

The Family You Make : A Scorpion 2.0 Story

By Kate Simon

Walter O'Brien looked up from his computer screen to see Ralph walk in and toss his backpack on his desk. He slumped down into his chair and flipped on his computer screen. Paige looked over at her son and rose from her desk. She sat down on the edge of Ralph's desk. She reached to smooth out his hair but he shook her off.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing. And I'm not a baby," he said a little too gruff.

"Hey, watch the tone. You'll always be my baby."

"Sorry," he said but didn't look up from his screen. Paige shook her head and started the walk back to her desk and caught Walter's gaze and shrugged. Walter stood and walked toward Paige.

"Let me," he whispered. It had been three months since Mark Collins had attacked Ralph and kidnapped Paige. Three months since Walter had been forced to kill Mark. Knowing he had no choice, knowing he'd done it to save Paige's life, didn't make it easier to live with. The only thing that had made his life bearable was he and Paige were back together as a couple. At least they were trying to figure out how to work as a couple. That was tough enough for Walter. Negotiating a romantic relationship was difficult for him but the added factor of a young genius boy in the relationship and Walter was in a constant state of confusion. He took Paige's place on the edge of the desk. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You can talk to me."

"It's nothing"

"So there is something. Turn off your screen."

"I'm working."

"After school you're working for Scorpion which means I'm paying you. Turn off the screen and come with me."

Ralph turned off his computer. Walter pulled two sodas from the fridge and led Ralph to the roof. He sat down in the folding chair and indicated Ralph should sit. "You can talk to me. What's going on, Ralph?"

"School."

"You'll have to be more specific. I'm not that good at this."

"I don't fit in."

"Where, elementary school or Cal-Tech?"

"Either."

"Explain. I need to understand."

"At elementary school I have some friends but the stuff they talk about doesn't really interest me. At Cal-Tech most people don't take me seriously. The professors even doubt I do the work myself."

"They do what? That's ridiculous. You're one of the smartest people in the world. You're smarter than me. How dare they doubt you."

Ralph smiled. "Thanks, Walter."

"Do you want me to talk to them?"

"No. I've managed to convince most them. The others resent me."

"What about the students?"

"Some are nice and talk to me about the work but after that..."

"I understand. They need your help."

"Yeah, but they don't relate to me on anything but an academic level."

"And the kids at your other school?"

"They're nice and it's okay when we're at recess or in gym but class is so boring."

“You know your mother feels it’s important for you to have daily contact with people your own age.”

“I know and I agree but it’s hard. The work at Cal-Tech is fascinating but the people aren’t used to working with someone my age.”

“I have an idea that might help but I’d like to talk to your mother first.” Walter took a deep sip of his soda. This part wasn’t going to be easy. “Ralph you’re way too smart for me to lie to you. The truth of the matter is it’s always going to be hard for you, no matter where you go. No matter how old you are, you’re always going to be the smartest person in the room.”

Ralph grinned. “Even here?”

Walter smiled. “Yes, even here. It’s always going to take a lot of effort for you to feel comfortable with normals.”

“How do you do it?”

“You mean other than hiring your mother to translate for me?”

“Yeah,” he laughed.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out. The only thing I know for sure is it’s worth the effort.”

“Is that what Mom taught you?”

Walter raised his bottle to Ralph. “Yes she did.”

“I’m glad you two finally figured it out, Walter. You make Mom happy.”

He tried to hide his blush. “She makes me happy too.”

“So don’t screw it up.”

“I’ll do my best. Feel free to warn me if I look like I’m about to crash and burn.”

“Count on it.”

“Okay, back to work. The DOD is waiting for your logistics software.”

Ralph smiled. "I'll be finished by the end of the week."

Walter watched the door close behind Ralph. He had an idea that might help him with the children his own age. Older students would be another matter.

Paige saw Ralph return to his desk, looking a bit more relaxed. Walter smiled and sat down at her desk. "What's wrong?" she asked quietly.

"Let's make a run to Kavelski's," he said.

She grabbed her purse and followed Walter out to his car. "Tell me about Ralph. I know something's wrong."

"It's nothing more than we should expect. He feels like he's not fitting in with either his elementary school classmates or his college classmates. I know what it feels like to not fit in. That's been my whole life."

"Until you started Scorpion."

"Until then. I don't want Ralph to have to wait twenty more years."

Paige smiled. She knew that look. "You have an idea."

"I do. Ralph really seems to enjoy working with the Aquarium. When we reengineered some of the tanks his input on the different species was invaluable to our designs."

"Okay. How does that help Ralph?"

"The Aquarium has overnight visits for classes and their teachers. I thought we could sponsor his class for a trip. Ralph could act as a guide. It might help him connect with his classmates."

"I think that's a wonderful idea but wouldn't it be awfully expensive?"

"We saved their biggest exhibits from system failures. I think they might be convinced to comp us the visit. For anything else, like food or the school buses, Ralph's

facial recognition software brought us a great payday. I think we can afford it but it's not going to help him with the college students."

"One problem at a time. That's what you always say." Paige leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. "You are a very good man, Walter."

He held her hand over his heart and smiled. "Thank you."

Toby looked over at his wife as she welded some metal together. He knew it was a little weird to be aroused by the image of his wife with a helmet on her head and fire in her hand but he didn't care. Happy Quinn was the most brilliant, powerful woman he'd ever met. He'd fallen in love with her the moment he'd met her. It took him four years but he'd won her heart and hand. Now, if he could only make her happy.

The last year had been incredibly difficult for both of them. That psycho Collins tried to kill him. Despite the fact that Collins was now dead he was still affecting them both. They'd been so excited when they thought Happy was pregnant. They were both devastated when they realized it was a false positive. They were due for some good news. He walked over to her workbench and waited until she set down the torch. "Hey sweetie. How about some lunch?"

"I'm busy," she said without looking up.

"You have to eat."

"Not now."

He decided today was a good day to be brave and he pulled her away from the bench. "Yes, now," he said quietly. "You've been working full out for weeks. We've barely had a single conversation that didn't revolve around work."

Happy stopped resisting and sighed. It was a move that was very familiar. It signaled she was admitting defeat without saying it. "Kavelski's, thirty minutes. That's it."

"Deal." Toby knew enough to take the win.

Happy looked over the menu even though she always got the same thing, burger and fries. Doc may be a pain in the ass, but he was right. They hadn't had a decent meal together in weeks. She had a lot of work to do, but that wasn't the reason. It was the excuse. She couldn't be around her husband but she didn't know why.

She glanced up when the waitress came to their booth. "A burger, medium well and fries."

“Same here,” said Toby. “And two milkshakes, one chocolate, one vanilla.”

“That’s a lot of ice cream, Doc.”

“The vanilla is for you.”

“Since when do you order for me?”

“Since you’ve barely eaten for weeks.”

She wished he wasn’t right, but he was. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Can you talk to me?”

“About what?”

“Anything not work. You’ve been avoiding me and I’m trying to figure out why.”

“I don’t know.”

He reached for her hand. “That’s a start. Tell me what you’re feeling, right now, no filter.”

“You think I have a filter? Fine. I’m wishing you’d let go of my hand.” She pulled her hand back as the waitress brought their food. After a good dosing with ketchup she popped a fry in her mouth.

“Can I tell you what I think without you dumping my milkshake on my head?”

“You’re a gambler. Take a shot.”

“Fine. I think the last year has been too much for you. We got married, we had the false pregnancy and then there’s the whole Collins nightmare. It’s a lot for anyone to process, let alone you.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means you’ve were not good at processing emotion. You’ve made great progress but this has been too much for you. You don’t even realize it. Since you can’t tell me how you feel, I’m going to tell you how I feel. I still can’t believe I was lucky enough to marry you. I think every day that you’ll wise up that you could have done so much better



and dump me. We haven't been right in a long time and I feel like you're starting to pull away. You need to know that I will do anything to stop that from happening. So if it means uncomfortable conversations in the middle of a crowded diner, so be it."

She took a sip of her milkshake. Doc was right. She wanted the milkshake. "Look, you're a pain in the ass, but you're my pain in the ass. I'm even used to that stupid hat. That being said, you're still the best thing that ever happened to me. You get me. No one else ever has or ever will. So, I'm not going dump you...ever." Toby smiled and tried to hold her hand, but she pulled it back. "We're still in public."

He nodded. "Got it."

"You're right about this past year. It's been hell. I keep waiting for the next disaster. I'm always looking over my shoulder."

"I get that. Is that all?"

"I...nothing." She popped another fry.

"Okay, you told me something so now it's my turn. I have nightmares."

Her head snapped up. "You do?"

"Yeah, about Collins. Awake me knows the crazy bastard is dead but asleep me is still scared of him. I still dream that he's trying to kill me."

"Ah, jeez." She blinked and tried to hide the fact that she was dangerously close to tears.

Toby reached for her hand and didn't let go. She should have known he'd be able to see. "Happy, please tell me. I'm asking not as a shrink. I'm asking as the person who loves you more than anyone else on the planet."

"I can't. You'll hate me."

"I can tell you with absolute certainty that will never happen."

"Don't be so sure."

"Please baby, just tell me."

“I’m not happy Collins is dead!” She looked around to make sure no one heard her. She was pretty sure the guy in the next booth wished he’d ordered in. “I know I should be. If he were sitting in the next booth I’d show him what my blowtorch could do to his privates.” The guy in the next booth picked up his dish and moved. She tried to lower her voice. “After Walter shot him I saw his body. All I could think of was he didn’t look crazy. He looked like the guy I first started working with years ago. He wasn’t always crazy. Sometimes he was fun. He was so brilliant. I liked the way he thought, that was before he went down the rabbit hole and never came back. I’m actually sorry he’s dead.” She leaned closer. “What the hell is wrong with me? He tried to kill you and I should be dancing on his grave, but I’m not. I feel...Ah...”

“Tell me, sweetheart. How do you feel?”

“Disloyal.”

Toby sighed, then squeezed her hand. “First, I don’t hate you. I’m surprised, but I don’t hate you. I can also tell you that you’re not disloyal to me. You’ve been pulling away from me because you feel guilty. You can stop that. What you are, is a far better human than I am. You can still remember the good that was in Collins before his pathology took it away. I admit, I don’t remember him that way and I don’t mourn him. May it’s okay you can remember what was good about him. He was a brilliant man but his life was a waste. Maybe I can find it in myself to mourn that.”

“You’re really not mad?”

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’m really not. I love you Happy Quinn. I’m so damn lucky you married me. Now eat your burger.”

Cabe Gallo hit the button and his target moved toward him. The figure had a few center mass shots but there were a few in the shoulder. Not exactly a miss but not what satisfied a sharpshooter like Cabe. He replaced the target with a fresh one and put it back at one hundred yards. One hundred yards was the maximum effective range on his 9mm. He rarely had to shoot at this distance in his work with Scorpion but he kept his skills sharp. He'd been one of the best during his time in the Marines. It may have been a couple of decades ago but he did whatever he could to maintain his skills.

Turning sixty had hit him in ways he hadn't expected. Most of his contemporaries were retired and had gone fishing. There were older agents who were desk jockeys but he was pretty sure he was the oldest field agent in Katherine's jurisdiction. He knew she would protect him. He and the team had saved the world. More than once. But Katherine shouldn't have to protect him. She should be able to point to his skills. He took aim and fired off another clip. He pulled back the target and smiled. Solid center mass. There was nothing wrong with his vision.

It was a short trip back to his apartment. He needed to change and get ready for his date with Allie. Changed into a fresh polo and khakis, he looked into the mirror. He kept in good shape. He worked out an hour a day six days a week. Some days were at the gym, some days he ran in his neighborhood. It was a necessary part of his job. It was also necessary when you had a girlfriend who was fifteen years younger. She seemed to be just fine with how he looked. He smiled when he remembered last night. Their love life was certainly nothing to complain about. He brushed back his hair. "Get it together, Gallo. A beautiful woman is waiting on you."

Cabe pulled into Kavelski's parking lot and spotted a halo of curls waiting outside the door looking at her phone. He walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Hello, sweetheart."

She turned around and smiled. "Do you always put your hands on women in parking lots?"

He gave her a quick kiss. "Only you, Allie."

“The curls are a giveaway.”

He grinned and turned her around, admiring how she filled out her jeans. “That’s not the only thing that’s a giveaway.”

Allie laughed and slipped her hands around his waist. “Well, someone’s in a good mood.”

He gave her another kiss. “Of course I am. You know how much I love Kavelski’s burgers.” Allie swatted his bottom as he opened the diner door. They grabbed a booth and opened the menus. Cabe really did love their burgers and Allie claimed they made a good veggie burger. Not that he would know.

They ordered their burgers and the waitress brought their drinks. Allie was talking about her sister’s upcoming visit but he wasn’t listening, he was just smiling.

“Cabe? Did you hear me?”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“I said my sister will be here in two weeks. I wanted to know if you can get some time off to spend with us.”

“I’m sure I can manage.”

“What has you so preoccupied?”

“You do.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I’m just thinking what a lucky man I am to have such a beautiful young woman in my life.” Cabe was surprised when she rolled her eyes.

“Are we having the age discussion...again? First, I’m not that young, but thank you. And you Mr. Gallo, I am lucky to have a man like you. I’m with you because you’re a brave, bold, honorable man. I respect you. But that’s not the only reason.” She leaned closer. “You’re hot. You’re so strong and fit. Really fit.”

Cabe thought he heard her growl.

She lowered her voice. "I love your broad shoulders and strong jaw. And you have the bluest eyes I've ever seen." She smiled. "You're so passionate."

This time he was sure she growled.

"So you see, I'm not just in this for the brilliant conversation." She smiled and winked. "I'm in it for the sex."

He chuckled and picked up his phone. "Hey, Walter. Yeah, I'm not coming in today. In fact I'll be unavailable for the rest of the weekend. Don't call me unless the end of the world is imminent." He disconnected the call and sipped his ice tea.

"I thought you had to go to work today. A ton of paperwork, you said."

"It'll still be there on Monday. I suddenly have something much more important on the agenda." He smiled and winked. "Now eat your burger."

Walter and Paige took Ralph to dinner Saturday night. They'd all worked late so they'd gone to Kavelski's. It was fine by Ralph because he liked their bacon cheeseburgers and curly fries. He figured they wanted to talk to him and curly fries were a way to insure he wouldn't run off.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" he asked.

"Can't we enjoy an evening out together without you being suspicious?" asked Paige. Ralph and Walter both gave her the same look.

"Paige, you know we can't get anything past Ralph."

"What gave us away?" she asked.

"Bacon cheeseburger and curly fries? You let me order and didn't comment on the lack of nutritional content."

Paige smiled. "Noted. Okay, yes, we want to talk to you about school."

"Which one?"

"Elementary school. Walter told me how you're not feeling a part of the group."

Ralph shot him a look. "Did you have to tell her?"

"Absolutely. We all know how badly it turns out to keep things from your mother."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Walter had a thought that might help."

"I'm listening," he said as he munched on a fry.

"Hey. Watch the attitude, mister."

"Sorry, Mom. What's your idea?"

"Remember how much you enjoyed working on the Aquarium project?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "That was a lot of fun."

“The Aquarium has overnight field trips for schools. We thought we might arrange for a field trip for your class. You could act as a docent for the class.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You love the Aquarium. So does everyone,” said Paige.

“Your work with the otter enclosure was invaluable to the project. You could explain what you did,” said Walter.

“It sounds good but that might be pretty expensive. Some of the kids in my class come from poor families.”

Walter smiled. “I’ve thought of that. The Aquarium has agreed to sponsor the class trip. Any other expenses, like food or transportation, Scorpion will cover.”

“You will?”

“Yes. Your facial recognition software gave us an unexpected windfall. We can cover extra expenses.”

“Did the school go for it?”

“We wanted to ask you before we talked to the school,” said Paige.

“We wanted to be sure you liked the idea,” said Walter.

Ralph looked at Mom and Walter. Ever since they got back together Walter was working hard to be sensitive to everyone’s needs. He had to give him an A for effort. His mom was always looking out for him. It was kind of nice to have two adults looking out for him. His father had gotten so caught up in his own life he’d all but forgotten about Ralph. “Yeah, Walter, I like the idea. I think it’s great.”

Walter nodded and reached for his soda. “Good, good.”

“We’ll call your principal on Monday,” said Paige. She glanced at Walter and Ralph could tell she was proud. This was his idea and it demonstrated a lot of EQ. A night at the Aquarium might be fun. He smiled and took a bite of his burger.

Walter set out the bagels and cream cheese from Kavel'ski's. Paige said it would help to smooth the way for what they were going to ask of the team.

"Nice," said Cabe. "I can get an egg bagel before Toby scarfs them all down." He grabbed one and smeared on some cream cheese. "So what's up?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I can tell this is Paige's doing. So that means you want something."

Walter sighed and nodded. He'd agreed that his policy of complete honesty with her had to extend to the team. "There is but I'd like to wait until all the team is here." Cabe nodded and reached for his coffee. Twenty minutes later everyone was enjoying their unexpected nosh. "Okay, everyone, if I could have your attention." He waited until everyone looked up from their monitors. "I have a request,"

Paige stood next to him. "We have a request."

"Yes. We have arranged an overnight field trip at the Scott Aquarium for Ralph and his class. The school has agreed but we need to provide some chaperones. I'm hoping some of you might volunteer."

"Overnight? On a cold floor? In front of a three hundred thousand gallon tank?" asked Sly. "Why are we doing this?"

"We're trying to help Ralph feel more comfortable with his classmates. He was very instrumental with our project at the Aquarium. He could give his classmates a tour and answer questions."

"I'm in," said Happy. Everyone gave her a stunned look. "What? It's for the kid."

Toby tried not to smile too broad. "If she's in, I'm in."

"Thanks, guys," said Walter.

"I'm in," said Cabe. "I'll ask Allie. She'd probably enjoy that."

"Thanks, Cabe," said Paige.

"Ahhh, I'll ask Florence," said Sly.



“Sly, buddy. I know this is a tough ask for you. It’s okay with Paige and I if you said no.”

“No, I’ll go. Like Happy said, it’s for Ralph.”

Walter smiled. “Thanks, buddy.”

The children were loud and rambunctious as they got off the bus. Cabe couldn't blame them. He also couldn't believe this was Walter's idea. He was stunned when Paige told him that Walter came up with this plan to help Ralph bond with his classmates. He watched Walter trying to herd the children into the Aquarium. He must have been uncomfortable as hell but he was forcing a smile. Cabe was so proud of him. He was really making an effort.

"Where should I put our bags?"

Cabe turned around and smiled. Allie was wearing a t shirt with a hoodie and those jeans he loved. "I'll grab the bags. We'll need to help move the kids stuff." Paige led them to a large conference room where they were met by a woman in a sea blue polo and khakis. At the far end of the room was a stack of twenty five child size sleeping bags. In another unexpected move, Walter decided to get each child their own sleeping bag, rather than ask them to bring their own. He decided that embarrassing some of Ralph's less fortunate classmates would do nothing to improve his standing with his class.

"Hi. I'm Julie Newsome."

"Hi, Julie. I'm Paige Dineen. We talked on the phone. This Cabe Gallo and Allie Jones."

Julie extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you. I'll be acting as your docent and I'll be staying overnight with you. I'm looking forward to meeting the rest of your team."

"We've talked about Ralph accompanying you on your tour."

"Yes, of course. His design for the otter habitat was terrific. It provides so much stimulation for them. Our residents are thriving. Scorpion's work was amazing. When do I get to meet him?" she smiled. "It's wonderful when a man is so in tune with an animal's needs. Wait. Dineen? He has the same last name. Please say he's your brother."

Paige glanced at Cabe who was struggling not to laugh. "Uh, I'm sorry. I thought you understood about Ralph."

"Oh God, he's your husband. I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

“He’s not my husband but...”

The door open and Ralph walked in. “Mom, should I have the kids bring in their stuff.”

“Yes, please. Before you do I want you to meet Julie Newsome. She’ll be leading the tour with you. Julie, this is my son, Ralph.”

Julie’s face fell. “You’re Ralph Dineen?”

“Yes, I am.” He shook her hand.

“You’re the Ralph that designed our otter enclosure?”

“Yes.”

“But you so...young.”

“I’m twelve.”

“But he is a member of Scorpion,” Cabe added.

“Uh huh,” she muttered.

“I look forward to working with you,” he smiled. He walked out of the room and they all heard Julie let out a breath.

“Oh my God, I’m so embarrassed.”

Paige put her hand on the young woman’s shoulder. “Please, don’t be. It’s understandable how you would have thought he was older. He works as an equal with a team of geniuses.”

“He’s a genius?”

“Actually, he’s the smartest one in the bunch,” said Cabe. “Paige and I are the normals.”

“Normals? I’m so confused.”

“Normals are like everyone else. Paige interprets the normal world for them.”

“What do you do?”

Allie smiled and held on to his arm. “He’s the muscle.”

Cabe chuckled. “I’m a Homeland Security agent.”

“Oh, okay. Um, I’m going to get my material and if you could have the children meet me at the open seas exhibit. That’s the tank your team redesigned. From there we’ll be moving on to the new otter enclosure.”

“All of our team is here, including Happy Quinn. She’s the engineer who designed the fix for the open seas tank.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll see your group at the open seas in twenty minutes.” Julie exited the room quickly and closed the door behind her.

Cabe waited a few moments before laughing. “Oh, that poor girl.”

Ralph tried his best to be a good host to his class. He made sure everyone was ready for the first presentation at open seas. The kids who hung together in class were doing it here. All except Kathy Pearson. She was always quiet but now she was hanging in the back of the group reading the program.

“Hi Kathy.”

“Hey.”

“Do you want to come up front? You’ll be able to hear better.”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? Happy is going to talk about how she redesigned the tank.”

“Happy?”

“I work with her at Scorpion.”

“You have a job? What do you do?”

“It depends. Sometimes I write computer code. Sometimes I help with projects like the Aquarium. Happy redesigned the tank. I redesigned the otter enclosure.”

Kathy gave him a side glance.

“No, really. I did.”

“Sure.”

“Come up front and you can listen. You’ll see.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Ralph was glad when Kathy followed him to the front of the group and they sat down in front of the tank. The lady Mom introduced him to came to the front of the group with their teacher, Ms. Duncan.

“Hi everyone. This is Miss Julie and she works here at the Scott Aquarium and she’ll be showing you around the exhibits.”

“Hi Miss Julie,” said the students.

“Before we start I’d like to introduce the members of team Scorpion, the sponsors of our trip. First there is Mr. Walter O’Brien. He’s the head of Scorpion.”

Walter gave the class an awkward nod. “Hello children.”

Ms. Duncan looked down at her paper. “Then we have Dr. Toby Curtis.”

Walter smiled. “He may not look like it but he’s a real doctor. If any of you feel unwell during the night, he can help you,” Ralph tried not to laugh at the look Toby gave Walter.

“Then we have Happy Quinn. Mrs. Quinn is an engineer.”

Happy stood next to Toby. “Hey.”

Toby leaned in and whispered. “Very good, dear. Eloquent.” Happy shoved her elbow in his ribs and all the children giggled.

“Mr. Sylvester Dodd.”

Sly stood next to Happy, even more awkward than Walter. “Hello.”

“What do you do?” called out one of the children.

“I am a mathematician and computer analyst.”

“Ms. Florence Tipton.”

Florence stood next to Sly. “Actually it’s Dr. Tipton.”

“Are you like the guy in the hat?” asked the same curious kid. Ralph turned around. Jamie Williams. Ralph should have known. Jamie was always calling out in class.

“No,” said Florence. “I have a PhD in Chemistry.”

“Mr. Cabe Gallo.” Cabe stood and gave the kids a wave. “Ms. Paige Dineen.” His Mom stood next to Cabe. Ms. Duncan looked down at the list and looked at his mom. “Is this right?” His mom smiled and nodded. “And Ralph Dineen.” Ralph stood in front of his mom but he could hear some of the kids chuckling. Walter moved in front of everyone.

“Let me explain about Scorpion. We are a group of high IQ people who solve problems for people. We helped the Aquarium repair and design a lot of their displays. Ralph is a very important member of our group. He is a brilliant computer analyst and designer. In fact, he designed the new otter enclosure you’re going to see.”

“No way,” said Jaime. Jamie was a kinda of a jerk.

“Yes way,” said Walter.

“Okay everyone,” said Ms. Duncan. “I’m going to turn this over to Miss Julie so she can start our tour.” The children gathered around Miss Julie as she began to explain what they were seeing. She described the sharks, dolphins and sting rays. The kids were fascinated with the schooling sardines.

“Don’t they get eaten?” asked Kathy.

“That’s a good question,” said Miss Julie. “Normally they would be at risk but the regular feeding of the other animals means they are pretty safe. A shark will choose to eat a dead animal over a live one because it preserves their energy.”

The children started squealing as an enormous fish swam by. “Don’t be scared,” said Ralph. That’s Charlie. He’s a mola mola fish. It’s also called an ocean sunfish. I know he’s really big, about three thousand pounds, but don’t worry. He only eats small fish and fish larvae. Even if you were in the water with him, he wouldn’t be interested in you.”

A timid voice asked. “Could he get out here?” Ralph spotted Kami Spencer. She was a little blonde girl who was almost hiding behind her friend Jenny. He walked toward the frightened girl.

“No, Kami, he can’t get out here. Happy, maybe this is a good time to tell everyone what you did to the tank.”

“Ah, yeah, sure.” Happy walked up to the tank. “The Aquarium was having a problem with the tank overheating from the sun. I developed a special polycarbonate coating to cover the tank. It blocks out the type of light that heats the water and it makes it super strong.”

“I don’t see anything,” said Jaime. Ralph rolled his eyes.

“That’s the point,” said Happy. “It’s like what’s on your glasses, just a million times stronger.”

Ralph leaned closer to Kami. “You see. You’re very safe.” Kami smiled at him and nodded. He walked back to Kathy and stood next to her.

“Nice,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked.

“What you did for Kami. She’s not scared anymore.”

“Thanks,” he smiled.

They moved toward the lower level of the otter enclosure where they could all see the otters rolling and swimming through their new home. Miss Julie waited until everyone gathered around her. “This is our new southern sea otter enclosure. They are native to the southern pacific coast. As you can see our residents really enjoy their new home. Normally this is the part where I would tell you all about them but I think I’ll turn it over to Ralph. Ralph, would you like to tell everyone about what you did?”

Ralph walked to the front of the class. “The Aquarium came to Scorpion asking us to update some of their exhibits. Walter assigned me the otter enclosure. The idea was to update the enclosure, adding enrichments. That’s things that stimulate them and keeps them active.”

“It looks pretty but isn’t it mean to keep them in a tank? Wouldn’t they be happier in the ocean?” asked Jenny. Ms. Duncan shot her a look like Jenny was being rude. Jenny looked embarrassed.

“Actually, Jenny, that’s a very good question.” Jenny smiled at him and shot Ms. Duncan an ‘I told you so’ look. “All of these residents were rescues. They either came to the Aquarium injured or as stranded babies. They can’t be released in the wild because they would never survive. The sea otter population had been declining. The residents



here are part of a conservation program to help preserve the species. One of the otters, Gidget, has been a foster mother to orphan pups for ten years.” Ralph turned and made a rhythmic tap on the tank. An otter sped over and put a paw on the tank wall. “Hi Gidget.” She swam up and down and tapped the wall again. Then she swam up surface. “She wants me to come up to the top.” He turned toward Miss Julie. “She wants to see me.”

Miss Julie smiled. “Well, we can’t keep her waiting.”

Ralph turn to his class. “Follow me. It’s just up those stairs.” They walked up the stairs to the outdoor section of the enclosure. It was still early enough that there was plenty of light. The children gathered around the a stone outcrop where the trainers worked with the otters during public feedings. Gidget popped up through one of the openings. “Hi, Gidget.” She made some noise and he turned to Miss Julie. “I think she wants a snack.”

Miss Julie pulled out two pails of chopped squid, shelled clams and shrimp. “I have these ready for you and your friends.”

“Cool! Thank you.” Ralph grabbed a bucket and picked up a shrimp. The children giggled at the noise Gidget made while she ate her treat. “She likes her shrimp unshelled. I think she likes the crunch, like tortilla chips. The rest of the otters were popping up at the edge of the outcrop. “They want their share. Who wants to try and feed them?” Of course Jaime pushed forward.

“I will.”

“Okay,” said Ralph. “Bend down like this and hand one a small piece.” Jaime did as instructed but squealed when a the rest of the otters charged him for the fish. He dropped the fish and backed up. “Maybe it would be better if we had enough people to feed everyone.” He selected six volunteers but he needed one more. “Kami, would you like to try?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“It’s okay. You can feed Gidget. She’s really sweet.” He handed a shrimp to Kami while Miss Julie helped the others. “Just bend down and hold it on the edge of your

fingers.” Kami did as she was told. Gidget grabbed the shrimp from her fingers and pushed it in her mouth.

“Oh my gosh! She ate it.”

“Good job, Kami. Do you want to give her some more?”

“Can I?” Kami smiled more than he’d ever seen as she fed Gidget and a few of the other otters. They fed the otters until the buckets were empty. When the otters realized there was no more food they went about their otter business, swimming, rolling and running through long tubes.

“That looks like my hamster cage,” said Billy.

“It kind of is,” said Ralph. “It’s one of the things I added to the enclosure. They enjoy running up and down through the tubes. There are hidden places inside it and spread out through the enclosure where the keepers add food. The otters have to think about how to get the food out. That keeps their minds active.”

“Look at that,” said Jenny. “Isn’t that sweet?” Jenny was pointing to Gidget grooming a smaller otter.

“Gidget cares for the younger ones.”

Miss Julie stepped forward. “That’s one of our newest rescues. He’s a young male. He’s recovered from his injury but he will be unable to fend for himself in the wild. He will spend his life here, being cared for by us and having fun with his otter family.”

“That’s nice. What’s his name?” said Jenny.

“Well, that’s something I was saving for later but we can do this now.” Miss Julie walked over to a covered display. “This is where we have pictures of each of our residents and we have just added our new member.” She pulled the cover off the display and Ralph gasped as Miss Julie read the new display out loud. “In recognition of the work he’s done to enrich the lives of the Scott Aquarium southern sea otters, our newest resident is named in honor of Ralph Dineen.” Miss Julie pointed to the small pup. “Everyone, say hello to Ralph.”

Ralph was startled when his classmates all shouted “Hi, Ralph”. He looked up at his mom who was wiping a tear from her cheek. “Wow, thank you,” he said.

“You’re very welcome.”

Jaime walked up to Ralph and looked at him. “That’s kind of cool, Ralph.”

“Thanks, Jaime.”

It got close to dinner time and Ms. Duncan and Miss Julie directed the children to the cafeteria. Walter had arranged for the cafeteria to be ready to serve twenty five children and their chaperones. Paige made sure all the children had their meals. She noticed a girl with long dark hair sitting by herself. She was about to say something to the girl when she saw Ralph sit down next to her. He started talking to the girl but she didn't look up. Ralph kept talking until the girl looked at him. Her son never ceased to amaze her. This trip was suppose to be about Ralph making inroads with his class. He seemed to be more interested in keeping a lonely girl company.

"Everything is going well, Walter," she said as she joined him in line.

"It seems to be," he smiled. "The children seem to be treating Ralph well, except for that one smart aleck with the glasses."

"It was very sweet of you to defend Ralph."

"He shouldn't require defending. He's an important part of Scorpion."

"You know that and I know that, but these kids are only twelve. They've never met anyone like Ralph."

Walter picked up a small salad and set it on his tray. "There is no one like Ralph."

Paige stopped and smiled.

"What?"

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Walter."

"I love you too."

Cabe sat down at the large table between Paige and Allie. "Do you have enough? They don't have a big vegetarian selection."

Allie smiled. "I have salad and a slice of mushroom pizza. I'm covered."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked as he took a bite of his burger.

“It’s great. I can’t believe we’re all sleeping in front of that huge tank.”

“I haven’t camped in a long time, especially not on a tile floor.”

Allie leaned close. “I thought of that. I got us a couple of heated sleeping bag liners.”

“How do we keep them warm?”

“Batteries.”

Cabe smiled and gave her a quick kiss. “Clever girl.”

Sly sat down next to Florence and looked at his dinner. “I don’t know about this. I haven’t seen the kitchen. How do we know they meet health code?”

Florence put her hand over Sly’s. “Think of this logically. They serve hundreds of meals every day. They are very experienced.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re good.”

“No, but in your research, and I know you researched the heck out of the place, did you find one reference to anyone getting sick on the food?”

“No.”

“Well then, I’d say it’s a safe bet,” she said as she took a bite of her pizza.

Paige smiled. “Good job, Florence. You’ve learned to speak Sly.”

Florence looked at him and smiled. “He’s worth the effort.”

Toby and Happy took the two seats next to Walter and Paige at the table. “I have to admit it, 197, this was a great idea. Ralph is a natural teacher. He explains without condescension. Obviously he gets that from Paige.”

“Do you think his classmates are warming up to him?” asked Paige.

“There will always be an alpha in any group that doesn’t want to surrender power.”

“Jaime,” said Walter.

“Exactly. He may never win over some people over but I think he’s on the right track.”

Walter nodded. “Thanks, Toby.”

Julie and Ms. Duncan took the last two seats at the table. “It seems to be going well, Ms. Duncan,” said Paige.

“It’s Linda, please. Yes, it is. Frankly, I’m surprised. I’ve never done an overnight trip with my class. Ralph, was my biggest surprise, Ms. Dineen. I knew he was gifted but I had no idea just how gifted.”

“Paige, please.”

“Paige, if he’s this gifted I have to ask why is he in my class?”

“I feel it’s important for him to have as normal a school experience as possible. It’s not all about facts. It’s also about learning to be with kids his own age. He’s always been different from everyone else and that can be very difficult.”

“We can attest to that,” said Walter. “All of us at Scorpion had difficult childhoods. Scorpion is a place for people like us. We come together to solve problems no one else can.”

“Like fixing giant fish tanks or redesigning otter enclosures,” said Julie.

“It was really nice of the Aquarium to name the otter after Ralph,” said Paige.

“He deserved it. The new enclosure has made a big impact on our otter population.” Julie and Linda started talking about the tours after dinner.

Cabe leaned over to Paige and whispered. “How much you want to bet she got that done to impress a guy she wanted to date?”

Paige smiled. “Sucker bet.”

After dinner the children broke off into two groups, one led by Miss Julie and one by Ms. Duncan and Ralph. He led his group to the Kelp Forest display. He waited as Ms. Duncan explained the display. Once the children started asking more detail questions Ralph took over. He answered questions about the sharks and octopus and star fish. All the children seemed interested, except Kathy, who'd wandered to the back of the group.

They moved on to the Giant Octopus tank where a lot of the kids squealed at the sight of the animal moving across the glass. He explained that they ate clams and other mollusks and they're was nothing to fear from them. "Ms. Duncan let's move them to Rocky Shore. I think they won't be so intimidated there." They moved to the new display and the children were fascinated by the anemones, crabs, star fish and a particularly odd looking eel called the monkeyface prickleback. Ralph had redesigned the tank so the there was an easier flow of water and the kids so get closer to the animals. While the rest of the group giggled at the giant green anemone he walked to the back of the group. "Hey Kathy, come check this out. I designed the tank so you can touch the starfish." She gave him a side glance. "It's safe, trust me." He led her up to the shallow tank with the gently flowing water. He put his hand in near a starfish and is wrapped one of its arms around his finger.

"Is he biting you?"

"No, actually it tickles. Come on, try." He pulled out his hand and Kathy put hers where Ralph's had been. He smiled when she giggled.

"It tickles."

"I told you so."

Happy watched the kids as they looked at the fish. Somehow they didn't seem quite as annoying as she'd expected. The one girl seemed separate from the others. She talked to Ralph but she didn't seem to have any other friends. Ralph was busy with the other student's questions. The girl was staring into the tank by herself. She stood next girl and looked straight ahead. "They're pretty cool," she said.

Kathy didn't look up. "Yeah."

"It's kind of peaceful."

"I suppose."

This kid wasn't going to make it easy. "I'm Happy."

"Good for you."

"That's my name, but you know that since your teacher introduced me." She waited a moment. "This is the part where you tell me your name."

"Kathy."

"Hey."

Happy waited.

"Did you really fix the tanks?"

"Yeah." She touched the tank. "I made this stuff that we coated all the tanks with. It makes them really strong and reflect the light that heats the water too much."

Kathy touched the tank. "Nice. Ms. Duncan said you're an engineer. So, like , you make stuff?"

"Yeah."

"Like what?"

"Besides, giant fish tanks, pretty much anything. I build the machines that we need to solve problems."

"You do?"



“Yeah.”

“Do you work on cars?”

Happy was surprised the girl seemed interested. “Yeah, cars, bikes, whatever needs fixing or improving.”

“Bikes? Motorcycles? Do you have a bike?”

“Yeah, a Harley Soft Tail Slim.”

“Oh, that’s cool. When I’m old enough I’m going to tech school to learn how to fix them.”

“Nice. Sounds like a good plan.”

Kathy gave her a look. “Most grownups say I should go to college. Ms. Duncan said I’m too smart to waste my time in tech school.”

Happy shot the teacher a dirty look. “What does she know? You never have to worry about having a job if you can fix stuff. There will always be stuff that needs fixing.”

“But you’re like a genius, right? You went to college.”

“Nope.”

“No? Did you’re parents get mad?”

“No. I was a foster kid. Once I was eighteen I was on my own.” Kathy stared at her like she was some great mystery. “What?”

“I’m a foster kid,” she said quietly.

The kids gathered around Walter, Sly, Toby and Cabe as they handed out new sleeping bags to all the kids. Ralph couldn't believe that Walter had arranged for all this including sleeping bags. It was nice for some of the kids who didn't have much to get something new. The kids picked out spots on the floor and got comfortable inside their bags. Kathy was setting up her bag away from the others. Ralph carried his bag over near her. "Do you mind if I put my sleeping bag here?"

Kathy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't care."

He laid out his bag and sat down on the floor next to her. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I haven't slept over anywhere except at my father's or at Scorpion."

She nodded toward Walter. "Isn't he your father?"

"No. He's my mom's boyfriend and our boss. He's a good guy."

"Does your father mind?"

"No, I haven't seen him in a while. He lives in Maine now. He calls sometimes."

"Oh."

"Were your parents okay with you spending the night here?"

"They're not my parents. They're just fosters and they're glad when they can get rid of me."

"Oh."

"Are you really as smart as the grownups?"

Ralph smiled. "Actually, my IQ is higher. All that means is I understand things and retain them."

"So why are you in seventh grade with us dummies?"

"First, you're no dummy. Neither are most of the kids in our class."

"Except Jaime."

Ralph chuckled. "He's no dummy, he's just a pain." He was glad when Kathy smiled. "Just because I know some things doesn't mean I know everything. My mom wants me to have a normal childhood."

"Your mom seems nice."

"She is." Ralph saw Kathy looking around as she was getting into her bag. "Don't worry. You're safe here."

"Are you sure?" she whispered. "You hear stuff, you know, about kids and creeps."

"I promise. And besides, we have Cabe." He waved at Cabe who winked and waved back. "He's a Homeland Security Agent."

"He's a cop?"

"Yeah, a federal cop."

"So he can arrest people?"

"Yeah." He thought he understood the look on her face. "Kathy, do you need someone arrested?"

"No, never mind." She pulled the edge of her bag over her legs and reached for the zipper. Ralph reached for her hand.

"Kathy, do you trust me?"

She paused but didn't pull her hand away. "I guess."

"Come with me." He stood up and helped Kathy to her feet. He led her over to where Cabe and Allie were setting up their sleeping bags. "Cabe, Allie, this is my friend Kathy."

Cabe extended his hand. "Hello, Kathy."

Allie shook her hand too. "Hello."

"Cabe, I told Kathy you're a Homeland Agent. Can you show her your badge?"

“Sure.” He smiled and pulled his badge out of his back pocket. He flipped it open and Kathy ran her fingers over it.

“Cabe, could we talk to you?” Ralph nodded toward the conference room. “In private.”

“Sure.” Cabe led them to the conference room. He held the door open for them and caught his mom’s attention. He nodded they should join them.

“What’s going on?” Mom whispered. Cabe shrugged.

“Guys, this is my friend, Kathy Pearson. Cabe, she needs to talk to you.”

“How can I help you, Kathy?”

“Ralph said you’re a cop, that you arrest people.”

“I’m a federal agent but yes, I can arrest people. Is there someone you want me to arrest?”

Kathy turned toward the door. “No, never mind.”

“Please, Kathy, wait. You can talk to us,” said Mom. She put her hand on Kathy’s shoulder and she winced. “Kathy, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” She pulled her arm away and gasped. “Ow.”

“You are hurt. Ralph go get Toby.”

“No!” said Kathy.

Ralph looked at her and spoke quietly. “Kathy, Toby’s an excellent doctor. I promise.” He walked out into the main hall and waved for Toby to join him.

“What’s up, kid?”

“Do you have your bag?” Ralph could see Toby switch to doctor mode.

“Yes. It’s in the car.”

“Could you get it and meet us in the conference room.” He thought for a moment and added, “bring Happy too.” A few minutes later Toby and Happy joined them in the conference room. “Kathy, you remember Toby and his wife, Happy.” Kathy nodded.

“I understand I may have a patient.”

“I think her arm is hurt,” said Mom.

“Let’s go in the next room...”

“No!” she cried.

The adults all looked at each other and Ralph had a sick feeling he knew what the problem was. “Toby, how about you examine Kathy at the back of the room. We’ll face this way.”

Kathy looked at Happy. “Will you come with me?”

Happy smiled, even though she knew what was happening. “Sure, kid.”

Ralph faced the wall and hoped Toby could get Kathy to talk.

Happy was getting very angry. Kathy was sitting in her undershirt and trying not to cry. Happy promised her it was necessary for Toby to do an exam. She took her hand and held it tight. She could see bruises of varying degrees on her arms. She bet they're were others. Toby was listening to her heart and was asking her to breathe. He walked behind her and asked her to lean forward. He listened to Kathy's lungs and looked up at Happy. She could see it in his eyes.

"Okay, Kathy. You can put your shirt." He waited until she was dressed. "Kathy, I can tell someone is hurting you. I can see it on your arms. I'm not going to ask you take off anything else but I'm going to guess there are more bruises." Kathy wiped a tear from her cheek and she nodded. "Kathy, who is doing this?" She looked down. "It's okay, I promise. You can tell me. Is it your father?"

"He's not my father!"

Happy put a hand on Toby's shoulder. "She's a foster, like I was." Kathy looked up at her and she had an idea. "Doc, can you give us a minute?"

"What? I need to..."

"You need to go stand with the others." Toby knew better to argue with his wife on a good day, let alone now. She waited until it was just her and Kathy. "Okay, it's just us. You can tell me. Is it your foster father?"

"Uh huh," she whispered.

"I see the bruises. Is he doing other stuff to you?"

Kathy nodded. "He touches me. He says I need to be nice to him or they'll send me back and I'll end up in an orphanage." Kathy looked at her and Happy's heart broke. "Please make it stop." Kathy broke down and sobbed. Happy pulled the girl toward her and held her tight, letting the girl cry herself out. She used her shirt to wipe the girl's tears.

"Okay, we're going to fix this."

Kathy looked at her with hope and fear. "How can you?"

“Scorpion fixes problems no one else can. We can help you, but you’ll have to trust me, trust us.” She led Kathy back to the rest of the group. “Okay, here’s the deal. We need to get Kathy out of her foster home.”

“Toby filled us in,” said Cabe. “I can make some calls but this is Friday night. Courts, hearings, none of that can happen until Monday.”

“Kathy, do you think you could call your fosters and tell them you’re staying with a friend from school for the weekend?” asked Happy.

“Yeah, they won’t care.”

“Good, because you’re not going back there, ever.”

Toby looked at her. “Sweetheart, I agree, but this is complicated.”

“No it’s not. Kathy’s coming home with us.” She could see Toby was about to say something when Kathy looked at her and smiled through her tears.

“Do you mean it?”

“I never say anything I don’t mean.”

Kathy threw her arms around her and hugged her tight. “Thank you.”

Happy and Paige took Kathy and Ralph back out to the main room to get them set for the night. She got Kathy tucked in and zipped up her sleeping bag. “Are you okay?”

“I am now,” Kathy smiled through puffy eyes. “Ralph said I could trust you.”

“He did?” asked Paige.

“Yeah. He said you guys fix things.”

“Well, were going to fix this,” said Happy. “Try and get some sleep. We won’t be far.”

“Thank you, Happy.” In a move that was both natural and shocking to everyone, including Happy, she leaned over and kissed the girl’s forehead.

Cabe would have laughed at Toby's stunned expression if it wasn't such a serious matter.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Toby.

"Your wife just took in a foster daughter." He let Toby absorb the last few minutes before he started his questions. "I assume you can confirm the girl is being abused." Toby was still staring at the door. "Doc! The girl. Someone's hurting her?"

Toby turned towards him. "Yes."

"You're sure? It's not just her way of getting away from people she doesn't like."

That snapped Toby out of it. "What the hell? A kid can't fake bruises in the shape of handprints, big handprints. So it's her foster father or her foster mother has some giant mitts."

Happy and Paige came back into the room. "She's tucked in."

"Ralph will keep an eye on her," said Paige.

Toby put his hands on Happy's shoulders. "Sweetheart, I understand you feel a connection to this girl but there's only so much we can do."

"It's not just physical abuse. He told her she had to be nice to him."

"Ah, Christ," whispered Cabe.

"We can't let her go back there."

Toby sighed. "Agreed. But there will have to be an official exam."

"Not right now. She needs to feel safe. We'll take her home and we can talk to her later. Cabe, who can you call?"

"Well, Child Protective Services is federal. Senator Murdoch said he owes us after the earthquake."

Paige smiled. "If you didn't have such a good arm all that gas would have exploded under the city."



“I’ll get in touch with him tomorrow. We’re going to need him on our side if we keep this girl away from her legal guardians.”

“There’s no if about it,” said Happy. She smiled when Toby put his arm around her.

“There’s no doubt about it,” he repeated.

Cabe sat down at his desk with a cup of coffee. He'd need a strong shot of caffeine before he called a United States Senator. Especially one who was being talked up as the next presidential nominee. John Murdoch was a good man who'd been very generous with praise of Scorpion after the earthquake. He'd given Cabe a number to call if he could ever be of assistance to Scorpion. He was about to call in this very big marker.

"Hello, this is Special Agent Cabe Gallo from Homeland Security. I'm calling for the Senator."

"One moment, please," the voice said.

"Agent Gallo, how are you?"

"I'm well, Senator, thank you."

"It's John, please."

"Thank you, John. Please call me Cabe."

"What can I do for you, Cabe?"

"We've had an incident and I wanted to make you aware of it. Our project manager, Paige Dineen has a son, Ralph."

"Oh, yes, the young man who helped shut off the pipeline."

"Yes, that's him. We discovered during a class trip that one of his classmates, Kathy Pearson, is being abused by her foster father. Dr. Toby Curtis, from our team, examined her and confirmed large hand shaped bruises on the girl."

"Ah, damn."

"Yes sir. Paige called the fosters and told them she's staying with her and Ralph over the weekend." Cabe didn't mention that he had Paige do it because he was afraid Happy was so angry she'd tip their hand before they were ready.

"Okay, where do I come in?"

"We're not giving her back."

“Jeez, Cabe, there are procedures.”

“I know John, but we can’t let her back into that situation. Right now she’s with Dr. Curtis and his wife Happy Quinn. They are going to let her rest this weekend before taking her for a full exam on Monday. Then we expect to be able to press charges. What I need from you, John, is to intervene on our behalf with Child Protective Services.”

“You know that’s highly irregular.”

“I know, John, believe me.”

“She’ll have to go back into the system.”

“Ah, that’s a no. You’ll never get her away from Happy. She’s determined to protect her.”

“Well, then, this is going to get complicated.”

Happy glanced in the guest room and saw Kathy was still asleep. She sat down at the kitchen table and Toby set a mug of coffee in front of her. "She's still asleep."

"She's had an emotional day. You were pretty restless last night. How are you doing?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know how I can protect her. I just know I have to."

"You're doing great. Your instincts are spot on."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do. Right now Kathy needs to feel safe. You're doing that. I will point out one thing. You're not doing it alone. We're in this together."

"What about when we get this sorted out?"

"She stays with us," Toby smiled.

"Do you mean it?" They turned to see a sleepy Kathy standing in the doorway.

"Yeah, Doc. Do you really mean it?" asked Happy.

"Yeah, I mean it."

"Thanks, Doc," she whispered. She turned to Kathy. "Come here and get some breakfast. We have some cereal. There's probably some OJ." Kathy walked toward them and looked at her with such fear it was all Happy could do to hold it together.

"Do you really mean I can stay?"

She tried to smile. "I never say what I don't mean." She looked to Doc for support.

"Neither do I. We will only tell you the truth." He smiled at Happy. "We've recently had a painful reminder what secrets can do to a family. "Happy and I will do everything in our power to keep you safe." He took a breath and Happy nodded. He was going to tell her. "Part of keeping you safe means we have to go to the police and tell them what your foster father is doing."

"No!" Kathy cried. Happy took her hand and pulled her into her lap.

“Please, just listen. Doc, tell her what she needs to know.”

“Part of reporting this will be a physical exam.”

“You already did that.”

“Not by me, by someone trained for this sort of thing. I won’t hide the truth from you. This process is not going to be easy. The exam will be unpleasant. They will ask you questions about what he did.”

“I don’t want to,” she said through tears.

Happy hugged her close as she wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’ll be with you. I won’t leave your side. I promise.”

“Believe her. Happy Quinn is known for promise keeping.”

Kathy managed a small smile. “What about you?”

Toby smiled. “Where she goes, I go. We’re a package deal.”

“Well, I guess I could get used to the hat.” This time it was a real smile.

Paige poured herself a cup of coffee. Ralph helped himself to a bagel while they waited for Happy and Toby to arrive with Kathy. She'd picked up a bag of things at the local superstore for her on the way in. She knew Happy and Toby wouldn't have the time to get her anything yet. Walter came downstairs from the loft.

"Good morning," Paige smiled.

"Good morning." Walter gave her an awkward but endearing kiss on the cheek. He was trying to be more open and she appreciated the effort. "Good morning, Ralph."

"Hey Walter. I saved you an egg bagel before Toby gets here."

"Most appreciated. Toby seems to get them all." Walter took it and reached for the cream cheese. "How do you think yesterday went with your class?"

"Everyone seemed to have a good time. Even Jaime said it was cool."

"Ah, yes, the alpha male of your class. If he accepts you so will the rest of your class. It's inevitable."

Ralph grinned at Walter. "I agree."

Walter set down his bagel and looked at her son. "That was very good, what you did for Kathy." Paige couldn't resist putting her hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"We're very proud of you," she said.

"I could tell it was something more than just being shy. Do you really think we can help her?"

"We're going to do everything we can."

Walter smiled. "Scorpion has saved the world, we'll help your friend."

"Thanks, Walter."

Paige kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Walter."

Toby and Happy arrived at the garage with Kathy. They could tell from the parking lot that everyone was already there.

“This is where you work?” asked Kathy.

“Yeah, it’s decrepit but it’s home,” said Toby. They walked inside and everyone looked up at them. “Awkward entrance, done. Bagels, where?”

Ralph pointed to a small stash. “I saved some for you.”

“Thanks, buddy.” He looked at Kathy. “Come with me and we’ll get some juice.” He got her set up with juice and Ralph, then walked over to Cabe. Happy joined them and she looked as nervous as he felt. “Did you make the call?”

“I did indeed,” he smiled. Cabe walked over to the small office and knocked on the door. He opened the door to reveal a tall man in well tailored khakis and a polo shirt on his cell phone. He held up his hand.

“Cabe, just a second. Yes, book the appointment. No, I don’t care the party chair doesn’t approve. He may be a vocal opponent but he has valid points. He deserves a meeting. Fine. I’ll call you later.” He disconnected the call and smiled. “Doctor Curtis, Mrs. Quinn, it’s good to see you again.”

“Guys, you remember Senator Murdoch.”

“Ah, I thought you were going to make a call,” said Happy.

“He did,” said Murdoch. “But for something like this I wanted to talk to the girl myself.”

Happy looked at Toby. Suddenly he realized he was feeling like a parent and his sole job in life was now to protect his kid. “I don’t want her pressured. She’s been through enough.”

“Agreed, but you realize that there are procedures that need to be followed if we’re going to make this happen, first of all, she’ll need to submit an exam.”

“We’ve already told her about that. We’ve also promised that we would be with her every step of the way,” said Toby.

“Don’t you dare make us liars,” said Happy. Toby grabbed her hand, out of affection but also so she wouldn’t launch herself at a United States Senator.

Kathy looked around at the garage. It didn’t look like much but everyone seemed nice. At least she didn’t have to go back last night. So far they’d kept their promises but she knew better than to trust words.

“Hi Kathy,” said Ralph. “How was Toby and Happy’s place?”

“It was okay. They seem nice.”

“They are nice.”

She looked at Ralph and wondered how someone who looked so regular could be a genius. Maybe that’s how he knew she was in trouble. “Thanks, Ralph.”

“For what?”

“For helping me.”

Ralph smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Happy and Toby came out of a room with Cabe and a man she didn’t know.

“Kathy, we want to introduce you to someone,” said Toby.

She walked over and studied the stranger. “You look familiar.”

“You may have seen him on television,” said Cabe. “This is Senator John Murdoch. He’s come here to meet you.”

“To meet me?”

The man reached to shake her hand. “Yes, Ms. Pearson. I’ve come here to meet you. Cabe called me and said you need my help.”

“You’re a Senator?”

“Yes I am.”



“That means you’re really important. Why would you want to help me?”

“Because I represent the people of California. That includes you. It’s my job to help you.” He sat on the edge of the closest desk. “Cabe tells me you need protection from your foster father.”

Kathy nodded and tried not to cry. This guy was freaking her out. Just then Happy came and put her arm around her shoulders. She looked up at her and saw a look that made her feel better. Happy would protect her. She didn’t how she knew that. She just knew.

“Doctor Curtis told me he explained what has to happen to press charges.”

“Uh huh,’ she said. At least she thought she said it out loud.

“Doctor Curtis and Mrs. Quinn have told me they want to be appointed your legal guardians.”

She looked up at Happy and Toby. “You did?”

“Sure thing, kid,” said Happy.

“Do you want them to take care of you?”

“Yes. But they already do. They tell me stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like what’s going to happen next. They don’t lie to me, and they’re nice to me and they ask me what I want. I’m not just a government check to them. You have to let me stay with them!”

Happy hugged her close. “Easy.”

“Well, that’s quite a testimonial. Kathy, I’d like to have a word with the adults now, but I will do everything I can for you.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Really. I don’t lie either,” he said. The man smiled and Kathy thought he meant it. She threw her arms around his waist. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Happy patted her back. “Why don’t you go sit with Paige and Ralph. When we’re done here you can help me tune my bike.”

“Okay,” she grinned. Maybe she could trust the words after all.

Cabe looked at the little girl and hoped she could survive what she’d been through. From the look on Toby and Happy’s faces, he knew she’d get all the help she needed. “John, what do you think?”

John looked at Toby and Happy. “I think that little girl has already bonded with you two. Are you sure you’re prepared to deal with this?”

“Yes sir, we are,” said Toby.

“What he said,” said Happy.

John stared at them for a moment and sighed. “Okay. I’ll back your play. I’ll contact CPS and get you cleared to be assigned as Kathy’s foster parents. Since you have Homeland clearance you should be okay.” He gave them and Cabe hard looks. “I’ll tell them it is my considered opinion you will make excellent parents for Kathy. I’m going to put that girl’s fate and my reputation in your hands. Don’t make me a liar.”

“We won’t,” they both answered.

Cabe saw the senator to the door and returned to Happy and Toby. They were hugging and smiling at their new daughter. It wasn’t legal just yet but that was a formality. They watched as Kathy was looking over Ralph’s shoulder at his computer screen. “Love at first sight,” he said.

Toby shot him a look. “Not until she’s thirty.”

“Not Kathy and Ralph, the two of you and Kathy. Love at first sight isn’t just about romance. When I first laid eyes on Amanda I knew I loved her more than I ever thought possible. She took her place in my heart.” He smiled at the thought of his baby girl. “She’s still there.”

Toby and Happy sat at the kitchen table drinking their morning coffee in silence. Yesterday had been a difficult day. An exam for sexual assault was difficult but for a child it was excruciating. Toby had waited outside the exam room while Happy stayed with her. Everything he'd feared had been proven out by the exam. Kathy had bruises where no child should be touched. The foster father hadn't raped her, but as the sexual assault nurse stated, it would have been just a matter of time. He'd been grooming her. Toby knew Kathy would have to have extensive therapy but it couldn't be with him. He was too close to the situation to be objective. His anger at this guy wouldn't help Kathy recover.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" asked Happy.

"Eventually, yes. She'll need therapy but we'll help her. The most important thing now is she knows she's safe."

Happy stood. "I'm going to check on her."

Toby smiled. He knew Happy was worried about her parenting skills but her instincts were perfect. Maybe part of this was righting her own history, helping Kathy would help her. He followed her to Kathy's room and Happy knocked softly. She opened the door and peered in. Kathy was staring out the window.

"Good morning," said Happy.

"Hi."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. I should get dressed for school."

"You get to play hooky today."

"I do?"

"Yeah," said Toby. "We'd like you to stay close until things settle down."

"You mean until they catch him," said Kathy

Happy nodded. "Yeah. We want you with us until he's no longer in the picture. Are you okay with that?"

Kathy smiled.

"What?"

"No one's ever asked me that before."

"What you want is important to us," said Toby.

Happy smiled. "What he said. Until things get sorted Ralph can bring you your homework."

"Okay," she said as she glanced back out the window. She had a view of the building next door and the road in front.

Happy walked to her side. "Whatcha looking at?"

"People. I wonder where they're all going. I...ah..."

"You what?" Happy asked.

"It's stupid."

"I bet it's not."

"I like to make up stories about the people."

"That's not stupid," said Toby. He pointed to a guy coming out of the next building. "What about that guy?"

"He's going to the gym. Look at those muscles."

Toby nodded. She was very observant. "Good call. How about her?" A woman was walking slowly toward the parking lot.

"She hates her job."

"Why do you say that?"

“Because it’s Tuesday morning and she’s should be on her way to work but she doesn’t look happy about it.”

“I’m really impressed,” said Toby. “I had to go to college to learn that.”

Happy put her hand on her back. “Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll get you some breakfast. Then we can figure out what we want to do today.”

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

“Nah, we’re playing hooky too.”

Happy scrambled some eggs while Doc made toast. “Don’t forget the juice. Kids need juice.” Doc kissed her cheek.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Shut up,” she said as she tried not to smile. Kathy came the table wearing some of the new clothes Paige bought her. “You look good.”

“It was nice of Ms. Dineen to get these for me.”

“Paige is very nice.”

“I guess,” she said as she sat down in front of her eggs. Toby sat down next to her.

“Kathy, I get it. You have no reason to believe in us or the rest of Scorpion. You don’t have a lot of good experiences with people. Just give us a chance.”

She studied their faces. “Well, you’ve told me the truth so far. And my room is kind of nice.” She smiled and took a bite of her eggs.

They spent the day getting Kathy more clothes and then went to lunch. Toby had to admit was he was overwhelmed at taking Kathy to her first restaurant and letting her order what ever she wanted. Maybe he could give Kathy things she never had. And maybe Happy wasn’t the only one righting the wrongs of their childhood.

“Hang up your clothes,” said Happy. “Paige and Ralph should be by soon with your homework.” A knock at the drawer startled her. “They’re early.”

Toby opened the door to a slight woman with long blonde hair in a plain blue suit. “Doctor Curtis?”

“Yes.”

The woman held up a ID badge. “I’m Barbara Cooper from CPS. May I come in?”

“Doc, is it Paige and Ralph?” asked Happy.

“It’s CPS.” He led the woman to their living room and they sat down. The woman extended her hand to Happy and then Toby. “I’m Barbara Cooper. I’m Kathy’s case worker.”

“Where’s Mrs. Hughes?” The looked up to see Kathy.

“Ah, she...retired.”

Toby would have bet that a woman who put a kid with a child abuser and brought a giant spotlight down on the department didn’t have much of a future career.

Kathy moved to sit between Happy and Toby. “You can’t take me. I won’t go.”

“I’m not here to take you anywhere.” She pulled a file from her bag. “I’m here for some signatures from Dr. Curtis and Mrs. Quinn.”

“Signatures?”

She set the file on the coffee table and turned it around to face them. “This is the paperwork that will make you the legal guardians of Kathleen Pearson.” She looked at Kathy. “You have some very important friends. My boss got a call from his boss. I’ve never seen paperwork go through so fast.” She pulled out a pen and handed it to Toby. “All I need is for you to sign at the X’s.” Toby signed and handed then pen to Happy. She signed quickly and handed her the pen.

“Is that it? Are we official?”

“I have to file the papers but yes, you are now the legal guardians of Kathleen Pearson.”

Kathy hugged Happy and then Toby. The way she looked at him made Toby understand what Cabe told them. This little girl had taken up residence in more than his home.

“There is something else I want to discuss with you.” She glanced at her file. “The previous fosters, Mark and Shirley Brown, were both arrested this morning.”

Kathy gasped and Toby wrapped his arm around her. “What do you mean, both?”

“Mark Brown has been charged with a variety of sexual offenses. Shirley Brown apparently took exception with her husband’s arrest. She attacked the arresting officers. They’re both in county lockup.’

“Is it over?” asked Kathy.

“Not yet,” said Toby. “There will still be a trial. We talked about that.”

“That’s true,” said Barbara. “I promise to keep track of what’s going on with the case. I will let you know of any progress.”

Happy leaned forward. “Listen to me. Kathy has been let down by the system. We won’t let that happen again.”

“Like I said, you have important friends.” Barbara gave them a stern look. “Kathy’s case has been given top priority in the department. You’ve been moved to the top of everyone’s to do list.”

Toby looked at Kathy and Happy. “You know Ms. Cooper, I recognize that other kids need help. Normally I would say we should play fair.”

“Since when?” asked Happy. He gave her a sharp glare.

“But this is about our kid. We don’t play fair when it comes to her.”

For the first time, Barbara smiled. “Maybe the governor was right about you two.”

“The governor?” asked Happy.



“Yes. Senator Murdoch, Governor Lane and my boss’s boss are golfing buddies. Senator Murdoch got Governor Lane to vouch as a character witness for the two of you. My boss is very motivated to make this happen.”

Barbara inspected their apartment and Kathy’s new room. “What’s all this?” she asked, looking at the bags.

“Toby and Happy took me shopping,” Kathy asked with a big smile. “Some of it’s from Ms. Dineen, Ralph’s mom.”

“Who are they?”

“My friends.”

Toby poured himself a coffee and sat at his desk. It had been a hell of a week. The turmoil of the getting Kathy's foster father off the street had subsided. Brown realized that taking a plea deal was his best chance of seeing the sun anytime in the next decade. It meant Kathy wouldn't have to testify. Toby wanted the guy to go to trial but he had to agree with Happy that this would be best for their daughter. Their daughter. Now Toby and Happy were trying to get the hang of being parents. They'd had their first dust up with Kathy over bedtime. Toby was surprised that Happy was the task master, making sure she finished her homework and adhered to a bedtime schedule. Now his newly maternal wife was showing their daughter the proper use of a blowtorch. Life was good.

Cabe walked up to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. "So how's it going, Dad?" he smiled.

"Everything is totally different. My wife is fretting over every detail for our kid and I'm playing referee."

Cabe chuckled. "Welcome to parenthood."

Toby smiled and raised his mug in salute. "Thanks, Dad."

Kathy picked that moment to come up to his desk. She looked at Cabe, then Toby. "You never said he was your dad."

Toby smiled. "He's not technically our dad, but he likes telling us what to do."

Kathy seemed to consider this. "Oh. If your my dad now," she looked up and Cabe. "Does that make you my grandfather?"

Toby held in a snicker.

Cabe smiled at Kathy. "I would be very happy to be considered your grandfather."

She thought for a moment, then smiled. "Cool. A grandfather with a badge and a gun. Could come in handy." She looked at Toby. "Happy wants her spare blowtorch. She said it's in her truck."

"She needs two blowtorches?" asked Cabe.

Kathy grinned. "She's going to let me torch some metal! She said that one's smaller and I can handle it better."

"Yo! Doc!," Happy called. "Any day now."

Toby snickered, "Yes ma'am." Toby got up and passed Paige and Ralph coming in.

Paige poured herself a cup of coffee and poured Ralph some juice. Walter came down the stairs and joined them.

"Good morning," he said. "I made dinner reservations for tonight. Le Jardien."

"Le Jardien," she smiled. "Very nice."

"Did you get a sitter for Ralph?"

Ralph looked up from smearing cream cheese on his bagel. "I have a sleepover tonight."

"You do?"

"Yeah. It's Jaime's birthday. He's asked a bunch of us guys over to his house."

Walter smiled. "That's excellent."

Ralph smiled. "Yeah it is. Jaime's not so bad when you get to know him." Ralph took his bagel and juice and joined Kathy at Happy's workbench.

"I'm glad his classmates are being more receptive to him. Now we have to do the same with his college classmates."

Paige smiled and put her hand on his arm. "You don't have to solve every problem for him. You made a huge difference for him with his elementary school classmates. Take the win, Walter."

Walter watched as Kathy was now demonstrating to Ralph how to use her blowtorch. "I don't understand."

“You don’t understand what?” asked Paige.

“How can Drew stay away from Ralph? How can he not love him?”

Paige sighed at the thought of Ralph’s absent father. “Drew does love Ralph, in his way. But it’s not enough. He doesn’t put Ralph’s needs ahead of his own. He’s simply not capable of being the father that you are.”

“Excuse me?”

She rubbed her hand up his arm. “Walter, you are more of a father to Ralph than Drew could ever be. You want to fix things for him, even when you can’t. His well being is a priority for you. Ralph looks up to you.”

“Ralph has a higher IQ than I do.”

“Your IQ has nothing to do with the respect he has for you. He understands that you care for him.”

He reached for Paige’s hand. “I love him.”

“He loves you too.” She glanced around before giving him a quick kiss. “So do I.”

Walter smiled and whispered, “With the two of you in my life, I really have won.”