

Toby Curtis : A Scorpion Story

By Kate Simon

Toby reviewed the chart on his tablet. He'd been volunteering at Amanda's Center for about six months. He'd thought at first he'd whip a little of his Harvard educated brilliance on the patients and their families once a week and call it a day. He'd been so wrong and that was something with which he had little experience.

He looked out over the playroom decorated with the drawings of patients, some of whom did not survive. Toby remembered every one of them. It was the downfall of eidetic memory. The chart he was looking at now was for Anna Peterson, a sweet little girl, nine years old with acute lymphocytic leukemia. He had the Super Fun Guy comic he'd promised to bring her in his pocket. But an hour before he arrived, Anna died.

His talks with her had been the most heartbreaking and at the same time enlightening of his career. He'd talked with her yesterday and promised to return today with the comic, even though it wasn't his regularly scheduled day.

She had more strength and wisdom than any nine year old should ever need.

"I know I'm dying," she said.

He been startled by her candor. "How do you know?"

"I can feel it. I know they're trying their best but it's not working. I'm getting worse." She looked up at him with the most beautiful blue eyes. "It's going to be soon."

He took her frail hand in his. He'd seen her chart and she was right. Anna was failing fast. He searched for words, any words that would make a difference. "Anna, what can I do for you? How can I help?"

She smiled at Toby and he was overwhelmed. She knew she was dying and she could still smile. "I'm going to be okay. I'll be in heaven and there won't be any pain. I'll probably get to have Montie with me."

"Who's Montie?"

"He was my dog since I was born. My parents had him before that. He died last year but he was old for a dog. I'm looking forward to seeing him again. He was such a good dog. He loved me a lot and he slept in my bed every night."

Toby struggled to maintain some emotional distance but it was damn near impossible. "Anna, how do you know all this?"

"Well, some of it I learned in church but mostly," she shrugged. "But mostly, I just

know." She squeezed his hand as best she could. "So you see, I'm going to be okay but my Mom and Dad, I'm worried about them. You seem really nice and smart and I was kinda hoping you'd help them, you know, after. I don't think they're going to take this as well as I can."

Toby did his best to smile. "Anna, I give you my word. I will do everything I can to help your parents."

Anna sighed and gave him a big smile. "Thank you. I knew you'd help. You're such a nice man."

Toby looked at the children coloring, building lego buildings. Some older kids were playing video games. It looked all perfectly normal, except for the IV poles some of the children were attached to. They weren't all cancer cases. Some were trauma. All were in need of the specialized care that Amanda's center could provide. He knew a lot of kids who came through here would do well. He also knew some, like Anna, would not. It was what he learned the first day in med school. You can't save everybody. He still thought that was wrong.

For now he had to see if Anna's parents were still in the hospital. He had a promised to keep.

Happy knew something was off with the Doc. He'd been acting weird. Even more weird than usual. It had been getting worse for the last few weeks. She startled awake, realizing he wasn't in bed. They didn't live together but they spent most nights at his place. She glanced at her cell phone. It read three a.m. She grabbed his hideous blue plaid robe and slipped it on, making a mental note to get him a new one.

Happy found him sitting at the living room window, looking out at nothing in particular.

"Hey, Doc. Why are you up?"

Toby gave her a small smile. "I was just working on a theorem for that study we're doing for Elia."

"Bull. Something's going on with you."

Toby slipped his arms around her waist. "I'm fine, sweetheart. I promise."

Happy brushed her hand over his cheek. "Don't you dare crash and burn on me, Toby."

Even in the dim light, Toby could see her eyes were welling. "Ah, baby, I promise. I'm good." He leaned in and gave her a light kiss.

"You can blame what I'm about to say on sleep deprivation, but I am in love with you, Toby Curtis, you big jerk. So if something is wrong, you talk to me."

He smiled and wondered how the hell he got so lucky. "Happy Quinn, I am in love with you too. So don't you worry. I'm fine. Trust me, I went to..."

"Harvard Medical School. Yeah, Yeah. Shut up and kiss me," she said as she grabbed hold of his t-shirt and pulled him in for a passionate kiss.

Cabe was doing his weekly visit to Amanda's center a day early. He knew it was the day Toby volunteered and he wanted to get a sense of what he was doing. Something was going on with the kid. His smartass remarks were down considerably and the normally unflappable Happy seemed concerned.

He spotted him down the hall. White coat, stethoscope and dorky hat. "Hey, Doc. How's it going?" Toby looked surprised and uneasy that Cabe was there.

"What's up? You're not usually here on Fridays," asked Toby.

"Not usually. Kate and Walter were working extra hours on the Elia project so I thought I put my free time to good use." He walked closer and could tell he wasn't sleeping. "How about I buy you a cup of coffee."

Toby smiled. "It's free in the break room."

Cabe smiled. "Who do you think paid for it in the first place? Come on."

Toby relented and followed Cabe into the break room next to the nurses station. He poured them both a cup and then cringed when Toby added hazelnut creamer. "Ugh, I don't know how you can drink that?" Toby took a sip and smiled. No snarky comment. Yeah, something was going on with him. They each grabbed a chair at one of the round tables.

"Talk to me," Cabe said.

"About what?"

"Come on, kid. I know you. What the hell's going on?"

"Did Happy put you up to this?" Cabe drilled him with the Gallo glare. Toby threw his hands up in surrender. "Sorry I asked." He paused and took another sip of his coffee. "It's this place."

"What do you mean? Is something wrong here?"

"No it's nothing like that. I've spent the bulk of what you could laughingly call my medical career profiling gamblers and taking down bad guys. I haven't really used my training."

Cabe put his hand on Toby's shoulder. "You saved Kate and me."

Toby smiled. "Yeah, that was good. When I came here I thought I'd put in a day a week. Help with some treatment issues and go." He took another sip of his coffee.

"It was a bit more complicated than that, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I'd been treating this leukemia patient, Anna and her family. The parents were in denial that their child was going to die and yet Anna was at peace with it. Her only concern was how her parents would handle it. I promised to help them and that seemed to make her feel better."

Cabe knew the answer to his next question just from the look on Toby's face. "How is it going?"

"Anna died two days ago. Her parents are a mess. I'm trying to help them but they are shutting me out." He looked at Cabe with tears in his eyes. "I promised her, Cabe. It was her dying wish and I'm failing."

"You haven't failed, son. You just haven't succeeded yet. You've tried to contact them, yes?"

He nodded. "They won't return my calls."

"Try again but this time tell them your not doing it for them. You're doing it for Anna. You are fulfilling your promise to their daughter."

Toby smiled. "That might work. I'm surprised I didn't of it."

Cabe smiled at the little bit of snark.

"Thanks Cabe."

A nurse pushed opened the door to the break room. Cabe recognized her as Elaine, the young nurse they'd had dinner with at the gala.

"Doctor Curtis, you're needed."

Toby and Cabe jumped to their feet and followed her to a small room with a patient on a gurney. At least Cabe thought it was a patient. If it was a child, they couldn't be more than six or seven. Cabe's stomach turned at the sight of the swollen and bruised face.

"He was brought into the ER about an hour ago."

"By who?"

"Police. He was found wandering the street. They're looking for his parents." Elaine handed Toby a tablet and he began swiping through the ER exam notes and the test results. Toby murmured, "Mother fucker."

"What is it?" asked Cabe.

Toby paged through the x-rays, pointing to lines on the boy's arms, legs and ribs. "Jesus," whispered Cabe. "Is that what I think it is?"

Toby nodded.

"He hasn't said a word," said Elaine. "Not even his name. We can't find his parents if we don't know who he is."

Cabe touched his shoulder. "I'll make some calls and see if there are any missing children reports. I'll be in the break room if you need me."

"Thanks, Cabe."

Toby moved to the boy's bedside and continued reviewing his chart. This boy, no older than six years old, had been a punching bag his whole life. He took a centering breath. "Hey buddy. My name is Doctor Curtis but you can call me Toby." He could see the child's blue eye look at him through what little of the left eye wasn't swollen. His right eye was completely closed.

"Can you tell me your name? We need to know who you are to find your family." Even with with so little of his eye open Toby could see a look of panic. "Buddy, I'm going to make sure whoever did this to you never does this again. You have my word." He leaned over and whispered. "I promise you, buddy." He stood and looked at the small, broken child. A single tear ran down the boy's face.

Toby had always been good at never letting his patient's pain touch him. He knew this time would be different. "Buddy, I'm going to another room for a minute but that nice nurse, Elaine is going to sit with you. I'll be back soon." Before he reached for the door he reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out Anna's Super Fun Guy comic that he was still carrying and set it on the bed. "Here. This is for you." Toby walked out of the room and leaned up against the wall. How in God's name was he going to protect this kid? He may have made a promise that was impossible to keep.

He walked to the nurses station and found Elaine. "How is he?" she asked.

"This kid has been somebody's punching bag his whole life. How do you think he is?" he snapped. He saw Elaine's stunned look and quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, Elaine. It's just..." She put her hand on Toby's shoulder.

"I know," she whispered.

He nodded and tried to center himself. "Elaine, I want you to sit with him. This boy is not to be left alone for a second."

"Doctor, as horrible as this is, we do have other patients that need us."

"I know. That's why I'm getting him private help. Until then, please make sure he's never unattended."

"Yes, Doctor."

Toby found Cabe in the break room on his phone. "Any luck?"

"There is a report from an Elementary school that a first grade boy, Tommy Brock, wasn't in class. They tried calling their contact numbers with no success. That's when they called the police. They have their suspicions that something is not right."

"If they suspect child abuse they have to notify the authorities. That's the law. Why the hell didn't they?"

Cabe was stunned at Toby's outburst. "Son, they had no direct evidence. There is only the father, no mother in the picture. Police are tracking him down."

Toby tried to calm himself but every nerve in his body was screaming at him and the injustice for this boy. "Cabe, I would never normally ask for..."

Cabe nodded. "Tell me what you need."

"I need a private duty nurse and a guard. An armed guard."

"I don't think anyone would try something here."

"I don't either but I just promised that boy I would make sure no one would hurt him again. Let me keep this promise."

"I'll make the calls."

There was something to having friends in high places. Cabe had gotten Tommy a private duty nurse within thirty minutes. Now he was walking up the hall with a man mountain. The guy had to be six foot five and was at least three hundred pounds of broad shouldered muscle.

"Toby, this is John Spencer. I've worked with him at Homeland. He's going to protect Tommy."

"Homeland?"

Cabe smiled. "I called a few of my friends. I have four agents working rotating shifts. Volunteers."

John smiled at Toby and he knew this guy was just what Tommy would need. "Thanks Cabe." He walked into Tommy's room and found his new nurse, Marion, reading the Super Fun Guy Comic to him.

"Hello Doctor Curtis. Tommy is being a perfect patient."

Toby gave the boy a big smile. "I'm sure he is. Tommy, there is someone I want you to meet." He opened the door and John entered. If it hadn't been for his warm smile he might have scared the crap out of the boy.

"Hello Tommy. I am Special Agent John Spencer from Homeland Security." He pulled out his badge and showed it to the boy. To Toby's surprise Tommy rubbed his fingers over the shield. It was the first interaction he'd made in five hours.

"Am I in trouble?" he whispered.

Toby fought back tears. Marion did not.

"Of course not Tommy. You're not in any trouble. I am here to protect you." He opened his jacket so the boy could see the gun in his shoulder holster. Tommy's swollen eyes widened as much as possible. "Doctor Curtis has fixed it so me and some of my associates at Homeland will be here to guard you." The big man smiled. "You know, you must be very important. We usually guard presidents and kings." They didn't really but it was close enough to the truth.

Then Tommy did something that surprised them all. He smiled.

He was standing at the nurses station making notes in Tommy's chart when he heard a loud voice.

"Where's my kid?" A doughy looking man was walking up the hall.

Toby walked towards the man. "Who are you?" he said.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the guy who's going to throw you out of here if you don't identify yourself."

"Brock. I'm here to get my kid. Cops said he was up here."

Toby understood the cops who tracked this loser down were only looking for the parent of a lost child. They didn't know he'd beaten the crap out of his kid. But he

shuddered to think what would have happened if John wasn't in Tommy's room right now.

"Tommy isn't going anywhere. He has severe facial injuries and a broken arm. We may need to operate to put a pin in it. Tell me how this happened."

"He's clumsy. Now I'm taking my kid and you can't stop me."

"That's what you think," he growled as he pushed the man into the stairwell.

"What the fuck?!" the guy yelled. "Get your hands off me."

Toby shoved him against the wall. "Why? Because I'm not a six year old boy. Because I can defend myself. What was the problem? Did he wet his bed? Did he eat too much dinner? Did he cry when you hit him so you hit him more to toughen him up?"

"So he falls down a lot. So what? I take care of my kid. His mother died and I had to do everything for him. He's a whiny little thing. So what if I discipline him? He's my kid. It's my job."

"Not any more," Toby whispered as he drove his fist into the guy's gut. He doubled over to protect his gut and Toby drove his fist into the guy's cheek. Some small part of his brain registered the irony of this guy screaming like a girl as Toby beat the crap out of him.

Cabe heard the commotion before the nurse ran into the break room.

"Mr Gallo, it's Dr. Curtis!" The nurse pointed to the stairwell.

Cabe yanked open the door to find Toby beating a man. He grabbed him and pulled him off. He shook him by the shoulders and forced his attention away from the man. "Toby, stop." He looked into Toby's eyes, watching the clearing fury.

"He did it." Toby said.

"Did what, son?"

"He beat Tommy. He admitted it."

Cabe looked at the lump of skin on the floor and was tempted to get in a few shots himself. The door opened again and John was filling the doorway.

"What's going on?"

"That lunatic just hit me," shouted Brock.

Cabe nodded at him. "That's the guy that beat Tommy." Cabe saw the look in John's eyes. He wanted to join the ranks of people who wanted to kick the shit out of this

guy. John grabbed his cuffs and slammed the guy against the wall.

"Hey! You should be arresting that guy. I didn't do anything."

John leaned in close to Brock and said "Your continued ability to breathe now depends on your ability to shut the fuck up." The man wisely shut his mouth. Cabe sat Toby down on the first step as John pushed the guy back into the hall.

"What's going on?" Cabe asked.

"He wanted to take Tommy out of here and I couldn't let that happen."

"What's going on?"

Toby looked at him. "I just told you."

Cabe rubbed his hand down Toby's back. "What's going on?"

He looked down the stairwell. He spoke so quietly Cabe nearly missed it. "They never believed me."

"Your Dad?"

He shook his head. "My mother. I know now it was a symptom of her mental illness but then..." He looked back at Cabe, tears running down his cheeks. "I tried to tell them but they wouldn't believe me." His voice choked. "They wouldn't believe me."

A nearly thirty year old dam broke and Toby put his head in his hands and wept. Cabe pulled him into an embrace. Not an embrace of two men but one of a father comforting a child. One he should have gotten all those years ago. He wept until he could barely breathe but Cabe never let go. He never would.

Once Toby had composed himself Cabe asked, "Are you ready to go back?"

"Yes," he said. He looked at Cabe and knew he would be there to listen but he'd never press him for details. Cabe would protect him, take care of him. Cabe had his back. Just like always. He stood as Cabe opened the door. Toby reached out and closed it again. "Thank you, Cabe."

He gave him a smile. "You're welcome, kid."

Before he could second guess himself Toby put his arms around Cabe and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too, son."

Toby pulled back and tried to straighten himself. "Let's do this."
They walked into the hallway to find a substantial police presence. "Well, I didn't expect them to get here that quickly but I guess I should surrender. Tell Happy to come visit."

"What the hell are you talking about, Doc?"

"For whaling on the guy. Aren't they here to arrest me."

"No," Cabe smiled. "They're here to arrest him." He nodded toward Brock who John had pressed up against a wall.

"I didn't do anything." Brock yelled. "It was that guy. He hit me."

Cabe walked toward him with his "You're so screwed and I'm enjoying it" look. "Well Mr. Brock. Oh excuse me. Mr. Burke. They are here to arrest you for the murder of your wife, Janice." The man suddenly looked like a deflated balloon

Cabe turned back to Toby. "I didn't get a chance to tell you. The team looked into it for us. Turns out Mr. Burke here is wanted in Pennsylvania for the murder of his wife and the kidnapping of their infant son. He skipped town right before the indictment was handed down. Janice's family have been looking for Tommy ever since. His grandmother and one of his aunts are on the next flight from Philly."

Toby saw the bruises already blooming on Burke's face. "What about what I did?"

"You subdued a child abusing murderer. No one's going to file against you."

Toby felt like he'd won the trifecta. "So Tommy's okay now. He's safe."

Cabe smiled. "He's safe, son."

"I need to go tell him. Oh, about the guards and the nurses."

"I'll keep everything in place until his family get here."

He gave Cabe a huge smile as he ran off to tell Tommy the news. He stood in front of Tommy's door and took a breath. He was about to tell this little boy that his whole life was going to change. He was finally safe.

This was one promise he was able to keep.