

THE CURVY GIRLS' BACHELOR AUCTION

WIN A DATE WITH A

player

KATE TILNEY

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ONE

NICOLE

“I’m... I’m... I’m coming!”

After this, words fail me. But when I throw my head back, cry out in ecstasy, and dig my fingernails into 250 pounds of pure muscle, I think the hunk of man pounding me like a jackhammer gets the idea.

I’m pleased with his performance. Very pleased. I’ve probably lost brain cells, I’m so mind-numbingly pleased.

I tighten around him as I’m swept away in a flurry of feeling. The last coherent thought I have is that I’m glad I kept my appointment for waxing. With how busy I’ve been coordinating the charity auction—and only a couple of weeks to go until the big day—I’d been tempted to cancel.

But feeling his rock-hard body between my thighs... taking his pleasure in me... just as I’ve found it in him... It was time well spent.

With a final thrust and grunt of his own, Chance presses a kiss to my shoulder and dismounts. Still reeling from what is undoubtedly the best series of orgasms I’ve ever experienced, I can do little more than lie here like a ragdoll, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom.

There’s not much to see. It’s a smooth, white ceiling—no popcorn finish for a man who makes millions every time he takes a breath. With his reputation, I wouldn’t have been surprised to see a mirror. Or one of those swings.

Chance turns his body toward me, and the mattress shifts beneath me. I turn my head. His piercing sage-green stare meets mine. “That was...”

My belly does a flip, and I take a shaky breath. “I know.”

Neither of us seems to be capable of forming complete sentences. Can you blame us? For the past—I lean up to check the alarm clock on his dresser—forty-five minutes, we have been exploring every inch of each other’s bodies. I came so hard I screamed myself hoarse.

Three times.

Quite simply, tonight has been the best sex I’ve ever had in my life.

Not that I’m surprised. There’s a reason Chance Buchanan has a reputation as one of the baddest guys in the league. It’s only partially earned from his finesse on the field, where he’s regularly fined for getting into it with refs and starting the occasional fistfight as a tight end on Seattle’s football team.

As for off of the field... Well... Let’s just say I’ll probably be feeling the most wickedly delicious reminders of his finesse between my thighs for a couple of days. I fight back a giggle at the thought of waddling around the office like I’ve gone horseback riding.

The fact that he would imply a night in bed with me was equally satisfying is enough to leave me feeling smug. Of course, he might tell all of the women he bangs that we’re incredible.

But he hadn’t been able to finish whatever praise he was about to heap. That, in itself, is more flattering than even the floweriest praise could be.

A smirk plays on Chance’s lips. They’re still glistening, reminding me of all the ways he’s used them on my body tonight.

Chance trails the back of his fingers over my shoulder and down my arm, leaving goosebumps as he does. “If I’d known this was what you had in mind when you asked me to come into your office to sign some paperwork...”

I roll my eyes. “This was not what I had in mind.”

Okay, that isn't the complete truth. Like just about every hot-blooded person in Seattle, I've certainly wondered what it might be like to climb into bed with Chance. On a couple of occasions, I may or may not have allowed myself to imagine him sauntering into my office and bending me over my desk as he laid claim to me.

Or, maybe he'd take me on the floor.

Or, better still, he'd drop to his knees in front of my office chair and spread my legs apart. Now that I know what he's capable of, that's definitely at the top of the fantasy list.

But, no, when I asked Chance to come into my office to sign the damn paperwork agreeing to be Bachelor Number Two for the charity auction I'm organizing for the hospital, I didn't expect it would lead to him asking if I'd like to grab a drink.

I didn't think we'd be grabbing said drink in his penthouse that overlooks Puget Sound.

And, I definitely didn't think that after a couple of drinks, we'd end up in his bed. Not that I'm complaining. Far from it.

Chance's fingers trail from my shoulder and arm to my collarbone. “You really didn't think about it?”

“No.” I chew on the inside of my cheek to mask my lie.

“That's interesting.”

“Is it?”

He nods, leading his caresses a bit lower. A ripple of desire pulses low in my belly. How? I don't know. It seems like I should be numb after being so thoroughly satiated, but the human body is a fascinating thing.

“I've been thinking about getting you into my bed since the day we met.” He glides his fingers down the valley between my breasts.

It's almost enough to distract me. Almost. “Really?”

“Mmm.”

I frown at him. “We were at a children’s hospital.”

“I know where we were.”

“There were children present.”

“What can I say?” He chuckles. “I get some of my best ideas in the strangest places.”

Before I can say anything else, Chance slides his hand down my belly and presses a kiss to my shoulder. The ripple in my belly shows signs of becoming a wave if he keeps this up. Much as I’d like to stay here forever and see just how many times he can make me come, I can’t.

Groaning, I roll away from him to the edge of the bed and sit up. Chance leans back on a pile of pillows, his muscular arms propped behind his head.

His hot gaze roves over my naked body as I look for where my dress landed. “Have I told you how much I love a woman with a full figure?”

“Yes.” My spine straightens, and the heat brewing inside of me chills. “A few times actually.”

Not enough to make me think he has a fetish. (Thank God, or I’d feel icky.) But he did make enough comments about my “humongous boobs” and “thick thighs” and “dumps like a truck” that I asked him to cool it on the bedroom talk. It can be hard enough for a woman to hit the Big O without being so distracted.

“You know...” He extends his arm toward me, the tips of his calloused fingers tracing my “dumps.” “It is our Bye Week.”

“I know.” That’s why he had been available to be one of our bachelors. If the team had a game this week, there would have been no way we would’ve gotten permission from the front office to have one of their players participate.

“So...” He glides his wandering fingertips up my spine, sending a fresh shiver up and down it. “If you’re game, if you want to hang out a little longer, I’d be more than happy to give an encore performance.”

I almost snort at that. Don't get me wrong, I've thoroughly enjoyed the time I've spent here in Chance Buchanan's bed. But do guys really think saying stuff like that will have a woman swooning at their feet?

Okay, lines like that worked at getting me into said bed earlier this evening. But it's almost midnight. I won't turn into a pumpkin. I don't have a glass slipper to worry about losing. What I do have is a meeting first thing in the morning with the hospital board to talk about the bachelor auction.

"I appreciate that." I spy my bra dangling from the lamp on the nightstand and slide it on. "But I think I'll pass on the encore."

TWO

CHANCE

My hand freezes just north of Nicole's luscious ass. "What did you say?"

"I said"—she clasps her bra into place and then shimmies the matching pair of panties up her rounded hips—"that while tonight has been fun, I really should be going."

I bolt upright, the bedsheet falling to my side. "But... I asked you to stay."

"Really? I didn't hear a question."

With a victorious fist pump to the air, she finds the dress I helped her out of a few hours ago near the bedroom door. Like Gretel, she's retracing the trail of crumbs we left behind us as we stripped naked before tumbling into bed.

Only, with every item of clothing she finds—with every crumb she uncovers—Nicole takes herself farther and farther away from where she should be.

In bed. With me. Naked, with her sweet body ready for me to devour again.

With her full figure, wild and curly brown hair, and a pair of lips that know exactly what they're doing, Nicole is like a fantasy. Only, unlike the models, influencers, and jersey chasers who I usually find myself spending the night with, she's not trying to be a fantasy. She's as real as a woman can get. Down to her smart-ass mouth and dimples in her cheeks.

Both on her face and ass cheeks and both drive me equally crazy.

And now she's leaving on a technicality? Because I didn't specifically ask her to stay? I can't decide if that annoys or arouses me. Based on how hard my cock is growing, I'll have to go with being aroused.

"Come on. Will you stay the night with me? Please?" I add so she'll know I mean it.

"Again, I appreciate the offer, but I have to get out of here." She smooths down the skirt of her dress and flashes me a sultry smile. "I have a meeting in the morning."

"I can make sure you get to—"

"It's too important to miss, and I can't risk oversleeping or... being distracted." She gives a meaningful look to my dick, which is now making his presence well known. "Thanks for having me over."

"But..." Did she really just thank me? Like I had her over for a cup of coffee or for a game night instead of mutually blowing each other's minds.

At least... I was pretty sure I blew her mind. Nicole sounded like she was having a good time. Was she... faking it?

That takes the wind right out of my dick's sail. "You..." I clear my throat, my palms growing sweaty and a knot forming in my gut. "You, you came, right?"

"A few times." She blinks at me. "I even told you the last time."

"Oh. Okay. Good." I release a breath, a cool rush of relief flowing through me. At least I don't have to worry about that. "So, why won't you stay?"

"I already told you. I have a meeting."

"But—but—you...we...I—"

I know, I'm sounding like a snotty kid here. I'm flustered and blubbing. I've all but begged her to come back to bed. But I'm in uncharted territory here. For the first time in my

adult life—hell, ever in my life—I’m the one asking the woman to stay instead of the other way around. It’s... it’s...

It’s once again equal parts annoying and arousing. And I have no idea why the hell I’d find a woman not wanting to stick around so damn appealing. Maybe I’ve taken a few too many knocks to the head out on the field.

“Thanks again for having me over tonight,” she says before I can string together enough words to form a complete sentence. “Thanks for the orgasms. I’ll see you at the auction later this week.”

Then, she blows me a kiss and saunters out of the bedroom, leaving me dazed. A deer in headlights, staring after her.

Later that morning in the team’s weight room, Jordan, an offensive lineman on the team, gapes at me from the chest fly machine. “She said what?”

“She told him she had a meeting in the morning and left.” Trev, the league’s leading punt returner, grunts as he finishes his reps and wipes his face with a towel. “Bummer, dude. That’s the oldest excuse in the book.”

I frown. “How do you know it was an excuse?”

“Everyone knows that line is an excuse. As I said, it’s the oldest one in the books.” Trev rolls his eyes. “I have an early meeting.”

“I have to take a pill every night at the same time.” Jordan says. “And it’s at my house.”

“I’m training for a marathon.”

“I think I might be coming down with something.”

“I need to feed my cat.”

“These are things women have said to you?” I ask.

“God, no,” Trev smirks. “But I’ve definitely used them all a time or two in my day.”

I stare at him without blinking. “It’s a wonder you don’t have a girlfriend or wife.”

“You’re one to talk.” He moves over to another machine. “Your rushing record isn’t only known on the field, my friend.”

“Don’t worry, man,” Jordan says. “I’m sure this was just a one-time fluke.”

“That’s right.” Trev nods. “The next woman you take home will be all over you.”

“I don’t want another woman,” I mumble, though not quietly enough from the wide-eyed stares I’m getting from my buddies. Clenching my jaw, I shake my head. “Just forget it.”

“No can do.” Trev releases his grip on the apparatus and hunches forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “You just told us you’ve found the love of your life and you scared her off last night.”

“I didn’t scare her off.” My frown deepens. “And I didn’t say she was the love of my life.”

“Yeah, but...” Jordan gives me a sheepish look. “You did seem pretty bummed she didn’t stay over.”

“Yeah, but that’s just because...” Fuck. I can’t come up with an explanation. Not now that I’ve let slip something I’ve barely started to understand myself.

I can’t explain it. I don’t know why or how it happened. But last night, with Nicole, something happened. It wasn’t just that the sex was good. Because it was. Really good. Mind-blowingly good.

And it’s not an ego thing about her not staying the night.

All I know is something happened when I stopped by the hospital to sign paperwork yesterday afternoon. The second I walked into her office, something flipped on inside of me like a light switch. Sure, there was a decent amount of lust. But there was more to it. Like... for the first time in a long time, I

found myself wanting to know everything about the woman I was meeting.

Over drinks, I got a glimpse of who Nicole is last night. It made me want even more. Hell, maybe I jumped the gun by taking her to bed so fast.

I scratch the back of my head. “What do I do? How do I make her more than a one-night stand?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy.” Trev shakes his head. “Should get you checked out for concussion protocol? Because I never would have guessed you, of all people, would ask me that.”

“Oh, ignore him.” Jordan rolls his eyes. “It seems to me that in a situation like this, you need to make a grand gesture.”

“A grand gesture?”

“Yeah, like in the movies.” He looks a bit sheepish. “The guys are always doing things to win the girl over in the end.”

While Trev gives Jordan grief for watching romantic comedies and Jordan insists he’s only watched them when his mom made him, I consider what he’s said. A grand gesture, something movie worthy. Something that’ll get her attention.

And I think I have an idea of where to start.

THREE

NICOLE

There's a little bounce in my step as I leave my meeting. And why shouldn't there be? Last night was exactly what I needed. It was fun, satisfying, and just naughty enough to be good. All in all, it was the ultimate stress reliever.

Now that I've been thoroughly satiated at the hands of such an expert in the sack—pun intended—I can focus on holding the biggest and best fundraiser the hospital has ever had.

My assistant, Nancy, is beaming at me expectantly when I reach my office.

I slow my pace, curious at the unusual enthusiasm she seems to be keeping barely contained. “Did anything happen while I was in my meeting?”

“Just one little surprise, ma'am.” I wince a little even as she gives up the fight of containing her smile. “Don't worry, it's a good one.”

Curiosity piqued, I cock my head to the side. “What is it?”

“It's in your office.” She practically bounces in her seat.

Cautiously excited, I open my door and gasp. On my desk, there's a flower bouquet that wasn't there before. No, calling it something as simple as a bouquet hardly does it justice. With hundreds of blooms, the arrangement fills half of my desk.

I turn to Nancy. “Who are these from?”

She lifts her shoulders nearly to her ears and all but squeals. “There’s a card. I didn’t sneak a peek, though I’ve been dying to find out.”

“Then I guess I’d better take a look to satisfy our curiosity. You’re too good of an assistant for me to lose now.” Even if she does keep calling me ma’am, which makes me feel old.

“Please do!” She stands in the doorway, all but hopping up and down.

I chuckle lightly, more amused by her response to the flowers than the flowers themselves, I dig through the flowers until I find the card. My fingers shake as I open the envelope and slide the note out.

*One flower for every way you blew my mind last night. -
Chance*

My nose wrinkles even as my heart beats a little bit faster. Ugh. What a line. But also... What a line!

I stare between the flowers and the card wondering what they mean. It doesn’t say that I should get in touch. Not that I have a direct way to reach him. All of our contact before last night was through his agent, and we never exchanged numbers. Granted, he clearly knows where I work and how to reach me.

“Well?” Nancy asks.

I’d nearly forgotten she was there.

“It’s from someone involved in the bachelor auction.” I try to make it sound like it’s no big deal and a completely normal occurrence. But I have to ask... “Did anyone call about it?”

“Nope.” Her brow puckers and I can see the disappointment. Clearly, Nancy is a romantic at heart. Or, maybe, she wants her boss to have more of a personal life so she can have more of one.

After the auction, I promise I’ll lighten her load.

I glance back at the card. He didn’t call or leave his number.

So... maybe this isn't a way to get in touch. Maybe this is just part of the Chance Buchanan experience. It would explain why he has a Casanova reputation without a lot of the negative backlash that comes with it. He must have a formula. Meet a woman. Invite her home. Give as good as he gets. Send flowers in the morning. Repeat.

My nose wrinkles again, this time from a tickle deep within. I try to hold it in, but I sneeze. Loudly. The tickling inside my nose turns to a burn that's quickly making its way down my throat. A jolt of ice flashes through me and my heart races, even as I try to take deep calming breaths.

That only makes things worse, and I sneeze again and again. Each one is louder and more intense than the one before.

Arm still up at my nose, I turn back to the flowers, scouring them until I find the culprit. Chrysanthemums.

Spinning on my heel, I race out of the room leaving a stunned Nancy in my wake. "Allergic." I manage to get out.

"I'll get them out of here right away." Her eyes widen. "And I'll call maintenance for an extra air purifier."

I nod in approval, fighting more sneezes. I race to the elevator and hit the floor that'll take me to the emergency room. I've never been more glad that I work at a hospital than now.

Later in the afternoon, I'm having a follow-up chat with Dr. Emmaline Majors, the head of our emergency room, when a delivery person knocks on my freshly purified office door.

"Delivery for Nicole Hardy."

I sigh and rise to my feet slowly. "That's me."

The man hands me a clipboard and I sigh, eyeing the white box. He hands me the box. "Enjoy."

I stand near the entrance staring at the box.

“Whoa.” Emmaline arches her eyebrows. “You’re looking at that box like it has a bomb or severed head inside of it.”

I give her a stern look. “After the last delivery I had, do you blame me?”

“Want me to do it for you?”

“Would you mind?”

Emmaline gives a light chuckle as she takes the box, weighing it in her hand.

“Not too heavy, but not exactly light.” She gives it a light shake. “Good news, I don’t think it’s a bomb or a body part.”

“How can you tell?”

“There isn’t much rustling around.” She sets it on the desk and rolls her eyes at me as I take another step back. “Want me to do a countdown?”

“Just open it. Please.” I hate how jittery and wussy I feel about this.

I all but hold my breath as she lifts the lid. “It’s a cake.”

The air whooshes out my lungs and I move closer. “A cake?”

“With your face on it.” She angles her head to study it more closely. “And isn’t that the hotshot tight end on the—”

“Yes.” The word is more clipped than I mean for it to be. “That’s Chase Buchanan.”

“Why would someone send a cake with a picture of you and Chase Buchanan on it?”

“Why indeed.”

Emmaline leans forward a little more and sniffs. “It’s a chocolate cake.” She frowns. “Doesn’t chocolate give you migraines?”

“It does.” I stare at the cake. “Where did he get a photo of me?”

Emmaline leans forward to study it more closely. “I could be wrong but isn’t that your photo on the hospital’s website?”

Of course, it is. It's also the photo I have on my LinkedIn profile, so he easily could have grabbed it from any of those places.

“Whoever sent you this cake must like you a lot.”

I roll my eyes. “Please, this is clearly an ego thing.”

Emmaline gives me a sly grin. “A man who stalks you on the Internet so he can have a custom cake baked for you doesn't strike me as ego.”

“His face is on the cake too.”

“Yeah, with lots of hearts and kissy lips drawn all over it.” She gestures at the cake. “He's clearly hoping to get a second date.”

“We barely went on a first one.”

“Then clearly he's wanting more of whatever it was you two did. Maybe you should give him a call.”

I don't bother telling her the only way I can reach him is to call his agent or see if I can sneak my way into the team's practice facility. Assuming he's there.

Instead, I sigh. “Come on. Let's go put the cake in the breakroom. But first.” I dig in my desk for one of the pieces of cutlery I keep in there for the days I eat lunch at my desk. I run the fork across the top several times until the colors blend and the pictures are virtually impossible to make out. “The last thing I need is for everyone here to talk.”

Emmaline gives me a tight-lipped smile. “I'm afraid it might be too late for that.”

Carrying a piping hot cup of coffee, the next morning I round the corner to my office and freeze. “Oh, God.”

There, standing right outside the door is a balloon arch. Not a simple one either, the kind you'd find at a preschooler's birthday party or a middle school dance. No, this arch—made

in a certain tight end's team colors—puts all others to shame. Over the top doesn't even begin to describe it.

From her seat outside my door, Nancy gives me a tense smile. “Good morning, ma'am.”

“Nicole,” I correct her while surveying the monstrosity. “Do I need to ask where these came from?”

“Probably not.” She chews on the inside of her cheek. “Want me to have the balloons divided up and distributed to patient rooms?”

“Please.”

Someone might as well enjoy these balloons. For me... they're more of a mystery than a pleasure. Chance Buchanan is clearly trying to get my attention. But... why?

The phone on my desk rings, and my stomach lurches. Oh no. Not again. Eyeing the phone wearily, I consider letting it go to voicemail.

With only days to go until the auction, there's a good chance it's someone calling for more information. It could be a reporter wanting a quote that will get us a bunch of free publicity. It could be one of the bachelors who has come down with a case of cold feet, and they need me to reassure them. Heck, it may even be some generous philanthropist offering to hand over a big check before the auction even begins.

It could also be him. And whatever fresh hell he's designed for me today.

There's only one way to find out. I'm not a coward. Taking a deep breath, I pick up the receiver. My voice shakes only a little when I utter a meek, “Hello.”

“Hello, ma'am.” My eye-twitches. I've reminded Nancy repeatedly not to call me ma'am. It makes me feel old. But that's a battle for another day. “You have another... delivery. Or, maybe it's more of a visitor. Should I send them in?”

I tighten my grip on the phone. “Please tell me it isn’t a pony from a petting zoo.”

“No, ma’am. It’s not anything from the petting zoo.”

A breath whooshes out of me. Thank goodness for that. As amused as my co-workers have been by the attention I’ve been getting this week, I don’t think the hospital administrators will appreciate any animals other than service pets entering the building.

Oh, God. “It’s not a puppy or a kitten either, is it?”

I love both, but I am not in a position to have a new animal at my home right now. I’m barely there right now with the auction. They’d tear my place apart, and God knows I’m too big of a sucker for puppies and kittens to send them away once they’re in front of me.

“No, it’s no animal of any kind.”

“Okay.” I nod to myself, steeling myself for whatever it might be. “You can send them in.”

As I hang up the phone, I stare at the door, the hairs on the back of my neck standing straight.

“Please, don’t let it be a stripper,” I whisper to myself. “Please, don’t be a stripper.”

That would be so inappropriate for a children’s hospital. Plus, I don’t carry any cash on me for the tip I’d feel obliged to give.

It’s probably not a stripper. What man would send a woman he’s slept with a stripper? Then again, Chance Buchanan has proven he isn’t like most other men.

The door to my office opens. Four men in matching candy cane-striped jackets, white pants, and straw hats burst into their harmonies.

Oh, beautiful Nicole,

You have bewitched me, body and soul.

We could have a romance,

If only you will give Chance a chance.

“Chance a chance?” My brow knits together in a frown. “Is he talking about himself in the third person?” And does he know he ripped off Mr. Darcy from the 2005 movie?

The quartet ignores me and moves on to more verses, because of course there are more verses. With every line they sing, the crowd outside of my office grows bigger and bigger and my cheeks grow more and more flushed.

Once they’re finished, I give them a short “Thank you” through gritted teeth. As soon as they’re out the door, I pick up the phone on my desk.

Nancy answers on the first ring. “What can I do for you, ma’am?”

Battle for another day. I have more pressing issues to deal with.

I clear my throat. “Please get me Chance Buchanan—or one of his people—on the line. As soon as possible.”

FOUR

CHANCE

Feeling pretty smug about my efforts to reel Nicole in, I'm in the middle of a session with one of the team's physical therapists when there's a knock at the door. Before either of us can respond, it swings open and the woman herself strides inside.

A grin spreads across my face, and I push myself up to a seated position. "Hey, baby. What are you—?"

"What is this?" She holds up a phone in her hand.

My smile slips a fraction. I dart a sidelong glance at the PT who is frozen in place, darting his glance between both of us. "What's what?"

"This." She shakes the phone.

I shrug. "I can't see the screen."

"There's nothing on it. And I'm not talking about that anyway." She moves closer and shoves the phone in my face. "What do you call this device?"

"Um..." Why do I get the feeling this is a trick question? "It's a phone."

"That's right. And what do you do with it?"

"Check Instagram and"—she sucks in a breath, and I quickly change course—"call people. Send texts. Emails."

"Very good." Nicole pulls the phone back. "So you do know how to use it."

My guard up, I ask the PT if he'll give us a few minutes and close the door. For a second, it looks like he might say no. As much as that irks me, I can't exactly blame him. Besides the time a player's girlfriend interrupted a practice to confront him about a pair of panties she found under his couch—ones that didn't belong to her—this is probably the juiciest thing to happen in a while.

Once the door closes behind him, I turn my attention back to Nicole. "What's this all about?"

"I came here to ask you the same question." She folds her arms across her chest. "So... what's the deal?"

I blink a few times, still not quite sure what's happening. "Is this about the stuff I sent you?"

"Umm. Yeah."

"I was... trying to make a grand gesture."

Her eyebrows shoot up on her forehead. "A grand gesture?"

"You know, like in the movies where—"

"I know what a grand gesture is. But what I'm trying to figure out is why you were trying to make one."

"I'd think it should be obvious." At least I hoped it would be.

She releases a heavy breath and stares at a spot on the floor. "What do you want from me?"

"I just want to get to know you."

She glances up then, her brows knitting together. "You want to get to know... me?"

I nearly grin at the surprise in her voice, but I don't. I want her to know I'm taking this conversation seriously. I want her to know I'm taking her seriously.

"From the moment we met, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you." I take a cautious step toward her, narrowing the distance between us. "That's not a line. It's a

fact. I—I have this deep need to know everything there is to know about you.”

“But... why?”

Can she really not know the effect she has on me? I take a few more steps toward her until there are only inches instead of a whole room between us.

I hold out my hand to her. “May I?”

Hesitating for a moment, Nicole bites her bottom lip but rests her hand on mine. I lightly take it and place it against my chest. She jumps slightly but doesn’t pull away.

“Do you feel that?” I press her palm flat against my chest, over my pounding heart.

Her gaze flashes up to meet mine, and she nods.

“From almost the moment we met, my heart has pounded like crazy every time I see or think about you.” I slide my thumb lightly over her knuckles. “It’s not just because you’re gorgeous, though you are. It’s not just because I want you so badly I can hardly stand it.”

I lower my forehead to rest against hers. “I just want to get to know you better. I...I need to.”

She swallows hard. “I think I’d like to get to know you better too.”

“Good, then—”

“But...” She pulls back and gives a short, humorless laugh.

“All I want is a chance.” I give a lop-sided grin. “It’s not just my name.”

“I remember. From the song.”

I grimace. “Yeah, that was pretty lame. No wonder you came here to chew me out.”

“It wasn’t the song, or even the fact that you sent a barbershop quartet, though”—she gives me a stern look —“please don’t ever do that again.”

“I promise. No more flowers. No more cakes. No balloon arches.”

“It’s not that I had a problem with any of those things really. I mean, chocolate does give me migraines and I’m allergic to chrysanthemums.”

I shake my head, not understanding what she’s getting at. “Then what was the problem?”

“The problem was that if you knew me—if you really knew me—then you’d know I like to be in the background, out of the limelight. I work behind the scenes. I don’t like things that draw attention to me.”

I nod slowly, starting to see the problem. “And all of those things drew attention you didn’t want.”

“Especially because I didn’t know why you were sending all of those things.” She gives me a pointed look. “I mean, at no point did you ask me to call or give me a way to reach you.”

I wince. “That probably would have helped. Wouldn’t it?”

“It couldn’t have hurt.”

We stare at each other, long seconds passing, but none of the confusion or tension from before swirling around us. Well, not the bad kind of tension. Because standing here this close to her, the scent of her sweet perfume wrapping around me, certain parts of me are tense. But I’m not going to let those parts call the shots right now. Not when I want something more than a couple of nights in bed.

My stomach clenches. I’ve never felt so unsure of myself with a woman. That’s why I took Jordan and Trev’s advice earlier. Clearly, they weren’t the right people to consult when it comes to winning over a woman of Nicole’s caliber.

I take a deep breath. “So, what happens now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can I…” I clear a knot that’s formed in my throat. “Can I see you again?”

“You’ll see me at the auction.”

“The auction.” Shit, I’d forgotten about that. And while it seemed like a fun idea when my agent pitched it to me, and it’s a cause I care about, now it feels weird. The notion of having women bid on a night out with me seems weird and wrong even. Especially when there’s only one woman I want to spend my time with. “I mean... Can I see you again outside of the auction?”

She purses her lips, seeming to consider. “I don’t know. It depends.”

“On?”

“On what you want to do.” She gives me a pointed look.

I can feel my ears turn red. “Oh, I didn’t mean that. Not that I don’t want to do that with you. Clearly, I do. I did. But, that’s not all I want. I...” Hell, I’m making a mess of this. I scratch the back of my head in frustration and let my hand fall to the side. “I really do want to spend some time getting to know you better.”

“Okay.”

“So... it’s a date?”

“Maybe.” She gives a light shrug, a playful grin playing on her delectable lips. “Make me an offer I can’t refuse.”

An offer she can’t refuse. What is this? The mafia? In some ways, it might be easier dealing with the mob than trying to figure out what to do to bring Nicole around.

I’m still mulling over that phrase later when I stare at her number on my phone. That’s one thing I got right today. I got her number and gave her mine. I just don’t know what to do with it.

Which is how I end up finding myself sitting in a wine bar across from a few of the G&Ws. That’s what we call the girlfriends and wives of people on the team. Officially, they

share a block of seating at the games. Unofficially, they pretty much run our lives outside of the stadium.

When I finish telling them about Nicole and the things she said they fall silent. My palms sweat, and I swear I'm more nervous than I was the night I was drafted.

"Well?" I swallow hard. "What should I do?"

The other half dozen women all turn to Gigi, the head coach's wife. She studies me for a moment longer, and I can practically feel the seconds ticking by in my gut.

At last, she gives a short nod. "From what you've told us, it sounds like this woman might have a few reservations."

My eyes widen. "You got that from her not liking the stuff I sent her?"

"What she wants, what most women want, is a man who will listen to them and really hear what they want." Gigi gives a stern look. "It wasn't about the deliveries."

"No." I blanch. "You're right. She said it wasn't that."

Though, it probably didn't help that two of the things made her sick and the other two embarrassed her.

I shake my head. "So what does she want? For me to listen to her?"

"For a start."

"So what does she mean by making her an offer she can't refuse?"

"Just that." Gigi smiles. "She wants you to propose—"

"She wants me to propose? Already?"

Half a dozen pairs of eyes glare at me in unison. Gigi rolls her eyes. "What did I just say about listening?"

"Oh, yeah." I pull a face. "Sorry."

"She wants you to *suggest* a date so perfect for her and you to get to know each other better that she won't be able to say no."

I wait to see if any of them will elaborate more than that, but they don't. With a few more bits of small talk, and after I pay for their drinks and appetizers, I drive home. I'm still confused as ever.

Until I pass a billboard that catches my eye. An idea begins to form in my head. When I send Nicole a carefully crafted text message later, I all but hold my breath waiting for her response.

I release it with a grin when I get her message.

I'm intrigued. And I'll see you Saturday.

Saturday. The day after tomorrow. It seems like forever to wait but also not enough time. Especially not when I'm still trying to work out how to make Nicole want a future with me.

FIVE

NICOLE

The next day, Chance arrives at my front door wearing a long-sleeved waffle-knit shirt, a pair of gray sweatpants, and his signature smirk. If my eyes linger a little too long at a certain prominent bulge on display courtesy of the sweatpants, sue me. I'm only human.

I'm almost surprised my underwear doesn't melt off immediately. Then again, I'm not wearing underwear, but that's hardly the point. If I was wearing panties—and this was a cartoon and not real life—it would definitely happen. Well, in an adult cartoon maybe. But my eyes would also definitely pop six inches out of my face while a clown horn honks in the background.

Since this is real life, I tear my eyes away from his bulge with a slow blink and take a few deep breaths so my tongue doesn't roll out of my mouth.

Chance swipes off his sunglasses and gives me a lingering once-over of his own. "You look good."

My belly flips and need pools between my thighs. I immediately want to roll my eyes at myself. The man said I look good. It's not like he wrote me a song or a poem on the spot to merit such a visceral response.

"You said to wear something comfortable." I gesture to the leggings and sweatshirt from college I'm wearing. They're what I settled on after trying half a dozen other variations,

with nothing seeming quite perfect for a casual day with one of Seattle's most eligible bachelors.

A bachelor I'm putting up for auction in just a few days, so it would be better if I keep things more professional from here on out. Not that I behaved anything like a professional the night I went home with him.

Oh, what am I doing? This is a terrible idea. If anyone at the hospital finds out I've been spending so much time with one of the bachelors, it won't look good for me.

But, I couldn't say no. Even after all of his increasingly insane ways of trying to capture my attention—not to mention my conscience screaming, "Don't do it"—I had to say yes. Because... Well, because I had the very real feeling deep in my gut that if I said no, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

"Anyway," I shift my stance while still under his direct stare. "I hope this will work for wherever we're going."

"You look great," he repeats. He reaches for my hand and presses a warm, wet kiss on the inside of my wrist. "Let's go."

Chance keeps my hand firmly grasped in his as he leads me to an SUV that is probably worth more money than I make in a year. Opening the door, he gives me a boost up into the seat, letting his hands linger a little longer than necessary. When he releases me to walk around to the driver's side, I release a breath and take several steadying gulps of air to calm my pounding heart.

As he climbs into the driver's seat, I can't help but once again take in the bulge on display. What is it about a man in a pair of sweatpants that is so freaking sexy?

Trying not to give myself away, I turn to look out my window. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

An hour later, with a basket in my hand, I stare out at a sprawling apple orchard. "Apple-picking?"

He shifts his stance awkwardly. "Is that okay?"

My lips curl up, and I fill my lungs with the autumn air that has just a hint of crispness in it. “It’s perfect. Just... unexpected.”

“Yeah, well...” He lifts a shoulder, looking almost embarrassed. “Shall we?”

Meandering down the lanes of trees, we pause from time to time to pluck an apple while we talk about nothing important.

“Favorite movie?” he asks.

I tilt my head to the side to consider. “I realize this is going to make me sound like I’m four, but...”

“Go on.” He gives me a playful nudge. “My favorite movie is *Star Wars*, so it’s not like my tastes have changed much since I was a kid.”

“Which episode is your favorite?”

“Gotta love someone who understands they’re called episodes and not movies.” Appreciation flickers in his eyes. “Episode V. Always.”

“*Empire Strikes Back*.” I nod. “That’s my brothers’ favorite.”

“You have brothers?”

“Two of them. Both are older.”

He sucks in a breath through clenched teeth. “Oh man. Are they the over-protective type? Do I need to worry about them showing up to ask about my intentions?”

“Probably not.” I try not to show how much I’m enjoying his sudden discomfort. “Especially not if you promise to give them a tour of the stadium and practice facility some time.”

“Done,” he says a little too quickly. “I can even get them tickets to a game.”

“That’s generous of you.”

“It’s the least I can do to make a good impression on your family. Now.” He looks at me pointedly. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“The one that started all of this. What’s your favorite movie?”

“Oh, that question.”

I almost tease him by saying we couldn’t possibly get through the rest of the date without him knowing the answer to that. But I stop myself because I realize something. He’s trying. Chance is trying to get to know me. All of the little bits of info he said he wanted to know. That’s why he’s essentially playing this game of twenty questions.

“There are a lot of movies I really love,” I say at last. “But if I had to pick just one—”

“—And you do.”

I grin. “I’d probably go with *The Little Mermaid*. It’s been my favorite for as long as I can remember. It’s always made me want to go live under the sea or something.”

“That’s a good movie.” He takes my hand and squeezes it. “I’ve probably watched it a million times with my niece.”

The thought of this brawny and muscular man sitting down to watch a cartoon with his niece is an awfully sweet picture to have in my head. My heart skips a beat and I nearly fumble the basket of apples. Chance reaches out to steady them, his rough fingers sliding against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me.

“Whoa, steady there.” He gives me a boyish lop-sided grin that has my heart pounding harder and faster. He slides his hand into mine, the one that isn’t holding the basket. “That’s our future pie.”

I blink. “Pie?”

“Isn’t that the best way to use apples?”

“Maybe. It depends.”

“On?”

“The type of apple.”

He lowers his head, bringing his mouth close enough to my ear. His warm breath tickles my skin. “You use a certain type of apple for pies?”

“I think so.” I moisten my lips, my hand growing clammy in his grasp. “My mom always used Granny Smith. She said the tartness made for tastier pies.”

“Is that so?”

I nod, barely able to breathe.

I can’t believe we’re having this conversation right now. We’re talking about apples and apple pies. And I’m hanging on to his every word as if this is the most interesting topic in the world. But, I suppose, when Chance Buchanan is staring at you with that signature heat of his burning in his eyes and his voice low and throaty, anything would be riveting.

“I’ll tell you this.” His lips are practically on my ear now. The hairs on the backs of my arms spring up. “I know of something that tastes a whole lot sweeter than any apple pie. And I could never get my fill of eating it.”

The basket falls out of my hand.

Chuckling, Chance retrieves the basket. “Here.” He slings it over his free hand. “Allow me. I’m known for being good with my hands.”

The smirk on his face, paired with the blatant innuendo, has the double impact of making my belly twist and my eyes roll. “Does that line work on most ladies?”

“Usually.” His expression sobers and he meets my gaze directly. “But I don’t care about what works on most ladies. I care about what works for you.”

Once more I nearly call him out on using a line but once again I clamp my mouth shut. What if maybe, just maybe, it’s not another practiced, smooth-talking line? What if maybe, just maybe, he means what he says?

What if he really does care about my wants and needs? He’s proven he’s good at meeting them in the bedroom. Today, he’s shown signs of caring for them outside of it too.

Which begs the obvious, yet pitiful question: Why me? With nothing to lose, I put it to him.

“Because...” He takes my hand in his and raises it slowly to his lips. “You’re you, and I like you. All of you.”

Then he presses his lips to the sensitive skin on my wrist. The touch paired with his sincere words spoken in his deep, turn my insides out. They turn every expectation I had upside down.

On impulse, I press my free hand to his chest and lean up on my toes to lightly kiss his cheek. He’s clean shaven, so it’s just his skin against my lips. The sensation has my insides humming, and my lips are left tingling.

He freezes, and I pull back before he can recover and turn my chaste kiss into something more. Not that I don’t want more. But considering how fast we fell into bed together on our first night together, if he really wants to know me, we should slow things down.

And, surprise of all surprises, I think the feeling is mutual. Chance Buchanan is a mystery to me. The more I know, the less it seems I know. But I want to know all of him.

SIX

CHANCE

The date on Saturday couldn't have gone better.

Old me might have been disappointed that after a full day together, I dropped a beautiful woman off at her home with only a kiss on her front porch. It was a quick one, no tongue, but the feel of her lips touching mine kept me up half the night with a hard-on.

New me likes that. New me spent the day flirting with and being teased by Nicole. New me spent the day learning more about her and telling her more about myself. Not my bank account. Not how many touchdowns I've made this year or how many yards I've racked up in my career.

And at the end of the day, when we shared that kiss on her front porch, something stirred inside of me. It was more than lust and desire. It was more than curiosity. It was the feeling that I could spend the rest of my life hanging out with and kissing this woman and never grow tired of it.

Better still: She agreed to go out with me again on Sunday evening. With the football season in full swing, this bye week is my best chance at getting to spend time with her, and I don't want to waste a minute of it.

So when I show up to pick her up on Sunday night, I'm brimming with excitement. I have the perfect night planned. After she told me her favorite movie was *The Little Mermaid* and that she always wished she could go under the sea, I'd been struck with inspiration. While taking her to Hawaii or

Australia to scuba dive isn't possible right now, though I definitely will take her both places later, I found the next best thing.

A private, candlelight dinner at the aquarium. Just Nicole and me, kind of under the sea.

I swear I wasn't even this jittery about going on a date with a woman back in high school. Of course, what I wanted out of girlfriends and dates then was different.

Tonight, I'm wearing a suit and carrying a bouquet of flowers when I reach her front door. They're roses, and I checked. She's not allergic.

I ring the doorbell and long seconds pass before there's a scuffling on the other side of the door. I hear a muttered f-bomb and I can't help but grin. Not at that thought that Nicole might have stubbed her toe or something like that, but that she can talk like a sailor when provoked.

I like that smart mouth of hers. Then again, in the short time I've known her, I've liked pretty much everything there is about Nicole. Including the chase, she's led me on.

When the door opens, it's a frazzled—and not ready—Nicole I find on the other side.

I frown. "Did I tell you the wrong time?"

"No, you told me you'd be here now." She opens the door for me and then runs a hand through her hair. "I was in the middle of getting ready when I got a call that threw everything into chaos."

"Oh, that sucks." I steal a glance at my watch. "Well, we can be a few minutes late if you want to finish up."

She freezes mid-pace. "I'm sorry, but I think I have to cancel."

"What?"

"The call I got." She starts pacing the living room again. "One of the bachelors for tomorrow night canceled."

"Oh." I frown. "Is that a problem?"

She turns and looks at me as if I've just asked the dumbest question ever. "Yeah, it's a problem. We promised women there would be ten bachelors and that only leaves us at nine. Besides that, we'll fall short of our fundraising goals."

"I'm sure people will understand." I frown. "Speaking of... I've kind of been feeling weird about tomorrow night."

She freezes and gapes at me. "What are you saying? Are you going to back out?"

"I'm not saying that. Though..." I clench my jaw trying to work out how to say this bit without upsetting her. "I don't know if it's a good idea for me to be one of the bachelors, all things considered."

"What things?" she asks, notable ice in her tone.

"Well, considering that we're dating each other. It seems I don't know, dishonest."

"Let me get this straight." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "I tell you that one of the bachelors for tomorrow night has canceled leaving me completely stressed and struggling to come up with a backup plan and you decide now is the time to bail on me."

"I didn't say I was bailing. Just... maybe there's a way for me not to do it. Not because I want to make your life harder. But because it seems dishonest and disloyal."

I want to suggest that maybe I can make a donation instead of participating. Or, if she wants the optics, I could give her the money to place the winning bid on me.

But her frigid stare gives me pause.

"I should've known," she says. "I should have known you were too good to be true."

"Hey." Now it's my turn to glare daggers. "I'm not being a bad guy here. If anything, I'm proving how loyal I can be."

"By making my life more complicated twenty-four hours before the biggest night of my career."

Though my blood is boiling, I have enough control to pause and take a deep breath to collect my thoughts. As irritated as I am at the moment at what she's accused me of—not to mention annoyed she's the one bailing on me tonight—I don't want to let things get out of hand.

Too late.

While I'm mulling over how to fix this, she turns back to the door and opens it. "You know, I think it would be better if you left right now."

"But, Nicole."

"Please." A tear slips down her cheek and she wipes it away angrily. "If you care about me at all, you'll leave right now so I can figure out how to fix this fundraiser."

I want to argue with her. I want to tell her that we need to resolve this issue between us and clear up a few things. But then I remember what the G&Ws said the other day.

A woman wants a man who will listen and really hear. Well, from what Nicole has told me, she wants me to leave. The least I can do is listen to what she's said.

I don't even see the ball coming my way until it hits me below the belt.

"Son of a—" Groaning, I fold over and blink back tears. My teammates have already just witnessed my total lack of attention on the field. I'm not going to double down on the embarrassment by letting them see me cry.

No matter how much I might like to let some tears flow right now.

Giving myself another second to take a breath, I pull myself upright. I wince a little—both from the shooting pain in my junk and the death glare I'm getting from my position coach on the sideline.

It isn't him, but the head coach, who motions for me to come off the field. Swearing under my breath, I jog his way, ignoring the curious looks I get from Jordan and Trev.

"Sorry, Coach." I smack the side of my helmet. "I know. I need to get my head in the game."

"Yeah, you do. And this lady seems to think she can help with that."

I frown and start to ask who he's talking about when I see his wife, Gigi, waving a few yards away.

"Oh, hell." I groan, but I move toward her. "Who told you?"

"Let's say I have my sources." She nods toward the field where I see my buddies standing together.

I roll my eyes. "You'd think they'd be more focused on the game next Sunday."

"And you'd think you would've known what to do after all our talking the other day." She clucks her tongue. "Luckily for you, I think I can help you with this mess."

Hope rises inside of me. "You can?"

"Yes, but only if you really want to get the girl and prove that she can count on you." She narrows her eyes. "Do you? Can you?"

I take a deep breath and nod. "Yes. Yes, all around."

"Good. Because we don't have much time."

SEVEN

NICOLE

With only a few hours to go until the auction begins, I study the hotel ballroom closely. Wait staff and volunteers are scurrying around the room adding the finishing touches on what will either be my greatest fundraising masterpiece or my most epic failure.

I hope it's my masterpiece. But only because I want to help the kids and the hospital. Either way, I can't imagine feeling any worse than I do now.

As busy as I have been in this final crunch, I keep replaying my exchange with Chance in my head over and over. I realize I overreacted. I was upset about the bachelor who canceled, and I lashed out. Unfortunately, it was at the man who has spent the better part of the past week trying to win me over.

I wonder if Chase will accept a barbershop quartet singing an apology. Because I don't know how I'm going to face him tonight. And, according to Nancy—who confirmed with his agent today—Chase Buchanan will be here tonight.

Hopefully, the woman who wins a date with him will appreciate everything there is to love about him. His boyish smile. His excitement and enthusiasm for living. The size of his heart.

How good he is with his hands.

But, mostly, I hope she sees he's so much more than the man on the field and in the gossip rags.

“Ma’am,” Nancy calls out motioning for me to come behind the curtain we’ve set up around the stage. “Ma’am, there are a couple of gentlemen here to see you.”

I hope they aren’t more bachelors with cold feet. Honestly, I don’t know why these guys have so many hang-ups about this whole thing. It’s not like I’m asking them to swim with sharks or jump out of an airplane with only a shopping bag for a parachute.

Okay, maybe I’m being a little unsympathetic. I just need them to keep it together for one more night.

When I reach the curtain I find two tall, hulking men in suits wearing grins waiting.

Blinking, I shake my head. “I’m sorry, who are the two of you?”

“I’m Jordan.” The bulkier of the two men steps forward. He flashes me a grin that’s surprisingly boyish for a man who looks like he could tackle a bulldozer. His hand dwarves mine as he shakes it.

“And I’m Trev,” the other guy says. His smile is more rakish than his friend’s.

“You, of course, are Nicole.” Shoving Jordan aside, he takes my hand and slowly raises it to his lips. His eyes sparkle as if he’s sharing a secret only the two of us know. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

In another life—heck, even just a week ago, back before I met a certain tight end—the way he’s fawning over me would make my heart skip a beat or my palms sweat. Now... I’m just really confused.

“How do you know me?”

“We’re Chance’s friends.”

My heart sinks. His agent must have been mistaken. “Did he send you here to cancel?”

Not that I can blame him. I was a really big wench to him last night.

“He sent us here,” Jordan says. “But not to cancel.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand. Why did he send you?”

“He said you might be short a couple of bachelors.”

Trev flashes his dental-ad-worthy grin. “We’re here to volunteer. That is if you can make room for a couple more NFL players.”

“Seriously?” I take a few breaths to steady my racing heart. “You’d be willing to do that?”

“Sure, we can’t let Chance have all the fun.”

If possible, my heart swells up even more. Chance sent them to help me. Even after I was awful to him yesterday—even after I didn’t make things easy on him the past week—he still came to my aid.

Because he cares. More than I ever could have imagined. And I had a pretty big imagination after the whole balloon arch deal.

“Speaking of fun...” Jordan clears his throat. “If you have about an hour to take a break before all of this starts, I bet he wouldn’t mind a little help getting into his tuxedo.”

“More like getting out of it,” Trev chuckles. “But, in all seriousness, the guy is crazy about you. We know he might not get things right the first time, but his heart is in the right place.”

“I know it is.” I take a few more breaths. “I seem to have the same problem.”

“I was going to say—”

Jordan elbows Trev in the ribs, silencing him. “If you want to go see Chance to clear things up before the auction, we’re happy to cover for you here. Plus, we brought reinforcements.”

He gestures over his shoulder where a group of gorgeous, smartly dressed women are already talking to my assistant.

“Who are they?”

“The G&Ws. I’m sure you’ll get to know them all well when you join their ranks.”

I have no idea what Jordan is talking about, but there isn’t time to wonder. I need to go find this man and thank him for not only having a huge heart but for sharing it with me.

I probably break at least half a dozen traffic laws as I race to Chance’s penthouse. The doorman at his building recognizes me and sends me up. On the elevator ride, I take deep, steadying breaths and try to imagine what I’ll say when I see him.

Thank you.

I’m sorry.

Can you ever forgive me?

None of those phrases is particularly poetic, but they’re the truth. Yet, they only capture part of what I want to say. Unfortunately, all the thoughts and feelings churning inside of me are so new, I can’t quite put them into words.

When the elevator stops at his floor, I practically stumble out of it and knock on his door. I repeat the basic phrases in my head over and over.

The door opens and I find a stunned Chance standing on the other side. He’s wearing most of his tuxedo—just his coat and tie are missing, but I see them hanging off the back of a chair.

“Nicole.”

My name has never sounded better than it does coming from him right now. All of the words and phrases I’ve practiced escape me. Instead, I throw myself into his arms and press my lips to his, showing him what’s in my heart without uttering a word.

EIGHT

NICOLE

My heart hitches as Chance returns the kiss.

His lips move against mine, applying a pressure that's both tender and insistent. The familiar pangs of longing brew low in my belly. But it doesn't stop there. The pulsing heat flows through my veins, filling my chest with its warmth.

God knows I've kissed him plenty of times before. Specifically, on the night we spent together.

But this kiss is different from any of those.

Those kisses were full of desire and heat. There was an urgent need that had us tumbling into bed together to explore the passion we share. None of that is lacking in this kiss. But there's more. There's a deep longing. There's searching.

There's love. True love. Or, at least, the promise of it. Not the kind of love that passes on a whim. The kind that, if you allow it, can grow and blossom in its most pure form.

With his soul-stirring kiss, Chance proves what he's been trying to say with his clumsy words and often misguided actions.

He loves me. Or, at least, he is on his way to being in love with me. He's willing to do whatever it takes to help it grow.

All he needs is for me to stop fighting the longing my heart feels for him. And I'm ready to stop fighting with him to start fighting to be with him.

When I pull back I rest my head against his chest. “You listened.”

“I did.” He runs his hand up my back sending a shiver of delight up and down my spine. “You said you really liked it when I put my tongue on your—”

“No.” I chuckle and reach for one of his hands. I link my finger with his. “I meant you listened to what matters to me in life.”

“I was always listening, but I wasn’t hearing. If that makes sense.”

“It does.”

“I know you’ve already given me a couple of chances.” He stares down at our hands, running his thumb across my knuckles. “If you give me one more, I promise to really listen and to hear you.”

“I’m the one who’s hoping you’ll give me another chance.” I squeeze his hand and bring our joined fingers to my lips. “I won’t lie. I thought you were just going to be a night of fun. I couldn’t understand why you would want more. I’m still not sure I do. But you’ve proven over and over that you want to be with me and, well, it’s my turn to show you I want to be with you.”

“You don’t have to prove anything.” He pulls me even closer.

“I have everything to prove.”

He chuckles. “Why do I get the feeling you’re never going to let me win an argument?”

“We’re not arguing.” I lean up to kiss his chin. “Besides, you’re a fierce competitor. What fun would it be if I just let you win without putting up a fight.”

“Oh, baby. What you do to me.” He lowers his head to capture my lips in a searing kiss.

I release his hand so I can slide mine up and over his chest, marveling at the hard planes and edges below my fingers. I’ve

explored his body before. This time, it's different. This time, I know it isn't a one-time thing.

This time, I know it's the first of many times.

Chance tugs his lips from mine and slides his teeth and tongue down the curve of my neck. "How much time do we have till we need to leave for the auction?"

Panting, I angle my head more to give him better access. "Thirty minutes. Tops."

"I can make that work."

He slides his hands down to grip my hips and lifts me. We move back only a few feet until he plants me on the edge of the bar in his living area. While his lips work their magic on my neck, he eases a hand up my thigh, sliding it under the hem of my dress. I part my legs, pulling him closer between me.

His hardness presses against me, and I melt even more against him. Stroking his chest, I feel my way to the buttons on his shirt and undo them. Pushing it aside, I splay my fingers over his chest, tracing the tattoos that cover it.

"Someday, I want you to tell me about all of them."

His lips curve into a smile against my collarbone. "And someday you'll have to tell me why you aren't wearing any panties."

I frown. "I'm wearing some."

With a quick tug of his hands, he eases them down my hips. He steps back until they fall on the floor. "Guess again."

Giggling, I slide my hand into his hair and pull his head back to mine. I kiss him with all of the love and desire churning inside of me. I'm so wrapped up in him and showing him what's in my heart, it's almost impossible to tell where I end and he begins.

Chance teases the curls at the apex of my thighs and groans. "You're already wet. I have to taste you."

Dropping, he buries his face between my thighs, kissing and teasing me. He stirs the need brewing inside of me. I grip

his hair and throw my head back as the first pangs of ecstasy tug at my belly before spreading through my whole body.

As the tremors of pleasure echo through me, I fall back against the bar, gasping for breath. Chance rises to his feet, kissing a path back to me. Kisses on my belly. My breasts. The skin below my chin. My cheek. My lips.

I open my eyes to find him gazing down at me with pure adoration on his face. I don't know what I did to deserve him or all of the chances he's given me to see the real Chance Buchanan. Few people have had the privilege.

Heart swelling, I push myself up and wrap myself around him. With a few fumbles of buttons and zippers and whispered words of encouragement, he fills me at last. My back is pressed against the bar, his arms hold me safe, and we gaze into each other's eyes.

"This is where we belong," he says.

"It is." I cup his cheek with my palm and lean forward to kiss him.

We move against each other, urging one another on until we both are crying out each other's name.

After we collapse into a pile on the floor, my head resting against his chest. When I'm able, I reach for his arm and pull his wrist toward me so I can look at his watch. When I see the time, I groan. "We need to get to the auction."

He pulls a face. "About that..."

I push myself up, a lock of hair falling across my face as I gape down at him. "I suppose it's only fair for you to cancel. You did bring in a couple of replacements."

"No, I'm not going to back out on you. You've worked too hard on it." He brushes the hair out of my eyes. "I was just going to say, it feels weird knowing that some stranger is going to win a date with me. I know it's for charity, but it feels like cheating."

"Mmm. I see your point." I purse my lips. "Maybe I could bid on you."

“I was going to suggest that.” He gives my pursed lips a friendly peck. “But only if you’ll let me reimburse you.”

“Well, I don’t know—”

“I just signed another deal with an underwear company. The money is burning a hole in my pocket.”

I scrunch my face. “I suppose if everyone else gets to see you in your underwear, you might as well put a little of that money to a good cause.”

“Does that make you jealous?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Maybe a little.”

“Good.” He kisses me again. “Not that you need to be. I’m yours, Nicole. In every way, I’m yours.”

EPILOGUE

CHANCE

“He’s coming!”

I hesitate outside the door of our condo and grin at the rustling on the other side. With my birthday only a couple of days away, it doesn’t take much to guess what I’ll find on the other side. Especially not when Nicole has been walking around with a sexy little smirk on her lips for the better part of a week as she not-so-subtly reminds me to be home on this night at the set time.

But, since she’s gone to the trouble of throwing me a surprise party, the least I can do is play my part. It’ll be a pleasure. Just like every day has been with the love of my life. We’ve had our share of ups and downs as most couples do. Yet, at the end of every day, she’s in my arms and my heart is full. So it’s pretty much been as perfect as life can get.

I make a production of jingling my keys before sliding the right one into the lock. Then, I take a few seconds longer than necessary to open the door to our mostly dark home.

“Babe,” I call out, fumbling for the light. “Are you here?”

Then, fighting my smile, I flip on the switch.

“Surprise!”

Our closest friends and family jump out from hiding spots behind furniture. I gasp loudly and clap my hands, hoping I look surprised enough, but not like I’m overcompensating.

Several of my teammates—past and present—come up to greet me, including Jordan and Trev, and their dates. While both of them brought in a fair amount of money during the bidding at the bachelor auction a couple years ago, neither of them found true love with their dates that night.

Unlike a couple of our other guests tonight, who—like me—found everything they could have wanted and more courtesy of the auction. Nicole says that after all of the money raised for the children’s wing at the hospital, all of the love matches that came out of the event are her biggest achievement.

As one of the lucky benefactors, I can’t argue.

I say hello to Gigi and the other G&Ws, but I don’t pause to do more than thank them for coming. I only have eyes for one person in the room. Well, technically two. Nicole is standing on the far side of the room with our eight-month-old son, Theo, perched on her hip.

Like his mom, his appearance in our life was a bit of a surprise. I was down on one knee at the aquarium, asking Nicole to make me the happiest man in the world when she got sick. Once she was feeling better, she said yes. I thought everything was fine, but she kept getting sick every time we talked about the wedding. After a couple of weeks, I was getting pretty worried.

Then one day she raced into the gym at the practice facility, waving a positive pregnancy test, and told me I was going to be a father.

We don’t always do things in the expected order. I mean, we found ourselves in bed before we went on a date. And I fell in love with her before we really got to know each other. So we do things our own way. It’s our way, which makes it the best for us.

When I reach their side, I slide one arm around Nicole and scoop Theo into the other. He giggles as he’s jostled around.

Nicole scrunches up her nose in that adorable way of hers. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Oh, well...” I pull a face. I don’t want to lie to her. Not even a little one like this. But I also don’t want to disappoint her. “I figured you might have something special planned, but I didn’t expect all this.”

“Oh, man.” She sighs. “You’re the hardest man in the world to surprise. Meanwhile, you’re always pulling off these incredible surprises for me.”

“And the pleasure is always mine.” I give her a squeeze and kiss her forehead. “Besides, you already gave me the biggest surprise of my life the moment we met.”

She makes another sweet sound and leans into my embrace. Theo giggles and snuggles himself into the crook of my neck.

As I hold my family in my arms and look around us, I know I’m the luckiest man in the world. If you look me up online, you’ll find a list of all my career stats and victories. Still, the greatest achievements in my life are right here.

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