We Need to Talk

by FoxPhile

Summary

The four most dreaded words in a relationship.

Notes

Author's Note - This is a very short chapter, and my plan for this is that most chapters will be pretty short. This is just a bit of sometimes angsty-fluff to explore how Walter and Paige might deal with the first few months of their new relationship. And get me through the summer hiatus. I hope you enjoy it with me!
"We need to talk."

Walter looked up from his tablet. "We… we are talking. We talk all the time. You were just telling me that you were thinking of sending Ralph to ah… to summer camp… for ah… for a couple of weeks. Was there something I missed?"

Paige sighed. She knew that Walter was perfectly capable of dividing his attention between what she was saying and his tablet. She was used to it. She knew that with his incredible memory he could quote back to her exactly what she said, word for word, as well as give a synopsis of the key points of the scientific paper he was reading. But it still bugged her a little bit. If he was working on a project, he would be too engrossed and she would have to pull him away. When he was just reading, as he was now, it didn't require his full focus. Still, she would prefer his undivided attention. She got it when they were intimate, of course. But she sometimes wondered if that was just because his hands were otherwise occupied so that he couldn't hold a tablet. She preferred not to think about what else might be going on in his brain in those moments.

She hadn't mentioned it to him. There were so many things Walter had to learn about being in a relationship. He was so eager to do this right, and he really was trying. It didn't seem fair to bombard him with every little thing that bothered her.

At the moment, though, there was something she wanted to discuss with the whole Walter. Time for a lesson in Relationship 101.

"Walter," she continued, sitting down next to him. "When one person in a relationship says to the other 'We need to talk', it usually means they have something important to discuss. They want the other person's undivided attention."

"Oh," Walter replied. "I see." Then his eyebrows shot up and he closed the tablet and set it on the table. "I see," he repeated. "Have I… have I done something?"

Paige shook her head. She was tempted to take his hand, to reassure him that everything was okay. But he was wearing just his robe, and she wasn't entirely sure if he had anything on underneath. It was Saturday afternoon and Ralph was on a day trip with his Forestry Braves troop. Naturally, any time they had alone usually included lovemaking. In the weeks since they returned from the island, she and Walter didn't get too many such opportunities, so they made good use of it when they did. Touching Walter so soon after making love might have an effect that she couldn't allow if she was going to finish this talk and pick Ralph up on time.

"No, Walter. You haven't done anything wrong. Everything's… everything's fine." She clasped her hands in her lap. She had taken a quick shower, but her body was still singing from the aftermath of three truly excellent orgasms and the urge to touch him was overwhelming. "I just… it… it feels like we're sneaking around whenever we want to… well… have time to ourselves."

"I'm not sure I understand."
Chapter 2

Walter was beginning to despair of ever understanding his role as "the boyfriend". Playing Romeo while posing as a theater professor was as easy as repartitioning his hard drive by comparison. In the past month, he had formulated and discarded at least a dozen theories about how this was supposed to be handled. Despite what he said to Paige, he felt he needed some sort of plan or guide to follow. But nothing he came up with fit all the rules and expectations. There was one thing, however, that he was beginning to realize was the root of many of his problems.

Subtext.

Often, Paige would say something to him in what was apparently a lover's code to which he didn't have the key. It was fun learning all the curious phrases and cues she used to let him know she wanted physical intimacy. Well, except for the times Toby picked up too quickly on something she said or did and pointed it out to him – loudly and embarrassingly - before Paige could clue him in.

It frustrated him when he couldn't pick up on Paige's non-sexual hints. What did that say about him as a boyfriend, or as a man, for that matter? He knew in his heart that, as much as he enjoyed their physical relationship, his feelings for Paige were deeper than that. But if the only time he could catch what she was getting at was when she wanted sex, what was she supposed to think?

The week before he'd failed to discern her hint that she wanted him to take her to dinner. Failed miserably, in fact. The week was slow for the geniuses – just some boring security upgrades for a couple of stuffy corporations that left Paige with a pile of paperwork to get through. It didn't occur to him that his slow week was grueling and mind-numbing for her. Instead of treating her to a relaxing dinner at one of their favorite neighborhood restaurants, he'd suggested that since they'd stayed home all week with a light case load, maybe she could make her famous fried chicken. That was the weekend he learned the meaning of the phrase "in the doghouse."

Instead of Paige's wickedly unhealthy but undeniably delicious fried chicken, their dinner consisted of a bucket of something soggy and quite possibly undercooked that she must have ordered from one of the many delivery companies. Which meant that it was also barely lukewarm. For Ralph, Paige made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sliced up an apple. Walter was hardly surprised. The delivery company might just as well have advertised "Ptomaine – delivered right to your door!"

Just before his bedtime, while they were sharing Ralph's allotted hour of video game time, the youngster explained the situation to Walter.

"You're going to need to apologize, you know," Ralph said while maneuvering his Ferrari past Walter's Mazerati. "Mom was really tired tonight. She usually doesn't like cooking on Friday night, anyway; but especially not when she's been catching up on paper work all week. It's really exhausting for her, you know?"

Walter's hand stilled on the controller, causing his vehicle to careen into the stands, scattering animated spectators and their rather gruesome body parts all over the game's fictional race track. The screen returned to a view of Ralph's car, which continued around the track several times, periodically passing the scene of Walter's carnage.

"I... I really blew it, didn't I?"
"Yep. You did. Even Tim knew better than to ask mom to cook on a Friday night," Ralph brought his car to a halt and turned in his seat. "But then, Tim never had mom's fried chicken, so…"

"Your mom didn't make dinner for Tim?" Walter couldn't help his curiosity about the man to whom he nearly lost Paige. On the surface, anyone would say that his predecessor was the better boyfriend. Walter was confident enough in Paige's feelings for him that he normally dismissed any comparisons. But having made yet another blunder, he was wondering if perhaps he should pay more attention to what made people think the Navy Seal was so perfect for Paige.

"Tim wasn't here much. I mean, he would come by and pick mom up some evenings, and they would go out somewhere. But he didn't hang out with us on weekends much like you do. He had dinner with us a couple of times, but mom just pulled one of her casseroles out of the freezer. She didn't make any of her special stuff for Tim."

"Oh… oh, that's… that's too bad. For… for Tim, I mean." Walter couldn't help the smile on his face. He might not be the best at this boyfriend business, but he apparently rated fried chicken and pot roast while the interloper just got frozen casseroles.

Walter realized it would probably be a while before he enjoyed Paige's fried chicken again. But when it happened, he would savor it even more.

June 3 - 17, 2017
Chapter 3

Paige stood up and began to pace. She knew it made Walter nervous when she did this, but it helped her to organize her thoughts, especially when she needed to word things carefully.

They’d been together for over two months. But since a little over three weeks of that was spent stranded on an island with virtually no time alone together – not to mention the fear they might never be rescued – those weeks didn’t seem like they should count.

Paige realized that, although she loved Walter deeply, he was far from perfect. In fact, being the first love of Walter O'Brien’s life could be downright exhausting.

From those first days on the island, when she tried to gently let him know that his odd ways of expressing his feelings were awkward and embarrassing, she knew she would have to tread lightly any time she needed to let Walter know that she was bothered about something. He was determined to be the perfect boyfriend, the perfect lover, the perfect **everything**. She told herself she really wasn't asking Walter to **change** – just maybe adjust a little bit. Still, he reacted to any hint that she was dissatisfied as if she had just whipped his dog and drowned his kittens.

Then he drove her crazy trying to "correct" himself and make up for what he saw as his shortcomings. The problem nearly stopped their sex life in its tracks, just as it was getting started.

Paige was pleasantly surprised when their first time turned out to be just as much of a wild ride for her as she promised him with her "Buckle up, Nerd" tease. But there was one thing that all the men Paige had been with did that she really couldn't stand. She always had to tell them not to do it – ever – and most of them understood and avoided it. It was silly really; her sides were terribly ticklish. She was okay if a man put his hands on her waist when she had clothes on, but touch her in the same place when she was naked and she would double up and giggle until she was breathless. It was a total mood breaker. She warned the poor guys about her very non-erogenous zones and asked them to please not touch her there, but for most it didn't sink in until they were actually exposed to the effect. Once a man spent several minutes waiting for Paige to stop cackling, they shrugged or laughed it off and did their best to comply thereafter.

Walter took it personally. The very logical, rational Walter O'Brien, seemed to think it was his fault that her odd ticklish quirk slipped his mind. It was a stroke of luck that Walter's hands spent most of the first hour exploring her breasts, her belly and areas below her hips and did not actually encounter the danger zone until they were both pretty well sated and exhausted. For the rest of the night and the two or three times after that, he drove her out of her mind constantly asking if it was okay for him to touch her in various places. Paige was forced to tell him that the constant questions – while a sweet indication of how much he wanted to please her – were driving her crazy.

Paige counted it a miracle that they ever had sex again after that. Except that she knew Walter was completely infatuated with it. In a moment of unusual candor, he told her that making love with her was wholly different from every sexual experience he had before. Much like his anecdote about Erwin Schrödinger, he said he never understood why people called it "making love". In part, he explained, "love" – assuming it even existed which he did not believe before Paige – was an emotion and was not something that people could manufacture. Moreover, he didn't understand the need to use a sentimental euphemism for something that was just a basic biological need. After being with her, he understood that it wasn't just a euphemism. That "making love" was something quite different from having sex. He also acknowledged that the flood of feelings he felt during and afterwards were very akin to manufacturing love – or more love, since he already loved her.
As usual, Paige wasn't entirely sure exactly what everything Walter said meant, but it was incredibly sweet and romantic in a very Walter way, so she smiled and kissed him.

June 21, 2017
Chapter 4

When Paige paced, it usually meant she was trying to determine the best way to express herself about something she was bothered or annoyed about, without hurting his feelings. Walter didn't think of himself as a particularly sensitive person. In fact, he welcomed her input on his new role. How else was he to improve, after all? Research and the Internet, tools that had always served him well, seemed terribly inadequate in this situation. He discerned that this was likely because individual humans reacted in different ways, so anything generic that he learned might or might not apply to his situation or to Paige and in some cases, was completely contrary to the reality he was dealing with. Toby would insist that there were behavioral consistencies that virtually all people adhered to, but Walter's experience did not seem to support that.

"I just feel that… any time we're… intimate… that I'm sixteen years old again, sneaking boys into my room through the window after my dad fell asleep waiting for me to get home from a date." Paige paused and faced him, arms dropping down to her sides. "I… I don't want you to think I was hooking up with every guy I went on a date with," she amended. "It was mostly just… you know… kissing… and sometimes we got to second base… but…"

"You… you want me to… to climb through a window?" As usual, Walter was completely mystified.

"NO!... No." Paige suddenly turned and sat back down on the bed. Walter reached out quickly to prevent his tablet from being bounced off the edge. "It's just that… Ralph knows that we're together and… and he's thrilled about it. But he doesn't know that we…"

"That we engage in sexual intercourse?"

"Well… yes. And why do I think he'd put it exactly the same way if he did know?"

Paige's mouth curved in a half smile. Walter noticed that she seemed nervous as well, which fit with her earlier pacing. He understood that people often became nervous when they discussed physical intimacy, although he didn't understand why. He realized he became nervous, as well; and he still didn't understand it. Hiding behind clinical terminology, even if he didn't think of it in those terms, was one of the ways he masked his own nerves. Pacing was Paige's way.

"However Ralph describes it, I'm not sure you're correct in assuming he isn't aware. He not only has a high IQ; he's also very observant."

"You think he knows? Since… for how long… do you think?"

Walter scooted to the edge of the bed. He thought he should put his arm around his girlfriend, or maybe just take her hand. But he hesitated. He could and did touch pretty much every part of Paige when they were making love, but at other times, it was different. He was never sure what was – or was not – appropriate. Sometimes he wished he could paint Paige's fingernails himself, just to have the excuse to hold her hand.

"Paige," he decided to risk it and reached out to take her hand, pleased when she wrapped her fingers around his. "I don't think Ralph believes Sly needed any help with the paperwork to reestablish his status as Alderman, so… pretty much right from the start." At her swift intake of breath, Walter rushed to continue. "I think… I think it's okay, though. Ralph was… he let me know, before the wedding, that he was… disappointed… about how I treated you… when I fired
you. There were other times when he made his thoughts about us… quite clear… to me, anyway. If he were upset about this, I think he would let me know."

"Ralph… spoke to you about… about us?"

"He… he said I was a coward. That I couldn't face how I felt about you. He also said that if he was bigger, he would fight me. He's quite protective of you."

"Oh my God, Walter," Paige said. "You should have told me about this sooner. I'll have a talk with him."

"No, don't. He was right. It's not for me to say, of course, but I don't think you should punish him for speaking the truth. I was a coward; he made me realize that. If it weren't for what Ralph said, I might never have told you I love you. The fact that he recognized my… my feelings… when even I didn't… is just one of the things that makes Ralph smarter than me… smarter than any of us."

"Still. He shouldn't speak to you that way."

"Please, Paige. Let this one go. I want Ralph to feel that he can talk to me… about anything… but especially if he has a problem where you and I are concerned. We'll be together for a long time and Ralph is a part of us… of you and I. I know I'm not good at… at this." Walter waved his hand between them. "I'm going to… to make mistakes. Those mistakes are going to hurt you… and maybe hurt Ralph. I don't want to do that… but at some point, odds are it will happen. I need… I want… Ralph to feel free to tell me when I mess up."

Paige nodded. "All right, Walter. I won't say anything. But Walter, you shouldn't feel all the burden for getting things right is on you. I'm not an expert in this either, you know. When I screw up, I depend on you to tell me when I mess up, too."

"But you are my zenith, the apogee of my life."

"Wal-ter!"

Walter grinned. He didn't use those odd pet names very often anymore. Not since he finally realized that Paige found them not just odd but disconcerting. Occasionally, though, he would tease her by throwing out a few. When well timed, they could lighten an otherwise weighty moment. "Tell me, my little utopia," he continued. "There was something bothering you. Let me know what I can do to make it right."

"I'm not asking you to make it right, Walter. I just… wish I was more comfortable about… having you spend the night. I've been worried that part of the reason I'm sending Ralph to camp is so that you and I can have that time alone. I hate to think I would base a decision like that on my own… needs. But I can't deny that the opportunity makes the idea of camp for Ralph even more… attractive."

Walter took a moment to adjust the front of his robe, which had come open slightly. He could understand Paige's dilemma. The thought of two weeks of Paige all night every night was undeniably attractive. But he hated the thought that either of them would consider that a perk of sending Ralph away. What did other dating couples do in this situation? For that matter, what did married couples do? He supposed that for married couples, the children were used to mom and dad sleeping in the same room, so there wasn't an issue beyond waiting until the children were asleep to engage in any private activities. That thought led him to wonder how married couples with older children managed to ever get any sleep themselves.

"Ralph enjoyed his botany lessons with Toby on the island. I'm sure he'll greatly enjoy the camp.
And… in his absence… we'll have time to think about our options for when he returns."

Walter wasn't surprised when Paige began to toy with the sash on his robe. She was conscious of his sensitivity about nudity. They’d discussed it and he'd assured her that he wanted her to help him push the envelope in that area. He doubted that he would ever be comfortable emerging from a shower completely naked, but he enjoyed it now when she undressed him, or just teased him a bit as she was now.

"I suppose if we both get used to sex on a nightly basis, we'll be motivated to come up with something, hmmm?"

Paige eased his robe open and leaned over to trail kisses from his jawline down to his nipple. Walter leaned back a moment, enjoying the attention until he caught a glance at the time.

"If you start this again, you'll be late picking Ralph up," he reminded her.

Paige stood up and grinned. "I'm just giving us both a taste of what we can look forward to if we put our heads together on this."

"I am… strongly motivated."

June 21-23, 2017
Ralph rolled one more shirt and stuffed it into his backpack. He reviewed the list his mom gave him against his memory of the items he'd already packed to make sure he had everything. It was strange to think of two weeks without his laptop, but he would still have his cellphone and his tablet, so he wouldn't be completely unplugged. He was grateful that his mom was smart enough to know that two weeks completely devoid of his electronic connections would be unbearable, so she'd selected a camp that allowed small electronic devices. Ralph wondered if that was totally his mom's idea, or if Walter had any input into the selection of the camp.

It would be weird, being away from his mom, Walter and the rest of Scorpion, but he was looking forward to it. Walter was committed to physics and math, and Ralph loved those disciplines. But he was learning to love botany and zoology and medicine as well, thanks to Toby. It wasn't as though he had to decide on just one. Ralph planned to have at least three doctorate degrees before he was twenty-one. But he still had to decide on which three. It made sense that at least one of them should be in the organic sciences.

He also hoped that, with more time to themselves, Walter and his mom wouldn't think they had to hide things from him. He wasn't bluffing when he told Toby that he understood what they were talking about. He didn't understand why everyone was so crazy about sex. The idea still seemed sort of gross to him. But it was apparent that adults were pretty jazzed about it and it wasn't hard to tell when they were thinking about it. Toby and Happy seemed to think about not much else. He didn't know if Cabe and Allie were doing it, but they sometimes had those funny smiles that were a lot like the smiles his mom and Walter had, so he figured they must be. He wondered sometimes if Sly and Megan ever did. They were married, and Ralph knew that married people were pretty much expected to do it. But maybe with Megan being so sick, it didn't work.

His mom and Walter, who he already thought about as his step dad, seemed to want to pretend they didn't. Even an eleven year old genius could figure out why Sly took care of him on their first day back from the island. Ralph wondered why his mom didn't have him stay overnight with Sly more often – or just have Walter come spend the night with them. It was weird – and a little icky – thinking of his mom and Walter doing that, especially if he was in his room right across the hall. But he figured it was something he had to get used to if Walter moved in with them; and that was something he hoped would happen soon.

He zipped up his pack and slung it over one shoulder, then walked out to the living room where Walter was waiting to drive him to the bus that would take him away for two weeks.

"You all packed and ready?" Walter helped him slip the strap over his other shoulder and adjust the weight.

"Yep. I've got clean socks and underwear and lots of sunscreen and bug repellant." Ralph made a thumbs-up sign. "I'm good to go!"

Paige walked in from the back of the condo. "Did you pack an extra pair of shoes? Your shoes might get wet or muddy tramping through the woods, you know."

"Yes, mom! I've got an extra pair of shoes, and I've got clean underwear and shirts and all the other stuff you told me to pack. I'll be fine, mom. We better get going or we'll miss the bus."

"Are you sure you're okay with this, Ralph? I don't want you to feel like I'm trying to… to…"
"To get me out of the way so you and Walter can do what you don't think I know anything about?"

"RALPH!"

"C'mon, mom. I'm not a baby. It would be hard for me not to know that people in love like to do certain… things… Especially considering how much Toby likes to brag about him and Happy doing it all the time! But don't worry, mom. I don't think you're trying to get rid of me. I know you would never do that - not even to be alone with Walter."

Paige locked her arms across her chest and looked from her son to Walter and back to her son.

"I swear you aged three years on that island. Is it too much to wish that when you come back from camp you'll be my sweet little boy again?"

"It would be unrealistic to expect my maturity level to regress, even while in the company of younger children."

Walter interrupted. "Perhaps we should get going. The bus leaves in about half an hour. We… we don't want to miss it."

Paige shook her head and shooed the two men to the door, picking up her keys along the way. Ralph hoped that his mother would be less tense when he got back.

June 23, 2017
After they dropped Ralph off at the bus to summer camp, Walter and Paige stopped by the garage so Walter could pick up the bag he'd packed with items he would need. He would be able to change out his clothes every few days, so he hadn't packed much. Waiting until after Ralph was gone before bringing over his things seemed ridiculous now. It was clear that Ralph was much more aware of things than his mother thought.

"Um… should I drop my bag in your room or…?" Walter asked as he followed Paige through the door and into the living room.

"Oh… um… no. I don't want you living out of a bag for two weeks. I'll clear some space in the closet and see if I can clear out a drawer for you. I should have thought…"

"It's okay," he quickly responded. "I don't mind. It's not like I'm moving in."

Paige turned around suddenly. Walter was aware by the look on her face that something he said shocked her. He went back over the last few moments of dialog. Perhaps he'd been presumptuous thinking he should stow his things in her room? Maybe she wasn't actually expecting him to share her bed all night? He was certain that she was anticipating a good deal of physical intimacy during the two weeks, but perhaps actually sleeping together was not part of that expectation?

No, he thought. That can't be it. She seemed concerned that she hadn't anticipated he would need a place to put his things, but she didn't react until he said something about… moving in?

"I… I didn't mean to suggest that I would be… moving in," he stammered. "This is just… just temporary. While Ralph is at camp."

"Walter… Walter…" Paige interrupted, reaching a hand out to touch his shoulder. "It's okay. It's just that I was just thinking… well never mind what I was thinking. Let's get your things unpacked. We've got a lovely free weekend together and I'm excited to get started on it."

She led him back to her bedroom and immediately opened one of the drawers in her chest, quickly gathering up the contents. She opened the next drawer down, shoved both hands in and moved the contents to one side. Settling the extra garments in the vacated space, she pushed everything down while she closed the drawer.

"There," she turned and gestured towards the now empty top drawer. "You can put your socks and… other things… in here while I make some space in the closet for your shirts and slacks."

She made her way over to the other side of the room and threw open a pair of mirrored doors. She turned and added, "Whatever toiletries you have you can set on the sink in the bathroom. It's a double vanity, and I've never managed to spread my stuff out enough to cover both."

Leaving Walter to wonder why Paige would aspire to cover two complete vanities, Paige turned back to study the contents of her closet. Within seconds, she was jerking blouses and skirts off their hangers and laying them across one arm. When she had a fairly large pile, she headed towards the door.

"I won't need these in the next few days. I'll just lay them on Ralph's bed. Grab any of the empty hangers you need for your stuff. I'll be right back."
After Paige left the room, Walter sat down suddenly on the bed. He was holding three pairs of socks that he'd extricated from his duffle bag along with a pile of neatly folded briefs. He stared at the articles in his hands, and then at the empty drawer. In all his life he'd never shared a room with anyone. He had no idea what was expected. Perhaps he should have discussed this more. Of course, he could always return to the garage. But he very much liked the idea of spending more time with Paige... especially more time **alone**. But perhaps actually living here for the next several days was overly ambitious. And why had Paige reacted so strongly to his statement that he wouldn't be moving in? Was it possible that these two weeks were some sort of trial run?

Moving in to Paige's apartment never crossed his mind until now. Although the lack of time alone was sometimes frustrating, Walter was relatively happy with the status quo. Truthfully, he would miss a great deal about his loft at the garage over the next two weeks. Access to his numerous projects at all hours was high on that list. He also appreciated the efficient layout. He was never more than a few steps from anything he might need. Despite this, he felt the extra time he could spend with Paige was worth the small, but temporary, sacrifice. He wasn't sure he would be willing to make that sacrifice on a permanent basis.

As was so often the case, Walter found himself confused and conflicted and unsure if he should address the problem with Paige, or just keep silent and hope that the issue either went away or she brought it up herself. Truthfully – and this was also a common dilemma – he wasn't entirely sure there was an issue. Some days he really felt he was beginning to understand Paige's reactions and the unspoken cues she gave. Other days he felt completely baffled.

"Walter? Is everything okay?"

Startled at her sudden reappearance, Walter jumped.

"Is there something you need? It doesn't look like you've unpacked anything yet." Paige bent over the open duffle bag and brought out a pile of folded shirts. "Did you want to keep these folded, or should I hang them?"

Walter looked up from the socks he held. He usually kept his shirts folded in his cupboard. It wasn't a preference, it was just that the tiny closet in his loft was barely large enough for his slacks, a robe and his two good suits.

He took a deep breath. "Paige, do you want me to move in with you?"

June 28, 2017

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I'm so proud of myself that I've kept to an every 2-3 days updating schedule with this. Thanks so much to everyone who has given kudos. Your support feeds and inspires me!
"Paige, do you want me to move in with you?"

Paige dropped the shirts she was holding. Most of them fell on top of the duffle bag but one slipped to the side and fell to the floor. She bent over and snatched it back up, her thoughts split between wondering how to answer Walter and wondering if she should just hang the shirt up or attempt to refold it. Making up her mind about the shirt, she shook it out to remove any stray hairs or other debris that might have transferred to the garment from the floor. She turned to take it to the closet, then realized that she was stalling; using the dropped shirt to avoid the question. She laid the shirt down on the end of the bed and walked in front of Walter to sit beside him. She felt his eyes following her all the way.

"Walter," she began, reaching out to lay her fingers on his arm while still mentally fishing for what to say. She was startled at his earlier comment about not moving in because she suddenly realized in that moment that it was exactly what she did want. Despite the fact that their relationship was still new; despite their differences; despite the fact that they worked together; despite everything – she felt that living together as a family – she, Walter and Ralph – was inevitable. So inevitable that it seemed silly to put it off. Still, as sure as she was, she wasn't certain how Walter felt. He could be so difficult to read at times. He just didn't give off the signals that most men did. On top of that, Paige spent most of the last three years carefully ignoring anything that might be considered non-verbal communication to maintain the fiction that they were just "professional colleagues". They'd both been fools.

"Walter… um… do you… do you want to move in? Have you thought about it?"

Paige couldn't believe it when Walter's mouth quirked, then curved up in a grin.

"If you ask me if I want to and I ask you if you want to and neither of us gives an answer, we won't get very far, will we?" He said. "To answer your second question – no, I haven't thought about it until just now. I… I noted that you reacted to my spontaneous remark, so I wondered if… if it's something you might be thinking about. If maybe… these two weeks are some sort of experiment… to see if cohabitation would be feasible."

It was on the tip of her tongue to protest that she had nothing of the sort in mind, but Paige paused, wondering if perhaps, subconsciously, that was exactly what she was doing. She certainly didn't want to rush things; and of course, she had Ralph to consider. She suspected Ralph would be over the moon to have Walter around all the time, but she would still want to discuss the subject with him before doing anything. But having wasted half a year of her life with a completely unsuitable substitute, maybe part of her wanted to fast-track this romance to something permanent – and difficult to back out of.

Paige knew she had abandonment issues. Her mother's flighty nature and frequent absences, her father's early death and Drew's defection all contributed to her fear that no relationship in her life could be permanent, except for Ralph. It was part of the reason she'd been alone for so many years. She didn't have to worry about the pain of loss if she never got attached, did she? So maybe these two weeks of playing house were her way to see if she could lock Walter in – or cut him loose while she could still do it and hope to survive.

"You… you could be right, Walter." Paige brought the hand that had been on Walter's arm back
into her lap, twining her fingers together. She rubbed one thumb against the back of the other. She wanted to believe there was nothing she couldn't discuss with Walter. When it came to issues like this, it wasn't so easy. "I honestly don't think I was doing anything like that… not consciously… but…" She looked up. If she was ever going to open up to a man again, that man would be Walter and she needed to do this looking him squarely in the eyes. "… I don't have the best track record when it comes to… to people in my life sticking around. So… I can't rule out the possibility that I might want to… give this a try in order to… see how things might work out more… permanently. I wouldn't blame you if you're angry about that."

"Angry?" Walter looked perplexed. "Why would I be angry? Experimentation is how we prove theories. I don't see why the practice shouldn't extend to… to…"

Paige breathed a sigh of relief. This wasn't the first time Walter's unusual way of looking at things got her off the hook – but she wasn't going complain about the free ride. Still, she felt she shouldn't take advantage of his inexperience.

"It's just that… most people feel it's not good to do… tests… in a relationship. Because if you feel you have to test your partner… it means you don't trust them. I would never want you to think I don't trust you, Walter… I do. But I also know that… things that have happened in my past could make me do things… without realizing why I'm doing them. Do you understand?"

Walter sat quietly for a few moments, his brow furrowed. He blinked a few times and Paige tried to wait patiently. She knew he often needed some time to process things. It was odd to think that a brain that could do complex calculations in no time at all and sift through millions of stored bits of fact to come up with the solution to a problem, would need time to process emotional issues – but that was Walter.

"So… it's not that you don't trust me… but you don't trust… people in general. And another man might be angry because he would assume that your experiment is evidence of distrust… if that's even what this is and you're not sure."

Paige noticed Walter's hand breaching the gap between them, then he pulled it back. She slowly reached hers over, stopping halfway to let him know it was okay if he wanted to hold hers. Slowly, he reached out again and took her hand, turning it over and lightly rubbing his thumb over her palm.

"That… that seems strange to me," he said. "If this is an experiment, then we're both test subjects, not just me. You need to know how you'll react to cohabitation as much as you need to know how I will. It seems logical to do a trial run before making such a change."

"Well, but the thing that would… that should bother you is that I didn't tell you."

"You said yourself that you aren't conscious of any intentional test. So how could you tell me? Besides, behavioral experiments are often best conducted without the subjects' knowledge of the true purpose of the test. Humans tend to alter the results if they know they are being tested."

"This… this really doesn't bother you?"

"The only thing that bothers me is that you still haven't answered my question!" Walter said sternly, but he squeezed her hand, letting Paige know that he wasn't really upset.

"Oh." Paige took a deep breath. "I guess… the answer is yes. I do want you to move in – not necessarily here, but just for us to move in together somewhere… eventually. It's still a little soon to make any definite plans, but at some point…"
Paige leaned over and kissed him lightly, letting her lips linger for a moment. Then she stood up and gathered up his shirts, including the one she intended to hang. "We don't have to talk about it now. For now, we can just enjoy the chance to spend some extra time together and see how it goes." She walked over to the closet and hung up the one shirt, then turned back around, the remaining folded shirts balanced on the palm of one hand. "But you never answered my question, either. Folded, or on hangers?"
"Cut it OUT, Doc!"

Toby was being unusually annoying about this. Toby was nearly always a little bit annoying, and Happy knew it was paradoxically one of the things she loved about the Doc. He could get under her skin like no one else, but she almost never got really angry with him. Annoyed – yes, but not angry. On the other hand, she could blow a gasket back at him and he almost never lost his cool. It was an odd fitting, but it fit, and that was the important thing.

"IF I had any interest in knowing how often Walter and Paige are," she paused and made air quotes, "doing it - then of course, I could find a way to find out. But I have no interest and neither should you. That's nobody's business but theirs. How would you like it if Walt bugged our bedroom?"

"I would not begrudge my friend Walter the pointers he would gain from listening in on a little Quinn-Curtis magic time!"

"If you ever plan to wave your wand in my direction again, Curtis, you'll drop the subject!"

Toby held up both hands in a mock-defensive pose. "Okay, my spicy little pumpkin, but I still can't believe you aren't the least bit curious."

Happy sat back in her chair, strategically putting distance between her fists and the delicate miniature electronics she was working on. She'd taken apart an old cell phone and was busy fashioning it into a tiny television set for her doll house. She'd decided on an early 90s theme for the house, imagining it as if it was her parents' home when she was just a baby - if her mother had survived her birth. She planned to download videos and television shows from the era to play on the miniature television. Like the plumbing and the lights, she wanted everything in the house to be as realistic as possible.

"I am NOT the least bit curious. I'm fairly certain that although Walter may not have the extensive experience that you seem to think you do, he's managed to perform well enough to keep the waitress happy – the woman has been positively glowing the last few weeks - and you should think about using the word "pumpkin" as a term of endearment. Pumpkins are big and round – not something most women care to be compared to."

Toby grabbed an extra chair and rolled it up next to Happy. He leaned over and wrapped an arm across her shoulders, pulling her close and nuzzling her neck before planting a wet kiss there. Happy put up a playful resistance, but the truth was she'd been working on the house all morning and a bit of a break – possibly including some afternoon delight – might be just the thing to ease the built-up tension from all the meticulous work.

"But my love," Toby whispered. "A pumpkin is round in all the right places – like you. And it's tough on the outside – like you. But it can be all sort of mushy and sweet on the inside – also like you, although I may be the only man on earth who knows about that part."

Happy turned, all pretense of objection forgotten. She put one hand on the side of her husband's face and captured his lips, eagerly deepening the kiss when he opened his mouth in response. Soon she pulled back, wanting to move this to a better venue. The chairs in her workroom were good for work – but not so much for tonsil hockey or other activities better performed horizontally.
"What do you say we stop worrying about what O'Brien and Dineen are up to and get up to something ourselves – in our bedroom? This is our first weekend off in almost a month, after all. It's been way too long since we've been able to spend an afternoon in bed."

Toby grinned and nearly knocked over his chair in his eagerness. "That, my sweet, is the best offer I've had all morning." He held out a hand. "Come with me to my castle and I'll show you just what spells I can cast with my magic wand!"

Happy grinned and stood, taking the offered hand and wrapping her other arm around Toby's waist. Leaning against each other, they made their way to the bedroom, stumbling blindly as they paid more attention to kissing than to where they were going.

Toby lay back against the pillows and watched appreciatively as his beautiful wife crawled naked across the covers. The towels they wrapped themselves in after their shower were discarded on the floor. This was one of the aspects of love in the afternoon that Toby liked best. After having made love with wild abandon, they showered together, then snuggled naked, usually falling asleep for an hour or so. They would wake up warm, cozy and ready for another round. The second round was invariably slow and sweet. That was when his usually taciturn Happy turned romantic. She would murmur his name and even tell him how much she loved him. It was intoxicating and he was avidly looking forward to it – after a short nap.

Happy tucked her legs under the covers and scooted down, curling up next to him and laying her head on his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her and prepared to surrender to sleep.

"She really has been glowing, you know," Happy commented. "You don't suppose…?"

Toby opened his eyes. Conversation at this point was unusual, but he wasn't averse to changing up the routine now and then. "Who's glowing?"

"Paige," Happy answered, drawing one finger around his nipple. "She really does seem to radiate some sort of… I don't know what to call it. But she's been like that for a few weeks now. I've just heard that women who are… you know… they glow."

Toby's eyes opened wide. "Wait. You mean you think Mr. and Mrs. 197 might be expecting a mini-197?" Toby paused for a moment, imagining the impact on the team dynamic. "I… I guess it's possible, but Walter's smart enough… and Paige – this isn't her first rodeo. I'm sure they were careful."

"I don't know," Happy countered. "We weren't exactly careful that first time after we got home from the island. You really think those two thought much about protection after almost three years of waiting?"

"Good point," Toby acknowledged, stifling a yawn. "But now who's suddenly so curious about someone else's love life?"

Toby's breath left him with a sudden "Whooooof!" from the punch Happy delivered. "Oh my diaphragm!" he groaned.

"I'm naturally concerned that a pregnancy could change things. I mean… Walt is pretty protective of Paige now. Can you imagine what he'll be like if she's carrying the next generation of Scorpion? Plus, Paige already has a kid. For all we know, she's itching to have another."

"You think?" Toby rolled over to face his wife. He brushed her hair behind her shoulder and
stroked her arm. "Is this about Paige wanting a kid…. or is it about you ready to give it a try?"

Happy looked up and stared into his eyes for a moment. It was one of the things he loved about her. She never hid from an issue; she attacked it head-on - even if it was difficult; even if it was painful.

"I… have been thinking about that. We should start talking about it. Not right this minute, but soon." She smiled and Toby responded by pulling her into a hug. He never thought about having children until their heartbreaking false pregnancy. Now he wanted it very much. He wouldn't push her, though. It had to be something they were both ready for.

"Besides," came a muffled comment from beneath his chin. "I'm not about to let Walter and Paige get the jump on us!"

July 3-4, 2017
Chapter 9

Paige opened her eyes. She was aware that there was another body in the bed with her since there was a heavy arm wrapped tightly under her boobs and one of her legs was trapped between what she assumed was another pair of legs. After a moment of disorientation, she smiled. The other body was Walter's and he'd spent his first night in her home, in her bed.

It wasn't the first time they'd spent a night together – it was the second. Paige was not used to spending the night with anyone, and she'd forgotten how bed partners could take over the space. She took a moment to assess the condition of her bladder. If she tried to get out from under Walter she would likely wake him up, but her urge to pee wasn't bad, so she could wait a bit. She closed her eyes and scooted her butt back up against the warmth at her back. With luck, she might even go back to sleep herself.

Ralph was a morning child and had been from birth. Paige could not remember the last time she slept past seven am. Her son was getting old enough that he could probably fend for himself for an hour or two on weekend mornings, but Paige had not yet lost the habit of waking up as soon as she heard him stirring.

She heard the sounds of a toilet flushing, quickly followed by water running and realized the noises were coming from her own bathroom – not the one at the end of the hall. Awareness hit her again. It wasn't Ralph making his usual morning noises – it was Walter. She wondered for a moment what he must have thought, waking up for the first time in a bedroom that wasn't actually strange to him – he'd been in her room many times – but that certainly wasn't where he was used to waking.

She suppressed a moment of disappointment that he'd gotten up from the bed without waking her first. It would have been nice to snuggle and exchange good mornings. Knowing Walter's love of efficiency, he would probably come out of the bathroom fully dressed and ready to tackle something that would seem much too much like work.

Paige wondered if she should start a list of the things she wanted Walter to do in the romance department. She grinned, thinking it would be a nice twist on the stereotypical "Honey Do" list. Walter might even appreciate it. He was very task oriented, although he was usually so focused that he didn't multi-task very well. Part of Walter's problem with relationships is that he simply had no blueprint to go by – no task list to follow. It might take some of the spontaneity out of things, but Paige could certainly provide him with a task list. If he was single-mindedly focused on the morning snuggle task, that wasn't a bad thing, was it?

Before she could get past number 1 on her hypothetical list, the door to the bathroom opened and Walter emerged. Paige turned over in the bed and scooted up to sit against the headboard, drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. She noticed Walter was wearing a robe. He tugged the lapels to close it more completely across his chest, then raked his fingers over his short-cropped hair. She supposed that must be a habit developed when he wore his hair longer. Now it just served to cause haphazard spikes to stand up here and there.

"Good morning, love," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"Good morning." Paige smiled and watched him as he crossed the room. "Did you have anything in particular that you wanted to do today? Don't feel that we have to stay here. If there's something you want to do back at the garage, we can head over there. I can always catch up on some paper work or there's a couple of movies on Netflix I've been meaning to watch…"
Walter sat on the side of the bed facing her. "I think we should consider this weekend at least to be a vacation. I can manage two days without working and you certainly deserve a couple of days away from Scorpion. We should do… um… fun things."

"All right." Paige ran a hand over the bedcovers that lay between them. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but what do you consider fun?"

Walter shifted so that he was sitting cross-legged on the bed. "Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of things that you consider fun. So I ah… I took the liberty of Googling local events and I've compiled a list of museum shows, art exhibits and other events that you may like." He reached to the side of the bed for his cellphone and tapped the screen a few times. "There's a um… food fair in the Arts District, and an outdoor art show in Beverly Hills; live jazz at the museum of art and a couple of other music events; a flea market in Venice – please tell me they don't sell actual fleas there – and there are some film showings; I also discovered there is a… a… sport of sorts known as 'star-gazing' wherein ordinary folk go to locations around town frequented by celebrities and try to 'spot' them. I was rather disappointed when I realized the activity was not related to astronomy." He paused and looked up. "Do any of these activities appeal to you?"

Paige took a deep breath. "Walter, it's sweet of you to think of doing things I'll enjoy. A lot of those sound interesting, but I don't want to be someone who drags you from one event to another that you have no interest in. Can you tell me if there's anything on that list that actually appeals to you?"

Walter sat quietly for a moment. He set his cellphone back on the bedside table. "I will say that I don't see any appeal in gazing for celebrities. I wouldn't know what any of them look like, anyway. Spending a day wandering between outdoor food stalls of questionable cleanliness is similarly unappealing. However, I do enjoy music; I'm somewhat intrigued at the concept of a flea market; and one of the art exhibits specifically mentioned kinetic art. As you know, I'm not a fan of painting, but I think moving art may be both aesthetically pleasing and arouse my curiosity as to the physics involved in the movement."

Paige sat back against the pillows. "I don't think we should overdo the effort to 'do' something. Honestly, since I don't have to drive Ralph to some seminar or something, I'm looking forward to a relaxing day of doing not much at all. How about we have some breakfast and then, maybe we can flip a coin and pick one of those things to do? Does that sound okay?"

"Flipping a coin to decide between more than two items…" Walter waved his hand, as if to erase what he'd just said. "We'll um… we'll come up with some means of choosing an activity for this afternoon. Until then, are you very hungry?"

Paige shook her head. She rather hoped Walter would suggest they go out for breakfast.

"In that case," he got up on his hands and knees and began to crawl across the bed. "I can think of an activity we can do together that I believe we'll both enjoy, and it might work up an appetite." He stopped beside her, leaned over and kissed her. "Then you can show me your favorite place to get breakfast and we'll flip that coin to decide what else to do with our day."

Paige reached up to take his face in her hands. "Now that sounds like a very good plan!"

July 5, 2017
"Whatcha doin'?"

Ralph looked up from his tablet at his cabin mate. "Oh. Hi Keith. I'm writing an e-mail to my mom."

"Why? Didn't you already write her the day we got here? They made all of us write home."

"Yeah. But I want to tell her what I did yesterday. She's real excited about me being here, but I think she feels guilty for sending me away. So, I want to make sure she knows I'm having a really great time."

"Man, are you DUMB!"

Ralph bristled. Kids at school had often taunted him when he was younger, calling him 'dumb' or 'stupid' or even 'retarded'; mostly because he kept to himself and didn't talk to anyone. Things were better now, since he'd learned how to interact with the other kids. He'd also learned how to outsmart most of the bullies and they left him alone since they didn't want to be made to look foolish. But this was a new environment with new kids, and of all the things he hated, he hated being called 'dumb' most of all.

"I am NOT dumb. Dumb means being unable or unwilling to speak. The fact that I'm speaking to you now demonstrates that I am not dumb. If you're using the more idiomatic meaning of the word – unintelligent - that is false as well. I have a very high IQ."

"Sorry! I just mean why would you not want your mom to feel guilty? Guilt is like gold with parents – especially moms. If she feels guilty for sending you here, she'll probably buy you some great stuff when you get back to make up for it. Last year I made a big deal about how boring the camp I got sent to was, and when I got home I scored a new X-Box, a new phone and even my own laptop."

Ralph saved his half-finished e-mail and set his tablet aside. "Mom gets me pretty much everything I need. She's got a great job. And Walter makes sure I have a great laptop, since I help out sometimes."

"Who's Walter?"

"Walter is my mom's boss… and her boyfriend now. He's also my best friend and I'm hoping he'll be my dad soon."

"You mean step-dad. I guess you've never had one because step dads are the worst. They act all nice when they're dating your mom. They buy you presents and play games with you. But once they get married – or move in – it's like you don't exist anymore. And it's not just the step dad. Your mom will get so wrapped up in her new guy you'll never see her."

Ralph frowned. He couldn't imagine Walter ignoring him; much less his mother. For most of his life, he and his mom were all each other had. Since Walter and Scorpion came into their lives he'd seen more of his mom, not less. She didn't have to work nearly as many hours and she often brought him along to the garage and let him hang out with the team. It was like having a couple of older brothers and sisters – plus Cabe was like a grandfather – or what he imagined a grandfather would be like, since he'd never known his real grandfathers. And Walter – Walter was way more of a dad than Drew ever was. It was like that from the start. Walter taught him things, played
video games with him, even read to him – despite the fact that Ralph was capable of reading at a university level. Walter was even teaching Ralph a little bit about driving. Walter told him that he should know what to do if he ever got into a situation like the one with Sly during the earthquake, and that just because the State of California didn't think he was old enough, he was certainly smart enough to understand the basic mechanics involved.

No – this change in his mom's relationship with Walter wouldn't really change things for him – even if they got married or Walter moved in. Would it?

"You just don't know, man. I've had two step dads so far and my mom is working on number three right now. It's always the same. They couldn't be nicer to me at first – then it all turned to crap when mom married them. Garry – the new one – he's great right now. He and my mom take me to the zoo, or to Disneyland – it's been a blast. Last week he even took me out to a ball game. But I won't be surprised if I get home and find out he's moved in already. He's been dating mom for about four months now and that's usually make-or-break time. Once he's moved in, all bets are off and I'll just be the pain-in-the-neck step kid again. The only thing I can hope for then is that mom will kick him out or divorce him in a year or two and get to work on number four."

"Gosh. That sounds awful!" Ralph couldn't think of anything else to say. His mom never dated anyone that he remembered until Tim. He didn't like Tim from the beginning, but he couldn't say why. He figured one of the biggest things he had against him was that he wasn't Walter. But Tim had made a point of spending time with him and including him on some of their dates. Was Tim just doing what Keith was talking about – playing up to him until he could move in? Ralph shuddered at the thought.

Keith shrugged. "You get used to it. I try to make the most of it when the guys are in their sucking up phase. Then I just try to stay out of their way until they're gone. It could be worse. Hey – don't worry about it. What about your real dad? Doesn't he like, do things with you? My dad lives up North, so I don't see him much, but when I do, we have a great time."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. "Umm… yeah… Dre… I mean… my dad's great. He's a ball player. Professional. We do lots of things together. He lives in Maine, so I don't see him much either. But it's great when I do." Ralph wasn't used to lying, but for some reason he didn't want this kid to think he didn't have a great dad, too. He knew enough now not to brag too much about his friends in Scorpion. Other kids didn't seem to think it was cool to spend time solving math equations or writing code or learning about biology. Some of them thought that building rockets was pretty cool – but most just thought he was lying about that.

"That's cool," Keith responded. "I guess you must be pretty good then, too. I bet we can find some bats and a ball in the equipment hut. You wanna go smack some balls around?"

Uh-oh, Ralph thought. His mom always warned him that lying would get him into trouble. He didn't know it happened so quick.

"Umm… nah. It's umm… it's too hot. Why don't we go swimming instead?"

Keith grinned. "'Kay! I betcha I can do a bigger cannonball!"

As the two changed into their swim trunks, Ralph wondered what a cannonball was. It sounded risky. He sighed. It was going to be a long two weeks.

July 9, 2017
Chapter 11

Paige eased off the sandals that were so cute, but had proved to be completely inappropriate for the Death March of Art she'd endured. She'd enjoyed the first hour, but as the day wore on, and her unbroken-in shoes turned into diabolical instruments of torture, she developed a deep appreciation for the availability of art on the Internet. Did she really need to see — in person — twenty different examples of wind-driven kinetic art? Especially on a hot summer day when there wasn't the slightest breeze to make the pieces… kinetic?

Walter was busy in the kitchen, dishing out Thai food onto plates. He'd wanted to take her out for dinner to conclude their all-day art adventure, but Paige had put her foot down – figuratively. Even the thought of stamping a foot caused her to wince. God bless him, he was trying so hard, and she hated having to rein in all that enthusiasm; but if she didn't cool his jets quickly, it might just be the death of her.

She grabbed her tablet off the sofa table and tapped the screen to open her e-mail app. Scanning through the day's accumulation of sale offers and bill notifications, she noticed a new message from her son. Smiling, she eagerly clicked on the message. Even though the camp allowed small electronics, the kids were not allowed to use the equipment while outdoors, and were discouraged from texting. Paige was pleased to see that Ralph was apparently following the rules, and equally pleased that he still took the time to communicate with her. She wondered how many of the kids wrote home more than the one required e-mail upon arrival.

Dear Mom,

It's only been a day, but I wanted you to know that I'm enjoying the camp so far. I'm not crazy about the rule about no Internet when we're outside, because sometimes the counselors are wrong about things and they don't believe me when I tell them. If I could Google stuff, I could show them. This afternoon one of them wanted to show us what poison ivy looks like. "Leaves of three, let it be," she says, then points to a blackberry bramble. I want to go back there and pick a bunch of the stuff, then stuff it in her backpack and watch her freak out, but that would probably get me in trouble so I'm really trying to resist the urge. It's hard, but I figure you probably wouldn't want me to get sent home. Tell Toby about that. He'll laugh.

I think I'm a lot more of an "outdoor" cat than I used to be, especially since we got back from the island. I like going swimming, and today we played a game in the water called "Marco Polo". If the game has anything to do with the explorer, I can't figure it out, but it's fun. I win a lot because even with my eyes closed I'm good at telling what direction the other kids' voices are coming from.
and based on the sound of their splashing I can figure out what direction they are going in and how fast. So, I usually find them.

I've made friends with one of my cabin mates, Keith. He's from Riverside. He doesn't like that he lives so far from the beach and he's envious that we go there a lot. I told him he wouldn't like it so much if he lived on a beach for three weeks, but he thinks getting marooned must have been cool.

Tomorrow a bunch of the kids are going to play softball. I've held the ball. It's not soft. I told Keith that Drew is a professional ball player and now he thinks I'm going to be really good at it. There's a lot of physics involved in hitting the ball, so I think I'll be good at that part, but I'm not so sure I can run and catch a ball very well. I guess I'll find out tomorrow.

It's almost time for campfire, so I have to go. I'm having fun, but I still miss you, mom; and Toby and Sly and the rest of Scorpion. Tell Happy they could really use her around here. There's a pump that pumps water from a cistern into the showers. It cuts on and off so often that sometimes you get just the hot water. That's more consistent because it goes into the hot water tank first. You know it's coming because the water sputters, but you have to jump out from under the spray to keep from getting scalded. Like I said, camp is fun.

Love,

Ralph

Paige laughed through most of the message, but frowned when she got to the last part. She would have to call the camp organizer first thing Monday morning and ask about the plumbing at the camp. She didn't want Ralph coming home with burns from a scalding shower!

She read through the e-mail again. Something about it seemed odd. When she got to the part where Ralph talked about softball — and about his father, Drew — she realized what it was. There wasn't a single mention of Walter. She looked through a third time to be sure. He mentioned Toby twice; he mentioned Happy and Sly; but not one word about Walter. Nothing about saying hello to him, or passing along any anecdotes to him — nothing.

Maybe Ralph assumed she and Walter would read the message together? If that was the case, he would probably have addressed it "Dear Mom and Walter." Like Walter, Ralph tended to be very exact. If he meant the message for both of them, he would have addressed it that way.

"Hey, something wrong?" Walter asked, handing her a steaming dish.

Paige set the tablet aside. "No," she responded hesitantly. "No. I was just going through my e-mail. It's nothing important. There's a bill that the company says I overlooked, but I'm sure I paid it. I'll call the bank on Monday and get it straightened out."

"You want me to hack the bank records and check on it for you?" Walter grinned.

He was only half joking and Paige knew he would do it if she wanted him to. She laughed. "No, I can handle it. Nothing to worry about. This sort of thing is what I'm good at, remember?" She pushed noodles around in her bowl. She was starving when they got home, but now her appetite just wasn't there anymore. She probably shouldn't worry so much about Ralph's letter. After all, he was still just eleven. Just because hardly a day went by that he didn't tell her all about what he and Walter did together didn't mean that he would necessarily say anything about him in a letter from camp, did it?

Except that he had. The e-mail she got yesterday afternoon was full of "wish you and Walter were here." Could something have happened in the past twenty-four hours? It didn't seem likely. With
one exception, Walter consistently walked on water as far as Ralph was concerned. As far as she knew, Ralph had forgiven Walter for firing her.

"Yes, you're very good at that sort of thing," Walter said in what Paige recognized as his attempt at a sultry voice. He set his own bowl aside, and began to stroke one hand up and down her calf. "There are a lot of things you are very good at."

The hand wandered up past her knee and Paige realized what Walter was doing just as he ventured to the hem of her shorts. She jerked her leg away and sat up straight, nearly spilling hot noodles on herself.

"I'm… sorry?" Walter looked chagrined. He withdrew his hand immediately, throwing both arms up in a gesture of surrender.

"I'm… I'm sorry, too, Walter. I… I'm just really tired. All that walking, you know? And my feet really hurt. I'm just… it's hard to be in the mood when your feet hurt, you know?" Paige groaned mentally. She lied about the e-mail because if Walter picked up on the same thing she did, it would hurt his feelings. Likewise, if he knew that she was so bothered by it that she didn't feel like sex, it would upset him even more. Was this how things would be if they lived together?

"Oh… Oh, of course," Walter responded. "M…maybe we can just… watch some TV and then… go to bed? To um… sleep I mean."

Paige nodded. Maybe an evening just snuggling with Walter would ease her concerns. "Since Ralph is away, maybe we can watch an adult movie?"

Walter reddened. "I um… I… suppose. If that's what you want…. I just… I've never…"

Paige laughed. "No, Walter. I don't mean that kind of adult movie. I just mean something that's maybe rated above G or PG! I like biographies and historical movies and sometimes they have some violence or sexual references that I don't want Ralph exposed to quite yet."

"Oh. Okay. Toby says that by Ralph's own assessment, he knows all about sex."

Paige reached for the remote and turned on the television, flipping to one of the streaming services to start looking for a movie. "Ralph may think he knows all about it; that still doesn't mean I want him to see it on the TV." She maneuvered around until she could lean comfortably against Walter's shoulder and brought her feet up onto the cushions. She tilted her head up and kissed him lightly under his chin. "Tonight I want to watch something that doesn't include singing sponges or spaceships."

Walter wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her up closer to him. Paige sighed. He'd proven very good at snuggling; he was almost a natural right from the beginning. She found a movie, set the remote aside and tried to relax, determined to put the issue with Ralph out of her mind and just enjoy some quiet time. As tired as she was, if she could just get that letter out of her head, she would probably fall asleep within an hour. She would have to figure something out; and she really should talk to Walter. If there was some problem that he and Ralph were having, they should discuss it. But all that could wait until tomorrow.

July 23, 2017
Chapter 12

Something was bothering Paige. It didn't take a…

Inwardly, Walter chuckled. How many times in the past few months had he been made aware of the literal truth of those words; 'It doesn't take a genius'? Throughout his life, nearly everything that he wanted was within his easy grasp because he was a genius. Lately he found himself almost wishing he had a normal brain – almost. Because he so often felt that what he really needed to successfully navigate the quagmire of love was to not be a genius.

Walter sighed. He had no desire to have himself lobotomized. He was a genius and he would have to find his way however he could. Why did Toby and Happy seem to have none of these problems?

He wasn't even sure how to open a conversation. Everything he read advised open communication. 'Talk to your partner' was stressed repeatedly. But how to begin the talk? His eyebrows shot up suddenly as a recent memory surfaced.

"Paige, um… I think we… we need to talk."

"Hmmm?" came the distracted response.

Walter frowned. Paige was not following the protocol she herself described. 'They want the other person's undivided attention' had been her exact words. Walter estimated he had less than five percent of Paige's attention right now. Perhaps it was his protracted delivery of the key phrase that failed.

"I said, we need to talk." He emphasized the last four words.

Paige looked up from the plate full of food that she'd been staring at. "Oh… um… Is something bothering you?"

"I was going to ask you that. You seem… distracted. Is something upsetting you? Have I done something? Is there something I haven't done?"

Paige reached a hand across the table and wrapped it around Walter's. "Walter… slow down. I'm not upset with you."

"But you are upset about something?"

She drew her hand back and picked up her cup. Walter was well aware that the coffee was cold. Paige never drank cold coffee. But he waited patiently while she took a sip and made a face. When she was about to get up, he stood and took the cup himself. "I'll get you a fresh cup. You tell me what's going on. That is if… if you feel like it."

He walked to the sink and poured out the contents of the cup. He was nearly finished pouring another when Paige finally began to speak.

"I'm not… I'm not really sure that I should. Not yet."

"So then," Walter urged as he set the hot coffee in front of her. "I assume that means that whatever it is, it isn't about… about us?"
Paige spent a moment blowing across the surface of the hot liquid, concentrating her gaze on the ripples. She took a sip, then put the cup down, wrapping her hands around its warmth. "It… it sort of is… or maybe not. That's why I'm not sure if I should say anything."

Walter took a breath and began to count. One thing he had learned is that he couldn't expect the sort of immediate, unqualified response that he got from a computer. He thought back on some of the things Doctor Rizzuto said about communication. Leaning back in his seat, he took his hands out of his pockets and carefully set his arms in an open, inviting position, laying his hands open on the table with his palms facing up.

"Walter, are you planning to meditate?"

"What? I… I don't understand." Walter struggled to keep his arms and hands relaxed. This was not going well. Perhaps he should suggest they sing; build some harmony?

"With your arms stretched out like that, you look like you're about to chant a mantra or something."

Walter looked at his outstretched hands, then brought his arms in and let them dangle into his lap. "It's… it's body language. I'm trying to show that I'm open and sharing."

Paige smiled. "Walter, you really don't have to try so hard."

"On the contrary, I do."

Paige lay her own arm across the table and beckoned with her fingers. Walter cautiously brought a hand up and lay it in hers. Of all the things that surprised him recently, this was perhaps the biggest surprise. Touch – something he avoided from all others - was something he found comforting with Paige. Despite his many blunders, a simple touch of their hands always made him feel that everything would be fine.

"Walter, we both have to try. We both have to work at this. You've… you've hit upon something that I need to work on. I… tend to be a little bit of a… a worrier. I see problems where they may not exist, and that makes me… broody."

She lightly stroked his palm with her thumb, which somehow made Walter realize that it was now over twenty-four hours on their free weekend since they last made love. He knew that statistically men were supposed to think of sex several times a day. That was yet another thing he used to think he was immune to.

"I've spent a lot of the past eleven years not talking about anything that bothered me… for Ralph, you know? I need to remember that… even if you don't always pick up on it… sometimes, you obviously do. It's not fair to let you worry, not knowing… soooo…"

Paige got up and walked to the desk where her tablet was sitting. After tapping the screen a few times, she brought it over to the table and sat down, clenching the tablet to her chest.

"I'm probably making something out of nothing, and I really don't want you to feel like… like this is anything more than an over-worried mom's… illusion. I got an e-mail from Ralph yesterday…"

Walter sat listening while Paige talked about the e-mail from Ralph. He chuckled at the poison ivy story, and wondered himself why a game played in a swimming pool was named after a travelling merchant from the thirteenth century. When Paige finished, he understood.

"Paige, it's hardly surprising that you're upset. I find it hard to believe that you imagine this might be anything other than a serious problem."
"Walter… it may not be that bad. We just need to give Ralph some time to work things out."

"Ralph?" Walter raised an eyebrow. "Ralph is quite mechanically gifted, but he shouldn't be spending his summer camp time repairing machinery that is at the very least not his responsibility. If necessary, we'll go to the camp offices and demand they get that water pump fixed immediately."

"Water pump? I'm not worried about the pump, Walter." Paige paused. "Well, that is, I am, of course. But…" Paige's shoulders slumped and she sighed. "I really am making something out of nothing, aren't I?"

"The pump problem certainly isn't nothing if it sends scalding water to the showers; but I think you need to tell me what is bothering you, if that's not it. Are you concerned about Ralph playing tricks on the counselors?"

"No. I'm concerned that Ralph… that he's not as happy… about us as we… as I thought he was. He didn't mention you in the e-mail at all, Walter. Not once. Not even a 'say hi to Walter'. Nothing. He knows you're spending the two weeks here and I can't help but wonder if that's bothering him. Maybe he thinks it's too soon or maybe… maybe he's… jealous?"

Walter stood, shoving his hands back in his pockets. He truly hadn't noticed what Paige pointed out. That didn't mean he wasn't concerned about it now that he was aware. He turned and stared out the small window over the kitchen sink at nothing. Doctor Rizzuto would tell him he was being closed off, and he supposed he was. Before the wedding, before Lake Tahoe, in the rare moments when he imagined a relationship with Paige, this was his biggest fear. He'd told Happy he was afraid of ruining his friendship with Paige. That was true. He still had concerns about that. But his biggest fear was that it would affect his relationship with Ralph. It already had. Ralph forgave him for firing Paige, but Walter wondered if the boy truly trusted him as he once had.

"Walter? Are you all right?"

Walter whirled. He was suddenly aware of just the sort of damage his instinctive reaction to emotional turmoil could do. By hiding his feelings, he was doing to Paige what she had been doing to him. He'd made her worry, with no clear idea of what she was worrying about. He hadn't liked the feeling, and he was sure she didn't either.

"I'm sorry. I'm… I'm okay. I just don't want anything to come between Ralph and I. Not even us. But I don't want Ralph to come between you and I, either. It's a… an infinite loop; the sort of problem that would cause a computer to crash, and I have no idea what to do about it."

Paige walked up and placed a hand on his cheek. He leaned into the touch, needing it.

"I think the only thing we can do is wait until Ralph gets home. And then we'll have to talk with him. We should find out if there is a problem before we try to solve it."

July 26, 2017
Chapter 13

"What do you think is wrong with those two?"

Cabe sighed. Allie was as nearly perfect a woman – for him – as he'd met in his life. She laughed at his jokes, made him feel handsome and desirable and even younger. She was a terrific boost to his ego. More importantly, she was a friend. She was impeccably dressed whenever they went out, but she had no problem donning jeans and an old flannel shirt to work with him in his garden or go hiking or riding in the hills. She enjoyed watching old movies – including Westerns. She was a big fan of John Wayne and Gary Cooper and James Stewart. It was based on her suggestion that they went on a road trip to visit the locations where some of those old classics were filmed. They'd had a great time posing for selfies with some of the more recognizable landmarks. He didn't share her interest in classic science fiction, but that wasn't a problem. He could enjoy almost any movie while curled up on the couch with her in his arms and he'd promised to join her one day on a trip to visit the Devil's Tower in Wyoming, a place that apparently figured large in one of her favorite films.

She did love to gossip, though. Discussing the romances of the members of Scorpion made Cabe uncomfortable, but Allie didn't seem to realize that it was a bit like asking a father to comment on his children's love lives. Or perhaps she did – but felt he needed to be more involved. It wouldn't be the first time she was more aware of the nature of his relationship with this team than he gave her credit for.

He was aware that Walter and Paige were using the time while Ralph was at camp to conduct an experiment in cohabitation. He took pains not to think about it if he didn't have to, even though he'd noticed the strain between the two as well. If he was being honest, he was worried. They had been this way all week, so whatever the issue was, it had come up nearly immediately. Gone were the loving glances and smiles. Both were all business on cases and conducted themselves like usual, but there was obviously something very disturbing going on. The usual relaxed post-case atmosphere on the roof hadn't eased the situation. Paige looked worried almost all the time. With Walter, it was harder to tell, but Cabe had seen the boy look at Paige like he was about to lose her. He sincerely hoped that wasn't the case. Recalling the time when Walter fired Paige, Cabe wasn't sure any of them would be able to pull Walter out of the pit he would surely sink into if Paige left again.

He took a long drink of his beer. "I… really don't know. I'm not the best judge of these things, but I… I can only guess that this whole living together idea is maybe not working quite the way they expected. Which… makes me wonder if maybe I wasn't right that Walter is just not ready for someone like Paige. He's come a long way… but maybe there's only so far he's able to go, and it's not far enough."

"It may not be Walter, you know," Allie reached over and placed a comforting hand on his arm. Cabe covered it with his own, patting hers in appreciation. "Walter would – has – gone through Hell for Paige. He'll do anything he can to keep her happy. Some people… they just don't know how to be happy. Maybe Paige is one of those. It wouldn't be surprising given her history with her mom and Ralph's dad. She might be the sort who… who looks for problems."
Cabe stared at Allie. "Do you really think she could be… sabotaging… their relationship?"

"It's possible. The only people who really know what's going on in a relationship are the ones who are directly involved." Allie removed her hand from his arm and picked up her own beer. "I know you don't like poking your nose in, but if Walter doesn't approach you soon, you might want to consider trying to draw him out. It may help if he just talks about whatever's wrong."

Cabe sighed again. Years ago, he'd been worried about how he would manage when his daughter grew into womanhood. He'd never imagined anything like the problems Walter O'Brien presented.

It was a smooth operation; one he'd orchestrated over years of experience. The choreography was only slightly altered by the presence of another body in the bed with him. Despite his urgency, Cabe smiled as he eased his arm out from under Allie, being careful not to wake her while at the same time he was amazed to realize the loud noise from his phone hadn't done just that. It was just as well, if this arrangement was going to become permanent, the fact that phones ringing in the middle of the night didn't wake her would be a good thing.

He reached over and grabbed the phone off his night table, quickly swiping the screen to stop the noise, while he simultaneously read the caller id. It was Walter. He glanced at the time. One-thirty. Why would Walter be calling at this hour?

"Walter? What is it son?"

He listened intently to the frantic voice.

"What hospital? Okay, son. I'll be right there. You just sit tight. Everything's going to be all right. Try not to worry." He ended the call and jumped out of bed, his mind spinning with the best route to take to get through the late night LA traffic. He wondered if he should pick up Toby along the way. When it came to medical issues, Walter's confidence in the genius behaviorist's abilities far outweighed his trust in even the best of other doctors. Grabbing his suit pants from the day before, he quickly drew them up over his pajama pants, then grabbed a fresh shirt from his closet.

He looked over his shoulder. Allie was sleeping peacefully. He hated to wake her, but they hadn't spent enough nights together yet for him to simply be absent in the morning and trust that she would understand. He stepped to the bed and slipped his phone, wallet and keys in his pockets. Leaning over, he gently shook her shoulder. "Allie, sweetheart?" He shook her again. "Allie? I need you to wake up for a minute, darling."

"Huh?" Allie's eyes opened and she rolled halfway onto her back. The covers slipped as she sat up, giving Cabe a view that made him wish fervently that he didn't have to leave.

"Allie," he whispered, not sure why he was still trying to be quiet. "Walter just called. There's been an accident. He's okay, but Paige is in the Emergency Room. I'm headed over there to… well for moral support if nothing else. I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I'll call you in the morning if I'm still at the hospital. You sleep and help yourself to anything you can find for breakfast in the morning. You know where the coffee is."

He leaned over to kiss her, and had a sudden flash of the hundreds of times he did the exact same thing when it was his wife, Rebecca, in the bed. Being the wife of an agent required a lot of sacrifice and tolerance. One thing he always loved about Rebecca was how well she dealt with all that. Time would tell if Allie was as understanding. If not… well then that might just be the signal that it was time for him to retire.
"Okay," she replied. "I can be up and dressed in two minutes if you want me to go with you."

Cabe considered the offer, but as little as he could do, Allie could do even less. He felt sure that Walter liked Allie, but in an emotional crisis, he might not be comfortable yet with her around. "No, you get your sleep. I'll let you know if there's anything you can do."

He kissed her once more and turned to the bedroom door. As he stepped through, he paused. There had been note of visceral panic in Walter's voice; as if his own life were in peril, not just Paige's. Cabe glanced back and saw that Allie was still sitting up on the bed, only now she holding the sheet up over her breasts.

"Allie, I... I love you. I want you to know that. It's been a hell of a long time since I've said that to a woman. I'm... I'm glad you came into my life so that I can say it again."

Before she could react and turn the moment into a mushy scene, Cabe closed the door softly and headed down the hall and out into the warm Los Angeles night.

August 13, 2017
"Look, I'm... I'm not just a friend. I'm her **employer**. She's an indispensable asset in a company that provides vital... and... and top secret services to the Department of Homeland Security. Our national security depends on her and I need to know what her condition is... whether she'll be... able to return to work!"

Cabe and Toby approached the desk in the Emergency Care Center, trading glances at Walter's atypical invocation of his government connections. Cabe latched on to his arm as a security guard warned Walter that if he continued to badger the nurse, he would be removed. Walter turned his head, startled, and Cabe used the distraction to draw the man away from the obviously irate guard and equally perturbed nurse. He left Toby to see what he might be able to find out.

"Walter," Cabe soothed. "What the heck is going on here? How's Paige? Do you have any word on her condition?"

Walter allowed Cabe to pull him down into one of the vacant seats a little away from the desk where Toby was using his best skills to charm information out of the nurse. To most observers, he would seem completely relaxed, but business like. A no-nonsense medical man inquiring after a patient. He was twirling his hat in his hands though, a sure sign that he was not having much success.

Walter leaned over in the chair, rubbing his open hands up and down his thighs. Cabe glanced around for a wastebasket, afraid the young man might actually be sick. He wondered if Walter had been checked out himself. The boy had been driving the car, he knew that much. Even if he was physically uninjured, shock would be a factor as well.

"Is there anything you can tell me about what happened?"

"They won't let me see her, Cabe. They won't even tell me anything about her condition. I was in the room with her until... until they insisted that I leave so they could examine her." He paused and raked fingers through his hair; the spikes evidence that he'd performed the nervous action more than once. "I don't... don't... I don't know if she's even..." He turned and Cabe nearly flinched at the look in his friend's eyes. "She was unconscious, Cabe. I couldn't get her to open her eyes. What if...?"

Walter stood suddenly and Cabe got up immediately to stand beside and a little behind him. When Walter turned abruptly, the older man was nearly knocked over and reached out an arm to steady them both.

"Son, you need to listen to me. Until we know something there's no sense in thinking the worst. Now why don't you tell me what the heck was going on when I got here? Why won't they tell you anything?"

"I'm not a damn relative! She's the most important person in my life but I have no right to even know if she's still ali..."

Walter O'Brien **never** cursed. Undoubtedly, he thought it inefficient. Cabe could not remember a time when a vulgar word left the boy's lips. It was a clear indication of just how distraught he was.
Toby walked up to the two other men. "This nurse is a real piece of work. He's a complete stickler for the rules and won't tell me anything because he 'has no record that I'm Ms. Dineen's primary care provider.' Walter, I would think you would be Paige's emergency contact. Surely it's not Ralph!"

Walter glanced from one man to the other. "I… we talked about it. We were going to get all that changed. You know how I am with paperwork. The reason I was married to Happy is because I didn't get my citizenship papers submitted on time. Apparently, Paige is a wiz at paperwork for Scorpion, but for personal issues, she's as bad as I am. As far as I know… her emergency contact is still Nemos… from the restaurant."

"Je…sus!" Cabe whistled. "Do you think they're trying to get hold of him?"

"I'm not sure." Walter raked his fingers through his hair and pivoted on his heels, not quite pacing, but obviously not able to stand still. "They… they got her wallet to get her health cards. I suppose she must have something in there about it. All I know for sure is it's not me and they won't tell me a thing."

"I have an idea!" Toby announced, his face brightening. He brought out his cellphone and stepped away, moving as far from the nurse's station as he could without leaving the room. He motioned for the other two to join him as he began to whisper into the phone.

"Right. Date it sometime shortly after she joined Scorpion. Be sure to include his full name. You've got her sig on file, right? Use yours and mine for witnesses. Great. Soon as you can, my sweet little counterfeiter."

Toby quickly pocketed the phone and motioned the others closer. "That was Happy."

"Well I should hope so," Cabe interjected. "You'd be in serious hot water if you called anyone else your sweet little anything."

"Right," Toby grimaced. "Of course it was Happy. She's working on getting up an Advance Medical Directive for Paige, naming Walter as her contact. Should take her just a few minutes, but she insists she needs to age the paper so it doesn't have the fresh stink of printer ink on it. She'll bring it over as soon as it's done. Did you ever tell them you weren't her emergency contact, Walter?"

Walter took a moment to answer. "No. I um… I lied and said I was. But they said unless I had paperwork superseding what was in her wallet…"

"They would go with the restaurant guy," Cabe finished.

Walter nodded. He looked around, made his way to the nearest bank of seats and fell into one. Holding his head in his hands, he began to shake. "I just… I can't take not knowing."

Toby and Cabe sat down on either side of their friend, doing their best to comfort him while they all waited for Happy to arrive.

"Mr. O'Brien? Walter O'Brien?" The woman in scrubs addressed the three men and one woman sitting together in the waiting area. Walter immediately stood up.

"I'm Walter O'Brien. How's Paige? How is she? Is she okay?"

"I understand you are Ms. Dineen's emergency contact. Can you tell me what your relationship is to her?"
Walter's impatience was getting the better of him. Couldn't this woman see that he just needed to know she was okay? "I'm… I'm her… boyfriend," he snapped.

"I see."

The doctor shifted the chart she was holding to her other hand, and held it down by her side. When she placed a hand on Walter's shoulder he flinched, but didn't move away. In his peripheral vision, he noticed Toby's head tilt slightly. He was trying to read what was written on the chart.

"Ms. Dineen has a concussion, and there is what appears to be a small crack in her skull. At this point, the fracture seems relatively minor, but we'll want to keep a close eye on her, especially since she was unconscious for some time. We did both CAT scans and an MRI and we don't see any swelling or any bleeding in the brain, so that's a good sign. She did regain consciousness while we were examining her, but she was understandably disoriented. We gave her a mild sedative, but that will be wearing off soon. She's been moved to Intensive Care where we'll keep her overnight."

"So… so she… she'll be all right?" Walter wanted to ask intelligent questions; quiz the doctor on the extent of Paige's injuries and the possibility of complications. But all he could think to ask right now was that simple question.

"She'll have a nasty headache. And she's got some facial cuts and bruises from where she lost a battle with your car's windshield. I'm surprised that the airbag apparently did not deploy. If she gets through the night without any complications, she can probably go home tomorrow." The doctor hesitated. Walter thought briefly that he must really be getting good at reading people if he could sense her reticence despite his own distress.

"Mr. O'Brien. I hope I'm not stirring up anything here but… Ms. Dineen has been asking for someone whenever she was conscious enough to speak. Do you know who 'Ralph' might be?"

In any other circumstance, Walter would have laughed. "Ralph is Paige's son. He's eleven and he's at summer camp right now. When… when can I see her?"

The doctor smiled. "I understand you were in the car as well, Mr. O'Brien. Have you been checked for injuries?"

"My airbag worked just fine. I got a face full of powder, but I'm otherwise fine. When can I see Paige?"

"The ICU is on the seventh floor. I've left instructions that you be allowed to see her for just a few minutes." She paused and looked towards the others. "I'm afraid that for tonight, I have to limit visitors to just Mr. O'Brien." She turned back to face Walter. "I understand you're anxious to see your friend Mr. O'Brien, but I really recommend that you…."  

Walter was running out the door and towards the elevators before she could finish. Cabe, Toby and Happy all shrugged their apologies and quickly followed him.

August 23-27, 2017
"Your mom is fine, Ralph. She insisted quite strenuously that you should stay at camp. She… she feels it's important for your continued social development. She specifically said that she wanted you to have the full experience of two weeks without… without the rest of us to… to fall back on. It's apparently more of her 'sink or swim' strategy."

Walter grimaced at the memory of his own experience with Paige's method, although in hindsight, he had to admit that it had produced some positive results. He'd opened up and been honest with her – brutally honest, but honest – while on their makeshift raft. He realized that, in part, it was because he'd been stuck there. He could not escape to his loft or bury himself in work. His only options were to keep silent or speak his mind. He'd seen the damage that keeping silent did to his mother in her relationship.

"I… I believe she also wants you to… to have fun and not to worry," Walter continued.

"Oh… okay. I'll… I'll see you guys in a week…. I guess. Good-bye Walter."

Walter stared at the blank screen a moment, wondering if Ralph was enjoying his time at summer camp at all. He'd assured the boy that his mother's injuries, while not trivial, were expected to heal quickly and without any residual damage. Ralph was considerably more adept at interacting with normals than Walter had been at that age – at any age, really. He understood that the camp put severe limitations on technology, but their time on the island taught Ralph that there were things to be learned in even the most primitive settings. Still, he sounded… dejected.

Walter shook his head, stood, and pocketed his phone. He was probably over analyzing the situation. He'd been awake most of the night, sitting by Paige's bedside as she slept. He was exhausted, and not in a little pain himself. He wasn't sure how much of the ache in his back and neck were due to the accident and how much due to his night in an uncomfortable chair.

When Paige woke briefly in the early morning, he promised to call Ralph as soon as was reasonable. Then a nurse appeared as if by magic, armed with a cup of pain pills. Paige had gone back to sleep almost immediately. He'd stepped out at six o'clock to make the call.

Ralph handed the phone back to the head counselor, thanking her again.

"Is everything all right, Ralph? Will your father be coming to pick you up?"

"He's… he's not my father… not really. And no, he and my mom don't want me to come back. They… they want me to stay here."

Mrs. Greenwald stood up from her desk and came around, placing an arm across Ralph's shoulder. He suppressed the impulse to shrug it off.

"Well, then, that's good, isn't it? That means they're both okay… no serious injuries. That's something to be thankful for. Aren't you happy that your mom and… and her friend are okay?"

Ralph forced his lips to turn upward into a smile. "Sure. Sure I am," he assured her, doing his best
to sound cheerful. He felt anything but. "Thanks again, Mrs. Greenwald. I'm fine… just… just a little hungry. I'm going to go to the mess hall before I miss breakfast, if that's okay."

"Of course, Ralph." She opened the cabin door for him and stood in the doorway as he stepped out onto the small porch. "Ralph?" she called as he stepped down onto the gravel path.

The mess hall was two doors over. Ralph could see a line of other campers slowly filing into the building. Breakfast started at six-thirty, but everyone knew if you didn't get there early you would get what no one else wanted. He sighed as he turned back and looked up, resigning himself to stale, generic Fruity-O's and a green banana. If he was lucky there might actually be a carton of milk for his cereal. If not, even the fish in the lake didn't like Fruity-O's.

Mrs. Greenwald glanced over to the mess hall, then stepped onto the porch herself, closing the cabin door behind her. "You know, Ralph. Even though we know your mom is fine, hearing that she's been in an accident can be… well… upsetting. I want you to promise me that if you start to feel upset or anxious, that you'll come see me or… or tell one of the other counselors, okay?"

Ralph nodded. "I'm aware that distressing news can sometimes cause delayed emotional reactions. Logically, I know my mom will be okay. But if I feel myself becoming stressed, I'll… I'll let you know."

Mrs. Greenwald looked at him quizzically, in the way that adults… adults other than Scorpion… often did.

"All right, then," she finally said. "I'll tell you what. I'll go over to breakfast with you. One of the perks of being head counselor is that I get to go to the head of the line. Let's see if we can snag some bacon and eggs, shall we?"

Ralph nodded, then managed an almost genuine grin. At least this day wasn't going to be a total suck.

"So, I heard you got called to the head counselor's office this morning. Heard she took you to the head of the line for breakfast. What happened that made you counselor's pet?"

Startled, Ralph dropped the stone he had been about to send skipping across the surface of the lake. He turned, relieved to see that his inquisitor was just Keith. They were nominally friends. Ralph expected that Keith might tease him a bit about his special treatment, but not extensively.

"My mom and… and Walter… were in a car accident last night. I had to go to her office because Walter was calling tell me that they're both okay and they want me to stay here. He doesn't want me coming back, even though my mom's still in the hospital."

"Oh man, that sucks. I told you, though. That guy wants your mom all to himself. Your mom and this Walter guy – they make good money, right? I mean you said they had like, brand new matching cars, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. My mom worked for this really, really rich guy for a while and she made a bunch of money. Walter – he owns Scorpion and they used to not make any money at all, but since they started working for the government, they get paid lots of money for some of the things they do. Except when they have to pay for damages to rental cars and stuff." Ralph turned back and sent another stone skipping across the water. Based on the trajectory, speed and the accumulated drag of each skip, he estimated the stone would bounce four times before sinking. His heart wasn't in the game today. He didn't even bother to watch.
"Don't be surprised if you get home and they've decided to send you away to a…" Keith made air quotes with his fingers, "…'special' school." Keith picked up some stones and tossed one. It skipped six times before sinking, causing Keith to whoop with excitement. "Wow! Six skips! I've almost got you beat, Dineen!"

Ralph dropped the rest of the stones he was holding, brushing his palms down his shorts to dislodge the dirt. "I don't think I want to play this anymore. Walter taught me how, but it's stupid. I mean, what's the big deal about making a rock skip across water? It's just basic physics. I'm gonna head back to the cabin. I'll see you later, Keith."

Ralph turned and made his way back up the scrub-covered bank that lined the lake in this area. It was hard to believe that Walter - let alone his own mother - would want to get rid of him. What Keith said, though, sounded so convincing. Back when it was just him and his mom, when she got sick – like with a cold or something – she'd let him take care of her. He knew he wasn't good at it. He'd tried to bring her breakfast in bed once and accidentally spilled a tall glass of orange juice all over her bed. But she'd laughed it off, despite the way that laughing made her cough, and they'd cleaned up the mess together. Now she was in the hospital and she didn't even want him there because she had Walter.

His eyes were burning and his vision blurred. He sniffed, and wiped an arm across his nose. Sly would be passing him a tissue and his giant bottle of Purell about now. If Sly was here. If Toby was here, Ralph might be able to talk to him. Maybe Toby could explain why adults had children, then decided they didn't want them anymore. Happy had been through that. Now she and Toby wanted a kid of their own. A kid they would probably send off to some camp or school after a few years.

Ralph sat down on the ground. If he went back to the cabin he would run into some of the other campers, and he didn't want to see anyone. He wiped a hand across his face, causing some of the dirt still left from the rocks he'd been holding to smear into muddy streaks. He looked around. This path to the lake wasn't heavily traveled, since it didn't end up at one of the sandy beach areas, but that didn't mean someone might not come along. He scrambled off the path and into a clump of bushes. He would stay there, out of sight, while he thought things through. If he had to, he could hotwire one of the camp counselor's cars. He'd only driven a car that one time, but it wasn't hard. Once in the car he could use the GPS on his tablet to find his way back home.

September 24, 2017
Chapter 16

Paige could not believe that it took three geniuses and one Homeland agent to drive one slightly banged up office-manager-slash-liaison home from the hospital.

She was glad that she had Walter’s arm to lean on as they made their way down the hall from the small elevator to her door. He would be staying with her anyway, insisting that she needed someone nearby as she finished recovering from the mild concussion she suffered in the accident.

It was probably best that Cabe drove them. From Walter’s description, no one would be driving her car ever again, and Walter was in no condition himself to be driving. Not that he was injured. He was simply too focused on her injuries.

She even understood when Walter insisted on Toby coming along to give her a final medical once-over when she was settled in her room.

Happy, though, was a surprise. Happy insisted on coming so that Paige would have someone “to help with any lady needs she might have.” Paige grinned again at the memory of the woman’s lame excuse. Of all the geniuses, Paige knew that Happy was still the one who was most uncomfortable with her feelings, unless the feeling in question was anger. It warmed Paige’s heart to know how much Happy cared.

“Are you all right? Are you in pain?” Walter stopped in the doorway, turning to look intently into her face. “It looked like you were grimacing. Were you grimacing?”

Paige started to chuckle, then stopped, realizing belatedly that it really did hurt when she laughed. “No, Walter. I’m fine. I was just… smiling. I’m glad to be home and have so many people who care about me.” She looked around and smiled at each member of her escort in turn.

“Take it from me, Paige,” Happy said, “You should avoid smiling for a few days. It’s… sort of terrifying.”

“No, Walter. I’m fine. I was just… smiling. I’m glad to be home and have so many people who care about me.” She looked around and smiled at each member of her escort in turn.

“Take it from me, Paige,” Happy said, “You should avoid smiling for a few days. It’s… sort of terrifying.”

“Noted,” Paige agreed. “It doesn’t feel so hot from this end, either.”

The group made their way slowly into the condo.

“Happy, you can help Walt get Paige settled into bed,” Toby instructed as he flopped down on Paige’s couch. “I’ve had a rough night; I’m gonna close my eyes for a couple of minutes. Call me when she’s all tucked in and I’ll pop in to check her over and review the meds with Walter.”

Cabe wished Paige a swift recovery and opted to stay in the living room with Toby, indicating that she had no need of extra men in her private boudoir. He joined Toby on the couch, ignoring the fact that the other man was sprawled over three-quarters of its surface.

“I shouldn’t condone forgery, of course, but that was pretty quick thinking having Happy come up with those documents for Walt. Isn’t it a violation of your medical ethics, though, to violate a patient’s known wishes?”

“First, do no harm,” he quoted. “Clearly, it would have done harm to allow Walter to continue suffering. He was my patient, too; especially in that situation since he was also in the accident.
Doctors are often called upon to weigh sometimes conflicting obligations. In this case, however, I saw no conflict. Walter was close to an emotional breakdown and needed the reassurance of solid information. Paige was unconscious. If she’d needed surgery or other medical decisions to be made, it was in her best interest for the hospital to have someone onsite that they could – as far as they knew – come to for consent. The fact that the diner guy wasn’t there was a pretty clear indication that her designation of him as emergency contact was likely because, at the time, she simply didn’t have anyone else even marginally close to rely on. It is curious that she never changed it, but it’s not outside the realm of possibility that it’s simply a matter of procrastination.”

“It’s times like these that I’m glad I’m not a genius,” Cabe said, leaning back and propping his feet up on an oversized ottoman. “That’s the most convoluted way of saying you were willing to throw ethics out the window to help your friends.”

“And I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Toby agreed. He closed his eyes again, leaned back and settled his hands on his belt buckle.

A phone started vibrating noisily, startling both men and causing them to sit bolt upright.

“It’s not mine, is it yours?” Cabe asked.

“It’s not mine,” Toby answered.

Cabe turned and grabbed the phone off the table behind them. “It’s Walter’s.” He turned the phone over and read the caller id. “Bio Horizons?” He raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the camp they sent Ralph to,” Toby said. “Maybe you should answer it. The kid might be worried about his mom.”

Cabe swiped a finger across the screen. “Walter O’Brien’s phone,” he answered. He scowled as he listened to the caller. “Walter is… he’s not available right now. This is… this is Walter’s father. Is there something up with Ralph?” He paused to listen for a few minutes, periodically nodding his head. “I see. Yes, I’ll have Mr. O’Brien call as soon as he’s available. Shouldn’t be too long.”

Cabe set the phone back down on the table.

“Walter’s father? Now who’s toying with ethics?”

“Greater good, Doc. Walter’s got his hands full right now and so does Paige. If it was a serious problem, I’d get them. As it is, if this is something I can handle for them, I will; give them some space to take care of each other. I might need to make use of some of your wife’s talents, though. Hopefully she’ll finish up and get out here soon.”

“So I take it Ralph’s okay, but there is some issue?” Toby asked.

“Yeah. Seems the kid went missing for a while today, but he’s been found and he’s more-or-less okay. He was sound asleep in the woods in a cluster of poison oak. Poor kid’s got it bad. They’ve given him a good scrubbing, got him into clean clothes and covered the rash with itch cream, but they feel like he’ll be more comfortable if someone can come pick him up and bring him home. I’ll need something official looking with Paige’s signature so I can do that.”

“Toby, you’re up!” Happy sauntered down the hall, dusting her hands together.

Toby jumped off the couch and headed towards the hall.

“Not a word, Doc!” Cabe called.
Toby waved a hand as he passed his wife. “My lips are sealed!”

“Not a word about what?” Happy addressed Cabe as she took the place recently vacated by her husband.

Cabe fished his own phone out of his pocket. “I’ll explain in a bit. Right now I need to call Allie and get her to come over here. Don’t go anywhere. I’ve got another little job for you.”

February 3, 2018

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