

The Guardian's
Forbidden
Mistress

*Miranda
Lee*

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Miranda Lee
The Guardian's
Forbidden Mistress

Аннотация

He couldn't resist her innocence. . . Nick Coleman was one of Sydney's most eligible billionaires. Love 'em and leave 'em—that was Nick's mantra. But he couldn't do that to Sarah; he had promised he would act as her guardian and protect her. Yet he wanted her, badly. . . Sarah was soon to claim her inheritance. She'd be a sitting duck to predators looking for a rich, innocent girl. Perhaps it was Nick's responsibility to personally teach her how wicked and seductive a man could be. . . .

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Miranda Lee
THE GUARDIAN'S
FORBIDDEN MISTRESS

QUEENS *of*
ROMANCE



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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

SEVEN years later...

A frown formed on Sarah's forehead as she watched Derek turn from the crowded bar and slowly make his way back to their table, a full champagne glass in each hand.

In the time it had taken him to be served, she'd begun to worry about having accepted his invitation for a Christmas drink.

Sarah comforted herself with the thought that in the six months Derek had been her personal trainer, he'd never made a pass, or crossed the line in any way, shape or form.

But there was a definite twinkle in his eye as he handed her a glass, then sat down with his.

'This is very nice of you,' she said carefully.

Sarah's heart sank when he beamed back at her.

'I am nice,' he said. 'And no, I'm not coming on to you.'

'I didn't think you were,' she lied before taking a relieved sip of the bubbly.

'Yes, you did.'

'Well...'

Derek laughed. 'This is just a little celebratory drink. One you deserve after all your hard work. But do be careful over the Christmas break. I don't want you coming back to me at the end of January in the same shape you were in six months ago.'

Sarah pulled a face at the memory. ‘Trust me. I won’t ever let that happen again.’

‘Never say never.’

Sarah shook her head as she put down her glass. ‘I’ve done a lot of thinking while you’ve been working my blubbery butt off these past few months, and I’ve finally come to terms with the reason behind my comfort-eating.’

‘So what’s his name?’ Derek asked.

‘Who?’

‘The reason behind your comfort-eating.’

Sarah smiled. ‘You’re a very intuitive man.’

Derek shrugged. ‘Only to be expected. Gay men are very simpatico to matters of the heart.’

Sarah almost spilled her wine.

‘You didn’t suspect at all, did you?’

Sarah stared across the table at him. ‘Heavens, no!’

‘I dislike guys who advertise their sexual preference by being obvious, or overly camp. Other gays sometimes guess, and the odd girl or two.’

‘Really?’ Even now that she knew the truth, Sarah couldn’t detect anything obviously gay in Derek. Neither could any of the women who worked out at the gym, if the talk in the female locker room was anything to go by. Most of the girls thought him a hunk.

Whilst Sarah conceded Derek was attractive—he had nice blue eyes, a great body and a marvellous tan—she’d never been

attracted to fair-haired men.

‘So now that you know I’m not making a beeline for you,’ Derek went on, ‘how about answering my earlier question? Or do you want to keep your love life a secret?’

Sarah had to laugh. ‘I don’t have a love life.’

‘What, none at all?’

‘Not this last year.’ She’d had boyfriends in the past. Both at university and beyond. But things always ended badly, once she took them home to meet Nick.

Next to Nick, her current boyfriend always came across as lacklustre by comparison. Time after time, Sarah would become brutally aware that she wanted Nick more than she ever did other men. Nick also had the knack of making comments that forced her to question whether her boyfriend was interested in her or her future inheritance.

Yet Sarah didn’t imagine for one moment that Nick undermined her relationships for any personal reasons. That would mean he cared who she went out with. Which he obviously didn’t. Nick had made it brutally obvious since becoming her guardian that he found the job a tiresome one, only to be tolerated because of his affection for and gratitude to her father.

Oh, he went through the motions of looking after her welfare, but right from the beginning he’d used every opportunity to shuffle her off onto other people.

The first Christmas after she’d left school, he’d sent her on an extended overseas holiday with a girlfriend and her family.

Then he'd organised for her to live on campus during her years at university, where she'd specialised in early-childhood teaching. When she'd graduated and gained a position at a primary school out in the western suburbs of Sydney, he'd encouraged her to rent a small unit near the school, saying it would take her far too long to drive to Parramatta from Point Piper every day.

Admittedly this was true, and so she had done as he suggested. But Sarah had always believed Nick's motive had been to get her out of the house as much as possible, so that he was free to do whatever he liked whenever he liked. Having her in a bedroom two doors down the hallway from his was no doubt rather restricting.

A well-known man-about-town, Nick ate women for breakfast and spat them out with a speed which was breathtaking. Every time Sarah went home he had a different girlfriend installed on his arm, and in his bed, each one more beautiful and slimmer than the next.

Sarah hated seeing him with them.

Last year Sarah had restricted her home visits to Easter and Christmas, plus the winter school break, during which Nick had been away, skiing. This year she hadn't been home since Easter, and Nick hadn't complained, readily accepting her many and varied excuses. When she finally went home on Christmas Eve tomorrow, it would be nearly nine months since she'd seen Nick in the flesh.

And since he'd seen her.

The thought made her heart flutter wildly in her chest.

What a fool you are, Sarah, she castigated herself. Nothing will change. Nothing will ever change. Don't you know that by now?

Time to face the bitter truth. Time to stop hoping for a miracle.

'His name his Nick Coleman,' she said matter-of-factly. 'He's been my legal guardian since I was sixteen, and I've had a mad crush on him since I was eight.' She refused to call it love. How could she be in love with a man like Nick? He might have made a financial success of his life in the years since they'd first met, but he'd also become cold-blooded and a callous womaniser.

Sometimes Sarah wondered if she'd imagined the kindnesses he'd shown her when she was a child.

'Did you say eight?' Derek asked.

'Yes. He came to work for my father as his chauffeur on my eighth birthday.'

'His chauffeur!'

'It's a long story. But it wasn't Nick who started my eating binge,' she confessed. 'It was his girlfriend.' The one who was there draped all over him last Christmas, a drop-dead gorgeous, super-slender supermodel who'd make any female feel inadequate.

A depressed Sarah had eaten seconds at Christmas lunch, then had gone back for thirds. Food, she'd swiftly found, made her feel temporarily better.

By Easter—her next visit home—she'd gained ten kilos. Nick had simply stared at her. Probably in shock. But his new girlfriend—a stunning-looking but equally skinny actress this time—hadn't remained silent, making a sarcastic crack about the growing obesity problem in Australia, which had resulted in Sarah gaining another five kilos by the end of May.

When she'd seen the class photo of herself, she'd taken stock and sought out Derek's help.

Now here she was, with her hour-glass shape possessing not one skerrick of flab and her self-esteem firmly back in place.

'Amend that to two girlfriends,' Sarah added, then went on to fill in some more details of her relationship with her guardian, plus the circumstances which had led up to her coming to the gym.

'Amazing,' Derek said when she stopped at last.

'What's amazing? That I got so fat?'

'You were never fat, Sarah. Just a few kilos over-weight. And lacking in tone. No, I meant about your being an heiress. You don't act like a rich bitch at all.'

'That's because I'm not. Not till I turn twenty-five, anyway. My father made sure in his will that I won't get a dime till I reach what he called a mature age. For years I had my educational and basic living expenses paid for, but once I could earn my own living I had to support myself, or starve. I was a bit put out at first, but I finally saw the sense of his stand. Handouts don't do anyone any good.'

‘That depends. So this Nick fellow lives in your family home, rent-free?’

‘Well, yes... My father’s will said he could.’

‘Till you turn twenty-five.’

‘Yes.’

‘When, exactly, does that happen?’

‘What? Oh, next February. The second.’

‘At which point you’re going to turf that blood-sucking leech out of your home and tell him you don’t want to see his sorry behind ever again!’

Sarah blinked, then laughed. ‘You’ve got it all wrong, Derek. Nick doesn’t need free rent. He has plenty of money of his own. He could easily buy his own mansion, if he wanted to.’ In actual fact, he’d offered to buy hers. But she’d refused.

Sarah knew the house was way too big for a single girl, but it was the only connection she still had to her parents, and she simply could not bear to part with it.

‘How come this Nick guy is so flush?’ Derek asked. ‘You said he was your father’s chauffeur.’

‘Was being the operative word. My dad took him under his wing and showed him how to make money, both on the stock market and in the business world. Nick was very lucky to have a man like my father as his mentor.’ Sarah considered telling Derek about Nick’s good fortune with Outback Bride but decided not to. Perhaps because it made Nick look as though he hadn’t become successful in his own right. Which he had. ‘Have you

ever been to Happy Island on a holiday?’ she said instead.

‘No. But I know about it.’

‘Nick borrowed money and bought Happy Island when it was going for a song. He personally supervised the remodelling of its largely derelict resort, built an airport on it, then sold the whole shebang to an international equity company for a fortune.’

‘Lucky man.’

‘Dad always said luck begins and ends with hard work. He also advised Nick that he’d never become rich working for someone else.’ Which was why Nick had set up his own movie production company a couple of years back. He’d already had some success but nothing yet to rival Outback Bride.

‘Your dad’s right there,’ Derek said. ‘I hated it when I had a boss. That’s why I started up my own gym.’

‘You own The New You?’

Derek gave her a startled look. ‘Don’t tell me you didn’t know that either.’

‘No.’

He smiled, showing flashing white teeth. ‘Talk about tunnel vision.’

‘Sorry,’ Sarah apologised. ‘I can be like that. I’m a bit of a loner, if you haven’t noticed,’ she added with a wry smile. ‘I don’t make friends easily. Guess it comes from being an only child.’

‘I’m an only child too,’ he confessed. ‘Which makes my being gay especially hard on my parents. No grand-kids to look forward to. I only told them a couple of years ago when Mum’s pressuring

me to get married got a bit much. Dad hasn't talked to me since,' Derek added, the muscles in his neck stiffening.

'That's sad,' Sarah said. 'What about your mum?'

'She rings me. But won't let me come home, not even for Christmas.'

'Oh, dear. Maybe they'll come round in time.'

'Maybe. But I'm not holding my breath. Dad is a very proud and stubborn man. Once he says something, he won't back down on it. But back to you, sweetie. You're simply crazy about this Nick fellow, aren't you?'

Sarah's heart lurched. 'Crazy describes my feelings for Nick very well. When I'm around him, I just can't stop wanting him. But he doesn't want me back. And he never will. It's time I accepted that.'

'But surely not till you've had one last crack at him.'

'What?'

'You haven't been working your butt off because some anorexic model said you were fat, sweetie. It's Nick you're out to impress, and attract.'

Sarah didn't want to openly admit it. But of course Derek was right. She'd do anything to have Nick look at her with desire. Just once.

No, not once. Again. Because she was pretty sure she'd spotted desire in his eyes one Christmas, when she'd been sixteen and she'd come down to the pool wearing an itsy-bitsy bikini that she'd bought with Nick in mind.

But maybe she'd imagined it. Maybe she was just desperate to believe he'd fancied her a little that day, despite his actions to the contrary. Teenage girls were prone to flights of fantasy, as were twenty-four-year-olds, she thought ruefully. Which was why she'd spent all week buying the kind of summer wardrobe that would stir an octogenarian's hormones.

The trouble was Nick wasn't an octogenarian. He was only thirty-six, and he kept his male hormones well and truly catered to. Sarah already knew that the actress girlfriend had gone by the board, replaced by an advertising executive with a penchant for power-dressing.

Sarah might not have been home personally for several months, but she rang home every week to talk to Flora, who always gave her a full update on Nick's comings and goings before passing the call over to Nick. If he was home, that was. Often he was out, being a social animal with a wide range of friends. Or contacts, as he preferred to call them.

'I presume you spend the Christmas holidays back at home?' Derek asked, cutting into her thoughts.

'Yes,' she said with a sigh. 'I usually go home as soon as school breaks up. But I haven't this year. Still, I'll have to make an appearance tomorrow. I always decorate the Christmas tree. If I don't do it, it doesn't get done. Then I help Flora prepare things for the following day. The lunch is partially catered for, but Flora likes to cook some hot food as well. Flora is the housekeeper,' she added when she saw Derek frown at the name. 'She's been

with the family for forever.’

‘I have to confess I couldn’t see your Nick with a girlfriend named Flora.’

‘You’d be right there. Nick’s girlfriends always have names like Jasmine, or Sapphire, or Chloe.’ That was what the latest one was called: Chloe.

‘Not only that,’ Sarah went on waspishly, ‘they never help. They always just swan downstairs at the last minute, with their fingernails perfect and their minuscule appetites on hold. It gets my goat when they sit there, sipping mineral water whilst they eat absolutely nothing.’

‘Mmm,’ Derek said.

Sarah pulled a face at him. ‘I suppose you think I’m going to get all upset and make a pig of myself again.’

‘It’s highly possible, by the sounds of things. But what I was actually thinking was that you need someone by your side at this Christmas lunch. A boyfriend of your own.’

‘Huh! I’ve brought boyfriends to Christmas lunch before,’ Sarah informed Derek drily. ‘In no time, Nick makes them look like fools, or fortune-hunters.’

‘And maybe they were. But possibly they were too young, and totally overawed by the occasion. What you need is someone older, someone with looks and style, someone successful and sophisticated who won’t be fazed by anything your playboy guardian says and does. Someone, in short, who’s going to make the object of your desire sit up and take notice. Of you.’

‘I like the idea, Derek. In theory. But even with my improved looks, I don’t think I’m going to be able to snaffle up the type of boyfriend you’ve just described at this late stage. Christmas is two days away.’

‘In that case let me help you out. Because I know just such an individual who doesn’t have anywhere to go on Christmas Day and would be happy to come to your aid.’

‘You do? Who?’

‘You’re looking at him.’

Sarah blinked, then laughed. ‘You have to be kidding. How can you be my boyfriend, Derek? You’re gay!’

‘You didn’t know that till I told you,’ he reminded her. ‘Your Nick won’t know it, either, especially if I’m introduced as your boyfriend. People believe what they’re told, on the whole.’

Sarah stared at Derek. He was right. Why would Nick—or anyone else at lunch—suspect that Derek was gay? He didn’t look it. Or act it.

‘So what do you think?’ Derek said with a wicked gleam in his eyes. ‘Trust me when I say that nothing stimulates a man’s interest in a woman as well as another man’s undivided attention in her.’

Sarah still hesitated.

‘What are you afraid of?’ Derek demanded to know. ‘Success?’

‘Absolutely not!’

‘Then what have you got to lose?’

Nothing at all, Sarah realised with a sudden rush of adrenalin.

At the very least she would not feel alone, as she often did at Christmas, especially during that dreaded lunch.

This year she would not only be looking her best, but she would also have a very good-looking man by her side.

‘All right,’ Sarah said, a quiver of unexpected excitement rippling down her spine. ‘You’re on.’

CHAPTER TWO

SARAH'S positive attitude towards Christmas lasted till she pulled her white car into the driveway the following morning and saw Nick's bright red sporty number parked outside the garages.

'Darn it,' she muttered as she pressed the remote to open the electronic gates.

She'd presumed Nick would be out playing golf, as he always did every Saturday, come rain, hail or shine. Come Christmas Eve as well!

If she'd imagined for one moment that Nick would be home, she'd have put on one of her sexy new sun-dresses this morning—probably the black and white halter-necked one that showed off her slender shoulders and nicely toned arms. Instead, she was sporting a pair of faded jeans and a striped yellow tank-top. Suitable clothes in which to decorate a Christmas tree. But not to impress a man, especially one who had a penchant for women who always looked as if they'd just stepped out of a beauty salon.

Still, with a bit of luck, she might be able to sneak up to her bedroom and make some changes before running into Nick. The house was, after all, huge.

Built in the 1920s by a wealthy mining family, Goldmine had been renovated and revamped many times since then. Its original stone walls were now cement-rendered white, with arched windows and lots of balconies, which gave it a distinctly

Mediterranean look.

Because of the sloping site, the house looked double-storeyed from the road, but there was another, lower level at the back where the architecture incorporated a lot of glass to take advantage of the home's harbourside position.

Actually, there weren't many rooms in the house that didn't look out over Sydney Harbour, the view extending across the water to the bridge and the opera house in the distance. On the upper floor, all the bedrooms had individual balconies with water views, the master bedroom opening out onto a walled balcony that was big enough to accommodate an outdoor table-setting.

The enormous back terrace had the best vantage point, however, which was why it was always the place for Christmas lunch. Long trestle-style tables would be brought in, shade provided by huge canvas blinds put up for the day. Only once in Sarah's memory, when the temperature soared to forty degrees, had the lunch been held inside, in the family room, the only room large enough to accommodate the number of guests who swamped Goldmine every Christmas Day from midday onwards.

The tradition had been started by Sarah's father and mother soon after they'd bought the house nearly thirty years ago, a tradition her father continued after her mother's death, and which Nick seemed happy to honour in the years he'd been living there.

Of course, the cynic in Sarah appreciated that Christmas lunch at Goldmine was more of a business lunch these days than a gathering of family and long-term friends. Most of the guests

at the table would be the people Nick did business with, valuable contacts whose priorities were where the next few million were coming from.

Sarah was under no illusion that Nick was any different from the types he mixed with. He liked money as much—possibly more—than they did.

This last thought reminded Sarah of what Derek had implied over drinks last night: that Nick was taking advantage of his position as her guardian to live, rent-free, in her harbourside home. Although she'd defended Nick in this regard, Sarah had to concede that living in Goldmine was a huge social advantage. Not so much because of its size—some of the neighbours' homes were obscenely large—but because of its position. There was no doubt that having such an address had benefited Nick no end in the business stakes. Which was why he wanted to buy the place.

The gates finally open, Sarah drove through and parked next to Nick's car. She frowned over at it, still perplexed that he hadn't gone to golf today.

Thinking about golf, however, reminded her of the Christmas present she'd bought him. It was a set of miniature golf clubs, with the club heads made in silver, the shafts in ebony and the bag crafted in the most beautiful red leather. She'd bought it on eBay and it had cost several hundred dollars, more than she usually spent on him.

The moment she'd seen it, she'd known Nick would like it.

But would he think it odd that she'd bought him something

so expensive?

She hoped not.

Sarah grimaced when she realised he might think it even odder that she hadn't bought her new 'boyfriend' anything at all. Which she hadn't. She and Derek had discussed when he was to arrive tomorrow and what to wear, but they hadn't thought of presents.

Sarah sighed, her confidence about this subterfuge beginning to drop.

Not that it mattered all that much. She couldn't seriously expect to achieve the miracle of having Nick suddenly look at her and be carried away on a wave of uncontrollable desire. Why should that happen now, after all these years? It wasn't as though she hadn't dolled herself up for him before. She had. With absolutely no results at all.

The truth was she obviously wasn't his type. Even with her normally lush curves pared down to the bone, she'd never look or act like the kind of girlfriend Nick inevitably chose and obviously preferred: not only super-slim, but also super-chic and super-sophisticated.

A kindergarten teacher just didn't cut it with Nick, even with a future fortune attached. If anything, that she was her father's heiress was probably a turn-off for him. Nick would not like any reminders that he wasn't entirely a self-made man. Or the fact that she'd known him when he was a nobody.

With every new girlfriend, Nick came with a clean slate.

Sarah had no doubt he hadn't told this latest girl, Chloe, that

he'd ever been in jail. Or that his ward's father had been a very generous benefactor. She felt sure Nick always represented her father these days as a long-term friend, thereby explaining his guardianship of her.

Sarah accepted these brutally honest thoughts with a mixture of emotions. There was disappointment, yes. But also a measure of relief. Because it made her realise that to harbour hopes of attracting Nick this Christmas was a case of desperation and delusion. It wasn't going to happen.

Whilst this realisation brought a pang of emotional pain—no one liked to have their longest and fondest dream dashed—the acceptance of reality also began to unravel the tight knots in her stomach. What she was wearing today no longer mattered. She could relax now and act naturally with Nick, which she would not have done with her previous pathetic agenda.

Sarah might have called Derek right then and there and cancelled his coming tomorrow, if she hadn't already told Flora when she rang last night that there'd be an added guest for Christmas lunch; her new boyfriend, Derek. Although Nick had been out at the time, Sarah had no doubt that Flora would have told Nick this news at breakfast this morning. Flora was a dear lady, but inclined to gossip.

No, there was nothing for it but to go through with this charade now.

'You'll probably be glad, come tomorrow,' Sarah told herself as she climbed out of the car and walked round to open the

hatchback. Nick's new girlfriend sounded like a right bitch, if Flora's character assessment was to be believed. When Sarah asked what she was like, Flora had said she was up herself, big time.

'Just as good-looking as the last one,' Flora had added, 'but more intelligent. And doesn't she know it! Still, she won't last any longer than the others. Six months is tops for our Nick. After that, it's out with the old and in with the new. If that boy ever settles down, I'll eat my hat.'

Sarah pulled a face as she lifted her two bags out of the boot. She would, too.

Nick was definitely not a marrying man; never had been and never would be. He wasn't into romance, either. Catering to his sexual needs was the name of his game where women were concerned.

Once Nick got bored with his latest game-partner, she was out.

He'd once admitted to Sarah when she'd been about twelve—they'd just watched a very sweet romance on TV together—that he could never fall in love the way the characters had in that movie. He'd confessed rather grimly that he didn't have any idea what that kind of love felt like.

Sarah presumed his inability to emotionally connect with women had something to do with his loveless up-bringing, a subject she'd overheard being discussed by her parents not long before her mother died. Apparently, Nick had suffered terribly at the hands of a drunken and abusive father, running away to

live on the streets of Sydney when he'd been only thirteen. After that, he'd been reduced to doing some pretty dreadful things just to survive.

Sarah never did find out exactly how dreadful, but she could guess.

Just after turning eighteen, Nick had finally been arrested—for stealing cars—and had been sentenced to two years in jail.

It was during this term that he'd finally been shown some kindness, and given some practical help. By a man who'd spotted his natural intelligence, a man who, for years, had generously given up many hours of his time to help those less fortunate.

Nick was put into a special education programme for inmates that this man had funded, and became one of their most successful graduates, achieving his higher-school certificate in record time.

That man had been her father.

'Sarah!'

Sarah almost jumped out of her skin at her name being called.

But when she saw who it was, she smiled.

'Hi there, Jim. You're looking well.' Flora's husband had to be over sixty by now. But he was one of those wirily built men who aged well and always moved with a spritely step.

'Got a lot of luggage there, missie,' he said, joining her behind her car and staring down at her two very large bags. 'Home for good, are you?'

'Not yet, Jim. Did you get me a good tree?'

‘Yep. A beauty. Set it up in the usual spot in the family room. I put the boxes of decorations next to it. And I’ve hung up the lights out the back.’

‘Great. Thanks, Jim.’

Jim nodded. He wasn’t one for chit-chat, unlike his wife.

Jim was happiest when he was working with his hands. He loved keeping the extensive grounds at Goldmine spick and span, not such a difficult job after her father had come home from a visit to Tokyo a decade ago and had all the more traditional flower beds and lawns ripped out and replaced with Japanese-style gardens. Now there were lots of rocks and gravel pathways, combined with ponds and water features, all shown to advantage by interesting trees and plants.

Jim hadn’t been too thrilled at first with the lack of grass and flowers, but he’d grown to appreciate the garden’s unique beauty and serenity.

Jim picked up Sarah’s bags without her asking and started heading along the curved path towards the front porch, putting paid to her earlier plan to sneak in unnoticed through the garages.

To be honest, Sarah still wished she looked better for Nick’s first sight of her. It would have been rewarding to see the surprised look on his face.

Sighing, she grabbed her carry-all from the passenger seat, locked the car and hurried after Jim, who by then had dropped her bags by the front door and rung the doorbell.

‘I do have keys,’ she said, and was fishing through her bag in

search of them when the door was wrenched open.

Not by Flora—but by Nick.

If ever Sarah was glad she was wearing sunglasses it was at that moment.

Not because of Nick's reaction to her, but because of her reaction to him.

She'd been so caught up with worrying about her own appearance that she'd forgotten just how devastatingly attractive she found him, especially when he was wearing as little as he was wearing today: just board shorts and a sleeveless white surf top, the colour highlighting his beautifully bronzed skin.

Sarah's thankfully hidden gaze travelled hungrily down his body then up again before fixing on his mouth.

If Nick's black eyes hadn't been so hard, and his other features strongly masculine, his mouth might have made him into a pretty boy. Both his lips were full and sensual, curving around a mouthful of flashing white teeth, their perfection courtesy of the top-flight dentist her father had taken him to as soon as he'd been let out of prison.

If Sarah had any criticism, it was of his hair, which she believed he kept far too short. Still, the buzz-cut style did give him an intimidating look that probably worked well for him in the business world.

'Well, hello, stranger,' he said, his dark eyes sweeping down to her sneakered feet, then up again.

Not a hint of admiration in his expression, however, or even

surprise. No reaction at all. Zilch.

His lack of reaction—she'd been expecting some sort of compliment—exasperated Sarah. What did she have to do to make the man notice her, damn it?

'Thanks, Jim,' he said, bending to pick up her bags. 'I'll take these now.'

'Yes, thanks, Jim,' Sarah managed to echo through clenched teeth.

Jim nodded, then moved off, by which time Nick had picked up her luggage and turned to carry it inside.

Sarah wanted to hit him. Instead, she gritted her teeth even harder.

Suddenly, she couldn't wait to turn twenty-five. The sooner she got Nick out of her life, the better. He was like a thorn in her side, niggling away at her. How could she have what she wanted most in life—which was children of her own—if he was always there, spoiling things for her? How could she feel completely happy when she kept comparing every man she dated to him?

Out of sight would be out of mind. Hopefully.

Sarah closed the front door after her, smothering a sigh when she saw Nick heading for the stairs with her cases.

'I can take those up,' she said, desperately needing a few minutes away from the man to regain her composure.

As much as Sarah had subconsciously always known that nothing would ever come of her secret feelings for Nick, finally facing the futility of her fantasies was a soul-shattering

experience.

He hadn't even noticed that she'd lost weight!

All that work. For nothing!

'It's no trouble,' he threw over his shoulder as he continued on up the stairs with the bags.

Sarah gritted her teeth, and hurried up the stairs after him.

'Why aren't you at golf?'

'I wanted the opportunity to talk to you,' he tossed back at her.

'Privately.'

'About what?'

He didn't answer her, instead charging on ahead with her bags.

'About what, Nick?' she repeated when she caught up, frustrated by his lack of reply.

He ground to a halt on the top landing, dropped her bags then turned to face her.

'Flora, for one thing.'

'What about her? She's not ill, is she?'

'No, but she can't do what she used to do. She gets very tired. This last year, I've had to hire a home-cleaning service to come in twice a week to do all the heavy cleaning for her.'

'I didn't realise.'

'If you came home occasionally,' Nick pointed out drily, 'you might have noticed.'

It was a fair comment, evoking a large dose of guilt. Sarah recognised she'd been very self-obsessed this past year. But she'd been on a mission. A futile mission, as it turned out.

'I...I've been very busy,' she said by way of an excuse.

'With the new boyfriend, I take it?' came his next comment, this one quite sarcastic.

Sarah bristled. 'I have a right to a social life,' she retorted, taking off her sunglasses so that she could glare at him. 'You have one.'

'Indeed. But it doesn't take over my whole existence.'

His critical tone was so typical of Nick when it came to her having a boyfriend, his condemning attitude often sparking a reckless rebellion in her that had her running off at the mouth.

Today was no exception.

'Derek and I are very much in love. Something you could never identify with. When people are truly in love they want to spend every minute of every day with them.'

'I'm surprised you came home today at all, then,' he countered quite sharply. 'Or will your lover be dropping by later?'

Sarah flushed. 'Derek's working today.'

'Doing what?'

'He owns a gym.'

'Aah. That explains it.'

'Explains what?'

'Your new shape.'

So he had noticed! 'You say that like there's something wrong with it.'

'You looked fine the way you were.'

Sarah's mouth dropped open. 'You have to be joking! I was

getting fat!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

Sarah rolled her eyes. Either the man was blind, or he cared about her so little that he’d never really looked at her before.

‘Maybe you just didn’t notice.’

Nick gave an offhand shrug. ‘Maybe I didn’t. Still, I suppose it’s not up to me to tell you what to do.’

‘I’m glad you’ve finally realised that!’

‘Meaning?’

‘I couldn’t count the number of times you’ve interfered in my life, and my relationships. Every time I brought a boyfriend home in the past, you went out of your way to make him feel stupid. And me to boot.’

‘I was only doing what your father asked me to do, Sarah. Which was to protect you from the money-grubbing creeps in this world.’

‘They weren’t money-grubbing creeps!’

‘Indeed they were.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that from now on, thank you very much.’

‘Not till your twenty-fifth birthday, madam. I have no intention of letting you fall into the hands of some gold-digging gigolo at this late stage. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I did that.’

‘Huh. I can’t see you ever losing any sleep over me.’

‘Then you’d be dead wrong, sweetheart,’ he grated out.

Their eyes met, with Sarah sucking in sharply at the

momentary fury she glimpsed in Nick's face. It came home to her then just how much he'd hated being her guardian all these years. No doubt he would be very relieved when she turned twenty-five next year and his obligation to her father was over.

'I haven't given you that much trouble, have I?' she said, her softer voice reflecting her drop in spirits.

As much as she accepted Nick would never be attracted to her, she'd always thought that, underneath everything, he liked her. Not just because she was her father's daughter, but because of the person she was. When she was younger, he'd often told her what a great kid she was. He'd said she had character, and a good heart. He'd also said she was fun to be with, proving it by spending a lot of his spare time with her.

Of course, that had been a long time ago, before Nick had become a success in his own right. When that started to happen, he'd begun to ignore her. Then, after her father died, the rot had set in completely. It was patently obvious that she was now reduced to nothing more than a responsibility, a responsibility that he obviously found both tedious and exasperating.

'Does he know how rich you're shortly going to be?' he demanded to know.

Sarah's mouth thinned. Here we go again, she thought angrily. Yet there was no point in lying. Better she answer Nick's questions now than to have him put Derek through the third degree on Christmas Day.

'He knows I'm going to be rich,' she bit out. 'But he doesn't

know the full extent of my inheritance.'

'He'll know once he shows up tomorrow. People who live in this street have to be multimillionaires at least. It won't take him long to put two and two together.'

'Derek's not a fortune-hunter, Nick. He's a very decent man.'

'How do you know?'

'I just know.'

'My God, you know nothing!' he flung at her. 'Your father thought he was protecting you with his will. Instead, he set you up for disaster. He should have given most of his money away, donated it to some charity, not left it in the hands of a girl such as you.'

'What do you mean, a girl such as me?'

He opened his mouth to say something but then obviously thought better of it. Instead, he picked up her bags and carried them along the hallway to her room, the stiff set of his shoulders very telling. After dumping her cases just inside the door, he retreated back out into the hallway.

'We'll continue this discussion later,' he said in that deceptively quiet manner he always adopted on the odd occasion when he was in danger of losing his cool.

Over the years Sarah had learned to recognise this tactic of his. Nick hated losing his temper. Hated losing control. He preferred to act like the consummate ice-man, both professionally and personally. She'd rarely heard him yell. He didn't even swear any more, as he once had.

But his body language could speak volumes. So could his eyes.

Though not always. He did have the ability to make them totally unreadable. But not straight away. If you were watching him closely, you could sometimes glimpse what was going on in his head before he drew the blinds down.

‘We’ll have morning tea in the kitchen,’ he pronounced, ‘then we’ll adjourn to my study and talk.’

‘Not about Derek,’ Sarah retorted. ‘I have no intention of listening to you criticising someone you haven’t even met.’

‘Fair enough. But I have lots of other things to talk to you about, Sarah. Important issues connected with your inheritance. I want to have everything settled before Christmas.’

‘But I don’t turn twenty-five till February,’ she protested. ‘We have the rest of my summer break to settle things!’

‘No, we don’t. I won’t be here.’

‘Where will you be?’

‘I’m spending most of January on Happy Island.’

Sarah’s heart sank. She knew Nick had a holiday house there. But he rarely used it at this time of year.

‘Flora never said anything about that when I called.’

‘The subject probably didn’t come up.’

‘There’s still the week between Christmas and New Year,’ she argued, feeling very put out with Nick’s choosing to go away for so long.

‘Yes. But I’m having a guest stay during that week. And you have your new boyfriend, who you freely admit you wish to spend

every minute of every day with. Better we settle everything whilst we have the chance.'

'But I have to decorate the tree today.'

'I just want a couple of hours, Sarah. Not all day.'

'What about tonight? Can't this wait till tonight?'

'I'm going present-shopping tonight.'

Sarah sighed. Wasn't that just like a man to go present-shopping at the last minute?

'Come on,' he said abruptly. 'Let's go downstairs.'

'I need to go to the bathroom first,' she said quite truthfully.

'Fine,' he replied with another offhand shrug. 'I'll go ahead and tell Flora to put on the kettle.'

Sarah shook her head as she watched Nick go. Derek didn't know what he was talking about. Dolling herself up tomorrow and sucking up to a pretend boyfriend wasn't going to make a blind bit of difference. She was nothing to Nick but an obligation that he obviously wanted over and done with. It was clear to Sarah that he couldn't wait for her twenty-fifth birthday to arrive.

Suddenly, she felt the same way. She was sick and tired of letting her feelings for Nick distress her. Sick and tired of secretly pining for what would never be.

Time to move on, girl. Time to get yourself a life. One that doesn't include Nick!

CHAPTER THREE

FLORA was in the kitchen, cutting up the caramel slice she'd made that morning, when Nick walked in with a face like thunder.

'Wasn't that Sarah at the door?' she asked.

'Yep. She won't be long. You can put on the kettle.'

Flora turned to pop the caramel slice back in the fridge before switching on the electric kettle. 'It's good to have her home,' she said. 'Isn't it?'

Nick scowled as he slid onto one of the four stools fronting the black marble breakfast bar. 'Speak for yourself, Flora.'

'Come, now, Nick. You've missed her. You know you have.'

'I know no such thing. Ray was out of his mind to make me that girl's guardian. I'll breathe a huge sigh of relief when February comes round, I can tell you.'

'I suppose it has been a big responsibility,' Flora agreed. 'Especially considering how much money she's going to inherit. What do you make of this new boyfriend of hers? Do you think he's on the up and up?'

'Who knows?'

'It's strange that she hadn't mentioned him before last night, don't you think? It makes me wonder what's wrong with him.'

'I've just been thinking the same thing. I guess we'll just have to wait and see.'

'I guess so,' Flora said. 'So how does she look?'

'What do you mean?'

'She told me last night that she'd been exercising and had lost weight. Don't tell me you didn't notice.'

'Yeah, I noticed.'

'And?' Flora asked, exasperated with Nick's reluctance to elaborate. He was just as bad as Jim sometimes. Why was it that men didn't like to talk? It would be nice to have Sarah home, just so she had someone to chat with occasionally.

'I thought she looked fine the way she was.'

'Isn't that just like a man? They never want the women in their life to change. Aah, there she is, the girl herself. Come over here, love, and give old Flora a hug.'

Sarah's heart squeezed tight when Flora enveloped her into a tight embrace. It had been a long time since anyone had hugged her like that.

There'd been no hug from Nick this morning. Not even a peck on the cheek. He never touched her, except accidentally.

Her gaze slid over Flora's shoulder to land on the man himself. But he wasn't looking her way. He was staring down at the black bench top, looking highly disgruntled.

Probably wishing he were at golf.

'Oh, my,' Flora said when she finally held Sarah out at arm's length. 'You have lost quite a few pounds, haven't you? Still, now you can have a big piece of your favourite caramel slice without feeling guilty,' she added before turning away to open the fridge.

'I made it for you first thing this morning.'

'You shouldn't have, Flora,' Sarah chided, but gently.

'Nonsense. What else do I have to do? Did you know that the whole of the Christmas lunch is being catered this year? Nick says it's too much for me. All I'm allowed to do is make a couple of miserable puddings. I ask you!'

She rolled her eyes at Sarah, who was thinking to herself that Flora had aged quite a bit this past year. Her face was very lined and her hair had turned totally grey.

'Not that I'm complaining, Nick,' Flora went on. 'I do know I'm getting older. But I'm not totally useless yet. I could easily have baked a leg of pork and a turkey. And some nice hot veggies for those who don't like salad and seafood. Still, enough of that. What's done is done. Now, sit up there next to Nick, Sarah, and tell us all about your new boyfriend whilst I pour the tea.'

Sarah smothered a groan, but did as she was told, though she didn't sit right next to Nick, leaving one stool between them.

'What would you like to know?' she asked with brilliant nonchalance.

'How old is he, for starters?'

Sarah realised she had no idea.

'Thirty-five,' she guessed. One year younger than Nick.

Nick's head swung her way. 'Handsome?'

'Very. Looks like a movie star.'

Was she crazy, or did Nick's eyes glitter when she said that?

'How long have you been seeing each other?' Flora asked.

Sarah decided to use the truth as much as possible. ‘We met shortly after last Easter. I hired him as my personal trainer.’

Nick made a small scoffing sound.

Sarah ignored him.

‘Why haven’t you mentioned him before?’ Flora asked.

Sarah winced. She should have realised she’d get the third degree about Derek, from both Nick and Flora. Again, she decided to stick to the truth as closely as she could.

‘We haven’t been boyfriend and girlfriend all that time,’ she replied. ‘That’s a more recent development. He asked me out for a drink one night after my workout, one thing led to another and... well, what can I say? I’m very happy.’

Sarah smiled, despite the lurch within her chest.

‘And very healthy, too,’ Flora said with a return smile. ‘Don’t you think so, Nick?’

‘I think she looks like she could do with some of your caramel slice.’

Sarah found a laugh from somewhere. ‘That’s funny coming from you. All your girlfriends have figures like rakes.’

‘Not all of them. You haven’t met Chloe, have you?’

‘I haven’t had the pleasure yet.’

‘You will. Tomorrow.’

‘How nice.’

‘You’ll like her.’

‘Oh, I doubt it. I never like any of your girlfriends, Nick. The same way you never like any of my boyfriends. I’ve already

warned Derek.’

‘Should I warn Chloe?’

Sarah shrugged. ‘Why bother? It won’t change anything.’

‘Will you two stop bickering?’ Flora intervened. ‘It’s Christmas, the season of peace and love.’

Sarah almost pointed out that Nick didn’t believe in love, but she held her tongue. Sniping at Nick was not in keeping with her resolution to move on. But he’d really got under her skin with his remarks about her being skinny.

When Flora presented a plate full of caramel slice right in front of her, she couldn’t really refuse. But she did take the smallest piece and proceeded to eat it very slowly between long sips of tea. Nick chose the biggest portion, devoured it within seconds, then had the gall to take a second salivating slice. The lucky devil had one of those metabolisms that allowed him to eat whatever he liked without getting fat. Of course, he did work out with weights every other day, and swam a lot.

Although thirty-six now, he didn’t carry an extra ounce of fat on his long, lean body. Really, other than some muscling up around his chest and arms, Nick hadn’t changed much since the day they’d met.

Physically, that was. He’d changed a good deal in other ways, matching his personality to suit whatever company he was in, sometimes warm and charming, at other times adopting a confident air of cool sophistication and savoir-faire, both personas a long way from the introverted and rather angry young

man he'd been when he'd first come to live at Goldmine.

Though he was never angry with me, Sarah recalled. Never. He had always been sweet, kind and generous with his time. He'd made a lonely little girl's life much less lonely.

Oh, how she'd loved him for that!

Sarah much preferred the Nick of old to the one sitting beside her today.

In the beginning, when he'd launched himself into the business world, she'd admired his ambition. But success had made Nick greedy for the good life, feeding on hedonistic pleasures that were as fleeting as they were shallow. Other than the holiday house on Happy Island, he owned a penthouse on the Gold Coast and a chalet in the southern snowfields. When he wasn't working at making more money, he flitted from one to the other, always accompanied by his latest lady-love.

Whoops, no. Amend that to latest playmate. Love was never part of Nick's lifestyle.

Her father had always said how proud of Nick he was. He'd lauded Nick's work ethics, his intellect and his entrepreneurial vision.

Sarah could see that, professionally, there was much to be proud of. But surely her father would have been disappointed, if he'd been alive today, at the way Nick conducted his personal life. There was something reprehensible about a man whose girlfriends never lasted longer than six months, and who boasted that he would never marry.

No, that was unfair. Nick had never boasted about his inability to fall in love. He'd merely stated it as a fact.

Sarah had to concede that at least Nick was honest in his relationships. She felt positive he never spun any of his girlfriends a line of bull. They'd always known that their role in his life was strictly sexual and definitely temporary.

'Glad to see you're still capable of enjoying your food.'

Nick's droll remark jolted Sarah out of her reverie, her stomach contracting in horror once she realised she'd consumed a second piece of caramel slice without being aware of it.

She kept her cool, however, determined not to let Nick needle her further.

'Who could resist Flora's caramel slice?' she tossed at him airily. 'Next Christmas we'll get back to having a smaller Christmas lunch, Flora, and you can cook whatever you like.'

'You won't keep your father's tradition going?' Nick asked in a challenging voice.

'Is that what you think you've been doing, Nick?' she countered. 'When Dad was alive, Christmas lunch was a gathering of true friends, not a collection of business acquaintances.'

'Is that so? I think perhaps you're mistaken about that. Most of your father's so-called friends were business contacts.'

Nick was right, of course. But people had still liked her father for himself, not just for what they could get out of him. At least, she liked to think so.

But maybe she was wrong. Maybe she'd seen him through rose-coloured glasses. Maybe, underneath his bonhomie, he'd been as hard and cynical as Nick.

No, that wasn't true. He'd been a kind and generous man.

Not a brilliant dad, though. During her years at boarding-school he'd often made excuses for not being able to come to school functions, all of those excuses related to work. Then, when she came home for school holidays, she'd largely been left to her own devices.

If she was strictly honest, things hadn't been much better when her mother was still alive. A dedicated career woman, Jess Steinway had been totally unprepared for the sacrifices motherhood entailed upon the arrival of an unexpected baby at forty. Sarah had been raised by a succession of impersonal nannies till she went to kindergarten, after which Flora had taken over as carer before and after school. But Flora, warm and chatty though she was, had mostly been too busy with the house to do much more than feed Sarah and make sure she did her homework.

No one had spent quality time with her, or played with her, till Nick had come along.

She turned her head to look at him, a wave of sadness washing through her. Oh, how she wished he was still their chauffeur, and she the little girl who could love him without reservation.

Tears pricked at her eyes, right at that moment when Nick's head turned her way. She quickly blinked them away, but not

before she glimpsed regret in his.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I didn’t mean any disrespect for your father. He was a good man and a very generous one. Christmas was his favourite time of year. Did you know that every Christmas he gave huge donations to the various charities round Sydney for the homeless? Because of him, they always had a proper Christmas dinner. And no one, especially the children, went without a present.’

Sarah frowned. ‘I didn’t know that.’ she knew about his good work with young prisoners. And he’d given lots of money to cancer research and cancer support groups. There were a few hospital wings named after him, too. But he’d never mentioned his Christmas donations. ‘I hope his estate is continuing with that tradition, Nick. Do you know if it is?’

‘It wasn’t written into his will, so I do it in his name every year.’

‘You?’

‘Don’t sound so surprised. I am capable of generous gestures, you know. I’m not totally selfish.’

‘I...I never said you were.’

‘But you think it. And, generally speaking, you’d be right.’

‘Don’t be so modest, Nick,’ Flora piped up. ‘You should see the huge plasma television Nick bought Jim and me a few weeks ago, for no reason at all except that he thought we’d like it. It has surround sound and its own built-in DVD. You can tape any number of shows and watch them later, when you have time. Jim’s in seventh heaven, watching cricket and tennis at all hours

of the day and night.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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