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Starting with a Kiss

BARBARA MCMAHON

Barbara McMahon

Starting with a Kiss

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HOW CAN I EVER HOPE TO ATTRACT THE MAN OF MY DREAMS WHEN HE HAS NEVER LOOKED AT ME THAT WAY?Abigail Trent had never intended to be thirty and still single. So when her colleague Dr. Greg Hastings offered to help her transform from prim-and-proper physician to irresistible temptress, Abigail couldn't refuse. But she never expected that with just one kiss, Greg would make her feel so desirable and special. For the first time in Abigail's life, she was keenly aware of the sensations and longings a man's touch could evoke. Suddenly, she began to hope that what had started out as a Cinderella-esque fantasy could turn into something much more…that maybe Greg was the Prince Charming she'd been waiting for all her life to give her innocence, and her heart.

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Abby told herself to stop all fantasies about Greg Hastings. They were medical colleagues—nothing more!

Just because his hair looked as if she should brush it back from his forehead was no reason for her fingers to tingle with yearning. Just because his dark eyes gleamed when they glanced at her was no reason to want to have him stay when she really wanted him gone. Just because his lower lip was slightly fuller than his top lip was no reason for her own to tremble and yearn to feel that sensuous mouth move against her own.

When he looked at her, she blinked. She saw his sister looking at her expectantly. Had Greg said something Abby missed? Had she been caught examining him? Catching herself in the spell of his presence, she tried to ignore the sensations flooding her body.

He radiated sex appeal.

For the first time in her life Abby felt flushed with femininity; she felt sexy—almost alluring.

Dear Reader,

What if…? These two little words serve as the springboard for each romance novel that bestselling author Joan Elliott Pickart writes. “I always go back to that age-old question. My ideas come straight from imagination,” she says. And with more than thirty Silhouette novels to her credit, the depth of Joan’s imagination seems bottomless! Joan started by taking a class to learn how to write a romance and “felt that this was where I belonged,” she recalls. This month Joan delivers Her Little Secret, the next from THE BABY BET, where you’ll discover what if…a sheriff and a lovely nursery owner decide to foil town matchmakers and “act” like lovers….

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What if… Two words with endless possibilities. If you’ve got your own “what if” scenario, start writing. Silhouette Special Edition would love to read about it.

Happy reading!

Karen Taylor Richman,

Senior Editor

Starting with a Kiss
Barbara McMahon

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my Dad—for making so many times special and for always being there for me. I love you!

BARBARA MCMAHON

has made California her home since she graduated from the University of California (Berkely) way back when! She's convinced she now has the perfect life, living on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, sipping lattes on her front porch while she watches the deer graze nearby, and playing "what if" with different story ideas. Even though she has sold over three dozen books, she says she still has another hundred tales to tell. Barbara also writes for Harlequin Romance. Readers can write to Barbara at P.O. Box 977, Pioneer, CA 95666-0777.

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Chapter One

"This is going to be a total disaster!" Abigail Trent exclaimed, frowning at her reflection in the mirror, nerves churning. Taking a deep, slow breath, she tried to calm her jitters.

"Hey, you're the one who said you wanted to make Jeb jealous," her friend Kim said, aiming the hair spray at the back of Abby's head. The hiss of the spray sounded before Abby replied. She held her breath as she was enveloped in the mist. She couldn't deny Kim's remark. When she'd first learned Jeb Stuart had stopped calling because he was seeing someone else, she'd been hurt, and furious. She'd thought they'd be heading for the altar one day. Instead, he was totally involved with someone else.

Stepping away from the mirror, she shook her head. "Do you think it'll work? Even though I don't look a bit like myself in this getup, I'm not sure it's going to be enough. I wish I was a fabulous blonde with a figure to die for." She frowned again. "What has me worried about tonight is I have no business accepting the donation. I'm not sure I should even be going to this presentation banquet. The hospital's chief administrator should accept. Or the head of Internal Medicine, not some newly appointed doctor of pediatrics."

"Carol's family specifically asked for you," Kim said gently.

Abby nodded, her eyes filling with tears. She missed her friend so much! It wasn't fair. She'd died so young! Too young. She'd had her entire life ahead of her, until a drunk driver had ended it by ramming into her car.

"Don't do that or all your makeup will run and we'll have to start over," Kim fussed, touching her shoulder in sympathy.

Abby looked up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly. "No time for that! Dr. Hastings will be here any second. And the last thing I plan to do is keep him waiting!"

Kim began to tidy all the bottles and containers she'd brought. "I can't believe you've worked at the same hospital for six months and you still call him Dr. Hastings. Don't you have any kind of informality there?"

"Not with him," Abby said, stepping in front of the mirror again. The push-up bra gave her cleavage she'd never expected, and the painted-on dress displayed it for all the world to see. She tried to pull the dress up to a more modest level. Kim slapped her hand.

"Stop that. It's fine."

"I feel I've been poured into this thing. I'm not sure this was a good idea after all." All her doubts and insecurities rose up to mock her.

"Hey, you wanted Jeb to see you in a different light. This is it. No scrubs, no lab coat, no jeans. Just pure Abby."

"This does not look pure!"

Kim laughed. "Okay, then mysterious, sultry, sexy Abby. Jeb will eat his heart out."

"I wish." Sighing softly, Abby turned when the doorbell sounded. "Great, nemesis himself."

"Why did you agree to go with Dr. Hastings if you don't like him?"

"Politics, why else? When the chief of staff heard I didn't have an escort, he insisted Dr. Hastings take me tonight. Who am I to argue with the head man? Being low on the totem pole, I need all the friends in high places I can get."

She hurried from the bedroom when the second peal came. The high heels felt strange, the turquoise dress was definitely two sizes too small, and her teased and tousled hair wouldn't move in a tornado, it had so much spray holding it. She wished she was spending the evening at home in comfy sweats.

Why had she ever concocted the idea of trying to compete with Jeb's new love?

Taking another deep breath, she threw open the door, bracing herself for the onslaught of feelings she always experienced when she faced Greg Hastings. It didn't seem to get easier, though she'd known him for six months.

She'd been in staff meetings with him. Seen him in the corridors dozens of times since she'd started working at Merrimac General Hospital—usually in the company of some nurse gushing in adoration. Not that it was hard to see what they found attractive.

Everything.

From his height, to the breadth of his shoulders, to the high cheekbones and dark, all-knowing eyes. Tanned as if he spent time outdoors and didn't care about sunscreen, he always looked healthy and vital.

Tonight he looked perfect in the charcoal-gray suit, white shirt and deep maroon tie. But he looked equally wonderful when she'd seen him in the white lab coat he wore attending staff meetings, or even the rumpled scrubs after a day in surgery.

"Hi," she said, trying to ignore the fluttering in her stomach that had suddenly grown worse. "I'll just be a sec. Want to come in?" She turned, without waiting for an answer, and snatched up her evening purse and the coat she knew she'd need for San Francisco's cool evenings.

Kim came out from the bedroom, her tote on her shoulder. "Have fun," she said. Her eyes widened with interest when she spotted Greg Hastings.

He'd stepped inside and stood studying Abby's apartment, or what he could see of it. Abby could imagine his disdain for her feminine furnishings. Not that she cared. She had more immediate things to worry about—like getting through tonight's presentation. She could do it. Take the check that would be given by the Walker family's attorney. Give her brief acceptance speech on behalf of the hospital. She could do that for her friend's sake. She had to.

When Kim cleared her throat, Abby rushed into introductions.

"Kim, this is Dr. Hastings." Abby motioned to Kim and said, "My neighbor, Kim Saunders."

"Hello, Dr. Hastings, I'm pleased to meet you," Kim said with a wide smile. She made it a point to cross the room and shake his hand.

Abby envied her friend's walk. If she practiced for years, she'd never get that sexy sway. Was that what men wanted?

"Kim, a pleasure, and it's Greg." His deep voice seemed genuinely pleased to meet her. Abby looked at him, and wished he sounded half as pleased to see her when they met at the hospital.

"You take good care of Abby tonight, Greg," she said flirtatiously.

"I'm ready," Abby said, wishing she had her friend's ease around men. But just being around Greg Hastings tied her tongue in knots and made her stomach feel as if a dozen butterflies were playing rugby.

Greg turned to her, letting his gaze run down the length of her. The slight amusement in his eyes flustered her even more. Was something wrong? Had Kim missed something?

Tilting his head to one side, he commented, "You look different from the way I'm used to seeing you at the hospital."

"I couldn't very well wear a lab coat," she said shortly. But his look only increased her uncertainty about the appropriateness of her dress. Of her whole appearance. After years of concentrating on study and work, she felt like a novice in the social scene. Time to make changes. Starting tonight!

Raising her chin, she glared at him.

His lips twitched as if in amusement. "My car is downstairs." Without another word, he stood aside for her to precede him out the door. Kim slipped through and waved.

"Tell me all about it tomorrow," she called to Abby as she headed down the hall to her apartment.

In only moments Abby was seated in the luxurious interior of Greg Hastings's silver Mercedes. He pulled away from the curb with ease and headed toward the downtown restaurant where the banquet was being held.

Feeling awkward in the silence, Abby reviewed what she planned to say when the endowment check was presented. Her heart ached. Carol Walker had been her best friend—she and Jeb. Both Abby's age, just thirty, they had gone through four years of college together, medical school, then done their internships in hospitals close enough to hang out or study together when they weren't working. She and Carol and Jeb—the three musketeers, they'd been dubbed early on. The best of friends.

Now one was dead—and the other just as gone.

Aware the silence had lasted a long time, Abby looked at her companion.

"Thanks for the ride," she said.

He shrugged. "I was going anyway."

"I can find my own way home. You needn't bother."

He flicked her a glance. "I'll take you home."

He could sound a bit more friendly, she thought. The embarrassment she'd felt when the chief of staff had informed her Dr. Hastings would pick her up hadn't totally faded. If she had thought about it early enough, she could have found someone to escort her tonight, couldn't she?

But Jeb was the one she would have chosen, and he was too entangled with Sara, the blond bombshell.

"Tell me about Carol Walker," Greg said, "and why her family is providing this endowment for the hospital."

"She had just been hired at the hospital when she was killed," Abby said slowly. The now-familiar ache in her heart seemed to spread. "She was so excited about being a doctor. Thrilled to be taken on at Merrimac General. I guess we all are when we start out." She looked at him, wondering if she'd become as cynical as he after she'd been working a few years. She hoped not!

"You don't have to say anything, I know what you're thinking," she said defensively.

"And that is?"

"That we all seem young and idealistic and it won't last. But I'm still excited and not afraid to admit it! Carol had her whole life ahead of her—finally able to start the career she'd spent years training for. She had just gotten engaged and was making plans to get married, have kids." Abby's voice broke and she looked away, furious with herself for letting this man see her emotions.

"Tough break."

"It's unfair."

"Life often is."

"Spoken like a true cynic."

"Is that how you see me—cynical?"

"Aren't you? Your views stated in the staff meetings sure seem to point that way. I don't want to become like you."

"Then let's hope you can stay in your cozy cocoon."

"I'm not encased in a cocoon. I've been working as a doctor for some time now. I love it. It has its bad moments, of course—when, no matter what, I can't help someone. But mostly, it's just what I always wanted."

He slid the car to a stop in front of the restaurant. Abby slipped out when the doorman held the door open, wishing the dress hadn't ridden up so much. She tugged it in place, pulling it up a bit for good measure.

Good manners dictated she wait for Greg, but she wished she could just go into the banquet room alone. The reality was she'd be spending the entire evening with him. She glanced down at her wrist. No watch—darn. How long would it be before the banquet ended and he took her home?

She regretted her outburst. She and Greg Hastings didn't see eye to eye, but there was no call to start an awkward evening off with hostility. Not that she was going to apologize. There was nothing wrong in expressing her thoughts. He was cynical. Even he hadn't denied it.

The banquet room was almost full when they entered. Walking toward the designated head table, Abby nodded to two or three acquaintances and quickly scanned the room to see if Jeb had come. He'd been invited—as a close friend of Carol's. Her family was not coming. It was still too soon after her death.

She saw him seated at a table to the right. Immediately her gaze was drawn to the blond beauty at his side. There was no denying Sara was gorgeous. Frowning, Abby marched onward, feeling self-conscious with the drastic change in her appearance. And with the looks she was getting from people who knew her at the hospital.

She took another deep breath. This technique for calming jittery nerves seemed highly overrated. Any more deep breaths and she'd hyperventilate. Her nervousness grew as more and more people swung around to stare at her. Was it simple curiosity, or was it the dress?

Maybe, just maybe, she'd gone a tad overboard.

Or were they fascinated by the fact that she had arrived with Greg Hastings? Would it be all over Merrimac General tomorrow that Dr. Abigail Trent couldn't get a date, that she had to be set up?

How long had it been since she'd been on a date? A real honest-to-goodness date—not a night out with Jeb and Carol? She shied away from thinking about all the evenings the three of them had shared. She would not let her emotions choke her again.

Tilting her chin, she stepped up to the head table, grateful to be able to sit. At least she didn't feel so much on display.

Unfortunately, Greg Hastings sat right beside her. Too close, actually. She peeked at him through her lashes, then looked quickly away. Could she pretend her beeper had sounded and dash away? No. She owed it to Carol's memory to accept the endowment.

She recognized some of the administrative staff, doctors, two head nurses. Glancing around, she looked for the Walkers' attorney.

The subtle scent of Greg's aftershave wafted her way, starting a curious reaction. Her heart rate sped up, her senses became more alert. A strange bud of interest curled deep inside. Swallowing hard, she tried to ignore the sensations, tried to ignore how awkward she felt. It was just a meal, a business commitment.

"What a large crowd," she murmured, wishing desperately she had the gift of small talk. Maybe she could pretend he was a patient and talk to him like a doctor.

That wouldn't work. Almost all her patients were under ten, and Greg Hastings was nothing like a ten-year-old! She even wondered if he'd ever been ten. She had trouble envisioning him as anything other than the successful surgeon he was.

A laugh almost escaped as she imagined him as a dedicated surgeon when only ten. She glanced at him and found his dark eyes on her. Her breath caught—that gaze felt as dangerous as skydiving. Her breathlessness couldn't be any worse if she'd jumped out of a plane!

He reached for his water glass and her gaze was drawn to his hands. As a skilled surgeon, did he take them for granted? His palms were large, as fitted a man his size, his fingers long.

What would they feel like holding hers? They had never touched, had no reason to. But for a moment she wondered what it would feel like to have her hand engulfed in his.

She raised her eyes and Greg quirked up one eyebrow, as if in silent inquiry. Heat flooded her face. She was no better than those silly nurses who fawned all over him.

Ben Taylor, chief of staff for Merrimac General, joined them at the table. Greg stood and shook the older man's hand, smiling in warm welcome.

In his right cheek a dimple appeared. Abby's heart skipped a beat. She used to daydream about some dashing knight sweeping her off her feet—and in her mind he'd always been a rugged rogue—with dimples.

Where did women get these silly notions? Greg was a respected member of the hospital staff, a surgeon with a growing reputation. Not some man to have fantasy dreams about. They were colleagues. Nothing more. A colleague, moreover, she wasn't sure she even liked. And if his attitude toward her was anything to go by, the feeling was mutual!

Seated beside him, she could almost feel the power and assurance that cloaked him. She definitely felt a tingling awareness that had nothing to do with business, but was totally personal.

It was simply sex appeal. Oh, Lord, did he have that in spades!

She looked around and caught the eye of one of the doctors from the emergency room. His knowing smirk startled her. What—? When his gaze moved to Greg, the oddest thought struck. Did he think she and Dr. Hastings were dating? How ludicrous. As if Greg Hastings, heartthrob of Merrimac General, would ever consider dating someone like her!

"We'll wait until the dessert is served before starting the speeches," Ben remarked.

She nodded and involuntarily glanced at Jeb's table to study the vivacious woman at his side. That was the kind of woman men liked—beautiful and gifted with the ability to make small talk.

"Is there someone you want to speak with? There's time before they start serving dinner," Greg said softly as he sat down when Ben moved on to speak to another staff member at the next table.

She met his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You keep staring at that table. If there's someone you want to talk with, you have time."

"No, there's no one." She looked away. He was too perceptive. She'd better make sure she didn't look at Jeb's table again anytime soon.

Greg studied her for a moment, perplexed with the enigma that was Abigail Trent. He'd been surprised yesterday when Ben had asked him if he would escort Dr. Trent to tonight's banquet. Used to the ploys of women on the make, he'd instinctively suspected an ulterior motive in the request.

When she'd opened her door tonight, he'd been shocked to see the change from quiet, slightly prickly young Dr. Trent to—to what? He didn't mind women dressing up for a date, but there was something too much about the way she was dressed tonight. Not that he'd ever mention it. He had two sisters and knew better than to make any negative comment when a woman had taken pains to dress to the nines.

And it wasn't that he didn't appreciate the way the dress showed off her figure. Who would have suspected behind those ubiquitous lab coats Dr. Abigail Trent had a tempting femininity that could capture a man's interest in less than five seconds.

Tempting?

Greg watched her take another deep breath. Did she have any idea what doing that did to the dress?

While her attire suggested one thing, her attitude puzzled him. Had she dolled herself up to make a play for him? If so, she'd lost her nerve. So far he felt more like a fifth wheel than the center of her attraction.

Wryly looking away, Greg wondered if he was starting to believe the hype his secretary told him every day. He did not expect every woman he met to fall for him. He didn't want anyone to, if the truth be known. He'd been down that road once—and had no intention of ever going again.

But neither was he used to taking a woman out and having her attention focused three tables away!

He frowned at the thought. He didn't care. He was merely doing his duty as a favor to the chief of staff. When tonight's event ended, they'd go back to normal. He'd see her a couple of times a month at staff meetings, maybe pass in the hallway. Or consult if she had a patient who needed surgery. That would be the extent of their involvement.

By the time dinner had ended, his companion was definitely displaying signs of nervousness. Amusement began to sweep through him as he studied her, taking in her agitated air, her held breath. She was a doctor, held the power of life and death in her hands, and she was nervous about accepting a check on behalf of the hospital? He hadn't felt that anxious when he'd diagnosed his very first patient.

Interested in how she'd handle herself, Greg sat back to watch, still trying to figure the woman out. And he glanced to the table she had under observation, trying to figure out which man sitting there was the one she was interested in.

By the time the evening ended, Greg felt almost sorry for Abigail Trent. She'd given a good speech when accepting the endowment. Her voice had broken once, but that had added to the poignancy of the evening. Several colleagues spoke warmly about Carol Walker, about the lost potential, the tragic accident that had claimed her life. The speeches seemed to upset Abigail.

He could tell the entire evening was proving a strain and almost felt her relief when they rose to leave. The next time Ben Taylor asked him for a favor, he'd be sure he had other plans.

A young man from the table she'd been staring at came up to her. Greg suddenly felt Abigail's tension increase.

"Abby, I nearly didn't recognize you. What did you do to yourself?" he asked bluntly, frowning as he looked her over from head to toe.

"Hi, Jeb." She smiled at him almost in relief. "I don't always wear lab coats, you know."

From the bright smile and the way she looked up at the young man, Greg suspected he'd been her focus of interest all evening.

"I guess not, but neither do you wear dresses like this." His gaze held obvious disapproval. "You look like a tart."

Hot color instantly stained Abby's checks.

A feeling of protectiveness suddenly and unexpectedly surged through Greg. She might not be dressed as conservatively as she normally did, but there was no reason to insult her! He stepped closer.

"I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Greg Hastings." He held out his hand, coming between Abigail and the rude young man as if he could cut the tension by his presence.

"Jeb Stuart. I'm an old friend of Abby's. And Carol's." Jeb held out his hand.

Greg resisted the temptation to annihilate him with a punishing handshake. It was surprisingly hard. He thought that kind of behavior ended in high school. Obviously not.

"We have to be going," he said to Abby, offering an out.

She took it gratefully. "Yes, of course. Bye, Jeb."

As they wound their way through the crowd, Greg kept an eye on Abby. Her head held high, she refused to meet anyone's eye, but walked determinedly toward the door. The deep pink in her cheeks made her blue eyes sparkle. He'd seen that same kind of sparkle once or twice when she became impassioned about a topic in the staff meeting.

He admired her for holding up after Jeb's insult.

There seemed to be more to Dr. Trent than he'd first thought, even though none of it concerned him. She'd made that abundantly clear during the evening.

Nevertheless, his interest was piqued—he wanted to know about the relationship between her and Jeb Stuart. Were they lovers who had had a falling-out? He frowned, not liking the idea at all.

They had to wait for the parking attendant to bring his car. The air blew briskly down the canyon between buildings, the cool ocean fog already blanketing the city. Abby huddled in her coat, buttoned to the neck, her gaze on her toes.

"You did well in your speech," he said to break the silence.

"Thanks."

Another couple from the banquet left, calling goodnights.

Just then a taxi came to a stop in front of the restaurant. Before he could react, Greg watched Abby dart into the cab. Halting before closing the door, she offered a phony polite smile.

"Thanks for being my escort, Dr. Hastings. I'll see myself home."

So much for thinking the lady had a hidden agenda, Greg thought wryly as he watched the cab pull away. Two seconds later his car arrived.

"Timing is everything," he murmured, giving the attendant a tip and sliding in behind the wheel. For a moment he considered following Abby to make sure she got home safely, then discarded the idea. The woman had made her choice clear. But he couldn't help wondering what her thinking had been—before and after seeing Jeb Stuart.

Who was the real Abigail Trent—quiet, shy doctor? Or budding femme fatale?

Chapter Two

"Rats!" Abby murmured as she rushed down the hospital corridor. She wanted to run, but that was very definitely frowned upon at the hospital unless there was a life-threatening emergency. She was late—again. Which didn't threaten anyone—except herself. The last staff meeting she'd been late for, Dr. Taylor had dripped sarcasm, and she'd had to endure the laughter of the whole staff.

Sometimes it couldn't be helped. They were all doctors, they should understand that!

She turned the corner and slowed down a tad to get her breathing under control. Being late wasn't the only reason she dreaded this meeting. Everyone in attendance would have been at the banquet last week. Everyone would know she'd made a fool of herself trying to compete in an area she had no business even venturing! She was a doctor, and a darn good one. Forget Jeb and concentrate on her work, she told herself for the millionth time.

True to her worst expectations, every eye immediately swung her way when she opened the conference room door and stepped inside. The lone empty seat was at the far end of the room. Murmuring an apology to Dr. Taylor, she began to walk toward it, only realizing at the last moment it was right next to Greg Hastings. Could life get any worse?

"Nice of you to join us, Dr. Trent," Dr. Taylor said.

Excuses didn't help. She nodded and sat, wishing she'd just skipped the meeting. She could have found out the news later from one of her friends. Susan Shattner looked at her and smiled, rolling her eyes. Susan had been late once, as Abby recalled. She too had been subject to Dr. Taylor's scathing comments.

But never Dr. Hastings. Of course not, wasn't he perfect?

Concentrating on Dr. Taylor, she did her best to ignore the man beside her. At least the chief of staff didn't stop to make a snide comment this time.

"…which leads to the next item on the agenda. As you know, Steve Johnston co-chaired the conference committee with Greg. Due to the death of his father and the needs his mother continues to have, he's leaving at the end of the month to return to Baltimore. I've relieved him of his conference responsibilities. But—" Dr. Taylor looked around the table, his gaze settling on Abby, "we still need a co-chair for the committee. Most of the work is done, but there will still be decisions to make, and continued supervision to make sure it comes off flawlessly. I'm appointing Abigail Trent to the position."

Abby stared at him, dumbfounded. Incredulously she swung around to Greg Hastings. She was to share the committee chair position with him? The man who had witnessed her most embarrassing night ever? She couldn't do it, not in a million years!

His cool gaze met hers, as if challenging her to say something.

She looked at Dr. Taylor again. "I don't think I'm right for this," she said. "I don't have enough experience."

"I'm not asking you to present a workshop, just assist Greg in coordinating the event. Sally Chapel and Bob Montgomery are also on the committee, to help as needed. But the final decisions will rest with you and Greg." The subject was closed as far as he was concerned. He picked up a sheet of paper.

"Next up, the scheduling changes the Nursing Administration is requesting. It impacts primarily…"

Abby's mind went blank. She couldn't believe the assignment. Of all the people to be paired with. Not only did she and Dr. Hastings scarcely speak to each other, he'd been right there last week when Jeb had been so scathing. At least she'd been spared others hearing Jeb's insult. Her cheeks burned again just remembering. She wished she could forget every moment, but her memory was excellent.

As, she was sure, was Dr. Hastings's.

He slid a note in front of her: "My office after?"

Idly she noticed his bold handwriting, the easy-to-read note reminding her of his reputation for saying what he meant and never mind whose toes he stepped on—no emotions, no wasted energy.

She frowned and picked up her pen, scrawling back: "Can't, I have appointments."

Two minutes later the paper was returned: "When, then?"

She had a vague idea of cornering Dr. Taylor after the meeting and arguing against the assignment, but upon reflection, that might appear less than professional. And she could use the experience—if only it wasn't with Dr. Hastings!

She dashed off the numeral four and slid the paper to her left. Her attention on the exchange of notes, she'd lost the trend of the discussion.

When the chief of staff called on Greg for an update on the conference, Abby tried her best to focus on what he was saying. After all, she'd have to come up to speed quickly.

But she found herself studying his hands as he held his papers, listening to the intonation and cadence of his voice as his richly masculine tones filled the room, cool and self-assured. He always was in control. Too controlled? she wondered. Did he ever let go? Maybe with close friends.

A close woman friend?

Frowning, she jerked her thoughts back to the presentation. She wasn't going down that road. Whatever Greg Hastings did in his spare time was his business, not hers!

"Which brings us up to the ball on Saturday the twentieth. We have several civic organizations pledging support, so we should realize the goal we set." Greg slanted a glance at Abby. "My new co-chair and I can check out the ballroom this week and make sure everything is on track. I trust Steve's judgment, but this was one area I've neglected. With him gone, I'll bring us both up to speed on that aspect."

The ball! A major fund-raiser for the hospital, the annual charity event drew corporate sponsors and individuals alike. Held at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, it was lavish and elegant. Or so she'd heard. It would be the first one she had attended.

Abby looked warily at the chief of staff. That was one event she'd make sure she had a date for even if she had to hire somebody off the street!

"Good job, Greg. Any other items we need to address?" Dr. Taylor asked the staff.

Not hearing any, the meeting was adjourned.

"Susan, can I speak with you?" Abby jumped up before she could be cornered by Greg Hastings and, gathering her notes, hastened to join her friend.

"So," Susan said, glancing over her shoulder.

"You and Greg. Is this a trend? You two went to that banquet last week, now co-chairs? Hmm, anything you want to share with a friend?"

"Yes, I wish I didn't have this assignment. And didn't you hear, last week was a duty escort arranged by Dr. Taylor."

"Not according to the rampant rumors going around. Apparently there's a nurse on the surgical wing who is very miffed."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Doesn't anyone have anything better to do than gossip?"

"About our sexy Dr. Hastings? I doubt it."

"Oh, well, if it's just about him—"

"Not exactly."

Abby waited until the hallway was almost deserted, then dared to ask, "Not exactly?"

"There was some speculation as to the way you were dressed."

Abby groaned with embarrassment. "I knew it, it was too much, wasn't it."

"Certainly not your style," her friend said gently.

"My neighbor helped. She's a bit more flamboyant than I am."

"I thought you looked fantastic."

"Well, some parties thought I looked like a tart."

"Greg?"

She shrugged. "If he did, he was polite enough to refrain from saying so."

"Who?"

"Just a friend who obviously felt no such restraints."

"And the purpose of that dress?"

Abby glanced around to make sure they couldn't be overheard. "I was trying to make someone take notice."

"Honey, I think the entire male population of the hospital took notice. Super doctor by day, femme fatale by night!"

Abby scowled. "Not my intent."

Susan studied her for a moment. "There's a happy medium—you just need some pointers."

"Are you volunteering?" Abby asked, diverted temporarily by the idea. She had been over the top last week. And it hadn't done a speck of good. Jeb had not found her attractive—just the opposite.

"No, but I know someone who would be perfect." The teasing look in her eyes made Abby wary.

"Right—in my spare time. But in the meantime, I didn't stop you to discuss my social life. I wanted to ask you about that procedure you were talking about a few weeks ago. I have a kid who is not responding to normal treatment."

Thankfully, their conversation turned to medicine and Abby was able to put aside the memory of that embarrassing night.

Until she showed up at Dr. Hastings's office that afternoon just prior to four. She made sure she was not late. His door was ajar, the secretary's desk empty.

Should she wait, or just go in? Taking a step closer, she heard voices. Someone was in with Greg. She'd wait.

"Shall I leave the door open when your four-o'clock appointment arrives?" The voice came from Greg's secretary, Rose. Abby had met her once before.

"Why?" The sound of papers being shuffled drifted outside the door.

"Your reputation, of course," Rose said with asperity. "After the way Dr. Trent was dressed when you took her to the banquet, you have to know she's trying to vamp you."

"Vamp me? Where do you come up with these terms, Rose?"

Abby's cheeks began to burn again. Did the entire hospital think she had been trying to make a play for Dr. Hastings?

"I'm into retro. Anyway, I'm looking out for you."

"Yeah, the man most likely to sweep a woman off her feet."

"One look at your killer smile and every woman in sight will swoon."

He laughed.

Abby stepped closer, charmed by the rich tone of Greg's laughter. If only she didn't feel she was the butt of the joke. Damn, why had she let Kim talk her into all that makeup and that dress?

"Rose, you're priceless. When Dr. Trent arrives, show her in, and then shut the door."

"What was that about last week?"

"Darn if I know. I expected a quiet, mousy physician to open her door, so I was as surprised as anyone else at the way she looked."

There were several seconds of silence. Mousy? Was that how he saw her? Did everyone see her that way? Abby turned to tiptoe away when Rose spoke again, her voice pensive.

"You know, maybe she's looking to change her image. You could help."

"Me?" Greg laughed again. "I don't think so, Rose."

"Think about it, Pam could get her some clothes that suited her personality. Elise could give her pointers on walking and looking sexy, and how to apply makeup for an understated look. I'm serious, Greg."

"I will not think about it. Thanks for the suggestions, Rose, but Dr. Trent is well able to look after herself."

"Hmm, I wonder."

Abby spun around and headed for the hall. She'd rather be thought tardy than be caught eavesdropping—especially when she'd been the topic under discussion. Heat scorched her cheeks. She wanted to dash away and never face the man again. Or his cheeky secretary.

She reached the water fountain and stopped for a drink, hoping the color that had flooded her cheeks would fade. This was worse than she'd expected. She thought she and Greg would just briefly touch base. He'd hand her a file of the committee information and she could escape. Now she'd be wondering what he was thinking the entire time.

She cleared her throat as she drew near the secretary's desk. Rose was just coming from Greg's office. Young and stylish, she was well thought of throughout the hospital, fiercely loyal to her boss, and the hospital in general.

"Hi, Dr. Trent. You're right on time," she said, smiling brightly.

Abby nodded, avoiding Rose's eyes. "Is Dr. Hastings ready?"

Greg appeared in the doorway, almost filling the space. Abby swallowed and tried to ignore the familiar fluttering in her stomach. Tried not to dwell on the conversation she'd overheard.

"Since we'll be working closely on the conference, don't you think you should call me Greg?" he said easily, leaning casually against the doorjamb and crossing his arms over his chest as he assessed her.

He'd noticed, had he, that she'd never been able to call him by his first name? Had anyone else noticed?

As she drew closer and he didn't budge, she wondered if he would move to allow her through the door?

He did, at the last second, his eyes dancing in taunting amusement.

She stepped inside his office, her defenses on the ready. She was not some woman to be swept away by his killer smile, or anything else. She was here under protest, and would do only what she had to in order to pull her weight on the committee.

Deliberately Greg shut the door.

"Have a seat." He gestured to one of the visitor chairs then took his seat behind his desk. Seconds later he began to fill her in on all the steps taken in preparation for the conference. Rose was handling many of the details and follow-up work. The schedule had been settled, speakers committed, programs drafted for the printers.

Several minutes later he looked up. "That leaves the ball. Steve was working on that, and I expect you can take over from where he left. The orchestra has been booked, the menu finalized, former donors contacted. There will be only the routine tasks left now. If you could supervise this aspect, it would help. Let me or Rose know if you need anything."

Abby nodded, wondering if she could leave now. She'd make sure she managed everything without ever bothering Greg or his outspoken secretary.

He slid the folder to her. "This pretty much recaps everything."

He leaned back in his chair and studied her. "Will you be needing an escort to the ball?" he asked.

"No," she said, gathering the folder and standing. Was she never going to live that down?

"Just checking. It would be easier to know early rather than the day of the event."

"It wasn't my idea last time. I assure you, I'll find someone to take me to the ball. And if I don't, Dr. Taylor will never learn it from me!"

He looked at her thoughtfully. “You’ll find someone? No steady man in your life?”

“Not that it’s any business of yours, Dr. Hastings, but no there’s not.” She clutched the folder to her chest and edged toward the door.

“Greg,” he said, standing.

She nodded abruptly. “If that’s all, I do have other things to do.”

“That’s all for now. Review the information and let me know if you have any questions. Are you free tomorrow at two?”

“Tomorrow? Why?”

“So we can check out the ballroom at the hotel. If that time’s not good, let Rose know when you can go. I’ll drive.”

“I don’t have my calendar with me, but I expect it won’t be convenient. I see patients all day long, you know.”

He nodded. “I have a gall bladder first thing tomorrow, but then am free. If you’re not, we’ll make it later. Say seven?”

Abby wanted to protest, but she didn’t have an alternative time that would be convenient. Never seeing him again would be convenient, but wasn’t going to happen.

“Fine. Seven, tomorrow.” Turning, she almost fled from his office.

Rose looked up in surprise. “Finished already?”

Abby nodded and kept walking. She had more than twenty-four hours to get herself under control before seeing him again. She’d be the epitome of professionalism.

Given time, there’d be other tidbits to capture the attention of the hospital gossips. Her one foray into life on the wild side would fade.

And she’d learned her lesson. She couldn’t compete with Sara. Jeb was gone. She had to accept it. And truth to tell, even if overnight she became some beautiful sex symbol, she didn’t want a man who would turn away at the first sight of a new face.

What did Greg Hastings look for? she wondered.

When Greg rang Abby’s doorbell the next evening, he felt a slight rise of anticipation. So far he couldn’t quite call their encounters productive. She always seemed poised to take off at any second—her leaving him in front of the restaurant last week a case in point. Yet he was almost looking forward to their get-together this evening. For a little while, at least, she’d have to give him some attention. Maybe he could better understand the woman.

She opened the door. For a split second he was disappointed she hadn’t done her hair up as if she’d just tumbled out of bed. And that she wasn’t wearing a dress that displayed every inch of her body like a man’s fantasy. She wore the expected tailored suit, her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. And she was not wearing any makeup. From one extreme to another.

“Good evening, I’m ready.” She stepped into the hall and pulled the door shut, checking the lock.

“Despite the rumors, I don’t believe you are trying to seduce me,” he murmured.

“What?” She looked up, startled.

At least that got a reaction. “Seduction needs more privacy than your hall.” He turned toward the elevator. “I’ll have to reassure Rose that we have a strictly business relationship.”

“I don’t feel we have any kind of relationship at all, Dr. Hastings.” Abby fell into step beside him. “I certainly didn’t ask Dr. Taylor to press you into service last week. And I could check out the hotel ballroom on my own this evening. You don’t have to accompany me.”

“But it’s so much easier if we check it out together.” Greg said smoothly. “If you don’t call me by my name from now on, Abigail, I’ll have to take drastic measures!”

“Such as?” She punched the down call button for the elevator with more force than he thought necessary.

"I don't know," he teased, suddenly enjoying himself for the first time in a long while. As the elevator doors slid open, they stepped inside. An older couple already was in the car.

"Maybe kiss you," he said outrageously just to get another rise from her.

She glared at him. Silence reigned.

When the elevator reached the lobby, the older couple gave them a brief glance and stepped out.

Abby watched until they were out the front door before spinning around.

"That was totally uncalled-for. I can just imagine what they were thinking!"

With a gentle nudge, he urged her from the elevator and across the marble floor of the lobby.

"What they're thinking, Greg."

"Greg, Greg, Greg! There, are you satisfied?"

Holding the lobby door for her, Greg watched as she stormed out to the sidewalk. For a moment the image of her saying the words in a different context slammed into him.

Abigail Trent and bed? The thought was ludicrous. She had no interest in him and he certainly could afford no long-term interest in any woman.

When they reached the hotel on Union Square, Greg availed himself of valet parking, wondering if Abby planned to dash into another cab when they'd finished.

"For the record, I'm taking you home," he said as they entered the St. Francis Hotel. The old San Francisco landmark was centrally located and perfect for the lavish fund-raising ball.

"There's no need—"

"Actually, there is. I have something to discuss with you," he said as they entered the lobby.

"About the conference?"

"Sort of."

"And you can't discuss it here?" Abby asked suspiciously.

"No."

They met the events coordinator and soon had a tour of the ballroom and the kitchen that would service the event. They discussed decorations and music, in addition to amenities like the cloakroom, anticipated space needed for valet parking, and rooms for guests who would like to avail themselves of the chance to spend the night after the ball.

Greg noticed Abby's questions were well thought out, and seemed to cover all aspects of the event. He knew she had never attended one of the balls, but she honed in on the aspects most likely to cause problems at the last minute.

He wasn't sure why Ben had assigned Abby as co-chair, but she proved she'd do her share.

It was after nine by the time they finished. Greg took her arm in a gentle grip.

"I won't run away," Abby said irritably.

"Indulge me," he said.

"You don't trust me, Doctor?"

"Not any further than I can throw you. But don't take it personally, I don't trust any woman."

"There's a comment that begs for elaboration."

"Not tonight. Here's the car."

The ride to her place was silent. Greg wondered what she was thinking—and how best to broach the subject Rose insisted he bring up.

When he stopped in front of her apartment building, he turned off the engine and turned to look at her.

"It's about the other night."

Warily she looked at him. "What about it?"

He reached into his pocket for a business card and handed it to her. "Rose suggested you might be in the market for some new clothes."

Abby made no move to take the card, looking at it as if it would bite.

"There's nothing wrong with my clothes."

"I never said there was." He was handling it all wrong. On the other hand, he couldn't imagine any way being considered right. Rose should have talked to her. It would have been better coming from another woman.

He dropped the card in her lap. "My sister has a boutique on Maiden Lane. Tell her I sent you and maybe she'll give you a discount. On the other hand, if it's a day she's mad at me, she'll probably charge you extra."

Looking at him suspiciously, Abby gingerly picked up the card. "Why are you doing this?"

Greg shrugged, wondering the same thing himself. As a rule he didn't become involved in other people's personal lives. "To stop Rose from haranguing me every minute. She's a terrific secretary. I'd be lost without her. But she can drive me crazy when she gets some idea in her head. She's convinced there was some hidden message in the way you were dressed the other night."

Abby fingered the card, taking a deep breath and meeting his gaze. "Thank you." Opening the door, she stepped out onto the sidewalk. "I'll think about it."

Chapter Three

Abby watched as Greg's car sped away. What was she, some charity case? Crumpling the card in her hand, she headed inside. Entering her apartment a moment later, she tossed it toward the trash. It fell short.

His carefully crafted words echoed in her mind. At least he hadn't laughed aloud. In fact he'd looked downright uncomfortable.

She almost smiled. Had he really expected her to believe that story about Rose pushing him around? A man less likely to be pushed by anyone she had yet to meet.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to go shopping and just look.

She picked up the card and smoothed it out. Maybe he'd done it out of the genuine goodness of his heart. She laughed at that. From what she'd heard, Dr. Hastings didn't have a heart.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"I was also supposed to add my sister would be happy to give you any pointers you might like. Like on your hair or something."

From the background noise, she knew he was on his cell phone. How had he gotten her number?

"Why?"

"The consensus seems to be you are trying to capture some man's attention."

"So much for being subtle," she murmured, sinking down onto the sofa. "Who shares this consensus?" The gossip had been even more widespread than she'd suspected if Greg Hastings was hearing it.

"That's not important. Is it correct?"

"No." Honesty nudged. "Well, sort of, maybe."

"I hope you don't give diagnoses that way."

"No, I don't. And this conversation is over."

She hung up. If she could turn back the clock, she'd never have agreed to Kim's outlandish suggestion. But of course if she could turn back the clock, she'd make sure Carol never got into a car that fateful day.

When the phone rang again, she snatched it up.

"Now what?"

"I can't believe a woman with your looks has any trouble holding on to a man."

"Your assessment means so much to me." She couldn't believe she was having this conversation.

"A problem shared is a problem halved. Want to tell me about it?"

"Not at all, but thank you for your kind bedside manner."

"Ah, if you're going to start talking dirty, Doctor, I need to pull over."

"Huh?"

"Bed and all."

Abby blinked. Was that teasing note coming from the no-nonsense, dedicated surgeon, super doctor-stud Greg Hastings?

"Let me assure you I haven't the faintest idea of how to talk dirty or flirt. That's part of the problem. Not that I need to tell you any more. Good night, Doctor!"

"I'll call back. Persistence is one of my strong points."

She could think of a few other things to call it. "Why the interest? To feed the rumor mill?"

"Ah, thanks for your high regard. Actually I'm on a reconnaissance mission for Rose."

"Who will then feed the rumor mill?"

"I doubt it. She seems to attract information like a magnet does iron filings, but rarely spreads it—except to me, of course."

"Now you want to return the favor?"

"Actually, I'll admit to being curious myself."

"It's no big deal, and probably a very tired, familiar story. I thought there was more to a relationship than a certain man thought."

"Jeb Stuart."

Abby caught her breath. Greg was too sharp. "I didn't mention any names."

"I could feel the tension between the two of you at the banquet. And I have eyes. The woman he was with was a knockout. Hence the change of style on your part, I suspect."

"Which did nothing but make me look like an idiot."

"I don't know. I liked the dress."

Abby doggedly continued, "I wanted a change, but obviously I don't have a clue about how to do it."

"Do it?"

She blinked and frowned. "Make the change." Heat flooded at the echo of his words. Suddenly she wondered what it would be like to do it with Greg Hastings. What would it be like to kiss him, have those surgeon's hands touch her intimately? Have his mouth cover her with passion? Pushing away the image, she frowned. Even fantasy had its limits, and this was one in which she dared not indulge. How would she ever face him at the hospital if she spent her free time daydreaming about the two of them together, intimately entwined?

It was warm in the apartment. She rose and walked to the window to crack it open a bit.

Intimate images refused to be dispelled, and began to dance in her mind again. Suddenly she envisioned him pursuing a reluctant female until she was totally captivated—just as Rose predicted.

"I guess I don't understand why you want a change. You're never going to look like that woman with Jeb last week. If that's his type, you don't have a chance."

"I heard you have a reputation for blunt speaking. Thanks for offering hope."

"False hope does no one any good. Are you hung up on Jeb Stuart?"

"Of course not! But I'm not exactly flooded with invitations for dates, either." She took a deep breath, deciding she knew where this was leading. "Don't worry that you'll be coerced into taking me to the ball. I'll find someone by then!"

She closed her eyes. Had she really told him all that?

"You make it sound like a quest, or a challenge. I bet I could get you lined up with someone with no trouble."

"Great, another setup. I didn't like Dr. Taylor's solution, so I don't want yours. I have to go. Please forget we had this conversation."

She hung up the phone and headed for the bedroom. Even if he called back, she'd refuse to pick up. She'd had enough—and revealed far too much!

Only Carol had known why she felt uncertain around men. She'd been the only one to whom Abby had given the full details of her fiasco with Terry Bolton. She couldn't seem to shake the lasting anxiety in her own femininity that debacle had engendered. Well, not anxiety precisely. More distrust. Uncertainty. She didn't trust her own instincts anymore.

Getting ready for bed, she thought about Jeb. She'd misread that situation, obviously. But they'd been friends for so long. And when Carol died, they'd seem to become even closer. Nothing had ever been said, so when had she begun to assume they'd get married one day?

By Saturday, Abby's curiosity about Greg's sister's boutique had grown. Dressing casually in dark brown slacks and a cream blouse, she decided to spend the morning just browsing. For a few minutes she debated enlisting Kim's help, but decided against it. Somehow the dress Kim had talked her into hadn't been the success she'd hoped for.

She could hear the echo of Jeb's scathing comment.

Then she remembered what Greg had said. Maybe it hadn't been totally bad.

It was early when she reached Maiden Lane. None of the trendy shops were yet opened. Passing time by gazing into the windows, Abby questioned what she was doing. Just because some arrogant man had suggested she try the boutique wasn't any real reason to do so. If she had her way, Dr. Greg Hastings would never know whether she had taken his advice or not. So why was she here?

The shop she stood in front of opened its doors. She checked her watch and headed back down the short street to the boutique. Finding it now open, she entered and was immediately impressed with its understated elegance. The place was larger than it looked from the small storefront, displaying suits, dresses and evening wear with loving care. To the right, frothy undergarments denoted the small lingerie section.

There were none of the tightly jammed racks she was used to in department stores. Here and there a few special dresses hung for ease in viewing, with mannequins displaying choice items.

Abby found herself gazing at a long, sultry slip dress in midnight-blue that whispered sex appeal. That's what she'd like to wear. But would it look as good on her as the mannequin?

Jeb's words echoed once again.

"Hello, may I help you?" A tall, slender woman appeared from the back. Her friendly smile relaxed Abby instantly.

"I'm just looking, thanks," she said, stepping to the rack nearest her. The silky feel of the blouses delighted her senses.

"Took my advice, I see." The masculine voice surprised her. She looked up—into Greg Hastings's amused eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Abby asked, surprised to see him. She almost groaned aloud. So much for keeping her activities secret.

"I took Pam to breakfast. I dropped her off here and was ready to leave when I heard you."

Embarrassed to be caught, Abby nodded stiffly. "I was in the neighborhood and decided to see what she had."

"A friend of yours, Greg?" the other woman asked.

"Dr. Abby Trent, meet my sister, Pam Schuler."

"Ah, how do you do, Dr. Trent?" Pam smiled, glancing at her brother.

Abby knew he'd said something to his sister about her and wished she could just spin around and dash away. But that would be bad manners and she already had enough on her plate with Dr. Hastings.

"You have a lovely place," Abby said, trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. Why wouldn't the man just leave?

"Thank you. Anything special in mind?" Pam asked genially.

"No. Just browsing."

"Get her a few things for evening and all. And something for the ball, don't forget," Greg said irrepressibly.

"I can choose my own clothes, Dr. Hastings!"

"Mmm." His gaze roamed over her from the open neck of her blouse to the tip of her toes.

Abby raised her chin and turned away. "I think I'll come back another time."

"No, don't go," Pam said. Turning to her brother, she frowned at him. "Thanks for breakfast. Now if you don't want to ruin my business, take yourself away!"

"I'm not ruining anything."

"Go!"

"Maybe Dr. Trent would like me to stay."

Abby met his dancing eyes. "I don't care what you do, I have other errands." She turned as if to head for the door, feeling as foolish as a ten-year-old caught out spying on her older sister.

"Greg!" Pam said sharply.

"Okay, I'm going. This is the thanks I get for treating you to breakfast?"

"Next time you can drop me at the door. Goodbye!" Pam said, glaring at him.

"Dr. Trent, don't let Greg's teasing drive you away. I'd love for you to look around and see if there's anything you might like."

Pausing, Abby met Greg's gaze, noticing the deep brown of his eyes. They seemed richer, deeper—interested. In her? No one had been really interested in her since high school. Or if they had been, she'd shut them out.

Yet just a single look from Greg Hastings and she felt flushed with femininity; she felt sexy, almost desirable. She wanted to fuss with her hair, check that her lipstick was still bright, ask if he would help her pick out a dress. Something like what that mannequin wore.

He was still talking with his sister and Abby watched him, unable to look away. Just because his hair looked as if she should brush it back from his forehead was no reason for her fingers to tingle with yearning. Just because his dark eyes gleamed when they glanced at her was no reason to want to have him stay when she really wanted him gone. Just because his lower lip was slightly fuller than his top lip was no reason for her own to tremble and long to feel that sensuous mouth move against her own. So why did her gaze keep dropping to his lips? Why did she wonder what he would taste like?

She'd told herself to stop all fantasies about Greg Hastings. They were medical colleagues—nothing more!

When he looked at her, she blinked. She saw Pam looking at her expectantly. Had he said something she'd missed? Had she been caught examining him? Catching herself in the spell of his presence, she tried to ignore the sensations flooding her body. He radiated raw sex appeal. For the first time in her life Abby felt—almost alluring.

"What?"

"I told Pam I thought you were after a new look. I suspect you're tired of the reliable-doctor look in your free time," he said, daring her to contradict him.

She ignored him and nodded at Pam. "He's right, much as I hate to admit it. I would like a change."

"Something to help her attract the opposite sex," Greg added suggestively. The thought of transforming the quiet Dr. Trent into a femme fatale piqued his interest. And offered tantalizing possibilities. Maybe Rose's suggestion hadn't been so outlandish after all.

Glaring at him, Abby said, "Don't you have to leave? I thought your sister told you to go."

He almost laughed. "When you get to know me better, Abigail, you'll know I rarely do what I'm told unless I want to."

"I have no doubt about that," she mumbled.

Trying to defuse the growing tension, Pam walked over to one of the display racks and pulled out a lovely cinnamon-colored dress. "How about something like this for evening. It'll wear all day and still look fresh at night."

"You ought to ask Rose for pointers on the dating scene. From what she tells me, she dates a different man every week," Greg added, leaning casually against a mirror, watching Abby's every move. If his sister really wanted him gone, he'd leave. But for now it was interesting to watch Abby's reactions.

"I don't need to talk to your secretary. I'll get my own experience, thank you." She regretted ever agreeing to Dr. Taylor's suggestion concerning an escort.

"I can just imagine the experience you'll get dating a lot of different men in San Francisco," he said dryly.

Abby raised her head. She wasn't planning to sleep with every man who took her out. But she didn't have to tell him that. She already regretted being so open with him, and coming to the boutique. She should have followed her first instincts and tossed the business card into the trash.

She'd made a mistake coming in the first place, and in staying so long.

"Greg, either help or get out," Pam said in frustration. "I have enough worries without you running off my clientele."

"Okay, I'll help," Greg said suddenly, amusement and something else in his expression.

"You will?" Pam asked. "That would be great. Exactly what kind of help are you talking about?"

"I'll help change our delectable Dr. Trent into the femme fatale she yearns to be." His gaze remained on Abby.

"Why ever would you do such a thing?" Abby asked, ignoring the sarcasm. She didn't need to be a femme fatale, just change enough that Jeb regretted destroying their friendship for the blond bombshell.

And maybe find her own date for the ball.

"So I'm not enlisted for escort duty at the last moment?" he asked whimsically.

Abby regarded him warily. "This may be a joke to you, but not to me."

Immediately his amusement fled. For a moment the cold, arrogant surgeon appeared. "I assure you I won't treat it as a joke. If you want some pointers, I'll give them to you. If not, say so and I'll leave just as Pam keeps trying to get me to do."

"What kind of pointers?" Suspicion grew as Abby tried to analyze why he'd make such an offer. It couldn't be because he didn't want to take her to the ball. All he had to do was say no.

He shrugged. "Whatever you don't know and want to about men."

"Well, that would fill a bookshelf!" Abby had never understood men.

"Are you serious, Greg?" Pam asked.

"We could try it and see. You game, Dr. Trent?"

Abby tried to see the pitfalls of such a crazy scheme. Greg already knew she didn't date, so there was no hiding that. She was committed to attending the conference and ball, her appointment to the committee had insured that. Could he help her? Or was it all some elaborate joke on his part?

Not that she'd ever heard Dr. Hastings was one for jokes. He was too cool, too reserved, too much a loner to go in for frivolity.

Which made his offer even more bizarre.

"I guess I could use some pointers," she said hesitantly.

His eyes stared into hers, holding her full attention. "The help would also include not only Pam, but my sister Elise, who is a very successful fashion model. Among the three of us we can give you everything you'd ever want."

His words sent a shiver up her spine. She didn't feel threatened, exactly, despite the aura of power that seemed to surge to the forefront. But she couldn't help imagining him wreaking havoc in her nice, orderly life.

Feeling awkward, Abby tried to think up something clever to say, but remained as tongue-tied as a young girl. "I appreciate your willingness to help me," she said formally. "But a few pointers would be all I'd need." Smiling at Pam, she added, "And some new clothes, maybe."

"Clothes will help, but you don't need much. You're a pretty woman, Doctor," Greg said bluntly.

Greg pushed away from the wall and stepped closer, his fingers brushing her hair.

"As for suggestions, I've got one right off the bat. Take this tawny-blond hair and lighten it up some with streaks of white blond, get it styled a little and you'll be a knockout. Your eyes are an unusual color, one moment almost green, another moment blue. With the proper clothes, you can make them your most compelling feature. Knock men off their feet. Especially if you flash them the smile that peeks out every once in a while."

You're a pretty woman. The last man to tell her that had been her father on her sixteenth birthday. And Terry a couple of times. But did she dare trust the words? Didn't men say one thing and mean something else entirely?

Abby felt the heat from Greg's body envelop hers. She took a breath, and his scent filled her nostrils, spicy and male. She licked dry lips and kept her gaze firmly on his, ignoring the overwhelming desire to step back and gain some distance, some perspective. He was so aggressively male!

Her thoughts whirling, she wondered if she was crazy to let herself even consider following through now that he had agreed.

As if he could read her mind, he leaned closer and cupped her chin in his hand, the warmth stealing into her skin, sweeping through her entire body. Mesmerized by the liquid heat in his eyes, she gazed up at him.

“Don’t back out now, Abigail. We’ll fix you up so good you’ll have to beat the men off with a stick.” Lightly his thumb grazed her lower lip.

The tingling awareness that swept through her from head to toes felt like a small electric shock. Her eyes locked with his and the boutique and his sister seemed to fade, disappearing into a gray mist. There were only the two of them, alone in the world, his breath against her cheeks and the odd, sensuous awareness that seemed to fill every pore.

She’d been dealing with men for years, first the cowboys on her dad’s small ranch, then aspiring doctors, interns, residents and established physicians. But she’d never experienced such a strong physical reaction to any of them.

She had not expected him to touch her. Nor had she expected the flaring sensations that consumed her. What had she gotten herself into?

“Then let’s start with the clothes,” Pam said.

Abby blinked and seemed to come out of a trance. She stepped away. How could she have been so mesmerized by the man? He and she didn’t have a thing in common. Where was this physical awareness coming from?

“I really just came to look,” Abby said, doing her best to ignore Greg, to ignore the clamoring of her senses for more of his touch, more of his attention. Remember his normal manner, she admonished herself. Today was the aberration. Usually he didn’t know she existed.

Still not certain of his motives, she would wait and see how things unfolded. She was not trusting the man—not completely. But then, she didn’t trust any man completely anymore. Not after her experience with Terry, and Jeb.

Chapter Four

By the time Abby returned home, she was excited about the clothes Pam had helped her choose. She had tried on dozens of dresses, skirts and blouses and casual wear. When they found the classical style that she liked, and suited her figure, Pam had brought several dresses into the dressing room that fit like a glove and enhanced the color of her eyes—just as Greg had predicted.

Frowning, she wondered how he'd known so much about women's attire and what would work. From his sisters? Or from women he dated?

Trying on one of the dresses again, she loved the feel of the soft silk against her skin. When the doorbell rang, she debated taking off the dress before answering, but that would take too long.

"Oh, that's beautiful. Where did you get it?" Kim asked when Abby opened the door.

"Come in and see what else I got," Abby said, glad to share her new purchases.

Kim raved over everything, then tilted her head and looked at Abby.

"There's something different about you. What is it?"

"The clothes, I guess. Nothing else has changed."

"Maybe. But there's something." Kim studied her for a moment then gave up. "I think the dress we bought wasn't quite right."

"It was a pretty dress, just not for me. Would you like it? It's only been worn once." And the memories of that night insured she'd never wear it again!

"Sure, if you don't want it. You need to do something with your makeup and hair next," Kim said, "to go with the new clothes."

"Someone suggested I get some highlights," Abby said slowly as she drew the dress over her head. Donning jeans and a casual top, she looked at her friend.

"What do you think?"

"I think you'd be a knockout. Can doctors do that?"

Abby laughed. "What, get their hair streaked?"

"No, start looking fabulous."

Warmed by her friend's enthusiasm, Abby laughed at the nonsense. "Afraid all my baby patients will distrust my skills?"

"I guess not. Wait until Jeb sees you. He'll have a fit and dump Sara like a hot potato."

Abby paused as she hung up another new dress. "I hope not."

"What? Did I miss something?" Kim asked in mock surprise as she handed Abby another dress.

"Actually," she said, turning toward Kim, "I don't want Jeb."

Kim sat on the bed and stared at her. "I thought that was what all this was about," she said, waving her hand around.

"At first. But I've been thinking about it and now I don't want Jeb to change a thing."

Kim's eyes narrowed as if she were deep in thought. "Another man?"

"Hardly," Abby scoffed. But despite her best efforts, the image of Greg Hastings rose. She frowned and resumed her task. She wasn't even sure she liked the man. She didn't trust his motives in offering help, and she sure didn't want to be reminded he'd been her escort at one of the most embarrassing events of her life.

Yet…

Making plans with Kim to go out Sunday afternoon to the movies, Abby finished putting away her things and, once her friend left, prepared a light dinner.

She no longer wanted to knock Jeb off his feet, but the thought of changing her image made her sparkle. It was past time. She'd spent all the years since the end of her relationship with Terry devoted to studying to become a doctor. Now that she'd achieved her goal, it was time to branch out and see what else life had to offer.

Monday flew by with extra appointments squeezed in for those children who had become ill over the weekend.

Tuesday was a disaster. One of Abby's patients was given the wrong medicine and had an immediate allergic reaction. While she responded to that, appointments stacked up.

Then she spilled coffee on a brand-new skirt and her lab coat and walked around feeling damp all afternoon. Twice she lost her train of thought when listening to consulting physicians regarding treatment for critical patients, and had to ask them to repeat themselves. Both times the frustrated physicians grew sarcastic, asking if she really wanted to listen to them, or would prefer daydreaming for some new and more effective way of treating patients?

It was raining when she left the hospital, and she had neither coat nor umbrella. Her car was parked far from the entrance and she was soaked by the time she reached it. To top it off, her period started and she felt achy and cranky.

She arrived home tired, wet and disgusted with everything. Maybe she wasn't cut out to deal with sarcastic, unsympathetic male doctors or to live alone in the city. She'd never had such a rotten day at home. Maybe she should have returned to Yreka and opened a private practice there. Small towns in northern California always needed physicians.

A quick warm shower went a long way toward making her feel better, but she was still slightly depressed and feeling weepy. If she'd been home, her mom and dad would take pains to cheer her up. She'd have the ranch animals to take care of, to take her mind off all the mistakes and stress and sardonic comments. But here she was alone, feeling dumb, clumsy and down. Some of it had to be because of the weather. Who expected rain in San Francisco in May?

Unable to settle on any one thing during the evening, Abby waited impatiently until she thought she could go to sleep. Bedtime couldn't come too early.

Changing into her nightgown, she was just about to climb into bed when the phone rang.

"Abigail?"

"Yes." It was Greg Hastings. "Is something wrong?" Why was he calling her so late? Or, more appropriately, why was he calling at all?

"Are you all right? Your voice sounds funny."

"Of course I'm fine." Immediately classifying the incidents of the day as minor annoyances, she sat down, ready to duel with Dr. Hastings.

"Rumor has it Dr. Peters was less than congenial over the bed of that liver patient."

"Trust the rumor mill to have picked up on that. And it was Jesse Mitchell. He's my patient but not responding to treatment. I thought Dr. Peters might help. Rose, I suppose," she said, resigned to the far-flung reach of hospital gossip.

"Naturally. What happened?"

Abby told him about the incident, and then expanded to include her entire day, embellishing each incident, making sure he understood the appalling gaffes she'd made with the other doctors, all the time wearing a lab coat with a huge coffee stain on it. She wasn't sure, but once or twice she thought she heard Greg chuckle. That was as far as she could go to dispel the rumors.

"Are you laughing at me, Doctor?" she asked suspiciously, her spirits inexplicably rising.

"And if I were?"

"I'll have you know these were serious incidents."

"Right, and I have a bridge to sell you."

"I know, the Golden Gate."

"Right. I called about the conference."

"At eleven o'clock at night? Couldn't it wait until I was at work?"

"I tried work, three times today."

"Oh." She thought about the small stack of pink phone messages waiting on her desk. She'd had her secretary pull any urgent ones, and every one relating to her patients. The rest she'd left to deal with tomorrow.

"It was a hectic day, sorry I didn't get back to you." She bet he ran his life with more order. Did he ever have to wait until the next day to return calls?

"No problem. We can talk now, unless I'm keeping you up."

"I was ready for bed," she said without thinking, then could have bitten her tongue. It felt strange to talk to him wearing only her nightgown. But there was no reason he had to know what she was wearing.

Idly she wondered if she could sound seductive and sexy on the phone. Not that she'd ever try such a thing with Greg Hastings!

"Are you wearing some prissy long white virginal gown?" he said, his voice suddenly rough.

She frowned. How had he known that? Was that her image? Prissy and virginal? No, quiet and mousy. Is that what mousy women wore? No wonder she needed to change her image. No woman of thirty wanted to be thought of as prissy and virginal!

She didn't answer right away. He thought he was so smart. Could she shake that assurance a little? Show him she wasn't as predictable as he thought? Without further thought, she blurted out, "Actually I'm wearing a cream-colored silk teddy. It is cut really high on the sides. It's plunging in front and back and covered in lots of sheer lace with tiny straps that I hope will hold it up during the night." She'd seen the teddy at Pam's, but never in her life imagined wearing such a frilly concoction. Still, Greg didn't need to know that.

His groan was clear across the telephone wire.

"What are you wearing?" she asked, hoping the laughter in her voice wasn't transmitted.

"Nothing. Not a stitch."

Liquid heat coursed through her instantly as she pictured his powerful, sexy body lying on white sheets. She knew his shoulders were wide, his chest muscles hard, with no extra flab anywhere. She blinked. Raised on a ranch, and trained as a doctor, she had a healthy understanding of the human body and procreation. She could picture Greg, and her breathing became difficult.

"Abby?" His low voice reverberated gently against her ear.

"What?" she said, glad he couldn't see her. Why had she thought she could sound sexy on the phone? Just the thought of him on the other end of the line naked in bed was shattering her equilibrium.

"I wish I could see you in that teddy." The velvet tones wrapped around her, heated her, excited her.

She prudently kept quiet.

"Abby? Are you still there?"

"Yes, but not for long. Good night, Greg."

She hung up the phone while she had an ounce of strength left. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she tried to sleep, but the picture in her mind refused to let her relax. Over and over she imagined him making love to her. She knew it would be glorious!

She seemed to know how his hands would feel on her bare skin. She knew they would be hot and electric against her breasts, her belly, her thighs. His body would be hard, sculpted with muscles. Her own hands would trace their outlines, learn his particular shape. Her mouth could explore his skin and learn his taste as he'd be learning hers.

With a groan, she rolled over and pulled a pillow on top of her head. Now she was driving herself crazy.

It rained Wednesday and Thursday and Abby was afraid it would continue through the weekend. She caught glimpses of Greg several times through the rest of the week, though they never had a moment to talk, and he'd never told her why he'd called about the committee.

Friday night when Abby turned the key in the door to her apartment, she wanted nothing more than a hot bath, a quick dinner and bed. She was exhausted! She'd had two difficult cases in the past two days and one emergency at three in the morning.

She had gone directly to work after the emergency and put in a full day. The uncommonly long hours proved difficult, though she usually loved her job. She had worked hard for a long time to attain her present position and wasn't about to complain about the down-side—though she was tempted. It was times like today that she especially missed Carol. And Jeb.

In earlier times, she would have called them. The three of them would have gathered at their favorite pizza restaurant and regaled each other with the trauma of practicing medicine. Sharing problems always made them seem lighter.

But those days were forever gone.

Kicking off her shoes, she wandered into the bedroom and collapsed on her bed. It was a wide four-poster, covered with a colorful quilt and a mound of pillows. Closing her eyes, she relaxed completely. Long, slow minutes slid by, then, worried she'd fall asleep still fully dressed, she forced herself up and into a bath.

Later, dressed in her most comfortable faded jeans and a loose cotton top, her hair still drawn into a high ponytail from bathing, she fixed a quick omelette for dinner. Revived by her bath and dinner, Abby turned on the television. It was something to while away the hours until bed. She was sleepy—it wouldn't be long.

When the doorbell sounded, Abby turned down the volume on the television and went to see who it was. She wasn't expecting anyone. It could be Kim, though she usually had a date on Friday nights.

Or Jeb?

No, surely he'd be out with Sara.

Greg Hastings was the last person she expected to find standing in the hall when she opened the door.

He wasn't wearing a suit, but dressed comfortably in dark slacks and a baggy tweed sweater. Obviously he'd been home and changed. What was he doing here?

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