

Merry Christmas, Mr. Bennett

By Kate Simon

Richard Bennett sat in the court room with his very expensive lawyer, Elliott Rogers, waiting for his turn. He hoped they'd get to him soon. He had to get back to his office. It was Christmas and that was the busiest time of the year for his chain two hundred department stores.

"Will this never end?" he growled.

"Richard, please. Enough with the faces. Don't think the judge can't see it."

"This is ridiculous. Why don't they just pay the fines and go instead of arguing?"

"Because not everyone can afford the points on their licenses or maybe, just maybe, they're not guilty."

"It's freaking traffic court. Who cares?"

"Obviously not you," Elliott muttered.

"Excuse me?" he demanded. No one spoke to him that way. Especially not someone he had on a six-figure retainer.

"What I'm saying is if you didn't have such a lead foot you wouldn't have been nailed for doing seventy in a thirty-five mile an hour zone. Again. This is your fifth offense in six months. And did you have to mouth off to the cop? That's why you were arrested and not just ticketed."

"Hey, I was late for a meeting. He was taking forever, just like this is."

"State calls Richard Bennett," called the clerk.

Elliott grabbed his arm before Richard could stand. "Let me do the talking unless you want to get life." Richard pulled his hand away and walked up to the defense table with Elliott. The judge opened a file and reviewed the pages. She looked up at Richard and made him feel oddly off center. Judge Carolyn Davies stared at him from the bench. Her long dark hair was pulled back and her dark eyes drilled him with a knowing look. If he'd seen her in a bar he might have sent her a drink.

“Mr. Bennett you have quite the track record. Five violations in the past six months. This last time you assaulted an officer.”

“I didn’t...” he started but Elliott grabbed his arm.

“Mr. Bennett greatly regrets his actions in this matter.” The judge stared at him and she seemed to be purposely taking her time, like she knew he had better things to do.

“I don’t think he does, Mr. Rogers. Mr. Bennett, I want to hear from you why you laid hands on the officer.”

“I was late for a very important meeting. The officer was being purposefully slow knowing I was expected. I was just trying to get his attention.”

“By jabbing him the shoulder with your keys.”

“It’s not like I hurt him.”

Elliott looked at him with his mouth open.

“Mr. Bennett, it seems like you have a real problem. No matter how many times you’ve been stopped you persist in offending. Let’s see what six months without your license does for you.”

“You can’t!” he shouted.

“Would you like to try for a year?” asked the judge. She pointed at Elliott. “If you can afford him you can afford a driver.”

Richard made the monumental mistake of sighing and making a face he should have thought twice of making.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me, Mr. Bennett?”

“I...”

“Don’t bother. Bailiff, did you see the defendant roll his eyes.”

The bailiff nodded at him with a look that said “Oh, dude, now you’ve done it.” He glanced at the judge. “Yes, your honor. The defendant rolled his eyes.”

“Mr. Bennett it is the finding of this court that you guilty of the charges. I’m fining you one thousand dollars in addition to the moving violation of five hundred dollars. I also find you in contempt of court.”

Richard looked at Elliott. He paid him a lot of money to get him out of things like this. He just shrugged and shook his head.

“On the contempt, I’m sentencing you eighty hours of community service to be completed by the end of January.”

“That’s not possible. I’m a very busy man.”

“Richard, for God’s sake, shut up,” said Elliott.

The judge drilled him with a look. “I would listen to your lawyer. If you fail to meet your eighty-hour commitment you will be spending a week in the county jail. See the clerk for your fines and your assignment.” The judge slammed her gavel down. “Next case.”

Richard tried to talk but Elliott pushed him out the side door to the clerk’s office. “You’ve got to fix this, Elliott.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Excuse me? I pay you to handle my legal matters.”

“No, you pay me to clean up your shit. As soon as I clean it up, you make more for me to shovel. Well, not this time. I warned you to shut up but you wouldn’t listen. Instead you pissed off the judge. Now, we’re going in there and wait for your paperwork. Then you will pay your fine and find out what your community service is. And you will do it!”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I think I’m the guy who graduated first in his class at Harvard law. Freaking first! And what am I doing? I’m handling parking tickets for a pompous ass!”

Richard was still staring at Elliott when the clerk came out with his paperwork. “Okay, first things, first,” said the clerk. “That’ll be fifteen hundred.” He pulled out his wallet and handed the clerk a credit card. “Okay, sign here.” He signed the receipt and the clerk

took back the slip. "Now you have a choice of community service projects. Teaching work skills to prisoners."

"Pass."

"Picking up trash on the highway."

"Hard pass."

The clerk snickered. "You can be a candy striper at the hospital."

"Excuse me?"

"You run errands for patients, read to people, stuff like that."

"Oh, God," he muttered.

"Take the hospital work," said Elliott. "Either that or grab an orange vest and a stick with a spike."

Richard sighed. He couldn't believe this was happening. "Fine. I'll take the hospital."

The clerk smiled and handed him paperwork. "Sign here." He pulled off a copy and handed it to him. "Call this number in the morning. They'll set up your schedule."

Richard looked at the paper and shook his head. "Now what?"

Elliott looked at him. "Now what is you get a new lawyer." He started toward the elevator then turned toward him. "And call a cab. You can't drive."

Richard looked at the closing elevator doors and wondered how the hell things had gone so wrong.

Richard took an Uber to the office. He'd be damned if he let that judge get the last word. He blew past his secretary's desk and went into his office. He threw the court paperwork down on his desk and sat down in his chair. Richard had occupied this office ever since his father retired five years ago. His grandfather had started Bennett's as a general store after he got home from World War II. He grew the store until he had ten stores. His father grew the company to one hundred stores. Richard started with the company as soon as he got out of college. He grew the company two hundred stores country wide. Richard did nothing but work. He provided jobs for thousands. Was it really so bad if he blew off a little steam now and then? So he liked to drive fast. What was the point in having a Porsche if he couldn't drive it the way it was meant to be driven?

He looked at the paperwork and couldn't believe he was stuck doing this. Elliott should have been able to fix this but the bastard had to go and quit. Normally he'd have wanted to sue for bailing on his contract, but Elliott was the one he'd have called for that. He picked up his phone and buzzed his HR department.

"Human Resources," said a young voice."

"This is Bennett. Get me Sandy." Sandy Jeffers was the head of HR. She'd been with the company for at least as long as he had.

"Hello, Richard. What can I do for you?"

"Elliott quit!"

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. He was supposed to get me out of a simple parking ticket and he failed miserably. Now I'm stuck doing community service and he quit. Make sure the rest of the team knows he's gone. Tell whoever else on the legal team to they're on call. I want them to see if we can sue for breach of contract."

"Excuse me?"

"Was I unclear?"

"No."

“Make the call.”

He disconnected the call to Sandy and dialed the community service number. Better he should get it out of the way.

“Patient services. This is Torres.”

“My name is Richard Bennett. The court clerk gave me this number to call.”

The woman chuckled. “Oh yeah, Bennett. They faxed me your paperwork already. Boy, you really must have pissed off Judge Davies.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Eighty hours in six weeks. She’s never that strict. Okay, let me look at my schedule. You can start tomorrow at ten a.m. Be prepared to work an eight-hour shift.”

“What? Eight hours? I have a business to run.”

“We offer community service shifts twice a week. If you expect to fulfill your obligation in six weeks, you’re going to need to do two shifts a week every week.”

Richard rolled his eyes, this time in the privacy of his own office. “Fine.” He hung up and buzzed for Becca. “Will you come in, please?”

“Yes, Mr. Bennett?” The young girl stood in front of him, obviously nervous. For some reason, he felt bad. This wasn’t her fault. It was Elliott’s.

“Becca, you’ll need to clear my schedule for tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

He might as well tell her. She was going to find out anyway. “My appearance in traffic court didn’t go well. I have to complete eighty hours of community service by the end of January. I will be off the books two days a week until that’s completed. I’ll let you know about my schedule when I have further information.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And no one is to know why I’m not available.”

“Of course, sir.”



The patient services office was a small dark office in the back of the hospital. Richard had taken an Uber from the his apartment to his breakfast meeting, then another from there to the hospital. This was getting old fast. He'd have to get a driver. A woman with dark hair and glasses glanced up at him from her desk. Her name plate read Lisa Torres.

"Bennett?"

"Yes."

"You're late."

"My Uber was late."

"I don't care. You're still late." She looked him up and down. "You wore a suit to a hospital?"

"I had a breakfast meeting."

"Good for you." She pointed at seat in the back of the room. "Sit there." He moved to the seat and she pulled a box camera in front of him. "Face forward." She hit a button and a less than flattering picture came out of a printer. She placed it with an ID and stuck it in a laminator. A minute later she pulled it out and hung it on a lanyard. "Wear this at all times."

He put it on and looked at the picture and muttered, "Christ."

"Look, Bennett, I know who your are."

His head snapped up.

"What? Surprised I read the papers?" She pointed out the door. "Out there you're a big shot. In here, you're just another guy working off his community service. So, dial down the attitude." She pulled out a file and looked at a list. "I've got a few patients for you to start with. You'll visit them, see what they need. I'll show you how to help someone take a walk. If they need a wheelchair you call the nurse. You'll help them walk the halls, run errands for them,"

"Errands?"

“Get them a newspaper or a book. See if they have need anything like toiletries. You can get them at the nurses’ station. If they don’t need anything, just talk to them.”

“About what?”

“What do you mean about what? About anything, the weather, their grandkids, whatever they want to talk about. Come with me.” She led him to the nurses’ station. “Hey Gloria.”

“Hey, Lisa.” Gloria looked him up and down and smiled. “Who do we have here?”

“This is Richard Bennett. He’s working off his community service.”

Gloria’s look went from curious to disinterested. “Oh. Show him around the station. If you have any questions ask, don’t guess.”

Lisa showed him where the drinks and snacks were. “Be sure before you give a patient anything that they are allowed to have it.” She showed him on a chart what codes meant full diet, limited diet and nothing by mouth. She led him to the first room. “This is Mr. Walter Hughes. He’s eighty-five years old, a veteran. He has end stage heart failure and no family. He doesn’t get any visitors. See if he needs anything, but mostly, spend some time with him.” She pointed out a code on the name plate next to his door. “This means he’s on a full diet. He can have whatever he wants. Come back to my office when you’re ready for your next patient.” Lisa turned and left him at the man’s door.

Richard stared at the closed door and wondered for what felt like the millionth time in twenty-four hours what the hell happened. He took a breath and knocked. “Hello?”

“Come in.”

He walked in and saw a tall man with a shock of white hair laying in the bed, watching a small TV. “Mr. Hughes?”

“Yeah, who are you?”

“Richard Bennett.”

“You’re not another doctor, are you? I’ve had my fill of doctors.”

“No sir, I’m not a doctor. I’m here to see if you need anything.”

Hughes glanced away from the screen and looked him up and down. “You don’t look like a candy striper,” he chuckled.

“I don’t look good in peppermint stripes.”

Hughes laughed until he started coughing. Richard grabbed the small pitcher and poured him some water. “Here. Drink this.” He helped Hughes sit up and sip the water.

“Thanks.”

“This is about empty. I’ll go fill it up. Would you like a soda?” He held up his ID card. “They gave me the run of the break room.”

“Yeah, that’d be good. Some ginger ale with a lot of ice. And maybe see if you can find some of those chocolate chip cookies.” Richard grabbed the plastic pitcher and walked to the break room.

“You back already?” asked Gloria.

“Mr. Hughes wants some ginger ale and some cookies.”

“He talked to you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“He doesn’t talk to anyone.”

Richard shrugged. “He talked to me and he’d like some cookies.”

“Yeah, sure. He hasn’t been eating that much. He can have whatever he wants.”

He filled the pitcher with ice and fresh water, then filled a large cup with ice and put in a straw. Having run out of hands, he put a can of ginger ale in one pocket and two large cookies in a paper towel in the other. He had the stray thought that his tailor would have a fit. He walked back into Mr. Hughes room and set down the pitcher and cup. He popped the top on the ginger ale can and poured it. Mr. Hughes took a sip and smiled.

“Oh, that’s good.”

Richard pulled the cookies out of his pocket and set them on his tray. Mr. Hughes broke off a piece and took a bite.

“These really are the best thing about hospital food.”

“Don’t you like the food?”

“It’s not bad but it’s not, you know, real.”

“What would you like to eat?”

“The menu’s pretty limited.”

“If you could have anything what would it be?”

Mr. Hughes leaned back against his pillow and smiled. “A New York strip and a baked potato the size of my fist.”

Richard smiled and pulled out his phone. “Hi, Richard Bennett. Can I talk to Xavier?”

“What are you doing?” asked Hughes.

“Carmen’s is right around the corner. Xavier named it after his mother. Hey, Xavier, it’s Richard Bennett. No, I don’t need a table. I was hoping you could do me a favor. I was wondering if you could deliver a New York strip and a baked potato the size of your fist to St. Luke’s, room 304. No, it’s not for me, it’s for a friend. Ah, thanks, buddy.” He disconnected the call and looked at the stunned Mr. Hughes. “What? My job is to get you what you want. It should be here by lunchtime.”

“Since when does a place like that deliver?”

“I’m a regular. Xavier will do me the favor.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Richard shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe because I can.”

“Why are you here? Somebody who rates a delivery from a restaurant like that has more important things to do than fetch water for an old man.”

He looked at the man and knew he'd never get anything past him. "Community service."

"What did you do?"

"Too many tickets."

"It wasn't DUI was it? I have no patience for people like that."

"No sir, just speeding. I have a lead foot."

"How many tickets do you need to get before they make you do community service?"

"Five."

"That doesn't seem like that much. What else did you do?"

"I pissed off the judge."

Mr. Hughes smiled. "Now that, I believe." He nodded toward the small chair. "Have a seat." Richard turned the chair to face him and sat. "So, what's a guy in a suit like that do for a living?"

"What about my suit?"

"It's too nice. Those shoes are shiny enough to pass inspection."

"I run the family business."

"Bennett. Bennett's department store?"

"Yes."

Mr. Hughes laughed. "It must be killing you to have to do stuff like this."

Richard smiled. "It's not what I expected, Mr. Hughes."

"Call me Walter."

"Okay, Walter. I'm Richard. They told me you're a veteran."

Walter's smile disappeared. "Yeah. I was an infantry officer. I thought it would be a career."

"What happened."

"Vietnam."

"Oh." Richard saw Walter didn't want to talk about it. "What did you do when you got out?"

"I taught high school English for thirty years."

"Wow."

"It was a good life. My wife Joan, taught social studies in the same school. We retired together."

"How long were you married?"

"Fifty-two years. She's been gone these last ten."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll see her again soon."

Richard tried to shift the conversation. "The Eagles are on tonight."

"Bah. They'll find a way to lose in the last quarter."

"This is Philly! They're our birds. Fly Eagles fly?"

"I guess I can't fault you for your loyalty, even though the Giants are going to kick their asses."

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. "Hello?" Xavier stuck his head in the door. "Richard?"

"Xavier, buddy. I didn't expect you to deliver it yourself." Richard grabbed the shopping bag from his hand. "Xavier, this is Walter Hughes. Walter, this is Xavier Mendoza, the owner of Carmen's."

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Hughes.” He set down the thermal bag he was carrying and held out his hand.

“It’s Walter. It’s real nice of you to bring this for me.”

“I like to make sure everyone has a great meal.” Xavier opened the bag while Richard cleared off Walter’s table. He uncovered a thick stake and Walter’s eyes got big.

“That smells so good.”

Xavier set out two more dishes. “One fist size baked potato and this is a mixed vegetable dish I do. It has some mild spice.”

“That’s delicious,” said Richard. “I’ve had it.”

“I brought cheesecake for dessert.”

Richard took the dessert box and set it on the side table. “Here, let’s get you set up.” He helped Walter set the meal in front of him and watched while he took the first bite of his steak.

“Oh God, that’s good,” said Walter.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” said Xavier. “Richard, I need to get back.”

“Thanks, Xavier. I appreciate this. Put it on my tab.”

Xavier looked at Walter as he tasted the vegetables and rolled his eyes and smiled. “Don’t worry about it.”

Richard sat while Walter ate his meal. He refreshed his soda and smiled as the old man devoured the food. He took the plates away and set them on a dresser.

“Cheesecake?”

“Not just yet, but leave it close.”

“Sure thing. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, thanks.”

Gloria walked into the room pushing a large cart. “You’re still here?”

Richard glanced at the clock and realized he'd been with Walter for two hours. "I lost track of time."

She saw the remains of Walter's four-star lunch. "What's all this?"

"Just the best steak dinner I've ever had," said Walter.

Richard shrugged and smiled. "I ordered out. I better get going. Lisa is going to wonder what happened to me." He held out his hand. "It was very nice to meet you, Walter. I'll be back on Thursday."

Walter held tight to his hand. "Thank you, Richard, for everything."

"You're very welcome."

"And stop speeding."

"Yes, sir," he smiled. Richard left Walter's room and headed toward Lisa's office. He got there just as she hung up her phone.

"You got the patient a steak dinner?" she asked.

"You said get the patient what they want."

Lisa sat back and looked at him. "Gloria said Mr. Hughes is talking about this great meal and the guy who had the chef personally deliver it."

"I didn't ask Xavier to deliver it. That was his idea."

Lisa shook her head and gave him a small smile. "Okay, follow me." She led him upstairs to the dialysis unit. "I have another patient for you. It's an ten-year-old girl. Her name is Emily Grace. She's hospitalized for a severe kidney infection. Her mother works two jobs and she doesn't have any other family so she doesn't get a lot of company."

"Why is she here and not a regular room?"

"She's only got one kidney. She's on dialysis but she's developed an infection."

"Poor kid."



“Yeah, look, I’ve read your file and I’ve read about you in the paper. You seem like you’re pretty much a tool, but you don’t seem like someone who can’t be trusted around a kid. That being said, leave the door open during your visit.” Lisa knocked on the door and propped it open. “Hello, Emily?”

“Yeah?”

“I have someone here to visit you.”

Richard followed Lisa into the room. Emily had long brown hair and big brown eyes. She was pale and was plugged into an IV machine bigger than she was. “Hi Emily.”

“Who’s the suit?”

“What is with everyone in the place having a problem with my clothes?”

“Nobody wears a suit unless you’re a doctor, but you’re not one.”

“How do you know?” he smiled.

“No lab coat. Doctors wear lab coats so they don’t get nasty crap on their clothes. Everyone else wears scrubs.”

“Logical assumption. No, I’m not a doctor.”

“Mr. Bennett is working with patient services. He’s here to visit and to see if he can do anything for you.”

“Oh, you’re one of those.”

“One of those?”

“One of those people who’re forced to come here and be nice to patients.”

Richard looked at Lisa who smiled and shrugged. “Now that you two have been introduced, I’m going to go back to my office.” He looked back at the little girl who had him pegged.

“Don’t take it personally, suit,” she said. “I’ve been in and out of here for months. I’ve seen a bunch of you types.”

He looked at her for a moment and wondered how a ten-year-old could be so intimidating. “Well, if you know the routine, then tell me what I can get you.”

“I could go for some more water.”

“They have soda and cookies.”

“Nah. They have me on this stuff that makes everything taste like metal.”

He found the nurses station and refilled the pitcher with ice and fresh water. He returned to Emily’s room and poured her a fresh glass.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Can I get you anything else? I think there are some toys in the visitors lounge.”

“That’s okay. I don’t really feel like it.”

“Did they tell you when you’ll get to go home?”

“No. When this happens it can take a while. It’s not that bad here. The nurses are nice and I have cable.”

“Christmas is coming. Did you ask Santa for anything special?”

She gave him a side glance. “I’m ten, not two. You really suck at this visiting stuff.”

“Yeah, I do. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s kind of nice to have someone to talk to who isn’t poking me with needles.”

“They told me your Mom works a lot. Do you have any other family?”

“No. My father’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“When you’re not here, what do you like to do? Do you play any sports?”

“No, I’m strong enough for stuff like that. I like to draw.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Anything. People, animals, you know, anything.”

“Excuse me? What’s going on here?”

Richard turned to see a grownup version of Emily. She had dark brown hair and eyes. She was tall but a little too pale. “Mrs. Grace?” He stood and extended his hand. “I’m Richard Bennett. I’m with patient services.”

“He’s one of those, Mom.”

She held on to his hand. “Community service. What did you do?”

“Speeding tickets.”

“Uh huh.” She nodded toward the hall. “Can I have a word with you.”

“Mom, don’t be too hard on the suit. He was doing his best.”

Richard followed her out in to the hall. He started to speak but she held up her hand.

“Look, Mr. Bennett, I understand you have your obligation to complete but my daughter is very ill. I don’t need you using my kid to further your cause.”

“Mrs. Grace, all I was doing was trying to keep her company. She didn’t seem to mind talking to me, even though she said I suck at it.”

She cracked a smile. “My girl doesn’t mince words.” She glanced back toward Emily’s room and Richard saw the tears in her eyes. “She knows she may not survive.”

“What? They told me she was being treated for a kidney infection.”

“That’s what it is right now. She’s weak and her system is compromised. She needs a new kidney or…” She held herself in check.

“Is she a difficult match?”

“No, I’m a perfect match but they won’t do it.”

“That’s crazy. Why not?”

“They won’t pay for a transplant if there isn’t a care system in place. I work two jobs. I can’t take off the time I would need to recover myself let alone take care of Emily.”

“I don’t understand. Why won’t your insurance pay for it?”

“I don’t have insurance. The boss at my main job won’t give me more than thirty hours. Thirty-two hours would make me full time. Then they’d have to offer me insurance. But you would know that.”

“Why would I know that?”

“I work for you.”

Richard sat in his office and sipped his second cup of coffee. He hadn't slept much last night. He kept thinking about his day at the hospital. Walter was a nice old coot. Emily was a pistol. Her mother, on the other hand, knocked the wind out of him. She worked for him. He had no idea. He didn't remember seeing her. She must be on the sales floor during evening hours. How did she take care of Emily if she worked nights? How was she going to keep her daughter alive without the surgery? He walked out of his office and past Becca's desk.

"Mr. Bennett, Mr. Peters will be here for your meeting in ten minutes."

Richard turned on his heels and was about to speak when he saw the frightened look on Becca's face. Was he really that terrifying? Or was he just used to being a prick? "Thank you, Becca. Please ask Alan to wait for me in my office. I'll try not to be too long." He almost laughed at the girl's stunned expression.

"Of course, Mr. Bennett."

He walked the flight down to HR and Sandy Jeffers office. He looked at a girl sitting in the first cubicle. "Is Sandy in her office?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Bennett."

"Thank you," he said. Was everyone this intimidated by him? He smiled. Emily wasn't. He knocked on Sandy's door.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Sandy."

"Richard. I wasn't expecting you."

"I know. I need you to look up an employee."

"Of course. Is there a problem?"

"No, I just need her information. I'm assuming she works on our sales floor here. I don't think she commutes to any of the suburban locations."

"What's her name?"

“I only got her last name, Grace. She’s about thirty-five, widowed with a ten-year-old daughter.”

Sandy typed a few keys and began to scroll. “Here she is, Carolyn Grace. She’s been with us about a year. Good sales record despite taking more days off than we’d like to see.”

“That’s because her daughter is very ill. She needs a kidney transplant. Mrs. Grace is a perfect match but they won’t do it without the insurance. Why doesn’t she have insurance?”

Sandy looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “It was part of your austerity measures five years ago. New employees are all part time. No benefits meant lower overhead.”

He remembered. All he’d seen was the numbers. “I want this woman and her daughter to have insurance. The company can pick up the tab.”

“Richard, that’s fine, of course, but it won’t help them with this.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s a pre-existing condition. Our insurance won’t cover it. They wouldn’t cover the surgery on Mrs. Grace because it’s not medically necessary.”

“What do you mean it’s not medically necessary? Emily will die without it,” he said a bit too loud.

“It’s not medically necessary for Mrs. Grace. Richard, I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.”

Richard walked out of Sandy’s office and took the stairs down to the main sales floor. He looked around at the mass of Christmas shoppers. That should have made him feel better. Sales the last few years had been a struggle. They were competing against the instant gratification of online sales. His family operated on the philosophy that nothing could compete with the experience of shopping at Bennett’s. He looked over at the café and decided it was time for another cup of coffee. He stood in line behind clerks wearing Bennett’s badges. Florence had worked behind the counter since they opened the café.

She recognized him and was about to wait on him first but he shook his head no. She nodded and waited on the women in front of him.

“Did you get your schedule?” asked the one woman.

“Yeah. Can you believe I have to work until eight on Christmas Eve?”

“Me too. I think he’s got everyone working.”

“I’ve got two kids, presents to wrap, a dinner to make, none of which I can do because I’m stuck working. I don’t have a single day off between now and Christmas.”

“Don’t they realize we have lives outside of this place?”

“They don’t care. It’s all about the numbers.”

“That’s the truth. Merry freaking Christmas.”

He saw the panicked look on Florence’s face. “It’s okay,” he said as the women walked to their table. “My usual please, Florence.” She handed him a large black coffee and he pointed to a gingerbread man. “One of those too, please.” She wrapped it up and he handed her a ten-dollar bill. She looked surprised he paid, considering he owned the place. “Merry Christmas, Florence.”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Bennett.”

He turned and saw the women had heard Florence. They’d both gone pale. Normally he’d have enjoyed their reactions. But nothing felt normal today. He walked over to their table and smiled. “Hello, ladies.”

“Hello, Mr. Bennett,” they all but whispered.

“Don’t worry. I’ll see what I can do about your schedules.”

He took the elevator up to his office to the meeting for which he was now very late.

Richard thanked his driver as they pulled into his parents Main Line home for their weekly dinner. Once a week he sat through lectures from his father about how he should run the company. Those were only slightly less painful than the guilt trips from his mother for his being single at forty. He found his parents where he always did before dinner, having a drink before dinner in the library.

“Hello, dear.”

“Hi, Mom.” He kissed his mother’s cheek. Mary Bennett was the epitome of a Main Line society matron. Her white hair was pulled into a tasteful twist. She was wearing a pale knit top with camel colored slacks. The look was finished with her ever present pearl stud earrings.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry, Dad. You know how it is at Christmas. I’m really busy.” Richard was the spitting image of his father. Richard senior took good care of himself playing racquetball at his club with the rest of his retired cronies. His father poured him a short whiskey and handed him the glass. His mother sipped her white wine.

“What is this I hear about you and traffic court?”

Richard took a breath. He should have known his father would have heard. He had contacts all over the city. “Yeah, it didn’t go well. I lost my license for six months and I got eighty hours of community service.”

“What?” his mother gasped.

“That’s crap,” said his father. “For what? For a couple of speeding tickets? Who does that judge thinks she is? I’ll make a call.”

“No, Dad, don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll just make it worse. This judge isn’t fooling around.”

“You’re an important man in this town. You employ hundreds in this town alone.”



“Dad, no.” He sighed. “The truth is I had it coming. I mouthed off to the judge. I got what I deserved. I’m going to complete my community service and use a lot of taxis for the next six months.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Bennett.” His parents cook, Naomi, stood at the entrance to the library. “Dinner is ready.” They walked into dining room and took their usual seats. Naomi served his mother first, then his father, then set a plate of roast beef in front of him.

“Thank you, Naomi.”

She looked stunned, then smiled. “You’re welcome, sir.”

His father waited until she left the room before he continued his inquisition. “So, what have they got you doing?”

“Oh, you’re not one of those people on the side of the road, are you? People would see you,” said his mother.

“No, Mom. I’m not picking up trash. I’m visiting people in the hospital.”

“I guess that not so bad,” she said.

“It’s ridiculous. Your time is too valuable to be wasting it with strangers.”

“Actually, I don’t think it’s a waste. Yesterday I met this vet named Walter. He doesn’t have anybody so I sat with him for a while. I got him a steak dinner from Carmen’s. You’d have thought I’d given him a million bucks.”

“That’s nice, dear,” said his mother.

“I also met a little girl named Emily. She’s really ill. She needs a kidney transplant but they won’t do it because the mother doesn’t have insurance.”

“That’s the mother’s fault,” said his father.

“Dad, the mother works for us. We don’t give her enough hours to get insurance.”

His father paused. “Nobody’s forcing her to stay. She can always get another job.”

“Can she? There’s a lot of unemployment in town and not a lot of new businesses.”

“So, you move to where there’s a better job.”

“Dad, it’s expensive to move.”

“This woman and her kid are not our problem. Mary, did they call about the car?”

“Yes. They said we’ll have to wait if we want the upgraded leather package and the heated seats.”

“What’s the point of a Mercedes without heated seats?”

“They said it would be another two weeks.”

“That’s unacceptable. I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

Richard set down his fork and looked at his parents. He didn’t know why tonight seemed so different. Maybe it was because his father didn’t mind stepping in to fix a problem with a seventy thousand dollar car they didn’t need but helping a dying child wasn’t their problem. What bothered him more was last week, it would have agreed with his father. Now all he could think about was a sweet little girl who was going to die. He took a sip of his whiskey and pulled out his phone.

“No phones at the table,” said his mother.

“I have somewhere I need to go and I have to call a car.” He pressed the buttons to order the car.

Thirty minutes later he was standing in front of Elliott Roger’s home. He knocked on the door and was opened by Elliott’s wife. She was not happy to see him and he didn’t blame her.

“Hello, Sue. I’m sorry to stop by without warning. Can I speak with Elliott?” She nodded and let him into the hallway. A moment later a very surprised Elliott came into the hall.

“Richard, what are you doing here?”

“First, I’m here to apologize. I was a complete ass to you and you didn’t deserve that. I understand why you told me off. I deserved it.” He extended his hand and held a breath. “I hope you’ll accept my apology.”

Elliott took his hand but looked skeptical. “This doesn’t mean I’m coming back.”

“I understand although I hope you will consider it but apologizing isn’t the only reason I’m here.” The look on Elliott’s face said his low opinion of Richard had been proven. “I need your help with a problem. Please give me a few minutes of your time. If you don’t want to help me I’ll be on my way.” Elliott nodded and led him to his home office. He looked out the office window at the driveway and then back at Richard. “I took an Uber,” he smiled. “I’m taking the judge’s orders very seriously.”

“Ah..., that’s good,” he said as he sat behind his desk.

“Look, Elliott, I realize you have no reason to believe me. I know I’m a pompous ass but all I’m asking is you hear me out.”

Richard wore a pair of jeans and a sweater. No one at the hospital would kid him about his suit today. He checked in with Lisa at patient services and was surprised when she smiled.

“You’re on time.”

“I’m trying to learn from my mistakes.”

“Good.” She pointed to the large Bennett’s bags. “What’s all that?”

“It’s for the patients I met on Tuesday. If you don’t mind, I’d like to check in with them first.”

She shook her head and smiled. “Sure, why not. Come see me when you’re done.”

Richard walked up to Walter’s floor and looked in his room. The bed was made but Walter wasn’t there. He went over to the nurse’s station and spotted Gloria. “Excuse me, where’s Walter? Is having some tests?”

Gloria walked over to him and took him aside. “Walter died last night.”

“What? He seemed fine. What happened?”

“He was in end stage heart failure. He was to be moved to hospice this week, but his heart gave out.”

Richard fought to maintain his composure. “Oh, I see. Well...ah, I have some other patients to visit.” He grabbed his bags and moved as quick as he could to the stairwell. He leaned up against the wall and wiped tears from his cheek. What the hell was wrong with him? He met the man once. He was very old with a bad heart. Why did he feel like he’d been gut punched? He tried to turn away when the door opened.

“Mr. Bennett? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just need to...I need to...” He closed his eyes and tried not to cry.

She put her hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. He was a nice man. He was worth mourning.”

“I didn’t know him, really. I only met him the one time.”

"Sometimes, that's all it takes. Walter talked about you. He said you were a good guy," she paused and smiled. "although you have your head up your ass about the Eagles."

Richard chuckled and wiped the tears from his cheeks. "He did?"

"Yeah, he did. He also talked about how you got him the best meal he'd ever had. Mr. Bennett, you made a connection with him. You gave him the best day he'd had in a very long time. You did a good thing."

"How do you do this? How do you lose patients and still keep going?"

"That's a good question. It's not easy. Sometimes you get close to patients even though you know there is nothing you can do to save them. That's when you close a door and have a good cry. You try and remember the good, the days you know you helped. Then you move on to the next patient. You just put one foot in front of the other."

"Thanks, Gloria."

"You're welcome, Mr. Bennett."

"Richard."

Richard knocked on Emily's door and sighed with relief when he heard her voice.

"Come in."

"Hi, Emily."

"Suit! You're back."

"I told you I'd come back," he said as he propped open the door.

"I thought maybe my Mom scared you off."

"I don't scare that easily." He set the bags on a chair. "I brought you something." He pulled a large teddy bear in a Santa suit from the bag. She took a look at the bear and looked at him. He could see what she was thinking.

"I know, you're ten not two, but it's Christmas and he's kind of cute." He saw a slight smile.

"I suppose. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I also brought you something that I think is a little more grownup." He pulled a dark brief case and set it on her tray table. He opened the lid and Emily gasped. Maybe he got it right.

"This is for me?"

"Yes, it is." He smiled as she moved her hand over the contents. He'd gone to an art store and told them to give him the best of everything for someone who liked to draw. There were dozens of high-end pencils in every imaginable color. There were blank sketch books and charcoals.

"Why?"

"Why what?" he asked.

"Why would you do this?"

"Because you said you like to draw."

"These cost a lot of money."

"Do you like them?"

She looked at her new kit and smiled. "Sure, they're great."

"That's all that matters," he said.

"What's all that matters?"

Carolyn Grace walked into her daughter's room. He was prepared for her to be ticked off at him since he'd had her boss tell her to report here. "Hello, Mrs. Grace."

"Mom, look at what the suit got me."

"Emily, you mustn't call him that. This is Mr. Bennett."

"Yeah, I know. It's on his badge."

"Mr. Bennett owns the store where I work."

Emily studied him for a moment. "Oh, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"How he could afford to buy me these. Look, Mom. Aren't they awesome?" She grabbed her Santa Bear. "He brought me this too."

"That was very nice of him," she said through gritted teeth.

"Emily, I think your mom and I need to have a talk."

"Definitely," Caroline growled.

"We'll be back." He grabbed one of the bags and walked toward an employee lounge. He held open the door for her and closed it behind them.

"Do you want to explain why you had my supervisor tell me to report here. She made a big deal of saying I'd be on the clock. Do you know how that looks? What is going on?"

“Please, have a seat.” He pulled out a file and set it on the table. “I looked into your situation.”

“My situation?”

“Concerning Emily.” He could see she was about to protest so he held up his hand. “Before you start let me tell you up front, I completely violated your privacy. I’ve made calls and done things that are totally out of line, starting with bringing you here. Listen to what I have to say first. Beat me up later.” He was satisfied she wasn’t going to immediately pounce when she sat back against her chair. “Okay, first. I looked into getting you insurance through the company. Unfortunately, since Emily’s condition is pre-existing the insurance wouldn’t cover it.” Carolyn’s expression fell. “Let me finish. Insurance won’t cover it, but I will.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve spoken with the hospital and gotten the financial commitment forms, which I have signed. I’ve spoken with her doctors,”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“I’m a big shot and I’m on the board. When I call, people answer. Her doctors told me what would be required for her recovery. She needs round the clock care in the beginning in a favorable environment. You will also need care after your donation. I looked at your file and saw where you live. I think we can both agree there are better locations in the city.”

“How dare...”

He held up his hand. “I’m not done. I own the building I live in. There is an available two-bedroom apartment which I will give you and Emily for a year, rent-free of course. I will provide the nursing care you will both require. I will also continue your salary.” He pushed a file toward her. “I had my lawyer working all night on this. It is a document that outlines everything I’ve just said. Take a look at it. If you have any questions or requirements let me know.”

She looked at the file and then looked at him. “Who the hell do you think you are?”



“I think I’m a giant pain in the ass. But I’m a rich pain in the ass.”

“No, this isn’t right. You can’t buy your way into heaven with my kid.”

“I’ve never really given heaven any thought. Maybe I’m trying to do one thing right. I want to help her. I need to help her. Are you going to turn down this chance to save your daughter because I’m...”?

“A pompous ass?”

He chuckled. “You aren’t the first person to call me that. You aren’t even the first to say it this week. All of it is true. Are you going to let me help you and Emily?”

She looked at the file and then back at him. “I still have to read this.”

“Of course. But you’ll let me help you?”

Carolyn sighed and looked at the file. “I can’t very well say no. You may be her only chance.”

Richard found he wasn't as focused on the sales numbers as he should be. He should be listening to his executive staff telling him about the Christmas sales. Instead he was thinking about Carolyn and Emily. He'd gotten a moving company to help Carolyn pack up her apartment. He somehow managed to convince her that moving Emily in to the new place before Christmas would be better for her recovery. The doctors said it would be a couple of weeks before Emily was recovered enough from her infection to proceed with the transplant.

"Richard, did you hear me?"

He looked at Mark Peters. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I was saying that our sales are up fifteen percent over last year. Our targeted advertising seems to be working."

"That's very good news. Do you have the number broken down by time frame for last year?"

"Yes, for what time frame?"

"Christmas Eve after five p.m. What is the percentage of the day's sales for that time period?"

Mark looked at his file. "It's five percent of the day's sales."

"Only five percent?"

"It's averages about twenty-five thousand per store."

"Huh."

"Do you want a last-minute push?" asked Michael Corbett, his head of marketing.

"No, actually, I don't." He looked at Sandy Jeffers. "I want you to send a companywide email. All stores will be closing at five p.m. on Christmas Eve so our employees can spend time with their families. Also, tell the employees that anyone who'd been scheduled for those hours will still be paid."

Sandy smiled. "Yes, sir."

Everyone else looked at him like he was crazy. “Ah, sir, we’ve already advertised we’d be open until eight.”

“It’s still a week until Christmas. Make signs for all the stores that we will be closing at five. Work up a statement we can release to the press.”

“Yeah, I can make that work,” said Michael. “Richard Bennett is Santa to employees.”

“No.”

“No?”

“This isn’t about me. This is about our employees. Make sure that the press release is to make our customers aware of the change in hours, that’s all. I want to see it before it goes out.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I think we’re done.” Everyone gathered their things and left the conference room. Everyone except Sandy. She walked toward him.

“I’ll draft the email and forward to you before sending it out.”

“Thanks.”

Sandy was studying him and smiling. “I don’t know what’s going on with you lately. I’ve known you for twenty years and I’ve never seen you like this. I like it.” She leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Merry Christmas, Richard.”

“Merry Christmas, Sandy.”

Richard managed to get through a series of conference calls with the district managers of the stores, explaining why they were closing early on Christmas eve. He was anxious to get home. Carolyn should be moved in by now and he wanted to make sure everything was in place. He decided to go the sales floor and pick up a housewarming gift. As he walked the floor, he noticed the clerks were watching him. Most were smiling and even a few waved. He walked up to the candy counter and spotted one of the women from the café. He glanced at her name tag. "Hello, Jane."

"Mr. Bennett. We just found out about Christmas Eve. Thank you, so much."

"You're very welcome."

"How can I help you?"

"I'd like a nice gift basket for a housewarming."

"Oh, I have just the thing." She pulled a large basket wrapped in clear paper on the counter. "This has all sorts of yummy treats, chocolates, cookies, shortbreads, teas, and my favorite, the best hot chocolate I've ever had."

"That's perfect. Thank you. I'll take it." He handed her a card to pay for a basket he technically already owned. He could have taken it without paying but that would have meant more paperwork for the clerk and for accounting.

Jane handed him his receipt. "Here you go. I'm sure they'll enjoy it."

"I'm sure they will."

Jane gave him a broad smile. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Bennett."

"Merry Christmas, Jane."

Carolyn looked out the window of her new apartment. She'd thought the building manager had made a mistake when he let her into the apartment and she saw the beautifully decorated tree. Surely this belonged to some else. Even when Matt was alive and their future was bright, they'd never dreamed of living in a downtown high rise. A place like this was out of reach for almost everyone. Everyone except Richard Bennett. Only someone like him could afford to sponsor them for a year in a place like this. She just didn't get it. She'd worked at Bennett's for a year and she'd never heard anyone say a kind word about him. He was an arrogant ass who barely acknowledged the people who worked for him. So why was he doing this? He had to have an angle.

What did it matter why he was doing it? All that mattered was Emily would get the transplant. She read every word of the file Bennett had given her. It seemed to be exactly what he said it was. She'd confirmed with the hospital that the forms were legitimate. Richard Bennett was committed to a quarter of a million dollars for Emily's treatment. That didn't include the cost of after care or the cost of the apartment.

Carolyn had talked to Emily about what Bennett had offered, including the new apartment. Even though Emily was normally a cautious person, she was completely on board with Bennett's plan. "Suit wouldn't lie to us, Mom."

"How are you so sure?"

"I trust him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's something in his eyes."

Something in his eyes, Emily said. Carolyn hoped she was right. She had noticed his eyes. So had every other woman she worked with. Richard Bennett may be a first-class jerk, but he was a handsome jerk.

Richard dropped his things at his apartment then went downstairs to Carolyn's new apartment, carrying his gift. She looked surprised when she saw him standing at her door. "Welcome to the building."

"Ah, thank you, come in."

He walked into the apartment and smiled. His crew had completed the Christmas decorations to his specifications. In front of the patio window was a large, decorated tree with wrapped presents underneath. He'd used the services of the store shopper to get appropriate gifts for Emily and Carolyn. "I hope everything is to your liking."

"Of course, it's to my liking. This place would be to anyone's liking but it's too much. The tree, the gifts, it's too much. You shouldn't be doing all this."

"I think we've established I never do anything half way. I assumed with everything that was going on with the move, you wouldn't have had time to decorate for Christmas."

"You assume a hell of a lot."

"Guilty," he smiled. "How is Emily doing?"

"She's doing better. She'll be released tomorrow."

"That's excellent. Is she okay with coming to a new place? I'm afraid I didn't look into her school district. I'm not sure this district is the same one."

"She had to miss so much regular school I've been homeschooling her this last year."

He watched Carolyn as she placed the gift basket on the coffee table. She was amazing. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Everything. Working, homeschooling, running back and forth to doctors and hospitals. I'm fairly certain there isn't anything you can't do."

Her chin began to quiver and she turned away. "I can't give her what she needs."

Richard turned him to face him. "You've given her everything. Emily's a smart, funny, gifted girl. She's obviously well loved. Now you're giving her your own kidney."

"I wouldn't be able to without you doing all of this." She wiped at the tears that ran down her cheeks. "Why? Why do you care? Why are you doing all of this? This isn't like you. We all walk by your portrait every day. There you are, starting at us with your arms crossed in your thousand dollar suit. You never even speak to a sales clerk let alone do all of this, so why? Why now, why us?"

"Honestly, I'm not really sure. Maybe it's because I've finally taken a good look at myself and I didn't like what I saw." He smiled when Carolyn rolled her eyes. "Or maybe it's because you and your daughter are the only two people who have the nerve to call me on my shit."

Carolyn managed a smile. "You told me someone else called you a pompous ass."

"That was my lawyer after I mouthed off to the judge in traffic court. Then he quit."

"And that's how you wound up with community service."

"Exactly."

"Wow, you really do know how to win friends and influence people." She smiled and shook her head. "I haven't done grocery shopping yet but I can offer you a soda."

"How about I order Chinese? I missed lunch and I'm starving." He saw she was standing with her hands on her hips, staring at him. "Carolyn, you need to accept the fact that I'm going to be underfoot for the foreseeable future. That includes ordering take out."

"Fine. I'm too tired to argue, Mr. Bennett."

"I think it's time you call me Richard." Thirty minutes later they were enjoying several dishes from the China Dragon.

"There must be somewhere else you're suppose to be right now," said Carolyn as she grabbed the last egg roll.

"There are places I could be. There aren't places I'd rather be."

“Are you insane!”

Richard looked up from his desk to see his red-faced father standing in front of him. “Good morning, Dad.”

“Don’t good morning me. What is this shit that you’ve move a woman and her child into our building?”

“My building. I own it.”

“It has my name on it.”

“It’s my name too.”

“What is the story with this woman? Is this your kid?”

“No, she’s not my child!”

“Then why are you supporting them?”

“Emily needs a kidney transplant or she’s going to die. Do you understand that? A ten-year-old child will die. Her mother, Carolyn, one of our employees, is giving her one of her kidneys. I’m making sure that will happen.”

“You’re paying for the surgery too! You’ve lost your mind.”

Richard stared at his father. He’d never had a conflict like this with him. They were always on the same page. Maybe that was his problem. He took a breath and stood. “Dad, I own Bennett Towers so I can give an apartment to whoever I damn well please. I am paying for Emily’s surgery out of my own funds, not corporate funds. So, like it or not, you don’t have a say in any of this.”

“You carry my name. You’re taking some homeless woman into your home. It’s an embarrassment to our family.”

Richard shook his head. “If that’s true, then we are the embarrassment, not Emily and Carolyn. I’m not going to explain myself any further. Frankly, I don’t have to. If you are embarrassed by my helping someone who needs it then that’s your problem, not



mine.” He closed the file he’d been working on. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Emily is coming home from the hospital today. I’m expected.” He grabbed his coat and walked past his father. His heart ached when he heard him mutter,

“Unbelievable.”

Was it so unbelievable that Richard would want to do something for someone? Had he always been as cold and unfeeling as his father? What had he been doing with his life for the last forty years?

Richard changed into jeans and a sweater before going down to Carolyn’s apartment. He’d stopped at the florist on the way home. He hoped she would like what he chose. Carolyn opened the door and actually greeted with him with a smile. He was making progress.

“Oh my. Those are lovely.”

“I’m glad you think so, but they’re not for you. Is she home?”

“Yes, she is. Emily, you have a guest.”

He was surprised to see Emily come out of her room wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He’d never seen her in street clothes. “Welcome home,” he smiled as he handed her the flowers.

“These are for me?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Wow, thanks, Suit.”

“You’re very welcome.” He looked at Carolyn and smiled. “I think I’m stuck with that nickname.”

“I think so,” she grinned. “Emily, let me take those. I think I have a vase in the cabinet.” She walked into the kitchen and found a vase for the flowers. She set them on

the kitchen island. "Can I offer you something? A soda or coffee? I managed a trip to the grocery today."

"A soda would be fine, thank you." He sat down at the island and Emily joined them. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. I don't have to take that nasty medicine anymore so Mom's making my favorite, spaghetti."

"That's great."

"Would you like to join us? There's plenty," said Carolyn.

"I'd like that, thank you."

"Emily, why don't you get that picture you made for Mr. Bennett."

"Sure." Emily jumped off her chair and ran out of the kitchen.

"She seems to be doing well."

"Yeah, for now."

"What did she say about having the transplant?"

"Not much other than she'd be glad to have it over with."

"So would you."

"Absolutely."

Emily came back to the kitchen with a page that had been ripped out of her new sketch book. "Here, Suit. This is for you."

He looked at the picture and was amazed. It was a sketch of him. It was rough but he easily recognized himself. "Emily, this is wonderful. You're gifted."

"You really like it?"

He looked at Emily and smiled. "I really do. I've never had a more wonderful picture." The child's grin went straight to his heart. He glanced at Carolyn and caught a look he didn't quite understand.

Richard had dinner at the best restaurants all over the world, but he'd never had a meal he'd enjoyed more. The food was good but the company was better. They laughed at his story of explaining to a disappointed, elderly female patient that he would not be examining her.

"How is your community service going?" asked Carolyn.

"Okay I guess. Lisa, the woman in charge, hasn't yelled at me lately."

"That's good," said Emily. "Do they mind you not being at work?"

"Well, I'm in charge, so even if people mind, they can't say anything."

"Is that why you said Mom doesn't have to come into work, because you're in charge?"

He looked at Carolyn who didn't seem to want to weigh in on this. "I think you and your mother have had a rough time. I'm in a position to make it easier, so I am. That included making sure your mom could stay home to take care of you."

"Mom told me you're paying for my surgery, and the new apartment and everything."

"Yes."

"You must be really rich."

"Emily Grace!"

"What, Mom? He must be. This is a really nice apartment. Much nicer than our other one." She looked at him. "So, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Huh, that's cool."

"It doesn't suck," he replied. Emily giggled and Carolyn glared. "If there is anything you need, you let me know."

“Well...”

“Emily!”

Richard smiled. “It’s okay. What would you like to ask?”

“I’ve never seen the ocean.”

Carolyn put her head in her hands. “That’s it. I may die of embarrassment, right here, right now.”

“It’s all right, Carolyn. Emily, I have a condo in Miami. It’s very nice, right on the beach. How about as soon as the doctors give you both the all clear after your surgeries, I send you down for a nice vacation.”

“That would be great!” Emily jumped up and gave him a big hug. “Thanks, Suit.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Emily, that’s enough. Go in and get ready for bed.”

“Mom! It’s still early.”

“You’ve had a big day and I don’t want you to tire yourself out.”

“But Suit is still here!”

“Emily, I live just upstairs. You’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

Her shoulders dropped, knowing she was defeated. “Okay.”

Richard took the chance to give her another hug. “Thank you for my picture. I’m going to find the perfect place to hang it.”

“You’re welcome.” Emily left them in the kitchen and he began helping with the dishes. He paused for a moment, wondering when had he ever helped with the dishes.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Carolyn. “Emily got carried away with herself. This is all so new.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. And I meant it about the condo. I will send you there as soon as you both get the all clear. I like seeing her happy.”

Carolyn turned from the dishes and looked at him. Then she surprised him by kissing his cheek. "Thank you for caring about my kid."

Richard smiled. "How could I not?" He held up his picture. "She made me look very dashing."

The next few days went by quickly. Between work at the store and the hospital, Richard barely had time to check in on Emily and Carolyn. He'd given the manager and the concierge orders to make sure they looked out for them. He needed to call his parents about Christmas Eve. He could have used the excuse he was too busy to call but the truth was he was in no hurry to talk to his father. But he couldn't take his anger out on his mother.

"Hi. Mom. Sorry I haven't called but you know how busy this time of year is for the store."

"I know, dear."

"What time for dinner tomorrow?"

"Ahh...about that. Your father booked us on a flight to London. We leave in a few hours. We're going to spend the holidays at the Dorchester."

Richard's heart skipped. "We're you going to call before you fled the country or were you just going to let me show up to a dark house?"

"Richard, dear, you have to understand. Your father is very upset about all this. Everyone at the club heard about your...trouble."

"I'm visiting patients at the hospital, not locked up in the county jail."

"I know dear, but you know how people can be. They say things that are very hurtful."

"Yes, Mom," he sighed. "I know."

"We'll be back after the New Year. We'll see you then."

"Yes, Mom. I'll see you then. Have a nice trip."

"Thank you, dear. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Mom." He disconnect the call and stared out the window of his office. The city was bright with Christmas lights. The car lights traveling down Broad Street blurred through tears.

Richard went from department to department, greeting all the clerks and thanking them for their work. He laughed at the clerks' stunned expressions when he lent a hand at a few of the busier counters. He'd worked these counters when he was a kid, learning the business, but he hadn't done it in years.

The hectic nature of the floor was just what he needed to take his mind off his call to his mother. Maybe he had it coming. He should have called sooner. Maybe he could have smoothed things over. He looked up and saw a mother walking through the sales floor, holding her child and letting her see all the decorations. Bennett's always won rave reviews for their elaborate displays. Then he noticed the woman wasn't carrying any packages. She was making sure her child didn't touch anything. She wasn't buying, she was looking. When she looked closer at her worn clothes, he realized she couldn't afford to shop here. But the funny thing was, they still looked like they were enjoying themselves. Each counter had a supply of plush teddy bears for last minute gifts. He got a large shopping bag and filled it. He went to the candy counter and grabbed a bunch of small boxes of mixed chocolates. He walked past the surprised clerks until he found the woman and her child.

"Hello," he smiled. He pulled a teddy out of the bag and handed it to the little girl. "Merry Christmas." The little girl giggled, but the woman looked suspicious. He pulled out a box of chocolates and handed it to her. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you," she smiled. "Who are you?"

"It's okay," he smiled. "I work here." As he moved on he noticed the head security guard staring at him. "Hi Barry. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, sir."

"Please let all your staff know that if you see anyone coming out of the store with bears and candy that it's fine."

"Yes, sir."

Richard walked around the sales floor to find a number of people like the first woman, just admiring the decorations. He refilled his bag several times, giving out a

couple of dozen stuffed toys and boxes of candies. It was near five when he got back to his office to gather his things. It was the best Christmas Eve he'd ever had at the store.



Carolyn wrapped the gifts the rest of their gifts, including a couple they'd gotten for Richard. Emily held up another picture. "Do you think he'll like it, Mom?"

She smiled at her daughter's work. Maybe it was her mother's pride but she really thought Emily was gifted. "It's wonderful, Em. I think he'll like it very much."

"I love the pencils he gave me. They're much better than the ones I had. Do you think he'll come to dinner?"

"Oh, I don't think so. I'm sure he has lots of friends and his family to spend the holiday with."

Emily looked aghast. "You mean you didn't even ask him?"

"Well, no. He's an important man."

"Mom, he's our friend. You need to go ask him. He'll think it's weird if we don't."

"I don't even know his apartment number."

"10A"

"Excuse me? How do you know that?"

"When I went to get the mail from the box, I saw 10A is the only one without a name. Suit said he lived right above us. We're 9A so it must be 10A."

Carolyn shook her head, unable to refute her logic. "Okay, I'll go see if he's home. Stay put." She walked upstairs to the tenth floor and looked for 10A. She took a breath and knocked on the door, prepared to make apologies. She was relieved when Richard opened the door. He looked like he'd just gotten home for work.

"Carolyn, this is a nice surprise. Come in."

She looked around and saw what she expected, a designer decorated bachelor apartment, with one glaring exception. Above the fireplace was the picture Emily had drawn. It had been framed and been given a place of honor. "You really did hang it up?"

"Of course, I did."

“I thought maybe you’d stick it on the fridge with some magnets. Not have it framed and hang it in your living room.”

“I really like it.”

“I guess so,” she smiled. “Look, Emily sent me up. She’s very cross with me that I didn’t invite you to Christmas Eve. I told her that you’d be with your family and friends but she insisted.”

“Did she?” he smiled.

“Yes. She said you’re our friend and you’d think it’s weird if we didn’t ask.”

“What do you think? Have we become friends?”

She had to smile. “Yes, I think we have.”

“Despite my being a pompous ass and pushing my way into your life.”

“Despite that.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Is Emily the only one who wants me to come to dinner?”

“Well, of course I would like it,” she grinned. “You’re not unpleasant company, for a pompous ass. So, consider the invitation to dinner tonight extended. I’ll tell her you have plans.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

“What? What about your family?”

“My mother informed me yesterday that she and my father will be spending the holidays in London.”

“Oh. Well, your friends,” she paused. “I’m sure your girlfriend wants to spend time with you.”

Richard grinned and stepped closer. “To be clear, I have no girlfriend. What friends I have are with their families. So, if you really are inviting me, then I would be happy to accept.”

“Great. Dinner is in an hour.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Carolyn walked downstairs and back to her apartment. Emily was still drawing at the kitchen table. “Okay, you got what you wanted. Mr. Bennett is coming for dinner.”

“Yay!”

“Save your yay for after you’ve picked up your room and set the table. I’m going to changed.” She went into her bedroom and dashed into the master bath. She’d have to get ready in a hurry to get her dinner on the table. She looked in the mirror and wondered why she was in such a frenzy. This is a friend, not a date. But he did seem to be making a point about not having a girlfriend. She rolled her eyes. What was she thinking?

An hour later Emily ran to the door and pulled it open. “Suit! You’re here!”

“Hello, Emily. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas. Mom! Suit’s here.”

Carolyn walked out of the kitchen. “Honestly, Em. Hello, Richard.” She smiled at the sight of a relaxed Richard in jeans and a light sweater. He handed her a bottle of wine.

“I brought a little something for the grownups.”

“Ooo. Wonderful. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

Emily grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the tree. “Come on, we have presents for you.”

“Presents for me?”

Carolyn was touched by his look of genuine surprise. “Apparently, you’re on Santa’s nice list.”

Richard gave them a big smile. “It’s only Christmas eve.”

“We always open one gift on Christmas eve to keep this one from jumping out of her skin,” said Caroline.

Emily pulled a large box out from under the tree and handed it to Richard. “This is for you.”

“Thank you. What about the two of you?”

Emily grabbed a small box and handed it to Carolyn. “Here, Mom. This is for you.”

“Thank you, baby. You can open that green one with the gold bow.”

Emily tore open her package and smiled. “Oh, Mom, it’s so pretty.” She turned it so Richard could see the small silver snowflake with a tiny diamond chip in the center.

“I thought it was time you have some grown up jewelry. Come here, I’ll put it on you.” Emily pulled up hair as Carolyn fixed it around her neck. She put her arms around her mother.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, baby.”

“Open yours.”

Carolyn smiled as she opened her box. She was surprised at what Emily had picked up. She hadn’t given her that much money to spend. In the box were a pretty pair of silver hoop earrings.

“Do you like them?”

“They’re perfect sweetheart. I’m going to put them on right now.” She put them in her ears and pulled back her hair. “How do they look?”

“Pretty, Mom.”

“Very pretty,” said Richard with a smile.

“Open yours, Suit!”

Richard unwrapped his gift and pulled off the lid. Then he started to laugh. He held his new sweater up to his chest. It was bright green with a white and red trim and a giant Rudolph with a red nose on the chest. “This is awesome.”

“That’s not all,” said Emily. She pressed the nose and it started to blink.

“We thought you could use a little whimsy.”

“Put it on!”

Carolyn’s heart skipped as Richard pulled off his sweater, revealing a toned body under a tight shirt. He put on his new sweater and put out his arms.

“How do I look?”

Emily was laughing so hard she could barely speak. “Mom, take a picture!”

Carolyn grabbed her phone and aimed it at him. She took a couple of shots and looked at them. The camera loved Richard Bennett. Even in this ridiculous sweater.

“Wait,” he said. He crossed his arms and gave a very severe look, just like his corporate picture.

“Oh, that’s perfect!” she laughed as she clicked more pictures.

“Let me see.” He looked over her shoulder and started to laugh. “Maybe this should be my new portrait for work.”

“It’s better than the one you have now,” said Emily. “Mom showed me when we went shopping. You look mean in the picture. You’re not mean. Maybe it’s the suit.”

Richard smiled. “Maybe it is, Em.”

Richard enjoyed the turkey dinner with all the trimmings almost as much as he enjoyed the company. He was completely at ease with Carolyn and Emily. This was much better than some stuffy party. Emily looked so much better than she had at the hospital, it was hard to believe she was still so sick.

“Are you liking your new place, Emily?”

“Yeah. It’s great. Mom and I don’t have to share a room anymore. And we have our own bathrooms.”

“I can’t get her out of that tub.”

“It has jets! It’s so cool.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“Myron and Brian are really nice.”

“Who?” asked Carolyn.

“The doorman and the consee...consee..”

“Concierge,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Is Brian the one that brought you the milkshake?” asked Carolyn.

“Yeah. I was getting the mail and he asked if there was anything he could get for me, but I said no. I said the only thing I wanted was a vanilla milkshake but I was sure he didn’t have one behind his desk. How was I to know he’d go out and get me one?” She looked at Richard and smiled. “It was really good.”

“I don’t want you taking advantage of people,” said Carolyn.

“Suit, are people being nice to us because of you?”

“Honestly, I’ve told the staff to look out for you. That means to keep an eye out for you and make sure you’re safe. If they choose to be pleasant and bring you the occasional

milkshake, well I'll say that's because you're nice people." He smiled and touched her cheek. "Who wouldn't like you, short stuff?"

He helped Carolyn and Emily pack away the leftover food and dried the dishes. "How about we have our pie in the living room?" asked Carolyn.

"Sounds good. Why don't I top off our wine?"

"Even better," she smiled.

"Are you going to stay for the movie?" asked Emily.

"What movie?"

"Every year we watch a Christmas movie. This year it's 'A Christmas Story,'" said Carolyn.

"What's it about?"

The girls looked at each other. "You've never seen 'A Christmas Story?'"

"I don't think so."

"Now, you have to stay," said Emily.

Richard took a spot on the couch in front of the big screen TV. It was one of the things he'd made sure was installed before they moved in, along with the cable and Wi-Fi. Carolyn sat in the middle and Emily curled up against her. They ate their pie and laughed at the funniest Christmas movie he'd ever seen. As the movie ended, he glanced over to see Emily asleep on Carolyn's lap. "She must be tired."

"She wears out pretty fast." Carolyn brushed a stray hair from her cheek. "It's easy to forget what's she's going through. I should get her into bed."

"Don't wake her. I'll lift her." He picked Emily up in his arms and carried her into her bedroom.

“Thanks. I’ll just be a minute.” A few minutes later Carolyn joined him on the couch and took a deep sip of her wine.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just...the hospital called. They’ve scheduled our surgery for January tenth. I guess that’s when everyone’s back from vacation.”

“Are you okay about this?”

“I’m fine. It’s my daughter’s only chance at a life.” She took another sip of wine. “There is something I want to talk about.”

He could see her hands were shaking. He took her hand in his. “It’s okay. Just talk to me.”

“I know you’ve made sure that we’re going to have the best surgeons and the best care. But with any surgery, there’s risk.”

“Emily’s going to be fine.”

“It’s about me. My husband and I were both foster kids. Emily doesn’t have anyone except me. If something were to happen to me...” She tried to hold herself together.

“Carolyn, you’re going to be okay too.”

“If I’m not, if something happens to me, would you consider becoming Emily’s legal guardian?”

Richard stared at her, dumbfounded. He’d never been asked to do anything so important.

“She trusts you.” Carolyn looked at him and his heart broke open. “I trust you. I see how much you care about her. I could go into this okay knowing Emily would be cared for. That she’d be loved.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I know this is a lot to ask of you, especially after everything you’ve done for us. Just think about it is all I ask.”

He threaded his finger through hers. “I don’t need to think about it. Of course, I’ll do it.” He leaned in close “I swear to you I will always protect her. I give you my word.”



Carolyn put her arms around him. "Oh, Richard, thank you."

"I'll call my attorney and ask him to draw up papers for you to review."

She pulled back and smiled. "I thought he quit."

"I've asked him to reconsider his resignation. He said if I can stop being a pompous ass long enough to stay out of trouble, he'd consider it."

"I'd say you've made a good start."

"Thank you."

The TV station changed to a new movie and Carolyn looked up. "It's past midnight. It's Christmas." She looked at him and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Bennett."

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Grace."

She smiled and gave him a gentle kiss. He touched her cheek and returned the kiss. The tender kiss deepened and he pulled her close. He lost himself in her until she pulled back.

"I shouldn't. I'm still working for you, you're taking care of us. We shouldn't be involved."

Richard smiled and brushed her cheek with his hand. "Carolyn, do you think I'm taking advantage of you?"

"No, I kissed you."

"Do you think you're taking advantage of me?"

"I just asked you to be my daughter's guardian, even after everything you've already done for us."

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "Do I strike you as someone who does things he doesn't want to do?"

"If the judge hadn't given you community service none of this would be happening."

“Maybe I wouldn’t have met you, and that would have been the real crime. No one forced me to keep coming back to visit Emily. There is something about her that makes me smile. She makes me want to do better.” He kissed her hand again. “So do you. I think you are an amazing, beautiful woman. You’re smart and funny and you call me on my crap. I’ve wanted to kiss you since the day I met you.”

“Really?”

“Really, but I didn’t want you to think I assumed I had the right. Carolyn, did you want to kiss me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Do you still want to?”

He smiled when she blushed. “Yes.”

“I still want to kiss you, but I won’t.”

“What?” she asked.

“You can let me know when you’re ready. You’re worth waiting for.”

Richard knocked on Carolyn's door at nine a.m. He'd promised her to be on time for Christmas breakfast because Emily could only wait so long before opening the rest of her presents. "Merry Christmas, Emily."

"Merry Christmas, Suit!"

Carolyn came out of the kitchen. "Merry Christmas, Richard."

"Merry Christmas, Carolyn."

"He's here. Can we open presents now?"

"In a minute. The coffee's ready."

"Yes, please," he smiled as he followed her in to the kitchen. As soon as they were alone, Carolyn turned and gave him a tender kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Richard," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas," he smiled.

"Mom! Come on!" Emily yelled from the living room.

"I see what you mean," he chuckled. She poured him a mug of coffee and he added two sugars. "Mmm. Perfect."

She picked up her mug and nodded. "We better get in there."

They took up places on the couch while Emily was already under the tree. The first thing he noticed was there were three stockings, one with the name 'Suit'. Emily picked it up and handed it to him. "For me?"

"Sure. Everyone gets a stocking."

He smiled as he unwrapped inexpensive supermarket candy and a tree ornament of a jolly Santa.

Emily was hanging her ornament on the tree. "You can hang that on your tree."

"I don't have a tree."

Emily looked confused. "What? Here, hang yours next to mine."

He placed his ornament next to Emily's and Carolyn put hers on the next branch. He looked at the three ornaments together and then at the two girls. He realized he'd never felt more a part of Christmas or a part of a family than he did at this moment.

"We have presents to open." Emily started passing packages to her mother and stacked up a few for herself. He was surprised again to have Emily hand him two more boxes.

He looked at Carolyn. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"Of course we did," said Emily.

"They're just small things," Carolyn said quietly.

He opened a box and started laughing. "Let me guess, you picked these out, Em." He pulled out a pair of slippers that looked like bear paws. He kicked off his sneakers and pulled on his new slippers. "These are great." He opened the other box and found a dark blue sweater. "This is very nice, thank you."

"Mom said it would look nice because of your eyes."

"Emily!"

"What? That's what you said."

Richard thought Carolyn looked adorable when she blushed. "Thank you. I like it very much. Now you two should have at it." That was all the encouragement Emily needed to dive into her gifts. Her mother had gotten her some new clothes and 'grownup' shoulder bag she'd been asking for. They began to open the presents he'd bought. He'd told Marie, the store shopper, to pick out appropriate gifts for them. She'd told him that she knew Carolyn from work and would be able to select things that she would like. Apparently, she was right because they seemed to like their matching pajamas and bathrobes. There were a couple of new sweaters, hats and gloves. Emily got a Christmas bracelet and Carolyn got a silver necklace she seemed to like very much. There was one last gift for Carolyn that he'd chosen himself. She gasped and her eyes teared at the sight of a tall Waterford crystal vase.

“Oh, Richard, this is so beautiful.”

“That’s really pretty, Mom. Look how it sparkles.”

“I thought it would look nice, with the new place and all.”

“It’s perfect, thank you.” Much to his surprise she leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“You’re very welcome.”

“There’s one more present,” said Emily. She got up and went into her room. She came back with a small shirt box and handed it to him.

“More? You’re spoiling me,” he smiled. He opened the box and pulled away the tissue. “Oh, Em,” he whispered. She’d drawn him another picture. It was of the three of them. They were sitting together on the couch. He was wearing his Rudolph Christmas sweater. Even though it was done by a ten-year-old girl, the picture showed real talent. He could see in the picture the love he felt for these two. He may have needed the picture to tell him but now he had no doubt. He loved them both. “This is beautiful,” he said through a cracked voice.

“You really like it?”

“Come here,” he said as he held out his arms. “I love it and I love you.”

“I love you, too, Suit.”

“Do you think, maybe, you could call me Richard?”

Emily looked at him and smiled. “Nah.”

Richard helped with washing up the dishes. Carolyn had made them an enormous Christmas breakfast of pancakes, bacon and eggs.

“There’s coffee and I got some cinnamon buns.”

He laughed and patted his stomach. “I’ll have to work that breakfast off.”

She gave a sly smile. “You’re fine.” They walked out to living room to find Emily asleep on the couch, cuddled with the Santa teddy bear he brought her in the hospital. “As much as she says she’s a big girl now, she sleeps with that bear every night.”

“I guess the excitement wore her out. Do you want me to carry her into her room?”

“She could use a nap.”

Richard picked up Emily and carried her to her bed. Carolyn covered as Emily stirred. “Mom, I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Just close your eyes for a little while. I promise to wake you.”

“Okay,” she whispered as she pulled her bear tight against her.

They closed the door behind them and sat down on the couch. “I don’t want her to push herself too hard. She needs to be strong for the surgery,” said Carolyn.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay.” She reached for his hand. “You’ve taken so much of the burden from us that I can focus on what she needs.”

“I’m glad,” he smiled.

“What about you? You’re running yourself ragged between the store and the hospital and us, you must be exhausted.”

“I’m fine. I’ve got a good team at the store. We’ve done well with this year’s targeted advertising but it’s still a struggle to keep up with competition with the internet.”

“The problem is...no, I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“It’s not my place.”

“I want your opinion. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t ask.”

“Okay, the problem is Bennett’s is still focusing on the Main Line society client, no matter where your store is located. You have beautiful merchandise that very few people can afford. I know your employees can’t. I certainly couldn’t.”

Richard was shocked. It never occurred to him that his own employees couldn’t afford to shop in his stores. “Do you have any ideas of what should change?”

“I would target the changing demographics of your stores. For instance, in your Philadelphia store, I would open a quinceanera department.”

“Quinceanera? What’s that?”

“When a Latina turns fifteen the family has a quinceanera. It’s a very big deal. It can cost as much as a wedding. The dresses are very elaborate, then there’s the guest’s dresses. Philadelphia has a large Latino community. It would bring in a large customer base that wouldn’t normally shop at your store.”

“It sounds like you know a lot about this.”

“My husband and I had a small dress shop. We did a lot of business with quinceaneras.”

“What happened?”

“We were doing well until Michael got sick. I couldn’t keep the store going by myself. The bank took the store and our home. The apartment we were in was the only thing I could afford.”

He took her hand. “I’m sorry you’ve been through so much,”

“I still have my girl,” she smiled.

“Yes, you do. So, tell me, what other ideas do you have for the stores?”

“Well,” she smiled. “I wouldn’t assume every line you buy will work in every store. For instance, who was the genius who decided to put surfing gear in the Philadelphia store?”

Richard chuckled. “That would be my head of operations. They sold well in our other stores.”

“Let me guess, in your California stores, maybe in Florida.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s where they surf.”

“There’s an ocean less than three hours from here.”

“The Jersey shore is not known for its giant waves.”

“Point taken.” He took a sip of coffee and sat back. “How would you feel about working up a plan for a quinceanera shop?”

“Sure. I could write something up for you.”

“I mean a real plan that we’d could use to put this into place. Then once it’s up and running and we have an idea how it’s working, we could put them in the New York, LA and Miami stores.”

She looked startled. “Yeah, sure. I could get in touch with my old contacts. I could put together a plan.”

“I’ll get you a laptop so you can link up to the store. That way you can work from here.”

“It sounds like you’re talking about a real position.”

“I am.”

“I’m happy to work up some ideas but you may want a professional with training for something like this.”



“Carolyn, listening to people like that has made us stagnant. Bennett’s needs fresh ideas. Your ideas. I’m going to make you a director. Let’s call it target merchandising. That way you’d only answer to me.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Quite possibly but I’m serious about the offer. I’m also serious about my store. I genuinely think you have some great ideas. If Bennett’s is going to thrive, we need to move forward, not stay stuck in the past.”

“What about...” she looked away as she blushed bright red.

“What about us?”

“Yeah.”

He smiled. “I know it’s an unorthodox situation, but I think we’d work well together. I also think we could fit our relationship in there too.”

“Our relationship?” she grinned.

“Our relationship, whatever you want it to be.”

“What if I want this?” she leaned in and gave him a kiss.

He put his hand to her cheek and whispered, “Then I’d say we want the same thing.”

Richard sat down in his seat in the conference room. This would be their post Christmas breakdown. What worked, what didn't. He startled Becca when he thanked her for the coffee and Danish. "Did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I got engaged." She held out her hand to show off her new ring.

"Wow, that's great. Congratulations." He stood and gave her a hug. "Make sure you register here so I know what to get you."

The other executives filed in. "What's going on?" asked Sandy.

"Becca got engaged." Sandy congratulated her with a hug. The men merely grunted acknowledgements.

They sat down to begin their meeting. He heard from his head of operations, Anthony Borden. Anthony had been with the company forever. Richard thought it may have been the only job he'd ever had. He paid Anthony a good income which he did not spend on clothes. His hair, always in need of a trim, was slicked back. His suits made him look like he was twelve and he stole them out of his dad's closet. When Richard had suggested Anthony talk to his tailor, he looked at him like he'd spoken a foreign language. They went through the sales numbers for the holidays.

"We were up ten percent over last year," said Anthony, "but it would have been more if we'd been open those last three hours."

"Not enough to balance against our expenses."

"The closing made the employees very happy," said Sandy.

"Of course, they were happy. Any excuse not to work," said Anthony. "We need to start getting rid of people who aren't making their sales and bring in people who can sell."

"It may not be the salespeople. It may be what we're asking them to sell," said Richard. He noted Anthony looked like he'd just punched him in the face. "I think we can thank Michael and his team for their targeted advertising. We saw an increase of twenty percent in the focus areas. We're now going to take that idea in a logical direction. I have

been presented a new concept by our employee, Carolyn Grace, for a targeted merchandising program. It would start in the Philadelphia with a quinceanera shop.”

“A what?” asked Anthony.

“A quinceanera is a party that’s thrown when a Latina girl turns fifteen. It’s a very big deal,” said Sandy.

“That it is,” said Richard. “It can be as big an event as a wedding. Philadelphia has a large Latino community. Carolyn has experience with this. She and her late husband had a dress shop in the city and did a large business with the Latino community. Carolyn will be our new director of targeted merchandising.” He looked at Anthony. “She will answer to me.”

“Richard, merchandising is under my authority.”

“And everyone is under my authority.”

“Is this that woman you’ve set up in the towers? Everyone is talking about it,” said Anthony. “Really, Richard, there are easier ways to pay for a girlfriend than to give her a corporate title. I mean, seriously, if you’re that desperate I know some women at the club who are much more suitable.” Anthony smiled at his colleagues, who were all red-faced with embarrassment.

Richard could feel himself ready to explode. A few weeks ago, he might have decked him. Not now. He realized it would serve no purpose, but he knew what would. He took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly. “Anthony, you’ve been with Bennett’s a long time.”

“Thirty-five years,” he smiled again.

“It’s time you take your pension and retire.” Richard heard the others gasp. Anthony went bright red.

“And if I don’t?”

“You’re fired.”

“You can’t do this! Your father won’t allow it! He knows about loyalty!”

Richard pounded his hands on the table and leaned closer. "My father has nothing to do with this company any more. I bought him out when he retired. I own Bennett's, every last one of them. Anthony, you have two choices here, leave with a pension or leave with nothing. Either way, you are gone. Now get out." He waited for Anthony to leave the room before he continued. "We need new ideas if Bennett's isn't going to go the way of Gimbel's and Wanamaker's. I will listen to thoughts any of you would like to present toward that end. Also, I want department heads to have serious discussions with their sales staff. These are the people on the front lines. Find out from them what are customers are saying. What do they want? He looked at Robert from accounting. "I'd like to see the percentage of employees who are taking advantage of their employee discounts and when they do, how much are they spending?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, if anyone has any questions?"

"Yes, how's Carolyn's daughter doing?" asked Sandy.

"She's doing well, all things considered. Thank you for asking. The transplant surgery is scheduled for the tenth. If you could get me a linked laptop for Carolyn. She'd like to start working but she will be doing it from home."

"Of course," said Sandy.

"If that's everything, I think we're done." People began to gather their things. "Sandy, I'd like a moment."

"Yes, Richard?"

"Start the paperwork for Anthony's long over due exit."

"You'll need a replacement. VP of Operations is your second in command. Would you like me to put out an email for anyone who wants to apply?"

"No, I've already made my choice."

"Oh? Who?"

"You."

“Me?” she gasped.

“Yes, you. You’ve been with the company as long as I have. You know me, probably better than I know myself. I need someone as my second who I can trust. I trust you.”

“Wow, ah, thank you. I’ll do my best.”

“You always do. About Carolyn’s position. She’s to have a salary commensurate with the other directors. Of course, put her and her daughter on the company insurance. I know it doesn’t cover now but it will cover things in the future.”

“Is the government picking up the cost of the surgery?” asked Sandy.

He nervously started tucking away his papers. “Ah, no.”

“You’re paying for it?”

Richard looked at Sandy and knew he could trust his friend with the truth. “She was going to die. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Sandy smiled. “I don’t know what’s going on with you the last few weeks but I really do like it.”

“Have I really changed that much?”

“You know what I think it is? You’re no longer your father’s clone. Your father would never think that there could ever be a better way to do things than the way they’d always been done.” She stood and put her hand on his shoulder. “I like the new you.”

He looked up at Sandy and smiled. “Funny thing is, so do I.”

Carolyn and Emily were going into surgery and Richard had never been more frightened in his entire life. They had the best surgeons in the city. He'd done everything he could to make sure they had whatever they might need. He'd gotten them a large room so they could recover together. He hired a private duty nurse for their recovery in the hospital. They would have nursing care at home once they were released. He covered every base. It was what he did. That didn't stop his heart from racing. He took a breath and walked into their room.

"Hey you two. How are you doing?" he asked with a phony smile.

"They gave us medicine," Emily slurred.

Carolyn rubbed her nose. "Yeah, it's feels a little weird."

"That means it's working."

There was a knock on the door and an orderly put his head in. "Somebody call for an Uber?"

"Your ride's here." He walked over to Emily and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Emily."

"I love you too, Suit."

He walked over to Carolyn and took her hand as they watched Emily wheeled out of the room. "She's going to be fine."

She fought to keep her eyes open. "Yeah, she will. This is going to take hours. It's okay if you need to go."

He leaned over her and smiled. "I'm not going anywhere," he gave her a soft kiss then whispered in her ear. "Ever." Her smile told him she'd heard him as they wheeled her away. He sat down in the easy chair and picked up the remote. He flipped channels trying to find something to distract his attention. He couldn't believe how many court shows were on every channel. Didn't people have better things to do than watch people tear at each other?

Why? Why did they have to go through this? They'd already lost so much. He didn't think either would survive without the other. He knew he couldn't survive without them. Finally, he buried his hands and wept.

Three hours later the surgeon came to see him. The upside of being a well-known, rich, pain in the ass, was people were more than happy to accommodate him. "How are they?"

"The surgery went very well. They'll be in recovery for another hour. After that we'll bring them up here. If all goes well, they'll be out in five days."

"Thank you, doctor." He released the breath he felt he'd been holding for hours. He went to the nurse's station to grab what was probably for his fourth cup of coffee.

"Hey. Your blood's gotta' be pure high test by now."

"Hi, Gloria."

"How are they doing?"

"Dr. Scott said they both came through it fine. I'm just waiting for them to come back from recovery."

"That's good to hear. Emily's a good kid."

"The best."

Gloria patted him on the shoulder. "You know, when I met you, I thought you were a tool."

"I still am," he chuckled.

"Maybe," she smiled. "but all in all, you're not bad, for a suit."

"Hah! I'm never going to live that name down."

"Not a chance," she smiled.

The next few days went fine, at least according to the surgeon and the nurses. He didn't like that they were in so much pain. He tried to understand that what they were going through was normal, but he didn't like it.

He'd an early breakfast meeting with Sandy. She was already proving he'd made the right decision in promoting her. She was handling everything he needed done while he was shuttling back and forth between the store and the hospital. He still had to finish his community service. It was becoming more difficult while he was trying to stay with the girls. His girls.

He knocked on the door. "Hey, everybody decent?"

"Come in," said Carolyn.

He came in with two milkshakes and set on down next to Carolyn. He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "How are you doing?"

"Okay. What do we have here?"

"Vanilla milkshakes. I know they're Em's favorite." He walked over to Emily. "Hey, sweetheart. I brought you a milkshake."

"Thanks."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss. "Sweetheart, are you okay?"

"I'm tired."

"Close your eyes. I'll be here when you wake up."

He walked back over to Carolyn. "Don't panic but I think something's wrong. I'm getting your nurse." He found their nurse on the computer at the nurses station. "Excuse me, Hannah? I think Emily isn't feeling well."

"I'll be right there."

He went back into their room and was followed Hannah with a large cart. She took Emily's vitals. She moved over toward Carolyn and Richard. "Her temp is up. I'm going to page Dr. Scott."



Thirty agonizing minutes later, Dr. Scott came into the room. He checked Emily's vitals "Why don't you drink your shake while I talk to your parents," he smiled.

Emily smiled and closed her eyes. "He's not my Dad, yet."

Dr. Scott stood closer to Carolyn's bed. "Her temp is up. I'm going to up her antibiotics."

Carolyn spoke in a whisper. "Is it rejection?"

"Right now, it's just a fever. We are going to keep a close eye on her." Dr. Scott left the room and Hannah came in with a several syringes.

"Mom? Suit? What's going on?"

"It's just a little fever. They're giving you some more medicine."

Richard took her hand in his. "It's going to be fine, sweetheart."

"Suit, I'm scared."

Carolyn got out of her bed and wheeled her IV stand to next to Emily's bed. "Don't you worry, sweetheart. I'm here. It's going to be fine."

"Suit, will you stay?"

"Of course. I'm not going anywhere. You just close your eyes and get some rest. We'll both be here when you wake up."

Emily closed her eyes and held the teddy bear tight against her. She walked back to Carolyn's bed and she sat on the edge. She rested her head on his chest. "I can't lose her," she wept.

"We won't. It's like the doctor said, right now it's just a fever. Now, please. Lay back. You need to keep your strength up for her." He got Carolyn tucked in and she looked up.

"It's Tuesday. Aren't you supposed to do your community service?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it."

Richard watched Carolyn close her eyes as he took up a seat in the arm chair and put the TV on closed caption, so he wouldn't wake the girls. He watched the TV judges ruled on damaged cars and bad tenants. He wondered what Judge Davies would do to him.

It took five days of strong antibiotics and a lot of sleepless nights but Emily got passed the immediate fear of rejection. He held Emily's hand through the high fevers and physical shaking. He covered her with blankets and gave her ice chips. Carolyn wanted to but couldn't risk an infection after her surgery. Hannah tried to take over but he wouldn't let her. "No, I promised her."

One of the happiest days of his life was when he got to take Carolyn and Emily home. Since he couldn't drive so he hired an elegant stretch limo. He got them settled in their apartment and Hannah, the private duty nurse, met them at there.

Carolyn got Emily settled in her room and then went to her room. "Richard, come here." He walked toward her and she put her hands around his neck. He gently put his hands around. "I won't break."

"I don't want to hurt you."

She gave him a soft kiss. "I don't think you ever will."

In all his life, he'd never been given a better compliment.

Carolyn felt like she could finally breathe again. In the few weeks they'd been home, Emily's color had returned. She was moving around the apartment just as if nothing had ever happened. Carolyn was happier than she'd ever been because she knew her daughter was going to be fine. Richard had worked with her on her merchandising plan and was impressed with her attention to detail. She estimated how much square footage the new shop would need to be effective and come up with a list of suppliers.

"Sweetheart, are you sure you're not pushing too hard," he asked.

"No, this is fine. I can do all of this from my spot on the couch. It also keeps my mind off how stiff I am."

"You know you're supposed to go for walks."

"I know but I don't like leaving her," she smiled. "Not yet."

Emily looked up at her from her latest sketch. "Mom, I keep telling you, I'm fine."

"Hey, short stuff. It's our job to worry about you," said Richard. "Hannah is due in a few minutes. Why don't we use the time to go out and have some lunch. We can bring something back for Emily."

"Mom, go. I'll be fine."

They waited until Hannah got there before they walked up to Richard's apartment so he could get his coat. "Come in for a minute," he said.

"Richard, is something wrong? You look nervous."

"No, nothing's wrong, I just wanted us to have a moment alone."

"Oh really?" she smiled as she put her arms around his waist.

He gave her a kiss. "There is something I'd like to talk to you about without an audience. I wanted it to be just us when I told you," he smiled and took a breath. "I'm in love with you."

Carolyn couldn't believe that this powerful CEO looked as nervous as a schoolboy. She touched his cheek. "I'm in love with you too."

He grinned and pulled her into deep kiss. When they finally pulled apart, he took a breath and stood back. "There's something else I want to talk to you about. After lunch I have to go somewhere."

"Okay."

"I have to go to court."

"Is this about your community service?"

"Yes. It may not go well. I didn't finish my eighty hours."

"It's because of us, isn't it? You spent so much time with us you couldn't do your service."

He took her hands in his. "There is nothing more important to me than you and Emily. Nothing, not even a judge, could have kept me away from the two of you. The judge said that if I didn't finish I'd get a week in county jail."

"Oh God," she gasped.

"I don't want you to worry. I'll be fine but I don't want Emily to know. Tell her I had to go on a business trip."

Carolyn rested her head on his chest. She couldn't believe that saving her daughter's life would cost Richard so much more than he'd bargained for.

Richard waited for his turn in front of the judge. He wasn't sure what to expect from a week in jail. It was just seven days, he told himself. He had his girls. He could handle anything.

"The state calls Richard Bennett."

He stood at the defendant's table and stayed quiet as Judge Davies looked over his file. She looked up at him and he had the same uneasy feeling he had weeks ago.

"Mr. Bennett, you're back."

"Yes, your honor."

"Where's your attorney?"

"Ah...I'm on my own today."

"I see that. I also see you did not complete you're eighty hours."

"No, your honor."

"Why not?"

"It's our fault."

Richard turned around to see Carolyn pushing Emily in a wheelchair. Hannah was standing behind them. "What are you doing here? Emily shouldn't be here. It's too much of a risk."

"We weren't going to let you face this alone," said Carolyn.

"Suit, how could you not tell me? I'm not a kid. I should be here."

The judge cleared her throat. "I'm the one who says who should be here and who shouldn't. Who wants to make the introductions?"

"I'm Carolyn Grace and this is my daughter, Emily. We met Richard while my daughter was being treated at the hospital."

Emily looked up at Carolyn. “No, Mom. Let me tell her.” She pushed her wheelchair closer to the bench. “I was really sick. I needed a kidney transplant. My Mom could donate but we didn’t have insurance. Suit took care of everything.”

“Suit?” asked the judge.

“That’s what I call him because he wore a fancy suit to the hospital.”

“I see.”

“He got Mom and me a room together and our own nurse to take care of us. But I got real sick with a fever after the surgery. I was real scared and I asked Suit to stay. He stayed with me and Mom until I was better. He didn’t leave us for days. I’m the reason he didn’t finish.” She pushed a tear off her cheek. “You can’t send him away. You just can’t.” Emily reached for his hand. “We love him.” Richard fought back tears as he kissed the top of her head.

“Thank you for your testimony, Ms. Grace. Mr. Bennett, I have reviewed the report from Lisa Torres, director of patient services.” She read from the report. “Mr. Bennett has been an asset to the patient services program. He has completed all assigned visits with a cheerful attitude, brightening the days of patients who would otherwise have no one. That’s quite the report, Mr. Bennett.”

Richard tried not to smile. He had no idea Lisa would have said something like that about him, hell, that anyone would say that about him.

“It appears that you have taken particular interest in Mrs. Grace and her daughter’s case.”

“He saved my life.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. “Hush, sweetheart.”

“Mr. Bennett, if you still had your expensive attorney, he would explain to you the definition of exigent circumstances.”

“Exi what?” asked Emily.

“It means that staying with you while you were sick was more important than following my orders.” The judge looked at him. “I am dismissing all charges against you and I’m restoring your license.”

Richard gasped. “Thank you, your honor.”

“You were ready to go to jail, weren’t you?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Huh, what do you know? Thank you, Mr. Bennett.”

“Your honor?”

“It’s been a long time since anyone has surprised me. You, sir, have surprised me.” The judge smiled and banged her gavel. “Case dismissed.”

Richard pushed Emily’s wheelchair down the corridor and waited for the elevator. He leaned over and gave Carolyn a kiss. “Thank you for coming to my rescue.” He kissed the top of Emily’s head. “Both of you.”

Emily took his hand in hers. “Ditto.”