

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace. The man, on the left, is kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair and is wearing a white cable-knit sweater. They are both looking towards the right with soft smiles. The background is dark, featuring a Christmas tree with warm white lights that are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect. A semi-transparent pink banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title and author's name. A large, stylized white rose graphic is positioned on the left side of the banner, partially overlapping the couple's faces.

THE NANNY WHO SAVED CHRISTMAS

MICHELLE DOUGLAS

Cherish

Мишель Дуглас

The Nanny Who Saved Christmas

«HarperCollins»

Дуглас М.

The Nanny Who Saved Christmas / М. Дуглас — «HarperCollins»,

This Christmas, Nanny Nicola McGillroy is determined to be a great nanny to Cade Hindmarsh's two adorable little girls – and forget her horrible ex-fiancé, along with the fact that she should have been planning her own wedding right now. Only problem is her attraction to her gorgeous, off-limits boss...surely this is just rebound, not true love – for both of them?

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Praise for Michelle Douglas

“Packed with a smouldering tension and underlying passion, *The Loner’s Guarded Heart* by Michelle Douglas will leave readers wanting more ... [It] is a keeper that I will treasure. If you are a reader who loves tender, heartfelt stories then this book is a must-buy, because it has all those elements and so much more.” —www.cataromance.com

“Michelle Douglas makes an outstanding debut with *His Christmas Angel*, a complex, richly emotional story. The characters are handled especially well, as are the many conflicts and relationships. This one’s a keeper.” —*RT Book Reviews*

If she pointed out to Cade that her title was in fact ‘Nanny’ and not ‘Friend’ or ‘Family Member’, it would give him the wrong impression. It would make it sound as if she didn’t really care for Ella and Holly, and she did. She adored them.

It didn’t change the fact that this was still a job, though, and that no matter how much Cade and his family welcomed her into their fold it still didn’t make her one of them.

It wasn’t anything to be bitter about. It wasn’t anything to be hurt about. It was the truth—plain and simple.

Oh, but how she wished she had a family like his!

About the Author

At the age of eight **MICHELLE DOUGLAS** was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. She answered, 'A writer.' Years later she read an article about romance writing and thought, *Ooh, that'll be fun*. She was right. When she's not writing she can usually be found with her nose buried in a book. She is currently enrolled in an English Masters programme for the sole purpose of indulging her reading and writing habits further. She lives in a leafy suburb of Newcastle, on Australia's east coast, with her own romantic hero—husband Greg, who is the inspiration behind all her happy endings. Michelle would love you to visit her at her website: www.michelle-douglas.com.

The Nanny Who Saved Christmas

Michelle Douglas



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Maggie,
who is everything a sister should be.
Thank you!

CHAPTER ONE

NICOLA craned to take in as much of the view as she could from the Cessna's window as they landed on an airstrip that was nothing more than red dirt, bordered here and there with spiky grass and mulga scrub. When the pilot cut the engine the sudden silence engulfed her.

He turned to her. 'Here we are then.'

'Right.' She swallowed and gave a curt nod. *Here* was the Waminda Downs cattle station in the far west of Queensland—the Outback, the Never-Never, beyond the Black Stump—and about as far from civilisation as a body could get. She glanced out of the window again and something in her chest started to lift. This place was the polar opposite to her native Melbourne. The *total* polar opposite.

'May I get out now?'

'Well, as this is your destination, love, I believe that's the plan.'

He let the steps down, she stuck her head outside and the first thing to hit her was the heat—hard, enveloping and intense. The second, when her feet found firm ground again, was the scent—hot, dry earth and sun-baked grasses. The lonely desolation thrust itself upon her consciousness with an insistence that refused to be ignored, greater than the heat that beat down on her uncovered head and greater than the alien sights and scents. A person could get lost out here and never be found.

She surveyed the endless expanse of pale brown grass, interspersed here and there with mulga scrub and saltbush, and at all the red dirt beneath it, and for the first time in three months she felt like her heart started to beat at the right pace again. Out here she wouldn't encounter acquaintances who would glance at her and then just as quickly glance away again to whisper behind their hands. Or friends who would rush up to grip her hands and ask her how she was doing. Or those people who just plain enjoyed others' misfortunes and would smirk at her.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sky. 'This is perfect.'

'Perfect for what?'

That voice didn't belong to Jerry the pilot.

Her eyes sprang open. She spun around to find a man hauling her suitcase from the plane's cargo hold. He set it on the ground and then straightened. He was tall and broad. He gave off an impression of strength. He gave off an even bigger impression of no-nonsense efficiency.

She blinked. 'Where did you come from?' So much for thinking she and the pilot were alone in this wilderness.

He pointed back behind him and in the harsh glare of the sun she caught the glint from a car's windscreen. 'You're from the station?'

One corner of his mouth hooked up. It wasn't precisely a smile, but she had a feeling it was meant to be friendly. 'I'm Cade Hindmarsh.'

Her boss.

He must be about thirty and he was tanned. Really tanned. He had deep lines fanning out from his eyes. Probably from all the habitual squinting into the sun one must do out here. A habit Nicola found herself mimicking already. He tipped his Akubra back from his head and she found herself staring into the bluest pair of eyes she'd ever seen. The sun might've faded everything else out here, but it hadn't faded them.

His gaze was direct. The longer she looked at him, the lighter she started to feel, a burden of weight slipping free from her shoulders and sinking into the dry earth at her feet. He didn't know her. He'd never met her before in his life. Nobody out here knew her. He wouldn't think her pitiful, stupid or a failure. Unless she did something to give him reason to.

She had absolutely no intention of letting that happen.

‘Nicola McGillroy,’ she said, recalling her manners and introducing herself. Cool, poised and businesslike, she lectured. That was the impression she wanted to give. And the antithesis of a pitiful doormat.

He strode over and extended his hand. She placed hers inside it and found it so comprehensively grasped it made her eyes widen. He grimaced and loosened his hold. ‘Sorry. I’m always being told not to grip so hard.’

She swallowed. ‘No need to apologise; you didn’t hurt me.’

Cade shook hands the way she’d always thought men should shake hands. The reality, like so many other realities, had disappointed her. Cade didn’t disappoint. His grip was firm, dependable. Strong. Men who shook hands like that didn’t get pushed around. She wanted to learn to shake hands like that.

From beneath the brim of his Akubra those blue eyes twinkled for a moment. Her lips lifted in response, and then with a start she realised her hand was still held in his. She gently detached it.

Her employer tipped his head back and stared at her for several long, pulse-inducing moments. She lifted her chin and met his gaze square-on. She didn’t kid herself that his survey was anything other than what it was—a sizing up ... a summing up. For the next two months she would have charge of his two young daughters. She wouldn’t respect any man who merely took her at face value, who went only by her résumé and a telephone interview. Even if that telephone interview had been gruelling.

‘Will I do?’ she finally asked, the suspense sawing on her nerves. She didn’t doubt for one moment that if his answer was no he’d put her back on that plane and send her home to Melbourne.

The thought made her throat dry and her heart falter for a couple of beats before it surged against her ribs again with renewed force. She couldn’t go back to Melbourne. Not yet!

Melbourne ... December ... with their joint reminders of the wedding she should’ve been planning. She didn’t think she could stand it.

‘Why is this place perfect?’

Perfect? Nicola Ann, you can’t be serious!

Her mother’s voice sounded in her head. Nicola resolutely ignored it. ‘All of this—’ she gestured to the landscape ‘—is so different to what I’m used to, but it’s exactly what I imagined.’

‘And that’s good?’

‘I think so.’ It was *very* good.

He planted his feet. ‘A lot of people who come out here are running away from something.’

She refused to let her chin drop. ‘Is that why you’re out here?’

Off to one side Jerry snorted, reminding her that she and her employer weren’t alone. ‘Love, generations of the Hindmarshes have been born and bred out here.’

She raised an eyebrow at Cade Hindmarsh. ‘Is that a no, then?’

Those blue eyes twinkled again. ‘That’s a no.’

‘Some people—’ she chose her words carefully ‘—not only want to see what they can of the country, but to experience it as well.’

‘And that’s why you’re here?’

‘I know if you were born and bred out here that you’re familiar with this kind of life and landscape, but being here is an adventure for me.’ It was also a timeout from her real life, a much needed break from Melbourne with all its reminders of her short-sighted stupidity and her cringe-inducing ignorance. She didn’t say that out loud though. He might interpret that as running away.

It will all still be here when you get home, you know, Nicola Ann.

And her mother might be right.

Though, in two months’ time, hopefully she’d have found the strength to face it all again. She hoped that in two months’ time she’d have changed, become a different person—someone stronger, tougher. Someone who didn’t get taken advantage of, lied to or cheated on.

Finally Cade smiled. 'Welcome to Waminda Downs, Nicola.'

A pent-up breath whooshed out of her. 'Thank you.' She grinned. She couldn't help it. She wanted to high-five someone for having passed Cade's assessment. Jerry's chuckle told her that her excitement was visible for all to see.

Cade's smile broadened into a grin that made her blink and just like that she could practically feel Diane's elbow in her ribs and her whisper of, *Hot, gorgeous hunk* at her ear. The thought of her best friend pulled Nicola up short. It made her pull back, compose her features and press her hands together at her waist.

Cade's eyes narrowed and his grin faded too until it had vanished completely. Something inside her protested at that, but she stamped it out. She was here to change. Not to gush. Not to be eager to approve of everything and everyone she met without considered judgement first. And not to be patted on the head and treated like a child.

She strode around him to seize her suitcase. 'I'm really looking forward to meeting Ella and Holly.'

Cade remained silent. Nicola bit her tongue to stop from prompting further. She wasn't here to make friends. She wasn't here to win approval—not from Cade, not from anyone. She was here to do a job ... and to get her head screwed on straight again. She'd do both those things to the best of her ability.

'Brought that generator you ordered.'

The men unloaded the generator. Beneath his work shirt Cade's arm muscles bulged. Despite the generator's bulk and weight, he didn't so much as break out into a sweat as he carried it to the car. With a wave to Jerry, she set off after him, admiring the broad sweep of his shoulders and the depth of his chest. The man was a veritable Atlas. He stowed the generator into the tray of his ute with ease and then took her suitcase. She told herself the only reason she let him take it was because he'd know how to load the tray to best effect.

It wasn't because it was too heavy and she had pitiful upper body strength.

Her lip curled. Oh, who was she trying to kid? But getting fit was on her to-do list while she was out here. In two months' time she'd be tossing that suitcase around as if it weighed nothing at all. The way Cade did.

She found her eyes drawn too easily to him so, setting her teeth, she did what he did—shaded her eyes and watched as the Cessna took off. And then, to stop from staring at him again, she completed a slow three hundred and sixty degree turn to survey the landscape. Finally she shrugged. 'Okay, it beats me. The land looks flat for as far as the eye can see. At least until that ridge way over there.' She gestured to her right. 'But I can't see a homestead.'

'The land is deceptive.' He opened the car door for her, and his unwavering scrutiny made her clumsy. She knocked both an elbow and a knee as she climbed into her seat.

Oh, Nicola Ann, you are such a klutz.

He didn't say anything, but she swore those blue eyes of his twinkled before he closed the door.

Without another word he climbed into the driver's seat and they set off along what Nicola could only loosely describe as a track.

'Is it far to the homestead?'

'About five kilometres.'

She waited. He didn't say anything more. On the rough track the car couldn't go much faster than thirty kilometres an hour and the silence pressed in on her. Cade's tall, broad bulk dominated the interior cab and, for reasons she couldn't fathom, that made her nervous.

'Is the land near the homestead unsuitable for an airstrip?'

He flicked a glance in her direction. She doubted much got past those eyes of his. She could imagine them filling with that soul-destroying combination of derision and pity she'd seen in her friends' eyes during the last few months.

Yes, she could imagine it all too clearly and it made bile rise in her throat.

‘Fire,’ he said.

She blinked. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The reason the airstrip is away from the house is in case there’s an accident that could start a bushfire.’

Oh. It made perfect sense when she thought about it.

At that moment they topped a rise and Cade pulled the car to a halt. She stared at the vista spread before her and her ‘wow’ breathed out of her before she could help it, before she could remind herself about tempering her enthusiasm and keeping things businesslike.

She shook herself and swallowed. ‘Very impressive, Mr Hindmarsh.’

‘Cade,’ he corrected. ‘We don’t stand on ceremony out here, Nicola.’ He gestured out of the front windscreen. ‘As you can see, this is the station complex.’

It was much larger than anything she’d imagined. On the side nearest them was a sprawling homestead with two wings that spread out in a V shape from the main structure. The weatherboards were painted a crisp white and the corrugated iron roof a cool deep green. A veranda wrapped around it all, but it wasn’t the homestead’s size that stole her breath. It was the garden that surrounded it. Even from this distance she could make out the fronds of the two magnificent tree ferns that stood at the end of each wing, as well as the breadth of the date palms that dotted the lawn. ‘I can’t believe you have a garden. It’s like an oasis.’

‘Bore water,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t stop here so you could admire the view. I need you to understand some basic facts so you can stay out of trouble while you’re here.’

She frowned.

‘You might think coming out here for two months is an adventure, but the land is unforgiving. Underestimate it at your own peril.’

She tried to suppress a shiver. ‘Okay.’ And then she realised how weak and pathetic her voice sounded. She lifted her chin and made her voice stronger. ‘What do I need to know?’

‘The land is deceptive to the eye. It undulates. You think you know where you are and then you turn around and can’t see the homestead or any familiar landmarks. It’s that easy—’ he clicked his fingers ‘—to get lost. You’re not to go wandering about on your own.’

Her heart sank. There went her plan of jogging her way to fitness and thinness.

Damn it! She’d sworn to return to Melbourne toned and tanned. It would signal to Diane, Brad and all her other friends that she was getting on with her life. It would prove that she had confidence and chutzpah and was no longer an object of pity. She gripped her hands together. And the next time a guy dumped her she wanted to make sure it wasn’t because she was half a stone overweight.

‘Waminda Downs covers three million acres. That’s twelve thousand square kilometres.’

She pulled her mind back.

‘That’s a lot of ground to cover if someone goes missing.’

She read the subtext. If a person went missing out here they might never be found.

‘See that perimeter fence? It’s painted white.’

‘Yes.’

‘That encloses the four acres of the home paddock, including the homestead and outbuildings. You can wander freely within that, but do not cross that boundary unaccompanied.’

Four acres would be plenty! ‘Roger.’

‘And I’d like you and the girls to stay away from the cattle yards.’ He pointed to a series of yards on the side furthest away from them. They were separated from the homestead by a number of outbuildings. He proceeded to name the buildings. ‘That’s the machinery shed.’ It was huge. ‘Barn and stables.’ He pointed. ‘Next to them is the jackaroo and jillaroo quarters. Those smaller cottages at the far end are for the stockmen and their families.’

She blinked. Waminda Downs, it seemed, was its own thriving community.

‘Why are the cattle yards out of bounds?’ She wanted to understand every hazard in her new environment so she could head off any potential disasters.

‘We corralled a herd of brumby in there the week before last and we’re going to start breaking them in. It’s dangerous work.’

‘Okay.’ She nodded once, hard. ‘Anything else I need to know?’

‘If you do go exploring within the home paddock you always take a water bottle with you, and wear a hat and sunscreen. It’s only four acres, but it’s summer and at the height of the day the sun is merciless.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr Hindmarsh. I won’t be letting the girls outside between eleven a.m. and three p.m.’

‘The garden is surprisingly cool.’

She’d make her own judgement about that. Located two hours by plane from the nearest hospital, she had no intention of risking sunstroke in her charges.

‘And there’s just one final thing.’

Something in his tone made her turn. ‘Yes?’

His blue eyes flashed. ‘The name’s Cade—try it.’

She’d never had a problem calling any of her previous employers by their first name, but it suddenly occurred to her that she didn’t want to be on a first name basis with this man. She swallowed. He was too ... too confident, too gorgeous ... too *everything* that she wasn’t. He brought home to her all the things she lacked with a realness that made her want to turn her face away.

Coward.

For heaven’s sake, she was his children’s nanny. First names could not be avoided. She lifted her chin. She would be cool and poised. She would be competent and clever. She would be respected. She moistened her lips. His eyes followed the action. ‘Cade,’ she said. His name scraped out of her throat with an appalling huskiness and none of the poised cool she’d tried so hard to carry off.

He cocked an eyebrow. ‘See? Wasn’t so hard, was it?’

Before she could answer he started the engine again and they set off towards the homestead. This time she curbed any impulse to fill the silence. She focused instead on the homestead and garden, and tried to make out what it was that glittered on the trunks of the date palms and to see what the shapes were that littered the lawn.

And as they drew closer her jaw started to drop. The glitter ... it was tinsel. The shapes on the lawn ...

Oh. My. God. The shapes were Christmas-themed wooden cut-outs painted in the brightest colours imaginable. On one side of the lawn a Santa sleigh squatted along with four merry reindeer. On the other stood a wooden Santa in all his holiday merriment, a sack of toys at his feet. Gold and silver snowflakes hung from the veranda ceiling, alternating with green and red stars. Tinsel in every colour twined around the veranda posts.

She flinched. *Christmas*. Oh, she’d known she wouldn’t be able to avoid it completely—Cade had two young daughters after all—but ...

She’d thought that out here in the Never-Never it’d be small-scale, low-key ... restrained.

It hit her then that she’d been counting on it. Her chest cramped.

The car stopped at the edge of a path lined with oversized candy canes that she knew would light up at night. At the end of the path four broad steps led to the veranda and the front door of the homestead. It was a testament to the door’s solidity that it didn’t buckle beneath the weight of its enormous wreath. Three wooden angels graced the roof of the veranda, their trumpets raised heavenward as if heralding the arrival of the silly season.

She bit her tongue to stop from blurting out something unpoised and stupid. Her hands fisted and she blinked hard to counter the stinging in her eyes. All this Christmas-ness was a too-vivid reminder of the merriment and festivity she’d known herself incapable of taking part in back home.

It reminded her of the wedding she should've been planning. It taunted her with all she'd lost and how nothing—*nothing*—could ever replace it.

It was only the first week of December. She'd taken a month's leave from her job as a teacher and her four weeks of Christmas holidays, because Christmas and wedding preparations had become synonymous in her mind. But Christmas with all its gaudy festivity now stared her in the face. The joke was on her. She swallowed and tried to ignore the ache that spread through her chest.

'Now I'll warrant this isn't what you were expecting.'

Beside her, Cade chuckled. She couldn't open her mouth to either agree or disagree.

'What do you think?'

She hated it! The truth, though, would not endear her to him. Of that she was certain. And while she told herself she didn't give two hoots what her employer thought of her—other than that she did her job well—deliberate rudeness was not in her nature. Nor was it poised, elegant or dignified. She tried to think of something coolly elegant to say ... or even something bland and inoffensive.

She turned to Cade, she racked her brain and then realised she needn't have bothered. One glance at his face told her he'd perceived her true feelings on the matter. His eyes narrowed and while there was no denying that he was broad, big and strong, for the first time he looked formidable too.

She swallowed. She couldn't find a smile, but she struggled for light. 'To think I'd left all this behind in the city.'

His lips tightened. 'So that's what you're running from.'

'I'm not running from anything.' Taking a timeout wasn't running.

He leaned back, but his eyes remained flint hard. Blue flint in a landscape of khaki and brown. The pulse in her throat swelled and pounded. 'That generator I just unloaded, it's to run all the coloured fairy lights I'm planning on hanging from the house and around the garden in the next week or two.'

The homestead would look like some tacky fairy tale palace. She sucked in a breath. Or an overdecorated wedding cake.

'We're doing Christmas big out here this year, Ms McGillroy. If that's going to be a problem for you then it's not too late for me to radio Jerry to come back and fly you out of here.'

So she could face all this insubstantial, bubble-popping, fake merriment in Melbourne? No, thank you very much! She could put on a happy face and *do* Christmas. The people at Waminda Downs didn't know her. They wouldn't murmur, *There, there, the holiday season can be tough sometimes, can't it?* She might not be through with gritting her teeth yet, but she was absolutely positively done with pity.

'I thought we'd agreed on first names, Cade.'

Very slowly, the tension eased out of him.

She turned back to stare at all the over-the-top Christmasness. 'My mother would find all this the height of tackiness.'

There was no denying that thought cheered her up.

'You repeat that to Ella and Holly and I'll throttle you.'

The words came out on a lazy breath but she didn't doubt their veracity. She stared down her nose at him. 'I'm the nanny, not the evil witch.'

'Just make sure you stay in character.'

She frowned and turned more fully to face him. 'You don't exactly strike me as the Santa Claus type yourself, you know?' And he didn't. Competent, calm in a crisis, perceptive, she'd peg him as all those things, but joyful and jocund? She shook her head.

'Just goes to show what you know, then.'

But he shifted on his seat and she remembered he was a father—a single father—and his first priority was making sure his daughters were looked after and happy. 'I would never ruin the magic of Christmas for any child,' she assured him.

He surveyed her again and then nodded. 'Glad that's settled.'

He still didn't strike her as Father Christmas material, but there was no questioning his devotion to his daughters. It warmed something inside her that she didn't want warmed. It made her draw back inside herself. 'When can I meet Ella and Holly?'

He eyed her thoughtfully, but eventually nodded in the direction of her car window. 'Right about now, I'd say.'

Nicola turned ... and fell in love.

Four-year-old Ella and eighteen-month-old Holly wore the biggest smiles and had the most mischievous faces Nicola had ever seen, and they were dancing down the front steps of the homestead and along the path towards her in matching red and green frocks.

Good Lord! She gulped. She hadn't factored this in when she'd plotted to keep her distance and maintain her reserve as she implemented her self-improvement scheme.

She pushed out of the car, a smile spreading through her. Children, she made an amendment to her earlier plan, didn't count. Children didn't lie and cheat. Children didn't pretend to be your friend and then steal your fiancé.

She didn't need to guard her heart around children.

Cade watched Nicola greet Ella and Holly and win them over in two seconds flat.

It wasn't a difficult feat. He refused to give their perplexing nanny any credit for that. Despite all they'd been through, Ella and Holly were remarkably trusting. They'd have shown as much delight if he'd presented Jerry, the pilot, as their nanny.

But as he watched them, especially Ella, delight in Nicola's undeniably female presence, his heart started to burn. It should be their mother here. Not a nanny. And no amount of Christmas cheer could ever make that up to his children.

His hands clenched. It wasn't going to stop him from giving them the best Christmas possible, though.

He pushed out of the car in time to hear Ella ask, 'Can I call you Nikki?'

Nicola shook her head very solemnly. 'No, but you can call me Nic. All of my friends call me Nic.'

Ella clapped her hands, but at the mention of friends a shadow passed across Nicola's face. And just as he had back at the airstrip, Cade found that he wanted to chase that shadow away.

He didn't know why. His children's nanny wasn't particularly winning. She was of ordinary height and weight, perhaps veering a little more on the solid side. When she'd first emerged from the plane and had gazed around with a smile curving her lips, he'd been satisfied. When he'd shaken her hand, he'd been more than satisfied.

And then she'd become stiff and prickly and he hadn't been able to work out why yet. He was pretty sure he hadn't frightened her—given his size and the remoteness of the station he'd have understood her apprehension. He was even more certain that she hadn't wanted to turn around and go back home.

She leant her hands on her knees to talk to his daughters—ordinary hair a nondescript brown and an ordinary face. Ordinary clothes—baggy three-quarter length trousers and an oversized shirt, neither of which did anything much for her. But those eyes—there was nothing ordinary about them. Or their shadows.

Christmas wasn't the time for shadows. And Waminda Downs, this year, was not the place for them.

He hooked a thumb into the pocket of his jeans. Despite what she said, she was running from something. He was certain of it. All the background checks he'd had completed assured him that whatever it was, it wasn't criminal. The way she smiled at his daughters, her easy manner with them, told him she could be trusted with them, that his instincts hadn't let him down there.

But could she be trusted to keep her word and not create a cloud over Christmas? Ella and Holly had suffered enough. They deserved all the fun and festivity he could crowd into their days this Christmas season.

Guilt for last Christmas chafed at him, filling his mouth with bile. They hadn't had a Christmas last year. His lip curled. He should've made an effort, but he hadn't. His hands clenched. Last year he hadn't been able to pull himself out from under the cloud of Fran leaving ... of her almost total abandonment of their daughters ... of his failure to keep his family together. He'd let his bitterness, his anger and his despair blight last Christmas.

But not this year. This year no effort would be spared.

As he watched, Ella took one of Nicola's hands and Holly the other and they led her across to Santa's sleigh and he thought back to the expression on her face when she'd first surveyed the Christmas decorations—a kind of appalled horror.

Then, unbidden, he recalled a portion of their phone interview last month. 'Mr Hindmarsh, are you widowed, separated or divorced? I know that's a personal question and that it's none of my business, but it can have an impact on the children and I need to know about anything that may affect them.'

He'd told her the truth—that he was divorced. But ...

None of the other applicants had asked that question. Nicola had been evidently reluctant to, but she'd screwed up the courage to ask it all the same. His children's best interests were more important to her than her own personal comfort. That was one of the reasons why he'd chosen her.

Nicola threw her head back now and laughed at something Ella said, and Ella laughed and Holly laughed and all three of them fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Nicola's face lit up as if from the inside as she gathered his children close to her and the impact slugged him in the gut, making the ground beneath his feet rock.

Blinking, he took a physical step away from the trio.

'The kids have met the new nanny then?'

He glanced down at his housekeeper, Martha Harrison—Harry for short—as she joined him. 'Yep.'

'And they seem to have hit it off.'

Nicola climbed back to her feet, looking perfectly ordinary again as she glanced towards him, her reserve well and truly back in place, and the world righted itself.

He introduced the two women. Harry nodded her approval. It should set his mind at ease. But as Nicola hugged her reserve about her all the more tightly, his unease grew.

He trailed behind as Harry led the way into the house. He waited in the kitchen as Harry and the girls showed Nicola to her quarters. 'What's eating you?' Harry asked, when she returned alone.

'Where are Ella and Holly?'

The older woman chuckled. 'Helping Nicola unpack.'

He huffed out a breath. 'Do you find her a bit ... stiff?'

'She appears to be no-nonsense and low maintenance; that's good enough for me.' She shot him a glance as she put the kettle on to boil. 'Don't forget she's a long way from home and this is a lot to adjust to.'

All of those things were true, but ...

Cade drew in a breath. He'd let Ella and Holly down enough these last sixteen months. His hands balled to fists. Christmas—bells and whistles ... the works—that was what Waminda Downs was getting this year. And he meant to enlist Nicola's help to ensure it all went as smoothly and superbly as he'd planned.

CHAPTER TWO

AT TEN past six the next morning, dressed in running shorts and an oversized T-shirt, Nicola stepped out of the French windows of her generously proportioned bedroom and onto the veranda. She blinked in the morning sun.

Ten past six? She bit back a whimper. She'd never been a morning person.

Ten past six and it was already getting hellishly warm. It might even be too hot for a run and—
Stop that!

She lifted her chin. She would not sabotage herself before she'd even begun.

Puffing out a breath, she stretched to one side and then the other. She tried to touch her toes. She was here to change. She needed to change. She would change!

She'd exercise if it killed her. She *would* return to Melbourne better and brighter and smarter.

She gritted her teeth and stretched harder. She'd keep getting up at six a.m. if it killed her too. It gave her a good hour before she needed to make sure her young charges were up and at breakfast, and before the heat of the day settled over the place like a suffocating blanket.

At the thought of Ella and Holly, she couldn't help but smile. The two little girls were delightful. While they might've presented her with the biggest flaw in her maintain-a-dignified-distance plan, she didn't regret amending that plan to not include them.

Children didn't pretend to be your friend and then tear the heart out of your chest with treachery and double-dealing.

The bitterness of that thought took her off guard. She brushed a hand across her eyes and straightened. Diane and Brad hadn't meant to fall in love with each other. They hadn't meant to hurt her. For heaven's sake, it had all happened three months ago!

She scraped the hair off her face and pulled it back into a ponytail, concentrating on her breathing until the ache in her chest started to subside.

A lot of people who come out here are running away ...

She wasn't running away. It was just ...

Seeing Brad and Diane together had become harder, not easier and she didn't know why. She only knew she couldn't spend this Christmas in Melbourne while continuing to maintain her sympathetic, understanding and oh-so-mature façade. She wasn't up to indulging in the usual jolly Christmas with her friends this year. She was out of jolly.

But she'd find it again. Somehow.

She adjusted her cap as Sammy, Ella and Holly's eight-month-old Border collie pup, came skidding around the side of the house to race up to her, full of excitement and delight at the sight of her. Children *and* dogs were the flaw in her plan. He rolled onto his back and she obligingly rubbed his tummy.

'You want to come for a run, Sammy?' She straightened and set off down the back steps. He scurried after her. 'Perhaps you can give me some pointers—' she sighed '—because I don't think I have ever been for a run in my life.'

He cocked his head to one side and watched her when she halted and planted her hands on her hips. 'Okay, Sammy, here's the plan. We'll jog to the perimeter fence—' she pointed '—and then around to that point there.' She indicated a second spot. Both spots were well away from outbuildings and cattle yards. 'Then we'll make our way back to the homestead.'

Nicola Ann, tell me you are not talking to a dog.

Nicola gritted her teeth and ignored her mother's imaginary voice.

At least you're finally going to exercise.

That almost made her turn back.

Sammy jumped up to rest his front paws against her thighs. She patted him. 'You don't care if I'm fat or frumpy, do you, Sammy?' It was one of the reasons she loved dogs ... and children. Sammy wagged his tail and it gave her an absurd kind of comfort. 'Okay, then.' She hauled in a less-than-enthusiastic breath. 'Tally-ho.'

She started to jog. Her brand new sports bra was supportive, but not quite as supportive as she'd hoped. Maybe she needed to adjust the straps again. Though, if she tightened them any further she'd cut off the circulation altogether. The bra started to scratch and irritate the sides of her breasts. It hadn't done that in the fitting room. 'No pain, no gain,' she muttered to Sammy. She'd bought an identical sports bra in a size smaller for Month Two when she'd lost some weight. Both bras had been horrendously expensive. When she'd paid for them she'd told herself the expense would provide her with an added incentive to exercise. She'd thought the expense would translate into comfort too. She'd been wrong about that.

By the time she and Sammy reached the fence she was gasping for air. She sagged against a fence post. It took a concerted effort not to sink to the ground. Oh God! She glanced at her watch.

Three minutes?

No!

She shook the watch. She held it to her ear. It ticked away in perfect working order. She swallowed. 'Okay, Sammy, amended plan,' she panted. 'We jog for three minutes, then walk for three minutes.'

She set off again, fighting doubts and discouragement. She'd known this would take time. It wasn't possible to undo a lifetime of couch-potato-ness in just one day. Besides, she had a lot of chocolate sultanas to shift from her hips and thighs.

To distract herself from bursting lungs and legs that had started to burn, she forced herself to gaze at her surroundings. The quality of the light would've stolen her breath if she'd had any to spare. The clear blue of the sky and the sun low in the sky behind her outlined everything in perfect clarity. It enchanted her, even as half her attention had to remain on the path she took to avoid tussocks of grass and rocks that had definite ankle-turning potential.

She glanced at her watch and sighed. 'Time to jog again, Sammy.'

They set off at a jog, slower this time, and when her lungs started to burn again she reminded herself how much her new trainers had cost—four times what she'd paid for the bras. She *was* going to get her money's worth out of them. She could keep running for another—she glanced at her watch—one and three quarter minutes. She glanced down at her feet to admire the way the red dirt had already tarnished the brand-new perfection of her trainers when Sammy chose that moment to leap in front of her in pursuit of a grasshopper. It happened too quickly for her to avoid contact with him, to dance out of the way, to regain her balance or for anything except a full-frontal plough on her stomach through red dirt. When she came to a halt she blinked and spat out the grit that had found its way into her mouth.

Very elegant, Nicola.

True. But she took a few seconds to savour the sweet stillness of her body until Sammy, distracted from his prey by her fall, chose that moment to plaster wet licks all across her face.

'Sammy, heel!'

Sammy immediately obeyed as a shadow fell across her.

Oh, God! Cade. With a groan she rolled over and sat up. Why did her most undignified and humiliating moments have to occur in full public view?

'Are you hurt?'

'No.'

He turned and waved some signal and that was when she saw another two men—workers of Cade's, she supposed—standing outside the barn. They returned to work. The realisation that so many

people had witnessed her pathetic attempt at fitness, not to mention her clumsiness, made her cheeks burn and her hands clench.

‘C’mon.’ Cade held a hand out to her.

Scowling at him and telling him to go away obviously wasn’t an option, so she put her hand in his and let him haul her to her feet. He hitched his head in the direction of the homestead and didn’t release her until she nodded her agreement.

Wiping the dirt from her face and the front of her T-shirt ... and her shorts and her knees, she managed to avoid his eye. ‘You don’t need to escort me back.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

His voice shook with laughter. She closed her eyes, more heat scorching her cheeks. She wasn’t sure what was worse—him being aware of her utter mortification or him thinking her cheeks were this red from such a pitiful amount of exercise.

‘I want to make sure you haven’t really hurt yourself—twisted an ankle or a knee—but you seem to be walking all right.’

If that was a cue to make her trip up, she had every intention of disappointing him. ‘I’m fine.’ Except for a bruised ego.

‘Good. Then you and I are going to have words.’

Her heart sank. Marvellous.

He made her sit on the back steps while he inspected her knees and elbows for scratches. ‘We’re a long way from a doctor,’ he said when she started to object.

She stared at the sky and tried to ignore the warmth of his fingers on her flesh.

Finally he subsided onto the step beside her. ‘So what’s with the jogging?’

Heat flared afresh in her face and neck. ‘Oh, I ...’

She had to look away. There was something about those blue eyes that saw too much. He’d laugh at her. Her lips twisted. Just like her friends in Melbourne would’ve laughed if they’d seen her earlier this morning. The butt of oh-yet-another joke.

‘Nicola?’

What the hell? She lifted her chin. She was through with turning herself inside out to please other people. ‘I thought I’d take advantage of all the wide open space and fresh county air to ...’ she swallowed in readiness for his laughter ‘... to try and get fit.’

She clenched her hands. Strong in body. Strong in mind. It might not happen overnight, but she *could* work towards it. She *could* change. She gritted her teeth. Losing her fiancé to another woman *did not* make her a loser or a failure.

‘Dry dusty air at this time of year more like.’

She didn’t say anything.

‘You didn’t have a water bottle with you.’

That was when it hit her—he hadn’t laughed yet. And one look at his face told her he wasn’t going to. He didn’t think her plan of getting fit was stupid at all. Instead, he was going to tell her off for not taking a water bottle. ‘I thought with it being so early and all ...’

‘If I see you without a water bottle the next time you go jogging, we will have serious words, you understand?’

She swallowed and nodded.

He frowned. ‘It’s a bit early for New Year resolutions, isn’t it?’

‘Getting fit and losing weight was this year’s resolution,’ she sighed. ‘I’m trying to get it in under the wire.’

His chuckle held no malice or ridicule. It warmed her blood. ‘Getting fit is an admirable goal, but losing weight ...’ He shook his head. ‘Seems to me women get too hooked up on that stuff.’

If she’d been half a stone lighter and had taken more care with her appearance, maybe Brad wouldn’t have dumped her for Diane.

Cade sent her a lazy appraisal from beneath heavy-lidded eyes and it did something ludicrous to her insides, made them light and fluttery. She didn't like it.

'Anyway, you look just fine to me,' he said with a shrug.

Her hands clenched. She didn't want to look *just fine*. She wanted to be gorgeous, stunning ... confident. She wanted to knock a man's socks off.

She had a horrid sick feeling that even if she did lose half a stone and took more care with her appearance, she would never be able to achieve that anyway.

His eyes suddenly narrowed. 'I don't want you getting obsessive about your weight while you're out here, dieting and exercising to within an inch of your life.'

She understood where Cade's concern came from. She wasn't a primary school teacher for nothing. 'I have no intention of being obsessive about anything. And I promise I will not send Ella or Holly any negative body image messages.'

He stared at her. It made her self-conscious. She made a show of looking at her watch. 'It's nearly time to get Ella and Holly up for breakfast.'

She stood and made her escape.

When Nicola and the children entered the kitchen a short time later, it was to find Cade seated at the kitchen table too. Nicola's appetite promptly fled.

He glanced up. 'You must be hungry after your morning's exertions.'

His words emerged with a lazy unconcern, but his eyes were keen and sharp. She lifted her chin. 'Absolutely.'

She might have no appetite to speak of, but there was no way she could refuse to eat breakfast. Not after their earlier conversation. The thing was, she had no intention of obsessively dieting. She just meant to avoid cakes and biscuits and chocolate sultanas and all those other yummy things while she was here.

She ate cereal and yogurt. She tried not to focus too keenly on Cade's bacon and eggs and beans on toast. Cereal and yogurt—yum, yum.

Liar.

She might not be able to summon up much enthusiasm for a high fibre, low fat breakfast, but she was well aware that Cade took note of everything that passed her lips. So she ate. It should've irked her that he watched so closely. For some reason, though, she found it strangely comforting instead.

When they finished, he rose. 'There's something I want to show you, something I think you'll be interested in.'

Wordlessly she followed him through the house. He wore jeans that fitted him to perfection. The material stretched across lean hips and a tight butt and she couldn't drag her gaze away. Her throat hitched. Awareness—sexual awareness—inched through her. Her blood heated up and a pulse started up deep in the centre of her. She moistened her lips, curled her fingers and wondered—

No way!

She slammed to a halt. No way!

He turned back, frowned. 'What's up?'

Her racing pulse slowed as his expression filtered into her panicked brain. The denial in her throat died. She shook herself. This man didn't see her as anything other than an employee. He certainly didn't see her as an attractive, available woman. She might doubt her own strength, but she didn't doubt his.

She'd come here to toughen up, to face reality and get stronger. Lusting after her boss *was not* the answer.

'Nicola?'

She shook herself. 'I just had one of those thoughts, you know? A bolt from the blue, but ... Did I leave the oven on?'

He leaned towards her. 'What? In Melbourne?'

She nodded.

‘And?’

‘No, I’m certain I turned it off.’

He frowned. ‘You sure about that? You want to ring someone to check?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m positive I turned it off.’

With a shake of his head, he continued down the corridor. He flung open a door near its far end and strode into the darkened room to lift the blinds at the window. She followed him in, glanced around and her jaw dropped. ‘You have a home gym?’

There was a treadmill, an exercise bike, a rowing machine and a weight machine. Oh, this would be perfect! She walked about the room, her fingers trailing across the equipment. ‘This is amazing,’ she breathed. ‘Is it okay if I use it?’

‘Sure.’ Then his face tightened up. ‘Someone may as well. I don’t think anyone has been in here, except to clean, since Fran left.’

Fran?

‘My ex-wife and the girls’ mother,’ he said, answering her unspoken question.

He didn’t smile. His face remained tight and it warned her not to ask questions. He obviously had his demons too. It took an effort of will not to reach out, though, and place her hand on his arm in silent sympathy. When he turned and left, she counted slowly to ten before she closed the door and followed him.

‘How was your day?’

Nicola blinked and then lowered her knife and fork when she realised Cade had directed that question at her. It was nearing the end of her second full day at Waminda Downs and they were all seated around the kitchen table eating dinner. She and Cade had barely spoken since he’d shown her the home gym yesterday. ‘I ... um ... good. Thank you,’ she added belatedly. ‘And ... uh ... you?’

He ignored that. ‘Have the girls given you any trouble?’

‘No!’

‘So ... you’re settling in okay?’

‘Yes, of course.’ She glanced at Ella and Holly and a smile built inside her. The three of them had enjoyed a fabulous day. ‘Your daughters are delightful. I can’t tell you how much I enjoy their company.’

One side of his mouth hooked up. ‘You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face.’

Was it? She sat back. Maybe that was something she should add to her list of personal-attributes-to-work-on-and-improve. She didn’t want to be so easy to read. She didn’t want to wear her heart on her sleeve.

She wanted to be coolly poised and self-possessed.

‘It wasn’t a criticism,’ he said quietly.

Definitely something she needed to work on!

She tried to smooth her face out into a polite smile. ‘I wanted to thank you for letting me use the home gym.’

He shrugged her gratitude aside, but his eyes started to dance. ‘How’s the treadmill turning out? Managing to stay on your feet?’

She nearly spluttered her mouthful of iced water across the table, but the grin he sent her made her laugh. ‘That was below the belt!’

‘I couldn’t resist.’ He took a long pull on his beer. ‘Have you been having any problems with any of the equipment? There must be instruction manuals somewhere around the place.’

‘It all seems to be in perfect working order. I might loathe it, but the treadmill is a cinch to operate and I don’t hate it as much as that darn rowing machine.’

He stared and then he threw his head back and laughed. Harry chuckled. Ella laughed too, although Nicola suspected she had no idea what she was laughing at. She just wanted to join in. Not to be outdone, Holly let forth with a squeal

Nicola Ann, must you sound so gauche?

Inside, she cringed. She was supposed to be developing polish and self-possession, not blurting out the first thing that came into her head and sounding like an idiot, becoming the butt of the joke.

Frustration built inside her. She clenched her hands so tight her fingernails bit into her palms. Why couldn't she manage one simple thing—to think before she spoke? Was it really that hard?

Failure. Loser. Doormat.

The insults flew at her, thick and fast. Not just in her mother's voice either. Her own was the loudest.

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. 'I'm sorry, that came out all wrong. I just meant ...'

He raised an eyebrow. He'd stopped laughing but he was still grinning. That grin made her heart beat a little harder. It made it difficult for her not to grin back. She swallowed and lectured herself for the umpteenth time about dignity. 'There's absolutely nothing wrong with any of the equipment. It's just that exercise and I have an ambivalent relationship.'

'Love, you ain't the only one,' Harry said with a consoling pat to Nicola's arm. 'Now, how about I bathe the littlies while you stack the dishwasher?'

It was obvious Harry adored Ella and Holly and, if the expression on her face was anything to go by, she enjoyed bath time too. Nicola was happy to divide the chores. 'Deal.' She rose and started to clear the table.

'You promised to read me a bedtime story, Nic!' Ella reminded her. 'Don't forget.'

She planted her hands on her hips and gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes. 'How could I forget something as important as that?'

With a giggle, Ella allowed Harry to lead her away.

A glance back at the table confirmed that Cade watched her. She couldn't decipher the expression in his eyes, but it made her break out in gooseflesh and turned all her fingers to thumbs. She opened her mouth to fill the quiet, but shut it again. That kind of rattling on was neither dignified nor self-possessed. She stacked the dishwasher, and suffered his examination in silence.

'Nicola,' he said, finally breaking the silence, 'you don't strike me as the gym-junkie type.'

No, she was more a curl-up-on-the-sofa-with-a-good-book-and-a-block-of-chocolate type. Admitting that certainly wouldn't be dignified, though. 'I think we've definitely established I'm not the jogging-outside-in-the-fresh-country-air type either,' she managed with a wry, hopefully dignified smile. 'Despite what I said, I do understand the benefits of regular exercise and I am grateful for the use of your home gym.'

She poured detergent into the dishwasher and then switched it on. 'I have every intention of continuing.'

He stood. 'Come with me. There's something I want to show you.'

Last time he'd said that he'd showed her a home gym.

He grinned at her hesitation. 'You'll love it, I promise.'

Nicola smelled like strawberry jam. He'd first noticed it when he'd helped her to her feet yesterday morning. He hadn't been able to get the smell of it out of his head. He'd been craving another hit ever since. Walking beside her now towards the stables, he could drag that scent into his lungs unimpeded and drink in his fill.

Still ... He glanced across at her. There was no denying that she was a hell of a puzzle. When she let her guard down her blunt honesty and self-deprecation made him laugh. She was completely unguarded around the children. She was much more reserved around him and Harry. Especially him.

And the shadows in her eyes haunted him. They reminded him of last Christmas, with all of its bleak despair and bitterness. He didn't want reminders of last Christmas. He wanted festivity and merriment and all-out Christmas cheer.

His lips twisted. He had a hunch that plugging away every day on that darn treadmill and rowing machine weren't going to improve Nicola's Christmas cheer. It might just cement those shadows in her eyes for good!

Exercise-wise, he had her pegged as a team player—basketball, cricket, softball, it probably wouldn't matter which. There wasn't a chance he'd be able to organise that out here, though. At least, not until the rest of the family arrived in a week and a half's time.

Which left him with one other option to win her over, and help dispel those shadows.

He ushered her through the door of the barn. She glanced up, spearing him with those amazing eyes. She opened her mouth, and then shut it again. He sensed the effort it took her and wondered why she didn't just ask what she so obviously wanted to.

He took her arm to guide her through the early evening dimness of the barn and through a connecting door to the stables. Her eyes widened as they walked along the line of horse stalls. Her breath quickened and beneath his fingers her skin suddenly seemed to come alive.

He dropped his hand, shook it out, and told himself to stop being stupid. Halting at a stall halfway down the row, he gestured to the horse inside. The mare whickered softly and nuzzled his hand for a treat. He fed her the lump of sugar he'd stolen from the kitchen.

'This here is Scarlett O'Hara.' He glanced down at Nicola, who was staring at the horse as if she'd never seen one before. 'She's yours to ride for the duration of your stay at Waminda Downs.'

She stared at him as if she hadn't understood. The hair at his nape started to prickle. He shoved his hands into his pockets. Did he have her pegged all wrong? It was just ...

She liked kids. She liked dogs. It made sense that she'd like horses too.

He hunched his shoulders. 'I mean, if you don't want to ride that's fine. But if you do, I'm happy to teach you.'

Her eyes filled and he backed up a step. Darn it all! She wasn't going to cry, was she? He was trying to instil Christmas spirit, not histrionics.

She clasped her hands beneath her chin. 'Do you really mean that?'

Just for a moment, she reminded him of Ella. He rolled his shoulders and eyed her warily. 'Sure I do.'

She swallowed. Her eyes went back to normal. If amazing could be called normal. 'All my life,' she whispered, reaching out to rest a hand against Scarlett's neck, 'I've wanted to learn to ride.'

Her eyes suddenly shone. Her whole face came alive. She smiled. The same way she smiled at Ella and Holly. A full and open smile. A wholehearted smile. At him.

The impact hit him square in the middle of his chest. The ground beneath his feet tilted. Fire licked along his veins to pool and burn in his groin. Desire stirred inside him for the first time in sixteen months.

He took a step away from her. 'First lesson at six-fifteen sharp in the morning,' he rapped out. Then he turned on his heel and fled. He couldn't even respond to the thank you she called after him.

CHAPTER THREE

CADE had Jack, his head stockman, give Nicola her first riding lesson. He stayed away.

Curiosity, though, defeated him by mid-morning. When he saw Ella and Holly with Nicola on the lawn in the shade of one of the date palms, their tartan blanket a flash of blue and red in the sun, he took a breather from breaking in a promising young colt to make his way over to them.

As he drew nearer he could hear them singing *Waltzing Matilda*, their heads bent over ... something. At least, Nicola and Ella were singing, Holly mostly la-laahed. He glanced around the garden at all the Christmas decorations and wondered why they weren't singing Christmas carols.

His gaze returned to Nicola and he chewed the inside of his lip. Without warning, Holly crawled into Nicola's lap. One of Nicola's arms went about her, cradling her easily. With her other hand she pushed the hair back from the child's forehead and dropped an easy kiss there before picking up her ... crayon again. She and Ella were colouring in a gigantic picture of a billabong—complete with kangaroos, koalas, wombats, a spindly emu and ... a bunyip that Ella was colouring purple and orange.

He surveyed the tableau and something warm and sweet pooled low in his belly. He'd have loved it if they sang *Jingle Bells* and coloured in a festive Santa-themed picture, but it was obvious Nicola had developed an easy relationship with his children in a very short space of time, and for that he was grateful.

'Ella,' Nicola said, halting mid-verse.

It was only when she stopped that he realised what a lovely singing voice she had.

'I have eyes in the back of my head and I do believe your daddy is standing right behind us.'

Ella spun around and with a squeal launched herself at him. He swung her up into his arms. 'Nic's magic,' she told him.

'She must be,' he agreed, wondering what had given him away.

Nicola turned then too and smiled. 'I'm a primary school teacher. Eyes in the back of one's head is a necessary prerequisite.'

Her smile didn't knock his world off its axis, didn't create a fireball of desire. He let out a long, slow breath. Last night's reaction had been nothing more than an overload of hormones—a temporary aberration. Understandable given he'd been celibate for the last eighteen months.

He did notice that her hair looked shiny in the dappled light, though, and that her skin had a healthy glow. 'How did the riding lesson go this morning?'

Her face lit up. 'Oh! It was the best fun!'

Something inside him thumped in response. He planted his legs and tried to quash it. 'I hope you didn't mind that Jack gave the lesson?'

'Not at all. He's a great teacher.'

Something in her voice, if not her face, told him she was glad he'd sent Jack in his stead. It made him want to thrust his jaw out and—

He shook himself.

'He says I'm a natural.'

It was what he'd told Cade too. When Cade had finally shown his face. It was obvious the older man liked her.

'Sore?' It was a malicious question and he didn't know where it came from.

'Not yet.'

He was going to tell her she would be in the morning, but Ella chose that moment to wriggle out of his grasp. 'Come and see our picture, Daddy. Nic brought a whole book of pictures and said we could colour in one a day if we want.'

'Any Christmas pictures?' he couldn't help asking.

The colour heightened in her cheeks, but she merely tossed her head. 'They're all native Australian bush scenes.'

'They're beautiful,' Ella announced.

He stared at Nicola and pursed his lips. 'How about a Christmas carol before I get back to work?'

'Yay!' Ella clapped her hands.

He could've sworn Nicola rolled her eyes.

Ella launched into "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer". To her credit, Nicola started on the song only a beat later. The sweetness of her voice held him spellbound.

She tossed him a crayon and broke off singing to say, 'Join in or get back to work, those are your options.'

He grinned at the school teacher bossiness of it. He started singing too and coloured a koala blue.

When they finished Ella squirmed in excitement. 'It's only twenty more sleeps till Christmas!'

Nicola didn't say anything.

Cade ruffled Ella's hair. 'That's right, pumpkin.'

'I want lots and lots of presents,' the child announced. 'I want the *Rapunzel* movie and a Barbie camper.'

Cade stifled a grin. He'd ordered the DVD and a whole load of Barbie accessories over six weeks ago. He hadn't wanted to risk the stores running out. They were stowed in the top of his wardrobe at this very moment.

'Nic!' Ella bounced some more. 'What do you want Santa to bring you?'

'I don't expect Santa to bring me anything because I'm a grown-up.'

Cade cleared his throat. 'At Waminda Downs, Santa brings everyone a present.'

Comprehension dawned in those amazing eyes.

'Every year,' Ella confided, 'he brings Harry the biggest box of chocolates and ... and ... something in a bottle.'

Nicola shot him a quick glance. 'Perfume?'

'Baileys Irish Cream.'

Her lips twitched. 'You know, that sounds exactly what I'd wish for too.'

'Not a Barbie camper van?' Ella said, her mouth turning down.

'I already have one. Santa brought me one when I was six.'

'Oh, okay.' Ella went back to colouring in.

Cade frowned. A box of chocolate-coated ginger and a bottle of Baileys suddenly seemed all wrong for Nicola. He shifted. 'If you could have anything, what would you ask for?'

She shook her head and shrugged. The question obviously didn't interest her and that disturbed him.

'Other than a horse,' he persisted, 'what was the one thing you asked for when you were growing up, but never got?'

She stared up at the sky, lips pursed. 'Romance novels.'

He blinked.

'I loved them when I was a teenager and when I was fourteen I asked for a collection of romance novels. What I received was a leather-bound set of the complete works of Jane Austen. Which, technically, are romances, and don't get me wrong, I love Jane Austen, but ...'

But they hadn't been what she'd asked for.

She frowned. 'I haven't read a romance novel in ages.' She glanced at him and then gave a defiant toss of her head, though he couldn't help noticing how she was careful not to jerk Holly awake. 'And no doubt my life is the poorer for it.'

Romance novels, huh?

He stared at her and his youngest daughter. 'You look like the Madonna and child.'

She snorted. 'There's nothing immaculate about me, take my word for it.'

He choked back a laugh. She stiffened and then did that stupid pulling back thing, as if she wished she hadn't said what she had, even though it was funny and had made him laugh. It ruined his mood completely.

'Time I got back to work,' he said abruptly, climbing to his feet.

'Bye, Daddy.'

He turned away, only to swing back half a second later. 'A soak in a hot bath this evening will help with the sore muscles.' And then he turned on his heel and strode off with long strides because the image that flooded his mind of Nicola stretched out in a steamy bath, her eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure, needed to be booted out again asap before the ground beneath his feet started shifting again.

He bit back a curse. Hormones might be a fact of life, but they could be darn inconvenient.

Ten days later Cade's family arrived—his mother and all her luggage on one plane, his sister and his five-year-old twin nephews on another. His brother-in-law would fly in on Christmas Eve.

This was what Cade had been dreaming of and planning for—a rowdy family Christmas full of fun and laughter and festivity.

He couldn't help noticing the way Nicola kept herself in the background, though. He'd done his best not to notice her this past week. Not that he'd been particularly successful.

He couldn't help noticing the way her gaze kept returning to the bowl of chocolate sultanas that Harry had put out as a treat, along with fruitcake and shortbread, either. She ignored the fruitcake and the shortbread, but she eyed those sultanas as if they held the answer to the universe. It made him smile. He held his breath and waited for her to seize a handful and enter into the Christmas spirit.

She didn't, even though she couldn't seem to stop her gaze from darting back to them again and again. Something in his chest started to burn.

When a bout of family Christmas carols started up, he couldn't help but notice the way her eyes dimmed, even though she kept a smile on her face. Or the way she slipped out of the French windows and onto the veranda.

Ella and Holly didn't notice. They were too entranced with their grandmother, their aunt and their cousins. Nobody else noticed either.

Cade pursed his lips and counted to ten—that was the number of days left till Christmas—and then he pushed out of his chair, had a quick word with Harry and followed Nicola into the night.

Nicola stared out at the darkness and couldn't believe how many stars this Outback night sky held. She had never seen so many stars. Around on this side of the veranda, away from the light spilling from doors and windows and where she could barely hear the Christmas carols, the stars gleamed bigger and brighter.

Away from all that Christmas merriment, the burn surrounding her heart started to ease too.

And then her sixth sense kicked in—Cade—and a different kind of burning started up in her veins. A heat she didn't want. A heat she certainly didn't trust.

She didn't turn from the railing. 'You should be in there with your family and enjoying this time with them.'

'So should you.'

She turned at that. 'They're not my family, Cade. Besides, I think it's nice for Ella and Holly to have a chance to focus on their grandmother, aunt and cousins without me getting in the way. And don't worry, I'm wearing my watch. I'll put them to bed in another half an hour.'

'Three things.' His voice cut the air. 'One, you're not in the way. Two, for as long as you're at Waminda you're part of the family. Three, I asked Harry to put the girls to bed. I saw how much you helped her with dinner.'

His high-handedness irked her. She didn't like his tone much either. Last month the old Nicola would've shrugged it off and tried to ignore it, but not the new improved version of Nicola McGillroy. No, sirree.

‘One—’ she held up a finger ‘—I’m here to do a job and I don’t need anyone else to do it for me. I can carry my own weight.’ She just wasn’t prepared to carry anyone else’s any more. ‘And two, I should be allowed a few moments’ quiet time every now and again without you jumping on me with that you’re-ruining-Christmas tone in your voice.’

She had no intention of ruining Christmas for Cade and his family. It was why she’d stolen from the living room earlier. All that Christmas gaiety had filled her with such unexpected longing it had stolen her breath and knocked her sideways ... For a moment she’d thought she might burst into tears.

She shuddered. How would she have explained that?

‘I didn’t mean to jump on you.’

The shock in his voice shamed her. All he was trying to do was give his kids and family a nice Christmas. Her hang-ups weren’t his fault. She gripped her hands together. She only had to put up with all this Christmas cheer for another week and a half.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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