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AUSTRALIAN BOSS: DIAMOND RING

JENNIE ADAMS

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AUSTRALIAN BOSS: DIAMOND RING Jennie Adams Fiona Donner breezed into Brent MacKay's office with her sunny smile and bouncy enthusiasm – and promptly turned his ordered world topsy-turvy. She may be the woman to finally release Brent's fears – and uncover the secret he's lived with his whole life...

LIGHTS, CAMERA...KISS THE BOSS Nikki Logan If hot-shot TV producer Dan nails his new show, a promotion's in the bag. He needs the X factor to smash the ratings – and she's just walked through the door. Don't lose your head now, Dan. The show's about to air. Lights, camera, kiss the boss – I mean, action!

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Australian Boss: Diamond Ring

by

Jennie Adams
Lights, Camera...Kiss The Boss

by

Nikki Logan



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Dear Reader

Fiona Donner is talented, insightful, open and giving. She is determined to reach her full potential as an artist, and is unaware of her beauty and appeal as a woman.

A man full of strength and shields, honour and vulnerability, potential and giving, Brent MacKay has faced abandonment and a physical condition that is his gift and his challenge. He is successful and grounded, has built a family with his brothers, but he will never marry or commit to a woman. That simply isn't a place Brent can go.

How can these two people find their way to a happy ending when the odds seem impossible?

When I wrote this story, I needed to put Brent and Fiona together and let them explore family and support networks, disappointment, hope, ambition and guardedness. Together, can they discover that wonderful connection and excitement and relief that comes from finding a soulmate and realising that, despite all the odds and obstacles, there is enough faith inside and enough love in each other to overcome all of it?

Do you believe a man and a woman can find a deep, calm happiness that is simply unbreachable, that all the world can see is for ever? I do, and I think Brent and Fiona will too. But I'll let you look for yourselves...

With love from Australia

Jennie

Australian Boss: Diamond Ring

by

Jennie Adams

Australian author **Jennie Adams** grew up in a rambling farmhouse surrounded by books, and by people who loved reading them. She decided at a young age to be a writer, but it took many years and a lot of scenic detours before she sat down to pen her first romance novel. Jennie has worked in a number of careers and voluntary positions, including transcription typist and pre-school assistant. She is the proud mother of three fabulous adult children and makes her home in a small inland city in New South Wales. In her leisure time Jennie loves long, rambling walks, discovering new music, starting knitting projects that she rarely finishes, chatting with friends, trips to the movies, and new dining experiences.

Jennie loves to hear from her readers, and can be contacted via her website at www.jennieadams.net

For David. For the sound of your laughter, and your un-caFFEinated morning voice. For the memories we're building, for the teasing and for your strength and your love and your vulnerabilities. For the best hugs in the world and for bringing me home the piece of my puzzle that I needed so much. I love you with all my heart. This one is for you.

Chapter One

A LITTLE tingle went down Fiona Donner's spine. It came from the impact of a pair of particularly appealing green eyes fringed with thick black lashes, focused utterly upon her as Brent MacKay made his job offer.

To compensate for that odd, unexpected reaction, Fiona used her best professional tone as she responded. 'Thank you. I'm thrilled to accept your offer and yes, I can start Monday!'

The famous, fabulous, talented, highly private and intensely focused millionaire landscape designer Brent MacKay wanted *her*. That was reason enough for a shiver or two, wasn't it? Fiona would be working with Brent for the next twelve months, with an option to extend if they were both happy with things by then. She knew already she would be happy. She'd just been offered the ultimate dream job!

Brent shifted in his executive office chair and his lean, tanned face creased into a smile. 'You may find the pace challenging at first. I work hard across multiple projects at once and you'll be providing input into all the major jobs I handle.'

'I'm not afraid of hard work. In truth, I can't wait for the challenge.' She meant that with all her heart. 'A chance at a job like this doesn't come every day. It makes the past two and a half years of graphic design study worth every moment.'

And his offer was a true shot in the arm for her confidence in her artistic abilities. He wouldn't want her if he thought she lacked the talent. She would work on computer graphic design for work proposals and job outlines. Original landscape paintings for the walls of his clients. Specialised photography for advertising and more. Fiona couldn't wait!

See, Mum? I do have what it takes to survive in this field.

Fiona straightened in the comfortable black leather visitor's chair and tugged at the hem of the pink and white checked jacket that covered her generous—well, okay, *quite generous*—curves, and tweaked the matching skirt into place.

She was five foot eleven in her stockinged feet, and Junoesque to go with it. Well, at least in this outfit she looked as good as she could look.

'Here's hoping you still feel as enthusiastic after your first week or so here.' Brent's glance lingered on her for just a moment before it moved to the bench-top storage that covered two of the walls in the room. Regimented rows of work covered their surfaces.

Fiona followed his glance, and followed it further, to the view of a busy outer Sydney suburb business street outside the ground floor window. A view of working class Australia going about what it did best. Working, and living.

If he wanted to, Brent could be in the heart of the city in a suite in a high-rise building with Sydney Harbour spread before him like an offering.

Instead, he was here in Everyman's territory. A place Fiona knew *she* would be very comfortable because she loved its reality. Fiona murmured, 'I will do everything possible to please you in every way.'

A beat of silence followed in which she realised her words could have been chosen a bit more carefully, and heat started to build at the base of her neck.

She hoped the blush stayed where it was and didn't give itself away all over her peaches and cream face. Fiona's hand rose to her high ponytail of blonde hair. She smoothed it in a nervous gesture before she could stop herself.

Her new employer stared at her intently before he dropped his gaze and said a low, deep, 'I'm certain you will be everything that's required.'

The fingers of his right hand drummed out a rhythm on the desk for a moment before he stilled them, became utterly still, and cleared his throat. 'To date I've worked very privately on my projects

at grass roots level, but I'm ready for this step now. You come highly recommended from the graphic design centre and, now that we've discussed the work, I very much want to bring you on board.'

To share in his creative process. It *was* a rather intimate thing. 'I'll respect your privacy, Mr MacKay. However you want us to work together, I'll do my best to fit in.'

'That's appreciated, though I'm sure we'll get along...fine.'

A few words followed by a calm glance that gave away absolutely nothing of his thoughts and yet somehow seemed to reach inside to a core part of her and find a connection anyway.

There was no reason for gooseflesh to break out on her skin, but it did. What was the matter with her? 'I'll work hard—whatever you feel will be helpful to the business.'

'Thank you.' He drew a breath. 'I'd like to introduce you to everyone now. It's a small office staff. Only about twenty people. Most of my employees are out on ground teams turning my designs into reality. You'll meet one of the teams Monday, others as time goes on.' Brent rose to his feet, crossed to her side and when she also stood, cupped her elbow to lead her to the door.

He was a tall man. Around six foot two, and all of it honed without an ounce of fat to be seen. Broad shoulders, slim hips, dark hair cropped short and with a distinct wave in it. His mouth was wide with a full lower lip, his teeth even and white. He had a straight nose that flared at the end.

And those gorgeous green eyes beneath winged brows. Eyes that seemed to watch the world with a combination of intensity and guardedness that Fiona found...compelling.

Employee to employer, that was. She found him compelling as a *brand new* employer. 'It will be nice to meet everyone, Mr MacKay.'

'They'll all be excited to hear you're coming on board,' he said. 'And please call me Brent. You're going to be all over a work site with me Monday morning getting grubby, so I think we can do away with the formalities. I suggest you wear jeans for that, by the way.'

As he spoke, a worker stepped through the front door of the building. A brisk May wind followed the woman in. Winter would officially arrive in another month. Out here in this suburb, further from the Sydney coast, it would get cold. For now, the weather just had a slight edge.

Fiona glanced at her employer. He had dressed for that edge in a tan button-down shirt over charcoal trousers. Business-casual. He should have looked less compelling than he did, but an aura of leashed strength and intensity came from him, was stamped on his face.

Please let me be equally strong and focused so I can do well here.

At almost twenty-six years of age, it shouldn't still matter so much to Fiona that she be able to prove herself. Perhaps if her family had been a little more supportive, or believed in her at all, it wouldn't have.

'Thank you...Brent.' Fiona breathed in the sharp blue tang of his aftershave and tried not to notice the warmth radiating through her clothing from his fingertips.

Brent led her deeper into the open-plan office area. 'You'll want to move out here to live, I assume, rather than try to commute? From the address on your résumé, I gather you lived in central Sydney while you attended your course.' He paused before the first desk, introduced Fiona and waited while she exchanged a few words with another employee.

As they moved on again, Fiona nodded. 'That flat-share in the heart of the city was convenient while I attended the graphic design centre. But I'd prefer to live close to my work here.' She liked the idea of migrating to this outer suburb. It would be an adventure.

It would bring her closer to several of her friends who came from out this way, too. And of course it would take her further from her family, who were all based on Sydney's North Shore, but she couldn't do anything about that.

The thought gave her a hint of something rather close to guilty relief. 'I'll start searching for a place immediately. Hopefully there'll be something available through a local real estate agent, or a listing in a shop window—'

‘We’ll discuss that once you’ve met everyone.’ Brent guided her through the room, pausing at this desk and that desk to present her to his other employees.

She did her best to remember names and position titles as each person was introduced.

Finally Brent led her to the kitchenette at the rear of the open-plan area. Two men stood almost shoulder to shoulder there. The youngest wore a business suit, the older outdoor clothes. They both watched Fiona and Brent’s progress across the room.

‘Fiona, meet Linc and Alex MacKay, my brothers.’ Brent gestured to each of the men in turn. ‘Boys, I’d like you to meet Fiona Donner, the company’s new graphic artist as of about—’ he glanced at the watch on his wrist ‘—ten minutes ago.’

The way he addressed the men held pride and deep affection. She hadn’t known he had brothers, but then her research for this job application had yielded very little of a personal nature about Brent MacKay.

‘I’m pleased to meet you.’ Linc shook Fiona’s hand and let go. ‘I run the chain of nurseries that, among other things, acts as Brent’s key supplier.’

Linc was a tall man with dark hair, grey eyes and the same lean build as Brent.

No. Not the same build. He was deeper through the chest than Brent, thicker set all over. The impression of a shared leanness actually came from something in his expression, in a measure of guardedness in the backs of his eyes that Brent had also revealed.

Fiona murmured a greeting. ‘I’m having trouble guessing who’s the eldest. You seem very close in age.’ As she said so, the lack of true genetic similarities between the men occurred to her.

‘Brent’s the eldest. Most people don’t pick up on how close we are in age...’ Linc gave her a slightly surprised look as he trailed off.

Before she could think about that, the youngest brother extended his hand.

‘I’m Alex. I run an export business near here, but I’m also a shareholder in Brent’s company. I hope you enjoy working here.’

‘I can’t wait to start.’ Fiona shook the young man’s hand and released it. The third brother was substantially younger than Linc or Brent. Early twenties, she’d have guessed, though that was young to be running a business.

Blue-eyed like Fiona herself, Alex had a square-cut jaw, broad forehead and mid-brown hair and looked nothing like either of his brothers. He also had a glint in his eyes that probably had women chasing after him.

Fiona wanted to know the nature of this family, how they all fitted together.

As for eyes, and glints therein, she only had eyes for her employer.

Well, she meant she was only *focused* on him. She was focused on her new job! She didn’t have ‘eyes’ for men generally, anyway. Her role was that of ‘everybody’s friend’ and she liked that just fine. It was much less stressful than getting into a relationship that would only end up disappointing her. Or, worse, disappointing the man involved. Been there, not interested in repeating that. It was enough having her mother’s criticism of all the faults in her ability to appeal.

Fiona turned to Linc. ‘Maybe I could take photos at one of the nurseries some time soon. I’d love to get some background material to use when I start working with my computer designs for Brent.’

Linc’s shrewd gaze examined her as he inclined his head. ‘That can be arranged for you.’

‘When there’s time for us both to go,’ Brent inserted, and fell abruptly quiet. His head twitched to the right and a frown swept over his brow.

Linc’s eyebrows lifted and Alex stared at his older brother before both he and Linc looked quickly elsewhere.

Brent’s entire body seemed to freeze then.

Uncertain of what she was sensing in him, Fiona said slowly, ‘I don’t need to visit the nursery if that’s not convenient. It was just a thought.’

‘It’s not a problem.’ Brent pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets. ‘I was just—’

‘Distracted,’ Alex put in.

‘He lost his concentration,’ Linc said at the same time, and clamped his lips together.

‘I was just *thinking*,’ Brent stated, and frowned again. ‘I’ll make a day for us to visit Linc’s nursery, Fiona.’ Brent seemed to make a conscious effort to move on from whatever that reaction had been. ‘I’ll make sure you get to do that. It’s a good idea for you to take those photos, and I visit the nurseries regularly anyway to inspect the stock, keep the inventory fresh in my mind and see what new things Linc’s managed to find for me. It’ll be convenient for us to go together, that’s all.’

‘Well, thank you. I’ll look forward to that when it happens.’ Fiona nodded and relaxed a little. She hadn’t committed a faux pax...

Which meant Brent’s reaction had been—?

Something she wasn’t going to be able to figure out right now.

So leave it alone, Fiona. You don’t have to understand everything about him.

In truth, she tended to want to delve too deeply into what made people tick. Well, her mother said so anyway.

A short silence fell before Linc cleared his throat and addressed his brother. ‘Have you discussed accommodation options with Fiona yet?’

‘That was next on my list.’ Brent turned to her. ‘You’re welcome to do whatever you like about your living arrangements, but Linc owns an investment property you might be interested in renting. It’s a one bedroom flat about a ten minute drive from here. The complex it’s in has courtyard parking for a car, if you own one.’

‘Are you serious? I thought I’d be looking all weekend and maybe end up staying in a pub or hostel before I managed to pin something down.’ Fiona tried to stifle her grin, and failed.

A smile lurked in the backs of Brent’s eyes in response, a beautiful, lovely smile. The man was lethal, and she didn’t understand the connection she felt towards him.

Fiona drew a steadying breath and turned to Linc. ‘How much are you asking for the flat per month? I’ll have to stick to a budget.’

Linc named the figure.

‘I’ll be able to afford that rent.’ That was a relief, and she simply needed to concentrate on the tasks and necessities at hand. Not on eyes that smiled at her through shields that made her think of her own life, its hurts and triumphs, and what Brent’s might have been and might be now. ‘When can I sign a lease agreement? I don’t need to see the place first. If you recommend it, that’s all I need to know. I don’t want to miss out on the opportunity to pin this down, if that’s at all possible.’

She smoothed her hands over her thighs and told herself to stop babbling.

Though Brent had remained silent during this interchange, his gaze followed the movement and she thought she heard him make a soft sound in the back of his throat before he glanced away.

If so, it was probably because she had drawn his attention to just how non-slim those thighs were.

On this lowering thought Fiona suppressed a sigh. Her body was what it was. There was no changing her build, or her height, or what she preferred to refer to as her curviness but her mother said was the result of far too much self-indulgence and couldn’t Fiona try to eat less?

She didn’t overeat. Her tiny mother couldn’t see that, though. To Eloise Donner, Fiona was the stork among the pigeons and someone needed to shrink her somehow. Preferably while shrinking her into a far more practical mould at the same time.

And Brent had simply followed her movement with his gaze. It was completely meaningless. It wasn’t as though her employer would be noticing her in that respect.

Which was a good thing, she reminded herself.

Linc drew a folded document and a set of keys from his back pocket and handed both to her. ‘Once you’ve read the lease, you can go ahead and sign it and leave it with Jaimie. She’ll pass it on

to me the next time I'm here. Brent will explain where the place is and about getting you moved in, if you need help with that.'

The two brothers excused themselves and left then, and Fiona curled her fingers around the keys and lease and turned to her employer. 'That was generous of you and your brother. Thank you.'

'It was no trouble. Linc deals in a lot of that kind of property investment.' Brent watched his brothers exit the room and the building before he allowed his gaze to return to his new employee. He hadn't meant to follow the slide of Fiona's hands down her thighs moments ago.

He hadn't meant to notice her at all, but he had. She was a striking woman. Tall, beautifully built and curvy in all the right places. A woman who wouldn't blow away in a strong breeze, who a man could hold in his arms without fear of crushing her.

She was also femininity through and through. From the dark blonde hair tied back from her face in a high ponytail to the robin's egg blue eyes and fine arched brows, the straight nose and generous mouth, she looked softer than a flower, and equally as sweet.

The thoughts surprised him. Not the appreciation of her beauty. How could any man fail to notice that? But the intimacy of where his thoughts had taken him—thoughts of how it would be to hold her, of wanting to protect her from harm. Brent's life had been all about protecting himself, his brothers. His father had put him in a place where he'd had no choice but to be strong. To hide his flaws from the world so they wouldn't judge him as Charles had done. Brent hadn't reached out to a woman for the kind of intimacy that would result in wanting to protect her as well as protect his own interests in a long time. Actually...he never had.

He never would do that. His limits would forever prevent that. And Fiona looked the kind of woman who would deserve exactly that kind of...care.

Which simply reminded him that he needed to appreciate her attractiveness from the distance of an unconnected observer.

Right. And he did. He'd simply become distracted for a moment. The same thing applied to the head twitch he'd experienced earlier. It wouldn't happen again in front of her. He'd make sure of that as he did in all other circumstances.

Brent nodded in a completely concise, controlled manner as he came to this conclusion. If he felt somewhat relieved to have arrived back at a more known, comfortable place in his thinking, he told himself this was a good thing, anyway. 'Let's take you to Jaimie so you can sign your employment agreement and leave the lease with her.'

Once Fiona had done that, Brent gestured to his office area. 'Would you like to hear about some of the projects I've got going? Some preliminary information to give you an idea of what's in store for you?'

'Oh, yes, please. That will give me a chance to think over the weekend before I start work officially on Monday.' Fiona half-reached one hand towards him, dropped it self-consciously to her side, and her face pinked slightly.

His gaze locked onto that blossom of colour and his breath caught...

He pushed the door of his office open and stepped through to open the adjoining door. 'You'll be working in here. It's a decent-sized room. I hope it'll suit your needs.'

His voice was deep. Too deep. He cleared his throat.

Fiona's gaze tracked around the long room, dodged his. 'I'm sure it will. It's a generous working space. There's good light for my easel work, and plenty of desk space for computer monitors.'

'I imagine there'll be times when you'll need all of that space.'

'Is it okay to dress casually for when I'm painting? I realise there'll be times when I need to look smart. Client discussions...' A little ridge formed between her brows. 'Perhaps I should just dress smart all the time, and wear a smock or something when I paint. I'm inclined to be a bit messy during that process, but I could try to change that.'

‘There’s a dressing room. I keep clothes here. You can do the same. Messy is fine, anyway.’ The thought of her using his changing room, shedding clothes and putting on new ones, wasn’t a place he needed to go.

So get on with it, MacKay. ‘On Monday we’ll be helping to finish up a landscaping project, and I’ll want you to take photos and think about a painting for the clients. They’re an elderly couple, very agreeable. They’ll be happy with whatever you put together. The photos will go into a Progress Album for the clients and our stock here for showing clients how we work. Nothing for newspapers or magazines, though. I accept the occasional interview to keep the media off my back but I’m selective, so if you’re ever approached I expect you to shoot the enquiry straight to me.’

‘I will do that.’ Her expression showed she didn’t understand the ‘why’ of it, but her acceptance was enough. ‘And I can certainly take the photos and also use them to help me create an appropriate painting for the clients.’

Fiona gave him a pleasant but firm look. ‘It’s not ideal to come in partway through and need to produce a painting in that way, but I’m sure that won’t happen in the future.’

Brent liked a woman—correction, a *person*—with enough spunk to say what they wanted.

From the distance of an observer. You like it from that distance. ‘Don’t worry. You’ll be included in future planning. In fact, I have a project that’s been driving me mad for the last three weeks. The client won’t settle on a design. I’m hoping if I pull you in on that one it might get me the breakthrough I need.’

‘Okay, well, that’s good then, and I’ll be happy to try to help with your project.’ Her expression held the slightest sheepish edge before she squared her shoulders and seemed to decide it was best she’d been clear about her expectations.

Brent went on to explain the problems with the project he’d mentioned, and to discuss some other issues. Work was easy. He always felt at home with his landscape projects.

An hour later Fiona stood at the door of his office once more, bag in hand, and thanked him for his time. ‘I can’t wait to start work Monday. I’ll have some photographic equipment to bring out to the landscaping site, if that’s okay.’

‘That’s fine. Anything you bring will be safe there, though we should get your equipment added to the business’s insurance cover.’

‘Shall I phone the details in later today? Model numbers and so on?’

‘Do that. You can leave them with Elizabeth, my receptionist.’ With this issue resolved, Brent went on, ‘If you need help to move into your flat this weekend—’

Fiona smiled her thanks, but shook her head. ‘I can get Tommy to use his delivery truck to help me shift the larger items. My friends all knew I was coming for this interview, so they’ve been on standby, half-expecting this.’

So ‘Tommy’ was simply one of those ‘friends’? Brent couldn’t explain why he suddenly felt... lighter than he had a few seconds ago. ‘Okay, then I guess I should let you go so you can start making arrangements.’

Fiona made a little bouncing motion on the balls of her feet. ‘A new home, a new job and a new part of the city to live in. I can’t wait to take it all on. Thank you again, Mr MacKay—*Brent*—for this chance.’

‘You’re more than welcome.’ Brent said his goodbyes and then watched her leave the building, hips swaying with each step she took.

And then he immersed himself in landscape plans, where he could line up his ideas in neat rows and spend as long as he needed on each aspect of his work. His head twitched sharply to the right, but he was by himself now. He didn’t worry about trying to conceal the action.

At least the condition he lived with was good for helping him to focus on his work, and he had every right to keep knowledge of it from the world at large. It was in his best interests to do so. His father’s past behaviour had made that abundantly clear.

Brent dug into his plans and put thoughts of Fiona Donner's lovely smile—of *his new employee's smile*—right out of his mind...

Chapter Two

‘A DOZEN shrubs for you, Russ.’ A worker placed the shrubs on the ground and moved away to collect another load.

It was Monday afternoon, towards the end of Fiona’s first day at the new job. Spending it out of doors helping to complete an actual work project as well as gather photographic resources for her painting and for the company to use to showcase its services had been a thrill. She smiled to herself as words continued to flow around her.

‘Hey, Phil. Can I use that mattock for the next ten minutes?’

‘Great job with the bougainvillea, Chelsea.’ This was Brent’s voice as he turned his head to check on one of the more junior members of the ground team. ‘Keep up the good work.’

The sun was shining and the ten-acre work site on the edge of a newish Sydney suburb was abuzz with activity. Brent was motivated and positive and determined, and the ground workers responded to his authority and encouragement by giving their absolute best. He was at home in this, and Fiona... found that knowledge of him perhaps a little too appealing.

‘We’re going to finish this job on time.’ The site boss, a man in his mid-thirties with a shock of carrot hair squashed under a baseball cap, paused beside Fiona to murmur the words. ‘I knew we would. The company hasn’t missed a deadline yet, even when things have gone pear-shaped, as they did with this project when some of the goods we ordered didn’t arrive three days ago.

‘That never would have happened with Linc’s nursery supplies. I’m guessing in future Brent will refuse to buy from anywhere else, even if it means asking his brother to import or source what it is that he needs.’

Brent had pulled in about a dozen extra workers from other job sites to work on this project. Fiona had done her share of carrying and carting and planting and fetching throughout the day, too. She was ‘grubby’, as Brent had predicted would happen. Mostly around the knees and seat of her jeans, and it was all good honest dirt. She’d learned so much about his process by getting her hands into it, and she’d had a ball getting dirty at the same time! ‘There doesn’t seem to be a lot left to do now.’

‘I’d say another half hour of work for everyone, if that.’ The boss moved on, and Fiona planted the last shrub in her allotment and dusted herself off.

She watched as Brent lifted a plant from a wheelbarrow and placed it in a prepared hole a few metres away with an efficient movement. In the early days of his business he had probably spent a lot of his time on this kind of thing.

He worked with a focused, economical efficiency. Her camera lens had tracked that focus again and again throughout the day. She itched to photograph him again now.

For their office files, Fiona justified. She glanced guiltily at the other nearby workers, but none of them seemed to be taking any particular notice of who or what she was studying.

Right now she needed to study landscape photo angles. She gathered her equipment. There should be a nice sunset soon, if she could find the right place on the property to photograph it. She fished her iPod out of her jeans pocket, placed the earphones in her ears and let the music and the lighting and the mood absorb her.

She truly was all about the work.

She was!

Brent found Fiona in a far corner of the property site, camera carefully placed on a tripod. She was waiting for something, he wasn’t sure what. And, while she waited, her body moved unconsciously to music only she could hear.

In her jeans and fitted red shirt, with dirt smears on her legs and other places, and her hair ruffled and half-falling from her ponytail, she looked...lived-in, girl-next-door.

He almost managed to convince himself she looked quite ordinary, in fact, until she made a small sound in the back of her throat, leaned in and took several photos before she straightened with a satisfied sigh, pulled the earphones from her ears and began to dismantle her equipment.

Because the truth was Fiona dressed in this way was anything but ordinary, and with the flush of achievement on her face she was anything but comfortable or girl-next-door.

Brent drew a deep breath and stepped forward. 'Finished? Did you get the shots you wanted?'

'Oh!' Her hand rose to splay over her chest. 'I didn't realise you were there. I was photographing the sunset. I've taken around two hundred photos today. Not all of them will be used, of course, but I think I've gained a good overview of what a team of people can achieve on a site in a single session. But please tell me I wasn't muttering or singing while I worked.'

'You were soundless, I promise. I didn't want to disturb your concentration so I waited, that was all.' Their fingers brushed as he reached to take the tripod from her.

Just that, and Brent's focus slipped. He froze on that slip. Came to a complete stop with his fingers closed over Fiona's. Only a beat of time passed before he moved his hand, but that one beat was a beat out of his control and that concerned him.

That Fiona now studied him with her head tipped to the side and curiosity stamped on her face bothered him more. There were certain things about him that he kept to himself. He'd learned from a master instructor that doing that was necessary.

Most of all it bothered him that this one woman set off in him things to do with his condition that very few other people could make happen, no matter how much they impacted on him. His need to protect his privacy about that rose even in the face of his awareness of her. It wasn't a comfortable combination.

'I think I got a couple of great shots just now.' She glanced up into the branches of the lemon-scented gum tree that towered over them. 'Ones with the light spearing down creating a dappled effect. I hope to base my painting on that concept.'

'That's good.' His thumb rubbed over and over against a ridged edge on the tripod. Brent forced the movement to a stop. 'I'm glad you got the material you wanted.'

'It only took a little while, a bit of waiting for that perfect moment.' Fiona seemed about to ask him something.

Brent braced, but her glance shifted around the vacant lot, past him, swung left and right and finally moved to the outside perimeter where all the work vehicles had been parked.

'I guess maybe I took longer than I noticed. The work's finished.' She seemed chagrined. 'They've all left. I was so focused on what I was doing that I didn't notice. How long did I keep you waiting?'

'Not long, and I didn't mind waiting.' He growled it in a tone that quite likely made her believe the opposite. The truth was, he'd got value out of watching her work. 'If you're done here, we can leave now.'

'Yes. I'm done. Thanks.' She hustled towards his utility truck.

Brent joined her, opened the passenger door for her and climbed in behind the wheel. 'The office will be closed by the time we get back, but we'll get anything from inside that you need. Then, if you're not too tired, I'd like you to join Linc and Alex and me for dinner so they can hear your impressions of your first day on the job.'

They'd planned for this—to get Fiona's impressions without giving her too long to think first and maybe fall back on more PC answers rather than simply giving her true impressions.

And it would be fine. Taking her to his brothers would be exactly what he needed to bring this—whatever it was that he experienced when he was near her—back into perspective.

It had probably just been too long since he'd spent time with a woman. There were always offers. They never meant anything more than what they were, and maybe he was starting to feel a little jaded about that.

Brent pushed the thought aside, because there was nothing else for him. And he wasn't jaded, anyway. 'Linc and Alex and I all hold shares in each others' companies. So you'll be reporting to all of us.'

'I'd be happy to discuss the day with all of you. Actually, I'd like a chance to bat my reactions around with you, particularly.' Fiona glanced down at her jeans. 'I'm grubby, though.'

Brent drove into the traffic. 'That won't matter. We'll be eating at home, and Linc and Alex know we'll be coming straight from the site.'

'Then I'm happy to come to dinner and "report in".' Fiona smiled. 'Thanks.'

And Fiona was. Happy. Cheerful. Chatting about the other workers and Brent's work projects generally as they made their way back to their suburb, where she collected her car from all day parking and followed him to his warehouse home.

'It's this way.' Brent waited while Fiona exited her car in the large ground floor parking area and led her into the foyer of the converted warehouse building he and his brothers shared. It felt good to bring her into his home, and that was one more reaction he didn't want to have to deal with.

Fiona stopped in the centre of the polished floor and her glance darted this way and that. 'Oh. How gorgeous. And it's so big and very private. I never imagined from the outside...'

'That was what we hoped when we bought the place and converted it. An illusion of it being nothing special, but inside there's space and...we know we're not on display.' He cleared his throat. 'We like it, anyway.'

Brent laid his hand on the curved handcrafted staircase that led to the upper level, and watched her look her fill in this place where he felt...comfortable, where he owned his space.

One end of the foyer held a leather sofa and chairs. The art on the walls was bold and bright—blues and whites, yellows and greens and pinks on canvases large enough not to get lost on the huge walls.

Fiona's gaze settled on those artworks for a long moment. Finally she said, 'The colours and designs of those are fabulous. I don't think I know the artist...'

'Alex'll be pleased you like his work.' Brent was pleased. And proud. And way too conscious of her reactions altogether. 'Let's go find my brothers.' He led the way up the staircase. 'We all have separate homes within the warehouse. For tonight, we're meeting in the courtyard area upstairs.'

'I think it's wonderful that you're all so close.' Her tone held a wistful edge she didn't quite manage to conceal.

Yet she had a family, had referred to parents and sisters on the drive to the site this morning, and obviously, if they'd raised someone like Fiona, her parents must be special people.

Before Brent could consider that further, his guest made a beeline for the youngest of his brothers. 'Alex. Your paintings are beautiful—'

'Thanks.' Alex turned from the barbecue with a modest smile and a wry twist of his mouth. 'Brent brought your portfolio home over the weekend to show us. Your work is far better.'

'Different,' Fiona corrected. 'Not necessarily better.'

Linc placed a bowl of salad on the long table. 'Hiring a graphic designer was a big step for our brother. He's accustomed to working his designs through on his own, but he felt the company was ready for it, that it would be a good thing.'

'I hope it will prove to be.' Fiona's gaze encompassed all of them.

Brent glanced her way. 'I've seen enough of Fiona's work, and now seen her in action, to have no doubt I've made the right choice.'

At least she had managed that while she'd fought her reactions to this talented and complex man. And surely, in a day or two, when she'd settled into the job and become used to her employer, she would move past this consciousness of him.

‘I appreciate your faith in me, Brent.’ In truth it touched a deep place in Fiona’s heart that had been chilled the day she’d told her family she’d decided to follow her dream career, rather than the logical, safe one they’d steered her into when she’d first left high school at eighteen.

They’d been equally unenthusiastic when she’d phoned to say she’d landed this job and moved out here. She might as well have said she’d got a good bargain on bread this week at the supermarket for all the level of excitement or support she’d received in response.

So Brent’s attitude was a boost, even if her reaction to it didn’t exactly help her to feel blasé towards him.

‘It’s easy to have that faith. You’re talented, enthusiastic.’ Brent’s gaze lingered on her for a long moment before he gave a deliberately relaxed grin that soon became a natural one. ‘The company can only benefit from your input.’

‘Thank you.’ For the generosity of his words and the sincerity in his eyes as he delivered them.

He was a complex man—there was so much beneath the surface. She’d sensed that from the first moment of meeting him. Now, she simply wanted to know him all the more.

And, because Fiona felt a little emotional about that, and about his praise, she quickly cleared her throat and smiled. ‘It means a lot to work for someone who has such faith in me and who I can have total faith in as well.’

Fiona drew a deep breath and glanced at the feast spread on the table. ‘The food smells wonderful. I confess I’m a little hungry!’

They all took their seats at a picnic style table with bench seating. Linc and Alex sat on one side. Fiona ended up seated beside her boss on the other.

Focus on the meal, Fiona. On being an appropriate guest, or talking about work.

There were vegetable kebabs made of cherry tomatoes, courgette, onion slices and button mushrooms marinated in a wonderful herbed Italian dressing and cooked to perfection. Steak and sausages—Fiona left those to the men. Whole potatoes cooked in foil and served with sour cream and fresh chopped chives. And delightful seasoned ground beef patties.

‘Which of you is the chef?’ The outdoor area was set up with potted small trees and plants everywhere. It was enclosed, no view, and the overall feeling was one of security and...intimacy.

In a purely familial context!

‘I did the easy stuff. Rosa did the kebabs.’ Alex’s glance dipped to his plate. ‘Rosa’s our cleaner, mostly, but she does other things for us as well.’ He hesitated and his brows drew together as he considered the matter. ‘Sort of like a mother would or something.’

A mother these men didn’t have? Alex’s words made it sound as though they hadn’t ever known that.

Fiona’s thoughts returned to how dissimilar the men were. She shifted her gaze to Brent’s face but his eyes were shielded with those long silky lashes again.

Perhaps they’d all had different mothers? Or fathers? Or some of both? Perhaps family life had been a little complicated for them? Well, she knew all about that from her own family. Though she was the only one who would say that situation was complex. Her parents and sisters would say it would all be just fine if Fiona would simply make an effort to fit in better. ‘My compliments to Rosa, then.’

‘So tell us your impressions from today.’ Linc carved another piece of meat from his steak as he waited for her response.

‘I have some photos now that I believe will be good for general marketing purposes.’ She explained the thoughts behind those concepts, and was pleased when Brent started to nod and approval showed clearly on his chiselled face.

‘I also have photos for the idea I want to use for a painting for the clients.’ It was a great idea to add a painting into each landscape project, and Fiona was keen to get started on this one. ‘If the clients hang the painting in their home and talk to their visitors about the landscaping work Brent’s done

for them, that can only be good for business. Working with my hands, helping to do actual planting, really helped me to get a feel for what Brent's work is all about, too. I...valued that.'

She felt as though she'd been given an insight into him. Fiona glanced his way and for a brief moment their gazes met and she wondered if he sensed that connection in the same way she did.

Seconds later he blinked and looked away and the moment was gone.

'I'd like you to create a better business logo for us, too.' Was Brent's voice a little deeper than usual as he said this? 'I think we're due for a change there. I've never been entirely happy with the logo we have. I want something timeless, with a style that won't date, but what we have now feels a bit too pedestrian.'

'I'm sure I can come up with some viable possibilities. You might want something with just a few bold lines. It's surprising how effective that can be.'

Brent's gaze narrowed as he considered the idea. 'Yes. I can see that.' Again, that smile kicked up one side of his mouth. 'I like the way you think.'

'Thank you.'

They ate and they talked and Fiona lost her over-consciousness eventually and relaxed and, before she knew it, they were batting ideas back and forth. So fast, in fact, that she was almost breathless with it.

The scent of barbecued meat and vinaigrette dressing and city in the evening filled the air around them and she leaned close to her employer and he leaned in close to her, two heads bent together in an almost conspiratorial huddle, until she realised just how close they were and her consciousness of him sharpened again.

As they fell silent and his gaze tracked over her and came back to rest on her eyes, a shiver similar to that very first one she'd felt tickled over her senses. There was warmth in his expression, and frank male interest...

Before he shut the latter down.

It stung. More than Fiona wanted to admit because she'd had this experience enough times in her life. She'd had it the one time she'd trusted a man enough to get truly close to him. That had been years ago now, but it had left its mark, had made her wary, and that wariness had proved accurate over the years.

And now her employer was doing the same thing.

But he *was* only her employer and that was what she needed to remember.

'I'm looking forward to tapping into your vision.' That was what they needed to talk about, to focus on. She swallowed. 'For your work. Tapping into it and learning how to present it in its best light for each project. The emotion you convey...'

His expression became a mask and the fingers of his right hand drummed out a staccato rhythm on the table.

Moments later that rhythm stopped.

All of Brent stopped, frozen in time for a long moment as his gaze searched hers.

Finally he said, 'All I do is make the best I can out of each project I take on. That's just...work. Any emotion you put into it will be your own.'

His belief in this was in his eyes, in the closed conviction on his face. Belief and self-protectiveness.

Why wouldn't he acknowledge that he poured himself into his work? It was so obvious to her.

She'd examined a lot of his projects over the past two years. Landscape design had fascinated her from the start of her course, and *his* work had held the most appeal to her purely *because* of what she sensed in it.

Strength and conviction, imagination and reaching out and...protecting himself. Oh, she had responded most of all to that. It was one of the things that drew her to him, even when she knew she

shouldn't and mustn't allow herself to be drawn. She'd only get hurt and, anyway, he was the boss, out of her reach and her league!

'I want to draw out what you've seen, your vision for each project.' Fiona spoke carefully, took the diplomatic route in her reply. 'But I'm certainly happy to add my own layering to that.'

'That's the best way to look at it.' Brent seemed satisfied with this and the conversation moved on then, expanded to include all three brothers again.

After a time, Alex got to his feet. 'I have phone calls to make to one of the company's overseas contacts before it gets too much later. If you'll excuse me?'

Linc stood beside Alex and a frown creased his brows. 'I might head out to Cecilia's. I wasn't really satisfied with the discussion we had earlier today on the phone.'

Fiona watched the brothers disappear and turned to Brent with the quirk of one eyebrow. She asked lightly, 'Woman trouble for your brother?'

Brent stood and began to gather dishes and utensils together. 'Cecilia manages Linc's largest plant nursery. Who knows what the issue is this time? They're two strong personalities. They clash sometimes.'

'Ah.' Fiona got to her feet and helped gather the remainder of the dishes. 'Where are we headed with these?'

'My place.' Brent led the way out of the courtyard area and along a hallway until they came to a recessed door. 'It can all go in the dishwasher.'

'And then I'd better leave.' Fiona held the plates carefully and waited as he opened the door to his home within the warehouse building. 'I enjoyed the meal and our talk. I hope your brothers were happy with my first day reactions.'

She'd all but forgotten the presence of the others at times as she'd focused her attention on her boss. Fiona knew she had to do better than *that!*

'I think we were all more than satisfied. Kitchen's this way.' Brent strode at a brisk pace past a large living area and into a slate and white kitchen.

Was it the rich aroma of percolated coffee that drew him along so fast? She didn't get the chance to more than half-glance around her.

Fiona stopped at the edge of the kitchen and then she did let her gaze take in the sight of three different coffee machines on the counter, and a myriad of other gadgets beside them.

Her lips twitched. 'I take it you *really* like coffee. And gadgetry.'

'Different blends for different times of the day. The coffee is on a timer, so I can make sure it's ready for me when I want it. My evening dose is decaf.' A slight smile creased his lips. Then his expression sobered as he examined the rest of the gadgets. 'The way they all work interests me. I probably have bought more things than I really need.'

As though he'd said too much, he drew two coffee mugs from an overhead cupboard and raised them in question.

'Yes, please.' If it was decaf, it wouldn't hurt to have it. She was intrigued by this small revelation into his personality, too. She would have liked to pursue the topic, maybe tease him a little about having an obsession about the way things worked.

A small memory flitted through her head as she thought this, of someone with similarities to her employer, but she lost it before it could fully form. 'The coffee smells far too good to be caffeine-free, you know.'

'It's an imported blend. A bit self-indulgent of me all up, I suppose. Overall, my curiosity hasn't always been welcomed, but I tend to indulge it nowadays, in my own setting, at least.' He cut off the words and then seemed to relax out of whatever place they had taken him. He poured the rich blend and passed her one of the cups.

'You're hardly self-indulgent, and I think curiosity is a good thing. How else do we learn?' The words emerged without her conscious volition. But he'd earned the money he had. If he wanted to

import coffee and invest in gadgets he didn't necessarily use, why shouldn't he? Those things seemed very *small* indulgences and if he enjoyed exploring them at the same time... 'I mean great coffee is worth investing in.'

She put the mug to her lips and sipped, and the rich thick liquid slid down her throat so smoothly that she had to close her eyes and let a small sigh of satisfaction escape. 'Oh, that is *good*. I think for the pleasure of that taste alone, all your curiosity has been well worth it in this case.'

'You have a unique way of looking at things. Calling it that...' Brent fell silent.

'What else would it be?' She opened her eyes and caught his gaze on her. Unshielded in that first instance, and somehow almost vulnerable.

And... edged with a consciousness of her that brushed across her senses like a touch.

This time he didn't shut it down. Oh, he looked away, but the awareness was still etched on his face when he did that.

It echoed inside her, too. Fiona dropped her gaze to her cup again while her heart inexplicably pounded. It was a foolish reaction. One that she needed to quash because, even if he did find her attractive right now, that could change. In any case, he was her boss and it would be really far less than sensible for her to allow feelings towards him or to start believing he had any towards her.

Maybe he simply found her opinions interesting and she was imagining anything else.

They sipped their coffee standing right there, leaning against the kitchen counter. When the silence stretched, Fiona turned her gaze to Brent's living room, to squashy chocolate leather sofas and chairs and long rows of magazines lined up like soldiers across a set of three coffee tables.

There were neat stacks of library books set exactly so, and other books and pieces of paper arranged carefully all through the area and beside armchairs positioned around the room.

'I see you like to bring your work home, and you're very orderly.' Was this why he had rushed her past the area? Because there was something quite *different* about the way he'd laid out all that work?

His office space was similarly regimented, and it *was* different.

He rubbed his hand over the back of his head. 'I sometimes have to work on projects until they're finished, whether that means bringing things home or not. Once I get started, I get very focused and I can't stop. I've always been that way. Some people... find that objectionable but it's how I am. Core me. It's not something that's going to change.'

'Nor should it.' If he changed, he might lose some of the intensity that made his work what it was. Why on earth would he even consider such a possibility—? 'I imagine there'll be times when I'll do the same. Get deeply involved in the work, I mean.'

He shifted on his feet, passed his empty coffee cup from hand to hand.

'It's time I went.' One part of her didn't want to leave, wanted to stay in his company longer.

To talk about work issues, she told herself. Instead, she put her empty cup down on the counter top and made her way towards the front door.

'I enjoyed our talk this evening.' Brent paced beside her. His words brought them back to business, and of course that was a good thing.

As she approached the door she noticed the photomontage on the wall. It was positioned so it would be the last thing he looked at as he left his home each day.

Photos of him and his brothers.

Fiona looked, and looked again. And the story embedded in those images hit her so deeply her breath stalled in her throat and for a long moment she couldn't speak. She simply stood there, unable to shift her gaze.

When she finally found her voice it wasn't to state the obvious. Not, *You were all institutionalised*. Or, *There are no parents, are there?* At least not for a very long time. Or, *You're not biologically related*.

But, oh, they had created themselves into a family, first in that cold building in the background of several of the pictures, and later as they'd found their freedom and relocated here.

They were three men who'd *become* men before their time, and had stood up for each other. It was all there, captured in the stark stares and guarded expressions of young boys and the determination of young men, and the laughter and wry smiles and inner shields of the men they were now.

How had they all ended up alone? Parentless? In Brent's case, extremely private, and she imagined the others had their issues with privacy, too. Just look at where they all lived.

His brothers must have changed their names through legal channels, or perhaps they'd all chosen the last name MacKay and adopted it at some point? 'I thought from the beginning that you and your brothers were close. I hadn't realised all the reasons why.'

Fiona didn't have that closeness in her own family. It was a knowledge she lived with and tried not to think about. Right now it felt very blatant to her. Blatant and sad, and yet Brent and his brothers must have been through so much more. Indeed, the two things were incomparable.

'We're there for each other. The few people who've looked at those photos didn't even realise —' Brent opened the door.

'That you're a chosen family, not a "by birth" one?' They were proof the former could be as strong as any example of the latter.

'Yes. "Chosen" is the right word for it. For us, that's better than where...we came from.' He stepped out into the corridor with her. 'I'll see you back to your car.'

End of discussion, and fair enough. Though she might want to know more, he *was* a private man and this was obviously very private business to him.

They walked in silence. Moments later she stood beside her small car.

'We have a meeting with a client at her home tomorrow.' Brent rubbed his jaw with his hand. 'It's the troublesome client I told you about on Friday.'

Fiona mentally reviewed her wardrobe. 'I'll be ready for it.'

'Perhaps between us we can get her to stop blocking the plans at every turn.' Brent waited while she seated herself, and then he pushed her door closed.

She started the engine and rolled down the window.

He leaned in. 'Drive safely. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Goodnight, Brent.' He'd given her some things to think about. The family he had built and her questions about where he might have come from. His emotional guardedness. That regimented work lined up in his living room and in his office. The privacy he sought in his home and his work.

'Goodnight,' he murmured.

With a final wave and an odd reluctance to leave him, and with myriad questions flitting through her mind and no answers anywhere in sight, Fiona drove away.

Chapter Three

‘MRS FULLER will either have to get on board during this visit, or we cut our losses and dump the project. The work is interchangeable with a dozen other projects that all need my attention. At some point I have to assess what’s going to be best financially for the company overall and, right now, letting her mess us around further isn’t.’ Brent murmured the words as he and Fiona waited in the formal sitting room of the woman’s ritzy Sydney home.

They’d been kept cooling their heels here for twenty minutes now with no sign of their hostess.

‘I agree. This isn’t a smart use of your time. The woman’s behaviour is insulting to you.’ And that insult made Fiona feel...protective towards her boss.

Which was fine, because she was his employee. She had the right to feel that way. Even if she had been somewhat too personally conscious of her boss initially.

The door to the room swished open and a maid entered with a tea tray.

Rose Fuller swept in behind her. ‘Thank you, Lilly. You may pour and leave us.’

Mrs Fuller waved a slender, well-tended hand towards the maid before she turned to greet her guests. ‘Oh, I see you’ve brought an assistant, Mr MacKay?’

A very lowly one, her tone seemed to suggest.

‘Mrs Fuller, meet my graphic designer, Fiona Donner. We were about to leave but, since you’ve managed the appointment belatedly after all, we’ll do what we can in the limited time we have left.’ Brent’s voice held just the right amount of firmness. He got to his feet to shake hands with the woman and stepped back so Fiona could do the same. ‘Fiona, meet Mrs Rose Fuller.’

The familiarity of name and face clicked into place when Fiona received a very practised smile and a rather limp hand to shake, though the woman had looked slightly chagrined by the end of Brent’s speech.

Husband in politics. Big aspirations. Lots of media coverage as they did their best to climb the ranks.

Ah...

‘It’s nice to meet you, Mrs Fuller. I’ve been studying the project plans Brent has drawn up for you.’ Fiona towered over Mrs Fuller by an entire head and shoulders. In the dainty room, with the maid pouring cups of tea into translucent china cups, Fiona had to fight off feeling oversized and, subsequently, unfeminine.

The two assessments did not necessarily have to go together, no matter what her mother may have said to the contrary at various times throughout Fiona’s life. ‘You must be pleased to have Brent on board for your landscaping work. He’s the best in the city.’

‘Well, of course I know Mr MacKay has a decent reputation, though he can be extremely elusive about contact outside of his work channels.’

‘I apologise for turning down the dinner invitation, Mrs Fuller.’ Brent’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. ‘I saw the write-up in all the major papers the next day.’

‘Yes, we made quite a splash.’ Mrs Fuller went on, ‘I’m afraid I just can’t decide on any one of the plans we’ve discussed. My husband is very exacting and everything has to serve our lifestyle and our business interactions perfectly.’ Their hostess gestured for them to take their seats, did so herself and waited while her maid handed out the teacups and left the room.

‘Of course.’ Fiona took a deep breath and turned her attention to the view from the bay windows for a moment.

The house was elevated and the grounds rolled away to a seemingly endless stretch of Sydney coast. The scene from this window once the design work was completed in the grounds below would make an ideal painting for the client. If they could get the woman to start cooperating.

‘Mrs Fuller, you’ve expressed what you want out of this landscaping project. Now it’s time to trust us to provide it for you.’ Brent placed his tea, untouched, onto the small table beside his chair and his fingers curled against his thighs as though he wanted to do something with them but was stopping himself.

Fiona took up the conversation where Brent had left off. ‘The exciting news for you, Mrs Fuller, is that you’ll be one of our first clients to have the benefit of an original artwork gifted to you at the completion of your project. I think a two metre by one metre canvas would work here. Of course, if you’re unable to settle on our plans we’ll need to move on. You’ll understand my employer is highly sought after, and my paintings are award-winning works that will always find a welcome home...’

‘That’s a substantial-sized painting. I wasn’t aware—What awards have you won?’ The woman’s eyes gleamed.

And Fiona ran with that. Just a little, and only because she truly did want her boss to get something back for the time he’d invested in this project so far. She named the prestigious awards.

Brent knew of them, of course. They’d been listed in her curriculum vitae and she’d included copies of the works in her portfolio.

‘I recall now.’ Mrs Fuller straightened her perfectly straight back even more. ‘You’re *that* Fiona Donner. One of the paintings was a landscape...’

‘Yes. They both were. It’s a favourite medium of mine.’ Fiona could almost see the cogs turning in their hostess’s brain.

She smiled at the woman. ‘At this stage we are utterly one hundred per cent informed of your needs, Mrs Fuller. You’ve discussed them in detail with my employer, and he has explained everything to me. Now you can let it go, take that burden off shoulders that no doubt have many other responsibilities. Your husband, your social engagements.’

A suppressed hint of sound came from Brent that *could* have been a snort, though a quick glance his way revealed nothing but the blandest of facial expressions.

‘It will be our pleasure to take care of the hard work and stress and decisions for you, Mrs Fuller.’ Brent offered this assurance with calm confidence. ‘All you need to do is enjoy the finished product when your landscape design is in place. Shall we discuss the original plans? I truly still believe they are what’s going to be best to meet your needs.’

They talked. Or, rather, Brent did most of the talking in a firm, determined way. Mrs Fuller occasionally tried to get off track or waffle about some aspect or another she wasn’t quite certain about. Invariably, Brent pulled her back.

Fiona sipped her tea until it was all gone while Mrs Fuller did the same.

Eventually, with all of his case put forward again as succinctly as possible, Brent leaned back in his chair. ‘Well, Mrs Fuller. What do you say? Do we have a plan, or do we leave this here, cut our losses and both move on?’

‘I’d like you to begin work, using the plan you originally produced, and providing a painting.’ Mrs Fuller replaced her teacup in its saucer with a small click. ‘It’s a pity you weren’t able to articulate things so clearly the first time...’

Several beats of silence passed.

Fiona didn’t know she’d moved until she realised she was on her feet.

Brent whispered into her ear, ‘Remember, the client is always right, even when she’s not.’ He’d risen with her and leaned in casually to give her those words while giving Mrs Fuller a businesslike smile.

Fiona bit her lip and bit back the words that wanted to pour out, telling Mrs Fuller exactly how offensive she had just been.

It would be unrealistic, Fiona supposed, to expect a *complete* turnaround from the woman and, in the end, Brent had achieved what he wanted.

So score one for Brent MacKay Landscaping Designs. With brief—and, Fiona thought in the circumstances, very constrained—goodbyes to their hostess, they took their leave.

Brent led the way back to his utility truck, opened her door for Fiona and got behind the wheel himself.

‘You have excellent people-handling skills, Fiona.’ A grin kicked up one corner of his mouth and spread until it reached his eyes. ‘I had a much easier time of it with you there to help me out.’

‘Oh, I didn’t do much. You’re the one who produced the ideas Mrs Fuller should have leapt at in the first place.’ Fiona brushed aside her part in things and did her best to brush aside her annoyance at the same time. ‘In the end it all worked out, I guess, and I think Mrs Fuller is someone who, despite all the difficulties with her up to this point, will talk your work up to the skies once it’s done for her.’

Fiona was doing quite well being upbeat and positive until she added a muttered, ‘I didn’t appreciate her insulting attitude to the importance of your time or the way she insinuated that her mucking around for weeks was somehow your fault!’

Brent laughed. ‘I caught that, and I appreciate you caring.’

He set the vehicle in motion. ‘You *were* very diplomatic with Mrs Fuller. I think you’d even manage to tame the crowd of people just like her who attend the Landscaping Awards nights.’

‘That’s one event you do attend each year.’ The words slipped out before she could consider how telling he might find them. ‘I mean, naturally you attend whatever functions you’re interested in—’

‘And I protect my privacy the rest of the time.’ He made no apology, simply stated it as fact.

‘The Deltran Landscaping Awards are prestigious.’

‘Yes, and I’m nominated for an award this year.’ Brent glanced her way. ‘I’d like you to attend the ceremony with me. It will give me a chance to showcase you as part of the company.’

‘I’d love to go.’ The invitation was unexpected, but her acceptance was instantaneous. Too fast, really.

Because she was a little *too* delighted. Because the thought of an evening out with him appealed a little too much. She wasn’t supposed to be feeling that way about him any more. Not since she’d thought that all through and concluded that she wouldn’t.

‘Then you can consider it a date.’ The moment the words left Brent, a frown creased his brow. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘Consider it a business arrangement, I mean.’

Right.

‘I think it will be a very useful evening for the company.’ And, for that reason, it would be good to attend the evening with her boss.

‘Maybe I should do something similar for this dinner Mum’s roped me into attending with the family.’ There. That was good. A segue into a different topic by commenting on something that bore similarities to the first topic. ‘I could go for “safety in numbers” and take a friend along.’

‘It sounds like an obligatory family event?’ This seemed to surprise him.

No doubt because his interactions with his brothers contained none of the difficulties Fiona encountered at family functions. Her family tended to find her far too different and ‘out of the box’ for their tastes.

Ironical, really, when Brent was the one with the unusual ‘family’ structure.

‘I didn’t mean to make it sound as though family events are a chore for me. Even if they were,’ she added, and couldn’t keep the doubt from her tone, ‘the evening might be fun.’

Extremely doubtful, but in the end you never knew, right?

Brent drew the truck to a stop in its space behind their office building and turned to face her. ‘I’ll trade. You come to the Awards night with me and I’ll be your “extra” for your family gathering. Assuming both these events aren’t scheduled at once. When is your family get-together?’

Not the same night, as it happened.

Fiona was still shocked by his offer, even as she answered him. ‘Th-thank you. I’d love to have you come along.’ She stuttered out the details while Brent climbed out of the truck and led the way into the building and through to his office.

His face was tight. Maybe he regretted making his offer. Should she try to let him off the hook? ‘If you don’t really—’

‘It’ll be a chance for me to meet your family.’ He picked up a handful of mail from his desk and began to sort through it. ‘I’m planning to have you working for me for a long time, so it’s strategic for us to do this.’

‘Oh. Of course. Well, that’s lovely, then.’ And it was. Absolutely. Lovely, and practical and, for goodness’ sake, why would she kid herself it was anything else? She would enjoy Brent’s company as her boss meeting her family for a one-off occasion. That would be no biggie. Not at all.

This might provide a chance for your parents and sisters to see you actually have a serious job working for Brent, not some ‘dangerously unstable artsy thing’ as your mother dismissed it on the phone when you rang to tell her the good news that you’d got the position.

And maybe they’d see that she was making progress in that job. Yes, it was still very early days but Brent seemed pleased enough with her so far. It was about time her family acknowledged that her choices and decisions in life, though perhaps not right for them, were right for her and could even be quite successful.

As for the fact she hadn’t entirely managed to quash her consciousness of Brent as a man... well, she would quash it.

Fiona hustled to the door so they could get on with some work.

‘You’re staring into space, Fiona! Do concentrate.’ Eloise Donner’s voice grated across Brent’s nerve-endings as she addressed her daughter. ‘You’re holding things up.’

‘I’m sure Fiona’s just taking time to think through how she wants to answer the game question.’ Brent battled to keep his tone unremarkable, polite.

He wanted to walk out, taking Fiona with him.

Her mother’s niggling wasn’t overtly vicious. In Brent’s opinion, it was worse than that because it was subtle, ingrained and would be very difficult for Fiona to fight.

Particularly if she didn’t want to get into an argument with her mother and have Eloise tell her she was overstating the problem or making much out of ‘nothing’.

Something told him Eloise Donner would be good at saying things like that.

It was Wednesday night, just over a week after Fiona had first started working for him, and they were at that obligatory family gathering he’d invited himself along to.

As her employer, he had wanted to meet her family. But curiosity had also motivated him.

He had wanted to see what her family were like. Maybe he’d wanted to be around a family that had parents in it, full stop?

You got over missing that a long time ago, MacKay.

His father had made that easy. Just dumped him and walked away...

Well, the answer to what Fiona’s family were like was ‘nothing he’d expected’.

With Fiona being so kind and sweet, he’d thought her family would be the same, people who would have brought out those things in her by their own example. Instead, they were clinical, critical, super-practical and unemotional people who almost seemed to lack...soul?

They certainly *looked* nothing like Fiona. Her mother and sisters were petite and brittle, where Fiona was tall and lush and vibrant. Her father was a ‘medium’ man. Medium height, build, medium brown hair, medium interest in life, it appeared. Fiona’s inner beauty was something that had obviously come from the core of her and flourished *against* the odds of her family influence.

Fiona glanced at the card in her hand. They were playing a board game. A particularly stultifying one, Brent thought. There were eight people at the table. Fiona’s family, Fiona, him, and a couple of extras.

Fiona cast an uncomfortable glance his way before she pinned on that smile she'd worked so hard to hold all night. 'I don't think I know the answer to this one, Mum. I'll have to pass.'

'You must know.' Terrence Donner cast a slightly impatient glance his daughter's way. 'None of the questions in this game are unanswerable.'

'For people who enjoy documentaries and non-fiction reading, perhaps.' Brent's knee brushed against Fiona's as he shifted in his chair.

The jolt to his senses shouldn't have happened. He'd made the choice not to notice Fiona in that way.

So why had he?

You've noticed her from the start. You've simply been avoiding your awareness of her.

Well, then, he could go on avoiding it. He had to go on avoiding it because she set off behaviours in him that he had worked hard for decades to subdue, and he wasn't about to reveal those shortcomings to her. He guarded those things.

'Nope. Sorry, Dad. I truly don't have an answer to put up at this point.' Fiona shrugged her shoulders and indicated they should move on to the next player, but her words were slightly breathless.

Brent reacted to that knowledge more than he wanted to.

The game ended. Brent got to his feet. He might not have all his answers, but he knew he'd had enough of this. And so had Fiona. 'It's been nice to meet you all, but we have a long trip to get home. I think it's time we left.'

When they emerged outside the family's house Brent breathed in the night air and thought of Linc and Alex and how lucky he was to have them. A chosen family, not a blood one. As if that mattered. He wouldn't trade them. The thoughts helped him regain perspective and that put him in a better place to care for Fiona.

As a colleague and someone he'd begun to admire in that capacity...

He helped Fiona into his truck and talked about this and that as they made their way back towards her home.

If he talked, maybe she would forget the unpleasantness of the evening. And maybe *he* would forget how much he wanted to draw her into his arms and kiss her to take her mind off the fact that her family didn't treat her the way they all should. *That* desire was not businesslike.

Words pushed past his lips anyway. 'What's wrong with them? They don't—'

'I'm glad you got to meet my family, that they got to meet my boss and hear a little about the work I'm doing.' Fiona spoke over the top of him. Her words were deliberately upbeat as he turned the truck into an empty parking space in the apartment complex's courtyard. Upbeat but edged with that same breathless quality as earlier, when their knees had brushed beneath the table.

She went on, 'I hope that will have made my goals a little more real to them, a little more understandable.'

A little more *acceptable*? Her family made her feel abnormal when she was a great person in her own right. And that was clearly something that had been going on for a long time. *That* was Brent's assessment and it was one that was...a little too close to the bone for comfort.

Brent turned off the truck's ignition and strode around the front to open her door and help her out. 'You have a good start in a job that's in your chosen field. There are plenty of people out there who never manage to say that much. Your family should be proud of the way you've pursued and begun to obtain your goals.'

'Thank you and...maybe they are.' She spoke in a way that seemed to try to keep the uncertainty out of her tone. And gave a soft smile, no doubt aimed at easing the moment. 'Well, I promise you I will do my utmost to support you in return when it comes time to go to the Awards dinner.'

'Your company on the night will be more than enough.' Brent all but growled the words. 'I'll walk you up.'

See her into her apartment safely and then leave. That was what he needed to do, not linger here wanting nebulous things he didn't want to name but knew would get him into trouble if he went after them. Things that had to do with odd notions, such as comfort and closeness and acceptance.

What was the matter with him tonight? Where were these deep buried thoughts coming from?

When they reached the top of the staircase and made their way to her front door, Fiona put her key in the lock and turned to face him. 'They didn't pry too much into your business, I hope. When I was in the kitchen clearing away dishes.'

He pushed his hands into his pockets, frowned and took them out again. 'They didn't pry too much.'

She seemed to relax a little at that. 'Would you like a coffee or something before you drive on? I've only got instant—'

'No. Thanks. But I'll see you inside.' He had to know she was safely secured behind these walls. That was only common courtesy.

'O-okay.' She pushed the door open and walked inside.

Brent followed, closed it after him and glanced around.

A hand-woven rug brightened the floor. Those splashes of orange and sky-blue and red and green were echoed in throw cushions and the table lamp and an abstract Fiona Donner original on the wall.

She'd made a beautiful home, welcoming and individual and full of her life and vitality and sweetness. Brent wanted to sit on her sofa and just...be there among these things that held meaning for her. As though, if he did that, he'd...belong.

The inexplicable feeling washed through him, so much more than a simple awareness of her, even if that awareness had been causing him enough problems all by itself.

It took him enough by surprise that he hesitated in the centre of her small living room.

He should go.

He wanted to stay.

Since when had his emotions reached for such odd things? He didn't even do that whole 'feelings' arena. Linc and Alex—he loved them, but that was it. His inability to maintain a relationship with his father had taught him what his limits were. The autism—he hadn't been able to get past that. With Alex and Linc it was different, but they'd all come up together, had faced down their demons together.

With Fiona, Brent wasn't even prepared to let himself be attracted to her. He wasn't in the market for a relationship, and Fiona was someone who should be given that if a man was interested in her.

So say goodbye and leave. Do it now before any other temptation comes over you.

'Well, thanks again.'

'I should go.'

They spoke at the same time.

Fiona paused and her lashes fluttered over eyes the colour of the sky in the mountains on a warm summer day. Clear, sweet blue.

So lovely. He could appreciate the pure aesthetics of her, couldn't he? Just appreciate that?

Yes? And where was the distance to go with that kind of remote appreciation?

Brent didn't know the answer and, because he didn't, and because he couldn't quite make his feet take him to the door and through it, he addressed another issue that he did want answers to.

'Your family made tonight all about themselves.' Maybe she didn't want to discuss this, but what if she needed to? What if *he* needed to talk with her about the way her family had treated her?

His fingers reached out and brushed the back of her hand. She had smooth, soft skin like the petals of a rose. Too late not to touch her now. He'd done it. 'Your parents could have tried to be a bit accommodating of your tastes in terms of entertainment.'

‘They think I need to fit in, be more like them, but I’m just...not. I tried that. It didn’t work.’ Her soft sigh was a whisper between them. ‘But I love them, and they don’t mean to make me uncomfortable.’ She gestured with her hand to dismiss the topic. ‘Thank you for your company, anyway.’

‘You’re welcome.’ And he *had* to go.

Brent walked to the door and tugged it open and, with a low, ‘Lock it after me,’ he stepped through. On the other side, he waited until she did as he had asked, and then he walked to his truck and drove away.

What he thought about her family, about all this, didn’t matter in the end. Whatever he now knew of her, whatever empathy he felt for her, he had nothing to offer anyone, and especially not someone like Fiona.

That was what he had to remember.

Chapter Four

BRENT parked his truck and made his way into the club. Fiona had left her flat keys on her work desk, half-hidden away between two separate messy piles of paper. He had discovered this fact as he'd cleared chocolate wrappers from her work area.

Not wrappers from chocolates his graphic designer had eaten from the stash in her bottom desk drawer.

But wrappers from the chocolates *he'd* eaten his way through while he'd examined her design program. He hadn't planned to eat the treats. He'd opened the drawer in search of a notepad and, though he'd told himself not to be tempted, somehow his hand had ended up in the drawer and the rest, as he focused all his attention on the nuts and bolts of her program and then on the work she'd done within it, had been, as they said, 'history'. He'd have to replace the candy stash before she got to work on Monday.

She was on the dance floor. His gaze locked onto her and he quickly forgot his thoughts. Dear God, she looked magnificent. A black skirt that came to just above her knees, high-heeled boots and a scoop-necked cream top that clung to her curves as she moved all combined to make her a highly irresistible package of appeal.

When the number ended, Fiona smiled at her partner and moved off the floor with him. She stood half a head taller than the man. At just about the moment Brent forced himself to acknowledge he felt jealous of that man, they joined a large group of people seated at some tables pulled close together.

The fellow put his arm around one of the women in the group and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

'Brent.' Fiona's exclamation came as he approached the tables. 'What brings you here—?'

'You.' The word was low, husky and far too intimate, reflecting thoughts that poured through him, pushed past his defences.

In her boots with the three-inch heel, she stood almost nose to nose with him. Brent wanted to trace all her dips and curves with his fingertips.

It had to be his autism speaking, a need for a tactile exploration to feed his thought processes the answers they sought.

Sure. You believe that, MacKay.

'Your flat keys. I found them on your desk after you left.' *That* was his reason for finding her here. Only that. 'You might have spares somewhere, but I didn't know.'

'I do have a spare set. *In* my desk at work. Oh, of all the silly things for me to do!' Her gaze searched his face. 'I'm so sorry you had to chase me down. I don't have my mobile turned on, either. It's a waste of time in here because I wouldn't hear it ring. How did you know—?'

'I heard you mention the name of this place when you were on your mobile phone as you were leaving. There's no need to apologise. I couldn't have left you without your keys to get into your home.'

Fiona's mouth softened. 'Thank you.'

Just two simple words, and he leaned towards her. Brent straightened and his head tipped to the right. 'Ah—'

She was returning his glance, was as aware of him in this moment as he was of her, and Brent's need to protect his privacy fought with his need...for her.

But for what? To explore physical attraction with her? Because that was all he could want, wasn't it? For him, intimacy—true intimacy that involved opening up and letting someone else in was...out of the question.

And have you asked yourself why that is, MacKay? Why you're so determined to keep people at arm's length?

Brent knew the answer. He was different, and his 'different' wasn't something people, generally, would be able to accept. So he kept it to himself. He was happier that way. Comfortable.

Safe?

It wasn't about that. And he had every right to value his privacy, for whatever reasons he wanted to. And there was *nothing else* behind the way he felt. Nothing.

Fiona's gaze searched his eyes.

Brent stared into deep blue irises until he felt the stares of some of her friends *on him*.

She looked past him and seemed to force a casual smile. 'Everyone, this is my boss, Brent MacKay.'

A round of introductions followed. It gave Brent a chance to settle his reactions to her.

So why did they continue to simmer beneath the surface of every word, every exchange and glance? Rejecting those reactions should be as easy as deciding they weren't in his best interests or, in fact, in hers. Brent had already decided that, so why...? 'I should get going.'

'Would you like to—?' She stopped, clamped those soft lips together.

Brent drew her keys from his pocket and, when she held out her hand, dropped them into it.

'Thank you.' Her fingers curled over the keys before she snagged her bag from the back of a chair and dropped them into it. 'Please, let me at least...I don't know...Can I buy you a drink or something? I feel awful, putting you out this way. We could go to the bar. I see a few spaces over there. Most people are on the dance floor right now, I think.'

The bar stretched across the entirety of the far wall beyond the dance area. It was further from the music than the tables here. Brent's voice emerged as a low growl of sound. 'A drink would be... nice.'

He'd led her halfway around the dance floor before he registered that his choice might not have been particularly smart.

When they reached the bar, they ordered drinks and Fiona watched Brent from the corner of her eye in the bar mirror and saw the way they looked together.

A dark head and a fair one. A lean, strong face and a soft womanly one. They looked right to her, side by side this way.

The image reached past her defences, left them in the dust, left her wanting deep silent things she couldn't want, couldn't let herself admit.

What did Brent want?

Nothing you can pin hopes on, Fiona. Remember that.

'I hope chasing me down with my keys hasn't interfered with other plans of yours.' She didn't quite meet his gaze. 'That is...it's none of my business of course...I simply didn't want to take you away from—'

A girlfriend? A lover waiting for him somewhere? The thought stung, yet it wasn't her business, was it?

'You might have come here with someone—?'

He spoke almost when she did, and then stopped, and their gazes met and held and the atmosphere between them thickened into silently acknowledged curiosity and a certain comprehension.

'I don't...'

'There's no one.' Fiona's heart began to beat more heavily in her chest.

They both lowered their gazes to their drinks, sipped.

Brent's face tightened as he looked up at her again. 'This—'

'I've been thinking about the Doolan project.' Fiona rushed the words out and took another fortifying sip of her lemon mineral water. If she made it all about work they could forget those moments looking into each other's eyes in a mirror.

Could forget the warmth and consciousness in their eyes, the desire that when they faced each other in reality, they both worked hard to hide.

A part of her wanted to see it again, even though following that path with him could only lead to hurt for her because he would do what every other man had done.

He would go cold on the idea of her sooner or later. He'd already shown the capacity for that.

So talk about work, Fiona, and ease through these moments and then let him go. 'I know the couple are at loggerheads with each other in their personal lives, but I thought I might have an idea to keep both of them happy with our project plans.'

'Go on. I'm interested in any contribution you want to make.' It was clear he meant this.

And perhaps equally clear that he welcomed the change of topic to a work-related subject as much as she told herself she must take the conversation there.

The little sting of hurt was foolish and incidental, and she did her best to ignore its impact. 'If we use either of the couple's suggested overall ideas for the project, one of them is likely to resent the result.'

'It will be one more thing for them to argue about, and our company might get caught in the middle of that altercation.' His lashes formed thick crescents against his cheeks as he briefly dipped his gaze.

There was something almost vulnerable in that sight, and that made Fiona vulnerable as she softened towards him.

Maybe *they* needed to be at loggerheads so she could stop being so conscious of him as a man. Because, whether she wanted to be or not, she was, and, though she felt that same vibe back from him, he *was* her boss and he seemed determined not to notice her even if he *was* noticing her.

Oh, she had to stop this analysing!

Brent cast a wry smile her way. 'So do you think you and I could agree on something that might satisfy both of them?'

Far too easily.

So much for her idea of being at loggerheads for her own salvation. Fiona straightened on the stool. 'Yes. I think we could do it, for the sake of the project and for the company's overall good. It's simply a collaboration of minds, after all.'

'I couldn't agree more.' His nod was pure professionalism. The warmth in his glance was not, but he masked that quickly and she told herself to stop noticing. They sipped their drinks in silence before she spoke again.

'To answer your question from earlier, I caught a lift here with Stacey but I think she'll end up at Caleb's place later.' The couple had been one of her 'fix it' projects and had got back together after not speaking to each other for three months. 'I'll head off myself soon. I don't want a really late night.'

They'd finished their drinks. Somehow they were both on their feet.

'Thanks again for bringing my keys to me, for taking the time to do that.'

'Do you need a lift home?' He asked it in such a level way, yet his gaze was not level. It was thoughtful and cautious, offering and...almost braced for her to say no?

As if Brent MacKay would care whether she rejected or accepted him in anything. He was a self-made, very wealthy, highly eligible and extremely talented man. If anything, he had the whole world at his feet.

Yet that's not what you see in the backs of his eyes at times when he drops his guard a little. That's not what you saw in those photos with his brothers.

Well, what Fiona looked for and believed she 'saw' in those around her were things *she* had to guard. Her family's discomfort with that side of her had proved that. She tried to respond in kind. 'I left my car at Stacey's place. I just need to get a taxi that far.'

'What suburb?'

Fiona told him.

Brent nodded. 'I'll drive you.' Decision made. 'It's on the way. It would be silly for you to wait around for a taxi and have the expense of it when there's no need.'

'Thank you. I just feel guilty for bringing you out when you must have had far better things to do with your time than chase after a designer who can't even keep track of her apartment keys.'

'You're an artist. It is okay for you to forget things sometimes, you know. Some people would say it was almost obligatory.' They drew near the tables of her friends and Brent waited while she bade them all a quick goodbye.

Once they were outside he quickly hustled her to his truck and got them on the road. They didn't speak much at first. In the quiet of the night the truck's cab felt isolated and enclosed and...intimate.

If only she could be a little less conscious of him, but that didn't seem to be an option for her at the moment.

As he drove them towards her friend's home, she turned to him and searched his shadowy face. 'Were you at work late before you discovered my keys?'

'Yes. I got...caught up there.' His slight hesitation seemed to hold perhaps a hint of embarrassment. Or some kind of chagrin?

'Well, now I'm going to owe you twice as much of an effort when I attend the Awards night with you tomorrow night.' Fiona gave him directions as they neared Stacey's home.

He drove the truck into an empty space on the street and killed the engine.

It was a quiet residential street and she'd parked her car underneath a street light.

'Talk about your work for the company if that chance comes up. That's all I ask.' He climbed from the truck, crossed in front and opened her door for her. 'Let's see you to your car.'

When they got to her car she had her key ready and she turned to him and thanked him quickly and maybe that would have done it, except her nose bumped the side of his neck as she did that because he moved, and she moved, and she didn't anticipate his closeness and suddenly all the resistance seemed pointless because all the awareness was there, wasn't it?

He smelled good. Did she press her nose to his neck for the slightest split second?

Did he tip his head towards hers, encouraging that act?

Two deep breaths, one from him, one from her, and they were apart again, the silence an endless consciousness until his gaze met hers and she saw what had to be rare indecision inside him.

'I shouldn't do this. It's not smart.' His words were an echo of her thoughts.

And she wanted to know... 'Why do *you*—'

He shook his head. 'Maybe it's those long, tall boots. They're as good to blame as anything.' His hand closed around her upper arm. His lashes swept down over glittering green eyes that had gone from indecision to determination in...the blink of green eyes.

And Fiona's senses stalled and her heart stalled and inside her the war hit a new level of anticipation and concern, of need to engage and need to retreat and she thought, *Now. He's going to kiss me now.*

And it *was* what she'd waited for, hoped for without wanting to admit it to herself. Would it be such a bad thing, even if it might cause complications for them?

But he stood there very still, and his fingers tensed where they held her. And his head twitched once, hard, to the right and the moment was lost.

Brent uttered a harsh, 'Goodnight,' and dropped his hand, and left her standing there while he walked away.

Chapter Five

‘IT’S the autism playing out. Having that happen as much as it has lately in front of...other people makes me tense.’ Brent muttered the words to Linc as the two men stepped out of his home the following night and into the communal corridor.

He tugged at the collar of the starched white dress shirt. ‘You know how I feel about being in the public eye with that kind of thing.’

The loss of control of his condition in Fiona’s company—he’d known it was happening from when he’d first met her. Because of that fact alone, he could forget any chance of being intimate with her. Not that he would have tried to pursue that. She worked for him, for starters, and she deserved better than he could give her.

Why was he thinking this way at all, anyway? He didn’t want to examine his motives.

‘Your autism is barely noticeable. Even when it does “play out”, most people wouldn’t figure out the source.’ Linc drew a breath and his gaze searched Brent’s. ‘Are you sure that’s what this is about?’

‘What else would it be?’ Brent spoke quickly, a little too loudly.

A murmur of voices sounded in the foyer below. Voices Brent recognised. His brother Alex.

And Fiona. Alex must have met her on the way in, before she had a chance to hit the buzzer.

He told himself he wasn’t relieved to end the discussion with Linc.

‘Good luck tonight, anyway.’

‘Thanks.’ Brent bade Linc a quiet goodbye and headed down the staircase.

When Alex spotted him, Brent’s youngest brother excused himself from his guest, shared a brief word on the staircase with Brent and disappeared.

That left Brent and the woman at the foot of the stairs.

She was stunning. Utterly and completely stunning. The dress was creams and pinks and greys with a fitted top that left her arms bare and nipped in at her waist, then flared over shapely hips and thighs and fell to her calves in a soft swirl of fabric. It dipped into a discreet V front and back, caressing the curves of full breasts to perfection and revealing a lovely hint of the dip between her shoulder blades.

The dress showcased her beauty, but her beauty itself was what stopped his heart for a moment before a deep, warm feeling washed through him.

He couldn’t explain it. Only that Fiona was soft and curvy everywhere. He wanted to immerse himself in that softness, body, mind and...something even deeper that he didn’t fully understand that had something to do with all the softness there *hadn’t* been in his lifetime.

Okay. So that was fine. Any man would want that softness anyway. It didn’t need to mean anything particularly deep. Brent’s body tightened.

‘Good evening. You look wonderful.’ Husky words, his gaze locked probably too intimately and directly on hers as he battled to pull his thoughts and reactions into place.

‘Good...good evening, Brent. And thank you. I thought about not wearing heels but you won’t mind if I’m eye to eye with you?’ She stepped forward on the killer high heels in question.

Her hair was piled onto her head and pinned back with some kind of butterfly clip. Wisps kissed her nape, and she looked tentative and a little uncertain of herself, and the way she walked in those heels...

Why would she see herself as anything other than stunning? Brent’s gaze rose slowly to her face and locked there. ‘I won’t mind.’ He might go mad from the results of all that not minding, but no. He wouldn’t mind.

Some of the tension seemed to leave her and her gaze shifted to encompass all of him in a swift examination.

Brent had just started to relax himself when she did that, and the blue of her eyes deepened. Her smile wobbled and she hesitated there in his foyer while a delicate flush rose in her cheeks. Desire flared, a small flame burning brighter, back and forth between them.

‘You look wonderful, Brent.’ Her quiet words held conviction, and unease, and a wary consciousness. ‘I hope I’m not too early. Alex let me in. I’ve kept the taxi waiting, as you suggested.’

‘The timing is perfect.’ Everything about her right now was perfect and, because that was so, it seemed a good idea to get out of here and get his focus onto the business of the evening. ‘I’m sure tonight will be a good PR exercise.’

‘I’m looking forward to it.’ Fiona chatted on about it as they made their way outside, almost as though she too felt the need to distract herself. ‘The guest list should provide some opportunities to mingle both with industry professionals and also members of the public who appreciate what we do.’

‘Those contacts will make the night worth it,’ Brent agreed.

Worth stepping outside his usual guardedness, worth letting people see past his privacy and defences to a little of the man beneath.

Brent guided Fiona to the outer door with a hand on her elbow. She trembled beneath his touch, just slightly, just enough to make it impossible to think of anything but touching her.

When they climbed into the back of the taxi, closed themselves into the confines of that rear seat that somehow seemed so isolated despite the driver right in front of them, Brent noticed that intimacy again.

It was there in the knowledge of his body close to hers, their thighs touching where his legs sprawled and hers were folded neatly in front of her.

‘I’m excited to have the chance to attend the Awards ceremony with you.’ Fiona smiled as she turned her head to search his gaze. Smiled with an edge of awareness that he should have wished wasn’t there.

Instead, a part of him that just didn’t want to obey him revelled in her reaction, even as he thought of all the things he wouldn’t like about the evening. ‘I don’t exactly adore public events, but this one is important for my work.’

‘I could take them or leave them most of the time myself,’ Fiona admitted, ‘but I’m excited about tonight. I want your nominated design to win. I’ve studied all the candidate works and yours is by far the best.’

Her faith in him made him smile. ‘I appreciate your confidence in me, though there are several other very talented contenders.’

They discussed the other works and their designers for the rest of the journey. Brent talked, but he never lost his awareness of her. She smelled of soft woman’s skin, of subtle perfume that made him think of a tropical stretch of beach at midnight at the height of summer.

As they arrived at the converted mansion that would house the Awards ceremony, Fiona vehemently assured him there was no chance anyone else would be the winner tonight.

Brent wanted so very badly to lean forward and kiss the passionate declaration right off her lips. He allowed himself one brief touch of her forearm with his fingertips instead and they climbed from the taxi and made their way past several function rooms to the largest one, reserved for the ceremony. He had to do better than this and yet, with each passing moment, his determination to keep at arm’s length from her became more and more difficult to follow.

The venue was busy, with multiple functions taking place in a variety of rooms. Brent turned his attention away from all of that and focused on the woman at his side. *On their joint interest in the night’s events, he meant!*

‘Oh, why can’t he stop droning on and hurry up and just announce it?’ Fiona couldn’t hold the words back any longer. She whispered them against Brent’s ear where they sat at the table with a number of other guests.

Yes, she shouldn't have leaned in so close and let her lips touch him that way, and no, she simply couldn't care about that fact right now.

They'd done all the right things all night, had mixed and mingled and every other thing they had to do. And all the while, through everything, the awareness of each other had simmered. Something had changed. Maybe it was Brent, maybe it was Fiona herself. Or perhaps it was both of them, striking sparks off each other in this different setting.

If he truly was attracted to her, if he was the exception rather than the rule...

A short bark of stifled laughter came from her employer's lips. He turned to smile at her, turned his head quickly enough that her lips brushed fully across his ear before she pulled back.

His smile turned to sensual consciousness between one breath and the next.

Fiona's senses fluttered as their gazes caught and held. A moment later she sat straight in her seat again and Brent sat straight in his and the keynote speaker continued his spiel about the history of the award. There'd been no break in proceedings, but her heart was pounding. That expression in Brent's eyes...

'The award.' She murmured the words beneath her breath. That was what was important right now. She shouldn't have said anything about the keynote speaker going on too much. She should have waited patiently and then she wouldn't have ended up with her mouth pressed to Brent's ear.

Well, right now patience wasn't her strong suit. Her senses were all out of whack because of what had just happened. And she wanted that award for her boss!

Are you sure you don't just simply want your boss?

Tonight, in formal suit, white shirt and bow tie, he looked better than James Bond. She could attribute his impact on her to the flattering clothing and the tie that exactly matched the colour of her eyes.

Her eyes. As though he'd chosen to wear it to complement her, not himself.

That's rather whimsical, don't you think, Fiona?

And attributing his appeal to any of those surface things simply wouldn't be honest, and she knew it.

Brent bent his head to hers and whispered, without getting too close to the shell of *her* ear, 'Whether I win the award doesn't matter one way or the other, you know.'

To a degree he was right. He would still be the highly successful landscape designer he was. But she wanted the industry recognition for him, believed he'd earned it, and wanted his peers and the various connections here tonight to see him win.

Fiona was about to explain those things when he reached out to cover her hand where it rested on the snowy linen of the tablecloth.

His deep voice whispered into her ear again. 'Don't stress, okay? We're fine here and look on the bright side. Whatever the outcome, we got a nice meal out of it.'

'We did, didn't we?' She laughed, as he had no doubt expected she would. And her hand turned. Her fingers curled around his and held on.

'For luck,' she murmured, and knew it was far more than that.

Brent made no attempt to break away from their joined touch. Instead, his fingers repeatedly stroked over hers as the speaker finally announced the third place, and a runner up, and finally, after a pause in which the whole room seemed to wait breathlessly...

'And the winner of this year's Deltran Landscaping Award is... Brent MacKay of Brent MacKay Landscaping Designs, for his design of Tarroway Gardens!'

'Oh, I *knew* they'd give it to you. I'm so proud, Brent. Congratulations!' Somehow Fiona ended up with her arms around Brent's shoulders.

By itself that would have been okay, but his arms closed around her in return and she felt the touch of his fingers against the flesh between her shoulders, the press of strong forearms covered in suit cloth against her upper arms.

The scent of his aftershave and his skin filled her senses and his mouth pressed against her hair. The moment of congratulation and excitement became something more, became a promise of what she had wanted all through this public night.

But people clapped, and the room and their surroundings came back. Brent got to his feet and gripped her hand and used that grip to tow her onto the podium with him. He introduced her and her role in the company, said a little about his work as he held their tucked hands at his side.

His acceptance speech was short and succinct and witty and wry. He stopped once in the middle and his shoulders tensed. His hand squeezed around hers before he seemed to relax and everything seemed all right again.

And then, award gripped in his other hand, he returned to their table and to a round of congratulations as the formality of the evening dissolved into industry talk, mingling and people drinking one last glass of wine while others lingered over pungent coffee served by waiting staff in smart grey coats.

There *were* some people like Brent's difficult client, people with certain aspirations, who now suddenly found Brent's business most interesting indeed.

Brent handed them business cards and let them know that if they wanted to book appointments to see him they'd be waiting at least a month. Fiona stayed at his side and simply gave herself the pleasure of watching people acknowledge his success. Pride in him joined other feelings and blended together inside her.

Finally they left the function room and made their way through the building's long winding corridors towards the front exit.

The doors to another of the function rooms just ahead swished open. Two men stepped through, one garrulous and talking a mile a minute, the other with his face turned half away, doing his best to ignore that man's effusiveness if his body language was anything to go by.

Fiona observed this and leaned on Brent's arm to peer across his body at the award statuette. 'It's a rather elegant tree, really. Sort of "eternal lifeish" in appearance, don't you think? I'd like to display it in a glass-fronted cabinet in the reception area at work.'

Brent seemed distracted by the men before them, but he forced a nod. 'We'll put *your* awards up at the same time—'

The men in front of them glanced their way as they drew closer. Probably they heard every word being said, but they weren't private words really so it hardly mattered, did it? So why did Fiona feel uneasy suddenly?

'Displaying all the awards would be nice,' Fiona murmured.

She would simply have walked on, but something about the stillness of one of the men drew her attention and she looked his way just as Brent drew a deep breath and did the same.

As they all drew level, Brent wrapped his free hand around her wrist, a gentle touch that guided her to a stop, yet his expression when she looked into his eyes was not gentle, but oh, so determined and guarded and...braced. For what?

Fiona left her wrist in his hold. She wasn't sure if he even knew he had it clasped there.

Brent could have done without this, but he looked into the face of one of the two men before him and waited for recognition to dawn. Oh, not for himself. He'd recognised Charles immediately. But for the older man—God, for his *father*—it was apparently taking longer.

Memory hit Brent. Of his father frowning, pushing Brent into a car, muttering that he couldn't be the father of a freak. Brent had tried so hard as a child to control the outward signs of his condition. He couldn't remember any other way. Even now he could feel his body tightening, trying to make sure nothing of the autism showed.

Well, it had been too late then. Tight-lipped and silent, his father had taken him to the orphanage, signed him over and walked away.

‘It’s been a long time.’ Brent was proud of the flat, even tone of his voice. He hoped that calm extended to his expression, even if his body was braced.

Charles was older, his hair was grey, but the dawning expression in his eyes was the same. Displeasure, discomfort, rejection.

For a moment Brent thought the older man might simply walk on, not speak, and in that moment Brent knew he would not allow that. This time he wouldn’t be ignored, brushed off. He opened his mouth to speak again.

‘If I’d realised you’d be here—’ Charles broke off, glanced at his companion and his frown deepened.

Brent recognised that look, too. It was amazing just how much came back to him. He’d thought it almost all forgotten. A twitch built at the base of his neck. He banked it down.

Fiona’s glance made him wonder if she’d sensed that tension building. Her hand turned and her fingers closed around *his* wrist, and he thought she murmured, ‘I know now where I’ve seen that before...’ before she leaned into his side.

Then she gave a polite, plastic smile and said in a normal tone, ‘Won’t you introduce me, Brent?’

‘Fiona Donner, meet Charles MacKay.’ He didn’t explain Fiona to Charles. He didn’t explain his father’s identity to Fiona.

Fiona’s nostrils flared and the sparkle in her eyes flattened out until they were pure blue, expressionless chips. Her gaze turned to his and came back to his father and a thick silence fell.

Into that silence, Charles’s companion spoke.

‘You’ve won an award. Congratulations.’ The man stepped forward and leaned in to examine the award, either oblivious at this point to the tensions in the air, or convinced he could actually do something about them. ‘Oh, I see that’s the landscaping industry award. I read about that in the club notices a few weeks ago. What do you think, Charlie?’ He turned to address the question to the second man.

And what did ‘Charlie’ think? Was he surprised by Brent’s success? Pleased by it? Discomfited by it?

Why care? His opinion means less than nothing. It’s meant less than nothing for a long time now.

‘The family resemblance is strong.’ Fiona’s words were low, the unspoken words written all over her.

This was the man who had given his son away. Somehow she understood so much. That knowledge hit Brent while a raft of emotions washed through him.

Old rejection. A need to understand.

His father’s rejection, Charles’s inability to love the child he’d helped create?

Brent pushed it all away before it could go any further. It was all past news. There was no point revisiting, though he couldn’t be sorry this meeting had happened. At least he could say it was done now, and let go of the feeling he’d carried around of waiting to stumble across this man.

Yeah? So why didn’t Brent feel any better or more resolved?

Because Charles was acting just the same, and some deep down part of Brent had maybe hoped, just the tiniest bit...

‘Yes, we should be going, Fiona. I think we’re done here.’ As he spoke the words, Brent became truly aware of the curl of Fiona’s fingers around muscles that had set like concrete. His free hand came up to close over Fiona’s, to register the tension in *her* fingers.

She gave a sturdy tug, as though to shepherd him away from there, and her entire body pressed into his side.

The level of protectiveness he sensed in her in that moment stunned Brent and touched him in ways he couldn’t define.

‘Wow.’ The jolly man’s mobile face worked.

No doubt in another moment he would voice his conclusion that Brent and Charles were ‘father and son’.

How would Brent’s father explain that? He’d done such a good job of ignoring the fact that Brent had ever existed.

How *had* Charles MacKay dealt with that? An inconvenient accident that had taken his son so soon after the death of the older man’s wife? If so, Brent was rather inconveniently ‘resurrected’.

‘If you’ll excuse us.’ The blandest of bland phrases. Brent decided it was somehow fitting.

He steeled his muscles to keep under his command. There would be no twitching of his head to the side, no drumming of fingers or anything else. Not in front of this man. No exposure. Brent started to turn away.

‘Surely you’d have realised the major industry event in my calendar year was at this venue tonight.’ His father’s words stopped him. The displeasure and self-centredness in them was clear. ‘You should stay out of the limelight altogether. I can’t have—’

‘I do what suits me. I’ve been in charge of myself for a long time now.’ Anger made its way through Brent’s reserve. That, too, he squashed down. It really wasn’t worth it, was it?

Charles couldn’t be proud of his success. The older man couldn’t see past the shame he felt in Brent’s existence.

You let Charles’s shame impact on you, on how you live, how you present yourself.

Had Brent done that? Would he have looked at his autism differently if Charles had done so?

Well, Charles hadn’t done, and that hadn’t changed. Brent spoke with that thought fresh in his mind. ‘If that doesn’t appeal to you, you’re welcome to stay clear of anywhere you think I might show up.’

As for Charles’s business activities, Brent had little clue and planned to keep it that way. If they crossed paths again, so what? Brent wasn’t about to actively keep away from anything for the sake of avoiding this man. What could Charles do, after all? Reject his son?

Been there, lived that, got the new and better, loving, close-knit family with Linc and Alex to prove it.

With that thought calmness came back to him. He *did* have Linc and Alex and they were what he wanted. Not the cold stranger in front of him.

‘Good evening. Don’t feel it’s necessary to speak the next time we meet—’

‘You must be highly medicated to succeed at hiding your flaw, even temporarily, for something like this evening.’ His father’s words held ignorance, accusation, harshness and confusion. ‘I didn’t know autism—’

‘Obviously you don’t know much.’ Brent spoke over the top of the older man. ‘Goodbye.’

He whisked Fiona away then. And he noted with some almost detached part of himself that his body responded perfectly to each of his commands.

Grip Fiona’s hand. Lead her around the two men. Nod politely at the goggle-eyed companion in passing.

Stride away, relying on the length of those beautiful legs of Fiona’s to allow her to keep up with his pace until they got outside and he sucked in a deep breath of cleansing air.

‘There’s a taxi. We’re going. We’re getting right away from here and from that—’ Fiona’s words were shocked, shaken. She flagged the cab forward with a hand that visibly trembled.

Brent turned his gaze to her and something deep and protective came to life in him. His voice was soft as he spoke, deep and gentle... ‘Don’t worry. Everything’s fine—’

‘No. It’s not.’ She shook her head, a decisive shake that said she wasn’t about to be convinced.

And what else had she registered? Charles’s final word? That Brent had autism?

Moments later they were ensconced in the back seat and her shoulder was pressed to his, their bodies tucked as close as she could get them as she gave her address to the driver without sparing him as much as a glance.

All her attention was for Brent. In part that made him uncomfortable, and yet...

‘I should explain.’ Brent cleared his throat. ‘He’s not...I don’t...’

‘What? He isn’t important? You don’t care that he rejected you because you’re autistic?’ The words burst out of her and then she chewed her lip. ‘I’m sorry. I heard him, but I’d already wondered.’

It shouldn’t surprise him that she’d come halfway to figuring it out. But now, thanks to Charles, Fiona completely knew the one thing that Brent had worked to keep to himself, where he could guard it and control it...and no person could judge him for it.

‘Yes, I have a form of autism. It’s less of a challenge physically or in other ways than many people live and deal with daily, but it’s still an inherent part of me.’

The mix of emotions he felt as he told her this was difficult to define.

Fiona’s face tightened and she whispered, ‘How could he treat you like that?’

And Brent realised that for all he’d believed he’d resolved this in his heart and mind long ago, there was still...something there. ‘I—don’t know. I don’t know how he could have done that.’

The glitter in her gaze was anger and other emotions mixed. It made something inside him clench. He curled his fingers because suddenly he wanted to lace them with hers.

‘This explains your ability to concentrate your focus so intensely when you’re producing those amazing landscape designs.’ Fiona drew a determined breath, deliberately seemed to calm herself. ‘I’ve thought that was amazing. Now I understand it.’

She turned Brent on his ear by addressing his condition as though it were of benefit.

God, she was amazing, even if she wasn’t seeing the whole picture. ‘Well—’ Brent realised he was simply sitting there, soaking in her warmth. He would have drawn away from Fiona then. He had to get this back to some kind of ordinary footing before his body started leading the rest of him, short-circuited what his brain knew he had to do, namely leave her alone, and got him in trouble.

‘Please don’t...shift away yet. I need...’ Her words were low, a blend of anger and hurt and heart.

She had a generosity in her nature that Brent couldn’t seem to help responding to.

‘I know...that man revealed something about you that you obviously feel wasn’t my business.’ Her words were low, careful. ‘He had no right to do that, but you can trust me with the knowledge. I’m just...furious about...’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Yet he couldn’t deny his anger and old resentment. ‘I don’t need Charles MacKay’s approval.’

‘Maybe not, but you deserved his love and acceptance.’ Fiona turned to fully face him and all her fury was in her eyes. Her fingers gripped his once again. ‘You probably don’t even want to think about him. We’ll talk about the award. The night we had. It was a good night. You deserved to win. I said you’d get it, didn’t I?’

She probably would have kept going, but he squeezed her fingers and laid them against his thigh and covered her hand with his. Set the award on the floor of the taxi so he could focus solely on her. ‘I dealt with my father dumping me a long time ago.’

‘What happened so that it was only your father making the decision to...stop parenting you?’

To reject Brent? Pass him off into strangers’ hands because he didn’t want to deal with a child who was different? ‘My mother died. I was young. All I remember was he couldn’t cope with my issues. Now he’s got the problem that I grew up, made something of myself, and he doesn’t want to have to acknowledge my existence.’

‘He’s the one who should be ashamed to exist.’ Fiona uttered the words and let him see in her gaze all she was feeling. Her protectiveness towards him that was so sweet when he was perfectly capable of looking after himself.

Yet something down inside him admitted it would be nice. To have a woman’s care.

Well, he couldn't do that, could he? He couldn't let himself care or wish to be cared for. Brent could take the hard knocks of life. But setting himself up for the embarrassment of rejection because of his condition—

That was one 'been there, done that' he didn't want to repeat.

Are you sure it's only about that, MacKay?

Tension pooled at the base of Brent's neck and he frowned. Of course he was certain. What else would there be?

'Here we are.' The driver's voice interrupted Brent's thoughts and he realised they'd arrived at Fiona's block of flats.

Brent still had Fiona's fingers pressed to his thigh, could feel their warmth. Her body remained pressed to his. Consciousness of her swept over Brent then, and pushed past his guardedness about his condition. His instincts took over and at this moment his autism didn't come into it. Brent's hand caressed over Fiona's. His fingers stroked hers.

A dozen different thoughts buzzed in Fiona's head, with as many accompanying emotions.

When Brent instructed the driver to wait, climbing from the taxi with her to start the short journey to her flat, those thoughts distilled into pure feeling. The touch of his fingers at her elbow as he guided her along the path, up the staircase and along the balcony that led to her flat.

The beat of her blood in her veins as she tried to decide whether to invite him in, say goodnight, talk about their night, the award, the good parts of the evening.

Of all of it, the trip back here in the taxi with their bodies close to each other had been the best. And for her, she had to admit, the most emotional.

His father had rejected him, abandoned him, all because Brent had a condition he had learned to live with and, indeed, to use to his advantage in business, in his work. His uniqueness only made him all the more appealing.

And right now he had his hand at her elbow and Fiona's heart was beating a little faster because...she liked that touch.

Liked it too much for her safety? Attraction, that was easy to deal with, but was she more than attracted? Were her emotions involved? Because she really mustn't let that be the case.

He was her boss. She should say goodnight and walk inside... 'Brent, thank you for tonight—'

'Thank you for attending the Awards ceremony with me.' He paused. 'You got more than you bargained for with our exchange of a family night for the Awards night.'

'My family situation isn't even worth words in comparison to what happened tonight.' She shook her head. How could she even think her paltry difficulties with her family mattered now? 'Brent, I just don't know how to comfort—'

'Don't feel sorry for me.' Though he interrupted her, he did it gently, wrapping his fingers around hers where she'd been toying with her keys. 'My past is what it is. I've moved on from it.'

'Maybe, but you went on trying to conceal a part of yourself that you shouldn't worry about that way.' She bit her lip. Her breath stuttered in her throat and she whispered, 'I can't talk—'

About it any more? Brent certainly didn't want to.

'Then we won't talk.' He uttered the words with an accepting edge. 'I'd rather do this, anyway.' He bent his head to hers.

Touched his lips to hers.

A soft, seeking, giving and taking exchange. Lips to lips. How could it be all of this between them? And yet, somewhere inside herself, Fiona had wanted and needed his kiss and not even known how much she did.

Now she knew.

A taste of delight and sweetness and desire and pleasure. Her fingers wrapped around his forearms, and his hands were about her waist.

It felt good and right to have his mouth over hers, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh of her waist. For a few wonderful moments, she lived in the sensations of kissing him.

His mouth caressed hers as though he needed and wanted to kiss her this way. Their gazes were locked, his lashes dusky crescents that fanned against his cheeks as he focused wholly on her. And then those lashes swept down fully and her eyes closed too, and it was all sensation and feeling and the beat of her heart in her breast and the spread of such warmth all through her.

That warmth told its own story. She *had* invested emotionally in him, at least to a degree, even when she knew that was dangerous. A little hint of panic surfaced as Fiona made this realisation.

And the moment that panic hit, she realised something in Brent had changed as well.

He ended the kiss and dropped his hands away from her. Stepped back, and some kind of regret showed in his eyes. 'I shouldn't have done that. It can't go anywhere. You and I can never—'

He cut off the rest of the sentence, but he didn't need to finish it. Fiona could do that herself.

Now that he'd felt the reality, had *touched* the reality of her generous curves, he did not want her. The house of cards that had been desire and pleasure and closeness and a hope she should never have allowed, crumbled down.

Fiona tipped up her chin and told herself it didn't matter. It absolutely, fiercely did not matter. 'Goodnight, Brent.'

'Goodnight. I'm—'

Sorry.

At least he didn't say it.

With one last glance from a troubled green gaze, Brent walked away.

Chapter Six

REPEAT after me: I am a professional, I am a professional, I am a professional. I'm focused on my work, my career, my 'five year plan' and my goals for success...

Fiona attempted, yet again, for the umpteenth time, to figure out what was wrong with the feature plants in the painting she was working on. If she could feel settled or focused about anything at all, it might help her make a decent assessment of the problem.

And how could she feel settled when all of her was utterly distracted and had been since the night Brent had kissed her and walked away straight afterwards?

'Stupid thing.' She grabbed the open container of ochre paint from her work shelf.

Perhaps, if she blended a little white into it, she'd overcome the toning issue she had going on. If indeed the problem actually was a toning issue. The colour wasn't right. That much she'd known from the start. She just wasn't certain if that was the entire problem.

'I shouldn't call the painting names. I'm the problem, not it.' She muttered the words, set the container on a small work table and set about mixing the white in.

Overall, this painting was *not* going well. That much she could say for sure, and that was a problem because the client expected to receive this artwork on Monday.

Brent was in the next room, working on something. Well, she assumed so. He'd had the door pushed across all morning so she couldn't be certain of anything, really, but she doubted he was having the same difficulties concentrating as she was.

In fact, he seemed just fine ignoring what had happened between them after the Awards night dinner. All of it. The revelation of his autism. The meeting with his father. Their kiss. His regret and rejection after it. Maybe it had been a sympathy kiss—for her sake. She had been very upset on his behalf and he was a kind man.

The thought made her cringe because to her it had been anything but that.

But he'd backed away from it, had clearly been put off by it. What other conclusion could she draw?

Fiona gave her paint one last vigorous stir. She would simply have to get on with her work, that was all. Take a leaf from her boss's book and only focus on the responsibilities they shared here. That was smart anyway. The only sensible thing to do, really, in the face of the fact that Brent didn't... want her.

So there. That was decided. Fiona snatched up her newly blended paint, briefly admired the glossy consistency of it and swung about to carry it to her easel.

'I need to go up into the mountains. This project—'

'I'm going to just focus on work... Oomph.'

As their words crossed each other, Fiona came up against a solid wall of chest. Paint hit that chest in a broad, gooey blob, slopped over her hand and splashed its way down until drips hit the floor.

'Oh, no.' The paint container wobbled in her hand. Fiona got it upright, but that was pointless now.

'I guess I should have knocked first or something.' Brent spoke in a slightly dazed tone while his fingers rose to his chest.

'It's my fault. I should have been looking at what I was doing.' Fiona's hand rose, too. She brushed at the dinner-plate sized splodge soaking into his shirt, sticking it to the firm muscles of his chest.

And then she stilled as Brent's fingers explored the paint, sliding back and forth through it, not to clear it off, but to get the full tactile experience of it.

The sight of that exploration was one of the most beautiful, sensual things Fiona had ever seen. Maybe he caught her staring because his fingers came to a standstill and very green eyes searched her gaze while heat coated his cheekbones.

Embarrassment, but why?

Because that's his condition speaking.

'You must think I'm strange—'

'I'm sorry I stared. It was just that you looked so—' She couldn't complete the words. Couldn't tell him that his expression had made her imagine his hands stroking her skin that way.

'I...um...I've ruined your shirt.' Her mouth pointed out the ridiculously obvious while the rest of her tried to catch its breath. 'I was trying to fix a problem with this artwork. The colour change probably wouldn't have fixed it, anyway. I need to *see* the particular seed pod that grows on the plants I've used in the painting. The trouble is they don't go to seed pods until they're quite mature. I won't find what I need at any young plant nursery.'

Brent's glance moved to the half finished painting. 'What you have there looks...okay.'

'Yes, and that's the problem. Okay is synonymous with "average". It isn't good enough.' Fiona frowned at the painting. 'I need the real thing.'

He looked from her to the painting and back again. 'If you can't fix this it's going to drive you crazy, isn't it?'

'Yes, but how do you—?'

'Know how that feels?' He shook his head. 'Because I've just spent all morning working on a project and not getting it where I need to because the one part of it that's vital to the design I can't perfect until I study rock formations in the mountains. And, as it happens, the rock formations I have in mind are the only place I know of where you'll find your plants, complete with seed pods. It's where I spotted the plants before I incorporated them into that landscape design in the first place. They aren't normally stocked in nurseries. Linc sourced some young plants for me when I needed them.'

'If you could get me a look at some...'. Without thinking about it, she took his hand in hers and used the base of his shirt to wipe as much of the paint off his fingers as she could. 'I hope that shirt didn't have sentimental value. I'll replace it, of course.' Her fingers worked at the buttons on the shirt. She got through three of them before he shackled her wrist.

'Don't—' He broke off. 'You'll get it all over yourself.'

'It's too late to worry about that.' It was too late to worry about a few things, Fiona realised, including the impact of revealing his chest to her gaze, even if she could only see a little of it. She dropped her glance so he wouldn't see the expression in her eyes.

He probably liked petite women with dainty feet who didn't have issues about plants, with or without seed pods on them... 'You should shower. There'll be residue soaking through onto your skin. At least it's not the most expensive brand of paint, but I'm sorry it got wasted.'

'Don't worry about that, and don't worry about the shirt.' Brent hesitated as he searched her face again. 'You've been putting in long hours, trying to get this painting pulled together. I shouldn't have asked you to produce something on demand for a project you weren't in on from its conception. I said I wouldn't let that happen more than once.'

'It's all right—'

'No, it isn't, but we'll make it right.' He wiped his hand on his shirt again. 'I came in to tell you I'm going into the mountains to study rock formations. Maybe you should come with me, see these seed pods, take photos, draw them, whatever you need.'

'A day trip.' A day to spend time with him. No. It wasn't about that. It was for work, had to be for that reason only. And Fiona had to look at it from that perspective. 'I'm a professional. *I have* to be able to produce the goods on demand, without special trips or anything else.'

'No. You don't have to be able to do that. I'd never expect that of myself and I don't expect it of you.' Brent's gaze became very focused as he said this. 'Finish up here in the office while I take

my shower. When I'm done, we're going to swing by your place and my place for clothes and then we'll go. Bring the work boots you wore on site. They'll do for the trail I want to take you on.'

'O-okay.' What else could she do but agree? And be grateful, Fiona added silently as she glanced once again at her stalled painting.

'Good.' Brent gave a nod and turned away to head for the shower. 'Oh, and we'll be gone overnight.'

He walked off before she could even collect her thoughts.

An overnight stay in the mountains with her boss...

'And that's a square-tailed kite. See it?' Brent pointed into the branches of a tree to the left on the trail in front of them.

They'd been flora and fauna spotting for the past hour, indulging in guesswork when they didn't know what they were seeing, though in Brent's case he recognised most things, right down to a gold and white daisy Fiona hadn't seen in exactly its type anywhere before.

Fiona had photographed and sketched her seed pods. More importantly, she'd spent time simply studying them. Examining them from every angle, exploring the texture with her fingertips, feeling their weight and the roughness of their shells.

Brent's response to bush walking like this was very tactile, too. He would stroke his fingers over the spiky leaves on a bush, or stop to carefully examine a bottlebrush or some other native flower. That attention to detail carried through into his work as much as Fiona needed to carry it to her work. Fiona didn't doubt it was part of the reason his designs were so successful. She shouldn't wonder if that tactility would carry through into other more personal parts of his life, because those thoughts were adding to her consciousness of him.

His autism made him unique and special, and yet he seemed determined to dislike it and hide its existence from the world if he could.

And Fiona needed to hide the existence of how attracted to him she was. She truly should have turned down the offer of joining him on this trip but, once decided, Brent had been set on the idea, convinced it would be good for both of them. And so far it had been. They were...enjoying themselves. It just worried her how much she struggled to do that without letting her emotions and feelings for him carry her in directions she shouldn't go.

'Is it really a square-tailed kite or are you making that up?' She was proud of the slight teasing tone she produced, the relaxed humour as she went on. 'I *think* I've heard of those, but I'm a city girl...'

'It really is one.' Brent's mouth quirked up at one corner, as though he understood that edge of humour and enjoyed it.

But their gazes caught in that moment and she lost herself in moss-green irises and in an instant the relaxed state of their interaction changed.

Part of her welcomed that, was fiercely glad that he hadn't managed to completely lose his awareness of her, after all.

The other part warned her not to think like that. She would only open herself to hurt from him all over again, though she knew he hadn't set out to hurt her.

Brent's head twitched to the side. It was only a little twitch in the scheme of things, but his gaze searched hers after it happened and suddenly every feeling she'd had the night they'd run into his father rushed to the surface to join with the rest of her confusion and interest in him that she needed to stifle, yet couldn't seem to.

'Families should love each other unconditionally.' The words burst out of her. 'There shouldn't be any question about it. That should simply happen as a matter of course. Your father was very wrong to reject you the way he did. He should have seen that you were unique and special, not less in any way.'

'Not less, perhaps, but I *am* different.' A lookout appeared on the trail to their left. He led the way down to it over steps hewn from dirt and rock and leaned his arms against the chest-high railing

to look out over the gorge spread before them. 'I made a family for myself with Linc and Alex and I'm happy in that.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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