

Life and the Scientific Method : A Scorpion 2.0 Story

By Kate Simon

Walter knocked on Ralph's bedroom door. "Your breakfast is ready. Come on, or you'll be late for school." Ralph opened the door and walked past him toward the kitchen.

"Fine," he muttered. He tossed his backpack on the floor and sat down.

"Good morning, sweetie," said Paige. Ralph grunted what passed for a greeting.

Walter sat down across from him in what had become his usual spot. "I recognize you're reaching puberty and hormones are causing your behavioral aberrations. But that doesn't mean you get to be surly to your mother or me."

"You're not my father."

"Ralph!" said Paige.

"No, I'm not. But I'm your mother's partner. We are a team, all of us and that means you treat your mother, and by association, me, with respect."

"Fine. Sorry." Ralph chugged his orange juice and got up from the table. "I've got to go. Mrs. Goldberg is outside." He grabbed his backpack and headed for the door.

"Can I get a kiss goodbye?" asked Paige.

"I'm late," he said as he closed the door.

"What is wrong with him?" asked Walter. "This is more than just hormones."

"His birthday is coming up."

"I'm aware, but turning thirteen doesn't equate with his recent level of surliness."

"Drew was supposed to fly in for it but he cancelled."

"What could be more important than his son's birthday?"

"His team is sending him to the Dominican Republic to scout a prospect."

"That's no excuse."

"We don't think so but for Drew, it means getting a full time management job in baseball."

“A child’s game.”

“I’m not having that argument again. I understand why Drew is doing it. It means more stability for him.”

“Are you defending him?”

“No, I’m saying I understand. That doesn’t mean Ralph is dealing with his disappointment.” She stood and picked up her plate. “We should get going too. Katherine will be at the garage at nine.”

Cabe looked over at Kate. She seemed completely absorbed in the equations on the white board. She and Walter were debating the validity of some portion of the work, at least that's what it sounded like to him. It had been three months since Kate Riley had gone undercover to find him with the Knights of Khaos. His investigation had gone pear shaped fast. He was stuck with the entire group of Knights with no way to alert the team.

He smiled at how Kate had introduced herself into the group of bikers. She walked into the diner, dressed in skin tight bike leathers, like she owned the place. She'd had a history investigating the group and without her, Cabe didn't know if he would have been able to stop the white supremacist group, The Brotherhood, from hijacking nuclear material.

As successful as the operation was, his boss had been ready to eviscerate him for going undercover without backup. He knew the only thing that saved him was his boss, Katherine Cooper, was also a friend. Still, she didn't let him off the hook. He'd had to endure sessions with Toby for the last three months. He was forced to talk about how his breakup with Allie had affected him. He had to admit that losing himself in the work by investigating the Knights on his own, had put himself and Kate at risk. He also had to admit to Toby and to himself that it wasn't grief over losing Allie that had gone off book, it was guilt. He knew that as much as he cared for Allie, he couldn't put his relationship with her ahead of his relationships with his team, his kids.

Then there was Kate. She'd been assigned to shadow Cabe until Katherine was satisfied he wasn't in danger of going rogue again. He'd balked, at least publicly, about having a supervising agent. Privately was another matter. Kate was as good an agent as he'd ever worked with. She was as brilliant as any member of Scorpion combined with the savvy of an agent with thirty years experience. Cabe knew that Kate was observing him and reporting back to Katherine but he didn't resent her for it. He was her assignment. Since Katherine had yet to pull his badge, he could only assume her reports were favorable. Today might be different. Katherine was due any minute and he expected her final three month review. He didn't honestly think Katherine would bench him. What concerned him most was she might reassign Kate.

Toby Curtis got ready for his meeting with Director Cooper. As much as he cultivated his devil may care persona, he took his responsibility as a doctor to the team very seriously. He'd been seeing Cabe regularly since the Knights incident. Toby wasn't concerned about Cabe taking any more impulsive risks. He'd recognized his risky behavior and hadn't displayed any evidence of further problems. Toby was only concerned about the one issue Cabe had yet recognize, his growing feelings for his new partner. A knock at the trailer door interrupted his train of thought.

"Ah, Director Cooper. Come in."

"Good morning, Dr. Curtis." She looked around the trailer. "This is where you practice medicine?" she asked.

He batted at the hula girl on his desk and it wiggled. "I think it has a certain flair."

"It's got something." She took a seat. "Okay, give me your final report on Cabe."

"I find that Agent Gallo is addressing his personal issues. I do not believe he poses any impediment to future missions."

"Addressing. Present tense."

"Therapy is an ongoing process."

"Do you believe Cabe needs continued treatment?"

"I've been seeing him as a patient twice a week for the last three months. I would like to continue to see him once or twice a month but I'd like that to be his choice."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been seeing me under your orders. He's benefited from it but it wasn't his choice to be here. I want to give him the choice to continue."

"Do you think he needs to?"

"I think everyone does, especially anyone in this business."

"What do you think of his partnership with Agent Riley?"

Toby looked at his hula dancer, surprised at the question. He knew more about their relationship than Katherine did. Hell, he knew more about it than Cabe did, or was ready to admit yet. "From what I've observed, they have respect for each other's work."

"You're not telling me something."

"I'm telling you everything I have observed in my professional capacity as an employee of Homeland without breaking medical privilege."

"So, there's more you're not telling me."

"Director Cooper, Agent Gallo is fit for duty. If Katherine wants to know how her friend, Cabe is doing, I suggest you ask him."

Katherine smiled at him, knowing she'd gotten everything from him she would. "Thank you, Dr. Curtis."

"You're welcome, Director."

Cabe followed Katherine into the small office they used for client meetings. After all these years they still hadn't spruced it up. They took seats opposite each other.

"Let's get right to it," said Katherine. "Dr. Curtis has given me his report. He says he feels you are no longer in danger of going off the rails."

He tried to hide his smile. "That's good to know, Director."

She sat back in her chair and smiled. "Now, tell me how you're really doing."

"I'm fine, Katherine."

"Really?"

"Really," he smiled.

"How's it been working with Agent Riley?"

Now Cabe sat back and grinned. "You already know. I'm sure Agent Riley has filed her reports. You know how the last few cases have gone."

"Yes, I do. You seem to work well together."

"I would agree with your assessment."

Katherine stood and opened the door. "Agent Riley, I'd like to see you." Kate walked into the room and took the seat next to Cabe. "I'm sure you're aware this is our three month review."

"Yes, Director."

"The two of you have worked well together."

Cabe thought he saw Kate blush.

"Yes, Director. I think so."

"You've also produced some excellent work with the team. Very few people have been able to work with Walter for any length of time without asking for hazard pay."

Kate chuckled. "He's okay. He reminds me of myself."

“I’m glad to hear it.” Katherine paused and Cabe knew the look. They weren’t going to like what was coming next. “Kate, I’m going to make your assignment to Scorpion permanent.”

“What? Director, as much as I like the team, I’ve always worked on my own.”

“I realize that. I also know you’re thinking of retirement,” said Katherine. Kate shot Cabe a look and he held his hand up. “Cabe said nothing. Kate, I know the look. You’re thirty years in and you’re wondering if you’re still up for it. The last undercover could have gone horribly wrong.”

Kate looked Cabe. “I was only supposed to find him and pull him out. It turned into a threat to the lives of millions.”

“And you handled it,” said Katherine.

“This time.”

“Kate, you’ve read the files. You know how many times that’s happened with Scorpion, the nuclear missile in Kazakhstan, the gas explosion after the earthquake, the reactor meltdown.”

“Exactly. Director, I’m a tech specialist”

Cabe felt the need to have his partner’s back. “Kate, I’ve watched you kick the ass of a biker twice your size. You’re are a stellar agent and one of the most brilliant people in the world. Scorpion would be lucky to have you.”

“Thank you, Cabe,” Kate said. “I appreciate that, but how are you so sure?”

“You may have been observing me for the last three months, but I’ve been observing you. You understand the team in a way no one else, including me ever could. I’ve also seen your work as an agent. You are as good as any I’ve ever worked with. I am confident you can handle any assignment that comes our way.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“That settles it,” said Katherine. “Agent Riley you are assigned as a Homeland liaison to Scorpion.”

“Director, there is one thing I’d like to cover. I’ve been assisting Walter with some of his projects. They are not Homeland related. I wouldn’t want my assistance to impair his ability to profit from his work.”

“Understood. I will ask that we get to make the first offer on any work you feel would benefit Homeland.”

“Walter will want assurances Homeland won’t commandeer our work.”

“How do you know that?”

Kate smiled. “Because I would.”

“Very well. I’d say our next discussion should be with Walter,” said Katherine.

Walter looked at the whiteboard and smiled. He and Kate had finally worked out the problem he'd had with the new banking software he'd been working on. He'd been wary of Kate helping him but she had come at the problem with a different perspective. It had taken a few days but they now had the answer he'd been looking for. This software for a national bank would bring Scorpion a big payday.

His meeting with Director Cooper had assured him that Kate's work on the software would not make it property of Homeland. Since she was permanently assigning Kate to Scorpion, she'd agreed that any work Kate did for the team would remain the property of Scorpion. All Director Cooper asked is they be careful about to whom they sold their work. Since they always did a deep dive on their clients, that wasn't a problem.

Walter wasn't sure how he felt about having another government agent looking over his shoulders. It had taken some getting used to having Cabe around all the time, but he'd had history with Cabe, good and bad. He supposed he could give Kate the benefit of the doubt. He smiled and looked over at Paige. Before he'd met her, he would have dismissed the idea of cooperation with a government agent. She'd shown him how to put trust in someone other than himself.

The door opened and Kathy Curtis walked in. She sat down at her father's desk and opened her backpack. The young girl was a classmate of Ralph's. When they'd discovered Kathy was being abused by her foster parents, Toby and Happy had taken her in. Her adoption had been made final a few months ago. He grabbed two bottles of water out of the fridge and walked over to Toby's desk.

"Hi, Kathy. Would you like a water?"

"Thanks, Walter," she smiled as she accepted the bottle.

"Ralph won't be here until later. He has a class at Caltech."

"Yeah, I know."

"Your parents should be back soon. Happy needed some supplies."

"They text me and told me to wait for them."

“Kathy, can I ask you something?”

“Sure?” she smiled as she took a sip from the bottle.

“What’s it like being adopted?”

“It’s pretty good,” she smiled.

“I mean, you seemed happy when Toby and Happy took you in as a foster child.”

Her smile faded. “Yeah. I was glad to get away from where I was.”

“I know it was a bad situation. Being with Happy and Toby is better?”

“Of course! They don’t beat on me.”

“No, of course they don’t. I’m sorry. I’m not saying this well.”

Kathy’s expression soften. “It’s okay. They told me about you.”

“They did? What did they say?”

“They said sometimes you say weird stuff.”

A few years ago he would have protested. “That’s why I hired Paige. She’s taught me how to deal with people.” He managed a smile. “I’m still a work in progress.” He was relieved when Kathy chuckled. “I want to understand what is different between foster and adoption.”

Kathy thought for a moment. “With fosters, they get paid to take care of you. Most of the ones I had only wanted the money and they didn’t care about me. Fosters can send you back any time they want. Some of them,” she paused and blinked back tears. “some of them, I was glad to be sent back. Even a group home was better.”

“Toby and Happy were different.”

“Yeah. I figured out pretty quick they weren’t in it for the money. They were nice to me. They cared about me.”

“How is it different now?”

This time Kathy gave him a warm smile. "Mom and Dad are great. They look out for me. Sometimes they're strict, well, Mom more than Dad." She looked around to see if anyone was listening. "Sometimes Dad takes me out for ice cream after he picks me up from school, even though he knows Mom would get mad. Don't tell. It's a secret."

"I promise."

"When you're adopted they can't send you back. I belong to them." A happy tear slipped down her cheek. "And they belong to me."

Walter looked up at the sound of Toby and Happy coming through the door, arguing.

"Did we have to spend all afternoon at the Harley dealer?" asked Toby.

"They just got in the new models. I couldn't just ignore them."

"Of course not."

Walter leaned in toward Kathy. "He's not really mad at her."

"Oh, I know," she smiled as she wiped her cheek.

"Thank you for talking to me."

"You're welcome."

Toby spotted Walter talking to his daughter. He turned and walked back to his desk. He watched as Toby and Happy each gave their daughter a kiss. Kathy pulled out a test paper and both of them nodded and smiled. Toby tousled his daughter's hair. Walter knew he was looking at a real family.

Toby looked at Kathy's math test and smiled. His daughter was brilliant. Okay, so she wasn't biologically theirs, but damn she was smart. Her previous school records had been good, despite her circumstances. Once she was in a stable home, she flourished, even with Happy being so strict with her. Maybe even because of it. His daughter knew her parents cared enough to correct her when she was wrong, praise her achievements and her Dad would sneak her an ice cream when Mom wasn't looking.

What had him wondering was what did Walter want? He saw Kathy's eyes were a bit teary, but she wasn't unhappy. So, he hadn't upset her. But they had seemed to have been having an intense conversation. Questioning Kathy now would mean bringing Happy into it and his wife tended to go all Mama Bear when it came to their daughter. Walter walked upstairs to his loft and Toby took his moment. "I'll be right back. I've got to ask Walter something."

"What about?" asked Happy.

"It's doctor stuff," he said. Happy squinted and he knew she didn't buy it. He'd have a lot to answer for later. He followed Walter up the stairs. He knocked once and didn't wait for a reply before walking in.

"I could have been changing my clothes," said Walter.

"You don't have anything I haven't seen on a coroner's table. So what did you want with Kathy?"

Walter took a seat at his desk. "We were just talking."

"It was more than that. She was emotional but not unhappy, so that's the reason I'm speaking still speaking in a calm manner. Now tell me what you wanted with my kid."

"I wanted to know what the difference between being a foster and adopted. She was the best one to ask."

"You're quizzing my twelve year old?"

"She's very bright and well spoken. She was the right person to answer my questions."

“Why did you want to know?”

“Basic scientific method.”

“Excuse me?”

“To begin research you start with questions. For instance, why did you marry Happy?”

“What is with you? Why are you pushing your nose in my family’s business?”

“The only way I can understand is if I ask.”

Toby looked at Walter. He wasn’t comfortable with personal feelings. Something was going on. “Tell me why you want to know.”

“I’m trying to understand social conventions. The two of you seemed fine when you were living together. I want to understand how being married is different. Why does it matter?”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

Toby sat down next to his desk. “You know that I’ve loved Happy from the moment I met her. I couldn’t imagine a day of the rest of my life without her. Because of all her emotional baggage, it took me years to get through to her. And it took all those years for me to learn to be what she needed.”

“I was very impressed when you gave up gambling.”

“Thanks. It’s what we both needed. Gambling was a rush for me but it was a question of stability. I needed to stop putting my financial status at risk. I had to find ways to redirect my more destructive impulses to constructive directions. Happy needed to know she could count on me.”

“You knew you’d lose her if you didn’t stop.”

Toby smiled. “That was my biggest motivation. I won’t say I don’t still get the urge but I look at Happy and Kathy and know I wouldn’t do anything to mess up my family.”

“I understand that. What I don’t understand is why you were so desperate to marry her.”

“The love isn’t different. Being married tells Happy and the world that I’m in this relationship for good. She doesn’t have to worry that I’ll bail on her like everyone else has.”

“The national divorce rate is fifty percent.”

Toby nodded. “Yes, that’s true. But being married makes it harder to walk away. It means we’re committed, to each other and in front of the world.”

“Is that important? What others think?”

“Surprisingly, yes. People look at us differently when they know we’re married.”

“How?”

“With respect.”

Walter sat back and looked like he was taking it all in. “Thank you. This has been most enlightening.”

“Now, tell me why you’re on this particular route of exploration.”

“I’m just curious.”

“Bull. Tell me. I promise to keep it to myself.”

Walter looked at him and nodded. “I find myself in a similar situation. Paige and I have been together for months. I have tried to step into the role of parent with Ralph but with limited success.”

Toby smiled. “I would disagree with your last statement. You’ve been a father figure to Ralph since he was seven. You’ve been the biggest male influence in his life.”

“Academically.”

“No. In all ways. Granted, you aren’t your average Dad, but I think you’re the one Ralph needs. You understand him better than most men ever could, especially Drew.”

“Thank you, but I’ve had limited success lately.”

“He’s becoming a teenager. All those hormones are coursing through his body, making him a like caged tiger.”

“It’s more than that. Ralph’s birthday is next week. Drew was supposed to come for it but he’s cancelled. He’s taking it out on Paige and me. I don’t know what to do for him.”

“I see,” he smiled. “Do what you always do. Just be there for him. That’s all you can do.”

“That’s not an answer. I don’t know how to fix this.”

“There is no answer, at least not one answer. You’ll just have to feel your way through this. Just like every other parent.”

“Feelings aren’t my strong point.”

“You’re better at them than you think.”

Cabe looked at Kate as she typed her daily report. He's already finished his. Paperwork was the bane of the existence of every government employee. She hadn't said much about her permanent assignment. He knew she was surprised but he wasn't sure how she felt about it. Or how she felt about working with him.

In the three months since their undercover with the Knights, they'd never spoken about what happened between them. There had been a powerful chemistry between them, not to mention the fiery kisses. If they were going to be working together permanently, they would have to sort this out. He got up and walked over to her desk.

"Hey."

"Hey," she said without looking away from her screen.

"You about ready to get out of here?"

"Yeah, I've had enough for today." Kate finished typing and hit send.

"Thanks for not dishing any dirt on me." he grinned. "I really wanted to keep my shield."

She chuckled and shook her head. "What dirt? Ever since the Knights you've walked the straight and narrow. You've been a freaking boy scout. Arrests by the book, reports filed on time. Most important, keeping your team safe."

"Our team."

She sighed as she grabbed her bag out of the drawer and stood. "It will always be your team."

"Kate, we need to talk. Do you have any plans tonight?"

"I was going for a swim, then have a big ass glass of wine. But you're right, we have a lot to talk about." She gave him an odd smile. "Do you have a swim suit?"

"Why?"

If you can't swim you can sit on the deck. I haven't been in the water for days and it makes me cranky. I need my swim even more than I want the wine. We can talk after."

“Fine. I have a suit in my gym bag.”

She stood and walked past him. “There’s a good restaurant up the highway. They deliver.”

“I’ll buy.”

Kate looked back and smiled. “Of course, you will.”

“Where am I going?”

“1815 Oceanside Drive.”

Cabe stopped in his tracks. Kate smiled at him as she walked through the door. Oh yeah. They needed to talk.

Cabe was very seldom at a loss for words, but he was now. Kate Riley's home was something out of an architectural magazine. It was a stunning, two story mansion on a hill, overlooking the Pacific. Kate locked the security gate behind them and reached for her door keys. She smiled at his expression.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what? This is your house?"

She smiled, knowing full well the effect her home was having on him. "I told you my father founded Rimark Computing."

"Yeah?" he replied as he followed her into the large living room.

"Rimark Computing manufactures computers, gaming software."

"So?"

"And the best security software in the world. We have a sixty five percent market share. It's probably in your laptop."

"We?"

"I still own it."

"Excuse me?"

Kate set down her bag and took her gun out of its holster. She pushed aside a painting on a hinge, revealing a small safe. She plugged in the code and placed her gun inside. "Cabe, you knew about Rimark."

He waved his hand around the expansive living room. "I didn't know about this."

Kate chuckled and put her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. I know it's a bit of a surprise but I'm never sure how to slip it into conversation. 'Oh, yes, I own a multi-national corporation and I have a giant house on the water.'"

"I can see you're point."

“My parents bought this place. It’s big for one person, but I love it here. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“How does Katherine and the Department feel about all this?”

“Actually, they’re fine with it.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m the least likely agent to be bought off.”

This time Cabe chuckled. “I can see that.”

“That’s enough family history for now. I’m going to change into my suit. Follow me and you can change in one of the guest rooms.”

Cabe followed her up the open staircase and down the hall. She opened the door to a bedroom that could have been featured in a four-star resort. He set his bag down on the bed and started getting changed. He looked up at the painting over the headboard. If he didn’t know better he’d say it was a Monet. He leaned in close. He didn’t know enough to say whether or not the painting was genuine, but the hi-tech sensor he spotted behind at the edge of the frame said it was the real thing.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. He hung up his suit in the closet and put on his swimsuit and pulled on a Marine t shirt. He walked back into the hall just as Kate came out of her bedroom wrapped in a short terry robe. He’d been often thought about her beautifully toned legs hiding under her knee length skirt. Yeah, they really needed to talk.

“Don’t worry about towels,” said Kate. “There’s a supply in a cabinet outside.” She pushed a button and the blinds slid aside. Cabe involuntarily gasped. The view was spectacular. Just beyond the pool was an unobstructed view of the Pacific. The large pool and hot tub were surrounded by a large deck and resort style wicker furniture.

“Holy shit.”

Kate smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” He followed her through the doors toward a large cabinet and pulled out two thick towels. She tossed one at him and set hers down on one of the deck chairs. She peeled off her robe and tossed it with the towel.

Cabe smiled at the form fitting tank suit. It was the first time he'd had a chance to see her like this since their undercover mission. She caught him staring.

"Are you swimming or not?" she asked.

"Ah, yeah." He pulled off his t shirt and tossed it and his towel on the chair next to hers. Kate walked to the end of the pool and dove in. She started slow, steady laps. He dove in alongside and started matching her stroke for stroke. Maybe some exercise would clear his mind.

Kate tried to lose herself in the feel of the water as her body moved from one end of the pool to the other. The water had always been her saving grace from the tension of the work. Thirty or forty laps after a tough day was better than a glass of wine. Today she would need both. She could feel the current of Cabe's body moving over her. Not many people could keep up with her pace but he was matching her stroke for stroke, length for length. She tried not to think about finally getting another glimpse of the tattoos over his muscled torso. She'd had many a dream about their time in that crappy hotel room. She'd even had quite a few daydreams, watching him at work. She pretended to herself it was her assignment. Observe and report. She observed how his jackets fit snug against broad shoulders. She left that out of her report. She finally gave up trying to forget who was swimming next to her and got out of the water. Cabe followed her out and she was pleased to see he was winded.

"Damn, woman. Are you training to swim the channel?"

She tossed his towel at him, hoping he would cover himself. "It's how I relax." She squeezed the water out of her ponytail. She dried off quickly and put on her robe. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks." Cabe followed her to the small fridge next to the barbeque. "This is quite the setup."

"I don't use it that often. Would you like a soda, or a water?"

"A water would be good, thanks. Why don't you use it? I'd love a set up like this."

“I’m not home that often.” Kate looked at Cabe and he could tell she was hiding something. That was the problem of dealing with a fellow agent. He could read her almost as well she could read him. “The designer I hired to refurnish the deck picked it out. I use the fridge but that’s about it.”

“So why did you pay for it?”

Kate opened the bottle of white wine and poured herself a glass. “Because I didn’t want her to know I never have guests.”

“Why not?”

She walked past him and sat down in one of the chairs. “You know what it’s like. It’s the job. Do you have friends outside of Scorpion?”

Cabe took the seat next to her. “A couple.”

“Well, that’s a couple more than me. I’ve been a computer geek most of my life. I’ve worked alone for years. The only people I know are people like Katherine.”

“You know me and the team.”

She took a sip of her wine and tried to think of something other than being more than friends with Cabe. “Okay. I’ll have everyone over for a barbeque. You’ll have to cook. I don’t know how to run the thing.”

“Deal,” he grinned. “Look, Kate, I wanted to talk to you about your assignment. Are you okay with the assignment being permanent?”

“Yes. Katherine’s right. I don’t want to be in the field anymore. Keeping me with Scorpion is the best way for her to keep access to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I did a lot of undercover but I also did some consulting too.”

Cabe took a sip of his water and he began to look nervous. “I meant what I said about Scorpion being lucky to have you.”

“Thank you.”

“But we both know it’s time to talk about the elephant in the room.”

“What elephant?” Kate hoped he didn’t see the slight shake in her hand.

“We’ve never talked about what happened between us during the Knights undercover.”

“It was part of the cover.” She knew she was full of it. She had a thing for her partner.

“No, it wasn’t.”

Yup, Kate thought. He knows it too.

“I didn’t bring it up because of Katherine’s short leash for the past three months.”

She tried to smile. “Afraid it would look like you were trying to influence my reports?”

“No. I thought we could talk after your assignment with Scorpion was finished but now things could be awkward.”

“Now I’m not going anywhere.”

“And I’m still very attracted to you.”

“What?”

“Please don’t tell me that’s a surprise.”

“More like a complete shock.”

He reached for her hand. “Kate, you are brilliant, beautiful woman and one of the best agents I’ve ever worked with. That first night, I pulled you close and gave you a kiss.”

“You were half asleep. You thought I was your ex.”

“I was wide awake and I wasn’t thinking about anyone but you.”

“Oh,” she whispered as she sipped her wine.

“When I was leaving for the operation and you kissed me, you knew no one was watching us. It wasn’t part of the cover.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Cabe smiled, enjoying his win. “So why did you kiss me like that?”

“Because I wanted to.”

“Good. Do you still want to?”

If Kate could have melted into the chair, she would have. “Yes.”

“Same here. The problem is, how do we keep working with each other?”

“The same way we have for the last three months,” she said.

“Ah, hell no. You’ve been driving me crazy for months. I can’t keep doing it.”

“Do you want me to transfer?”

Cabe smiled. “God, no. I want us to figure out how we can work together and see each other.”

Kate smiled as she felt a blush on her cheek that wasn’t from the wine.

Walter and Paige had gotten into a routine in many aspects in their lives. Today it was drop Ralph at Cal Tech, then drive into work. He was frustrated at his lack of progress with Ralph. "Ralph's attitude doesn't seem to have changed. Has Drew at least called him?"

Paige opened the door to the garage and moved toward her desk. "He's out of the country. I doubt he'll hear from him before his birthday."

"That's not right," said Walter.

"There's nothing we can do about it." She sighed and tossed down her purse. They walked over to the coffee station. "Now we have to figure out what to do about his birthday."

Cabe walked over and reached for the pot. "Is it the kid's birthday?"

"This weekend," said Paige. "Ralph is very upset about Drew cancelling on him." She looked at Cabe. "He'll be thirteen."

"He's been very surly to us lately," said Walter.

"Ah yes, all those hormones. I remember them well. I finally settled down by the time I enlisted in the Marines."

"Does everyone understand this better than I do?"

Paige smiled and patted his cheek. "Yes, dear."

"If you're stuck for a party place I have an idea." He turned toward Kate. She was already at her desk, absorbed in her computer screen. He let out a whistle. "Yo! Agent Riley, your attention is required."

Kate smiled and joined them. "Good morning, guys."

"Good morning."

"Kate, you may be able to help Walter and Paige with an issue."

Paige put a hand on Cabe's arm. "Oh, Cabe, that's okay."

“I won’t know if I can help if you don’t tell me,” Kate smiled.

“Remember when you said you’d like to have a barbeque for the team? Well, it’s Ralph’s birthday this weekend.”

“Oh, that would be great. He can invite his friends.”

“We couldn’t impose on you like that,” said Paige.

“It’s no imposition. I have plenty of room. And a pool.”

“It’s a big pool,” Cabe smiled.

“And an ocean.”

“It’s a big ocean.”

“Wait, what?” asked Paige.

“Cabe is trying to be cute,” she turned to him and shook her head. “And failing.” Cabe feigned disappointment. “What he’s trying to say is I have a rather large home on the beach. You invite Ralph’s friends and Cabe and I will take care of the food.”

“I don’t know,” said Walter. “We could have something here. There’s enough room.”

Paige took his hand. “It sounds great. The kids would be able to swim.”

“If that’s what you want,” said Walter. “Thank you, Kate. That’s really nice of you.” He took his coffee and went back to his desk. Paige followed him and stood in front of his desk.

“You, me, outside.”

“I have messages to return.”

“Not now. Come on.” She took his hand and led him outside. “Tell me why you’re so upset.”

Walter took a deep breath and looked at Paige. The last few months had taught him many things. First on the list was never conceal facts. "I wanted to do something for Ralph's birthday, to make it special for him, but I seem to be at a loss."

"A party at Kate's makes you feel left out?"

"I know what it's like to be Ralph. I want to make a difference for him, but I've never felt more useless."

Paige smiled and slipped her hands around his waist. "You've been exactly what Ralph needs since the day he met you. Before he met you he didn't speak to anyone except me. Now he has friends and a job. That's all thanks to you."

"I think that's more about you than me."

"No, it's not. You showed him that there were other people like him. He doesn't feel alone. You are the most important man in his life."

"Thank you, but I wanted to do something special for his birthday."

"Arranging a party would count as something special." She gave him a quick kiss and they walked back into the garage. He looked at Kate and turned to Paige.

"I have an idea."

Toby looked at the open garage door and back at Happy. She was busy working on her Harley. She'd gotten it mostly running but she was constantly on the phone, looking for things like the ancient chrome parts. That meant whenever they were near the Harley dealership, they had to stop and look. Today had been no different. Happy had drooled over the latest models. He heard a rumble in the driveway and a motorcycle pulled into the garage. A driver pulled off her helmet. She pulled off her helmet and smiled at Toby. Mary Rowe worked at the dealership. She made him think of an older Happy. Mary was in her sixties and knew almost as much about bikes as Happy. She pulled boxes out of her side case. He nodded and walked over to her.

"Do you have everything?"

"She's going to flip," she smiled.

"Mary? What are you doing here?" asked Happy.

"I came to see your husband," she grinned.

"Excuse me?"

Toby smiled and took one of the boxes. "It's your anniversary present." He set the box on Happy's workbench. Mary set the other box down as Happy looked at her.

"You're in on this, Mary?"

"Let's just say I was a facilitator. Toby was in charge."

Happy rolled her eyes at him as she opened the first box and pushed the tissue aside. "Holy crap," she whispered. She pulled a gleaming chrome headlight. "Is this...?"

"Completely original," said Mary.

"Original parts from the 50's? I've been trying for months to find these. I had to make due with reproduction parts."

"There's more."

Happy opened the other box and found a taillight and a chrome badge. "How did you find these?"

“It took some work but your husband was persistent. Once I got them it took some effort to get them to look like that.”

“You do the best work.”

“Thanks,” smiled Mary.

“Hey, I had a little to do with this,” said Toby.

Happy grinned as she set down the chrome badge. “They must have cost you a fortune.”

“It’s surprising how much money you can save when you stop gambling.”

“Thank you. They’re the perfect gift.” She leaned up to give him a kiss.

“That’s my cue to leave,” said Mary.

“Thanks, Mary,” said Happy. “You do great work.”

“Thanks, Happy. Are you going on the charity ride next month?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” They waved to Mary as she jumped on her bike and pulled out of the garage.

Happy pulled Toby close. “So, you’ve been conspiring behind my back?”

“Only in an effort to make you happy, my love.” He gave her a quick kiss.

“You realize, of course, that I forgot it was our anniversary.”

“I know.”

“It’s not that I don’t care...”

He placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. “I know you do.”

“I’ll tell you what, after Kathy’s in bed, I’ll get the pink flamingo costume out of the closet.”

Toby’s eyes widened. “The wig too?”

Happy smiled. “Happy anniversary.”

Ralph got dressed and looked in the mirror. He was officially a teenager. He didn't feel any different from yesterday. He supposed he was getting a little taller. His jeans seemed not to reach as far down his ankles as they did before. He'd have to tell Mom. She'd get him some new jeans.

He tied his sneakers and grabbed his phone. Mom said they were going out to celebrate his birthday. She hadn't told him what but he guessed they'd be going to the garage. That would be okay. The team was his family. They understood him. That would make it easier to get through the day.

His Mom knocked then opened the door. "Ralph, you have a call."

"Why didn't they call on my phone?"

"It's on the laptop. Now come on." He followed his mother down the hall toward the kitchen table where Walter was waiting next to the laptop. He sat down at the table and was surprised to see his father staring at him.

"Happy birthday, son," said Drew.

"Thanks, Dad."

"I can't believe you're thirteen. It seems like just yesterday you were figuring out ways to climb out of your crib."

Ralph refrained from saying the reason it was what he remembered because it was the last time he lived with them. "Yeah, it has."

"I'm really sorry I couldn't be there but this was important for my job. If I find the team a hot prospect, it could insure my future with the organization."

"I understand, Dad." The hell of it was, he really did understand. Baseball was his father's life. He hadn't made a mark as a player. This was his last chance to make it in baseball. Ralph just wished that he was more important to his father than hitting a ball faster than anyone else.

“There’s a present there for you,” said Drew. Walter grabbed a large box from the hall closet. It was wrapped in bright paper. The label read ‘To Ralph From Dad.’ He recognized Walter’s handwriting. He tore off the paper and opened the box with a gasp.

“Wow!” Ralph pulled a chrome laptop out of the box. “This is the new T-1000 model. It’s faster than anything other model.”

“So, I’ve heard. I hope you like it.”

“I do, Dad. Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m sorry, but I have to go. I have to get to the stadium.”

“That’s okay. Thanks, Dad.”

“Happy birthday, Ralph.”

His father signed off before he could say anything else. Walter closed his laptop and moved it so Ralph had room to look at his new computer.

“Do you like your gift?” asked Paige.

“Oh yeah. This has the faster processor on the market and the video card is insane!”

“I’m very glad. I’m going to finish getting ready. Then we’ll get going.” His Mom went into her bedroom and closed the door. Walter got up from the table and started to clean up the rest of the breakfast dishes. Ralph ran his hand over the smooth, bright chrome case. He stood up and walked over to Walter.

“We should be leaving as your mother...”

Ralph stopped him in mid sentence by giving him a tight hug. “Thanks, Walter.”

“Ahh...for what?”

“For the computer.”

“That’s from your father.”

“No, it’s not, or at least it wasn’t his idea. Mom would never know what exact model I would want. Only you would. It’s a Rimark which means you got it through Kate, because only the owner of the company could get a model that hasn’t been released yet. Therefore, it had to be from you.”

“Ralph...I...”

“You don’t have to say anything, Walter. I know this stuff is hard for you.”

“It is, but I need to be better. I knew you were unhappy and I wanted to help.”

“So, you would let me think my father bought this for me instead of you.”

“It was important to me that you have a good birthday.”

Ralph smiled. “I love you too, Walter.” He was surprised when Walter’s eyes welled with tears.

“Are you two ready to go?” asked Paige.

“We’re good,” said Ralph with a smile.

Cabe found Kate in the kitchen, giving Sylvester a stacks of plastic plates to put on the deck. She was dressed in a pair of slim jeans and a pale blue, sleeveless blouse. Her long red hair was pulled into a loose ponytail. The squared away agent looked completely frazzled.

“Do you think these will be alright? Plastic plates? Should I have had it catered?”

He smiled and put his hands on her shoulders. “Calm down. Everything’s fine. You’re about to have a dozen kids and the entire team in your house. It’s going to be busy and messy. The kids will only care about what’s on the plates.”

“Do we have enough food? How much do teenagers eat? I’m not....”

He stopped her spinning out by giving her a kiss. It was a soft, gentle, kiss, not the one he wanted to give her. They’d started seeing each other but were keeping it quiet. The last thing they wanted was any teasing from the team while they were still figuring things out. “Now, I want you to take a breath and relax. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Are you handling me, Agent Gallo?” she smiled.

“I’m giving it a shot.”

“Well done. I’ll be sure to give you high marks in your next performance review,” she grinned. “Now why don’t you check on the grill. Toby and Happy should be here with the kids any minute now.”

Happy maneuvered the large rental van around the curves of Oceanside drive. She tried to remember this wasn’t the team van so no gunning the engine or hard turns. Kate had rented a van for the guests rather than try and fit a dozen cars in her driveway. She’d picked up the kids and a few parents at their school.

“Ah, sweetheart, how much longer?” asked Toby.

“You’re worse than the kids,” she chuckled.

“I’m in the middle of a dozen twelve and thirteen-year olds.”

“One of those is ours.”

“Yeah, well, our normally perfect daughter is getting as antsy as the rest of them.”

“They’re just excited about the party and the swimming.”

“I’m supposed to be the behavior expert. When did you get so smart?” he grinned.

She looked at him and smiled. “When I became a mother. Now go sit down. We’ll be at Kate’s in ten minutes.”

They both looked at the house beyond the gate with their mouths hanging open. It wasn’t just a house on the beach. It was a mansion with wraparound porches and a long drive lined with palm trees. “Are you sure this is the right address?” asked Toby.

“The GPS says it is.”

“Press the button,” said Kathy. She’d come up from her seat and pointed to the speaker on a wrought iron pole. Happy rolled down her window and pushed the button.

“Hello?”

Cabe’s voice came through the speaker. “Oh, great. You’re here. I’ll buzz you in.” A loud buzz was followed by the large iron gates opening to receive them.

“Holy sh…” Toby began.

“Language,” warned Happy as she drove past the tall palms. The children and their parents grew quiet as they pulled up to house. “Holy sh…” she whispered.

“Language,” warned Toby as Happy shut off the engine. Cabe and Kate came out of the of the side door near the large garage.

“Great you’re all here,” said Kate.

“Hello, everyone,” said Cabe. “Everything is set up around the back. Follow me.” He led the partygoers around the side of the house. Toby and Happy followed behind Kate.

“This is an amazing house,” said Happy.

“Thanks. I like it. I hope you brought your suits,” said Kate.

“We did. Kathy is pretty excited about swimming.” They followed Kate around the side of the house and both stopped at the view. The house was set on cliff with a stairway leading down to the ocean. The only things in view were seagulls and a few other homes, widely spaced around the cliff. They barely noticed the children running around the deck of the large pool.

“Okay, kids, parents, hang out here. Ralph should be here in about fifteen minutes,” said Cabe.

The guests stacked up presents on the table that was tied off with Super Fun Guy balloons. Sly and Florence started serving drinks. They’d all agreed they could forego serving alcoholic drinks. All those kids would need alert eyes watching them.

“Happy, if you’d come help me with Kate. She’s having a bit of a freak out. Toby, why don’t you lend a hand out here.”

Toby waited until Cabe went back into the house and leaned close to Happy so no one could hear. “Don’t forget. Keep you’re eyes open.”

Happy gave him an indulgent nod and followed Cabe.

“Where are we?” asked Ralph.

Walter hoped Ralph would like his surprise. “You’ll see.” He rolled down the window and pressed the call button. “We’re here,” he said. No one replied but the electric gate opened. He parked next to the large van and opened the door. “Let’s go around the back.”

“Are you sure?” asked Ralph. “Who lives here?”

Paige grabbed Ralph’s hand. “Come on.” They moved around the side of the house to a crowd of Ralph’s classmate’s and the team.

“Surprise!” The crowd shouted.

“Wow! Ralph smiled. “Hi, everyone.” Kathy ran to his side.

“We’re you surprised? I promised Mom and Dad we’d keep it a secret.”

“Yeah, I had no clue.” He leaned towards Walter. “Whose house is this?”

“It’s Kate’s house.”

Kate walked up to them and gave Ralph a hug. “Happy birthday, Ralph.”

“Thanks. You have a nice house.”

“Thank you. After lunch and cake everyone we’ll be able to swim. We also have a volleyball game set up on the beach.”

“Wow.”

“I’ve got your swimsuit in my bag,” said Paige.

“Why don’t you go say hello to your friends?” said Walter. Kathy pulled Ralph by the hand to his group of friends. “What can I do to help?” he asked.

“Cabe may need some assistance at the grill. A dozen teenagers? That’s a lot burgers and dogs.”

“Not to mention Toby,” he said. “He eats more than any teenager.”

Kate watched as Walter joined Cabe at the large grill. “Did Ralph like the laptop?”

“He was thrilled. We let him think it was Drew’s idea. I told Drew he’d have to send us a check. I’m not holding my breath.”

“Why would you do that? Walter was the one who arranged it.”

“He’s trying to compensate for Drew’s lacking as a father.”

“From what I’ve seen, he’s doing fine. And I told him he didn’t have to pay me for it but he wouldn’t hear of it.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Neither am I,” Kate smiled. “He seems to take his responsibilities to his family very seriously.”

Cabe found Kate in the kitchen, putting candles on a sheet cake. The kids had demolished the hamburgers and hot dogs. Next was cake, ice cream and presents. "There you are."

"I should have made the cake."

"Katie, there are thirty people out there."

"Birthdays are supposed to have scratch cakes. It's a rule."

He could see she was starting to spin out again. He pulled her hands away from the cake and held them in his. "Who's rule?"

"What?"

"Whose rule is it that birthday's must have a scratch cake?"

"My mother's. She always made our cakes. I used to help."

He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. "It's been a long time."

"Thirty years. I still miss them."

"Of course, you do." He gave her a soft kiss. He was interrupted by someone clearing their throat behind him. He turned to see Toby and Happy standing behind them.

"We came to help with the cake," said Toby.

Kate tried to hide her blush. "Thank you."

"You can help me carry it out," said Cabe. Toby walked toward him but Happy smacked his shoulder.

"Pay up, buddy," said Happy. Toby pulled a twenty out of his pocket and handed it to his wife.

"Gambling?" asked Cabe.

"Happy made a special exemption."

"For what?"

“For you two,” he grinned. “I said you weren’t together yet. Happy said you were. Apparently, my wife has become a better judge of relationships than I have.” He looked at Happy. “Although I did say it was inevitable.”

“Tough. I still win. Now go help.”

“Yes, dear.”

Walter observed Ralph playing with his friends on the beach. After the pool, they came down to the beach for some volleyball. They were yelling and laughing and normally Walter would find such noise annoying. But Ralph finally looked happy. He was playing volleyball with his friends. Walter also noticed Ralph seemed to be closer to Kathy than his other friends. He noticed she smiled more broadly around him.

“Hey you. What are you doing?” asked Paige.

“I’m just watching the children. I want to make sure they don’t go in the ocean.”

“No, you’re not. You look like you’re observing an experiment.”

“I suppose I am. Ralph seems to be enjoying his party.”

“He definitely is. That’s a real smile.”

“Does he seem to be favoring Kathy?”

Paige paused and watched the two as they stood closed to each other. “I think you’re right. She may be Ralph’s first girlfriend.”

“Kathy is a very nice girl and very smart. She would make a good companion for Ralph. Although Toby may not agree.”

She put her hand on his arm. “Slow your roll. They’re only thirteen. But I agree about Kathy, she’s a very nice girl. Why are you obsessing? This is a party. You should be having fun.”

Walter realized he needed to tell her the truth. More than that, he needed to admit it to himself. “I want Ralph to have a better childhood than I did. I want him to be happy.”

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “He is and thank you for loving him.”

“Of course, I do.”

“Now, I want you to come back up to the deck so you can go swimming with me.”

“What about the children? The ocean?”

“I’ll send Toby and Happy down.” She pulled him to his feet. “Come on. It’s time we have some fun.”

Cabe watched Paige swim rings around Walter until he finally caught her. Walter appeared more relaxed than he’d seemed in quite a while. He felt arms reach around his waist.

“What’s caught your attention?” said Kate.

He put his arm around her shoulder. “Walter. He seems different.”

“He seems more focused on Paige and Ralph than he does on Scorpion.”

“Exactly. I wonder what that means?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. Do you think everyone is having a good time?”

“I think this will go down as the best thirteen-year old’s birthday party in history.”

Kate gave him a slight shove. “I’m serious.”

“So am I. I doubt any of the other parents will be able to compete.”

“Do you think it’s too much?”

Cabe chuckled and pulled her close. “Will you relax? Look at all the smiles. Everyone is having a great time.” He took her by the hand and led her toward a private corner of the living room. “We haven’t had a chance to talk since we were found out. Are you okay with being public?”

Kate smiled and ran her hand up his cheek and gave him a deep kiss. “I’m very okay,” she whispered. She turned and walked toward the deck.

Cabe grinned. “Hell, yeah, you are.”

The kids had all wound down after the volleyball game thanks to the sugar double whammy of cake and ice cream. The parents had loaded them all into the van about an hour ago. Toby and Happy had driven the kids and their parents back to their cars. Sly and Florence had left for a late dinner. More likely Florence recognized Sly had reached his tolerance level for loud children and the ocean. That was Sly's double whammy.

Cabe poured Kate and Paige a glass of wine while he and Walter finished their sodas. Ralph was looking over his stack of gifts. "Did you have a good day, kid?" he asked.

"It was great! Look at all the cool stuff I got. He held up a Rams sweatshirt.

"That was very nice of your friends."

"Yeah, it was," he smiled. "Thanks for letting us have it here, Kate."

"You're very welcome, Ralph. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Ralph walked between Walter and Paige's deck chairs. "Thanks for this, guys. It was really great." He gave his mother a hug, then turned gave Ralph a hug.

"You're welcome, Ralph," said Walter.

"I had a great day," he whispered.

Cabe watched the tender scene and wondered if Walter realized he'd become a father.

Cabe found Kate in the kitchen, washing the last of the wine glasses. "I've got the deck put back to rights."

"Thanks."

He took the cloth from her hand and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Do you think they all know about us?"

"I think that's a safe bet," she smiled.

"No one said anything."

“I don’t think they will. From the sound of it they already knew, or at least, assumed.”

Cabe began to feel awkward. They’d only just started dating. Dinners, a couple of movies, they were at the beginning. “Well, everything’s cleaned up. I guess I should get going.” He started to pull away when she pulled him close.

“Cabe, do you want to go?”

“Do you want me to stay?” he smiled.

Kate smiled and headed toward the upstairs.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he chuckled as he followed her.

Walter looked out the window of Paige's apartment. He spent most of his nights here instead of his loft. At first, he felt like he was pretending to be a normal, in a normal relationship. It was only recently he'd realized being here, with Paige and Ralph, felt like he wasn't pretending. Being here felt like home.

"Hey you."

He turned to see Paige. Even in the t shirt and shorts she slept in; Paige was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. "Hi."

"Ralph is down for the count. It was quite a busy day."

"It did seem to go well."

"It was a great day. You made it a great day."

Walter took Paige's face in his hands and gave her a deep kiss. "I love you, Paige."

"I love you too," she smiled.

"And I love Ralph."

"I know that. So does he."

He took her by the hand and led her to the small couch. "I've been looking at my relationship with you and with Ralph. I've talked to Toby."

"You have? Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm trying to understand. When a question presents itself I have to analyze all the factors before I come to a conclusion."

"You make us sound like a science experiment."

"For me, everything is. I've come to understand that's how my brain works."

Paige smiled. "You have been talking to Toby."

"A lot," he said. "I think I've also realized that this is not all about me." He appreciated Paige withholding her giggle. "I want to know your opinion on how we are doing."

She smiled and threaded her fingers through his. "I think we are doing well. We have faced enough adversity to learn what defines a healthy relationship for us. And, when we hit a bump, we've learned to talk to each other."

Walter took a breath and held tight to her hand. "How do you think I'm doing in my relationship with Ralph?" He was relieved at her large smile.

"I think you are doing wonderfully. You put his needs and welfare first. That's what a good parent does."

He was surprised at her answer. "Do you think I'm a good parent?"

"I think you've become an excellent parent and you know why?"

"No. That's why I'm asking."

"Because when you're unsure of what to do you ask for help."

"Thank you. There is something I have talked to Toby about and I would like your opinion."

"Okay."

"I asked Toby why he wanted to be married?"

"What?" she gasped.

"I needed to know what was the difference between living together and being married. I think I understand."

"What do you understand?" she whispered.

"I understand about forever."

"What do you mean?"

"I understand that I love you and Ralph. I see us together, as a family, forever. I would like the world to see that too."

"Are you asking...?"

"Paige, would you like for us to be married?"

“Would you like it?”

“Yes, I would. I already feel like we are a family. I would like it be official.”

She smiled through tears. “I’d like that too.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because I’m happy. Now would be the time you should kiss me.”

He smiled and gave her a warm kiss. “I guess that means we’re engaged. Should we tell Ralph?”

She smiled and stood. “He can wait until tomorrow. She pulled him to his feet and led him toward their bedroom. “There is one other thing you’ll need to do.”

“What’s that?”

Paige laughed. “You’re buying me a ring, bud.”

Walter and Paige accepted the congratulations of the team. The women were admiring her ring. The men patted him on the back. He'd been surprised at Ralph's reaction to their engagement. He broke into tears. At first, he thought Ralph was upset but he realized that wasn't the case when Ralph gave them both a hug. He'd talked to Paige about getting a home together but she said getting married was enough change for right now. Even so, he thought it wouldn't hurt to do some research on the housing market in Ralph's school district. Toby walked up to him and patted him on the back.

"Well done, 197."

"Thanks, Toby."

"So that's why you had all the questions about marriage."

"Yes, I wanted to do my research before discussed it Paige."

"How did Ralph take the news?"

"Very well although he was crying."

"That was overwhelming relief."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he's for all intents and purposes, he's already lost one father. You've been his father figure since you first met. The fact that you're willing to be that father figure for him on a permanent basis is a great thing."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yeah, I do. You'll never give up being there for Ralph."

"I'm not his father."

Toby smiled. "No. You're better. You've chosen him as a son."

"Like you chose Kathy."

"Exactly. By the way, my daughter is crushing big time on your son."

"I've noticed that. Is it a problem for you?"

“No. Ralph is a good kid. Almost good enough for my daughter,” Toby smiled as he rejoined the team.

Three months later Walter found himself back at Kate Riley’s home. The pool had been covered with a dance floor. Flower garlands were strung around the deck, leading to the small podium. The chairs were beginning to fill with guests. As soon as Walter and Paige announced their engagement, Kate had offered her home for the wedding. He was waiting in the living room until he was still called to walk down the aisle.

Cabe came up from behind him and put his arm around Walter’s shoulder. “How are you doing, kid?”

“I’m a little nervous.”

“I’d be worried about you if you weren’t. Just focus on the fact that you are making a commitment to your family and they are to you.” Ralph came down the stairs looking so grown up in his tuxedo that it took Walter was surprised.

“Mom said she’s ready so we should go stand at the front.”

“Okay.” He looked at Cabe. “Where’s Toby and Sylvester?”

“They’re outside seating the guests,” said Cabe. He opened the sliding door to the deck and signaled to them. Toby clapped his hands.

“Are we ready to do this?”

“Yes, and thank you for losing the hat,” said Walter.

“That was my wife’s doing. So, let’s go get you one of those.”

The men walked down the aisle and lined up in their positions next to Walter. Ralph stood next to him as the best man. Sylvester was next to him as his brother-in-law. Then Toby and Cabe. The music started and the first one down the aisle was the flower girl, Kathy. She was followed by Florence, then Kate and finally the matron of honor, Happy. The music changed and Paige began her walk down the aisle. Walter had to catch his

breath. She wore a long strapless gown covered in lace with a top and sleeves of more sheer lace. Her hair was gathered in curls and pinned up with small flowers.

“Wow, you look beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she blushed. “You look very handsome.”

They turned to face the minister but Walter heard very little until the man said they should say their vows. It was Paige’s idea to write their own vows. He’d hesitated until Paige convinced him that they were a unique couple and standardized vows wouldn’t do.

Paige turned and took both of Walter’s hands in hers. “Walter, I knew the day we met, you were special. You care. You cared about Ralph. You cared about all those hundreds of people you and the team saved.” A murmur ran through the guests. Paige turned toward them and smiled “It’s a long story.” She turned back to Walter. “It took a long time for us to get where we are now, but everything we’ve gone through has been worth it. I love who you are as a partner, as a parent, as a man. I love you, Walter. I can’t wait to see the rest of our lives together will be.”

Walter took a breath and tried to focus on Paige and not all the people watching him. “Paige, I knew that first day you were different. I don’t know many people who’d have the courage you did to stand up in a car going one hundred and twenty miles an hour to save a plane flying twenty feet over her head.” Again, the guests murmured. He turned toward them and smiled. “It’s a long story.” He looked at Paige’s smile and he felt his nerves disappear. “I may have learned many things, but I never learned how to be a man.” He turned toward his groomsmen. “Despite the fact that I was surrounded by very good men. You taught me what I never learned in books, how to really live my life. You let me into your life. You let me love your son. I love who you are as a partner, as a parent, and as a woman,” he leaned close and grinned. “A very beautiful woman.” He loved her bright blush. “I love you, Paige. Thank you for marrying me.” They turned toward the minister.

“By the power invested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Cabe and Kate stood at the edge of the dance floor, watching Walter and Paige dancing. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I've never seen Walter like this."

"Like what?"

"Happy. Smiling. Dancing. This is not the Walter O'Brien I knew."

"Things change. People change with them."

He looked at her and smiled. "Yes, sometimes change can be very good."

"Yes, it can."

Cabe leaned in and gave Kate a kiss. "May I have this dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask."