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Crashing The New Year

He tilted forward with his head tipped slightly downward in a pose resembling Le Penseur; under different circumstances, one might interpret this as a reflection of his professional life which was dependent on the acuity of his cerebral skills combined with the dexterity of his hands. He could have been considering all the complexities of medical symptoms to decide the best course of treatment, but instead his thoughts were on the unfortunate issue that brought him here tonight. Unlike The Thinker, his chin wasn't resting in his hand; instead the thumb and forefinger of his right hand were pinching the bridge of his hawkish nose with his remaining three fingers wrapped around several crumpled paper napkins.

A curtain of silver-gray bangs covered the right side of his forehead. He gazed downward at the placket of his shirt and took down a great ruby red dot of blood between the middle two shiny black studs. Within that vicinity were other small splatters and splotches marring the once pristine whiteness of his dress shirt. The pain in his injured ankle beat in tandem with his pulse. He concentrated on breathing through his mouth in order to shut out his date who was fussing over him. It would have been easier for him to deal with her if she gave him the silent treatment or even nattered away at him over his ineptitude. It was his ham-handedness – or rather *ham-footedness* – that humiliated both of them this evening.

"Well, it looks like we finally have a room ready for you."

He lifted his head up enough to see the kindhearted smile on the face of Nurse Dixie McCall. Dixie signaled a nurse to come over. He was grateful that she had sensed that he wasn't in the mood for any lighthearted teasing. Things were too fresh for him to appreciate whatever humor might be found in his follies this evening.

"Dr. Brackett will see him in Treatment Room 2."

His companion started to follow him and the nurse, but was halted by Dixie. "Uh-uh, Ginger you're going to Treatment Room 4 and Dr. Morton is going to take a look at your arm."

He felt the strong arm of Rampart's Emergency Room head nurse holding him down in the chair as he tried to get up. He looked up into Ginger's face as she shrugged and gave him a wide-eyed look that reflected the guilt of a patient that failed to mention a seemingly minor detail about their illness. His ire rose as his memory flooded with incidents of patients hiding what they thought as insignificant details from him. In some cases, a detrimental 'thing' a family member didn't reveal about a patient because they failed to see the importance of something they considered trivial. Occasionally, that one little tidbit of information might have made the difference between life and death in some cases. The one thing that turned this doctor into a hard-ass with any patient or family member was the instant he sensed something was being secreted from him.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me? All this time you were in pain and you didn't say one word," Dr. Early grumbled.

"It's not a big deal. I just twisted it when we fell," Ginger replied.

"Not a big deal? I never would have let you drive if I had known."

"You're the one who didn't want an ambulance. B'sides, it's nothin'." Ginger shrugged.

"Nothing? Don't tell me it's nothing!"

He glared at her, unable to control the knee-jerk reaction at her not telling him about her arm. He didn't mean to bark out the words so harshly at her. She turned away from him with a quick swish of her ball gown as she abruptly turned and followed Dixie. He pounded the arm of the chair with his free hand in frustration as the nurse pushed him into the treatment room.

"Dammit," he swore under his breath as he was wheeled in the other direction.

Dr. Brackett crossed his arms over his chest, his eyebrows drawing downward in a disapproving manner as he stood in the open doorway, watching as the nurse wheeled in his patient. "Help me get him up onto the exam table," he told the nurse.

"I can manage," Joe protested as the doctor and nurse helped him out of the chair and onto the table. He undid his gold and onyx cuff links and barely managed to slip them into the pocket of his tuxedo jacket, caught off guard by the nurse who ended up wrestling it off him. He muttered a "sorry" at the nurse.

"Joe, let us do our jobs and quit giving us a hard time," Dr. Brackett said calmly before turning his head towards the nurse. "Sharon, can you go get a couple of ice packs?"

"Sure," she answered quietly before briskly walking out of the room.

Dr. Brackett started to remove the napkins Joe had wadded up his nose earlier to stem the blood flow. "Now you hold still while I check out that enormous proboscis of yours," he said as he deposited the crimson-coated rags into a kidney basin. He tilted his patient's head upwards and gently began pressing on his nose.

Dr. Early batted Dr. Brackett's hands away from his bruised nose. "Kel, you're going to start it bleeding again if you keep that up."

"Here, hold this against your nose while I check out your ankle," Dr. Brackett huffed at him as he handed him one of the ice packs Sharon had returned with. "Get me a set of vitals on him, Sharon."

"VITALS? That's a little overboard for a sprained ankle, don't you think, Kel?" Dr. Early looked peevishly his fellow doctor.

"It's a good possibility that ankle is fractured," Dr. Brackett volleyed back with a smug look at him. "AND you're not a doctor right now; you're *MY* patient and *I* get to call the shots here."

"Fine," Dr. Early relented. "Let's get the dog and pony show over and done with."

He closed his eyes in defeat, knowing that the quickest route out of here was to shut up and be cooperative. He put up no resistance with the nurse as she rolled up his sleeve and wrapped a BP cuff around it. He remained still for her; after all, she was only following orders. Sharon gave him a quick squeeze on the shoulder as a signal to assure him she wasn't taking anything personally. He gingerly pinched his nose with his thumb and forefinger as he sat upright on an exam table with its head tilted down. He wasn't surprised that his blood pressure was slightly elevated or his pulse was a little fast. When Dr. Brackett was done examining his right foot, Sharon wrapped the second ice pack around it.

"Sharon, how about you leave us alone for now? I'll send for you when he's ready to go up to X-ray."

He let his shoulders slouch as he stared at the black jacket of his tuxedo that was now hanging off an unused IV pole. *It figures*, he thought sourly as he jutted his lower lip out, *first time in fifteen years I decide to take tonight off and I end up here anyways*. He lifted the ice pack from his nose and peered towards his feet. His right shoe and sock lay in between them. He winced as Dr. Brackett palpated his swollen foot and ankle. He stared at the scuff marks that marred the shoe that had boasted a glossy shine earlier in the evening.

"You know it's a good possibility that ankle is broken." Dr. Brackett moved to the side of the bed and looked down at his fellow doctor and friend. "As far as that oversized schnozzola goes, I doubt it's broken, but we might as well get it X-rayed."

"Kel, why didn't you just have Sharon take me on up to X-ray?" Dr. Early looked suppliantly at Dr. Brackett.

Dr. Brackett sat down on a stool and crossed his arms. He lifted his brows as his mouth shaped into a sympathetic half-grin. "Because I believe you need a good dose of spending a few minutes with a friend."

"Talking about it isn't going to change anything."

"Probably not Joe, but sometimes having a close friend listen is the best medicine that can be administered."

"Even when that friend makes a colossal ass out of himself in front of several of Rampart's administrative bigwigs, along with some of its generous benefactors and trustees?"

"A friend is exactly what you need the most, *especially* after making a colossal ass of yourself. Besides, things may not be as disastrous as you think they were. We all have a way of amplifying incidents to the point where they seem far worse than what they really are. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Joe let out a complaisant sigh, "Ginger saw the sign posted outside of the cafeteria about the New Year's Eve Ball fundraiser the hospital was putting on and she made a comment about how fun the whole thing sounded. I told her I'd take the night off and take her to it."

"Your date was with Ginger from daycare?"

He chuckled and nodded his head in agreement. "She wasn't comfortable going because of all the big shots that might be there, so it took a little convincing and a lot of appealing to her love of dancing to get her to agree to go." Joe paused and looked over at Kel before continuing. "The evening got off to a good start. I had a gal on my arm who looked like a million bucks. We made the social rounds with a few of the doctors I know from the OR and Peds. We ended up sitting with Fred and Tom for dinner. The ladies rolled their eyes as we eventually drifted into shop talk."

"I just bet all three of you broke your promise not to discuss work tonight," Dr. Brackett joked.

"Yep, we certainly did. Ginger fit right in with the other ladies at the table. Fred's girlfriend is a kindergarten teacher, so they had a lot in common to talk about, and Tom's wife has two small children. So between those three, all they talked about was kids."

"Looks like the gals have a double standard. Isn't it a rule that the ladies aren't supposed to talk about the kids?"

"Well Kel, wives specifically aren't supposed to talk about the kids. They would have gotten off on a technicality with only one of them was a mother. We had enough common sense not to call 'em out on it. Anyhow, shortly after dinner, the band started on playing and the dancing began. The guys and me began about who would win the Rose Bowl tomorrow. I felt a sharp jab to my ribs when the band started the third song and took the cue to excuse myself and ask my date to dance. Roughly about halfway through our second waltz was when the evening came to a crashing mess. I'm on the floor; Ginger and her dress are tangled up on top of me. Some lady kept shouting at me for being an old fool. She stopped when I shouted back that I heard her the first time...you get the picture. In a matter of seconds I managed to create total bedlam on the ballroom floor; spilled drinks, broken glasses, the whole bit."

"That bad, huh?" Dr. Brackett grimaced imagined the scene in his mind.

"I couldn't get outta there fast enough, Kel."

"Now hold on Joe. How'd you happen to fall in the first place?"

"It felt like I stepped on something which caused me to roll my ankle. I remember someone shouting 'ouch' so maybe it was the waiter's foot I stepped on, which then caused him to drop the tray of champagne glasses he was carrying. That's how the whole train wreck happened."

"And how'd you end up with the bloody nose?" Dr. Brackett inquired.

"Ginger clipped me with her elbow when we landed. I'm seeing stars, my eyes are watering up, and my nose is bleeding all over the front of my shirt. Tom and Fred are hovering over me while someone is hollering at them get the drunken fool outta the place. Tom and Fred helped me up and to the lobby."

A scowl formed on Dr. Brackett's face. "Well, those people don't know you. You're not one to overly imbibe on alcohol."

"Fred's holding cocktail napkins to my face. I put the kibosh on them calling an ambulance. The sirens would have only added to the spectacle. They made it clear I was going to the hospital one way or another. Ginger made me cough up my car keys and told them she'd drive me to Rampart. She was pretty upset over the whole ordeal and I suppose she wanted to leave just as badly as I did at that point." Joe let out a defeated sigh. "It was the first time we went out publicly together and I ended up humiliating both of us."

"So you're wondering if your first date is going to be your last?" Dr. Brackett's eyebrows knitted together.

"I never said this was our first date." Dr. Early looked directly at Dr. Brackett. "We've been seeing each other for several months. This was our first step to being a little more public about it."

"Really? You kept this little secret from your dearest friend and associate?" Dr. Brackett looked testily at him. "I can't believe you didn't at least tell me you were dating someone."

"Don't take it personally, Kel. We haven't told anybody about us. Although, I have a feeling Dixie has her suspicions."

"Joe, neither of us has ever been successful at pulling the wool over her eyes," Dr. Brackett snorted amusingly.

"That is true, Kel," Dr. Early chuckled.

"Hey, I managed to make you crack a smile and your face didn't shatter."

"I think we have to give Dixie and her intuitiveness the credit for that."

"You know, one day we're going to have satisfy our medical curiosity, and examine the back of her head to find her second set of eyeballs."

Dr. Early nodded affirmatively. "You know what the worst thing about tonight was, Kel?"

"What, Joe?"

"I never considered the prospect that Ginger could have been hurt during the fall. I didn't even ask her if she was ok. Then I bawled her out in front of Dixie when I did find out. I feel like a

jerk, Kel. I had no idea she'd been injured in that fall. I wouldn't have let her drive me over here if I knew she was hurt."

"Joe, you're being too hard on yourself. I have a feeling your powers of doctorly observation were obstructed by the napkins hanging outta your nose. I have a sneaking suspicion she was too worried about you to notice her arm was injured. Heck, you weren't the only doctor there. Fred and Tom didn't notice it either."

"We didn't say much to each other on the drive over here because I was busy breathing outta my mouth. When I finally say something, I yell at her in front of the Emergency staff. I've never raised my voice at her before."

"I think you're beating yourself up too much over everything. I have a hunch she's not gonna dump you over it."

Dr. Early slightly shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sure we'll make up, but I have a feeling it may be a while before we go out to any place fancy again."

"You could offer to wear a paper bag over your head."

"That's all I need, is tips from you on how to dress!" Dr. Early teased. "Kel, I really hate to tell you this, but you have a terminal case of fashion impairment."

"Watch it, Joe. You may find your nose bleeding again," Dr. Brackett harrumphed. "All these years I considered you one of my *dearest* friend."

"Now Kel, I've always valued our friendship, even on your most badly dressed days."

The door to the treatment room opened slightly as Dixie poked her head inside. "Kel, is Twinkle Toes ready to go up to X-ray?"

"Yeah, I think he's about ready."

"I'll send Sharon back in," Dixie answered as the door closed.

Dr. Brackett leaned against the counter of the Base Station with a cup of coffee in his hand. He observed the minute hand on the clock move one increment. The start of a new year would begin in another forty minutes. He didn't want to think about what a madhouse the Emergency Room would be like in about an hour from now as it filled up with the casualties of too much overindulgence in drink and New Year revelries. He hoped this year wouldn't be as bad as others had been in the past.

Dixie scooted by him and made her way to the end of the Nursing Station. The auditory sensation of metal clapping against metal broke the silence as she put several metal charts away

in the steel file hanger on the desk. She gave Dr. Brackett a slight smile as she pulled up a stool and sat down.

Dr. Brackett slowly sauntered up to the counter. "How long have you known about Joe and Ginger?"

"What is it I'm supposed to know?" Dixie looked up at him innocently.

"Dix, its common knowledge around here that not much gets by you."

"Well," Dixie drawled. "I've had my suspicions."

"I'd like to know how I missed it."

"Well Kel, it's just little things most men would naturally overlook."

"Oh yeah, what kind of little things?"

"You mean you haven't noticed he's much pickier about his appearance and eating right...or how often Ginger's car isn't working?"

"But Dix, after his bypass surgery, we all got on his case to take better care of himself and some people have lemons for cars."

"Yes, but he's been more conscious of his diet in the last few months. In all the years you've worked with him and he's never started brown bagging it until recently? Did you know he was the one who helped Ginger pick out that 'lemon?' Joe *does* know the difference between a car and a sour fruit."

Dr. Brackett smiled and nodded knowingly. "So either he deliberately picked out a lemon for her or the two of them cooked up an excuse to keep the gossip mongers at bay, or at least wondering."

"You know that Joe's always had a wily side."

"He's also been known to give me a few lessons here and there on charm, diplomacy, and con jobs."

The sound of a door closing farther up the hallway interrupted their conversation. They heard a pair of heels clicking against the tiled floor and the voice of Dr. Morton headed in their direction.

"Now you take it easy on that arm. Don't try to lift anything more than a pound or two with it. Just wear the tensor band for a few days to a week, but if it's still swollen and tender after a few days, come back and see me."

Dr. Morton escorted Ginger to the front of the Nursing Station beside the Base Station.

"How's your arm, Ginger?" Dr. Brackett stepped out from behind the counter and gently examined her bandaged limb.

"Doc says it's just a bad sprain," Ginger answered.

"Did you check for a Colles' or scaphoid fracture?"

"X-rays appear negative." Dr. Morton held up the films. "I have them here if you want to double check them."

"Might as well. Never hurts to have a second pair of eyes."

"How's Jo- Dr. Early doing?" Ginger corrected herself.

"He should be back from X-ray anytime." Dr. Brackett held both her hands gently, a charming half-smile on his face as he looked directly into her eyes. "He really feels badly about everything that occurred this evening."

"I just hope he's alright and nothin's broken, Doc." Ginger looked downward at her shoes, feeling uncomfortable talking about Joe in front of his colleagues.

Dixie came out from behind the counter, putting an arm around Ginger's waist and guiding her down the hall, leaving the two doctors looking on. Dr. Brackett turned towards Dr. Morton.

"Why don't we go to the lounge and you can help me set up things for our New Year's toast. You're welcome to stick around and join us." Dixie suggested as she guided Ginger towards the staff lounge.

"How about I double check those X-rays for you, Mike?" Dr. Brackett said as he turned to his associate.

"I'd like to apologize for giving you a rough time earlier, Sharon," Dr. Early said as he held onto the films in his lap.

"Someone told me when I was a student nurse never take anything from a patient too personally. People don't always exhibit their best behavior when they are hurting or sick."

"Or when people are worrying about someone they care about," Dr. Early added.

"Sides, even when you have a bad case of the grumps, you're *still* not as grouchy as some other doctors around here when they're on their best behavior."

Dr. Early gave her a wide, knowing smile as she wheeled him onto the elevator. "I haven't a clue who you might be talking about."

"Do you recall what I did at Dr. Brackett's birthday party earlier this year?"

Dr. Early's eyes twinkled in amusement. "Oh, that's a moment many of us will always remember."

"The shocked look on his face as his cake ended up all over his feet and all he could do was grimace and say 'I know Sharon, you're sorry.' You followed me out into the hall and put your arm around my shoulders as all those stupid things that went wrong around him when I was a student nurse came flooding back to me."

"Remember, I told you it wasn't your fault because the wheel fell off the cart. It coulda happened to anybody."

"I started crying and said 'Things always screw up for me whenever I'm around Dr. Brackett!'"

"I reminded you that you proved to Dr. Brackett ages ago what a competent nurse you were and it had been a long time since you had one of those incidents with him."

"No matter what you said, I kept blaming myself for ruining his birthday party."

"I told you after some time had passed it would be something we'd all get a good chuckle over."

"Well, at the time I never imagined I'd ever laugh over that disaster."

"But now you can?" Dr. Early smiled up at her.

Sharon smiled back gratefully. "Now I can. It helped when Dr. Brackett came out and said he was sorry he upset me over something that wasn't really my fault and he wasn't mad at me. He was glad that when the cart broke it was a cake that hit the floor and not some expensive piece of medical equipment."

"Dr. Brackett told you the truth. He was never upset with you over that. You know that don't you?"

Sharon nodded her head as she gave him a large toothy smile. "I have a feeling your mishap tonight is something you and your girlfriend will laugh about in the future."

"Shame on you." Dr. Early grinned at her. "You're playing psychologist with me."

"Nope, I'm playing Dr. Early right now," she tittered. "Dixie's given me plenty of hints on how to handle all the doctors around here."

The elevator let out a 'ding' just before its doors slid open. Sharon pushed him down the hall towards the Emergency Department. They could see Drs. Brackett and Morton standing near the nursing station.

"I take it Dixie's tips are part of the nurses' training around here."

"Yep." Sharon leaned forward and whispered, "You have to keep this a secret. You've always been my favorite doctor around here."

Dr. Early smiled up at her as Sharon stopped the wheelchair in front of Dr. Brackett.

"It doesn't look like anything is broken," Dr. Early said as he held the film of his foot up to the ceiling light.

Dr. Brackett plucked the films from Dr. Early's hand and gave him a deep, dark scowl. "You're forgetting you're *a patient* right now."

Dr. Morton crossed his arms over his chest and looked downwards, trying to hide the smirk on his face while his shoulders shook with laughter.

"You want me to put him back in Treatment Room 2?" Sharon asked.

"I think we can handle him from here." Dr. Brackett turned to Dr. Morton. "Would you like to assist me, Mike?"

"Why I would *loooovvvve* to!" Dr. Morton grinned wickedly.

Dr. Early leaned his head backward and looked upward at the nurse behind him. "You're not going to leave me alone with these two grouchy doctors are you?"

"Sorry, Dr. Early. I'm outranked." She shrugged her shoulders before stepping aside to let Dr. Morton grab the handles of the wheelchair.

"Don't worry, the grouchy doctors will take *reeeeaaally* good care of him." Dr. Brackett smiled malevolently at the man in the chair.

"Do me a favor, Sharon." Dr. Early said over his shoulder. "Make sure to turn on Guy Lombardo at 11:30. It isn't New Year's Eve without Guy Lombardo."

"You sure you don't want Dick Clark instead, Dr. Early?" Sharon asked.

"No!" Drs. Early and Brackett said simultaneously.

"Now fellas, don't I get a say?" Dr. Morton said.

"NO! You're outranked by us, besides it's time you remove the ice pack from my foot. My toes are turning blue," Dr. Early griped at Dr. Morton.

Dr. Morton stooped down and grabbed the ice pack before depositing it in Dr. Early's lap. "Here you go, Mr. Astaire."

Sharon watched as Dr. Brackett held the treatment room door open and Dr. Morton rolled their grumbling patient into the room. She didn't notice Dixie was behind her until she spoke.

"What's up with those three?"

"Drs. Brackett and Morton are ganging up on Dr. Early. Do you think you might have to rescue him from them?"

"I think we should let them be. It's not too often the three of them get to play in the sandbox together," Dixie answered.

"I'll go start to set up things up for our New Year's toast, Miss McCall."

"Already done. Ginger helped me out."

"Dr. Early's girlfriend? I know she works here, but I haven't really met her. How's she doing?"

"Sprained wrist, but otherwise fine. How about you come with me and I'll introduce you to her?" Dixie suggested as the two women headed towards the lounge.

It took several moments but Dr. Early finally managed to open the door to the staff lounge while balancing himself upright on a pair of crutches. His right shoe was tied securely to the handgrip of one of the crutches while his tuxedo jacket was draped over his left shoulder. He hobbled into the room, glanced over and saw that Guy Lombardo was on the television set. Spotting Ginger sitting on the sofa, he made his way over to her. He plopped his jacket onto the far cushion and sat down on the cushion next to the one she was sitting on. He leaned his crutches against the sofa beside him before slowly turning his head towards her. He could see the apprehension in her eyes.

"Mike says your arm is sprained." He gently took her injured arm. "I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier."

"I don't think you ever raised your voice ta-me before." A touch of trepidation in her voice.

"I was more upset at myself because you had gotten hurt because of my stupidity."

"You didn't say anything unforgiveable. I was wrong for not mentioning it to ya'." Ginger gave him a small smile. "So how's your ankle, Joe?"

"It's badly sprained. I've been ordered to stay off it for the next week." Dr. Early inched a little closer to her.

"Joe, I've had some time to think over some things."

Dr. Early felt his breathing freeze up. "You mean you don't want to..."

"Let me finish what I hafta say first." Ginger interrupted him. "I couldn't help thinkin' that if you were hurt and I wasn't around who'd know ta' tell me. I'd wanna be there for you if ya'. I guess what I'm tryin' to say is I'd rather people know 'bout us in case anythin' was ta' happen to you."

"I have to be honest with you Ginger." Dr. Early took her hands into his and looked directly in her eyes. "If anything ever did happened to me, I'd need you there. Is it okay if I put you down as an Emergency contact just in case?"

"I'd like that," Ginger whispered as her eyes gleamed with tears.

"I also want to be there if anything happened to you."

He could tell Ginger was too choked up to say anything more than 'me too' as she nodded her head vigorously. He cupped her chin with his left hand and raised it up slightly before bending his head downwards to brush her lips with a soft transient kiss.

"Now the deal's sealed." He was looking downward into her eyes as a slight grin turned up the corners of his mouth.

Ginger curled her arms around his waist and leaned against him. "It's okay, you got a little testy with me earlier 'cause I'd get upset too if you were hidin' somethin' like that from me."

She continued to lean against him as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder. A few staff members drifted into the room. Someone had propped the door open. A middle-aged man dressed in khaki pants, plaid shirt, and leather jacket holding a magnum of champagne stopped Dr. Morton just outside the door. Dr. Morton pointed towards the sofa Dr. Early and Ginger were sitting on. They both sat up straight as the man approached them.

"Are you Dr. and Mrs. Early?" The man asked as Dr. Early and Ginger exchanged puzzled looks.

"And you are?" Dr. Early inquired.

"I'm just a cab driver playing delivery boy. Mr. and Mrs. Brady asked me to drive this over ta' you." The man held the large bottle of Moët towards them.

Ginger and Joe both looked quizzically at each other. "I'm sorry we don't know who Mr. and Mrs. Brady are."

The man reached inside of his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "Almost forgot. They told me to give you this as well."

"Thanks." Dr. Early handed the envelope to Ginger as he leaned forward to reach for the wallet in his back pocket.

"Oh no, Mrs. Brady said you weren't to tip me. They gave me a generous tip already just to run this over special for ya'." The cab driver explained. "Anyways, I gotta get going. Big night tonight in this business."

"I bet." Dr. Early said. "You have a Happy New Year and thanks for driving for those who shouldn't be driving tonight."

"You too, Doc." He nodded his head at Ginger. "And to your misses as well."

Ginger let out a little giggle as the man walked away. "Why didn't you tell him we weren't married?"

"It wouldn't have made a difference in his life knowing that." Dr. Early grabbed his tuxedo jacket and retrieved his reading glasses. "Besides, I'm curious who Mr. and Mrs. Brady are and why they gifted us with a magnum of champagne."

He took the letter out of the envelope and held it between the two of them. Dr. Early peered down at her when he finished reading. "So now we figured out who Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Brady are."

"Oh, that is too funny, Joe." Ginger twittered girlishly. "It was HIS fault you fell."

"I'm not sure if I'd rather people know the truth or if it's better for them to believe I have two left feet when it comes to dancing."

Dr. Brackett walked over to Dixie who was standing just within the doorway. "It looks like those two have squared things away," he said with a nod towards the couple on the sofa.

"I had no doubt they wouldn't," Dixie said.

"What happened to your shirt, Kel?" Dixie asked as she held the material at the side away from his skin before checking out the backside. "It's all wet!"

"Someone decided to slip one of his ice packs down my back."

"Before or after you knotted his shoe to the crutch?"

"I didn't do that to his shoe. I only told Mike to make sure he didn't forget it when he left."

"So you two ganged up on him, huh?"

"They ganged up on me! Who do you think kept me distracted while Joe slipped ice down my back?"

"Wanna hear my suggestion for you three clowns?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me anyways."

"The next time Barnum and Bailey brings their circus to town the three of you should run away and join it."

"Face it Dix, you'd miss the three of us."

"Don't be too sure of that." Dixie nudged him.

"Hey! Is it alright if we crash the party?" Dr. Brackett and Dixie looked towards the door to find two tuxedo-clad men with accompanied by two nicely gowned women.

"Tom! Fred! Are you crashing our party?" Dr. Brackett greeted them. "The ladies are welcome, but I'll have to consider allowing you two rift-raft admittance."

"I say the more the merrier." Dixie welcomed the two men before leading the two ladies to Joe and Ginger.

"It was the girls' idea to come here," Tom started explaining to Dr. Brackett. "They were worried about Joe and Ginger and felt badly about their evening being cut short. They thought it would be a great idea to come here and ring in the New Year with them."

"And we sort of thought the party lost its punch after they left. Plus, we heard the real party is here," Fred added.

"Fred! Tom! You didn't have to leave the other party on my account," Dr. Early shouted from across the room. "But I'm glad you did!"

"We don't really have much to eat and the only bubbly stuff around here is the ginger ale. Feel free to help yourself to some of that," Dr. Brackett said.

"As long as we have something to toast with at midnight, that's fine. We're easy to please, Kel," Tom quipped.

"You have fifteen minutes left for the big countdown."

"Can I have everyone's attention!" Dr. Brackett voice filled the room with its bellowing sound silencing the chatter. "They're starting the countdown. Let's gather around the television set."

"Here, help me stand up," Dr. Early said to a nearby Mike Morton who looked disapprovingly at him. "I ain't sitting for the count down."

"All right, fine, but I'm sticking beside you in case you decide to topple over," Dr. Morton said as he helped him off the couch.

"FIVE!...FOUR!...THREE!...TWO!...ONE!...HAPPY NEW YEAR!" Everyone in the room shouted simultaneously.

Dr. Early turned to Ginger and gave her a full, hearty kiss on the lips that lasted a few seconds before exchanging "Happy New Year's" with those nearby them. When he tried to walk a few steps towards Dr. Brackett and Dixie, Dr. Morton halted him. "You stay rooted right there. They're coming to you."

"Happy New Year, Joe."

"You too, Kel." The two men exchanged robust handshakes

Dixie drew Dr. Early into a hug first and then moved onto Ginger. "I think things turned out rather well, don't you?"

"Truth be told Dix, I'd rather ring in a New Year amongst friends than a ballroom full of strangers." Joe put one arm around Dixie and the other around Ginger.

The mellow sound with the dominant alto saxophone of The Royal Canadians playing 'Auld Lang Syne' weaved through the air as a few people in the room softly sang the words. Dr. Early placed his right hand in the middle of his date's back and held her right hand in his left. "Sweetest music this side of heaven. Ginger, I've been waiting all night for this dance."

"But honey, you've been told to stay put," Ginger reminded him.

"How about we just sway nice and easy and not move our feet," Dr. Early suggested.

"I think we can manage that." She beamed up at him radiantly.

Dr. Early grinned down at her. "You know meeting you last year is something that's going to be pretty hard to top this year."

"Really? Cause I was thinkin' that the only way to top the last few months that we had this year would be having a whole year with me instead." Ginger smirked.

"Have I told you today how much I like the way you think?" Dr. Early leered.

"Nope," She answered.

"Or how that wonderful mind of yours is encased in such wonderful wrapping."

"You're on a roll, Joe."

"Do you think you two can break it up for a moment?" Dr. Brackett placed an arm on Dr. Early's shoulder. "It's traditionally Joe's job to give the toast before we all head back to work."

"You mean you're chickening out," Dr. Early joked.

Dr. Brackett gave him a pleading look. "You know you're better at these things than I am."

"Help me over to the table and let's start passing out the glasses."

The three of them made their way to the table that was filled with Styrofoam cups filled with ginger ale. Those near the table started passing the cups to those behind them. Once everyone had a glass, Dr. Brackett loudly cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"The floors all yours, Joe." Dr. Brackett held up his cup.

Dr. Early looked around the room before starting to speak. "Here's to the beginning of a New Year. I'd like to share with everyone here something that I learned tonight about celebrating meaningful moments. Obviously, my plans were to be celebrating tonight elsewhere, where most of the people there were pretty much acquaintances or strangers." He paused. "Only a few of the people there I could actually call friends."

"Fate had other plans, and I ended up here instead," he said as he paused for a moment and continued, "amongst the people and friends I interact with on a daily basis. We all depend on each other around here."

Dr. Early tilted his cup towards the nurses gathered around the table. "To those of you who bring a smile to my face just by walking into a room." He noticed Sharon Walters giving him a quick wink.

He turned first to Dr. Morton and then to Dr. Brackett. "And to those of you who bring a smile to my face just by walking out of a room."

Dr. Early waited for the outbreak of twittering in the room to subside. "Here's to 1976 and may this year be bountiful for us all."

After everyone had finished toasting, Dr. Early had Dr. Morton fetch him the magnum of champagne on the couch and put it on the table in front of him.

"There's one more thing I'd like to do tonight. I'd like to pass on this bottle of champagne to Sharon for reminding me tonight that it's the unexpected and sometimes calamitous events in life which are always the reminiscences we laugh over when we gather together. I believe it's those memories which end up being our fondest and most endearing ones."

Sharon made her way around the table and gave him a big hug. "You don't mind if I share this with the rest of the girls at Dixie's open house tomorrow do you?"

"I didn't think you could handle this whole bottle by yourself." Dr. Early playfully tapped her nose. "And try not to hurt anybody when you pop the cork."

"You should tell her the part about the toupée in tonight's events." Ginger smiled mischievously.

Sharon turned her innocent doe-eyes on the two of them. "I'm sure we'd all like to hear about the toupée."

Ginger handed Dr. Early the letter she had retrieved from her clutch purse. "Go ahead and share it with your friends, Joe."

"My reading glasses are over on the couch in my jacket." He smirked believing he was about to successfully worm his way out sharing the contents of the letter.

"I'm wearing mine." Dr. Morton offered as Ginger handed the letter over to him.

"Okay, it reads 'To Dr. and Mrs. Early'...wait a minute...did you two sneak off to Vegas without telling any of us?" Dr. Morton inquired.

"Of course not! I'd actually consider inviting you to that event." Dr. Early annoyingly replied. "I believe Mr. and Mrs. Brady, whom we don't know, made that assumption."

"Mike, you can finish now that we know we're not being hit with another surprise." Dr. Brackett said.

Dr. Morton continued to read the neat feminine scrawl of the letter. "Please accept our sincerest apologies over the series of unfortunate events that lead to your injuries. We accept full responsibility for any damages you feel you are owed. We feel horrible that your evening was ruined by my husband's vanity and skinflintedness. Had he chosen to invest in a custom high quality hairpiece he wouldn't have been on the ballroom floor on all fours searching for his ill-fitting toupée. It was his hand that you stepped on which caused you to fall. Please accept this bottle of Moët as a token of our regrets over this unfortunate event. Again, our sincerest apologies and well wishes for the two of you in welcoming in the New Year."

"That's like the wheel falling off a cart." Sharon whispered to Dr. Early.

"So in other words, Joe didn't hurt himself cutting a rug; he actually slipped on one." Dr. Brackett quipped as he clapped Dr. Early on the shoulder.

"You know Kel," Dr. Morton mused. "We're going to have to alter some of the digs we had ready for him."

Dr. Brackett decided to throw the first one. "I guess he can cut a rug as well as slip on it."

Some of the staff had already left the room to return to duty and it was only ten minutes into the New Year when a nurse approached Dr. Morton to inform him he was needed at the Base Station.

Dr. Early turned to Ginger. "Would you mind calling a cab?"

"I think I can manage to drive us back to your place." Ginger answered.

Dr. Early shook his head at her slowly. "Not with that bum arm you're not."

"Give me your keys, Joe," Tom said. "My wife will drive you two home in my car and Fred and I will follow from behind in yours."

"Problem solved, Joe." Ginger pulled out the keys of her small purse and offered them to Tom. "Here ya' go."

The six of them exited out of the room and headed down the hall towards the exit.

Author Notes:

Guy Lombardo (1902-1977) often billed himself and 'The Royal Canadians' as making 'the most beautiful music this side of heaven.' He was known as 'Mr. New Year's Eve' from 1929 until his death in November of 1977. Between the years 1929-1959 Guy Lombardo and The Royal Canadians performed on New Year's Eve at the Roosevelt Grill in the Roosevelt Hotel in New York. His New Year's Eve performances were then done from the Waldorf Astoria. Guy Lombardo and his band performed their first New Year's Eve special in 1956 for CBS.

It wasn't until the mid-70s when younger viewers gravitated to the "New Year's Rockin' Eve" hosted by Dick Clark (1974 was its first year) where Guy Lombardo's New Year's Eve show began to get some competition. After Guy Lombardo's death, in 1977 the band was taken over by his brother where they performed two more New Year's Eve specials before being replaced by Paul Anka hosting 'Happy New Year, America' which ran from 1979-1995 airing on CBS.

A magnum of champagne is 1.5 liters.