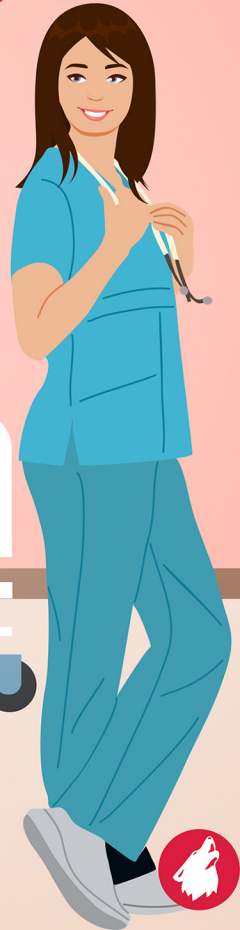
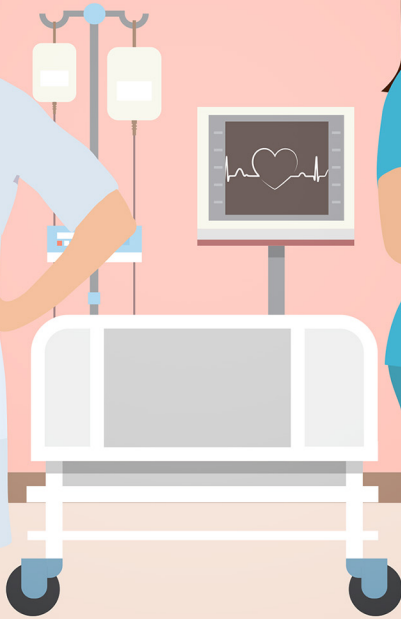


BACHELORETTE

Number Twelve



Jae



Chapter 1

ELLIE STOOD ON HER TIPTOES on top of the ugliest orange plastic chair she'd ever laid eyes on, stretching to the right as far as she could, when a pair of sneakers squeaked to an abrupt stop behind her.

"That better be a workplace safety demonstration on what *not* to do," a cool voice cut through the background noise in the emergency department. It drowned out the steady beep of cardiac monitors, a ringing phone, and loud coughing from one of the treatment cubicles.

Ellie dropped to her heels and glanced over her shoulder.

Dr. Regina Novak loomed in front of her, athletic arms folded across her blue scrub top and her full lips compressed into a disapproving line. "This"—she jerked her chin in the direction of Ellie's feet on the chair—"is exactly how many of our patients end up in the ED."

She was right. Of course Ellie knew that. But the doctor's superior tone grated on her nerves. One of the reasons she enjoyed being an ED nurse was that emergency physicians tended to be more laid-back, not as abrasive and arrogant as some of the surgeons.

Clearly, Dr. Regina Novak was the exception. She was all the stereotypes about doctors with God complexes rolled into one five-foot-ten package—an admittedly gorgeous package, but that was beside the point. She had rubbed Ellie the wrong way ever since Dr. Novak's first day as a new attending at Campbell Medical Center, and every interaction in the seven months since had only cemented that first impression.

"I'll be right down. I just need to..." Ellie stretched to her right again and pinned the end of the string to the wall. "There. All done."

Dr. Novak squinted at the string of paper hearts as if Ellie had fixed alien artifacts to the wall. "What is that?"

Ellie gazed down at her from on top of the chair. Was it childish that she enjoyed being able to look down at the tall doctor for once? Reluctantly, she jumped down. “Paper hearts,” she said with what she hoped to be a disarming smile.

“I can see that.” Dr. Novak gripped the lanyard that held her hospital ID as if she wanted to strangle Ellie with it. “I mean, why are you putting that up here?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “Because February is the month of love, and tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. I thought putting up some decorations would cheer up our patients and create an uplifting atmosphere.”

“This is an emergency department. The least uplifting and romantic place on earth,” Dr. Novak replied coolly. “People come here because they are sick or injured and need help. I doubt they feel like celebrating anything, least of all this commercialized nonsense holiday.”

Ab. Ellie should have known Dr. Novak didn’t have a romantic bone in her body. “It’s not just for the patients,” she said quietly. “The staff could use a boost of morale too. We have several couples who’ll spend Valentine’s Day working. What’s wrong with celebrating their love by putting up some paper hearts here and a few balloons in the break room?”

At the mention of balloons, Dr. Novak’s jaw tightened even more. “We need to focus on functionality. This stuff will get in the way.”

“Up there?” She couldn’t be serious.

“It’s inappropriate.”

Ellie had a feeling Dr. Novak could keep up this silent stare-down until their shift ended. Time to play her trump card. “Not according to the charge nurse and the director of nursing. I cleared it with them.”

Dr. Novak sent her a look that could have saved all the glaciers in Antarctica from melting, but since the director of nursing had okayed the Valentine’s Day decorations, there was nothing she could do about them. “At least tie it in with American Heart Month. Hang up a poster to raise awareness about cardiovascular diseases or something.”

Did this woman ever think of anything but medicine? “Sure,” Ellie said. “I can do that.”

After one last glare up at the offending paper hearts, Dr. Novak strode away. “And get a step stool before you break your neck,” she called back over her shoulder. “We can’t afford to be short-staffed this week.”

Ellie playfully clutched her chest behind Dr. Novak's back. *Wow, such heartfelt concern. Thanks, Doc.* She seriously doubted Dr. Novak had a date for Valentine's Day, but if she did, Ellie pitied the poor person.

* * *

"You're not still glaring at the poor paper hearts, are you?"

Regina lowered her gaze from where she'd been staring at the wall.

Dr. Kayla Vaughn, the night shift attending who would relieve her, leaned against the counter at the workstation. She had her braids tied back into a bun and was already equipped with three of the most important tools of their trade: a tablet computer, the stethoscope in her pocket, and a large cup of coffee.

"What? No, of course not." Regina had managed to ignore the paper hearts since Ellie had put them up the day before. "Just relaxing my eyes while I'm thinking about how to phrase 'accidentally swallowed the engagement ring her boyfriend hid in the chocolate mousse' on the discharge sheet."

Kayla laughed. "Sounds like an interesting shift."

Regina gave a noncommittal grunt. "The usual."

"Candle burns, lacerations from cutting flowers, and allergic reactions to chocolate candy hearts?"

"Check, check, and check." Regina drew three check marks in the air. "Crossed off every square on the Valentine's Day ED bingo card. February 14 should be considered a health hazard."

"Oh, so it's not just the paper hearts you hate; it's Valentine's Day in general."

"Nonsense," Regina said. "I couldn't care less if other people want to waste their hard-earned money on cheesy cards and overpriced chocolate."

The charge nurse looked over and raised one eyebrow.

"Aww, come on," Kayla said. "It's the celebration of love."

"Oh yeah," Regina muttered. "I'm sure Hallmark, florists, and jewelry stores love and celebrate all the extra cash they're making."

Kayla shook her head at Regina. "You might change your mind and stop hating Valentine's Day once you meet that special someone."

"Doubtful." The supreme silliness of Valentine's Day wouldn't change, even if her relationship status did. Besides, who said she was looking for a special someone? She was perfectly happy on her own, thank you very

much. “And I told you I don’t hate it. I just hate distractions while I’m working.” Regina flicked her gaze up toward the damn string of paper hearts. “In our job, distractions can cost lives.”

Kayla chuckled into her coffee. “Don’t you think you’re being overly dramatic? I don’t think anyone will die because Ellie put up a few Valentine’s Day decorations.”

Okay, maybe not. But it was still annoying as hell. They were a hospital, not a preschool that put up badly done paper cut-outs for every holiday that came along. What was next? Ellie wanting to organize an Easter egg hunt in the ED?

Besides, it wasn’t only the decorations that annoyed her. It was that Ellie had—once again—gone straight to the higher-ups in the hospital hierarchy instead of asking her and the other attending physicians.

Apparently, that was becoming a habit with Ellie. In their first week of working together, she had gone above Regina’s head and complained to the chief of the emergency department because she was convinced Regina had delayed the treatment of a patient with an abscess on his arm because he was a drug user and didn’t have health insurance.

Ridiculous. Regina remembered that patient well—she remembered every drug-using patient with an abscess—and the last thing she would ever do was to unnecessarily delay the kind of treatment that could have saved her brother’s life.

She slashed her hand through the air, ending that line of thought. Enough about abscesses, Ellie, and that cheesy holiday. She finished writing the discharge order, closed the digital chart, and pointed at the intake board up on the wall. “I’ve worked some serious magic clearing the board before the end of my shift. Only two patients left for you to take care of.”

Kayla gave a low whistle. “Just when I thought you weren’t into giving gifts on Valentine’s Day! What have we got?”

“The patient in exam one presented with pain in his jaw. No chest pain or shortness of breath, but a BP of 170/115 with no prior history of hypertension.” Regina gave her colleague a meaningful look.

“Smoker?” Kayla asked.

Regina nodded. “Two packs a day. The EKG is inconclusive, and we’re still waiting for the cardiac enzyme labs. In exam two, we’ve got one of the Valentine’s Day victims. She and her boyfriend were trying to spice

things up in the bedroom by using a sex swing, and somehow, her head went through the drywall.”

Kayla whistled quietly. “And you thought romance was dead.”

Regina ignored the comment. “Anyway, she lost consciousness for a minute, and she’s got a headache, but no neck stiffness, nausea, or blurry vision. Her GCS is fourteen. She’s waiting for a CT scan to rule out something more serious than a concussion.”

“Great. I’ll take over, then, so you can leave,” Kayla said. “Any plans for your days off?”

Regina shrugged. “Sleep.” She wasn’t one for small talk or sharing details about her private life with co-workers.

“Are you going to the Heart-to-Heart Auction on Friday?”

“Heart-to-Heart Auction?” Regina repeated. Her colleague made no sense at all.

“You haven’t heard about it? How’s that even possible? The nurses, techs, and residents have talked about nothing else all week!”

Regina gave another shrug. She was there to work, not to chat about everyone’s social calendar.

“It’s our annual charity event,” Kayla continued. “Twelve of Kansas City’s most eligible singles, many of them CMC staff, will be auctioned off for a good cause. It’s always great fun, plus all the money raised goes to our pediatric cardiac care program.”

“Sounds, um, nice.” Well, at least the part about the proceeds going to sick children. Watching desperate singles bid on the people gullible enough to volunteer was about as nice as getting puked on by a patient with food poisoning. “But I wasn’t planning on going. See you next shift.”

When she got up and headed toward the locker room, Kayla quickly put down her coffee mug and jogged after her. “Um, wait. I’m actually helping organize the auction, and I’m not just filling you in on the details to make small talk. Marissa was supposed to be one of the bachelorettes, but she bailed at the last minute, and now I’m wondering if you might consider covering for her.”

“You mean...covering her shift?”

“I mean climbing up on the auction block and,” Kayla stepped closer, waggled her eyebrows, and lowered her voice, “selling your body to the highest bidder.”

Regina gave her the kind of look she normally reserved for fresh-out-of-med-school residents who were about to do something that would get a patient killed.

Kayla gulped audibly. “I’m kidding. It’s not like that. The bachelors and bachelorettes are only auctioned off for a few dates—just dinner and some other fun activities. You don’t even need to kiss your date. All you have to do is strut down the catwalk and smile while they bid on you.”

That mental image did nothing to convince Regina otherwise. Letting herself be auctioned off like a slab of meat? No, thanks. “Hard pass.”

“Oh, come on! It’s for the children!”

“I’d be happy to make a donation,” Regina said.

Kayla shook her head. “We don’t need you to write a check. We need a replacement for Bachelorette Number Twelve.”

“Ask someone else.” Anyone else. Regina looked around, and her gaze landed on Ellie, who was sitting out of earshot at the nurses’ station, charting. With her long, brunette hair that shone beneath the fluorescent lights and her warm smile that soothed even their youngest patients, she would surely be popular with bidders. “What about her? She clearly enjoys all that romantic stuff.” She unobtrusively nodded in Ellie’s direction.

Of course, Ellie chose that moment to glance up from the digital chart. She gave Regina a questioning look, but not even a hint of her typical smile dimpled her cheeks.

Regina was used to it. Ellie had taken a dislike to her from day one. Well, the feeling was mutual.

She gave Ellie a quick never-mind wave.

“Ellie was a bachelorette a few years ago, and she did great, but you know people. Everyone dreams of nabbing a doctor, not a nurse. I bet you’d raise a chunk of money for the children.”

“Why don’t you do it, then?” Regina shot back. “Last I checked, you were a doctor too.”

“Sorry, I can’t.” Kayla pointed at her wedding ring, which she wore on a chain around her neck. “Being single is a requirement.”

Regina folded her arms across her scrub top. “What makes you think I’m single?”

“Oh, I don’t know... Maybe your cynical attitude toward Valentine’s Day,” Kayla muttered.

Regina pierced her with a glare that made Kayla gulp again.

“Okay, okay. You didn’t correct me earlier when I said you’d appreciate Valentine’s Day once you found your special someone. Plus emergency medicine is a small world. I know people who know people who did their residency at Cedars-Sinai too.”

“Then your spy network probably also told you that I’m gay. I’m sure that disqualifies me as a bachelorette.” Regina didn’t usually find it necessary to out herself to her colleagues, but she wasn’t ashamed of her sexual orientation and wasn’t above using it to get out of this silly auction.

“Why would it?” Kayla asked. “You can keep it strictly platonic. Besides, who said only men would bid on you? The women-loving ladies in the audience deserve to have a hottie to bid on too.”

Regina tilted her head in vague acknowledgment. “True, but—”

“Great!” Kayla clapped her hands. “So I can add you to the lineup?”

“I really don’t—”

“Please say yes. It’ll be fun. Plus it’ll do wonders for your reputation.”

“My *reputation*?” Regina drew out the word. Her reputation as an emergency physician was stellar. She had graduated at the top of her class from Harvard Medical School and had been the chief resident of her residency program. Her reputation didn’t need any help, least of all from an absurd event where she would be auctioned off like livestock.

“Yeah,” Kayla said. “Doing the charity auction will go a long way to convince the nurses you’re not a stuck-up snob who believes she’s better than everyone else.”

Regina huffed. “No one thinks that.”

Kayla gave her a look.

Well, even if they did, Regina didn’t give a rat’s ass. She was here to do her job, not to win a popularity contest with the nursing staff.

“Then prove it. Prove you’re a team player by becoming our twelfth bachelorette.” Kayla nudged her. “Come on. You know I wouldn’t be asking you for this favor if I weren’t desperate.”

Regina made a face. “Thanks a lot. Maybe it’s a good thing you aren’t allowed to be a bachelorette—your compliments are seriously lacking.”

“You know what I mean. Pleeeeease! You don’t want me to be distracted at work because I’m worried about having to find a replacement, do you?”

Before Regina could answer, Ellie rushed over from the nurses' station. "EMS just called in. They're en route with a thirty-five-year-old female in acute respiratory distress due to anaphylaxis. She's got a history of nut allergies, and the husband thinks she might have accidentally eaten some chocolate that contained almonds."

Ugh. Another Valentine's Day victim. Adrenaline flooded Regina, and she opened her mouth to ask for their ETA. Then she remembered that her shift was over and she had handed off the baton to Kayla.

"They're two minutes out," Ellie said as if anticipating her question anyway.

Kayla rattled off orders, then turned back toward Regina. "I'll add you to the lineup, okay?"

Regina took a deep breath to tell her she'd let herself be auctioned off when hell froze over.

But Ellie's gaze went back and forth between them, then came to rest on Regina. She cocked her head, probably waiting to see who would take charge of the incoming patient.

Or maybe she knew what Kayla had asked Regina to do and was curious to find out if Regina had the guts to step onto the auction block.

The wail of a siren started up in the distance, then quickly grew louder.

Regina gritted her teeth. This wasn't the time for silly arguments. *Ah, to hell with it.* No way would she let Ellie think she was scared to get up on stage when Ellie had already done it. Besides, it was for the children. "All right. I'll do it. But you owe me big-time!"

Kayla jogged toward the trauma bay. "Thanks," she called back over her shoulder.

As Regina headed toward the locker room to change into her street clothes, a heavy weight seemed to settle on her shoulders. Why did she have a feeling she would end up regretting this?

Chapter 2

THE FRIDAY AFTER VALENTINE'S DAY, Ellie entered the lobby of the historic Muehlebach Hotel, careful not to get her coat or her best dress caught in the revolving doors. The heels of her pumps echoed across the intricate tile floor.

"Wow." Two steps into the lobby, she stopped to take it all in.

Beth bumped into her from behind. "Hey, careful! You can't just—!"

She paused next to Ellie, and now both stood and stared.

The Muehlebach, once *the* place to stay in Kansas City, wasn't used as an active hotel anymore, just for special events like the Heart-to-Heart Auction. Clearly, whoever had decorated the lobby for the auction loved Valentine's Day as much as Ellie did.

Red, heart-shaped helium balloons crowded around the crystal chandeliers on the high ceiling. Two bouquets of red roses flanked the mantel of the giant marble fireplace. Pink ribbons twisted around the square mahogany columns, and swathes of blood-red cloth were draped above the ornamented brass elevators to the left and right. Cupid figurines perched in the key slots behind the marble-topped front desk, each one holding a tiny bow with a golden, heart-tipped arrow. A romantic love ballad played in the background.

"Hey, you two!" Jasmine stuck her head out of the elevator door she held open for them. "Are you coming? The ballroom is up there."

More dressed-up people entered through the revolving door behind them, so Ellie hurried forward as fast as her unfamiliar footwear allowed and squeezed into the tiny elevator with her friends and colleagues.

The ballroom upstairs was as elegant as the lobby. Red and white balloons formed two huge, intertwined hearts on one of the walls. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ornamented ceiling, throwing their soft

light on an elevated stage and a connected catwalk that extended into the room. Countless round tables, all draped with white linen, took up every bit of space. Ornate chairs with crimson velvet covers were arranged around each one.

This was huge! No comparison to the much smaller ballroom and stage they had started out with their first year, when Ellie had been talked into letting herself be auctioned off. She hadn't been able to attend the past two years because she'd worked the night shift. While she had heard the event had grown and attracted more philanthropists and donors, seeing the impressive changes still took her by surprise.

The auction attendees looked more polished too. All around them, people in tuxedos, sequined ball gowns, and cocktail dresses mingled, chatting over canapés and champagne. She caught sight of purses that probably cost more than she made in a month.

"Why do I suddenly feel like Cinderella at the ball?" Ellie whispered to Beth and Jasmine. This so wasn't her crowd. If the hospital hadn't given them tickets, security might have kicked them out.

Beth nodded, wide-eyed. "Yeah, Cinderella *after* the stroke of midnight!"

"Well, Cinderella found her prince at the ball, so..." Jasmine dragged them with her toward the open bar.

Apparently, the event organizers thought people would bid higher after they'd had some liquid encouragement—and they were probably right.

"You know I'm not interested in princes," Ellie said.

Jasmine waved her hand. "Fine, a princess for you, then. Have you thought about who you'll bid on?"

Ellie firmly shook her head. "I'm not going to bid."

"Why not? It's an auction, Ellie. That's why we're here. To bid on the hotties."

"I'm here to support our colleagues and a good cause," Ellie answered.

"Me too—with my wallet. I think at least one of us should walk out of here with one of KC's most eligible bachelors...or bachelorettes. Preferably one of us who hasn't been on a date in forever." Jasmine gave her a meaningful look, which Ellie promptly ignored.

"I doubt we'll be able to outbid the Gucci and Prada folks," Ellie said.

“We will if we do it strategically,” Jasmine said. “Just wait until the last couple of bachelors, when everyone else has run out of steam or money.”

“The best strategy doesn’t change the fact that all the bachelorettes are probably as straight as an arrow.”

“Maybe,” Jasmine said with a grin. “Maybe not.”

What was that supposed to mean? As far as Ellie knew, none of the doctors and paramedics up for auction were gay or bi.

“You could still bid,” Beth threw in before Ellie could ask. “Remember that you’re not just bidding on the guy or gal but on the entire package.”

“No, thanks,” Ellie muttered. “I’m not interested in anyone’s package.”

Jasmine and Beth burst out laughing.

Ellie’s cheeks heated despite the cool temperatures in the ballroom. “I didn’t mean it like that! I was talking about the date packages, like dinner at a posh restaurant, a private suite at a Chiefs game, and stuff like that!”

“Sure you were!”

Her friends were still chuckling as they reached the front of the line at the bar.

Ellie took a moment to read the list of Valentine’s Day cocktails behind the bar, then decided on one called Love Potion Number Nine.

Once they had their drinks, Jasmine insisted they register for auction paddles before they headed to their table, which was toward the back.

“I won’t use mine,” Ellie said as she put her numbered paddle down on the table next to the roses centerpiece. “Unless it’s to give you a swat if you don’t stop trying to convince me otherwise.”

Jasmine giggled. “Ooh! I had no idea you’re into spanking.”

Ellie picked up the paddle and lightly swatted Jasmine’s shoulder. “Why are we friends with her again?” she asked Beth.

Beth held up both hands, palms out, in a leave-me-out-of-this gesture. “I’m actually with her on this. You need a date, my friend. You haven’t been out with anyone in at least six months, not even on Valentine’s Day.”

“Hey, it’s not that I’m not open to dating.” In fact, she would love to meet someone special. She just wasn’t desperate enough to buy herself the company of a woman. “But I’m not forcing it. My soulmate will come into my life when the time is right. I doubt it’ll happen tonight, though. In fact, my bank account says it *definitely* won’t happen tonight. The auction is strictly a spectator sport for me.”

“How can you be such a romantic yet so pragmatic at the same time?” Jasmine studied her with a shake of her head.

Ellie grinned. “It’s called multitasking. I can even walk and chew gum at the same time.”

“Oh yeah?” Jasmine poked her with the auction program. “I remember a certain nurse who sent an emesis basin flying because she couldn’t walk and stare at a certain doctor at the same time.”

Ellie resisted the urge to fan herself with the paddle. “I wasn’t staring at her.” Okay, maybe she had been. Dr. Novak was an attractive woman—objectively speaking. But the initial *wow* had turned into *ugh* within a minute of meeting her. “I was merely pausing to introduce myself. Unlike her, I have manners.”

Jasmine chuckled. “Yeah, you introduced yourself by throwing the basin at her feet.”

Ellie’s cheeks burned. “It was an accident. No reason to ignore me and not even introduce herself.”

“She didn’t introduce herself to me either,” Beth said, “so don’t take it personally. We’ve all worked with doctors like that. If you don’t have an MD behind your name, they think you’re not worth talking to.”

“Yeah, a few are arrogant assholes, but some just come across as cold and snobbish, while they’re really sizzling hot.” Jasmine turned around the auction program and showed them the picture of a bachelor, his shirt half unbuttoned and a red rose clenched between his toothpaste-commercial-white teeth.

Beth took a look. “Nope, not him. He might be hot, but he’s an ass too. My friend who works in the OR says he’s got only one volume: shouting.”

“Oh.” Jasmine folded the corner of the dog-eared page back up.

While her friends leafed through the program, Ellie leaned back to people-watch. She hummed appreciatively as she sipped her Love Potion Number Nine. *Yum*. The pomegranate juice, strawberry vodka, and black raspberry liqueur blended together into the perfect mix of sweet and tart. Heart-shaped strawberries were skewered on a Cupid’s arrow that rested on the glass.

Jasmine held her champagne flute with one hand while flipping through the program with the other, studying the bios and photos of

the bachelors with the kind of attention some of Ellie's married lesbian friends gave picking out a sperm donor. Every now and then, she folded back one of the pages.

Ellie couldn't help grinning as she watched her. "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

Jasmine nodded without looking up from the program. "You bet your sweet ass I am," she said with a determination she usually reserved for saving lives as an ED nurse. "I—"

"Shh, it's starting!" Beth pointed toward the stage.

Ellie turned so she was facing the front of the room.

A blond guy walked up to the podium and leaned in to the microphone. "Welcome to the fourth annual Heart-to-Heart Auction! I'm Noah Hanson from *Soundbites* on KRCX radio, and I'll be your emcee for the night!"

Someone in the front of the room let out a wolf whistle, giving Ellie a good idea of how rowdy the evening might get, despite how refined this crowd looked.

The emcee laughed. "Sorry, I'm not up for grabs tonight, but if you've had a chance to leaf through our program, you'll have noticed that we have an amazing lineup of twelve of KC's most eligible singles braving the catwalk. All proceeds will go to the pediatric cardiac care program at Campbell Medical Center, so don't be shy—bid high and often." He made a dramatic pause. "So, without further ado... Here's your first bachelor!"

Jasmine leaned forward as if preparing herself for a sprint. "Get ready, girls! One of us is getting herself an eligible hottie!"

Ellie pulled one of the strawberries off the arrow-shaped skewer and popped it into her mouth. Even if Jasmine's prediction came true, one thing was for sure: it wouldn't be her.

* * *

"Do it for the children, she said. It'll be fun, she said," Regina muttered as she waited in the wings of the stage.

Nearby, two of the bachelors—both surgeons—were betting on which of them would go for more money.

Regina bit her lip so she wouldn't tell them to shut up. Her feet ached in those damn three-inch heels, and her patience was wearing thin.

Why, oh why had she let Kayla rope her into this? And why couldn't she be among the first to be auctioned off instead of the last one?

She wasn't nervous. Of course not. She handled cardiac arrests, strokes, and subdural hematomas for a living, bringing people back from the brink of death on a regular basis. A silly auction wouldn't make her sweat.

Standing around, waiting, had just never been her thing. She was a woman of action.

But as much as she hoped for a last-minute miracle that would get her out of this, she knew it wouldn't happen. The only way out was through.

She took a step forward and peeked through a tiny gap in the burgundy velvet curtain.

On the catwalk, one of the respiratory therapists took off his shirt and waved it over his head like a lasso. Apparently, the two surgeons had successfully convinced him that a striptease was expected of each bachelor, even though Kayla had told them it was fine to keep it PG-rated. He turned, gyrated, and flexed his butt in the direction of the audience.

Regina groaned. *Ugh*. She would have to work with him again during her next shift and so didn't need this mental image. Quickly, she looked away and scanned the crowd instead.

The audience seemed to be having a great time. Everyone was laughing, clapping, whistling, catcalling, and tossing back champagne as fast as the waiters could serve it.

Well, everyone except for one woman.

Regina's gaze paused on a familiar face in the crowd.

Ellie sat at a table toward the back, sipping a cherry-red drink that looked like one of those disgustingly sweet cocktails. She smiled politely but seemed unimpressed by the RT's on-stage antics.

Would that smile waver when she saw Regina walk out onto the stage? Would she lose respect for her as a professional when Regina had to strut around and show some leg to drive up the bidding?

What do you care? It wasn't as if Ellie seemed to have much respect for her anyway.

Bachelorette Number Twelve

But truth be told, Regina did care. Not really about Ellie's opinion, of course. She had always kept up a professional demeanor at work, though. Only once had her colleagues gotten a glimpse of the woman behind the white lab coat, and afterward, nothing had been the same.

Well, this isn't work. Besides, according to Kayla, Ellie had been a bachelorette in the past, so she wasn't in a position to judge.

For a second, Regina wondered what Ellie had worn up on stage. Had she danced, twirled, or flashed a bit of cleavage to drive up the bidding?

No, no, no, no. Don't think about it. She's someone you work with. Someone you don't even like. She doesn't have cleavage.

But even at this distance, her eyes told her otherwise. Ellie actually looked fantastic in a simple but flattering red dress.

Not that Regina cared about that either. She just wasn't used to seeing Ellie in anything but scrubs.

"Are you ready?" the stage manager asked from behind her.

Regina turned and gave her a questioning glance.

"You're up after him." The stage manager waved her clipboard at one of the surgeons.

The other one had stepped out onto the stage without Regina noticing.

Regina braced her shoulders and gave a stiff nod. "Ready."

It didn't take long before the emcee's voice filtered through the buzz of the crowd as he called out, "Please welcome our last bachelorette of the night, Dr. Regina Novak!"

He drew out her name as if she were a boxer about to step into the ring—and Regina felt like that too.

It's for the children, was her last thought before she pushed the curtain aside, plastered a confident grin onto her face, and walked out onto the stage.

* * *

Ellie clutched her paddle with both hands. Had she misheard over the clapping and hooting, or had the emcee just announced Regina Novak as Bachelorette Number Twelve?

Quickly, she flipped through the program. Bachelorette Number Twelve was supposed to be one of their fourth-year residents. Dr. Novak's

picture was nowhere to be found, but there was no mistaking the woman now stepping out into the spotlight.

She strode across the stage with the same confidence Ellie had watched in the ED a hundred times before. But unlike those times, Dr. Novak wasn't wearing scrubs now.

Her black, formfitting halter-neck dress showed off her slim figure and left her toned arms and shoulders bare. Its broad strap crisscrossed above her breasts and framed her elegant neck. The hemline ended several inches above the knees, revealing her long legs as she strutted down the catwalk in a pair of high heels that could have been classified as lethal weapons.

Jesus, she had gorgeous legs! Okay, gorgeous *everything*, but she was still an arrogant ass.

Dr. Novak paused in the middle of the catwalk and took up a confident, almost challenging stance. Unlike some of the other bachelors and bachelorettes, she didn't dance or strip.

Not that she needed to—she commandeered everyone's attention without any showy moves. Even the people who had lost interest in the auction and hung out at the bar now turned their heads.

The slightest hint of a smile played on Dr. Novak's lips. It seemed to dare the crowd to bid on her. Her chin-length, black hair, tucked behind one ear, shone like a raven's feathers under the bright stage lights.

Ellie's mouth had gone dry, and she'd finished her cocktail earlier, so she grabbed a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter and took a big gulp.

All right, Dr. Novak cleaned up unexpectedly well. So what? That didn't make up for her snobbish personality.

A loud whistle from Jasmine nearly pierced Ellie's eardrum.

"Jazzy!" Ellie clutched her ear. "Cut it out!"

"What? She's *hot* with a capital H!" Jasmine gave her a meaningful look. "And according to one of the EMTs who used to work with her in California, she also happens to be gay."

She is? Ellie hadn't known. She'd learned very little about Dr. Novak from the usually effective hospital rumor mill. Not that she had tried to find out anything about her, of course. "Oh? Um, I mean, so? Even if it's true, that doesn't mean I'll bid on her, if that's what you think. I can't

stand her, so why would I pay for her company? Having to work with her is bad enough.”

“Can’t stand her. Mm-hmm. Right. That’s why your eyes nearly bounced across the room when she walked out from behind the curtain.”

Ellie tried to cross her arms over her chest but realized she was white-knuckling the auction paddle. “They did not. I just took a closer look to make sure it’s really her. She looks very different in scrubs.”

Jasmine chuckled. “She sure—”

“Shhh.” Beth glared at them both. “You’re missing her introduction!”

Ellie turned her attention back to what the emcee was saying.

“...has graciously agreed to step in for a colleague who couldn’t make it.”

Ah, so that was why she wasn’t in the program. Ellie wondered who had talked Dr. Novak into stepping in and what they’d had to offer her in exchange. Surely she hadn’t volunteered out of the kindness of her heart.

“Dr. Novak is an emergency physician by day and an avid piano player and disc golf athlete by night, so I think her date can safely assume she’s good with her hands.” The emcee gave an exaggerated wink.

Ellie cringed. She might not have liked the hospital’s newest attending, but she appreciated comments like that even less.

Dr. Novak’s annoyingly beautiful face remained impassive, however.

Despite her dislike, Ellie couldn’t help admiring her composure.

“The three words that describe her best are calm, efficient, and inventive,” the emcee said, reading from his notes.

Ellie suppressed a snort. *More like cold, arrogant, and dismissive.*

“The highest bidder won’t just win a chance to experience Dr. Novak’s renowned bedside manner; the package also involves a romantic ice-skating date at Crown Center, dinner at The Meadow, a surprise activity planned by our bachelorette, and a hands-on baking class for two, taught by Sasha Peterson, the baker who made Jenna Blake’s wedding cake.”

That sounded like fun! Too bad Ellie wouldn’t get to do any of that.

“Let’s start the bidding at one hundred dollars for that awesome date package with Dr. Novak.” The emcee scanned the audience. “Do we have one hundred?”

“One hundred,” someone shouted a few tables to Ellie’s left.

She craned her neck to see who it was.

A guy with a comb-over and an expensive-looking tuxedo had stuck his paddle into the air.

“We have one hundred over here. Do I hear one-fifty?”

The bidding rapidly went up, then stalled at eight hundred.

Eight hundred for a date package! Ellie couldn't believe it. She'd paid less for her first car. Granted, it had been a piece of junk, but it had been hers.

“Come on, folks! Don't be shy! Getting to spend several dates with Dr. Novak will be worth every cent!” The emcee circled his finger at the doctor, encouraging her to strut her stuff to drive up the bidding.

Dr. Novak sent him a look that made him duck behind the podium. Then she sauntered down the catwalk with her head held high.

Now she was closer than before so Ellie could see the play of her lithe muscles with every confident stride. God, those legs! Ellie tried to take another sip of champagne, but not a drop of liquid hit her lips. She must have emptied the glass without realizing.

When Dr. Novak reached the end of the catwalk, she paused and gave the audience a sexy grin.

“Eight-fifty,” the guy with the comb-over yelled.

For a second, Dr. Novak's gaze seemed to connect with Ellie's, and something flashed in her eyes. Irritation? Uneasiness? A cry for help?

Ellie shook her head at herself. *Ridiculous*. She had seen Dr. Novak talk down a drunk patient who had hurled bedpans at the nurses; she could handle going on a few dates with Mr. Comb-Over.

Then Dr. Novak did a slow turn and strode back down the catwalk.

“We've got eight-fifty from the gentleman with paddle number forty-seven,” the emcee's voice boomed through the hotel's sound system. “Who'll give me nine?”

Jasmine nudged her. “Come on. Do it.”

Ellie refused to answer. Sure, she had some money saved, but that was for emergencies. She would gladly donate half of it to the children's cardiac care program, but she wouldn't bid on a woman who had never said even one word to her that wasn't work-related.

Besides, Dr. Novak didn't need Ellie to rescue her. Someone else would bid in a second. Probably several someones because now the audi-

ence could see the back of the black dress—or rather, the lack thereof—for the first time.

The dress dipped low in the back, revealing an intriguing amount of bare skin...and the fact that she couldn't possibly be wearing a bra.

Ellie's mouth went as dry as the sandwiches in the hospital cafeteria. Where was a waiter when she needed a drink? She fanned herself.

"Great!" The emcee nodded approvingly at someone in Ellie's vicinity. "We've got nine hundred from the lady with paddle number thirty-three."

Ellie looked around to see who'd been bidding.

No one at the table to her right had paddle number thirty-three.

Neither did anyone at the table to her left.

And why were they all staring back at her or someone at her table?

With a sinking feeling, Ellie peered at Jasmine. "You didn't...? You wouldn't...!"

But Jasmine had put her paddle down next to the auction program, and it didn't have the right number either. She was smirking at Ellie.

"What?" Ellie mouthed.

Still smirking, Jasmine pointed.

It took Ellie's overheated brain a second to figure out what she was gesturing at.

The number thirty-three.

On the paddle she was using to fan herself.

"Wait, what?" Ellie stared at her traitorous hand and quickly lowered it to the table. "No, no, no, no, I didn't mean to bid! I just—"

"Anyone want to take it to nine-fifty?" the emcee asked. "Or a whopping thousand?"

Ellie shot Comb-Over Guy a pleading look, but he was talking to the man next to him and seemed to have given up on bidding.

"Nine hundred going once..."

Sweat broke out on Ellie's brow. She clutched the edge of the linen-draped table so she wouldn't fan herself and make the emcee think she was bidding again.

"Going twice..."

Come on. Someone. Anyone! Ellie's gaze bounced from table to table.

"And...sold to the lady in red with paddle number thirty-three." The thump of the gavel coming down on the podium echoed through

the ballroom. “Let’s give the highest bidder a round of applause for her generosity.”

Loud clapping from the crowd around her reverberated in Ellie’s ears. Or maybe it was her own thundering heartbeat.

Oh God. Ellie barely resisted the urge to bury her burning cheeks in her hands. She had accidentally bought herself several dates with a woman she couldn’t stand.

Chapter 3

FINALLY, IT WAS OVER! IF the emcee had made one more unoriginal comment about her “hands-on” skills or a date with her being “just what the doctor ordered,” Regina would have stripped off her heels and stabbed him with one.

She paused in the middle of the catwalk and squinted against the bright stage lights following her every step as she tried to make out who the highest bidder was. According to the emcee, it seemed to be a woman, so at least she wouldn't have to put up with a guy thinking he could take liberties because he'd paid for her company.

A spotlight moved through the ballroom in search of the “lady in red” who'd paid nine hundred dollars to go on a date with her.

Regina snorted quietly. What a complete waste of money! It had been quite some time since she had last been on a date. Most of them were as boring as dry toast.

And now she was about to find out how much worse it would be on a paid-for date.

The spotlight stopped on a table toward the back.

Regina lifted one hand to block out the glare of the stage light that made it impossible to see the crowd clearly from where she was standing now.

What the fuck?

The vision in red looked a lot like...

No, that couldn't be right. She lifted her other hand too and shaded her eyes. But another glance confirmed what she had thought she'd seen.

The highest bidder wasn't some mysterious stranger.

It was Ellie Fisher.

They stared at each other as if the crowd between them didn't exist.

What the hell was Ellie planning? She wasn't really after a date with her, was she? Was Ellie even interested in women?

Regina had no idea since she'd always made it a point to stay away from the emergency department rumor mill.

But even if Ellie was queer, she had never shown any kind of interest in Regina—certainly not enough interest to spend nine hundred of her hard-earned dollars on a date with her!

Ellie didn't exactly look ecstatic to have won the highest bid. The expression on her face resembled the one Regina had seen on patients when she told them they'd have to have surgery. Her cheeks had taken on the scarlet color of her dress, and she had slid lower in her seat as if she considered ducking beneath the table to hide from the beam of light.

Was she embarrassed that now everyone knew she had bid on Regina?

But then why had she done it? Was this some kind of power play? Revenge for Regina protesting the Valentine's Day decorations? Or an attempt to reverse their roles and be the one to call the shots during their dates?

If that was why Ellie had bid on her, she would be in for a surprise. Regina had no intention of turning into a meek damsel just because Ellie had shelled out a lot of money.

She cursed herself for ever agreeing to this silly auction as she tore her gaze away from Ellie and slipped behind the curtain.

But before she could change back into more comfortable clothes, the stage manager stopped her. "We've set up a short reception next door for our bachelors and bachelorettes to meet their winning bidders. If you'd follow me..."

Maybe it was for the best. They could sort this out right now, so they wouldn't have to talk about it at work and could keep their interaction in the ED strictly professional.

Regina marched down the hall and pushed open the door the stage manager indicated.

Her fellow bachelorettes and bachelors had already found their winners. Laughter and the clinking of champagne flutes echoed throughout the reception room as they toasted their upcoming dates.

Regina seemed to be the only one who didn't feel like celebrating. She looked around, searching for Ellie, but couldn't find her anywhere.

Probably still in the ballroom, writing a check for me. She grimaced—and, of course, that was the moment the door opened again and Ellie walked in.

“No, you don’t understand,” she said to the auction volunteer who’d walked her in. “I didn’t mean to—” She stopped abruptly. Her big, brown eyes went deer-in-headlights-wide as she came face-to-face with Regina.

Avoiding awkward situations like this was why Regina had never dated anyone she worked with. But then again, she wasn’t the one who had bought a date. Ellie had—and it was time to find out why.

Regina marched over to her.

“Dr. Novak, meet Ellie Fisher.” The volunteer gestured back and forth between them. “Ms. Fisher, meet—”

Regina interrupted him with an impatient swipe of her hand. “Thanks. We know each other.”

“Oh. Great. I mean... I’ll leave you two alone, then.” He scurried away, probably sensing the tense atmosphere.

Ellie looked as if she would have loved to rush after him. “Um, hi.” She shuffled her feet in a way that was kind of cute.

No, Regina firmly told herself. Ellie wasn’t cute. She was up to something. And Regina would find out what. Now. She pierced her with a stare she normally reserved for parents she suspected of abusing their kids. “Why did you bid on me?”

“I...I didn’t mean to,” Ellie blurted out.

Ouch. Despite some people accusing Regina of having a big ego, that kind of hurt.

“I was just...”

“What?” Regina snapped.

“Um, swatting at a fly with the paddle?” It sounded like a tentative question more than an explanation.

Regina squinted at her. “A fly?”

Ellie nodded while staring down at her pumps. “Yeah. A really big one.”

“Remember the patient from last week? The one who came in with a flashlight stuck up his rectum and told us he slipped in the shower and fell on it?”

Head still down, Ellie nodded again.

“I’m getting the same feeling of being lied to right now.”

Ellie peered up at her through a few strands of hair that had escaped the low bun at the nape of her neck. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to bid on you or embarrass you in any way.”

It was easy to recognize that as the truth, but that made things even worse. “Embarrass me?” Regina repeated slowly. “I’m not embarrassed to be seen going out with a woman. But maybe you are.”

Ellie swiped the loose hair back from her face with both hands and now fully looked at Regina for the first time. “Me? Why would I be embarrassed? Even the cleaning staff at CMC knows I’m gay.”

“So...you do date women.” Regina mentally kicked herself. There was no reason for her to take any interest in this new information. It didn’t matter. “But you don’t want to go on a date with me.”

“Um, no.” Quickly, she waved at Regina’s dress but again glanced away as if trying not to stare. “I mean, no offense, you’re beautiful and all, but...”

“But you don’t like me.”

Ellie looked up as if startled by Regina’s bluntness. A light pink dusted her cheeks. But then she met her gaze. “Not overly, to be honest.”

That took guts. Regina frowned at herself. Guts? What the hell was wrong with her? Ellie had openly insulted her, and yet she couldn’t help admiring her. She set her jaw. “Well, the feeling is mutual, so it’s clearly better to keep our interaction strictly professional. Let me go talk to one of the organizers. I’m sure I can get you your money back.” She whirled around to march off.

“Wait!” Warm fingers wrapped around her bare arm.

Regina turned back around and glowered at Ellie’s hand.

Ellie snatched it away. “Sorry. I... I don’t think that’s a good idea. The money goes to sick children, and it wouldn’t feel right for them to pay for my mistake.”

Mistake. Regina ground her teeth. “Right. We’ll just tell them we went on our date, then. We don’t actually have to go.”

Ellie fiddled with the red satin bow at the waist of her dress. “Actually...we do.”

“What?” Regina put her hands on her hips. For once, her three-inch heels were good for something, giving her even more of a height advantage. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I was a bachelorette a few years back.”

“Yes, I heard.”

Ellie blinked. “You did?”

“People constantly think they have to catch me up on hospital lore. So?” Regina gave her an impatient wave. “What does you having been a bachelorette have to do with anything?”

“That’s how I know we’re expected to be seen together, having fun. The auction organizers are sending someone along to take photos, which they’ll use to promote next year’s auction. Plus the sponsors might post a few pictures on their social media too.”

Great. Regina rubbed her eyes, not caring that she was probably messing up her makeup. “So we can’t get out of it.”

Ellie nibbled her full bottom lip. “No. Not unless we want to be complete a-holes who don’t care about children with heart conditions.”

Was it just her imagination, or was there a faint note of challenge in Ellie’s tone? She didn’t really think Regina would walk out now, sick kids be damned, did she? Of course she wouldn’t! Regina squared her shoulders. She had made it through med school and eighty-hour work weeks as a resident. She could make it through one measly date. “Well, it’s just a date. Not like we have to get married or anything.”

Ellie fiddled with the bow at her waist again. “Actually, it’s at least two.”

Regina squinted at her. “Two what?”

“Dates.” A twinkle entered Ellie’s brown eyes. “Didn’t you listen to what the emcee announced or read the fine print before you signed on the dotted line? The highest bidder wins an entire date package with four activities that we can stretch out over as many days as we want. We could do two activities over two days or each one separately over four days.”

Two or four days? Kayla hadn’t offered that information—probably because she’d been afraid Regina would back out if she knew. *Hell, yeah! I would have.* She rarely spent that much time with anyone, even the last woman she’d dated. She’d better pack her first aid kit because they’d surely kill each other before the first date was over.

The slight grin on Ellie's face faded. "You really didn't know? You thought all the activities the emcee mentioned would be squeezed into one date?"

Truth be told, Regina had barely listened to the emcee's silly babbling. Something about ice-skating was all she could remember. "Why not? If we plan it efficiently, we could get it all done within a few hours."

Ellie's grin reappeared. "Plan it efficiently? It's a date, not getting a polytrauma ready for the OR."

Too bad. Regina would have preferred handling a polytrauma. At least it wouldn't involve spending two days making awkward small talk with a co-worker she couldn't stand.

"Oh, come on," Ellie said as if reading her thoughts. "It won't be so bad. We can totally do this." She sounded as if she was giving herself a pep talk.

"Yeah."

"For the children," they both said at the same time.

They nodded at each other, then stood in silence for a moment.

The easy chatter of the other singles and their highest bidders drifted over.

"All right," Regina finally said. "Let's get this over with in as few days as possible."

"Two is probably doable," Ellie answered. "We could start with going ice-skating in the morning, then attend Ms. Peterson's baking class in the afternoon, if that's okay with her. Then we could knock out the last two activities on another day."

Regina suppressed a sigh and nodded.

"Do you want to give me your number?" Ellie asked, then added, "So we can compare shift schedules and agree on a day and time for our first, um, date."

That was probably a good idea. Getting Ellie's number from hospital admin would send rumors flying. She took the phone Ellie handed her and added her name and number.

"Thanks." Ellie took her phone back and glanced at the screen, then up at Regina. "Um, Dr. Novak?"

"Yes?"

"No, I mean, you put your name as Dr. Novak."

“Because it *is* my name.”

Ellie’s lips twitched, but Regina couldn’t tell if she was suppressing a grimace or a smile. “It’s your name at work. Do you seriously want me to call you ‘Dr. Novak’ while we’re on a date?”

“A just-for-publicity’s-sake date,” Regina said.

“Still. It’s not work-related, so we should be on equal footing.” Ellie held her gaze. “If I kept calling you ‘Doctor’ over a candlelight dinner, I’d feel like I have a medical fetish.”

Regina sighed. This was exactly why she didn’t date co-workers. Mixing business with pleasure was never a good idea. Not that she expected there to be any pleasure on their dates. “Fine.”

A smile dimpled Ellie’s cheeks. “I can call you by your first name?”

“If you must.”

“Well, I could call you Bachelorette Number Twelve if you prefer.”

Regina fixed her with a glare as piercing as a scalpel. “Only if you want me to call you Paddle Number Thirty-Three.”

“Okay, okay. First name it is.”

Regina lifted one finger in warning. “Just while we’re on a... while we’re not at work.”

“Of course.” Ellie tapped a message into her phone, then slid it into her purse. “I just sent you a text, so you now have my number too.”

Regina gave her a nod.

Another awkward silence descended on them.

“I guess I’ll see you at the ice-skating rink,” Regina finally said.

“Actually,” Ellie said, “you’ll see me at work before that.”

A dull pounding crept up the back of Regina’s neck. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “There’s probably no chance of keeping this between the two of us, is there?”

Ellie’s laughter sounded amused, not sarcastic. She gestured in the direction of the ballroom. “Have you forgotten how many nurses, doctors, paramedics, and RTs were in the audience?”

“So what will we tell them when they ask about our dates?”

“I guess that depends.”

“On?”

An impish twinkle lit up Ellie’s dark eyes. “How good or boring our dates are.”

Regina raised both brows at her and put a growl into her voice. “Are you challenging me?”

“Well,” Ellie said, again with that charming little smile, “I did pay nine hundred dollars, so...”

Regina was stunned into silence for a moment, not sure if she wanted to yell at her or kiss that damn grin off her lips.

Where had that thought come from? Of course there wouldn’t be any kissing. None whatsoever. “Don’t you worry,” she finally replied. “I’ll make sure you have the best dates ever. Um, strictly for publicity purposes, of course. Can’t have you looking bored in the promo photos.”

“Right. Can you even ice-skate? I hear you’re from California.”

So the hospital gossips were talking about her behind her back. *Great.* Regina flashed her teeth, not caring if it looked like a grin or a threatening growl meant to put Ellie in her place. “Guess you’ll have to wait and find out.”

Then, ensuring she had the last word, she pivoted on her heel and marched from the reception room.

* * *

I didn’t just say that, did I? Ellie stared at Regina’s retreating back—her nearly naked back. Why had she challenged Regina to provide a great date experience?

Any second, she would wake up and laugh about the ridiculous dream she’d had.

She pinched herself hard. Pain flared up her arm, but the bustling reception didn’t turn into her cozy bedroom.

This was really happening. She had accidentally bought several dates with Dr. Novak.

With Regina, her mind helpfully supplied.

She couldn’t believe she had insisted on calling the doctor by her first name. “It was that damn Love Potion Number Nine,” she muttered. The cocktail had been stronger than she’d realized, loosening her tongue. The glass of champagne she had chugged down at the sight of all that smooth skin hadn’t helped either.

“Love?” a voice said next to her. “Wow, you really got your money’s worth if you’re already talking about love!”

Ellie turned her head and groaned.

Of course. Just what she needed. Her sister Vickie stood there in her navy-blue dress EMT uniform and with a big grin on her face.

“Haha. Very funny.” Ellie gave her a gentle swat on the shoulder. “What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t planning on coming to the auction?”

“I wasn’t. My friend Brandon talked me into it at the last minute.” Vickie nodded toward one of the EMTs across the room.

“Wasn’t he one of the bachelors?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah. He panicked and made me promise to bid on him in case no one else would.” Vickie studied her. “Was that why you bid on the doc? Because she asked you to?”

Ellie snorted. “As if. She’s got an ego the size of the western hemisphere. It would never cross her mind that no one would be bidding on her.”

“So she’s not paying you back the nine hundred dollars?”

Ellie shook her head.

“Shit, Ellie! That’s a lot of money!”

“I know, I know.” Ellie scrubbed both hands across her face, then remembered that she was wearing a bit of makeup and stopped. “At least it’s going to a good cause.”

“Yeah, but why did you bid on her?” her sister asked. “Just a few days ago, you couldn’t stop complaining about Doctor McIcy, and all it took to change your mind was for her to flash some skin up on stage?”

“No. That’s not—”

“You bid on her, didn’t you?”

“Well, okay, yes, but... It’s complicated.”

Vickie laughed. “Oh, now I see what’s going on! That’s what you said when Mom and Dad found out you had faked being bad at math because you had a crush on the girl who tutored you.”

Heat stung Ellie’s cheeks. She vehemently shook her head. “This isn’t like that. I didn’t mean to bid. It was—”

“A Freudian slip of the paddle?”

Ellie ignored the comment. “I was just fanning myself with the paddle because...um, I got a little overheated.”

Her sister gave her a knowing look. “Right.”

“No, really. The only thing I’ll be faking this time is having fun on a date with Regina.”

“Ooh, it’s *Regina* now?” Vickie drew out the name in a singsong tone.

Ellie sent a pleading-for-heavenly-intervention gaze up at the chandeliers. “It’s hard to believe you’re the older one. What am I supposed to do? Call her ‘Doctor’ while we bake heart-shaped cupcakes?”

Vickie grinned. “Could be fun.”

“Like I said, no fun involved. I’m just doing this for the children.”

“Yours and Regina’s?”

Ellie tried to channel Regina by letting out an intimidating growl but ended up sounding like a cat with a hair ball. “The children in the cardiac care program.”

“Right. You’re doing this for charity. Going out with an attractive woman is going to be a big sacrifice on your part.”

“Yep,” Ellie said with an exaggeratedly destitute expression. “I’m going to suffer through every second of it. Now go see what Brandon wants. He’s waving at you.”

After one last amused grin, her sister finally strolled away.

Ellie watched her go with a shake of her head. She loved her family. But this time, Vickie’s teasing was totally off. There wouldn’t be any hand-in-hand skating—Regina would rip her arm out of its socket if she tried—and they definitely wouldn’t feed each other cupcakes.

More likely, Regina would give her a lecture on the health hazards of eating too much sugar.

A sound somewhere between a sigh and a chuckle escaped Ellie. Yes, she would suffer through every single second of their dates, no matter how—objectively speaking—attractive Regina was. She couldn’t even make up an emergency at work, as she had done a time or two in the past to get out of an awful date, since Regina worked in the same hospital and would instantly know she was lying.

Despite her usual optimism, she knew one thing for sure: February wouldn’t be the month of love for her.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

BACHELORETTE NUMBER TWELVE

BY JAE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com