

Peter and Chloe

By Kate Simon

Chloe held the last note longer than she'd ever done before. She'd sung this song a hundred times but she knew, she'd never been better. She opened her eyes to the thunderous applause. "Thank you," she said though no one could hear her. She walked off the stage as the band leader took the mike.

"Everyone get ready," he said. "Thirty seconds."

She tried to make her way through the crowd but was slowed by the congratulations.

"You were wonderful," said a familiar voice.

She turned and saw Peter standing behind her. "You like to sneak up on me."

"I stand still. You keep finding me."

"Huh, I guess I do."

"Three, two, one, Happy New Year," shouted the crowd.

"Happy New Year, Chloe."

"Happy New Year, Peter."

Chloe couldn't believe she was kissing a stranger. Well, not a total stranger. She'd nearly tripped over him on the beach about an hour ago. She'd been trying to figure out her next move. She fired her manager/boyfriend and she didn't want to go back to LA after the holidays. She'd been visiting with her family here in Clear Lake, Texas for the holidays. She loved them to pieces but she'd needed a break from all that couple happiness. Her older brother John had gotten engaged to a wonderful woman after thirty years as a widower. Her twin brother Quincy and his wife were the weirdly happy parents of five. All that blissed out happiness had gotten to her so she'd taken a walk on the beach. She'd stood at the water and asked the universe "What do I do now?" That's when she heard a gravel voice ask "What do you want to do?" Behind her was a handsome

stranger and he introduced himself as Peter. Before she ran back to the club and her family she'd impulsively kissed him and wished him a Happy New Year.

Now here she was kissing him again. Damn, could he kiss. Then someone bumped into her and she realized where she was. She pulled away and looked into his deep blue eyes. "I have to go," she whispered. "My family." She nodded to her family's table.

"I know," he said. "You'll see me again."

She had to asked. "How are you so sure?"

"You keep finding me."

Chloe smiled as she turned and moved toward her family's table.

Peter Blake stood in the crowd and watched Chloe Holmes return to her family. He knew who she was of course. Everyone did. She was one of the most popular singers in the country. She had no idea who he was other than his first name.

He waited to see if she looked back for him. She was kissed all her family members and then looked out to the dance floor and saw him. Even at this distance he could see her blush. He smiled and nodded before turning around and leaving the main room. He knocked on the club manager's door and was invited in.

"Hey Mark, could I borrow your office for a moment. I want to call my family but they're isn't any quiet place to do it.

"Sure thing, Mr. Blake." The manager got up and closed the door. He rarely used his influence for things like this but being a Blake did have some perks. He hit the contact button and his father picked up.

"Happy New Year, son."

"Thanks, Dad. Happy New Year to you too. Are you and Mom enjoying New York?"

"She's loving it. You know me. I rather be at home and watching the ball drop from my recliner."

“Put her on.”

“Hello, Peter.”

“Chuc mung nam mob,” he replied. His stepmother, Thuy, was Vietnamese and she’d raised him since he was a toddler. She’d raised him to be fluent. He was also one of the few white guys at the Buddhist temple they attended.

“Happy New Year, sweetheart. You aren’t sitting alone in your house, are you?”

“No Mom, I went to the club.”

“Good. It’s good for you to be around people. You’re never going to meet a woman staying home.”

“You’re right, Mom.”

“Of course I am,” she said.

“Dad says you’re having a good time.”

“It’s a beautiful hotel. And I even got your father to promise me a dance.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

“He’s worked hard all his life. Now that he’s retired he needs to learn to relax.”

“You’re just the woman to teach him.”

“Hell yeah, I am.”

Peter smiled. Thuy had lived in this country over forty years. He thought he combination of her Vietnamese and Texas accents was adorable. “Okay, you go get Dad out on the dancefloor and I’ll talk to you when you get back home.

“Bye, sweetheart”

“Bye, Mom.”

Peter hung up the phone and walked back out to the dance floor. He should just go home. She’s a big time star. It would never work. What the hell was he thinking? Yeah, he should go home. “Aww what the hell” he said to himself as he walked toward her table.

Chloe's heart was still pounding at the thought of Peter's kiss. Peter, Peter who? She didn't even know his last name. What the hell was she thinking?

"Hey squirt!" called Quincy. "Are you listening?"

"What? I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Caro and I are having another baby."

"What? That's great. She hugged and kissed her twin brother and his wife Caro. All Chloe could think was better you than me. She gave her brother John and his fiance, Mari, a hug and kiss and wished everyone a Happy New Year.

"Okay," Quincy started. "So how do you know Peter Blake and why were you kissing him?"

"Blake?"

"You didn't even know his name?"

"I know his first name."

"What? Chloe, that's so unlike you," said John.

Mari set her hand over John's. "Sweetheart, it's New Years. Everyone kisses everyone." John shook his head but seemed to accept Mari's logic.

Chloe leaned back so John could see her and mouthed "Thank you" towards her. She sat back and took a sip of her drink and tried to push the best kiss she'd had in years out of her mind. Yeah, good luck with that.

Chloe felt a touch on her shoulder.

“Excuse me, Ms. Holmes. May I have this dance?”

Peter was smiling and she took a quick look at her family. They all were looking at her and she didn't want a scene. “Of course,” she said as she stood. He took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor. “I thought you said you stand still. I find you.”

“I'm making my mother happy.”

“Excuse me?”

“I promised her I'd go out and be around people. Specifically, female people.”

“I guess I qualify.”

“You certainly do,” he smiled.

“Is your family here?”

“No. They're in New York on vacation.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Peter moved her around the dance floor with a grace she found surprising. “Did you sneak in here?”

Peter laughed. “Excuse me?”

“Well, it's not black tie here but your jeans aren't exactly dress code.”

He pulled her close and she could feel him chuckle. “They tolerate me here.”

Chloe closed her eyes and lost herself in the music and the man. She could tell he was well muscled. He wore no cologne. His clothes were off the rack. He was the complete opposite of Sebastian. He stopped moving and she realized the music had stopped but she hadn't noticed. She tried to cover her embarrassment. “Thank you for the dance, Mr. Blake.” She turned to go back to her table but he grabbed her hand.

“You asked about me?”

“My family knew who you are. They wondered why I was kissing you.”

“What did you tell them?”

She smiled. "My brother's fiance saved me. She said it was New Year's Eve and everyone was kissing everyone else."

"Was that why?" he asked with a lopsided grin.

"I really should get back to my family."

"Come watch the fireworks with me."

"I should..." she glanced over her shoulder and saw her family. Quincy was whispering in Caro's ear. John and Mari were cuddled together. She looked back at Peter and smiled. "Okay." She walked back to her table and whispered in Mari's ear. "Peter and I are going to watch the fireworks. I have my phone with me."

Mari smiled and said, "Have fun."

John and Quincy watched their sister leave with Peter Blake. "What's going on with that?" asked Quincy.

"She's going to watch the fireworks with Peter," said Mari.

"She doesn't know him."

"You do. Is he a bad guy?" she asked.

"Not that I know of."

"So what's the problem?"

Caro put a hand on her husband's arm. "We've heard about Peter since we moved here. You know he's a good guy."

"Well..."

"This is supposed to be a family outing," said John.

"Sweetheart, look at us," said Mari. "Caro and Quincy are having another baby. You and I just got engaged. She must feel like a fifth wheel."

"She said she was okay with all this."

“Of course she did. But now she’s going to spend time with an attractive man who wants to spend time with her.”

“I don’t know,” said John.

“John, stop being a big brother for a night and trust Chloe’s judgement.”

John sighed and watched Chloe walking out of the club, holding Peter’s hand.

“The grandstand is that way,” said Chloe, pointing to where everyone was beginning to gather.

“We’ll have a better view from my place.”

Chloe stopped dead. “Your place?”

“I have a small place a little way up the beach.” He said, “You can trust me, Chloe.”

“Do you promise?”

He leaned in and whispered, “I swear.”

Chloe thought she was must be crazy but she kept following Peter to his place. It wasn’t a far walk before they came upon a small cottage with a high A frame roof and large glass windows facing a small deck. “This is lovely.”

“Thank you. I like it.” He led her up to the deck and slid opened the door just as the first shell went off. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, thank you.” She stood at the window and watched the shells go off. Beautiful blue and red lights filled the sky.

Peter came up from behind her and handed her a glass of wine. “Let’s go out on the deck.”

She followed him back to the deck and they sat on a small couch. “It’s getting a little chilly.”

“I can take care of that.” He flipped a switch on table in front of them and flames sprung up.

“Well that’s convenient.”

“I have a stack of wood for the one inside but this is too small for that.”

They sat quietly on the couch and watched the display. He put his arm around her and she leaned in closer. If this had been LA there would have been no way she’d have gone off with this guy. She didn’t know why but she felt she could trust him.

“You never did answer the question,” said Peter.

“What question?”

“What do I do now?”

“Oh. That was a general question to the universe. I didn’t expect to solve my issues in one night.”

“What are your issues.”

“Oh Lord, you really don’t want to hear someone like me whine about my problems.”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to know.”

She set her glass and looked in his eyes. In the firelight she could see his sincerity. “Okay, you asked. “I broke up with my boyfriend about a month ago.”

“Why?”

“He was sleeping around.”

“Good reason.”

“He was also my manager so I fired him. Now I have no manager, no boyfriend and I’m not sure what I want to do next. I thought some time with my family might help but...”

“All that togetherness gets a bit much.”

“And noisy.”

“Noisy?”

“I’m staying with my twin brother Quincy. He has five kids under twelve. Tonight his wife announced she’s expecting again.”

“And your other brother got engaged tonight.”

“Yeah. I thought I might hang around for a while because I have no real desire to go back to LA. Now, I’m not sure.”

“Do you need to go back to LA?”

“No. I spent so much time traveling from gig to gig that my place in LA was just a place to hang my clothes.”

“So you’ve circled around to the same question. What do you want to do?”

Chloe looked in his eyes and took a breath. “I want to be happy.” She gasped. “Oh God, why did I say that?”

“Because it’s the truth?”

“I don’t know why I told you.”

“I told you why. You can trust me.”

Chloe jumped at a sudden burst of shells, signaling the end of the fireworks display. “That was very pretty. I guess I should get back to my family.”

“Stay. I’m enjoying your company. I’ll drive you home.”

“I really...” Chloe looked at Peter’s smile and thought “What the hell.” She pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket. She hit a few keys and hit send. “I just told my brother Quincy that you would bring me home. He knows who you are.”

He leaned in and said “I told you, you can trust me.”

“You can understand why I’m still a little nervous.”

“Of course.”

“We’ve talked enough about me. Tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

“You said your parents are in New York. Do you have any siblings?”

“No. My mom died when I was two. My father married the sister of his partner about two years later. She raised me. They didn’t having children together.”

“What does your father do?”

“He was a Gulf shrimp fisherman. He wanted his own boat so he partnered with Bao. There are a lot of Vietnamese shrimpers. That’s how he met Mom. Her name is Thuy. She finally got him to retire last year.”

“You sound very close to them.”

“I am. They’re great people.” He smiled and said, “Ban dang rat dep.”

“What?”

“I said you’re very pretty in Vietnamese. Mom raised me bilingual.”

“Wow.”

“I’m also Buddhist. My father said since he grew up with no religion he was okay with me going to temple with Mom.”

“Interesting”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I sell outdoor goods.”

“Like fire tables?”

Peter smiled. “Like fire tables.” He leaned closer. “I’d like to kiss you again.”

“Are you asking permission?” she smiled.

“I am.”

“Permission granted.”

His kiss was soft and tender. She slid her hand his cheek and pulled him close. Peter pulled back and smiled. “Don’t go back to LA.”

“Maybe I can hang around for a while.”

“Now, if I’m going to keep my promise of being a gentleman, I should take you home now.”

“I don’t recall that promise.”

Peter smiled. "I promised my mother."

Chloe saw Quincy's car as Peter pulled into the driveway. She was going to face an inquisition from her brothers for sure. Hopefully the Caro and Mari would come to her defense. "Thank you for a very nice evening."

"Very nice? How about tomorrow night we try for excellent."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Dinner. I'll pick you up about seven and prove I do own something to wear other than jeans."

Chloe smiled. "Give me your phone." He pulled it out of his pocket and she called her own phone. She handed him back his phone and answered hers. "Seven will be fine."

"I'm looking forward to it." He glanced toward the front door. "I do believe I saw one of your brothers peaking out the window."

"Good Lord."

"I better let you go before one of them comes out here with a shot gun."

Chloe laughed and gave him a quick kiss. "Good night, Peter."

"Sweet dreams, Chloe."

Chloe walked into her brother's house smiling, until she saw everyone waiting for her in the living room. She squared her shoulders and readied herself for the inquisition.

"Did you have a nice evening?" asked Mari

Leave it to John's fiance to put a good spin on things. "I had a lovely evening, thank you."

"I can't believe you went off with someone you don't know," said Quincy. He was always overprotective of his twin.

"Quincy, hush. You know who Peter Blake is," said Caro.

"Only to say hi to at the club."

"At the club?" Chloe asked. "I didn't realize he was a member. I thought he snuck in because of his jeans. He said they tolerate him there." She didn't understand the Caro's snicker.

"Did he tell you what he did for a living?" asked Caro

"He said he sold outdoor supplies." This time Quincy snickered. "Somebody better tell me what's going on."

"Do you know the store Outdoor Life?"

"Sure, the big sporting goods chain. They're everywhere, even LA." She looked at her brother. "No."

"Yes."

"He just works there? Right?"

"Nope. Owns everyone of them. He may be the richest man in Texas," said Caro. "He may even be richer than Caro."

Caro slapped Quincy's shoulder. "Hush now."

"But he just has this cute little cabin on the lake. Nothing fancy." She glanced out at the lake. "I kind of liked it."

John stood and put his hands on Chloe's shoulders. "Rich or poor, did he behave himself?"

She turned and looked and looked at her protective big brother. "He was a perfect gentleman."

"Do you like him?"

"Yes. He's taking me to dinner tomorrow, that is if I still go."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"He never said anything."

"Did you pull out your last tax return?"

"No." She blushed realizing she never asked Peter any details. She'd been too lost in those beautiful blue eyes.

"So have dinner with him. You deserve to have some fun." John paused and glanced at Quincy. "He does know you have two brothers, doesn't he?"

"Yes, and I think the idea makes him a little nervous."

John smiled and nodded. "Good."

Peter pulled into the driveway at Chloe's brother's place about ten to seven. He'd made reservations at Oscars, It was an excellent restaurant without being pretentious. He knew Chloe's brother from the club. Some sort of engineer, he thought. And the wife, very old school Texas. He stood at the front door and straightened his tie. He was about to knock on the door when a young boy about nine opened the door.

"Aunt Chloe! You're boyfriend is here!" he shouted.

"Jason Robert!" A well dressed woman approached the front door. "My apologies." She extended her hand. "Hello. I'm Caroline Holmes."

"Peter Blake. It's very nice to meet you."

"Please come in."

Peter entered and saw two men sitting in the living room, the brothers, along with a tall woman with long dark hair. He assumed this was the fiance. He better face them now. He followed Caroline into the living room.

"Everyone, this is Peter Blake," said Caro. "This is my husband Quincy, his brother John and John's fiance Mari."

Peter shook everyone's hand and smiled. "It's nice to meet you all."

"Where are you going tonight?" asked Quincy.

"Oscars."

"Oh, I love the food there. Excellent choice," said Caro.

"Hello, Peter."

Peter turned around and saw Chloe standing behind him. She was wearing a simple black dress with a thin gold chain. Her short dark hair was tucked behind her ears. Her makeup was a bit heavier than last night, but still not overdone. He walked toward her and took her hand. "You look lovely," he whispered as he kissed her cheek.

"Thank you."

He turned to the rest of the family. "We should get going. It was very nice meeting you all."

"Why don't you come by for dinner tomorrow?" asked Quincy.

"Quince!" said Chloe.

"What? John and Mari have to get back to Davenport soon."

Peter threaded his fingers through Chloe's. "That sounds fine. I'll see you all tomorrow night." He led Chloe out to his car and opened the passenger door. He sat down and fastened his seat belt.

"Peter, I'm so sorry. My brothers can be so pushy."

"They're protective. I can understand that."

"But I'm no little girl I'm forty three!"

"You're still their little sister."

"Well, don't feel obligated."

He leaned close and gave her a soft kiss. "Chloe, I don't do things I don't want to do, okay?"

Chloe smiled. "Okay."

Peter had asked for a table off in the back corner by the windows. It had a good view of the lake without the rest of the restaurant seeing Chloe. He knew how popular her music was and he didn't want their evening interrupted.

"This is lovely," said Chloe.

"You've never been here before?"

"When I come to visit Quincy it just for a few days. Then it's usually a blur of kids and meals. Caro is always experimenting."

"She's Caro's sauces, yes?"

“You’ve done your homework.”

The waiter brought their wine and poured. Peter smiled and raised his glass. “To a new beginning.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Chloe and took a sip. “Oh my. That’s delicious.” She set down her glass. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“I didn’t realize you’d asked one.”

“It was implied. You researched me. Why?”

“Mostly I wanted to know if I needed to be afraid of your brothers.”

Chloe laughed. “Afraid of Quincy and John? A space engineer and an English professor. Hardly. Caro can be a little scary but I think you can handle her.”

“Good to know.”

“Tell me about you.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t mention the two hundred sporting goods stores.”

“Looks like I’m not the only one who used Google.”

“My family laughed at me when I said you sell outdoor supplies.”

He took a sip of wine and set down his glass. “I apologize for not being forthcoming but it was nice for me to be someone who didn’t think about what I did for a living.”

Chloe sighed. “I understand. Believe me, I do.”

“I imagine you would.”

“By the way, your CEO picture in Wikipedia doesn’t do you justice.”

He laughed as the waiter brought their meals. Peter had ordered a steak. Chloe ordered the salmon.

“So how did the son of a Texas Shrimper wind up a retail magnate?”

“I started as a kid by fixing nets. Then I made and sold nets to make some extra money. Pretty soon I was selling supplies boat to boat. I had my first store by the time I was eighteen. I started branching out with different products. Next thing I know it’s thirty years later and I’m having dinner with a star.”

Chloe laughed. “I’m no star.”

“Didn’t you just sell out the Hollywood Bowl?”

Chloe blushed. “Yeah.”

“And how many seats are at the Hollywood Bowl?”

“Seventeen thousand, but it’s not like I’m filling stadiums.”

“Your music doesn’t lend itself to that kind of venue. It’s too intimate.”

“You know my music?”

“I thought I’d wait until the third date to ask you to autograph my copies of your albums.” Chloe’s laugh was a surprising source of delight to Peter. He was fascinated by her sparkling blues eyes. Something was different. This was not a typical date.

“What are you smiling about?” she asked.

“I was just thinking my mother is going to love you.”

Peter pulled into Chloe’s driveway and turned off the engine. “I had a great time, Chloe.”

“So did I,” she smiled. She leaned in and kissed him. She tried to deepen the kiss but he pulled away. “What’s wrong?”

He pointed toward the house. “Nothing except your brothers are on the other side of that door.”

“I feel like I’m in high school,” she said.

“Me too,” he laughed. “After all these years it’s kind of fun.” He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. “Have you thought about hanging around Clear Lake?”

“I’m giving it some serious consideration,” she grinned.

“I’m very glad to hear that,” he said as he gave her another kiss.

“I should go,” she whispered.

“Hmm?” he asked as he kissed her neck and nipped at her ear.

“I should go...brothers...waiting for me?”

He pulled back and smiled. “Yes. Brothers.” He pulled back and took a breath. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Chloe opened the door but leaned back in and whispered. “You know, we may be behaving like we’re in high school, but I’m no girl.”

Peter watched Chloe walk to the front door. She turned to him and smiled before she let herself in the house. He exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Wow. Definitely no girl.”

Chloe fixed her what little makeup she had on. She'd told Peter it was a casual evening with the family so she was wearing her comfortable jeans and the new sweater she bought this afternoon at the mall. Caro and Mari said it was going to be a girl's only lunch out but it turned into a shopping expedition for the perfect sweater. Royal blue with a cable design running from the moderate V neck to the hem. She had to admit it did look good. She also admitted to herself this was the first time she'd wanted to make an effort for a man.

She came out into the living room and the entire family turned and looked at her. "Oh that does look good," said Mari.

"Thank you. Look, everyone. I want best behavior. John and Quincy, no Spanish Inquisition. Kids, no teasing him. Peter is a nice man." The doorbell rang and everyone moved toward the door. Chloe put out her hand. "Stay." Everyone froze. She couldn't help but smile. "Good family." She opened the door and her breath caught. Peter was wearing a navy blue long sleeve crew neck sweater and dark jeans. They fit every curve of his body perfectly. Her mind couldn't process the images that were racing through her head.

"What's wrong? You said casual."

Chloe pulled the door closed behind her with one hand and ran the other up his chest and around his neck. She pulled him into a deep kiss. She pulled back and took a breath.

"Well, hello to you too," he said.

She smiled and blushed. "I'm sorry, that was...bold."

He leaned in and whispered, "I'm very fond of bold." He gave her a soft kiss and then nodded toward the door. "We better go in now."

"Yes, of course." She opened the door and only then noticed Peter was carrying a bottle of wine. They walked into the living room where everyone was waiting.

"Hello, everyone," said Pete. Her brothers stood first to shake his hand. Peter gave Quincy the bottle.

“Mmm, nice. Thanks,” said Quincy. “Okay, you’ve met the adults, let me introduce the rug rats.”

“Quincy!” Caro admonished him. “Our children are not rug rats.”

He smiled broadly at his wife. “Yes dear.” He indicated to a young boy who stood and extended his hand. “This handsome fellow is my son, Michael.”

“Hello sir,” said Michael.

“Hello, Michael.”

“This young lady is his twin sister, Mary.”

The shy girl stood and extended her hand, “Hello.”

“Hello, Mary.”

Quincy looked over at the young boy who was absorbed in a handheld game. “Jason, put the game away and come say hello to our guest.”

The boy grudgingly set the game aside. He walked over and extended his hand. “Hello.”

“Hello, Jason.”

The boy quickly returned to his game. Quincy looked around the room. “Where’s Peter?” He glanced back. “We have a Peter too.”

“He’s probably still in his room. He’s reading that book Uncle John got him,” said Jason.

“Go get him.”

An adorable little girl came up to her father. “My turn, Daddy.”

Quincy smiled and picked up his daughter. “This little angel is Sadie.” She extended her hand like she’d seen her siblings do.

“Hello.”

Peter smiled broadly and put on his best Texas gentleman charm. "It is a real pleasure to meet you Miss Sadie." Sadie giggled and hid on her father's shoulder.

Jason came out of the hallway with a young boy with sandy blonde hair. "Here he is."

"Peter, come here and meet our guest." The boy walked over and stood next to his father. "This is Mr. Blake, Aunt Chloe's guest."

"Hello," he said and extended his hand.

"Hello Peter, I'm Peter too."

The young boy looked at Peter sideways. "This is going to get confusing. Maybe we better call you Mr. Peter."

Chloe could see Peter was trying not to laugh. "That's probably a good idea."

Caro started herding the children to the kitchen. "Okay, finish setting the table. Quincy, why don't you open that lovely bottle of wine."

"None for you," he smiled and gave his wife a quick kiss.

Caro smiled as she extended her hand to Peter. "I can't believe we're doing this again."

He leaned in closer. "Chloe told me your good news. Congratulations."

"Thank you but no need to whisper. We told them this morning." She glanced back at her children and smiled. The boys were arguing and Mary was trying to quiet them. "You can see they are all quivering with excitement for the new brother or sister."

"I'm excited, Mommy," said Sadie who was still in her father's arms.

Caro gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, angel. You are going to be a wonderful big sister." The little girl beamed with pride.

"Why don't you and Chloe have a minute to yourselves on the deck and we'll let you know dinner is ready."

“Thanks, Caro,” said Chloe as she took Peter by the hand and led him outside. She closed the door behind her and sighed. “I know my family can be a bit much but you handled that very well.”

“I admit I’m not used to kids but they seem really nice. That Sadie is adorable.”

Chloe slipped her arms around Peter’s waist. “She was very charmed by your Texas gentleman ways. So am I.”

“Oh yeah?” he smiled.

“I have a question. Do you have a cowboy hat?”

He adopted a stronger Texas twang. “Why ma’am, I was born and raised in Texas. I have several.”

“Really?” Do you ride?”

“I spend more time on the water than on a horse but yes, I do.”

Chloe closed her eyes and blew out a breath. “Damn.”

“What?” he laughed.

“I have several highly inappropriate things running through my head right now.”

He held her a little tighter. “Oh really? Like what.”

She shook her head. “Oh no. Suffice to say the cowboy thing is working for me.”

“Do you think I can risk kissing you out here?”

Chloe glanced in at her family who seemed to be preoccupied with getting dinner on the table. “Go for it.”

Peter gave her a tender kiss and then whispered in her ear, “We will discuss this cowboy thing of yours later.”

Chloe smiled. “Count on it.”

John opened the sliding door. “Dinner’s ready.”

Chloe sat down next to Peter as she shot Quincy a warning glare. She hoped her twin would behave himself, but she doubted it. John was always a protective big brother but Quincy took it to another level. She remembered the time she came home from a date and looked in the front window. Quincy was sitting in the front room polishing his shotgun. She said good night to her date at the door.

“So, Peter,” Quincy began, Chloe tensed. “How did you manage to get away from your business for the holidays. I imagine it must be very time consuming, having what, two hundred stores?”

“Actually, when you hire good people it’s not that hard. They can reach me by phone if they need me but for the most part they can handle anything that might crop up.” Peter smiled and took a sip of wine. “And it’s two hundred and fifty stores.”

“What stores?” asked Jason.

“Outdoor Life,” said Peter.

“Oh, cool. Last time we were there I saw some really cool cowboy boots. They were dark brown with fancy stitching. Mom said they were too expensive. Do you think you could get me a discount?”

“Jason!” said a blushing Caro. “I said they were too expensive for you. You’re nine.”

Peter smiled. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Jason, you come helping serve the food,” said Caro.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, knowing he was going to get a whispered talking to in the kitchen.

Caro and Jason returned with platters of chicken, pasta and two bowls of sauce. “Peter, one of these is my regular marinara and the other is my new sauce, Mari’s Gold. If you like a spicy sauce I’d love a non-family member’s opinion.”

“The spicier the better, thank you,” he smiled. He looked at John’s fiancée. “Mari’s Gold?”

“Mari runs a nursery and landscaping business and she brought me a rare spice for Christmas.”

Peter took a taste of the sauce and smiled. “Oh that’s delicious. You have another winner here.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. I wouldn’t just say that. As a fellow business owner I would only give you my honest opinion.”

Caro beamed. “Thank you, Peter. That means a lot to me.”

Chloe patted Peter’s knee under the table. He smiled at her and shot her a quick wink. “John, when do you and Mari have to go back?” she asked.

“Class starts in a week so we have a couple more days. That is of course if Caro can put up with us that long.”

“John, I married your brother and I have five and a half children,” she smiled and rubbed her hand protectively over her belly. “You two are a piece of cake. Stay as long as you want. As a matter of fact I was going to ask when are you coming back?”

John looked at Quincy who smiled and shrugged. “What can I say? Pregnancy makes her warm and fuzzy.”

John looked at Mari, “What do you think, sweetheart?”

“Well, you do have spring break,” said Mari.

“Oh, maybe we could have the wedding here. Four months is enough time to plan it.” said Caro.

Mari nearly spit her wine. “What?”

“We haven’t set a date yet, Caro,” said John. “We only just got engaged.”

“Summer, then. Summer is a great time for a wedding,” Caro replied undaunted. John looked at his brother for help.

Quincy laughed. "Like I said, warm and fuzzy."

Chloe leaned into Peter and whispered, "Having fun yet?"

He smiled. "Yes, actually I am." He took another bite of his pasta. "John, I understand you're an English professor."

"Yes, at Markham University."

"Markham? Good school. Good reputation."

John smiled "Great academics, crappy football team."

"How did you meet Mari?" Peter noticed everyone looking at each other. "What did I say?"

"No, it's fine, Peter. Mari was my student twenty five years ago. We ran into each other recently and well..." John reached for Mari's hand. "That was that."

"Chloe, you never did tell us how you and Peter met," said Quincy.

"I told you," she said through gritted teeth, "at the club."

"She tripped over me on the beach." Peter smiled when Chloe's head snapped around. "What? There's nothing wrong with how we met. Chloe was walking on the shore and she happened to walk where I was sitting. She couldn't see me in the dark. I'm afraid I startled her. We had a very nice conversation. Then I came back to the club to hear her sing."

"How did you know I was going to sing?"

He smiled a lopsided grin. "I tipped Mark Brown to ask you." Caro and Quincy laughed.

"That explains why he comped our meal," said Quincy.

"How did you know I'd say yes?"

"I didn't. I hoped. I told you I really love your music."

Chloe didn't know whether to be angry or pleased.

He leaned in and whispered, "I was hoping you'd trip over me again."

Pleased it was.

Dinner with Chloe's family was fun. He wasn't used to such a raucous family but he liked her nieces and nephews. The older kids were arguing over doing the dishes while Caro was putting Sadie to bed or at least tried.

"Chloe, Sadie wants you to tuck her in."

"Sure."

Peter followed her down the hall. "Bathroom?"

"Down the hall to the right."

As he washed his hands he looked at himself in the mirror. It had only been a few days and he was already comfortable with her family. Her brothers were protective but he could understand why. She was a celebrity as well as their sister. How did they know if his intentions were honorable? They were. He smiled. Well, not completely. He walked back up the hallway and stopped when he heard Chloe singing softly. He stood outside of Sadie's room and closed his eyes.

Summertime and the livin is easy

Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high

Oh your daddy's rich and your ma is good lookin'

So hush little baby, don't you cry

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing

And you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.

But till that morning that morning there ain't nothing can harm you

With daddy and mammy standin' by

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing

And you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.

*But till that morning that morning there ain't nothing can harm you
With daddy and mammy standin' by*

*Summertime and the livin is easy
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high
Oh your daddy's rich and your ma is good lookin'
So hush little baby, don't you cry.*

He heard Chloe say "Sweet Dreams, angel." And then the light in the room went out. "Oh, hi. Sadie likes what she calls 'the summer song'."

He couldn't stop staring at her. He touched her cheek.

"Peter?"

He gave her the softest of kisses. He knew everything had changed for him. Quincy walked down the hallway so Peter backed up.

"We're moving out to the deck. Would you like another glass of wine?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Not for me, thanks," said Peter. "Driving."

Quincy looked him up and down. "Okay." He turned and walked back down the hall.

"We should rejoin the others," said Chloe.

He took her hand in his. "Yes, we should. They were walking down the hall when he stopped. "Do you think you could get me the kids shoe sizes?"

"What? Why?"

“I can’t very well bring Jason the boots he wants if I don’t bring them for all the kids.”

Chloe smiled. “Peter Blake are you trying to win me over by currying favor with my nieces and nephews?”

He leaned in and whispered, “Is it working?”

She gave him a sly grin. “I’ll let you know.”

Peter looked around his house and everything seemed to be presentable. He'd gotten all the groceries for lunch and picked up boots for the kids. He grabbed his keys and reached for the front door. He stopped and smiled. "What the hell." He opened the hall closet and reached in for one of his cowboy hats. It was a dark brown that matched the boots he was wearing. He wondered if Chloe's thing for cowboys was for real. He got his answer when she opened the door at Quincy's. Her eyes grew wide and she looked him up and down.

"Well, howdy cowboy."

He touched the brim of his hat in salute. "Afternoon, ma'am."

"Come on in and set a spell." He walked into the living room carrying two large shopping bags. Quincy was sitting in the living room with John and Mari.

"Caro, Peter's here," called Quincy.

Caro came out of the kitchen and smiled. "Hello Peter. What's all that?"

"I brought something for the kids."

"Oh, how sweet. Quincy, the children are in their rooms." Quincy went to the back of the house and the five Holmes children followed him back into the living room. "Hi, Mr. Peter," said several of the kids.

"Hi guys. I brought you a little something from my store." The kids gathered around him and he handed the first box to Jason.

"Wow, it's the boots! These are the ones." He threw himself on the floor and pulled off his sneakers and pulled on his new boots. "Oh, man, these are so cool! Thanks, Mr. Peter."

"You're very welcome." He looked at the downcast eyes of the other kids. "Don't worry. I didn't forget the rest of you." He handed boxes to each of the kids. Michael's boots were black with black stitching. Mary's were a cream colored with brown stitching. Peter's were light brown with dark brown stitching. Sadie sat on the floor and opened her box.

“Mommy look. Pretty.” Sadie held up her small boots is a very girly shade of pink with fancy white stitching.

“They’re very pretty, angel.” She looked at Peter. “It’s very nice of you. Thank you.”

“Oh, I have one more.” He reached into the bag and pulled out a small box and handed it to Caro. She opened the box and gasped.

“Oh Peter.” She wiped her eyes. “Damn, hormones.” All the children looked at Caro at once. Apparently she didn’t swear much.

“What is it, sweetheart?” asked Quincy. She held up cowboy boot baby booties. “Oh man.” He extended his hand to Peter. “Thanks. That’s very cool.”

“You’re welcome.”

Caro stood and gave Peter a hug. “Thank you. You’re very sweet.”

“You’re welcome.” He watched as the kids admired their new boots. He caught Chloe smiling at him.

“How did you get at all the sizes right?” asked Quincy.

“That was me,” said Chloe. “I went into everyone’s closets and text Peter the sizes. I’m glad everyone likes them but Peter and I have lunch plans.” She reached down for his hand. “We need to get going.”

Caro gave Peter another hug. “Thanks so much for the gifts. The children love them. You have to come back to dinner soon.”

“I’d like that.”

Peter opened the passenger door for Chloe, then got in the drivers side and buckled up. “I’m glad the kids liked the boots.”

“Oh, they loved them.”

“I’m glad.”

“You wore the hat on purpose, didn’t you?”

Peter smiled and started the car.

Peter let Chloe in his front door. "It won't be long for lunch I just have to..." He was cut short by Chloe pulling him into a passionate kiss.

"You said you were fond of bold."

"I am," he said.

"I hope lunch can wait, because I don't want to."

Peter pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply. "I don't want to wait either," he whispered. He took her by the hand and led her upstairs to his bedroom. It was a large room, taking up half the upper level. The far wall was all glass, giving them a spectacular view of the lake, a view they were ignoring.

Chloe started unbuttoning his shirt. "I've wanted to do this since I met you." She spread open his shirt and smiled. "Ummm. Even better than I imagined."

"You were thinking about me without a shirt?" he smiled.

"Oh yes," she whispered.

He nipped at her ear. "Funny, I've been thinking about the same thing." He pulled her sweater over her head. "Damn," he whispered. She smiled and backed up. She kicked off her shoes and slowly stripped off her jeans, torturing him. She was wearing a lacy black bra and panty. "You're killing me." She slowly walked toward him.

"We can't have that. I have plans for you." She pulled off his hat and slipped it on her head. She got up on his bed and smiled.

He couldn't strip off his boots and jeans fast enough. He was about to strip off his boxers when she stopped him.

"Let me," she whispered. She pulled down his boxers and gave him a big smile. "Well, howdy cowboy."

Peter laughed as he pushed her back as he got on the bed. He slipped off her panties and bra and sat back to admire her. "You're so beautiful," he said as he raised himself over her. He kissed her deeply before moving to her neck, nipping and tasting. He moved down slowly, lavishing attention on her breasts. He loved her gasps and moans

as he moved down further. He paid attention to legs moving up to feel her heat. He teased her skin with his tongue.

“Oh God, Peter, please. You’re killing me.”

He looked up and smiled. “We can’t have that. I have plans for you.” He came up and gave her a deep kiss as slipped inside her. He lost himself in her as they found their rhythm. He reached between them and stroked her outside as he stroked her inside. He drove hard as she flew apart. The spasms of her body pushed him over the edge.

He rested his head on her shoulder as sighed. “Damn, woman. That was amazing.”

Chloe sighed. “Yes it was.”

He rolled over and leaned up on his elbow. “I’m going to have to wear that cowboy hat more often.”

Chloe smiled, “It’s not the hat...well not just the hat.” She brushed his cheek. “It’s your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“You said when I first met you that I could trust you. Do you know how many people in my business have said that to me? I don’t trust words. I trusted your eyes. I don’t know why but when I looked in your eyes, I knew you I could trust you. I know I’m safe with you.

He pulled her close and she rested her head on his chest. He gave her a gentle kiss. He’d never had a better compliment.

Chloe got ready for her date with Peter. The last week with him had been the most fun she'd had in longer than she could remember. She touched up her makeup and thought she looked different. Then she realized what it was. What she told Peter she wanted that first night. She was happy. She sighed when she realized that she'd have to leave soon for a gig in Chicago. She didn't want to leave Peter, but she'd come back right after she was done. She'd checked her schedule and she had a few firm commitments but other than that she could spend as much time in Texas as she wanted. As much as Peter wanted her to be around. Surely his business would take him away soon enough. The holidays were over and the real world was seeping back into daily life. She looked into the mirror and chastised herself. "You're a big girl, so act like it. Talk to him tonight. He asked you to stay. Find out just how much he meant it." She touched up her lip gloss as there was a knock on the door.

"Chloe, can I come in?"

"Sure Caro. I'm decent."

"You look great."

"Do you think it's okay? He said casual but well...you know." Chloe was wearing a trim pair of khaki slacks with a black V neck sweater and a cream colored button down shirt.

"You're meeting his parents tonight."

"Yeah, and I'm really nervous."

"Sweetheart. Imagine Peter having dinner with all of us after the first date."

Chloe laughed. "That did require some fortitude on his part. But these aren't siblings, these are his parents. Their only child."

"You are a wonderful woman, accomplished and financially independent. They can be sure you're not after his money."

"Okay, that's one thing in my favor."

"That and the fact that Peter is crazy about you."

“What?”

“Please, Chloe. I may be an old, pregnant, married woman but I’m not blind to the fact the Peter can’t take his eyes off you. Whenever you’re not looking he’s watching you.”

“He’s watching me?”

“And smiling.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Caro took a breath and sat on the edge of the bed. “Junior is making me a little queasy so I’ll have to tell you what I came in for fast. It was to tell you that you don’t have to rush back here every night from Peter’s.”

Chloe blushed as she sat down next to her sister in law. “I didn’t want you to have to explain my absence to the children.”

“I appreciate that but the children will be fine if their Aunt Chloe finds a partner.” She took Chloe’s hand in hers. “You know you’re welcome to stay here as long you want but your privacy is sorely limited here. Maybe you want to make some long term arrangements? Maybe Peter has some ideas?”

“You think I should move in with Peter? Caro, I’m shocked. It’s only been a week.”

“First off, I’m not the prude people think I am. Most important I think the two of you really care for each other.”

Chloe gave Caro a hug. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Talk to Peter.”

“I will.” A door bell interrupted their conversation. “Speak of the devil.”

Caro stood and gave Chloe a hug. “That’s no devil. That’s the man you love. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to vomit.”

Chloe stared opened mouthed as Caro dashed from her room. “Love?”

“Chloe, Peter’s here,” called Quincy.

Chloe walked down the hallway and gave Peter a kiss. “Quincy, you might want to see to Caro. She’s having some issues.”

“Oh I’ve been down this road four times before. All she wants me to do right now is pour the ginger ale and get the crackers.” He extended his hand to Peter. “Gotta go. Good to see you.”

“You too,” he replied. Left alone, Peter gave Chloe a more enthusiastic kiss. “That’s better,” he whispered.

“Yes it is,” she smiled. “Is this okay for your parents? You said casual.”

“You look great.”

“I’m nervous.”

He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “They’re going to love you. They’re good people. You’ll love them too.”

“I’m sure I will.” Chloe followed him to the car and he opened her door. She buckled up and waited for Peter to do the same. “Before we go there is something I wanted to tell you. I have to go to Chicago in two weeks. I have a gig at the Symphony Center, two nights.”

“Oh, okay.” His smile dimmed a bit. “Where do you go after that.”

Chloe took his hand. “I’m not on tour. I’m planning on coming back to Clear Lake.”

Peter gave her the lopsided grin she’d come to adore. “That’s certainly good news.”

“Before Caro’s...incident, we were talking. She suggested I needed a place to stay with more privacy.”

“Is she kicking you out?”

“God no, especially since John and Mari flew back to Pennsylvania. To Caro, the bigger the crowd the better. What she said was maybe I should talk to you about where I should stay.”

Now his grin just about burst off his face. “Did your traditional, southern belle sister in law suggest you move in with me?”

“I believe she did. Quincy says the pregnancy makes her warm and fuzzy.”

“Chloe, I would love for you to move in with me.”

“Are you sure? It’s only been a week.”

“Sweetheart, we’re not a couple of impulsive teenagers. I’m sure.” He took her face in his hands and gave her a deep kiss. When he pulled back he smiled and whistled. “Hot damn!” He pulled out of the driveway and started the drive to his parents. “I’ll help you pack tomorrow.”

“When I get back from Chicago.”

“Why wait?”

“Because it’s only been a week and I don’t want to set a bad example for the kids.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Bull. You’re still nervous, but that’s okay. If a few more weeks will make you feel better about it then that’s what we’ll do. I also have some business to take care of. I have to go into Dallas next week. Come with me. It’s only a couple of days of meetings but we can have some fun after.”

“You just want me to keep you company on the drive. That’s about four hours each way.”

“Yeah, I don’t like the commute either so I fly.”

“Okay. There is something. When I fly I have to do the incognito thing. You know, sunglasses, hat. Otherwise it can get awkward.”

“Ahh...that’s not a problem either. We’ll be flying private.”

“You’re hiring a private plane for a commute.”

“No, actually. I own a private plane. And it’s a jet. My stores are spread all over the country. It was much easier for me to go from place to place.”

“I assume you’re a good pilot?”

“No. I have a pilot.”

Chloe looked at him with her mouth agape. “You have your own private jet and pilot? Just how rich are you?”

Peter laughed. “Pretty damn rich.”

Chloe's head was spinning. Peter was rich enough to own his own jet. His home was very nice but no where near private jet zone. It had a great room and nice kitchen. There were two good size bedrooms upstairs with a wonderful view of the lake. She was very comfortable there. Now they'd pulled up to his parent's home, a two story, suburban tract home. None of this spoke of great wealth. She could afford better than the condo she owned in LA but she was rarely there and it seemed to be pointless to get something bigger. She tried to clear her head as Peter took her hand and they walked up they walkway.

"Calm down," said Peter.

"I'm calm."

"Your hand is shaking. Chloe, you've performed before tens of thousands of people. These are just two people."

"Two very important people."

Peter smiled and gave her a soft kiss. "Thank you. Yes. They are important. I love them and I'm very close to them. But I promise you, they'll love you too."

He turned and led her toward the front door as her heart pounded. Did he just admit he loved her?

"Mom, Dad, we're here."

The man who walked into the room couldn't be mistaken for anyone other than Peter's father. He was the same height, same cleft chin, the same laughing eyes. His hair was silver but other than that he was a spitting image of his son. "Hey son," he said as he pulled him into a hug.

"Hi Dad. This is Chloe."

He extended his hand. "It is a real pleasure to meet you, Chloe. My wife and I are very fond of your music."

"It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Blake. I'm glad you both enjoy my work."

“Please, it’s Joe.”

“Okay Joe.”

“Is that my boy?” a voice called from the kitchen.

“Chloe and I are here,” said Peter in Vietnamese. A petite woman with dark black hair streaked with grey came into the room. She hugged Peter and said more to Peter than Chloe didn’t understand. “Okay, back to English, Mom. Chloe doesn’t speak Vietnamese.”

“Of course, my apologies.” She extended her hand. “I’m Thuy. It’s wonderful to meet you, Chloe.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Thuy.”

“I couldn’t believe it when Peter said he was seeing you. Joe and I are big fans.”

“Well, that’s very nice to know.” Chloe was anxious to get the topic of conversation off herself. “I understand you just got back from New York.”

“Oh yes, Peter gave us the trip for Christmas. He really spoils us.” She looped her arm around her husband’s. “He also knew it was the only way to get this one out of his recliner.”

“I like my recliner. Peter gave it to me for a my birthday.”

“I think you love that thing more than your wife.”

“Chloe, come see it and you’ll understand,” said Joe. Thuy said something to Joe in Vietnamese and then repeated it to Peter.

“Dad, Chloe’s a guest.”

“It’s okay,” she smiled. “I’d love to see what piece of furniture could distract your father from someone as lovely as your mother. Thuy smiled. “I may need to know what would distract you from me. Like father, like son.” Joe led them to the family room where there was a large recliner. It was black leather with a high headrest that reached out from the back. Inside the head rest were speakers. The chair was unusually plush and had

separate sections for each leg which wrapped three quarters around each leg. “Wow, it looks like it’s out of a space ship.”

“Just about,” said Joe with a smile. “Sit, please.”

Chloe sat in the chair and found it fit every curve of her body. “Oh, this is comfortable.”

“As they say ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet’.” Joe touched a keypad and the chair hummed to life. It first moved into a zero gravity position. Then began a massage equal to any she’d received in any LA spa.

“Oh my,” said Chloe. “Oh this is amazing.” She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Joe, you turn that thing off or dinner will get cold,” said Thuy. Joe touched the keypad and the chair righted itself and the massage stopped.

“Wow. That was amazing. I understand why you never want to get out of it,” said Chloe.

Joe put his arm around Chloe’s shoulder and looked at his wife. “You see, Chloe understands.” Thuy gave him a look that made him snatch his arm back.

“Dinner is ready,” she said as she headed toward the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Joe. I didn’t mean to get you into trouble.”

“That’s okay, Chloe. She’s a spitfire. That’s what I love most about her,” he says as he swatted Thuy’s bottom. Thuy replied something loud and in Vietnamese but she thought she caught a half smile.

Chloe pulled Peter aside. “Am I in trouble?” she whispered.

“No. They’re like this all the time. They’re crazy about each other.”

She sighed and reached for his hand. “Thank God.”

Peter turned her to face him. “Will you please calm down.”

“I can’t help it. I want so much for them to like me. It’s important.”

Peter smiled and gave her a soft kiss. “Thank you for caring that much what my parents think. I know you’re nervous so just think about later.”

“Later?”

He leaned in and whispered, “I promise to make you feel a lot better than that chair ever could.”

Chloe laughed. “I’ll hold you to that, Mr. Blake.”

“A gentleman never goes back on his word, Ms. Holmes,” he replied in an adorable Texas twang.

Chloe was surprised when she sat down to a traditional roast beef dinner. Thuy noticed her expression and laughed.

“Don’t worry, Chloe. We thought we’d wait until then second meal before I broke out the Ca Kho To.” Chloe glanced at Peter.

“It’s a caramelized fish dish. It’s quite good, but I was raised on it. It might take you some time to get used to our food,” he said.

“I’d love to try it sometime.”

“Oh Lord, woman,” Joe laughed. “Never give my wife an excuse to cook. She’ll never stop.”

“Tell me how you met my son,” asked Thuy.

“Mom!”

Chloe looked at him. “To quote you, there is nothing wrong with the way we met.” She turned toward his mother. “I tripped over him. I was walking along the beach at the club on New Years Eve. Frankly, I was feeling a little sorry for myself. My twin brother Quincy is ridiculously happily married to his wife Caro and my brother John got engaged that night to Mari. I was feeling like a fifth wheel. I was walking along the beach and there he was. We talked for a bit and then I walked back to the club. I no sooner got back to

the club when the manager asked me to sing.” She looked at Peter and smiled. “He later confessed that he’d tipped the manager to ask me.”

Joe laughed. “That’s my boy! Goes after what he wants.”

“Joe!” Thuy chastised. “Chloe is a world famous singer, not an acquisition.” She turned to her son. “Peter, did you treat her with the respect she deserves?”

“Yes, Ma’am”

Chloe smiled. “Don’t worry, Thuy. Peter told me he had promised to be a gentleman. When I told him I didn’t remember that promise he said he’d promised you.”

Thuy beamed at her son and patted the top of his hand. “Eat. Dinner will get cold.”

Peter smiled at Chloe and shot her a wink.

They walked to the car and Peter held the door for her. He got in and before she could hook her belt he pulled her into a deep kiss. “Not that I mind but what was that for?”

“You not only scored big with my parents you made me look good too. When I was helping Mom with the dishes she said she was proud of me.”

“I’m sure she’s always proud of you.”

“I’m sure she is but she doesn’t say it, she shows it. Tonight she actually said it.”

“I so glad,” She buckled up and gave him a sly smile. “Now I recall some promises were made, Mr. Blake.”

He smiled and put the car in reverse. “And a gentleman never goes back on his word, Ms. Holmes.”

Peter drove straight to his house on the lake rather than take Chloe home. After all it would be her home soon enough. But he couldn't think about that now. He led her into the house and closed the door behind her. He locked the door as he pushed her up against it. He took possession of her mouth until they were both robbed of breath. "If you think any chair could distract me from you, I'm about to prove you wrong." He scooped her up in his arms and took her up the stairs to the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" she giggled.

"Keeping my promise. Now, you are wearing far too many clothes." He placed her on the bed and started removing her clothes. He slipped her slacks and sweater, then carefully undid her blouse.

"You're making me crazy."

"Patience, minx." He leaned close and whispered. "I promise to make it worth the wait." He smiled at her bright red lace bra and thong. "Very nice," he whispered as he ran his finger under the lace strap. He stood and looked at her "Stay put." He headed toward the bathroom. When he came back he was naked and carrying a small bottle. "Roll over."

"What are you doing?"

"You are an impatient little thing. Is this how it's always going to be?" he asked as he rolled her over.

"Yes, I'm a pampered diva used to getting what I want."

Peter laughed. "No, you're not."

Chloe chuckled. "No, I'm not."

He slid her thong down over her legs and then unhooked her bra. "Much better," he said mostly to himself. He opened the bottle and put some oil in his hands. He rubbed his hands together and then started on her shoulders.

"Oh, it's warm," said Chloe.

“Self warming.”

“You just happened to have self warming massage oil?”

He leaned down and whispered, “Jealous?”

“No.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe a little.”

He rolled her over to face him. “I got the oil from my gym. Chloe, there’s been no one but you since you tripped over me on the beach, and there won’t be. That’s not who I am. But you already know that.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m sorry. It’s a reflex.”

“This isn’t LA, sweetheart. This is Texas and when I give my word, that’s all you’ll ever need.”

“It is all I’ll ever need. And just to be clear, there hasn’t been anyone since you and there won’t be. That’s not who I am.” She gave him a big smile. “But you already know that.”

“Yes, I do.” He leaned down as if to kiss her, then flipped her back on her stomach. “Now, where was I?” He started at her shoulders and arms, working his way down. He slid his hands down her sides and worked the muscles in her back. He worked his way down to her ass and smiled at her moans. He worked his way down her legs and then turned her over on her back. Her eyes were half closed and she had a blissful smile. He worked his way back up her legs to her waist.

“Oh, I could get used to this,” she whispered. He worked up her waist to her breasts. He added his mouth to his attentions. “Oh God, Peter.”

“Yes?” he asked quietly.

“Please.”

“Please what?”

“I need you.”

“Not before you admit it?”

“What?” she gasped. She moaned as his lips tasted and teased.

“Admit this feels better than that chair.”

“What? Are you kidding me?!”

He held himself over her and smiled. “Admit it.”

“Nothing feels better than you do. Nothing ever could.”

He took possession of her mouth as he took possession of her body. Nothing felt like this. Chloe had become everything to him. He just wished he could tell her everything.

Chloe couldn't believe the luxury in Peter's jet. The seats were almost as comfortable as Joe's chair. She glanced behind a partition and saw a king size bed. She glanced back and saw Peter talking to the pilot.

"Ah...Peter..." she nodded toward the partition.

Peter smiled and she thought she saw the pilot blush. "Sometimes it's a long flight."

"Uh huh," she smiled.

"I don't just use this for meetings. Sometimes I fly to different venues."

"Like the Olympics?"

"I sponsor a few athletes. I usually go to the Olympics."

"Okay, I'm officially impressed."

"Frank, this is Chloe Holmes. Chloe, this is my pilot Frank Wolfe."

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Holmes."

Chloe extended her hand. "It's a pleasure."

"You should strap in. We're about ready for take off."

They strapped into their seats and Peter reached for her hand. "Frank's an excellent pilot."

"I'm sure he is." She smiled but she could tell he knew she was nervous. "Okay, I'm a white knuckle flyer."

"I'll do my best to make it easier for you." He glanced at the partition and Chloe burst into laughter.

"Let's wait until we make a transcontinental trip."

Peter squeezed her hand. "Deal." Her stomach flipped as they took off. "Don't worry, sweetheart. We'll be on the ground soon."

"Landing. Not on the ground," she said.

“My bad. We will be landing very soon.” He unbuckled his seat belt. “In the mean time can I pour you a glass of wine?” He stood and opened a cabinet that revealed a fully stocked bar.

“Got an Johnnie Walker Black in there?”

“As a matter of fact I do,” he smiled. “Straight up?”

“God yes.”

He poured her two fingers of scotch in a crystal tumbler for her and handed it to her. He poured one for himself and they touched glasses. “To a new beginnings.” Peter liked that she didn’t sip. She took a deep gulp and down the whiskey. “Damn, girl!” he smiled.

“What? I’ve been a professional musician for more than twenty years. I can drink most men under the table. I don’t, but I can.”

Peter smiled and finished his glass. “Good to know. Would you like another.”

“No. This is enough to steady my nerves.”

“Is it the flight or going away with me.”

“Honestly, a little of both.”

“Why?”

“Spending a few days together is a big step.”

“We’ve already said we’re moving in together. Are you having second thoughts?”

She reached for his hand. “No, not really. It’s just that Clear Lake is a small little world. Nobody gives us a second glance. Dallas will be different. You’re a big deal in business. I have a certain number of people who will recognize me.”

“More you than me.”

“Exactly. It’s going to be different for us.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Peter smiled and kissed her hand. “Honestly, I don’t know. I just do. I’m certain we’re going to be fine.”

“Well, if sometimes I need to borrow a little of your confidence...”

“I will be happy to share.”

Their room at the Grand Duchess in Dallas was magnificent. It was old world elegance in the heart of Texas. “I’ve never heard of this place before.”

“Not many have. I like it because it looks good to clients for meetings but the rooms are nice.”

“Nice? I’ve been in some of the best hotels in Europe. This is incredible.” She looked at the luxurious bed and glanced in the bath. There was a huge walk in shower and an equally large Jacuzzi. She sat on the bed and waited for the Peter to lock the door. “Can I ask you a question? It may seem a bit impertinent.”

He sat next to her and took her hand in his. “Impertinent? I love when you get all fancy.”

“Peter I’m serious.”

“I was just teasing. You can ask me anything.”

“Okay. This hotel is magnificent and definitely not cheap. The private plane, you obviously can afford a very nice life style. But your house, your parent’s house, even your car don’t indicate any of that.”

He dropped her hand. “What’s wrong with my house?”

“Nothing, not a thing. It’s beautiful and I’m very comfortable there. You’re parent’s house is wonderful. Warm and inviting. I imagine you had a great childhood there. I know other people with your level of success. They have huge homes and cars. They buy their

family's big homes. You're not like that. When I first met you I thought you'd snuck in to the club. It's just...it's not what I'm used to from people."

"Okay, first, let me ask do you have a big home in LA?"

"No, just a small condo. I was never home long enough to warrant anything bigger. It was more like a comfortable closet."

"And it worked for you."

"Yes."

"I assume you could afford a bigger place if you wanted it."

"Yes, I could."

"Why don't you have one?"

Chloe smiled, understanding his point. "I don't need it or want it. I don't need to show off to neighbors I've never met."

"So, you do understand. What I have was more than big enough for me and I think it will work for us both, unless you want something else."

"God, no. I love it there. The view is perfect and it's just far enough away from my family that it requires a car for them to drop in."

Peter laughed. "Good, so that's settled. When I first started making big money I went to my parents. I told them I could get them anything they wanted. They said they already had everything. My father worked his ass off on that boat for years to give me a great life in a nice home. He sent me to great schools. He did that. For me to try and replace that home with something bigger would be saying what he did wasn't enough. I would never do that to them. They did allow me to install a security system for my sake. I worry that my position could make them targets."

"And you buy them nice recliners and send them on trips."

"Exactly. The way I see it, there is such a thing as enough. Enough house, enough car, enough money. I think you see that too."

“I do understand. When I stay at Quincy’s in a small guest room surrounded by the mayhem of five kids, I’m much more comfortable than I am alone in a fancy hotel room.”

“I’m afraid you will be alone here for several hours during the day. My meetings will take some time. There’s a great spa here. They have all kinds of wraps and all those frou-frou things you girls like.”

“They have frou-frou?”

“I checked.”

“Well aren’t you efficient?” she smiled.

He stood and headed toward the master bath as he tugged his shirt out of his jeans. “I thought I’d check out that big shower before my first meeting. Care to join me?”

“I’d love to but I have one more question.”

“Okay?” he said as he pulled off the shirt and kicked off his boots. “But hurry because the jeans are next.”

“If you had enough, why do you keep doing it?”

“Doing what?” he dropped his jeans on the floor.

“Building more stores, expanding.”

His boxers joined his jeans. He smiled and shrugged. “Because I’m really good at it.” He disappeared into the enormous master bath.

“Damn straight, you are,” she said as she followed.

Chloe was curled up on the bed wrapped in a plush hotel robe. She smiled as she watched Peter straighten the dark blue tie that brought out the color of his eyes. He turned and saw her staring at her.

“What?”

“Ummm, you look great.” She slipped off the bed and ran her hands up the lapels of his jacket. “I’ve never seen you in a suit before.” She nibbled at his ear. “You look good.”

“Oh, baby, as much as I would love to stay and finish this conversation my car is waiting. I’m afraid I won’t be back before dinner. Make use of the hotel, the spa, whatever you want and just sign for it.”

“Are you turning me into a kept woman, Mr. Blake?”

Peter looked a little annoyed. “Okay, let’s shorthand this argument. Is there anything in this hotel you couldn’t afford yourself?”

She smiled and shrugged. “Not really.”

“Good. Well, since my name is on the registration, I pay this time. Next time we go away, you can foot the bill. Deal?”

“Deal.” She smiled and gave him a quick kiss. “Okay, go be brilliant. I’ll stay here and frou-frou my brains out.”

Peter smiled and shook his head as he walked out the suite door. Chloe slipped out of the robe and slid under the cool sheets. She closed her eyes and wondered if the Jacuzzi would be as much fun as the shower.

Peter took a breath before he walked into the conference room. He remembered his pride when he'd bought this building. His parents were there at the opening. It was one of the best days of his life. Things had changed. He didn't want the same things he wanted even five years ago.

He knew what to expect when he walked into the room. Tony Varcos would be there. He'd been his number two for the last fifteen years. Tony was a good guy. He treated employees fairly and was smart about business. He was almost as good at spotting trends as Peter. His board were all good men and women and they'd all become wealthy since working for him.

As far as his board knew this would be an average meeting. New year, new projects, but it would be anything but average. He'd been thinking about this for a long time and it was time. He'd discussed his plans with Tony and it had taken him some convincing get him to agree to his plan. He knew they were going to give him a hard time but he was certain Tony had his back.

He took a breath and walked into the conference. "Good morning, everyone." He set his briefcase down and sat down. "Everyone get a coffee?"

"We're fine, Peter. What's going on?" asked Alice Cronin.

Peter smiled. Alice was an intuitive woman. She'd started on the sales floor and worked her way up to the board room. She could spot bullshit a mile away. "Okay, I'll get right to it. I've decided to resign as Chairman of the Board." The room erupted in noise, with the exception of Tony.

Alice looked at Tony. "You knew about this and didn't say anything?"

"Yes, Alice, Tony knew. He will be taking over as Chairman and I hope all of you will give him your support."

"Why Tony?" asked Roger Fleming. Roger was a good guy but a bit old school. He balked when Alice and Elizabeth Connors were given seats on the board.

“There still has to be a vote of course, but I have faith in Tony. He’s been here from almost the beginning. I know he shares my vision for Outdoor Life. I will still be the primary shareholder, but I’ll be stepping away from most of the major decisions.”

“You’ve been doing that for months,” said Roger. Alice gasped and Tony drilled him with a look.

“Roger, I’m still here. I’m still in charge. You have two choices here. You can back the decisions of the board or you can take your stock options and retire.”

Roger looked around the room. He could see the writing on the wall. He pushed his chair back, picked up his briefcase and walked out of the room.

“Holy shit,” whispered Alice.

“Roger’s a good man but he’s old school. He doesn’t see the future the rest of you do. I have faith in all of you. I spent thirty years of my life building this business and I’m ready for the next phase of my life.”

“Do you know what that is?” asked Elizabeth.

“You mean other than letting Tony take those late night calls when deals fall through?”

“Yeah, other than that?” she smiled.

“I’m going to get married.”

Everyone stood to congratulate him and give hugs all around. “That’s great! Who is she? We’ll be invited, won’t we?”

“Her name is Chloe and of course you’d be invited.” He stopped and smiled. “I probably should ask her first.”

“I’d highly recommend it,” said Tony.

“Well, if I’m going to do this we better get through the meetings.”

Peter sat down and opened the prepared book and looked at the first page. He looked up at his friends and smiled. He was leaving his company in good hands it was

time for him to get on with his life, including marrying Chloe. Then it hit him like a thunderbolt. They'd made plans, he assumed so much but he'd forgotten one major thing. How could he have forgotten? Peter Blake was known for never missing a trick. He'd never told her he was in love with her.

Chloe had enjoyed every bit of the spa treatments. She'd had a massage, a manicure, pedicure, and had her hair done. Her hair wasn't that long but the hairdresser had coaxed some curl and extra shine from it. She'd had her makeup done. She'd even bought a cute new dress for dinner tonight. She snickered. Well, Peter bought it. He did insist on her signing for everything.

She answered the door to a waiter with a small cart holding a bouquet of roses and a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket. "What's all this?"

"Mr. Blake ordered it."

She stepped aside and let the man enter the room. "Oh good. It's here," said Peter as he entered the room. He took the bottle from the waiter as he slipped him a fifty dollar bill.

"Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you," said the waiter as he closed the door behind him.

"I assume your meetings went well."

He popped the cork and poured each of them a glass, then set them down. "They did but that's not what this is about." He took a breath and took her hand. "We've made some plans, moving in together."

Chloe paled. "You're not changing your mind?"

He held her hand close. "God, no. I just realized we've made these life altering plans and I never told you something very important?"

"What? Peter you're freaking me out."

"No, No, it's nothing like that. I'd just realized that we'd made all these plans and I'd never told you." He got very close and gave her a soft kiss. "Chloe Holmes, I'm in love with you."

Chloe smiled. "Oh. That."

"Oh that? That's your response?"

“I know you love me, Peter.”

“How? I never said anything.”

“When we were going to your parents house. You said ‘They’ll love you too.’ I inferred from your implication.”

Peter laughed. “You inferred from my implication? Are you sure John is the only professor in the family?”

Chloe blushed a bit. “Yale School of Music. I was financing a my doctoral studies by singing on the weekends. The singing took off and I didn’t finish my doctorate.”

Peter shook his head. “You went to Yale? How far from finishing were you from your doctorate?”

“Just a couple of courses.”

“What were you studying?”

“Piano and Composition.”

“Why didn’t you finish?”

“It was a little difficult when you’re living on a tour bus. And I think we are digressing from the topic at hand?”

“Ah, yes, we are.” He wrapped his arms around her and gave her the sweetest of kisses. “Chloe Holmes, I am madly in love with you.”

“Well, that’s very good to know, because “Peter Blake, I am madly in love with you. So that works out nicely.” She nodded toward the champagne. Is it time for the champagne now? I do love champagne.”

“I’m glad, but there is one more thing.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a square box. He got down on one knee and Chloe gasped. “Chloe Holmes, will you marry me?” He opened the box and Chloe saw a beautiful oval shaped diamond with triangle shaped sapphires on either side. It doesn’t have to be today or tomorrow or next month.

We can get married when ever you want. Just say that you will.” He glanced down and smiled. “And if you could say yes, my knee would appreciate it.”

Chloe smiled. “Cowboy, are you staking a claim to me?”

“Hell yeah, I am.”

“Get up, Peter.” She slipped her arms around his neck. “Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll marry you.”

He slipped the ring on her finger and gave her a deep kiss. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.”

They sipped champagne while they called their families. John was a bit more mushy than he’d expected, but that was probably because he’d just gotten engaged himself. His fiance Mari laughed and claimed Caro owed her ten bucks. She’d bet Caro that they’d be engaged before the end of the month. Caro said Valentine’s Day.

Quincy was a bit subdued, which she’d expected and Caro let out a few expletives that Mari was part witch. All the children wished them congratulations and Peter all but melted when Sadie asked if this she should call him Uncle Peter.

“I would love that Miss Sadie.”

“If you’re my Uncle now does that mean I could I get a pink cowgirl hat to go with my boots?”

“Sadie June!” They heard Caro call in the background.

“I will see to it first thing, Miss Sadie,” said Peter with a broad smile.

Caro would forever remember Thuy’s scream of delight when Peter called his parents. Joe congratulated his son and his mother promised an engagement party as soon as they got back. Peter warned her about Quincy’s five children but she was undaunted.

Peter clicked off his phone and smiled. "Well, you can't back out now. Once my mother's involved she becomes a force of nature."

"Don't worry. I have no intention of backing out."

"Good." He took the glass from the hand and set it down. He gave her a deep kiss. He started nibbling on her neck."

"Ah...don't we have dinner reservations."

He looked at his watch "Damn...we'll finish this later."

She stood and gave his a wicked smiled. "Damn straight, cowboy."

The waiter sat them at a table toward the back of the restaurant. Peter didn't want anyone to recognize Chloe and she agreed. This was their moment. He ordered some more champagne as they looked at the menu.

"Are you trying to get me drunk, Mr. Blake?" Chloe smiled.

"Drunk? No. Maybe a little buzzed." He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I have plans for you later." Chloe blushed as the waiter came back to take their order.

They enjoyed their meal as they discussed what type of wedding they'd want. Peter was surprised to find that Chloe wanted a wedding in Clear Lake. "Most of my family is there and John and Mari can fly down. If we get married in the summer, John and all the kids are out of school so that works." Peter grinned. "What?" she asked.

"You just picked a date, at least a time frame, this summer."

Chloe smiled. "I guess I did. Is that okay with you?"

"It's great with me but don't you have people in LA who'll you'll want to invite."

"There are a couple of friends. Not many. And they can afford a ticket to Clear Lake."

"The club would be a nice place to have the wedding. It's really pretty in the summer and people could spread out along the beach. We could reserve some rooms at the Hilton for out of town guests."

Chloe smiled.

"What?"

"You've got this planned down to the smallest detail already, don't you?"

"I'm sorry. Force of habit. It's what I do."

"I'm not objecting. I think it all sounds great. All I ask is you let me pick my own dress."

He smiled and kissed her hand. "I think I could agree to that."

They enjoyed their meal but Chloe could tell they both wanted to get back to their room as quick as possible. She turned her head when she heard a familiar laugh. “What the...?” She angled her head to get a better look. “I don’t believe it.” She slipped out of her chair and headed toward a table of women.

Peter immediately followed. “Where are you going?”

Chloe stopped at the table, next to a woman with a short dark bob, not unlike her own. “Stacee?”

The woman glanced up and gasped. “Chloe? Oh my God. She jumped up and gave Chloe a hug. “What are you doing here?”

She turned and smiled at Peter. “I’m here with Peter Blake, my fiancee.”

“Your fiancee!” She grabbed Chloe in a tight hug. She pulled back and smiled. “Sebastian was SO not worthy of you.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Sorority reunion.” She looked at the table of women who ranged from polite smile to broad grin. Obviously not everyone at the table liked jazz.

“Oh, right, you mentioned that. “Go Longhorns.”

All the women at the table covered their two middle fingers with their thumbs and extended their two remaining fingers. “Go Longhorns,” they chorused.

“So introduce me,” said Stacee.

“Peter, this is Dr. Stacee Hawkins. She’s the best trauma surgeon in LA. We became friends after I’d done a few fundraisers for her hospital.”

“Well, not exactly for me,” Stacee smiled. “Marina is a little hard to say no to.”

“Marina?” asked Peter.

“Sokolov.” Chloe continued the introductions while Peter stood with his mouth open. “You know Marina Sokolov?” he whispered.

“Later,” she replied. “How is Derek?”

“Busy as always.”

Chloe turned back to Peter. “Stacee’s married to Derek Brown, the best orthopedic surgeon in LA.”

“Wow. That must keep you busy,” he said.

“We manage to get away from time to time.”

“Introduce me to your friends.”

“Sure, She pointed to a lovely red head to her right. This is Gillian, she works for the government and won’t exactly tell us what she does.” Stacee pointed to a pretty brunette whose high cheekbones brightened her smile. “Next to her is Allie. She’s an architect. Next to her is Lynne. She’s a screenwriter. Then there’s Amber. She writes for Motor Trend. Vintage Car specialist, next to her is Cassiopeia, she’s an attorney and rounding out the crew we have Linda. She’s a photographer.” Stacee smiled and turned to Chloe. “And this is Chloe Holmes.”

“Oh I know who you are Ms. Holmes,” said Allie. “My husband and I saw you perform in Houston last year. It was a wonderful performance.”

“Why thank you, Allie. I’m so glad you enjoyed it. This is my fiance...”

“Peter Blake,” said Linda. “You own Outdoor Life. You were a big sponsor of the last World Surf League Competition.”

Peter gave the woman a lopsided smile. “I see my reputation proceeds me.”

Chloe gave Stacee another hug. “It was so good to see you again. I’ll be in touch soon.”

Peter found the waiter and signed for the bill. Chloe spotted him nodding toward Stacee’s table. He took her hand and walked toward the elevator. As soon as the elevator door closed he pulled her close and gave her a deep kiss. “Ummmmm. I’ve been waiting for that.” He slipped a curl behind her ear. “So, you know Marina Sokolov?” She pushed him back. “Yes, smart ass. I know Marina.”

“First name basis, wow?” he grinned. He raised his eyebrow. “Do you think she’d come to the wedding?”

She put her hands on her hips. Yes, I think she might. I think she’d bring her Marine Colonel husband and her four kids. I bet Sadie and Riley would get on great.”

“Four kids?”

“Don’t forget the Marine husband. Big arms. Built like a brick bunker.” Chloe tried not to laugh when his attitude changed.

“How did you know how he’s built?”

“Pool party. Great ink.”

He turned toward the elevator and crossed his arms over his chest. “Humph.”

Chloe waited until the doors opened until she started laughing. “Okay, admit it. You had that coming.”

Peter opened their door and smiled. “Yeah. I guess I did.” He closed the doors and she slipped her arms around his waist.

“You picked up their check, didn’t you?”

He smiled and gave her a kiss. “Why are we talking about other people?”

“I don’t know.”

“You realize we became engaged today.”

She looked at her finger and smiled. “I’m aware.”

“Don’t you think we should be doing something to celebrate?”

She gave him a sly smile. “We had champagne, a nice dinner. I’d call that celebrating.”

Peter scooped her up in his arms. “We can do better.” He stripped her clothes from her body in record time.

“What the?” she asked.

“I’ve been wanting you naked for hours. I plan on keeping you that way for hours.”

Chloe giggled. “Oh, I like this plan.”

Peter pulled off his clothes. He covered her body with his and began nipping at her ear. “Brick bunker, huh.”

She pushed up on his shoulders. “Oh for God’s sake. Mr. Blake would you like me to make an inventory of your physical characteristics that I find particularly fascinating?”

He rolled on his shoulder and smiled. “You know, I think I would.”

“Fine.” She rolled up on her shoulder and faced him. “The first thing I noticed about you were your eyes. Even though I could only see by moonlight, I could see your eyes were the most beautiful shade of blue I’d ever scene. When you stood to talk to me you didn’t talk down to me even though you have at least five inches on me. I’d never impulsively kissed anyone like I did that night but your lips...”

“My lips?”

She ran her finger over his lower lip. “I just needed to kiss you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Hush, I’m not done.”

“My apologies, please continue.”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about that kiss.” Then Mark Brown asked me to sing. “I knew I hadn’t ever sung it as well as I did that night. All because of one little kiss. Then I ran into you again and it was New Years, and you kissed me again. Boy, can you kiss. I thought my heart would pound out of my chest. When you took me in your arms to dance, I could feel how strong your chest is. I didn’t want the music to stop.”

“Wow, Chloe, I...”

“Not done. When you showed up in jeans and the cowboy hat I wanted you right there. My God man, you look amazing in a pair of jeans. It was all I could do not to grab your ass right there.”

Peter laughed.

“I’m serious.” She leaned close and whispered, “Peter Blake you have a first class ass.”

“Wow. As much as I’m enjoying this conversation and plan on detailing your many fine physical qualities. It’s really not possible right now. He pushed her on her back. “I need you, Chloe.”

“I’m yours. From now on.”

Chloe looked at her ring as Peter navigated the road. Their trip had been great fun. His meeting today hadn't taken as long as the previous meeting. They'd had time for a lovely dinner before the flying back to Clear Lake. They were going back to Peter's so they could have one more night to themselves before they saw their families.

He reached for her hand. "Did you have a good time?"

"I had a wonderful time."

"I did feel guilty about leaving you alone during the meetings."

"Don't worry. I ran up your tab at the spa."

Peter looked at her and smiled.

And then the world exploded. An airbag blew up in her face. The car spun and glass flew. She thought she was screaming for Peter but she wasn't sure. The spinning stopped and she tried move but she couldn't. She couldn't move, she couldn't speak, she couldn't see. The last thing she remembered before passing out was the sound of police sirens.

Peter tried to open both his eyes, but he was only successful opening one. “Chloe,” he said. “Chloe, answer me.”

“Take it easy, buddy. The EMT’s are almost here.”

“Chloe!” he screamed.

“You need to calm down. I checked her pulse but I can’t move either of you until the fire department cuts you out.”

“Someone hit us.”

“I know. He’s laying on the road.”

Peter tried to move against the steering wheel that had him pinned. “Bastard. I’ll kill him.”

“No need. He’s dead.”

He turned and looked at the cop. “I wasn’t speeding. He hit us.”

“I believe you. I know the guy. Arrested him myself for DUI at least three times.” Peter closed his one good eye against the flashing lights of the fire truck. “Can you tell me your name?” asked the cop.

He tried to turn his head toward the cop. “Peter. Peter Blake.” He thought he heard the man gasp.

“And your passenger?”

“My fiance, Chloe Holmes.”

“Holy shit,” the cop said.

Peter saw a yellow mass head toward him. “Okay sir, let’s get you out of here.”

“Chloe. Get her first.”

“My partners are working on her. Let me get you out.”

“Leave me. Get her out,” he yelled.

Peter felt a gloved hand on his shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Peter."

"Peter, try and look at me. He opened his good eye and saw a surprisingly young man looking at him. "Peter, my name is Grant. I promise we will get you both out of here but there is a certain way we have to do this to minimize the danger to both of you. You need to trust me."

Something about this young man told him he would keep his promise. "Okay," he whispered just before passing out.

He woke to blinding light and noise. He looked up and saw cheap acoustical tile. He heard people talking and looked around as best he could.

"Welcome back, Mr. Blake," said a woman in blue scrubs. "I'm Dr. Touma. We're about to send you up to X-ray."

"Chloe?"

"She's being taken care of."

"I need to see her. I'm not going anywhere until I see her."

"Very well," she put her hand on Peter's shoulder. "But you need to prepare yourself. Ms. Holmes is in critical condition."

"Take me to her now!"

Dr. Touma nodded to the nurses who'd been setting Peter's IV so he could be moved. The nurse pushed him down two cubicles and pushed the curtain aside. There were twice the number of people working on Chloe. Her face was so swollen, no one but Peter would have recognized her.

"Get me near her." He looked up at the nurse and realized he was barking orders. "Please, ma'am. Please let me touch her." She smiled and nodded.

"Dr. Cooper, he's the patient's fiance. Can we let them have a moment?"

“Just a moment. We’re about to move her to ICU.” said the doctor.

“How is she?”

“You can have a moment but all medical information has to go through her family.”

Peter closed his one good eye and took a breath. Losing control now would do no one any good. “Her family is local. Her twin brother is Quincy Holmes.”

“Both of your families have been notified,” said his nurse. “I’m sure they’ll be here by the time you get back from X-ray.”

He looked up at her and smiled. “Thank you.” He nodded toward Chloe. “Please?” His nurse maneuvered the gurney so his head was close to Chloe. He reached for her hand. “Chloe, sweetheart, it’s me. I’m here baby. We’re going to get through this. But you have to fight. You hear me, baby? You have to fight. If we’re going to have that summer wedding, you have to fight.” He moved his head as close to her as he could and whispered, “I love you, Chloe. Fight for me.” He felt a slight pressure on his hand. “Chloe? Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand.” He felt the slightest pressure as her hand moved. He looked up at her doctor. “Did you see that? Her hand moved. That’s good, right.”

“Yes, Mr. Blake. That’s very good. It means she’s aware. Now please let me take care of her.”

“Okay.” He leaned close to Chloe. “I have to go for X-rays but I’ll never be far away. I’m not going anywhere without you.” He saw a tear run down her cheek as she squeezed his hand one more time.

“I really have to get you to X-ray,” said his nurse. She pulled him out of the exam room into the hallway just as Quincy and Caroline ran down the hallway.

“Peter, Oh my God, what happened?” asked Quincy.

“Drunk driver hit us. They won’t give me specifics on her condition because we aren’t married yet.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get all the information for you.”

“I really need to get him to X-ray,” said his nurse.

“One more thing,” said Peter.

“My God, are you always this much of a pain in the ass?” asked the nurse.

He managed a small smile. “Always.” He turned back to Quincy. “When we were in Dallas she ran into a friend from LA, Stacey Hawkins. She said she’s the best trauma surgeon in LA. Get Chloe’s phone. She might have her number. Maybe she can help.”

“Now, He’s going to X-ray.” The nurse pushed him toward the elevator. “You know Dr. Stacey Hawkins?”

“You know who she is?”

“Everyone in trauma care knows who she is.”

Chloe tried to open her eyes but couldn't. Her head felt like it was going to explode. She tried to remember what happened. Dallas, Peter, getting engaged, the accident. She remembered his voice after the accident, at least she thought she did. She rubbed her left thumb against her ring finger but felt nothing.

"My ring," she whispered.

"Chloe?"

She thought she heard her brother. "Quince?"

"It's me, squirt. I'm here." He carefully took her hand. "Squirt, you had us so worried."

"My ring," she repeated. "Where's my ring?"

"I have it," said Caro. "They had to take you to surgery and so they gave us your valuables. It's safe."

Her mind began to clear. Surgery, the accident. Peter saying he wouldn't go far. Peter! She tried to sit up "Peter," she tried to speak but her voice sounded strange to her ears. "Where?"

"He's in surgery right now."

"Oh, God, Peter," she started to weep.

Quincy reached for her hand. "You're both going to be fine. We've got the best doctors for you."

"Well that's very nice of you to say," said a familiar voice. "And accurate."

Chloe tried to focus on the white coat that had entered the room. "Stacey?"

"The one and only. I was already back in LA when your brother called. Peter sent a jet for me and Derek. He's the one putting Peter's leg back together."

"Thank you," she whispered.

“No problem. Never flew in a private jet before. It was cool.” She pulled out a penlight and tried looking in her eyes. “Okay you’re alert enough for me to give you the pain med I’m sure you desperately want. I’m going to fill your family in on your condition.”

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“You’ll never remember.” She pulled a syringe out of her pocket and inserted it into the tube.

“Peter. I want Peter.”

“Squirt, please calm down.”

“No, I need Peter.”

Stacee looked around the large private room. As soon as the word got out that Chloe Holmes was in Clear Lake hospital in critical condition, the hoards descended. That necessitated them moving her to a secure location. There were two security guards on the floor twenty four seven.

They’d moved her to the largest room on the top floor. Despite the machines there was still enough room for another bed. “I think we can work something out.” She looked at Chloe. “Have you been hanging out with the Gallos?” Chloe was already asleep. Stacee indicated they should step outside in the hall. “She may be asleep but I don’t want her remembering bits and pieces. She led them to a conference room and Quincy and Caro took seats. “Okay, here’s what’s going on. First thing I want to tell you is she’s not out of danger but I’d say her odds are very good. She has a fractured skull and a concussion. The facial injuries and swelling will heal on their own. She has a broken right arm and multiple rib fractures. The rib fractures punctured her lungs so she’s going to have breathing issues. I’ve repaired the holes surgically but I had to go down her throat with large tubes to do it. These injuries will heal. There is one thing that does concern me. She has a fractured larynx. Between that and the work we had to do to fix her lungs...”

“Oh God,” said Caro. “She might not be able to sing again.”

“It is a real possibility.”

“She might be facing a lot of emotional fallout from this. I met Peter in Dallas. He seems like a good guy and he was obviously crazy about her.”

“He is a good guy,” said Quincy. “The family is very happy about it.”

“Good because she’s going to need all the support she can get.”

“How’s Peter?”

“Since you’re not family yet I can’t give you the details but I can tell you my husband is the best orthopedic surgeon in LA.”

“Your husband?” asked Quincy

“Derek Brown. I wasn’t sure what I was facing with Chloe and he volunteered to come along. I’m glad he did.” She stood adjusted her jacket. “I’m going to get some rest and I suggest you get some too. We’re in for a long haul here.” Stacey left the room.

“She right, Caro. Why don’t you lay down on the couch. I’m sure I could get you a pillow and blanket.”

“Okay. I am a bit tired.”

He went out to the hall and as he came back with a pillow and blanket from the nurses station he saw two people approach him. The woman was a petite Vietnamese woman but there was no mistaking the man. He was the spitting image of his son. “Mr. and Mrs. Blake?”

“Yes. They told us to come up here. I’m Joe and this is my wife Thuy.”

Quincy extended his hand. “I’m sorry to meet you under this condition. Why don’t you join us in here. My wife needs to rest.” He turned to the nurses station. “These are Mr. Blake’s parents. We’ll be in the conference room. Could you let us know when they bring Mr. Blake back from surgery?” The nurse smiled and nodded and Quincy made a mental note to send them flowers or maybe a muffin basket. He led them into the conference room and introduced Caro to the Blakes.

“How is Peter?” she asked. “They won’t tell us because we’re not family.”

Thuy sat down next to Caro and patted her hand. "Not yet."

"They say his right leg is badly broken. They are putting him back together now. Apparently Chloe knows some pretty big wigs in LA."

"She does a lot of charity work for their hospital."

"How's Chloe?"

"She's pretty badly hurt. Broken arm and ribs, Punctured lungs, fractured skull. She's got a lot of healing to do. She's resting now. I think once they're done working on Peter they are going to put him in the same room with her." Quincy looked at his watch. "I'm wondering if I could ask you a favor. I need to get to the airport to meet my brother's plane. Would you please stay with Caro until I get back?"

"That won't be necessary. Peter called his number two man, Tony Varcos from the ER. He arranged for the doctors to be flown in from LA and he found out when your brother and his fiance are arriving. They will be met by a driver."

Quincy sighed with relief and leaned against the table. "Thank you."

Caro came to his side. "Sweetheart?" Quincy burst into tears and sobbed into his wife's shoulder. He pulled away and wiped his eyes with his hands.

"I'm sorry."

Joe Blake put his arm around Quincy's shoulder. "No need to apologize. No need at all."

"Thank you," he whispered. "Chloe and I are close."

Caro smiled. "They're twins."

Peter tried to move but he wanted to scream. The pain was awful. His head and his leg felt like they were on fire. He opened his eyes and looked to his left. Chloe was in the next bed. She was asleep, thank God. If she was in as much pain as he was, sleep was the best thing she could hope for. He tried to move and his leg and shouted. "Shit!"

"Peter, language!"

"Mom?"

"I'm here, baby."

"Dad?"

"Right here, son."

He turned his head despite the pain and saw Chloe. "Tell me. How is she?"

"It's going to be rough for her. She has a fractured skull, a broken arm and had multiple broken ribs and punctured lungs." He paused and looked over at Chloe.

"Tell me, Dad. What is it?"

He lowered his voice. "She has a fractured larynx. It may affect her singing."

"Oh God, no."

"She doesn't know yet," he whispered. Joe stood straighter. "I promised to get her family when you woke up."

"Dad, they're going to hate me."

"Why? They know the accident wasn't your fault. The guy who hit you had a blood alcohol three times the legal limit. The police have already closed the case."

His Mom took his hand. "I think they want to thank you for what you did. You got the doctors from LA and you made sure Tony took care of everything. You did what you do son, you took care of your loved ones." He leaned over and kissed his son's forehead. "I'm very proud of you."

His father left the room and came back with Chloe's brothers. "How are you feeling?" asked John.

"Like shit."

He looked over at his mother who smiled instead of chastising him she stood. "I'll go tell the nurse you're awake and see if you can get something for the pain."

"I'm so sorry, guys."

"Nothing was your fault. We wanted to thank you for bringing in the doctors. I thought the doctors here would have their noses out of joint but they didn't. They said Hawkins and Brown are a world famous team. They turned it into a teaching experience. Other surgeons watched from the gallery."

His mother returned with the nurse who had a syringe. "Hello Mr. Blake. Let me check your vitals before I give you your pain med." She checked his pressure and temperature. "Dr. Brown will be in later to check on you." She injected the syringe into the IV and he could feel the warmth run up his arm to his brain.

"Tony, is Tony here?" he asked.

"He's been here the whole time. He's been wonderful, making arrangements, taking care of the press."

"The press. I need to talk to him."

"You should rest now," said Thuy.

"Please, it's important."

"I'll find him," said Joe as he left the room.

He heard a scratchy voice. "Peter?"

He looked over and saw his beautiful Chloe battered and bruised. "Hey baby, I'm here."

He looked at her brothers. "Can you push me closer?"

John nodded. "Quince, pull that side table out." Quincy pushed the nightstand to the opposite corner of the room. Peter's machines were on the left side of the bed, Chloe's were on the right.

"Let us know if we're hurting you," said Quincy.

They pushed the beds together and Peter slipped his hand through both guard rails, taking Chloe's hand in his. "I'm here, baby."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Peter managed a smile. "I'm okay, baby. How are you doing?"

"It hurts."

"I'll get the nurse," said Quincy. He came back with the nurse and she gave Chloe an injection.

"What is going on with the beds?" asked the nurse.

"Please, it makes us both feel better," said Peter.

The nurse nodded. "You should be asleep. I gave you enough painkiller to knock you out."

"I need to see someone first."

"Well, they better hurry. You won't be able to fight it for long."

His mother snickered. "You don't know my son."

Joe came back in with Tony who looked like he hadn't slept in two days. "Hey dude," said Tony. "You look like crap."

"It's a matched set. I feel like crap. They gave me something so I don't have long. First, thanks for taking care of everything. Getting the doctors, here..."

"You know I'll do anything you need."

"I want you to make the announcement today."

"You don't need to think about this now."

“It’s already done but if the shareholders think the CEO is incapacitated they could panic and sell.”

“What are you talking about, son,” asked John.

“I resigned as CEO.”

Chloe’s eyes flew open. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m forty five and I’ve spent my life building a business. Now it’s time to build a life.”

“Is it because of me?”

“No, sweetheart, it’s not. I’ve been thinking about doing it for about a year.”

“How could you not tell me?”

“I’ll answer that,” said Tony. “It’s insider trading. If word got out before it was official it could cause a run on the stock.” He turned toward Peter. “I’ll call a press conference. Chloe’s family should probably issue a statement too.”

John stood. “You’re right. Best to get the correct information out there.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Quincy.

Tony took Peter’s hand in his. Peter could see he was fighting back tears. “I’ve got this, boss. You two get some sleep.”

Peter smiled and finally closed his eyes. “I’m not the boss anymore.”

John and Quincy decided to leave talking to the press to Tony. They told him what they wanted disclosed and what they wanted kept private. They sat on either side of him as they waited for reporters to calm down. It was an interesting mix of entertainment and financial reporters.

“Alright everyone, let’s get started. My name is Tony Varcos and I’m here to update you on the condition of Peter Blake and Chloe Holmes. Ms. Holmes has been upgraded to serious but stable condition. Mr. Blake is in stable condition. They were driving home two nights ago when they were struck by a drunk driver. The driver of the other car died at the scene.

“Are charges going to be filed?” a reporter interrupted.

“Please hold your questions but, no charges will be filed. The driver of the other car had a blood alcohol level three times the legal limit.

“Will Mr. Blake be able to continue as CEO of Outdoor Life in his condition?”

“At the last meeting of the board of Outdoor Life, Mr. Blake announced he is stepping down as CEO.” Half the reporters started shouting questions. “Please hold your questions. At that meeting I was installed as the new CEO. Peter Blake still remains the primary shareholder. I’ve worked with Peter for twenty years and am proud,” Tony paused to control his emotions. “I’m proud to call him my friend. I’ve learned from him and will be carrying his vision for Outdoor Life into the future.”

A reporter John recognized from an entertainment show jumped to her feet. “What was Chloe Holmes doing in the car?”

“During the their trip to Dallas, Peter and Ms. Holmes became engaged.”

“What about Sebastian Hood?”

“I am told by Ms. Holmes brothers that Sebastian Hood was terminated months ago as her manager.”

“That’s not what he’s saying?” said the reporter.

Quincy half stood from his chair. “What do you mean, what he’s saying?”

The woman pointed over her shoulder. “He’s out in the hall giving an interview.”

Quincy pushed his chair back and headed for the door. John could only try to catch him. Just outside the conference room they saw a small cluster of reporters around the perfectly groomed Sebastian Hood holding a bouquet of roses.

“Yes, I’m on my way to see my dear Chloe. The poor thing.”

“Hood,” Quincy growled. “You aren’t getting anywhere near our sister.” He spotted a security guard and flagged him over. “Please make sure he’s escorted out of the building.”

“I don’t know who you think you are Holmes, but I’ve come a long way to see Chloe.”

“She fired you months ago.”

Hood shrugged. “Artists are temperamental. She’ll get over it. She’s nothing without me.”

“That’s tears it,” said Quincy as he lunged for Hood but John stopped him.

“No, Quince.” John put his hand on Quincy’s chest. He turned and smiled at Hood and said “Allow me.” Dr. John Holmes, PHD, lauded academic, flattened him with one punch. He leaned down and whispered to the bleeding man. “You come anywhere near our sister and I won’t stop him next time.”

Quincy smiled and patted John on the back as they walked down the hall. “Didn’t think you had it in you, old man.”

“Old man, my ass,” he laughed. “Let’s go check in with Chloe before they come for me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I just belted a guy in front of cameras and a security.”

“John, this is Texas. You were defending your sister. Nobody’s going to come for you.”

Chloe loved her family but was glad when everyone finally went home. She didn't know how Peter had arranged for them both to be in the same room but she was glad for it. She was so tired, and she hurt so much. She had to struggle just to breathe, let alone talk. Getting comfortable seemed to be completely out of the question.

"How are you doing?" asked Peter.

"I'm fine."

"Liar."

"I feel like crap."

"Well you look much better," he said with a less than convincing smile.

"Now's who's the liar?"

He reached for her hand. "I do mean it, Chloe. I didn't know when they pulled you out of the car if you were still alive. It felt like forever before they told me they had a pulse."

She reached for his hand. "It's okay, babe," she whispered. "I'm okay."

"You're lying again. Don't lie to me, Chloe. I was here when they told you about your voice. I'm so sorry."

"Wasn't your fault, drunk" she said, conserving what voice she could manage.

"I didn't see him coming. I should have seen him."

Now she really felt like crap because tears were running down Peter's face. "Not your fault. Don't blame you."

"I blame me."

“Well knock it off,” she said with surprising vehemence. He wiped his face and smiled.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, Get over yourself, Blake. You didn’t do this to us. A drunk did. Arrested?”

Pete’s smile faded. “Dead. He was killed on the scene. He had multiple DUI’s.”

“Police?”

“The case was closed. He had blood alcohol three times the legal limit.” Chloe sat back against her bed and stared ahead. “I know,” said Peter. “Somehow that doesn’t make it better.”

A bright sprite of a girl came into their room with an enthusiasm that was nearly painful. “Hi, I’m Dawn. I’ll be your night nurse. What ever you need, just press your buttons.” She moved around the room first checking Peter’s machines, then his vitals. “Looking good, Mr. Blake. I still can’t believe you got them to agree to this setup.” She smiled at the beds being close together.

“That was Dr. Hawkins,” He smiled and reached for Chloe’s hand. “But I’m all for it.”

“Down boy,” said Dawn. “Ms. Holmes’ needs her rest.”

“Chloe,” she whispered.

“Thanks, Chloe,” Dawn said awkwardly as she checked her machines. “I’m a big fan. And now I’m a big fan of your brother.”

“Brother?”

“It’s all over the news.”

Chloe bolted upright and immediately regretted it for the pain. “What happened to my brother?”

“What did Quincy do?” said Peter.

Chloe shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Not Quincy, the one with the glasses.”

“John?” they both asked.

“It’s all over the news.” Dawn grabbed the remote and started flipping channels. It wasn’t long before they found a clip of John flooring Sebastian. “Apparently the guy on the floor said he was your manager and wanted to see you. Your brother John convinced him what a bad idea that was.”

“Is John in trouble?”

“He was defending his baby sister. This is Texas, honey. They’re more likely to throw him a parade.”

Peter smiled. “Well how about that? John.”

Chloe managed a smile. She could always count on her brothers but it had always been her twin, Quincy, who was the most protective.

“Okay, med time, so say your good nights because after I give you these shots you’ll both be down for the count.”

Peter leaned toward her and gave her a kiss. “Good night, sweetheart.”

“Good night.”

Dawn injected a syringe into Chloe’s IV and her eyes fluttered closed. “You love her a lot,” said Dawn as she injected another syringe into Peter’s IV.

“More than I could ever say.”

Whoever thought you could rest in a hospital was sadly mistaken. Peter and Chloe had been in the hospital for four days. Peter tried to get rest when he could but there were a constant barrage of tests and the beginnings of therapy. Dr. Hawkins had pronounced Chloe healthy enough to eat solid food, which made her a little less cranky, but only a little less. Today would be their last visits from Brown and Hawkins before they flew back to LA.

“Do you think they’ll let us go home soon?” asked Chloe.

“God I hope so. This is a good hospital and the staff is great but I really want to sleep in my own bed.”

“I want to sleep in your bed too.”

He smiled at the first sounds of his girl coming back to him. He reached over and gave her a kiss just as Hawkins and Brown walked into the room. “Well, somebody’s feeling better,” said Stacey.

“Hi Dr. Hawkins, said Chloe.

“Please, call me Stacey. Okay. We’ll start with you. The news is good. You were in excellent health before the accident so you are recovering better than I expected.” She opened Chloe’s gown and Peter tried to hold in a gasp of surprise. He knew she most of her stitches were internal but Chloe’s bruises were still dark purple. He glanced over at Dr. Brown who was keeping himself busy looking at Peter’s stitches. He was trying to give Chloe as much privacy as he could and Peter respected him for it.

“What do you think, Dr. Brown?”

“The name’s Derek. I would say your right leg would have been toast if you hadn’t called Stacey.”

Peter gasped. "Wow. You don't believe in false modesty"

"It's something I learned from my wife." He glanced at Stacey and smiled, then went back to examining his work. "I don't know a half back from a forward but I know how to piece people back together."

"Football and Soccer," he gasped as Derek manipulated his leg.

"What?"

"One was football position, the other was a soccer position."

"See what I mean? Your leg is healing well but you are going to have some wicked PT ahead of you. I'm going to leave some instructions for you and for your local doctor and your therapist. Follow my instructions to the letter or you'll be limping for the rest of your life."

"You don't sugar coat things do you?"

"Would you want me to?"

"Maybe a little," he smiled.

"You're going to marry a beautiful woman."

Peter gave him broad smile. "That'll do nicely, thanks." He looked over at Chloe just as Stacey tied up her gown.

"Just like your handsome fella, you are recovering well but you will need to put in the work. Respiratory therapists are going to work you like mad. Do what they tell you."

"What about my voice," she asked.

"I can't say for sure. You have a fractured larynx. It needs to heal. I can't tell whether you'll be able to sing like you used to or at all. Don't push it too soon. I can tell you that your best chance is put in the work."

Peter could see the look on Chloe's face. He'd do anything to make it better for her. "When can we get released?"

“Chloe will need a couple of more days,” said Stacee.

“You should be able to go in a day or so,” said Derek.

“No,” said Peter.

“No?” asked Derek.

“Chloe and I are a team. I don’t go anywhere without her.” He didn’t care what the doctors thought. The small smile he got from Chloe told him it was the right decision.

“Okay, well that’s it for the two of us. We fly out tonight,” said Derek. “Thanks for the use of the jet on the way back.”

Peter extended his hand. “Thank you, both of you.”

Stacee smiled and put her hand on Chloe’s shoulder. “You’re very welcome. Your local doctors and therapists will be keeping us up to date so don’t make us come back here and kick ass.”

Derek grinned, “Seriously, you never want her to do that. It’s not pretty.”

Chloe looked at the meal they'd brought her and pushed it aside. "Ugh. I hate hospital food."

"Sweetheart, you have to eat something," said Peter.

"I know it's just..." she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Caro stuck her head in the door. "Is everyone decent?"

"Yes, Caro, we're decent."

Caro came in carrying a large thermal bag followed by a quiet Mary. "I see we're just in time. Mary, take away those lunch trays." Mary moved quickly and took the trays out to the hallway.

"Oh is that your Mari's Gold pasta?" asked Peter.

"For heaven's sake no. You're both only a few days out from surgery. Don't worry, I checked with your doctors. This is my home made chicken soup and some fresh rolls." Caro set out bowls and poured out the hot soup in each bowl. She set the bowls in front of each of them along with some hot rolls and butter.

Peter took a sip and rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, Caro. This is delicious."

"Pasta sauce isn't the only thing she's great at. Caro you are a godsend. This is delicious." said Chloe as she took another sip of her soup. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine so long as I keep moving."

"And cooking," Peter smiled.

"That too. Don't eat too fast. You don't want to get sick." Caro reached into her bag and handed Mary some money. "You and your brother please go down to the café and get two large ginger ales."

"Thank you, Mary. That would taste great," said Chloe.

"You're welcome. Mom, what do we do with Sadie?"

"Sadie's here?" asked Chloe.

“Yes. She was very insistent.” Caro looked at Chloe. “She says she needs to see you.”

“I look awful. I’ll scare her.”

“You don’t look awful and she understands what happened to you.”

“I would love to see her.”

Caro looked at Mary. “Okay, send her in here before you two get the ginger ales.”

A minute after Mary left the room the door open and little Sadie June stuck her head in. Her looked like a miniature version of her mother, with perfectly curled hair and flower printed dress under her jacket. She was also carrying one of her teddy bears who also happened to be wearing a flowered dress. “Hi Aunt Chloe. Hi Uncle Peter.”

“Hi, angel,” said Chloe.

“Hello Miss Sadie,” said Peter. “I’m sorry I haven’t been able to keep my promise about your hat.”

“That’s okay. I understand. You guys got hurt in the car.”

“That’s right. We did.” Sadie walked over to Peter’s side and then looked at Caro. “Mommy, I can’t reach Uncle Peter to give him a kiss.”

Caro bit back a grin as she picked Sadie up and she leaned in to kiss Peter’s cheek. “Does it hurt, Uncle Peter?”

“It does a little, but they’re giving me medicine for it.”

She nodded and smiled. “That’s good.” She looked at Caro. “Now I need to talk to Aunt Chloe.” Caro set her down and she walked to the side of Chloe’s bed. “Can I sit with you?”

“I think that would be okay.” Chloe scooted closer toward Peter. If she hadn’t gotten a pain shot thirty minutes before, this would have been impossible. Caro carefully set Sadie next to her in the bed. Sadie looked very serious. “I know you’re upset. I heard the grownups.”

“Sadie!” said Caro.

“Mommy, I did. I heard you and Daddy talking. You said you were very worried about Aunt Chloe. You said she was really upset because she may not be able to sing again. Chloe was stunned and didn’t know what to say. All she knew was she didn’t want to cry. She looked at Caro for guidance but she looked as shocked as Chloe felt.

“It’s true, Sadie. You can hear my voice is scratchy. It may not get better.”

“But that’s okay. You’re still Aunt Chloe.”

“I might not be able to sing again.”

“That doesn’t mean you stop being Aunt Chloe. I’ll still love you,” she said giving her a delicate hug as if she’d been warned not to hold her too hard.

Chloe looked at Peter who smiled. “She’s right,” he whispered.

“I love you too, angel. So much.”

Sadie sat back and handed her the teddy bear. “This is why I brought you Sugar Bear. Uncle John sent her to me when I was sick.” She sat the bear in the crook of Chloe’s arm. “I held her real tight when I didn’t feel good and she made me feel better. You can also tell her stuff. She’s real good at keeping secrets.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. She keeps all your secrets and that’s important when you have three snoopy brothers and a snoopy sister.”

“I don’t think your father and Uncle John will hear my secrets.”

Sadie looked over at Peter and then back at Chloe. “You never know when you might need to tell Sugar Bear something.”

“Aren’t you going to need her?”

“No. We had a chat and she understands. You need her now.”

Chloe held her as tight as she could and kissed the top of her head. "Thank you, Sadie. I think Sugar Bear will be a great help to me."

Sadie smiled and spoke with only the conviction a five year old could have. "Of course she will. It's what she does."

Mary and Michael returned with the sodas. Michael handed his to Peter and he took a sip. "Oh, thank you. That's really good."

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"I'm feeling better now for this and the good food your Mom brought. Thank you for coming. And I think it's okay if you call me Uncle Peter. Sadie already is."

Mary handed her soda to Chloe and she took a drink. "Thank you so much, Mary. That hits the spot."

"You're welcome Aunt Chloe."

Chloe could tell of every one of her family, Mary was the most nervous around her and she suddenly knew why. "Sadie, you know I think they have a playroom at the end of the hall. Michael, could you take Sadie to the playroom few minutes?"

"Sure thing Aunt Chloe. Come on, squirt."

Chloe smiled at Michael's use of his father's nickname for her. "Mary, come over here." She took Mary's hand in hers. "Peter, you don't know this but Mary has a beautiful voice."

"I'm not like you."

"I told you this before. You're not me, you're you. You're terrific. I want you to promise me something. No matter what happens for me, don't you dare stop singing."

"I just do it for fun. It's not serious like you."

"Yes it is Mary, and you know how I know?" Mary shook her head. "When we sing together you get the look. The same one I get. It takes you to another place, the place where you're unique and completely you."

Mary nodded as the tears rolled down her cheeks. "I want to sing with you again but I don't want you to feel bad if you can't."

"Mary Holmes, I want you to listen to me. I will only feel bad if you give up singing. Promise me you won't quit."

"I promise," she whispered.

"Good. Now give me a kiss and go join your brother and sister while I finish this excellent meal."

Mary kissed her cheek whispered a quick, "Bye Uncle Peter," and walked out the door

Caro stared at the closed door. "I swear I don't know my own children."

"Yes you do. They're just growing up."

Caro shook her head as if she was trying to clear her mind of the confusion. "Okay, you two take your time eating. When Quincy, John and Mari come later they will pick up the dishes."

"Thank you, Caro. We really appreciate it," said Chloe.

"Would they be bringing more of your food?" asked Peter. Caro and Chloe looked at him like he'd spoken a different language. "Sorry, my bad. Thank you for the food, Caro. It really is delicious. But please don't work too hard."

She kissed Peter's cheek. "I'm never more relaxed than when I'm cooking. Try and get some rest," she said as she closed the door behind her.

"Wow, your family is really something," said Peter.

Chloe held Sugar Bear against her trying to hide her tears. "Yes, they are."

Chloe glanced over to see Peter dozing. She held tight onto Sugar Bear. "What am I supposed to do? She whispered into the bear's ear. If I can't sing what do I do? It's all I am. It's all I've been. Now what?" She looked into the bear's dark eyes as if she was supposed to have her answers. She put the bear aside when she heard a knock at the door.

Quincy stuck his head in. "Can we come in?"

"Sure," she said as she reached for Peter's hand. "Company," she whispered.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you?"

Peter spotted a new thermal bag. "If that's your wife's cooking you are forgiven."

Quincy walked in followed by John and Mari. Quincy set the thermal bag down and gave his sister a kiss. Then he shook Peter's hand. Mari gave Chloe and Peter both a kiss. John tried to give Chloe a quick kiss but she pulled him back.

"Come here you." She gave him as tight hug as she dared.

"You know," he said.

"Everyone knows. You were all over the news."

John started raising his voice. "He was trying to get to see you. He was pretending like you were still a couple." Mari grabbed his arm.

"Calm down, babe."

"I was good until he said you were nothing without him. That's when I hit him. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

Chloe smiled. "Embarrassed me. She pulled him into a hug. "You're my big brother. You were looking out for me."

Peter extended his hand to John. "I appreciate it too. I'm not exactly in a position to defend her."

"Hey, both of you," said Chloe. "I'm pretty capable of taking caring of myself. I've been doing it for a long time."

Peter took her hand. "But you do have to do it alone anymore."

Chloe looked at John's face and knew she had to let him off the hook. "No I don't. I've got my badass brother John."

"Ha," he laughed. "I don't know about that."

"I'd call you badass," said Peter. "She told me about your sculling trophies."

Chloe smiled at Peter, knowing full well, he'd called Tony Varcos and ordered every top of the line piece of sculling equipment and it would be waiting John him when he got back to Pennsylvania.

John took Chloe's hand. "Are you sure you're feeling better? We could stay a little while longer."

"No, I know you've got some grad ass frantic over covering your classes and you have to get back." She was surprised to see tears in John's eyes.

"I don't want to leave you."

"You aren't. We'll text and FaceTime and you'll come back at spring break. It's going to be a long time before Peter and I are back on our feet." She looked over at her soon to be sister in law. "Mari, promise me you'll help keep him calm."

Mari flipped her long hair over her shoulder. "I promise if you'll promise me to help with our wedding. I haven't picked out anything fancier than patterned garden gloves in decades."

"I promise. We can help each other. I'm not exactly the planning type."

Mari smiled, "That why we have..." Everyone in the room said "Caro," at the same time.

"Oh babe, you have to try this chicken. It's amazing," said Peter.

"Caro made the nutritionist crazy on what you could and could not have so close to surgery. She also made you some strawberry smoothies. They're cold and might feel good..."

“Against my throat,” said Chloe. “It’s okay, guys. You can talk about it. My voice is so quiet and raspy I sound like an obscene phone caller.”

“You do not,” said Mari.

“Yeah I do,” she replied with a false bravado. “But it might not always be that way. I have good doctors and therapists and I’ll get better.” She realized what she’d said and turned to Peter. “We both will.”

“Of course we will. Now eat your chicken before it get’s cold,” Peter replied before taking a big bite.

Chloe took a bite and smiled. It was delicious, of course. Everything Caro made was delicious. It was a perfectly seasoned chicken breast with a very light cream pasta. The smoothie was her favorite, Caro knew that. It felt great against her throat. She smiled at her family and her fiance and couldn’t wait until she could be alone in the bathroom with Sugar Bear for a good long cry.

Chloe waited until Peter was asleep before she started to walk down the hall. It took her a few minutes to learn to maneuver the IV stand, but she got the hang of it. She was allowed to walk around the hallways, in fact, she was encouraged to do so. It was supposed to be good for her. She loved Peter, with all her heart, but she needed a few minutes on her own. If she didn’t get it she thought she’d go mad. Eleven thirty at night is actually a good time to be left alone in a hospital. Most people had been given their night meds and were half asleep. The only conversations were those on talk TV. She stopped of a moment and looked at the rebroadcast of a Conan show. She smiled when she heard her own voice. She’d done the show four months ago, before Sebastian, before Peter, when she could still sing. No doubt they were running it because it was the last televised performance of her singing. Conan introduced her song and the music started. It was one of her favorites to sing, ‘Feelin’ Good’. She listened for a few moments and then tried to sing along with herself. She didn’t recognize the sound coming out of her throat. It was hoarse, scratchy, not her voice. She couldn’t push the sound out of herself no matter how hard she tried. She needed to get away. She started walking down the hall as fast as she

could. She hid her face from the few people she past. She didn't want them to see her tears. She didn't want pity. Didn't need it. She kept walking and walking. People were starting to notice her.

"Should you be down here?" asked one nurse.

"Just going for a walk," she said. Or at least she tried to say. Her voice was gone. She tried to say something else. The harder she tried, the worse it got.

"It's okay, Ms. Holmes. Just stay here. I'm going to get a chair."

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"Not unless you just put on some blue lipstick, you're not." It was the last thing Chloe heard before she passed out.

The next thing she remembered were people hovering. Why was there always someone hovering? She was so dizzy. She looked to her left and saw a panicked Peter as nurse put a nasal cannula over face.

"Chloe, talk to me," Peter called.

"Actually, she shouldn't talk. She should just concentrate on breathing," said the nurse. She moved aside as a doctor ran into the room and started listening to her chest. He had her sit up and he listened to her lungs from the back. He carefully laid her back against the bed. He looked at the machines and then looked back at her.

"Okay, Ms. Holmes. The good news is you don't have another collapse of your lungs. Your pulse ox is going back up. What happened was you pushed it too hard. You don't have the lung capacity yet. No more walks alone." Chloe nodded as the doctor put an injection in her IV tube. "This will help with the pain and help you sleep."

She waited for the team to leave before she reached for Peter's hand. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Where did you go?"

“Walk.”

“With out me?”

“You can’t,” she said, pointed to his leg.

“Neither can you,” he said. That tore it. She rolled to face the wall, grabbed Sugar Bear and held her tight. She felt his hand on her shoulder.

“Chloe, please.”

She ignored him. She wasn’t supposed to be talking anyway. She closed her eyes and pretended she was asleep until she and Sugar Bear really were asleep.

Peter stared at Chloe sleeping. She was holding tight to the teddy bear Sadie had given her. He watched her thrash back and forth as she had a nightmare. He reached his hand to hers and whispered. "Chloe" She rocked back and forth. "Chloe," he repeated.

She gasped awake. "Peter."

"I'm here, baby."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. She moved her bed upright. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," he smiled.

Chloe smiled. "No you're not. You're pale as a ghost. You don't have to pretend for me. Hit the button for your meds."

"They told me they were coming for me for my therapy. Actually, they said they were going to come for you too."

"Oh Lord. I haven't washed my hair since I got here. I look like crap."

"Chloe, we both look fantastic."

"What?"

"We're alive."

A tall, brawny man came into their room. Chloe pull her sheet up to her chest. He smiled at her and said, "I'm John and I guessing you're not Mr. Blake."

"That would be me," said Peter.

John help Peter into the wheelchair. Chloe gasped at the extent of the stitches on Peter's leg. She'd seen the bandages but she's never seen the extend of the scars. Peter looked up at her and faked a smile. It's okay baby. Dr. Brown put me back together. I just have to do the work now. He indicated to John that he should move to the side of Chloe's bed. He took her hand in his. "I'm going to be fine, baby. We both are." He gave her a quick kiss and John wheeled him down the hall.

Chloe pulled back her hospital gown and looked at her scars. They weren't nearly as bad as Peter's. She knew most of her scars were internal but she wouldn't have the external scars Peter did. What the hell was wrong with her? She needed to find out more about what happened to Peter. She pushed the button for the nurse.

A voice came over the speaker. "Yes, Ms. Holmes?"

"Is Mr. Blake's doctor available?"

"He's just finishing up his rounds. I'll ask him if he can stop by your room."

About thirty minutes later Dr. Kelton came into their room. "I thought Mr. Blake wanted to see me?"

"No, he's at therapy. I want to talk to you."

"Well, technically..."

"Doctor, we could go around and around about this. Peter and I are engaged and share the same room. You can answer my questions or you can come back when Peter is done his therapy."

"You are a force of nature, Ms. Holmes."

"Yes, I am and it's about damn time I remember that. Tell me about Peter's leg. I hadn't seen the extent of his scars until today. Will he recover the use of his leg?"

"I can tell you Dr. Brown is one of the most gifted surgeon's I've ever seen. I doubt anyone," he paused and glanced down, "even I could have saved his leg. There are no guarantees but if he does the work, I think he will make full recovery."

"You really do?" she smiled.

"He is a very determined man. I seen the reports from his therapist. He's working very hard to get better."

Chloe smiled. "I bet he is." She smiled and extended her hand. "Thank you, Doctor."

She watched Dr. Kelton leave and she looked at Sugar Bear. “What the hell is wrong with me? I have this beautiful man who loves me. I need to do better. There’s nothing to say I won’t sing again. I just have to do the work, right?” She looked at Sugar Bear who seemed to give her a look. “Don’t give me the stink eye. I’ve played sold out venues all over the world. I can do this.”

A woman came to her door with a wheelchair. “Ms. Holmes, it’s time for your therapy.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” she said. She knew her voice was scratchy and only half volume, but she’d work on it. She could do this. Peter was counting on her.

She thought the therapist would have her running scales like her singing teacher. Instead, she had her breathing into machines and it hurt like hell.

“It’s going to hurt,” said Irene. “You have stitches in there. They will dissolve eventually but in the meantime they’re going to hurt.” She reached for her hand. “I know you are used to holding a note longer than most singers. But now you have to start over. Think of yourself taking baby steps, but every step will get you further to where you want to go. It’s going to take time.”

Chloe nodded. “Okay. I’ll try and behave and limit my swearing if you promise to have ignore my diva rudeness.”

Irene held out her hand. “Deal.”

Chloe sat on the deck of Caro and Quincy's home while she watched Sadie June have a tea party with her dolls. She'd been home at Peter's for about a week, doing therapy and trying to get used to her new life. A life without music.

Her therapist would tell her to stop whining. Irene wasn't the hand holding, coddling type. She was the kick your ass, ex Marine type. The worst part wasn't the pain, The worst part was she couldn't hear the music. She could always hear the music. The ocean, the traffic, conversations, the wind. She could always hear it.

"Daddy's upset about you," said Sadie.

"Are you eavesdropping again?"

"Huh?"

"Listening to the adults when you're not supposed to."

"Oh, that. I can't help that. Daddy is worried and Mommy keeps telling him you'll be okay, it will just take time."

"Mommy's right." She moved over to a dark brown bear wearing an Aran knit sweater with patches on the elbows. "Who is this handsome fellow?"

"That's Grandpa Bear. He keeps the others in line."

"He does?"

"He's older and he knows things, so they listen to him."

"Well, that's very good. I keep meaning to bring Sugar Bear back. They must miss her."

Sadie smiled and took her hand. "No. She's yours now. You need her. They understand." She pulled Chloe to her feet. "Come with me." She led her down the steps toward the lake. "Take your shoes off. Mommy doesn't like sand in the house."

She couldn't explain why but she was following this five year old child without question. "Where are we going?"

“You ask too many questions.” Sadie took her to a spot on the jetty. “Sit here.” Chloe sat next to her on the large rock. She pointed to the water. “Look.”

“What am I looking for?”

Sadie looked at her and smiled. “Everything.”

They sat on the edge of the rock and watched the water, the birds. Sadie giggled when the water covered her toes. “It’s cold.”

Chloe dug in her feet to the sand and let the water wash over her. “Oh it is.”

“Sadie June, I’ve told you a dozen times not to go this far out.” They looked back toward the house and Caro was standing there with her hands on her hips.

“We’re in trouble.”

“You’re the grownup. You’re supposed to have my behind.”

Chloe laughed. “Your back. I have your back. Don’t worry, June Bug, I’ve got you covered.” She reached for her shoes and tumbled forward getting soaked from the waist down. Sadie laughed so hard tears ran down her face.

“Oh Aunt Chloe, you’re so funny.”

Chloe looked into Sadie’s smiling face and she knew she was going to be alright.

Peter said goodbye to his therapist and wiped his chest down with a towel. He'd never been in better shape, with the exception of his lower right leg being held together by a dozen pins. He accepted the fact that he would always set off metal detectors at airports but other than that he was determined to get his life back. His and Chloe's. They'd been home for a week and he'd arranged for the therapists come to the house. No one would know Peter if they fell over him but Chloe was a different story. He didn't want pictures or worse, videos of her trying to regain her voice showing up on the internet.

Chloe insisted he leave the house while she did her therapy and she did the same. She said she didn't want anything or anyone to distract them from getting better. He knew she would be at least another hour spending time with her nieces and nephews. Her sister in law was about five months pregnant and was a genius chef. He couldn't wait to see what care packages Caro sent home with Chloe. He should probably walk a couple more miles on the treadmill in anticipation. He looked through his favorite music for some inspiration. He looked at one disc and smiled. It was one of Chloe's. The color on the cd's cover had faded from being out of the rack so often. He hadn't been kidding Chloe when he told her she was one of his favorite artists. One of her songs had always inspired him to get moving and start his day with a smile. He put the disc in the changer and got on the treadmill. He'd set the treadmill to what he would have called laughable a month ago but his therapist said she was impressed with his progress. Who was he to argue? He hit the remote and started walking.

Birds fly high

You know how I feel

Sun in the sky

You know how I feel

Reeds driftin on by

You know how I feel

It's a new dawn

It's a new day

It's a new life

*For me
And I'm feeling good
I'm feeling good.*

Peter glanced up and saw Chloe staring at him in the mirror. He fumbled for the remote and turned off the music. He hit the button to turn off the treadmill. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I just...the song...it always inspires me."

She walked over to him frozen on the treadmill and kissed his cheek. "It's okay, babe. I'm glad you like it. I have a favor to ask."

"Anything."

"I need a piano."

Peter hadn't seen Chloe this happy since before the accident. He didn't even think she's been this happy when he proposed. Okay, maybe she was. This was more a kid-at-Christmas look. They were in a musical instrument store. She was looking around at all the pianos when the salesman approached him. He balanced on his crutches as he shook the salesman's hand.

"Hello, I'm Richard Kirby. How can I help you?"

"We are looking for a piano and my fiance has very specific taste."

Kirby saw Chloe sit down at grand piano with electronics embedded above the keys. "That's a rather elaborate model for a beginner."

Peter smiled as the he waited for Kirby to recognize one of the world's greatest jazz artists was in his store. Chloe hit a switch and turned it on to classic mode. She started quietly, then closed her eyes and dove into "An American in Paris"

"Oh my God, that's, that's..." He started to walk toward Chloe and Peter grabbed his arm.

"Yes it is, and let's not disturb her."

Chloe hit a few more keys and turned the notes from classic to electronic. She began rifting up and down the keyboards. She finished the run and turned toward Peter with a broad smile. It was then she noticed she had an audience.

"Mr. Kirby, can you give us a minute?"

"Well, I should show Ms. Holmes some of the intricacies of the instrument."

"Do you think you actually know more about music than she does?" Peter asked with a smile.

Mr. Kirby pointed to a desk. "I'll be over there."

He waited until Kirby left them alone and then sat down next to her on the bench. "What do you think?"

“This is amazing. It has everything I could want and a headphone jack so I don’t drive you nuts.”

“You know I love your music.”

“Babe, when I get in the zone, I could go eight hours without stopping.”

Peter smiled. “Headphones it is. I’ll see if he can deliver it today.”

“Wait you didn’t even look how much?” She looked at the tag under the lid. “Holy Shit.”

“What?”

“I figured it wouldn’t be cheap but this is...it’s five figures. High five figures.”

“I only have one question. Is this everything you want in a piano?” Chloe turned and touched the keyboard. That was all he needed to know. He looked over toward Kirby who was nervously twisting his pen. “We’ll take it. How soon can you deliver it? Oh, and headphones. She needs headphones.” He turned back to Chloe who’s mouth was hanging open. He smiled and closed it for her. “Go pick out what ever headphones you want.”

“Are you kidding me? Shouldn’t we discuss financing or something.”

“Nope. Remember when I told you I was pretty damn rich?”

“Yeah?”

“I still am.” He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss.

Peter was gratified that the piano was such a hit with Chloe. The problem was now he couldn't pry her away from it. She said she was working on something. What ever it was it was alternately frustrating and wonderful. He could only tell from the expression on her face. She wouldn't let him listen. She said it was in her head, she just had to get it out. She play a section and write it down on sheet music paper. Then she ball up the paper and throw it in the direction of the trash can.

Apparently whatever she was playing was working because her eyes were closed and she was smiling. He fingers were flying up and down the keys and the woman was blissed out. He hated that he had to interrupt her. He could see Irene's car coming up the drive and it was time for her therapy. He touched her shoulder.

"What? Don't interrupt." She turned back to the keys.

He took off her headphones. "Chloe Holmes I love you more than anything, more than my mother's Banh Mi, but you need to stop. Irene is about to knock on the door and it's time for your therapy."

She sighed and closed the lid over the keys. "Fine." She gave him a kiss. "Aren't you late for your parents?"

"That I am. My mother's been cooking for days. I think she's gotten into a contest with Caro. I'm going to need that treadmill just to keep the weight off."

Chloe smiled and rubbed her hand over his stomach. "You're look just fine by me, cowboy."

"Oh yeah?"

She gave him a sly smile. "You know, you haven't worn one of your hats for me lately."

He smiled and slipped into a heavier Texas drawl. "Why ma'am, I apologize for my neglect. I would like to remedy that as soon as possible."

Her smile slipped a little. "How's your leg?"

“I’m checking in with the orthopedist before I go to my parents. I’ll see what he thinks.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to the doctor.”

He tapped the piano “I haven’t been able to tell you much of anything since this thing moved in.”

“Oh, I so sorry...”

“Don’t be. You’re working and you’re happy.” He gave her a light kiss. “It’s all I want.”

Peter looked out the window and saw Irene with a woman he didn’t know. “Is Irene bringing someone?”

“That’s just Martha. She comes sometimes.” She stood and pulled him to his feet. “Now shoo.”

Irene and Martha had put her through her paces. Between that and working so hard on her music she'd pulled off her jeans and curled up in bed as soon as they'd left. She heard the lock on the door and glanced out the window realizing the sun had gone down.

"Chloe, where are you?"

"I'm in the bedroom," she said. She smiled to herself that her voice was sounding more normal to her. It wasn't as loud, but it wasn't as scratchy.

Peter walked into the bedroom and she smiled. He was so handsome and his blue eyes always made her heart race. And he was wearing a cowboy hat.

"I take it your check up went well," she said with a grin.

"To quote the doctor, my rehab is ahead of schedule and I should continue to make a full recovery" He smiled as he ran his hand around the edge of her panties.

"Food from your Mom?"

"Massive quantities all in the fridge ready to nuke."

"Excellent." She started to push him aside. "I'm starving."

"What?"

She burst into laughter at the look on his face. "You're so easy." She pulled on his shirt and pulled him down on her. "Get over here, cowboy." She barely let him take a breath before she pulled him into a passionate kiss. He pushed himself up, careful not to touch her. "What are you doing?"

"I don't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you."

"You aren't the only one who's had their check up. My fractures are set and I've been given the go ahead?"

"Go ahead?"

"Actually I specifically asked Dr. Beckett if I was fit enough to ravage my gorgeous fiance?"

“You didn’t? Isn’t she like seventy?”

“If she’s a day. Would you like to know what she said?”

“You mean she didn’t die of embarrassment? I would.”

She unbutton the top button of his plaid shirt . “She said, the endorphins produced during sex have a positive medicinal effect.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what I said. She looked at like I was some silly undergrad. She said so long as we don’t get crazy, the more the better.”

Peter gave her his brightest grin. “Well yee-hah!”

Chloe and Peter had been home for about three months. Tomorrow was the first time they'd invited everyone to their house. She'd been afraid there'd be a war of chefs between Thuy and Caro but it turned out they loved talking about cooking and had become great friends. Thuy was even consulting with Caro on some new sauces for her product line. They used every gathering as an opportunity to try something new out on the family. Chloe, being a barely average cook and not a complete fool, let them. Caro and Thuy put together the main dishes but Peter insisted on wait staff so everyone could relax and enjoy themselves.

It was the second week of March which meant spring break and it was the first time they'd seen John and Mari since the accident. They had come over when they first arrived so they could have a quiet visit before the mayhem of the entire family descended.

Chloe had become close with Mari thanks to email and FaceTime. They'd gone over wedding details for both of them. They looked at dresses and venues until it all became a blur. Neither was a girly girl but each had found a dress that suited them. Now it was just a matter of when. Chloe and Peter could get married when ever they wanted but Chloe insisted John and Mari had to be there. Therefore it had to happen in the summer. They were going back and forth about dates and locations. How were they going to get all the kids up to Davenport? What hotels to stay at with so many kids. Caro was due in June so that meant it would have to be later.

"Ugh, this is hopeless," said Chloe

"Agreed," said Mari as she pushed they wedding magazines aside.

"Why don't we do it together?" asked Peter.

"What?" said the women.

"Double wedding, here in the summer. That way Caro and Quincy don't have to travel with an infant and everyone will be together." he said starting to back out of the room, terrified he made a horrible faux faux.

"What about our guests from Davenport?" asked Mari.

"I have a plane," said Peter, hoping to redeem himself.

“You have a what?” asked John and Mari.

“It’s very nice, a jet, actually.” Chloe.

“We don’t have that many guests but still,” said Mari.

“It seats eighteen comfortably,” said Peter. “John, you want a beer?”

“Hell yes, eighteen?”

“I told you it was very nice,” said Chloe.

Mari looked at John, who still looked confused about the jet. “Sweetheart, what do you think?”

“About the jet?”

“No, about the wedding.”

John finally snapped out of it when Peter handed him the cold bottle. “Wedding, yes, excellent.” He pulled Mari into his arms and gave her a kiss. “So long as we end up married I’m happy.”

“We only had about a dozen guests other than family. Chloe what about your friends from LA.”

Chloe laughed. “The few people I’ll invite from LA can buy their own tickets.” She picked up the calendar. “We liked the Magnolia House. It’s available June fifteenth.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mari. “We were going to...”

“Okay let’s get this out of the way,” said Peter. “There’s a reason I have a jet. I have a lot of money.”

“I’m pretty comfortable too,” smiled Chloe as she wrapped her arms around Peter’s waist. “Let us take care of the venue.”

John started to look uncomfortable. Chloe walked to her brother and put her arms around him. “You’re my big brother. You’ve taken care of me my whole life. Let Peter and I do this.”

“Our guests will need hotel rooms,” said Mari. “We’ll take care of that. A hotel bill for rooms and meals for the weekend. That’s probably the about the same as a wedding in Davenport.”

“You’re probably right,” he smiled.

“And the flowers,” said Mari. “I’m sorry Chloe but I have to design the flowers.”

Chloe held up her hands in surrender and laughed. “Of course you would. I will have to arrange the music, although I will accept your selection for your first dance.”

Peter smiled. “So are we good here? Are we all getting married in June?”

“As soon as I call the venue,” said Chloe.

“Call. Now,” said Peter. He pulled out his wallet and handed Chloe his black American Express Card.

Chloe laughed and grabbed her wallet. “I have one of those too, cowboy.” She was about to make the call when she spotted John walking out on to the deck. Mari stood to follow but she stopped her. “No, let me. Peter, you call the venue. Mari, make sure he gets it right.”

“Hey!” said Peter.

She gave him a kiss on the forehead. “Sweetheart, this is a wedding, not an acquisition.” Chloe followed John out to the porch and sat in the chair next to him. “We need to talk.”

“I’m fine, squirt. Not to worry. How goes the therapy?”

“No deflecting. You have a problem with Peter and I paying for the venue.”

“Well, Peter’s paying. He’s the one with the jet.”

“You never had a problem with Caro, did you?”

“What?”

“She’s made millions with her company.”

“Really?” He looked genuinely surprised.

“Really, but you never had a problem with her. They bought the big house on the lake. Where do you think that money came from?”

“Quincy does well.”

“Not that well.”

“Well, they never flaunted it.”

“And neither does Peter so you were surprised. You know what Peter said to me when I realized how wealthy he is? He said there is such a thing as enough. Enough house, enough car, enough money. That’s why he’s walked away from the day to day of Outdoor Life. He started working before he was a teenager. He wants time to enjoy himself.”

“Well, that’s...”

“That’s Peter. The only thing he’s splurged on since we’ve met is the piano. I told him I wanted one and he bought the best one in the store. Not because it was expensive, because it was exactly what I wanted.”

John reached for Chloe’s hand. “That was very nice of him.”

“Yes it was, but I could have afforded it myself.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know why Sebastian was so anxious to see me in the hospital?”

“He wanted to get back with you”

“No, I guarantee he had a power of attorney with him. He probably figured I was too incapacitated handle my own affairs. He was trying to get his hands on my assets. The smartest thing I ever did beside dumping Sebastian was never giving him access to my accounts. He had no control over anything. I signed all the checks.”

John smiled and kissed her forehead. “What a clever little squirt.”

“Yeah, well this clever little squirt is worth about thirty million.”

John coughed his beer. “Excuse me?”

“Touring can be very profitable.”

“And Peter is worth about ten times that.”

“Holy Shit.”

Chloe laughed. John never cursed. “I feel a bit...out of my element,” he said.

“Okay, this is why we’re having this conversation. We’ve all worked hard, the four of us for what we have. Mari told me she started working when she was twelve. You’ve been studying your whole life. You became the youngest tenured professor in Markham history.”

“Well that...”

“Don’t you dare qualify what the two of you have made of your lives. Peter says that my music inspired him long before we met. Sometimes it made him happy, sometimes it made him thoughtful. You have enlightened thousands of minds over the years. It’s a ripple in the pond, John. Who knows what those people did with the knowledge you gave them.”

“Mari writes,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“She’s been writing since she took my class but she’s doing it full time since she took a year off from her company.” He took another sip of beer. “We also wrote something together. A fairy tale. I showed it to some people and they’re going to publish it. They want us to write some more as a team.”

“What?! Chloe squealed and threw her arms around her brother. “That’s amazing. I want to read it.”

“It’s just a kids story. But Sadie liked it. We read it to her when it wasn’t quite finished. She gave us the ending.”

“Sadie gave you the ending?” Chloe sat back and smiled. “It’s amazing what that little minx can do.”

Peter opened the patio door. “I heard squealing. What’s going on?”

“Mari and John wrote a fairy tale and it’s being published!”

Peter shook John’s hand. “Congratulations, that’s terrific.”

“John, I thought we weren’t going to make a big deal about it?” asked Mari.

Chloe stood and grabbed Mari’s hand. “You sit. I’m going to shorthand the conversation I just had with John. Don’t either of you ever qualify what you do against what we do. We have all worked very hard for what we have accomplished. I’m very proud of both of you.”

Mari smiled and looked at John. “She’s kinda pushy.”

“I warned you,” John replied.

“You told her I’m pushy? I’ll show you pushy, Alistair!” She shoved her brother’s shoulder and he nearly spilled his beer.

“Hey you two, do you want to know about our wedding?”

Chloe stopped roughhousing and looked up. “Did you get it?”

“The four of us will be getting married June fifteenth.”

Chloe jumped up and gave Peter a deep kiss. She glanced back at her brother. “Now would be a good time to kiss your girl.”

“I agree,” said Mari. John gave a Mari a deep kiss.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” said Chloe.

John smiled. “Shut up, squirt.”

The party went on as planned. Thuy and Caro had outdone themselves and everyone was enjoying themselves. The kids were playing out on the deck and everyone seemed relaxed. Peter and Chloe were told the family all about their therapy and they all agreed they looked great.

Chloe knew the family was lovingly exaggerating. They both look tired but they looked better than they had. As Peter always told her, they looked alive. She looked at Peter and smiled. She truly felt alive, like she was getting back to who she was. Now she had a little surprise for everyone.

“Quincy, can you get the kids to come in.”

“You sure? They’re all sandy by now.”

“I’m sure.”

Peter slipped his arm around her waist. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll see,” she smiled.

The kids were herded back into the great room and had them sit on the floor. “Okay, Aunt Chloe wants your attention, so behave.”

Chloe looked over at Sadie who was sitting with Caro. Sadie smiled at her like she knew something was up. “Okay, everyone if you’re all comfortable, I’ll begin. The accident was bad but for me what I lost was my music.” She smiled at her niece. “Mary can tell you. When you’re like us, you hear music in everything, in voices, in traffic, in the ocean. After the accident I couldn’t hear the music anymore and it made me very sad. Then Sadie June gave me Sugar Bear.” She pointed to the bear sitting on top of the piano. I told Sugar Bear all my secrets, she’s very good at secret keeping.”

“I told you so,” said Sadie with a proud smile.

“Well, I asked her what should I do and she said I should go visit Sadie June, so I did. Sadie and I were on the deck and she said we needed to go for a walk so we walked down to the jetty.” Chloe walked over to Sadie and pick her up in her arms. “And you know what happened?”

“You fell in the water,” she laughed.

“Yes I did. But you know what else happened?”

“You heard it?”

“Yes I did. Do you want to hear?”

“Uh huh,” she said quietly. She sat her on the piano bench and opened the lid. She looked over at Peter and smiled. This would be the first time he would hear her play his very expensive gift. She’d played it so many times she didn’t need her sheet music. She started to play and lost herself in the notes. It was light in parts, joyful, others were dramatic and bold. When she finished the piece she closed her eyes and could see Sadie’s hand in hers as they walked along the beach. The room was quiet for a moment and then broke out into thunderous applause.

“You haven’t written like that since college,” said Quincy as he gave her a hug.

John had tears in his eyes. “It was magnificent.” Mary smiled and gave her aunt a hug. She didn’t need to say anything. Mary understood. Chloe saw Peter standing off to the side, watching her receive congratulations from her family. Chloe accepted a tight hug from Sadie.

“See, I told you so,” said Sadie.

“Told me what, angel?”

“You’re still Aunt Chloe.”

Chloe fought back tears. “Yes, I guess I am. Would you like to know what I called the song?”

“It doesn’t really need a name but okay.”

“I called it Sadie June.”

Sadie gave her a huge smile. “That’s very nice. Thanks, Aunt Chloe.”

“You’re welcome, angel.”

“Could I have a lemonade?”

“Sure, angel.” She handed Sadie off to Caro who was teary eyed too. She walked toward Peter and smiled. “What did you think?”

He pulled her hand and guided her down the hall to his small office. He closed the door and gave her a passionate kiss. She was stunned when he pulled back and there were tears in his eyes. “I marrying a genius.”

It seemed like June fifteenth had arrived with lightning speed. Fortunately, the venue had an excellent event planner who kept everything on track. Chloe had finally listened to Peter and let the planner handle as much as possible. She was, after all, only six months out from the accident and neither of them should push too hard.

Caro and Thuy handled the catering, Mari designed the flowers and Chloe talked to the musicians. There would be no chicken dance at her wedding.

Chloe wasn't sure about Mari's moss green satin gown but she said to trust her. She'd woven flowers in her long chestnut hair. John had to wipe the tears from his eyes when he saw Mari walk up the aisle with Quincy at her side. Quincy shook John's hand and went back down the aisle for Chloe.

Mari took John's hand and whispered, "Well, Sir John, are you prepared to make me your Lady?"

"You're already my beautiful Princess."

Chloe walked up the aisle on her brother's arm. "You ready for this, squirt?"

"Absolutely." She missed a step when she saw Peter. He was wearing a beautiful black tux with a leather vest and boots. And a cowboy hat. He was every fantasy she ever had made real. "Oh God," she whispered in Peter's ear. How am I supposed to keep my hands off you?"

"That's the idea," he whispered.

"You'll pay for this, Blake."

"I'm counting on it, Holmes."

The wedding for both couples was wonderful. Each were using saying hello to guests as an excuse to hide behind the potted trees to steal a kiss. At one point they ran into each other.

“Okay, we need to get to the dancing so we can get to the honeymoon,” said Peter.

“Let me go talk to the band. I have a very specific playlist,” said Chloe.

“Yes Ma’am, Mrs. Blake,” he said with a smile as he touched the brim of his hat. “Your happiness is my only goal,” he said with a deep drawl.

“Oh, you’ll get yours, Blake,” she said.

“I’m counting on it, Mrs. Blake.”

Chloe took a deep breath and walked up to the small stage. She hadn’t been on a stage of any kind since New Years Eve. She talked to the band leader and he nodded and gave her a microphone.

“Hello everyone.” Everyone turned to look at her but no one was surprised but Peter.

“I want to thank all of you for celebrating this day with Peter and I and John and Mari.” She took another breath to steady her nerves. “When I first started dating Peter he told me he’d been a fan. Then one day I caught him on the treadmill. He’d been working out after our accident. I wasn’t supposed to be home.” Chloe wiped the tear from her eye. “He actually apologized for listening to my song. He didn’t want to upset me. Well, the accident may have changed some things, but like my Sadie June says, I’m still Aunt Chloe. So Peter, husband, love of my life, this is my wedding gift to you.” She started slowly, without the band.

Birds fly high

You know how I feel

Sun in the sky

*You know how I feel
Reeds driftin on by
You know how I feel*

She made a haunting sound that was the signal for the band to join her.

*It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling good
I'm feeling good.*

*Fish in the sea
You know how I feel
River running free
You know how I feel
Blossom on the tree
You know how I feel*

*It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling... good*

She didn't hear the thunderous applause. All she saw was the look on Peter's face and she knew she would never doubt she'd married the right man. He met her at the foot of the small stair case and led her behind the stage. He caressed her cheek. "Best wedding gift ever." He gave her a soft kiss. "Are you okay?"

"Actually I wouldn't mind a little champagne."

Peter let out a whistle and pointed to a server with a tray of champagne flutes. He took two from the young man and dismissed him with a look. Chloe took a sip and smiled. "Ahh, that's better."

"As much as I loved it, and I did love it, should you have done that? Your throat..."

"I've been cleared and I've been training."

"The other woman with Irene."

"Voice coach."

"You were magnificent."

"Thank you, but you're prejudiced."

"No I'm not." He took a sip of his champagne, well maybe a little." The smile slipped from his face. "Does this mean you're going back out on tour?"

She gave him a broad smile. "God no. Even if my voice was one hundred percent I wouldn't want to. I've done that. Now I have a hot cowboy at home and I don't intend to go far."

"I would never stop you. You know that."

"Yes, I know that. Actually I was thinking I might go another direction. I talked to the Music Department at U of T. I was thinking I might finish my doctorate. Actually, they seemed very keen on it. They offered me a teaching position when I finish."

"Wow, that's amazing, babe. I'm so proud of you."

"What's amazing and why are you hiding behind the potted palms again," asked John. "As if I didn't know why." He pulled Mari to him and gave her a kiss.

"Your sister is going to finish her doctorate. They've offered her a teaching position at U of T."

John gave her a big hug. "Squirt, that's fantastic."

"It's not a done deal yet. I have to finish my doctorate."

“You’ll do it,” Peter said with a smile. “I married a genius.”

“I have something for you,” said John. “It was delivered today. It’s an advance copy of our book.”

Chloe read the title “The Adventures of Sir John of Davenport and his Faithful Companion Cicero.” She looked at her brother and sister in law and smiled. “By John and Mari Holmes.” It was a beautiful book, illustrated with great style. Then she saw the dress and looked at Mari. “Princess Marigold. I get it.”

John looked at Mari with a love that brought tears to Chloe’s eyes. “She looks perfect, my Princess come to life.”

She flipped to the dedication page. “To the four feet of magic that is Sadie June.”

“She really is something special,” said Peter.

“That, she is,” said Chloe.

“Why are you all hiding?” They looked down and saw Sadie staring at them holding a copy of John’s book. “I was looking for you, Uncle John. I really like your book. Aunt Mari you look just like Princess Marigold, really pretty.”

“Thank you, Sadie.”

“You should be a doll.”

“Excuse me?”

“Princess Marigold is prettier than any of the dolls in the toy store.”

“Sadie June where are you?” called Caro.

“I’m here Mommy.”

Caro look elegant but harried carrying her newborn son while looking for her stray daughter. “What are you doing?”

“I believe she’s giving us financial advice,” said John.

“I may see if there is a position on my board,” said Peter.

“What board?” asked Sadie.

“The one that you’ll be running in a few years.”

Sadie shrugged and looked at her mother. “Do you want me to hold John for you, Mommy? I could read him Uncle John and Aunt Mari’s book.”

“Yes, please, angel.” She looked up at the adults. “She’s quite good at it and I’d really like to dance with my husband.”

“What an excellent idea,” said Mari as she led John out to the dance floor.

Chloe and Peter watched as Sadie got settled in a deep wicker seat and then held her arms out for Baby John. “I haven’t been around a lot of kids but isn’t Sadie a bit unusual.”

Chloe smiled. “I have been and yes, she is. It was so nice of them to name the baby John Blake.”

“I think they were running out of names.”

“Peter Blake haven’t you figured out that you’ve married into a very unusual family? We don’t do anything we don’t want to do. They named him after you because they love you almost as much as I do.” Peter smiled and led Chloe out to the dance floor. “And they already had a Peter.” Peter laughed out loud.

Peter leaned in and whispered, “Do you think anyone would notice if we start the honeymoon a little early.”

“I think they might notice. The dance floor is a little crowded.”

“I need to be alone with my wife.”

Chloe got a wicked smile. “I need to be alone with my husband.” She whispered in his ear several things that involved breaking in the bed on the jet and Chloe wearing his new cowboy hat.

“Wow,” he gasped. “That was revenge for the hat, wasn’t it?”

“That wasn’t revenge, cowboy, that’s a plan of attack.”

“Ah hell,” he said and pulled phone out of his pocket and turned it on. He hit a contact number and waited only a moment before someone answered. “Frank, is the jet ready? Good. We’ll be there in thirty minutes.” He hit another button. “Smith, please pull the car around front.”

“What are you doing?”

“My own plan of attack. Come on. We need to say goodbye to our guests.”

Thirty minutes later they were being escorted up the gangway of his jet. His pilot, Frank greeted them. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Blake.”

“Thank you,” said Peter. “Are we ready to go?”

“Yes sir. My copilot is going over the checklist.

“Thank you Frank. Tell the staff I’ll let them know if we need anything.”

“Flight time is thirteen hours.”

“Thirteen hours? Staff?” asked Chloe. “Where are we going?”

Peter picked Chloe up and carried her into the back cabin. He tossed Chloe on the bed. “Fiji. Now Ma’am, someone mentioned a plan of attack.”

She raised herself up on her knees. “Someone is going to have to help me get out of my gown. Shall I call the staff?”

“Turn around, wise ass.”

He unpinned the flowered crown Mari had designed for her. Then he unzipped the cream satin gown and let it pool around her knees. “Wow,” he whispered. She was wearing a small strapless bra and a barely there thong. She moved aside and he laid the dress on the chaise lounge. He just stood there, taking her in.

“Peter, are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh hell, yeah.” He pulled her into a deep kiss. “Damn woman, you always look good but this...” he ran his fingers around her lingerie.

“You like?”

“Uh huh,” he muttered.

“I’ll get some more,” she smiled.

“Lots more,” he said as he pulled her legs out from under her. She squealed as she fell back against the bed. He kicked off his boots and pulled off his tux. He tossed his cowboy hat on top headboard. He took a moment to smile at this vision. This beautiful woman was his wife. He leaned over her and kissed her deeply. He pulled himself up and looked in Chloe’s eyes. “I need you to know this now. I love you, Chloe Blake. I love you more than I ever thought possible.”

Chloe’s eye’s teared. “I love you too.”

He got a gleam in his eyes. “Good, because I’m probably going to be incapable of speech for quite some time.” He unhooked her bra and slipped her thong down her legs. He began feasting on her body, traveling down her breasts, stomach and legs. He restrained himself as long as he could until he couldn’t wait any longer. When they came together he knew they were completely back, knowing who they were before the accident was who they were now.

No.

They were stronger.

