

A Scorpion Christmas Story
by Kate Simon

Cabe smiled as he watched Kate run around the kitchen like a maniac. It was their first Christmas as a married couple and she'd declared what she wanted was a real family Christmas. Cabe's assignment had been to get the Christmas tree, which Kate had insisted should be big enough to take up half the living room. He looked over his shoulder at the massive blue spruce. Mission accomplished.

"Gallo," Kate shouted. "Get your ass in here and help me."

"What do you need?"

"Besides, four more hands? Get the turkey out of the oven."

"Katie, you didn't need to do all this. You could have had it catered." She looked at him like he'd just uttered a blasphemy. He threw his hands up in surrender. "Forget I said it." Cabe pulled the enormous bird out of the oven and set it on the butcher block to cool.

"They're going to be here soon and the table's not set and I still need to grab a shower," she let out an exasperated sigh.

Cabe put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to stand still. "Katie girl. Stop. Take a breath." He couldn't help but smile at her flushed skin and lopsided ponytail. "Go get your shower. I'll finish up."

"I still have to..."

He silenced her with a kiss. He felt her muscles relax as she slipped her hands around his neck. He deepened the kiss, pulling her close. That is until she pushed him away.

"Oh, no you don't, Gallo. You're not going to distract me. I still have so much to do."

"Katie, it's not the Queen of England, it's family."

Kate smiled and nodded. "Okay. I'll jump in the shower and I'll be back in twenty." She was halfway out of the kitchen when she turned back with a concerned look. "Cabe, do you think the gifts are okay? Are they going to like them?"

"Sweetheart, they're perfect. I think they'll love them. Honestly, I do." He was relieved to see a wide smile as she fled upstairs. He'd never seen anyone go to such lengths for Christmas gifts. He just hoped she'd like his gift.

The house hadn't been this noisy since their last pool party. The team piled in with packages. Paige had a green bean casserole and Happy had brought mince pie. Dinner was loud and relaxed accented with the sound of silverware on china. Cabe was about to carve the turkey when he looked out over the scene. His family was all around him and he couldn't remember the last holiday he'd been this content. "Okay, who wants a leg?"

"Does anyone want dessert now or after presents?" asked Kate.

"Presents!" said Ralph, and Toby, and Sly.

"Presents it is," she said.

They moved into the living room. Everyone took seats on the couches and love seats while Ralph stood at the front of the tree. "I get to be Santa," he said.

"You always get to give out the gifts," said Sly.

"I'm a kid, I'm cute, I win." Everyone laughed at Ralph's irrefutable logic. "Cabe and Kate are first." He handed them large green box with a big red bow.

Cabe put his arm around Kate. "You open it, sweetheart." She tore at the paper and opened the box. Sitting on top of the tissue was an envelope. Kate opened it to see that a donation had been made in their honor to Amanda's Center. Cabe looked at the group and smiled. "That's terrific, guys. Thank you."

"There's more," said Ralph.

Kate open the tissue to reveal a framed portrait photo of the team. They'd stood under the Scorpion sign, with Walter and Paige in the center, Ralph in front of Paige. Happy and Toby stood next to Paige. Sylvester stood next to Walter. Their family. Kate looked up at Cabe with watery eyes to see his eyes were equally affected. Kate managed to say, "Thank you, guys. It's perfect."

Ralph saved them from the overwhelming emotions when he announced Sly's gift from Cabe and Kate. He handed Sly a small box which Sly tore into with the gusto of a ten year old. He looked at the gift and gasped. Everyone thought it was a rare Super Fun Guy comic, and they were right, sort of.

Kate got up and sat next to Sly. He was shaking as he looked at the cover of the comic. It was a drawing of a him, with the heading 'Super Sly'. He was dressed in a red

and black outfit with a flowing cape. He wore red and black goggles and stood with his hands on his hips, looking off into the distance, every inch a hero. Hovering next to him was a small sprite with wings and curly black hair in a blue dress. Her name was Merry Megan. The others were starting to wonder why tears were running down his face. Kate opened the first page to show Sly a drawing of himself as he normally was, sweater vest and horned rimmed glasses. He started reading in a shaking voice. "Introducing Super Sly. By day Sylvester Dodd, math genius, by night Super Sly, using his brilliance to defeat all manner of villains. His faithful companion, Merry Megan, keeps watch on him and protects him from evil doers." He looked at Kate in stunned surprise. "You got them to make me a comic of my own?"

"Not exactly," she said. "This is the first copy of the first issue of Super Sly, a new character in the Super Fun Guy mythology. The company will announce the new characters next week. They'd also like you to meet with them so you can help map out the timeline for your characters."

Cabe looked at Kate and smiled. She'd gone to great lengths for Sly's gift, like she had with all of them. For Sly she'd managed to convince the Super Fun Guy people to introduce new, continuing characters in exchange for some very expensive graphic computers.

Sly quietly set his gift in the box and set it down. Then he threw his arms around Kate. "This is the greatest present anyone ever got." He sat back and looked over at Cabe. "You made me a superhero."

Kate touched his arm. "You already were."

He shook his head. "No. I'm afraid of everything."

Cabe came over and sat on the other side of Sly. "That's what makes you a hero. You're afraid but you still get the job done. That's courage, son."

Sly threw his arms around Cabe, the only real father he'd ever known.

Ralph broke the spell when he tried to move Happy's gift. "This is heavy."

Happy hefted the box into her lap. "Huh! Probably a toolset for my bike," she smiled. Happy paused when she opened the lid. Not tools. She pulled out a large hand tooled leather bond book. The title was 'My Family.' She glanced up at Kate and Cabe and

opened it to the first page. It was engraved 'The Family of Happy Quinn'. The next page covered both sides of the book. It was a tree with Happy in a box at the bottom and her parents in boxes directly above her. Above them there were more boxes with names, dozens of boxes, ten generations of boxes. Happy gasped.

"Happy, what is it?" asked Toby. He moved closer and slipped his arm around her. He looked at the charts. "Wow," he said quietly.

The first two pages were dedicated to her. It listed her birth date, her schooling, such as it was. Then it listed a timeline of her achievements. The micro jack device to save the boy in the sink hole, the air tank that saved them from an exploding submarine, the EMP device that took down a rouge nuclear satellite. There were lists of devices she'd created, awards she'd won. She looked up at Cabe and Kate, not believing what she was seeing. The next page was devoted to her father, Patrick Quinn. It said he'd been born in Minnesota, something she didn't know. It listed his accomplishments in high school. She smiled at a picture of him running track. He'd graduated with honors and had been offered a full scholarship to the University of Michigan. Then it listed his marriage to her mother, Amy Fugimora, in what would have been the summer after graduation. It listed moving to California that same year and opening his own garage in Burbank five years later.

She turned the page and gasped to see pictures of her mother as a child, a young girl and as the woman in the video her father played for her. She had gone to the same high school in Minnesota as her dad, where she was a Homecoming princess. She ran her hand over a picture of her mother, all of sixteen, wearing a tiara. There was even a wedding picture. It also listed her death from an aortic aneurysm.

Toby pointed to the cause of death. "These are congenital and almost impossible to detect."

Her eyes filled with tears. All she'd known was her mom had died in childbirth. Now she knew it wasn't her fault. She started flipping through page after page, pictures of people she didn't know yet with whom she had a strange connection. Her eyes on her mother's mother, her chin on her father's grandmother. There were photos and stories and timelines reaching back two hundred years. She handed the book to Toby and stood. Cabe and Kate stood meeting her halfway. "Thank you," she whispered as she hugged Kate and then Cabe.

"You're welcome, kid," said Cabe. They had given her something she'd never had.
History.

"Toby this is for you," said Ralph. He handed him a large box. He tore open the paper and pulled off the lid. Inside was a portfolio, like what artists use to carry sketches.

"This one was all Cabe's idea," said Kate.

"More art from from the master?" laughed Toby.

"Not exactly, " said Cabe.

Toby opened the portfolio and saw pictures drawn by children. Some were by very young children. Others were more detailed, obviously done by older children. Toby looked up at Cabe and then back at the pictures. They were all different, pictures of children, flowers, rainbows. But there was one thing in every picture. A man with a scruffy beard, and a hat.

"I was at the center and I stopped by one of the playrooms. I saw this little girl drawing a picture of a man holding a playing card. I asked her who it was. She told me it was Doctor Toby. He came to visit her and talked to her. He made her laugh with card tricks. I talked to the nurses. They said that Doctor Toby was the favorite of all the children. He visited the center every week, talking to the children and the parents. He helped them deal with the illnesses and the treatments, the uncertainty. She showed me there were dozens of pictures. These children gave permission for their pictures to be part of your Christmas present."

"Why didn't you say anything?" asked Kate.

"Ah, I was just hanging out with the kids," he said, his voice hoarse.

Cabe moved next to Toby on the couch. "Sometimes it gets lost under all the jackass, but your a great doctor and an even better man. I'm very proud of you, son."

"Cabe, I, well its just, ahh hell.." he put his arms around Cabe in a tight hug. "Thank you," he whispered.

Cabe smiled. "You're welcome, son."

"This is yours, Mom," said Ralph.

Paige smiled, "I wonder what it could be? What do you think, Ralphie?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Mom, but I bet it's pretty neat."

Paige opened the box and found an envelope and brochures. "Oh my God, Kate what is this?"

"Paige, you're always taking care of everyone else so it's time to take care of yourself. This is a week in a very nice resort in Napa. They have spa treatments, massages, everything you need to relax. We've set it up for next month because that's when they're having a country music camp. They have all sorts of singers and coaches. At the end of the camp they have a singing contest."

"The judges at the contest are Lady Antebellum? Are you kidding me?"

"We thought that week Ralph could stay with us," said Cabe.

Paige looked confused. "But these are reservations for two people."

Kate smiled and made a quick glance toward Walter. "You can invite anyone you like."

"This is amazing, thank you. Are you sure about having Ralph stay with you?"

"We're looking forward to it," said Cabe

"Ralph are you okay with this?" asked Paige.

"Mom, Cabe and Kate are really nice and Kate could help me with my AI project for my robotics course."

"I'd be happy to, Ralph," said Kate.

Paige smiled. "Well it looks like I'm going on vacation." She stood and gave Kate and Cabe hugs. "Thank you so much. This is wonderful."

"You're welcome, kid," said Cabe.

Cabe caught Paige's look toward Walter as she returned to her seat. Walter did not have a single clue. He really was going to have to have a talk with that boy.

Ralph picked up a small box. Cabe hoped Ralph wouldn't be disappointed in his gift. Kate had said he would like it but he was still an eleven year old boy. Maybe he'd pick him up a mountain bike for when he stayed with them.

"This one's mine," said Ralph.

"Hey buddy, why don't sit by me," said Cabe.

Ralph moved to sit next to Cabe on the couch. He ripped the paper and opened the box. He looked inside and then looked up at Cabe. Inside the box was a large gold ring with a blue star sapphire in the center. "Ralph, this belonged to my grandfather,

Alfonso Asaro. It had belonged to his father, and his father before him. He gave it to me when I turned sixteen. He said I was a man and old enough to be responsible for a family heirloom."

"I'm not sixteen," said Ralph looking a bit confused.

"You may not be sixteen yet but then again I'd never saved a cruise ship full of people by hacking a Japanese missile."

Ralph grew quiet.

"Don't you like it?" asked Cabe, suddenly wishing he'd bought the mountain bike.

"No, it's cool, but...I'm not your grandson."

Cabe put his hand on Ralph's shoulder. "If my Nonno knew you he'd approve. You are a fine man, Ralph. It doesn't matter what your age, or your biology." Cabe struggled to keep his voice steady. "Maybe we don't share DNA, but I couldn't love you more if we did."

Ralph smiled. "Does this make you my Nonno?"

Cabe stopped fighting his emotions and pulled Ralph into a tight hug. "That would make me very proud." He glanced up and saw the rest of the team smiling. Tears were flowing down Paige's cheeks as freely as they were flowing down his.

Ralph looked down at the tree and saw a small envelope with Walter's name on it. "This is for you," he smiled as he handed it to him.

"Umm, okay," said Walter. He opened the envelope and found a DVD inside.

Cabe stood and reached for the disc. "I'll put it on." He slid the disc into the player and hoped. They had worked hard on this gift. He hoped Walter would understand.

The video began with Christmas music and a title card that read "Merry Christmas, Walter." A black man with a bald head appeared on the screen. "Hi, Walter. We've never been formally introduced. I'm Marcus Brown. The last time I saw you I was eight feet above you traveling at two hundred miles an hour. I was the copilot on the plane you saved." The man smiled. "There's someone I'd like you to meet. A young woman appeared on the screen carrying a beautiful baby girl. She wore a green Christmas dress with a green and red bow on her bald head. "This is my daughter, Malia. She's three months old." Marcus looked at the baby with a smile and placed a kiss on her head. He looked at the screen again. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. Neither would she."

Thank you, Walter and Merry Christmas."

The scene changed and now a young boy with sandy brown hair appeared. "Hi, Walter. It's Owen. Your friend asked me to tell you what I've been doing since the cave." He held up a trophy and smiled. "This is my trophy for track. I run cross country." His eyes brighten. "Oh, I've got into a summer program at Cal-Tech for robotics. I can't wait! It's going to be so cool." He tilted his head. "Is that okay?"

"That's great, son." said Cabe off camera.

Owen tilted his head down and then looked back at the camera. "Thanks for coming back for me Walter. I don't think my parents would have been okay if something happened to me." Owen smiled. "Don't worry. I'm staying out of caves. Thank you, Walter. Merry Christmas."

The scene changed again. A young girl with long blonde hair appeared on the screen. "Hi, Walter. It's Olivia. I'm doing fine since my transplant. I'm back at school and I'm doing pretty well with my classes. Oh, I went to my first sleepover." She had a broad smile. "It was a lot of fun. We ate ice cream and watched a horror movie and stayed up really late. My mom said I can have a sleepover for my birthday." She stopped and looked at the camera. "Now, I get to be normal. Thank you, Walter and Merry Christmas."

The scene change and they were at the garage. The team, including Ralph, were sitting a circle. "Where were you when you met Walter," said Kate off camera. "Happy?"

"I was wrenching in a body shop and trying to make rent. I had an entry in a fabrication show. I won, by the way. Walter came up to congratulate me. I didn't know why, because I had a stand in, but he knew it was my work. He said he could see something in me, something great," Happy said with one of her rare smiles. "He said he was trying to create something great, and did I want to be a part of it?" She looked into the camera. "You did it Walter. You created something great. Thank you for letting me be a part of it. Merry Christmas."

The camera moved over to Toby. "Okay, my turn. Before I met Walter I spent my nights in casinos and my days in the drunk tank. Walt found me as I was about to get my ass kicked by a pit boss. He cleared my debt. Then he ask me if I was ready to stop wasting my talent. I was. I got a purpose and a best friend. Merry Christmas, Walt."

Sylvester looked particularly nervous and glanced at Ralph. "When we met, well,

you remember. It was bad. You offered me the first safe place I'd ever known. Thanks Walter. Merry Christmas."

Paige smiled as the camera centered on her. "Walter you looked at a waitress and saw something special. You believed in me. Thank you for letting me be a part of something so wonderful. Merry Christmas."

"My turn," said Ralph. "I didn't talk a lot before I met you. People didn't understand me. They said I was weird. You understood because you're like me. Kate said we should say how are lives are different because of you." He shrugged and smiled. "It's just better. Everything is better. Merry Christmas."

Finally, the camera moved to Cabe. "Walt, meeting you changed the course of my life. We've accomplished great things but most important, you gave me a family. Thank you and Merry Christmas.

Kate came out from behind the camera. "Walter, I know what it is to be in love with the numbers. They are beautiful. They make sense to us when nothing else does. But we want you to know your life is more than the math. You have changed the course of all of our lives." She reached for Cabe's hand. "We are truly grateful. Merry Christmas."

The team shouted a last "Merry Christmas" and then the screen went dark. Cabe turned to see Walter staring at the blank screen. "That was , uh, it was, " He stood and fled to the deck.

"I think he's on emotional overload. I'll go talk to him," said Toby.

Paige stood, turned to Toby and in her best mom voice said, "Sit." She followed out to the deck and close the door behind her.

Kate looked at Cabe in a panic. "Was it too much? Did I ruin Christmas?"

Cabe put his arm around her. "No sweetheart. It was a wonderful gift."

Happy smiled. "Yeah. Walter just not used to that much emotional juice. He blew a circuit. Paige will flip the switch. It'll be fine, Kate."

Walter was pacing back and forth on the deck when he Paige joined him. She put her hands on his shoulders and made him hold still. "Talk to me."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say what you're thinking right now."

"What, no I , it's just..."

"Stop. Breath. Now, the first thought in your head."

"Olivia looks good. She has good color. Last time I saw her she was blue."

"Good, next thought."

"Owen looks happy."

Paige smiled, "Yes he does. Now, next."

"I never met the pilot but, his daughter," Walter looked at Paige and smiled. "That's kind of amazing."

"Yes it is. Next." Paige could see him relax his stance.

"The team, what they said was , it was very nice."

Paige touched his cheek. "We meant every word."

"Cabe and Kate must like me to go to all that trouble for me."

"Walter, they love you. We all do."

Walter calmed and whispered, "Do you, Paige?"

"What?" her voice faltered.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Very much."

"Good. Then this won't be awkward for you." Walter took her face in his hands and kissed her. He dropped his hands to her waist and continued to kiss her deeply. He pulled back and whispered, "I love you too."

"Huh,"Ralph said as he looked out the window.

"Buddy, why don't you come sit by me. You should give them some privacy. Walter's a little upset."

"I think he's okay now."

"Why do you say that."

"Because he's making out with my mom."

Walter looked uneasy as he and Paige walked back into the living room. "I want to apologize for running off like that."

"That's okay," said Kate.

"Thank you for the video. It was...enlightening."

Cabe stood and extended his hand. Then, in something akin to a Christmas miracle, Walter threw his arms around Cabe in a tight hug. Kate stood in shocked surprise as she was the recipient of an equally emotional hug. Walter looked at the team and smiled. "I'm not good at this so you'll need to bare with me. Thank you for the video." He paused, looked at Paige and smiled. "Merry Christmas."

"I remember the mention of pie," said Toby.

Kate smiled. "Two kinds. Everyone grab a seat at the table and I'll get them." She moved about the kitchen, putting the mince pie in the oven for a few minutes to warm. She was reaching for the whipped cream when Cabe came up behind her. He slipped his arms around her waist and placed a kiss on her neck.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I was so worried I'd gone too far. He was really upset."

He smiled and brushed her cheek with his thumb. "It was just what he needed, Katie. Maybe now he can move forward."

Kate smiled and gave him a kiss. "I hope so." She handed him the whipped cream. "Here. Make yourself useful."

It was the kind of Christmas they'd all remember as one of the best ever. They'd polished off most of both pies and were laughing and telling childhood stories. Some were some were funny, some were sad, but what mattered was they were sharing their lives with each other.

"Hey, you know what we're missing? Christmas carols," said Paige. "I'll start." She started singing "Jingle Bells" and pulled Ralph on her lap. Ralph joined in and everyone followed.

Next, Happy started a rowzing rendition of "Grandma Got Runover by a Reindeer." Sly chimed in with "Here Comes Santa Claus." Everyone was laughing and smiling when Paige started a quiet version of "Oh Holy Night." Her beautiful soprano voice was perfect

for the song. Then, in a surprise no one saw coming, Cabe joined in with his deep baritone. Kate sat in stunned amazement when they both hit the high note in the last chorus. She leaned in and kissed Cabe's cheek. "That was beautiful, sweetheart."

"I know a carol."

Everyone looked at Walter. "What?" asked Paige.

"I remember a carol from when I was a kid. It's called the Wexford Carol. Megan and I used to sing it at church, in Gaelic."

Paige covered his hand with hers. "We'd love to hear it."

He started quietly, with a soft tenor voice. "O, tagaig uile is adhraigi." The song continued, a lilting melody. You could almost hear the Irish pipes. Walter finished the song and looked up at the team. There was a moment of silence before everyone applauded.

"That was great," said Kate.

Walter looked over at Paige. "It really was," she said.

Cabe looked at Walter and thought he looked like he'd won the Nobel Prize.

Ralph's falling asleep on the couch seemed to signal the end of the party. Everyone began gathering their things and making their way to the door.

"Walter, would you get the packages while I get Ralph?"

Walter walked to the couch and scooped Ralph into his arms. "I've got him."

Paige smiled and nodded. She turned to hug Cabe and Kate. "Thank you for everything. It was a wonderful party."

Walter followed behind. "Thank you. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," said Kate.

"Merry Christmas, son." said Cabe.

Kate closed the door behind their guests and gave a relieved sigh. "I think that went well."

Cabe pulled her into his arms. "Katie girl, It couldn't have gone better. He gave her a deep kiss before he stepped back and said, "Santa brought you a present."

"He did?"

"Oh yes," he said. He leaned in and whispered, "You've been a very good girl."

Kate got that child like excitement she had when ever he brought her something.

It didn't matter if it was a piece of jewelry or some dime store candy, she was happy.

"Santa brought you something too,"

"He did?" he smiled.

She nodded and dragged him toward the tree. She reached toward the back and pulled out a small box. "I hope you like it."

Cabe tore off the paper and found a gold ring. It was had Marine insignia and listed his unit on one side and his specialty on the other. The center stone was a dark orange citrine, his birthstone. "Oh, Katie," he said.

"I wasn't sure," she said. "I didn't want to remind you of painful times."

Cabe slipped it on his right hand and smiled. He leaned in and kissed her. "I love it, sweetheart. Thank you." He reached for the last box under the tree and handed it to Kate. She tore open the box to find a note. It read 'Same cottage, same beach, same clearing.' She broke into a broad smile. "I booked it for the two weeks after we have Ralph," he said. She threw her arms him and gave him a deep kiss.

"You cleared two weeks for both of us?"

"You and I have saved the world a couple of times. The world can do without us for two weeks."

"Santa brought you something else," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

" 'Tis true," she said in brogue. "You've been a fine lad and should be rewarded."

He pulled her closed. "What's my reward?"

"Patience, boyo. Give a lass a minute." She gave him a kiss. "I'll call you when your reward is ready."

Cabe smiled to himself while he picked up the torn wrapping paper. This really was the best Christmas he'd ever had.

He'd managed to get rid of all the torn paper when her heard her. "Well, boyo. Are ya ready for your reward?"

He turned to see Kate standing before him in a tight red bustier edged with white fur. She was wearing red stiletto heels and a wicked smile.

He smiled just before he sprint towards her and swept her in his arms.

The best Christmas ever just got better.

Walter stood in Paige's living room while she tucked Ralph into bed. He was a swirl of emotions that he didn't understand. All that he knew was after today there was no going back to the way things were, the way he was. Of that, he was certain.

"He is out like a light. I just pulled off his shoes and tucked him in. No need to wake him." She smiled. "I don't think I could."

"Paige,"

"Walter, I know today was difficult for you and you may need to sort through some things,"

He took her hand in his. "Paige, Yes, today was very different for me. I'm not used to so much emotion let alone being the focus of it. But there is one thing I don't need to analyze. I'm in love with you. I think I have been since that first day in the diner. You were so smart and brave," he paused and smiled. "And so beautiful." He pulled her hands to his chest. "I'm going to be lousy at this romance thing. You're going to have to help me with it. All I'm asking is don't give up on me."

Paige smiled and gave him the softest of kisses. She took his hand and led him toward her bedroom.