or not, however, her mother’s words had the desired effect. A moment later she heard Sully reluctantly answer in the affirmative.

“Sure,” he said quietly. “Michaela and her ma are right. There’s plenty of room here.”

There was another hesitation on Brendan’s part, then he finally agreed. “Well, if you’re certain—then I accept with pleasure.”

“I’m glad,” Michaela said, grateful that she had succeeded somewhat in smoothing things over with Brendan, and desperately hoping she could do the same with Sully the moment they were alone. “I regret that I’m unable to offer you the hospitality of a home-cooked meal this evening,” she continued politely to
Brendan. “But our friend Grace, who runs the café behind the clinic, is a wonderful cook. Mother and my children can join you there for dinner—Sully too,” she added, even as she knew he would object. He didn’t disappoint her.

“I’m sure your ma and Brendan will understand that I want to stay here with you.” Sully’s voice carried through the clinic, his tone brooking no contradiction. To Michaela’s surprise, even her mother—for once—was silent.

Instead, Brendan spoke. “Of course,” he said. His eyes fleetingly acknowledged Sully. “Tell me,” he added to Michaela. “Can we bring you anything?”

Again Sully’s voice overrode any possible reply from Michaela. His eyes were the color of flint, and his tone and manner clearly possessive. “Thanks—but I’ll see Michaela gets what she needs,” he said flatly. Michaela sensed Brendan retreat, but then a moment later Sully seemed to regret his harshness, and he added more mildly, “You must be tired and hungry. That trip by stagecoach ain’t easy.”

“I’ve had worse,” Brendan said shortly, piquing Michaela’s curiosity. But he didn’t elaborate. Instead he added, “But you’re right. A hot meal would be very welcome about now.”

Her curiosity about Brendan now fully aroused, Michaela couldn’t resist asking him a final question. “That reminds me Brendan—you never mentioned your occupation. Are you a physician like your brother?” she queried.

For the first time in several minutes he seemed to relax. His mouth curved into an amused smile as he shook his head. “I’m afraid I was never attracted to the medical arts,” he told her. “Fortunately, in William my mother got the doctor in the family that she’d always wanted, and my brother Hugh made my father happy by following him into the family business. Which left me free to be the ‘black sheep’ of the clan.”

His turn of phrase disarmed her. “That sounds quite intriguing,” Michaela remarked. “I’d love to hear more.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ll be happy to tell you—but I think that’s a conversation best left for another time,” Brendan said.

Michaela conceded the logic of this, but then rather neatly put him on the spot with her next statement. “I’ll look forward to it—when you join us for dinner at the homestead tomorrow evening,” she said adroitly. “My ankle will be much improved by tomorrow, and my daughter Colleen is also a wonderful cook. We insist—don’t we, Sully? Mother?” she added, knowing her mother would agree and hoping Sully would support her as well.

“Yes, indeed,” said Elizabeth, giving her expected response.

“Whatsoever Michaela says,” Sully answered after a moment. While his manner was not as warm as it could be, at least he was being civil. She accepted that she had to be content with that.

Brendan still looked as if he felt he should protest; but ensnared as he’d been in Michaela’s gentle web, and buoyed by Elizabeth’s reaction—and to a lesser extent Sully’s lukewarm but positive response—finally he submitted.

“Well, if you’re absolutely certain I’d be no trouble—then I accept, with thanks,” he said.

“I’ll take you over to the café, and then go fetch Colleen and Brian,” Matthew offered helpfully. The next few minutes were taken up with words of parting and exhortations to Michaela to rest. Finally, the others departed, and she and Sully were alone.

Both the distance, and the silence between them were palpable. Sully stood in front of her awkwardly, his eyes not meeting hers. In her heart Michaela knew what was bothering him and she was eager to allay his concerns, but instinctively she felt that he wasn’t going to tell her voluntarily. She needed to persuade him to open his heart to her. More, she felt it was necessary for Sully to give voice to the feelings that were troubling him, for his own sake.

“What’s wrong, Sully?” she said directly, her eyes focused intently on his.
“Nothin’s wrong,” he denied, his own tell-tale blush appearing to belie his words.

She regarded him benignly. “Are we going to resume our engagement with a lie?” she said gently after a moment.

She could see Sully struggling with the need to free his mind, conflicting with his equally strong desire not to upset her. Finally he reached some sort of resolution, and raised his eyes to hers.

“Who’s William Burke?” he asked. “And what’s he got to do with you?”

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MY JOURNAL  
Wednesday, 28 March, 1870

“Well?” Michaela said impatiently when I didn’t immediately answer. Guiltily I raised my eyes to hers.

“I know you’re mad,” I began uneasily. “And I guess I got it coming—“

“You ‘guess?’” she repeated derisively.

“All right,” I placated her. “I got it coming. Every angry word you’ve got to say. I deserve it—all of it. But it’s been a long day, Michaela. You’re tired, you’re hurting . . . Now ain’t the time to get into all this—“

“On the contrary,” she said coldly, her expression implacable. “I think now is *precisely* the time to ‘get into it.’” She stared at me, as if I’d suddenly turned into someone she didn’t know. “What on earth were you thinking, Sully?” she went on after a moment. “Brendan was a guest in my home—in *our* home,” she hastily amended. “How could you behave so disgracefully?”

“I know I was wrong—“ I tried again.

“Do you?” she retorted. “I wonder. If you knew how boorishly you were acting, then what possessed you to continue?”

I chewed on my lower lip. I wasn’t proud of how I’d behaved, but at the same time, I believed I had cause. There were things about Brendan Burke that I believed I knew, and she didn’t. Now she’d asked the question—that meant she was obliged to listen to the answer. I only hoped she’d be willing to hear me out.

“Well first off, he lied,” I said levelly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me,” I repeated, staring into her eyes, which were by turns stunned and then disdainful. “When I asked him, before, what he and his cronies did with the remains of the people they dug up? . . . He lied.”

She stared back at me, temporarily speechless. But being Michaela, she didn’t stay that way for long. “I have no idea where you came up with such a preposterous allegation,” she said sharply after a moment. “More than that, I can’t believe that you dislike Brendan so much you would go to such lengths to discredit him. What’s happened to you, Sully?”
I flushed, anger and hurt fighting it out inside me. “More like, what’s happened to you?” I countered. “I don’t lie to you, Michaela. I never have, and I ain’t starting now. I’m stating the truth. Brendan Burke lied.”

“Assuming you’re correct,” she began more quietly, her expression somewhat chastened. “How could you possibly know that, Sully? Are you an antiquarian or an Egyptologist?”

“There ain’t no need to make fun of me,” I said.

“I wasn’t—!”

But I plowed on over her objection. “Maybe I ain’t got a ‘Harvard education’—maybe I didn’t even finish school—but I ain’t—I’m NOT—stupid, Michaela.”

“Sully, I never meant to suggest—“

“I read,” I resumed defensively, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Fact is, I used to read a lot. When I was young, before my ma died . . . The people she worked for—they let me have the run of their library. I read everything I could get my hands on—books, newspapers, periodicals. I learned—and I remembered what I learned. Least I tried to.”

She was listening quietly to me now.

“And that’s how I know,” I went on in a more moderate tone. “That Brendan lied. Because of something I read in a history of Napoleon, when he invaded Egypt. For years Napoleon had his scholars survey and map Egypt, and record and describe every artifact they found.”

She waited for me to go on.

“He didn’t tell you about the mummies,” I said.

“The ‘mummies?’” she repeated blankly.

“Yeah,” I answered. “The mummies—that Napoleon and his men discovered when they invaded in 1798. They dug them up out of the sand. Not just a few, but scores of them. It must have been some kind of sacred burial ground. But Napoleon’s army didn’t care about that. The French soldiers dragged the mummies from their resting places and shipped them back to Europe by the hundreds. It was the first that people in the West had ever heard of mummies, and they went crazy, flocking to see them. But the mummies weren’t treated with respect—folks had no reverence for them. And soon, there were so many of them coming from Egypt, that they stopped being a curiosity and turned into—things—to be used.” I swallowed. “Folks—burned them for firewood, and stripped off the bandages to turn into pulp to make paper.

“Kind of a far cry from Brendan’s claim about treating human remains so carefully, and then sending them to museums to ‘educate the public,’” I finished, a bitter edge to my voice.

Michaela was quiet for several moments after I stopped speaking. Finally she looked up at me. Her eyes were solemn. “I recall reading something about that myself, some years ago,” she said. “And I agree with you, Sully, it’s appalling. But I can’t believe that Brendan would ever willingly take part in such desecration. I believe that the people who engage in such practices are thieves and profiteers—scoundrels who care only about exploitation and greed. Not scholars like Brendan and his colleagues. Their abiding interest is in preserving the past.”

“If they really wanted to ‘preserve’ it, they’d leave it be,” I said flatly.

“That’s your opinion,” Michaela countered. “To which you’re certainly entitled. But Sully, your view of the situation isn’t the only one. Brendan is as justified in his beliefs, as you are in yours. Neither of you is right or wrong. You simply happen to disagree.”

“Be that as it may, it still don’t explain why he lied,” I maintained.

“Sully, he didn’t lie—he simply chose to withhold that part of the truth.”
“Same thing,” I shrugged. “The point is, why? If he has nothing to do with desecrating these burial sites, then he has nothing to hide.”

“I agree,” said Michaela. “I don’t believe he has anything to hide.”

“Then why wasn’t he honest?” I said.

Michaela fixed me with a reproving stare. “Perhaps,” she said quietly, “because he wanted to spare Brian? Brendan was aware that Brian was troubled about the—handling of human remains. I think it more than likely that he deliberately refrained from discussing such a grisly topic, so that Brian wouldn’t be upset.

“Isn’t that what you would do?” she asked, her eyes penetrating.

I flushed again. She had me. I had forgotten for the moment about Brian, and how he’d reacted to Brendan’s tales of digging up bones and skeletons. Michaela was right—Brian would have been upset—and Brendan would have known that.

It was my turn to be silent. Seconds ticked past, as I tried to think of a response. Finally I met her eyes.

“You have a point,” I conceded slowly. “He probably was trying to protect Brian, and I commend him for at least having common sense. But all the same . . .” I trailed off.

“What?” she said.

“I don’t trust him,” I said ominously.

“Sully, just because you disagree with Brendan’s profession or principles—“

“That ain’t why,” I said stubbornly.

“Then would you please enlighten me?” she implored. There was another long pause as I tried to scrape up the nerve to get to the heart of the matter.

“I . . . didn’t like his attentions to you,” I said finally. She gaped at me.

“Attentions?” she repeated. “What attentions? Brendan has been a perfect gentleman since the moment we met.”

“Maybe on the outside,” I mumbled.

She sighed in exasperation. “You’ve lost me, Sully. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I stared into her eyes. “What I’m talking about, is that he’s interested, Michaela. In you. He’s careful not to show it—at least not much—but I can tell.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, flatly dismissing the idea.

“Is it?” I questioned, my eyes fastened on hers. “His brother fell in love with you—why should Brendan be any different?”

“Whatever William felt for me has absolutely no bearing on this situation,” Michaela replied. “William and Brendan are two entirely different men, regardless of the fact that they’re related. Sully, I only met Brendan for the first time yesterday. I barely know him, for heaven’s sake!”

“We didn’t know each other yet when I fell I love with you,” I reminded her. “It may have taken me a couple of years to finally say the words, but the feeling was always there, from the beginning.”

Her expression softened slightly. “I accept that you may have had feelings for me from the start, Sully—and I’m honored that you cared for me. But just because you felt that way, doesn’t mean that every man I meet is going to swoon at my feet.” She looked at me earnestly.
“Sully, I understand how difficult it’s been for you these past weeks—losing your memory of our original relationship, so that both of us had to—to start from scratch again. Even as you had to cope with your returning memories of other men in my life, like William,” she began reasonably.

“But that still doesn’t give you the right to be rude to Brendan while he’s a guest here, and humiliate me in the process—no matter how jealous you may be. And there’s no reason for you to be jealous!” she declared.

“You sure about that?” I asked.

“Of course I’m sure!” she exclaimed. “Have I done anything to suggest otherwise to you?”

“Not exactly, but . . .”

“What do you mean, ‘not exactly?’”

“Michaela—” I said reluctantly.

“Tell me,” she insisted.

“All right,” I capitulated. “If you’re so bent on knowing . . . He’s a handsome man, Michaela. Rich, educated, cultured . . . He’s traveled around the world, been to all these far-off places, done all these exciting things . . . There probably ain’t a woman alive who wouldn’t be attracted to someone like that.”

“Except for *this* woman,” she said pointedly.

“Look—I’m willing to accept that consciously you believe that,” I said. “But—“

“ ‘But--?’”

“But I saw the effect he had on you,” I burst out, hard-put to keep the accusatory tone out of my voice. “Does every man you meet make you blush that way?” I stared at her piercingly.

She looked startled, then flustered. After a long silence she said, “If—I was blushing slightly, it was only because I was embarrassed by your behavior, and concerned that Brendan would be offended.” Her words sounded innocent enough, but she looked acutely uncomfortable under the force of my gaze, and her eyes shifted away from me.

“You’re saying that you didn’t find him the least bit fascinating? I thought we weren’t going to lie to each other, Michaela,” I said. Now she was the one on the defensive.

“Well, certainly I found Brendan to be interesting, and very pleasant company,” she ventured. “But as I said before, I barely know him, Sully. Besides, he’s quite young—”

“At least thirty—maybe more,” I said. “That ain’t so young.”

“Well, it’s considerably younger than I am,” she asserted.

“Only seven years—that’s nothing out here in the West, where there’s ten men for every woman,” I argued, trying to make her feel better. But my comment didn’t have the desired effect. Instead, she flushed self-consciously.

“It’s one thing for a man to be older than a woman—and quite another when it’s the woman who’s older than the man,” she said quietly.

“Well you’re older than me, too—but it ain’t never made a difference between us—“ I began, then stopped short as I saw the injured look in her eyes. Damnation! I fumed inwardly, cursing myself for my stupidity. What had possessed me to say that?

“Thank you *so* much for reminding me,” she said, her voice and posture stiff with anger and hurt. “I wondered when the age difference between us would become an issue.”
“It ain’t!” I exclaimed. “Michaela, I’ve never thought about it, and I’ve never cared. Besides, it’s only two years—“

“Obviously you *have* thought about it, or you never would have brought it up,” she maintained stubbornly.

“Michaela, this is crazy. You’re a young, vital, beautiful woman, and I love you. I always have and I always will. Two little years between us ain’t never mattered to me, and it never will.”

“You say that now, and perhaps you even believe it,” she said distantly. “But what happens five years from now, Sully—or ten or fifteen? When I’ve lost my looks and I’m no longer the woman you married?”

“You’ll always be the beautiful woman I married,” I said softly. “Beauty ain’t only on the outside, Michaela. I admit—your looks take my breath away. But I love you for *everything* you are, inside and out—and that’s never going to change.

“Look—ain’t we got off-track here?” I went on reasonably. “We started out talking about Brendan being dishonest, and having eyes for you, and then somehow we got into this foolish discussion about age—”

“I don’t consider it foolish,” Michaela said coolly. “And we started out talking about your unfortunate behavior this evening.”

“All right, all right. Whatever you say,” I tried to pacify her. “We were talking about me behaving badly. So let’s stick with that. Let’s not waste any more time arguing about something like age. Please?” I implored.

“You know, I believe you were right earlier when you said that now was not the time to discuss it,” Michaela announced suddenly, rebuffing my attempt at reconciliation. “I think perhaps it would be best if you left now and returned to the clinic.”

“Michaela, don’t do this—“ I begged.

“Sully, I really am quite tired,” she insisted, her eyes remote. “Please do me the courtesy of honoring my wishes.”

I sighed heavily, recognizing that her mind was made up. “Okay,” I gave in. “You win—no more arguing tonight. But I don’t like the thought of leaving you when you’re in pain like this. At least let me stay and take care of you—”

“Colleen can give me all the care and help I need,” she stated.

“Of course she can, I know she can . . . but I’m worried about you—“

“Don’t be,” she said shortly. “I’ll be fine.” With an effort, she rose to her feet, propping a crutch under one arm. I saw her grimace slightly, and I ached to reach out and help her, but I knew she wouldn’t abide it.

“Can—can I call on you in the morning?” I asked after a pause.

“I’ll be coming into the clinic as usual,” she said. “I’ll see you there.”

“Well, can’t I at least drive you—?”

“Matthew can drive me,” she said, bringing our encounter to a firm close. “I’ll see you there,” she repeated. “Good night, Sully.” Realizing that further words were useless, I moved to the door and opened it.

“Take care of yourself,” I said softly. “Get some rest.” She didn’t answer. I stepped out onto the porch. “Good night,” I added, but received only the closing of the door in reply. I stood there uncertainly for a moment, then slapped the railing in frustration.

“As long as I draw breath, I’ll never understand women,” I muttered to myself. I stomped down the
steps and began the long trek back to town.

But I never made it. Colorado Springs had been my destination when I started out, but the closer I got, the more I realized I didn’t want to be there. My only reason for staying on at the clinic had been for Michaela. Now that she was back at the homestead, there was no need for me to pass the night in town. But that wasn’t the only reason I didn’t want to be at the clinic. Truth be told, I didn’t want to bump into Brendan every time I turned around. In fact, it seemed to me the less time we spent together, the better. Michaela was already furious with me for treating him the way I had. If I were to go up against him again, without Michaela there to keep the peace—well, I didn’t know for sure what would happen. But one thing I was convinced of—it could only lead to more trouble. Not just between Brendan and me, but more important, between me and Michaela.

And there was something else nudging at me—something that had nothing to do with my problems with Brendan and Michaela. It was a feeling—one that I couldn’t really describe or put a name to. All I knew was that I wanted—I needed—to be out in the woods. It wasn’t just a craving to breathe the fresh air and be close to the land—though I’d keenly missed those things over the long weeks of my recovery. It was more that I felt drawn there—though at the moment I had no clue why.

Cloud Dancing and the Cheyenne had taught me how to listen to my inner voice, and follow my instincts. That ability had always served me well, and I had no reason to think that this time would be any different. Thus, as I reached the familiar fork in the road—the branch I was on heading toward town, the other doubling back and leading deeper into the woods—without hesitation I turned off and followed the latter, bound for my campsite. I’d never had the chance to rebuild my lean-to, and I was too tired now to even think about embarking on the task. But I wasn’t concerned. An enormous yellow moon hung above me, and the sky was like a clear, inverted bowl, splashed with a million twinkling lights. The air was soft and warm. I would have no need of a roof over my head tonight.

I’d build a fire, make an offering to the spirits, and seek their counsel. And wait for whatever was to come.

* * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Michaela’s heart went out to Sully as he plaintively questioned her about William. He’d had to cope with so much since this nightmare began—not least of which the constant insecurity of being unable to recall people and events from the past—his own, and the one they shared together. She thought back to the depth of panic he’d endured when he finally regained consciousness and realized he’d lost so much of his life—and she tried to imagine how he must have felt—but discovered she could not. Her mind simply shut down in protest—the prospect too frightening, too intimidating even to consider. And yet somehow Sully had found the courage within himself not just to accept what had happened to him, but learn to live with it as well; even though he had no promise—not even truly a hope—that he would recover his memories someday.

His memory loss alone would have been sufficient cause to push Sully’s strength and courage to the breaking point, Michaela mused—but he had also been forced to endure still more stress: the emotional confusion arising out of their relationship—or ‘relationships,’ she corrected in her mind—since they’d essentially started over from the beginning when he first awakened. Given all the obstacles that he’d had to confront—that he was still facing—was it any wonder that he appeared to feel threatened by her history with William? She knew in her heart that what she’d had with William was over—that in truth it had never really begun, because she’d never had the feelings for him that she’d had for Sully. But Sully didn’t know that. He didn’t know William. He couldn’t share her confidence that the past was over, and that all that mattered now was the present—their present. But he could imagine what had gone on with her and William—and he could very well be picturing the worst.

She had to reassure him, Michaela thought compassionately. Once and for all, she had to lay Sully’s fears and insecurities to rest, and convince him that there was no other man—past or present—in her heart.

She gazed at him tenderly, wanting more than anything to smooth the lines of anxiety from his face, and replace them with a look of confidence. She was about to answer Sully’s question, when he suddenly spoke again.
“I’m sorry,” he apologized rapidly. “That came out all wrong. I sounded like I didn’t trust you, and that’s not what I meant, Michaela—I swear.” He took her hand and kissed it, endearing himself to her still more.

“I know,” she told him gently. His expression brightened at her response, but a trace of worry that he might have offended her still lingered in his eyes.

“I just—couldn’t help bein’ curious, hearin’ about this William Burke person . . .” he faltered after a moment, abashed.

“It’s all right,” Michaela answered. “In fact—” A smile tugged at her mouth. “I rather enjoy you being a little jealous.” He relaxed a bit more at her mild jest. “But truly, Sully,” she added, remorseful in her turn, “I understand how you must have felt, being left out of the conversation, and I’m sorry for my part in that.”

“You didn’t do anythin’ wrong,” he responded immediately. “You were just—reminiscin’—‘bout an old friend.” Sully’s words were sincere, but Michaela could still sense the strain and tension he was feeling—in the set of his jaw, and the way he compulsively fingered the string of beads hanging around his neck, rubbing them over and over. He confirmed her observation after a moment’s hesitation. “He *was* just a friend, right?” Sully asked, not quite able to hide his apprehension as he waited for her reply.

Michaela hastened to reassure him. “Yes, he was a friend,” she said. “I confess that things between us reached a point where he wanted it to be more—but I turned him down. I cared for William very much, but I didn’t love him—at least, not in the way he wanted. Because it was my relationship with William that made me realize *you* were the man I loved, Sully—and after that I knew there could never be another man in my heart but you.”

His relief was palpable. “Really?” he said, as if he hardly dared believe it.

“Really, truly,” Michaela told him, her love for him glowing in the force of her smile.

“Well, then, that’s good enough for me,” he said, clearly anxious to prove to her that she needn’t explain herself to him further.

Michaela was moved by Sully’s sincere attempt to put his questions about the past aside, and place his trust solely in her. And part of her was strongly tempted to take Sully at his word, and avoid going into her relationship with William. It had ended long ago, after all, and posed no threat to the commitment she and Sully had made to one another. Was it really necessary to dredge up this particular piece of the past?

But even as she posed the question to herself, she knew the answer. Yes, she had to tell him—to clear the air—precisely *because* William was not Sully’s rival, and she needed him to know that. But more important, she had to tell Sully because he had a right to know. He had been there, he had lived through it with her. And while there was no guarantee that Sully would recover his memories of their time in Boston; at least by telling him the entire story she could prove to him, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he had been the one to capture her heart.

Michaela gazed into Sully’s eyes. “That’s very generous of you,” she said sincerely. “But you certainly deserve an explanation of my relationship with William, and I’ll gladly tell you everything.” She paused. “If you want to hear it,” she added, allowing him to make the choice.

It was Sully’s turn to hesitate. “Well . . .” he finally said, unable to disguise his desire to know the truth.

Impulsively Michaela squeezed his hand. “It’s all right,” she reassured him. “I want to tell you. What happened back then lead to a very important turning point in our relationship. I want to help you remember, because it was such a special milestone for us.”

Sully’s eyes flooded with gratitude and love. “Then I want to hear it,” he said with a tremulous smile. “And anythin’ else you’re willing to tell me. I want to know every precious moment I’ve had with you, whether I remember myself, or relive it through your words.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. “I’m selfish, Michaela,” he added more softly, staring passionately into her eyes. “I want to build a lifetime of new memories with you, but I don’t want to lose any of what we had before. I want us to share it all.”
Michaela’s eyes glistened at his words, and emotion swelled inside her, making it difficult to speak. But after a moment she managed, “I’ve been praying for nothing else since you awakened and we realized your memory was gone. Every moment we were together I had to fight the urge to tell you how we felt about one another—how we became close and fell in love—all the wonderful and courageous things you’ve done for me and for the children since we met—” She saw Sully’s face redden at her praise, even as he looked deeply moved.

“Not half as much as you’ve done for me,” he replied softly. “I may not remember it—yet—but it’s somethin’ I know in my heart. I thought I’d never love anyone again after Abagail,” he ventured after a pause. “I thought I never could. But you changed all that, Michaela. You helped me to open my heart again—and then you moved into my heart to stay.”

Michaela traced the curve of his cheekbone with her fingertips. “You’ll forever be in my heart as well,” she softly pledged in return. Sully cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply, then pressed his forehead to hers. When they reluctantly drew apart several moments later and Michaela had a chance to collect herself, she added, “Shall I tell you about William now?” Her fingers strayed to Sully’s hair, her touch feather-light as she brushed a lock away from his temple.

“I want to hear it, but first I’m going to get you settled in bed and bring back some food from Grace’s,” Sully answered, surprising her. “We’ll have supper together—just the two of us. I think I can even arrange for some candlelight,” he added, his eyes twinkling. “Then we’ll have a nice, long talk.”

Though the prospect of food had little appeal to Michaela, her stomach still feeling the faint vestiges of the upset that had plagued her earlier in the day, the thought of a candlelight evening alone with Sully made her heart race in anticipation.

“I like the sound of that,” she said.

Sully gave her a devastating smile, then lifted her into his arms, cradling her close. Michaela laid her head against his shoulder, embracing him tightly.

“One romantic evening coming up,” he whispered to her seductively, and carried her away.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela lay awake, replaying their evening together in her mind, and marveling at the unexpected but thrilling way it had concluded. She knew that downstairs in the examination room, Sully—believing her to be asleep—sat hunched over his journal in the soft illumination of the desk lamp. She wondered if he was writing about everything that had happened between them in the past twenty-four hours, culminating with the startling outcome of their discussion a short time before. She imagined he probably was, but it seemed to her that to document all the amazing twists and turns their lives had taken in so short a span of time, Sully would have to sit there writing for a week or more. Then again, Michaela thought with an indulgent smile, Sully was a man of few words—far fewer than she, at any rate!

She thought back to how they’d lain together “spoon fashion” after supper—and a delightful shiver coursed through her as she remembered the smoldering look in Sully’s eyes, and the exciting sensation of his body against hers as he’d wrapped his arms around her. She recalled their mutual declarations of love and forgiveness for the hurts they had caused one another. They had sealed their ardent apologies with a heartfelt kiss that left her breathless.

Michaela would have been content to stay that way forever, and knew that Sully felt the same—but finally they had agreed to discuss William, so that they could put her past with him aside, once and for all.

The conversation started innocently enough, with Michaela explaining how she had received a telegram from her oldest sister Rebecca stating that their mother was gravely ill, prompting her and the children to immediately begin preparing for a journey to Boston. She recalled for him how she’d tried to be calm and brave—to mask the fear and panic swirling around inside her—and how it had all fallen apart when her anxiety over her mother’s condition had caused her to break down, and flee the homestead in tears. Eyes soft with love, she related to Sully how he had followed her outside and offered her comfort. He had always been such a private person up to that point in their friendship, finding it difficult—perhaps even impossible at times—to talk about himself or his feelings. But in his tender desire to reassure her of her own strength and courage, he had departed from his usual reticence that day, and confided surprising
details to her of his own past—the deaths of his parents, and his resultant decision to come west, when just
a child himself. As Michaela reiterated the essence of that earlier conversation for Sully, she told him how
moved she’d been, that he’d been willing to share the hidden part of himself with her, just to make her feel
clearly.

Touched by her gratitude, Sully responded in his turn that he’d been unwilling to trust anyone but the
Cheyenne, until she came along. Something about Sully’s tone, or his turn of phrase, prompted Michaela
to suddenly wonder if a memory had returned to him.

And that’s when it had happened—the small miracle with such enormous implications for their future.

Sully made a startling confession to her, admitting that he’d had some “visions” of the past—for lack of
a better description. He explained that the images had come into his mind immediately after her
revelation to him that morning that he was the author of the telegram—and the man she loved.

His confession sparked her own memory of their confrontation, and how the strangeness of his manner
in that moment, had elicited her powerful hunch that a recollection had returned to him. But despite her
near-certainty that he had remembered something, Sully—in his anger that she’d withheld the truth from
him about their relationship—had coldly denied the return of any of his memories. His abrupt departure
moments later, devastating her with guilt and remorse that she might have driven him away forever, had
pushed everything from Michaela’s mind but her fear that she had damaged their relationship beyond
repair. As the day progressed, Michaela had been far too preoccupied by the emotional discord between
them, as well as the lingering effects of her hangover, to think about her earlier suspicions that Sully might
be regaining his memories. In fact, those thoughts had vanished from her mind completely, until Sully
himself reminded her by making his stunning admission.

Michaela’s initial shock at Sully’s revelation quickly gave way to excitement, as she eagerly asked him if
he recalled the content of his “visions.” Sully began to speak, and she sat in wonder as she heard him
describe with great accuracy several vignettes from their past: her initial arrival in town, and how she’d
fallen in the mud; Black Kettle’s comment—upon being told by Sully that she was a medicine woman from
the east—that she must be a “crazy white woman;” being together out in the woods as Sully brushed her
tangled hair after she’d fallen and broken her wrist on their sojourn to Harding’s Mill; and how they had
dined and sipped champagne together in an elegant restaurant, when they had been in Boston.

Many of the details were still missing for Sully—specifically the circumstances surrounding these
various events. He even assumed that he must have imagined being dressed in a fine suit and escorting
her to a fancy restaurant, since he had no memory of owning such an outfit, and no establishment fitting his
description existed in or around Colorado Springs.

But then it had been Michaela’s turn to fill in the missing pieces—to assure him that each of these
“visions” were not visions at all—but genuine memories of times they’d spent together. And miraculously,
the more she spoke, the more Sully began to recall—till in their mutual excitement they were nearly
stumbling over one another in their rush to relate the details of their shared memories.

So overcome with joy at Sully’s “breakthrough” that she feared she couldn’t handle any more, Michaela
finally asked Sully if he remembered anything else. And that’s when he related to her the most cherished
memory of all: his original proposal of marriage to her in the sweat lodge.

Her cheeks wet with tears that Sully had recalled the first time he’d proposed to her, coupled with his
declaration of love for her now, Michaela had wanted nothing more than to continue exploring Sully’s past
with him. But Sully, discerning that her ankle was giving her pain even though she’d sought to hide it, had
insisted that she needed rest, and further conversation could keep till another time. As he lovingly pointed
out, giving her a kiss, they had “all the time in the world.”

Now, lying in bed, Michaela felt the warmth of Sully’s love wrapping her like a blanket. She wished
that he were by her side, instead of below her in the clinic. But she was content in her knowledge of his
devotion, just as she knew in her heart that eventually all of Sully’s memories would come back to him.
For the first time since the beginning of this painful ordeal, she dared to believe that a bright future awaited
them. And on the strength of this joyful thought, Michaela finally drifted off to sleep.
In the instant before he appeared, I knew what it was that had brought me here. My heart feeling suddenly lighter, I looked up through the aromatic smoke of my campfire and saw the figure of my brother emerge from behind a screen of trees. I stood up with one fluid motion, and waited for him, a smile burning fiercely on my face. An answering smile lit Cloud Dancing’s eyes as he closed the few yards to where I stood. We embraced tightly, a wealth of unspoken emotion charging the air between us. After a moment Cloud Dancing stepped back, his hands lightly grasping my arms, and studied me keenly.

“You are much better,” he said, nodding his head in satisfaction. “I am glad.”

I looked back at him in gratitude. “More than that, Cloud Dancing. I’m completely recovered. And I got you to thank for a lot of it.”

“Michaela saved you,” my friend said modestly.

“You BOTH saved me,” I insisted, looking at him steadily. “Even through the worst of it, Cloud Dancing, I always knew that.”

“I am grateful I was able to get you to Michaela in time,” he responded, appearing to find it hard to accept my thanks.

I gestured toward the campfire, eyebrows raised. He nodded, and we both sat down, legs crossed, facing each other across the flames.

“Cloud Dancing,” I resumed earnestly, “You did more than just get me to Michaela. You kept me alive. And when I was lying unconscious all that time, you helped Michaela to understand what was wrong with me, and what she needed to do to bring me back.”

“I lied to you when you were consumed by fever and sickness,” Cloud Dancing said gravely. “Then later, I betrayed your confidence.”

“I don’t look at it as lying,” I responded. “I see it as you doing whatever was necessary to give me a reason to keep fighting. And as for ‘betraying my confidence’—you were willing to risk losing my friendship, my trust—to save my life. That ain’t a sin, Cloud Dancing—it’s a sacrifice. A big one. But you were willing to make it for my sake.”

His eyes kindled with gratitude, and I saw them shine in the firelight, though he said nothing.

“I ain’t angry at you,” I went on more quietly. “I’m grateful to you—more than I can say. And it worked, Cloud Dancing. I’m well now, thanks to you. Even my memory’s coming back, more every day.” I looked at him intently. “You knew about that—about me losing my memory—didn’t you?” I asked, strangely certain of his answer even as I posed the question. Just as I was equally certain that his visit to me hadn’t been a dream or a hallucination, but a reality. “I don’t think I told you what had happened to me, when you came to see me that night . . . but you knew anyway.”

“You did not tell me,” he confirmed. “But afterward, as the days passed, I could sense something wrong. Each time I called upon the spirits, asking for a vision to guide me . . . each time I tried to picture you in my mind—I saw nothing but a strange mist swirling around you, concealing you from my sight. After a time, the spirits helped me to understand that this strange mist was in your mind, closing you off from your past, from me . . . and most of all, from Michaela.”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Except I wasn’t just ‘closed off’ from Michaela—I lost my memories of her completely. I was so confused about Michaela and Abagail—so afraid that if I married Michaela I’d repeat the past—that I blocked out my past with Michaela altogether. White folks got a saying: ‘What you don’t know won’t hurt you,’” I quoted.

“But it’s going to be all right now,” I went on confidently, anxious to reassure my friend and brother that I was both recovered, and content. “I understand what happened to me—the fear that stole my memories—and I’ve made my peace with it. I’m not afraid of the future any more. Maybe marrying
Michaela is a risk—but no more of a risk than anything else in life. Besides, a life without Michaela . . . well, it wouldn’t be any kind of life—least not for me,” I added.

“I see this new confidence that shines from your eyes,” Cloud Dancing observed. “I see that you are looking to the future. That is good . . .”

“But?” I interjected, voicing the thought he’d left unspoken.

He raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement of my insight. After a moment he said quietly, “But I also see something else. I see that things are still . . . out of balance for you. The spirits do not tell me why this is so. I know only that something—or someone—threatens to keep you and Michaela apart.”

BRENDAN, said a voice in my mind. I felt a flush of renewed anger, yet at the same time I felt vindicated. If Cloud Dancing could sense that Brendan’s presence in our lives meant trouble, even without knowing anything about him—then surely I hadn’t imagined the threat he posed to Michaela and me.

“There’s someone new in town,” I began slowly. “He came out here with Michaela’s ma. He was on his way to a job waiting for him in Mesa Verde—but now he seems to be thinking about staying on here—least for a while. He’s interested in Michaela,” I added darkly.

“This troubles you,” Cloud Dancing said, his eyes penetrating.

“Yeah, kind of,” I admitted.

“Does Michaela have feelings for this man?” my brother asked, going to the heart of the matter with his usual directness.

“No!” I said quickly, wondering belatedly who I was trying to convince more—Cloud Dancing or myself.

“You have no doubts?” Cloud Dancing persisted.

“I know Michaela loves me,” I said. “I know what we got between us is strong. But we’ve already fought once over this man—and I’m afraid it might happen again.” Cloud Dancing waited.

“All right,” I conceded reluctantly after a pause. “Maybe there *is* a slight attraction there. But I don’t believe she’s drawn by his looks, so much as by what he represents. He’s the brother of the doctor she was involved with in Boston—the one who helped treat her ma when she was sick. I think maybe Michaela’s inclined to like Brendan Burke, because she was so fond of his brother William.”

“Is this Brendan also a doctor?” my brother inquired.

“No—far from it,” I answered, irritated again as I pictured Brendan combing the countryside, looking for Cheyenne burial sites and whatever else he could get his hands on.

“What is his work?” Cloud Dancing asked curiously, noting my disparaging tone.

“He’s what’s known as an ‘archaeologist,’” I replied. I noted by my brother’s raised eyebrow that he was unfamiliar with the word. “He travels around the world, visiting ruins of ancient cities and burial sites, and digs them up,” I elaborated.

“Why does he do this?” Cloud Dancing inquired further, clearly puzzled.

“To search for ancient artifacts—like tools or pottery—or human remains,” I replied derisively. “He claims that studying them teaches us about man’s early history on earth.”

“And this makes you angry?”

“Yeah, it makes me angry—when I think about him taking human bones or remains from their final resting place and putting them on display in some museum—just so he can satisfy his curiosity, or give people something to gawk at,” I said vehemently. “Up to now, he’s been doing most of his digging in a far-off place called Egypt—but it looks like he’s got it into his head to do the same thing here with the Cheyenne burial sites—if there’s any left to find,” I added bitterly.
Cloud Dancing nodded slightly. “Uh hunh.”

“They got no right, Cloud Dancing,” I declared self-righteously. “Brendan says that he—and others like him—treat the remains they find with reverence. But if they truly had respect for the dead, they wouldn’t violate their burial sites and take the bodies away from where they belong.”

“And this is the only reason for your anger?” my brother asked mildly.

“Ain’t it enough?” I said.

“Disturbing the resting places of our ancestors is an affront to the spirits,” Cloud Dancing agreed. “It is understandable that you would be angry, revering the spirits of my people as you do. But I think that something else troubles you as well—perhaps even more than what you have told me.” His dark eyes—deep with wisdom—studied me closely, seeming to see clear through to what was in my heart. I wasn’t surprised at his insight. Cloud Dancing had always been able to read what I was feeling inside—often before I knew or understood it myself. I was silent for several moments, trying to sort through my emotions and find the right words to express myself.

“You’re right,” I conceded finally. “I *am* worried, a little. This fellow Brendan—he’s got a lot going for him, Cloud Dancing. He’s young, rich, good-looking, cultured—with a fancy education besides. He’s the total opposite of me—and just the kind of man to capture Michaela’s interest.”

“But you said that you know Michaela loves you,” Cloud Dancing reminded me. I sighed.

“I do—I know she loves me,” I acknowledged. “But—“

“If Michaela is the woman you believe her to be, do you think she would let her head be turned by this stranger—simply because he is handsome, or has wealth?” Cloud Dancing asked.

“No,” I admitted. “Michaela ain’t impressed by things like that—least she’s never appeared to be. But her and Brendan—they come from the same background, the same world,” I went on. “They understand each other. They got a lot in common . . . a lot more than we do. It’s like you always said, Cloud Dancing—folks recognize members of their own tribe. And maybe—maybe it’s best to stick with your own kind,” I finished softly.

“And do you think Michaela believes she should be with her ‘own kind?’” said my brother.

I bit my lip. “No—well, maybe—I don’t know,” I said, awash in the tumult of my insecurity. “William had the same kind of appeal for her—and she wound up turning him down and coming back to Colorado Springs. But he was way off in Boston. It was probably easy for Michaela to put William out of her mind, without him being around to give her a constant reminder of what they’d had together. But Brendan—he’s right here. Not a rosy memory, but flesh and blood. Sometimes I think . . .” My voice trailed off.

“Tell me,” my brother urged.

I swallowed. “Sometimes—I think that what I have to offer Michaela . . . well, that it ain’t enough. I don’t have the book-learning to be able to talk to her the way Brendan does—or William, or even her old fiancé, David. And hard as I aim to work to provide for her and the kids, I’ll never be able to give her the kind of life she grew up with—that she’s used to. I can’t help wondering if she’ll end up being unhappy or discontented, tying herself to me. Maybe—maybe I don’t got the right to ask her to make that kind of sacrifice,” I finished, barely above a whisper.

“Why did Michaela come west?” Cloud Dancing asked unexpectedly.

I glanced up at him, startled. After a pause I replied, “She came out here to build her own practice—to get away from the people who wouldn’t let her do her doctoring because she was a woman. She came out here to have her own life.”

“It seems to me then, that Michaela made her choice long ago,” Cloud Dancing observed. “If she was happy with the life she was living in Boston, would she have turned her back on it to come here?”

“I suppose not,” I conceded. Cloud Dancing was watching me intently.
I think, perhaps, that what is standing between you and Michaela is not this man—but you," he pointed out gently. "You are allowing your jealousy and your distrust of this man to drive you and Michaela apart. Once again, my brother, you are not giving Michaela credit for having her own mind. You see yourself as inferior to this Brendan—and so you conclude that Michaela must see you the same way. But to persist in such a belief, you are not being fair to Michaela—or to yourself."

I shook my head, marveling again at my brother's perceptiveness. "How is it that you can see things so clearly—even when it all seems so muddy to me?" I asked him with a small, sheepish smile.

"We rarely see the things that are closest to us," Cloud Dancing remarked. "Sometimes we need another person to take our hand and show us the way."

"You been showing me the way for a long time now," I said gratefully. "Lots of times I wonder what would have happened to me if I didn't have your friendship or wisdom to guide me."

"You would have survived," Cloud Dancing said confidently. "Your spirit is strong—too strong to surrender to fear or doubt."

"You really believe that?" I asked quietly.

"I know that," he said.

I sat pensively for several moments, considering all my brother had said. Finally I met his eyes. "Deep inside, I know you're right. I ain't giving up on Michaela—or on the two of us having a life together—not after all we've been through. I guess this thing with Brendan is just another—bump in the road."

"It is good to hear you say that," Cloud Dancing commented. His eyes were approving.

I gave him a crooked smile. "It's going to be all right," I said. "You don't got to worry about me, Cloud Dancing. Michaela and me will find a way to work through this, just like we done with all the troubles we've had in the past."

"You will," he agreed. "And the spirits will help you."

"Just like you helped me," I said sincerely. "But enough of this," I suddenly announced, changing the subject. "I want to know about you—if you're alright, if you're safe. And if you got any news on Custer or Bloody Knife. Stuck in the clinic the way I been all these weeks, I've had no way of knowing what's been going on."

Cloud Dancing nodded. "Ah, yes—the yellow hair and the scout," he replied soberly. "You are right, my younger brother—we need to talk."

* * * * * * * * * *

I looked at him sharply. "What's happened?" I asked. "Did you find out what became of Bloody Knife?" A chilling thought struck me. "Cloud Dancing—did he come after you?" I said urgently. "Him, or maybe Custer?"

"I do not know what happened to Bloody Knife," my brother replied. "A few days after the attack I returned to the place where we had left him—but he was gone."

"Well that's good—ain't it?" I said. "Least we know he ain't dead, so there's no way Custer can come along later and accuse us of killing him."

"I would like to believe that," Cloud Dancing began soberly, "but I am afraid we cannot be sure Bloody Knife is still alive. The long-hair and his men could have found Bloody Knife's lifeless body and buried it. The long-hair could have even killed his scout himself, so that he could blame us for his death."

I was silent for a moment, absorbing this dismal theory. Presently I asked, "Do you got reason to believe Custer found Bloody Knife before you could get back there? Have you seen him?"

Cloud Dancing nodded. "I have been shadowing the long-hair and his unit since I discovered Bloody
Knife was missing,” he said. “They have been combing through the hills in search of me.”

“Did they spot you?” I said quickly.

He shook his head. “If they had, I would not be here,” he answered, a touch of irony in his eyes. “But the yellow-hair is determined. He will not give up until he gets his revenge on us.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I agreed. “But it’s strange,” I went on thoughtfully. “Custer hasn’t come after me since all this happened. If he’s so set on making us pay for Bloody Knife, then it seems he would have come looking for me a long time ago. I mean, I was right there—a sitting duck.”

“Are you sure of this?” my friend asked solemnly.

“That he ain’t come looking for me? Yeah, I’m sure—” I started to reply, then broke off, my eyes narrowing. I suddenly remembered a day shortly after I’d regained consciousness, when Michaela had come to my room to examine me. I had no memory of her then, so I barely “knew” her—but even so, I’d been able to tell how tense and nervous she was. I’d asked if she was all right, and she’d admitted to having a visitor she “didn’t want to see.” But though I’d tried to find out more—and had even offered to send this person away for her—she’d refused to say anything else, and then she’d made light of it and changed the subject. I found myself wondering now if Custer had been the unwelcome visitor, and if he’d tried to threaten or frighten her. Something in my gut told me I was right, and my heart twisted inside as I thought of her facing him alone, unable to tell me the truth or ask for my help, because of her desire to protect me.

I felt my face flush as anger toward Custer coiled inside me. If he’d done anything to hurt or scare Michaela in any way . . . My hands curled into fists.

“What is it?” Cloud Dancing said, as he saw my mood and expression alter.

Quickly I related my recollection and my suspicions to him. “What do you think?” I added as I finished. “Do you believe it’s possible that Custer tried to get to me through Michaela?”

My friend’s eyes were sober. “I think it is—‘a good bet’—as the long-hair from the saloon says,” he replied.

“Well, I intend to find out,” I vowed. “First thing tomorrow, when I see Michaela, I’m going to ask her to tell me everything.”

“I believe—that you will need to do more than that,” Cloud Dancing ventured gravely after a moment.

“What do you mean?” I asked, disturbed by my brother’s ominous tone.

“I think you must keep a close eye on Michaela and her family,” he said. “The long-hair is trouble—but so is Bloody Knife, if he is still alive. The scout does the long-hair’s bidding—but he also wants revenge for himself. He may seek to take his revenge on you, through the people you love.”

Despite the warmth of the campfire, and the mildness of the night, I suddenly felt cold all over. Here I’d been childishly worrying about Michaela being attracted to another man, and all this time she could have been in mortal danger from a far more menacing threat.

“I’ve got to get back to the homestead,” I said rapidly. “I don’t want Michaela or the kids alone even one more night.”

“That is wise,” Cloud Dancing agreed.

“But what about you?” I said, looking at him in concern. “You’re in just as much danger—more even. Custer could shoot you on sight, if he finds you. And we already know what Bloody Knife’s capable of.”

“Do not worry about me,” he said calmly. “I will continue to remain in hiding. You must think of Michaela now.”

We stood and grasped forearms. “Thank you, Cloud Dancing,” I said. “For the warning—and for everything.”
“Be well, my brother,” he said.

“And you be safe,” I answered. We embraced once more, and then like a wraith, he disappeared back into the woods. Quickly I folded my bedroll, then broke off a slender limb from a nearby tree and used the leaves to brush away the evidence of our footprints. Finally I extinguished the campfire, using the moon’s illumination to glance one more at the campsite and make sure I hadn’t left any other signs of our presence. Satisfied at last that I’d concealed our visit as well as I was able, I hefted my bedroll over my shoulder and stole off into the trees, headed back in the direction from which I’d come.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

For several seconds Michaela stood staring at the door after it closed upon Sully, the palm of her hand pressed against its weathered surface. She heard the muffled sound of his boot heels crossing the porch, then a momentary pause, followed by a sharp bang! that made her jump. The crosspiece of the crutch propped under her other arm bit uncomfortably into her skin, but she didn’t notice, being consumed with curiosity about what Sully could be doing outside. After a second, briefer pause, she heard the staccato sound of his boots once again, sharply descending the steps.

He’s angry, she thought. Well, so am I! Oh yes, she thought again, she was angry—and frustrated and confused and who knew what else. How could Sully have been so tender, so loving, just hours ago, and then turn into this stranger that she didn’t know tonight? Why must he persist in being jealous, when time and again she’d sworn that she loved him and only him? What else must she do to prove her fidelity? She’d brought him back from the brink of death. She’d endured his anger and his rejection to protect his fragile mental state, though it had nearly broken her heart. What must she finally do, to prove to Sully once and for all that her love—and her commitment—were forever?

Angry tears came to her eyes and rapidly she blinked them away. She would NOT cry over that man tonight—not after the things he’d said, the way he’d behaved, how he had humiliated her . . . Awkwardly Michaela maneuvered herself around and moved haltingly across the room, making her painstaking way to where her medical bag rested on the sideboard. With her free hand she released the catch, then reached inside, her fingers trailing over the familiar shapes of her bottles and instruments until they found the small vial of laudanum. She withdrew it, double-checking the label to be sure she had the right bottle. A sudden stab of pain in her ankle made her inhale sharply. “Damn!” she swore softly under her breath, profoundly grateful there was no one in the room to hear her. Wincing, Michaela hobbled toward the rocker by the fireplace.

With a gusty sigh of relief she lowered herself into the chair, leaning her crutch against the adjacent table. She glanced down at the vial of laudanum in her hand, preparing to remove the stopper, then suddenly realized she had neglected to get herself a glass. “Damn!” she repeated. Frowning in annoyance, Michaela took a deep breath and reached for the crutch, readying herself to get up once again.

“Ma?” came Colleen’s tentative voice behind her. Startled, Michaela lost her grip on the crutch and it clattered to the floor as she abruptly sat back down in the rocker.

“Colleen!” she exclaimed softly, her heart pounding. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you—I’m sorry,” her daughter apologized, hastening over to where the crutch lay at her mother’s feet. She picked it up and propped it by the side of the fireplace. “Are you all right, Ma?” she added, noticing the bottle of medicine in Michaela’s lap.

“Oh, yes—I’m fine,” Michaela answered, her pulse beginning to return to something approaching its normal rhythm. “My ankle aches a bit. I was just going to take a dose of laudanum, but I—” she shrugged and smiled sheepishly. “I forgot a glass.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Colleen said promptly. She went quickly to one of the kitchen cupboards and took down a glass, then returned to her mother’s side. Removing the stopper from the vial of laudanum, she poured a small amount into the bottom of the glass, then handed the dose of medication to Michaela.

“I’ll put on the kettle for tea,” Colleen offered as Michaela gratefully accepted and swallowed the
“Thank you, Colleen,” she said, smiling up at her daughter. “A cup of tea would be lovely.” She leaned her head back against the headrest of the rocker, closing her eyes and listening to the sound of water from the pump splashing into the sink, and the clatter of the tea kettle as Colleen put the water on to boil.

Suddenly sensing a presence beside her, Michaela opened her eyes to see Colleen looking down at her hesitantly.

“Is something troubling you, Colleen?” she asked.

“No, not exactly . . . Truth is, I was wonderin’ if somethin’ was troublin’ you,” Colleen responded, flustered.

“Thank you for being concerned, Colleen, but as I told you, my ankle just aches a little—” Michaela broke off as she saw the expression in Colleen’s eyes. “Oh,” she said quietly. “Sully. You heard.”

Colleen dropped her eyes. “A little, yeah,” she confessed.

Michaela flashed her a guilty look. “I’m sorry you had to hear us argue. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” Suddenly she stared at Colleen in consternation. “Oh dear—then Brian must have heard as well,” she added, her guilt increasing as she remembered how much it troubled Brian on the rare occasions she and Sully fought.

“He didn’t hear much,” Colleen told her, attempting to assuage her mother’s concern. “I was readin’ him a story. He dozed off before I finished the chapter. He was sleepin’ for a while before Sully left.”

What you really mean, is that Brian fell asleep before our argument reached its climax, Michaela thought, touched by her daughter’s tact, but angry at herself for the unfortunate scene with Sully. Well, at least she could be grateful that Brian hadn’t heard the sharp words which had passed between them.

“That’s a relief,” she said to her daughter now. “Thank you, Colleen, for—distracting him.”

“That’s all right,” Colleen replied with a supportive smile. Steam began to issue from the kettle, and she went to the stove and took it off the fire. She crumbled tea leaves into a cup and then poured in the water. A few moments later she brought the fragrantly steaming cup to her mother.

“Chamomile,” Michaela said with pleasure, recognizing the aroma.

“I thought it would relax you,” Colleen said helpfully.

“You thought exactly right,” Michaela told her approvingly. She took a ginger sip of the hot liquid. “Perfect,” she pronounced.

Colleen blushed, pleased.

“There’s no need for you to stay up with me,” Michaela said after a moment. “You must be tired.”

“Not that tired,” Colleen replied. “But—if you’d rather be alone . . .”

“Not at all,” Michaela assured her. “I’d love to have you keep me company for a while. Pour yourself a cup of tea and join me.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Colleen said. She prepared a second cup of tea, and then rejoined her mother by the fire, pulling up another chair and seating herself. A brief silence fell between the two women as they sipped their tea, each preoccupied with her own thoughts.

Michaela could sense Colleen’s powerful curiosity about what had transpired between herself and Sully. She knew she owed her daughter an explanation, but it seemed there was nothing she could say that wouldn’t put both Sully and herself in a deeply unflattering light. The things they’d said to each other echoed in her mind, sounding more petty and childish each time she thought about them. Privately Michaela had to admit to herself that she had been as much at fault as Sully—perhaps more. But the way he’d tried to suggest that there was something between her and Brendan! How foolish!—even
insulting—for him to think that her head would be turned by any attractive man she happened to meet. She sympathized with Sully's insecurities—she did. He'd been through a terrible ordeal; one that had cost him in ways she probably couldn't even imagine. But that still hadn't given him the right to be so rude to a guest in her home, to embarrass her in front of a stranger. Sully had to learn to harness his jealousy; to stop being so uncertain—even distrustful—of her commitment to him. Because if he didn't... Well, she didn't know what she would do. But Sully's recurring episodes of jealousy were increasingly disturbing to her.

However now was not the time to brood over Sully's insecurities and her own frustrations. Her daughter was awaiting an explanation—silently asking for Michaela's assurance that her relationship was Sully was sound. After all the pain and uncertainty of the last few weeks—which had no doubt been as much of a strain on the children as it had been for Sully and herself—Michaela believed she owed her daughter and sons that much.

"Colleen—" she began.

"Ma," Colleen said in the same moment. They broke off and stared at each other, then laughed self-consciously. After a moment Michaela spoke again.

"I imagine you were going to ask about Sully and myself—what happened between us," she said to Colleen kindly. Her daughter nodded after a fraction's hesitation.

"I don't mean to pry..." Colleen ventured.

"It's all right," Michaela went on, giving her an encouraging smile. "It's only natural that you're curious, Colleen. You have a right to know why Sully and I argued.

"Though I don't know that my answer will make much sense," she continued with a sigh. "Since I'm not entirely sure I understand it myself."

"Well, it sounded—from what I heard—like you were angry about what Sully said to Mr. Burke," Colleen said cautiously. "I wasn't eavesdroppin', Ma—I swear—"

"I know that, Colleen," Michaela said soothingly. "You couldn't help but hear. Sully and I hardly endeavored to keep our voices lowered. That was our fault, not yours."

"At any rate, you're correct—I was distressed at Sully's behavior," Michaela resumed after a pause. "And I told him so. He had no right to treat a guest like that—especially one who had generously done my mother the service of escorting her on that long journey from Boston."

"Sully seemed pretty mad—about Mr. Burke disturbin' the Cheyenne burial grounds," Colleen commented.

"Yes, he was—and I sympathize with his feelings," Michaela replied. "I understand better now than I ever have before, the pain that Sully endured over Washita and its aftermath—and my heart aches for his loss.

"But Sully's objection to Brendan's profession—well, that's only part of the reason why he's so upset. And not the greatest part, I fear." She looked into her daughter's eyes. "Sully has the foolish—and mistaken!—impression that Brendan is interested in me," she confessed. "More than that, he believes that I return the interest." Colleen watched her, but didn't reply.

"Well, of course it's ludicrous!" Michaela exclaimed self-consciously, a tell-tale blush coloring her cheeks. "Brendan and I barely know one another. He was simply being a gentleman, and I was being cordial to an invited guest. Sully should understand that," she added, a self-righteous note in her voice.

"Maybe... he was thinkin' about William?" Colleen said softly.

Michaela sighed. "Yes, he said something to that effect. But it's so foolish, Colleen. For Sully to accuse me of caring for Brendan just because I was involved with his brother William—well, that's tantamount to me suggesting that Sully could love one of my sisters, simply because he claims to loves me."

"Claims?" Colleen repeated, looking troubled.
“Forgive me,” Michaela said quickly. “That was a poor choice of words. Sully loves me—I know that. But right now that love seems to be inextricably tangled up with his insecurities about our future. I can’t seem to convince him that my love is true—that my commitment to him is genuine. And, quite frankly, I’m at my wit’s end as to what I should do.”

“Well, like you said, Sully’s been through a real bad time,” Colleen reminded her. “Maybe he’s scared. ‘Specially with losin’ his memory of how you loved each other, and havin’ to start again from the beginnin’. Maybe he’s still afraid of losin’ everythin’ that matters to him, after comin’ so close once before.

“And Mr. Burke—well, he’s so handsome, and interestin’ . . .” Colleen’s voice drifted off, and she stared down at her lap, blushing.

Michaela regarded her daughter thoughtfully. “You think Mr. Burke is handsome?” she asked.

Colleen looked up at her, eyes shining. “Don’t you?” she said eagerly.

“Well, yes—that is, he’s certainly a fine figure of a man,” Michaela acknowledged a bit awkwardly. “But just because I may find him attractive, doesn’t mean—” She stopped speaking, looking at Colleen closely. The young girl’s eyes were sparkling, and scarlet roses bloomed in her cheeks. “Are you—sweet on Mr. Burke, Colleen?” Michaela asked softly after a moment.

Colleen bit her lip and glanced away, and Michaela had her answer. Clearly, the young girl was smitten. After a few moments she looked back at Michaela shyly.

“I like him,” she admitted softly. “I think he’s real nice. But—I know he’d never look at somebody like me,” she went on. “The whole time he was here tonight—he didn’t even notice me.” The small, sad note of resignation in her voice tugged at Michaela’s heart.

She regarded her daughter with a mixture of empathy and tenderness. She had been so preoccupied with her own concerns, that Colleen’s reaction to Brendan had entirely escaped her notice. Now that she realized, however, it seemed so obvious—even inevitable. A man as dashing, as fascinating—as Brendan Burke, could not fail but have a powerful impact on a sensitive, impressionable young girl like Colleen.

But though Michaela both understood and sympathized with Colleen’s infatuation, it was also her reluctant duty to make Colleen understand that her attraction to Brendan could have no future—that a relationship with a man so much older and sophisticated was out of the question.

“Well first of all, Colleen, I don’t agree that Mr. Burke would never, as you say, ‘look at somebody like you,’” she began kindly. “You’re a lovely, intelligent, sensitive young woman—and if circumstances were different, I have no doubt that Mr. Burke would not only be honored by your admiration, but might very well reciprocate your feelings. But at only fifteen years of age, you’re far too young to even entertain the idea of a—a ‘friendship’—with a man so much older than yourself.”

“But he don’t seem that old,” Colleen ventured.

“Not by adult standards, no—but he’s at least thirty, which is half again as old as you are, Colleen,” her mother pointed out. “I’m sorry, Sweetheart—but if you’re cherishing any private hope of something developing between yourself and Mr. Burke—than I must urge you to try to put those feelings aside. I don’t want you to be hurt—but I’m afraid that you will be, if you’re hoping for something that can never happen,” she added gently.

“It’s all right, Ma,” Colleen said quietly after a pause. “Even if I were older, it wouldn’t make no difference. It was clear all night that Brendan—Mr. Burke—didn’t have eyes for nobody but you—“. At Michaela’s shocked expression, Colleen stopped abruptly, looking as if she wished she hadn’t spoken. But the words were out, and she couldn’t take them back.

Michaela was silent for several moments, trying to frame a reply to Colleen’s statement. It had been easy to dismiss Sully’s accusations; arising, as they did, from his unfounded—even irrational—jealousy of Brendan. But to hear Colleen voice the same observation was much more unsettling. Was it possible? Had Sully and Colleen both detected something in Brendan’s manner that she had been too blind to see? And even more troubling—had she been guilty of being too familiar towards this man? Of somehow unconsciously encouraging his attentions?
“I think, Colleen, that you must be mistaken,” Michaela said finally, choosing her words with care. “Mr. Burke is very kind, and I look forward to knowing him better. But he is well aware that I am engaged to Sully. Even if he did harbor any—feelings—for me—which I’m certain he does not—he would be far too much of a gentleman ever to act upon them.”

“But William proposed to you—even after Sully came all the way from Colorado Springs to be with you,” Colleen said.

“That’s true,” Michaela acknowledged. “But those were very different circumstances. Sully and I were not yet courting at the time. Sully hadn’t declared his feelings for me, and there was nothing—‘official’—between us. And yet, when I went to William to give him an answer to his proposal, he could see how things were between Sully and myself, without my having to tell him. And he accepted it.”

Colleen was listening politely, but it was clear that Michaela’s words were having little effect on her frame of mind. Colleen’s expression was somber, and all the light and animation had gone out of her eyes, making Michaela’s heart twist with compassion. Michaela hated to burst Colleen’s fragile hope, or be the cause of her child’s pain—and yes, for all her intelligence and maturity in medical matters, in many ways Colleen was still a child, most especially in matters of the heart. But Michaela also could not encourage Colleen’s indulgence in a fantasy which could never come true, and which would only bring her more hurt and pain in the long run.

Nor did she want to be put in the position of being her daughter’s rival. Of course that wasn’t the case, she amended to herself. But if Colleen, in her unrequited affection for Brendan, perceived her mother that way—did it really make a difference?

It couldn’t be true, she declared to herself. Sully and Colleen—they were both jealous, each in his or her own way. They saw what they expected to see—not what was truly there. Neither she nor Brendan had done anything improper. Neither of them was harboring “secret” yearnings for the other. She would have known it—she would have felt it.

The challenge which lay before her, was to convince Sully and Colleen of what she believed to be true in her own heart.

“Colleen, I’m so sorry,” Michaela said penitently.

“Why, Ma?” her daughter asked, a flicker of surprise coming into her eyes.

“This entire ordeal—everything that’s happened since Sully first fell ill and was injured—has no doubt been as difficult for you and your brothers, as it’s been for Sully and myself. And I’m afraid I’ve been so preoccupied with Sully’s needs—not to mention my own—that I’ve been terribly guilty of neglecting your feelings. Why these past few days alone must have been so confusing for you. First Sully and I are apart, then together, then you hear us exchanging words in anger . . . I deeply regret putting you through all that.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Ma—I understand you’ve been upset,” Colleen responded honestly, unable to feel resentful of her mother, even as she envied Michaela the beauty and sophistication that mature womanhood conferred.

“That’s very generous of you, Colleen, but I *have* been at fault—most especially tonight, when I let my anger toward Sully get the best of me. I know how much that unpleasant scene between us must have troubled you, and I’m ashamed for my part in it. I’m sure Sully would say the same, if he were here.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Ma—I understand you’ve been upset,” Colleen responded honestly, unable to feel resentful of her mother, even as she envied Michaela the beauty and sophistication that mature womanhood conferred.

“That’s very generous of you, Colleen, but I *have* been at fault—most especially tonight, when I let my anger toward Sully get the best of me. I know how much that unpleasant scene between us must have troubled you, and I’m ashamed for my part in it. I’m sure Sully would say the same, if he were here.”

“It’s all right, Ma—really,” Colleen responded, looking at her mother earnestly. “You and Sully have been through so much—it’s gonna take time for things to get back to normal. ’Sides, I know you and Sully ain’t perfect. Everybody fights now and then, but they can still love each other. And you and Sully love each other. Matthew, Brian and me—we all know that.”

“I’m glad, Colleen,” Michaela said tremulously. “That’s the one thing—the one constant in all of this—that I never want you to doubt. Sully and I will always love each other—and we’ll both always love all of you.”

“We love you and Sully too, Ma,” Colleen said sincerely. “You don’t gotta worry about that—or about
us. And as far as Brendan—Mr. Burke—well . . .” She paused, then shrugged slightly in resignation. “I guess I knew deep inside that there couldn’t be nothin’ between us. It hurts a little, but I’ll get over it. I just wish sometimes that I was older—and beautiful and allurin’, like you . . .” She gave Michaela a wistful smile.

Impulsively Michaela reached out and grasped Colleen’s hands. “You *are* beautiful!!” she said passionately. “And you will only grow more so, as time goes on.

“Your time will come, Colleen,” she vowed. “I promise you that. And when you meet the man of your dreams—your one true love—you’ll know it was worth the wait.”

Colleen smiled at her gratefully, tears glimmering in her eyes. “Thanks, Ma,” she said softly. Her arms slipped around her mother’s waist, and Michaela tightly returned the embrace.

“I love you, Colleen,” Michaela whispered.

“I love you too—” Colleen answered, then broke off as her body stiffened in Michaela’s arms. “Ma?” she added after a moment, a high, strained quality to her voice.

“What is it?” Michaela said urgently. “Is something wrong?”

“I saw somethin’—through the window,” Colleen said unsteadily.

“What did you see?” Michaela pressed her.

“It was somethin’ movin’,” Colleen said, a tremor in her voice. “It looked like a man.”

She and Michaela stared at one another; then automatically their eyes went to the window, trying to pierce the ominous darkness beyond.

“Perhaps it’s Matthew returning,” Michaela suggested blandly, keeping her voice as calm as possible so as not to alarm Colleen further. Colleen turned dark, anxious eyes on her mother, indicating she hadn’t been fooled by Michaela’s transparent attempt to mollify her.

“Matthew wouldn’t pussy-foot around outside—he’d just come right in,” she said, instinctively lowering her voice. “Where’s Wolf?” she added after a moment, glancing quickly around the homestead.

“He’s not in the house,” Michaela replied, her voice equally hushed. “He could be in the barn with Pup, or prowling the woods . . . Sully may even have taken him along when he left,” she speculated, her heart sinking as she dismally realized they were without protection of any kind—even the guardianship of Sully’s devoted pet.

“Maybe it *is* Sully,” Colleen whispered hopefully after a moment. “Maybe he came back for some reason.”

But Michaela shook her head. “Sully wouldn’t lurk about the property anymore than Matthew would,” she pointed out. “Besides, I made it very clear to Sully that I wanted him to leave—and that I had no intention of seeing him again till tomorrow at the clinic. I sincerely doubt that he’d ignore my wishes—particularly after the way we parted.”

A slight, almost indistinguishable sound outside caused them both to freeze. Under ordinary circumstances they would never have heard it, but anxiety had fine-tuned their senses. For several long moments they were silent, straining their ears for any additional sound. But the noise was not repeated.

“What do we do, Ma?” Colleen said uneasily.

Michaela gripped Colleen’s shoulders firmly. “I’m sure that Matthew will return at any moment,” she said as confidently as she could manage. “But until then, we have to protect ourselves.” She fixed her eyes intently on her daughter’s face. “Listen to me carefully, Colleen,” she directed. “First, I want you to extinguish most of the lamps—the less the intruder can see, the better. Then I need you to bring me the rifle from over the fireplace, as well as the box of ammunition from the drawer in the sideboard. Stay close to the walls, and remain out of sight of the windows.”
“But Ma, you’re in no condition to be firing a gun—”

“Don’t argue with me, Colleen!” Michaela commanded, in a tone that brooked no dissent. “I need you to do this for me,” she added more quietly. Acceding to her mother’s authority, Colleen moved to fulfill Michaela’s request, cautiously making her way about the room.

Michaela could feel the adrenaline pumping through her veins as she opened the box of ammunition and slid a bullet into the rifle chamber with shaking fingers. She finished loading the weapon, then leaned it against the table. With an act of will she tried to subdue her trembling, then carefully gripped the arms of the rocker and pushed herself to her feet. Eschewing the crutch, she picked up the rifle and silently signaled Colleen to fetch one of the two lanterns still burning. Gesturing for Colleen to get behind her, Michaela painfully and awkwardly limped over to the door. She positioned herself between the door and the adjacent window.

“When I give the signal, I want you to throw open the door and then get out of the way,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“But Ma—“

“Do it!” hissed Michaela. Colleen watched her anxiously, but didn’t attempt to argue.

Michaela eased the curtain back from the window and looked outside. All seemed peaceful—then suddenly she glimpsed a flicker of movement. Colleen was right—the figure’s shape was vague, the features indistinct—but it was definitely a man. She darted a glance at Colleen, who huddled on the opposite side of the door. “Get ready,” she mouthed. Colleen nodded.

“Now!” Michaela said sharply, and Colleen wrenched the door open as Michaela simultaneously moved into the exposed entry way and brought up the rifle.

“Don’t move!” she bellowed, with an intimidation she didn’t feel. “I’ll use this if I have to!” She aimed toward the shadowy figure nearing the base of the steps, as she saw the intruder’s arms go up.

“Don’t shoot!” came a familiar voice, making her pulse pound as the figure tentatively approached and climbed the porch. “Michaela—don’t shoot!” he entreated again, moving into the illumination of the porch light. “It’s me!”

“Sully!” she exclaimed, the strength running out of her nerveless fingers in her shock and relief. She lowered the rifle, which suddenly seemed too heavy for her arms to support. “What—what were you doing?” she gasped after a moment, a fuzzy darkness starting to snake across her vision.

“Michaela?” Sully’s voice came dimly to her ears, as blackness began to engulf her.

“Michaela . . .!” He was just in time to catch her as she fainted.

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It seemed like forever till she came around, though it was probably only a matter of minutes. But finally her eyelids fluttered and opened, and I got a glimpse of her beautiful eyes—cloudy and disoriented at first, but gradually clearing as she focused on my face.

“That’s it—wake up, Michaela,” I said softly, continuing to gently bath her forehead with the cool compress Colleen had provided.

“Sully?” she said weakly, looking up at me in confusion. “What—what happened?”

“You passed out,” I told her, pressing the compress to her temple. “Must have been the shock.”

She nodded vaguely, then suddenly stared at me in panic. “Colleen?” she exclaimed, rising up from
“Easy, Michaela,” I cautioned, gently restraining her. “Don’t try to move just yet.”

“But Colleen—is she all right?” Michaela repeated, agitated.

“Colleen’s fine,” I said calmly.

“I’m right here, Ma,” Colleen said, coming up to stand behind me.

“And Brian—?”

“The kids are both fine, Michaela—safe and well,” I soothed her. “But you need to take it easy now.”

I could feel the rapid pounding of her heart begin to slow beneath my hand, but her body was still rigid with tension. She studied me anxiously, her eyes moving over every inch of my frame, and I realized she was searching for signs if injury.

“Sully . . . I didn’t shoot--?” she whispered, unable to voice the entire thought.

“No!” I said quickly, hastening to reassure her. “You didn’t shoot me or anyone else.”

Her eyes closed. “Thank God.”

For a moment I thought she’d drifted off. I reached out to stroke her hair, my fingers shaking in my profound relief that she was all right. But suddenly her eyes opened again, and my hand froze, inches from her face. I just had time to register her cold and distant expression before she spoke. “Do you have any idea how badly you frightened us?” she said accusingly. “What were you doing, sneaking around like that?”

“I wasn’t ‘sneaking,’” I answered, taken aback by her mercurial change of mood. “I was just—keeping an eye on things, making sure you were all right.”

“Do I look all right?” she said acidly, pulling herself up into a sitting position.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Michaela,” I said. “But you gave me quite a turn yourself, waving that rifle around. What if it hadn’t been me outside? What if it had been somebody really trying to hurt you—somebody armed with a gun of his own? You could have been shot, or—or worse.” A cold, clammy feeling blossomed inside me, spreading icy tentacles throughout my body, as I thought of how easily it could have been Bloody Knife lurking around the homestead, instead of me.

“Well, what would you have had me do?” she demanded. “Colleen and I were alone here, without any protection. You weren’t here, or Matthew. Even Wolf was gone.”

“I would have been here—but you sent me away,” I reminded her testily, my tone sharpened by my own tension and anxiety. She dropped her eyes, choosing to ignore my statement. More quietly I said, “Michaela, I’m sorry—”

Her head snapped up. “You should be!” she retorted, her posture rigid and her eyes like ice. “Why did you come back here, anyway?” she inquired petulantly after a pause. “I thought I made it clear I didn’t want to see you until tomorrow.”

“I told you—I wanted to make sure you were all right,” I repeated.

“We would have been just fine if you hadn’t taken it into your head to show up here without warning,” she shot back.

I took a deep breath, trying to hold onto my temper. “Michaela, what do you want from me?” I said. “First you’re mad at me for not being here, then you’re mad at me for coming back. Seems no matter what I do, it’s wrong. I was only trying to protect you—”

“So I’m supposed to commend you for your actions?” she said derisively.
“You’re supposed to understand that I love you and I was just trying to watch out for you!” I burst out. “Look,” I went on, trying my best to be reasonable. “I know I scared you, and I’m sorry. But I had my reasons for doing what I did.”

“Well, I want to hear them,” Michaela demanded. “I think that’s the least you owe us, after frightening us half to death.”

“And I intend to tell you,” I said quietly. “But—” I glanced at Colleen, who continued to stand by Michaela’s bedside, her expression pale and strained. As much as Michaela needed to know about Custer and his scout, I didn’t want to bring up the subject while Colleen was in the room. One look at her dark, troubled eyes was proof to me that she’d had more than enough scares for one night.

I met Michaela’s eyes, then looked side-long at Colleen, hoping that Michaela would be able to read my unspoken message. She followed the direction of my gaze, and a moment later I was relieved to see understanding register in her eyes.

“Colleen—why don’t you go to bed??” she suggested gently after a moment. “It’s very late, and you must be exhausted after such a fright. We’ll be safe now,” she added reassuringly, sensing Colleen’s reluctance.

“But will you be all right?” Colleen asked uncertainly.

“She’ll be fine,” I spoke up before Michaela could answer. “I’ll make sure of that.” I laid my hand gently on Colleen’s shoulder. “I’m real sorry I scared you and your ma, Colleen,” I said softly. “I was just trying to look out for you all, and make sure you were protected. Unfortunately I was real thoughtless the way I went about it—even though I meant well.” I held her eyes with mine.

“I know what happened tonight must have brought back bad memories of when Tom Jennings broke into the homestead,” I went on even more gently. “I could kick myself for frightening you like that a second time.”

“You didn’t mean to,” Colleen said faintly.

“No, I didn’t—but that don’t change the fact that you were upset anyway,” I asserted. “I promise you I won’t do nothing like that ever again. But there’s something I want you to remember, Colleen—something I want you to hold onto,” I said. “You, your ma and Brian are all safe—and I plan on keeping it that way. I’m going to stay right here and make sure you’re protected.” Michaela looked at me sharply, but restrained herself from speaking.

“Are we in danger?” Colleen asked, her voice tremulous.

“Let’s just say that it makes good sense to be cautious,” I responded mildly after a moment’s hesitation. “But I don’t want you fretting anymore.

“I’m staying right here, Colleen,” I repeated softly. “I ain’t going nowhere.”

“Promise?” she asked, the strain in her face easing a little at my words.

“I swear,” I said solemnly.

“Thank you, Sully!” she said, hugging me gratefully.

I held her close for a moment, my hand stroking her soft blonde hair. “Maybe you’d best go on to bed now,” I whispered in her ear after a moment. “Let your ma and me ‘mend some fences.” I gave her a smile. My heart felt lighter as she mustered a smile in return.

Colleen moved to her mother’s side and leaned over to give her a kiss. “Night, Ma,” she said. “Promise you’ll call if you need me.”

“I will—and thank you, Sweetheart,” Michaela responded, squeezing Colleen’s hand.

“Make sure Ma gets some rest,” Colleen added to me, pausing at the entrance to her room.
“Count on it,” I told her. She managed another fragile smile, then vanished behind the curtain.

By unspoken agreement, Michaela and I waited until we saw the light from Colleen’s lamp go out—then we waited still longer, giving her time to fall asleep. Finally satisfied that we had privacy, Michaela fixed me with an iron gaze.

“All right—we’re alone now, with no one to overhear,” she said. “The fact that you resorted to such elaborate subterfuge to come here tonight, tells me that you must have had a compelling reason for doing so. I must know what that reason is.


* * * * * * * * * *

I stared into her eyes, trying to think how to begin. I knew I had to tell her everything—not only because she deserved an explanation for what I’d just put her through—but so she could protect herself and the children. “Forewarned was forearmed,” and all that . . . The thing was, Michaela and Colleen weren’t the only ones who’d had a bad scare tonight. I was feeling pretty shaky myself. Each time I replayed the evening’s events in my mind, and pictured Michaela silhouetted in the doorway, aiming that rifle into the darkness . . . or saw the chilling image of her collapsing to the floor . . . the blood seemed to freeze in my veins and I felt like my heart would stop.

I thought—at least I hoped—that Michaela would be willing to forgive me once she’d heard about Cloud Dancing’s warning. But I wondered how long we’d have to live in fear of the next dire occurrence taking place. And even after we got through this latest threat—“if” we got through it, I amended grimly—still our problems wouldn’t be at an end. Michaela and I had yet to resolve our differences over Brendan. Michaela liked him—I didn’t. She wanted him to stay—I couldn’t wait for him to leave. Seemed like we were at loggerheads. And right now I didn’t have a clue as to how we’d reconcile our feelings—or even if we could. Inside me was the gut instinct that as long as Brendan was around, he would remain a bone of contention between us.

“Sully—I’m waiting,” Michaela reminded me.

With an effort, I put my thoughts of Brendan Burke aside, and turned to the far more urgent matter before us. I took a breath and looked her square in the eyes. “All right, here it is,” I began without preamble. “I saw Cloud Dancing tonight. He . . . had some news—about Custer and Bloody Knife.”

Her eyes were wide and startled, her anger towards me temporarily forgotten at the implication of my statement.

“You saw Cloud Dancing?” she repeated. “He risked coming to see you at the clinic?”

“No, not the clinic,” I answered. “I saw him in the woods, at my campsite.”

“But how—?”

“I never made it to the clinic,” I explained. “It’s true I was headed there when I left you. But I didn’t get very far when I realized there wasn’t any need for me to be in town. I only stayed at the clinic to take care of you. But with you back at the homestead, I was free to go where I liked.”

“I’m sorry that staying at the clinic was so odious for you,” Michaela said stiffly.

I sighed in exasperation. “That’s plain foolish—and it ain’t what I meant at all, Michaela. Don’t you know that wherever you are, that’s where I want to be? It don’t matter whether we’re at the homestead, or out in the woods, or at the clinic. I’m just happy to be with you, any time and any place I can.”

“Still, you vastly prefer the wilderness, to being in town,” she asserted.

“Yeah, that’s true,” I admitted. “But this ain’t news, Michaela. You know I don’t like being cooped up—you’ve always known that.”

“Yes, I have,” she agreed. “And you may consider my concern to be ‘foolish.’ But it makes me
wonder, Sully, what will happen when we marry. If you'll be able to make the—the transition—to living inside a house, with walls—instead of sleeping out under the stars. Perhaps you're not ready to make such a radical change in your life—perhaps you never will be,” she said quietly.

I looked at her intently. “This ain’t the first time I’ve been married, and lived inside four walls,” I reminded her. “Have you forgotten why I built this place?”

She flushed. “No, I haven’t forgotten,” she said. “But after Abagail—that is, after she was gone, you turned your back on the homestead and went to live with the Cheyenne.”

“Yes—because being with the Cheyenne was what I needed at that time in my life,” I replied. “But things have changed. I have different needs now. I want different things. Most of all, I want you,” I said.

“I built another homestead, Michaela—for us. For our family. A special place all our own, where we could live, and love each other, and share our lives. You really think I could put so much of my heart and soul into building a home for us, and then not want to live there?”

“No, I don’t think that,” she admitted.

“Good,” I said bluntly. “Because it ain’t true and never will be. So how about we put this argument aside, once and for all? I want to be with you—if you’ll have me—and it don’t matter where or how. I’d even live in Boston for the rest of my days—if that was the only way we could be together.” I reached out and cupped her chin in my hand. “Do you believe me?” I asked softly.

Her eyes softening slightly, she nodded. “I’m sorry,” she said after a moment. “I suppose with everything that’s happened, I’m a little—uncertain—about us, and about our future.”

“There’s a lot that’s uncertain right now, I agree,” I said. “But only the things that are out of our control, like Custer. What we got, Michaela—you and me—that’s the one thing you can count on. I’m always going to love you, and I believe—least I’m hoping—that you feel the same way.”

“I do,” she said softly. “Of course I do. I’ve tried to prove that to you time and again, Sully. But lately you’re the one who seems to be unsure about us. You persist in being jealous of Brendan, when I’ve told you over and over that you have no reason to be.”

“Point taken,” I conceded—surprising her, I think, with my candor. “I’m willing to admit that all the confusion I went through with losing my memory—well, that maybe it shook me up more than I realized, and that it made me more scared of losing you.

“I ain’t proud of how I behaved,” I confessed. “I know I embarrassed you, and I’m sorry. I guess it’s just that . . . I want so much to make you happy, to give you the kind of life you deserve. But I know that I can never offer you the kind of life that William could—or Brendan. I suppose deep inside I’m scared that it won’t be enough—and that someday . . . you’ll get tired of struggling, and you’ll want to leave.”

“Oh, Sully,” she sighed, shaking her head ruefully. “The things we worry about! Don’t you know that I love my life here—and that the prospect of sharing that life with you is all I want in this world?”

“That’s what I want to believe,” I answered.

“Then believe it,” she told me firmly.

“But even if you’re not drawn to Brendan, he’s still attracted to you,” I pointed out. “I’m sure of it, Michaela, even if you can’t see it.”

“Well, I don’t happen to share your opinion,” she said. “But even if you’re right, Sully, it makes no difference.

“My heart is with you,” she vowed. Impulsively she reached out and drew me close to her, pressing her lips to mine. She kissed me deeply, hungrily, with an abandon she’d never shown before. I gazed at her with wonder and delight as we finally released each other.

“Are you convinced?” she whispered, her eyes seductive.
“You put up one heck of an argument,” I said huskily, dizzy with desire. I pulled her back into my arms and returned the favor, till we were both breathless. When I could manage to speak again, I said, “Does this mean we’ve made up?” I gave her a crooked grin.

“I would venture to say that’s a safe assumption,” she answered, smiling back.

But her words reminded me of how our conversation started, and regretfully, I abandoned my teasing manner.

“Speaking of ‘safe,’ Michaela—“ I began, but she anticipated me.

“Cloud Dancing! Of course,” she said in a rush, her eyes shadowed with guilt. “I didn’t let you finish telling me about him, or what he had to say.” She covered my hand with hers. “I’ve been so petty and selfish, Sully. I’m sorry.”

“You ain’t petty, and you ain’t selfish,” I told her softly. “Or if you are, then I’m guilty of being a lot worse.

“You don’t owe me any apologies,” I went on. “We needed to clear the air, Michaela, and I think we done that—or made a good start, anyway. But Cloud Dancing’s news is what we got to focus on now,” I added soberly.

“You’re right, of course,” she agreed. “Please tell me about Cloud Dancing, Sully. Is he all right? Is he safe?”

“He’s well—and safe for the moment,” I told her. “But Custer’s looking for him. Cloud Dancing said Custer and his men have been combing the hills for weeks.”

“Oh, Sully,” she murmured compassionately. “You must be beside yourself with worry.”

“I’m concerned about him, that’s true,” I conceded. “But I also know that Cloud Dancing can take care of himself. He’s been shadowing Custer’s men all this time and they’ve never spotted him.”

“Thank God,” she said fervently. After a moment she added, “But what about Bloody Knife? You said before that Cloud Dancing had news of him as well.”

“Yeah, he did—and I’ll get to that in a minute,” I promised. “But first, there’s something I got to know, Michaela—and only you can give me the answer.”

“If I’m able,” she replied helpfully.

“I need you to remember back to a couple of days after I woke up,” I said. “You’d come to my room that morning to check on me, and Matthew came to the door to fetch you. The two of you left for a few minutes, but when you returned, I could tell you were fretting about something. No—I take that back,” I corrected myself. “You weren’t just fretting—you were upset. I tried to get you to tell me what was wrong, but all you’d say was that you had a ‘visitor’ you didn’t want to see.” I paused momentarily, watching her reaction. She’d been doing a good job of masking her feelings as she listened to me, but as I mentioned her unwelcome visitor, I saw the expression in her eyes subtly shift, and I knew my instincts had been right.

“I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest,” I said. “No holding back because you think you’ve got to protect me.”

She looked extremely uncomfortable, but she didn’t try to argue. In a way, she’d already given me my answer, but I needed to hear her say it straight out.

I fixed my eyes on hers. “Was it Custer who came to the clinic?” I asked.

After a long pause, she nodded. I felt a surge of anger flare inside me, and it took everything I had to maintain control.

“What did he do?” I said darkly. “Did he try to hurt you?”
“No—no, he didn’t hurt me . . .” she said haltingly.

“Did he threaten you?” I could feel my pulse pounding like a hammer.

“Sully—“

“The truth, Michaela—*did he threaten you?*” I repeated, enunciating each word slowly and ominously.

“Yes,” she whispered finally.

My hands knotted into fists as the rage exploded within me.

“I’ll kill him,” I said.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Sully!” Michaela gasped, almost more horrified by the look in his eyes, than by the threat he had made. No—not threat, she corrected herself, a chill laying icy fingers upon her. Promise.
“You mustn’t even *think* such a thing, let alone say it,” she added fearfully.

“How not? No less than he deserves,” Sully said grimly.

“Yes, but is it worth throwing your life away?” Michaela remonstrated. “Sully, you know that if you—“ She paused, unable to say the word ‘kill.’ “if you—*harm* him—if you even raise a hand against him—you’ll face a firing squad, or a hanging . . .”

“Only if they catch me,” he said ominously. “And I ain’t about to let that happen.”

Michaela stared at him in astonishment and dismay. “Sully, I can’t believe I’m hearing you say these things. Less than six months ago you were court-martialed, and came within a hair’s breadth of being executed—of leaving me forever! Have you forgotten what happened in Washington? The agony we all suffered?” He gave her a bitter look, and she suddenly realized what she’d said. Instinctively her hand flew to her lips.

“Oh, Sully, I’m so sorry!” she breathed, appalled at her insensitivity. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Of course you had no recollection of that experience—”

“Not at first, no,” he agreed, some of the menace going out of his eyes and voice. “But you told me about it, remember? And bits and pieces are comin’ back to me on their own. It’s still kinda hazy, but I recall the court martial, and bein’ in prison . . .” His voice died away and Michaela saw him shiver, as if this was one memory he’d gladly sacrifice. “And I remember you,” he managed to continue softly after a moment. “How you fought with all your heart to get me free, and risked your life for my sake . . .”

“I wouldn’t have had a life, without you,” she whispered, laying her hand against his cheek. “That’s why this anger—this vendetta—you’re nursing against Custer frightens me so badly.” Her eyes were stricken. “Sully, I nearly lost you just weeks ago. When Cloud Dancing brought you to me—bleeding, burning with fever, your lungs ravaged by pneumonia . . . I was certain you were going to die. And I felt as if I would die as well. I can’t—I can’t go through that again. I can’t lose you—“ She choked over the last words and buried her face in her hands as the tears came.

A moment later she felt his strong, tapering fingers cupping her face. Tenderly Sully lifted her chin so that he could see into her eyes. He gently wiped the moisture from her tear-stained cheeks, then planted chaste, delicate kisses on her eyelids, the tip of her nose, and finally her lips, where he lingered, his mouth silken against hers. Passion ignited inside Michaela, growing quickly from smoldering embers to a consuming fire. Her hands drifted upward and sought his face, then trailed over his temples and twined themselves in his golden-brown locks. Her eyes slipped shut and she arched her neck as his lips sensuously moved along the line of her jaw and then traveled down to the hollow of her throat.

“Michaela,” Sully murmured, his voice low and hoarse with the depth of his desire. As he pressed himself more tightly against her, Michaela could feel his physical reaction to their embrace, and the shy,
virginal part of her had a moment of wanting to recoil in embarrassment. But a deeper, more elemental part of herself—what she supposed they called the “libido”—had other ideas. Even as a small, barely coherent voice in her mind cried, “Stop!”—Michaela’s body strained to meet his, and she felt would expire if they couldn’t bring their coupling to its ultimate conclusion. All she wanted was to mold herself to Sully—to become one with him—in heart, mind and body.

“I love you, Michaela,” Sully whispered in her ear, leaving a trail of kisses along her shoulder and the stretch of her collarbone. His hands glided up her back, gathering up the gleaming mass of her hair. He held it aloft, marveling at its glory, then let it stream through his fingers so that it rained down her back like a copper waterfall. His fingers slid over her shoulders and down her arms; kneading and stroking, setting her nerve endings ablaze. Then, slowly, delicately, she felt his hands moving over her bodice, stopping just shy of touching her breasts. His lips nuzzled tantalizingly behind her ear, the sensation driving her pulse to a fever pitch. He was whispering endearments, but for a moment she couldn’t hear him for the pounding of her heart. Then his voice, velvet-soft, came to her.

“I wish—I could show you how much I love you,” he murmured, his breath dizzyingly hot against her skin.

“You do,” she whispered back “Every day of our lives.”

He drew back from her slightly, so that he could see her face. “I mean—I wish I could show you like this,” he said softly. He began to ply her with kisses, tenderly pressing his lips to her forehead, her cheeks, and finally her lips, as his fingertips trailed feather-light across the top of her bosom.

She longed to give herself to him completely, to live solely in the rapture of the moment, with no thought for the consequences. But finally, the warning voice of reason penetrated the veil of passion that engulfed her. “Sully,” she said quietly, placing her hand against his chest and gently pushing him away.

For a moment he looked bewildered, as if he’d been startled out of a trance. Then his eyes cleared and he gazed at her with remorse. “I’m sorry,” he said unsteadily. “I didn’t mean . . . to force myself . . .” He looked stricken.

“You didn’t,” Michaela said in a rush, gazing at him compassionately. “It’s all right, Sully.” She hesitated, a blush heating her cheeks. “I—I wanted it as much as you did,” she confessed.

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it tenderly. His eyes, darkly blue and mesmerizing, stared into hers. “I love you so much, Michaela,” he breathed. “I feel so close to you . . . like I’m already married to you in my heart. Is it so wrong to want to show you how I feel? No one would ever have to know . . .” he said wistfully.

Michaela gazed at him yearningly, wanting to surrender to the temptation of her senses, but compelled to adhere to the rigid code of her upbringing. “We would know,” she answered gently.

Sully released her hand and drew a deep, shuddering breath, taking a long moment to collect himself. “You’re right,” he managed finally. “Much as I want you, I’d never make you do anythin’ you’d regret.” He gazed at her intently. “In my heart, in my soul—you *are* my wife, Michaela—and I don’t need no piece of paper to prove it.

“But I know you do,” he added. “And I’d never forgive myself if I hurt you. So I’ll wait—long as I have to.” He stood up from the bed. “Except I think—for a little while at least—I need to put some space between us,” he added with a crooked grin, moving a few steps away.

“I’m sorry, Sully,” Michaela said guiltily. “To—to stir you this way, and then not be able to satisfy your needs—”

“Don’t be sorry!” he interrupted, his eyes burning with love. “Oh, Michaela, don’t ever be sorry! What happened between us just now—it was like a preview of somethin’ wonderful—a miracle worth waitin’ for, no matter how long it takes. And when we do come together at last, Michaela—it will be perfect,” he promised.

“Do you really believe that?” she whispered hesitantly. “That I won’t disappoint you? That I can—fulfill you?”
“You’re the only woman who can,” he said. “The only woman who ever will.”

Sully took a pinch of chamomile from the canister and sprinkled it into Michaela’s cup; then added a measure of boiling water from the kettle. After a moment’s hesitation, he took a second cup from its hook and repeated the process. As he put the kettle aside, he noticed Michaela watching him.

“I was thinkin’ of what you and Cloud Dancin’ said about chamomile bein’ relaxin’,” he said with a self-conscious grin. “I figured that maybe if I drank some, it might, uh—” He cleared his throat. “It might ‘settle’ things down a bit.” Even in the muted light of the oil lamps, Michaela could detect the blush that brought a rosy glow to his tanned face. A dimple flashed and teased at the corner of her mouth as her lips curved into a smile.

“Remind me, then, NOT to bring any chamomile along on our honeymoon,” she said, her eyes sparkling provocatively. Sully chuckled as he brought the steaming cups over to her bed.

“I’ll put it at the top of my list,” he declared, handing her one of the cups. “Careful—it’s hot,” he cautioned.

She stared up at him from under the lacy screen of her lashes. “Yes, it is,” she murmured.

The rhythm of Sully’s heartbeat became uneven. He felt his mouth go dry and his hand shook as he placed his own cup on the nightstand. He lowered himself to the floor, crossing his legs Indian-fashion.

“There’s room for you to sit here,” Michaela offered, indicating the empty portion of the mattress next to her.

“Thanks—but I think maybe I’d better stay where I am, for now,” he replied, his eyes lingering over her longingly. “Easier to avoid temptation.”

Michaela sipped delicately at her tea. “I believe I understand what you mean,” she said in a rich contralto, her eyes regarding him alluringly over the rim of her cup.

Sully took a deep breath and then expelled it. She could see the pulse beating in his throat.

“You better stop what you’re doin’—or I’ll never be able to keep a clear head,” he managed after a moment.

“I’m not doing anything,” she protested innocently.

“Yeah—you are,” Sully contradicted. “But I guess you can’t help bein’ irresistible,” he added softly, twin flames of desire smoldering in his eyes.

Michaela shivered under the force of his hot blue gaze. Her heart and body craved to be with Sully; the compulsion to give in to her need almost overwhelming. The small portion of her mind that remained rational, marveled at the potency of their attraction; a force so intense that it had the power to blot out everything else.

But she knew that somehow, they must find a way to suppress their mutual longing. Social convention didn’t permit them the luxury of capitulating to their desire. But far more important, the threat of danger posed by Custer and Bloody Knife must take precedence now.

Reluctantly, but resolutely, she placed her cup aside and looked earnestly into his eyes.

“Sully, speaking again of Custer . . .” she ventured.

He grimaced. “I’d just as soon not. Just the thought of him turns my stomach. But—I know we got to,” he said grimly.

“Sully,” she attempted again, “Please tell me that you didn’t mean what you said before—that you wouldn’t truly try to—to—“
“Kill him?” Sully finished for her bluntly. She nodded, her eyes kindling with renewed anxiety as she watched him. The tension coiled within him was palpable. Michaela could discern it from the tendons of his neck, which stood out in sharp relief, and in the way a tiny muscle ticked erratically in his jaw. A sinister chill knifed through her as she observed his eyes assume the ominous cast that had so alarmed her earlier. For a moment she barely recognized him—his eyes flat and hard, dark as obsidian, his expression cold and without mercy. After several long seconds Sully spoke again.

“I wish I could tell you what you want to hear, Michaela—“

Afraid to let him finish the sentence for fear of how it would end, she hastened to interrupt, hoping to somehow diffuse his anger.

“Sully, I know how upset you are—I understand the rage which must be consuming you. I feel it as well. I’ve never felt such—such hatred—for anyone. But as much as we may despise Custer—we can’t just take the law into our own hands. It’s not for us to mete out justice, Sully.

“And there’s something else,” she added, looking soberly into his eyes. “I can’t believe you could be capable of taking a life—even of someone you hate.”

He was silent for a moment, chewing on his lower lip in the familiar, nervous gesture she’d come to know so well. “I know you want to think the best of me—to give me credit for bein’ noble and honorable and all that . . . and I love you for it,” he said quietly. “But truth is, Michaela, I’m not nearly so fine as you make me out to be. I’m capable of killin’. I got it in me, I know that. And this ain’t the first time I’ve threatened to do it. Remember Jedidiah Bancroft?”

“Something else you’ve recalled,” she noted, still amazed at the rapidity with which his memories were returning. He nodded briefly.

“Yes, I remember Jedidiah Bancroft—all too well,” she resumed after a pause. “And I recall how furious you were when he threatened the children. But even then, Sully, I didn’t truly believe you would actually make good on your threat—I thought it was just your rage at Bancroft talking. That you only meant to frighten him.”

“’Fraid you were wrong on that one, Michaela,” he answered gravely. “I coulda done it. I wanted to do it. And fact is, I nearly did. That night they tried to lynch Robert E.—I came this close to slittin’ that banker’s throat. And part of me was always sorry I didn’t go through with it.

“And there’s one thing you’re forgettin’, Michaela,” he went on softly. “I *have* killed before.”

“But you were set up—manipulated!” Michaela exclaimed. “The crime—it wasn’t truly yours.”

“It was still my finger on the trigger,” he reminded her.

“Yes—and remember how you suffered? The guilt and shame you felt afterwards?”

“The man I killed was innocent—he wasn’t my enemy,” Sully said. “But Custer’s different. He’s evil. He took Cloud Dancin’ hostage and nearly executed him—not once but twice. The second time all the women, children and old men in Black Kettle’s village nearly died with him. A few weeks ago, Custer finally succeeded in murderin’ Snowbird and Black Kettle, and most of the Cheyenne—and the ones he didn’t kill he took prisoner. He used Bloody Knife to try to kill Cloud Dancin’ and me, and now—“ He broke off, getting to his feet and moving restlessly to the window.

“What is it, Sully?” Michaela asked softly, her gaze following him. “What *of* Bloody Knife? You never told me Cloud Dancing’s news.”

Sully stared out at the night, his face set and grim in profile. “When Cloud Dancin’ went back to where we left Bloody Knife in the mountains, he was gone.”

“Well that must mean he’s alive,” Michaela said, attempting to be optimistic.

He turned slightly to meet her eyes. “Maybe—maybe not,” he said. “Custer and his men coulda found the body and buried it. Custer might have even killed Bloody Knife himself, just to frame Cloud
Dancin’ and me. He’s crazy enough to do it.”

“But Bloody Knife *could* be alive,” Michaela maintained.

Sully turned the rest of the way and faced her. “Yeah,” he said darkly. “He could be.”

Terrible knowledge dawned in Michaela’s eyes. For a moment she felt as if she couldn’t get her breath. “You think he’s coming here,” she managed at last. “It wasn’t a question. ‘That’s why you came back. That was Cloud Dancing’s warning to you.” Fear leeched the color from her face as she thought of the children.

Immediately Sully closed the few feet that separated them. He hunkered down by her bedside, taking her hands in his.

“You know I hate to frighten you, or cause you worry,” he said. “But truth is, Michaela, you’re right. Bloody Knife tried to kill Cloud Dancin’ and me once, at Custer’s bidin’. But now, he’s got his own reason to seek revenge. We got the best of him—and he ain’t gonna forget that. Cloud Dancin’ thinks—” He hesitated, then went on as carefully as he could manage, “Cloud Dancin’ thinks Bloody Knife might try to take his revenge on us—through hurtin’ you or the kids.

“But I ain’t gonna let that happen, Michaela,” he vowed passionately, squeezing her hands more tightly. “I’m gonna keep you safe—and if it means killin’ Bloody Knife or Custer, then I’ll do it—without hesitation. And without regret,” he said levelly.

“I’m gonna keep you safe,” he repeated. “That’s my promise to you, Michaela.” He released her hands and stood up, then moved over to where the rifle rested against the fireplace. He picked up the weapon, one hand unconsciously caressing the barrel, as foreboding filled her heart.

**MY JOURNAL**

**Thursday, 29 March, 1870**

**Evening**

At the sound of boot heels crossing the porch, I hastily returned the gun to its rack above the fireplace, and drew my tomahawk. I was all but certain that the new arrival was Matthew—still, I wasn’t taking any chances. I glanced fleetingly at Michaela. I could see relief in her face that I’d put up the rifle, but it was mingled with anxiety at the sight of me holding my weapon. “Just being cautious,” I whispered. A moment later the door opened and Matthew stepped inside. Simultaneously I slipped the tomahawk back into its loop on my belt.

“Sully!” he said in surprise. “Didn’t think you’d still be here.” He looked from one to the other of us, noting Michaela reclining on the bed, and taking in our flushed expressions. “Is everything all right?” he asked quickly. “You feeling okay, Dr. Mike?”

“Yes, yes I’m fine, Matthew,” she answered, her voice subdued, though she managed to summon a smile. “I was simply resting my ankle. What kept you?” she added after a moment, and belatedly I realized that it had taken Matthew twice as long as it should have to drive into town and back.

“I was spending some time with Ingrid,” Matthew answered, hanging his hat on a hook by the door. “We ain’t seen too much of each other lately, what with everything going on here, and Ingrid taking that job with the family in Soda Springs, minding their kids. Keeps her away from town most of the week,” he explained.

“Matthew—I’m sorry if my problems have been interfering with your life,” I said.

“Forget it,” he said promptly. “You know I’m here for you and Dr. Mike, Sully. Whatever you need, I’m glad to help.”

“I’m grateful to hear you say that,” I responded in relief. “Because fact is, Matthew, something’s come up, and I’m going to need all the help I can get.”
“I wondered if something was wrong when I saw the looks on your faces,” Matthew replied. “At first I thought that maybe I, uh—” He cleared his throat, coloring slightly. “That maybe I—walked in on something.

“But that ain’t it, is it?” he added, his expression altering as he watched us closely.

A knowing, half-guilty smile hovered around my lips as I thought of how close Matthew had come to being right. If he’d walked in a mere ten minutes sooner . . .

But reluctantly I put aside the tempting thoughts of Michaela and me together. There would be time enough for all that later, when this was finally over—(if it ever *is* over, a thought chimed dismally in my mind). Determinedly, however, I ignored it. We *would* get through this—we *would* be happy. In a few weeks I would stand up before the Reverend with my beautiful bride Michaela at my side, and I would pledge myself to her forever. We would have our happy ending—if I had to vanquish Custer, Bloody Knife and the whole Seventh Cavalry to make it happen.

“Sully, tell me,” came Matthew’s voice, breaking in on my thoughts. “What’s the trouble?”

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“So you got no way of knowing if Bloody Knife is alive?” Matthew asked, as I finished filling him in on the night’s events.

“Nope,” I answered. “No way of knowing if he’s alive, or where he could be if he is, or which way he’s going to jump. But Cloud Dancing ain’t one to give empty warnings. If he’s got reason to believe Bloody Knife’s still lurking around and could be a threat, then that’s more than enough for me. I trust Cloud Dancing’s instincts,” I added. “He’s never steered me wrong.”

Matthew nodded sagely. “What’s your plan?” he asked after a moment.

I shrugged. “I don’t really got one—least not yet. Except to make sure someone’s with your ma, Colleen and Brian every minute. I’m afraid I gave your ma and Colleen quite a scare when I showed up here before,” I went on. “But after what Cloud Dancing said, there was no way I was going to leave you all alone even one more night.”

“I can look out for them,” Matthew said a little stiffly.

“I know you can,” I told him. “And I’m counting on it. But you can’t keep an eye on them twenty-four hours a day, Matthew. You got cattle to tend, and besides, Ingrid needs you.”

“True,” Matthew conceded.

“So that’s why I’m going to be sticking close from now on,” I added.

“You planning on staying at the homestead full time?” Matthew asked.

“At the homestead, at the clinic . . . Wherever your ma and the kids are, that’s where I’ll be,” I said firmly.

“Sully, that’s very noble of you, and I confess that it eases my mind to know you’ll be nearby,” Michaela spoke up. “But you can’t be with us every moment, any more than Matthew can.”

“I’d like to see anybody try and stop me!” I declared.

“And I’m certain that anyone who tried to attempt such a thing would regret it,” Michaela acknowledged readily. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?” I said.

“You have a job, as well,” she reminded me. “At the reservation.”

Her words brought me up short. Strange how I kept blocking the reservation out of my mind, as if I
didn’t want to be reminded of my obligations there. Part of it, I knew, was my anger at the army for rounding up the various tribes and penning them up together as if they were no better than cattle. No, I thought dourly—that was wrong. Cattle got treated better.

But maybe my real reason for avoiding thoughts of the reservation, was the same as my reason for blocking out my memories of Michaela. I didn’t want to face the idea of losing any more of the Indians to the army’s mistreatment and cruelty. And even if the people managed to survive somehow, I knew in my heart that the world they’d known before was gone forever. And deep in my gut, I also knew that the Indians wouldn’t want to live in the white man’s world that was left.

But as heavy as my heart was over the plight of the Indians, even they had to take second place now, to my duty to Michaela and the kids. I couldn’t risk leaving them unprotected—I couldn’t risk anything happening to them. Not even for the Indians.

“I’m afraid they’re going to have to get along without me,” I dismissed Michaela’s mild objection. “I care about the people at Palmer Creek—you know that. But they got by all the time I was sick—I’m hoping they can wait a little longer. If I have to make a choice, Michaela, I choose you and the children. That’s the way it’s got to be,” I told her.

“I appreciate your devotion to us, Sully—truly I do,” she replied. “But I’m afraid it’s not that simple.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. She sighed.

“I regret I haven’t had the chance to discuss this with you before now,” Michaela began, her expression apologetic. “But Custer wasn’t the only visitor at the clinic while you were convalescing, Sully. Hazen came to see you as well.”

“Hazen?” I repeated. “What did he want?”

“Ostensibly, to pay you a sick call,” she answered. “I put him off, claiming you were still too ill to see anyone—since at the time you hadn’t recovered any of your memories, and I hadn’t been able to tell you, as yet, about your post as Indian Agent. Ironically, on that particular day, my claim that you were too weak to receive visitors wasn’t a lie—it was the day you suffered your migrim,” she explained.

“Yeah, right,” I said slowly, mortification washing through me again as I recalled her having to watch me go through all that. It had been nearly intolerable to me to be so weak and helpless in front of her—even though I knew she was a doctor, and well used to such things. Even more than that, I knew she would have stayed by my side, nursing me through the pain and illness forever, if that’s what it took—because she loved me. Still, my male ego had a hard time accepting that I couldn’t always be the strong one, much as I wanted to be. But right now, all of that was neither here nor there.

“How did he react?” I asked, bringing the focus of my thoughts back to Hazen.

“Actually, he seemed genuinely concerned about you,” Michaela noted. “Very distressed to hear from the Reverend about your injury and illness, and very relieved to hear from me that you would recover. He praised your integrity, and your devotion to the Indians. And he asked me to give you his best wishes, since he was on a tour of the reservations, and didn’t have the luxury of remaining in town until you were well enough to see him.”

“So then, what was the problem?” I asked, figuring that things couldn’t have been that simple—otherwise, she wouldn’t have brought it up.

“He expressed concern about when you would be able to return to your duties,” she answered. “He pointed out that though the Reverend had been doing his best to fill in for you, managing the reservation wasn’t his responsibility. Hazen said that the time was fast approaching when he would have to make a decision as to whether to hold your job open for you, or hire a replacement.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I wasn’t precisely sure what to tell him,” she replied. “I thought about how you’d nearly resigned when we first heard about Palmer Creek—and later, how you almost seemed to welcome the possibility of being fired from your post, before you left to find Cloud Dancing. On the one hand, this seemed the perfect opportunity to help you sever your ties to the reservation and the army. However, I also knew that I had no
right to make such a decision for you—even if I believed I was sure of how you felt.

“Finally, I asked him to wait a little longer, assuring him that physically, you would be able to return to work—at least on a limited basis—within a few weeks. He seemed reasonable, and willing to be patient—for a while. But he also imposed a deadline—"

“Deadline?” I repeated.

“Yes—of one month. If, at the end of that time, you were still unable to resume your duties, he would be forced to let you go and hire a new agent.

“That month is nearly up,” she added soberly. She fixed me with a penetrating gaze. “So now that you know the situation, Sully—what will you do?”

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“Like I said, I care about the Indians,” I repeated after a long pause. “It kills me to see them suffer . . . to watch a little more of their way of life—their freedom, culture and traditions—slip away from them every day. But harsh as it sounds, what you told me don’t change anything.” I stared into her eyes.

“You’re going to be my wife,” I said solemnly. “Matthew here—and Colleen and Brian—they’re going to be my family. They already *are* my family!” I amended. “What the Indians are going through—it breaks my heart. But if anything happened to any of you . . . I couldn’t live with it.

“Regardless of the consequences, my answer’s the same. I’m staying with you, Michaela,” I said.

“But Sully—could you live with it if anything happened to the Indians because you weren’t there to protect them—to look out for their welfare?” Michaela said worriedly. “What if the agent Hazen appoints in your place doesn’t share your concerns? What if all he cares about is profiting at the Indians’ expense? We know from our unfortunate encounter with Captain Borgnine, as well as what we learned in Washington, the caliber of most of the agents the government has assigned to the reservations. Could you stand by and watch the Indians’ future placed in the hands of someone like that?” Her face was strained as she appealed to me.

I paced restlessly across the room, finally stopping at the foot of her bed. What I had to say pained me, but it was the only decision I could make.

“It may not come to that,” I began slowly. “Maybe we’ll be lucky enough to track down Bloody Knife and resolve all this peacefully, before the time runs out. But if not . . .

“I was ready to walk away once before,” I reminded her. “If I got to, I’ll do it again. There’s no other choice to be made, Michaela—I’m staying with you. And that’s an end to it,” I said with finality, trying to ignore the anxiety in her eyes.

“It’s time you were getting some rest,” I added abruptly. “And Matthew—you need your sleep as well. I’m going outside to stand watch. See you all in the morning.” I circled to the side of the bed and bent down to brush Michaela’s forehead with a kiss.

“But Sully—“ she tried once more, grasping at my hand.

Gently I disengaged my fingers from hers. “Sleep well,” I said briefly. “Good-night.” And with those words, I moved to the door and opened it, letting myself out into the night.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The sun was stretching tentative fingers above the horizon as Matthew emerged onto the porch of the homestead the following morning, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand. Sully was propped in a weather-beaten straight chair, the frame tipped backwards so that it seemed to balance precariously on two legs; though in fact, the slatted back was braced securely against the exterior of the cabin. Sully’s booted feet rested on the top of the rail in front of him. His head was slumped forward, his chin nearly resting on
his chest. In his lap, under his loosely folded hands, lay a slim, dark, leather-bound volume, with the legend, “LEDGER” inscribed in gold on the cover. A pencil was jabbed inside the book, apparently marking his place. Matthew recognized the successor to the simple pad of paper Dr. Mike had given Sully to start his journal.

Above Sully’s head the oil lamp still burned on its hook, its contents nearly exhausted. Matthew stared down at Sully sympathetically. Up all night watchin’ and writin’, too, he thought. No wonder he finally nodded off. Carefully Matthew leaned forward and blew out the flame.

His movement, slight though it was, was enough to rouse Sully; and the older man awoke with a violent start, his right hand instinctively going to the knife on his hip as he brought his feet down and rocked forward, the front legs of the chair landing heavily on the boards of the porch. The journal shot off his lap and slid several feet away.

Instantly Matthew put out his free hand and grabbed Sully’s shoulder. “Easy, Sully—it’s just me!” Sully shot a menacing glance at him, then his expression slowly altered as he focused on Matthew’s face. Gradually his posture relaxed and his fingers loosened and released their hold on the handle of his knife.

“Sorry—didn’t mean to startle you,” Matthew said.

“No need for apologies—I shouldn’t have fallen asleep,” Sully reproached himself.

“For how long—ten minutes?” Matthew asked reasonably. “You been up all night, Sully—you’re tired, you need rest.”

“Plenty of time for rest when Bloody Knife and Custer are dealt with,” Sully said ominously, then groaned as he was seized by a sharp pain in his neck and shoulder. He kneaded the tender area, stretching gingerly and grimacing as further aches and pains from his tense, cramped muscles announced their presence.

“Dr. Mike’s got some lineament works real good on stiff necks, lumbago and the like,” Matthew remarked. “You should have her rub some of it into your shoulder.”

Sully nodded, smiling briefly at the prospect. “Good idea—maybe I will,” he acknowledged. He scrubbed his hands over his face. Matthew noted the dark shadows of fatigue beneath his eyes.

“Dr. Mike poured this for me, but you look like you need it more than I do,” Matthew said, offering him the coffee. Sully accepted the cup gratefully, letting its warmth relax the stiffness in the joints of his fingers, as the steam drifted up to bathe his face. He breathed appreciatively of the fragrant aroma before taking first one sip, then another.

“Thanks—this hits the spot,” he said.

“Sure—but you ain’t gettin’ off that easy,” Matthew informed him. “Dr. Mike sent me out here to bring you inside and make sure you eat a proper breakfast. She and Colleen have been cookin’ up a storm—eggs, bacon, oatmeal, biscuits . . . She said to come and get it while it’s hot.” He gave Sully a small grin.

“Your ma shouldn’t be on her feet cookin’ yet,” Sully said worriedly as he used one hand to grab the railing and pull himself erect. His outraged muscles jabbed at him in protest. At that moment, he thought about one hundred years old, he thought dourly.

“Dr. Mike figured you’d say somethin’ like that,” Matthew replied, his grin broadening. “She said her ankle needs exercise if it’s gonna heal proper. ‘Sides, she says it feels better today.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it, but I still don’t think she should be pushin’ herself,” Sully said doubtfully. He took a few experimental steps, trying to work the stiffness out of his knees.

“Sure is somethin’, how the two of you fuss and fret over each other,” Matthew said, his tone gently teasing, but his eyes frank with admiration. He moved over to where the journal rested near the edge of the porch and leaned down to pick it up, brushing off the dust. He brought it back to Sully, who accepted the journal with a nod of thanks and bent to tuck it into the blanket of his bedroll. Matthew went on, “Dr. Mike was the same way when you were laid up. Wouldn’t leave your side ‘less we practically dragged her . . . wouldn’t let nobody else look after you ‘cept Colleen—and even then it was like pullin’ teeth to get her to
rest, or eat . . .” His voice trailed off, but then he added suddenly, “What you and Dr. Mike got between you, Sully—it’s special.” His grin flickered again. “’Course you don’t need me to tell you that,” he added.

An answering smile touched Sully’s eyes and mouth. “You got that right,” he agreed, taking a larger swallow of the cooling coffee. But then his eyes darkened. “And that’s why, if it takes every last breath in my body, I’m gonna keep her safe.”

“Well, you won’t be doin’ it alone.” Matthew’s voice was quiet, but firm, his eyes steady as they met Sully’s.


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“Good morning,” Michaela greeted him as he and Matthew entered the cabin. She smiled briefly at him over her shoulder from where she stood at the stove, stirring a skillet of scrambled eggs. Behind her, Colleen busied herself setting the table.

‘Mornin’,” Sully responded. Matthew immediately headed to the table, where Brian was already seated, but Sully remained standing just inside the door, feeling unexpectedly shy as the sight of Michaela’s face reminded him of all they’d been through the night before—the bad *and* the good. The VERY good, he thought, his face warming pleasantly at the memory.

“Please, sit down,” Michaela urged him. “I’ll be with you momentarily.” She turned back to her task, keeping her attention on the eggs so they wouldn’t scorch or burn.

“Uh . . . all right,” Sully agreed after a moment’s hesitation. He crossed the room and took his usual place opposite Brian and adjacent to Michaela’s chair at the head of the table.

Colleen placed a bowl, plate and silverware in front of him. He gave her a warm smile. “Thanks, Colleen,” he said. “You feelin’ better today?”

He was gratified to see much of the fear and tension gone from her eyes.

“Yeah, I am. Thanks, Sully,” she said softly.

“What’s the matter, Colleen? You sick?” asked Brian curiously. He took a swallow of milk.

Colleen assumed a cheerful expression as she regarded her little brother. “No, Brian—I just had a stomachache, is all. It’s better, now.” She went to the stove to fetch the coffeepot. As she returned to the table and leaned over to refill Sully’s cup, the two of them shared a brief look of commiseration.

Michaela took the skillet of eggs off the flame. “Colleen, would you dish these onto a platter and put them on the table?” she asked.

“Sure, Ma,” Colleen said readily, taking the pan.

“Should you be doin’ all this?” Sully asked Michaela, observing her critically. “And what about your crutches?” he added, suddenly noticing them propped against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

“I don’t require them anymore,” Michaela replied, answering his second question first. “My ankle is much improved—as I’m sure Matthew already told you,” she said lightly. Noting his unconvinced expression she added, “I really am better, Sully. I’m a doctor—I know these things.” She gave him a impish smile.

“Maybe so—but they also say doctors make the worst patients,” Sully countered.

“Perhaps—but this is one doctor who has no intention of being foolish,” Michaela assured him. “I realize I still need a bit of extra help. That’s why I have this.” She reached for an object leaning against the wall beside her, and held it up for his perusal.

Sully’s eyebrows raised in surprise. In her hand was an elegant cane, the shaft composed of deepest
ebony, with a handle of intricately carved silver. As Sully peered at the walking stick more closely, he could discern that the handle was wrought in the shape of two snakes entwined around the shaft. The design looked familiar to him, and after a moment he recalled seeing it pictured in Michaela's medical texts. Michaela had explained to him that it was called it a “caduceus”—a Latin term denoting the symbol of the physician.

“That’s real handsome,” he said in admiration. “But I don’t recall seein’ it before. Where did it come from?”

Michaela looked down at the cane, reverently trailing her fingertips over the handle. “It was my father’s,” she replied softly after a moment. “A gift from the doctors and nurses under his supervision at Massachusetts General Hospital, on the occasion of his twenty-fifth year as chief of staff. He treasured this cane, and carried it with him every day. Unfortunately, he was only able to enjoy it a brief time—he died a mere three months later.” Sully detected a trace of tears in her eyes as she finished speaking.

“I’m sorry, Michaela,” he said gently. She gave him a tremulous smile of thanks.

“It’s all right,” she managed. “Though in one sense it’s a sad reminder that he’s gone; in another way, it gives me joy to remember how deeply loved and respected he was by all his colleagues. It was one of the few keepsakes of my father’s that I brought with me to Colorado. It’s been packed away all this time, but I like to think that my father would be pleased to see it getting some use again.”

“I’m sure he’d be real pleased,” Sully told her, looking at her tenderly. “But—ain’t it too long for you?” he added curiously.

“Perhaps by an inch or two,” Michaela acknowledged. “As it happens, however, my father was a man of modest stature—but only physically. In the hearts of his family, friends and colleagues, he stood ten feet tall!” Her eyes remained suspiciously bright, but her face blazed with pride.

“And I can actually get around quite well,” she added cheerfully after a moment. She grasped the handle in her left hand and took a turn up and down the room for his benefit, limping only slightly on her injured right ankle.

“Looks like there’s gonna be no stoppin’ you,” Sully remarked admiringly, his eyes twinkling.

“You got that right,” Michaela teased, dimpling mischievously as she delivered a dead-on impression of Sully’s vernacular and inflection.

He chuckled. “That’s pretty good—but do me a favor, Michaela. Go back to speakin’ like you always do. Somehow my crude way of talkin’ just don’t sound right comin’ out of those pretty lips.”

“Rustic, perhaps, Sully—never crude,” she reproached him gently. “I love the way you speak,” she added after a moment. “Plain and honest, and you always say what you mean. There are very few people who can say the same,” she asserted.

He gave her a crooked grin. “Thank you for that. But still . . . I like my elegant, mostly proper Michaela from Boston.”

“Only ‘mostly?’” she repeated archly. Her eyebrows raised in mock offense, belied by the devilish sparkle in her eyes.

“‘Almost always,’ then. How’s that?” he bantered. Michaela cocked her head, considering.

“Acceptable,” she pronounced finally. She maneuvered her way to his side, bending down to kiss him lightly.

Sully cupped his hand around the back of her head and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, hungrily exploring her mouth with his. Instinctively Michaela responded, matching his ardor with her own, until they were suddenly reminded of their audience. Embarrassed, they parted abruptly, feeling the amused eyes of the children upon them.

Sully dropped his eyes, feeling a hot flush creeping up his neck and face. After a moment he grinned sheepishly at the children, then looked up at Michaela. “I’m glad you’re doin’ better, but you been on your
feet too long, Ma’am,” he announced. “Time you were sittin’ down.” Without warning he pushed his chair back from the table and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her down into his lap before she had time to react.

“Better?” he asked her softly, his lips just inches from her face, his warm breath stirring the tendrils of hair at her temples. His arms tightened around her and Michaela felt her heart begin to pound as a delightful shiver coursed through her body.

“Much better,” she whispered. She traced the curve of his cheekbone with her fingertip. “I wish our wedding were tomorrow,” she breathed, forgetting their young spectators once again as she began to lose herself in his eyes.

“Can’t come soon enough for me,” Sully agreed, his gaze riveted on her face.

“I love you so much, Sully,” she whispered in his ear, her voice barely audible.

“I love you more,” he responded, the huskiness in his voice betraying his emotion. Unable to resist the invitation of her tender lips so close to his own, he drew her to him once again.

Matthew’s voice came awkwardly. “I hate to break this up,” Matthew’s voice came awkwardly. “But time’s passin’ . . .”

Michaela and Sully reluctantly separated, their faces flushed crimson; though whether it was more from embarrassment or passion, neither could have said.

“You’re right, of course, Matthew,” Michaela said, somewhat flustered, as Sully helped her to her feet. “Everyone finish eating while I get ready to leave for town. That especially means you, Sully,” she added pointedly. “You need nourishment.”

“You know, you don’t need to go back to the clinic just yet, Michaela,” Sully observed. “It’s only been a couple days since you got hurt. Folks’ll understand if you need another day to heal.”

“I understand that you’re concerned, but you’ve seen for yourself that my ankle is much better, Sully,” she replied. “Besides, I want to get back to work. Staying busy—well it helps to keep my mind off—” She stopped, glancing quickly at Colleen and Brian. “Staying busy is good for me,” she amended lamely.

Matthew inclined his head toward Sully’s. “There’s safety in numbers,” he pointed out in a low voice. “Isolated here at the homestead, we’re sittin’ ducks, just waitin’ for Custer and Bloody Knife to come along and pick us off. But there’re lotta folks in town—that means plenty of witnesses. Plenty of friends we can call on too, if there’s trouble,” he added.

Sully nodded, impressed by Matthew’s logic. “Good point,” he conceded. “Easier to protect Michaela’s ma, too, if we’re all together.” Matthew bobbed his head in agreement, then looked at Sully quizzically.

“Mr. Burke too?” he questioned.

Involuntarily Sully grimaced. “Yeah, him too,” he grudgingly allowed after a long pause, his tone disgruntled but resigned.

“I’ll hitch up the wagon,” said Matthew.

MY JOURNAL
Friday, 30 March, 1870

I never meant to eavesdrop. But when I was passing by in the hall outside the main room of the clinic and heard Michaela say my name, I was compelled to stop and listen. I guess it’s true what they say about eavesdroppers never hearing any good of themselves . . .
We'd arrived in town a short time ago, dropping the children off at the schoolhouse on our way to the clinic. Once Michaela was safely ensconced inside, I'd secured Matthew's promise to stay out front and keep watch while I headed over to the livery to speak to Robert E., hoping to enlist his help in keeping an eye on the clinic whenever Michaela or any of the family were there. Even with Matthew spelling me, I knew that the two of us alone couldn't stand guard twenty-four hours a day.

A short time later, armed with Robert E.'s offer to help whenever he could, I returned to the clinic, freeing Matthew to leave and tend his cattle. I started to enter by the main door, but froze with my hand on the knob when I heard Michaela in conversation with someone. Assuming she was seeing a patient, I let myself into the building by the adjacent door instead. As I took a few steps inside, I noticed the inner door leading to the examination room standing ajar. It was then that I realized Michaela was talking to her ma—followed a few moments later by my discovery that I was the topic of discussion.

"Just as I told Sully, I am telling you as well, Mother—except for some residual weakness in my ankle, I'm the picture of health. As you see, I no longer require the use of crutches to get around," Michaela was saying as I approached the door.

"Yes, I noticed your father's cane," Mrs. Quinn remarked, though I couldn't tell from her tone whether she was pleased or offended.

"Does it disturb you?" Michaela asked. There was a hesitation.

"I was—surprised to see it," came Mrs. Quinn's voice finally. "I hadn't lain eyes on it since—"

"Since I left home," Michaela finished.

"Yes," her ma replied briefly.

"Father willed it to me, Mother—I was free to take it when I left."

"I know that, Michaela. Your father meant for you to have it—that's not in dispute. Seeing it unexpectedly—well, it simply brought back memories for me." Mrs. Quinn sounded suddenly vulnerable, and I found myself feeling sympathy for her. Michaela hadn't only lost a pa when Josef Quinn died—Elizabeth Quinn had also lost a husband.

"It brings back memories for me, as well," Michaela said now, her tone softer.

There was a brief silence, as if neither of them knew how to proceed. Then Mrs. Quinn spoke again.

"Are you very busy at the moment?"

"I was just updating some files. I have no patients scheduled, as yet."

"In that case, Michaela, I wish to have a word with you—about Mr. Sully."

I peered through the crack in the door. Mrs. Quinn was standing before Michaela's desk, her back to me. Michaela herself was concealed from my view.

"I wanted to speak with you as well," Michaela responded. "I haven't had a chance to explain about the telegram I sent—"

"Yes, yes, we'll get to that," her ma interrupted. "But first, I would like an explanation of Mr. Sully's behavior last evening."

"Mother—"

"Well, surely you don't condone that boorish display he put on?" Mrs. Quinn said sharply. I heard Michaela sighing.

"Mother, I apologize if you were offended. I agree that Sully was not—at his best—last night. But
there are reasons—“

“There is no excuse for ill manners, Michaela,” Mrs. Quinn said flatly.

“How can you make such a sweeping statement when you have no idea of the circumstances?” Michaela demanded. “You were right there when I told Brendan about the recent massacre of the Cheyenne at the Washita River, and how devastated Sully was by the murder of Chief Black Kettle and his other Cheyenne friends and family. Enduring such a loss would be tragic enough in its own right, but since then Sully has had to additionally witness the desecration of the Cheyenne burial grounds by ignorant and callous homesteaders. Is it any wonder that he believed Brendan intended to do the same, given Brendan’s tales of excavating ancient tombs and burial sites?” she argued.

“From my observation, Brendan made it quite clear that he abhors such wanton destruction. Mr. Sully simply chose not to listen, or even be reasonable,” Mrs. Quinn objected.

“It’s difficult to be ‘reasonable’ when you’re forced to watch the wholesale slaughter of an entire people—of people you love—and you’re powerless to stop it,” Michaela said passionately. “And this isn’t the first time Sully has had to face such a loss. You already know about the deaths of his first wife and child. Sully told you himself, on your first visit here—and at the time you seemed quite sympathetic. Have you forgotten that?” she said accusingly.

“No, of course I haven’t,” the mother conceded quietly. “It’s terrible to lose a spouse, or a child—and my heart goes out to Mr. Sully. But that was a long time ago, Michaela. One would think he would have become resolved, by now. At least I would certainly hope so, given his desire to marry you and begin a new life.”

“Some types of pain are harder to put behind you,” Michaela said gravely. “Particularly if that pain is a reminder of other hurts from the past.

“Did you know, Mother, that Sully’s father died when he was just a baby—that Sully doesn’t even remember him?” she went on. “Or that when Sully was barely seven years old, he watched his only brother dragged to death by a horse? Or that his mother, so grief-stricken over the loss of her older son that she couldn’t live with the agony, drowned herself in the Hudson River and left Sully an orphan at the age of ten?” As Michaela reiterated each of the tragic events in my past, her voice grew steadily more brittle, as if at any moment her composure threatened to crack and fly apart into a thousand pieces.

“Pain is cumulative, Mother,” Michaela resumed after a moment, and I could hear the tears in her voice, even if she refused to let them spill. “It builds up inside—day by day, year by year—until finally it cries out for release . . .” Raggedly she broke off. I felt tears sting at my own eyes. My heart ached at the sorrow she felt on my behalf.

“Michaela—what are you saying?” asked Mrs. Quinn, at a loss to understand her daughter’s meaning.

“I’m saying . . . I’m saying that Sully has suffered many terrible ordeals in his life—that he deserves your compassion, not your criticism,” Michaela managed stiffly after a moment. “And just weeks ago, he suffered the worst ordeal of all, when he nearly lost his life, and his—”

“Michaela, what in heaven’s name are you talking about?” her ma interrupted, clearly alarmed now.

“Sully nearly died—I nearly lost him forever,” Michaela said bleakly.

“But he—he seems healthy enough,” Mrs. Quinn ventured. I could hear a trace of concern in her voice, but mostly what I heard was skepticism.

“Yes he is—now,” Michaela retorted. “By the grace of God. But just a short time ago . . .” She trailed off, and even hidden from my sight as she was, I could sense her anguish as I imagined her remembering the agony of the past several weeks.

There was a silence, and I figured Michaela was trying to collect herself. Presently she resumed, “Sully was in the mountains. Though winter was nearly over, we’d experienced a sudden cold snap. The weather was especially bitter in the higher elevations.” She hesitated, and I heard her sighing heavily. After a moment her voice came again.
“Though we didn’t realize it before he left, Sully had contracted a catarrh from Brian, but his symptoms
didn’t manifest themselves until after he’d been exposed to the frigid temperatures for at least two days.
The exposure lowered his resistance to the illness and the infection quickly spread to his lungs and
developed into pneumonia. By the time Cloud Dancing brought Sully home to me he was close to death.”

“Cloud Dancing?” her ma repeated. “He was with a fugitive Indian?”

“Yes,” Michaela answered, her voice tight with suppressed anger at her mother’s implied aspersion
toward our friend. “And I am profoundly grateful. If it weren’t for Cloud Dancing bringing him back to
me in time, Sully surely would have perished.”

There was another silence, then Mrs. Quinn’s voice came again.

“Of course I’m sorry to hear that Mr. Sully was so ill,” she allowed. “But I fail to understand why you
couldn’t tell me that in your telegram.”

“Because there were—complications,” Michaela replied reluctantly after a moment. “The pneumonia
wasn’t the only threat to Sully’s life. He . . . he’d also been shot.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Mrs. Quinn’s tone was shocked.

“Fortunately the bullet just grazed his skull, but with his condition already so depleted by the
pneumonia, the wound posed an additional threat to Sully’s survival,” Michaela explained.

“Michaela, this—this shooting,” her ma sputtered. “Were you in danger?”

“No, Mother,” Michaela replied impatiently. “Sully and Cloud Dancing were attacked in the
mountains. Sully was shot when he tried to stop their assailant from firing at Cloud Dancing.”

“Well—who was this assailant?” Mrs. Quinn asked. She sounded appalled, but I suspected it wasn’t
out of concern for me or Cloud Dancing.

“It was a—a renegade Indian, named Bloody Knife,” Michaela answered.

Mrs. Quinn moved away from the desk, and I could finally see Michaela sitting in her chair. She
watched her ma pacing around the room. Eventually Mrs. Quinn stopped and turned, facing her daughter
again.

“This is all quite difficult to grasp,” said Mrs. Quinn. “I think you had better start at the beginning,
Michaela, and tell me everything.”

* * * * * * * * * *

Slowly, haltingly, Michaela started to speak, beginning with the first conversation we’d had in which
I’d expressed my worries for Cloud Dancing’s safety, and my need to seek him out, to put things back “in
balance” for myself again. She continued to describe the sequence of events as they’d occurred,
culminating with the morning Cloud Dancing brought me back to the homestead, unconscious and
desperately ill. Even knowing how her ma might react, she was completely frank, omitting nothing, and
silently I applauded her gumption in being so honest. I knew how hard it was for her, facing her ma with
the truth about me, and I felt guilty for not being by her side. But I also knew this was something she
needed to do on her own. Fact was, not only couldn’t I help her this time, but I knew that if I tried, I’d
probably only makes matters worse.

As Michaela finished describing Cloud Dancing’s and my return the morning of the blizzard, she
stopped speaking, and I knew she was working up the courage to tell her ma the most difficult part of all
this—about my loss of memory. But before she got the chance, Mrs. Quinn spoke again.

“I find all of this quite distressing, Michaela,” she announced.

“Yes, it was terribly distressing, not knowing if Sully would live or die,” Michaela agreed. “And there
was something else—“

“I mean, I find it very distressing that you intend to tie yourself to a man who has such a troubled past,
and who lives such a dangerous existence," her ma cut her off. Now it was Michaela who was shocked into silence. I could just see Mrs. Quinn's profile, ramrod straight, and suddenly I had a premonition of disaster. The next moment, my worst instincts were confirmed.

“I am compelled to tell you, Michaela, that if you marry this man, I believe that you will be making the gravest mistake of your life. And if you persist in going forward with this union, I cannot and will not give you my blessing.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“I am well beyond the age of consent, Mother,” Michaela said, an edge of barely suppressed fury in her voice at her mother’s pronouncement. “I hardly need your permission.”

“You’re quite correct—you don’t need my permission,” Elizabeth said smoothly. “But my permission, and my blessing, are two very different things, Michaela. You don’t require the former, but if you choose to reject the latter, you will have to live with that decision.”

“How can you be so heartless?” Michaela asked. “Have you heard nothing of what I’ve told you?”

“Not heartless, Michaela—pragmatic. And as for not listening to what you said, on the contrary, I heard every word,” her mother replied. “And that’s precisely why I believe a marriage between you and Mr. Sully can only result in disaster.”

“On what could you possibly base such a conclusion?” Michaela demanded.

Elizabeth fixed her daughter with a penetrating look. “You accuse me of not hearing you, Michaela. But have you listened to yourself? Did you not, just moments ago, tell me that Mr. Sully deliberately put his safety at risk by going to the mountains to seek out a man who was a fugitive from the law? And that the reason he made such a reckless choice was because he was terrified to marry you, for fear that he would lose you the way he lost others in his life?

“Perhaps I seem callous,” she went on. “But I am simply trying to make you see the truth, Michaela. It’s obvious that your obsession with this man has blinded you to his problems.”

“Problems?” Michaela echoed coldly.

“Yes, my dear—problems,” her mother repeated. “From everything you’ve said, it is quite evident to me that Mr. Sully is—damaged—emotionally. His recent behavior is ample proof that not only is he disturbed and conflicted about his past, but that he is clearly unready for a relationship with you. He may never be ready. I can’t stand by and watch you throw your life away on a man who will almost certainly hurt and disappoint you—perhaps even abandon you, as Everett did to Marjorie.”

“I can’t believe you would compare Sully to Everett, or even mention them in the same breath!” Michaela reproached her indignantly. “You understand nothing about Sully and me,” she added, her eyes chilly and remote.

“No, Michaela—it’s you who doesn’t understand,” Elizabeth contradicted. “Many women foolishly wed men of questionable character in the misguided belief that they can rescue them, or change them. Sadly, most of these matches inevitably fail, because such men can’t or won’t change. As much as you may desire to help Mr. Sully, Michaela, it’s obvious that his problems are far too complex for you to fix.”

“I am not interested in marrying Sully to ‘fix’ him, Mother,” Michaela said hotly. “Besides, Sully is not like other men.” She regarded Elizabeth with antagonism.

“No, he isn’t. Nor is he anything like you. The plain and simple truth, is that Mr. Sully is the complete antithesis of you, Michaela. Even putting these emotional complications aside, I’ve never been able to comprehend your attraction to someone so different from yourself—someone who is hardly your equal, socially, intellectually—”

“Mother, if you believe that ‘class’ matters to me, then you’ve never known me at all!” Michaela
snapped.

“I have no illusions about your attitudes in that regard,” Elizabeth replied drily. “But it *should* matter to you, Michaela. A successful marriage is built upon a foundation of shared interests, a common background. The idea that opposites attract may seem romantic and appealing, but it’s largely a myth. And in this day and age, seriously unrealistic as well.

“And we haven’t even addressed the issue, as yet, of Mr. Sully’s questionable way of living,” Elizabeth added.

“Meaning—?” Michaela challenged.

“Meaning that Mr. Sully’s life seems to be one of constant upheaval, not to mention frequent danger,” her mother noted. “This recent attack waged against Mr. Sully is only the latest in a long series of perilous situations with which he’s been involved. Situations that have frequently threatened the safety—perhaps even the very lives!—of you and your children. You’re an adult woman, Michaela. If you choose to risk your own life by staying with this man, there’s nothing I can do to stop you. But I cannot believe that you would endanger the lives of the children put into your care, by exposing them to a man whose life is constantly shadowed by violence.”

“How dare you suggest that Sully or I would ever willingly or knowingly endanger the children!” Michaela exclaimed, her eyes livid.

“I am simply stating the facts,” Elizabeth retorted, infuriatingly calm. “If you persist in turning a blind eye to the truth, that’s not my fault.”

Michaela was nearly shaking with the anger that hummed and vibrated through every inch of her body. But somehow, she managed to keep her voice controlled.

“Hear this, Mother: nothing you say is going to dissuade me from loving Sully, or sharing my life with him,” she said evenly.

“In that case, Michaela, I feel sorry for you.”

Mother and daughter stared at each other, each implacable, separated by the yawning gulf of their opposing philosophies. A gulf that only seemed to widen, not lessen, the longer they talked. Michaela wondered if they would ever be able to bridge the extreme differences between them—dismally concluding that the prospect was remote, if not impossible.

Apparently reaching the same conclusion, Elizabeth spoke again. “This conversation is pointless,” she said. “Clearly, you are incapable of listening to reason, Michaela—at least at the moment. I suggest, however, that you give serious consideration to what I’ve said. Perhaps it’s still not too late for you to see the light.

“I will certainly be available if you wish to resume this conversation at a later time,” she finished. Michaela didn’t answer, and Elizabeth regarded her pityingly. She turned away from the desk, preparing to leave, when suddenly the door to the hallway swung open, revealing Sully framed in the entrance.

“Wait, Mrs. Quinn,” he said, stepping into the room. “Don’t go just yet.”

* * * * * * * * * *

“Sully!” Michaela exclaimed, startled.

“Mr. Sully,” Elizabeth echoed, smiling thinly. “Good Day. Tell me: are we now to add invasion of privacy to your list of transgressions?”

“Mother—!” Michaela choked, appalled. She flushed crimson with embarrassment and anger. “Sully, I’m sorry—” she began lamely, turning distraught eyes upon him. But he put up his hand, silencing her.

“No need,” he said calmly. “Your ma’s right, Michaela. I was eavesdroppin’, and that’s wrong.” He
fixed his gaze on Elizabeth. “I didn’t mean to listen, Ma’am—and I surely didn’t intend to interfere in your conversation with your daughter. But since it’s me you been discussin’, I kinda figure I oughta speak for myself. Leastways, I don’t think it’s fair for Michaela to be attacked, when her only ‘crime’ is lovin’ me and carin’ for me out of the goodness of her heart.”

“I am not questioning my daughter’s motives, Mr. Sully—simply her choices,” Elizabeth told him.

“Be that as it may, it ain’t—isn’t—right for me to hide behind Michaela’s skirts, forcin’ her to defend me all alone,” Sully stated.

“I commend your sense of ethics, Mr. Sully. But I must warn you that I see little hope of you saying anything that will change my mind,” Michaela’s mother responded coolly, her expression bordering on smugness.

“Probably not,” Sully agreed matter-of-factly. “Fact is, Mrs. Quinn, what I got to say will more than likely drive the last nail in my coffin, far as you’re concerned. But of all the things you can accuse me of, the one thing you can’t call me is a liar. Michaela tried to be honest with you—to tell you everythin’ about me. But there’s one real important thing she didn’t get the chance to say. And I figure if you’re goin’ to hear the truth, you better hear all of it. Even if when I’m through, you wind up writin’ me off for good.”

“Sully, you needn’t do this—you needn’t justify yourself to her,” Michaela attempted to intercede.

“No, Michaela—I got to do this,” he maintained quietly. “A few days ago, I was the one sayin’ that maybe we shouldn’t tell your ma about my memory loss, for fear she’d think I wasn’t fit to be your husband. But the way things stand now, I don’t believe her opinion of me could get much worse. And at least we’ll have the satisfaction of knowin’ that we’ve been completely honest.” His eyes held hers for a long moment. Michaela returned his gaze, a volume of unspoken communication passing between them. Finally she responded.

“It’s your decision,” she said.

“Good enough,” he answered, reaching out to lightly stroke her cheek. “It’ll be all right,” he added softly. He moved away from the desk and went to fetch a straight chair from against the wall, placing it in the center of the room. He faced Elizabeth once again. “You’d best sit down, Ma’am,” he added, gesturing toward the chair. “This’ll take a while.”

* * * * * * * * * *

“And so, bottom line is, you’re right,” Sully concluded some time later as Elizabeth regarded him quietly, her hands folded in her lap. “I was confused and I was afraid—I ain’t denyin’ it. I was scared to death about marryin’ Michaela, for fear somethin’ bad would happen, like it did to Abagail.” He was silent for several moments, then met Elizabeth’s eyes squarely.

“No, that ain’t right,” he amended. “Truth is, I was convinced I was gonna lose Michaela. I couldn’t see how it could be otherwise, after watchin’ so many people I’d loved die over the years. Even though livin’ with the Cheyenne helped me to find my path again—gave me hope again—still, I was carryin’ a heavy burden of guilt around inside me. Guilt that went so deep I didn’t even know it was there till the massacre at Washita. Then it all came pourin’ out—and it just about crushed me. Seen’ so much senseless death . . . the death of my adopted family . . . I was outta my head with grief. It brought back all the pain of losin’ Abagail and our baby—the pain as fresh as the night it happened. And lovin’ Michaela like I did—more than anybody I’d ever known—I thought it would be better to die myself rather than risk condemnin’ her to the same fate.

“And I nearly did die,” he went on soberly. “I came about as close as a body can get. But then—it didn’t happen. The people I loved had died—were still dyin’ around me—but stubbornly, I just kept on livin’. And I guess at some point, somewhere in my mind, I decided that if I couldn’t stop the pain by endin’ my life, then I’d stop it the only other way I could—by blockin’ out every memory I had of the woman I loved and wanted with all my heart, but thought I didn’t deserve.

“You got a right to think I’m “damaged,’ as you put it,” he told Elizabeth. “Because it was true, for a while. It was like a sickness in my mind and my heart—not so different, really, from the sickness in my body. And there wasn’t no easy cure. It took the help of my ‘brother’ Cloud Dancin’, and then weeks of Michaela’s tender love and care to heal me enough so that I could finally face the memories again. But I
*did* face them. I got better. And I’m recoverin’ more, every day. But far more important, I learned that it took a lot more courage to find a way to make peace with the past and move forward, than to run away from my problems—run away from Michaela—out of some misguided sense of sacrifice.

“Your daughter taught me that, Mrs. Quinn. Her courage, her devotion—she’s been like a shinin’ star, lightin’ up all the dark corners of my heart and soul. And I’ve come to know that our love is a precious gift—one to be cherished, for however long it may last. I’m grateful for every moment of every day we have together, and all I want—now and forever—is to be allowed to love Michaela and make her happy.

“I’m hopin’ you can find it in your heart to give us your blessin’ after all,” he said softly. “I know you don’t got a very high opinion of me—and like you warned me, probably nothin’ I’ve said here is gonna change that. But I also know how much it would mean to Michaela to have your support and your approval—even if she has a hard time admittin’ it,” he added, favoring Michaela with a gentle smile.

Turning back to Elizabeth he continued, “But if you can’t give your blessin’—well, then, so be it. ‘Cause in the end, Ma’am, there’s only one person whose feelsin’ matter to me—and that’s Michaela.” He glanced over at her, his eyes brimming with love. She returned his gaze, a smile of pride hovering about her lips as an errant tear escaped to tremble on her cheek. “No matter what anybody else says or thinks, I’m gonna marry this woman, and love her to the end of my days—if she’ll have me,” Sully vowed. “But if, for some reason, she can’t bring herself to marry me—’cause she thinks our problems are too big, or she just can’t love me the way I love her . . . well, then—only Michaela can send me away.

“The choice is hers,” Sully finished. Both he and Elizabeth looked toward Michaela, an expectant silence filling the room as they awaited her reaction.

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Friday, 30 March, 1870

“Before you respond, Michaela, there is something I wish to say,” Mrs. Quinn spoke suddenly.

Beside me, I felt Michaela immediately stiffen, anticipating the worst. I reached down and gently squeezed her shoulder, nodding to her ever so slightly. “Give your ma a chance,” I whispered to her, my voice barely audible. “She might surprise you.” Might surprise us both, I thought to myself, with an irrational sense of hope.

Resistance shadowed Michaela’s eyes for a moment, but then she relented. “Very well,” she said guardedly. There was a pause, as her ma appeared to gather her thoughts. Finally Mrs. Quinn spoke again.

“I thought that nothing you could say would sway me, Mr. Sully—I was convinced of it, in fact,” Mrs. Quinn began, her eyes meeting mine. “But I confess you have surprised me. Your honesty and frankness regarding your difficult history, both touched and impressed me. I was especially moved by your eloquent expression of love for my daughter,” she added.

“And after hearing you describe the—illness—that resulted from your grief, I’ve come to believe I was wrong to question your—”

“Sanity?” I broke in, with a crooked smile.

“Let’s say ‘stability,’” she suggested, with a small smile of her own. This time the smile was genuine. “Over the years, as the wife of a physician, I’ve learned something of the devastating effect of grief and melancholy. Recently, in fact, I’ve had the opportunity to observe it firsthand.” Her odd and unexpected remark made Michaela study her curiously, but Mrs. Quinn didn’t elaborate. Instead she went on, “I believe now that the source of your affliction was indeed melancholy—and that it was most unfair for me to criticize you, or suggest that your mind was less than sound, simply because you were experiencing the effects of long-delayed grief.
“I hope you will accept my apology for any injury I caused you,” she offered sincerely.

“Apology accepted, Ma’am,” I said respectfully.

“I also accused you earlier of being Michaela’s intellectual inferior—but I see now that this second assessment was likewise in error,” she went on. “Though events in your life conspired to prevent you from receiving a formal education, it’s obvious you’ve been blessed with both intelligence and sensitivity—as well as a liberal dose of common sense. I believe I’m beginning to understand why my daughter loves you, and is so fiercely loyal to you.”

I looked at Michaela, pleasantly surprised and gratified. Was it possible? Had I really managed to redeem myself in Mrs. Quinn’s eyes? Was she finally going to grant us the approval she’d been withholding for so long? Michaela met my glance, and I could see she wanted to believe, just as I did, that we’d turned a corner in our relationship with her ma. But wariness lingered in her eyes. She couldn’t quite bring herself to trust that her ma’s opinion had truly changed.

“I would very much like to offer you my blessing,” Mrs. Quinn continued—and inside I breathed a tremendous sigh of relief. We’d done it—we’d made her understand. She was in our corner—at last. I gave Michaela a fleeting smile of triumph.

“—but I am afraid I cannot,” her ma finished.

I felt like I’d been sucker-punched—all the wind knocked out of me. In the space of just seconds, she’d managed to raise my hopes to the loftiest heights—and then send them plummeting. Sharp as my disappointment was, however, I dreaded even more how Michaela would react.

I looked into her eyes, and my spirits sank even further. She was regarding her ma bitterly, hectic spots of color blazing in her cheeks, and her lips pressed together so tightly they were white.

“I knew it!” she lashed out suddenly, the air charged with her anger. “I knew you were incapable of accepting Sully, despite all your gracious manners and pretty speeches!

“I had hoped that once—just once—you would be on my side, Mother. But I should have known better. Hasn’t experience taught me by now? You’ve never supported me, and you never will!”

“Easy, Michaela,” I tried to mollify her, as Mrs. Quinn recoiled from her daughter’s venom. “Hear her out.”

“To what purpose?” Michaela said dully. She appeared to have spent all her rage in her brief tirade, and now she just slumped in her chair, her eyes flat and lifeless. The sudden change in her mood, as if all the fight had gone out of her, worried me even more than her outburst.

“Because you’d want her to do the same for you,” I reasoned gently. “It don’t cost nothing to listen, Michaela.” I glanced over at her ma, who was sitting in injured silence, her face averted.

“But don’t you see it already has?” Michaela said miserably. “It’s cost you your privacy and your dignity . . . Being forced to bare your soul like that . . . And for what? The price is too high, Sully.”

“No, it ain’t,” I told her softly. “Not if it’s for your sake. Nothing’s too hard, Michaela, if I’m doing it for you.”

“Thank you,” she managed. “Your generosity—your forgiving spirit—they touch me more deeply than I could ever put into words, Sully. But I can’t allow you to be further humiliated on my behalf. This was the final straw. After all these years of struggle, I am finally past caring what she thinks. There’s nothing left between us.”

I hunched down next to her chair and took her hand in mine. “I don’t believe that,” I said. “You’re hurting and angry now, but that’ll fade. You and your ma—you’re blood, Michaela. That’s never going to change. You can try to erase your ma from your life, but you can never wipe out the bond that connects you. And deep down, I don’t think you want to,” I added.

“Give her one more chance, Michaela,” I urged. “Do it for me. Do it for us. But most important, do it for yourself. Because your heart’s never going to heal if you don’t try.”
Her mouth trembled with the effort of holding back her tears. “For you,” she whispered finally. “Only for you.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it gently. “It’s going to be all right,” I promised. I got to my feet, then faced Mrs. Quinn.

“We’re ready to listen, Ma’am,” I told her. “Both of us. What were you going to say?”

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“I am aware that I often appear cold and remote—a fact about myself that I cannot deny—and which I’ve often regretted. Even toward members of my own family, it has always been—difficult—for me to express affection,” Mrs. Quinn began slowly, taking me by surprise yet again—the rigidity of her posture and the halting quality of her tone plainly hinting at her discomfort in revealing this hidden side of herself. I’m not sure what I’d been expecting her to say, but this startling foray into self-confession or examination surely wasn’t it. As I watched her hands unconsciously twist together in her lap, I found myself feeling a renewed sense of compassion toward her.

“My parents were not what one would term—‘warm,’” she continued quietly. “Oh, I am quite certain that they loved me, in their own fashion—just as I am sure that they loved my brother and my sisters. But my father was frequently absent, attending to his business, and on the rare occasions when he was at home, his attitude toward us was—at best—merely polite. Far more often he seemed both distracted and disconnected from his children . . .” Her voice trailed off momentarily, and she stared into space, as if at something only she could see. Inside me was the certainty that in her mind’s eye, she was envisioning herself as a little girl, innocently pining for the pa who was never there.

Abruptly she gave us a guilty glance, then kind of shook herself—simultaneously squaring her shoulders and pressing her lips together as if ashamed of even this small lapse into wistful vulnerability. “As for my mother,” Elizabeth continued (and yes—to me suddenly she’d become an ‘Elizabeth,’ maybe even a ‘Lizzie’—no longer the chilly, forbidding woman who sat before me, but someone who had once been a young girl with hopes and dreams and longings of her own). “—well, she, too was distant and removed . . . occupied with her numerous and never-ending social obligations, preferring to leave the details of our day-to-day upbringing in the hands of nannies and governesses. We would see her at breakfast, and occasionally she would reappear at dinner—that is, on the rare occasions she and my father were not hosting a dinner party, or accepting one of their numerous invitations to dine out. And at bedtime, if she was at home, she would visit our rooms and bestow obligatory—but fleeting—good-night kisses.

“But I don’t believe I ever recall her singing a lullaby, or reading a story, or coming to our bedsides in the middle of the night, offering comfort if one of us had a nightmare . . .” she went on thoughtfully, straying back into the landscape of her memories. “As for our deportment—we were expected to be well-mannered, respectful and quiet, always. In those days—at least among the circle in which we moved—children were expected to be ‘seen and not heard,’” she added by way of explanation.

“Yet this was not unusual,” she hastened to say, as if anxious to convince us that while her parents may not have been affectionate, they’d been no worse than anybody else’s. “Personal affairs among the families of my parents’ ‘set’ were almost universally conducted in this manner. It was not considered—fashionable—to indulge children, or lavish affection upon them.

“I confess that as a child, I sometimes didn’t understand my parents’ seeming lack of interest, or their apparent inability to demonstrate filial devotion,” Elizabeth continued. “I can even recall—after some emotional slight or other—promising myself that I would never be like my mother and father . . . that I would never withhold love and affection from my own children. But as the years passed, and I came to realize that my parents’ distance was the rule rather than the exception, I began to . . . change. To—to ‘harden,’ I suppose one would say. The emotional detachment in my home was all I had ever known; thus, after a time, it began to feel natural to me. Even necessary—as a defense against the emotions of others. I found myself mimicking my parents’ behavior more and more frequently—until, at last, I was incapable of acting any other way.

“Josef understood,” she said softly, unexpectedly—and I heard the minutest tremor in her voice. “Somehow, from the time we first met, he was able to see past my reserve, and refused to be put off by my—prickly—exterior, and frequently sharp tongue. Sometimes, he even called me ‘Kate’—after the character in ‘Taming of the Shrew.’ Josef managed to love me, despite my faults. And with our
daughters, he compensated for my difficulty in displaying my feelings, by showering them with all the attention and affection that they craved.

“While in part, I was grateful that from their father at least, my children would never suffer the emotional neglect that I had experienced through so much of my life . . . still, as time passed, I found myself feeling jealous of the relationship Josef enjoyed with our daughters. Somehow, he had found the key to expressing love freely and without reservation . . . a key I’d never known, or had forgotten long ago. And since it was with Michaela that Josef shared the closest kinship—it was toward Michaela that I directed most of my jealousy, and resentment.”

I had been so caught up in listening to Elizabeth as she painfully confided her innermost feelings, that I had temporarily forgotten to look at Michaela for her reaction to her mother’s words. But now I stole a glance at the woman beside me, and saw that she was staring intently at her ma with her lips slightly parted, regarding Elizabeth in astonishment. In that moment I suspected—no, I knew—that Elizabeth’s startling confession was as much of a revelation to Michaela, as it was to me.

Elizabeth paused, as if expecting Michaela to make some sort of response. When none was forthcoming, Michaela’s ma spoke again.

“Have I shocked you?” she asked, with a dry sort of irony. “I imagine I have. But it’s true, Michaela—what you’ve always suspected. As much as I loved you, I was jealous of you—and jealous of your place in Josef’s affections. It was an ugly emotion, and part of me hated myself for feeling it—but I couldn’t seem to stop. And I was far too ashamed ever to admit to being so base.

“I would not be at all surprised if you confessed to hating me,” Elizabeth asserted calmly after a moment. “Not only did I resent your closeness to your father—a bond that seemed to exclude me—but I went so far as to believe that you’d usurped my role in his life.

“But far worse—is that for all these years I’ve encouraged you to believe that our estrangement was as much your fault as mine. I even went so far as to suggest that you’ve been the transgressor, rather than myself. I can offer no excuse, no justification for what I’ve done. I’ve been insecure, petty and bitter—and because I’ve been incapable of admitting the truth to you or to myself, I’ve punished you for my own inadequacies.”

Elizabeth stared at her daughter—her face vulnerable, stripped of the smug, aloof mask she’d always worn as if it were a second skin. “Have you nothing to say to me, Michaela?” she said at last. “I’ve just confessed the worst of sins to you—surely you must want to express your indignation, your anger—perhaps even your hatred—toward me. You’re certainly entitled.”

Suddenly I felt like I had no right to be here—that the brutal truth and naked emotions Elizabeth had revealed were too tender, too raw—to be glimpsed by the eyes of a stranger. As I glanced from mother to daughter, the expressions on their faces twin mirrors of the pain in their souls, I murmured, “Maybe I should go . . . let you talk alone . . .” But Elizabeth immediately turned to me, her steely eyes capturing and holding mine.

“No, Mr. Sully—don’t leave. We began this painful and arduous journey together—we are all obligated to see it through to the end, no matter how difficult the cost.” Her eyes strayed back to her daughter and she waited for Michaela to speak. I could see how desperately Elizabeth needed to hear a reaction—any reaction—from her child. But I also knew she wouldn’t ask again. Whatever happened next, was up to Michaela.

After a long, agonizing pause, Michaela said softly, “Why are you telling me this now?”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to be silent. The fingers of her right hand toyed with the ornate wedding band on her left. Presently she sighed, and answered, “Perhaps . . . perhaps because admitting how I’d wronged you, was the only way I could think of to prove that I genuinely *do* love you, Michaela. That I want only the best for you. So that you’ll believe me when I say that even though I sympathize with your love and devotion for Mr. Sully, my fears for your safety are too strong for me to bless a union that might ultimately hurt you, or bring you to grievous harm.” She turned to me.

“I know you love my daughter, Mr. Sully. I am sure you would do everything in your power to make her happy. But I also know that you live an existence fraught with uncertainty, frequently attended by danger. A life that clearly, you are unwilling to sacrifice—even for Michaela’s sake.
“I may have already lost my daughter forever, through my own actions,” she went on quietly. “And if so, then that is a mistake I must live with for the rest of my life. But I can’t live with the constant fear that at any time, any moment—I may lose my child to the violence that seems to follow in your wake. I heartily regret that I must come to this conclusion—but it is the only decision I can reach.”

After that, there didn’t seem to be anything else to say.

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CHAPTER FORTY

Elizabeth rose to her feet, her demeanor subdued. “I suppose it’s best that I leave now—our discussion seems to have come to an end,” she said stiffly, echoing Sully’s thought and broadcasting it aloud. No one protested or made an effort to stop her; and after a long moment in which she lingered mutely by the door, she exited the room, the whisper of the crinolines beneath her skirt the only sound in the sudden stillness.

The silence was tangible, a thing with weight and substance that seemed to lay heavily over everything, muffling their emotions and constricting their hearts. At last, unable to bear the quiet, Sully pinned a determined smile on his face.

“Well, that’s that,” he said lightly into the suffocating silence. “We didn’t expect to change your ma’s mind, and we weren’t disappointed. So now, we just move on.”

Michaela didn’t reply. She stared at the chair her mother had vacated, the intensity of her gaze seeming to pierce the very essence of its structure. Tentatively Sully touched her shoulder.

“Michaela? You all right?” he ventured.

Still she didn’t answer, and Sully knew that he needed to provoke a response from her—that he must somehow make her talk about what she was feeling. Even if her articulation of her emotions proved painful—for her, or for them both. He knelt down by her chair and gently cupped her cheek, turning her head so that she was forced to look at him. As her eyes met his, his hand dropped away.

“What are you thinkin’?” he asked softly.

Michaela focused her distracted gaze upon him, and gradually her eyes cleared. “Can you believe what just happened?” she spoke suddenly. “Can you imagine what it must have cost her to make such an admission?”

Anticipating Michaela’s anger, or hurt—or any of a number of tempestuous scenes or reactions, Sully was unprepared for the measured calm of her response. Clearly the daughter had as much power to surprise him as the mother. And was that actually sympathy he detected in her eyes?

“It took guts,” he agreed finally, feeling suddenly as if he were on unfamiliar ground, the terrain ahead mysterious and unknown.

“Never in my life has my mother been so frank, so forthcoming. So . . . vulnerable,” Michaela went on after a pause.

“Are you sayin’ . . . you ain’t mad? That you understand her?” Sully asked uncertainly, finding it nearly impossible to believe that this could be the case.

Michaela faced him, her emotions in turmoil. “I’m not sure,” she responded slowly after several seconds had elapsed. “All these years, through all our battles, I was always so consumed by my own anger, my own sense of injury. I never stopped to consider that she could be in pain as well.

“But the courage it must have taken for her to admit the truth . . . to lay open her soul to my scrutiny and criticism . . . I’m not at all certain that if I were in her position, I’d be capable of being so honest, Sully.” A dart of guilt lanced at her inside, and she flushed with shame.
“Sure you would,” he said readily, soothingly.

But Michaela was shaking her head. “I never have,” she said flatly. “Through all the altercations we’ve had over the years, not once have I ever confessed my own failings—or even allowed for the possibility that I had any.

“I’ve always accused her of being so cold, so unfeeling . . . Yet I’ve been just as rigid, just as uncompromising. Perhaps more,” she insisted, the echo of her recent hateful words grating harshly in her mind.

“You had cause, Michaela,” Sully reminded her, as distressed to see Michaela shoulder the entire blame for hers and Elizabeth’s estrangement, as he had been to see her lash out at her mother earlier. “Your ma—she ain’t an easy woman to know, or to live with. She said it herself. You can’t be blamed for feelin’ hurt and rejected,” he asserted.

“But don’t you see?” Michaela queried him, her expression tense and strained with the need to make him understand. “By admitting her inadequacy, my mother has granted validation to the feelings of hurt and rejection I’ve had all these years. As if finally, she understands both my pain, and my right to feel it. It’s her gift to me,” she said.

Sully nodded. “A gift of wisdom,” he said.

“Yes—that’s it precisely. A gift of wisdom, for both of us,” Michaela confirmed.

Sully was silent for some moments, attempting to frame his thoughts into what he wanted—no, what he needed—to say. Finally he stared levelly into her eyes.

“Do you agree with her?” he asked simply.

Her expression was puzzled. “Agree?” she echoed. He chewed on his lower lip.

“Yeah . . . agree,” he repeated. “That we ain’t got a chance—that the life I live is too complicated, too dangerous—even to think of draggin’ you and the kids into it?”

Michaela felt a sudden rush of panic and confusion. “My mother has a flair for the melodramatic—she often exaggerates, Sully,” she ventured, the words sounding lame and unconvincing to her ears.

“Maybe so—and maybe, you think there’s a germ of truth in what she says,” Sully said pointedly, confirming that he hadn’t been fooled by her transparent response.

Feeling suddenly apprehensive at pursuing this ominous line of discussion—or perhaps a better word would be “frightened,” she admitted grimly to herself—Michaela placed the flat of her hands on the desktop, and pushed herself to her feet. Sully followed her lead, rising from his crouching position. “It’s been a difficult morning,” she announced. “Our nerves have been frayed. I believe we need to take some time to reflect, before we go on with this, Sully.”

“I think we need to talk it out, Michaela,” he said warningly, recognizing what she was trying to do, and attempting to head off her retreat.

“We will—I promise—but not now,” she maintained. “I need to get back to work, Sully. Please—you must excuse me,” she concluded, putting a period to their conversation.

Reluctantly accepting defeat, he backed away quietly toward the open doorway. “I’ll be here—if you need me,” he added, but with little hope that she’d take him up on the offer.

Michaela nodded rapidly, refraining from looking at him. She resumed her seat and took up her pen again, bending to the patient file before her. There was a long and painful pause—then soundlessly, Sully left.

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He stood in the hall, uncertain what to do next. His heart thudded against his ribs, and there was a cold, unpleasant knot in the pit of his stomach. Vainly he tried to ignore the sensations, for to
acknowledge them meant he would be forced to consider where they were coming from, a question he was loathe to examine too closely.

Michaela just needed some time, after that scene in the clinic, Sully told himself. Sparring with her ma, being torn between Elizabeth on one side and himself on the other . . . and then Elizabeth's startling confession, coming when they'd least expected it . . . Michaela had been upset, her feelings all jumbled up inside. She needed to sort things out—to find her balance and her perspective again. He had to allow her the freedom to do that. After some time to herself, she would be ready to talk.

. . . he hoped. But truth was, he didn't know—not for sure. Why else would his gut be clenching right now with something approaching fear?

For all that Michaela fought with her ma, and claimed to deny Elizabeth's values, the mother's influence over the daughter was considerable. Michaela would never admit it—might not even see it—but to him it was plain. He'd seen it in Boston—had watched the ease with which Michaela had slipped back into her old life, clearly enjoying the elegance and refinement of her mother's privileged world.

He remembered the night he'd arrived on Elizabeth's doorstep, pushing his way into the dining room amid Harrison's protestations. He remembered the shock in Elizabeth's eyes at his appearance—and the shock in Michaela's. Shock, and maybe even a trace of embarrassment?

He didn't want to believe it. He told himself it was the strain of their confrontation with Michaela's ma, that was coloring an imperfect memory. But the sinking feeling in his heart said otherwise.

He never should have gone in there, Sully reproached himself. He should have listened to his instincts, and stayed out of it. If he hadn't interfered, then Michaela wouldn't be so confused and stirred up now . . . And she wouldn't be feeling . . . what? Sympathetic toward her ma? Maybe even willing to forgive Elizabeth for her mistakes?

But that's what he'd wanted, wasn't it? Why else would he have encouraged Michaela to hear Elizabeth out, give her a chance? He understood how much the rift with her ma was hurting Michaela, and how much she needed to heal—how much they both did.

Oh, yeah—he was “noble” all right, Sully thought bitterly—as long as Michaela making up with her ma didn't threaten his own place in Michaela's life. But if it came to Michaela siding with Elizabeth over him—then suddenly he wasn't willing to be so generous. And if Michaela should decide that her ma was right in believing that a life with him was too dangerous—that marrying him was a mistake . . . Elizabeth didn't even know about the threat from Bloody Knife and Custer—and frankly, he couldn't imagine what she'd do if she found out. But Michaela knew. She was scared for the children. And he'd been responsible for putting her in that position. She had to be thinking about that right now. Weighing the danger they faced against the advantages of being with him. Advantages that seemed to be shrinking more and more with every passing moment.

Sully swallowed with difficulty, staring at the door which separated him from Michaela with tortured eyes. What if she decided it wasn't worth the risk?

The heavy tread of footsteps on the stairs intruded rudely on his thoughts, and made Sully look up, startled. He groaned inwardly as Brendan appeared on the landing and descended the bottom flight. The day was going from bad to worse—and it wasn’t even noon, yet.

Brendan looked equally leery as he spotted Sully, but after a fraction's hesitation he arranged his features into a polite expression.

“Sully—good morning,” he said pleasantly as he approached.

‘Mornin’,” Sully answered briefly.

“How is Dr. Mike today? Much improved, I hope?” Brendan inquired.

“She's just inside—you can ask her yourself.”

Brendan's eyebrows raised in surprise. “Back at work?” he said. “Then she must be feeling better. I'm glad to hear it.”
Sully shrugged slightly. “She’s doin’ well enough,” he allowed. “So—what are you up to?” he added after a moment. “Goin’ *explorin’* again?” He was unable to completely disguise the derision in his voice. To be honest, he didn’t try very hard.

“Actually, I’m on my way to send a telegram,” Brendan replied blandly, choosing to ignore Sully’s baiting tone. “I’ve had a wire from William Jackson.” Belatedly Sully noticed the folded sheet of paper in Brendan’s hand.

“That right?” he replied casually. “So when are you headin’ down to Mesa Verde?”

“I’m not,” Brendan said smoothly. “At least, not for some time. Jackson’s been called back by Hayden, to assist with the geographical survey—he’s been forced to temporarily abandon his exploration of the cliff dwellings. Which essentially leaves me at loose ends.”

Sully felt a trace of alarm. He studied the towering young man before him, his height and the breadth of his shoulders seeming to fill the narrow hallway. He noted Brendan’s striking features, and the clear, luminous eyes which regarded him confidently.

“Then what’ll you do? Go back to chasin’ after Cheyenne burial sites again?” His mouth was dry, and he felt the nervous beat of the pulse in his throat.

“No, I’ve abandoned that idea,” Brendan told him. “As you said last evening, there are very few left now. But more importantly, I didn’t want my interest in the Cheyenne burial sites to be a source of distress or dissension.”

“Don’t do me no favors,” Sully said sharply, his tone laced with sarcasm.

“Don’t worry,” Brendan shot back, his eyes mirroring the hostility in Sully’s own. “In matter of fact, I was thinking of young Brian. When I realized that—certain aspects—of my work disturbed him, I didn’t want to do anything that might upset him further.”

“Well thanks for that, at least,” said Sully grudgingly.

Brendan nodded slightly, then fixed him with a penetrating look. “Exactly what is it that you have against me, Sully?”

Sully stiffened, and he fumbled for a response, caught unprepared by Brendan’s boldness. “Told you,” he muttered finally, furious that Brendan had put him at a disadvantage.

“Yes, you ‘told me,’” Brendan repeated. “The trouble is, I don’t buy it. Oh, I believe that you revere the Cheyenne, and that the thought of their resting places being disturbed genuinely bothers you. But the grudge you’re nursing against me goes far deeper than that.”

Sully opened his mouth to protest.

“Don’t bother,” Brendan said quickly, and Sully froze. “You’ve resented me since the moment we met, Sully—long before you learned what I do for a living. The truth is, your reason for disliking me is much more personal—and her name is Michaela Quinn.”

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As the door closed behind Sully, Michaela replaced her pen in its holder and pushed aside the patient file in which she’d writing. With a heavy sigh, she propped her chin on her hand, her elbow resting on the desktop. A ray of sunlight slanting through the window at her back, caught the cut glass of the inkstand before her, silently exploding the ordinary crystal into shimmering bands of color—a tiny rainbow for the benefit of her eyes alone. She stared at the glorious jumble of hues painting the worn surface of the desk, seeing but not really registering their beauty.

Why had she suddenly been seized with panic when Sully questioned whether she agreed with her mother? Why had she consequently felt so nervous in his presence, that she’d been compelled to send him away? Was it simply the shock of her mother’s confession, leading her to believe that she’d never really known Elizabeth at all? Was it just that she needed to be alone, to examine and come to terms with this...
heretofore unknown side of her mother’s personality?

It seemed like a fair assessment. Elizabeth’s comments had been more than unexpected—they’d been stunning in the extreme; leading Michaela to feel that without warning, her entire world had been turned on its ear. Suddenly, she hardly knew what to think, how to act, what to believe.

But Sully understood all that. He had been willing, even anxious, to talk it through with her, help her make peace with her mother’s feelings. So why had she rejected him?

Michaela realized she was avoiding the issue; using the shield of her confusion to hide from thoughts that were deeply disturbing. There was no other help for it—she must confront the reality of her feelings, in her own mind, at least. If she didn’t, how could she hope to face Sully?

Had he been right? she thought dismally. Was her fear getting the best of her—both of their current peril, and the potential for danger in the future? Was Elizabeth right to accuse her of putting the children at risk by staying with Sully? God help her—did she agree with her mother after all?

Had circumstances reached a point where she had to consider that—as much as she loved him—the cost of marrying Sully might be too great? Had the time finally come for her to give him up forever?

Her heart twisting inside her, Michaela buried her face in her hands.

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“You’re crazy,” Sully said flatly.

“Am I?” Brendan retorted. “Protest if you like—but if you do, you’re lying to me and to yourself. You’ve been consumed with jealousy ever since I entered the picture.”

“Jealous? Of you?” Sully’s voice was mocking.

“Of me—or perhaps someone else.”

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

Brendan ignored his comment. “What bothers you so much, Sully? Is it my connection to William?”

Sully bristled. “He ain’t got nothin’ to do with this.”

“No? He and Dr. Mike had a relationship. He proposed to her.”

“And she turned him down.”

“So she did,” Brendan said mildly.

“She didn’t love him—she told me.”

“That’s true—she didn’t love him enough to marry him. William understood that, which was why he knew he had to let her go, even though it pained him.”

“So why even bring him up?” Sully challenged.

Brendan regarded him shrewdly. “Because what happened between William and Dr. Mike is the whole point of this, isn’t it? It’s obviously eating you up inside.”

“What are you sayin’?” Sully’s body was rigid with barely restrained anger, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

“Clearly, Dr. Mike deserves a suitor—a husband—who is successful and accomplished. Someone with polish and refinement equal to her own, who can offer her the type of life to which she’s always been accustomed.”

“Michaela don’t care about things like that,” Sully countered. “She proved it when she left her life in
Boston to come out here. She proved it when she rejected your brother.”

“According to William, Dr. Mike claimed that she came to Colorado because prejudice against women physicians barred her from establishing a practice in Boston. And she rejected William’s suit because she didn’t return his affection—not because of a lack of common background,” Brendan replied.

“Besides,” he added provocatively, “just because one Burke failed to win her heart, doesn’t mean the other must necessarily suffer the same fate.”

“She don’t feel nothin’ for you,” Sully said hotly, his rage at Brendan’s smug superiority escalating to the boiling point.

“Really?” Brendan goaded him, pressing his advantage, pushing him to the brink. “Are you absolutely sure?”

He just had time to register a blur of motion, coupled with a gust of air whistling past his cheek, before Sully’s fist connected solidly with his eye, sending him crashing to the floor.

Dazed, he lay at Sully’s feet, a thread of blood slowly tracking its way down his temple. Sully stood over him, breathing raggedly and massaging his bruised knuckles as the door to the examination room burst open, revealing a horrified Michaela transfixed on the threshold.

“Sully!” she gasped, appalled. “What in God’s name have you done?!”

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“He had it coming,” I spat.

Michaela gaped at me in astonishment. “Sully, I can’t believe there is anything Brendan could have done which would warrant such treatment!” Awkwardly, because of her ankle, she lowered herself to the floor, and bent over him, her brows knitting in concern as she gently examined his eye.

“You saying you doubt my word?” I demanded of her, feeling angry at him, at her, at the whole damn world.

“Of course not—you know better than that. But after what you said last night—how you apologized for your behavior—“

“And I meant it,” I interjected.

“I know!” she answered, regarding me with frustration. “And that’s precisely why I can’t fathom how you could be so penitent one moment, and then turn around the next and raise your fists to a guest—to a friend . . .”

I couldn’t stop myself. “YOUR friend.”

Her eyes darkened, and I could feel her withdraw from me. “Have it your way. But Brendan was still my guest.”

“You didn’t invite him,” I reminded her sharply. “Your ma dragged him out here. She engineered this. She brought him here, hoping he’d come between us, hoping to break us up—“ I stopped as I saw her face pale with shock, then indignation. “—And maybe she got her wish,” I finished slowly.

I could sense Michaela struggling to restrain herself—her obligation to treat Brendan the only thing stopping her from losing control completely and lashing out. And I knew I was driving her to it. Knew it, and didn’t care.
No . . . that wasn’t true. Of course I cared. I cared too much—that was the whole trouble. Without warning, it seemed as if everything had shifted . . . turned upside-down . . . and I was losing my grip—on Michaela, on the threat from Bloody Knife . . . on everything.

Suddenly, I felt like I was fighting for my life, desperately trying to hold on to the woman I loved—yet instead of helping my case, all I could seem to do was sabotage myself more.

I stole a glance at Brendan. He was coming around now, listening to us with avid interest. More than anything in the world, I didn’t want to be having this conversation with Michaela in front of him. But like everything else about my life since this whole nightmare began, I didn’t have any choice.

Choosing not to respond to me immediately (too mad at me to risk it, I figured), Michaela said tersely, “Help me get him up.”

I stared at her for long moment, and she looked back at me defiantly, her eyes drilling coldly into mine. Finally, I looked away.

Hunkering down, I got my arm under Brendan’s shoulder and prepared to lift him. Michaela moved to support his other side but my hand shot out to restrain her. “No—you’ll hurt yourself,” I said. For a moment she looked like she might defy me. “Please,” I added. “Just this once, do what I ask. I can manage.” After a pause she dropped her hands. I released my grasp on Brendan and stretched out my hand to her instead. Again she hesitated, but then she reluctantly took hold of my fingers and I raised her carefully to her feet. Then I bent down to him again, slung my arm under his and around his back, and pulled him up. He got dizzy when he stood, and I had to support most of his weight as we half walked, half staggered into the examination room and I hoisted him onto the table. Michaela followed us inside and immediately began to examine his injury more closely. He groaned softly as she probed the flesh already starting to bruise and swell around his eye and along his cheekbone.

She picked up an enameled basin and handed it to me. “Please fill this with cold water,” she said as she took a bottle of what I presumed to be chlorine water from the medicine cabinet. “After I clean and disinfect this cut, I’ll need to apply a cold compress to take down the swelling.”

Silently I did as she asked, then brought the bowl back to her. She took a folded square of cloth from a pile of fresh linen, dampened it with the antiseptic, and began to dab carefully at Brendan’s eye, not looking at me.

“Michaela—I want to explain. Can’t we please talk?” I flashed a quick glance at Brendan. “—In private?”

“Here—cover your eye with this,” Michaela instructed him, soaking a second square of linen in the cold water and pressing it against his eye and temple. She placed his hand over it to hold it in place. He still looked groggy, but I had the feeling he wasn’t nearly as bad off as he’d like us to believe. Belatedly Michaela turned to me, as if only just noticing I was there. “I’m sorry, Sully—I would like to oblige you, but thanks to your actions Brendan requires my attention now.” She turned away from me, then lit a candle, passing it slowly back and forth in front of his face as she peered into his eyes, studying their reaction to the light. “Any headache or blurred vision?” she asked.

“No.”

“What about nausea?” Again he replied in the negative.

“Are you still dizzy?” she continued.

He nodded dizzyly. “A little.”

“Michaela, I didn’t hurt him that bad. He just got his bell rung. He’ll be all right alone for a few minutes. Please—I need you to hear me out.”

“How would you know how badly he’s hurt?” she demanded sharply. “Are you a doctor now?”

“Of course not—“

“Well I don’t happen to share your opinion. I intend to stay with Brendan and observe him until I’m
certain he’s not suffering from a concussion or other injury. If you wish to talk to me, you’ll have to do it here.”

“Michaela, I’m asking you, please—don’t make me do this. Not in front of him—“

“And did you ask Brendan if he minded being hurt before you struck him?” she asked coldly.

“Oh, come on, Michaela!” I exploded, dangerously close to losing my temper again. “He’s a grown man—he can defend himself.”

“I have no doubt of that—when he has warning,” she retorted. “You, however, saw fit to give him none.”

“I got angry,” I said evenly, willing myself to keep my composure. “He provoked me, I told you. The things he was saying—“

“What things?” she challenged.

“Well—what I said about your ma—“

“He told you that?” she asked quickly.

I sighed and bit my lip. “Well no, not in so many words, but—“

“So all of it was just your jealous imagination working overtime,” she concluded coolly. “And you were willing to cast aspersions upon my mother to make your case.

“How could you do that, Sully?” she accused, her expression going from angry to injured. “After the way she humbled herself—she way she bared her soul to us . . . ”

I swallowed hard. “Look, I shouldn’t have spoken in anger like I did about your ma. I didn’t mean for it to come out so harsh. But she made it clear what her feelings are about me—about us. And Brendan—“ I shot him a hostile glance. “Well, he made it real clear to me that he has feelings of his own—about you.” I softened my tone, trying to speak reasonably. “Is it so hard to believe that your ma might have brought him out here, hoping you’d prefer him to me, hoping you’d make a different choice?”

“Brendan told us himself that he came out here at the invitation of William Henry Jackson,” Michaela reminded me stubbornly. “My mother certainly had nothing to do with that. She simply wanted the security of a traveling companion, and Brendan was kind enough to do her that favor.”

I sighed again. “I don’t know what your ma had in mind. Maybe she’s innocent, like you say. Or maybe she saw a chance to drive us apart, and she took it. But whatever your ma’s intentions, Michaela, I’m telling you that as far as Brendan’s concerned, he’s got his own plans for you—and they don’t stop at friendship.” I stared at her pleadingly, willing her to understand, to believe. Why couldn’t she see it? Why couldn’t I convince her?

She waited several moments before she spoke. Finally she said quietly, “Sully, have you any idea of how much you’ve humiliated me? I can barely face Brendan, thanks to you.”

“Please, Dr. Mike—there’s no need for you to suffer distress on my account,” he spoke up at last. Butter wouldn’t have melted in his mouth. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Ask him,” I told her. “Ask him what he said—about you and William—about you and him. See if he’s got the guts to tell you the truth.”

Michaela stared at me, her expression still resistant, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. After an uncomfortable pause, she turned to him. “Is—any of this true?” she asked slowly, hardly able to get the words out. “Did you express some type of opinion about William and myself, or indicate that you had—feelings—for me?”

“We talked of William, yes,” Brendan responded. “Sully pointed out that you refused William’s proposal of marriage because you didn’t love him. And I agreed,” he added innocently.
“Well?” she said to me.

“He’s twisting it around,” I protested.

“Is that what you said to each other?” she pressed.

“Yeah,” I admitted reluctantly. “But what about the rest of it? He said other things—“

“Such as?”

“Ask him,” I repeated stubbornly.

“I’m asking you.”

I opened my mouth to repeat what he’d said—about succeeding where his brother had failed. About how I wasn’t good enough for her.

I wanted to make her understand how he’d goaded me, hinting that she had feelings for him too, knowing that it would drive me crazy. I wanted to say all that, but suddenly I knew it was useless. If she wasn’t willing to take my word, if she couldn’t accept me on faith—then nothing I could say would make any difference. She either trusted me—or she didn’t. There was no going half-way.

“I ain’t going to argue with you anymore,” I announced. “There’s no point. I’ve never lied to you, Michaela. You know that. If you ain’t willing to believe me now . . .”

“I believe you’re telling the truth as you see it,” she conceded after a moment. “But you’re jealous, Sully—which makes you biased.”

“I concluded the same thing,” Brendan offered. “I tried to get Sully to explain why he disliked me so much, but he just became more and more belligerent.”

“I concluded the same thing,” Brendan offered. “I tried to get Sully to explain why he disliked me so much, but he just became more and more belligerent.”

“Shut up!” I snapped.

“Sully!” Michaela gasped.

“He’s coloring the truth, Michaela, twisting it around to suit his own needs—to cast me in a bad light! But you just can’t see it, can you? Or you won’t. I guess it don’t matter which—it all comes down to the same thing. He’s put it into your head to believe the worst of me, and there’s nothing I can do.”

“What I believe, Sully—is that you’d better leave now,” she said slowly. “I need time to think—and apparently, so do you.”

I stared at her. “You know I can’t do that, Michaela.”

She drew herself up. “We’re here in town, in broad daylight, surrounded by dozens of people,” she said. “How could anything possibly happen?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “I told you how serious the situation was,” I said rapidly. “You know what’s at stake. I said I’d protect you, and that ain’t going to change—no matter what else happens.”

Brendan looked at me sharply, and then at Michaela. “What’s Sully talking about?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“Just a moment,” she told him. She faced me. “I have to tell Brendan.”

“It ain’t his business—“

“It’s his business if he could be caught in the middle,” she contradicted. “As long as he’s involved with us, he has a right to know.”

“He’s involved with you,” I said bitterly.
I’d had enough. She wasn’t going to see reason—not with him sitting there listening to everything we said and trying to twist my words to his own selfish purpose.

“Do what you want,” I lashed out, hurling the words at her. I strode across the room and yanked the door open, leaving it standing wide as I crossed the porch and went out in the street. Maybe I couldn’t stop her from telling him everything about me, but I didn’t have to stick around while she cut me open, leaving me exposed and defenseless in front of a stranger. Worse, a rival.

But when I got out front of the clinic, I found my feet inexorably carrying me around the corner of the building, till I reached the half-open window facing the alley between the clinic and the telegraph. And for the second time that morning, I became an eavesdropper.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Michaela watched him go with mingled relief and regret. Why did he have to be so jealous? And why did his episodes of jealousy never fail to bring out the absolute worst in her?

Of course she believed him. She knew he’d never lie to her. But she also knew that Sully was completely incapable of being objective about Brendan. That had to color his opinions—his perceptions—didn’t it?

And Sully himself had admitted that Brendan’s claims about what each of them had said had been accurate. But Sully had also tried to tell her that there had been more to it—much more. He’d wanted to explain—but she wouldn’t let him.

She had been terribly hard on Sully—she knew that. She had humiliated him in front of Brendan. And yet, the instant he’d walked out, she had been desperately sorry for her cruelty. It was hard to face such an ugly truth about herself, but Michaela had to admit that in the heat of the moment she had wanted to hurt Sully—to embarrass him, exactly as he’d embarrassed her.

But Sully hadn’t been blameless in this, a self-righteous voice spoke up in her mind. He had used violence against Brendan, and she couldn’t just overlook that, could she? Wouldn’t that be just as wrong as assigning all the blame to Sully for his and Brendan’s conflict?

But you don’t purposely hurt the ones you love, spoke another voice inside her, sounding suspiciously like Cloud Dancing’s. Michaela couldn’t recall if the medicine man had ever actually spoken these words to her, but they sounded very much like the thoughts he would express.

She thought about how just a short time before, Sully had humbled himself before her mother, speaking with his characteristic honesty, conducting himself with honor. She thought of Sully’s generosity in trying to help her make peace with Elizabeth, despite her mother’s disapproval of their relationship. She pictured his face and heard his voice as he pledged his heart to her, and remembered the rush of love she’d felt as she listened.

Michaela thought of all this, and wondered how she could be so riddled with self-doubt. The questions—or were they actually revelations—piled up, one upon another. Despite all her best intentions to sever herself from Elizabeth’s influence, was she still allowing her mother the power to control her life? Was it possible that Elizabeth’s “touching” confession had actually been part of an elaborate scheme to manipulate Michaela into doing what she wanted?

Was Brendan here with Elizabeth for a far less innocent reason that they claimed? Leading to the corollary that, contrary to being unreasonably jealous, Sully had in fact seen the truth—a truth to which she’d blinded herself? Had Elizabeth, as Sully suggested, seen her chance to drive them apart—and taken it?

Michaela shook her head. She didn’t know—not for sure. But was her mother capable of doing such a thing? Oh, yes.

She wondered if this was what Cloud Dancing meant when he talked of calling on the spirits and listening to their wisdom. Was she experiencing an epiphany now—a gift of wisdom sent by the spirits to
help her see clearly and guide her toward the correct path?

She wanted to think about it further—to examine her feelings and carefully consider the meaning of all this—but she didn’t have the luxury of such contemplation now. She had more immediate obligations—first, to give Brendan the information he needed to protect himself.

And then—to ferret out the truth, and learn if she had done Sully a terrible injustice.

She took a deep breath, assuming what she hoped was a calm, neutral expression, and turned to face the young man sitting on the table. “How are you feeling?” she asked kindly.

He attempted a smile that was partially a grimace as his face throbbed. “Pretty foolish for letting Sully get the drop on me,” he admitted ruefully.

“I’m truly sorry that he hurt you,” Michaela said apologetically. “And I’m also sorry for the—assumptions—he made about you.”

“Dr. Mike, as I said before, you have no reason to apologize,” Brendan replied earnestly. “You’re innocent in all this. It’s Sully who obviously has the problem.

“And not only this one, I fear,” he added. He studied Michaela keenly. “Dr. Mike, what did Sully mean before about protecting you? Has he put you in some kind of danger?”

“There is some possible danger, yes,” Michaela admitted carefully. “But not of Sully’s making—at least not deliberately.

“It’s a long and complicated story,” she went on. “One that is intensely personal in many ways—for Sully, and for myself... It’s difficult to talk about—however I can’t let you remain in ignorance of the situation when you might also be threatened because of your association with us.”

“I assure you I don’t fear for myself, and I don’t want you to waste time worrying about me. But I am concerned for you, Dr. Mike—Michaela,” Brendan said nobly, cleverly slipping in her given name at the end. Michaela heard and registered the familiarity, but pretended not to take notice.

“You’re very kind, but I can assure you that I’m well-protected and cared for,” she told him. “Sully has seen to that.

“However now I need to explain the situation. But before I do, I want to make it clear that by far, Sully has suffered the most from this ordeal,” Michaela stated, regarding Brendan levelly. “I hope you will be able to find it within yourself to feel some sympathy and understanding for him.

“Sully’s trouble started a few weeks after Washita—but I believe its true origins go back much further...” she began quietly.

* * * * * * * * *

Out in the alley, Sully leaned casually against the wall of the clinic, arms folded. To passing observers, he appeared to innocently be taking the air of a pleasant spring morning. But in reality his ears were attuned to the sound of Michaela’s voice softly issuing through the open window as she spoke to Brendan in quiet, measured tones.

Sully wasn’t quite sure why he felt compelled to listen to Michaela tell Brendan the history of the past several weeks. It could only bring him further humiliation, to hear her reveal his mistakes and his weaknesses to the man competing with him for her affection. He thought about all that had happened, all he had done, and how much of it could be grist for Brendan to use against him. Michaela was already halfway convinced that he was a barbarian—dangerous and unpredictable—thanks to her mother’s opinion and his own temper. It wouldn’t take much effort on Brendan’s part to finish nudging her over the edge into his and Elizabeth’s camp.

Bitterly considering this dismal state of affairs, Sully resigned himself to hearing the worst—to having the shreds of what was left of his pride and dignity stripped away. Thus he was at first stunned, then deeply moved, as he listened to Michaela relate a tale far different from what he’d anticipated.
It was his story, of course: his grief over Washita and fear of losing Michaela, his illness, getting shot, the amnesia and now this current threat . . . It was all there, she left nothing out. But it was the way she told it . . . without judging him, and with no hint of blame, her voice filled with gentleness and compassion, and—dare he believe it?—love.

It was the last thing he’d been expecting. He’d left her so hurt and angry, certain that he’d all but driven her into Brendan’s arms. Not to mention causing her to lose whatever respect she’d ever had for him. And yet, to listen to her now, it was as if all of that—his attack on Brendan, their resultant quarrel—had never happened.

Somehow, miraculous as it was, she still loved him. He was at a loss to understand why, after the jealous and spiteful way he’d acted. He didn’t deserve her love, her loyalty—and most certainly not her forgiveness. The truth of the matter, in fact, was that he’d come dangerously close to throwing all of it away.

But the love was there. It was in her voice, her demeanor . . . Michaela couldn’t know he was listening, but it was as if the words she spoke to Brendan were actually for his ears instead—that somehow, on some level, she was reaching out, letting him know that her heart still belonged to him.

Sully continued to listen, tears gathering in his eyes, as he silently gave thanks for this extraordinary woman who had graced his life.

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“That’s an astonishing story,” Brendan commented. “I had no idea that Sully endured a life-threatening experience so recently. And the memory loss in addition—”

“It was very hard,” Michaela agreed quietly.

“He’s obviously had a hard life,” Brendan remarked. “Losing his family in childhood, then his wife and child, and still later the Indians . . . I’m truly sorry that he’s suffered so much. I hope you believe me, Michaela.” He hesitated. “Forgive me—I should have asked before. May I call you ‘Michaela?’”

“I think we know each other well enough,” Michaela answered with a small smile. “And as to whether I believe you—you certainly seem sincere. But it really doesn’t matter if I believe you, does it? The person you need to convince is Sully.”

“Clearly, we got off on the wrong foot—and I regret my part in that,” Brendan confessed. “But he did seem to resent me from the outset, and just now he assailed me without provocation.”

“‘Was’ it unprovoked, Brendan?” she asked, her eyes penetrating. “I hope you’ll tell me the truth, even if it reflects poorly on you. I can respect that—but I cannot condone a lie.”

The expression in his eyes altered. It was just a subtle shift, hardly detectable at all, but Michaela saw it. Saw it, and knew that Sully had told the truth.

Immediately she wanted to confront Brendan, but managed to restrain herself. She genuinely wanted to give him a chance to be honest. He was a good and decent man at heart—she felt that. She couldn’t hold him entirely to blame if he had allowed himself to be unduly influenced by her mother. And she couldn’t fault him if he felt affection for her. But if her assumptions about his motives were correct, then he was destined to be disappointed, on both counts. She was not going to fall prey to her mother’s machinations. Much more important, her confusion and uncertainty about Sully was gone—for good. She loved him, and she was going to spend the rest of her life with him—if he’d still have her.

“What truly happened, Brendan?” she asked again, softly.

He looked down at his lap, and she caught a slight flush of—shame?—rising in his face. A few moments later he raised his eyes to hers, his expression contrite and resigned.

“I suppose that I *was* guilty of—baiting Sully, somewhat,” he admitted. “But I did have cause, Michaela. Sully made no secret of his antagonism toward me, and I confess that I resented his aspersions on my brother.”
“Sully dislikes being reminded of my relationship with William, that’s true,” Michaela confirmed. “Though I feel it’s understandable, given the circumstances. If you were in his place, would you enjoy being reminded of an old rival for your loved one’s affections?” He shrugged slightly, conceding the point.

“However in Sully’s case, those feelings of jealousy were complicated and compounded by his bout with amnesia,” she continued. “Losing his memories of our relationship—and specifically being unable to remember what transpired between William and myself—only exacerbated the uncertainty and inadequacy he was feeling. I’m afraid that you managed to target Sully’s ‘Achilles’ heel,’ Brendan—the one aspect of our relationship he was incapable of viewing objectively.”

“It was petty of me to sink to such a level—I acknowledge that,” Brendan replied. “But I didn’t know what Sully had been through. Had I known, I wouldn’t have given in to my baser instincts, or resorted to provoking him in that manner.”

“That’s quite decent of you, considering that Sully was no doubt as hostile as you were—perhaps more,” Michaela remarked. “However, Brendan, I find myself compelled to ask if your resentment of Sully’s attitude was your only reason for taunting him.

“This subject is—difficult—for me to broach,” she added. “But for the sake of the truth, I have to put the question. *Was* Sully correct—did you suggest to him that there could be something between us?” She flushed in her turn, but regarded him unwaveringly.

He was slow to respond, but presently he said, “Perhaps I did infer that—I might be more successful in winning your affections than William had been. I know I had no right to give Sully that impression, or make assumptions about your feelings, since no—declarations of any kind had passed between us. But I—“ he hesitated, as if wondering whether he dared to go on, but finally continued, “I genuinely believed that I’d detected a spark—an attraction—between you and me. And I thought—or at least I sensed—that you felt it as well. Was I wrong about that, Michaela?” Now he was the one regarding her intently.

“I won’t deny that you are an—attractive and exciting man,” Michaela admitted slowly. “I appreciate your wit, and I’ve enjoyed our conversations. But as far as any feelings beyond that . . . I’m sorry, Brendan, but we could never be anything more than friends.” He looked away, his eyes shadowed with sharp and sudden disappointment. “If I unintentionally gave you cause to believe otherwise, I’m deeply sorry,” she added.

“I want you to know that I’m honored by your admiration,” she ventured further, wanting to be gentle. “Perhaps, if we’d met at another time—before I knew Sully . . . But something—call it fate, or the spirits, perhaps even God—brought Sully and me together—and since that time, I’ve never looked back. I admit there have been diversions along the way—William, for one, and my former fiancé, David, who came back after many years and caused some dissension in our relationship. And of course this latest crisis with Sully’s memory, which meant that in essence, Sully and I had to start all over again.

“But even though he couldn’t remember what we’d had before, and despite all the obstacles, Sully fell in love with me a second time,” Michaela went on, a note of wonder in her voice. “That he could develop those feelings for me not once, but twice in his life—confirmed what we’d always known about each other: that we’re ‘soul mates.’ He calls me his ‘heart-song,’ Brendan—and he is mine,” she said fervently. “We’re meant to be together—and if for even a moment I questioned that destiny, then I am the one at fault—not Sully.”

“I confess that I wish I could be the man to put that look in your eyes,” Brendan remarked, his expression regretful, but resolved.

“Thank you for that,” Michaela said kindly. “However, I have no doubt that someday, you *will* put that sparkle in a woman’s eyes—a woman who can love you the way you deserved to be loved.”

He gave her a bittersweet smile. “I hope so,” he said. Michaela looked as if she were about to speak again, but then hesitated. “What is it?” he added.

“I don’t want you to think me callous or insensitive,” she began reluctantly, “but I need an answer to one more question.”

“Ask, by all means,” he replied. “At this point, I don’t think we have any secrets between us.” He smiled again, a bit more animatedly this time.
“I suppose not,” she agreed, returning his smile. “Nonetheless, I thank you for understanding my need to learn the whole truth.”

“What did you want to know?” he inquired. She took a breath.

“Precisely how much, if anything, did my mother have to do with all this? Please tell me honestly,” she added.

He looked uncomfortable, but recognized that there was no going back now—she would accept nothing but the complete, unvarnished truth.

“Well, she praised you very highly, as I told you when we met,” he began slowly.

“Yes—and . . .?” Michaela urged, knowing there was more.

“And . . . she indicated that you deserved a man who could offer you the life to which you’d always been accustomed,” he went on.

“I see. And did she have any—‘candidates’—for this position?” Michaela inquired wryly. He looked even more embarrassed.

“Well, she may have suggested that we would be—compatible,” he admitted.

“As I suspected,” Michaela sighed, more resigned than angry.

“I must say, Michaela, that I don’t feel comfortable about betraying Mrs. Quinn’s confidence,” Brendan confided.

“It’s all right,” she told him. “My mother and I have already had this discussion. I am well aware of her opinions regarding my—romantic life—as well as her bias against Sully and the danger she believes he represents.”

“No parent wants to think of his or her child in jeopardy,” Brendan pointed out.

“No, of course not,” she agreed. “But I’ve more than reached the age where I must make my own decisions, and lead my own life. I need my mother to respect my autonomy and independence.”

“You’re certainly justified in that desire,” Brendan concurred. “But I need to be honest and tell you, Michaela, that I also sympathize with your mother’s feelings in this matter. Sully may have been an innocent victim of this renegade Indian—but the fact is that as long as he remains in danger, he puts you and your children in danger as well.”

Michaela gazed at him for a moment, then grasped her father’s cane and moved slowly toward the window facing the telegraph office. A stretch of seconds passed as she stood staring out at the placid scene. Finally she turned back to Brendan.

“I suppose it *should* be that cut and dried,” she said quietly. “But it’s not. It’s not nearly so simple.

“What you’ve learned of Sully and myself from my mother—or even what you’ve observed first-hand—is only a tiny fraction of what Sully and I are all about,” she said. “When you and my mother look at Sully, you see danger. But when I look at him, I see the man who would lay down his life for me or the children, without hesitation. I see the man who literally did save my physical life more than once—and who has saved me emotionally in ways too numerous to count.”

Brendan listened to her respectfully, noting the passion in her eyes as she spoke the name of the man she loved, and envying Sully more than he could ever have imaginable possible. He was fleetingly grateful that Michaela couldn’t read his thoughts—that she was unconscious of the feelings she still inspired in him.

“When an influenza epidemic struck Colorado Springs—an event beyond anyone’s control—I used up all my quinine treating the townspeople, so that when I fell ill with the disease, there was nothing left to give me,” she explained. “I would have died, if Sully hadn’t taken me to his blood brother Cloud Dancing, the Cheyenne medicine man, who gave me the fever tea that saved my life.
“A year or so later, I was abducted by dog soldiers,” she went on. “When I was taken, Sully came after me. For days he searched tirelessly, forgoing food and sleep, refusing to give up. He wouldn’t rest until he’d managed to rescue me and bring me home safely.

“And that was a danger I brought upon myself, when I betrayed the dog soldiers to General Custer,” she stated, her eyes somber. “Sully warned me not to say anything—implored me, in fact—knowing the deadly repercussions that could result. But I didn’t listen. I’d witnessed the dog soldiers murder two army soldiers, and I couldn’t remain silent. As a consequence, not only did my recklessness imperil my own life, but Cloud Dancing’s son was murdered by the leader of the dog soldiers, and Cloud Dancing and his village were taken captive and nearly executed by Custer—all because of the events I set into motion.”

“But you couldn’t have known those things would happen,” Brendan interjected earnestly. “You were simply following your conscience. You did the right thing, Michaela. No one can blame you for that. Nor should you blame yourself.”

“Perhaps it was the right thing—but in this case, telling the truth did far more harm than good,” Michaela maintained. “Many innocent people paid for my mistake—Cloud Dancing and his wife Snowbird most of all.

“And yet, never once did Cloud Dancing—or Sully—reproach me,” she said softly. “I put their lives at risk and brought them pain, but they still forgave me.”

“Because they knew that you were in just as much pain,” he said.

“But don’t you see?” Michaela said passionately. “If they could understand and forgive the danger I brought down upon them, the sorrow I caused them, how can I possibly condemn them—condemn Sully—for the danger we’re in now?” She paused, blinking back the tears that threatened to flow.

“I love Sully, Brendan,” she resumed poignantly. “I need him. If I were to lose him, I . . . I wouldn’t want to live.”

“Michaela—” he murmured worriedly.

“Oh, I don’t mean I’d do something desperate,” she amended hastily. “I’d continue to breathe—and walk and talk and do my job. Somehow, I’d find a way to function, for the children’s sake. But I’d be empty, dead inside. Sully is a part of me, Brendan. The best part. When I fell in love with him, I gave my heart and soul into his keeping.

“Can you understand that set against all that, the prospect of ‘danger’ loses all meaning? I can’t give up Sully—it would be like giving up a piece of myself.”

Her voice died away, and Brendan sat in thoughtful silence. Finally he said, “I truly envy you, Michaela. I envy you both. I suppose . . . there’s nothing else to be said.”

“Actually, there *is* one more thing,” she told him. “My mother knows about Sully’s recent crisis, and how he was attacked by Bloody Knife. But I haven’t told her that this Indian could still be a threat, and I would be grateful if you would keep my confidence. If I can persuade her to return to Boston as soon as possible, there’s no reason she should ever have to know. There’s no point in her remaining here any longer, and Sully has more than enough stress, without having to worry about her safety as well as ours.

“And I think—that when my mother leaves, you should go with her,” Michaela added slowly. “First and foremost, it would ease my mind to know that both of you are safely away and out of danger. But also, given the enmity between you and Sully, perhaps it would be—easier—for everyone,” she said gently.

“If you insist, I’ll respect your wishes,” Brendan answered after a pause. “And I suppose it would be for the best. But I can’t say that it will be easy to leave, or that I won’t worry about you.”

“I truly will be all right,” she promised him. “Sully and I will both be all right, as long as we’re together.”

He appraised her admiringly. “I believe you will be,” he said.
“May I ask one more favor of you?” Michaela said.

“Anything.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to be alone for a while—that is, if you’re feeling better,” she added.

“I am,” he confirmed. “Shiner notwithstanding.” He grinned at her crookedly, eliciting another smile from her.

“Well it’s definitely colorful, but fortunately not serious,” she assured him. “It will probably be tender for a day or two, but there’s no sign of concussion.”

“That’s a relief,” he replied. “But getting back to the issue at hand—are you sure you’ll be all right if I leave? Sully didn’t want you to be alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeated. “Knowing Sully, he hasn’t gone far, even if he’s angry. It’s just that right now, I need to be by myself, to sort things out.”

Brendan nodded. “I understand.” He got up from the examination table, and took a few steps to the door, still standing open from Sully’s exit. He paused on the threshold, then impulsively returned to her and bent to kiss her cheek. “Sully is a lucky man,” he said. A moment later, he was gone.

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong, Brendan,” Michaela spoke aloud into the silence of the empty room. “I’m the lucky one.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “That is—if I haven’t driven Sully away forever . . .”

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Friday, 30 March, 1870

I hung back as Brendan passed the alley on route to the telegraph office, apparently on his way to send his wire at last. Intent on his errand, or more likely preoccupied with what had just happened in the clinic, he didn’t notice me. As soon as he entered the other building, I emerged from the alley, circled around to the front of the clinic, and approached the open door.

Michaela was standing in the middle of the room, eyes cast downward, her hands folded over the head of her cane. It almost appeared as if she were in prayer. Perhaps she was. Certainly I had been doing some praying of my own during the last quarter hour, asking forgiveness for how I’d hurt her, and giving thanks to the spirits that she hadn’t abandoned me—that she still loved me. For several long moments I just watched her, admiring her delicate, fragile beauty—a beauty that was deceptive, because it gave no hint of the great strength and courage she carried within. Finally, however, I took a tentative step inside. A floorboard squeaked beneath my feet, announcing my presence, and she raised her head suddenly.

Our eyes met. I stared at her with longing, but couldn’t seem to find my voice. As I watched, her lips parted and formed the shape of my name, but she made no sound—apparently as much at a loss for words as I was. The air between us was charged with a potent energy, making the hairs at the back of my neck stand on end. Thousands of tiny needles seemed to dance across my skin, and I had trouble getting my breath. The silence spun out as we gazed at one another.

Gathering my courage at last, I took a step toward her, then another—and then she was moving toward me, too. We came together, and her cane clattered to the floor, forgotten, as we pressed close, holding on to one another with an almost desperate intensity.

For a long time there was no need for words, as our hearts seemed to do all the talking that was necessary. But finally, I pulled back from her a little, finding her hand and clasping it tightly within my own.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered brokenly.

“No—I am,” she answered tremulously, her lashes glittering with tears. “I’m so sorry for how I treated you before, for being so cruel, Sully.”
“Shh,” I murmured, tenderly pressing a kiss to her palm. As I lowered my head slightly to look into her face I added, “I had it coming—and worse besides.” But she wouldn’t be placated.

“I did you such a terrible injustice,” she reproached herself. “You were right—about Brendan, about my mother—about all of it. But I didn’t want to accept the truth, and I must have caused you such pain because of my stubbornness.”

“You were just reacting to what I started,” I said. “I was the one out of control. I should never have let Brendan get to me like that. He deliberately tried to get a rise out of me, and I handed him what he wanted on a silver platter. I was a reckless fool.”

“Please don’t speak about yourself that way,” she implored gently. “You were feeling hurt, and threatened. And no wonder—I’d certainly given you cause, sending you away as I did.”

“Because you were feeling upset and confused, over everything your ma said,” I pointed out in my turn. “You needed time to work things through, and I should have given you that time. Instead I let Brendan scare me into thinking I was losing you—that you wanted him instead of me. I never should have doubted you, Michaela.”

“And I never should have allowed Mother to shake my resolve—to cast doubts in my mind about whether we belonged together,” she said fervently. “I know how much my confusion and ambivalence must have hurt you.”

“Seems like we were both confused, letting other people control us, or try to tell us what we should feel—instead of listening to our own hearts,” I said. “But none of that matters now,” I added softly. “Not as long as you love me . . . as long as you still want me. Do you, Michaela?” I entreated anxiously, my heart pounding.

“Of course I do,” she whispered passionately. “I’ve never stopped, Sully—I never will! I was just so frightened that I’d pushed you too far—that you’d given up on me. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Sully? Can you still love me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I answered, my voice trembling a little. “And as for loving you—I’ll stop loving you when I stop drawing breath.” I drew her to me again, caressing the shining hair that tumbled down her back. My arms encircled her as I covered her mouth with mine. Then all was quiet, as we let the language of our hearts fill the silence.

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“I feel so decadent, being here with you like this,” Michaela remarked to me later as she sat in my lap with my arms clasped firmly around her. “What would my patients think if they were to walk in on us?”

“Well, I hope they’d knock first!” I commented. “Good thing I had the presence of mind to close the door and give us some privacy,” I added.

“Yes, a very good thing,” she agreed, staring at me seductively. I felt my heart turn over at the expression in her green and amber eyes. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my galloping pulse.

“Anyway, as to what people would think—they’d envy me being with the prettiest lady in town,” I replied to her question. “But I don’t care if anybody walks in. Let ‘em get their own girl!” I grinned.

“Sully!” she said, swatting me playfully.

“Hey, the doctor has a right to do some ‘snuggling’ with her fella,” I declared.

“That’s true, but it hardly looks very professional for the doctor to be stealing kisses from her fella in the middle of the day,” she noted, amused.

“The doctor don’t have to ‘steal’ any kisses—I’m giving them out, free of charge. Only to a *very* select clientele, though,” I added, unable to resist planting yet another kiss on those luscious lips.

“I daresay you could teach the men in this town a thing or two,” she remarked a trifle breathlessly as I released her a few moments later.
“So you think I’m good at kissing, huh?” I teased.

“You’ll do,” she said primly.

“Careful—you’ll turn my head,” I cautioned, smiling.

“Oh, we wouldn’t want to do that!” she exclaimed in mock concern. I chuckled and moved in to kiss her again. She responded with ardor, the curtain of her hair falling forward to cloak us.

My lips strayed downward to nuzzle the sweet hollow in her throat. Then up again as my tongue found and teased the sensitive, tender flesh behind her ear. I felt her body erupt in delicious shivers beneath my hands.

“Sully?” I heard her say, her voice not quite steady.

“Hm?” I murmured, intoxicated and distracted by the scent of her skin assaulting my senses.

“You haven’t asked me about my conversation with Brendan. Aren’t you curious about what happened?”

I stopped short—then reluctantly drew away from her, nervously raking the hair back from my forehead as I thought of how I’d played eavesdropper while she and Brendan were talking. I hated to risk spoiling this special moment by admitting what I’d done, but I had to be honest.

“About that, Michaela . . .” I cleared my throat. “I, uh—kind of have a confession to make.”

“Well, this seems to be the day for it,” she noted wryly, making a half-hearted attempt to smooth the long, copper locks which I’d tousled in my enthusiasm.

“Yeah, guess so,” I said uncomfortably. “You can get up if you’d like,” I offered. “You may not want to stay in my lap after I tell you.”

“I’ll risk it,” she said mildly. “What do you have to confess?”

I swallowed and wet my lips, which had suddenly turned very dry. “Well, when you were talking to Brendan, I—I was outside, listening. I heard everything you said.” I watched her apprehensively, waiting for her to explode.

She regarded me serenely. “I know.”

“You know?” I repeated, gawking at her. “But how . . .?”

She looked at me archly. “Well, I might be blessed with clairvoyance—“

“I wouldn’t put it past you,” I broke in wryly.

“Thank you—I think,” she chuckled. “But as I was saying—“ She lowered her voice theatrically. “It *could* be that I’m clairvoyant—or perhaps it could be that while I was talking to Brendan, I looked out the window and saw your shadow on the wall of the telegraph office.”

I gave her a sheepish grin. “So much for me covering my tracks.”

“I believe you were distracted by other things,” she said kindly.

“So—you ain’t mad?” I asked hesitantly, still amazed by her reaction.

She reached out her hand to stroke my cheek. Her expression was tender. “No, I’m not mad,” she said. “In fact, I’m relieved.”

“Why?” I asked wonderingly.

“Because you were able to hear for yourself how I feel—and now that you have, I hope that you’ll never
again doubt my love or commitment to you.”

I captured her hand and brought it to my lips.

“You know, I had the strangest feeling while I was listening—that even though you were talking to him, you were really speaking straight to me,” I replied softly.

“You were right,” she said gently.

“Did you know I was there the whole time?” I asked.

“No—but it didn’t matter. Because I was speaking from my heart to yours. It was simply a fortunate coincidence that you were able to hear the words I said aloud.”

“Maybe not a coincidence,” I ventured quietly. “Maybe it was meant to be.”

“Perhaps it was,” she agreed. She paused, then went on, “But how did you feel about what you heard, Sully? Did I prove myself to you at last?”

Overcome with gratitude for her loving and generous spirit, for a moment I was incapable of speech. But finally, tremulously, I looked into her eyes.

“You never had nothing to prove,” I managed. “I was the one who was mixed up and confused, not seeing clear. How could I have ever doubted you, when all the time, the proof of your love was right in front of my eyes? I could see it, I could feel it . . . but I let my mind and my heart be blocked by anger and jealousy. I’m so sorry for what I put you through, Michaela. Not just bringing me back from dying, or even the amnesia—but for everything that happened after—all the pain I inflicted on you.”

“Oh, Sully,” she said softly, the rich contralto of her voice filling my ears like music.

“I’m the one who needs to prove myself to you,” I went on. “To make you a promise that I’ll never close myself off to you again—that I’ll never question the depth of your love, or doubt that everything you’ve done has been for my sake.”

“And will you make me one more promise?” she asked.

“Tell me,” I entreated, feeling that nothing could be too hard—if it would make up for how I’d hurt her.

She freed her hand from mine and reached up to brush the hair back from my temple, then let her fingers trail down my jaw to gently cup my chin. “Stop punishing yourself,” she said quietly, looking intently into my eyes. “Stop blaming yourself for something over which you had no control.” Her hand drifted downward, and came to rest over my heart. “I knew how you felt—in here,” she continued, her voice hushed and tender. “I think a part of me always knew. Even when you couldn’t consciously remember me, I could feel that your love was still there. Just hidden . . . or sleeping—waiting for me to find a way to awaken it.

“Sully, the fact that any of this happened at all is because you love me—because you were so desperately afraid of losing me!” she said, her tone impassioned. “But too many times I let myself forget that, because of my own confusion, my own doubts.

“I’m far from perfect,” she asserted. “I let my own heart be blinded by petty anger and misunderstandings. When I think back to some of the things I said, or how I behaved, I’m so ashamed.

“You went through an unspeakable, terrifying ordeal, Sully. I said that to others, but I wonder if I ever really understood it myself. Sometimes I tried to imagine what it must be like for you—what you must be feeling—but I couldn’t. My mind refused to consider it. It was too frightening a prospect—and I was too much of a coward to ask myself what I would do if I were in your place.

“But you LIVED it, Sully. And suffered, terribly. And somehow had the courage to try to rebuild your life, even in the face of the possibility that a part of it was gone forever.”

I was crying and didn’t care, the tears brimming in my eyes and slipping silently down my cheeks. “But I wasn’t suffering alone,” I said, my voice breaking. “I had you with me, every step of the way, loving
me through all the bad times, easing me through my fear, holding tight to my hand and leading me toward
the future.

“If I’m brave, Michaela, it’s because of you,” I told her, scrubbing the tears from my face and giving her
a watery smile. “Like I told you once, a woman’s love gives a man courage. And there’s no better proof of
that than everything you’ve done for me—everything you’ve sacrificed for me since all this began.

“What you said—about my being the best part of you . . . I don’t have the words to tell you what that
meant to me,” I said reverently. “You’re the best part of me, Michaela—the reason I keep living, the
reason I exist. You’re the one who got me through this. You’re the one who made me whole.”

Our arms slipped around each other and we embraced, with no more need for explanations, or
apologies, or spoken declarations of love. As my arms enfolded her, my chin resting on top of her head, I
felt our souls forever uniting into one.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Later still, after they had both composed themselves somewhat, Michaela dared to broach the one
subject they hadn’t yet discussed—or put to rest.

“Sully—how do you feel about Brendan now?” she asked carefully.

“Does it matter?” he responded calmly. “You sent him away—he ain’t a part of this no more. Never
was, I guess—I just didn’t understand.”

“No, I never had romantic feelings for him. Just as you said that you never had those kinds of feelings
for Katharine. But I don’t want there to be even a trace of doubt or uncertainty lingering in your mind.”

“There ain’t,” he said promptly. “Not where you’re concerned, Michaela. I know I said that more
than once these past weeks, and then went back on it, letting myself get jealous all over again. But I swear
to you: this is it. I will never—“ He kissed her cheek. “—ever—“ He kissed the other cheek. “—doubt
you again!” he finished dramatically, kissing her lips. “EVER!” he added for emphasis, and kissed her a
fourth time, amid Michaela’s laughter. Sully’s eyes twinkled. “You believe me?” he asked.

“I might need a little more convincing,” Michaela answered slyly.

He gave a gusty sigh, then shrugged elaborately. “Well, if I *got* to . . . Come here.” He pulled her
close, pressing his lips to hers. An exhilarating few minutes ensued as they found pleasure with one
another, but eventually they parted.

“NOW are you convinced?” he said, smiling.

“What was the question?” Michaela teased.

He chuckled. “I think I got my answer.” He drew her head back to rest on his shoulder as he
rhythmically stroked the gleaming strands of her hair. After a pause he spoke again, but now his tone was
soft and subdued. “I really mean it, Michaela. I’ll never question your love, or put you through that kind
of pain again. I promise.” He tipped her chin up so he could see into her eyes. “I really need you to
believe that,” he added.

“I do,” she answered, her voice equally gentle. “And I promise to never again be swayed by outside
forces, or allow myself to become confused about what I truly feel in my heart. I want you to believe that,”
she said earnestly.

“I do,” he echoed solemnly. He gave her a tender smile. “Feels like we just made our vows to each
other,” he said.

Michaela felt suddenly apprehensive. A shadow crossed her face as she thought of them professing
their wedding vows to one another—a reality that seemed very distant right now—perhaps even
unattainable. “I wish we had,” she murmured wistfully. Sully cupped her chin again, gazing reassuringly
“It’ll come, Michaela. Trust me. Somehow, I’m gonna make everythin’ right, and then we’ll have the weddin’—and the life—that we dreamed about.”

With an effort Michaela tried to cast off the pall of unease that had unexpectedly descended upon her. “I do trust you,” she answered, pinning on a hopeful smile. “I know we’ll be together, just as we planned. That you’ll let nothing get in the way of the beautiful future ahead of us. I suppose . . . I’m just so anxious for it to finally happen. It was hard enough to wait before you got sick and hurt—”

“And lost my memories,” he broke in gently. She nodded, grateful for his understanding.

“Yes. But then coming so close to losing you . . . it just made me realize how—precarious—life can be. Sometimes I feel as if I need to hold onto you with all my might and not let go—for fear that you’ll slip away from me,” she confessed just above a whisper.

“I’ve felt the same way about you,” Sully admitted in his turn. “But the one thing you can count on above all else, Michaela, is that I ain’t goin’ anywhere—not without you by my side. And I’ll never let anythin’, or anyone, take you away from me. Any time you’re feelin’ scared, or low—you just remember that. Will you?” he urged.

“I will,” she promised.

“Feelin’ better?” he asked, his smile warm and loving.

“You always make me feel better,” she declared. “I love you so much, Sully!” She hugged him impulsively. His arms tightened around her as he bent to kiss the top of her head.

“I love you, too,” he answered, his voice choking a little as his throat tightened with emotion.

They remained that way for some time, quietly locked in each other’s embrace, drawing comfort from one another. Eventually, however, Michaela saw fit to break the silence. She drew back to face him.

“Sully? May I ask you something else?”

“’Course—you can ask me anythin’. You know that.”

“Well—I don’t want to upset you, or make you angry—but I’d still like to know how you feel about Brendan, after hearing our conversation. I think—that we need to talk about him a little more.” She watched with trepidation for his reaction.

“I ain’t upset—or angry,” he said after a moment, to her relief. “And if you really feel the need to talk about this, I’m willin’. But like I said before, I honestly don’t see the point, Michaela. I know you don’t have feelins’ for him—I know he’ll never come between us again. So what difference does it make what I think about him?”

“Everything you say is true, of course,” Michaela acknowledged. “But I’m sure you must still harbor some resentment toward him. It’s only natural, considering the circumstances. And even though I’ve suggested that he leave, your anger may very well linger. I just thought that perhaps . . . you might feel more resolved—more content—if you could make peace with him before he goes.”

“Make peace?” Sully repeated skeptically.

“I understand that it may be difficult to put your anger aside,” she added hastily. “But Sully . . . when I questioned him—about his encounter with you, and my mother’s involvement—he told the truth. And I believe that he was genuinely remorseful.

“I don’t expect that the two of you could ever become friends,” she conceded. “But perhaps you needn’t part as enemies.”

He was silent for several moments, his expression mildly cynical. However presently he said, “I guess I can afford to be generous. After all, your heart belongs to me—not him.”
“Yes, my heart is yours,” she affirmed ardently. “My heart will *always* be with you, Sully.”

He embraced her again, feeling his love for her swell inside him to fill every part of his being. After a time he said, “All right—you got your wish. I don’t know what he’s gonna think about this, and I can’t promise that anythin’ will come of it—but next time I see him, I’ll do what I can.”

“You’re an extraordinary man, Mr. Sully,” Michaela told him, her eyes locked with his.

“Just look at my inspiration,” he responded, and claimed her lips once more, as a passionate silence enveloped them both.

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“It’s past noon,” Sully observed presently, glancing up at the clock on the wall. “You gettin’ hungry?”

“To be honest, I haven’t thought about food recently,” Michaela admitted.

“I know what you mean,” he agreed. “It sure feels like we could ‘live on love.’” He gave her an impish smile. “But you need food for the body as well as the soul. I know I could do with a little somethin’. How about we head over to Grace’s for some lunch? She’s got pecan pie today—your favorite,” he added.

“I can’t resist that!” she dimpled.

“Didn’t think so,” he teased. He helped her to her feet and bent down to retrieve her cane. “Let’s go over and feed that ‘sweet tooth’ of yours,” he said, giving her the cane and taking her other hand to lead her to the door.

They’d only taken a step or two when there was a brief rap from outside and the door opened to reveal Matthew in the entrance.

“Hey Sully, Dr. Mike,” he said as he entered.

“Matthew,” Sully answered as Michaela smiled in greeting.

“I’m back in town now, and I can stay all afternoon, so if there’s anythin’ you need to do, I’ll be here,” Matthew offered to Sully.

“Thanks,” Sully replied. “I may take you up on it a little later—but for right now, we were headed over to Grace’s for lunch. Want to join us?”

“Sure,” Matthew said readily. “Sounds good.”

“Maybe while we’re there we can stop in at the livery and talk to Robert E.—work out some kinda schedule among the three of us for guardin’ your ma in the clinic,” Sully suggested.

“It’s lucky Robert E.’s willin’ to help us out,” Matthew remarked.

“Yeah—he’s a good friend. I don’t know how we’d manage between just the two of us,” Sully replied. “You’d find a way,” Matthew said simply, his eyes regarding Sully with respect. “Still, the more help we can get, the better.”

“But is it really necessary to go to such lengths, Sully?” Michaela suddenly asked. “I love you for wanting to go to such trouble to protect me—but as I said earlier, the clinic is in the heart of town, with dozens of people surrounding us. I truly don’t see how anything could happen—at least during the day. And I feel guilty for making you tie yourself to me here, as well as forcing Matthew or Robert E. to take time away from their other obligations on my account.”

He looked down into her eyes. “Sorry, Michaela,” he said regretfully. “I admire your bravery and all, and you might very well be right about bein’ safe here durin’ the daytime—I surely hope you are. But I just can’t take the risk. If anythin’ *were* to happen ‘cause I didn’t take this threat seriously enough—I just couldn’t live with it. And I’m sure Matthew agrees with me,” he added, glancing at the young man.

Matthew was already nodding. “Sully’s right, Dr. Mike. Better to be safe than sorry. I don’t mind
stickin’ close to you and the kids—if nothin’ else, it’ll give me peace of mind.”

“Exactly,” Sully said emphatically.

Michaela smiled in surrender. “Very well, if you both insist. I’ll defer to your judgement.”

Sully raised an eyebrow. “You mean you ain’t gonna argue?” He put his hand under her chin, peering into her eyes. “Are you *my* Michaela—or did you get replaced by some imposter?” He grinned.

“Very droll,” she said drily. “But as to your question—would it do me any good to argue with you?”

“No,” he said matter-of-factly.

She shrugged. “Well, then . . . ?”

“The café was lookin’ pretty crowded when I passed by,” Matthew noted. “We’d best get over there if we want to get a table.”

“Well, let’s do it,” Sully said.

A harsh clamor suddenly erupted from outside, and they heard the sounds of shouting and running footsteps.

“What is it?” Michaela said startled.

“Don’t know,” Sully answered, equally alarmed as he moved hastily to the window fronting the street. He peered through the glass and then looked back at them sharply. “Saloon’s on fire!” he exclaimed. He scanned the street again and spotted Hank running back from ringing the alarm bell, bellowing “Fire!” as he headed toward the water trough in front of his business. His cry was taken up and carried along the street by several others.

“Oh my God!” Michaela said breathlessly.

“Better get out there,” Matthew said quickly, heading for the clinic exit.

“Yeah—I’m right behind you,” Sully told him. He grasped Michaela’s arms. “I gotta go help them,” he told her.

“Of course,” she said.

“But I don’t want to leave you,” he added, torn by indecision.

“Sully—they need your help. Of course you must go,” she urged. “In fact I should come with you—there may be people burned or injured that need my help,” she said worriedly.

“NO!” he told her. “You stay put. If there’s anybody needin’ help, we’ll bring ’em here to you.”

“But Sully—“

“I mean it, Michaela,” he said strongly, brooking no contradiction. “I want you to stay here in the clinic, and close and lock all the windows and doors.”

“Sully, that’s not necessary—“

“DO IT, Michaela! Promise me!” His eyes were burning with intensity.

“All right, all right—I promise,” she mollified him. “Go!” she urged again. “You’re wasting time.”

“I’ll be back soon as I can,” he said, releasing her reluctantly and backing slowly toward the door.

“Take all the time you need,” she said. “And don’t worry about me.”

“Lock the door behind me,” he instructed again, as he stepped out on the porch. She nodded, and
finally, he tore himself away.

She moved over to the door and closed it, turning the key in the lock; then crossed to the window, staring out with anxious eyes as she watched a hastily formed queue of men passing buckets up and down the line, flinging water at the flames that blazed from the roof and one side of the building opposite.

She could see Sully and Matthew among them, as well as Hank, Jake, Loren, Robert E., Horace and the Reverend; their faces and hands rapidly becoming streaked with sweat and grime, and smoke blackening their clothes. A moment later she spotted Brendan as well, laboring as hard as the rest.

She couldn’t imagine how the fire had started. Such an event hadn’t occurred since dog soldiers had descended on the town shortly before her abduction, setting most of the buildings—including the clinic—ablaze. Could the dog soldiers be responsible for what was happening now? She ardently hoped not, fearing a new set of repercussions and renewed fighting between the Indians and the army. Agonizing over the possible cause, and bound by her promise to Sully, she could only stand by helplessly, watching and praying that the blaze would be extinguished and no one would be hurt.

Belatedly she recalled that she had sworn to Sully to lock the windows and doors. Reluctantly she left the main room and made her way throughout the clinic, shutting and securing the windows and entrances on the ground level. She thought briefly of locking the French doors leading to the balcony, as well as the upstairs windows, but then rejected the idea as unnecessary. No one could possibly gain access to the clinic from the upper story without being spotted.

As soon as she was able, she returned to the main room and continued to watch the men fighting the fire. Slowly and surely it appeared they were making progress. The flames issuing from the side of the saloon had been extinguished, and they were actively working now to subdue the fire consuming the roof.

It occurred to her that she should make preparations for treating possible burn victims, or those affected by the inhalation of smoke. She would require bandages, ointment, chloroform to ease the air passages . . . Relieved to feel that she could be of some use, and ticking off a list of items in her mind, Michaela started to turn from the window to attend to her task.

A hand closed over her mouth.

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Michaela froze, her skin crawling at the feel of the alien hand smothering her mouth and nose. The fingers bit cruelly into the flesh of her cheek. A rank odor of stale liquor assaulted her nostrils, and grimly she fought the urge to gag.

The hand was suddenly replaced by the cold, wicked edge of a knife blade beneath her chin, barely touching the flesh of her throat.

“You will move back slowly from the window,” a harsh male voice commanded in her ear, his breath hot and repellent. “If you scream, I will kill the first person who comes to help you. Do you understand?” He moved the knife from her neck, brandishing it slowly before her eyes as he awaited her answer. After a pause, she nodded mutely.

The knife returned, the flat of the blade sliding across her throat like a lover’s caress. His other hand seized her upper arm, rudely yanking it back, nearly pulling it from the socket. Michaela gasped, dimly thinking that she would have bruises there; grateful that he hadn’t dislocated her shoulder altogether. She had a fleeting moment of wondering if this rough handling would be the extent of her injuries, or if he had something worse in mind for her—much worse.

“We will move now,” the voice came again. It was unfamiliar, but Michaela didn’t need to see his face to know the identity of the man who held her.

Awkwardly, haltingly, they backed toward the center of the room, until they came up against the examination table. Suddenly her assailant released her, circling her quickly and brandishing the knife before her face once again.

As she’d instinctively known, she recognized the features of Bloody Knife, though he had sought to camouflage himself by donning white men’s clothes. A wide-brimmed hat was jammed low on his head,
his raven hair tied back and stuffed up inside the crown. His flat black eyes watched her menacingly as he taunted her with the knife.

Michaela pressed herself against the edge of the table, recoiling from the blade. Her arm and shoulder joint ached and she wanted to massage the painful area with her other hand, but she feared making any movement which might startle him into harming her. Suddenly, with a shock, she realized that she was still holding the cane, her fingers gripping it convulsively. Simultaneously she became aware of pain in her hand as the ornately carved serpents coiling around the shaft bit into her palm. She wondered how Bloody Knife had failed to see the walking stick, but could only conclude that he'd been too intent on his intimidation of her to notice. Or perhaps it was the spirits, watching over her. At that point she neither knew nor cared, but could only offer up a silent prayer of thanks for this one small advantage. She huddled before the Indian, willing that her luck would hold and he wouldn't register the presence of the cane before she could conceal it behind her back.

Seconds inexorably ticked past, Michaela's nerves stretching to the breaking point. She was beginning to think that she couldn't tolerate the threat of the knife another moment—when suddenly he withdrew it. Michaela blinked in surprise—then realized the Indian must have felt that he had her sufficiently cowed. He looked away from her, his eyes darting about the clinic as if searching for something. Taking advantage of his distraction, Michaela eased the cane behind her, keeping tight hold of the handle.

After a moment, emboldened by the reassuring feel of the cane pressing into her back, Michaela spoke. “It was you. You set fire to the saloon.”

He faced her again and raised the knife, its point glittering ominously. “You will be silent, or I will kill you now,” he said flatly. Michaela stood rigidly, impaled by his dagger-like glance. Again, agonizing seconds slipped past while she waited for his eyes to move away from her. Finally he broke the contact, simultaneously sidling over to where her medical bag rested on the desk. He picked it up with his free hand and returned to her.

“We will leave through the back,” he announced. “You will act normally—you will not call attention to us. Remember: if you cry out, I will kill you—and then I will kill the half-breed as well.”

Michaela’s stomach clenched, and the color drained from her face. She felt herself trembling, but nonetheless she was compelled to speak.

“You—you can’t mean Sully,” she ventured, her voice thin and shaky. “He’s dead—you shot him.”

“Do not insult me with lies!” he spat. “I have been watching for a long time. You think I do not know that the half-breed lives—as well as the coward Cheyenne? The half-breed is outside right now, and I will slit his throat if you do anything to raise an alarm.” He leaned in close to her. “His blood will be on your hands,” he whispered malevolently.

Michaela dropped her eyes, cringing back from him and trying to appear as frightened and helpless as possible. After a pause, apparently satisfied that he had browbeaten her into submission, Bloody Knife stepped back.

“Move!” he said sharply, gesturing with the knife.

Michaela raised her chin, taking a deep breath and trying to empty her mind of the fear that was assaulting her in waves. She focused her concentration on the next few moments.

“Move!” he repeated, the knife coming dangerously close to her face. Gingerly she took a step forward, and he moved back another step to allow her to pass him. Suddenly, without letting herself think, Michaela brought up the cane, seizing it with both hands and swinging it around in one smooth arcing motion to club him on the side of the head, sending his hat flying. As the cane impacted with his skull the shaft splintered in two; the bottom half, soaked in blood, whistling through the air to slam against the wall. Michaela stood as if paralyzed, her hands still holding the silver-topped remnant aloft.

Breath exploded from the Indian in a sudden whoosh of air as he went down on his knees. Michaela's medical bag slipped from his grasp and his hand went to his scalp, blood oozing through his fingers from the freely flowing wound. Stunned, he lowered his head, shaking it slowly back and forth as if trying to clear it.
But he was still conscious. And he hadn’t dropped the knife.

Desperately trying to keep the shreds of her wits about her, Michaela slowly lowered her hands, the remains of the cane pointed before her like a dagger. Keeping her eyes riveted to the form of the injured scout, she carefully began to back away.

Bloody Knife lunged at her, his movement a blur of motion as his bellow of rage rang in her ears. Before Michaela could register what was happening, his arm was around her throat, pressing suffocatingly against her windpipe.

She fought for air, as black spots began to dance across her vision.

“You will pay for that,” he hissed, and Michaela felt an explosion of pain in her neck and shoulder.

Then . . . nothing.

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 3 April, 1870

This is the first chance I’ve had to write anything down since it happened. Fact is, even if I’d had the time, I didn’t have the heart or the stomach to record and relive the horrifying details. Even now, three days later, the memory still sets me to trembling all over with rage—and fear. I try to draw serenity from the peacefulness of the night sky above, it’s soft fabric sewn with a million glittering stars, but its majesty has no power to comfort me. Before me, the campfire burns, but its heat can’t penetrate the icy coldness at my core.

Across the fire the others slumber, their blanket-wrapped forms vague shapes in the darkness. Nearby, Matthew stands watch. But sleep eludes me. Truth is, I’m relieved—every time I attempt to close my eyes, I’m assaulted by nightmares that bring me awake in terror, a scream caught in my throat.

I won’t rest again until I find her.

* * * * * * * * * *

The fire out at last, I made my weary way toward the clinic. Around me others were dispersing as well, heading to various destinations. Every inch of my skin and clothes was blackened with soot, and rivulets of sweat ran down my face. A fine drift of ash blanketed every visible surface, and above my head an acrid pall of smoke hung over the street, stinging my eyes and nose and making my throat feel like sandpaper.

I spotted Matthew with Ingrid near the meadow. As I watched, they parted, her eyes following him anxiously as he took his leave. I stopped, waiting. He started to head toward the clinic, then noticed me and changed direction, angling over to where I stood. His clothes were as filthy as mine—his hat, formerly pale gray, now nearly black.

“You all right?” he asked as he reached me.

“Yeah. You?”

He nodded.

“Anybody hurt?” I said.

“Nothing too serious, far as I know. Some minor burns, and a few people overcome by the smoke.”

“Your ma will take care of them,” I said. He nodded again. A sudden thought occurred to me, and I felt a stab of alarm. “Kids all right?” I asked sharply.

“They’re fine,” Matthew said quickly. “I talked to the Reverend—he said that before he came over here, he made all the children promise to stay in the schoolhouse till their folks could come fetch
them—told the older ones to look out for the younger ones.”

I sighed in relief. “Good. Maybe you could head over there and pick them up.”

“Sure—soon as we check on Dr. Mike and make sure she’s okay,” Matthew agreed.

“How about Michaela’s ma?” I inquired further. “She accounted for?”

“I spotted her in the café before the fire started. I figure when all this was going on she was well out of it,” Matthew replied.

“That’s a relief,” I answered. “I wouldn’t want Michaela worrying.”

“You hear anything about how the fire started?” Matthew asked after a moment.

I shook my head. “About all I know for sure is that it wasn’t dog soldiers this time.”

“Hank’s probably fit to be tied, though,” Matthew commented.

“Yeah, he’s mad all right—more so because he ain’t got nobody to blame—at least yet,” I replied.

“Sure is mysterious, happening out of the blue like that,” Matthew went on.

“I’d like to know who was behind it,” I concurred. “But right now all I care about is seeing your ma.”

“Same here,” said Matthew and fell into step with me as I resumed walking.

As we approached, we saw Brendan coming from the other direction, heading toward the water trough in front of the clinic. He reached it and hunkered down, plunging his hands into the water and splashing it liberally over his face and head.

We came up beside him. He looked awful, the black and blue of the shiner around his eye competing with the soot, sweat and water streaking the rest of his face.

“You all right?” Matthew inquired. Brendan looked up at us, his injured eye almost swollen shut, and the other one closed nearly to a slit from the smoke. Slowly he rose to his feet, droplets of water dripping from the ends of his hair.

“Yes, I’m fine—” he began, then broke off as he was seized with a violent fit of coughing. Without thinking about it I clapped him on the back, keeping it up until the racking cough finally subsided.

“You don’t sound so fine,” I remarked.

“I suppose the smoke affected me,” he said.

“You should let Michaela take a look at you,” I told him. “She uses chloroform to ease coughing spells and breathing problems. She helped Matthew’s fiancee with her asthma.”

“Yeah,” Matthew chimed in. “Fixed her right up.”

“I know Dr. Mike is a skilled physician,” Brendan commented. “Thanks for the suggestion—I’ll do that,” he added, his breathing still a little harsh.

I hesitated for a long moment, then said, “You, uh—you done good.” I cut my eyes toward the saloon.

He followed the direction of my glance. “I was glad to help.”

“Yeah, well—we appreciated having an extra set of hands.”

“Are you both all right?” he inquired in his turn.

I hazarded a small smile. “Dirty and tired, but nothing that a dunk in the creek and a good night’s sleep won’t cure.”
“That sounds like a good prescription for all of us,” he agreed, risking a smile of his own.

I bit my lip, thinking of my promise to Michaela. Now was probably as good a time as any.

“Look . . . I’m, uh, I’m sorry—for hitting you like I done,” I ventured. “Even though I was mad, I had no call to use my fists.”

“To be honest, I can’t say that I would have done any differently, had I been in your place,” Brendan said frankly. He paused, then continued, “I apologize as well, for the way I goaded you . . . the things that I implied. Michaela—that is, Dr. Mike—made me see I was wrong.” He hesitated again, then added, “Is everything—all right?” He didn’t have to explain what he meant.

“We . . . worked it out,” I replied.

“I’m relieved,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be responsible for causing dissension between you—at least, no more than I already have.”

There was an awkward pause, then impulsively I stuck out my hand. “Let’s just—forget about it,” I suggested. “What do you say?”

He regarded me levelly, then accepted my proffered hand and pumped it briefly. “It never happened,” he said.

“Good enough,” I replied. Matthew watched us curiously, but didn’t comment, recognizing that this was something between just the two of us.

“We were just on our way to the clinic to check on Michaela,” I spoke again, changing the subject. “Why don’t you come along? Michaela can see to that cough of yours, and we could all do with some cleaning up.”

“She’s alone?” he asked quickly, looking concerned.

“I had no choice—everything happening so fast and all,” I responded. “But I made her promise to lock all the doors while we were gone.”

“Well, then—I’m sure she’s all right,” he said.

“Yeah. Still, I’ll feel better once I see her,” I remarked.

“Agreed.”

The three of us made our way to the main entrance of the clinic, and I knocked on the door.

“Michaela—we’re back,” I called out. “Let us in.” We waited, seconds ticking past. I tried that door, then the other one, but they were both locked, just as she’d promised.

“Michaela!” I repeated, knocking louder. The seconds crept by once more and still there was no response. Matthew and I looked at each other uneasily.

“Maybe she’s upstairs and couldn’t hear you,” he suggested.

“Yeah—that’s probably it,” I replied, trying to ignore a twinge of apprehension. I stepped back out into the street, looking up at the balcony that fronted the upper story of the building.

“Michaela!” I shouted, willing her to open the doors and step out on the balcony. But the doors remained closed. My apprehension grew. Fact is, now that my senses were heightened by anxiety, I realized that the whole place had a deserted feel to it. I rejoined Matthew and Brendan.

“Go around back—check that door,” I told Matthew. He bobbed his head and took off, cutting through the alley. Brendan and I waited tensely, not speaking. Within moments he was back.

“Locked,” he announced, breathing hard. He took a moment to get his wind, then said, “Maybe she
left the clinic after all. You know Dr. Mike—how hard it is for her to stay put if she thinks folks are in trouble. Besides—remember she thought you were worrying too much?"

"Yeah . . ." I said slowly. "All that’s true—" I broke off and turned to Brendan. "Would you check around town? Ask if anybody’s seen her?"

"Of course," he said promptly, and headed in the direction of the mercantile. I watched him go, a knot of fear starting to form inside me. Matthew must have seen it in my face.

"What is it?" he said soberly.

"I don’t think that’s what happened, Matthew," I told him. "Michaela may have thought I was over-reacting, but she also knew how serious I was. She made me a promise—she wouldn’t break it. Besides, if she thought people were hurt, the logical place she’d go is the saloon. And we know she’s not there."

"So what are you saying?" Matthew asked, the concern in his eyes deepening.

"I ain’t sure . . ." The sweat dried on my skin as I felt a sudden chill.

"Sully—you think . . . maybe something happened to her? That maybe she’s lying in there sick, or hurt . . ." He swallowed, his skin paling under the mask of grime.

Instead of answering, I ran to the front window and peered through the panes. It was dim in contrast to the brighter day outside, and I had to wait a moment for my eyes to adjust. Once I could see clearly though, I didn’t know any more that I had before. There was no sign of Michaela, and everything seemed the same as always—

There was something laying on the examination table. Something that gleamed in the muted light coming through the window. Something that looked like . . .

I bolted back over to the clinic entrance, Matthew watching me anxiously.

"What is it?" he demanded.

I threw myself against the door. It rattled in its frame, but didn’t give way. I rammed it again. Still it held.

"Sully—what is it? Is she in there?" Matthew repeated, now nearly frantic.

"No—I don’t know!" I gasped, hitting the door a third time.

"Then what . . .?"

On my fourth try the door burst inward, taking me with it. I stumbled, nearly falling, but managed to catch myself. Then, on legs that suddenly felt too weak to support me, I made my way over to the examination table. Matthew was right on my heels. With shaking fingers, I reached for what I’d seen.

Michaela’s cane—or what was left of it. The silver handle intact, but the shaft broken in two, with no sign of the other half. Matthew stared down at the broken walking stick, then up into my eyes, his face going even whiter.

"What happened?" he whispered harshly.

My heart was galloping in my chest, the fear clutching me in an iron grip. But somehow I had to keep my wits about me for Matthew’s sake—and Michaela’s.

"Look around," I managed. "See if you can find anything—any clues . . . I’ll check upstairs."

Immediately he began to move around the room. I went out in the hall and began to go through the rest of the building, grimly opening one door after another, investigating every room, always with the same negative result. I reached the recovery room opening onto the balcony, and hastily crossed to the French doors. I tried the handles—and they opened easily.
No—please no, I thought silently.

“Sully!” Matthew called up to me. Even separated like we were, I could hear the panic in his voice.

I raced to the stairs, and practically vaulted to the bottom. As I ran back into the main room of the clinic, I saw Matthew standing like a statue. I stopped short, feeling physically ill as I saw what he held in his hand.

The other half of Michaela’s broken cane—the end drenched in blood.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Mutely Matthew held out the shattered portion of the walking stick, blood glistening darkly on its tip. Sully accepted it with hands that shook visibly.

As he stared down at the grisly evidence of the terrible occurrence that had taken place here—perhaps only minutes ago . . . and mere yards from where he’d been—the strength ran out of his legs and he sank to his knees. His trembling fingers touched the crimson smears defacing the cane, and came away streaked in red. It was still wet—still fresh.

As he rubbed the blood between his fingertips, staring at it in horrified fascination, the feel of it—the sight of it—made him physically ill. He crouched on the floor, holding the terrible relic in his lap as he took deep, shuddering breaths, grimly willing down the gorge that rose in his throat.

What had he done to her, came Sully’s thoughts, black and tortured. What had that monster DONE to her?

He thought of how precious the cane had been to Michaela, because of all it represented: her adoration and respect for her father; but also her father’s love and respect for her. He remembered the glow of pride in her eyes as she’d shown it to him. Could it have only been hours ago?

He thought of how he’d sworn to Michaela that he’d never let anyone or anything take her away from him. He’d made her a sacred promise, but he hadn’t been able to keep it. Just as he’d failed to keep his promise to Abagail to protect her, years ago. The fear that had dogged his steps since this agonizing ordeal began . . . the shadow that had trailed him since the beginning . . . had finally fulfilled its dark promise. The nightmare had finally come to pass.

Harsh, racking sobs rose up inside him, violently seeking release—but desperately, he held them in check. If he allowed himself to crack—if he broke down now—there was no hope. Somehow, he had to believe that Michaela was still alive—and if she was, then he would travel to the ends of the earth . . . he would offer up his own life, if that’s what it took—to save her.

“It don’t have to be Dr. Mike’s blood,” Matthew said rapidly, kneeling down next to Sully. “It looks like she mighta fought back.” He swallowed, then added, “She coulda fought back—couldn’t she?”

Sully raised tormented eyes to the young man. As he saw fear desperately warring with hope in Matthew’s face, he knew that he must somehow lock his own anguish away, and call on every ounce of strength he possessed, to be strong for the children’s sake—for *their* children’s sake. Matthew, Colleen and Brian were counting on him. Michaela was counting on him. He’d failed them once—he wouldn’t fail them again. He swore it on the souls of all those he had loved and lost before.

Sully summoned his resolve. Matthew was waiting for him to make things right—to give him hope. To give them all hope.

He reached out his hand and squeezed Matthew’s shoulder. “You’re right—it don’t have to be Dr. Mike’s blood,” he agreed. “It’s probably his.” He hands clenched around the broken cane. “I hope it’s his,” he muttered darkly. “I hope he’s sufferin’ the tortures of the damned.”

“But if he’s hurt, won’t that make him more dangerous?” Matthew asked soberly.
“Maybe,” said Sully. “But if he’s losin’ blood, it could also make him weak. Maybe weak enough for your ma to fight him off.”

“You think it was *him*?” Matthew said.

Sully looked into the young man’s steely blue eyes. “What do *you* think?” he answered quietly.

“But how? How, Sully? How did he get in when Dr. Mike had everythin’ sealed up tight? The locks on the doors—they weren’t jimmed or tampered with . . .” Matthew stared at him helplessly.

Wearily Sully got to his feet, followed by Matthew. “Balcony doors were unlocked,” he said bleakly.

“Damn!” Matthew cursed, slamming his fist against the doorframe in frustration. “Why didn’t she lock them?”

“I don’t know,” Sully sighed. “Maybe she didn’t think she needed to, maybe she forgot. Maybe—she didn’t get the chance . . .

“But whatever the reason, Matthew—it don’t make no difference. I shoulda known. A locked door or closed window wasn’t about to stop him—he was bound to get to her, no matter what.”

“Which is why he set fire to the saloon,” Matthew stated.

“Exactly,” Sully said grimly. “What better way to distract me—distract both of us—and get us away from the clinic? It was the perfect set-up to raise a commotion and keep most of the men in town busy while he slipped off with your ma.”

“But not everybody was fightin’ the fire,” Matthew pointed out. “What about the folks who were left in the café—like Grace, or Dorothy or even Dr. Mike’s ma? How could he get Dr. Mike past them without bein’ seen?”

“Maybe somebody *did* see ‘em,” Sully countered. “Maybe Brendan’ll bring back good news. But—if not . . . well, there were ways he coulda done it. If he was in disguise, and your ma was conscious and on her feet—he coulda walked out the rear entrance with her—then forced her away with a gun stuck in her back, and nobody woulda been the wiser.

“And if she was . . . unconscious—“ He stopped a moment, trying to control the tremor in his voice. “He coulda wrapped her body in a blanket or a quilt or somethin’ . . . slung her over his shoulder and escaped off the balcony. He’s big, and strong—and your ma weighs next to nothin’. Then all he’d need is to have horses or a wagon waitin’ to take her out of town.” Sully fixed his gaze on Matthew. “If a quilt or blanket was missin’ from the clinic, would you be able to tell?”

Matthew shrugged, shaking his head. “But maybe Colleen would know,” he offered hopefully.

“Maybe,” Sully agreed. “It’s all right—it don’t matter, for now. Did—did you find anythin’ else?” he added after a moment, his voice not quite steady.

“Looks like Dr. Mike’s medical bag is missin’,” Matthew told him. “What do you ‘spose that means?”

“Means she’s alive,” Sully said resolutely. “That’s what I’m gonna believe. That’s what I got to believe. Why else would he take it? Or take Michaela, for that matter—if he was just gonna k—“ He choked over the word, unable to voice it—then walked toward the window and stood staring out, his back to Matthew.

Matthew came up behind him, laying his hand on Sully’s shoulder. “You’re right,” he said. “She’s alive, Sully—and we’re gonna find her.”

Sully swallowed hard, forcing down the tears that threatened to spill. He took a deep breath and turned to face the young man. “We *are* gonna find her, Matthew—that’s a promise.” He took a step away from the window and his boot struck something small and hard which rattled away across the floor.

Startled, he looked down at the floorboards, his eyes combing their worn and weathered surface,
unsure of what he was searching for, but knowing somehow that he’d recognize it when he found it.

There—by the washstand—something pinkish-red and roughly oval, appearing to be nothing more than an ordinary stone.  For an instant his heart constricted in disappointment; nonetheless, he moved over to where it rested and bent to pick it up.

As he’d suspected, it was a stone, deep rose in color, its texture worn smooth over the passage of time.  But as he turned it over in his hand, he was surprised to see an image carved into its surface.  It looked like a primitive representation of a mountain goat, or perhaps a sheep.  But not like any kind of sheep Sully had ever seen.  This creature had large, prominent horns.

Matthew studied the image over Sully’s shoulder.  “Looks Indian,” he commented.

“Yeah,” Sully agreed.

“Is it Cheyenne?”

Sully shook his head thoughtfully.  “No, not Cheyenne.  But I don’t think its Arikara either,” he speculated, referring to Bloody Knife’s tribe.  “This looks old—real old.”

“You ever see anythin’ like it before?” Matthew inquired further.

“No, sure haven’t,” Sully replied.

“Maybe Cloud Dancin’ would know,” Matthew suggested.

“He might—but there’s no time to go lookin’ for him to find out,” Sully replied.  “Sides, if I went to Cloud Dancin’ with this, he’d insist on comin’ along when I search for your ma.”

“But don’t he have a right?” said Matthew.  “Bloody Knife came after both of you in the mountains. Wouldn’t Cloud Dancin’ feel he was entitled to justice, just like you?”

“It’s true—he has a right to his revenge,” Sully acknowledged.  “But it could be even more dangerous for Cloud Dancin’ to make this trip than it is for me.  The Cheyenne got other enemies, Matthew.  Not to mention he’d be making himself a target again for Bloody Knife—maybe Custer, too.  I don’t want to be responsible for puttin’ him in that kind of danger on my account.

“But even more than that . . . The moment Bloody Knife took your ma, this became my fight.”  Sully regarded Matthew with eyes the color of flint.  “Cloud Dancin’ would understand that.”

“But if you don’t know what this is, and you can’t ask Cloud Dancin’—how are you gonna figure out where it came from?” Matthew asked him.

“I don’t know what it is . . . but there’s somebody who might.”  Sully’s eyes were determined as he looked at Matthew.  “Go find Brendan for me and bring him back here,” he said.

* * * * * * * * * *

But it proved to be unnecessary.  At that moment, Brendan appeared in the entryway.  Beyond him Sully and Matthew could see a knot of people gathering outside.  Apparently Brendan’s questions concerning Michaela’s whereabouts had raised curiosity among the townsfolk.  The young archaeologist stared at the door canted slightly on its bent hinges, and the splintered frame where the lock assembly had been wrenched from its housing.

“You broke in?” he said, venturing slowly into the room.  “Has something happened to her—was she hurt, or . . .?”  His voice died away as he realized that Michaela was nowhere in sight.

“She’s gone,” Sully announced briefly, the pulse beating in his throat.  His eyes said the rest.

“He took her?” Brendan managed, his voice barely above a whisper.  “He actually got in here and took her while we were—”  Knowledge dawned in his eyes.  “The fire,” he said.

“You got it,” Sully replied.  “He staged the whole thing just to get us away.”
“Oh, God,” Brendan muttered, raking his hand through his wet hair. After a moment he added, “How did he get her past us without being spotted?”

“You know what it was like out there,” Sully reminded him, gesturing toward the street and the damaged saloon opposite. “It was crazy, confused . . . you could barely see, for the smoke. ‘Sides, he might have taken her out through the back . . .” He stared at Brendan. “What did you find out? Did anybody see her?” he asked urgently.

Brendan shook his head regretfully. “No—no one. But I have to tell you that there are people wondering now what’s become of Dr. Mike—including Mrs. Quinn,” he added warningly. “I did my best to treat the whole thing casually, and asked her to remain at the café until we could bring her some news, but I don’t think she’s going to be content to wait for information.”

“We’ll deal with her and everybody else later,” Sully answered, feeling that right now, Elizabeth was the least of his problems. Returning to the issue at hand, he said, “What about Bloody Knife himself—did anyone recall seeing any strangers in town? Anybody who hasn’t been here before?”

“Sully—” Matthew broke in reluctantly. “There are lots of new folks streamin’ into town with the railroad comin’ in a few weeks. Some real tough-lookin’ characters, too. He coulda blended right in . . .” His face was shadowed with guilt at having to dash Sully’s hopes. “I’m sorry,” he added lamely.

“Don’t feel bad,” Sully attempted to mollify him. “It was a long-shot. You’re right—there *are* plenty of new folks in town, and Bloody Knife was countin’ on that. It fit right into his plan.”

“Are you sure it was the Indian?” Brendan asked. “Do you have some kind of proof?”

“Not exactly,” Matthew said. “But we found these—” He held out the top of Michaela’s cane, and pointed to the bloodied other half still cradled in Sully’s hand. Brendan swallowed with difficulty.

“Is that—her blood?” he said slowly.

Matthew shook his head. “We ain’t positive. Maybe it’s his. The one thing we do know for sure is that there was some kind of struggle, and we’re thinkin’ that maybe Dr. Mike fought him, hit him with the cane. I guess it wasn’t enough to stop him though, ‘cause . . .” he trailed off, his voice trembling slightly, then cleared his throat and added, “And Dr. Mike’s medical bag is missin’.”

Brendan considered all this for a moment, then said, “Perhaps that means it wasn’t the Indian. It might have been someone looking for drugs, such as morphine or opium . . . William’s told me about soldiers injured in the war who developed a dependence on morphine—he called it morphinism. He said that once they became slaves to its effects, they’d do anything to get it—lie, steal, even commit violence.”

“Yeah, we know about that,” Sully said. “There was a young fella here in town—the son of one of Michaela’s friends—who got so desperate for the stuff he broke into the homestead once. Scared Colleen within an inch of her life and shot at Matthew, so Michaela was forced to shoot him. She wound up havin’ to take his leg.

“Michaela did her best to wean him from the morphine, though it was hell for everybody concerned,” he went on. “But finally, it looked like she’d done the trick. He seemed real sorry for what he’d put everyone through, and he appeared to be more content and ready to start a new life. But then, a few days later, he was gone—along with all the money in Loren’s cash box. I guess—it just had too strong a hold on him.

“Don’t know where he is now—nobody’s heard from him since,” he finished gravely.

“How tragic,” Brendan said sympathetically. “For his mother, for Michaela and her children . . . But the effects of his dependency sound very much as William described them,” he went on. “So isn’t it possible this could be a similar occurrence? Perhaps even the same young man?” he added.

“Anythin’s possible,” Sully responded. “But if all this person wanted was morphine, why take Michaela? Why not just steal what he needed and leave? When this young fella broke into the homestead, he didn’t care about nothin’ but gettin’ what he wanted and gettin’ out.”
Brendan raised an eyebrow, conceding the logic of Sully’s statement. After a pause he said, “But there still doesn’t seem to be any definitive proof that it was the Indian scout who did this. How can you be so sure?”

Sully’s expression was implacable. “I’m sure.”

“And there’s somethin’ else—“ Matthew spoke up.

“That’s right,” Sully broke in, stepping closer to Brendan. “We need your help.” He held out his hand, the unusual stone resting in his palm. “What do you make of this?”

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Brendan stared down at the curious relic in my hand. “May I?” he asked.

I nodded, and he took it from me, examining both sides carefully and rubbing his fingertips over the surface of the carving. “Where did you find this?” he asked, glancing up at us.

“It was on the floor,” Matthew put in. “We might have missed it altogether if Sully hadn’t accidentally kicked it with his foot.”

“Do you know what it is, or where it comes from?” I said bluntly.

“Possibly,” he said slowly, studying its surface once again. “It seems strange that you found it here,” he ventured.

“Why?” I asked quickly.

“Because it definitely isn’t native to this area,” he answered.

“I kind of figured that—I know it ain’t Cheyenne, and I don’t think it’s Arikara either,” I said.

“The scout is Arikara?” Brendan asked.

“Yeah—half Arikara, half Hunkpapa Sioux,” I told him.

“Well, I can say with confidence that this was not produced by either of those tribes,” he stated.

“Who *did* make it then?” I asked sharply, impatient for answers.

“Sully, take it easy,” Matthew murmured, placing his hand on my arm.

“Sorry,” I added, softening my tone. “No offense meant. I just need to know what this is—if it’s got anything to do with Bloody Knife and Michaela . . .”

“Of course—I understand,” Brendan said. Again he studied the stone. “This is very familiar,” he speculated softly, talking to himself as much as to us. “Very reminiscent of . . .” He broke off. “Wait here!” he commanded us suddenly, putting the stone in my free hand and moving quickly toward the door to the hallway.

“We ain’t going anywhere,” I called after him. We heard his footsteps running up the stairs, and I figured he was headed to his room. The two of us eyed each other tensely, half eager to learn what Brendan would tell us—and half afraid to hear it as well.

“Sully!” came a voice, startling me, and I looked up sharply to see Hank in the ruined doorway.

“What do you want?” I replied, in no frame of mind at that moment to deal with the saloon keeper. Even my guilty knowledge that our troubles with Bloody Knife were responsible for the damage to Hank’s business, had to take second place right now to my fears for Michaela.
“Where’s Michaela?” he said brusquely.

“She ain’t here,” I said flatly.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he remarked sarcastically. “Listen, there are folks out here who want to know what’s going on, and I got people over to the saloon that need treatment for burns.”

“Tell them to go to Jake,” I responded briefly.

“Guess I got no choice,” he said irritably. “What I want to know is why Michaela ain’t here to take care of them.” He regarded me peevishly; but then, for the first time, he took a really close look at the scene around him—the shattered door, the bloody cane in my hand, and the expression in my eyes. His own expression sobered dramatically as he came further into the room.

“What the hell happened here?” he said softly.

“I can’t go into it right now, Hank—” I began, afraid of losing my grip on my composure if I had to go through explanations of the grisly events once again.

“Well, you better go into it!” he countered sharply. “Whether you believe it or not, I care about Michaela, too. What happened to her?” he repeated, fixing me with a penetrating gaze.

We heard Brendan’s footsteps again, hastily descending the staircase, and a moment later he burst back into the room, a book in his hands. As he spotted Hank he stopped short, unsure about whether it was safe to speak in front of the saloon owner.

I realized that the details of what had happened were bound to become public knowledge—sooner, rather than later, knowing the gossips in this town. Not to mention that Hank had a right to know who had set fire to his business.

“Hold on a moment,” I instructed Brendan, and then faced Hank. “All right, I’ll fill you in,” I told the tall, long-haired man in front of me. “But I’m warning you now not to make trouble. What’s happened is deadly serious, and I got too much to worry about without having to deal with you.”

“Just get on with it,” Hank told me.

As succinctly as I could, I launched into an explanation of our history with Bloody Knife, and the sequence of events that had brought us to this moment. When I got to the part about the Indian scout setting the fire as a diversion, Hank’s face darkened with anger.

“I’m sorry our troubles had to affect you,” I told him hastily. “I’m sorry for the damage that he done. I’ll make it up to you soon as I can—you got my word. But right now, Michaela’s my only priority.”

“Yeah, all right,” Hank responded, surprising me with his tolerant reaction. “Go on,” he urged.

Briefly I continued my story, concluding with the objects we’d found in the clinic. As I finished, Hank grimly examined the shattered pieces of the cane, then studied the rose-colored stone curiously. He looked at Brendan. “You know what that is?” he asked.

“Yes,” Brendan answered, glancing at each of us in turn. “I believe that I do.”

By now we had an audience, other folks having crept in while I’d been occupied talking to Hank. I wasn’t sure when they’d come in, or how much they’d heard, but as Hank asked Brendan about the stone, I glanced over to see Loren, Jake, the Reverend and Robert E. looking on with varying expressions of shock or dismay on their faces.

“Dr. Mike’s been *kidnapped*?” Loren burst out in agitation, unable to remain silent any longer.

“Appears that way, Loren,” I said quietly.
“Lord protect her,” the Reverend murmured, his eyes anguished. I saw his lips moving as he silently offered up a prayer for her safety.

“*Again*?” Jake spoke up, his tone scornful. “I suppose it was dog soldiers this time, too,” he added disdainfully.

“Jake!” the Reverend reproved.

“Did you *see* any dog soldiers, Jake?” I said coldly.

“Who could see anything in all that smoke?” he exclaimed.

“It wasn’t dog soldiers,” I announced clearly, for the benefit of anyone who was in doubt. “Just—one dangerous Indian, with a grudge against me,” I finished bleakly.

“Well, that don’t surprise me,” Jake spoke again. “So Hank’s got you to thank for his saloon nearly burning to the ground?”

“Why don’t you let *me* worry about that?” Hank said sharply. Jake looked wounded, then resentful.

“Hey, wait a minute, Hank—I was out there with you, shoulder to shoulder, putting out the fire that *he* caused!” the barber retorted, gesturing angrily at me. “You got no call to talk to me like that!”

“Sully was out there too,” Hank reminded him levelly. “Plus he says he’s going to make good on my losses, and I’m taking him at his word. Besides, it ain’t his fault if some crazy Injun gets it into his head to come after Michaela.”

“He just that said this renegade, or whatever he is, had a grudge against him!” Jake countered. “Tells me that Sully started all this, as usual.” He looked at me balefully. “What’s it going to take for you to finally figure out that being mixed up with the Cheyenne only leads to trouble?”

“This Indian ain’t Cheyenne,” I snapped, meeting Jake’s hostile gaze head-on. “For your information, Jake, he’s a scout for the 7th Cavalry—Custer’s *favorite* scout,” I added, my voice dripping with venom. “And he’s got a grudge against me because I fought him off when he tried to kill me in the mountains—under *Custer’s* orders. He’s the reason I got shot and lost my memory.”

“Well, you must have done something if Custer sent him after you,” Jake said mulishly.

“I guess you’re right, Jake,” I said coolly. “If being a ‘thorn’ in Custer’s side is a reason to kill me. But what happened between Bloody Knife, Custer and me ain’t important. Michaela’s the one paying now, and all that matters to me is getting her back safe.”

“Jake, I can’t believe you could be so callous where Dr. Mike is concerned,” the Reverend chided him. “Dr. Mike’s done a lot for this town—and she’s taken care of you, more than once. She saved your life during the influenza epidemic—”

“And stopped you from drinking yourself to death after Harry died,” Loren broke in.

Jake flushed. “Shut up about that,” he muttered.

“What’s the matter, Jake? Truth hurt?” said Robert E., speaking for the first time. Jake shot him a malevolent look.

“Don’t you care about Dr. Mike, Jake?” the Reverend said.

Jake dropped his eyes for a moment, then raised them to me. “Look—I don’t want no harm to come to Dr. Mike. It’s just that the two of you are forever getting yourselves in trouble, and bringing grief to this town. This seems like just another case of you starting something with the army, and the rest of us getting hurt as a result.”

“You want someone to blame?” I challenged him. “Then go ahead and blame me. But Michaela’s innocent in all this.”
“Let’s all take it easy,” Matthew said suddenly. “Fighting between ourselves ain’t going to bring Dr. Mike back any sooner.”

“Matthew’s right,” said the Reverend. “We need calm, cool heads.”

I nodded to Matthew, ashamed that I’d let myself get sucked into a shouting match with Jake when there was such a desperate matter demanding my attention. The Reverend was right, too—getting hot-headed or allowing myself to go off half-cocked wasn’t going to help Michaela. Fact is, it might even get her killed.

I summoned my composure once again. “Look, Jake—what happened to the saloon is the last thing Bloody Knife’s going to do to hurt this town. His fight is with me, now—and I’m going to finish it,” I said with finality. Jake looked like he wanted to protest further, but after quickly glancing around at the stony faces of the others, he subsided.

I turned back to Brendan, holding up the stone. “Tell me,” I said.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Brendan noted the urgency in Sully’s eyes. “Of course,” he said. “Well, to begin, do you recall our conversation the night Mrs. Quinn and I dined with you at the homestead, when I mentioned publishing a book? I said that it was a collection of photographs from various digs in which I’d participated, and the artifacts and relics we’d found?”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Sully replied.

“Digs?” Hank repeated the odd phrase. “What were you diggin’?”

“Brendan’s an archaeologist,” Matthew said. “He travels around to different places, lookin’ for the remains left by people who lived thousands of years ago—like the pottery they made or the tools or weapons they used. Most of these things have been buried over time, so he has to dig for them. Then he studies these things to learn about the people who made them—how they lived, and such. He even finds and studies human bones, so he can figure out when these people lived and died.”

“You mean like that fella who was so hot to find a new kind of dinosaur, and offered to buy up all our dinosaur bones?” asked Hank. Brendan looked at Matthew curiously.

“A man showed up in town a while back who was real anxious to search for dinosaur bones around here,” Matthew explained to him briefly. “Called himself a pale—paleo—“

“Paleontologist?” Brendan supplied.

“Yeah, that was it,” Matthew replied.

“Well, this area would certainly be a rich source for fossils,” Brendan agreed. “But to answer your question, Mr. Lawson, my work is similar, but not quite the same. My interest is in human history, though I have great respect for the science of paleontology and its practitioners. Without their discoveries, we would have no way of calculating the age of the earth; we would know nothing of the creatures called dinosaurs; nor would we understand how the mysterious disappearance of these creatures gave rise to the mammals; and ultimately, to the appearance of man, himself.”

Sully tried to curb his impatience. “That’s all very interestin’, but you were sayin’?” he interrupted, prompting Brendan to return to the issue at hand.

“Oh, yes—quite,” Brendan said hastily. “Forgive me. At any rate—four years ago I was in the Mojave Desert of southern Nevada, exploring the La Madre Mountains. My investigation was specifically confined to an area of stunning limestone ridges and sandstone bluffs called Red Rock Canyon. The name derives from oxidized iron leeching through the sand and groundwater, giving the bluffs their spectacular rose-red color,” he explained.
“I was searching for evidence of the people who had once lived there—a race of Indians known as the Anasazi, or ‘Ancient Ones,’” Brendan continued. “They’re the antecedents—the ancestors—of the contemporary Pueblo Indians. The Anasazi flourished in the Red Rock area—as well as throughout much of the southwest—at about the time of Christ. It was the Anasazi who constructed the cliff dwellings I was going to explore in Mesa Verde,” he added.

“Anyway, I’d heard from various colleagues that there was a rich store of archaeological artifacts in this region, such as stone points for hunting, stone tools, pottery fragments and so forth—and I wanted to see and document it all for myself.

“Just as I was told, the area proved to be a veritable treasure trove of relics,” he went on. “I found several sites containing features of Anasazi life and society such as roasting pits, rock circles and rock shelters. And I found something else as well—numerous rock paintings, called pictographs, and rock etchings, know as petroglyphs, left by these prehistoric Indians. Sort of a primitive version of the sophisticated pictorial writing we found in Egypt—though unlike Egyptian hieroglyphics, which extensively document every aspect of Egyptian culture—most archaeologists are divided on the meaning of the Red Rock images. Some believe that the pictures or etchings represent an early form of communication. However others claim that because most of these petroglyph sites are along animal migration routes, the petroglyphs—or the act of making them—were designed to ensure the success of a hunt.

“Whatever the meaning behind such representations, however, I can tell you that this image is definitely an example of a petroglyph,” Brendan stated.

“You’re sure?” asked Sully.

“There’s no question about it,” Brendan answered.

“And you think it came from this Red Rock Canyon?” Sully persisted.

“Almost certainly.”

“Well, with all due respect, you didn’t seem so certain ‘fore you went upstairs,” Sully pointed out.

“I understand your skepticism,” Brendan acknowledged. “But I wanted to be absolutely sure. As I said, it’s been some years since I explored the area, and I wanted to check my notes and photographs first to double-check my facts and confirm my suspicions.”

“But how can you be so positive that it came from this Red Rock Canyon place, if you say that these—Anasazis—were all over the southwest?” Matthew asked curiously.

“For several reasons,” Brendan replied. “First, because of the sandstone in which the image is etched, its color and striation typical of the sandstone bluffs which compose much of the region.

“Secondly, because of the image itself. It’s a representation of a big horn sheep—a creature which is abundant in the canyon because of the steep, rocky outcrops where the sheep can outrun its enemies. There are also numerous rock piles, overhangs and caves where a big horn can shelter from the weather; as well as scattered and permanent sources of water.

“Thirdly,” he went on, “because the formation in which the image is etched is known as an ‘Indian marble.’ Hundreds of them litter the base of the sandstone cliffs. They’re formed somewhat like the pearl in an oyster—over time, a grain of iron becomes surrounded by several layers of deposits. These sandstone balls, cemented by the iron, don’t erode—but eventually they fall to the ground as the softer rock material around them is weathered away.

“But the fourth and final reason I’m sure of the petroglyph’s origins is this,” Brendan said. He opened the volume he was holding to a place he’d marked with a small slip of paper, then held out the book for all of them to see. On the facing page was a photograph of a rock wall, a twin image of the petroglyph Sully held in his hand prominently etched upon its surface. They all bent over the page, observing the photograph in wonder.

“Like lookin’ in a mirror,” Matthew murmured.

“There’s no denyin’ they’re identical,” Sully agreed, glancing from the object in his hand, to the page,
and then back again. He looked up at Brendan. “You know your job,” he said. “I’m obliged.”

“Yeah, me too,” echoed Matthew. “‘Cept—there’s one thing I don’t get.”

“What’s that?” asked Sully.

“Well, if this petroglyph thing belongs to Bloody Knife, don’t it seem like he was awful careless, droppin’ it and leavin’ it behind the way he done?”

“Matthew’s got a point,” Brendan chimed in. “For someone diabolical enough to construct such an elaborate scheme to kidnap Dr. Mike, I find it hard to believe he’d make such an obvious error.”

“Don’t seem like somethin’ he’d be stupid enough to do,” Hank agreed, making it unanimous.

“You’re right,” Sully spoke up. “It *would* be a careless mistake. ‘Cept—it ain’t no mistake.”

“What’re ya talkin’ about?” asked Hank.

“He didn’t drop it by accident,” Sully told them. “He left it here, deliberately. He wanted me to find it, and figure out where it came from.”

“But that’s crazy!” Matthew exclaimed. “Why would he kidnap Dr. Mike, and then leave a clue that would lead you straight to him?”

“Because he wants me to confront him,” said Sully flatly. “He wants to lure me away from Colorado Springs, where I’d have the advantage, and face me on unfamiliar territory where he has the upper hand. It’s a game—a deadly game—and he’s doin’ everything in his power to weight the odds in his favor.”

“Looks like we’re gonna give him exactly what he wants,” Matthew said dourly.

“Maybe—but not necessarily the way he wants it,” Sully said.

Matthew raised his eyebrows. “I don’t understand.” The others were also regarding Sully curiously.

“As Brendan told us, this—petroglyph thing—is real uncommon, leastways around here,” Sully began. “So uncommon that Bloody Knife figured I couldn’t help but notice it, and that I’d do whatever I could to find out what is was and where it came from. Once I knew, he expected that I’d go rushin’ right off to Nevada—where’d he’d be waitin’ for me.”

“Which is just what we’re about to do,” Matthew said. “So far it seems to me that Bloody Knife’s set the trap and we’re just walkin’ into it.”

“That’s true to a point,” Sully conceded. “But there’s one thing Bloody Knife didn’t count on—somethin’ he couldn’t have known.”

“Which is . . . ?” Matthew asked.

“That we’d have somebody here who knows this area as good or better than Bloody Knife himself. Somebody who could maybe give us a map of the canyon, tell us about the terrain, let us know where we can find water, andwarn us about any dangers.

“Bloody Knife thinks I’m gonna show up there totally helpless, knowin’ nothin’ about the surroundings. But instead, I’ll have the advantage of bein’ prepared. I can face him on his own terms. Thanks to Brendan.” He favored the young archaeologist beside him with a brief look of approval. Brendan shrugged, embarrassed but gratified by Sully’s approbation.

“I’ll certainly provide you with every bit of information I can,” Brendan promised.

“I’m countin’ on it,” said Sully. “Startin’ with a map. Do you have any of the area, or do you think you could draw me one?”

“I have some maps of the region around Red Rock Canyon and Las Vegas made by Captain John C. Fremont, who explored the area in 1844—and I can draw a more detailed map of the canyon itself,” said
“Las Vegas?” Matthew repeated. “Is that a town?”

“It’s the closest thing to a town for miles,” Brendan replied. “Though nowadays all it really consists of is a few scattered sheep and cattle ranches, and an abandoned fort built by a group of Mormon settlers in ’55. For two years they tried to farm the land and mine lead; but finally the harsh elements of the desert—as well as the isolation of the area—defeated their efforts, and they gave up.”

“No surprise there,” Hank spoke up. “Who’d be stupid enough to build a settlement in the desert, anyway?” he added derisively.

“Actually, it wasn’t as foolish a choice as you might think,” Brendan countered. “Back in ’29, a man named Antonio Armijo was leading a party of sixty along the old Spanish Trail from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Los Angeles, in California. While they were camped about one hundred miles northeast of where the fort exists today, an advance party set out to search for water. They headed west over the unexplored desert, and much to their surprise, came across an abundant oasis of spring water. This discovery shortened the Spanish Trail to Los Angeles by allowing travelers to go straight through, rather than around, the desert; and also eased the difficulties of travel for the Spanish traders who used the route. They named the oasis, ‘Las Vegas’—which means ‘the meadows’ in Spanish.”

“This is all real helpful,” Sully told him. “And it’s good to know we’ll have a plentiful source of water when we arrive.”

“But Sully,” Matthew spoke reluctantly. “Southern Nevada—that’s a long ways off. It’ll take days to get there.” He hesitated, then continued quietly, “Anythin’ could happen durin’ that time.” He didn’t elaborate, but Sully understood his meaning.

“That’s true,” he answered. “But Bloody Knife’s only got a couple hours head start on us, at best. Maybe we’ll be lucky enough to catch up to him ‘fore he gets too far. But if not—I’ll go as far as I have to, Matthew—no matter how long it takes. I ain’t givin’ up.”

“Me neither,” Matthew told him promptly. “I’m with you, Sully.”

“Thanks,” Sully said softly, eyeing him with respect.

“I’ll go with you, as well,” Brendan announced unexpectedly. Sully glanced at him, startled.

“You don’t got to,” he said. “This is my fight—no need for you to get involved in it. ‘Sides, I wouldn’t feel right, puttin’ you in danger. You’re givin’ us enough help as it is, just tellin’ us what we need to know and providin’ us with the maps.”

“Maps are a useful tool,” Brendan agreed. “But they can’t replace the advantage of having a personal guide—one who’s traveled the terrain before and knows it inside and out.

“I want to do this, Sully,” he added, regarding the other man intently.

Sully considered it. “Well, I can’t deny you got logic on your side,” he conceded presently. “If you’re sure—then I’m glad to have you along.”

“Good,” Brendan said.

“I’ll ride with ya, too,” Hank drawled.

“That’s decent of you, Hank—but the less people we got, the less chance we have of bein’ spotted,” Sully pointed out.

“This Injun’s dangerous,” Hank said flatly. “You’re gonna need somebody with a sharp eye and a steady hand, to back ya up. Ain’t a better shot in the territory than me. If you’re smart, you’ll let me go with ya.”

Sully studied him for a few moments, then finally shrugged. “All right, you’re in,” he said. “Thanks.”
“Ain’t nothin’,” Hank said dismissively.

“I’ll come too, Sully,” Robert E. offered.

“Thanks Robert E.—I’d feel mighty confident, havin’ you along. But I was hopin’ that you and Grace could help Michaela’s ma watch out for Colleen and Brian while we’re gone. It would set Michaela’s mind at ease when we reach her, to know they’re bein’ well looked after.”

“Sure thing, Sully,” Robert E. replied.

“And speakin’ of Colleen and Brian,” Sully went on soberly, turning to Matthew. “You better get over to the schoolhouse and tell them what’s happened to your ma, ’fore somebody else does. Break it to them as easy as you can. And tell them I promise to bring her back.”

Matthew looked uneasy. “Sully, I know you’ll do everythin’ you can, but makin’ them a promise you might not be able to keep—”

“I’ll keep it,” Sully stated unequivocally. “It don’t matter what I got to go through—I *will* find her, Matthew. And just like that time with the dog soldiers, I swear that I’ll bring her home.”

After a pause Matthew nodded, accepting Sully’s word.

Sully sought out Loren. The older man’s usually taciturn expression had vanished, replaced by a look of distress and concern which touched Sully inside.

“Loren, I’m gonna need several days worth of supplies,” he announced.

“O’ course,” Loren declared, eager to help in whatever way he could.

“And Robert E.,” Sully added, turning back to the blacksmith, “We’re gonna need a horse for Brendan.”

“You got it,” Robert E. said.

A sudden thought occurred to Sully and he appraised Brendan warily. “You, uh—you *do* know how to ride?” he asked.

Brendan allowed himself the hint of a smile. “Though you may not believe it to look at me now, I’m really not the ‘tenderfoot’ you think I am, Sully. I’ve been all over the world, and traveled in or on some very strange or unusual conveyances. I’ve ridden camels in Egypt, and elephants in Burma. Not to mention a pack mule down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. I think I can manage to sit a horse.”

“Camels, huh?” Sully repeated, a ghost of a smile touching his own eyes. “How do you stay put on one of them things?”

Brendan’s smile broadened slightly. “A lot easier than tolerating their evil-smelling breath, or trying to avoid being bitten or spit on,” he answered.

Sully raised an eyebrow. “Camels spit?” he said, faintly amused.

Brendan shook his head ruefully. “You don’t know the half of it. I could tell you stories . . . Perhaps I will, while we ride.”

“Think I’d like that,” Sully told him. “It’ll help pass the time, and keep my mind off . . .” His voice trailed away, the humor dying out of his eyes.

Brendan regarded him sympathetically. “Dr. Mike and I only spoke for a brief time; nonetheless, she gave me a very strong sense of your capabilities, your tenacity—and your devotion to her,” he said honestly. “I’ve come to believe that if anyone can rescue her from this desperate situation, it’s you.”

“Thanks,” Sully answered, unexpectedly moved. “She, uh—she made me see you in a different light, too,” he ventured. “And I know that I probably wouldn’t have a prayer of trackin’ her down if it wasn’t for you guidin’ me in the right direction.”
“I’ll do everything in my power,” Brendan vowed.

Sully nodded. “Well, then—let’s get to it,” he said after a moment. “Why don’t you go back to the livery with Robert E. and get fitted out, while I get the supplies from Loren?” He turned his eyes to the men assembled before him.

“Get yourselves cleaned up, pack your gear, and then meet me back here in front of the clinic in an hour,” he announced to the group.

“And may I advise that you all bring warm clothing?” Brendan interjected. “I know it probably doesn’t seem necessary, judging from the mildness of the weather here in Colorado. Spring in the Canyon is glorious as well; and even the Mojave is quite temperate and blazing with beauty. But the temperatures can drop dramatically when the sun goes down—in the mountains, certainly, but also on the desert floor, which is actually over two thousand feet above sea level. You’ll need to be prepared,” he cautioned.

“Brendan’s the expert here, fellas,” Sully commented. “Whatever he says, goes. And now I suggest we get a move on, before we lose any more time.”

Armed with their instructions, the members of the search party, and those assisting them, departed to make their preparations.

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 3 April, 1870

I made as short a business of getting ready as I could. There were people I needed to speak to before I left to go after Michaela: the children, of course—and Elizabeth Quinn.

I dreaded having to face them. Talking to Colleen and Brian would be especially hard, because I knew all too well what they would be feeling—the shock, the anguish, and most of all, the fear. That terrible, gut-wrenching fear of not knowing where Michaela was, how she was, or—God and spirits help us—if she was even still alive. I’d been living with that fear since the moment I’d found Michaela’s blood-stained cane. It had become a part of me—taking up permanent residence in my heart and soul, like a sickness that had no cure. But sick at heart as I was, I knew that somehow I had to find a way to hide it—to be strong, for the children’s sake. I had to make them believe that Michaela would be all right, and that I’d do whatever it took to find her and bring her back safe. They’d trusted me to save Michaela when the dog soldiers took her. I prayed that they’d trust me now . . . and that I’d be able to honor that trust.

And there was Elizabeth. I wasn’t sure how much she knew—with the way gossip tended to race through town like wildfire, there was no telling what kind of frightening—or quite possibly distorted—version of the facts she’d heard by now. But I could surely make a guess at what she must be thinking.

I felt guilty that I hadn’t been able to seek her out immediately. I didn’t want to cause her worry or pain—any more pain, that is, beyond what I’d already caused through my failure to protect her child and keep her safe. Regardless of her motive for coming out here—even if her intention had been to split us up—I knew that the love Elizabeth bore for Michaela, as well as her fears for her daughter’s safety, were genuine. Whatever else had passed between them over the years—bad as well as good—Michaela would always be Elizabeth’s “little girl.”

But now I had to face Elizabeth with the news that her precious child was missing and at terrible risk from a man consumed with hate and the need for revenge. And I had to tell her that it was all my fault—proving, inevitably, that everything she’d believed about me putting Michaela in danger was true.

I heard Michaela’s voice in my mind—the echo of the plea she’d made mere hours ago for me to forgive myself. It had been easy then for me to promise her that I’d put aside my guilt, when the danger from Bloody Knife was still just a threat . . . when I’d been arrogant enough to think I could stop him from carrying out his vendetta against me. But now that the threat had become reality—now that the woman I loved beyond all reason was enduring the pain that should have been mine—all my guilt and self-loathing came rushing back. Like bands of iron, crushing fingers of despair relentlessly wrapped themselves about me—and I wondered if I would ever be able to break free of their shackles.
I was suffering, but I deserved to suffer—the way Michaela and those who loved her most were suffering now. The haunting question was whether I’d be able to stop that suffering, or whether—through my failure to keep Michaela safe—I had not only signed her death warrant, but condemned myself to an eternity in Hell.

* * * * * * * * * *

They were all waiting for me when I returned to the clinic after cleaning up and making my own preparations for the journey. The torment in Brian’s and Colleen’s eyes cut me to the quick, and I could barely bring myself to meet Elizabeth’s eyes, for fear of what I’d find there.

“Sully, where’s Ma?” Brian burst out before I could even jump down from my horse.

“Matthew said it wasn’t dog soldiers that took her, but he wouldn’t tell us any more than that,” Colleen chimed in anxiously.

“I tried to reassure them that Dr. Mike would be all right, but I thought maybe it would be better if the details came from you,” Matthew explained quietly as I dismounted and tied the reins to the hitching post.

“You were right,” I told him. “I brought all this on—it’s my responsibility.”

Matthew drew me aside. “Sully, that ain’t what I meant,” he said softly, afraid that he’d added to my guilt. “None of this was your fault. You’ve been as much of a victim in this as Dr. Mike.”

“I appreciate that, Matthew. But she’s the one out there somewhere—scared, hurt, maybe worse . . . and none of it would have happened if it weren’t for me,” I replied in low, harsh tones.

“Mr. Sully, what has happened to my daughter?” Elizabeth spoke up at last, unable to contain herself any longer. Her face was white and tense. “Please tell me!”

“I’m fixing to do exactly that, Ma’am. I’m going to tell all of you. But let’s go inside,” I suggested. “What I got to say ain’t for all ears.”

I entered the clinic and they filed in after me. I faced them, gazing at each of their strained, anxious faces in turn.

“Sully, who’d want to hurt Dr. Mike?” Colleen asked miserably. “She’s never done nothing to deserve this.”

“You’re right, she don’t deserve it,” I said. “Truth is, it ain’t Dr. Mike he was after. It’s me he wanted to hurt—and he knew the best way to do it was to go after someone I loved.”

“Who is this ‘he’ to whom you refer?” Elizabeth said, agitated. “Mr. Sully, who has kidnapped my daughter?”

I took a deep breath. “It was Bloody Knife,” I began slowly.

“‘Bloody Knife?’” Elizabeth repeated. “You mean the Indian who—“

“Yeah,” I said. “The Indian who attacked Cloud Dancing and me in the mountains.”

“But I thought he wasn’t a danger no more,” protested Colleen. “After he shot you, Cloud Dancing knocked him out and tied him up. I remember Ma saying he might even be dead, from exposure.”

“That’s what we thought,” I answered. “Truth be told, I guess that’s what we hoped. It seemed like no less than he deserved.

“Fact of the matter is,” I went on gravely, “Cloud Dancing came real close to killing him right there on the spot. If it hadn’t been for the snow starting, forcing us out of the mountains—well, I ain’t sure what Cloud Dancing would have done. I don’t think he really knows himself.

“Point is, last we knew, Bloody Knife was still alive. But for weeks Cloud Dancing couldn’t find out what became of him because he had to stay in hiding from Custer and his men. Finally, though, he got the
chance to go back to where we’d left Bloody Knife—but he was gone.

“Then, last night, I saw Cloud Dancing again, and he told me Bloody Knife was missing. We weren’t sure what to make of his disappearance. He could have got loose on his own, or Custer could have rescued him—or Custer could even have killed and buried him, to try to frame us for his murder. We knew Custer was more than capable of going to those lengths—he even came here to the clinic once and tried to threaten your ma, accusing Cloud Dancing and me of doing something to his scout.”

“I remember that day,” Colleen said softly.

“Yeah, I do too,” I said grimly. “I didn’t know what was going on then—I was still recovering from pneumonia and I’d lost my memories, so your ma wanted to protect me. But after talking to Cloud Dancing last night, I made your ma tell me what Custer had said.” I felt my face flush with anger yet again as I thought of the vain officer without morals or scruples. With an effort, I pushed my hatred of Custer to the back of my mind, and continued with my story.

“But even though we couldn’t be sure what had happened to Bloody Knife, Cloud Dancing had a feeling—a strong feeling—that he was still alive . . . and that he would come back to have his revenge on us,” I went on. “And Cloud Dancing figured that the best way to pay us back—or to pay me back, anyway—would be for Bloody Knife to hurt the people I cared about most. Cloud Dancing advised me to stay close to you all, just in case. Not that I needed his warning—as soon as he told me about Bloody Knife, I knew that I had to guard you and your ma around the clock.”

“That’s why you came back last night,” said Colleen.

“Yeah—and scared you like I did,” I said, my voice tinged with regret.

“It’s all right, Sully,” she said softly.

“I’m grateful to you for being so forgiving, Colleen,” I told her. “But after putting you through such a fright, the last thing I wanted to do was scare you any more. And we didn’t want to worry your grandma unnecessarily. That’s why, even though I told your ma and Matthew the truth, we decided to keep it from the rest of you. It’s also why we decided to move everybody back here to the clinic.”

“That was my fault,” Matthew interjected. “I thought we’d be safer here—that Bloody Knife couldn’t get to us with so many witnesses around. If only I’d thought it through better—”

“You got no call to blame yourself, Matthew,” I said. “It was a good plan, and I agreed with it. We just didn’t figure on Bloody Knife being so hell-bent on his revenge that even a town full of people wouldn’t stop him.”

“But how did he do it, with so many people around?” asked Colleen.

“He started by setting fire to the saloon,” I said flatly.

“Bloody Knife started the fire?” Colleen replied, her eyes widening in shock.

“We’re pretty sure of it,” Matthew told her. “It was the perfect way to get us out of the clinic and away from Dr. Mike.”

“We had no way of knowing when the fire started that it was just a set-up to get us out of the way,” I said. “Even so, I still told your ma to lock all the doors and windows while we were gone. But for some reason—maybe because she didn’t get the chance to go upstairs—the doors to the balcony were left open. We figure that’s how he got in.”

“What happened then?” Brian said tremulously. “It was the first time he’d spoken since he’d asked about his ma, and his eyes were dark and frightened in his pale face. Matthew and I glanced at each other. I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was: that the news of Michaela’s kidnapping was bad enough, without our adding to Brian’s anguish—and Colleen’s and Mrs. Quinn’s—by letting them see the bloody, broken cane, or telling them what we suspected about the confrontation that had taken place. If they had even an inkling of what Michaela might have endured at the hands of this monster, it might push them over the edge completely. It was all I could do to hold onto my own sanity—I couldn’t bring myself to torture Michaela’s children or mother with any more of the truth.
“We ain’t sure exactly what happened, Brian,” I said gently. “All we know is that somehow, in all the confusion from the fire, he managed to get your ma away.

“But there’s one bright spot,” I added, anxious to give them even a small piece of hope. “We found something peculiar on the floor—a strange kind of carved stone that don’t come from anywhere around here. We’re pretty sure that Bloody Knife left it behind, and that it can lead us to where he’s taken Dr. Mike.”

“Do you know what it is?” Colleen asked.

“I had no idea—I’d never seen nothing like it before. But lucky for us, we had somebody here who *did* know,” I answered. “We showed it to Mr. Burke—and he was able to tell us what it was and where it came from.”

“Mr. Burke told you?” Colleen echoed.

“Yes—and I’m obliged to him. Without his help, we’d have no idea where to start looking,” I said, not quite able to keep my eyes from straying to Elizabeth’s. She colored slightly, perhaps guessing that I knew more about why she’d brought Brendan here than she’d realized. But a moment later any trace of embarrassment was gone, replaced by her overwhelming anxiety for her daughter.

“Where has he taken her, Mr. Sully?” she asked.

“To Nevada,” I said.

“Nevada?” Colleen repeated, shocked. “So far away? Sully, are you sure?”

“Mr. Burke was sure,” I told her. “Not only was he able to tell us all about the stone we found, but he was able to describe the place it came from in detail. He’s got photographs of the area, and maps for us to follow—and he’s even coming along with us to serve as a guide.”

“So now you intend to involve yet another innocent person in this nightmare?” Elizabeth burst out accusingly.

I looked at her squarely. “No, Ma’am, it wasn’t my choice to ‘involve’ him. Fact is, I told him just the opposite—I said this was my fight and I didn’t feel right about putting him in danger. But he insisted. If you don’t believe me, ask him yourself.

“But I’ll say this,” I added. “Brendan’s got guts—a lot more than I gave him credit for. He was out there fighting the fire right along with us, even though he didn’t have to risk his safety.

“And he cares about Michaela. He wants to do whatever he can to help me get her back. And I’m grateful. Having him along might just make the difference between success or failure.”

Again I studied their faces, wishing with all my heart that I had the words to take away their pain—that I could promise them beyond a shadow of a doubt that everything would turn out all right. But all could offer them was a vow to do my best—to do whatever was in my power to save the woman so precious to all of us.

There was one other thing, however, that I wanted them to hear. That I needed them to know.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, tears pricking at my eyes. “I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart for everything I put you all through since I first went to find Cloud Dancing. If I could change things, I would—without hesitation. I’d give anything to turn back the clock and stop your ma from being taken. But all I can do is swear to you that I won’t give up till I find her and bring her home.” I turned to Elizabeth.

“You got a right to hate me, Mrs. Quinn,” I said levelly. “I wouldn’t blame you, since all I’ve done is prove you were right in your estimation of me. I never meant to, but I put Michaela in danger, just like you predicted. And I’ll never forgive myself that she’s suffering now for my mistakes.

“But despite all the wrong I’ve done, there’s one thing that’s been true from the start—one thing that
will never change. I love your daughter, Mrs. Quinn. I love her with everything I have, everything I am. Nobody will ever fight harder for her than I will, and I’ll lay down my life for her if that’s what it takes.”

She met my eyes, and I felt like she was looking clear into my soul. “Just bring her home, Mr. Sully,” she said quietly. “No matter what it costs, just—bring her home.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

A short while later the travelers congregated outside the clinic, along with a contingent of friends, neighbors, and a handful of curious on-lookers. Brendan emerged from the building with a saddle-bag slung across his shoulder and crossed to where the horse he’d rented from Robert E. stood waiting. Now that he was cleaned up, his black eye was even more prominent. As he occupied himself attaching the bag to his saddle, Jake eyed him speculatively, then strolled over to him.

“That’s a hell of a shiner you got,” he observed, avidly studying the younger man. “Maybe ya oughta let me take a look at it ‘fore ya go.”

Brendan glanced at him briefly, then turned back to what he was doing. “Thanks, but Dr. Mike attended to it, before—” He broke off, then amended quietly, “It’s all right.”

“How’d ya get it?” Jake persisted, his eyes still brightly curious. A thought struck him, and eyebrows raised, he glanced over to where Sully stood a few feet away, then back to Brendan again. “Run into a door?” he said archly.

Brendan favored him with a dour look. “No.”

“If you must know, Jake, he ran into my fist—but it was all a misunderstandin’,” Sully spoke up coolly as he joined them.

“Oh, yeah?” Jake said with prurient interest. “What was this ‘misunderstandin’” about?” A smug grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Not nothin’ worth repeatin’,” Sully said flatly, quashing any further discussion. Jake took the hint and backed away a step or two, but he continued to regard the two men knowingly.

“We better be headin’ out—ain’t that many hours of daylight left,” Hank announced from where he already sat astride his mount.

“You’re right,” Sully agreed. He started toward where the children and Elizabeth stood on the clinic porch, but was waylaid by Grace and Robert E.

“I packed some food for ya—all the things Dr. Mike likes best,” Grace said kindly, handing Sully a bundle wrapped in gingham. “There’s a few pieces of pecan pie in there—her favorite,” she added.

Sully accepted the package, a pang going through him as he recalled the teasing words he and Michaela had exchanged just minutes before . . . But no, he couldn’t let his thoughts progress past that point or he would surely break down. “Thanks, Grace,” he managed. “She’ll appreciate that.”

“You’re gonna find her, Sully,” Grace told him, her eyes dark and compassionate. “I know it in here—” She tapped her chest. “—and in here,” she said softly, laying her hand briefly over his heart. “Me and Robert E.’ll be prayin’ for ya, and we promise to take good care of the children,” she added.

“I’m obliged—for Michaela and for me. You’re good friends,” Sully responded, regarding them both gratefully.

Robert E. put out his hand. “Good luck,” he said quietly, a wealth of meaning contained in the two small words. Sully grasped the blacksmith’s hand, then Robert E. drew him into a quick, hard embrace. “It’s gonna be all right,” he said as they parted. Sully nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

“Sully!” he heard another voice seeking his attention. He turned as Dorothy came up to him.
“I just—want you to know how sorry I am,” she said, her eyes bright with the hint of unshed tears. Resolutely pinning a hopeful expression on her face, she went on, “Is there anythin’ I can do for you?”

“Thanks, Miss Dorothy, but I think we got everythin’ pretty well covered—“ Sully began, then broke off.

“What do you need?” Dorothy asked intuitively.

He took a breath. “Actually there *is* somethin’, but I don’t know . . . that is, I ain’t sure how comfortable you’d be with doin’ this . . . “ he began slowly.

“Tell me,” Dorothy urged. “I’ll do anythin’ I can.”

“Well, I’m guessin’ you know all about what’s happened?”

She nodded. “Loren told me. I was sick about it—poor Michaela!” Her expression was instantly tinged with regret. “I’m sorry, Sully, I didn’t mean to make you feel worse,” she added remorsefully.

“It’s all right,” he told her kindly. “Michaela’s lucky to have such good friends—me too.”

“We’re lucky to have her—the whole town is,” Dorothy told him. “So—what do you need?” she asked, returning to the subject at hand.

He drew her aside. “Well, what Loren and most of the others don’t know, is that my friend Cloud Dancin’ is involved in all this,” he began in a low voice. Dorothy was nodding again.

“I know,” she said softly. “Michaela confided in me—back while you were still unconscious and she brought you to the clinic. Is he all right?” she added with concern.

“Last I saw of him, he was,” Sully confirmed. “Fact is, it was Cloud Dancin’ who warned me Bloody Knife might try somethin’ like this. I just didn’t figure he’d go so far, or that I wouldn’t be able to stop him—“ He broke off again, his eyes tormented.

“You did everythin’ in your power to protect her,” Dorothy said firmly. “I know that. Michaela does too,” she added gently.

Sully drew another deep breath, forcing the despair back down inside. Meeting Dorothy’s eyes again he continued, “Well anyway, there wasn’t any time to go find him and tell him what’s happened. Plus I was afraid that if he knew about Michaela bein’ taken, he’d insist on comin’ with us, and it’s too dangerous for him. I don’t want him takin’ that kinda risk,” he said.

“I understand,” Dorothy replied.

“Thing is, he’s got a right to know about this. I was tryin’ to think of a way to get word to him after we’re gone. I thought about sendin’ Colleen, but if Custer and the army are watchin’, they might follow her.”

“Do you want me to take a message to him?” Dorothy offered, taking the initiative.

Sully looked at her appreciatively, grateful for her insight. “I know it’s askin’ a lot, but I don’t think you’d raise any suspicion,” he explained. “Still, it could be dangerous. If you’d rather not, I’ll understand.”

Dorothy gazed at him calmly. “Where can I find him?” she said.

“Thanks, Miss Dorothy,” Sully answered, moved by her courage and willingness to help. “Ask Colleen—I told her where to look, just in case.”

“I’ll do that,” Dorothy told him. “There’s just one thing, though,” she added, her face anxious. “Do you think he’ll trust me? After all, I’m little more than a stranger to him.”

Sully slipped off his beaded necklace and dropped it into her hand. “Give him this, and say that I sent you,” he said. “Then he’ll know you’re a friend.”
Dorothy nodded. “Besides tellin’ him the news, is there any other message you want me to give him?” she asked.

Sully was silent, considering. There was so much he wanted to say, and so little time—and mere words seemed so pitifully inadequate to express what he felt in his heart.

“Tell him—I’m sorry,” he said finally. “Sorry that I couldn’t come to him myself, and that I wouldn’t let him come along ‘cause of the danger... and tell him I promise to find him soon as I can, when I—” He hesitated. “—when we—come home.

“Tell him to be careful, to watch out for the army, and—“ He stopped abruptly, then gave Dorothy a small, bittersweet smile. “Never mind,” he said softly. “He’ll know. Just—tell him I’m prayin’ to the spirits to keep him safe,” he finished simply.

“I’m sure he’ll be prayin’ the same thing for you,” Dorothy assured him. “Just like I will.” She covered his hand with hers. “I know you’re gonna find her, Sully.”

Sully managed a smile. “Keep a good thought,” he said.

“Always,” Dorothy vowed. She patted his hand, then walked away.

Sully noticed Loren on the fringes of the crowd, and approached him. “Loren—could you spend some time with Brian while we’re gone?” he asked. “Maybe take him fishin’—help keep his spirits up?”

Loren hooked his thumbs into his vest. “Yeah, I can do that,” he allowed, the sternness of his expression unable to conceal the emotion in his eyes.

“Thanks, Loren,” Sully said respectfully. “I’m obliged.”

“No thanks necessary. Just—watch out for yourself,” Loren instructed gruffly. “And give my best to Dr. Mike.” He turned away, his eyes suspiciously bright.

Finally, Sully made his way to where Brian, Colleen and Matthew waited on the porch. A few feet away, Brendan was taking his leave of Elizabeth, and Sully skirted them slightly to give them their privacy. He reached the children, and knelt down on one knee before Brian. Brian faced him stalwartly, but a shine in his eyes and a slight tremble to his lip betrayed the frightened little boy inside. Sully’s heart went out to the child he was lucky enough to call his “son.”

“You take care of yourself,” he began, propping one arm on his knee as he reached out his other hand to lightly brush the hair off Brian’s forehead. “Keep on doin’ everythin’ you’d normally do, just like your ma would want. Go to school, do your chores, help Colleen and your grandma... But be sure to take time out to have some fun while you’re at it. Go for rides on Taffy, play with your friends, go fishin’ with Mr. Bray—’cause those things are important, too, Brian.”

Brian swallowed hard. “It don’t seem right to be havin’ fun when Ma’s in trouble,” he said softly. Sully regarded him compassionately.

“I know,” he said gently. “But your ma wouldn’t want to think of you bein’ sad. Just try to keep your chin up, Brian—for Dr. Mike. And for me, too.

“You know, you’re gonna be the man of the house while Matthew and me are gone,” Sully added, fighting a lump in his own throat. “I’m countin’ on you to take care of everybody.”

“I will,” Brian promised.

“I know you will,” Sully answered. Bravely Brian stuck out his hand and Sully shook it solemnly. Then impulsively, Brian threw himself into Sully’s arms. Sully hugged him close, feeling the tears threatening again. He could feel the moisture of Brian’s tears dampening his shirt.

“Tell Ma I miss her,” Brian whispered.

“First thing when I see her,” Sully whispered back.
“I love you, Sully!” Brian confided, his face pressed against Sully’s chest.

“I love you too, Brian,” Sully answered, his voice breaking over the words. He gave the boy a final hug, then stood up and moved to Colleen. Tears glimmered in her eyes as well, but she managed to summon a smile for his sake.

“Tell Dr. Mike not to worry—we’ll be fine, and we’ll take good care of things till you can bring her home,” she said. Sully rested his hands on her shoulders.

“Did I ever tell you how proud we are of you—and how grateful I am for everythin’ you did for me?” he asked with a tender smile. “Your ma told me how you helped her take care of me—said she didn’t know what she woulda done without you.

“You’re gonna be a wonderful doctor, Colleen—just like your ma. You’re already a wonderful daughter,” he told her.

“Thank you, Sully!” she said tremulously, and hugged him. He gently stroked her long, blonde hair for a moment, then released her.

“I’ll give Dr. Mike your love,” he said. She nodded, and managed to smile again through the tears that had spilled over.

As Matthew began his good-byes to his brother and sister, Sully turned aside and walked over to Elizabeth, who now stood alone. She regarded him steadily, hands clasped in front of her.

“What I said before, Mrs. Quinn—I meant it,” he stated. “I’m truly sorry for what’s happened, but I’ll do everythin’ in my power to make things right again. I promise I’ll find Michaela.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sully,” she said stiffly after a moment. “Brendan tells me you’re a good man—he says I should trust you.” She gazed at him intently. “Very well. I’m going to trust you, Mr. Sully, with the thing most precious to me—my daughter’s life.”

“I’ll make myself worthy of your trust, Ma’am,” Sully vowed quietly. “I swear.”

“Sully!” Hank said warningly.

“Right—I’m comin’,” he said. He glanced to where Matthew was giving Ingrid a final embrace. “Matthew?” The young man nodded, and reluctantly parted from his fiancee, then climbed into the saddle.

Sully took a last look at Brian and Colleen, then started for his own horse. Suddenly he stopped. “Wait—there’s one more thing I need to do,” he added. Hank rolled his eyes impatiently as Sully walked swiftly over to Robert E. He took the blacksmith aside, and the two men exchanged a few whispered words, then finally, Sully returned to the men who were accompanying him. He untied the reins and vaulted onto his horse’s back, then maneuvered the animal to the head of the group.

“We’ll be prayin’ for you,” the Reverend told them. “God bless you all,” he added, lifting his hand to them in benediction.

With a last farewell glance for those watching, the rescue party moved off down the street, on their way at last to whatever destiny awaited them.

* * * * * * * * * *

Michaela’s head twisted restlessly, a soft moan of agitation escaping her as her eyes rapidly darted back and forth beneath her closed lids. She was with One-Eye again, standing by the creek under the night sky, the stars cold and implacable above. She stared up at the renegade in terror as he loomed over her, his visible eye coldly calculating, his expression a contemptuous leer.

He seized the waistband of her skirt and yanked her toward him. Impotently she tried to resist.

“No!” she gasped, recoiling from his repellent breath, his lascivious look. Suddenly his large hands were on either side of her head, almost crushing her skull in an iron grip. He pulled her head toward his
own as his mouth closed over hers, his snake-like tongue forcing its way between her lips and relentlessly probing her mouth. Disgust and panic surged through her at his assault, her strength no match for his as she vainly sought to fend him off.

Then suddenly he was gone, a figure catapulting out of the night to knock him away.

SULLY! she thought, intense relief flooding through her. But her joy at his appearance turned immediately to fear for his life, as Sully desperately fought One-Eye. Oh God—SULLY . . .

Michaela awoke with a violent start, her body trembling and her tortured mind awash in confusion as she emerged out of one darkness into another.

Crushing pain in her neck and shoulder brought her abruptly back to the present. For a moment the intensity of the pain left her gasping for breath, but gradually it waned, and she was able to take stock of her situation.

She was propped against a rock, her hands and feet bound tightly. Her arms and legs felt numb, the circulation nearly cut off by the cruelty of her restraints. In contrast to the deadened sensation in her limbs, slowly and surely other aches and pains made themselves known, and she became aware of a papery dryness in her throat.

She moved her head gingerly, the tortured muscles in her neck stabbing in protest. Some yards away she saw the bulk of two horses tethered to a clump of bushes. As she listened, the animals nickered softly in the darkness. Beyond her feet a fire burned, sending tiny bursts of sparks spiraling up into the night. But it had little power to warm the icy coldness which permeated her. Bloody Knife sat across the campfire, desultorily feeding twigs and fragments of wood into the flames.

Michaela’s eyes tried to penetrate the pressing closeness of the darkness surrounding her, but her efforts were in vain. There was no way to tell where she was, or even how much time had passed. It could have been hours since Bloody Knife had taken her—or days. She looked up at the expanse of coldly flickering stars blanketing the sky, but they had nothing to tell her.

“Please,” she finally broke the silence, able to muster no more than a harsh whisper over the aridness in her throat. “Some water . . .?”

He eyed her coldly, but after what seemed an interminable hesitation, he reached for a canteen beside him and rose to his feet, crossing over to where she sat. As he approached her and his face was illuminated by the firelight, she could detect a crudely fashioned, blood-stained bandage around his head, beneath his hat. Dried blood caked his temple, and more streaks ran down his neck, disappearing into his shirt collar. She wondered that he could have escaped notice, bearing such obvious evidence of his injury—but could only conclude that he’d taken advantage of the confusion engendered by the fire to get them both away without being seen. Once beyond the outskirts of town, it would have been easy for him to stay off the main roads, traveling exclusively through the woods to avoid detection.

Bloody Knife hunkered down uncomfortably close to her, pulling the stopper from the canteen and holding the vessel to her lips. Michaela drank eagerly, the tepid water blessedly cool and refreshing on her parched throat. Almost immediately, however, he snatched the canteen away; so that instead of assuaging her thirst, the tantalizingly brief drink of water only made her crave more.

But that was the least of her problems. She was a helpless captive of someone who was both violent and vindictive, quite possibly insane—and most definitely unpredictable. She had no way of knowing what his intentions were toward her, how long he intended to keep her prisoner, or even whether he would let her live. Yet strangely enough, she instinctively felt that he did not intend to violate her. He didn’t seem interested in physical relations, or forcing himself upon her. No, Bloody Knife’s interest was not in rape—but revenge.

And it was the thought of Bloody Knife’s revenge which was the source of her greatest fear and worry. The scout had made no effort to disguise his hatred for Sully and Cloud Dancing. From the first moment the Indian had appeared in the clinic, he had repeatedly threatened Sully’s life. Michaela had no doubt that he intended to make good on his threat—that his abduction of her was just a crucial step in an elaborate plot to kill Sully, and perhaps Cloud Dancing as well. Bloody Knife had failed in this mission once—he didn’t intend to fail again.
And powerless as she was at the moment, she had no way of stopping him from carrying out his plans—and yet she had to try. If only she could persuade him to remove her bonds, she could restore the circulation in her arms and legs so that she would be prepared to run, if the opportunity somehow presented itself—as remote a possibility as that seemed to be. But far more importantly, if her hands were free, she might be able to reach her medical bag, and somehow devise a plan to use one of the drugs it contained to overcome her captor.

Michaela gathered her courage. “You should let me treat your wound,” she said carefully. “It could become infected.”

“I already carry the scars you inflicted upon me,” he said darkly. “You will not get a second chance.”

“But I’m a doctor—I can help you—” Michaela ventured again, trying to keep the desperation out of her voice.

“Silence!” he snapped. “You will speak only when I command it.” He stood up suddenly and went to where he had been sitting, picking up something large and roughly rectangular. As he returned to her, the firelight fell upon the object in his hands. Startled, she recognized her medical bag.

He set it down on the ground and thumbed open the catch, sharply yanking the edges of the bag apart.

“Which is the chloroform?” he demanded.

Michaela stared at him in shock. How did he, an Indian scout, know about chloroform? Much more ominously, had he somehow read her mind, or guessed her intentions? Trying to subdue her trembling, she said, “What do you want with—”

“That is not your business!” he said sharply. “Which is the chloroform?” he repeated. “I will touch each bottle—you will tell me when I reach it.” The knife suddenly reappeared in his hand. Tauntingly he held it before her face. “If you refuse to tell me—or if you try to lie—I will kill you and leave you for the wolves. And then I will kill the half-breed when he comes after you and finds what’s left.”

An intense chill pervaded her that had nothing to do with the temperature. She knew that Sully would come in search of her—that he would do everything in his power to find and rescue her, regardless of the cost, or the consequences. She knew all this because she knew Sully. She knew the depth of his love and devotion to her, and his determination to protect and save her from any threat, any danger. He had done it once before with the dog soldiers, and he would do it now. Michaela knew all this in her heart, as surely as she knew her own name.

But Bloody Knife didn’t know Sully. He didn’t know their history with one another, or the profound strength of the bond which connected them. Yet the scout seemed strangely confident of Sully’s actions. He seemed to expect Sully to appear. Did that mean he’d left some kind of clue behind when he’d taken her, to lead Sully into a trap? The thought terrified her, but it seemed the only logical explanation.

She had to find a way to stop Bloody Knife, though it appeared impossible. Which meant that she had to try to discover his plan.

All these thoughts went through her mind in an instant, as the scout stared at her menacingly. Summoning the shreds of her courage once again, Michaela defiantly raised her chin. “What do you know of chloroform?” she demanded in her turn.

“I have seen the army doctors use this white man’s medicine to make men sleep,” he told her. “I will ask you once more,” he added threateningly. “Which is it?” He sheathed the knife, then held the opening of the bag toward her so that she could see its contents. Slowly his fingers touched one container, then the next. Finally his hand fell on a bottle of clear liquid, capped with a black nozzle. Reluctantly, Michaela inclined her head.

Nodding in satisfaction, Bloody Knife withdrew the bottle, along with a length of bandage, then tossed the medical bag aside. Liberally dampening the bandage with the anesthetic, he suddenly put the cloth over her nose and mouth.

“No!” Michaela choked, trying to twist away. But one of his hands snaked around to hold her head immobile as the other hand relentlessly held the cloth in place.
She continued to struggle, but her movements began to weaken as the fumes took effect. Within seconds, her head slumped as she fell unconscious.

Carelessly releasing her so that her upper body fell back against the rock, Bloody Knife retrieved the medical bag and foraged through its contents once again. After a few moments he withdrew another length of bandage, along with a small mirror. He wet the cloth with water from the canteen; then, studying his image in the mirror, he methodically began to wipe the blood from his face and neck.

Several minutes passed as the scout carefully cleaned away the visible evidence of the woman’s attack. Finally done, he critically examined his reflection. With the application of a fresh bandage, and his hat pulled down low, no one would be the wiser.

He had misjudged the woman’s strength and spirit, and so he had been caught unawares. He would not make that mistake again. But it had only been a minor setback, and it would not stop him from going forward with his plan. Even now, the half-breed who called himself Sully was coming in pursuit of him. Sully had feelings for the woman—and those feelings made him reckless, and predictable—and weak. Before too many more suns had set, Sully would arrive at the spot Bloody Knife had selected for their final confrontation. And the scout would be waiting for him.

Bloody Knife would have his revenge upon the half-breed at last—for himself, and for the Son of the Morning Star. Sully would die, as he should have died that night. Perhaps the Cheyenne would be foolish enough to come with him, and Bloody Knife would dispatch them both at once. But if not, he would track down the Cheyenne wherever the coward was hiding, and finish what he’d started.

The scout reached behind him and picked up a bottle of whiskey, two-thirds empty. Biting down on the plug, he yanked it free and spat it out, then up-ended the bottle, draining the contents. He flung the bottle away into the darkness, and heard the muted sound of breaking glass.

Once again Bloody Knife appraised himself in the mirror, his eyes glittering in anticipation.

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 11 April, 1870

We crossed out of Utah into Nevada yesterday. Over halfway there, and yet it feels as if our destination is no closer than when we started. The days blend together, one melting into the next, so that it seems as if we’ve been traveling forever. But as much as I’m haunted by the fear that we’ll never get there—or that we won’t get there in time . . . simultaneously I feel as if I’m sliding helplessly down this steep slope—like what happened when I was on my way to Wrightwood with Loren, and we were crossing the washout. Only this time, there’s nothing for me to grab onto, nothing to break my fall—and it feels like I’m hurtling toward a destiny I can’t control.

It’s been a strange pursuit, with no tracks to find, no trail to follow. And it’s felt odd, having to step back and let Brendan take the lead as he’s guided us along the swiftest, surest route to this place I’ve never seen. But that’s why he’s here, why I let him come along. He knows this country—its mountains and deserts, and stark, stunning landscapes—having traveled way further south than I’ve ever been. I need his help. I need every advantage, to tip the scales back in my favor—to face and defeat my adversary. I’ve got to be prepared, to figure out how the Indian’s mind works . . .

I could make guesses about Bloody Knife’s methods—how he had stolen Michaela and then spirited her away—but that’s all they were, guesses. I didn’t know whether they were riding horses, or traveling by wagon . . . whether they were alone, or the scout had allies. Common sense told me that he would have escaped on horseback; or if he had used a wagon, that he would have abandoned it quickly. A wagon would have been useless to him as he sought to conceal Michaela and himself in the woods and mountains.

And instinct told me that he that he had acted alone. His revenge was an intensely personal thing; something to be savored, and hoarded, like gold. He wouldn’t want to share the pleasure of that with anyone else.
But I couldn’t *know* all these things. Not for sure. And the idea of so many unknowns was nearly as frightening to me as the thought of what Michaela might be suffering at his hands. The only thing I could be sure of was that I dared not weaken, or give in to the black despair that threatened to overwhelm me whenever I imagined the torment Michaela must be going through. I had to keep my mind, and my resolve, razor sharp. I had to maintain my edge—it was all that stood between me finding Michaela and bringing her back safe . . . or losing her forever.

* * * * * * * * * *

“Time for my watch,” Matthew whispered as he crouched down beside me in the still hours of the night. “Go on and get some sleep, Sully.”

“That’s all right—I ain’t tired,” I replied, from where I sat on a log near the campfire, a rifle propped next to me within easy reach. The sight of the weapon was repugnant to me, but at the same time reassuring. Much as I abhorred the thought of using a gun, I needed every advantage, if I was going to defeat Bloody Knife. It was his game, his rules—and I was forced to abide by them, for Michaela’s sake.

A dismal thought struck me. What if I had no hope of winning, because Bloody Knife was holding all the cards? A gambler might win his share of pots—he might even ride a lucky streak all the way into a fortune. But if he pressed his luck too long or too often, he was destined to lose. Because in the end, he could never beat the house.

Matthew joined me on the log. Even in the shadows, I could see concern for me etched on his face. “You can’t keep going like this,” he said. “You think you been hiding it, but I know you ain’t slept more than two or three hours out of twenty-four since we started out, Sully. You ain’t going to be any good to Dr. Mike if you collapse from exhaustion.”

“I know—and you’re right,” I answered, reaching down for a tin cup at my feet and taking a swallow of the contents. The coffee was cold and bitter, and I grimaced in disgust, then dumped the dregs out on the ground. “I try to sleep, but I can’t. I have these nightmares . . .” I left the sentence unfinished, as vague, menacing remnants from my dreams crowded into my mind, sending a chill down my spine.

“Yeah,” Matthew said quietly. “I know what you mean. I have bad dreams too, sometimes. Even so, Sully, you got to try to get some rest.” He sighed. “If only we had Dr. Mike’s medical bag, maybe you could take something, help you sleep . . .”

I shook my head in the darkness. “No, Matthew. Even if we had the bag, I wouldn’t take nothing. It might make me groggy or slow my reflexes, and I couldn’t risk that. My mind needs to be sharp—I need to be ready, in case . . .” Again I left the thought unspoken.

“Lack of sleep slows your reflexes too,” Matthew pointed out. “Sully, you got three able-bodied men with you. We all got guns, and we’re ready to fight. Let us help you—that’s why we’re here.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s just—we’re here because of me. I’m the one Bloody Knife wants, and I feel like I got to be the one to do this.”

“I understand,” Matthew replied. “And nobody’s stopping you. But we’re here to back you up, Sully. You ain’t going into this alone—we won’t let you.”

“That an order?” I asked, a faint smile tugging at the corner of my mouth.

Matthew gave me a crooked smile in return. “If need be,” he said.

“Well, you don’t got to go that far,” I told him. “I’ll try to get some rest—you got my word. But . . . not just yet, Matthew—all right?”

He nodded, and the two of us sat without speaking for several minutes. Presently he said, “You feel like talking—or would you rather I left you to yourself?”

“No!” I said quickly. Too quickly, I guess, because he shot me another look of concern.


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well, it takes my mind places I'm scared to go."

“We're all scared for her, Sully,” Matthew said softly.

I stared down at the ground. There was a short, stout length of twig lying between my feet, and mechanically I picked it up, rubbing it back and forth between my palms. “I hate this,” I muttered darkly. “I hate that I did this to you—and to the kids, and Mrs. Quinn. To Michaela . . .” My fingers suddenly tightened around the stick, and with a crack like a muffled gunshot, it snapped in two. Seeing the broken pieces in my hands reminded me eerily of Michaela's shattered cane, and in revulsion, I threw the two halves away.

“YOU didn't do it, Sully!” Matthew exclaimed in a sharp whisper, forcing me to raise my eyes to him. “Bloody Knife did it! Custer did it! It ain't your fault. You didn't ask for any of this and you ain't to blame.”

Part of me registered and was grateful for what he was saying, but the rest of me . . . I lifted my chin and stared ahead into the darkness, smug with its secrets.

“I set all this in motion,” I said fatalistically. “I stared Custer right in the face, and I told him I was headed up into the hills—to go hunting!” I gave a short, bitter laugh. “How could I have thought for even a second that he'd buy that? That he wouldn't know I was on my way to Cloud Dancing?

“Cloud Dancing was a fugitive, Matthew,” I said hoarsely. “He had a price on his head, and I all but marked out a trail for Custer and Bloody Knife to follow! I lead them to Cloud Dancing—I caused this.”

“Sully— Matthew attempted to interject.

“Your ma begged me to wait,” I went on reproaching myself, oblivious to everything save my own guilt. “She asked me to hold off leaving a day or two till Custer wasn't watching so close. But I refused. I said Custer would be too suspicious if I stayed on in town. I thought I knew it all. If only I'd listened to her . . .”

“Sully, you can't keep blaming yourself for what's over and done with,” Matthew reiterated. After a moment he added, “What would Dr. Mike say if she could hear you now?” Finally his words started to sink in. Again I thought about Michaela telling me not to punish myself. So easy to say, but so hard to do . . .

I was silent for a time, but presently I began speaking again, almost without realizing I was talking aloud.

“I never knew a woman like your ma,” I ruminated softly. “I been around a lot in my life, seen my fair share of places—and women. But never anybody like Michaela. Beautiful, and elegant . . . but at the same time, smart as a whip and full of fire. So passionate about her work and her patients . . . so loving and tender—but with a healthy dose of stubbornness thrown in just to keep things interesting.” I smiled a little. “You know, she looks so small and delicate, like a stiff breeze would blow her away. But she's got this amazing strength running through her—this will of iron. I never knew a woman so strong, and so brave, but with such a gentle heart.”

“That's Dr. Mike,” Matthew agreed.

“You know, I think she fell in love with me right off,” I confided, unable to keep just a trace of smugness out of my tone as I thought back to our beginnings together. “Even if she couldn’t say it straight out till she came back from Boston. But as for me . . . well, I pretended to myself that I didn’t feel anything, for a long time. I tried to make myself believe that we were just friends, because I guess I couldn’t admit, even to myself, that I could love someone again after Abagail. And we were so different, your ma and me. I just couldn’t imagine that we could make a life together.

“But truth is, Matthew, I loved her her too—from the moment I first saw her fall flat on her face in the mud.” I smiled again, the pleasure of the memory fleetingly blotting out the anguish of the present. “I lost my heart to a woman with dirt on her face and mudstains all over her fancy Boston dress . . . and a yard of spunk.” I took a ragged breath. “I thought we’d have all the time in the world—but now . . .”

“You can’t give up, Sully,” Matthew said firmly. “You’re just feeling low right now because you’re worn out, and it’s been a long trip, with a ways still to go. After you get some rest, things will look
“We’re going to make it, Sully. We’re going to find Dr. Mike, and we’re going to bring her home. Then the two of you will get married, just like you planned. You got to believe, Sully, same as you been telling me.” He laid a hand on my shoulder. “Go on and get some sleep,” he urged again, his voice kind.

Reluctantly I nodded, recognizing the wisdom of what he said. I rose to my feet.

“’Night, Matthew—see you in the morning,” I said quietly.

“’Night, Sully,” he answered, looking up at me sympathetically.

I moved around the fire to my bedroll, lowered myself to the ground, and stretched out. Lacing my fingers beneath my head, I stared up at the distant stars, wondering if Michaela was seeing them as well. After a bit I closed my eyes, and reached out to her with my thoughts.

I’m coming, Michaela, I promised her. Hold on, Sweetheart—just a little longer. I’m coming . . . Eventually, I slept.

* * * * * * * * * *

I came awake suddenly, bolting up from my pallet, the remnants of the dream clinging to me like a shroud.

Matthew was by my side in an instant. Hunkering down next to me, he said, “Sully—you all right?”

My mind was fogged with confusion. Unable to tell where the dream left off and reality began, I didn’t immediately answer.

“Sully!” Matthew repeated urgently.

“Yeah—yeah, I’m all right,” I responded finally, the dissorientation slowly dissipating from my mind.

“You have another nightmare?” Matthew persisted.

“I—ain’t sure,” I said hesitantly, mentally trying to grasp the rapidly receding images. A fragment suddenly came clear, and my eyes widened. “No,” I amended after a pause. “No, this dream wasn’t the same as the others.”

“Want to talk about it?” Matthew encouraged.

I shook my head, in uncertainty rather than refusal. “I don’t remember much,” I responded slowly. “Except—” I shut my eyes tight, straining to bring the elusive memory into focus. “I was dreaming of . . . of water,” I finished wonderingly, opening my eyes again and staring at Matthew.

“Water?” he repeated. “You mean, like water you drink?”

I was silent, still pondering the curious recollection.

“Well, that don’t seem so strange.” Matthew went on when I didn’t answer. “We’re headed for the Mojave, after all. Maybe you were dreaming you were stuck out in the desert without any water,” he suggested.

“No, that ain’t it,” I replied, the images becoming slightly clearer the longer I thought about them. “It was water like . . . like in a lake, or a stream. Or a waterfall.”

“Well, at least that don’t sound so scary.” Matthew’s tone was positive.

“No, not scary,” I echoed. “But I don’t know what it means—and I feel like I should,” I added, looking at him earnestly.

“I wouldn’t worry yourself,” he said with confidence. “I’m still wagering you were thinking about being in the desert before you fell asleep, so your mind conjured up pictures of lakes, and rivers and such.”
“Maybe so,” I allowed, feeling more doubtful as the scraps of the dream continued to fade. “But—for just a minute there, it was so clear, Matthew. I was standing before a waterfall, watching it cascade down from this low mountaintop . . . I could even hear it, splashing on the rocks below. And I felt mist on my face . . .”

“Maybe you were remembering somewhere you been in the past,” he suggested. “You’re still getting your memories back, right? Maybe you visited this place once, and it’s just now coming back to you.”

But I was already shaking my head. “No, I never been there,” I said emphatically. “I’m sure of that. And I pretty much recall everything from the past three years now.

“No,” I repeated, sure about this much, if little else. “No, this was something different.”

“Well, you ain’t going to solve it now,” Matthew said reasonably. “It’s just a couple hours till daylight. We got another long day of riding ahead. Take advantage of the time to get a little more shut-eye.”

“I guess I should try,” I conceded, relaxing slightly. But my mind continued to hold onto the image, worrying at it, unable to let it go. Instinctively I knew I’d get no more sleep this night. But I didn’t want Matthew worrying about me, or watching me like he thought I’d take leave of my senses any moment.

I lay back down on the bedroll, and crossed my arms over my chest. “Wake me at sunrise,” I requested, closing my eyes.

“Sure,” he said, and I felt him stand up and move away.

I lay in the predawn silence, visions of splashing water and frothy spray tumbling endlessly through my mind.

* * * * * * * * * * 

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

And so the days slipped past, the miles slowly and surely piling up behind them. Sully realized that if the situation hadn’t been so desperate, he might have enjoyed such a trip—traveling someplace he’d never been, indulging the wanderlust that remained alive inside him, despite the commitment he’d made to Michaela and to himself to live a different sort of life.

Brendan had said the spring was glorious in the Canyon and the desert, and the vistas which met Sully’s eyes constantly fulfilled the promise of the young archaeologist’s words.

Though the ominous cloud of Michaela’s fate continuously hovered over him, Sully couldn’t help but feel a sense of wonder as they left the familiar contours of the Rockies behind, and the slope of the land leveled out to vast, arid plains and endless sand dunes, as far as the eye could see. Forests of blue spruce, Douglasfir and Rocky Mountain cedar gradually gave way to pinyon pines, juniper and willow, and the ubiquitous Mojave yuccas and Joshua trees. The groundcovers of chokecherry, mountain mahogany and oregon grape holly soon disappeared; to be replaced by beaver tail, cholla and barrel cacti, and red barked manzanita shrubs. Likewise, wild orchids, spiderflowers, and the beautiful yellow pond-lily so common to the mountain lakes and ponds in the higher elevations of the Rockies, eventually yielded to creosote bushes, goldenbrush, yellow-throat phacelia and white forget-me-nots dotting the desert floor.

Yet Sully was gratified to see some familiar “friends” as well, such as prickly pear; and—unexpectedly—even glimpses of ponderosa pine, flourishing within the sheltered canyon walls of a peak Brendan told them was known as Bridge Mountain.

There were delightful surprises, too—almost like “gifts” offered up by the desert and the canyons to explorers intrepid enough to find them—such as the fiery orange glow of globe mallow, which Brendan told them served as forage for the big horn sheep, while simultaneously adding a brilliant touch of color to the landscape; and the vivid reddish-purple flowers of a plant Brendan called redbud, enhancing the sandstone outcrops.

The nearer they drew to their destination, the more their eyes were beguiled by the red, yellow and white-striped escarpments of sandstone on the horizon; their summits dwarfed in turn by the darker gray
limestone of the Spring and La Madre Mountains rising behind them. The dramatic formations shimmered tantalizingly in the distance, the unusually clear quality of the light making them appear deceptively close. Etched starkly against the brilliant blue of the southern sky, the craggy mountain peaks and more softly rounded domes of the sandstone bluffs beckoned them onward.

As they rode along, and often when they made camp for the night, Brendan made good on his promise to keep them entertained by regaling them with tales of his travels and archaeological exploits—talking of excavations in Egypt, France and Greece, as well as sharing vignettes of his other explorations in the southwest. One evening, as the four of them sat grouped around the campfire, he told them of a journey he had undertaken to China, describing his awe when he first viewed the Great Wall, and relating curious experiences, such as being ferried through the narrow, teeming streets of Hong Kong in a chair on wheels called a “rickshaw;” or sailing in the harbor on a boat with four-cornered sails known as a “junk.”

“Junk—that’s the word for it,” sneered Hank, with his characteristic prejudice toward anything or anyone Chinese.

“You’re entitled to your opinion, of course Mr. Lawson,” Brendan noted politely. “But while you’re being so smug, may I point out that the Chinese are descended from an ancient civilization whose sophisticated culture predates our own by thousands of years?”

“Well, if their culture is so much better than ours, then they got no call to be comin’ over here, do they?” Hank contested scornfully. “Let ‘em stay where they belong.”

“Let’s not get started on this,” Matthew cautioned.

“Just givin’ him my opinion,” Hank said, unfazed by Matthew’s warning. “I never met a Chinaman yet that was good for nothin’,” he added for emphasis.

“What about the hundreds of Chinese that have been employed in constructing the railroads?” Brendan pointed out. “Are you suggesting that they haven’t made a valuable contribution?”

“Yeah—stealin’ jobs from honest, hard-workin’ men!” Hank shot back.

“Hank!” Matthew said sharply. The saloon keeper raised an eyebrow at the latter’s temerity in challenging him. “Not everybody here feels like you do,” Matthew amended more quietly after a moment, striving to keep the situation from erupting into an argument.

“Perhaps it *would* be best to change the subject,” Brendan conceded diplomatically, earning a grateful look from Matthew, but regarding Hank with disdain.

“Hey, you brought it up,” Hank retorted.

“Anybody want more coffee?” Matthew offered hastily, lifting the pot from the flame. Without waiting for an answer, he busied himself refilling their cups.

Sully had been sitting silently throughout this exchange, only half-listening to the mild bickering between the men. Now that it appeared a potential quarrel had been averted, he stood up and strolled away from the group. Matthew thoughtfully watched him leave, but didn’t attempt to follow. Despite Sully’s aversion to being by himself some nights ago, Matthew recognized that this time, his friend was choosing solitude, needing time by himself to clear his head, or perhaps seek a small measure of serenity. Privately Matthew was deeply grateful that they were near the end of their journey—not just for Dr. Mike’s sake, but for Sully’s. Truthfully he didn’t know how much longer Sully could bear up under the strain of his worry and guilt. Though their arrival at Red Rock would thrust them into danger, at least the situation would finally have some kind of resolution. One way or the other, it would soon be over—and then, maybe, Sully might be able to find some peace.

Sully kept walking until he’d left the distant murmur of their voices far behind him. He had tried to put on a front for them, had tried to join in on their conversation. But he couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t sit still. Finally he had been forced to surrender to his restless need to be on his feet and off by himself.

Irrational as it was, inwardly he had begrudged every moment sacrificed by stopping to make camp, or any other delay they’d encountered which slowed him from reaching Michaela. He recognized that his impatience and unwillingness to rest were both unreasonable and unrealistic. Periodic stops for rest and
...food were obviously necessary—for the horses, and certainly for their riders.

And for himself, as well. Sully knew that, without Matthew having to tell him. But for days he’d had little or no appetite, and he’d continued to resist the thought of sleep—dreading the nightmares which he could never remember when he awoke, but which always left him with a residual feeling of panic. It was true that the dreams weren’t always bad. His dream of the waterfall had also been recurring with more and more frequency. But even that dream had been equally maddening in its way, because he had yet to figure out its meaning—if in fact, it had any meaning at all.

Even more intense than his fear of the dreams, however, was the constant compulsion that had been driving him to keep pushing onward, to reach their destination as soon as possible. They’d already been on the road better than two weeks; and as Matthew had observed before they left, in all that time anything could happen. Over and over Sully found himself thinking of when Michaela had been abducted by the dog soldiers—of what she’d endured, and how close she had come to being violated by One-Eye. Even now, a year later, it still chilled him to think what might have happened if he hadn’t been there to prevent it.

But thanks to the spirits, it hadn’t come to that. He “had” been there. He’d rescued Michaela, and brought her back relatively unharmed, apart from the superficial wounds she’d suffered. The other wounds—the ones she carried on the inside—had no doubt been slower to heal. But she had survived the experience. She’d gone through hell, and come out on the other side.

He had thought neither of them would ever have to face such a trial again. But he’d been wrong. The nightmare was repeating itself. Only this time, she was so much further away, so far beyond his reach. The thought which struck terror into his heart was whether she was permanently beyond his reach. Beyond saving.

A great weariness suddenly descended on him, seeming to leech the strength from his limbs and the vitality from his spirit. Directly ahead of him a tumbled collection of boulders crouched in the darkness, one broader and flatter than the rest; and with a deep sigh, Sully made his way over to the weathered rock and sat down.

He was doing it again—letting himself sink into despair, even though he’d sworn to himself that he wasn’t going to let the emotion overtake him. Even worse, he was indulging in self-pity. It shamed him to admit it, but the truth was that as desperately as he’d been worrying about Michaela, he’d been feeling equally sorry for himself. He’d persisted in playing the martyr, castigating himself over and over for his mistakes. And while that might have provided him with a perverse sort of satisfaction, it had done nothing to help her. On the contrary, he might have even harmed Michaela further, by allowing self-recrimination to steal his focus from the only thing that mattered: getting her back.

Sully recalled something he’d heard once—a proverb from the Bible, he thought—about not making a graven image of one’s mistakes. But that was precisely what he’d been doing—what had, in fact, initiated this entire nightmare. He hadn’t been able to live with his memories of the past, and so he had let it affect his present. He’d been so desperate to escape his guilt and grief that he’d blocked them out altogether—and in so doing, he’d not only seriously harmed himself, but also hurt all the people he loved most. And now, he was letting his emotions impede his ability to find and rescue the woman he loved.

It was affecting him in other ways, as well. Matthew had been watching him more and more closely of late, clearly questioning his state of mind. And Sully had to admit there was good reason. Many times recently, in the privacy of his thoughts, he himself had questioned his ability to get through this ordeal without cracking under the strain. After all, he’d only just recovered from another kind of mental breakdown—wasn’t it only natural that Matthew and perhaps the others would wonder about his sanity now? Still another and even more dismal question occurred to him: Could he even be sure he *had* recovered? Or was this malaise of fear and guilt just another symptom of the illness which had nearly destroyed his relationship with Michaela?

Nervous adrenaline shot through him, and again Sully rose and paced restlessly. If only he knew more about the circumstances of Michaela’s abduction . . . if only he knew more about Bloody Knife’s intentions, what he was capable of. Then perhaps he wouldn’t feel so helpless. At least when Michaela had been taken by the dog soldiers, he had been able to track them, and later, keep them in sight. It had been only a matter of time before he’d found an opportunity to act.

But this time, it was like Michaela had vanished off the face of the earth. They had good reason to believe that Bloody Knife had taken her to Red Rock, but even that was a supposition. The fact of the
matter was that this entire expedition had been mounted on the basis of a hunch. But what if he’d misread the signs? What if he’d been wrong? Would Michaela pay for his mistake with her life?

Michaela, he thought to her in his mind. Speak to me—tell me where you are. You helped me find you once before. Help me now. I don’t think I can do this all alone . . .

Send me a sign, he implored. Let me hear your voice or feel your thoughts. I need to feel you, Michaela. I need to feel that you’re alive—that I haven’t lost you. You’re my heart, you’re my soul . . . I can’t lose you.

Can you hear me, Michaela? he thought. Are you there?

He stood very still, tipping his head back and closing his eyes, clearing his mind and listening for the voice that he ached to hear. For a long time all was silent; yet a subtle sense of expectation began to steal over him, like a portent of something coming. Calmly he waited. Slowly, an image began to appear in his mind’s eye. Ghostly at first, it gradually solidified, and he saw the waterfall again. In front of him was the sheet of cascading water, its muted thunder filling his ears as it boomed on the rocks. He felt the spray bathing his skin, the sensation so real he unconsciously raised his hand to his face to feel if it was wet.

But his hand froze in midair as the vision shifted. Suddenly he was there—actually there!—climbing over the rocks which descended to the pool at the base of the waterfall, carefully negotiating their slippery surface as he gingerly worked his way down the slope to the bottom of the gorge. The massive barricade of water plunged relentlessly downward, crashing on the boulders and sending up huge gouts of spray that soaked his skin and clothing. The roar was nearly deafening as he skirted the pool and waterfall, and edged his way into a hollow between the rushing cascade of water and a dark opening in the face of the cliff. A cave . . .

He could feel the pounding of his heart as he stared at the hidden cavern. Involuntarily he began to tremble; then, taking a shuddering breath, he ducked his head to go through the entrance—

The vision was gone. He was standing in the aridness of the desert once again, alone under a vast blanket of remote, indifferent stars.

But there was a dampness on his cheeks. Sweat, no doubt. Perhaps even tears. Or could it be, possibly, droplets of mist . . .?

Sully’s shocked eyes stared into the darkness. “Oh, my God,” he muttered aloud. Why hadn’t he seen it sooner? How could it have taken him so long to understand?

He looked up into the night sky. “I heard you, Michaela,” he whispered. “Loud and clear. I’ll find you. Hold on just a little longer. I promise I’ll find you . . .”

He took off for camp at a run.

MY JOURNAL
Saturday, 15 April, 1870

Their heads snapped up and they all stared at me in shock as I burst into camp. I stood there breathing hard, trying to get my wind. Matthew looked at me in alarm.

“Sully! What is it?” he said urgently. “Is it Dr. Mike? Did you see something?”

“Yeah—no—I mean, not exactly,” I managed between gulps of air.

“Clear as mud,” Hank remarked sarcastically, from where he reclined against a large rock. His usual cigar was pinched between thumb and forefinger.

I ignored him, fixing my eyes on Brendan. “I need to talk to you,” I said abruptly.

“Of course,” he said, still looking somewhat startled.
“Are there any waterfalls in Red Rock Canyon?” I asked in a rush.

He looked taken aback at my unexpected question, but recovered himself quickly. “Uh, yes—several,” he responded after a moment. “Some plunging hundreds of feet down the bluffs. But many of them are only transitory.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, they’re created from the seasonal rains pouring out of cracks in the sandstone monoliths,” he explained. “Along with numerous rock pools, watering holes and a host of streams and creeks. But many of these waterfalls and other bodies of water dry up as summer comes on,” he added.

“Well, are there any that are permanent—that are there year-round?” I persisted.

Again he looked a little disconcerted. “I believe—there’s one that I know of,” he said slowly.

“What’s it called?” I asked.

Brendan shrugged. “It doesn’t really have a name,” he said. “But it empties into First Creek Canyon.”

“Do you got a picture of it in your book?” I said tensely.

He hesitated. “Quite possibly,” he allowed. “But I took a great many pictures of the region, Sully, and I didn’t include all of them for publication.”

“Well, check in the book anyway!” I demanded. I could hear how desperate I sounded, but I couldn’t help it. My eyes were riveted on Brendan as he quickly reached for his saddlebag and opened the flap. He drew out his book and opened it, leaning in closer to the fire so that the light fell on the pages as he rifled through them.

Roughly a quarter of the way into the book he stopped. “Yes! Here,” he said briefly. I circled the fire to where he sat. Kneeling down beside him, I took the volume from his hands and followed his pointing finger to the image sharply etched in light and shadow. A narrow cascade of water crowned with scattered rocks bisected two immense boulders, emptying into a calm, clear pool. It was a pretty sight, but only a smaller, paler echo of the waterfall I’d seen.

I sat back on my heels, crushing disappointment descending on me like a giant weight. “No, that ain’t it,” I said bleakly. “It must be one of them ‘transitory’ ones,” I added to myself.

“What’s all this about?” Hank said, his eyes narrowing, but again I paid him no heed.

“Sully . . . I know that you dreamed about a waterfall,” Matthew began uneasily. “But—”

“Dreamed?” Hank repeated incredulously as he flicked the butt of his cigar away. I saw the glowing ember describe a spiral in the darkness before it disappeared. “That’s it,” he stated acidly to no one in particular. “He’s finally snapped.”

“Shut up!” Matthew said. He turned back to me. “Sully—”

“I’ve dreamed about the waterfall a lot more times since that night, Matthew,” I told him, as if Hank hadn’t spoken. “But this time, it was much more than a dream.”

“What was?” he asked, his wary eyes searching my face. “What’s happened, Sully?”

“I know where she is,” I announced, regarding him levelly.

He bit his lip. I could tell he was trying hard to give me the benefit of the doubt, but I could also see the misgiving in his eyes. “How do you know?” he asked carefully.

“Michaela told me,” I said quietly, again knowing how it sounded, but not caring. “She sent me a vision.”
Hank uttered an explosive oath and jumped to his feet. “He’s crazy!”

“I told you to shut up!” Matthew snapped at him.

“Don’t tell me you ain’t thinking the same thing!” Hank retaliated. “I see the way you look at Sully sometimes, like you’re expecting him to lose what little marbles he’s got left.”

“That’s uncalled for,” Brendan said coolly.

“What are *you* defending him for?” Hank replied derisively. “You got roped into this wild goose chase same as I did.”

“I didn’t get ‘roped into’ anything,” Brendan contradicted him sharply. “I volunteered of my own free will.”

“Just like you, Hank,” Matthew said coldly.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t have if I’d known how unhinged he was,” Hank said scornfully, with a derogatory look at me. “Face it, Matthew—Sully wasn’t that tightly wrapped before he cracked up—and he’s even crazier now than he was then. This whole godforsaken trip was based on his harebrained idea.”

“You didn’t think it was so harebrained when you decided to come,” countered Matthew, his eyes hostile.

“Well, I do now,” Hank maintained stubbornly. “But a hell of a lot of good it does me, stuck out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“You want to turn back?” I challenged him. “Be my guest.”

“If it weren’t for Michaela, I would,” he retorted. “It’s a sure bet she ain’t going to get out of this if she has to depend on any of you.”

“I’ll take care of Michaela,” I said threateningly, my eyes drilling into his and my hands curling into fists at my sides.

“Like ya done so far?” he taunted.

I lunged at him and Matthew and Brendan jumped between us. “Back off—both of you!” Matthew exclaimed, restraining me while Brendan grabbed hold of Hank. The two of us stared at each other belligerently.

“Matthew’s right,” Brendan agreed, with a wary eye on Hank. “We won’t accomplish anything by fighting among ourselves or hurling insults.”

I took several deeps breaths, trying to calm myself, and then focused my attention on Matthew. “You agree with him?” I asked bluntly, jerking my head sharply toward Hank. “You think I’m crazy?”

“Of course not—” Matthew said reflexively.

“—but you got your doubts,” I finished. I could see guilt warring with loyalty in his expression. “It’s all right,” I went on more quietly, saving him from having to answer. “I know how all this sounds. But I ain’t lost my senses, Matthew, in spite of the way it seems.” I was silent for a moment, thinking how to phrase my words. “You remember when you went on your vision quest?” I said finally. “What you saw—what you went through?”

Matthew’s expression altered, and I saw a flicker of comprehension in his eyes. “Yeah,” he said solemnly.

“Did it seem like it was real?” I went on.

He nodded slowly. “It felt real,” he said.

“I should have known—things ain’t bad enough, and now you’re dragging Injun mumbo-jumbo into
“Why don’t you be quiet long enough to hear Sully out?” Brendan spoke up.

“I think you’ve all gone soft,” Hank said flatly. “Sun must have cooked your brains.” He twisted away from Brendan and strode over to his horse. Reaching into his saddle-bag, he withdrew a bottle of whiskey and yanked the cork free. He took a long pull of the contents, staring at us in contempt.

I disregarded him, caring only about convincing Matthew that I hadn’t folded under the strain.

“There’s something else,” I said to him. He waited. “Did I ever tell you how I found Michaela when she was taken by the dog soldiers?” I asked. “What is was that led me to her?”

“No . . . but Dr. Mike did.” His tone was respectful.

“Did you believe her?” I went further, watching him carefully.

“Yeah,” he answered after a moment. “I believed her.” I looked closely into his eyes, and saw he understood.

“If it’s not too personal,” Brendan ventured. “May I ask—?”

I gave him my attention. “I’ll tell you—but you’ll probably end up agreeing with Hank,” I warned him. “Besides, you hardly know me. You got no reason to believe what I say—especially after the bad blood between us.”

“Why don’t you try me?” Brendan suggested mildly. “I always try to keep an open mind. And I usually have good instincts about people.”

“What are your instincts telling you now?” I said quietly.

His clear eyes stared calmly into mine. “That I want to hear what you have to say.”

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I looked at him speculatively. “Are you saying you’re willing to believe I had a vision just now?” I asked after a pause. “That’s a lot to take on faith—especially from somebody who’s practically a stranger to you. Not to mention that it ain’t no secret I had some . . . problems . . . not so long ago. Problems that might make certain people—” I glanced pointedly at Hank, then back to Brendan. “Maybe even most people—question whether I’ve taken permanent leave of my senses.”

“Well, it’s obvious something happened to you tonight,” Brendan replied, his tone matter-of-fact. “And I believe I’ve seen enough of the world and its mysteries, that I’m not prepared to dismiss the possibility that you might have received some sort of—communication—which can’t be logically explained. With regard to the ‘problems’ you spoke of, however,” he went on. “Dr. Mike told me something of what you endured; and quite frankly, I wouldn’t characterize being stricken with amnesia as ‘taking leave of your senses.”

“Well, it ain’t so much the amnesia, as what brought it on,” I admitted reluctantly.

“Grief?” he said perceptively.

“For the most part, yeah,” I conceded.

“How can any of us know how we’d react if faced by a devastating loss?” he asked reasonably. “There’s isn’t a right way or a wrong way to grieve, Sully, as far as I know. I’m certainly no physician, or a specialist in maladies of the mind—” He smiled slightly. “I leave all that to my brother. But I do know this: there are many kinds of pain—and not all of them are physical. And it seems to me that blocking out your memories was your way of putting a bandage over your pain—much the way Dr. Mike bandages a wound. And just as a bandage protects a wound and allows it to heal, your amnesia protected you, allowing you to heal until you were ready to face the pain of your memories again.”
“That’s—kind,” I managed.

“I’m gratified you think so,” he responded. “But I’m simply being honest. We needn’t pursue the subject any further—I realize that it’s intensely personal and I don’t wish to intrude on your privacy. I only expressed my opinion so you’d know that I have no intention of letting your recent history prejudice me toward you now.”

“I’m obliged that you’re willing to give me a fair hearing,” I said.

“I think everyone deserves that,” he replied. “But I must confess that you’ve also piqued my curiosity. I’d like to understand more about your rescue of Dr. Mike after her previous abduction, as well as your experience a short time ago.”

“Well truth is, I still ain’t sure that you won’t change your mind, after you’ve heard me out,” I allowed.

“But you were willing to trust me this far—to come along on this trip even though it might put you in danger. I figure the least I owe you is an explanation of what you’ve got yourself into.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“Well, this should be interestin’,” Hank said complacently, the whiskey apparently having mellowed—if not necessarily altered—his disposition. “Course, I outgrew fairy tales a long time ago,” he scoffed.

Matthew left Sully’s side and walked up to Hank. “You know, I’m gettin’ pretty damned tired of all your smart remarks,” he commented sharply. “No matter what you think of Sully, the fact is that the woman he loves—that he’s gonna marry—is in terrible danger. He’s scared for her—real scared. We both are. Least you could do is remember that and keep a civil tongue in your head.”

“It’s all right, Matthew,” Sully said calmly. “I’m obliged for your support, but I can fight my own battles.”

“Just lettin’ Hank know what I think of him,” Matthew replied to Sully, his gaze fixed on the saloon keeper. He spared a fleeting glance for the whiskey bottle in Hank’s hand. “Gettin’ drunk don’t help matters neither,” he added contemptuously.

Hank stared down at Matthew from the superior height of his lofty frame. Pinning the young man in his sights he said slowly and deliberately, “I don’t get drunk.”

“That right, Hank?” Sully spoke again, joining the two men. “Then how would you describe what happened at Horace and Myra’s engagement party? You came real close to shootin’ somebody that day—maybe worse. You gonna claim that you weren’t drunk out of your mind at the time?”

“And you came close to killin’ me!” Hank retorted hotly.

“That’s true,” Sully acknowledged. “And I regret it. I didn’t mean to hit you so hard. But somebody had to do somethin’. You were out of control.”

“What’s it like bein’ perfect, Sully?” Hank said bitterly. “Standin’ there in all your self-righteous glory, passin’ judgement on all the rest of us?”

“I ain’t perfect—as you been takin’ every chance to point out,” Sully responded. “And it ain’t my way to throw a body’s sins up to him, or judge him for past mistakes. I just wanted to remind you that we all go through bad times, and do things we regret afterwards. But I ain’t holdin’ you to blame for somethin’ that’s over and done with, and it ain’t fair for you to do it to me.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t drag you hundreds of miles on a fool’s errand!” Hank said sharply.

“And I didn’t threaten to shoot Myra!” Sully retaliated. “But that was then, and this is now. Maybe I
am on a fool’s errand,” he went on more quietly. “Maybe I ain’t. But for what it’s worth—and I know that’s nothin’ far as you’re concerned, but still . . . I don’t believe this trip is a mistake. I read the signs, best I could, and they pointed to Red Rock. And tonight, I believe I had a vision from Michaela, leadin’ me to where she is. If I’m wrong, it’ll be on my head, and somehow I’ll have to live with it. But fact is, this is all we got to go on.

“So I’m gonna keep to this path, and follow my instincts wherever they lead me,” he concluded. “If you don’t want to come any further, that’s your choice. Nobody’s stoppin’ you from leavin’. But if you’re willin’ to stay on, I could use your help.” He met Hank’s eyes squarely.

The saloon owner was silent for several moments, staring back at Sully, taking his measure. Finally, with a shake of his head, he set the liquor bottle aside. “So what’s all this about ‘visions’ anyway?” he said grudgingly.

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Sully nodded, satisfied that now everyone, Hank included, seemed willing to listen. He was silent for a few moments, thinking about where and how to begin. Presently he glanced at each of them, and started speaking.

“Of course Matthew remembers Michaela’s kidnappin’ last year, and most likely Hank recalls it too,” he began. “And I know that you’re already aware of some of what happened back then,” he added, addressing the latter part of his remark to Brendan. The other man looked surprised.

“That’s true—but how did you know?” he asked.

Sully suddenly remembered that he’d come by this information when he’d eavesdropped on Michaela and Brendan talking together, and he flushed in embarrassment. He was fleetingly grateful for the darkness, which largely hid his discomfiture. He considered admitting his transgression to Brendan—it would certainly be the honorable thing to do—but concluded that being honest at this point would serve no useful purpose. For one thing, he didn’t want to risk losing Brendan’s respect when the other man seemed so willing to hear him out, despite how unorthodox—even unbelievable—his claims might be. But far more importantly, there was a much graver issue at hand than the childish act he’d committed in a fit of jealous pique, and none of them needed their attention distracted now from what truly mattered.

“Michaela told me a little about her talk with you,” he answered finally, hoping that Brendan hadn’t noticed his hesitation or visible discomfort. Brendan regarded him with a look that was mildly speculative, as if to suggest that he *had* noticed, but had decided not to call Sully on it. As if he’d reached the same conclusion as Sully—that the present circumstances were far too serious to allow any previous and minor wrongdoing on Sully’s part to interfere.

“Go on,” was all he said.

Inwardly relieved, his respect for Brendan’s decency and discretion rising another notch, Sully began to talk, first relating the mysterious bond which had led him to Michaela a year ago, and then describing the startling phenomenon he’d experienced just a short time before. He tried not to overly magnify the mysticism of each experience, wary of straining Brendan’s and Matthew’s credulity, not to mention incurring more of Hank’s derision. Nonetheless he wanted to make them understand the certainty he felt inside—that indescribable “something” which told him he was on the right track.

Eventually Sully finished speaking, and waited for their reactions. Matthew and Brendan looked thoughtful, and even Hank seemed to be mulling over what he’d heard, rather than dismissing Sully’s words outright. Matthew was the first to break the short silence.

“I can understand how real it must have felt to you,” he ventured, referring to Sully’s vision of the waterfall and the hidden cavern. “But Sully, how can you be sure that Dr. Mike was in that cave that you saw? You said you didn’t get a chance to see inside, ‘fore the vision ended.”

“I can’t explain it in any way that makes sense,” Sully readily admitted. “I don’t got the words for it. It was just a feelin’. But a powerful feelin’. No—more than that,” he corrected himself. “It was a *knowin’*—deep in my gut. I’m sorry—I can’t put it any better than that.”

“Was it the same feeling you had during the events a year ago?” Brendan asked.
Sully nodded. “Without a doubt. The only difference is that last time, when Michaela was with the dog soldiers, I could hear her voice. But this time, it was like she—planted a picture in my mind. A picture that somehow—for just a few moments—became real. But the feelin’—the ‘sense’ of her I got each time, was the same.”

He looked at Brendan candidly. “So—do you think I’ve gone round the bend, or I’m a few logs short of a load, or whatever?” he asked.

Brendan shrugged, looking tranquil. “Well, if I were to accuse you of being crazy, then I’d have to accuse Dr. Mike of being the same,” he said frankly. “And I’m hardly about to do that.

“No, Sully—I don’t think you’re crazy,” he concluded. “I trust your instincts.”

Sully felt relief wash through him. Well, that’s one, he thought. He turned to his stepson.

“And what about you, Matthew?” he asked. “How do you feel?”

“I’m with you, Sully—you know that,” Matthew answered.

Sully smiled slightly. “Thanks, I appreciate it. But bein’ loyal to me and thinkin’ I might have lost my senses ain’t quite the same thing. You can tell me the truth, Matthew. I’ll understand.”

“You ain’t crazy, Sully,” Matthew said honestly. “I didn’t think so before and I don’t believe it now. If you’re convinced that this place you saw is where Bloody Knife took Dr. Mike, then I accept that.”

Sully nodded, touched by Matthew’s trust. Two on my side, his thoughts came again. But convincing Matthew and Brendan was relatively easy. Now came the hard part. He faced the tall saloon keeper, preparing himself for the worst. “Well, that just leaves you, Hank. I ain’t foolish enough to think you’re gonna be as willin’ to go along with all this as the others. But you got a right to speak your piece.”

Hank pushed a stray lock of his long, blonde hair behind one ear, then stalled for time a bit longer by sticking a fresh cigar between his teeth and lighting it with a match he pulled from a small box in his breast pocket. He puffed aggressively on the cigar to get it going, then exhaled an impressive plume of smoke. Cocking an eyebrow, he regarded Sully levelly. “Ya know me,” he spoke at last. “I ain’t much of a one for believin’ in things I can’t touch or see. I deal in what’s real—it’s how I always lived my life. And I gotta admit that I’d feel a heap better about these ‘stories’ of yours if I could ask Michaela for her version.”

“If you could do that, we wouldn’t be here,” Sully pointed out quietly. Hank looked back at him.

“Yeah,” he conceded after a pause, his voice and expression subdued. The toe of one boot scuffed restlessly in the dirt. Hank was silent for several moments, and Sully could almost sense the struggle between belief and disbelief going on in his mind. Presently he went on, “I ain’t sayin’ I accept all this. Ya gotta admit—it’s a lot to swallow. Most folks would call it a bunch o’ hogwash,” he added almost defiantly, as if to justify his objections.

“True,” Sully agreed. He looked into Hank’s eyes and nodded slightly, beckoning him to continue.

“But—I’ll say this much,” Hank finally allowed. “Maybe . . . ya ain’t as out of your head as I thought.”

“That’s comfortin’,” Sully said wryly.

“All right—ya ain’t crazy,” Hank capitulated. “Leastways, not any more than the rest of us, I reckon. And since that stone and your—‘vision’—“ He grimaced as he spoke the word. “—are the only clues we got to follow—“

“You sayin’ you’re stickin’ with us?” Sully interrupted.

Hank gave him his familiar cocky grin—slightly muted, but as devilish as always. “Well, somebody’s gotta go along to keep ya’ll out of trouble,” he said.

“And you figure you’re the one to do that, huh?” Sully replied, feeling a sneaking regard for the rangy saloon owner, in spite of himself.
Hank shrugged. “Who else?”

“Well, whatever the reasons, I’m obliged for the help,” Sully said. “And now that we got that settled, we need to talk about the next step—figurin’ out exactly where this waterfall is.”

“Which brings up something I’d been meaning to discuss with you,” Brendan spoke again. His tone was hesitant. “I chose not to say anything before now, so as not to add to your burdens. But I’m afraid it’s an issue which needs to be addressed before we reach our destination,” he added uncomfortably.

“I’m listenin’,” Sully said.

“Well, to put it simply, it’s a question of vast distance, and limited resources,” Brendan began reluctantly.

“Meanin’ . . .?”

Brendan sighed. “Meaning that even though we’ve narrowed the focus of our search to the vicinity of Red Rock Canyon, we’re still talking about a mountainous area that easily encompasses between fifteen and twenty miles,” he explained. “There are numerous escarpments, mountain peaks and canyons—not to mention the many waterfalls caused by the spring runoff, which I spoke of earlier. The fact of the matter is that it could take a very long time to cover the entire area, Sully—especially among only four of us. While I don’t doubt the veracity of your vision, unfortunately it gives us no clue as to the location of this particular waterfall. And though you described this place to us in impressive detail, I regret that as diligently as I’ve been going over it in my mind, I don’t recognize it,” he concluded unhappily, obviously fearing that he was dashing what little reason for hope that they had.

Matthew and Hank also looked sober.

“To be honest,” Matthew said slowly, “I’d kinda been wonderin’ about that myself—more even since we’ve come within sight of Red Rock and I’ve seen how big it is and how far it stretches. I didn’t want to cause you more worry either, Sully, but . . .” His voice trailed off.

For once Hank was quietly restrained, but his expression made it clear that he agreed with the others.

“You’re both right—it’s a serious task we got facin’ us,” Sully responded after a moment, his expression equally solemn, but containing none of the defeat that they had feared. “I ‘spose it almost amounts to lookin’ for a needle in a haystack. But all I can tell you is what I’ve said since the beginnin’—no matter how far I got to go, or how long it takes me to find this place, I ain’t quittin’. I can’t.

“And who knows?” he added after a pause. “Maybe what I saw before—maybe it ain’t the only vision I’m gonna get. If Michaela reached me once, she can do it again. Maybe Michaela’s gonna give us the help we need.”

Immediately Sully saw a shadow of concern return to Matthew’s face, while skepticism crept back into Hank’s eyes. Brendan’s expression was neutral, but Sully didn’t need to be a mindreader to guess that he had the same doubts as his companions.

“You all don’t need to look at me like that,” he said drily. “I ain’t sayin’ I expect to get more visions from Michaela, and I sure ain’t pinnin’ my hopes on somethin’ like that happenin’ a second time. I’d give anythin’ to feel her close to me again, but I figure it was a miracle she could reach me at all, and I’m grateful. And now I’m the one who’s gotta do the work, takin’ the clue she sent me and makin’ the most of it.

“I’ll do it alone if I got to,” he stated frankly. “But I’d rather have your help, if I can get it.

“I guess it all comes down to a matter of trust,” he concluded quietly. “Me trustin’ my instincts that Michaela’s alive and in this place I saw in my mind—and you all trustin’ in me to get us there. Question is: are you willin’? You come this far—do you trust me enough to go the rest of the way?”

MY JOURNAL
They gave me the benefit of the doubt. They all agreed to keep going, even knowing the difficult—maybe even impossible—challenge we faced. While Hank took first watch, I lay on my pallet and pretended to sleep, while I pondered it all.

I hadn’t really been surprised by Matthew, whose loyalty I could always count on—or even Brendan, who’d been unexpectedly open-minded and understanding, in spite of the rocky beginning we’d had. But Hank—now there was a revelation. Only a short time before we’d been at each other’s throats, hurling insults back and forth. Hearing him call me crazy and berate me for bringing them all out here on a wild goose chase had been especially hard—since I’d spent so much of my own time punishing myself over Michaela’s kidnapping, and anguishing over whether I was doing the right thing, dragging everybody so far from home all on the strength of one mysterious clue and a fragile theory about Bloody Knife taking Michaela to Red Rock. Receiving the vision from Michaela had restored my faith to a large degree—but just because I believed in it, didn’t mean the others were obliged to. Fact is, as outlandish as it must have sounded to them, it’s a wonder they didn’t all turn tail and run straight back to Colorado Springs.

But no. They chose to cast their lot with me, even though it seemed to fly in the face of all reason. In Hank’s case, I suspected that his decision to stick around had a lot more to do with his admiration for Michaela, than any loyalty he felt to me—but the reasons weren’t important. If he cared about Michaela and what happened to her (and I had no illusions about his feelings in that regard—I’d seen a certain look in his eye more than once in the years since Michaela had come to town)—then he’d fight for her to his last breath. Think what you would about Hank (and I’d thought plenty—and said it too, from time to time), he was a man of conviction. If he made up his mind to do something, then he’d see it through, and damn the cost.

It was an unexpected quality in a man who seemed to go out of his way to foster his reputation as a scoundrel. Hank had spent a lot of years cultivating his villainous image, and he was proud of it. Fact is, I think he would have sooner faced a firing squad than ever admit to doing a “good deed” for anybody.

And yet I knew that a lot of his bravado was just a sham—a pose he maintained to hide that small kernel of kindness lurking at his core. Of course he’d deny it. The mere idea of anybody thinking he was “soft” was enough to horrify him. But as hard as he worked to disguise that part of his nature, I knew he had some decency inside, even if you had to look real deep to find it. I’d seen the proof, more than once. Like the time Michaela and I had to collect samples of water contaminated by mercury from Harding’s Mill. Hank had been a member of the search party dispatched by the town to warn us we were in danger of getting shot; and from what I heard later, he’d done more than his share of grumbling about having to come to our rescue. (At least they *thought* they were rescuing us—though it was more like the other way around, when we had to lead them back to town after they got hopelessly lost.) But the fact remained that he did try to help, despite all his bluster.

And there was last Christmas, when the Jewish family came to Colorado Springs. Loren, Jake, and plenty of other folks had been against them—had done everything in their power, in fact, to drive the Frankels out. But Hank had refused to have any part of it. It turned out a Jewish family had saved his life once when he was caught in a blizzard, and the experience had marked him. Hank was no saint—far from it. He carried a lot of grudges around inside him, like the way he felt about the Indians, the Chinese and the immigrants. But he also possessed his own brand of integrity, convoluted though it might be. He never forgot a debt, or a kindness.

Hank also had a son—whose existence he’d managed to keep secret for a lot of years after the boy’s ma died when the child was five. But when the woman Hank paid to take care of his son also passed on a few years later, the truth about Zak, and the identity of his father, finally came out.

On the face of things, it seemed like a cold and heartless act for Hank to turn his back on his son—letting somebody else raise him, and not even letting on to Zak that he was his pa. But there had been reasons for Hank doing what he did. And maybe, in his way, he’d believed he was doing Zak a kindness.

Zak’s mother, Clarice, had been one of Hank’s “girls.” And though Hank had loved her, they hadn’t been married, and there were no prospects in that direction. Hank had known what it would be like for Zak growing up—the whispers and vicious gossip, the pointing and staring—if folks knew about his parents: his ma an unmarried prostitute, his pa the owner of the saloon where she “entertained.”

And Zak was . . . slow—for lack of a better or kinder word. Something having to do with a problem
when he was born. It made him a target of folks’ cruelty, even before they found out the truth about Hank being his pa. I think maybe during those years after Clarice died, Hank had figured to spare Zak some suffering, by keeping him out of town and out of sight.

The one thing Hank hadn’t figured on was caring so much for his son, which made him admit the truth about being Zak’s pa to protect him from the townspeople who wanted to put Zak away in some asylum. Hank had been prepared to raise Zak, even knowing that the saloon was no place to bring up a young boy.

But the unexpected discovery that Zak possessed artistic talent, had changed all that. Michaela had contacted an art school in Denver, and it turned out they were eager to welcome the child. He would be able to live there while he learned and developed his skills, and his pa could visit whenever he wanted.

It was a happy solution, and a lucky one, solving a lot of problems. I figure it was mostly a relief for Hank—the life he lived hardly allowed much room for a child, and Zak was clearly better off going away to school. But if the school hadn’t been an option, Hank would still have been willing to do what he could to make a life for Zak—just like he’d provided for the boy all his life. I believe he loved Zak—and that he was proud of him.

Yeah, there was more to Hank than met the eye. He cared about folks—certain folks—a lot, and he wasn’t afraid to put himself on the line for them, if he had to. He was here with me now—which surely proved something. And despite how ornery he could be at times, I was still grateful to have him on my side.

Which brought me back to our present situation. Thinking about Hank had diverted me for a while from my worries about Michaela, but it hadn’t helped me to solve my own problem: how to find one waterfall among many, in a mountain range that stretched across the landscape for better than fifteen miles.

The others had been right—tracking down the waterfall without any clue as to its location wouldn’t be easy. Fact was, it would be damn hard. But we would do it. We had to. My mind and my heart wouldn’t accept any other outcome.

But without anything to point me in the right direction—and in this case, not even Brendan could help me—I had to come up with another way to ferret out where the waterfall could be.

It seemed like the only way I was going to manage it, would be to put myself in Bloody Knife’s shoes—to try to think like he did—repellent a prospect as that was. I lay there and thought about Bloody Knife. I thought about him for a long time.

From the moment Brendan told us the origins of the stone (or “petroglyph” as he’d called it), I’d known that Bloody Knife’s abduction of Michaela hadn’t been an impulsive act. While for days I’d lain close to death from pneumonia and the bullet he’d nearly put in me; and then all those weeks after when I’d been unconscious of the threat he posed to us because of the amnesia . . . he’d watched, and he’d waited . . . his hate crystallizing more every day as he conceived and plotted his revenge.

Likewise, his selection of a remote and distant place like Red Rock had been no accident. He’d wanted his revenge over me, but he’d also wanted to stretch it out . . . to sweeten it by toying with me and prolonging my suffering.

But why he’d felt the need to go clear to Red Rock to accomplish his purpose, I couldn’t say. As Hank had pointed out only this afternoon while we rode along, there were plenty of other places—equally unknown to me but a heck of a lot closer—where Bloody Knife could have lured me. I hadn’t been able to give Hank an answer then, and I didn’t have one now. But I let my mind explore the question for a bit.

The first thing that occurred to me was that Red Rock Canyon might be significant or special to Bloody Knife in some way. Perhaps it had been a place of conquest for him, where he’d won a great victory in battle—and he wanted to repeat his triumph by defeating yet another enemy on the site of his former glory. Or—it could have been the opposite. Maybe he’d suffered some kind of defeat or degradation here—and he wanted to wipe out the shame of his previous failure by finally killing me, as he’d sought to do on that fateful night. Or maybe . . . it was neither of those things.

I sighed. Truth was, there could have been any of a dozen reasons why Bloody Knife had picked the place he did—and crazy as he was, his choice didn’t have to make any sense. Which was the thing about
him that scared me the most. With his mind so twisted, there was no telling what he might take it into his head to do to Michaela. What he might already have done . . .

Sweat broke out on my brow and my stomach lurched sickeningly, threatening to bring up the acid remains of what little I’d had to eat. Desperately I breathed deeply, willing the nausea away. I couldn’t let Hank see me being weak—puking my guts out as if I didn’t have the stomach for what lay ahead. The fragile confidence I’d worked so hard to elicit from him would evaporate like dew in the morning sun.

Gradually the feeling of sickness faded, and the sweat dried on my clammy skin. I continued to take deep breaths, trying to clear my mind of everything save my consideration of Bloody Knife’s actions.

Mentally I reviewed my facts. The scout had spent weeks formulating his malicious plot; and when the time had come to execute it, his plan had gone off without a hitch—except maybe for Michaela managing to wound him—if in fact she’d been the one to hurt him, rather than the other way around. But even allowing for being injured, he’d still succeeded in stealing her away, so for all intents and purposes, he’d gotten away clean.

Except—he hadn’t. That was the strangest and most vital part of this mystery. He could easily have escaped with Michaela, with none of us the wiser or having any idea where he’d gone—but he hadn’t. Instead, he’d left a clue behind. Granted, the clue—the stone—was obscure, and he must have known it might take a lot of doing on my part to find out what it was and where it had come from. But he’d also known I wouldn’t rest till I did. And that then—I’d come after him.

So his trap was set to lure me hundreds of miles away to the mountains and desert of Nevada, where he’d triumph over me at last. The thing was, he also knew it would take a long time for me to reach him—the days crawling past while he was forced to wait for his revenge. Why would he be willing to postpone that pleasure? To make me sweat a little longer? Maybe. But even Bloody Knife couldn’t wait indefinitely. By now, he had to be as impatient as I was—all but salivating for the conclusion of our end-game.

My thoughts returned to the waterfall. As I’d said to the others before we’d left Colorado Springs, Bloody Knife couldn’t have known we’d have someone to guide us to Red Rock. And he surely couldn’t be aware of the vision Michaela had somehow sent me. As far as he knew, we faced a nearly impossible task in tracking him down somewhere within this vast stretch of mountains. And fact was, even with the advantages we had, the prospect of finding the scout under these conditions was daunting.

Except—if Bloody Knife made it impossible for us to find him, he would never achieve the revenge he wanted so desperately. He wouldn’t win.

So, knowing all this, would he have selected a place so well concealed that we might never come across it? Or would he have hidden in plain sight, choosing a spot I couldn’t help but find? He’d controlled every aspect of this tragic drama since he’d set it into motion. It stood to reason he’d carefully planned the final act as well.

I couldn’t be sure if any of my speculation was true. But something in my gut told me I was right—that I’d had a glimpse into the darkness in his heart and seen the truth.

There was less than twenty miles left to go till we reached the sandstone foothills of Red Rock. If we kept a steady pace—and I would let nothing delay us now—we would get there well before sundown tomorrow.

That feeling of “knowing” came over me again. I couldn’t say why I suddenly felt so certain, but I knew it in my heart—and in my soul. Tomorrow . . . we would also find the waterfall.

Tomorrow would be the day of reckoning.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“Sounds like wishful thinkin’ to me,” Hank commented as Sully finished sharing his insights from the night before. The barkeep emptied what remained of his coffee over the guttering campfire. A cloud of
steam arose, coupled with an audible hiss which filled the predawn quiet.

“I know that’s how it sounds,” Sully conceded, pulling on his gloves. There was a rose-colored glow in the eastern sky as the sun began to emerge above the mountain peaks, but its rays were still too weak to counteract the night’s lingering chill. This would change within an hour or so, but for now, he shivered slightly beneath his buckskin coat. “I mean, think about it,” he continued, strolling over to where Hank now stood by his horse, tying his bedroll to the saddle. “Bloody Knife waited all those weeks to set his plot into motion, and then waited even longer for us to get out here. He had this whole thing planned from the start, but by now he’s gotta be gettin’ impatient to bring it all to an end. ‘Sides, he already left a clue to lead us to this spot. So why would he make it hard for us to find him now that we’re here?”

“My point exactly,” Hank replied, lighting his first cigar of the day. “He’s been waitin’ a long time. He’s good at it. Most likely enjoys it, too, leadin’ us by the nose like we was a bunch of dumb jackasses, followin’ a carrot on a stick. Seems to me he wants to stretch out the torture long as he can.”

“He’s getting’ his pleasure out of this, and no mistake,” Sully agreed grimly. “I ain’t arguin’ that. I’m just sayin’ that things are reachin’ a head now. He’s been expectin’ me for a long time, and he’s ready to finish me off. And I got a gut feelin’ that it’s gonna be today.”

“’Nother one of them ‘visions’?” Hank inquired, regarding him with a mildly jaundiced eye.

Sully returned Hank’s skeptical look with a frank one of his own. “No, not this time,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Just common sense—along with a hunch about what makes him tick.”

“It sounds like a valid conclusion to me,” Brendan remarked, joining them.

“Me, too,” offered Matthew.

“Mighta knowed you’d both agree,” Hank said drily.

“You sayin’ you don’t?” Matthew asked.

Hank shrugged. “Ain’t sayin’, one way or the other. Just warnin’ ya not to get your hopes up.”

“One thing you can count on Hank—far as Bloody Knife goes, I got no illusions about how dangerous or deceitful he is,” Sully said flatly. “And I’m prepared for anythin’.”

“Then we’d best get to it,” Hank advised. Sully nodded, and the four men mounted their horses. With Sully and Brendan in the lead, and Matthew and Hank following, they set off on the final leg of their journey.

* * * * * * * * *

She was cold. She was so cold. The damp and clammy chill seemed to penetrate every bone in her body, and she felt as if she would never be warm again. Beyond the mouth of the cave, the barricade of relentlessly plunging water created a constant white noise that roared in her ears. She yearned for silence, but had almost forgotten what that sounded like—or didn’t sound like—she thought wryly, amazed that she could find even a particle of humor—black though it might be—in her desperate circumstances.

Michaela knew she should try to move, to stretch her limbs, but her mind and body recoiled from the prospect. Her arms and legs were no longer bound, but that made no difference. Scarcity of food and water had made her appallingly weak, and frequent drugging had left her feeling groggy, disoriented, and sick.

A thin blanket covered her, but it provided little warmth. Nor did she need to look beneath it to know that she was swimming in her clothes. It frightened her a little to think of how much weight she’d lost; of how much this ordeal had sapped her strength. There were also the effects of exposure to consider. Every limb, every muscle in her body ached from the damp, and she found herself wondering if she might permanently suffer from arthritis after all this was over—assuming, of course, that she survived at all . . .

She looked down at her hands, the flesh transparent, her fingers thin and clawlike. Gingerly she tried to flex them, and moaned softly at the explosion of pain. She thought of the time Colleen’s fingers had become frostbitten from exposure to the cold of the mountains. Michaela had feared she might have to
amputate Colleen’s hands to save her life, though mercifully that hadn’t proved necessary. Colleen had recovered.

But would she end up suffering a fate similar to the one she’d managed to avert for her daughter? Would she lose the use of her fingers to arthritis, or worse; and thus be forced to give up her career—her life’s blood? Tears slipped unbidden down her cheeks as soundlessly, helplessly, she began to cry.

A moment later a surge of stubbornness washed through her, and she awkwardly wiped at her face with the backs of her hands, blotting the tears away. Weeping would do her no good. And dehydrated as she was, she knew she couldn’t afford to waste even a fraction of her body’s diminished resources.

For the moment she was alone. Bloody Knife had disappeared on some unknown errand, confident in the knowledge that she wasn’t going anywhere. And even if she could have summoned the strength to move, to leave the cave—where would she go? She was somewhere in the desert—she knew that much—but the knowledge was useless to her. Repeated exposure to the chloroform had robbed her of large blocks of time, as well as completely confusing her sense of direction or distance.

At the thought of the chloroform, her stomach turned over. It had become like a part of her now. The odor was constantly in her nostrils; her hair and clothing reeked of it. Again, she thought of the future. Would she ever be able to use chloroform on a patient again—assuming her hands didn’t suffer permanent damage—assuming she even lived?

Stop it! she told herself angrily. Indulging in self-pity didn’t help—it certainly wouldn’t get her out of this.

And there *was* a way out of this—there *had* to be. She couldn’t accept that Sully had triumphed over so much suffering—that they both had—only to be vanquished after all.

Sully. As her mind spoke his name, as she pictured his face, a torrent of longing for him flooded through her, and she couldn’t prevent the hot tears which scalded her cheeks once again. She had tried to avoid thinking about him, because the thoughts were too painful. As desperately as she yearned for him, as much as she prayed for him to appear, she was equally terrified for him. She knew he would come after her, that he would let nothing stop him from rescuing her. But the price of her survival might be his death. Perhaps even her own, in a way—because if Sully forfeited his life to save hers, she wouldn’t want to go on. She might continue to exist, for the children’s sake, but it would be a mockery of life—cold, sterile and empty.

Michaela tried to push the thoughts of Sully from her mind. But even as she made the attempt, she realized that the effort was futile. Because even if she avoided thinking of him consciously, she couldn’t prevent him from filling her dreams.

The dreams. They had been her constant companion since all this began—her only means of escape. At first they had been a jumbled collage of memories—bits and pieces of times she and Sully had spent together, random fragments of conversations and exchanges of loving words and embraces between them. But a few days ago—she couldn’t say how many—a different sort of dream had come to replace the others. One in which she saw Sully in the desert beneath the blanket of a vast, velvet sky sewn with stars. At first he was alone, but suddenly she felt herself by his side. She reached out to touch him, but her form was ghostly, transparent, and her hand passed right through his body.

He seemed to be calling out for her, pleading with her to tell him where she was. She wanted to answer—oh, how desperately she tried!—but to no avail. Just as he couldn’t feel her touch, he couldn’t hear her voice.

She thought it was useless; that there was no way to reach him, no way to let him know that she was there. Because she wasn’t there—not really. Her mind and heart might be with Sully, but her physical body was far away, marooned in a cold, dank cave screened by a powerful waterfall. How could she tell him where she really was? How could she help him to find her, when the location of her “prison” was as much a mystery to her as it was to him?

But then, miraculously, something of what she was thinking or feeling seemed to communicate itself to him. His eyes widened with knowledge, and he looked up into the night sky and spoke to her. Only a whisper, but his words sounded like a clarion in her mind. He had heard her—and he would find her.
The dream always ended at this point, leaving her heart soaring with hope—until she awoke and was reminded once again of her bleak reality. It was a beautiful fantasy, but no more than that. And she couldn’t pin her hopes on a fantasy.

As the familiar feeling of devastation which always followed the dream claimed her yet again, a shadow darkened the entrance to the cave, and Bloody Knife entered. Warily she watched him approach. As he drew closer to her, she noticed an unusual expression on his face—one she hadn’t seen before. Suddenly it came to her. He looked . . . happy.

The scout knelt down beside her, his eyes bright and alive with expectation.

“What it it?” she managed apprehensively, her voice little more than a croak. Bloody Knife stretched out his hand and stroked her cheek lightly with his thumb. Michaela tried not to flinch.

“He comes,” the Indian said.

“I don’t like this,” Hank said grimly several hours later as they picked their way across the desert floor, its sandy, hilly surface carpeted with scrub, cacti and scattered rocks. He glanced up uneasily at the sandstone and limestone peaks that circled them on three sides. “I feel real exposed out here—like we’re bein’ watched.”

Sully knew what he meant. He had been experiencing the same sensation the last couple of miles or so, but he hadn’t been sure if the feeling was genuine, or just paranoia fostered by the knowledge that they were now so close to their adversary.

His eyes traveled over the unending crags, folds and hollows in the peaks and domes surrounding them. Thousands of places where somebody could hide, where he could watch . . .

“He probably*is* watchin’,” Sully said aloud, glancing back over his shoulder at Hank. “That’s what I’d be doin’, if I was him. ‘Sides, his line of sight stretches for miles. No way he could avoid spottin’ us out in the open like this.” He drew back slightly on the reins and brought his horse to a stop. The others followed suit, Hank pulling up alongside him.

“That’s *sposed to make me feel better?” Hank asked Sully dourly. Again he squinted up at the mountains ahead from under the brim of his dusty black hat. “We’re lined up here like a row o’ tin cans on a fence, just waitin’ for him to pick us off.”

But Sully was shaking his head. “No—that ain’t the way he’s gonna do it.”

Hank looked at him pityingly. Obviously he believed Sully to be hopelessly naïve. “Injun’s crazy—he ain’t stupid,” he said flatly. “This is his chance. Ya really think he’s gonna pass it up?”

“Yeah, that’s what I think,” Sully responded. He maneuvered his horse around so that he was facing all three of them. Leaning forward over the animal’s neck he said, “Don’t you get it? It’s too easy. Pickin’ us off from a distance—like he was a sniper—that’s the coward’s way. ‘Sides, where’s the challenge in that? Where’s the reward?

“Bloody Knife went to a lotta trouble to set this up—to bring me all the way out here,” Sully went on. “And he’s a warrior, don’t forget that. He wants to meet me in battle—to confront me face to face. He wants me to know who it was who defeated me.”

“Well, that’s all right for you, but what about us?” Hank argued. “What’s to stop him from killin’ the rest of us so you and him can have a clear field?”

“That’s a possibility, I guess, but—“ Sully began.

“Ya ‘guess?’” Hank interrupted, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Pretty free and easy with other folks’ lives ain’t ya, Sully?” he added caustically.

Sully drew a deep breath, holding onto his temper. “What I was *gonna* say, is that it’s possible he might do that—but I don’t think he will. Too much potential for somethin’ goin’ wrong, for one thing. He
might manage to take down one or two of us, but it’s still four against one. At least one of us could probably hit him before he managed to get the rest. ‘Sides, he’d be givin’ away his location, makin’ it easier for me to track him, and that might spoil his plan. He wants to get the drop on me, not the other way around.

“And there’s one more thing—maybe the most important thing,” he added. “If all he cared about was killin’ me, he coulda done it while we were fightin’ the fire. I was right there in front of the saloon—a perfect target. He coulda just shot me through the window of the clinic. But that wouldn’t have given him the pleasure he craved. And I woulda never known who it was who killed me.

“Everythin’ he’s done since he started all this points to him wantin’ to face me, eye to eye, and then defeat me,” Sully concluded earnestly. “And if he can do it in front of an audience—” He glanced around at each of their faces. “—so much the better.”

“So what do you propose we do?” asked Brendan.

Sully shrugged. “Keep goin’. Keep lookin’ for the waterfall and see what turns up. That’s about all we *can* do, for now.”

“It don’t sound like much of a plan,” Hank objected, still disgruntled. “I don’t like bein’ at anybody’s mercy—lettin’em have the advantage over me,” he added.

“Me neither—but it looks like we don’t got any choice at the moment,” Sully said. “Course, if you got any better ideas, I’m open to suggestions.” He regarded Hank levelly.

The saloon owner stared back at him defiantly and seemed on the verge of uttering a sarcastic retort—but then flicked his long hair back from his face and took up his reins. “Let’s just get on with it,” he muttered.

Sully glanced at Brendan and Matthew, and they nodded in confirmation. He turned his horse’s head around, and nudged the animal forward. The others followed, and they began moving again.

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Michaela began to tremble. “Who comes?” she asked apprehensively, knowing the answer in her heart, and both longing and dreading to hear Bloody Knife utter the name.

“You wish to hear me speak it?” he said with a cold smile. “Very well—if I must. Your man,” he told her, his smile of anticipation broadening. “Your . . . *beloved.*” The way he said the word made it sound like an epithet. “He comes to ‘rescue’ you—just as I predicted. Just as I planned.” He wore a look of smug satisfaction.

Michaela’s cheeks drained of what little color they’d had and her heart began to hammer against her ribs.

“What?” he said unctuously, his smile becoming a leer. “The news does not please you? But I thought you cared for this man.” His fingers toyed with the lank strands of hair laying against her cheek. Michaela’s skin crawled at his touch.

“I do care for him,” she managed, barely above a whisper. She gathered her courage. “How do you know he’s coming?” she asked, her voice slightly stronger.

“I have seen him,” Bloody Knife replied. “He is very close. He will be here soon.” The scout’s expression altered, became darker. “He comes with other men,” he announced. “Your son—”

Michaela’s heart skipped another beat. Matthew, she thought. Oh, Matthew.

“The long-hair from the saloon—“ Bloody Knife went on.

Hank, the voice spoke in her mind. She was curiously unsurprised to learn that Hank was a member of the posse, and her spirits lifted minutely at the knowledge that he was there to provide back-up for Sully and Matthew.
“And one other, who I do not know,” the scout concluded. “Tall, dark. He speaks like a white man from the east.”

Michaela’s eyes widened in stunned disbelief. Could Bloody Knife be describing Brendan? Brendan accompanying Sully on this rescue mission? How could such a thing have possibly come about? True, Sully had promised her he would try to make peace with the younger man, and she knew he’d keep his word—but beyond apologizing for his actions, she’d been certain that Sully would have nothing else to do with the archaeologist.

Bloody Knife peered at her closely, noting her startled expression. “Who is he?” he said.

“Just—a friend—of my family,” Michaela answered haltingly. “He was visiting. He has nothing to do with this.”

“Clearly you are mistaken,” the scout countered. “He is here—that means he has made it his business.”

Guilt washed through her. It was bad enough that Sully’s and Matthew’s lives were in danger on her account. But now she had to bear the responsibility of Hank and Brendan risking their safety as well. Where Hank was concerned, she didn’t feel quite so badly—she knew that Hank wouldn’t do anything he didn’t want to do. But Brendan was uninvolved—entirely innocent in all this. If anything happened to him because of her, she could never forgive herself.

“Please,” she spoke up. “Don’t hurt them. They only came to help Sully—you have no quarrel with them.”

“They are the friends of my enemy, therefore they are my enemies,” Bloody Knife retorted.

“But why is Sully your enemy?” Michaela burst out in anguish and frustration. “He did nothing to you!”

“He attacked me,” the scout said harshly.

“Only in self-defense!” she exclaimed. “To protect his friend, Cloud Dancing. He would never have done it if you hadn’t tried to harm them first. You tried to kill them,” she insisted. “You nearly succeeded, with Sully. Isn’t that enough for you?”

He gave her a lethal look. “It will not be enough until he is dead.”

Icy fear sliced through her. “Why did you attack Sully and Cloud Dancing to begin with?” she persisted recklessly. “Because of *orders* from General Custer? Why would you let Custer use you in that way? How could you murder someone in his name—someone who’s never done you any harm?”

“I am loyal to the Son of the Morning Star,” Bloody Knife stated flatly. “If the half-breed and the Cheyenne are his enemies, they are my enemies.”

“Please,” Michaela entreated, accepting at last that there was no reasoning with him. “I’m begging you. Do what you want with me, but spare Sully and the others. I’ll do whatever you ask.”

The scout rose to his feet, ignoring her plea, and moved to the mouth of the cave.

Michaela was seized with panic. “Where are you going?” she asked quickly.

He stopped and faced her. “I am not so heartless as you believe,” he said, the leer reappearing on his face. “Soon, the half-breed will come. I will allow you time alone to say good-bye. Make the most of this chance. It will be the last one that you have.” He ducked his head and exited the cave.

“Wait!” Michaela called after him frantically. “Please!” But her appeal went unanswered. He was gone.

Tears of rage and fear sprang to her eyes. “Damn you!” she choked as a black cloud of misery enveloped her. “Damn you...”
As he rode along, Sully kept his eyes trained on the mountains and bluffs hovering over them, searching for any trace of landscape that seemed familiar. Periodically he dropped his eyes to the ground as well, studying its surface for any visible signs of Bloody Knife’s and Michaela’s passage. But he did it more out of reflex, rather than with any real hope of detecting anything. They hadn’t been able to rely on tracks to guide their way on this journey up till now; and he seriously doubted that any such clues would be forthcoming at this late date. Noticing some unusual and attractive vegetation immediately ahead, he adroitly angled his horse a few paces to the side to avoid a cluster of tiny cacti, their round and oval stems resembling the blossoms of a miniature garden.

He was gazing at the crest of a limestone peak, its charcoal summit thrusting up boldly against the sun-washed blue of the sky, when Matthew suddenly spoke.

“Look at it,” the young man said. “Just look at it . . .”

Sully glanced at him sharply, thinking for a moment that Matthew had spotted something; but immediately recognized that Matthew’s expression was not one of discovery, but awe.

“It’s amazin’,” Matthew went on more softly. “I ain’t never seen nothin’ like this.”

Despite the sense of urgency impelling him onward, Sully had to agree with Matthew’s assessment. The terrain surrounding them was truly a collection of contrasting and colorful wonders. On his right, vibrant green patches of desert grass yielded to a band of rust-colored sandstone—it’s red-orange hue glowing in the light of the afternoon sun. And beyond that rose a limestone ridge, its coal-black contours like a row of jagged teeth silhouetted starkly on the horizon.

On his left lay another stretch of sandstone, the folds and crevices in its weathered face reminding him of the swirls of frosting on a birthday cake. A little further on hunched a larger sandstone monolith, its tumbled layers infused by an even deeper shade of red. Deep fissures, created by thousands—perhaps millions—of years of erosion, sliced into its surface and cleaved its summit, making it appear as if an enormous block of clay had been squashed by a giant hand. Ahead, a mass of clouds swept dramatically down from the sky, sheathing the crests of distant limestone peaks in a mantle of white.

On all sides, the vistas were stunningly beautiful, primitive and wild, and Sully wished he could give these gifts of nature the reverence they deserved. But until he found Michaela; until he held her safe in his arms again, he knew that none of Mother Earth’s creations—regardless of how exquisite—would have the power to move him.

“What’s this?” Matthew spoke again, breaking into Sully’s thoughts. “Looks like a road.” The young man was pointing off to the left. A relatively clear swath of desert stretched before them, cleaving a path into the foothills. It did indeed resemble a road, albeit one peppered with a scattering of rocks, clumps of scrub and the sword-like stems of the occasional yucca.

Sully studied it. “Probably a wash,” he concluded.

“That’s correct,” Brendan confirmed, drawing abreast of them. “Storms in the mountains frequently produce flash floods, which in turn create raging torrents of water that fill dry washes like this one and sweep rock fragments—even boulders—toward the valley. See all these rocks and stones?” He gestured with his arm to encompass the scene before them. “They were carried down out of the mountains by the water.”

“So are we gonna head this way?” Hank asked.

Matthew raised an eyebrow. “Seems as good a direction as any.” He glanced at Sully. “What do you think?”

“Appears to be safe,” Sully judged. “You agree?” he consulted Brendan.

“If there was any threat of a storm, I’d recommend that we avoid it,” Brendan replied. “These washes can turn dangerous very quickly, as I’m sure you know. But since the weather’s clear, there shouldn’t be any problem.”

“You sure ’bout that?” Hank persisted. “I don’t exactly cotton to drownin’ out in the middle of the
“Of all the things we got to worry about, Hank, I’d say gettin’ caught in a flood is the least of our concerns,” Sully remarked drily. “We ain’t deliberately gonna head into any danger.”

“Whatta ya think we been doin’ all this time?” Hank retorted sarcastically, and spurred his horse forward. Sully shook his head, as Matthew caught his eye with a look of commiseration. On his other side, Brendan shrugged and flashed him a resigned smile.

“Well, c’mon!” Hank called back to them sharply. “Day’s not gettin’ any younger!”

Recognizing that Hank was correct on this point at least, the others formed a column and followed his lead.

For a stretch of time they pursued the course of the wash, as it led them through the foothills. Eventually it emptied out into another open plain, the horizon crowned with still more gaunt and towering limestone cliffs.

Sully’s eyes continued to scour the face of the mountains, looking for any hint of what he’d seen in his vision, his anxiety level starting to climb as the view remained stubbornly unfamiliar. He began to wonder if Hank had been right after all. Perhaps he “was” unbalanced. Perhaps his tortured mind had invented the image of the waterfall, and he had been pinning all his hopes—not to mention the lives and the safety of his companions—on a fantasy. Grimly, he wondered how soon the others would reach the same conclusion.

He marked the passage of the sun. It was markedly lower in the sky now, and with its steady descent ebbed the last traces of his confidence. A pervasive fear began to gnaw at him, as his anxiety turned to desperation.

He was staring down at the ground again, ostensibly searching for clues, but seeing nothing through the black cloud of depression that shrouded him. What if he’d been wrong about everything? What if they were forced to give up? God help him—what if he never found her . . .

“Sully!” Matthew said sharply, his voice tight with excitement. “Look!”

Sully’s head snapped up and his gaze followed the line of Matthew’s outstreached arm as it pointed ahead. Almost directly before them, perhaps a mile distant, stood a tall limestone peak, its dark and ancient surface cleft with myriad folds and fissures. Issuing from the heart of this ediface was a towering rush of water cascading hundreds of feet to the bottom.

Sully suddenly found it hard to breathe. He stared at the sight, half-convinced for a moment that he was witnessing a mirage. If Matthew hadn’t spotted it first, he would have sworn he was imagining it.

Matthew was watching him anxiously. Peripherally he was aware of Hank and Brendan staring at him as well, awaiting his pronouncement. But for several long moments he was incapable of speech.

“Well?” Hank said impatiently at last. “Is that it, or not?”

Sully swallowed hard and wet his dry lips. Finally he managed to find his voice.

“We made it,” he said softly. “We’re here.”

MY JOURNAL
Sunday, 16 April, 1870

My Darling Michaela,

If God and the spirits are merciful, you will never have to read this. I’m going to do everything in my power to get you out of that place—to finally end this unspeakable torment you’ve had to endure because of me. But if something should go wrong . . . if I’m—not around—after all this is over . . . I can’t let us be parted forever without telling you how I feel—without letting you know what it’s meant to me to be a part of your life, and for you to be a part of mine. I’m going to leave this journal with Matthew; and though I pray
it won’t be necessary, I’m going to instruct him to give it to you if the worst happens.

As I write this, we’ve taken cover behind a ridge overlooking the waterfall—the waterfall I’ve seen so often in my dreams—the waterfall you helped me to find by sending me a vision of where you were. I know there’s a cave behind that wall of water, and that Bloody Knife is holding you prisoner inside. I know that these past weeks must have been a nightmare for you; and I promise you that one way or the other, the end of the nightmare is finally at hand. But what I don’t know—what I can’t predict—is how it will all turn out. So now, while I’ve got the chance, there are things I need to say.

Forgive me, Michaela. Forgive me for failing you—for not being there for you when it counted most. I thought I had the situation under control—I thought I was protecting you. Instead I was a fool, overconfident and arrogant. I misjudged Bloody Knife—I underestimated his determination and his cunning; and most of all, the extreme depth of his hatred and his need for revenge. That knowledge is so bitter to me now, and I’ve punished myself over and over for my tragic mistake.

I’m so desperately sorry for what he did to you, Michaela. I’m so sorry that you had to be the one to suffer. I pray to God and the spirits that he didn’t hurt you—that it wasn’t your blood we found on your broken cane. I pray with all my heart that he hasn’t hurt you in—other ways—in the time that’s passed since he took you from me.

I would have given my life to spare you this agony—and if my life is the price I need to pay now to save yours, then I’ll offer it up, without hesitation. But if it comes to that—if death is the fate that awaits me—then I want you to know that being loved by you was the fulfillment of a dream. And that even our brief time together brought me more joy than most people know in a lifetime.

It’s so difficult for me to write this because I know it will bring you more pain, and I’d rather cut off my hand than do that . . . but Michaela, I need you to know that if I have to die—that I died with no regrets; that I gladly gave my life for your sake. The Cheyenne believe there is honor in a meaningful death; and what greater honor could there be than to die saving the lives of the ones you love? Of the woman you love with a depth and a passion that is eternal—that will live forever?

That’s how I love you, Michaela. With every particle of my being; with my heart and with my soul. The Cheyenne brought me back to life, but you made that life worth living. You made every day an adventure, every moment a joy. You gave me meaning, and purpose, but most of all, you gave me love—and made my life complete. You *are* my heart, Michaela. From the first time I saw you, every beat of my heart, every breath that I’ve drawn, has been measured to yours.

I don’t want to draw my last breath if it means being parted from you. But if that is my fate, then I pray that someday, a long, long time from now, you’ll join me on the hanging road and we’ll climb to our home in the stars, where we’ll live together forever.

I could fill a page of this journal for every one of the miles I traveled to find you, and still it wouldn’t be enough to tell you how much you mean to me. But time is short, and every minute that I spend writing is another one that you have to endure at the hands of your tormentor. So soon I must bring this to a close.

But before I do, I need to talk about the men who helped me to find you. To tell you of their strength, and their courage. I owe them so much, more than I can every repay—and to say “thank-you” doesn’t even begin to honor that debt. But at least by writing down my feelings in these pages, I can offer this humble legacy—so that you and everyone else I leave behind will know that in my eyes, they were heroes.

First and foremost, there’s Matthew. What can I tell you about him, Michaela, that you don’t already know in your heart? From the moment we discovered you were missing, and put the pieces together about what happened, he stuck by me; giving me support, and encouragement—and loyalty. Even when they all had reason to doubt me—to think the strain of this ordeal had unbalanced my mind—Matthew never lost faith. Only a short while ago, I’d been close to giving up. I’d begun to doubt myself—to question whether I’d truly lost my senses and only imagined that you’d sent me a vision. But Matthew never stopped trusting that you’d found a way to reach out to me; or that somehow, some way—I would find a way to reach you.

And when I was feeling my lowest—when my despair was at its worst—it was Matthew who spotted the waterfall, and knew without my having to confirm it that this was the place I’d seen in my mind—and that we’d found you at last.
He's a fine young man, Michaela—decent, caring and honorable. You raised him up right. Charlotte may have given him the foundation, but you were the one who carried on, bringing him up straight and strong through your love. I'm lucky to know him, and be a part of his life.

But moving on . . . Though my vision helped us to pinpoint the exact spot where you were—it wasn't what brought us hundreds of miles from home to this canyon in the Nevada desert. For that, we've got Brendan to thank.

Yes, you read right. Brendan was the only one who could identify the origins of a clue that Bloody Knife left behind—an ancient stone called a "petroglyph" that came from this particular spot in Nevada called Red Rock Canyon. The petroglyph was all we had to go on—our only lead to where Bloody Knife had taken you—but we would never have understood its meaning or known where it came from, if it hadn't been for Brendan's archaeological skills. And his willingness to help us . . . to help me.

I know I did a lot of complaining about Brendan's profession—and that was partly why I was so quick to judge him unfairly, without getting to know him as a person. Not to mention the way I misjudged the feelings between the two of you, and went on being jealous of him even after you swore I had no reason to be. I know I caused a lot of bad feelings and unhappiness among all three of us because of my stubbornness, and I truly regret that. I'm even sorrier now than I was the last time you and I were together. But even though you finally proved to me that I was a fool to be jealous—that my fears about losing you to him were groundless . . . it wasn't till you were taken from us that Brendan really proved his mettle to me, and I really understood how wrong about him I'd been.

It started with him helping us to put out the fire at the saloon—the fire Bloody Knife started, though we didn't realize that till later. Brendan didn't have to risk his safety on our account. He had no connection to this town, and no real reason to help us—especially after how I'd behaved. Yet despite all that, he was out there with us, working as hard as everybody else to fight the fire. Even getting overcome by the smoke didn't stop him.

I got to admit I was surprised. More, I was impressed. But the respect I had for him then turned out to be nothing compared to the way I felt later.

Like I said before, he was the one who recognized this stone and was able to tell us, chapter and verse, all about its origins. It turns out he'd explored this Red Rock Canyon in the past, so he knew all about the terrain, he had maps of the area, and he'd even taken pictures. At the time, I wasn't conscious of feeling anything save relief, that we had someone with the knowledge to help us and make this part of our pursuit so much easier. But now, looking back . . . I can't help but wonder if the spirits were watching over us, and sent him to Colorado Springs. Despite what happened with your ma, maybe Brendan coming out here wasn't about her reasons at all. Maybe it was the spirits who brought him to us, because they knew we'd need him . . . that I'd need him.

It probably sounds like I'm talking foolish—maybe I am. I guess I'm feeling real sentimental about now, believing in miracles—or at least praying for them. But I also ain't willing to overlook the possibilities. There's no earthly explanation for how you were able to reach me and lead me to the waterfall. And yet, here it is in front of us in all its glory, looking exactly as I saw it in my mind, yet totally, undeniably real.

There was also no rational explanation for how we heard and felt each other when the dog soldiers took you—but we both know it happened. And how could you have known about Bloody Knife attacking me in the mountains, before Cloud Dancing brought me home? You couldn't have—not in any way that makes sense. And yet you did.

Shakespeare said that there's "more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy"—and I believe I finally understand what he meant.

But coming back to Brendan. It wasn't just that he provided us with so much valuable information to aid us on our journey—that would have been more than enough. But he went further than that. He offered to come along and be our guide—no, he "insisted"—in spite of being fully aware of how dangerous it could be; that he might even be risking his life. And it wasn't out of some craving for glory or need to be a hero. He simply wanted to do what he could—whatever he could—to help.

And there's more. He's been an ally. Like Matthew, he's supported me and given me the benefit of the doubt—even when my claims of "visions" and such would be enough to stretch most people's belief to
the limits. Bottom line, is that he’s been a friend, when I needed one most. I’ll always be grateful for that. And I’ll never forget it.

Which brings me, finally, to Hank. You might be surprised that he came along on this trip—then again, maybe not. You’ve seen for yourself in the past how Hank’s come through for folks in a pinch—lots of times when they were least expecting it. It was a decent thing for him to do, being willing to help us—especially given the fire in the saloon. Then again, maybe Hank sees this as his chance to get his own revenge on Bloody Knife. I suppose the reasons don’t matter, though—only the results. But if truth be told, Michaela, I think Hank’s motives for being here have a lot more to do with how he cares for you, than anything else.

Don’t worry—I ain’t mad, or jealous. Fact is, it touches me. I can hardly be angry with someone who’s willing to put his life on the line out of his respect and affection for you.

But that ain’t to say it’s been easy. Hank and me have had more than our share of dust-ups on this trip, which probably doesn’t surprise you either. You can only imagine his reaction when I first talked about my “vision.” But in the end, he came around and he’s stuck by me too—and I got to say, I’m grateful.

I just wanted you to know how much everyone misses you and how hard they’ve been trying to get you back. And that includes all our friends back in town: Grace and Robert E., who offered to help your ma care for Colleen and Brian, and who provided us food, and a horse for Brendan to ride; Loren, who nearly emptied out his store loading me up with supplies, and who promised to look out for Brian and keep his spirits up; Dorothy, who was willing to take a message for me to Cloud Dancing, to let him know what happened; and the Reverend, who’s been praying with all his might for your safe return.

They all did whatever they could to make my burden easier. And they’re all praying for you, Michaela. They’re praying for all of us.

Last but not least, I want to tell you about the children. I know how you much you miss them, and how you must be worrying about being apart from them for so long. But I swear to you, Michaela, they’re all right. They’re scared for you, of course, but they’re being incredibly brave. You’d be so proud of them.

You ma’s holding up too. Being every bit as strong as I always knew she’d be. I made her a solemn promise that I’d find you and get you back—and I intend to keep it, even if I might not be there to see your reunion.

And now, it’s time to end this. I pray that in a short while, I’ll see your precious face, and hold you in my arms. And that no one will ever part us again. But if I have to say good-bye . . .

Never forget how deeply I love you; how much joy you brought into my life. I’ll carry your song in my heart forever, no matter what destiny the spirits see fit to bestow upon me.

I will be with you always, Michaela. Always.

All my love, in this life and beyond,

Sully

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The shock finally began to wear off, and Sully made a move as if to spur his horse forward. Immediately Hank’s hand shot out and he grabbed Sully’s arm, restraining him.

“What are ya doin’?” the barkeep demanded in alarm.

“What do you think?” Sully retorted sharply. “I’m goin’ after Michaela!” He tried to twist out of Hank’s grasp, but the saloon keeper’s fingers tightened their grip.

“Don’t be crazy!” he exhorted. “Ya can’t just ride down there, half-cocked.”
Sully’s eyes were grim. “Michaela’s been goin’ through hell for weeks—I ain’t lettin’ her suffer one more minute of torture at his hands.” He gave Hank a steely glance. “Let me go,” he said ominously.

“No,” Hank said flatly, the blue of his eyes turning to flint. “Not till ya start makin’ sense.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Sully demanded, his body almost humming with tension.

“Ya go runnin’ out there in the open without no protection—who knows what might happen?” Hank argued.

“I *told* you—I don’t think Bloody Knife’s gonna finish me off that way,” Sully insisted.

Hank rolled his eyes. “Yeah, ya ‘told me,’” he repeated. “Well, what if you’re wrong? Ya claimed you were gonna be careful, but now you’re willin’ to throw away all your common sense. Why’d ya let us come along at all if ya wasn’t gonna let us give ya back-up?”

Sully tried to calm himself. In a more reasonable tone he said, “Hank—I know you mean well, and I’m obliged that you wanna protect me, but I can take care of myself. And I haven’t come all this way just to make Michaela wait now.” Hank continued to regard him critically. “Look, I absolve you of any responsibility,” Sully added. “Whatever happens, it’ll be my choice and on my head.

“Now let me GO,” he commanded.

But Hank shook his head. “Sorry.”

Sully stared at him, incredulous. “You can’t stop me!”

“Yeah I can—if I think you’re puttin’ yourself and the rest of us in danger,” Hank countered stubbornly.

Sully’s anger erupted. “Hank, I’m warnin’ you—“

“He’s right, Sully,” Matthew spoke up suddenly. His eyes were sober. “We can’t just let you go runnin’ off.”

Sully turned betrayed eyes on his stepson. “I mighta expected this from Hank, Matthew—but you?”

“We’re tellin’ you this for your own good,” Matthew maintained. “We need a plan—“

“I GOT a plan!” Sully exclaimed. “And it consists of gettin’ Michaela out of that cave, and then gettin’ my hands around Bloody Knife’s neck and squeezin’ the life out of him.” His eyes were lethal.

Matthew’s expression was troubled, but he didn’t waver. “Sully, that’s just your anger talkin’. I know how you feel about Bloody Knife—I know you wanna punish him, make him suffer the way he made Dr. Mike suffer—“

“And who’s got a better right?” Sully burst out.

“Nobody,” Matthew agreed quietly. “And nobody’s tryin’ to stop you from gettin’ the justice you deserve. We’re just sayin’ there’s better and safer ways to go about it.”

“Listen to reason, Sully,” Brendan advised. “Matthew and Hank are making sense.”

“So you’re betrayin’ me too?” Sully said to him coldly. Brendan dropped his eyes and didn’t answer.

“Sully, if the situation was turned around—if it was one of us proposin’ to just go into this blind—you’d never let him take that kinda risk,” Matthew insisted. “It’s just your worry over Dr. Mike that’s keepin’ you from seein’ things clear.” He looked at Sully earnestly. “You brought us along so we could help you,” he added. “That’s what we’re tryin’ to do. We’re just askin’ you to let us.”

Sully’s eyes were dark pools of anguish. “Don’t you care about what your ma’s been through?” he said accusingly. “What she’s *still* goin’ through?”
“‘Course I care,” Matthew said quickly, his tone injured. “How can you even ask? But I care about you too, Sully, and I don’t wanna see you run out and get yourself killed when we’re this close to rescuin’ Dr. Mike.”

“I can’t let her suffer any more, Matthew,” Sully said more quietly, not quite able to disguise the tremor in his voice. “Sides, we gotta face the fact that I might get killed no matter what I do.”

“Not if we can help it,” Matthew declared, his face determined.

“Nor do we intend to let Dr. Mike suffer further,” Brendan spoke again. “None of us wants that. And we’re not trying to keep you from her. We’re simply advocating that you approach with caution—for Dr. Mike’s sake certainly, but also for your own.”

Silently Sully studied each of their faces. Seconds ticked past. Finally he glanced down at Hank’s fingers still closed around his arm. “You can let go of me now,” he said dully. “I ain’t gonna run off.”

Hank eyed him warily, but after a moment he loosened his grip and withdrew his hand. “Bout time ya came to your senses.”

“So what do you suggest we do?” Sully asked them, his tone flat and resigned.

“For starters, find some cover,” Hank stated. “While you been flyin’ off the handle, I been scoutin’ the terrain. I think that ridge over yonder’s a good bet.” He pointed to an area off to their right. “There’s good visibility, it’s protected and it’s defensible. I say we take cover up there, then figure out our next move.”

“Fine with me,” Matthew said. He glanced questioningly at Brendan.

“Agreed,” Brendan said briefly.


After a long pause Sully nodded reluctantly. “Time’s wastin’,” he observed. “Let’s go.”

* * * * * * * * * *

Hank moved over to where Matthew was crouched behind a boulder, loading his pistol. “What’s he doin’?” he asked in a low voice, jerking his head toward where Sully hunched against the rockface nearby, huddled over something in his lap. Matthew followed his gaze, his eyes dark and compassionate as they rested on his friend.

“I ain’t sure,” he whispered back. “But I think—he might be writin’ a letter to Dr. Mike.”

Hank looked perplexed. “What’s he doin’ writin’ her a letter when he’s gonna see her in just a little—“ He broke off, his expression altering, becoming sober. “He’s sayin’ good-bye.” It wasn’t a question.

Pain touched Matthew’s eyes. “Yeah . . . I think maybe he is,” he answered gravely.

“What happened to all that confidence he had?” said Hank. “He was so sure ‘bout everythin’—comin’ out here, that ‘vision’ thing . . .” He leaned back against the boulder and lit a cigar. “I hate to admit it, but he was right,” the barkeep went on. He exhaled a stream of smoke and watched it drift away on the air. “The waterfall was real. We finally found it. And now he’s givin’ up?”

“No, “ Matthew said quietly. “Sully’d never give up. Not where Dr. Mike’s concerned. But I think he feels like he’s gotta—prepare himself—in case . . .” He didn’t finish the thought.

After a pause Hank leaned closer to Matthew. Pitching his voice even lower he said, “What if—somethin’ happens to Michaela? What if somethin’s already happened?” His eyes were solemn.

“You mean . . . what if she’s—“ Matthew couldn’t utter the word.

Hank stared at Matthew knowingly. “Hey, I know it hurts, but somebody’s gotta say it. What if she’s
dead?” His tone was blunt, but his expression was troubled. “What’s that gonna do to—” Again he inclined his head toward Sully.

The pain in Matthew’s eyes deepened, but now it was colored by fear as well. “I truly don’t know,” he answered finally.

“Ya scared?” Hank said intuitively.

“Yeah,” Matthew replied quietly. “I am.”

Sully closed the book in his lap and glanced toward them. “Matthew—can I have a word with you?”

“Sure,” Matthew said readily. He rose and moved over to Sully, hunkering down beside him. “What do you need?”

Sully held out the leather-bound folder for Matthew to see. The young man regarded it uneasily.

“This is the journal Dr. Mike started me writin’ when I lost my memory,” Sully told him.

“Yeah, I know,” Matthew said slowly. He cleared his throat. “What about it?”

Sully looked regretful in his turn. “This ain’t to easy talk about,” he began reluctantly. “Believe me, I wish I didn’t have to. But... we gotta face facts, Matthew. I don’t know what’s gonna happen with Bloody Knife—how things are gonna turn out. But it’s real possible that... I might not live out the day. And if that happens—”

“Sully, don’t talk crazy!—” Matthew erupted, then stopped short, looking as if he wished he could bite off his tongue. “I mean, nothin’s gonna happen to you,” he amended lamely after a moment. Sully gave him a bittersweet smile.

“You don’t gotta feel bad about usin’ the word,” he told his stepson kindly. “Fact is, with the way Hank’s been tossin’ it around so much the past few days, I’m gettin’ used to it.” There was a faint spark of humor in his eyes.

“Still, Sully, that’s not what I meant—” Matthew attempted.

“I know what you meant,” Sully said gently. “And I’m obliged. More than I could ever say. And I’m sorry for how I treated you before. I had no call to act that way.”

Matthew shrugged. “It’s all right. I understood you were upset.”

“We’re both upset,” Sully noted. “Don’t mean my pain is any greater than yours, or that I got a right to take my feelin’s out on you. Michaela ain’t just the woman I love—she’s your ma, too. You got to be hurtin’ as much as me, Matthew.”

“That’s why we came on this trip together, Sully,” Matthew pointed out. “To help each other.”

“Well, you surely helped me, in more ways than I can count,” Sully told him.

“And I’m gonna keep on helpin’ you—we all are,” Matthew asserted. “Which is why you got no call to worry that anythin’s gonna happen to you.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sully responded. “I ain’t afraid to join the spirits—but I gotta confess that it would be a bitter thing to leave you all now, when I’m just about to get the wife and family I always wanted. Still, Matthew, I gotta prepare for the possibility that I won’t be around when all this is over.” Matthew looked away, and Sully could see a tell-tale shimmer at the corner of his eye. He reached out and touched the young man’s arm. “Matthew,” he repeated softly. “Look at me.”

Matthew swallowed with an effort and faced him again. His blue eyes were watery with unshed tears.

Sully placed the journal in Matthew’s hands, then laid his own hand over the young man’s. “If I don’t make it, I want you to give this to Dr. Mike,” he instructed calmly. “There’s a letter for her, at the end. Some important things I needed to say, in case I don’t get another chance.”
“Please, Sully, don’t make me do this,” Matthew entreated, his face miserable.

“Who else can I ask?” Sully persisted gently. “We’re family, Matthew. I need you to do this for me. I need your promise. Will you?” His eyes regarded the young man pleadingly.

After a long hesitation, Matthew nodded mutely.

Sully looked satisfied. “Good,” he said, squeezing Matthew’s hand briefly. “I feel better now.”

Matthew was silent for several moments longer, marshaling the courage for what he had to say next. Finally he took a breath, and spoke. “Sully—as long as we’re talkin’ about facin’ things that might happen. . . well, there’s somethin’ else I think we need to consider.”

Sully nodded slightly, encouraging him to continue.

“I’d give anythin’ not to say this,” Matthew went on haltingly. “I don’t even wanna think it. But Sully—it’s been a long time since Dr. Mike was taken. And we know how hot-headed—how dangerous—Bloody Knife is. What if—” He swallowed again. “What if—he did somethin’ to Dr. Mike? What if she’s—”

Sully’s eyes turned the color of storm clouds and his expression became closed and hard. “No,” he said.

“But—”

“NO,” Sully repeated, his tone implacable. “She ain’t dead.” He drew his knife from its sheath and mechanically began to polish it with a soft rag he pulled from his pocket.

“I don’t wanna believe it either,” Matthew tried again. “But Sully, you just said we gotta face the possibilities, and . . .”

“She ain’t dead,” Sully insisted levelly. He stopped rubbing the blade of the knife and looked intently into Matthew’s eyes. “Don’t you understand, Matthew? I’d know it if Michaela was dead. I’d *feel* it.

“She’s scared,” he went on. “And hurt—maybe even hurt bad. But she ain’t dead. I know it, in my gut.” He laid his hand on his stepson’s shoulder. “Trust me on this, Matthew.”

Hank approached them at that moment, his tall figure blocking out the lowering rays of the sun as he stood over them. “Couldn’t help but overhear,” he ventured somewhat awkwardly, as they looked up.

“And if you’re positive she’s alive, I got no reason to dispute ya. But we still ain’t come up with a plan for rescuin’ her—”

Sully rose to his feet, followed by Matthew. “I got a plan,” he announced, his eyes steeely and determined. “The only one there is. I’m goin’ down there right now and get her out.”

“But Sully—“ Matthew started to protest, however a look from the other man hushed him.

“I know it’s dangerous, and I know you’re worried,” Sully told him. “I let you talk me outta goin’ to your ma before ‘cause you were right—I was bein’ foolhardy and reckless. But I ain’t gonna let you talk me out of it this time. I swear I’ll be cautious,” he promised. “But your ma needs me, Matthew. She waitin’ for me and I’m goin’ to her—now.

“You all can keep watch and cover me from here,” he added, resheathing his knife and preparing to climb down from their hiding place. He glanced around at their faces; Matthew and Hank beside him and Brendan a few feet away. “Any arguments?”

Matthew and Brendan looked sober, but didn’t protest. Hank drew his pistol and cocked it.

“Stay low,” he advised. “Get outta the open soon as ya can and keep to the rocks till ya can get close. We’ll be coverin’ ya.”

“Good luck,” he said.

Sully nodded, then turned to his stepson. “You’ve been a good friend, Matthew,” he said quietly. “A good . . . son.” He started to shake Matthew’s hand, then pulled him into a brief, hard embrace instead. “Watch out for yourself,” he whispered. “Watch out for your ma.” Matthew clung to him for a moment, unable to speak.

Gently Sully drew away, and managed to favor them all with a smile. “I’ll be back with Michaela ’fore you got time to miss me,” he said cheerfully. He raised his hand in a gesture of farewell. “See ya,” he added, and immediately began his descent from the ridge before anyone could say anything else.

Sully’s parting words echoed hauntingly in Matthew’s mind as silently he began to pray.

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Sully moved quickly and carefully across the open expanse between the ridge and the waterfall, following Hank’s admonition to stay close to cover as much as he was able—though he honestly doubted that such precautions would make any difference. Bloody Knife could be secreted anywhere among the cliffs overlooking the plain, and if the scout took it into his head to shoot at him, he would be a helpless target. In fact, the closer Sully drew to the waterfall, the more certain he became that he *was* being watched. The sensation, like thousands of hot pins pricking his flesh, grew steadily stronger, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Instinctively his hand went to his tomahawk and he drew it from his belt, holding it at the ready.

Anxiety and apprehension had acutely sharpened his awareness. Colors assumed an even more vivid clarity, and his ears seemed to detect every sound, no matter how minute. His entire body thrummed with tension—his muscles taut, and his nerve endings feeling raw and exposed. Continuously his eyes raked the cliffs, alert for any sign of the danger telegraphed by his senses.

But to no avail. There was no one in sight, and nothing to disturb the stark, primeval beauty of his surroundings. As he closed the remaining yards to the waterfall, his coiled muscles gradually relaxed, and his galloping heartbeat slowed to a more normal rhythm. Just as his instincts had forecast, it appeared that Bloody Knife was going to allow him to live until they could confront one another, face to face.

Sully tentatively approached the plunging water, its sound thundering relentlessly in his ears. For a few moments he could only stand transfixed, staring at the awesome sight, his anxiety ebbing as it was replaced by wonder. It was real—truly, unmistakably, real. He could feel it, touch it—even fill his cupped hands with water and taste it, if he chose. The dream-image of the waterfall had been vivid, and it had assumed even more depth and reality in his vision—yet he wondered now if he had ever *truly* believed in the existence of the waterfall until this moment.

But there was no doubting, no denying the evidence of his eyes, or his ears—or his skin, which was moist with spray. And if all this was real, then the rest of it was real as well—Michaela was here; was actually *here* somewhere inside—and he was about to be reunited with her at last.

Suddenly he couldn’t wait another moment, and recklessly he scrambled down the wet and slippery rocks, throwing caution to the winds in his eagerness to get to the bottom. He had a fleeting thought of gratitude that again the spirits seemed to be watching over him, as he managed to reach the edge of the rockpool without incident.

Carefully Sully skirted the pool and edged behind the curtain of water to the mouth of the cave. A shallow lip of rock extended out beyond the entrance, and he paused there momentarily, the strength draining from his legs as he was assaulted by the force of powerfully conflicting emotions. Part of him felt a rush of incredible longing, his body almost aching to see and hold Michaela again. But warring equally with his longing was fear—black and intense—of what Bloody Knife might have done to her—of what he might find.

But Michaela needed him. She needed him to be strong, and he would be that for her—even if he died trying.

The strength slowly returning to his limbs, Sully resolutely moved forward into what lay beyond.
Though he had to duck his head to enter the mouth of the cave, he immediately sensed that the ceiling inside was taller, and he was able to straighten to his full height. It was dark inside, nearly pitch black, and for several moments he was forced to remain by the entrance, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dimness. Finally he was able to make out the features of the rockface on either side. He was standing in a short tunnel, almost like an alcove, infinitesimally brighter at its opposite end, hinting at a larger room beyond. Stealthily, trying not to make a sound, Sully covered the few feet toward the pallid light, trailing his hand along the wall as he went.

Abruptly the tunnel ended, emptying into a bigger, roughly circular chamber. Toward the far wall flickered a tiny cookfire, its meager flame insufficient to light more than a small portion of the cavern. The air smelled and tasted acrid, hinting at poor ventilation. The walls nearest him exuded beads of moisture, and from somewhere in the dark reaches of the cave Sully could hear water steadily dripping. He looked down at the floor of the cave and saw footprints in the damp earth. Crouching down, he studied them carefully, but rather than the two sets he was expecting, he saw only one. For the moment he wasn't sure what that meant, and something deep in his mind recoiled from exploring the thought further.

Straightening again, he moved further into the room, his steps tentative and cautious. As he drew close to the fire, he saw the blankets of a bedroll tossed carelessly off to the side. His eyes flickered over them briefly, but his mind immediately dismissed them as his attention was caught and riveted by a humped, blanketed shape lying in the shadows.

Sully's heart began to hammer again, and his pulse pounded in his ears. Slowly he moved around the fire to where the figure rested. As he got close, he saw a thatch of reddish gold hair gleaming dully. A moment later he spotted one fragile, terribly pale hand flung outside the coverlet.

He dropped to his knees, his heart squeezing painfully in his chest. With trembling fingers, he reached out and gently drew back the blanket.

Tears sprang to his eyes and his soul flooded with anguish. “Michaela,” he whispered, heartbroken. “Oh my God, Michaela . . .”

Michaela lay with eyes closed, unsure if she was awake or dreaming. All the chloroform Bloody Knife had forced upon her had confused and distorted her perceptions, and she couldn't always trust the evidence of her senses. But if this was a dream, then it was different from all the rest, with more clarity than any that had come before.

She was still in the cave, but Sully was here. He was with her, cradling her, holding her close to his heart. She could feel his warmth, his strength, the gentleness of his touch. She could even smell his scent. Oh, but if this was a dream she didn't want to wake up! She didn't want to leave the safe and comforting haven of her mind, for the ugliness and despair of her reality. If she was going to die, let her die like this, with at least the illusion that she was with the man she loved more than life itself . . .

“Michaela? It's me—I'm here. I'm here now, Sweetheart. Can you hear me? Can you open those lovely eyes and look at me? Please, Michaela. Wake up—please wake up.”

His voice—so tender, so gentle. The most beautiful voice she'd ever heard, sounding just as sweet as she'd dreamed it would a thousand times since Bloody Knife had stolen her away. How she longed to see his face—the golden brown of his hair tumbling about his shoulders, the sensuous curve of his lips and the azure blue of his eyes, with a message of love meant only for her.

But she was afraid—so afraid—that if she opened her eyes the dream would be gone. Sully would be gone, and all her joy, all her hope, with him . . .

“Please, Michaela. Please . . . Give me a sign that you can hear me. I'm touchin' your face—can you feel it? Can you feel my flesh against yours? I love you, Michaela. I love you so much. Please, please come back to me . . .”

His hand. Delicate as a butterfly's wing, yet slightly rough, the fingertips calloused by years of physical labor. She could feel that hand stroking her cheek, her temples, gently smoothing the hair from her
forehead. And
then . . .

His lips, against hers. Warm, soft. So soft . . .

“You’re safe, Michaela. You’re safe. I’m here with you now, and I ain’t never gonna let him hurt you again. It’s safe to wake up, Michaela. It’s safe to open your eyes . . .”

She wanted to believe in that voice. In Sully’s voice. She wanted it so much . . . Tears squeezed out from beneath her lashes and trickled down her cheeks. And she felt him kiss her tears away.

“But don’t cry, my love. Don’t cry. It’s gonna be all right. Everythin’s gonna be all right now.”

Sully cradled her close against him, as if to infuse her with his strength, just as Cloud Dancing had once done for him. The sight of her tears hurt his heart. And yet, they might be a sign that she had heard him, and for that he should be grateful.

His mind was awash with agony. Why wouldn’t she wake up? The scout had clearly starved her, and robbed her of water as well—her parched lips testified to that. But what other torture could Bloody Knife have inflicted upon her to leave her in this condition? Gingerly he probed her scalp, searching for a headwound. He found no evidence of one, and was deeply relieved—apparently the blood on the cane *had* been Bloody Knife’s. But the light was dim, and he wanted to be thorough. He carefully lifted her hair, bending close to examine the base of her skull. Suddenly an odor assaulted his nostrils—sharp, distinctive, familiar . . .

Chloroform. As his mind made the connection, he was stunned to realize how long it had taken him to detect it. It came to him that he must have been breathing it for the past few minutes, but his anguish over Michaela had masked his senses to everything else.

The reek of the anesthetic was strong, cloying. Either Bloody Knife had only recently dosed her with it, or he had been drugging her all along. The translucence of her flesh and dramatic loss of weight pointed to the latter.

As he pressed her fragile body close to his, Sully felt a surge of hatred for Bloody Knife course through him. But on the heels of his rage he was conscious of relief that the Indian wasn’t there. For had he been, Sully knew he would have killed the scout as coldly, as ruthlessly, as Bloody Knife intended to do away with him.

“Oh, God, Michaela, I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry for lettin’ him do this to you. I’ll never forgive myself for this. Never.” He lowered his head over hers, his eyes squeezed shut in pain and grief.

Something touched his cheek—lightly, feebly. For a moment he wasn’t sure he felt it at all. The touch came again, and his eyes snapped open. Michaela was looking up at him.

“But . . . blame yourself,” she whispered. “Not your fault . . .”

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SULLY’S JOURNAL
Sunday, 16 April, 1870

Dear Dr. Mike,

I don’t know if Sully would mind me writing in his journal like this. I hope not. I hope you won’t mind either. I know these pages are private, for his eyes alone—and I swear I ain’t read any of them and I never would. But Sully asked me to hold onto this and give it to you in case . . . well, in case he ain’t around after all this is over. It’s a promise I pray I won’t have to keep, but I gave him my word. Long as I’ve known him, Sully ain’t never broke his word to me or anybody else—he’s never made a promise he didn’t keep. So the very least I owe him is to honor my pledge, in spite of how much it might hurt.

I just wanted . . . that is, I just felt that there should be some sort of record . . . that I should write down what happened here, so that you’d know later how brave he was—how far he traveled and how hard he
struggled to find you and bring you back safe. Though we had to come hundreds of miles on this journey, and there were times when Sully was feeling real low and fearing the worst about what had become of you—still, he never gave up. He never stopped believing that you were alive, and he never wavered in his determination to bring you back to all of us who love you.

It was Sully’s determination, his faith—that gave me hope, and the courage to keep going. It’s what inspired Mr. Burke to come along and help us; and it’s even what convinced Hank to stick with us to the end, in spite of how ornery and skeptical he was. Knowing Hank like you do, you also know how stubborn he can be. So Sully’s faith had to be powerful indeed to make even Hank believe.

As I write this, Sully is somewhere behind the waterfall, maybe even with you in the cave this very moment. I hope so—I’m praying he’s found you, that you’re together and any moment he’ll be bringing you out and he can get you up here to us where we can all take care of you and protect you. There ain’t no sign of Bloody Knife so far. We could see Sully searching all the cliffs and terrain around as he made his way from here to the waterfall. We were watching too, and covering Sully till he could reach the waterfall and get out of sight. As far as we can tell he’s all right, and we can only hope that Bloody Knife ain’t with you in the cave, waiting to ambush him the moment he shows up.

But you know better than anybody, how careful and cautious and clever Sully is—every bit a match for Bloody Knife. The Indian scout may have been calling the tune up to this point, but now it’s Sully’s turn, and he ain’t going to let anything else happen to you, no matter what he has to do, or what lengths he has to go to. I don’t mean to frighten you by saying that—I’m sure Sully will avoid violence if he can. We both know he doesn’t want to kill, even though he has it in him to do it if he’s got to. But if he can’t avoid a fight, then he’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.

There ain’t much more I can say at this point, till we know better what’s happening. But no matter how it goes, I promise you, Dr. Mike, that we’ll do everything we can to help Sully, and protect him. And that we’ll protect you, too.

We love you, Ma. I love you—and I’m praying that the end of this day will find both you and Sully back with us again.

Matthew

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FIFTY

“You’re awake,” he whispered, his eyes lighting with joy as they hungrily searched every inch of her face. “Oh, thank God, thank God . . .” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then drew back to fill his eyes with her image once again.

Michaela was looking up at him from where her head rested in his lap. “Sully? It’s . . . really you?” she added faintly after a moment. “Not . . . a dream?”

He gave her a smile that melted her heart. “No, Michaela, it’s not a dream. I’m here. I’m real. See?” He reached for her hand and squeezed it—but felt a sharp stab of remorse as she flinched and moaned. A look of misery crossed his face. “I hurt you . . . I’m sorry, Michaela, I’m sorry . . .” he apologized softly.

She managed to shake her head. “My hands . . . from the cold and damp . . . you couldn’t know . . .”

Again Sully felt hatred for Bloody Knife surge through him, and with a supreme act of will he choked it back down. Trying not to acknowledge the tempest of black thoughts which roiled through his mind; instead he looked down at Michaela’s fragile hand resting in his. He held it as lightly, as gently as he was able, then bent his head and brushed the back with the tenderest of kisses. A moment later Michaela felt a tiny splash of wetness on her skin.

“It’s gonna be all right,” he murmured, smiling at her through the sheen of tears in his eyes. “Everythin’s gonna be all right now. I’m gonna get you outta here, and then we’re gonna take you to a
doctor and get you all fixed up. You’re gonna heal and get well, and everythin’ will be fine.”

She tried to smile back, but it faltered on her lips, and she trembled instead. A shadow seemed to cross her face, and Sully felt a cramp of fear in his gut. “I . . . don’t know . . .” she ventured. “It might be—too late . . .”

“Don’t you say that,” he admonished her immediately, fear like a knife stabbing at him. “Don’t even think it. Nothin’s gonna happen to you. I won’t let it.” His eyes were pleading and poignant. “I know I let you down before, but never again, Michaela. I swear, never again.”

“You never . . . let me down,” she answered softly. “You never could. You’re here now. I knew you’d come,” she went on, reaching up weakly with her other hand to touch his cheek. “I knew it . . .”

He swallowed down his tears and smiled at her again. “And I knew you’d hold on and wait for me,” he said tenderly. “You’re the strongest, bravest woman I’ve ever known. I knew your courage wouldn’t fail you.”

“I . . . get it from you,” she told him, finding the smile that had eluded her before. “A man’s love also gives a woman courage,” she added.

His tears threatened once again and Sully buried his face in her hair. “I love you so much,” he whispered brokenly. Michaela brushed her cramped fingers through the gold-brown locks falling against her cheek.

“I love you, too,” she breathed in his ear.

Sully took several breaths, trying to regain his composure. After a few moments he lifted his head and announced resolutely, “Plenty of time for talkin’ and holdin’ when we get you out of here. And that’s what we’re gonna do right now.”

“But—Bloody Knife . . . he’s watching . . .” Michaela protested weakly.

Sully’s eyes immediately darted around the cavern, then returned to her face. “Where?” he said.

“Outside . . . somewhere . . . He said he would allow us to be together alone . . . He said it would be—the last time,” she related fearfully.

“Don’t you believe it,” he told her, managing to summon yet another smile of reassurance. “I finally got you back—I ain’t never lettin’ you go again.”

“But Sully—he wants to kill you . . . he’s obsessed, even mad—” The tears trickled down her cheeks.

“Don’t you worry about me,” he said. “I’ll be fine. You just save your strength for holdin’ on till we can get you to a doctor.”

“But I’m so frightened for you”—she tried again, her eyes anguished. Immediately he placed his fingertips gently against her lips.

“Shh,” he whispered. “No more of that. We’re gonna get out of this, Michaela. Trust me.” His eyes were steady, determined, and she found herself drawing strength as she gazed into them. “I’m gonna pick you up and carry you outta here, but first I need your help. I need to know if you’re hurtin’ anywhere else. If he—did anythin’ else to you.” He swallowed, his heart beating a tattoo against his ribs.

“My legs—they were bound for a long time. I don’t think I can stand on them,” she answered. “But—he didn’t hurt me any other way.” Sully felt a rush of relief so intense it was painful. But on the heels of that emotion was a resurgence of the rage still coiled in his mind.

“He just drugged you and starved you,” he said darkly. Unable to deny it, Michaela didn’t reply.

“Did he at least give you water?” Sully added. Michaela noted the rigid profile of his jaw, and the familiar muscle ticking beneath the skin.

“Yes . . . from time to time,” she said. “But—I’m so thirsty now. Could I—have a drink before we go?”
“Of course,” he said in a rush, reproaching himself for not thinking of it immediately. He eased himself out from under her and then stood, looking quickly around the cave. There was no sign of a canteen, but after a few seconds of searching his eye fell on a tin cup laying upside down by the wall. He retrieved it, then cautiously made his way to the mouth of the cavern.

Sully eased his head out carefully, studying the surroundings, but there was no sign of the Indian. He emerged the rest of the way and rapidly rinsed the cup in the thundering spray, then filled it nearly to the brim.

He returned to Michaela and knelt down beside her, slipping his strong arm under her shoulders and around her back, supporting her as he held the cup to her lips.

“Slow,” he cautioned her gently. “Just a few sips at a time.” He held her patiently, waiting until she was able to finish most of the contents of the cup. “Better?” he asked solicitously.

Michaela nodded. “Much,” she answered, her voice a little stronger. “I think—I can get up now.”

“Don’t try to move,” he cautioned her again. “You let me take care of that.” He tucked the blanket more snugly about her, then got his feet under him. Sliding one arm securely around her back, he carefully slipped the other under her legs and then straightened, lifting her in his arms and holding her close. Another dart of pain lanced him. She felt as if she weighed almost nothing at all. “Tell me if I hurt you,” he added.

She rested her head against his chest, the crown of her hair tucked beneath his chin. “You could never hurt me,” she whispered.

He started to carry her out, but she stopped him. “My medical bag,” she said, pointing toward a spot in the shadows. He detected the bag lying on its side, and crossed to where it lay, bending awkwardly to grab the handle while he balanced her in his arms.

A moment later, the bag dangling from his hand and Michaela’s body cradled tightly against him, Sully delivered his heartsong from her prison.

* * * * * * * * * *

“How long’s it been?” Hank asked, his eyes restlessly perusing the cliffs. The stub of still another cigar was poised between his thumb and forefinger. It had burned down to ash, the fire extinguished, but he didn’t appear to have noticed.

“How long since Sully left, or since the last time you asked?” Brendan replied mildly, the gold case of a pocket watch resting loosely in his hand.

Hank looked at him dourly. “And I ‘spose you ain’t worried?”

Brendan gazed back at him. “Of course I’m worried,” he admitted honestly. “Any sane person would be. I suppose I just feel that an obsession with the clock serves no purpose.”

“Yeah, but the longer he’s gone—“ Hank began.

“What?” Brendan interjected. “We don’t know for sure what it means if Sully’s gone a long time. We don’t have enough facts. It could be a good sign—he could have found Dr. Mike and be ministering to her. On the other hand—“ He shrugged, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Hank stared past him at the rush of water opposite. Unguarded for a moment, his eyes became unexpectedly vulnerable. Brendan noted the change, and had a sudden glimpse into the depth of Hank’s feelings. He was aware of a spark of compassion for the acid-tongued saloon keeper.

“Nearly twenty minutes,” he said, relenting. Hank darted a glance at him. “Since Sully left,” Brendan added. Hank acknowledged the information with a slight bob of the head.

“You think one of us should go down there?” Matthew asked from his position by the boulder.
“I don’t know if Sully would want that,” Brendan speculated uncertainly.

“He didn’t tell us not to follow him,” Matthew countered.

“That’s true, but I think his intent was that we remain up here, out of sight,” Brendan replied.

“Only way to maintain an advantage,” Hank agreed.

“But what if Sully’s in trouble?” Matthew persisted uneasily. “Bloody Knife could be holdin’ him at gunpoint right now, while we’re just sittin’ up here twiddlin’ our thumbs.”

“Yeah, but if we go rushin’ into the situation blind, we could make things even worse,” Hank told him. “The Injun’s unpredictable . . . and most likely real jumpy by now. If we startle him, he might decide to just start shootin’. Somebody could get hurt—maybe even killed. Sully, or Michaela . . .”

“I think Hank’s right,” Brendan agreed. “Without knowing more of the circumstances, we might do more harm than good. I think we should continue to wait. As I said, only twenty minutes have passed, though it feels like it’s been much longer. For all we know, Sully could emerge from the cave with Dr. Mike any minute now,” he added hopefully.

“But him and Dr. Mike could be lyin’ in there hurt, or dead . . .” Matthew said grimly.

“Chance we gotta take,” Hank maintained calmly, finally tossing away the dead stub of his cigar and lighting a fresh one.

“Chances we gotta take.” Matthew burst out in frustration. “We’re ‘sposed to be givin’ Sully back-up, and instead all we’re doin’ is coverin’ our own backsides!”

“That ain’t what we’re doin’, and ya know it,” Hank reproached him quietly, sounding surprisingly compassionate. “We ain’t gonna do Sully or Michaela any good if we wind up gettin’ ourselves shot.”

“Well, we sure ain’t helpin’ ‘em by doin’ nothin’,” Matthew maintained stubbornly.

“Sometimes that’s all you *can* do,” Brendan pointed out gently. “It’s hard, but it’s often the only safe course of action.”

“And what happens if Sully gets killed?” Matthew challenged him. “How do I face Dr. Mike afterwards and tell her that I let Sully die ‘cause I was playin’ it *safe*? How could I ever expect her to forgive me—not that I’d deserve it,” he concluded miserably.

“Ya know Michaela would never hold ya to blame,” Hank asserted. “Sides, she don’t wanna see you get shot any more than Sully. Think how she’d feel if she had two bodies to bury by the time this day is out.”

Matthew shook his head. “I hate this,” he muttered. “I hate the waitin’, the not knowin’ . . .”

“Better get used to it,” Hank told him sharply. “You’re a man now, not a wet-nosed little brat. Stop whinin’ and grow up.”

Matthew shot a venomous look at him. “You’re a fine one to talk about whinin’, after the way you acted the other day!” he retorted.

“Do what I say, not what I do,” Hank quoted blandly, unfazed by the young man’s reaction.

“Yeah, I’ll put that on Sully’s tombstone,” Matthew snapped. “I’m sure it’ll be a real comfort to Dr. Mike.”

“That’s right, get mad,” Hank said suddenly. “Go ahead, yell at me. And then once ya got it outta your system, we can figure out what we’re gonna do.”

Matthew’s eyes widened. “You did that on purpose,” he said after a moment. Hank regarded him knowingly and didn’t answer.
“All right, you made your point,” Matthew conceded. “Flyin’ off the handle don’t do nobody any good.”

“Never has,” Hank said bluntly.

“But how long do we wait?” Matthew went on. “How can we be sure when it’s time to take matters into our own hands?”

Hank shrugged. “No way to be sure,” he responded. “But here’s what I think: we give it a little more time—maybe another fifteen minutes or so, and then we make our way down there.”

“What’ll be different fifteen minutes from now?” Matthew argued. “Seems to me we’ll still be in the same fix.”

“Maybe nothin’,” Hank answered. “But maybe Sully and Michaela will be outta the cave by then. But if not—well, then we just gotta go ahead and do whatever’s necessary.

“There ain’t no guarantees in a situation like this,” he concluded. “No right or wrong. Sometimes, ya just gotta go with your gut.”

“Hank’s making sense, Matthew,” Brendan chimed in. “I think you should listen.”

Matthew looked unconvinced, but some of the tension drained from his face and his posture relaxed minutely. There was a long pause. “All right,” he finally capitulated. “We’ll wait—for a few more minutes. But then—“

“Then—“ Hank interrupted, his eyes steely. “We’ll take care of this Injun once and for all.”

“Deal,” Matthew agreed, his expression equally determined. “But ‘fore that happens, I got somethin’ to do . . .”

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Sully draped a fold of the blanket over Michaela’s face and head to protect her from the powerful spray. Manuevering along the lip outside the cave entrance with the bulk of her body in his arms was tricky. The rock beneath his feet was slippery, and the narrowness of the ledge wouldn’t forgive mistakes. He hugged the cliff wall, sidling gingerly along its expanse until he was out from behind the cascading water.

As he skirted the edge of the rock pool, his eyes were constantly on the move, combing every inch of the immediate terrain. But still there was no sign of danger, no indication that Bloody Knife was anywhere in the vicinity. Sully stood still for a moment, trying to clear his mind and search himself to see if he still had that prickly feeling of being watched. But the clamor of his emotions blocked his other perceptions. All he could think about—all he cared about—was getting Michaela to the safety of the ridge and his companions. He would ask Brendan the location of the nearest town, the nearest doctor. And then he’d get her there with the quickest possible haste. He’d ride all night if that’s what it took. He wasn’t going to let her slip away from him now.

But what about Bloody Knife? a grim voice spoke up in his mind. You don’t really think he’s going to let you get away so easy, do you? Michaela said he was watching—and you can count on her being right about that. He isn’t going to let you leave. Not without paying a price. A price of blood . . .

Michaela pushed the blanket away from her face, but then flinched with a sharp intake of breath, distracting him from his dire thoughts.

“What is it?” Sully asked her quickly. “Is somethin’ painin’ you?”

Her eyes were narrow slits, her hand shading her forehead. “It’s so bright . . .” she murmured. “It hurts my eyes—makes my head ache.”

“Turn away—cover your eyes,” he told her. “You been in the dark a long time—you need time to adjust.”
She had already complied, forced to close her weakened eyes against the slanting rays of the westering sun. “But I want to see you,” she confided softly, her face pressed against his shirt front. “I’ve waited so long . . .”

“You will,” he promised. “Soon we’ll have all the time in the world to look at each other. You just need to be patient a little longer,” he pacified her. “Just concentrate on the sound of my voice—and on the feel of me holdin’ you and kissin’ you.” She felt his lips brush her temple. “Keep your mind fixed on that.”

She smiled dreamily. “It feels wonderful,” she sighed.

Tears stung Sully’s eyes again, and one escaped to trail down his cheek. He was grateful her eyes were closed so that she wouldn’t see him weeping, unable to control his emotions.

He made an effort to swallow down the tears and keep his voice normal. “You feel wonderful too,” he managed. He took a deep breath and then continued, “I’m gonna carry you up the slope now. I’ll be as gentle as I can, but there’s gonna be some rough footin’, so try to prepare yourself. Once we get to the top, though, it’s smooth sailin’ across to the ridge. Matthew, Hank and Brendan are all up there, waitin’ for us. Just a little farther to go, Michaela—and then ‘fore you know it, you’ll be in a warm bed, with a doctor to tend you, and plenty of food, water, and anythin’ else your heart desires. Then you can start to put this nightmare behind you.

“Can you hang on a little longer, for me?” he added gently.

Michaela nodded, unable to resist the urge to open her eyes and look at his face. Her eyes slitted slightly, she whispered, “I’d do anything for you.”

“And I’d do anythin’ for you,” he returned the vow, feeling close to breaking down again.

She continued to gaze up at him, though the effort pained her. “There’s only one thing I want you to do for me,” she answered softly.

“What’s that?” Sully asked, looking down at her tenderly.

“Stay alive,” she said.

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“There he is!” Matthew exclaimed suddenly. “And he’s got Dr. Mike!” Hank and Brendan looked sharply to where Matthew was pointing. They could see Sully’s figure in the distance, cradling a blanket-wrapped form. They watched as he paused for a few moments by the edge of the pool, then began his precarious ascent up the rock-strewn incline. Their eyes remained riveted on Sully as he moved slowly and carefully from one tenuous foothold to the next, cautiously making his way upward. Finally he achieved the top of the slope, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“He did it,” Matthew declared. “He got her out. It’s gonna be all right.”

“He got her out, yeah,” Hank allowed warily. “But they ain’t outta the woods yet.”

“But now Sully’s got us to cover him,” Matthew maintained. “If anythin’ happens—“ He broke off raggedly as his eyes caught a flash of movement on the cliff-face to their right. Someone was crouched on a shelf of rock roughly ten feet above the desert floor. The figure was nude to the waist, raven-black hair adorned with feathers fanning over his shoulders. In the split second it took for Matthew to register the intruder’s presence, he simultaneously noted that Sully and Dr. Mike were about to pass beneath his position. “Hank—!” he said frantically, pulling his gun from its holster and cocking the hammer.

But the saloon keeper had already spotted the scout. Rejecting his pistol, he seized a loaded rifle instead, training it on the figure poised above Sully. “I see him,” the barkeep said softly. “I see him . . .” A few paces away, Brendan also had his gun aimed toward the Indian.

“We gotta warn Sully!” Matthew said harshly, sweat beading his forehead.

“No time,” Hank muttered. “If I can just get a clear shot—“ He closed one eye and subtly adjusted the angle of the rifle till the Indian was square in his sights. He took a deep breath and held it, squeezing
the trigger. As his shot echoed eerily around the canyon, Bloody Knife launched himself into space.

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“You all right?” Sully asked immediately as he reached the crest of the hill. “Did I hurt you too much?”

“I’m fine,” Michaela assured him, though the lines of pain in her face belied her words.

“I don’t think so,” Sully countered, his eyes deep wells of concern as he gazed at her. “But I promise you’ll feel better soon.”

“I’m already a thousand times better, now that I’m with you,” she insisted. “My eyes can even stand the light now.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s real good.” He inclined his head toward the ridge opposite. “See those rocks yonder?” he added. “That’s where we’re headed. Matthew and the others are right up there.”

“I can’t wait to see him,” Michaela said longingly. “It feels as if I’ve been parted from the children forever.”

“That’s all over with now,” Sully vowed. “Just a few more yards, and you’ll be together again—“

Abruptly he stopped speaking as a sudden chill knifed through him. Simultaneously he felt the insidious sensation of needles pricking his skin, and his arms unconsciously tightened around Michaela.

“Sully?” she said quickly, immediately alert to his apprehension. “What is it?”

“Nothin’,” he managed after a moment. “Don’t fret . . .” But she knew he was lying.

“Sully, please!” she entreated. “You don’t have to protect me. Do you see him?”

“No,” he answered carefully, taking one step forward, then another, fighting the urge to run. “I just wanna get you to where you can rest.”

“Sully,” she repeated with unexpected strength, forcing him to meet her eyes. “Your face is deathly pale and you’re sweating. Something’s wrong.”

“I ain’t pale,” he protested lamely. “It’s just your eyes, playin’ tricks—“

“My eyes may be weak at the moment, but I’m still a doctor,” she reminded him briskly, lapsing into her professional persona. “I can feel your anxiety.” Gingerly she pressed her fingertips to his throat to check his pulse, then laid her hand on his forehead. “I don’t need my eyes to tell me that your skin is clammy, and you’re experiencing palpitations,” she added. “Please, Sully,” she urged more softly, “Tell me the truth.”

“All right,” he capitulated finally, recognizing that she wasn’t going to relent. “I don’t see him,” he added after a moment, referring to the scout. “And that’s the truth. But—I got this bad feelin’ . . . I just wanna get you outta the open—“

A shot rent the air, cutting off his words and reverberating in his ears. There was a blur of motion above him, and Sully had the fleeting impression of a dark, malevolent bird swooping down to seize them in its talons.

Bloody Knife dropped to the ground.

* * * * * * * * * *

“Damn!” Hank cursed, frantically steadying and aiming the rifle again. Matthew saw his finger contract on the trigger.

“No!” the young man blurted, knocking Hank’s arm away.

“What the hell are ya doin’??” Hank exploded.
“He’s too close—you can’t get a clear shot—” Matthew protested.

“I’ll get a clear shot,” Hank growled, squinting into the glare of the setting sun.

“I’m tellin’ you—don’t do it!” Matthew warned. “He’s too close to ‘em. ‘Sides, you can’t see through that glare. You’ll wind up killin’ Dr. Mike, or Sully—maybe both!”

Hank stared at him grimly. “Don’t ya understand? We may not get another chance! Ya just gonna let him go?”

Matthew’s face was implacable. “We can’t take the risk,” he maintained. “Not till he moves away from ‘em. We gotta wait.”

Hank’s flint-colored eyes drilled into him. “Wait too long, and ya might just sign their death warrant . . .”

* * * * * * * * * *

“You cannot leave,” Bloody Knife intoned, rising from his crouch. He stood an arm’s length away from them, a blade the size of a butcher knife in his hand. It glittered wickedly in the dying sun. Sully watched it catch and reflect the light, while against his chest, he felt Michaela recoil. Slowly his gaze moved to Bloody Knife, his eyes like twin vessels of blue fire.

“Get outta my way,” he said, his voice soft and sinister. He took a step forward.

The knife suddenly floated before Sully’s face, sleek and sharp. “Take another step, and she dies,” the scout promised. The blade dipped to the hollow of Michaela’s throat. Her pulse began to beat erratically, and she couldn’t suppress a tremor of fear for Sully and herself.

Sully felt her trembling, and tried to turn aside to shield her with his body. But the point of the knife immediately probed beneath his chin. “I said, do not move,” Bloody Knife threatened.

“All right,” Sully pacified him, keeping his voice neutral. “Take it easy. I’ll do what you want.”

“We will see about that,” the Indian predicted ominously. He lifted his head. “You can also tell your friends to come out from their hiding place with their hands raised and their weapons in plain sight,” he called out in ringing tones, relying on the unique acoustics of the canyon to carry his words to Sully’s companions.

Sully glared at him in impotent fury, but after a brief hesitation he reluctantly raised his eyes toward the ridge and gave an exaggerated nod. “Do what he says!” he called to them.

* * * * * * * * * *

The three men exchanged looks of anger and dismay.

“We ain’t gonna just give in!” Matthew said harshly.

“No choice,” Hank muttered. “We don’t do what he says, we really *will* get ‘em killed.”

Matthew opened his mouth to protest again, but broke off as he saw Hank tuck his pistol into his waistband at the small of his back, then conceal the gun beneath the hem of his vest. The saloon keeper glanced over and caught Matthew watching, but didn’t speak. A moment of silent communication passed between them and Matthew nodded slightly, then Hank rose to his full height, prominently holding up the rifle. Matthew slowly did the same, grasping his own gun by the barrel. Brendan followed suit.

They filed out from behind the cover of the rocks, the weapons in their hands held aloft, and carefully began to descend to the desert floor.

* * * * * * * * * *

Sully watched the figures of his friends as they emerged from their refuge, a host of jumbled, panicked thoughts crowding his mind. He’d expected to confront Bloody Knife one-on-one; but always tucked into a
corner of his mind had been the reassuring knowledge that his companions would be there to back him up. Now that safety net was gone. He hadn’t expected things to go this way... but he *should* have, he thought to himself darkly. He should have known. Over and over he’d underestimated Bloody Knife’s cunning; and now not only was Michaela paying, but his friends and stepson were in danger of losing their lives because of his short-sightedness.

And yet, as wracked with guilt as he was about the threat to his companions, even that worry paled in comparison to his fear for Michaela. He had to get her out of the way. Somehow, he had to convince this madman to let her go...

Matthew, Hank and Brendan approached slowly and steadily. When they were roughly fifteen feet away, Bloody Knife called out sharply, “Stop!”

The three men came to a halt, standing in a ragged line.

“Lay down your weapons,” the scout commanded. They bent to comply, carefully placing their guns and rifle on the ground. “Kick them away,” he instructed. The men obeyed, and their weapons went spinning across the sand.

Bloody Knife stood at an angle to Sully and Michaela, keeping the knife trained toward Michaela’s throat as he simultaneously watched the others. He regarded them scornfully, then turned back to Sully.

“Where is the Cheyenne?” he asked.

Sully’s eyes were hostile. “I don’t know.”

“A lie,” said the Indian.

“The truth,” Sully countered. “He was missin’ for days ‘fore we left to come here. He don’t even know what’s happened.”

“When I am—finished here—I will find him,” the scout said confidently.

“Leave Cloud Dancin’ out of it,” Sully told him. “This is between you and me.”

“The Cheyenne is still a fugitive, and the Son of the Morning Star has a score to settle with him. That debt will be paid,” Bloody Knife maintained.

“Well, Custer don’t got a score to settle with Dr. Mike,” Sully said flatly. “You done all you’re gonna do to her. Let her go.”

“Sully—!” Michaela said in a choked whisper, but he ignored her, his eyes locked on the Indian.

Bloody Knife’s lips curled into a half-smile. “I do not think so,” he said.

“I’m tellin’ you—she ain’t got no more part in this,” Sully insisted. “You only used her to get to me. Well now you got me. You don’t need her no more.”

“But she is so useful,” the scout remarked. “As long as I control her, I control you.”

“Look, I ain’t goin’ nowhere,” Sully told him. “We’ve had this appointment for a long time—I ain’t backin’ out of it.” He regarded Bloody Knife steadily.

“Let me take Dr. Mike to our friends.” he urged. “You made ’em get rid of their weapons—they ain’t no threat to you. Let ’em all go peacefully, and then you got me to yourself.

“You and me, face-to-face, alone,” he said. “That’s what you’ve wanted since the beginnin’, ain’t it? Well now you got finally got your wish. Release Dr. Mike and the others, and we’ll finish this.”

“You are in no position to bargain,” Bloody Knife said sharply. “I owe you nothing.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Sully said levelly. “But you do care about protectin’ your own skin, don’t
you? You don’t want to get into Custer’s bad books, runnin’ off without his permission and doin’ things he
don’t approve of. After all, he’s your hero, right? Or is he more like your master, and you’re his faithful
dog? Who’s really in control, Bloody Knife?”

The scout’s face darkened. “No man controls me,” he said balefully.

“Sully!” Michaela gasped under her breath, her eyes large and frightened.

His hand tightened where it curled around her arm, and his eyes telegraphed a warning to her to be
still.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he went on casually to the Indian. “You used to do Custer’s scoutin’ for him. Now
you’re doin’ his killin’ for him. I’d say he’s pretty much got you under his thumb.”

“I kill—or do not kill—for my own reasons,” Bloody Knife said menacingly.

“Maybe so, but as long as you’re part of the 7th Cavalry, you’re still responsible to Custer,” Sully
reminded him. “You’re still responsible to the army. And last time I checked, the army sorta frowned on
its soldiers and scouts hurtin’ or killin’ innocent white folks. What do you think Custer’s gonna say when
he finds out you kidnapped and murdered a helpless woman—a helpless *white* woman?”

“She attacked me!” Bloody Knife spat, roughly yanking the hair back from his left temple and revealing
an ugly, imperfectly healed scar twisting from his cheekbone into the roots of his hairline.

“You pathetic . . .” Sully muttered in disgust. “She fought back in self-defense—against an attacker
twice her weight and size,” he said more loudly, his expression livid. “And everybody’s gonna know it.
This story’ll be in every newspaper in the country, and who do you think they’ll blame? You?” he sneered.
“Nah, they’ll just hang you. They’ll figure no Indian could be smart enough to plan somethin’ like this.
But they’ll *blame* Custer. They’ll say it was his fault ‘cause he didn’t keep you in line. They’ll say he
allowed a renegade Indian to murder a white woman—maybe even ordered him to.” He leaned forward,
pinning Bloody Knife in his sights.

“You’ll take Custer down with you,” he continued ruthlessly. “He’ll go from a hero to a criminal.
They’ll court martial him and throw him in prison for the rest of his life . . . or worse. You’ll forever be
known as the traitor who destroyed the ‘Son of the Morning Star.’”

Sully’s eyes had taken on that flat, obsidian cast that had so frightened Michaela weeks ago at the
homestead, when he’d sworn to kill Bloody Knife and Custer. Now with his relentless baiting, he seemed
to be inviting Bloody Knife to do his worst—even to take his life, if it might save hers. She couldn’t let Sully
do this—she couldn’t remain silent and allow him to goad the scout into murdering him . . .

She put her lips to Sully’s ear. “Stop, please!” she implored him. “I’m begging you, Sully—don’t anger
him! Don’t make him hurt you! I don’t care about myself—I don’t care what he did to me. I just want
you to live—”

“And I don’t care what he does to me—I ain’t lettin’ him hurt you no more,” Sully harshly whispered
back. “I’ll do whatever I got to, if it’ll buy your freedom, and Matthew and the others.”

“Sully—” she entreated again.

“Leave it be, Michaela,” he pronounced, with a look that silenced her. He faced Bloody Knife again.
“So what’s it gonna be?” he challenged. “You hurt Dr. Mike anymore, or kill her, and you’ll destroy your
own life, and Custer’s in the bargain. Let her go, along with the others, and nobody’ll ever know what took
place here. You can do whatever you want to me. You’ll get the revenge you been waitin’ for.”

“You ask me to believe that if I release them, they won’t go straight to the law?” Bloody Knife said
derisively. “When I can simply kill you all and leave no witnesses? Do you take me for a fool?”

“You’re a fool if you go on with this,” Sully answered. “There are folks back in Colorado Springs who
know we’re here, and why. You think they won’t go to the army if none of us come back? And what about
Custer? What’s he gonna do when you go missin’, and he finds out what you been up to? You think he’ll
just turn a blind eye?
“Nobody here will breathe a word, if I tell ’em not to,” he went on. “If they know that Dr. Mike’s life depends on it. And even if they did, you’d be long gone before the law or the army could come after you.

“Let ’em go, and you and me will finish this,” he repeated.

There was a long silence, as Bloody Knife contemplated Sully’s words. “Take her to them,” he said suddenly, startling Sully with his abrupt reversal.

“You’re serious?” he said suspiciously.

“I have said it,” the Indian replied. “Go, before I change my mind.”

“No!” Michaela exclaimed to him in panic as Bloody Knife stepped back and Sully carried her the few yards to his companions. “Sully, I won’t leave you! I beg you—don’t do this!”

Again he ignored her. He reached Matthew, Hank and Brendan, and carefully lowered Michaela to the ground as they gathered protectively around her.

Matthew embraced her tightly, then put his arm around her so that she could lean against him. “Missed you, Ma,” he whispered tremulously. She touched his face, too overcome for the moment to speak.

“It’s good to have you back,” Brendan told her. “We’ll take good care of you now.”

“Sight for sore eyes, Michaela,” offered Hank, his expression unusually gentle.

“Thank you—all of you,” Michaela managed after a moment. “I’ll never be able to repay you for what you’ve done for me. But I need to ask for your help again. Please stop Sully from doing this—from giving himself up to Bloody Knife. He’s determined to throw his life away for my sake, and I can’t let him!” Though she directed her plea to their companions, her tear-filled eyes never left Sully’s face.

“Michaela, there’s nothin’ they can do,” he told her quietly. “Not without riskin’ their lives, and I won’t allow that. All of you got a chance to get away clean, and I’m gonna make sure you take it.

“I don’t want you to worry about me,” he insisted, sitting on his heels before her so that he could look into her eyes. “I’m doin’ what I got to do. What I been prepared to do for a long time.

“We talked about this before,” he added more softly. “We knew there was danger—we knew what could happen. And now the time’s come to ‘pay the piper.” He smiled crookedly. “We just gotta accept it.” He reached out and caressed her cheek.

Michaela seized his hand, ignoring the pain in her fingers. “I can’t accept it!” she said brokenly. “I can’t lose you like this! Please, Sully—don’t leave me!”

“Tell Colleen and Brian I love them,” he whispered. “And always remember how much I love you.” He gently pressed his lips to her hand, and then cupped her face in his palms and covered her mouth with his. Michaela clung to him desperately, praying that time would stop—that this was all some horrible dream from which she would awaken any moment—but all too soon, Sully was pulling away from her.

“No!” she cried out in anguish, and tried to rise from the ground to stop him, but Matthew and the others held her back.

“Easy, Dr. Mike,” Matthew cautioned soothingly.

“Gotta let him go,” Hank told her, his eyes sober.

“I can’t!” she choked, breaking down and weeping harshly. “I can’t . . .”

Sully watched her with tortured eyes, but didn’t waver. He glanced at Matthew. “Remember your promise,” he said.

Matthew swallowed hard and managed to nod, his eyes stricken. Sully allowed himself one more look at Michaela, feeling the sight of her tear at his heart. Then he deliberately turned away and walked back to
“All right—let ‘em go,” he said.

“In due time,” Bloody Knife said, his eyes sly and calculating.

Sully looked at him sharply. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“I cannot let them go before the—what is that phrase that the General is so fond of?” he queried himself. “Oh yes—before the ‘piece de resistance.’ I would not want them to miss my final victory,” he added, an insolent smile hovering about his lips.

“You lyin’ piece of filth,” Sully said venemously. “You said you’d let ‘em go.”

“In fact, I never did,” the scout contradicted. “But—I will . . . in my own time.” His smug manner suddenly altered, his eyes growing dark and sinister. “I advise you to take care how you speak to me,” he warned.

“I’ll speak to you any way I want,” Sully said recklessly. “You can only kill me once.”

“But I can do far worse things to your woman,” Bloody Knife reminded him ominously. “I can hurt her in ways you cannot imagine.”

“You lay one finger on her, and you’ll never have a moment’s peace,” Sully threatened darkly, his eyes stabbing Bloody Knife like daggers. “You better kill me now, ’cause if you don’t, I’ll spend the rest of my days huntin’ you down. And even if you kill me, my friends and family won’t rest till they see you rot in Hell.” He leaned closer, so that his face was just inches from Bloody Knife’s. “And my spirit will come back and haunt you forever.”

A muscle twitched in Bloody Knife’s impassive face—and did Sully even detect a twinge of fear in his eyes? But the scout refused to give ground. “You make a brave noise,” he said scornfully. “But that is all it is—empty threats.” His glance fell on Sully’s tomahawk, then flickered toward his knife. “Lay down your weapons,” he said contemptuously.

“Why?” Sully countered. “Are you so scared of me that you think you can’t win ‘less I’m unarmed?”

“I am afraid of nothing!” Blood Knife spat.

“Yeah?” Sully baited him, defiantly pulling his tomahawk from his belt. “Then prove it. You’re ‘sposed to be such a great warrior—or is that just another lie?” He regarded Bloody Knife smugly, daring him to do his worst. “C’mon,” he relentlessly goaded the scout. “Are you a warrior—or a coward?”

With a bellow the Indian rushed him, but Sully was ready. As Bloody Knife’s arm came around, slashing his knife through the air in a wicked arc, Sully sharply brought up the handle of his tomahawk, bluntly deflecting the blade. The impact made Bloody Knife stumble backward and Sully pressed his advantage, moving in on the scout and punching him solidly on the jaw, the entire force of his anger behind the blow.

Bloody Knife landed on his back and Sully stood over him, raising the tomahawk and preparing to bring it down on his enemy. For a split second he hesitated, summoning his resolve, but in that moment the Indian erupted, shooting upwards and launching himself at Sully. Sully fell backward on the ground and suddenly Bloody Knife was pinning him down, one hand violently yanking at Sully’s hair, the other holding the knife to his throat.

“Who is the coward?” he said gutterally, an insane glitter in his eyes.

“Sully!” Michaela screamed.

For a fleeting moment the Indian was distracted; and with a cry of rage, Sully pulled his hands free and knocked Bloody Knife’s arms away, tears of pain springing to his eyes as the scout ripped some of the hair from his scalp. The two of them rolled over together—once, twice, a third time, grappling desperately.

The spectators watched tensely as the momentum shifted back and forth between the two men. Sully
and Bloody Knife were evenly matched—*too* evenly matched, so that neither could get an advantage over the other.

Matthew’s throat closed with fear as he watched the Indian try to overpower Sully. Sully had successfully managed to elude Bloody Knife’s blade so far, but he’d have to tire soon, and if the scout got lucky with the knife just once . . .

Matthew looked longingly to where their guns rested on the ground, mentally calculating whether he could close the yards to where they lay before being spotted by the scout. Maybe he could, but if Bloody Knife saw and made Sully pay for it . . .

No—it was no good. Too much risk.

And then it hit him. Hank. He glanced sharply to the long-haired man crouched to his left. Hank’s eyes were riveted on Sully and Bloody Knife, avidly following their moves, their positions. His hand rested lightly on his thigh, almost seeming to hover there, and Matthew could almost read his mind—instinctively sensing that the saloon owner was waiting for the chance to make his move.

Another gasp of fear from Dr. Mike brought Matthew’s eyes sharply back to the conflict.

The men were on their feet now and Bloody Knife was whipping the knife from side to side, forcing Sully steadily backwards toward the adjacent cliff-face. Sully’s reflexes were sharp as he adroitly dodged the knife, but there was no time, no opportunity for him to aim a blow of his own.

Suddenly he stumbled backward over a rock, briefly losing his footing. Before he could recover Bloody Knife lunged forward, driving Sully back against the cliff as the knife drew a line of blood across his chest. The base of Sully’s skull impacted with the stone and he sank to his knees, his eyelids fluttering. The scout reared over him, raising the knife above his head and preparing to plunge it into Sully’s heart.

“SULLY!” Michaela screamed again in a tone that chilled Matthew’s blood.

On his other side, Hank was suddenly on his feet, his hand going to his back in a lightening blur. The next moment he was cocking his pistol as Matthew breathlessly watched. In one smooth motion the barkeep brought up his arm and aimed the gun squarely at Bloody Knife.

Matthew heard a second gunshot explode on the air, and almost as if in a dream he saw Bloody Knife collapse to the ground and topple over on his side. The Indian’s hand spasmodically went to his leg, where a flower of blood was rapidly blooming on his thigh.

Matthew felt like he’d been sucker-punched. All the air in his lungs seemed to be gone, and for a moment he couldn’t summon his voice. But finally he could breathe again, and he stared in wonder at Hank.

“You did it!” he gasped. “You got him!”

But Hank was looking at him strangely. “Wasn’t me,” he said.

“What are you talkin’ about?” said Matthew, startled.

“Somebody else shot him—’fore I had a chance to fire,” Hank answered, sounding just as stunned as Matthew felt.

“But how’s that possible?” Matthew questioned, dumbfounded. “Nobody here had a gun, ‘cept—“

“That, Mr. Cooper, would be me,” said a voice off to his right, and Matthew turned sharply to behold General George Armstrong Custer.

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 18 April, 1870
Evening

The doc keeps telling me I need to rest.  Fact is, he threatened to give me something to knock me out if I can’t get to sleep on my own.  Any other time I’d never resort to those measures, but now I’m beginning to think it’s the only thing that will help.  Even the chamomile I asked them to brew for me didn’t work . . .

I can’t remember the last time I slept.  I try, again and again—but when I close my eyes all I can see is Bloody Knife—his eyes soulless and empty, and the glitter of his blade as it slashes into my flesh . . .  All I can hear is Michaela screaming, freezing my blood . . .  I remember thinking that it would be the last sound I would ever hear . . . that the echo of her agony would follow me down into death and haunt me for eternity . . .

And when I’m not fighting the images of what happened, I’m thinking about Michaela . . . the horror of what she went through, the desperate condition she was in when I found her—and whether she’ll be able to recover from all that . . .

I thought finding Bloody Knife at last would put an end to my torment, one way or another.  How foolishly wrong I was.  About that, and so many other things . . .

* * * * * * * * * *

After my head hit the rock I was too dazed to know much of anything.  I saw the blood oozing from my chest but it seemed like it wasn’t connected to me, and I couldn’t feel any pain—at least, not then.  I remember Bloody Knife glaring down at me, his eyes like red-hot coals, and the knife poised above me, about to strike . . . but it was unreal, dreamlike, and I could only hold onto my senses long enough to whisper a final goodbye to Michaela, sending her my spirit, before I left my earth life.

I must have closed my eyes—maybe because my consciousness was fading from the blow to my head, or maybe it was from loss of blood . . . or maybe because I couldn’t face the moment of my own death.  I don’t want to believe it’s because I was a coward . . . I hope it was only the unbearable prospect of being parted from Michaela, that made it so hard for me to accept my fate.

I’m getting maudlin again.  I can’t seem to help it.  I’ve been like this ever since we got here—depressed, guilty, ashamed . . . going off alone and keeping to myself for fear of breaking down in front of the others.  I’d never experienced nothing like this before—my emotions so confused and out of control—and it scared me.  Finally, out of desperation, I asked Doc Hunter if he could explain it.  The good news, I suppose, is that he didn’t seem nearly so worried as I was.  He said it it was a normal reaction to everything I’d been through—my exhaustion, my injuries, my worries over Michaela—but most of all, to my coming so close to dying.  The way he put it, was that I’d held my emotions in check for so long, through losing Michaela and going after her—and then nearly dying when I found her—that it was like a damn had finally burst inside me, letting all the feelings come flooding out.  He said it wasn’t permanent—that with time the melancholy would fade as I healed in my mind and in my body.

Doc Hunter is a good man—wise and compassionate—and I wanted to believe in his explanation.  But I couldn’t—because in my heart I knew what was wrong with me even before I asked.  And it wasn’t something the doc could cure, or even understand—because he didn’t know my sin.  For so long I’d despised my enemies for having no honor—but in the end, I was no better than they were.  And I wondered how Michaela could ever respect me, or want me, again . . .

I know I’m avoiding the subject.  It’s kind of ironic—even funny, in a perverse sort of way.  I’d give anything to forget this whole nightmare—to blot it all out.  But now, when I pray for amnesia, the memories are stubbornly, relentlessly clear.  It’s painful to write about—more shameful still to remember.  But I made a promise to myself to be honest in these pages, to record everything—therefore I’ve got to see this through to the end.

So . . . where was I?  Oh, yes.  The attack.

My eyes.  Closed.  And then a gunshot.  At first my mind couldn’t fathom the sound.  How could it be?  Where had it come from?  My friends had no weapons—they’d been forced to give them up.  Bloody Knife didn’t have a gun—at least none that I’d been able to see.  Of course there was no end to his treachery . . .
But it wasn’t the sound of the gun that drove the fog from my head and made me open my eyes. It was the voice. A voice I knew—a voice I despised—that had no business being here in the wilds of Nevada. And yet . . .

The first thing I knew was that Bloody Knife was gone. I couldn’t take it in for a moment, and then I saw him, lying sideways on the ground and clutching his leg while blood pooled out beneath his fingers. Somebody had shot him, but far as I knew, it couldn’t be Matthew or either of the others. Which left only . . .

Custer. I managed to turn my head in the direction of his voice, sure that my mind was playing tricks, positive that there must be some other explanation.

But no. It was no dream, no trick of my imagination. There he was—as real, as solid, as smug and preening as I’d ever seen him. And he’d just saved my life.

I couldn’t grasp it. None of it made sense. But I quickly realized that in this case, I wasn’t the only one at a loss. Everybody—Matthew, Hank, Brendan, Michaela . . . all of them were frozen, staring in shock at the army officer.

Michaela was the first to recover. She clutched at Matthew’s arm and looked in my direction, frantically saying something to him I couldn’t hear. Matthew’s paralysis broke then, and he jumped up and started toward me.

“Mr. Cooper,” Custer spoke again, stopping Matthew in his tracks.

“I’m seeing to Sully,” Matthew announced, staring at Custer defiantly. “He’s hurt—he needs attention.”

The officer nodded slightly, granting his permission. “But keep your distance from my scout,” he warned.

“Don’t worry,” Matthew told him flatly. “He can bleed to death for all I care.” He reached me and crouched down at my side. “Sully—you all right?” he asked anxiously. His gaze flickered quickly over my cloudy eyes and the blood on my shirt. “No, you ain’t,” he answered his own question. “Sully, Dr. Mike wants me to bring you over to her so she can tend to you,” he explained to me carefully. “Think you can stand?”

“She ain’t in—no shape—for doctoring,” I managed.

“I agree—but you know Dr. Mike,” he said lightly. “She won’t take no for an answer. Anyway, how about it? Can you get to your feet if you lean on me?”

Rather than wasting energy on a reply, I tried to stand on my own, but my head swam and I stumbled. Matthew lunged to catch me. “Hank!” he bellowed over his shoulder. “I need help!”

The barkeep came running, and a moment later I felt strong arms on both sides lift me up and support me over to where Michaela sat on the ground, looking like the slightest puff of air would carry her off.

Her face seemed to pale even more as she saw me. Yet somehow, frail as she was, she couldn’t deny her doctoring instincts, and she began to examine me just as if we were in the clinic.

“Matthew, my bag,” she requested, her tone crisp, as she took my pulse, peered into my eyes and then turned her attention to my wound. “I want to examine you for signs of concussion or other injury, but first we need to stop the bleeding,” she told me, glancing around to include everyone in her remarks. “I need something to apply pressure to the wound,” she instructed Matthew as he brought the bag to her side. He opened it and hunted quickly through the contents, bringing out a folded piece of linen. “Press it firmly to Sully’s chest,” she told him. She turned her eyes to me. “The gash is wide and fairly deep,” she said. “But thankfully it missed the vital organs. You’ll need stitches and rest, but I believe that once the cut is cleaned and sewn, it will heal completely.”

“You ain’t in no condition to be stitching anybody up,” I protested. I glanced at Matthew. “Make her listen,” I said. “Her hands are painful—crippled up from the damp—and I don’t want her using up her strength tending to me.”
“I’ll help,” Matthew immediately placated me. “Whatever needs doing, Dr. Mike—stitching Sully up, or anything else—just talk me through it,” he added to his ma, paling a little himself at the prospect of poking me with a needle, but determined to help in whatever way he could.

“Thank you, Matthew, but I don’t think that will be necessary,” Michaela told him. “I believe if we pack the wound with yarrow root and then bandage Sully’s chest firmly, he can wait until we can get him to the nearest doctor.

“I’d do it myself, but I don’t have the control—the precision—I need right now,” she added to me.

“Even if you could, I wouldn’t let you,” I told her firmly. “I don’t want you fussing over me, Michaela—I’m all right.”

“No, you’re not,” she contradicted softly. “But you will be. Thank God, you will be,” she added to herself, her voice trembling a little. After a moment she shook herself slightly, then turned again to Matthew. “There’s a bottle of chlorine water for disinfecting the wound, as well as a pouch with some dried yarrow root in my bag,” she said. “We’ll sponge away the blood and clean the cut. Then we’ll add some water to the yarrow root, make a paste, and apply it to the wound—after which we’ll bandage.”

“I’ll bring the water,” Brendan offered, but then stood helplessly, looking around for something to carry it in.

“There’s a tin cup in the cave—but it don’t hold much,” I said.

“I’ll go back up to the ridge—fetch the canteens and the other supplies,” said Hank, and took off in the opposite direction.

“While we’re waiting, let me examine you more closely for concussion,” Michaela said to me, businesslike.

She tilted my chin up and looked into my eyes again. “Follow my finger,” she instructed, passing her index finger slowly from right to left in front of my eyes and observing the results.

“Michaela—“

“Any dizziness?” she asked.

“He had some when he tried to stand up,” Matthew offered helpfully.

“What about now?” Michaela asked me.

I shrugged, uninterested in my own condition. “I don’t know—maybe a little,” I said. “Michaela—“

“Nausea?” she questioned.

“A little,” I admitted. “Michaela, I don’t want you fretting about me, or hurting yourself more trying to care for me. You’re the one who needs a doctor—“

“Hush,” she said briefly, and gently probed the back of my skull. “There’s a swelling here,” she added after a moment, as her fingers encountered the bump on my head and I winced sharply. “I’m sorry,” she apologized.

“I believe you have a concussion, and I’ll want to observe you carefully over the next twenty-four hours,” she went on. “But barring any complications, you should recover completely. I’m wary of giving you strong medication at present, but when we get the water, we’ll brew you some willow bark tea. That should ease the pain. Depending upon your progress, perhaps later I can give you laudanum if necessary.”

“You ain’t going to do nothing but lay in a bed and get well,” I told her. “We’ll find another doctor, and he’ll tend to me if I need it. After he tends to you. You got to take it easy, Michaela,” I said, gently removing her hand from me and replacing it in her lap.

She opened her mouth to protest but froze as Custer, apparently tired of being ignored, wandered up to us. He touched his fingers to his hat.
“Dr. Quinn—I’m sorry that we should have to meet again under such circumstances,” he began politely. “What is Mr. Sully’s condition? And yours, of course,” he added hastily.

“We’ve both suffered injury,” Michaela replied stiffly. “But fortunately, I believe we will both recover.” She made herself look to where Bloody Knife still lay on the ground. “General, your scout also needs attention. The bleeding must be stopped, or he’ll die. After I’ve seen to Sully’s injuries—”

“You ain’t going within ten feet of him!” I said sharply.

“Sully—”

“I mean it, Michaela,” I said, implacable. “You ain’t lifting one finger to help that—“ I bit down on the obscenity that rose to my lips. “You ain’t helping him,” I repeated grimly.

“Sully, I can’t watch someone dying and do nothing,” Michaela said. “Not even if it’s someone I despise. I’m a doctor,” she reminded me gently. “It’s my duty to save lives.”

“It ain’t your duty to save *his* life,” I muttered.

“Sully, please—“ she said, distressed.

“Your ethics are most commendable, Dr. Quinn,” Custer interjected smoothly. “And I thank you for your willingness to help, in view of what you endured. But your efforts won’t be necessary, as it happens. I’m camped with two of my aides just over that rise.” He pointed to a hill beyond the cliff and the waterfall. “They can give Bloody Knife the attention he requires until we can transport him back to army headquarters.”

“Why help him at all?” Hank asked rudely as he returned, saddlebags slung on his shoulders and canteens dangling from his hands. He let his burdens slide off and drop to the ground, glancing murderously at Bloody Knife, then turning his flinty gaze on Custer. “He’s a miserable excuse for a man—even for an Injun,” he went on. “He’s a miserable excuse for a man—even for an Injun,” he went on. “He damn near burned down my saloon, kidnapped Dr. Mike and tried to kill Sully twice. Why don’t you save the army the cost of a hanging and just let the life bleed out of him?”

“Your anger is understandable, and your ‘suggestion’ duly noted, Mr. Lawson. But *I* will decide the disposition of my scout,” Custer told him.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Hank demanded, finally voicing the question none of us had had the opportunity to ask. “Where’d you come from?”

A half-smile tugged at Custer’s mouth. “Why, from the same place you did—Colorado Springs,” he said blandly.

“You know what I mean,” Hank retorted.

“If you’re asking if I’ve been following you, the answer is no,” Custer replied.

“You ain’t been tracking us?” I said suspiciously.

He shook his head. “No, Mr. Sully, far from it. When Bloody Knife committed this—act—I was away on leave, visiting my wife, Libby. It distresses her when my military campaigns keep us separated for months at a time. She worries about my safety—legacy of the war, I suppose,” he mused. “At any rate, periodically I must go home to reassure her.” He broke off as he realized that none of us gave a damn about his domestic troubles. “Well, no matter,” he said. “The point is, I had no knowledge of my scout’s activities until I returned to Colorado Springs. Had I suspected Bloody Knife’s intentions sooner, none of this would have happened,” he added.

My expression told him what I thought of that claim. “Then how did you know to find us here?” I challenged him. “The Nevada desert ain’t exactly a stroll around the corner from Colorado Springs.”

“You know as well as anyone how rapidly news travels in a small town,” Custer said. “When I returned to Colorado Springs, I read an account of the kidnapping in the Gazette. Mrs. Jennings’ article made
mention of the fact that a posse of four men, including Dr. Quinn’s fiancé, had gone in pursuit of the suspected kidnapper. It required little effort on my part to make some discreet inquiries, and learn the details."

“Not from our family or friends,” I said with certainty.

“No, you’re quite right,” Custer said regretfully. “Your friends and family were definitely not forthcoming. However, my investment of an afternoon in the saloon produced gratifying results. It’s not hard to loosen a few tongues for the price of a whiskey or two,” he added.

“Still—even knowing Red Rock Canyon was our destination couldn’t have lead you to this exact spot,” I accused. “Unless you already knew about it.”

“I might have been—familiar—with the location,” Custer admitted. “Not from first-hand experience, mind you, but because Bloody Knife had spoken of it before. Something about a failed love affair,” he recalled vaguely. “A Paiute woman—the daughter of a chief—whose father refused to sanction her union to Bloody Knife because of his mixed blood. They drove him out, I believe. Pity,” he added casually, sounding no more concerned or sympathetic than if he were discussing an animal instead of a man.

“I wouldn’t know about any involvement Bloody Knife had with the Paiutes. But as far as how you knew to come to Red Rock, you’re lying,” I said flatly. “You knew about this place because you sent him here. You been behind this since the beginning. Who was it who ordered Bloody Knife to kill me in the first place?”

“I never ordered him to ‘kill’ anyone,” Custer replied levelly. “I sent him on a legitimate mission to find the fugitive medicine man, Cloud Dancing. And I suggested that he keep a watch on you, in the hope that you might lead us to our target. I instructed Bloody Knife to apprehend the Cheyenne and bring him back to headquarters for trial. However I did not order him to kill the Cheyenne, nor did I instruct him to take any violent action against you. In fact, you were only involved insofar as your activities to aide and abet a fugitive.”

“What happens now?” Hank spoke up again. He jerked his head toward Bloody Knife. “To him?”

“As I said before, I will handle the situation,” Custer said enigmatically.

“You’re going to let him go,” Hank said softly, ominously. “That’s it, ain’t it? He ain’t going to stand trial, he ain’t going to hang—you’re just going to brush this under the carpet like it never happened.”

“Not true,” Custer denied. “He will be punished.”

“Not like he deserves,” I said, the rage boiling up inside me. “A slap on the wrist and that’s all.” Ignoring my dizziness and pain, I got to my feet, the anger coursing through me giving me the strength. I regarded Custer with loathing. “Do you got any idea what Dr. Quinn suffered at his hands?” I went on dangerously. “Kidnapping, starvation—his constant threats to her life? To mine? The army would hang him for a lot less. And you’re gonna protect him.”

“I am taking the only practical course necessary under the circumstances,” Custer persisted.

“Practical for you,” I said contemptuously. “Well if you ain’t going make him pay for what he done, then I will.” I started to move toward the Indian, staggering slightly as I drew my knife from its sheath.

“Sully, NO!” Michaela cried out desperately.

There was a moment of absolute silence, and then a small metallic sound—that of a hammer being engaged.

“Stop right there, Mr. Sully,” Custer said coolly, his pistol aimed at my heart.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE
“What do you think you’re doin’?” Sully demanded.

“Saving you from yourself,” Custer said even.

Sully regarded him in amazement. “That’s rich,” he said after a moment. “As if I didn’t know you’d just as soon gun me down as look at me.”

“You seem to forget that I saved your life mere moments ago,” the officer reminded him pointedly.


Custer sighed and shook his head ruefully. “As I observed at our last meeting, Mr. Sully, you’re so very predictable.” He took a few steps closer to Sully, continuing to keep the gun trained on him. “You don’t get it, do you?” he asked. “You don’t understand that I’m trying to prevent you from ruining your life.”

“Is that right?” Sully said sarcastically. “How noble.”

“That’s right,” Custer echoed, disregarding the barb. “Use your head, Mr. Sully. If you kill Bloody Knife in cold blood, I will have no choice but to arrest you for murder and take you back to stand trial. You’ll spend the rest of your life in prison—or you’ll hang. Either way, you will be parted from Dr. Quinn forever. Is that worth a moment’s revenge?”

“What do you care?” Sully shot back.

“I don’t,” Custer said flatly. “Not about you. But it seems a shame to make Dr. Quinn suffer for your hot-headedness. Besides, I feel a certain—responsibility—for what’s happened. He is my scout, after all, even if he acted without my authority and in direct violation of my orders.”

“That’s it,” Sully said slowly. “That’s why you want to stop me from killin’ Bloody Knife. You don’t care about him, just like you don’t care about me. You’re just tryin’ to save your own skin.”

“I am adhering to army regulations,” the officer said neutrally.

“You sayin’ you’d let the army string Sully up for riddin’ the world of a crazy, murderin’ Injun—’cause of *regulations*?” Hank spoke again, regarding Custer with contempt. “After all the evil things the Injun did? What kinda justice is that?”

“General Custer ain’t interested in justice,” Sully pointedly answered Hank. “All he cares about is coverin’ this up so the army’ll never know what his ‘favorite scout’ did in his name.” His voice dripped with venom.

“You’re extremely lucky, Mr. Sully,” Custer cut in. “I realize you have—cause—to feel bitter. Therefore, I am going to ignore your aspersions on my character. But if I were you, I’d listen carefully to what I’m going to say, if you cherish any hope at all of having a future.” Sully’s eyes remained coldly hostile, his expression mirrored in the faces of Michaela and their companions. However for the moment, he was silent.

“Bloody Knife did terrible things,” Custer began frankly. “That is a fact—one which I do not dispute. I did not order him to take matters into his own hands—that is another fact. However, I am, to a certain degree, responsible for his conduct. In that assertion, you were essentially correct. I confess that it would—“ He hesitated. “—reflect ‘badly’ on me, shall we say, if Bloody Knife’s crimes were to become public knowledge. If you murdered him, I might be able to cover up Bloody Knife’s disappearance—even possibly, your own crime. But there are citizens back in Colorado Springs who know what’s happening here, and who might start asking questions. Questions neither of us would want to answer.”

Sully’s eyes narrowed. Custer noted the look. “Yes, you heard me,” he went on. “Trust me, Mr. Sully—you wouldn’t want your murder of Bloody Knife to become public any more than I. Despite everything he’s done—despite the injury he’s caused you, Dr. Quinn and Mr. Lawson—the fact remains that he is a member of the 7th Cavalry, entitled to all the military protection afforded him by that status. Which would include a trial and almost certainly a guilty verdict for the man who deliberately caused his death.”

“I would never advocate that Sully commit murder,” Brendan spoke for the first time. “But with all
due respect, General Custer, if the extraordinary circumstances drove Sully to such an act, are you suggesting that the army wouldn't take into consideration his extreme duress? This Indian committed terrible crimes against both Sully and Dr. Quinn—kidnapping, attempted murder . . . The army surely couldn’t disregard all that—"

"Murder is still murder, Sir—particularly when it's premeditated," Custer replied. "And when it's perpetrated against a member of the army, it becomes a matter for military law." He turned back to Sully.

"Think about it, Mr. Sully," the officer said more quietly. "You would incur a life sentence, or perhaps even pay with your own life—for the death of a man who caused you grievous harm. And not only you. Dr. Quinn, her children—anyone close to you would be permanently scarred by your actions. Is that what you truly want? I understand you're about to marry. Can you honestly tell me that if I offered you the chance to walk away from all this right now—to have the life you planned—you wouldn't want to take it?"

Custer regarded him shrewdly.

"I ain't a coward," Sully said coldly.

"No—just a man consumed with foolish pride and bent on revenge—two things that may very well get you killed," Custer responded. "The same things that drove Bloody Knife to do what he did."

"That sounds real admirable and all, but I notice you keep glossin' over your true reason for all this," Sully reminded him. "Savin' your own neck."

"We would be—helping each other, that's true," Custer conceded. "I don’t deny it. But you would be alive—and free. A more than equitable trade for ‘turning the other cheek’—wouldn’t you say?"

"You mean, for makin’ a deal with you," Sully said scornfully. "A prospect that turns my stomach."

"I never said you had to like it," the officer said crisply. "Do you think that I relish being allied with you? Think of it as an ‘unholy alliance’ if you wish—I really couldn’t care less. I’m interested only in results, as you should be.

"What do you say, Mr. Sully? Are we agreed?" Custer concluded. He held up a cautionary hand. "And before you answer, I would advise that you seriously consider how Dr. Quinn or her children might respond to the question. You may find that their feelings don’t necessarily echo your own," he added, glancing knowingly at Michaela and Matthew.

Sully stood silently, a tempest of black thoughts raging in his mind—fury that Bloody Knife and Custer might escape the punishment they deserved; self-loathing that he could even consider going along with Custer and condoning his and Bloody Knife’s actions; and finally, helpless anger at Custer’s inescapable logic. Almost reluctantly, he allowed himself to look at Michaela. Her eyes were haunted, pleading; confirming his bitterest realization of all—that Custer was right about her, too.

Michaela didn’t care about revenge—about making Bloody Knife pay for hurting her. She wanted the man she loved. Alive. Nothing else. From the moment he’d found her, she’d begged him not to confront Bloody Knife, not to sacrifice himself. What would it do to her if he disregarded all that?

Sully felt his hate, his need to hurt Bloody Knife uncoiling inside him. A need so strong it was like a physical thing—an animal with pointed teeth and razor claws, straining for release. Unconsciously his fist clenched around the knife.

How could he just let Bloody Knife walk away? How could he allow Custer to protect the scout, and himself? It would be like denying Michaela’s pain, her suffering. And most of all, her right to justice. What kind of man would he be if he allowed that to happen?

But what kind of man would he be if he wounded Michaela beyond healing, beyond recovery? If he threw his life away and destroyed hers in the process? He could never hope to receive forgiveness from Michaela, or from the spirits. He would never ask for it, because he would be damned.

He risked another glance at Michaela. Her eyes, washed with tears, begged him, entreated him—their language so expressive he could hear the words in his mind. (I LOVE YOU, her eyes spoke to him. I NEED YOU. DON'T DO THIS—DON'T LEAVE ME.)
Sully took a deep breath, then slowly returned the knife to his belt. He lifted his chin and fixed his gaze on Custer. “If I agree—what then?” he asked.

The officer lowered his gun and met Sully’s eyes. “Bloody Knife wasn’t responsible,” he said levelly. “For the initial abduction of Dr. Quinn, or her subsequent injuries. I will personally attend to Bloody Knife’s punishment, and there will be no mention of your name in connection with his. In return, you will pledge to keep the secret of Bloody Knife’s involvement in Dr. Quinn’s kidnapping. You and I will agree never to speak of this again. And then you can move forward with your life, and I can proceed with mine.”

“What about the folks back in Colorado Springs?” Sully persisted.

“It’s easy enough to fabricate a story for their benefit,” Custer told him. “You were pursuing the wrong man. Though the evidence suggested Bloody Knife; in fact it turned out to be a stranger who assaulted and kidnapped Dr. Quinn. A stranger who, unfortunately, got away.”

“You got it all figured out, don’t you?” Sully said bitterly. “Talk about your silver-tongued devils . . .”

“While we’re standing here debating morality and trading insults, my scout is bleeding to death,” Custer replied bluntly. “Make a decision, Mr. Sully.”


“He’s still a fugitive,” Custer replied. “I have no control over the army’s pursuit of him.”

“Not good enough,” Sully said sharply. “If I say yes, I want the soldiers called off, and Cloud Dancin’ left alone to go in peace.”

“I, personally, will not actively pursue him,” Custer said after a moment. “However, if I am ordered by my superiors to apprehend him, I will have no choice but to obey. To do otherwise would risk suspicion, insubordination, or worse. And then the entire story would come out.”

“That’s the best I can do,” he concluded. He eyed Sully speculatively. “So what will it be, Mr. Sully? I want an answer, now. Do we have an agreement?”

*S * * * * * * *

Sully closed his eyes briefly. Forgive me, Michaela, for what I have to do, he thought. Forgive me for being a coward—for needing to stay with you even more than my need to destroy the man who hurt you so badly. Forgive me for making a deal with Custer—for selling my soul to the Devil—because it’s the only way we can be together. I promised you justice—but now all I can give you is myself. I hope it will be enough . . .

Forgive me, Cloud Dancing, his thoughts continued their desolate course. Forgive me for dishonoring you by not getting the justice you deserve. Forgive me for allying myself with your enemy—so that I can have a life with Michaela . . . so that I can try to protect you and keep you alive . . . I hope someday you can understand the choice I had to make—

“My patience is wearing thin, Mr. Sully,” Custer’s voice intruded. Sully opened his eyes and faced the officer.

“All right,” he said dully. “You win.”

“This agreement must extend to everyone,” Custer insisted, glancing around at the grim faces regarding him. “All of you must pledge not to breathe a word of what transpired here.” No one spoke, but no one refused.

Apparently it was good enough. Custer finally relaxed and holstered his gun. “You made the right decision,” he said heartily, extending his hand for Sully to shake. Sully glanced at the officer’s preferred hand in disdain, his arms remaining at his sides. After a moment Custer withdrew the gesture. “Well, then,” he added awkwardly. “I should fetch my aides, so that they can take Bloody Knife back to our camp.”
"The bleeding should be stopped and his wound treated before you attempt to move him," Michaela told the officer. "If you like—" She glanced at Sully who was standing silently, his face closed and still. "I can advise your aides on how to proceed," she finished lamely.

"Thank you, Dr. Quinn. I’m sure they would appreciate your expertise," Custer responded. "Perhaps we can be of assistance to you as well," he continued. "I have two wagons at my disposal. I would be happy to lend one of them to you and your companions, to transport yourself and Mr. Sully to the nearest doctor."

"We don’t need nothin’ from you," Sully said shortly. Michaela looked up at him apprehensively.

"In fact, we do, Sully," she said softly. "I don’t believe I can sit a horse, and you’re in no condition to ride—not until after you’ve had medical attention."

"Then we’ll build a travois," Sully said, his eyes stubborn.

"That takes time," Michaela pointed out. "Time we really don’t have. We have no idea where the nearest doctor is, or how long it would take us to get there."

"Dr. Mike’s right, Sully," Matthew spoke up. "She needs attention, and so do you, soon as possible." He pitched his voice lower. "I know how you must be feelin’—how angry you are," he added. "I don’t blame you. But right now we gotta think about Dr. Mike."

"Long as Custer’s offerin’, might as well take him up on it," Hank spoke up. "The whole thing stinks to high heaven," he commiserated quietly. "But ya did the only thing ya could."

"I don’t want to talk about it," Sully said curtly.

"I’m just tryin’ to say that everybody understands," Hank persisted. "Ya had no choice. Ya got no call to feel ashamed—"

"You deaf?!” Sully snapped. "I said I didn’t want to talk about it!” He turned his back on Hank and moved away, his gait unsteady.

Hank raised an eyebrow. "No need to take my head off," he observed, but without rancor.

Michaela stared after Sully helplessly. She felt as if she were torn in two. Part of her wanted to exult with joy that Sully was safe—that in the end, he’d been strong enough to resist his murderous impulses, and his desperate need to punish Bloody Knife. But the other part of her ached with grief for him—sensing intuitively what it had cost him to surrender to Custer. Sully had sustained grievous wounds this day, and only some of them were on the outside.

He had survived Bloody Knife. He would live. But she wondered if he would be able to survive what came after. Was there an antidote to guilt? To shame? And if so, would she ever be able to help Sully find it?

MY JOURNAL
Tuesday, 18 April, 1870

Evening

I had no call to take my feelings out on Hank—he was just trying to help, to make me feel better about myself—and part of me knew that. Fact is, that was probably one of the kindest things he’d ever said to me. The problem was, he couldn’t make me feel better—nobody could. I’d failed to make Bloody Knife pay for his crimes. Worse, I’d sold out to my enemy—the man who’d murdered the Cheyenne . . . who’d murdered my family. There could be no defense for what I did—no words to describe the depth of guilt I felt. And shrouded in self-loathing as I was, I couldn’t stand to hear any words of comfort, no matter how well intended. From Hank—or anybody else.

As I turned my back and walked away from Hank, Michaela tentatively called my name, but I pretended not to hear. I tensed, wondering if she would try again, but she didn’t. I knew she wasn’t
fooled, and I despised myself for shutting her out, but at that moment I couldn’t even face Michaela. Despite her obvious relief that I would live—and my knowledge that I’d done what she wanted me to do . . . still, I’d never felt like more of a traitor—or less of a man.

I knew I didn’t have the luxury right then of giving in to my emotions—there was still the vital matter facing us of getting Michaela to a doctor—and I had to fix my mind on that. But I was compelled to take just a moment alone to clamp down on my feelings—to try to hold myself together for Michaela’s sake, and the sake of my stepson and my friends. Michaela was depending on me, and Matthew, Hank and Brendan had made countless sacrifices—had risked their lives—because of me. I couldn’t leave them in the lurch, or allow myself to fall apart now. There would plenty of time to punish myself in the days and weeks to come.

There was an awkward silence, as I felt everybody’s eyes on me, boring into my back. I could feel their pity, coming off them in waves—and it was intolerable to me. Bitterly, I found myself wishing that Bloody Knife *had* killed me. At least I would have died with honor. It would have been better—*anything* would have been better—than the shame and humiliation I was feeling now.

The painful seconds ticked past, and finally Hank stepped in to fill the breach. “So,” he said self-consciously into the quiet. “How do we find a doctor?”

“Guess we need Brendan’s help again for that,” I heard Matthew reply, his voice equally stilted. “You know where we can find a doctor—or the nearest town?” he added more naturally after a moment, presumably talking to Brendan.

I was starting to feel light-headed again, and I dug my fingernails into my palms, using the bright, sharp pain to drive away the dizziness that wanted to claim me. Taking a deep breath, I turned around in time to see Brendan looking solemn.

“As I told you before we left, Las Vegas would qualify as the nearest town, but there’s not much there,” Brendan admitted apologetically. “And no doctor—at least there wasn’t one when I was here last.”

“What do we do, then?” Matthew asked, looking concerned as his glance went from Michaela to me.

“We go to this—‘Las Vegas’—anyway,” Hank declared. “If it’s the only sign of civilization around these parts, then somebody there has got to know where a doctor is.”

“That’s logical, but Las Vegas is at least a twenty mile ride in that direction, over rough terrain,” Brendan explained, pointing west of our position. “Difficult enough for horses, let alone a wagon. I’m not sure that Dr. Mike or Sully could tolerate the trip.”

“No need to worry about me,” I said briefly. “But we’ll build a travois for Michaela, just like I said.”

“There *is* cause to worry about you,” Michaela spoke up strongly. “You could start bleeding again.”

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. I could sense her pain as she watched me anxiously, but I couldn’t bring myself to meet her eyes.

“Still, Sully, the trip would take hours, and you know how the temperature drops after sundown. You can already feel a chill,” Brendan observed. He was right—I could detect a marked coolness in the air and I shivered slightly. “It could be dangerous for Dr. Mike to suffer further exposure,” he added.

He was right about that too, and I stood there helplessly, trying to figure out our next move. We couldn’t stay here, that was clear—not with Michaela’s condition. But trying to make it to Las Vegas under the present circumstances might do her even more harm. There had to be a solution, but I couldn’t seem to see it. Fact was, my light-headedness was getting worse, and I was finding it hard to think clearly at all.

“Wait!” Brendan said suddenly, and I tried to focus on him through eyes getting increasingly fuzzy. “There’s a spread close by called Sandstone Ranch—I spent a week there during my previous trip. It’s only five miles south of here. It’s owned by a man named Jim Wilson. He and his wife were very cordial to me—I’m sure that they’d be willing to put us up, and they’d certainly know if there’s a doctor in the area and where to find him.”

“Sounds good to me,” Hank commented, his voice seeming to come to me from far away. I squinted at him. He looked real small—they all did—like I was peering at them through the wrong end of a
telescope. I tried pressing my nails into my palms again, but the strength had drained from my hands—I couldn’t even make a fist.

Black tatters fluttered at the edges of my vision, and I swayed on my feet. “Get the wagon from Custer . . . get Michaela settled,” I managed, my voice echoing oddly in my ears. “Make sure she’s . . . comfortable. Get her to . . . to . . .” The gauzy black veil descended completely over my eyes and the ground came rushing up to meet me.

“Sully . . .!” I heard Michaela’s voice, tinny and remote, and then, there was nothing.

* * * * * * * * * *

I felt something cold against my chest, and my hand instinctively groped to knock it away even before I opened my eyes.

“Easy, young fella—nobody’s going to hurt you,” came a relaxed drawl, as I felt a strong hand close gently over mine and hold it still. “Just trying to listen to your heart.”

The words took a moment to filter through the cotton batting in which my mind seemed suspended. A stretch of time passed that could have been seconds or minutes, as I tried to distinguish if I was still dreaming. But the warmth of the flesh against mine—the slightly bony feel of the hand and roughened texture of the fingers, was enough to convince me this was reality, and with an effort, I opened my eyes.

I was laying in a high, comfortable tester bed, in a room wreathed in shadows, an oil lamp on the table adjacent to me casting a soft pool of light on the coverlet. By my bedside, a tall, rangy man perched on a spindly, ladder-backed chair. One large-boned hand still covered mine. The other rested on his knees. A stethoscope dangled from his neck, the bell disappearing beneath the lapels of the dark coat hanging slackly from his gangling frame. His head was crowned with a startling thatch of bushy gray hair that sprang up wildly, leading me to believe he’d been called from his own bed to come here. A trick of the light created a nimbus, like a halo, around the planes of his skull and turned the gun-metal strands of his hair to silver. His eyes, vividly blue and looking extraordinarily young in his weathered face, regarded me discerningly.

“Welcome back,” he said kindly, giving my hand a slight, but reassuring squeeze. “We were beginning to worry about you.”

I looked at him doubtfully. “Who are you?”

“Doctor Patrick Hunter. ‘Doc’ Hunter to my friends—and my enemies,” he said, giving me an easy smile. “But most folks just call me ‘Doc’ or ‘Pat’—take your pick.

“You’re at Sandstone Ranch,” he went on, anticipating my next question. “Jim Wilson’s place. He came to fetch me when you folks pulled in.”

“How long have I—?”

“Been unconscious?” he finished, reading my thoughts again. “Well, between the trauma you suffered and the chloroform I administered to suture your wound, roughly three to four hours since you got here—plus another couple hours before that, give or take—according to your lady and your friends. You got a respectable bump on the head and a concussion to go along with it, just like Dr. Quinn diagnosed. Not to mention losing a fair amount of blood. But you’ll be all right—“

“Michaela!” I said sharply, the disorientation leaving my mind as he spoke her name. “I mean Dr. Quinn. How is she?” Automatically I started to rise up from the bed and pain flared in my skull and mid-section. I gasped sharply, my body straining against the constriction of the bandage wrapped around my chest, and fell back on the pillows.

“Like I said, Mr. Sully, you got a concussion,” Doc Hunter reminded me. “You need to take it easy and rest for a day or so. No need to fret about the knife wound,” he added, as he saw my hand stray to the site of my other injury and encounter the layers of linen winding around my torso. “I cleaned and stitched it up, and it should heal just fine. Shouldn’t even leave a scar.”

“I don’t care about that. I just want to know about Dr. Quinn. Is she all right?” I demanded.
“She’s resting comfortably,” Doc Hunter said mildly. “I just left her.”

“But what does that mean? What’s wrong with her? Her hands, they were all crippled, and—“

“Just slow down,” he said, his voice powerful and soothing. In spite of my anxiety over Michaela, I felt myself marginally relax. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know, long as you remain calm.” I met his eyes, and was reassured once again by their piercing directness. After a pause I nodded.

Satisfied, he relaxed as well and released my hand, leaning back in his chair. I heard it creak alarmingly.

“To answer your question, Dr. Quinn is suffering from dehydration, malnutrition, and exposure,” he began. “It’s lucky you got to her when you did—much more time in that cave and I believe her hands would have suffered permanent damage. As it is, I think the outlook is good. I’ve got her soaking her hands in warm water, and I believe that regular treatments for a few days will restore the health of the tissues and avert any danger of arthritis or neuralgia.”

I closed my eyes briefly in profound relief. “Good,” I murmured, letting out a sigh. “Good.” After a moment I looked at the doctor again. “She once treated her daughter’s hands the same way,” I informed him.

“So she told me,” he remarked.

“What about the rest of her condition?” I inquired apprehensively. “The starvation, and the de—dehy—“

“Dehydration,” he supplied. “Well, she’s lost an alarming amount of weight, so we’re going to need to build her up again, help her get her strength back. But I believe that a regimen of nourishing food, plenty of liquids and rest—along with a mild program of exercise—will restore Dr. Quinn to her former self.”

“Even her legs?” I added. “When I found her, she couldn’t stand on them—“

“Just a consequence of her limbs being bound for a prolonged period of time, diminishing the circulation,” he said reassuringly. “But the effect is only temporary. Dr. Quinn has full range of motion and feeling in her legs, and I believe she’ll be up and walking around very soon. She certainly has the mental determination,” he added, a note of admiration in his voice. “Quite an uncommon woman, your Dr. Quinn.”

“And an uncommon doctor,” I said firmly.

“I strongly received that impression from her son and your friends,” Doc Hunter replied, smiling with warmth at my tone of pride. “The condition of your wound, and her discussion of your injuries and recommendations for treatment, are certainly a testament to her skill,” he added.

“But I don’t want her upset,” I protested, alarmed that Michaela was continuing to fret over me, and that this man was allowing it. “You just said she’s weak and needs rest—why are you letting her risk her health bothering about me?”

“Dr. Quinn is a very strong-minded lady, as you must certainly be aware,” Doc Hunter commented wryly. “There wasn’t much I could do to dissuade her from consulting on your condition.” His expression softened. “Never fear, Mr. Sully—she’s getting both the treatment, and the rest, that she needs,” he said compassionately. “I’m making sure of that. I’ve been a doctor for over forty years—a pretty fair one, according to my patients. You can trust me.”

“Call me Sully,” I said after a brief hesitation, and extended my hand. As we shook, I added, “Thanks for what you did. I’m obliged to you.”

“And I’m glad I could be of help,” he replied. “You folks have been through quite a trial, from what I hear.”

A dart of alarm lanced me again. “What exactly did they tell you?” I said carefully.
“Just that Dr. Quinn had been abducted from your town of Colorado Springs, and that you managed to track her kidnapper all the way here to Nevada—but that when you confronted her assailant, he attacked you and got away.

“Why—was there more to it?” he added after a pause, studying me. There was something disconcerting about his gaze, as if he could see right through me. For a fleeting moment I felt a powerful temptation to tell him everything, as if he were a priest and I needed to confess my sins and ask him for absolution.

But I had made a promise—dark and dishonorable though it might be—and I couldn’t go back on my word.

“No—nothing more,” I denied, hearing how false the words sounded. “That’s what happened.”

“I see,” he remarked, his tone neutral. “I only wondered because you were muttering a while ago, tossing and turning—you seemed deeply distressed.”

“Must have been a nightmare,” I said dismissively.

“A mighty powerful one,” he noted quietly. He leaned forward, clasping his hands together loosely and looking intently into my eyes. “You know, Sully, when a man goes through a traumatic experience, it’s only natural for him to have a strong reaction to it,” he said kindly. “Your fiance was kidnapped by a dangerous man, and for weeks you didn’t know if she was even alive. And then when you finally found her, she was ill and weak, and you were violently attacked. A man would have to have a heart of stone not to be affected by something like that.”

“All I care about is Michaela getting well,” I maintained. “What happens to me ain’t important.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong,” he contradicted gently. “It’s important to Dr. Quinn. And it should be important to you, too—both for your own sake, and if you care for this lady as much as I think you do. She loves you very deeply, and she’s worried. She seems to believe that your emotional reaction to these events could be even more serious than your physical injuries. And now, having talked to you myself, I tend to agree.”

“Michaela worries too much about me,” I said briefly.

“With good reason, I think,” Doc Hunter noted. “She’s concerned that you’re suffering depression, or melancholy, over this ordeal,” he went on. “She’s afraid that you’ve chosen to blame yourself for what happened to her. Most of all, she’s afraid that you no longer care about your own life—about whether you live or die,” he said soberly.

“Sounds like you had quite a talk about me,” I said, an edge to my tone.

“Dr. Quinn needed to tell me everything she could to aid me in treating your condition,” he pointed out mildly.

“Does that include—what happened to me before?” I asked a trifle unsteadily. “The amnesia?”

“We discussed it,” he admitted. “Dr. Quinn thought it important that I know something of your recent medical history.”

“I suppose,” I conceded. “Well, I appreciate Michaela’s feelings and I’m obliged for your concern,” I said distantly. “But I can assure you that I got no intentions of dying. I’m alive, and I plan on staying that way.”

“Is that so?” he commented insightfully. “I wonder.”

“Look—I’m real grateful for what you done for Michaela, and for me,” I said abruptly. “And I understand that you’re trying to be kind. But I’m all right. Ain’t nothing wrong with me that a few days of healing won’t cure. And now, if you’ll help me out of bed, I’d like to go see Michaela.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse that request,” he replied. “Both you and Dr. Quinn need a night’s uninterrupted rest. I’ve already given her a sedative to help her sleep, and I intend to do the same
for you. I promise that you’ll see her in the morning. But for now—"

“All right,” I agreed, too aware of my weakened condition to argue. “But no sedative. I can sleep without it.”

He looked doubtful. “I really feel that—“


“Very well,” he capitulated, rising to his feet. “Then I’ll leave you to it. I’ll be nearby if you need me,” he added as he went to the door. “Rest easy, Sully,” he said, with one more perceptive look at me, and then he left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

I leaned back and shut my eyes, yearning for the blessed oblivion of sleep. But it never came.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

“What is your estimation of Sully’s condition, Dr. Hunter?” Michaela asked the next morning as the physician hovered over her, completing his examination. She was sitting up in bed, a tray holding a shallow bowl of warm water propped across her lap. Gently he took her hands and placed them in the bowl, then straightened.

“Don’t you want to hear my opinion of your own condition first?” he asked.

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary,” Michaela said promptly. “My vital signs are all normal, my strength is returning, and my fingers are already starting to respond to the treatments. I know that I’ll recover. I’m much more concerned about Sully,” she told him.

An indulgent smile touched Doc Hunter’s lips. He had anticipated her answer, and she hadn’t disappointed him.

“That true, Doc?” Matthew asked from where he perched at the foot of her bed. “Is Dr. Mike really gonna be all right?” He regarded Doc Hunter intently. Brendan stood near him, and Hank lounged in the open doorway, toying with an unlit cigar. All three awaited the doctor’s pronouncement.

“Really, Matthew—I believe I’m more than sufficiently acquainted with my own condition,” Michaela interjected crisply, sounding mildly put out.

“’Course you are, Dr. Mike,” Matthew placated her hastily. “I’d just feel better if we heard it from Doc Hunter.” His eyes sought the older physician’s. “How about it, Doc?” he repeated.

“Well, I wouldn’t dream of disputing my learned colleague’s diagnosis,” Doc Hunter responded, a twinkle in his eye. “Yes,” he told Matthew reassuringly. “I believe Dr. Quinn will make a full recovery.”

Matthew and the others visibly relaxed, and Michaela looked vindicated. “*I* could have told you that. In fact, I believe I did,” she said drily.

“Never doubted it for a minute, Michaela,” Hank said expansively.

“Thank you, Hank,” Michaela said pointedly. “At least *someone* here trusts in my abilities.” She fixed Matthew with a mildly jaundiced eye.

“You know I believe in you, Dr. Mike,” Matthew tried to charm her. “But you know what they say about doctors makin’ the worst patients.”

“Well, let me go on record as stating that I also believe in my colleague’s abilities,” Doc Hunter chimed in. “But they also say that physicians shouldn’t diagnose themselves,” he pointed out, eyeing Michaela meaningfully.

“Well, that’s true of course, and I certainly don’t mean to cast any aspersions on your diagnostic skills,”
Michaela began, in some embarrassment. Doc Hunter noted her reddened cheeks and took pity on her.

“Forgive me, Dr. Quinn,” he said contritely. “I was just having a little fun.” He smiled at her disarmingly and Michaela couldn’t help but respond, feeling rather foolish. The doctor turned to Matthew. “And I can assure you, Mr. Cooper, that you can absolutely trust in Dr. Quinn’s estimation of her own health,” he added. “We just need to keep a close eye on her to ensure that she doesn’t overdo, too soon.”

“You can count on it,” Matthew vowed, regarding his mother fondly. “No ridin’ in any horse races, climbin’ any mountains, or jumpin’ off any cliffs for a while,” he teased gently.

“I’ll try to refrain,” Michaela said primly, but her lips twitched in a brief flicker of a smile.

“Climbing mountains and jumping off cliffs?” Doc Hunter echoed, his eyes bemused. “Seems like when I told Mr. Sully you were an uncommon woman, I didn’t give you nearly enough credit, Doctor,” he commented, the admiration he’d expressed to Sully apparent again in his tone.

“Well I don’t make a habit of such things,” Michaela responded, looking slightly abashed. “In each case there were extenuating circumstances which prompted my actions. And in two of the instances, Sully was there with me,” she added. A shadow crossed her face and she turned suddenly somber eyes on her colleague. “Talking of Sully, you never answered my question,” she reminded him. “I sincerely want to hear your opinion, Dr. Hunter. And please— withhold nothing,” she urged. “Don’t feel that you need to protect me in view of my present condition.”

“I wouldn’t dream of being anything but absolutely frank with you, Dr. Quinn,” Doc Hunter said honestly, struck by this fragile woman’s spirit and strength in adversity.

“I appreciate that,” Michaela said sincerely. She tried to maintain a professional detachment, but couldn’t mask the inner anxiety reflected in her eyes. “How is Sully?” she asked softly. “Really?”

The physician’s eyes were kind, but guarded. “Physically, he’s doing well,” he began. “Just as you discerned, he’s suffering from a concussion, but I don’t believe that there are any other complications. I successfully sutured the knife wound, and I believe it will heal completely. With luck, there won’t even be a scar. Thanks to your own measures in treating the wound, as well as in getting Sully here so quickly, I don’t anticipate much risk of infection—though of course I’ll keep a close watch on his progress.”

“But are you sure about the concussion?” Michaela asked worriedly. “He’s been sleeping so long. Perhaps it’s not a natural sleep—”

Doc Hunter’s expression altered slightly, and she felt a rush of alarm. “What?” she said immediately. “What is it?”

He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable, but then resolutely went ahead. “Actually, Sully awoke late last night,” he admitted.

“What!” Michaela exclaimed again, her eyes shocked. “Why didn’t you tell me when it happened?”

“Because I anticipated that you might react this way, and I wanted you to have an undisturbed night’s rest,” Doc Hunter told her mildly.

“But you knew how concerned I was about Sully’s condition!” Michaela said accusingly. “How could you keep me in the dark till now?”

“Dr. Mike, I’m sure Doc Hunter did what he thought was best—” Matthew attempted to soothe her.

“That may be true, Matthew, but you know the state that Sully was in after—” She bit her lip. “After everything that happened,” she finished awkwardly. “She turned back to the doctor. “And you knew of my concerns regarding Sully’s state of mind,” she said. “Not to mention the other things I confided to you—about Sully’s recent history, his emotional difficulties . . . I simply don’t understand how you could keep such an important development from me.”

“Dr. Quinn, I understand your concern for Sully,” Doc Hunter said calmly. “And I also understand your need to care for him, and your frustration that the current situation makes that impossible. But right
now the responsibility for Sully’s care—and yours—rests in my hands. I have to do what I believe to be best for both of you, and I have to ask you to trust my judgement.”

“Forgive me,” Michaela managed after a moment. “Of course I didn’t mean to suggest that you weren’t giving Sully the best of care. It’s just—Sully’s been through so much . . . we both have—” Her throat tightened and she couldn’t finish.

“And it’s hard maintaining your detachment as a doctor, when you’re also a woman in love,” Doc Hunter said gently.

Michaela swallowed, forcing down the tears welling up inside her. “Yes, something like that,” she confessed softly, looking down at her lap. After a moment, however, she raised her chin determinedly. “Tell me about Sully, Doctor—please.”

“Oh course,” he said kindly. “But perhaps, we could have this discussion in private?” He glanced apologetically at Matthew, Hank and Brendan.

Hank immediately straightened. “Uh, sure,” he said self-consciously. “I gotta talk to that Wilson fella ‘bout sendin’ a telegram to Colorado Springs anyway. Let ‘em know all’s well and we’ll be comin’ home soon.”

“There are a lot of people who will be very happy to get the news,” Brendan agreed. “I’ll go with you,” he offered to Hank.

“I appreciate you both attending to this matter,” Michaela told them sincerely. “Sully will too.”

Hank shrugged. “No big thing,” he said diffidently, and quickly made his departure.

“We’re glad to help,” Brendan said warmly. “We’ll see you later,” he added, then followed Hank out the door.

“I’ll be back too,” promised Matthew, rising and approaching the head of the bed. He stooped to kiss her on the cheek.

“Matthew—you needn’t leave,” Michaela protested. “We’re family—we’ve all been in this together from the beginning. Anything Doctor Hunter tells me you can certainly hear as well.”

“Thanks, Dr. Mike, but that’s all right,” he answered. “I kinda think you and the Doc need some time to talk alone. You can fill me in on Sully later.” He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, then left.

There was a silence, then Michaela took a deep breath and fixed her gaze on Doc Hunter. “As you requested, we’re alone now,” she stated, her eyes grave. “It’s time for you to tell me what’s wrong with Sully.”

* * * * * * * * * *

But she was unable to contain her impatience, and couldn’t refrain from plying the elderly doctor with questions. “What was Sully’s condition when he awoke?” she asked anxiously. “Was he lucid? Was there any confusion, or sign of—“ She hesitated, almost too frightened to voice the words. “—of memory loss?” she finished.

“He was groggy at first—entirely normal under the circumstances, as you know,” Doc Hunter said. “But his disorientation abated quickly—soon as he heard your name, in fact. He was alert and talking, concerned for your condition, and seemed to have total recollection of what happened to you both.” Relief flooded through Michaela at the physician’s positive report; but even as she mentally offered a prayer of thanks, her ears registered an odd note in Doc Hunter’s voice, and a sensation of unease swept her anew.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she asked intuitively.

Doc Hunter raked his hand through his hair, rumpling his bushy locks even more so that they rioted over his head in wiry tufts. After a moment he pulled a chair close to Michaela’s bedside and lowered his tall, spare frame onto the seat, expelling an audible sigh. Michaela noted the shadows beneath his eyes and the deep lines which cleaved his forehead and bracketed his mouth, testifying to his lack of sleep. She
knew that she and Sully were the cause, and guilt assailed her at the demanding, high-handed way she had treated him. How rude and disrespectful to an elder colleague she must have sounded! What an ingrate she must have seemed, shrewishly attacking this kind man after he’d left his warm bed and come out into the night to treat two people who were complete strangers to him.

Yes, she knew he was a doctor, like herself . . . that he was well accustomed to having his rest disturbed, and that unexpected emergencies any hour of the day or night were a fact of life for him—just as they were for her. But still, he could have provided the medical treatment they required and then left; perhaps to return once—at most, twice—to check on their progress. Many doctors she had known in Boston—not to mention one or two in Colorado, like Doc Cassidy—would have done just that. But instead, Doc Hunter had stayed with them both through the night, monitoring their conditions and treating them with sensitivity and compassion. She owed him so much. What if he hadn’t been here? What would have happened to Sully then?

Plainly, even before she heard the news about Sully she so anxiously craved, she owed the gentle physician an abject apology.

“As far as Sully’s emotional state—” Doc Hunter ventured, breaking in on her thoughts.

Michaela raised a hand to forestall him, splashing a dollop of water onto the bedtray in the process. “Dr. Hunter—before you begin, there is something I’m compelled to say. I must humbly beg your pardon for the shameful way I’ve behaved—for raising my voice to you and most especially for criticizing you. I’m not in the habit of conducting myself in such an appalling manner . . . I can only conclude that my extreme duress over Sully has affected my senses even more than I realized. Please forgive me for my apparent lack of gratitude, and for any injury I caused you. On the contrary, I am profoundly grateful for everything you’ve done for Sully, and for me. I . . . don’t know we would have done, otherwise.” Her voice shook slightly.

Doc Hunter immediately reached out and carefully took her hand, his large yet extraordinarily gentle fingers dwarfing hers. “No need for apologies, Dr. Quinn,” he said, his eyes humane. “You’ve been through a particularly frightening ordeal—one which would have broken most people. And I’m not just talking about what happened to Sully—I’m talking about what you, yourself, suffered. Ever since I met you last night, your one abiding concern has been for Sully—what he endured. But you’ve said nary a word about yourself . . . what it was like to be stolen away from your loved ones, threatened, abused, not knowing if you would live or die . . . that must have been terrible to bear, and it’s only natural that it would leave deep scars—”

Michaela tensed, his words summoning up images she didn’t want to remember. “I suppose—I prefer not to think of all that,” she said quickly, mentally thrusting away the chilling memories. “I’m alive and I’m safe—thanks to Sully. And in time, I know I’ll heal.” She paused briefly and then went on, “Do you recall my telling you about the massacre of Black Kettle’s tribe at the Washita, and how Sully’s grief over that loss contributed to his amnesia?” The doctor nodded.

“Well I went through my own emotional trauma because of that tragedy,” she continued. “What happened was so unspeakable, and my guilt and anguish over it was so great, that I thought for a while I might never survive it. But with Sully’s love, and the help of our dear friend Cloud Dancing, I made it through my ‘dark night of the soul.’ I managed to recover then, and I will again.

“But—I’m not so sure about Sully,” she confided softly. “There was something he had to do at Red Rock—a choice he had to make—that was equally agonizing regardless of which path he took. And I believe—” She stopped, demanding honesty of herself. “That is, I *know*—that he based his decision on what I needed—on what I begged him to do. But I fear now that he’s greatly tormented by that decision—that he sees himself as a coward. If only he could recognize that it took far greater courage to resist his impulses—to take the path of peace rather than violence—” She broke off again, fearing to reveal too much of the incident they had all sworn to conceal.

“That doesn’t mean that you aren’t suffering equally at having to watch him go through such pain,” Doc Hunter said compassionately. “However—” Here he sighed and knit his brows. “I agree with you about Sully’s emotional state. He’s carrying a tremendous amount of guilt inside, and it’s eating him up alive.”

“Why—what did he tell you?” Michaela said, fear clamping icy fingers upon her.

“Almost nothing,” Doc Hunter said soberly. “That’s just it. He was very remote—very . . .
self-contained. Every time I tried to get him to talk about his ordeal, he eluded the question or changed the subject. When I attempted to explain the effects of melancholy, he didn’t want to hear it. Even when I told him how worried you were about his state of mind, he insisted he was all right and simply reiterated his concern for you.” His eyes, deeply blue, were sympathetic in his lined face. “I believe Sully is punishing himself, and he doesn’t want to be forgiven,” the physician concluded.

“Or he believes he doesn’t deserve forgiveness,” Michaela said barely above a whisper, her heart aching as she imagined Sully’s agony.

Doc Hunter nodded. “Perhaps your assessment is closer to the truth,” he agreed. He leaned forward, regarding her earnestly. “Is there any more you can tell me about what happened?” he asked gently. “If I understood better the crisis Sully was facing, perhaps I could be of more help in his recovery.”

“I wish I could tell you,” Michaela said honestly. “But I’m afraid there are aspects of this incident that I’m—not at liberty—to discuss. All I can do is prevail upon you to give your best estimation of Sully’s condition based upon your limited knowledge. What can I do to help lift Sully out of his despondency? How can I help him find his self-esteem—his sense of worth—again?” She gazed nakedly at Doc Hunter.

Her anguish tugged at his heart. Hard to believe he could be so moved by the troubles of a couple he’d only just met. But there was something about these two . . . a passion, a single-minded devotion to each other that eclipsed anything he’d ever seen before. When they spoke of one another, their eyes glowed with a fiercely burning incandescence. It was as if they were one being—two halves of the same soul . . . And now this gentle yet courageous woman was desperately seeking his help to save the life of her beloved—her other half. But it wasn’t up to him. She was the one who held the key to Sully’s recovery . . .

His peculiarly arresting eyes regarded her serenely. “How do you help him?” the physician repeated. “That’s simple, my dear. Love him—that’s the best medicine of all. Just keep loving him like you always have—and together you’ll get through.”

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“Michaela?” The familiar, beloved voice stirred her from sleep, and she opened her eyes to behold Sully standing over her, his hand lightly resting on her hair. As he saw her focus on him, he smiled tenderly.

“Sully!” she breathed in joy and relief, rising up to meet him. He gathered her into his arms and for several moments they could only cling to each other, too overcome for speech. Suddenly, however, Michaela drew back from him. “Should you be up?” she said anxiously.

“Doc Hunter promised if I took it easy last night, I could come see you this mornin’,” he told her, taking the seat the older doctor had vacated a short time before. As he sat down, Michaela saw him wince, his lips blanching as he pressed them together, though he tried to conceal it.

“Sully, you shouldn’t try to hide your pain from me,” she reproached him softly. “I believe it’s too soon for you to be moving about.”

He stroked her arm reassuringly. “I’m all right,” he said. “The Doc looked me over just ‘fore I came in here. He said I could get up—walk around a little, if I felt like it. And there was no way I was gonna wait any longer to come see you.”

“But your wound—the concussion—“

“Both better,” he said. “It’s the truth, Michaela. You can ask Doc Hunter. So—“ He cupped her chin in his hand and assumed a mock-serious expression. “No frettin’—all right?” His features dissolved into a smile. She managed to smile back but her heart wasn’t in it. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes, and a pallor had leeched the tan from his skin. But more than anything else was the aura of sorrow that seemed to hover about him like an invisible shroud, despite his determined attempt to be cheerful for her sake. His eyes were shadowed with a kind of pain that had nothing to do with the physical injuries he’d suffered.

“You look so tired,” was all she could say.

He shrugged dismissively. “We’re all tired,” he said. He still wore the smile, but it looked brittle,
forced. “I don’t want to talk about me no more,” he added suddenly. “I just care about you and how you’re feelin’.” She watched his eyes travel over her frame, noting every subtle detail.

“You look beautiful,” he breathed, his gaze riveted upon her. Briefly the manufactured smile vanished, replaced by an expression of genuine pleasure that lit his eyes with a warm glow.

“Then I think it must be your vision that’s weak this time,” Michaela replied, making a half-hearted attempt at a jest. But it sounded flat to her ears.

“Oh no, Michaela,” he declared, his expression frank with admiration. “There’s nothin’ wrong with my eyes.” Again he was being sincere. Michaela’s shining copper brown hair—freshly washed and brushed out by Mrs. Wilson—cascaded around her shoulders like a cape; and the pink satin gown their hostess had lent her put a faint blush of rose in her cheeks. She was still far too thin, but Sully thought that the sharp planes and shadows in her face weren’t as harsh as they’d been two days ago, suggesting the promise that eventually she would regain everything she had lost.

“The Doc told me you’re gonna be fine,” he spoke again. “You don’t know how relieved I was to hear it,” he added more softly, but Michaela could sense theanguished tension within him, hovering just below the surface, as if he was struggling manfully to contain his emotions and keep them from spilling forth.

“Yes,” she confirmed, just as softly. “I’m going to be fine. Which is why I don’t want to waste our time together discussing myself. I want to talk about you, Sully. I’m worried for you—“

“There’s nothin’ to say,” he responded reflexively. “I’m all right, you’re all right—that’s all that matters.” Again the artificial smile, the false bravado.

“I wish that were true . . .” she began, her eyes troubled.

“Well, it is—so stop worryin’,” he told her.

Michaela sighed, her expression grave. This wasn’t going to be easy. It was as if Sully were reverting to the early period of their relationship, throwing up walls to shield himself again. And as much and as hard as she was fighting to break through those walls, that’s how hard he was struggling to keep her out. He had resisted Doc Hunter’s initial attempts to discuss his emotional condition, but that didn’t surprise her. Kind and understanding though he was, Doc Hunter was a still a stranger; thus Sully may have found it difficult, if not impossible, to unburden himself. But she had hoped that between the two of them, it would be different. That if she broached the topic and let him know she was here for him—ready to listen and offer comfort and support—that he would open up to her. But his response to her first tentative overtures—or more precisely his avoidance of them—had dramatically diminished that hope. Clearly, she would need to be more direct—even demand that he respond to her, if necessary.

“Let’s talk about goin’ home,” Sully suggested, abruptly changing the subject. “I was thinkin’ of sendin’ Hank and Brendan on ahead with the horses—Matthew, too, if he wants to go with ’em—while you and me can take the train. If the doc says you can travel in a few days, hopefully we’ll all make it back to Colorado Springs within a couple weeks. That all right with you?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” she said. “But there’s something much more urgent I need to discuss with you, Sully—“

“What is it?” he asked quickly. “You hurtin’? Want me to fetch Doc Hunter?”

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m not experiencing discomfort, I don’t need the doctor. I just want you—“

“Well, I’m here—I ain’t goin’ nowhere,” he interjected.

“That’s not what I mean!” she exclaimed vehemently. He looked shocked, and she immediately felt guilty for raising her voice. “I’m sorry. Of course I want you here with me,” she amended more quietly. “But I need you to talk to me, Sully—please.”

“That’s what we been doin’,” he responded, his eyes and tone carefully neutral.

“No, it isn’t,” Michaela contradicted him soberly. “I’ve been talking—or trying to—but you’ve been putting me off, changing the subject . . .” She paused, then plunged ahead. “You’ve been avoiding the real
issue, Sully—refusing to discuss the heart of what’s bothering you. Sully, we need to talk about Custer and Bloody Knife—about how it’s affected you—“

“It’s over,” he said flatly. “No need to dredge it up anymore.”

“But it isn’t over!” she burst out. “Not as long as you’re suffering.”

He averted his eyes, as if once again he couldn’t bring himself to face her. She gazed at him in frustration and longing, willing him to drop the mask and share his pain with her.

“Sully,” she ventured again. “Please—look at me.”

After a long moment he complied, his expression guarded and a tell-tale shimmer in his eyes.

“I know Doctor Hunter tried to talk to you about your feelings,” she began. “And that apparently you were unwilling or unable to respond. That’s all right—I understand that you may have found it difficult to confide in someone you hardly know. But this is me, Sully,” she said earnestly. “*Me.* I love you. You can talk to me. You can tell me anything, you know that.

“I can’t presume to know your thoughts and feelings . . . but I can make an informed guess based on what I know of your nature. And one thing I can say with absolute certainty, is that I understand better than anyone else what you’ve been through these past several weeks—culminating with what happened yesterday. And—” She hesitated, then gently continued, “And I believe I understand what it cost you to agree to Custer’s terms. I know that you did it for Cloud Dancing, to protect him—and for my sake, because I begged you not to leave me. But because of that, I can’t help feeling responsible for the pain you’re enduring now. I’m so sorry—“

“You got no reason to be sorry,” he said distantly. “You got no call to apologize for any of this.”

“But the pain—the guilt that I believe you’re feeling . . . it’s because of me,” she insisted. “Sully, I can’t pretend I wasn’t profoundly grateful that you let go of your need for revenge to stay with me. But I’m afraid that now you’re punishing yourself, perhaps even thinking of yourself as a coward, or as less of a man—when in fact it’s just the opposite! Don’t you realize how much courage it took for you not to submit to violence—to go along with Custer even though every fiber of your being raged against it? You did it for me, and for Cloud Dancing and the others. I know you believe you failed us—and failed yourself. But in fact you gave us a priceless gift. You were willing to sacrifice everything for our sake.

“Sully,” she concluded passionately. “You saved our lives!” She sought his eyes, desperately searching for some outward sign that her appeal was reaching him. But the mask—the wall—remained. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, he spoke.

“And lost my honor in the process,” he said dully.

“No—that’s not true!” she said fervently. “You’re the most honorable man I’ve ever known. You always have been, and you always will be.”

“Tell that to Cloud Dancin’ when he finds out I made a pact with the enemy who murdered his wife and his people,” Sully replied, his eyes dark and wounded. He stood, pressing a hand to his chest as pain flared briefly in his eyes. “Think I could do with a little rest now,” he added. “You should rest too. I’ll come back later.” He bent awkwardly, and kissed her forehead.

“Sully, please—don’t withdraw from me now—we’re not finished . . .” she entreated.

“Take it easy—get some sleep,” he told her, moving toward the door.

“Sully—!” But he was gone.

Michaela covered her face with her hands, anguished tears fountaining up from a place deep inside her.

Unknown to her, alone in the hall, Sully wept as well.
Doc Hunter found me on the veranda of the farmhouse early in the afternoon. I don’t know how long I’d been sitting there, desultorily rocking back and forth... long enough, at least, for the cup of chamomile tea I’d been nursing to grow cold.

“I looked for you in your room,” the doc remarked as he took the weathered rocker next to mine. “But I’m gratified to see that you’re out enjoying the fresh air. Must mean you’re feeling better,” he added.

“About the same, I guess,” I said colorlessly, not in the mood for chatting.

His brows knit together in mild concern. “Are you having much pain?” he asked. “Would you like me to give you some laudanum?”

“Pain’s tolerable,” I replied briefly. “I’ll brew some willow bark tea if I feel the need.”

“Willow bark?” he repeated curiously.

“The Cheyenne Indians use it for pain and fevers,” I explained. “My friend Cloud Dancing—“ I stopped abruptly, wondering if I’d ever be able to call him my friend—or my brother—again. I felt my heart plummet in my chest. After a pause I swallowed painfully and went on, “The Cheyenne medicine man taught it to me. Taught Michaela too—about all sorts of herbs and Indian remedies.”

“Willow bark,” the doc repeated thoughtfully once again. “Hm. I never would have thought of it... And does Dr. Quinn use these remedies in her practice?”

I nodded. “All the time. They work, too. Once, when her ma was sick from hepatitis, Michaela saved her life with a liver detoxifying tea made from dandelion roots.”

“Fascinating,” he mused. His eyes fell on the cup in my hand. “What do you have there?” he asked. “Another Indian curative?”

“Chamomile,” I said. “Cloud Dancing and Michaela say it’s good for relaxing you, helping you sleep—“ I broke off, inwardly cursing myself. I hadn’t intended to let on to him that I hadn’t slept. I knew it would just call his attention to me even more, and all I wanted was to be left alone. For a fleeting moment I hoped he wouldn’t notice my slip of the tongue; but truth was, I knew he was too smart, too attentive to details, to overlook something like that. This man didn’t miss a trick.

“You haven’t been sleeping?” he inquired sharply, right on cue.

“It’s nothing,” I said immediately. “I’m all right.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to disagree,” he said. “You may have survived your injuries, but you need rest to allow your body to heal. And even though physically you’re recovering satisfactorily... Sully, from what I’ve been able to observe, you’re far from ‘all right.’”

My fingers clenched around the cup. I couldn’t face going through it all again, this time with Doc Hunter. It had taken every ounce of self-control I possessed to keep from breaking down in front of Michaela. The way she’d tried to comfort me... to persuade me to forgive myself... The love that had poured out of her when I felt so ashamed, so unworthy... My heart twisted with guilt at the way I’d felt compelled to retreat from her. But I’d been so shaky, so scared... that if I let myself accept her sympathy I’d lose control altogether, and maybe never get it back...

And now Doc Hunter was pushing me too, and I couldn’t deal with it. I couldn’t risk breaking down again, the way I’d done in the hall after I escaped from Michaela. The way I’d done all throughout the previous night, every time I relived the events at Red Rock and heard my voice say to Custer, “You win.” Every time I pictured the look on Cloud Dancing’s face when I had to tell him of my betrayal. Every time I thought of having to face Michaela and the children each day of our lives together with the cloud of my shame hanging over me.
"How many ways do I got to say it?" I snapped at the doc. "I told you I'm all right. I just wish everybody would leave me alone." There was an uncomfortable silence. I avoided his eyes, staring straight ahead at the wide expanse of desert dotted with scrub, and the sandstone peaks shimmering in the distance. Part of me knew I should apologize, but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. But then Doc Hunter spoke again, rescuing me from having to make the attempt.

"If that's what you truly want, I won't press you further," he said tranquilly, seemingly unfazed by my display of temper. He hoisted himself to his feet, his hands going to the small of his back as he stretched and grimaced. I could hear his spine cracking. "I believe I could use some rest myself—ain't as young as I used to be," he said idly. "One of these days when I threaten to retire I'm actually going to go through with it." He started to move toward the front door, but then stopped. "I'll be heading home now, but I'll be back to look in on you both tomorrow," he told me. "Of course, if you or Dr. Quinn should need me sooner, just send Jim around to fetch me." I nodded in acknowledgement, still not trusting myself to look at him.

He put his hand on the doorknob, then hesitated again. After a moment he seemed to make a decision, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him turn to face me. "You know, Sully—curing the body is only half the battle," he said. "We need to treat the mind—or the spirit—as well. I've attended many cases in which the patient's mental attitude—his will to live—made the difference between life and death. There are even some doctors—and I happen to be one of them—who believe that the mind and the body are connected. That you can't treat one without the other."

A remnant of another conversation suddenly echoed in my mind.

("Sully?" Michaela said softly, bending over me.

"This pain—I can't sleep," I groaned. "I never felt nothing like this."

"I wish I knew what to do. The bark tea isn't working," Michaela said worriedly, absently raking her fingers through her hair as she brooded. "What would Cloud Dancing do if he were here?" she asked herself.

"That's just it—he's not," I said miserably, holding a cloth to my head as the migrim assaulted me with wave upon wave of unremitting pain.

"I know what he'd say," Michaela mused.

"What's that?" I asked, momentarily distracted from my suffering.

"He'd say that something's out of balance," Michaela answered. "We have to treat the whole person."

I reached over and laced my fingers through hers. "He always starts a healing with the sweat lodge," I said.)

Tears stung my eyes at the memory of Cloud Dancing's wisdom, even as I was amazed to hear Doc Hunter express almost the identical thought. And just as the spirits had spoken to me in the sweat lodge as I sought to heal my migrim, helping me to discover the truth about what I truly wanted, and leading me to propose to Michaela ... I wondered if the spirits were speaking to me now, telling me that I shouldn't reject this white man's wisdom. "What would Cloud Dancing do if he were here?" I posed Michaela's question to myself. And I believed I knew the answer.

"I can't force you to confide in me if you don't want to," Doc Hunter was saying to me now. "But something is clearly troubling you, Sully, and the longer you hold it inside, the worse it's going to get. As hard as it may seem, sooner or later you're going to have to talk about it." He turned the handle and opened the door.

"Wait!" The word spontaneously came out, startling me almost as much as him. He paused. "It's true," I admitted reluctantly after a moment. "I can't sleep. I tried to do it on my own, I tried the chamomile—nothing works." As I spoke, he let the door swing closed again, then retraced his steps and lowered himself back into his chair. He didn't speak, but sat in a listening posture, inviting me to go on without pressuring me. Restlessly I chewed on my lower lip. "And—there's more," I said with difficulty. "I—I'm having trouble . . . that is, I can't seem to control my . . . my feelings. I keep . . . breaking down."
couldn’t bring myself to admit that I’d actually wept, and that I’d done it more than once—but he seemed to
guess without me having to say the words.

“Do you know why you’re feeling this way?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged. “Michaela,” I said, voicing the first and foremost reason that came into my mind. “Being
taken from me, and then almost losing her.”

“That’s certainly more than adequate cause for you to be upset,” he remarked.

“You think so?” I asked uncertainly.

“Of course,” he said. “You love this woman. It’s only natural that you should be deeply shaken by
what happened to her.”

“So that’s what the trouble is?” I said hopefully. “Just my leftover feelings about Michaela being
kidnapped and almost dying?”

Instead of answering, he eyed me speculatively. “What about you?”

I looked back at him, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“What about you almost dying?” he elaborated. “Coming close to losing one’s own life can also be a
profoundly upsetting experience.”

“I ain’t afraid of dying,” I said immediately.

“I can see that,” he commented. “But I wonder if there’s more to it. Is it possible that the thought of
death—holds a certain ‘attraction’ for you?” he ventured.


“Are you sure?” he said, his eyes looking through me in that peculiar way they had. “You risked death
to pursue Dr. Quinn. You risked death when you fought her kidnapper.”

“I had no choice,” I said. “I had to do whatever was necessary to find her and get her back.”

“That’s true,” he acknowledged. “And from what I can gather, you demonstrated great heroism.”

I looked away, the word grating harshly in my mind. “I ain’t no hero,” I muttered.

“But Dr. Quinn, her son and your friends are alive and safe because of you,” Doc Hunter argued.
“That certainly suggests to me that your actions were heroic.”

“Trust me,” I said grimly. “That ain’t the way it was.”

“How was it, Sully?” he asked softly. “It’s clear you’re carrying a tremendous burden inside, and I get
the impression that you want very much to release your feelings and lay down that burden.”

Rather than answering, I took a page from his book and put a question to him instead. “Are you
saying that’s why I’m feeling this way?” I asked. “Because I’m—” I swallowed, then went ahead. “Because
I’m ashamed of something I did?”

“I really can’t say,” he responded, his eyes penetrating. “Because you’re unable or unwilling to tell me
the entire story of what happened to you. Thus it seems that’s a question only you can answer.” A brief
silence fell between us as I pondered his words.

“There are reasons I can’t go into it,” I said finally. “I—made a promise—and I can’t go back on it.”

“Dr. Quinn said much the same thing,” he remarked. “All right, I won’t press you on that point. But
I have to say that without more information about your experience, I can’t really give you an informed
opinion about your emotional difficulties.”
“But ain’t there anything you can tell me? Anything you can advise me to do?” I implored, casting away my pride as I desperately sought relief from the guilt that gripped me.

He eyed me sympathetically. “Well, based on what I do know of your circumstances, I believe I can say this much,” he ventured. “It appears that a great deal of the tendency toward emotionalism which you’re experiencing now, can be traced to what you’ve gone through since Dr. Quinn’s abduction. From what I gather, your pursuit took several weeks, during which time you were forced to suppress your fears for her safety—even her very life. Then, when you finally did locate her, you found her ill and drastically weakened. In addition, some type of dramatic confrontation took place, in which you yourself barely escaped with your life. From what I’ve observed, you’ve been sublimating your feelings—” He broke off at my uncertain look, then amended, “You’ve been keeping your feelings of anxiety tightly contained, for a prolonged period of time. When a person denies his emotions for too long—when he doesn’t allow himself to feel—ultimately these emotions must seek release,” he explained. “I believe that at least partially, this is what’s happening to you.”

“Is that bad?” I asked apprehensively.

“It needn’t be,” he said. “Actually, the fact that you’ve been experiencing these emotional episodes could be considered a good sign. That it’s your mind’s way of venting your feelings of anxiety and sadness.”

“But how long will it last?” I said warily. “I ain’t going to be this way forever, am I?”

He smiled reassuringly. “I seriously doubt it,” he said. “Just as the body needs time to recover from a physical illness, the mind needs time to recover from an emotional one, as well. While I can’t give you any guarantees as to how long it will take, I believe I can promise that your emotional episodes and inability to sleep will fade gradually with time. Eventually, you will heal.

“Does that make you feel any better?” he added.

I wanted to say yes—I wanted to put all my faith in his hopeful prediction. But as long as he was missing the most vital piece of the puzzle—as long as he was in the dark about what was really tormenting me—his optimism was meaningless. I knew that with time, I could recover from Michaela’s kidnapping, and everything I’d gone through to get her back. Someday I might even manage to put it all behind me. But my betrayal, my dishonor—that was a stain I would carry on my soul for the rest of my life.

But the doc was still waiting for an answer. “Yeah, that helps,” I said finally, wondering if he’d see through the lie. “Thanks.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to talk about?” he inquired. “Anything else you’d like to ask me?”

There was a pause, then I shook my head. “No, nothing else. But thanks again for listening. I’m obliged.”

“No thanks necessary,” he replied kindly. “But may I offer one more piece of advice?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Talk to Dr. Quinn,” he urged gently. “Unburden yourself to her, if not to me. Think of it as part of the ‘healing process.’ For both of you.” With an effort he stood again, and laid a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Sully,” he said. “Don’t ever lose sight of that.” He squeezed my shoulder once, then went into the house, leaving me to think about all he had said.

* * * * * * * * * *

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

He came to her at twilight, his entrance into her room as silent as the shadows which blossomed and grew in the corners, and spread in a widening pool across the floor. Michaela had graduated from her bed to an easy chair, but she had fallen into a light doze, her feet propped on a hassock and a book tented in her lap. Sully paused in the entryway, momentarily transfixed by the sight of her delicate figure. The
flickering glow of the lamp beside her limned the copper strands of her hair, making them stand out in bright relief. The light was equally tender to her face, warmly caressing the alabaster of her skin. He thought he had never seen her look more beautiful—or more fragile. He thought of how close he had come to losing her, and his breath caught in his throat.

He thought about all the days and weeks of her captivity, wondering how she had ever survived it—from what place deep inside she had managed to summon the courage to endure. And was stunned and ashamed to realize he didn’t know. Why? Because he had never asked. Because his heart and mind had been so selfishly consumed with his own suffering, that no room had been left for anything else. Even for the feelings of the woman he loved more than his own life.

And yet she hadn’t reproached him for his insensitivity. Instead, her entire being had been focused on him—his needs, his anguish. She had tried so hard to help him; to offer him solace and support. All she had asked in return was that he talk to her; that he tell her what he was honestly feeling. But he’d rejected all her efforts. He’d shut her out—when she, more than anyone else, had a right to know what was in his heart. He could argue that it was his guilt which had prevented him from opening up to her, and it was true—even now, the thought of facing her in light of his degradation filled him with shame.

But she knew all that. She knew him. She had intuitively and rightly surmised that he thought of himself as a coward, a traitor. And it didn’t matter to her. More importantly, she didn’t perceive him that way. Of course it was difficult—if not impossible—for her to be objective, given her love for him. But she wouldn’t tell him something she didn’t truly believe, just because she thought it was what he wanted to hear. She wouldn’t lie to him, even if it was to make him feel better. She had always been honest with him. It was something he could count on, as he’d been able to count on little else since all his troubles began. So why was he pushing her away?

He examined his heart, and found that he didn’t have an answer. But the one thing he was sure of, was that he couldn’t work through this all alone. Perhaps it was time to do what Doc Hunter had advised. To abandon the remaining shreds of his pride, and turn to the one person whose love might allow him to forgive himself, and set him on the path toward healing. Maybe, they could even heal each other.

Sully took a deep breath and moved forward into the room. He didn’t make a sound; yet something seemed to alert Michaela to his presence, and she opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Sully?” she said softly. Just that, nothing more—yet her simple utterance of his name seemed to encompass a world of emotion. He hesitated for a moment, then closed the remaining distance between them.

He reached her side, and knelt by her chair. Her hand reached out to touch his cheek, and tears stung his eyes. Like a little child, he laid his head in her lap, and her arms came around to embrace him.

“I need your help,” he whispered.

* * * * * * * *

Compassionately Michaela stroked his hair. He was saying something else, but his voice was muffled, and she had to bend her head close to his to hear him.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” he was repeating, the words a litany of remorse. Tears started in Michaela’s eyes as well, and her throat ached with the love and anguish she felt for him.

“You have nothing to be sorry for—nothing,” she said softly into his ear.

“But I do,” he choked. “I have everythin’ to be sorry for. I don’t know how you can ever forgive me—or even look at me the same again.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she told him again, her tone extraordinarily gentle. “Sully, I wouldn’t even be here now, were it not for you.”

He lifted his head and met her gaze, his blue eyes dark with misery, tears like tiny beads of crystal clinging to his lashes and slipping down his cheeks. “That’s right—you wouldn’t be here,” he said brokenly. “Weak and starved, your hands hurt . . . only a shadow of what you were before . . .”
“But I’m going to get well,” she reminded him. “The damage to my hands is only temporary, and in
time I’ll gain back the weight I lost. And none of this was your fault,” she said more strongly. “Bloody
Knife did this to me—not you. You rescued me—you saved me! Sully, you must stop punishing
yourself—”

“If I hadn’t let him take you from me, none of this woulda happened,” he persisted, refusing to be
comforted. “He made you suffer ’cause he wanted to hurt me. I’m to blame, if only by default.”

“You didn’t *let* him abduct me!” she protested. “On the contrary, you did everything in your power
to prevent it.”

“Not everythin’—or he never woulda succeeded,” Sully responded dully.

Michaela stared into his eyes. “You did everything you could,” she repeated clearly. “But you’re not
clairvoyant, Sully. You couldn’t predict his actions. How could you possibly know that he would set the
fire as a distraction?” She regarded him earnestly, but he was silent. After a moment she spoke again.

“Sully, I must bear equal responsibility for what happened,” she admitted. “Before you left for the
saloon, you begged me to lock every door and window in the clinic. But I . . . didn’t honor your wishes.” It
was her turn to look ashamed.

“What are you talkin’ about?” he asked, momentarily startled out of his depression.

“I locked the doors and windows downstairs, as you told me,” she answered after a pause. “But as for
the upstairs . . . I told myself it wasn’t necessary—that no one would be able to gain access to the clinic from
the balcony or upper windows without being spotted. I was foolish and arrogant, believing that you were
over-reacting. Tragically, I discovered all too soon how wrong I had been not to heed your warnings. I
should be the one begging your forgiveness, for subjecting you to weeks of agony, and for putting Matthew,
Hank and Brendan in danger on my account.”

“You didn’t do nothin’ wrong,” he said immediately. “And you got no call to be sorry. Even if you’d
locked the clinic up tight, it wouldn’t have made a difference. He was determined to get to you, one way or
another. Locked doors and windows weren’t gonna stop him. He would have just broken in—or he
woulda come up with a different plan.”

“Well if that’s the case, then why are you blaming yourself?” Michaela said reasonably. “If Bloody
Knife was that determined to do us harm, then no action on your part would have prevented it.”

Again Sully looked startled, as she turned his argument around on him. After a long pause he
responded, “Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” Michaela declared. “So I want you to stop reproaching yourself for something that
was out of your hands.”

He was silent again, and she felt briefly hopeful as he considered the logic of her statement.

“I ’spose you got a point,” he conceded presently. “But even if I couldn’t stop you bein’ taken from the
clinic, that’s got nothin’ to do with what happened at Red Rock. I had a choice to make, Michaela, and I
took the dishonorable path. I made a deal with Custer and let Bloody Knife go free—and in the process I
betrayed you, Cloud Dancin’, and the memories of Snowbird, Black Kettle and all the other Cheyenne that
Custer murdered. And for what? So I could live, or stay out of prison? How can I live with myself after
that? How can I face Cloud Dancing after what I done?” he added miserably.

“Do you really believe Cloud Dancing would want you to die, or rot in prison for the rest of your life, to
prove a point?” Michaela asked him softly. “That he would have expected you to sacrifice yourself for his
sake, or to honor the memories of his slain people? As tragic as their deaths were, Sully—as bitter a thing
as it is to accept—the fact is that they’re gone. Nothing and no one can bring them back. For you to die as
well would just be one more senseless, empty death added to the others. One more reason for Cloud
Dancing to grieve. And even if you went to prison, it would be a life wasted—a “living death,” if you will. I
can’t believe Cloud Dancing would want you to condemn yourself to that fate.

“There’s something else very important that you need to consider, Sully,” she went on. “It wasn’t just
your own life in question. You held the fates of four other people in your hands that day. You did what
was necessary to save *all* our lives—not just your own."

But he was shaking his head, unconvinced.

“Very well,” Michaela continued. “Let’s consider what would have happened had Custer not intervened, and Bloody Knife succeeded in murdering you. Do you think he would have honored his word to let the rest of us go? We were witnesses to his crimes. Personally, I have no doubt that he would have killed us without a second thought.”

“You got that right,” Sully agreed darkly.

“Well, then?” Michaela said reasonably.

“But what about Custer?” Sully persisted.

“All right,” she said. “What about Custer? He’s a despicable human being, an enemy to the Indians, and I know how much it devastated you to enter into an alliance with him. But the fact remains that he saved your life. He claimed that he didn’t intend to harm you—that Bloody Knife acted of his own volition—“

“And he lies the way other people draw breath,” Sully interrupted grimly.

“I agree,” Michaela replied. “But in this case—as extraordinary as it sounds—I believe he was telling the truth. I don’t think he ever intended that you should be involved when he sent Bloody Knife in pursuit of Cloud Dancing. And when Bloody Knife nearly killed you in the mountains, I think his actions were as much of a shock to Custer as they were to us.”

“But he admitted he ordered Bloody Knife to follow me,” Sully argued.

“Following you is one thing,” Michaela said. “But murder quite another. Custer made it plain that Bloody Knife’s crimes were a serious threat to his own position and future. We know how consumed Custer is with his own self-interest. You said it yourself, Sully, when you confronted him. Why else would he be willing to cover up any hint of your involvement, if not to protect himself, first and foremost?”

“Savin’ his own skin,” Sully muttered.

“Precisely,” she said.

“But . . . agreein’ to forget about what Bloody Knife did to you—what Custer tried to do to Cloud Dancin’ . . . I don’t know if I can ever put that behind me, Michaela . . . if I can ever make peace with it . . .” His voice trailed away, his face a mask of guilt.

“I know that right now it must seem like your guilt is unique, and your pain insurmountable,” Michaela replied. “But you’re not the first person to have such feelings, Sully. Someone very close to you went through a very similar kind of suffering.”

There was a flicker of surprise and curiosity in his eyes. “Who?” he asked.

“Cloud Dancing,” she answered softly.

“Cloud Dancing’s never done nothin’ wrong,” Sully protested. “What reason would he have to feel guilty?”

“Washita,” Michaela said simply. “When Black Kettle took the tribe to Fort Cobb, Cloud Dancing stayed behind with the dog soldiers.”

“But that ain’t the same,” he objected. “He thought they were gonna be safe—he couldn’t know what would happen.”

“Of course not,” she agreed. “But that didn’t mitigate his guilt.” She paused for a moment, then went on, “Have you recovered your memories of that time? Do you recall when you took me to Cloud Dancing so that he could finish teaching me about the medicine?”
“Yeah, I remember,” he said quietly. “I remember it all.”

“Cloud Dancing was in such pain when you first brought me to him,” Michaela continued, her eyes shadowed with memory. “He said that he should never have let Snowbird go on without him. And he wondered if he would ever be able to forgive himself, or move forward with his life. I understood what he was feeling, because I was equally wracked with guilt, believing myself culpable for the deaths of the Cheyenne because I supported the railroad coming to town. Both of us felt so lost, both of us blamed ourselves. But by sharing our sorrow, somehow we learned to make peace with what had happened. We began to find our way out of the darkness.

“But the torment I saw in his eyes at the beginning . . . I see it in your eyes now, Sully,” she said gently. “Cloud Dancing would recognize that look if he were here, because he languished in that same slough of despond. And that’s why I know he would never judge you or hold you to blame for the painful decision you were forced to make. Just as you claimed he didn’t blame me, when you said that he wanted to see me.”

“When you were hurtin’, and I went to Cloud Dancin’ for help, I told him you were in a dark place, and he said he knew, ‘cause he’d been there too,” Sully recalled quietly.

“Yes,” she said. “And now you’re in that dark place, and you need to find your way out.”

“But it still ain’t the same, Michaela,” he maintained. “What happened to the Cheyenne—Cloud Dancin’ didn’t have no control over that. But it was different with me. I made a deliberate choice. I didn’t have to give in to Custer—but I did it anyway.”

“To save all our lives,” she reminded him. “And the fact is that Cloud Dancing *did* make a choice—to let the tribe go on without him. Don’t you think that must have haunted him afterward? Just as your choice haunts you?” She regarded him earnestly.

“We know that Cloud Dancing didn’t fail his people,” she stated. “But Cloud Dancing believed he did—and to him, that was all that mattered.

“I believed I’d let the Cheyenne down—that I should have stopped what happened—even though you said there were some things we couldn’t stop.

“And now you believe you’ve failed me, Cloud Dancing, the Cheyenne . . . even though it’s not true. Don’t you see?” she concluded passionately. “It *is* the same, Sully—in every way that matters.”

He stood with an effort, his hand pressed to his chest, and walked a few paces away, standing with his back to her. Michaela watched him anxiously. The seconds stretched out. Finally he turned. Slowly he retraced his steps, emerging from the shadows veiling the room into the circle of illumination cast by the lamp. “I guess . . . I never thought of it that way,” he conceded softly. “I was so wrapped up in my own guilt, I couldn’t see past it. I couldn’t—see myself the way you see me. Even now, it’s hard . . .”

“It’s very hard to be objective about one’s self,” she agreed. “And harder still to see ourselves the way others see us. But the only thing that matters is that it’s all right to forgive yourself, Sully—to allow yourself to go on. And perhaps—someday—even to be happy again,” she added.

“Do you think that’s possible?” he asked yearningly.

“Yes,” she answered, her eyes tender. “With the help of those who love you. Doctor Hunter said love is the best medicine of all.

“Will you let me help you, Sully?” she entreated. “Will you let me love you and help you to heal?”

He gave her a small, tremulous smile. “Ain’t nobody whose love and help I need more,” he said. “If . . . you’ll still have me.”

“May 20th—just as we planned,” she replied, her eyes radiant and her smile of joy like a glimpse of sunshine after the storm. His injury forgotten, Sully bent and took her in his arms.
It wasn’t quite as easy as I’d hoped to get back home. We had to take a stage to Cedar City, Utah, and catch the train from there to Denver. Then back on a stagecoach again for the remaining miles to Colorado Springs. It was kind of ironic, in a way. As much as I’d fought the train coming, I found myself wishing more than once during those long days of rattling over the rough terrain, that the railroad had already started running to town. But it wouldn’t start till the 10th of May, so we had to make do the best we could.

Not that I was thinking of myself. My wound was healing quickly enough, and I recovered rapidly from the concussion. But I didn’t like the idea of Michaela having to endure such a long and uncomfortable trip. Neither did Doc Hunter. Michaela and me had to do some fast talking to convince him we were both ready to travel just two days later. I think it was only the fact that she was so anxious to get home to the children, that finally persuaded the doc to give us his blessing to leave. The prospect of discomfort didn’t seem to faze Michaela, though. All that mattered to her was seeing Brian and Colleen again, and she was willing to put up with just about anything to be reunited with them as soon as possible.

The amazing thing, was that the closer we got to home, the stronger she seemed to become. Her hands improved rapidly, relieving us both, and soon it was hard to tell that they’d ever suffered any damage. And I didn’t have to urge her to eat, or remind her to drink plenty of water. She ate and drank everything put before her, consuming it all with relish. Of course it didn’t hurt that Mrs. Wilson had prepared a huge basket of delicious food for us to take along. Neither one of us could resist all the tempting items she’d included, and it felt good to have an appetite again, and to take pleasure in such a simple thing as eating a meal. Day by day I watched Michaela’s condition improve. The hollowness in her cheeks gradually vanished, and she began to fill out. By the time we were within sight of home, she looked almost like her old self again. She even joked that Dorothy, Grace and Myra wouldn’t need to change the measurements for the wedding dress they had insisted on making for her.

It was clear that something else was driving her to recover besides the prospect of being with the children, however. She didn’t say it in so many words, but I knew she was thinking about seeing her ma again. Foremost on her mind, of course, was relieving Elizabeth’s anxiety over her condition. A flurry of telegrams had gone back and forth in those two days prior to our departure. After Hank and Brendan sent the first wire, briefly telling the family that we’d found Michaela and that though she’d been hurt, she would be all right—Elizabeth had promptly wired back, demanding a full explanation from Michaela’s doctor of her daughter’s injuries and prospects for recovery. Doc Hunter was kind enough to oblige, giving me a lift in his buggy to a nearby hamlet called Indian Springs—the closest town with a telegraph office—where we composed an answer to Elizabeth together. And then I sent a couple of additional wires as well: one to the children alerting them that we would be traveling separately from Matthew, Hank and Brendan, and promising to tell them everything that had happened when we returned; and one to Dorothy, with a similar message for her to deliver to Cloud Dancing.

It eased Michaela’s mind, knowing that her ma’s worries had been assuaged, but I sensed a lingering concern in her mind, and I figured she was thinking about the last encounter they’d had, when Elizabeth had made her “confession”—and how things had been left unresolved between them. Despite how Elizabeth had tried to interfere in her life, I knew that in her heart Michaela forgave her ma, and longed for her to be a part of our wedding. I found myself hoping for the same thing—for Michaela’s sake, of course, but for my own, as well. I guess, in spite of everything that had happened, I still hoped for Elizabeth’s approval—or at least her acceptance.

So Michaela’s shock and disappointment—and, I confess, mine as well—were even greater when the children, along with Matthew and Brendan (who’d arrived back in town with Hank just a day and a half before us) met our stage with the news that Elizabeth was gone.

“Gone?” Michaela repeated, her eyes stunned, after we’d exchanged joyful embraces with Colleen, Brian and Matthew, and warm greetings and handshakes with Brendan. “What do you mean, ‘gone?’”

Matthew shrugged, his eyes compassionate. “Went home,” he replied. “About a week ago, according to the kids.”

“Once she was sure that you were all right, she said she needed to return to Boston—that she had affairs she needed to tend to, and she’d been away far longer than she’d planned,” Colleen added apologetically, regarding her ma with concern.
“She just—left?” Michaela repeated, as if unable to grasp it. My arm tightened around her, and absently she reached up to cover my hand with hers. “Did she at least . . . say anything about the wedding?”

Reluctantly, Colleen shook her head. “But she left you this letter,” she said, holding out an envelope of creamy stationery with Michaela’s name inscribed across the front in Elizabeth’s elegant hand.

Michaela accepted it slowly, then stood staring down at it for a moment, as if unsure what to do next.

“Want me to open it?” I asked softly.

There was another pause, then she glanced up at me. “No, it’s all right,” she said, her tone subdued. She turned the envelope over, her fingers awkwardly moving to break the wax seal. But before she could lift the flap and withdraw the contents, several friends and neighbors clustered around us, eager to welcome us home.

The next several minutes were taken up with excited greetings and embraces from Dorothy, Loren, Grace and Robert E., the Reverend, Horace and Myra. Even Jake joined in, a smile softening his normally caustic expression. Hank stood on the fringes of the group, and when I caught his eye he grinned.

“Glad you made it back it one piece,” he said, a cigar pinched between the fingers of one hand, as he moved forward and stuck out his other hand to shake mine. He appraised Michaela admiringly. “You’re looking lots better than the last time I seen you,” he commented. “You both are.”

“Thank you, Hank,” Michaela said sincerely, momentarily putting aside her disappointment over her ma to accept his compliment, as well as the warm welcomes and wishes of the others.

“Real good to be back,” I answered him. Our eyes met.

“Yeah,” he said briefly. “Know what you mean.”

“Well, I hope you folks are up for a party!” Grace said gaily. “Ever since we got word of when you’d be arriving, I been cooking up a storm in honor of your homecoming. Whenever you all are ready, you just come on over to the café and we’ll celebrate!”

“Sounds wonderful, Grace,” I said appreciatively. “Just give Michaela a little time to rest up from the trip, and then we’ll join you.”

“Sure,” Grace replied warmly. She patted Michaela’s hand. “Take all the time you need—it’ll all be waiting for you whenever you’re ready.”

“It sounds lovely, Grace,” Michaela echoed. “We’ll be looking forward to it.” Dorothy and Myra joined them, and for a few minutes the women huddled together, chatting animatedly. While they were occupied, I took Robert E. aside.

“Were you able to take care of that matter I spoke to you about?” I asked him in a hushed voice.

He smiled broadly. “Sure thing. It’s as good as new—or at least as close as I could manage,” he assured me, slightly above a whisper.

“Thanks a lot,” I said softly. “It should help to cheer Michaela up—she’s pretty down in the dumps, with her ma leaving and all.”

He looked sympathetic. “Yeah—I kind of thought she’d be disappointed when I heard that Mrs. Quinn went back to Boston. Hard to figure why her ma would up and leave like that, without even seeing Dr. Mike or saying good-bye.”

I shook my head. “I don’t really understand it myself, but Mrs. Quinn has always been a hard woman to know. I guess she had her reasons, but she must have known Michaela would be hurt. Well, at least she left a letter—maybe that’ll explain it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Well anyway, I’ll have that for you when you come over to the café,” he promised. “I got to be getting back to the livery and finish up a few things, but I’ll see you in a while.”
“Thanks,” I repeated. “I’m obliged, Robert E.”

“Forget it,” he said, smiling. “I was glad to do it.” He clapped me on the back. “Good to have you both home safe,” he added sincerely, then headed down the street toward his business.

Dorothy broke away from the group clustered around Michaela and approached me. “I just wanted you to know—I spoke to Cloud Dancing,” she told me quietly. “He sent these back—” She held out her hand, my string of beads heaped in her palm. “He figured you’d be wanting them.” I accepted them gratefully, slipping them over my head. As they slid down to rest against my chest, my fingers unconsciously caressed them.

“Thanks—I missed these,” I told her.

“Back where they belong,” she said approvingly, with a gentle smile.

I hesitated for a moment, my heart accelerating slightly. “Did he say anything?” I ventured.

Her eyes were knowing. “He wants to see you,” she replied kindly. “Whenever you got the chance. He said you’d know where to find him.”

“Thanks, Dorothy,” I said again. “I really appreciate what you done.”

“It was no trouble,” she answered. “I was glad to do whatever I could. Now you take Michaela off to get some rest,” she added briskly, her smile bright. “We’ll talk later.”

“I’ll do that,” I vowed, returning the smile. However my smile faltered and vanished as she moved away to take her leave of Michaela. I stroked my beads once again, thinking of my blood brother and the meeting yet to come.

* * * * * * * * * *

I knew Michaela was anxious to return home and get settled in again, but it had been a long and arduous trip from Denver, and I thought it best to give her a chance to rest before embarking on the final few miles to the homestead. I waited until she had said good-bye to Dorothy, Grace and our other friends, then advised softly that she lay down in the clinic for a few hours. She recognized the wisdom of my suggestion, and gratefully accepted my arm to lean on as we made our way slowly down the street from where the stagecoach stood outside the mercantile.

We neared the saloon, which still bore the scars of the fire—the smoke-blackened walls and charred shingles of the roof a mute testament to what had happened weeks ago. I glanced quickly at Michaela. She was looking at the saloon, her expression appalled and guilty. I made a vow to myself to get started on the repairs for Hank as soon as possible—not only to fulfill my promise to him, but so that Michaela wouldn’t have a constant reminder of that day every time she looked out the clinic windows. I slipped my arm around her shoulders, gently but firmly turning her away from the sight, and we approached the clinic. The children and Brendan followed us, but as we reached the entrance, they considerately made themselves scarce, seeming to sense that we could use some time alone.

In our absence someone—most likely Robert E.—had replaced the frame and rehung the door. I made a mental note to thank him for his thoughtfulness and offer to pay him for his work, though I suspected he wouldn’t accept. As I reached for the knob, I felt Michaela stiffen at my side.

“You all right?” I asked quickly.

“Yes,” she managed after a moment. “I was just remembering . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“The last time you were here,” I finished gently, looking down into her troubled eyes. She nodded.

“I’m a fool,” I reproached myself. “I’m sorry, Michaela. I realized the saloon would be a reminder for you, but I wasn’t thinking about the clinic itself. Where was my head?” I said in disgust, furious at my stupidity.

“I know how bad the memory of that day must be for you,” I added apologetically. “We can go on to
the homestead after all, if you ain’t ready to be here yet.” Momentarily she looked as if she were tempted to accept the offer, but then she squared her shoulders, lifting her chin resolutely.

“No,” she replied. “It’s all right. I have to face what happened—the sooner the better. This is my clinic. People come to me here for help. I can’t allow the memory of one terrible day to prejudice me against being here and doing my job. I can’t let fear control my life.”

“That’s real brave,” I told her softly, my fingers lightly caressing her arms. I could feel her trembling slightly, belying her bold-hearted words. “But it’s only natural for you to be feeling afraid—to dread being here—especially the first time you’re seeing it after . . .” I swallowed. “Maybe it’s too soon,” I went on. “Maybe we should go straight to the homestead. Let you rest up and get stronger before you have to face being in the clinic.”

“The thought of postponing it is enticing,” she admitted. “But whether it’s today, or next week, or a month from now—it would be the same, Sully. As I said, the sooner I conquer my fear, and learn to put the memory behind me, the better. After all, it’s just a building. It’s true—something bad happened here. But so many good things have happened here, too. I treated patients here—I saved lives here! That’s what I need to concentrate on. This is the place where I conduct my work, where I practice my profession. I have to learn to be comfortable here again.

“Besides,” she added, managing to summon a smile. “I have something very important to do—to plan for our wedding. A wonderful, joyous occasion. There’s so much to do and very little time left in which to do it, if we’re going to be ready by May 20th. I can’t allow residual fears or memories to get in the way of that. And if mother should decide to come back, she’ll need a place to stay . . .” Her voice dwindled away again, as she looked down at the envelope still clutched in her hand.

“Maybe you should wait till we’re back at the homestead to read the letter,” I cautioned. “You got enough to deal with, just being here, without thinking about your ma, too—”

“No, it’s all right,” she assured me again. “I want to know what Mother had to say. I don’t think I could wait till later.”

“But I don’t want you getting more upset,” I said in concern.

Again she managed to produce a smile. I marveled at her courage and resiliency. “My battles with Mother are old and familiar territory,” she said wryly. “In a perverse sort of way, I’m grateful to have this to focus on. It helps to take my mind off the other.”

“Are you sure?” I asked soberly.

“I’m sure,” she answered. As if to prove it, she stepped in front of me and turned the handle of the door herself. She looked back at me over her shoulder. “Let’s go inside,” she said.

* * * * * * * * * *

She moved into the room, her steps slow but purposeful. I followed, closing the door softly behind me. I watched as her eyes traveled over her surroundings, going first to the window, then to the examination table—and I knew she was remembering where he’d hurt her.

One night, during the long train ride back, she had finally told me exactly what happened that day. Her words had come haltingly at first, but had gradually strengthened, as if in the act of telling alone, she was managing to purge the poison of the memories from her mind and heart. I suppose it had been easier for her to talk about it then, far removed as she was from the physical and emotional reality of it all. But now . . .

She went to the window, her hand reaching up to lightly brush the glass. “Here,” she said suddenly, sounding as if she were talking to herself more than me. “When I was watching all of you fight the fire . . . This is where he put his hand over my mouth, and the knife to my throat . . .” A few seconds ticked past, then her hand dropped away, and she turned and slowly circled the desk, approaching the examination table. She laid her palm against the snowy whiteness of the sheet draped across it. “And here,” she spoke again. “This was where I hit him.

“My father’s cane,” she went on idly after a pause. “So many times when I was in the cave, I wondered
whatever became of it. I suppose... someone threw it away.”

My eyes went to the wall opposite. I remembered that there had been a smear of blood, almost like a question mark, left by the broken piece when it flew through the air—but it was gone now. More of Robert E.’s handiwork, I thought, and silently blessed him.

I came up behind her, gently grasping her shoulders. “Don’t do this to yourself,” I murmured, planting a tender kiss on the crown of her head. She turned in my arms so that she could look at me.

“It’s all right,” she said quietly, reassuring me yet a third time. “It’s only a window, only a table. Just things—and I know they have no power to hurt me. And... he’ll never come back here.”

“That’s right,” I agreed, my pride in her courage going almost too deep for words. “He can never hurt you again.” I cupped her cheek in my palm and pressed my lips to hers. She covered my hand briefly with her own and looked up at me with a tremulous smile, then turned to stare once again at the features of the room.

“Even my father’s cane,” she said after a moment. A quiet sigh escaped her, the breath catching slightly in her throat. “It was a beautiful symbol of his colleagues’ regard and admiration for him—but I don’t need it to remember my love for him—or my pride in all he accomplished.” I enfolded her in my arms, and she leaned back against my chest, resting her hands over mine. “I’m going to be all right, Sully,” she said softly.

“I know you will,” I said. “Because you’re the bravest, strongest woman I’ve ever known. And because I’m going to see to it. I’m going to spend every day of my life making you happy, Michaela. And I’m going to do everything in my power to help you forget any of this ever happened—to help you put it behind you forever. I swear it.”

Again she twisted around to face me. Her smile strengthened. “You already make me happy,” she said lovingly. “You always have and you always will. And I pledge to do the same for you—to spend all the days of my life making you happy, and to help you put the memories of Red Rock behind you forever.”

I touched her face, letting my fingertips trail along the soft contours of her skin from her temple to her throat. “I’m grateful,” I said softly. “More than you’ll ever know. But—I’m afraid I ain’t going to be able to forget till after I’ve seen Cloud Dancing.”

“He’ll understand, Sully,” she promised, her eyes gentle. “Trust me on this.”

“I trust you—always,” I said fervently. “And I’m trying to believe... about Cloud Dancing. But that’s for another day. Now, all I care about is taking care of you, and making sure you’re all right.”

“I will be—as long as you’re with me,” she said.

“Then it’s a sure thing—because I ain’t ever leaving you,” I vowed. “I love you, Michaela,” I whispered.

“And I, you,” she breathed in return.

Again we kissed, instinctively moving toward one another, surrendering to the mutual need that suddenly overwhelmed us both. We drew apart finally, our faces flushed, the pulse pounding in our throats, our wrists... in every part of our bodies.

“How am I going to wait three more weeks?” I asked, grinning down at her crookedly. She chuckled slightly, and the sound of her gentle laughter gladdened my heart.

“How indeed?” she answered. I hugged her, and she returned my embrace, her body fitting itself perfectly to mine. Presently we summoned the will to part, and attempted to compose ourselves. Her eyes sought mine.

“If it’s all right with you, I’d like to read my mother’s letter now,” she announced.

“Of course it’s all right,” I said. “But you know, Michaela, there ain’t no rush. Why don’t you rest awhile first—get some more of your strength back? The letter ain’t going nowhere. It’ll be waiting for you
when you wake up.” I regarded her solicitously.

“I love you for wanting to protect me,” she answered. “But I’m ready to read it, Sully—truly.”

“Well then—maybe you’d like some privacy,” I suggested. “I’ll understand if you’d rather be alone.”

“There’s nothing she could say that you couldn’t hear,” she responded. “I’d like you to stay, Sully,” she insisted. “Please.”

“Whatever you want,” I said readily. “Here,” I added, releasing her and moving to the desk, pulling out the chair. “Sit down.” I took her hand and led her over to the chair, lowering her into it gently.

She arranged her skirts, making herself comfortable, then lifted the flap of the envelope and withdrew two sheets of thick vellum. I stood behind her, my hands resting lightly on the back of the chair, and followed along over her shoulder.

Michaela unfolded the pages, cleared her throat, and a bit self-consciously began to read aloud:

“Dear Michaela,

I deeply regret that I will not be there to welcome you home when you arrive in Colorado Springs. I hope you can forgive my absence. Rest assured that had I not been entirely convinced by your physician that you were out of danger, and could anticipate a complete recovery from your injuries, I never would have departed. But with my anxieties assuaged, I felt compelled to return to Boston, where many of my neglected affairs await my attention. You cannot be unaware that my visit, protracted by the dire and extraordinary circumstances of your abduction, extended far longer than I had either planned or expected. And as much as I was longing to see you again, I was forced to weigh my personal desires against the other and equally compelling demands of my life. Please do not conclude that because I made the choice to leave, that I estimate you to be of lesser importance than other elements of my life, for that is certainly not the case.

I must tell you frankly, however, that another component entered into my decision, and that was the state of affairs between us when we were last together. I could not forget your anger when I refused to give my blessing to your union with Mr. Sully. And while I sensed a—softening—shall we say, in your attitude toward me after I confessed my failings to you, I could not be certain that you had, indeed, forgiven me—or even that you ever could. Given these facts, I thought it might be easier if I removed myself from the situation, thus eliminating the likelihood of yet another painful confrontation between us. Certainly your entire focus now must rest with the complete recovery of your health, and I would never wish to be guilty of compromising that recovery by disturbing you with my presence.

I have no way of knowing whether you still seek—or even desire—my blessing upon your marriage; though it was patently clear to me at the time that you intended to go forward with this union with—or without—my consent. Quite honestly I haven’t come to a decision as to how I feel now about your marriage. The circumstances were complicated enough before this tragedy occurred; now they are even more complex. If you were to be honest with yourself, I think you would be forced to agree that my warnings, and my prediction, about Mr. Sully compromising your safety and well-being, have indeed come to pass. However if I am to be equally honest, I must concede that Mr. Sully’s devotion to you, and his determination to rescue you regardless of the risks, were both sincere, and genuine. Before he departed for Nevada, he made me a solemn vow that he would find you and bring you back safely. He kept his promise—for which I commend him, and for which I am profoundly grateful. It seems that despite how dramatically different you are, he truly loves you; and, even more importantly, you truly love him. I suppose if I can accept nothing else, I must learn to accept that.

In spite of all that has passed between us—the good as well as the bad—I want you to know that I love you and genuinely wish you well. And that includes my fervent hope that no matter what path you choose, that you have a happy life.

With deepest affection, I remain
CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Sully circled around her chair and crouched down on one knee by her side. He looked into her face searchingly. "What're you thinkin'?" he asked softly.

Slowly and deliberately Michaela refolded the pages of her mother's letter and slid them back inside the envelope. She placed the envelope on the desk, the front of it bearing her name in her mother's formal, finishing school script facing upwards. For several seconds she stared at the stark swirls of ink against the white background, as if seeking some type of hidden meaning in the elaborate flourishes.

"I'm not quite sure," she said at last, her tone flat and unemotional. "Though the issue seems to be more what my mother is thinking."

"Well, that seems pretty clear," Sully offered tentatively. "She loves you, and she hopes you love and forgive her."

"I suppose," Michaela said diffidently. She folded her hands, resting them in her lap. Of its own accord, Sully's hand reached out to cover hers.

"You know, truth be told, Michaela, it ain't nearly as bad as I was expectin'," he said. "She apologized for not bein' here, and she said she didn't want to upset you. More than that, she didn't try to tell you what to do this time. That's a change from the way she's acted in the past, right?" he pointed out.

"Yes, that's true," Michaela allowed.

"But you still feel bad that she didn't stay to see you," he concluded. She was silent. His fingers tightened around hers with a gentle pressure. "C'mon, Michaela, tell me what's botherin' you," he urged sympathetically. "Is it just that she left before we got home—or is it more than that?"

Michaela bit her lip, her hands twisting restlessly beneath his. Sully sensed that she was trying to frame her thoughts and feelings into a reply, and didn't push her, but waited patiently. Presently, she sighed and looked at him.

"I admit it hurts that she didn't wait for me to return," she confessed. "But there are other things that bother me more."

"What?" he encouraged, the fingers of his other hand tenderly brushing a strand of her hair back from her face.

"Why she didn't stay," Michaela replied. He looked faintly puzzled.

"Well she said . . . she had things she had to attend to, back home . . ." he ventured.

"That's what she said, yes," Michaela acknowledged. "But it's not necessarily the truth."

"You don't know that, Michaela," he placated her.

"No, I don't," Michaela said unconvincingly.

"But that's what you believe," he stated.

She sighed again. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "But I'm afraid it was only an excuse—that she might have said that as a cover for her real reason . . ."

"What would that be?" he said gently. There was another pause. Again he waited quietly.

"There are only a few weeks remaining till our wedding," Michaela replied finally. "If she'd stayed, she
would have felt bound to attend. But the fact that she left... I can’t help but think that it was her way of avoiding having to be there.”

“Michaela, you can’t know that,” Sully repeated soothingly. “She *was* away from Boston a long time. Stands to reason there were lots of things she needed to see to. Maybe she deliberately left early to take care of everythin’ in time to come back for the weddin’.”

“It’s possible, I suppose—but I doubt it,” Michaela responded, her tone subdued. “You heard what she wrote, Sully—she didn’t even mention the wedding.”

“No in so many words—but she *did* talk about our marriage,” he noted.

“Yes—but only to point out that all her predictions about us came true,” Michaela answered, her voice tinged with bitterness.

“That ain’t all she said, Michaela,” he reminded her mildly. “She admitted that I’d kept my promise to bring you back safe. That was a big concession for her to make, considerin’ how she felt about us gettin’ married. And she went even further than that. She said she had to accept that we loved each other—that we were gonna get married, whether she approved or not.”

“But she didn’t give us her blessing, did she?!” Michaela retorted sharply, startling him. Her expression quickly altered, and she regarded him penitently. “I’m sorry, Sully—I didn’t mean to raise my voice. I’m not angry at you—”

“I know that,” he said softly, kissing her temple. “You’re just feelin’ hurt about your ma.” He smiled, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “I can take it.”

She managed a small, half-hearted smile in return. “No, I don’t want to shout at you,” she said.

“Well, the offer’s open, if you feel the need,” Sully told her. Now his expression altered, becoming earnest. “I know you’re hurt, Michaela, and you certainly got the right to feel that way. But the fact is, your ma didn’t refuse to give her blessin’. She just said she didn’t know how she felt. You can’t really fault her for that—for bein’ confused. It was a lot for her to go through, you bein’ kidnapped and all... not knowin’ if you were alive, if you’d ever come back. Look at what it did to us.”

“I realize that—but then all the more reason for her to stay, if she was so concerned,” Michaela countered critically. “And you demonstrated such courage, Sully—coming after me as you did, risking your life to save me at any cost. She should be grateful—she owes you a tremendous debt!”

“She said she was grateful,” he reminded her calmly.

“A few words on a page,” Michaela said disdainfully. “Hardly an adequate expression of thanks for all that you did.”

“It was good enough for me,” Sully pacified her. “‘Specially considerin’ it was ‘cause of me that all this happened to begin with. ‘Sides, he went on quietly. “It ain’t your ma who owes me—it’s me who owes her.”

“How can you possibly think that?” Michaela exclaimed.

“I put her child in danger,” he said. “I put your life at risk. Your ma’s got every reason to hate me for that, and she’s sure got no reason to ever forgive me. But she found it in herself to thank me anyway—and she didn’t condemn me, though she had the right. She was lots more decent to me than I deserve, Michaela.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re being much more decent to her than *she* deserves,” Michaela answered petulantly.

Sully regarded her compassionately. Instead of arguing the point further, he decided to take a different tack.

“Remember what you said to me when I was feelin’ so guilty—when I was punishin’ myself about Cloud Dancin’?” he said, surprising her with his unexpected question.
She looked uncertain. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You said it’s hard to be objective about ourselves,” he reminded her. “Well, in this case, Michaela, I think it’s hard—maybe even impossible—for you to be objective about your ma, or the feelin’s you got for one another. You’ve had negative feelin’s about her for so long, you just can’t see through the hurt right now. But let me ask you this: If you didn’t love her so much, would you even care whether or not she was here for the weddin’? Or for that matter, what she thinks of me, or the two of us together? I don’t think so,” he added, studying her carefully. She didn’t answer, but he could see she was turning the idea over in her mind. “Truth is, Michaela, you love her a lot, and she ain’t here. That’s why you’re angry—not ‘cause of any insults she might have made about me.”

She opened her mouth to protest, and he held up his hand to forestall her. “I know you want to defend me,” he went on quickly. “And I love you for it. But I can take care of myself, Michaela. We both know that. If your ma doesn’t like me or accept me—well, I’m sorry for that; I’d like to think she could learn to be happy one day about us bein’ married. For your sake, if nothin’ else. But if it never happens, it ain’t gonna ruin my life, or even affect it that much. You love me, and you’ve promised yourself to me—that’s all I care about. But what “would” bother me is if you go on bein’ angry with your ma purely on my account. I don’t want to be the one responsible for comin’ between you.” He paused, continuing to watch her face. She was listening quietly now. “So I think you got to search your mind and your heart real carefully. And I believe that if you do, you’ll discover that it’s your fear that she doesn’t care about you that’s causin’ your anger—not her opinion of me.”

She continued to be silent, and he felt suddenly apprehensive. Perhaps emotionally she wasn’t strong enough yet to recognize and accept this fact about herself. Perhaps it was too much for her to absorb, on top of everything else she’d been through. Maybe he was pushing her too hard . . .

Michaela suddenly smiled, and relief washed through him like a wave. “How did you become so wise?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It’s a gift,” he said airily, the mischief returning to his eyes.

“Well, you’re right,” she admitted, a bit ruefully. “I want her to be here—and I want her to be happy for us. With my father gone, she’s the only parent I have, and I want her to love and respect my husband, just as I know my father would have.”

“Well, if you think your pa would have felt that way, then I’m honored,” Sully said sincerely. “As far as your ma, goes, though—I think ‘love and respect’ might be a little too tall an order—least in the beginnin’. But I hope she can find it in her heart to be glad for us someday, ‘cause it’s so important to you.”

“And there’s somethin’ else I think,” he added.

“What’s that?” she asked, her fingers now firmly entwined with his.

“I think she’ll be here,” he predicted.

“Do you really, Sully?” she asked vulnerably.

“I really do,” he told her. “But if she ain’t—it won’t be ‘cause she don’t love you, Michaela,” he said softly. “And that’s one thing I’m sure about.”

Spontaneously she hugged him. “Thank you, Sully!” she whispered against his shirt front, her head tucked beneath his chin.

“No charge,” he whispered back, caressing the softness of her hair. His fingers found her chin and he tilted it up, covering her mouth with his.

After several moments they drew apart, and he looked into her face with a smile. “As long as I’m spoutin’ all this wisdom, I got one more recommendation to make,” he said.

“And what would that be, ‘Professor’ Sully?” Michaela responded, dimpling at him.

“Lay down and get some sleep,” he advised. “Things will look lots brighter when you’re rested, I
reckon. ‘Sides, we got a party to go to, and I don’t think anybody’s got a better right to celebrate than we do.”

“Once again, very wise advice,” Michaela pronounced, favoring him with another smile.

“Of course,” he said smugly. She rolled her eyes at him, then allowed him to take her hand and lift her to her feet. Together they walked over to the cot against the wall, and he helped her settle onto it, covering her tenderly with the blanket.

“Sweet dreams,” he said softly, brushing her forehead with his lips.

“They’ll be sweet,” she whispered back, reaching up to caress his face. “Because I intend to dream only of you.”

“I’ll let you get to it, then,” he told her, with a roguish but loving smile. Touching his fingers to his lips, he backed away toward the door, keeping her in his sights. Turning the knob, he stepped outside, quietly closing the door after him.

With a restful sigh, Michaela pillowed her hand beneath her cheek, and contentedly closed her eyes.

* * * * * * * * * *

The afternoon sun was bright after the dimness of the clinic, and Sully slitted his eyes slightly against the light. As his vision adjusted however, he noticed a large satchel and another, smaller piece of luggage standing on the porch. Just as he registered their presence, the other door to the clinic opened and Brendan stepped out. He had changed clothes and his face was freshly shaved. He looked ready for travel.

“Hello again,” he greeted Sully with a smile. Sully glanced down at the bags, then back up at the young man opposite.

“What’s all this about?” he asked curiously.

“Just what it looks like,” Brendan replied easily.

“You’re leavin’?” Sully said, feeling a sudden brief stab of regret at the thought. “So soon?”

“Afraid so,” Brendan replied apologetically. “The stage pulls out at three o’clock. When it does, I’ll be on it.”

“But what’s your rush?” Sully persisted. “There’s a party at Grace’s—can’t you stay for that? And Michaela—she’s restin’ now, but I know she’d feel real bad if she didn’t get a chance to say good-bye.”

“I’d regret it as well,” Brendan said sincerely. “I hope I’ll have the opportunity to take my leave of her. But unfortunately I don’t have a choice. When we returned yesterday, I had a wire waiting for me from William Jackson. He’s returning to Mesa Verde, and he wants me to join him.”

“But couldn’t you put it off for another day or two?” Sully said persuasively, inwardly amazed that the prospect of Brendan leaving disappointed him so much. Who would have believed it, he thought to himself. And then on the heels of that: But who would have believed he’d come to mean so much to our lives?

“I wish I could,” Brendan said regretfully. “I truly mean that. But the telegram was already a week old when Mr. Bing gave it to me. Jackson’s time in Mesa Verde is limited, because of his obligations to Hayden’s geographic survey. If we’re going to explore the cliff dwellings, it has to be now.”

It finally began to sink in to Sully that Brendan was truly and actually going to leave town. And now that the young archaeologist was on the point of departure, there suddenly seemed so many things that he needed to say.

“I’m really sorry that you’re leavin’,” he said slowly after a moment. “I know we got off to a rocky start—that there were bad feelin’s and misunderstandin’s between us. But the last few weeks... well, they changed all that.
“I don’t know how to thank you—for what you did,” he went on more strongly. “I owe you so much—"

“This isn’t necessary,” Brendan interrupted. But Sully fixed him with a steady look.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is. I gotta say this. If it weren’t for you—well, I never woulda had a prayer of findin’ Michaela—of trackin’ her down and bringin’ her back safe. You told me where to look. More than that, you guided me there, and stood by me against Bloody Knife. You risked your life, Brendan—for Michaela, and for me. That took guts—"

“Everything I did, I wanted to do Sully,” Brendan interjected again. “I was just grateful I could be of help.”

“Well I was grateful you were there,” Sully replied.

“You know, Sully, I owe you my thanks as well,” Brendan said unexpectedly. Sully look surprised.

“Well I was grateful you were there,” Sully replied.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is. I gotta say this. If it weren’t for you—well, I never woulda had a prayer of findin’ Michaela—of trackin’ her down and bringin’ her back safe. You told me where to look. More than that, you guided me there, and stood by me against Bloody Knife. You risked your life, Brendan—for Michaela, and for me. That took guts—"

“Well I was grateful you were there,” Sully replied.

“You know, Sully, I owe you my thanks as well,” Brendan said unexpectedly. Sully look surprised.

“Why—for almost gettin’ you killed?” he asked, a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

Warmth gleamed in Brendan’s eyes as well, but then his expression turned thoughtful. “No. For giving me the chance to . . . I don’t know . . . to prove myself, I suppose,” he said. “I’ve been all over the world, had my share of stimulating experiences, and seen some wondrous things. But I don’t think I ever felt more—alive . . . that I had more of a sense of purpose—than when I accompanied you on this journey. Thank you for helping me to find that spark of strength inside.”

“Any time,” Sully said, his expression genuine. He hesitated a moment, then went on, “As long as we’re talkin’ plain . . . Well, maybe I don’t completely understand about your interest in the past—how you choose to study it and all. But everythin’ I said when I first met you—everythin’ I thought . . . I was wrong. Dead wrong. And I’m sorry.”

Brendan nodded. “Thanks,” he said quietly. “I appreciate that.” It was his turn to hesitate, but then he went on, “About . . . Michaela. My behavior. I had no right—"

“It’s forgotten,” Sully said.

“That’s generous of you,” Brendan said levelly. “But still, I don’t feel right about my attentions to her, and particularly about the way I acted toward you. I deeply regret it all. I was wrong.”

Sully shrugged, giving him a crooked smile. “What can I tell you? You have good taste. Look, I can’t very well fault you for having the same feelin’s I had myself when I first met her. Michaela’s . . . well, Michaela’s an easy woman to love.”

“She’s very special,” Brendan agreed. “Beautiful, brilliant, courageous . . .”

“She’s got the ‘heart of a warrior,’” Sully said with quiet pride. “That’s what Chief Black Kettle said about her once.”

Brendan met his eyes. “That’s it exactly.” There was a pause, then he added, “You’re a lucky man, Sully.”

Sully smiled. “You don’t got to tell me that.”

Brendan returned his smile. “No, of course not. And—Michaela’s a lucky woman.”

Sully dropped his eyes for a moment, then looked back up at Brendan. “That’s good of you,” he remarked. “And I know that someday, I’ll be sayin’ the same thing about the woman lucky enough to marry you.”

Brendan shrugged. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “Tell me,” he went on with a small grin. “Are there any more at home like Michaela?”

Sully chuckled softly. “Four—but none quite like Michaela.”

“Just as I suspected,” Brendan replied. He smiled once more.
Sully extended his hand and Brendan grasped it firmly. “It’s been good knowin’ you,” Sully said sincerely. “I hope your travels bring you back this way someday.”

“I hope so too,” Brendan answered. “Now that I know I’ll be returning to friends.”


* * * * * * * * *

Michaela leaned back in her chair with a contented sigh. “It was all wonderful, Grace,” she declared to the slender woman standing nearby. Grace looked pleased. “I don’t believe I have room for another bite!”

“But ya gotta find room, Ma,” Brian said, appearing at her side suddenly with a plate in his hand. “I brought ya some of Miss Grace’s apple cobbler—your favorite. I brought ya the biggest piece,” he added importantly.

Michaela chuckled. “You’re absolutely right, Brian. I stand corrected. There’s always room for Grace’s cobbler.” She picked up her fork and cut a piece, putting it into her mouth. Her eyes closed briefly as she savored the cidery sweetness of the fruit blended with the flaky tenderness of the pastry. “A slice of heaven,” she breathed, glancing at Grace once again in admiration. Grace’s vibrant dark eyes beamed with pleasure.

Michaela started to take another mouthful but Sully touched her arm, staying her hand.

“Uh, ‘fore you tuck into that, there’s an important matter we got to attend to,” he announced. Something about the sparkle in his eyes and the tone of his voice immediately seized her attention. She scrutinized him closely.

“Byron Sully, are you up to something?” she queried.

He regarded her innocently. “Who, me?” Looking over her head toward the large, gnarled oak that dominated the café, he raised his hand in a signaling gesture. “Robert E.?”

The blacksmith moved forward from where he’d been standing by the tree. In his hands he held a long, slim package, wrapped in plain paper and tied with a festive red ribbon. He reached the table, and placed the mysterious package before her. “For you, Dr. Mike.”

Her eyes widened, and a blush of pleased surprise colored her cheeks. “How nice! But there was no need for presents. All of this—” She waved her hand expansively. “—was more than enough.”

“It ain’t exactly a present,” Sully spoke again. “More like . . . restorin’ somethin’ that was lost—puttin’ it back where it belongs.”

She stared at him again, her ears attuned to the odd note of suppressed emotion in his tone. Suddenly she became aware that everyone was watching her avidly, their eyes expectant.

“What’s all this about?” she asked, her glance going from one face to another.

“Well if you don’t open it, guess we’ll never find out,” Sully told her, grinning. Michaela smiled back, still feeling in the dark but pleasantly so, and drew off the ribbon, then parted the folds of the paper. Her hand unconsciously went to her mouth and she gasped as she saw what lay inside. “Oh!”

She felt Sully’s arm slip around her shoulders as tears stung her eyes. “Oh,” she breathed again more softly. “I can’t believe it . . .”

The silver head of her father’s cane gleamed up at her, its shaft of dark, oiled wood whole and pristine. It looked nearly identical to the way it had before; and yet, there was a subtle difference. Michaela couldn’t quite put her finger on what had changed, but it didn’t matter.

“How is this possible?” she managed, nearly overcome. “I thought it was gone forever . . .”
“Robert E. fixed it,” Sully said, looking at his friend in admiration. Michaela gratefully followed his gaze.

“It was Sully’s idea,” Robert E. added, sharing the credit. Michaela’s eyes turned to Sully.

“Of course,” she whispered.

“It ain’t quite the same,” Robert E. spoke again, his tone apologetic. “Didn’t have no ebony, but I used the best piece of maple I could find. Shortened the length a little too, so it would be just the right size for ya. I hope it’s all right, Dr. Mike, even though it’s different.”

Michaela touched the cane, her fingers trailing lovingly over the shining contours of carved silver, then stroking the smooth, polished length of the shaft. After a moment she raised her head.

“Yes, it *is* different,” she said, her voice tremulous. “It’s better.” She swallowed down the tears that threatened to flow, then rose to her feet. Softly she continued, “This cane always meant so much to me because it represented my love and admiration for my father. But now it will be doubly precious, because it will be a symbol of the priceless gift of friendship—” She looked at Robert E. “And of love,” she finished, meeting Sully’s eyes. Sully gazed back at her, deeply moved. “Thank you, Robert E.,” she said simply, turning back to the blacksmith. “With all my heart.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Welcome home, Dr. Mike,” Robert E. said warmly.

“I can’t tell you how good it is to be home,” she answered.

“All right, now—no tears allowed!” Grace suddenly exclaimed briskly. “This is a party!” The emotional mood of the moment was broken, as everyone chuckled appreciatively. A buzz of conversation and laughter resumed in the café, and Michaela sat down again, her eyes continuing to regard the cane with gratitude and wonder.

Sully reached over and took her hand, drawing her eyes to his. “Is it all right that we fixed it?” he asked her under the cover of the hubbub of voices, his expression slightly apprehensive. “It won’t be too much of a reminder of—” He hesitated. “Well, you know . . .”

“It’s more than all right,” she answered tenderly. “And it will be a reminder of nothing but joy.”

“Good,” he said, satisfied. “I’m glad.” He picked up the cane and laid it aside, then pointed to the plate of cobbler still sitting in front of her. “Better finish that,” he added. “You still need to put some weight on.”

“With pleasure,” she said, picking up her fork once again. But then her hand paused, the fork hovering over the plate. There was an expression of mild regret in her eyes.

“What is it?” he asked.

She sighed. “I was just wishing Brendan could have been here for this,” she said.

Sully nodded. “Me too. He deserved to be part of the celebration.”

“At least I got to speak with him before he left,” she added. “I’m so glad you woke me, Sully.”

“Figured you’d never forgive me if I let him go without givin’ you the chance to thank him and say good-bye,” he noted with a smile.

“I would have been very sorry to miss him,” she acknowledged, smiling back. Then her expression turned earnest. “I owe him so much.”

“So do I,” Sully agreed. “He’s a good man.”

“You really feel that way, Sully?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. He risked a lot for me—for us. We got to know each other pretty well over all
those days and weeks. We put all the bad things behind us and got to be friends.”

“I’m glad,” she said sincerely.

“Did you have a nice conversation?” Sully asked her.

“Yes, very,” Michaela responded. “I told him that I hoped he’d return to visit us one day, and he said
that he thought he might be able to come back sometime over the summer. Is that all right with you?” she
inquired solicitously.

“More than all right,” he assured her. “I told him the same thing.” He gestured toward the cobbler.
“Eat,” he instructed, with a smile.

She smiled back, and resumed her consumption of the tempting confection. After a few moments,
however, she noticed that Sully had fallen silent, a faraway expression in his eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

His eyes cleared, and he gave her his attention. “Cloud Dancin’,” he confessed quietly. “I was wishin’ he
could be here too.”

“Yes,” she said softly, covering his hand with hers. “You should go to him,” she added.

He looked startled. “I didn’t say . . . that is, it can wait,” he protested, but without much conviction.

“No, you didn’t say it,” Michaela echoed. “But I know what’s in your heart. And as far as you’re
being able to wait . . . Perhaps you can, but I don’t think you should. You need to see him, Sully. To make
your final peace with all this. I think you should go to him now,” she repeated.

“Are you sure?” he asked, looking grateful, but a a trifle guilty as well. “I don’t feel right about leavin’
you . . .”

“I have the children and half the town to look after me,” she reassured him. “Besides, soon we’ll be
returning to the homestead.

“I’ll be fine,” she added. “Go, Sully,” she urged again. “Please.”

Again he smiled gratefully. “How’d I get so lucky?” he said.

“The feeling is mutual,” she answered, smiling back. She leaned over and kissed him lightly.
“Give Cloud Dancing my love,” she told him.

“Done,” he promised. He raised her hand to his lips. “I love you.”


Sully rose from the table and started to move away, then raised his hand in a wave of farewell. She
returned the gesture, then followed his graceful figure with her eyes as he walked rapidly away,
disappearing around the corner of the clinic.

“Where’s Sully goin’, Ma?” Brian asked, reappearing at her side.

Michaela smiled at him. “To see a dear friend,” she said.

Just then Loren approached. “Sure is good havin’ ya back, Dr. Mike,” he commented. Michaela
regarded him warmly.

“It’s very good to be back, Loren,” she replied. The storekeeper cleared his throat, fidgeting with the
chain of his pocket watch.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Michaela asked, noting his discomforture.

“Well . . .” He cleared his throat again. “I was just wonderin’ . . . that is, some of the other folks and
me was kinda curious . . . What exactly happened out there? We asked Hank, but he won’t utter a peep about it. Ain’t like him.”

Michaela picked up her empty glass. “Brian, would you get me some more cider?” she asked.

“Sure, Ma,” the young boy said readily, accepting the glass and moving away through the cluster of tables.

“Little pitchers got big ears,” Loren remarked sagely, watching him go. He turned back to Michaela, his eyes glittering in anticipation. “So, then, Dr. Mike, what’s the story?” he asked again.

Michaela looked down at her plate, toying with the remains of her cobbler. Finally she looked up again and met Loren’s eager gaze.

“Loren . . . What happened ‘out there’—is best left forgotten,” she said finally. “I hope you can understand.”

The storekeeper’s eyes were disappointed, but mingled in their expression was a trace of compassion. “Yeah, well, sure,” he conceded. “Guess ya just want ta put it all outta your mind.”


“That’s all right, Dr. Mike,” Loren said kindly. “We’re still real glad yer back safe with us.”

“Thank you, Loren,” Michaela said graciously. Loren’s seamed face dissolved into a smile. “You take care, Dr. Mike,” he added.

“I will,” she replied. Loren moved away. Michaela propped her elbow on the table with her chin resting on her hand, the crotchety store owner already forgotten. She stared off into space, her thoughts filled with Sully and Cloud Dancing.

MY JOURNAL
Saturday, 30 April, 1870

I found him where I’d last seen him—an encounter that seemed a lifetime ago—sitting cross-legged by his small cooking fire as a glorious sunset banded the sky with vibrant shades of red, violet and gold.

As I entered the clearing his back was to me, but he sensed my presence, turning and then rising to his feet, his dark eyes glowing with warmth.

“Welcome my brother,” Cloud Dancing said, moving forward to meet me as I approached. I savored his use of the term as we embraced, wondering if he would still look upon me as a brother by the time our meeting was concluded. “It is good to see you again,” he went on. “Many suns have risen over my camp since we saw each other last.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” I managed, equal measures of joy and trepidation filling me inside. “I’ve missed you.”

“You have had much trouble,” he observed, looking into my eyes. “But you are all right. I prayed to the spirits to protect you on your journey, and to bring you and Michaela back safely.”

“Thank you,” I answered, moved by his kindness, yet feeling so undeserving. “I’m grateful for your concern, and your help.”

“There is no need for thanks,” he replied. “I could do nothing less for someone who is a part of me. Here,” he went on, leading the way back to the campfire. “Let us sit. I am anxious to hear what has happened to you since the night we parted.”

My heart began to beat an uneven rhythm as I contemplated what I had to say, but I followed him to the blanket spread on the ground, and we sat down together.

“Michaela—is she well?” Cloud Dancing asked as we made ourselves comfortable.
“She is now,” I answered.

“She was hurt?” he said quickly.

“She . . . went through a lot,” I replied vaguely. “I’ll explain by and by . . . What about you?” I changed the subject abruptly, inwardly cursing myself for my cowardice but unable to resist the temptation to postpone the inevitable, if only for a few more minutes. “Have you been all right?”

“Soldiers continue to pursue me, but it requires little effort for me to elude them,” he answered. “But I have not seen the long hair in many weeks.”

I could feel an ugly flush stain my face at his statement, and prayed he wouldn’t notice. “You sure the soldiers have been after you?” I asked carefully, wondering if Custer had already broken his promise, or whether his men had been operating on orders he’d given them before he’d followed us to Nevada. “Maybe they were chasing the dog soldiers.”

“I heard them talking about me,” Cloud Dancing confirmed.

I nodded. “I see. Well, I’m glad you were able to keep out of sight,” I added lamely.

“You are disturbed. What is it, Sully?” His eyes were upon me, direct and piercing.

I decided to address the lesser of my transgressions first. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come to you before I left,” I apologized. “You had a right to know what Bloody Knife had done, especially after you warned me—”

“There was no time,” he interrupted. “I understand. Michaela’s friend explained it to me. It was good of you to send her.”

“I didn’t want to go without any explanation . . . leave you wondering or worrying,” I replied. “And I felt bad that I chose to set off without you, but I didn’t want to put you in more danger.”

“The danger would not have mattered,” he said. “But the circumstances did not permit another choice. Do not trouble yourself about it further.” A slender length of wood roughly a foot long, its bark intact, lay on the blanket beside him, along with a knife. He picked them up and rapidly began to strip off the bark with the blade, fine shavings fluttering down as his fingers flew. I watched his hands work the wood, wondering how to proceed.

“And what of Bloody Knife?” he asked suddenly. “Is he dead?”

My heart lurched in my chest. There would be no putting it off, then. My painful moment of truth had arrived.

I swallowed. “No,” I said. “He ain’t.”

His hands paused in their task and his eyes met mine. “Then he is still a threat?”

My mouth was dry. “No . . . not any more.”

Cloud Dancing continued to watch me, his expression a neutral mask. “Then how did you defeat him?” he said after a long pause.

My fingers knotted themselves together. Tension tightened the muscles in my neck and jaw. “I didn’t defeat him, Cloud Dancing,” I answered finally. Another silence fell between us as I tried to summon my courage. “I better start at the beginning,” I added slowly, and began to speak . . .

* * * * * * * * * *

I talked for a long time. The only way I could get through it was to begin with the fire and forge steadily forward to the end of that day when I found Michaela, and had my final and shameful confrontation with Bloody Knife and Custer. Throughout the whole thing Cloud Dancing listened gravely, quietly, his carving forgotten. He never interrupted, never asked a question, never made a response of any
kind. I almost wished he had . . . I think it would have been easier for me if he’d erupted in anger, or cursed me—even accused me of betraying him . . . anything that would have let me know what was in his mind. His silence was so much harder for me to bear, as I imagined all kinds of terrible things that he must be thinking.

Full night had fallen in the time it took for me to make my confession, and the darkness seemed to intensify my feeling of isolation even more. Flickering firelight shadowed Cloud Dancing’s face, throwing the sculptured planes of his cheekbones into harsh relief. His eyes were dark holes, their depths seeming to reach to infinity. It was impossible for me to read their expression. I’d believed that nothing could be more degrading than the way I’d felt after I cast away my honor and surrendered to Custer . . . But no, this was infinitely worse, as I witnessed the veil that had descended over the familiar features of the man I’d always called my friend—and my brother.

After what seemed an eternity I finished, and still he didn’t speak. His silence was a palpable thing, deep and ominous. I felt like I was suffocating in a mire of guilt and misery.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” I said at last. “I betrayed you, and the memories of Snowbird, Black Kettle, and all your Cheyenne brothers and ancestors. I chose my love for Michaela—for my own life—over the martyrdom of your people. There ain’t no way for me to fix it—to make it right—except to tell the truth about what happened. But if I go back on my word—if I break my promise . . . it would hurt Michaela. It might even destroy her. In spite of everything, she still loves me—she needs me. But . . . more than that—I need her. Spirits help me, I’m weak, Cloud Dancing. I can’t give her up—not even if it means dishonoring you.” I looked down at the ground, unable to face him anymore. “I ain’t the man you believed me to be,” I said dully, barely above a whisper. “I ain’t the brother you trusted. Not any more.”

“The Cheyenne believe the tribe comes first, then the family, then man,” his voice suddenly uttered into the silence, intoning the belief I knew as well as my own name.

“And I violated that,” I choked. “I put the man—I put myself—first.”

“Shall I tell you what I would have done, had I suspected the fate that awaited Snowbird when I let her go to Fort Cobb without me?” he asked softly.

I managed to raise my eyes to him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I have always tried to live as the spirits wished—to honor them and follow their guidance,” he elaborated. “But I am not one of them. Nor am I like my ancestors, infinitely wise. I am only a man—flawed, imperfect. I have known anger, and bitterness. I have made mistakes. The greatest of these was when I chose to stay behind with the dog soldiers. But if I had believed there was even the smallest chance I might be sending Snowbird to her death . . .” His voice shook slightly. “I would never have let her go. I would have done whatever I could to keep her with me—to keep from losing her, though it would have been selfish.”

“But you would have been sparing the lives of Black Kettle and the others, as well as Snowbird,” I argued. “That wouldn’t have been selfish, Cloud Dancing. You would have been saving all of them.”

“You do not understand,” he said quietly. “What I am saying . . . is if I had been forced to choose between Snowbird and the rest of my people . . . I would still have chosen Snowbird.”

I stared at him, momentarily speechless at the implications of his statement. After several long seconds crawled past I managed to find my voice again. “But you didn’t need to make that choice.”

“It does not matter,” he replied, then continued gravely. “Even after my people perished at the Washita, still I chose to ride with the Arapahoe dog soldiers. My grief left room for nothing but revenge in my heart. But as time passed and I was lost in that dark place, I was finally forced to face the truth. I came to know that though I loved and honored my people—I loved myself more. I loved and needed Snowbird, and I would have done anything to prevent her fate.” He fixed his somber gaze upon me. “Anything,” he repeated softly. I gazed back at him, my throat tightening as I imagined his agony.

“When I taught Michaela about the medicine, we talked honestly of many things,” he said. “I told her of my guilt and pain over Snowbird. But I could not tell her this. I could not confess my weakness, for I was too ashamed. It is a bitter secret that I have kept hidden in my heart.”

“The spirits spared me from having to make such a choice,” he stated. “But you were forced to
choose. To confront the darkness in your soul. You speak of betraying me—of dishonoring yourself before me and all the Cheyenne who have gone before. But how can I stand in judgment of you, Sully, when I am no different? How can I condemn you for taking the same path I would have taken, had I been in your place?"

“You’re saying—you forgive me?” I whispered.

“I have no right to forgive, or condemn,” he answered. “But I understand.

“You are the custodian of your own soul, Sully, as I am the custodian of mine,” Cloud Dancing went on. “You must search your own heart, and find a way to forgive yourself. I must do the same. I have not reached that point yet—perhaps I never shall. But I have begun to find a measure of peace. Teaching Michaela about the medicine helped me to take the first steps on that path. And I have found comfort in the hope that Snowbird would have understood.”

“Michaela understood,” I said softly.

“Then you will be all right,” Cloud Dancing pronounced. “Somehow we will both be all right, one day.

“I said that I do not have the right to judge you, or to forgive,” he repeated. “But if it helps to take away some of your pain, then know this: I do not blame you.” His eyes were kind now, and gentle. “You are still my brother, Sully—you always will be.” He reached out his hand and gripped mine. My fingers clung tightly to his, as together we reforged our bond.

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Much later I said, “There’s one thing I never understood—I still don’t. If Custer was telling the truth—if he really never meant for you to be killed, or me to be harmed—then that means that Bloody Knife did all this out of his own hate, his own need for revenge. But why did he hate us so much, when we’d never done nothing to him?”

“For me, that is easy,” Cloud Dancing replied. “The Arikara and the Cheyenne have always been enemies. He was only following a pattern set forth before he was born. But for you . . .” He paused, his eyes thoughtful. “Bloody Knife often called you ‘half-breed,’” he stated unexpectedly.

“Yeah,” I responded. “I’ve gotten used to it from the army, or other whites. But it always sounded so strange, coming from an Indian. I could never figure it.”

“I believe . . . that you reminded him of himself,” Cloud Dancing speculated. “Neither dog nor wolf . . . neither Arikara or Sioux . . . always outside, apart . . . separate from both. You followed the Cheyenne, but you were not Cheyenne. But you also were not completely white. You had a foot in both worlds, yet you were not fully part of either. Turning his anger outward toward you—trying to destroy you—was Bloody Knife’s way of hiding from the truth: that the one he truly hated was himself.

“In a way, he is to be pitied,” he concluded quietly.

“I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to find pity in my heart for him,” I said soberly.

“Nor I,” Cloud Dancing agreed. “But I do not think it will matter.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“I told you once that what you fear will always come to you,” he reminded me. “I also believe that the evil men do comes back to them. I do not think that Bloody Knife or Custer are long for this world. Justice will find them in the end, and they will pay the final price for their deeds.”

“If that’s true, I can’t say I’m sorry,” I admitted. “And there’s one more thing I should warn you about. Custer claimed he wouldn’t deliberately come after you, but there ain’t no guarantee that he’ll keep his word. The fact that the army soldiers are still looking for you could mean that he’s already gone back on what he said.”

“He must follow his destiny, as I must follow mine,” Cloud Dancing said.
“Maybe that’s so, but still—promise me you’ll be careful,” I entreated.

“I will,” he vowed. Suddenly he rose to his feet. As I followed his lead, he said, “It is time for you to return to Michaela.”

“Yeah, guess I need to be getting back,” I agreed. “But there’s one final thing I want to say. It took great courage for you to share the most private part of yourself with me, Cloud Dancing. You gave me a priceless gift of wisdom tonight. I thank you for that. I’ll never forget it.”

“We helped each other,” he said. “You set my feet further upon the path to healing. I thank you also. Go with honor, my brother,” he added softly.

“Live in peace,” I answered, as we embraced. Parting from him reluctantly, I turned and walked out of the clearing, feeling the weight of the burden I’d carried for so long slide from my shoulders at last.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Michaela drifted, soothed by the gentle motion of the train, as if she were a baby being rocked in a cradle. But gradually the recollection of where she was filtered through to her sleepy mind, and she came fully awake. She stretched languidly, her limbs heavy, her body feeling sated and content. She lay in a cocoon of warmth, enjoying the unfamiliar yet intoxicating sensation of soft sheets against her bare skin. Never in her life had she slept entirely unclothed, and she felt deliciously decadent—as if she were doing something forbidden. But it was not forbidden—not any more. For she was married now . . .

Married! The mere contemplation of her new status was enough to send a thrill of excitement through her. As she savored the thought, instinctively she rolled to her left, letting her eyes travel lovingly over the profile of her husband.

Sully still slept, his lips slightly parted, his chest rising and falling slowly. Michaela’s eyes gradually moved from the spill of his gold-brown hair on the pillow; to the sight of the crisper, slightly darker hairs which traced a pattern down his chest and stomach and drew her gaze inexorably to the suggestive shadow just below his navel, barely concealed by the sheet which covered his lower body. Unable to resist the temptation, she slid across and molded herself against him, her blood pounding hotly as her flesh pressed his. Beneath the sheet, her leg hooked over his thigh, and her arm slipped over his torso, caressing his soft warmth. She pillowed her cheek on his chest, her head tucked beneath his chin.

Suddenly she felt his arm curl around her, drawing her tightly against his body, and she knew he was awake. Michaela lifted her head, propping her arms on her left, letting her eyes travel lovingly over the profile of her husband.

“How are you?” she asked, gazing at her raptly. “You all right?”

She smiled radiantly. “More than all right.”

He studied her closely. “You sure?” he persisted. “I didn’t . . . That is, I was careful enough? I didn’t . . . hurt you?” His eyes were anxious.

“No, you didn’t hurt me,” she said softly. “It was . . . “ She searched for words adequate enough to describe the wealth of emotions she was feeling . . . the overwhelming sense of wholeness, completeness . . . and concluded reluctantly that no such words existed. “It was—better than I could ever have imagined,” she said finally.

“I’m glad,” he answered, relieved. “I know that the first time . . . well, that it can be
uncomfortable—even frightenin’ . . .”

“I confess I was nervous . . . before,” she admitted. “But never frightened. And you were so tender, so
gentle . . .”

“I promised that we’d take it ‘ever so easy,’” he reminded her, smiling.

“You kept your promise—and more,” she said ardently.

“So you think you could get used to this ‘marriage business?’” he asked impishly.

She pretended to consider the question. “I suppose,” she allowed primly after a moment. “With
some ‘practice.’” Her eyes were rife with meaning.

“Well, we’ll do plenty of that,” he assured her, grinning. “Just keep practicin’ and practicin’ till we get
it right. Should take—oh, I don’t know—maybe fifty, sixty years.”

“If we must, we must,” she sighed exaggeratedly, and then a giggle escaped her. He chuckled as well
and pulled her head down to his, claiming her lips in a deep, intoxicating kiss.

As they breathlessly drew apart a few moments later he said suggestively, “Ready for lesson number
two?”

“Why, Mr. Sully, you’re relentless,” she declared.

“ Comes from havin’ such a “willing” student,” he responded, his eyes devilish.

“What a pity they never taught this in medical school,” she teased, raising an eyebrow provocatively.

“Just as well—I wouldn’t have wanted you learnin’ from anybody but me,” he said.

“And I wouldn’t have been able to concentrate on anything but you,” she agreed.

“Well, not everythin’ worth knowin’ comes out of a book, anyway. Some things . . . you learn by
doin’,” he replied, grinning wickedly.

“And do you give much ‘homework?’” she asked innocently.

“Tons,” he said huskily, and drew her into his arms again.

* * * * * * * * * *

“Oh, Michaela,” he gasped softly, as his thundering pulse finally began to slow. They lay with limbs
entwined amidst the tangled sheets, perspiration dewing their skin.

She raised her head from the pillow, feeling a stab of anxiety. “Did I—do something wrong?” she asked
timidly, suddenly shy as she met his eyes.

He gaped at her. “Somethin’ wrong?” he echoed disbelievingly.

“Well, I mean . . . that is to say . . .” She fumbled for words, flustered. “Did I . . . disappointment you
somehow?”

He regarded her indulgently, both amazed and touched that she could have misconstrued his meaning.
“Oh, no,” he asserted softly. “You didn’t do nothin’ wrong. And you *surely* didn’t disappoint me.”

“Are you certain?” Michaela ventured again. “You needn’t protect my feelings, Sully. After all, I’m
so—so very inexperienced. I certainly couldn’t fault you if your—well, your expectations—were unsatisfied.
And I want to please you. In every way. If there’s something—” She swallowed, then forged ahead. “If
there’s something that you’d—like me to do. . . some way that I can—pleasure you—that I have yet to learn .
. . please—tell me, teach me,” she entreated.
“Oh, there will be lots of things to learn, over time,” he ruminated, stroking her cheek. “‘Bout pleasin’ each other, in all kinds of wonderful ways. But we’ll learn those things together, Michaela. That’s one of the joys of marriage,” he said tenderly. “Of bein’ one with each other, in heart, and in body.

“But as for what you were frettin’ about just now—well you had it all wrong,” he added gently. “Our bein’ together was beautiful. More beautiful than I’d ever pictured, in all the hundreds of times I musta dreamed about it.

“Remember when I told you at the homestead that when we finally came together, it would be perfect?” he recalled for her.

“Yes, I remember,” she said softly.

“Well, it was better than that,” he assured her, running his fingers through the curtain of copper hair framing her face and spilling over his chest.

“Better than perfection?” she asked, a spark of amusement mingling with the joy in her eyes.

“Better than perfection,” he repeated, with a smile. “We’re finally together—totally and completely,” he went on, voice reverent; marveling at her beauty, at the feel of her nude body resting next to his. “And that’s all that matters.”

“It’s all that matters to me,” she whispered.

“Glad we agree,” he said, his finger gently tracing the outline of her lips. He kissed the corner of her mouth. “So you don’t ever need to question again how much I love bein’ with you, or how wonderful you make me feel. All right?” he concluded softly, love shining from the depths of his eyes.

“All right,” she answered, her qualms disappearing at last. She lowered herself to snuggle against him. Her hand rested on his chest and he lifted it, pressing her fingers to his lips, then let it fall again, covering it with his own.

“Speakin’ of wonderful feelin’s—what did you think of our weddin’ day?” he asked presently. “Was it everythin’ you’d hoped for?”

“‘Better than perfection,’” Michaela quoted again. Sully couldn’t see her expression from the position in which they lay, but he could sense her smiling, and heard her sigh of contentment. “Mother came back, just as you predicted . . . I was able to have Rebecca as my matron of honor, along with Dorothy . . . Even Marjorie and I finally began to resolve our differences, and feel like sisters,” she said a trifle wonderingly. “I’m so glad I followed your advice to write to Mother, after you returned from Cloud Dancing,” she continued gratefully. “Thank you, Sully.”

“Well, I was able to make my peace with Cloud Dancin’, and I felt so much better after . . .” he said softly. “I just wanted you to have the same kinda chance with your ma. Though I gotta confess I was a little nervous about pushin’ you to work things out with her when she first got here, and I saw how things were goin’. I was beginnin’ to think I should never have meddled.”

“Things are never easy with Mother,” Michaela noted drily. “Such as the high-handed way she tried to organize everything about the wedding, regardless of whether her plans met with our wishes,” she added regretfully. “She—tested my patience a few times, it’s true,” he allowed. “But that’s just your ma. In some ways, she ain’t ever gonna change. Guess I’d better get used to that, now that I’m her son-in-law.

“And I wasn’t always that reasonable myself,” he admitted. “‘Sides, things worked out all right in the end, after we all learned to ‘bend’ a little,” he noted, smiling.

“You mean about things such as wedding rings and names?” she clarified, dimpling.

“Exactly.” He grinned wider.

“Well, at least there’s one thing I can say for Mother,” Michaela remarked. “Life with her is certainly
“Kinda reminds me of her daughter,” Sully teased.

“I assume that’s meant as a compliment?” she said archly.

His eyes were innocent. “Of course!”

“Then it’s accepted,” Michaela pronounced graciously. “But getting back to Mother,” she went on, “I suppose the most important thing is that we love each other—which makes all our struggles to get along worthwhile.

“And by the way, Sully, as far as meddling—feel free to ‘meddle’ any time,” she assured him. “If it weren’t for you urging me to write to her, she probably would never have come.”

“Well maybe I helped to push things along a little,” he conceded. “But I think she woulda come back regardless of anythin’ I did, Michaela. You’re too important to her, and she loves you too much, not to want to see you get married.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Michaela agreed. “But whatever the reason, I’m glad she was here.”

“I know,” he said softly. “I’m glad things turned out the way you wanted.”

“Everything was perfect,” Michaela declared again. In her mind she saw him again as he’d been earlier that day, waiting for her beneath the flowered canopy in the meadow, resplendent in Cloud Dancing’s wedding shirt. “In all of this beautiful day, there was only one fly in the ointment—"

“I know,” Sully repeated, his eyes turning dark and hard for the first time since his outburst to her at the clinic the evening of her family’s arrival, when he’d demanded to know when she was going to look at the world through “their” eyes. “Custer,” he added grimly.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I’m so sorry Mother invited him, Sully. Thank you for not holding it against her.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” he said more mildly. “We didn’t tell her nothin’ about him. Far as she knew, she was doin’ a good thing. And when Loren told her otherwise, she felt bad.

“Sides, only Custer woulda had the gaul to accept her invitation, after everythin’ that happened between us,” he went on.

“I can’t believe that after your agreement at Red Rock, he still made Horace post the notice about the $500 bounty on Cloud Dancing,” Michaela said hotly. “Not to mention capturing you and holding you in custody the night of the rehearsal dinner!”

“Yeah, well, none of that surprised me none,” Sully commiserated. “It’s like what Cloud Dancin’ said about the army, after I became Indian Agent. Custer’s promises mean nothin’. The only thing he *did* keep his word about, was not speakin’ of what happened at Red Rock, when he held me that night,” he continued. “Course he’d probably claim that everythin’ he did before the weddin’ was under orders from his ‘superiors,’” he added, his tone sarcastic.

“Including threatening to kill both you and Cloud Dancing?!” Michaela said vehemently, incensed at the nerve of the army officer. Sully’s arm tightened around her, his fingers stroking her soothingly.

“He’s got no honor, Michaela—we both know that,” he responded, more calmly that she would have imagined. “So there’s no point in gettin’ yourself worked up over it. The important thing is that he let me go and I was able to get back to you. And Robert E. and Jake knocked him out and stuck him in the clinic, where he couldn’t hurt Cloud Dancin’ or cause no more trouble.”

“I suppose,” Michaela conceded reluctantly, though she was still furious at Custer’s actions. After a few moments she relaxed, however, realizing that Sully was right—Custer had been neutralized in the end. “Talking of Cloud Dancing, I was so happy he was able to be there for you, Sully,” she said sincerely, recalling Sully’s joy at Cloud Dancing being his best man.
“Me, too,” Sully agreed. “Even if he could only stay for a little while.”

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” she inquired in concern.

“Well, I’m gonna do everythin’ in my power to make sure of it,” Sully vowed. “I’m hopin’ there’s somethin’ I can do as Indian Agent to arrange for his protection.”

She stared at him, as his words suddenly sparked her memory. “Hazen!” she exclaimed. “I’d completely forgotten! The deadline is long since past now, Sully. He must have dismissed you. I’m so sorry—”

But Sully merely smiled. “No need to be,” he said serenely. “I’m still Agent.”

“But how can that be?” Michaela asked him, mystified. “Hazen was so definite about the time limit he imposed—“

“That’s true,” Sully acknowledged. “But he changed his mind. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner—in all the excitement of your ma and sisters comin’ and all, it completely slipped my mind. But a few days before your family arrived, Hazen came to see me, along with the Reverend. Turns out the Reverend had been campaignin’ for me, so to speak. He claimed that nobody could keep things orderly on the reservation, or earn the Indians’ trust, like I could. Said Hazen would be makin’ a serious mistake if he tried to replace me. I think he kinda played on Hazen’s sympathy too, remindin’ him of everythin’ I’d been through—nearly dyin’, and then you bein’ kidnapped . . . Whatever he said, it musta done the trick. Hazen listened to him, and agreed to keep my job open till I could return.”

“Will wonders never cease,” Michaela declared. “We owe the Reverend a debt of gratitude,” she added.

“Yeah, he’s a good man, and a good friend,” Sully concurred.

“So everything’s truly settled now,” Michaela said, marveling that they’d finally reached that point. “No more obstacles to overcome, no more problems left to solve . . . no loose ends,” she concluded.

“Well, *almost* everythin’,” Sully said guardedly.

“What do you mean?” she asked, feeling a trace of disquiet.

He glanced toward the windows, where alluring flashes of a spectacular sunset were visible around the edges of the shades they’d drawn earlier to make the train car “darker and darker.” The rumble of the train wheels was loud in her ears as she waited for him to reply.

“Sully?” she persisted after several moments had passed. “Is something wrong—something you haven’t told me?”

He looked back at her, his expression reassuring, but his eyes preoccupied. “No, nothin’s wrong,” he pacified her. “I was just thinkin’ . . .”

“What?” she said.

He took a breath. “What would you think if we put off Denver for a couple of days?” he asked finally. He watched her anxiously, expecting disappointment—possibly even anger—in her expression, but finding neither. Her eyes held only curiosity.

“To do what instead?” she questioned simply. Sully immediately relaxed, realizing he should have given her more credit.

“Well,” he began slowly. “With everythin’ that’s happened these last months—Washita . . . me gettin’ amnesia over losin’ the Cheyenne and my fears of losin’ you . . . then all that with Bloody Knife and Custer . . .”

“Yes?” she encouraged gently.

“Well, it’s just that we came so close to losin’ everythin’ that mattered—each other, our love . . . But by some miracle—maybe a whole bunch of ‘em—we’re still here. We’re together, and we’re gonna be
happy—for the rest of our lives.”

“And no one could be more grateful for that than I,” Michaela said fervently. Sully smiled at her tenderly.

“I’m grateful too—more than I could ever put into words,” he said humbly. After a pause he resumed, “I just feel like . . . like I should give thanks to the Spirits for watchin’ over us . . . for bringin’ us back to one another even when so many things threatened to tear us apart forever.”

“I understand,” she said, her voice soft.

“But it’s even more than that, Michaela,” he went on, warming to his theme. “The way things went after Washita . . . well, I never got the chance to—I don’t know how to say it, exactly—to ‘pay tribute,’ I guess, to the memories of all the Cheyenne. Snowbird, Black Kettle . . . I’d like to remember them in some way—to go to a place where I could give them the—the memorial they deserve.”

Her expression was compassionate, but a trifle uncertain.

“You mean—go back to Oklahoma? To where they fell?” she asked after a moment.

His hand tightened around hers. “No,” he said quietly. “No, I think it’s too soon for that. Someday, maybe, but not now. But—I think there *is* a place—a beautiful place—where we could honor them together. If you’re willin’ . . .?” he added.

“Just tell me what you want to do,” she said.

He gazed at her, gratitude and admiration infusing him at her understanding. “Did I ever tell you how much I love you?” he asked suddenly.

“Once or twice,” she allowed, smiling. “But it bears repeating.”

He grinned back at her, then lifted her hand to his lips once again. “Well, I love you,” he said softly.

“And I, you, Sully,” she breathed. “With all my heart.”

“I know,” he answered quietly. “It kept me goin’ through every sad and frightenin’ thing we endured in the past—and it’ll keep me goin’ for every day of our lives together.” They embraced, their adoration for one another flowing back and forth between them. Eventually they parted, and she regarded him serenely.

“So,” she reminded him. “What’s your idea?”

“Well, we’ll be pullin’ into Monument soon,” he observed. “I thought we could wire the hotel in Denver, tell ‘em to hold our reservations for a couple of days. I still want to take you there, Michaela,” he added quickly. “I don’t mean to spoil all our honeymoon plans.”

“You’re not spoiling a thing,” she said promptly. “We have two weeks. And Denver will still be there in a few days. Go on,” she urged.

“Well, I thought we could rent a couple of horses, buy some supplies, then take a ride to this special place and . . . remember the Cheyenne,” he finished, his voice soft.

“It sounds perfect,” she told him. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” she added after a pause.

He smiled at her, his eyes glowing. “You’ll see,” he said.

**MY JOURNAL**

Sunday, 21 May, 1870

I suppose it’s not necessary for me to continue this any longer. Once my memories returned, my reason for doing it no longer existed; and my recovery from the amnesia has been complete for some time now, so its original purpose has long since been served.
But an odd thing happened after I’d been keeping this journal for a while: it stopped being “therapy,” and started becoming something else. At first, I relied on it as a practical and harmless way for me to express my feelings—or vent them, as circumstances dictated. And I surely went through more than my share of anger, frustration and depression over these last months; so having this journal as a way for me to blow off steam occasionally actually seemed vital, sometimes, for my sanity.

But the journal also took on another and more lasting purpose as time went on. It started becoming a record of my life. And the more I went through—the more complex my life became—the more important it seemed to write it down; to document it all, for— Well, I don’t know, exactly. Posterity? That sounds pompous, doesn’t it, as if I’m consumed with my own self-importance. As if I really believe that my foolish scribblings would actually matter to anybody else. But I don’t mean it to be—pompous, I mean. And I surely don’t believe that anyone but me could possibly care what’s in these pages. After all, from the beginning this has never been intended to be anything but private. Something for my eyes alone.

I guess a better way of explaining what I mean, is to say that the more complicated things became . . . like after I learned that Bloody Knife might be a threat to Michaela and the children, and then he took her away from me . . . or when I had no way of knowing if I would live through that last confrontation with him . . . Well, I felt the need to describe it all—to leave some sort of record behind, in case I didn’t survive.

Which means that the truth is—deep down inside of me—I suppose I intended for Michaela to read this all along. To know what I’d thought and how I’d felt—about her, about our love and our life together . . . . I don’t mean to be maudlin—really, I don’t. And certainly when I wrote her that letter of good-bye, I hoped and prayed she’d never have to see it. But if I was to meet my final destiny—if I was meant to die at Bloody Knife’s hands—then I had to make sure that she would know after I was gone that she’d been the best and most important thing in my life—that she’d made my life worth living, no matter how brief it turned out to be.

Of course none of that matters now. Because we managed to survive all the pain, all the danger. We went through hell and came out the other side. We’re together now and we’re going to stay together. I pledge it with my life.

So maybe it’s time to bring this to an end. To close the book on this difficult, yet incredible chapter of our lives. But not quite yet. There are still a few things left to say . . .

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Roughly twenty-four hours after we got off the train, we were watching another sunset together—possibly the most splendid one of all. Just a short time ago I had completed my ritual of thanksgiving to the Spirits, and my tribute to the memory of my Cheyenne family; and now we stood at the cliff’s edge, marveling at the beauty of Mother Earth’s creations as the wind softly stirred our hair.

It was only the second time in my life that I’d brought someone here to share the glory of this special, private place with me—and Michaela had been my companion on the previous occasion, just as she was now. Our first visit here had been a kind of beginning—a way to mark the start of our courtship. At the time, we’d both been uncertain how to proceed with this new stage of our relationship, and I’d told Michaela that there were no maps. But I’d suggested that if she was willing to set off without one, then I thought I knew where to start . . . And then, I’d brought her here.

Now, we seemed to have come full circle: taking our first awkward steps on the journey of courtship, traveling a road fraught with both joys and sadness, and finally reaching the end of our pilgrimage with the beautiful conclusion of marriage. And yet this was a beginning too . . . of the next phase—the next adventure—in our lives together.

I found myself thinking that we should make this a tradition . . . that we should come here to mark every important event in our lives: our anniversaries . . . the special moments in the lives of our adopted children . . . the births of the children we would make together . . .

I made a mental note to discuss my idea with Michaela later. But for right now, all I wanted was to revel in the joy of being in this wondrous place with the woman I loved with all my heart.

“I should have guessed that this was where you wanted to come,” Michaela’s quiet voice broke in on my
thoughts. “The one place in all the world that was a fitting enough setting to honor the Cheyenne.”

“And the one place I’ve never wanted to share with anybody but you,” I said.

She looked up at me, her eyes luminous, then stared out at the vista before us.

“Do you recall an evening two months ago when you were still recovering in the clinic?” she said unexpectedly. “We stood at the railing of the balcony, looking out over the mountains, and you described this spot to me, unaware that I already knew of it—that we’d been here together.” Her words summoned an image of the scene to my mind, and instinctively my fingers sought hers. After a pause she continued, “I remember praying so hard at the time that your memory of our visit here would return to you . . . Or that at least we might become close enough again one day for you to want to bring me back.” The wistful, faraway note in her voice stabbed me with regret.

“I’m sorry, Michaela,” I said softly. “That must have hurt you so much . . .”

She squeezed my hand. “It wasn’t your fault,” she assured me. “You couldn’t have known.”

“But it must have been so difficult for you, not knowing if I’d ever get my memories back . . . wondering if I’d ever remember what we’d had between us . . .”

“Certainly not as difficult as it was for you, struggling with the loss of three years of your life,” she responded solicitously.

"It was frightening, sure—but at least I didn’t know what I was missing. But for you . . . It must have been so lonely, having all those memories—all those feelings—inside, but not being able to express them,” I said gently.

“You were lonely too, Sully—your amnesia cutting you off from your past and from those who knew and loved you,” she replied. “I always understood that.

“And the important thing is that my prayers were answered—for both of us,” she added. “That’s part of why we’re here now—to give thanks.”

“And I do, with every fiber of my being,” I told her, lifting her hand to my lips.

“As do I—and that’s all that matters,” she said. Our arms slipped around one another.

A stretch of time passed as we held each other close, but presently she spoke again. “How do you feel, now that you’ve done what you came here to do?” Her eyes were compassionate.

“Content,” I said quietly, after a moment. “As if I’ve finally put paid to all the loss, all the heartbreak. I believe the Cheyenne can finally rest in peace now, and it gives me comfort.”

“I’m so glad, Sully,” she replied softly, resting her head against my shoulder. “I’ve wanted that for you for so long.”

“I’m grateful, too,” I added as I looked down at her, my heart full of emotion. “For you. Thank you so much for understanding my need to do this, to be here. I’m so lucky to have you, Michaela.”

“You needn’t thank me,” she said. “As soon as you told me why you wanted to come here, I wanted to come as well. I have my own reasons for wanting to make amends. And to give thanks for the gift of our love.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you never had to make amends,” I told her. “But I know that the spirits of Black Kettle and Snowbird can see what’s in your heart.”

“I hope so,” she whispered.

“I know so,” I answered. “They loved you, Michaela. And they respected you. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I loved and respected them,” she said tremulously. “And I still miss them—so much.” Her voice
trembled slightly, and I saw the track of a tear wend its way down her cheek. Tenderly I brushed it away with my thumb.

“I miss them too,” I agreed, a catch in my voice as well. “But they’re watching over us, Michaela, I know it—I can feel it. Just like they’re watching over Cloud Dancing. I know they’ll do everything they can to protect us, and to guide us. Maybe we can’t see them, but they’ll always be near—alive in our hearts, and our memories. That’s something no one can ever take away.”

“You’re right,” she replied, a smile shining through her tears. “We’ll always hold them close to us.”

We continued to stare out over the valley as dusk moved in to claim the mountains. The contours of the peaks gradually disappeared, becoming one with the velvet of the night. Just then I glimpsed a bright spark, its glittering tail hurtling across the vastness of the sky.

“Look!” I said to Michaela, my voice instinctively hushed as I pointed at the sight. “Shooting star.”

She followed the direction of my outstretched finger, a sign of wonder escaping her. “How beautiful,” she breathed. We continued to gaze at the celestial gift until it finally vanished, swallowed up by the darkness. We were silent for a bit, absorbing the magic of the moment, reluctant to break the spell. But after a while she spoke into the stillness.

“Do you think it means anything, Sully?”

“Yeah,” I replied, my tone reverent. “I think it’s a blessing. On us, on our future . . . on the joy we’ve found with each other, that we’ll pass on to our children. We’re going to have a wonderful life, Michaela, rich and happy and full of possibilities. We’ve traveled a long road, with lots of obstacles in our path, lots of hardship to overcome. We’ve struggled, sometimes even fallen . . . and sometimes it’s felt like we’d never reach the end. But we made it, Michaela—we’ve climbed the mountain and reached the top—and now we can turn our faces to the sun and feel the grace of God and the Spirits shining upon us.”

“I never knew you had such a poet ic soul,” she said, her tone reverent.

“Just one of the things we’ll learn about each other, I guess,” I answered, smiling gently. “But if I have any poetry in my soul, it’s because you put it there, Michaela. You bring out the best in me—you always have, and you always will. Because I have your love.”

“And you bring out the best in me,” she echoed. “Because your love gives me strength, and hope, and courage. And most of all, joy.”

“Guess we were made for each other then,” I said, gazing into the glow of light in her eyes that even the darkness of night couldn’t extinguish.

“There was never any doubt,” she whispered.

We moved into each other’s arms, our souls united, our lips meeting to seal the promise of our life together. Happiness and sorrow, past and present mingled in our minds and hearts. All time became one for us, as we joyously faced our future.

THE END

October 1998

December 1999

AFTERWARD

Not long after I first started posting TIME OUT OF MIND, and readers saw the rather unusual way I’d chosen to structure it, I began to receive e-mails every so often in which people wanted to know how I’d managed to come up with such a complex format. They asked if I’d outlined the structure of the story ahead of time; or if I’d written all the journal entries separately, and then wrote the narrative; as well as other similar questions. In some cases people just assumed that I was writing the book with an elaborate
plan in mind, and they very generously complimented my inventiveness. At first I was stunned, and then
tremendously flattered, that some readers believed there was such a complicated process at work; and quite
frankly, nothing would have pleased me more than to confirm their assumptions, and pass myself off as
some sort of literary “genius.” But the unremarkable reality, I’m constrained to admit, is that nothing
could have been further from the truth.

In actual fact, I had no plan—beyond a very hazy idea of writing a story about Sully suffering from
amnesia and having to “fall in love” with Michaela all over again. That’s all there was to it, in the
beginning. The device of Sully telling part of the story in the form of a journal literally came to me when I
sat down at the keyboard that first day. I can’t even recall exactly how the idea came into my mind—or
even if it truly formed in my mind at all. I just started typing, and that’s what came out. I certainly had
no way of knowing ahead of time if the juxtaposition of journal and narrative would work out logically, or
make sense—since I wrote them in a linear fashion and not separately. And there were many times, in fact,
when I came close to confusing myself by presenting both Sully’s and Michaela’s versions of the same
scenes—and many more times when I found myself seriously worrying that I’d bitten off more than I could
chew.

Going back to how I started, however: After I’d written the first couple of pages or so, the structure of
the story did begin to take shape in my mind somewhat. It occurred to me that it might be interesting to
“drop” the reader into the middle of the action, and then use the flashback of conventional narrative to
explain what had brought Sully to the point at which the story opened. Hardly a new idea, but it was one
which I’d never seen utilized in the other fan fiction I’d personally read. Of course the plot device of
amnesia was also hardly original, but I hoped that I might be able to make it interesting. I also realized
very quickly that narrative story-telling, in addition to the journal entries, would be necessary to expand the
story beyond the limits of Sully’s experience and observations, as well as to serve the very important
function of providing Michaela’s perspective on the events.

So, armed with these prerequisites, I proceeded. Once I established the timeframe of Sully’s amnesia
(clearly it had to precede Michaela’s arrival in Colorado Springs, and then cover the balance of their
relationship together; thus I settled on three years, which encompassed the massacre at the Washita), it
struck me that this would be a golden opportunity to explore one of the plot points many of us felt had been
neglected in the series: that of Sully’s reaction to the death of the Cheyenne. And once I decided to
incorporate the element of Sully’s emotional turmoil, I realized I had my “hook.” A physical injury at the
hands of an assailant might instigate Sully’s amnesia, but that would be only the tip of the iceberg. The
real root of his memory block would prove to be his grief over Washita, in addition to unresolved feelings of
grief and guilt he had about Abigail—typified by his irrational and previously subconscious fear that if he
married Michaela, he would lose her as well.

This last idea actually sprang from personal experience: before the births of our two children, my
husband and I had lost a child, and for a long time afterwards I was plagued with an irrational fear that
something might also happen to my husband. Even more frightening to me was the prospect of having
another baby, for fear that history would repeat itself. I’m profoundly glad and grateful to say that neither
of these scenarios came to pass—and that once we were blessed with a very healthy son and daughter, I was
able to put much of my pain and dread to rest. However I reasoned that if something like this had
happened to me, it could just as easily happen to Sully. And his experience in “One Touch of Nature”—
certainly bore out my hypothesis. (And while I’m on the subject I should briefly note here, that though I
may have felt the writers dropped the ball in “Sully’s Recovery;” I believe—based on my personal
experience—that they gave us an extremely sensitive and realistic treatment of the issue of parental grief in
OTO, fully realized in Joe’s poignant portrayal. Thus this episode has always touched me deeply.)

But returning to the theme of my story: I also wanted to give Cloud Dancing a prominent and heroic
role in this drama, so I decided that he should be involved when Sully sustained the injury that precipitated
his amnesia. And with Washita being a key motivation in the plot, I needed to tie Custer into it as well,
though I determined that he would be more peripheral—at least at the beginning. Which left me with the
problem of who would fulfill the role of Sully’s assailant. At about the time I was wrestling with this
question, I happened to see an episode about Custer on the History Channel’s “The Real West,” and that’s
when I first heard the name of “Bloody Knife.”

For the benefit of those readers who—like me—were unfamiliar with this figure before TOOM, Bloody
Knife was most definitely real, and was indeed characterized by Custer as his “favorite scout.” From the
moment I learned of him I was intrigued, since he seemed to have such a compelling, “love-hate”
relationship with the army officer. In many ways, Bloody Knife was exactly as I presented him in the story:
Arikara on his mother’s side and Hunkpapa Sioux on his father’s. He had lived with the Sioux in childhood

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but was taken away by his mother as a teenager when she returned to her own people. This physical separation from the Sioux, as well as the mutual animosity between the Sioux and the Arikara, had the effect of alienating him from both tribes in adulthood. He was known as a strong warrior; and this reputation made him very desirable as a scout to the army. On Bloody Knife’s part, he was drawn to the army by his realization that he could utilize his talents as a tracker and fighter; have the freedom to travel the plains untouched; and perhaps find the acceptance that had eluded him among his own people. I admit that I’ve painted him as much “darker” than he probably was in real life, since I needed a “villain” who was, for all intents and purposes, unredeemable. But he was described in historical accounts as being extremely mercurial, as well as a heavy drinker—a potentially lethal combination.

Bloody Knife’s relationship with Custer also provided rich fodder for fiction. From the beginnings of their association, he was almost slavishly devoted to the general, looking upon Custer as a great warrior with fighting skills equal to his own, but also regarding him as a kind of mentor—perhaps even a father figure. Custer’s feelings about Bloody Knife were a different story, however. He certainly admired Bloody’s Knife’s prowess as a warrior, and he was “fond” of the scout, enjoying his company. But it was more the way one would be fond of a favorite pet. And just as a violent man might kick a dog that angered him, Custer was not above turning on Bloody Knife at the least provocation; graphically illustrated by an incident in which Bloody Knife committed an error in following one of Custer’s orders, and without blinking an eye, Custer pulled his gun and shot him. Fortunately the wound wasn’t serious, and Custer had the grace to express regret after the fact. Still, Bloody Knife would have had every right to be angry at Custer, or at least resent him. Yet amazingly he forgave the general, and a mere hour later they were behaving as if the incident had never happened.

I must also confess to “playing with time” a bit in terms of the period when Bloody Knife and Custer were associated with one another, since they actually didn’t come together till approximately 1873. However I thought I could be forgiven this touch of poetic license for dramatic purposes, since I had the precedent of the series “altering the time period during which both the Sand Creek and Washita massacres occurred (if DQ had remained absolutely faithful to history, Michaela would have known Black Kettle for only a year, at best, before his death at Washita).

As to why Bloody Knife didn’t meet his end at Sully’s hands—well, the chief reason is obvious: since he was a genuine historical figure, I dared not alter the true circumstances of his death. I had to let him “escape,” so to speak, so that he would still be alive in 1876, when he perished with Custer at the Little Big Horn. His actual death was quite gruesome and the stuff of legend: a Sioux bullet took him in the head, splattering bits of his skull and brains all over the face of one of Custer’s fellow officers, General Reno.

Even if actual history hadn’t been a consideration however, I still wouldn’t have chosen to have Sully murder him, feeling that such a scenario would have done a serious disservice to Sully’s character. Though Sully came close to exacting revenge on his enemies on at least three different occasions, he was never guilty of deliberately taking a life. He resisted his impulse to kill Rankin in “Running Ghost;” and though both One-Eye and O’Conner met their deaths in confrontations with Sully, they both died as a result of falls from a cliff. The one occasion when Sully did purposely commit murder, he was tricked into doing so by unscrupulous men, and as an army lieutenant, his actions could also be justified by virtue of him being a member of the army during a state of war. Of course we all know from “A Washington Affair” the extremity of guilt and remorse Sully suffered as a result of his actions—so much so that he was driven to desert from the army and return to Colorado.

Some readers also may wonder why I chose to let the “bad guys” win, in a sense, rather than finding some way to make both Bloody Knife and Custer pay for their persecution of Sully, Michaela and Cloud Dancing. Once again, to some extent, historical considerations played a role in my decision; however my chief reasons were more complex. The first of these reasons had to do with my motivation to be as faithful to the series as possible. I loved the episode “For Better, For Worse” just as it was, and had no desire to tamper with it any way. This meant that I had to fashion the events in my story to blend in as seamlessly with this episode as possible. Hence my having Custer offer to cover up any evidence of the events at Red Rock, but only with the proviso that Sully and the others “never speak of these events again.” This same reason was behind Custer’s equivocation about continuing to pursue Cloud Dancing; as well as Sully’s remark to Michaela on the train that Custer had only lived up to their agreement insofar as not speaking of what happened at Red Rock, when he held Sully in custody the night of the rehearsal dinner. My blending of fiction (mine) and DQ fact (in FBFW) wasn’t quite “perfect”—but it was as close as I could manage, while still presenting a realistic scenario.

My second reason had to do with presenting a more emotionally complex story. Bloody Knife and Custer getting their “just desserts,” so to speak, would have been dramatically satisfying, no doubt—but I
Believe me when I say that I have always loved and revered Cloud Dancing—he's always been one of my favorite characters. But I think part of why I loved and admired him so much was because he wasn't forced to make such a choice. I realize that here I was assigning entirely my own interpretation to his inner feelings and motivations. However, I felt that even though he had always been presented to us as a deeply spiritual and honorable character, he was also a man—as beset by human frailty as anyone else. We had certainly witnessed examples of his anger (and even his willingness to cover up the crimes of the dog soldiers) on many occasions; such as in “The Incident,” “The Offering,” “The Abduction,” “Indian Agent,” and most certainly, “Washita.” Therefore I felt a precedent had been set; and I didn’t think it would be so very amiss to have him confess that his love for his wife would have superceded even his love for his people. Believe me when I say that I have always loved and revered Cloud Dancing—he’s always been one of my favorite characters. But I think part of why I loved and admired him so much was because he wasn’t perfect, but also very human as well. I believe that it was his constant striving for spiritual perfection that made him compelling and sympathetic—not that he had achieved such perfection, thereby making him in a sense, “untouchable.”

Speaking of Cloud Dancing, I hope I wasn’t guilty of “tarnishing” his image in anyone’s eyes, with his admission to Sully that he would have saved Snowbird even before the rest of his people, had he been forced to make such a choice. I realize that here I was assigning entirely my own interpretation to his inner feelings and motivations. However, I felt that even though he had always been presented to us as a deeply spiritual and honorable character, he was also a man—as beset by human frailty as anyone else. We had certainly witnessed examples of his anger (and even his willingness to cover up the crimes of the dog soldiers) on many occasions; such as in “The Incident,” “The Offering,” “The Abduction,” “Indian Agent,” and most certainly, “Washita.” Therefore I felt a precedent had been set; and I didn’t think it would be so very amiss to have him confess that his love for his wife would have superceded even his love for his people. Believe me when I say that I have always loved and revered Cloud Dancing—he’s always been one of my favorite characters. But I think part of why I loved and admired him so much was because he wasn’t perfect, but also very human as well. I believe that it was his constant striving for spiritual perfection that made him compelling and sympathetic—not that he had achieved such perfection, thereby making him in a sense, “untouchable.”

Turning to my rationale behind the actions, motivations and introduction of other characters, I’ll start with Elizabeth Quinn. My decision to have her leave Colorado Springs before Michaela’s return might have surprised some of you, and may in fact have struck you as being out of character for her. I apologize for this impression, if it exists; but my removal of her from the action essentially arose out of necessity, as well as my afore-mentioned desire to integrate the events in my story with those of “FBFW.” Simply put, I had to send her home, so that she could return later on the train with Rebecca and Marjorie for Michaela’s wedding. Somewhat unfortunately, at the outset of the story, I had set myself a rather limited time-frame for the plot to play out; but once the time sequence was established, I was locked into it, and had to work within it as best I could. This meant pushing the boundaries, in some respects, such as in the length of time in took for Sully and the others to go in search of Michaela, as well as—in Elizabeth’s case—the amount of time it took for her to return to Boston and then get back to Colorado Springs in time for the wedding. While the time involved for these events to take place may not have always seemed realistic, I hope I can be forgiven for occasionally falling back on the amazing “elasticity” of “Quinn-time.”

My creation and introduction of the character of Brendan Burke had a two-pronged goal: First, I admit to surrendering to the temptation to throw a bit of a “wrench” into Sully’s and Michaela’s relationship for dramatic and entertainment purposes. And I felt that making him William’s brother would even further complicate this “triangle.” But I never meant for his rivalry with Sully to be anything but temporary; and it was always my intention that he would ultimately play a vital role in the pursuit and rescue of Michaela—thus “redeeming” him in Sully’s eyes.

As far as my portrayal of other familiar characters, most notably Hank—I can only hope that my “version” of him was as realistic and faithful as possible. I’ve always loved him, and strongly admired and appreciated the unique and irreplaceable zest he brings to the life of Colorado Springs. Further, I wanted to give him a special presence in the story, and allow him to demonstrate the latent qualities of heroism I’ve always believed him to possess.

Of course, more than anything else, I hope that my portrayal of Sully and Michaela was both honest and true to their heart and spirit. I wrote them as I’ve always perceived them (though I confess to injecting qualities of my own husband—my own “Sully”—into Sully’s character from time to time). But I always tried, to the best of my ability, to be entirely faithful to the characters which we love so much.

A couple of concluding notes: My decision to send Michaela, Sully and the others to Red Rock Canyon near Las Vegas, Nevada was a choice I made to please myself. It’s an astonishingly beautiful place, and I felt that my description of the landscape would be much more realistic and ring far truer, if I could speak from personal observation. It was also a way to challenge myself and expand the scope of the book, by taking the characters so far afield.
And with respect to the historical events and characters (real and fictional) that I incorporated into the novel: this arose out my fervent desire to write a story superior to CAMEO, both in turns of complexity, and as a realistic portrayal of the life and times of 1870s Colorado. Thus I did a tremendous amount of research—seeking information from the Internet about Bloody Knife, William Jackson, Sand Creek, Washita, and the battle of the Little Big Horn; as well as acquiring and consulting books on archaeology, Custer, and Ferdinand V. Hayden. Additionally I drew from some wonderful materials I obtained from the Visitor's Center in Red Rock Canyon. I hope that my efforts bore fruit, and that I did all these excellent resources justice. Certainly, I expanded my own knowledge in a variety of areas and consider myself richer for it.

And now, at the risk of writing yet another "book," I'll bring this to a close. But not before I express my profound thanks and appreciation to so many people who inspired and supported me.

First and foremost, my ardent thanks, admiration and respect must go to Beth Sullivan, whose vision created this incredible show and its unforgettable characters. Without Beth to bring them all to the screen, and the remarkable talents of Jane Seymour, Joe Lando and an outstanding ensemble cast and crew to imbue them with life, there would be no show, no book—and certainly, no List with whom to share it. Thus I further owe my deepest appreciation and gratitude to all those on the List—as well as others—who have made such a difference in my life, and enriched it beyond measure; including, particularly:

Mary Ann Marino, my closest friend, who was the first to read the early chapters of TOOM and whose enthusiasm and encouragement gave me the courage to share it with the List; Pam Hunter, whose friendship I'll always cherish and whose insights on writing which she shared with me in LA I'll always remember; Jane Winter, my loyal and "Constant Reader;" my friends of "Homestead East" who honored me with their request that I share with them the "bedtime story" of TOOM; friends I made from around the world through the posting of this story, like Chiara in Italy and Anna in Moscow, who sent me generous, thoughtful and often movingly poetic comments about my work; fellow fan fiction writers, like Gypsy, Debby, Rebecca, Scout, and Pam Hunter, of course—not to mention many others—whose talents entertained me and constantly inspired me to be better; my "hero" Stephen King, whose genius I could never hope to emulate, but whose remarkable gift for story-telling has inspired me and enhanced my life for 22 years; and last—but NEVER least—my beloved husband Rick, whose constant love, support and belief in me keeps me going, and whose opinion I value and cherish above all else. Every woman should be so lucky.

To slightly paraphrase Mr. Watkins in "Portraits:" I am indebted to you all.

With love and gratitude,

Carolyn Williams