

*EXCERPT*

It was a night to remember.

Michelle Renard had never attended such an extravagant affair before, and as she stood on the steps overlooking the hotel ballroom, she felt like Alice about to fall through the looking glass into Wonderland.

There were flowers everywhere, beautiful spring flowers in sculptured urns on the marble floors and in crystal vases on all the white linen tablecloths. In the very center of the ballroom, beneath a magnificent crystal chandelier, was a cluster of giant hothouse magnolia trees in full bloom. Their heavenly fragrance filled the air.

Waiters glided smoothly through the crowd carrying silver trays with fluted champagne glasses while others rushed from table to table lighting long, white, tapered candles.

Mary Ann Winters, a friend since childhood days, stood by Michelle's side taking it all in.

"I'm out of my element here," Michelle whispered. "I feel like an awkward teenager."

"You don't look like one," Mary Ann said. "I might as well be invisible. I swear every man is staring at you."

"No, they're staring at my obscenely tight dress. How could anything look so plain and ordinary on a hanger and so—"

“So devastatingly sexy on you? It clings in all the right places. Face it, you’ve got a great figure.”

“I should never have spent so much money on a dress.”

“For heaven’s sake, Michelle, it’s an Armani. You got it for a song, I might add.”

Michelle self-consciously brushed her hand down the side of the soft fabric. She thought about how much she paid for the dress and decided she would have to wear it at least twenty times to make it cost-effective. She wondered if other women did that—rationalize a frivolous expense to appease the guilt. There were so many more important things she could have used the money for, and when, in heaven’s name, was she ever going to have another opportunity to wear this beautiful dress again? Not in Bowen, she thought. Not in a million years.

“What was I thinking? I never should have let you talk me into buying this dress.”

Mary Ann impatiently brushed a strand of white blond hair back over her shoulder. “Don’t you dare start in complaining about the cost again. You never spend any money on yourself. I’ll bet it’s the first really gorgeous dress you’ve ever owned, isn’t it? You’re absolutely beautiful tonight. Promise me you’ll stop worrying and enjoy yourself.”

Michelle nodded. “You’re right. I’ll stop worrying.”

“Good. Now let’s go mingle. There’s hors d’oeuvres and champagne out in the courtyard, and we’ve got to eat at least a thousand dollars worth each. That’s what I heard the tickets cost. I’ll meet you there.”

Her friend had just gone down the stairs when Dr. Cooper spotted Michelle and motioned for her to join him. He was the chief of surgery at Brethren Hospital where she had been moonlighting the past month. Cooper was usually reserved, but the champagne had rid him of his inhibitions, and he was quite affectionate. And effervescent. He kept telling her how happy he was that she was using the tickets he'd given her and how pretty she looked all dressed up. Michelle thought that if Dr. Cooper got any happier, he was going to pass out in the soup.

While Dr. Cooper expostulated on the attributes of the crawfish, spraying spit every time he said the word "fish," she backed away to get out of the firing range. A few minutes later, Cooper's wife joined them with another older couple in tow. Michelle used the opportunity to sneak away.

She didn't want to get trapped sitting next to the Coopers during dinner. The only thing worse than a happy drunk was a flirtatious one, and Cooper was definitely headed in that direction. Since he and his wife were standing near the entrance to the courtyard and would see her if she went past, she walked around into the adjacent hallway with the bank of elevators, hoping there was a way to get to the courtyard from the opposite side.

And that's when she noticed him. He was leaning against a pillar, hunched over, tilted protectively to one side. The man was tall, broad-shouldered, well-built, like an athlete, she thought. But there was a sickly gray pallor to his complexion, and as she walked toward him, she saw him grimace and grab his stomach.

He was obviously in trouble. She touched his arm to get his attention just as the elevator doors opened. He staggered upright and looked down at her. His gray eyes were glazed with pain.

“Do you need help?”

He answered her by throwing up all over her.

She couldn't get out of the way because he'd grabbed hold of her arm. His knees buckled then and she knew he was going to go down. She wrapped her arms around his waist and tried to ease him to the floor, but he lurched forward at the same time, taking her with him.

Theo Buchanan's head was spinning. He landed on top of the woman. He heard her groan and desperately tried to find the strength to get up. He thought he might be dying and he didn't think that would be such a bad thing if death would make the pain go away. It was unbearable now. His stomach rolled again, and another wave of intense agony cut through him. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be stabbed over and over again. He passed out then, and when he next opened his eyes, he was flat on his back and she was leaning over him.

He tried to bring her face into focus. She had pretty blue eyes, more violet than blue, he thought, and freckles on the bridge of her nose. Then, as suddenly as it had stopped, the fire started burning in his side again, so much worse than before.

A spasm wrenched his stomach, and he jerked. “Son of a bitch.”

The woman was talking to him, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. And what the hell was she doing to him? Was she robbing him? Her hands were everywhere, tugging at his jacket, his tie, his shirt. She was trying to straighten out his legs. She was hurting him, damn it, and every time he tried to push her hands away, they came back to poke and prod some more.

Theo kept slipping in and out of consciousness. He felt a rocking motion and heard a siren blaring close to his head. Blue Eyes was still there too, pestering him. She was asking him questions again. Something about allergies. Did she want him to be allergic to something?

“Yeah, sure.”

He felt her open his jacket, knew she could see the gun holstered above his hip. He was crazed with pain now, couldn't seem to think straight. He only knew he couldn't let her take his weapon.

She was a damned talkative mugger. He'd give her that. She looked like one of those J. Crew models. Sweet, he thought. No, she wasn't sweet. She kept hurting him.

“Look, lady, you can take my wallet, but you're not getting my gun. Got that?” He could barely get the words out through his gritted teeth.

Her hand pressed into his side. He reacted instinctively, knocking her back. He thought he might have connected with something soft because he heard her yell before he went under again.

Theo didn't know how long he was out, but when he opened his eyes, the bright lights made him squint. Where the hell was he? He couldn't summon up enough energy to move. He thought he might be on a table. It was hard, cold.

“Where am I?” His mouth was so dry, he slurred the question.

“You're in Brethren Hospital, Mr. Buchanan.” The man's voice came from behind him, but Theo couldn't see him.

“Did they catch her?”

“Who?”

“J. Crew.”

“He’s loopy.” A female voice he didn’t recognize made the comment.

Theo suddenly realized he wasn’t in any pain. He felt good, in fact. Real good. Like he could fly. Odd, though, he didn’t have the strength to move his arms. A mask was placed over his mouth and nose. He turned his head to get away from it.

“Are you getting sleepy, Mr. Buchanan?”

He turned his head again and saw her. Blue Eyes. She looked like an angel, all golden. Wait a minute. What the hell was she doing here? Wait . . .

“Mike, are you going to be able to see what you’re doing? That eye looks bad.”

“It’s fine.”

“How’d it happen?” the voice behind Theo’s head asked.

“He clipped me.”

“The patient decked you?”

“That’s right.” She was staring into Theo’s eyes when she answered. She had a green mask on, but he knew she was smiling.

He was in such a happy daze now and so sleepy, he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Conversation swirled around him, but none of it made any sense.

A woman’s voice. “Where did you find *him*, Dr. Renard?”

“At a party.”

Another woman leaned over him. “Hubba, hubba.”

“Was it love at first sight?”

“You decide. He threw up all over me and ruined my new dress.”

Someone laughed. "Sounds like love to me. I'll bet he's married. All the good-looking men are married. This one's sure built. Did you check out the goods, Annie?"

"I hope our patient is sleeping."

"Not yet," a male voice said. "But he isn't going to remember anything."

"Where's the assist?"

"Scrubbing."

There seemed to be a party going on. Theo thought there were at least twenty or thirty people in the room with him. Why was it so damned cold? And who was making all the clatter? He was thirsty. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton. Maybe he ought to go get a drink. Yeah, that's what he would do.

"Where's Dr. Cooper?"

"Probably passed out in the dessert by now." Blue Eyes answered the question. Theo loved the sound of her voice. It was so damned sexy.

"So you saw Cooper at the party?"

"Uh-huh," Blue Eyes answered. "He wasn't on call tonight. He works hard. It was nice to see him having a good time. Mary Ann's probably having a great time too."

"You." Theo struggled to get the word out. Still, he'd gotten her attention because when he opened his eyes, she was leaning over him, blocking out the glaring light above him.

"It's time for you to go to sleep, Mr. Buchanan."

"He's fighting it."

"What . . ." Theo began.

"Yes?"

“What do you want from me?”

The man hiding behind him answered. “Mike wants your appendix, Mr. Buchanan.”

It sounded good to him. He was always happy to accommodate a beautiful woman. “Okay,” he whispered. “It’s in my wallet.”

“We’re ready.”

“It’s about time,” the man said.

“Who do you want to hear tonight, Dr. Renard?”

“Need you ask, Annie?”

A groan went around the room. Then a click. Theo heard the chair squeak behind him, then the stranger’s voice telling him to take deep breaths. Theo finally figured out who the man behind him was. Damn if it wasn’t Willie Nelson, and he was singing to him, something about Blue Eyes cryin’ in the rain.

It was one hell of a party.