

# FIONA PALMER

## Heart of Gold

By the bestselling  
author of  
*The Family Farm*



FIONA  
PALMER

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Gold*

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editions



# 1

THE sun was a foot above the horizon and there wasn't a cloud in the pale-blue sky. Another clear summer morning, thought CJ as she shut the door of her ute and walked towards the shearing shed. Normally it was calm at this time, just the pink and grey cockies screeching in the gum trees and the freshness of the cool morning air. But today a dog was barking nearby and she could hear sheep moving through the dry dirt, bleating out protests. The flies had already started to buzz and the air was warming up fast.

Nearly every farm had a shed like this one – rectangular in shape and covered in silver corrugated tin. Like a big, shiny spaceship on stilts. It had sheep yards off to one side and a portaloo parked next to a gum tree fifty metres away. CJ veered towards the sheep pens and ran her hand over the top rail as she walked. The metal yards were still cool under her fingers.

Catherine Jean Wishart looked every inch a vibrant twenty-six year old but inside, her mind felt tired and battered. Instinctively she raised a hand to her face and touched the tenderness from the

bruise that still throbbed slightly from last night's swelling. She couldn't bring herself to look in the mirror this morning. But not seeing it wasn't going to change the fact that it was there. It wasn't the kind of thing you could explain by saying you'd tripped and fell, although she'd used that excuse a dozen times already. You name it – ran into a door, knocked over by a sheep, elbowed by a shearer. It had almost been a pastime, thinking up different reasons, but now she didn't bother. She was way past caring what people thought.

CJ waved to Jim, the owner of Clearview Farm, who was penning up the last of his sheep from the mob he'd just brought in.

'Morning, Jim,' she called on her way past. Her jeans clung to her long legs, fitted to perfection, and her arms were lean, strong and tanned.

'How you going, C . . . J?' Jim stumbled over her name as he spotted the big, round bruise. It looked like someone had thrown a slice of beetroot at her. He shook his head. 'It's gonna be another hot one today,' he went on, lifting his worn-out John Deere hat and scratching his bare hairline.

'You bet,' said CJ, and left Jim to his sheep. She'd seen the concern in his wise, aged face and was glad he was nice enough not to mention it.

Another four strides and she was in the shed. Inside, the dark coolness wrapped around her, along with the smell of wool and oil from the machines. To the left of her, a raised floor ran along the end of the shed. It was a blessing for rousies, who didn't have to bend down to pick up a fleece. Up on the raised floor were six shearing stands, with pens laid out behind them. This was a flasher

shed than most, as a lot of the smaller sheds could only handle four stands.

Sheep panted and shuffled in their small, tightly packed pens, ready for the shearers. In front of CJ stood the skirting table, and further to the right were the segregation bins and wool press. Yesterday's bales were piled up towards the back of the shed, where a large door opened so the farmer could load them onto his truck.

CJ stripped off the chequered shirt she wore over her singlet, flung it over the skirting table and headed to the triple A stack of fleeces, tying up her brown, wavy hair into a ponytail as she walked. She scooped up an armful of fleeces and carried them to the wool press. The scent of the wool was pungent with lanolin and a hint of machine oil, but she embraced it. She loved wool. It was so soft, especially underneath where it was snow white and pure and the little crinkles reminded her of crimping her sister Emily's hair for a blue light disco when they were kids.

Pressing bales wasn't her job but the presser was sick. CJ didn't mind – she loved working in the shed while it was so tranquil. She was the team classer. It was her job to grade the quality of each fleece, segregate it for baling and also to mark the bales with the farm name and her classers' number. So if they opened up a bale and found the wool graded incorrectly or containing contaminants, it was her arse on the line. But she'd never let that happen.

The morning light was glittering as it filtered through the nail holes in the tin walls and the sound of the press compacting the wool echoed around the shed. It wasn't everyone's dream job, working in a shearing shed. Some days the heat was so bad you ached for an ice-cold beer by midmorning, and the work was brutal on

your bones, joints and muscles. It had started out as just a way to earn a living, but now CJ didn't think she belonged anywhere else. These sheds were familiar, her escape, her safe haven.

She managed to get one bale pressed and marked before the white minibus pulled up outside. The rest of the team poured out of the side door, like fish from a broken water tank. Half of the crew were Kiwis. More and more were coming to Australia to work. It seemed that the call of the high-paid jobs at the mines had the Aussies moving – Doug, her boss, was losing shearers to the mining boom all the time. He couldn't compete with those wages.

CJ nodded as they walked past her in the shed, their towels hung over their shoulders and water bottles in hand. She grabbed a bale hook and buried it deep into a finished bale. Muscles rippled along her arms as they strained with the weight of it.

'I'm glad I'm not that bale.'

She turned to see Marty on the end of her bale, pushing with some effort. He flashed a smile, causing her insides to churn – and not in a good way. Marty's insides were as rotten as the arse-end of a maggoty sheep. He was as tall as her six-foot frame, with eyes almost as black as his hair. But he was as sleazy as they came and there was something menacing in his dark, almost sinister eyes, as if he would turn on you in a second.

CJ instantly remembered the time she got Sam, her beautiful dog. Sam's dad had suffered years of abuse, and had finally turned on his owner after being kicked. The owner had then threatened to shoot the dog, but Sam's dad was his top breeding border collie, so he stopped short. CJ, having turned up to buy a puppy, had seen the whole incident. She'd been tempted to tie

the owner to a dog chain and leave him there to rot, but instead bought the last three pups to save them from any more abuse. She'd sold two and kept Sam for herself. Her beautiful black and white collie.

This made her wonder whether Marty might've had a bad upbringing. She'd heard the rumours that his old man had been in and out of prison for God knows what. One minute he'd killed a man, the next he was a thief, or drug runner. Who really knew what went down, or if any of it was true? That was about the only sympathetic thought she'd ever had for Marty. She'd been trying to head off his advances for a few weeks now and it was starting to irritate her.

'Cheers,' CJ said, trying not to give him the wrong impression.

Marty gazed up and down her body, pausing on her breasts for much too long. 'Any time, gorgeous.'

Damn her mother for blessing (or cursing) her with a C-cup cleavage. Right now she wished she was still in a trainer bra.

He paused at her face, at her bruise, his grin fading as he winced. CJ wondered whether she'd seen pity in his eyes – or was it more like understanding? Either way, he'd blinked and it was gone.

CJ shivered with repulsion and felt like covering herself with a bale bag. She had hoped he'd realise by now that she wasn't interested, but Marty liked to get his own way. She adjusted her blue singlet, but it couldn't hide the natural swell of her breasts.

'Hi, CJ. Mr Occy came to hit on you again, hey?'

CJ laughed at the name she and Irene had made up for Marty. Irene was about her best friend and ally out of all Doug's shearing teams. She was twenty-two years older, not quite as tall as CJ but



just as skinny. She had come over from New Zealand when she was only seventeen and had never left.

‘I hate working with him,’ CJ replied. ‘He ruins the day.’

They walked over to the CD player and flicked through the collection of CDs.

Irene held up a Midnight Oil CD. ‘This, or Acca Dacca?’ she asked. ‘And did you hear Doug finally found a replacement for Duncan?’

‘Go with AC/DC. And no, I hadn’t heard.’

Irene put the CD into the player. ‘Apparently his name’s Lindsay. No one seems to know anything about him. We’ll see how he shapes up soon enough – Doug’s putting him with us.’ Irene quickly tied her dyed-blond hair up into a scrappy knot at the back of her head.

CJ rolled her eyes. ‘Great. Another one we have to babysit. *We* should get paid more.’

‘Too bloody right,’ Irene laughed.

CJ felt Irene inspecting her black eye and could read her friend’s thoughts in her green eyes.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ CJ said, touching the bruise with her fingertips. ‘It was nothing.’

Irene nodded but her face twitched with worry.

‘You know I can handle it, Irene. Don’t stress.’

Irene wouldn’t push her for information. She knew that CJ would talk when she was ready.

The shearers were oiling up their handpieces and fetching the waiting sheep from their pens, while the rousies fiddled with their scrapers and waited in front of the shearers. CJ looked up at the clock just as it hit seven and the shed erupted with noise. Six



handpieces went on and the hum echoed around the tin shed, like a million bees at work.

CJ leaned over to Irene. 'Let's just hope this guy Lindsay can take Marty's place when we do the smaller sheds. I'd sure like to see him in another team for a while.'

'With a bit of luck he might even be all right and you could go on a date for once in your life.' Irene winked.

'My life is complicated enough,' CJ said, shaking her head. She'd had a rough trot with dating shearers – well, all men, really.

'We'll see,' said Irene, and with that she walked off to wait by the nearest shearer, who was finishing the last couple of blows down the ewe's back.

Following Irene's lead, CJ headed to the skirting table. She knew the first fleece would come from Dave, the large Maori shearer on the end. He was good and she enjoyed watching him shear, but as quick as he was, there was usually a lot of skin in the fleece. Kate, their young rousie, threw the fleece up and over the table. As the cloud of white wool descended, so did CJ's concentration. The day had begun.

At lunchtime, CJ grabbed a handful of ham and salad sandwiches and headed out to the pens. She left the other workers chatting together on a collection of mismatched chairs and a brown sofa in the corner of the shed.

People probably thought she was stuck-up or weird, but she liked being away from crowds. She preferred eating her lunch while watching Sam push up the sheep out in the sun, or chatting with

Irene, if the farmer didn't want her help. When she'd first started, she had tried to mix with the shearers and other rousies, but they came and went a lot, which made it hard. Irene was the only other one who had matched her time here in Doug's teams. Plus she'd met too many people who were complete dicks, especially early on when she first left school, so it was just easier to stick to herself. Her track record with blokes was worse than a prison inmate's. One of the shearers she'd dated had a girlfriend and kids already, which she'd only found out about when they unexpectedly came home early one day. The other shearer did nothing but sit around and smoke pot while drinking. Then there was the classer, a control freak who'd watch her every move, even following her to the toilet. Yes, she was a magnet for crappy men. How she always seemed to find them was nothing short of amazing. She must have a sign on her head saying, 'Available to all idiots.'

Irene reckoned CJ's run of bad luck was over – she'd been saying that for the last four years. Her bad luck *was* over, but only because she hadn't dated anyone in that time. Between those blokes and her family problems, she'd sworn off men for life, or just about. She was no longer naive. She wasn't a weakling, either; her muscles were strong and she knew her stuff. Her hands were dry and callused from the constant work. They didn't look like a woman's hands, but CJ wasn't out to win any beauty contests.

Much to her mother's dismay, from the age of eight onwards CJ had refused to wear dresses, skirts or anything pink. Even now, her going-out clothes consisted of a newish pair of jeans, a shirt or tank top and a pair of clean boots. Her mum had long ago given up on her – and everything else, for that matter.

Stuffing a triangle sandwich in her mouth, she watched Sam ride the back of the sheep, pushing them into the shearing shed. 'Get back!' she yelled, sending Sam around the back of the sheep, pushing more of the mob up the race.

Jim waited until the last sheep was inside before sliding the metal door shut and calling out to his old kelpie, who had been resting in the shade of the mallee trees that lined the edge of the pens.

'Thanks for the help. Poor old Sylvie is getting a bit long in the tooth,' said Jim as he made his way to CJ, his dog now faithfully by his side. Jim's jeans were up high on his waist, held with a leather belt, and his belly overhung by an inch. But he had a smile that was sweet and gentle.

'No worries, Jim. I bet you're glad to see the last of them in.'

'Too right, love. It's been a long and bloody hot week. Me and the missus are going down to the coast next week, and I can't bloody wait to feel that cool sea breeze.' Jim leaned to one side, his hip obviously causing him pain.

CJ smiled. 'And a spot of fishing too, I bet.'

Together they walked back inside the shed.

'So,' Jim said, 'I hear Duncan has finally pulled the pin?'

'Sure has. Jill has been nagging him to get out of shearing for years and when a little shop down south came up, they grabbed it. He's too old to be putting his body through this kind of punishment. I'm glad he's going to retire. Do them a world of good.' CJ walked through to the pens and called Sam over. 'We have the new bloke starting next week, when we head over to Phil Robinson's place. I hope he can keep up.'

Jim nodded, looking over at Sam. 'Will your dog take my orders?'

‘Yep,’ said CJ.

‘Get back!’ Jim called to the collie. By the look in his eye and the smile on his face, she could tell Jim was impressed by the response he got.

‘Good. Sam and I will handle this. Why don’t you put your feet up and have a rest before the last run?’

CJ gave him a look.

‘Go on, piss off. You look after me too good as it is. Take your break. You’re as bad as your dad was,’ Jim said with a smile.

CJ smiled too. She headed over to the wool bales and sat down. For five minutes she let her body relax. The smell of the wool and sheep shit mingled with the sound of sheep bleating and the click of their hooves on the wooden boards as Sam and Jim moved them around. She closed her eyes and thought how nice it would be to have a quick nap, but the sound of shuffling feet and the changing of cutters brought her back to life after a few minutes. Before CJ could move, Irene had plonked herself down on the end of the bale.

‘So are you coming to Duncan’s send-off?’ Irene asked, glancing over at CJ, whose skin shone from the greasy lanolin in the fleeces and her blue singlet sprouted little tufts of wool. CJ knew that look in Irene’s eyes. She was daring her to say no to the party, daring her to leave the confines of her family and all that responsibility for one night.

‘Yeah, but only ’cos it’s Dunc.’

‘Great. Come on. I’ll help you get a bale started. Let’s hope John gets better by tomorrow. Aren’t you sick of pressing these?’

CJ shrugged. ‘It’s not too bad, especially with you helping.’

Irene gripped CJ’s shoulders and shook her gently. ‘Well I don’t

know about you but I'm looking forward to meeting this Lindsay fella. I have a good feeling about him.'

CJ groaned and dropped her head forward. 'Irene, I don't know about your so-called good feelings. As I recall they tend to be a bit wayward.'

Irene scooped up an armful of fleeces. 'Nah, girl. I'm sure about this one.'

'That's what you said about the last one,' said CJ under her breath with a chuckle.

## 2

IT was a new week and a new shed. CJ had arrived early at Phil Robinson's shed, so she had plenty of time to get ready. Doug was already there dropping off the wool press. When he had finished setting it up, he headed over to see her.

She knew something was up by the way he walked and the sheepish look on his face.

'What's up, Doug?' She braced herself.

'Um, I'm a rousie down this week so I've brought Tim in.' He put his large hands on his wide hips. His blond hair sat up in disarray and his blue eyes looked tired and stressed.

CJ shook her head. It wasn't the first time Doug had done this to her. 'No, Doug.' She loved this bloke like an uncle, but she could still be pissed off with him.

Doug's face reddened slightly. 'Please, CJ. Tim would only do it if he could class.'

'And what about me? I told you last time I wasn't being sidelined again. It's bullshit and you know it.'

Doug was as tall as CJ and quite lean for a bloke who had given up shearing to run the teams he'd built up. He was a good boss, when crap like this didn't happen. She had been with Doug and his shearing team for so long now that he'd kind of made her an honorary boss and expected her to be able to control whichever team she was with. Fat chance! Most of them did what they pleased nowadays. They knew it was hard to find a new shearer or rousie, so they played up all the time.

Doug had employed her as soon as she'd left school at the start of year eleven. The family couldn't afford for her to stay, even if she'd wanted to. CJ had to work so Emily could stay at school. Leaving hadn't bothered her. CJ wanted her little sister to have a better start at life.

Doug had known CJ had a background in rousing, as her old man was a good shearer in his heyday, so he'd eagerly signed her up, age sixteen. When she was little, her mum would take her to a shed her dad was working in. No one had ever minded CJ in their sheds. She would help the farmer pen up or give the rousies a hand. She loved to sit and watch her dad shear for hours on end, marvelling at the way the wool came away with the smooth blow of the handpiece. That was before it all went pear-shaped. Now it was all just work, work and more work.

'Tim told me he'd quit if I made him rouse under you. Reckoned he'd get laughed at,' Doug tried to explain. 'He said he'd been offered another job.'

'He's only yankin' ya chain, Doug. He knows you'll cave in. Why put up with his shit when he could up and quit next week anyway?' CJ put her hands on her hips to force her point.



Doug's eyebrows met as he scrunched up his forehead. 'Come on, CJ. Don't make me beg.'

'You're a prick, Doug. How about paying me a classer's wage, then? I don't see why I should have to take a pay cut because of Tim.'

Doug's lips moved with a hint of a smile. He knew she'd given in. He began to head towards his small truck.

'Douglas Taylor, you better be paying me a full wage or I'll go and work for Stumpy's team, and I mean it,' CJ yelled.

She saw Doug's steps falter, but only for a fraction. Yeah, she had him thinking about it – after all, she was his best classer.

In another thirty minutes they were just about to start the first run.

Irene was trying to do running repairs on her scraper with some duct tape. 'So, have you calmed down yet?'

CJ rested her bum on the raised floor. 'Oh, I'm still peeved but there's not much I can do about it.'

'It's pretty crap of Doug to do that to you,' said Irene, shaking her head in disbelief.

'That's blokes for ya. I'm just as qualified as Tim, I've worked for Doug longer, yet I'm instantly put on the floor and Tim's the classer.'

'It's not like Tim can't work the floor. He's only twenty-nine,' added Irene.

CJ screwed her face up in disgust.

'You put up with enough crap as it is without him adding to it,' Irene went on. 'I bet you didn't tell him what you really thought, did you?'

CJ gave Irene a dark look. 'What's the point anyway? It wouldn't have changed anything. I think Doug's finding it tough at the moment. It can't be easy running a few teams when you're struggling for staff.'

'Yeah, I suppose. Oh my . . .' Irene didn't finish her sentence.

CJ followed her gaze to the open door of the shed as a tall figure walked in from the sunshine. Ryan Reynolds, eat your heart out. It had to be the new guy. He was lean and ever so smoulderingly sexy. He had vibrant blue eyes, with a hint of smoky grey, which caused her blood to start to bubbling. But she wasn't going to let Irene know any of this.

Lindsay went straight to the empty stand nearest the door and introduced himself to the other shearers.

'I wish I was twenty years younger,' whispered Irene. 'Come on, let's go say hi.'

CJ was about to say 'let's not', but Irene was already leading her across the floor. Damnation!

'G'day, you must be Lindsay? I'm Irene, I'll be your rousie today along with my mate CJ here.' Irene held out her hand and shook Lindsay's.

Bugger, thought CJ, now she'd have to do the same or else she'd look like an snob.

'Hi,' she said, holding out her hand. CJ tried to avoid contact with his eyes and focused on his hand. It was an amazing hand, connected to his rather gorgeous arm. She swallowed hard.

'Thanks, nice to meet you both. Sorry if I forget your names; I've met so many new people.'

His voice was smooth like caramel, but with a sexy edge to it.

CJ quickly glanced at him, his eyes just leaving her as he turned back to his stand. In another minute the clock hit seven and the shed erupted.

CJ went and stood by Dave, waiting for the belly wool and trying not to think about those sparkling blue eyes.

Before the start of the second run, Irene asked her what she thought of Lindsay.

‘To tell you the truth, I haven’t checked him out properly. But I noticed he’s keeping to himself. That’s way better than Marty.’

‘Yeah, I don’t think Marty’s going to like Lindsay much. He’s going to hate competition,’ Irene laughed, before heading off to dump the locks into a bin.

CJ could just imagine Marty losing his cool. When sheep didn’t do what he wanted, they got more than just a smack across their nose with a handpiece. Sometimes he left them bloody and dazed. Dogs often got a kick up the bum if he was in a shitty mood, and she’d seen him in many fist fights after cut-outs.

Sighing, she went over and jumped into the skins bin and started to pack it down. Lindsay walked past and, out of the corner of her eye, CJ took a moment to watch him. He lifted his long body up onto the raised floor and began to change and oil the cutters on his handpiece. Yeah, he was handsome. No, he was bloody sexy. She didn’t know why, but something about him seemed familiar, like she might have met him before. But she would have remembered him and his long, brown arms. Even his hands were large and powerful, and very enticing. Arms were her weakness and his were definitely a ten out of ten. The heat was building in her temples, making her mind rather foggy. She had seen some nice bodies every

now and then working in the sheds; it kind of came with the job. But there have also been blokes with huge beer bellies – or a built-in airbag, as Dunc called his.

Hands down Lindsay's arms were definitely the best yet. His short-cropped blond hair suited his strong jaw line, and she'd already caught a glimpse of his blue-grey eyes. An involuntary shiver went down her spine as she climbed out of the bin. The music cranked up, signalling the start of the next run. Thoughts of Lindsay lurked in the back of CJ's mind as she waited for the first fleece.

Lindsay held a ewe tightly between his legs and began to take off the belly wool. His first day on the job and things were going okay. He was thankful Doug had offered him a job, as it had been short notice. It's not every day you walk off the family farm. At least this way there was distance between him and his dad. Des hadn't been too impressed, of course, but he couldn't do much about it. Lindsay was twenty-eight and could make up his own mind. Truth be told, he should have left years ago. If it hadn't been for the fight with his dad, he might never have had the guts to leave. Maybe he would go back one day, but not for a while. Not until he had found himself and got his head around what his dad had said during their fight. Lindsay had slaved away on the farm and now it was his little brother's turn. James was the better farmer anyway.

Lindsay noticed a couple of rousies watching him, and he groaned. At first it'd been great – pulling in the girls – but now he'd had enough of shallow women. Lindsay had hoped that if he

kept to himself, they might leave him alone. But he could see their minds ticking over. He'd been in enough shearing sheds to know their sort. Some worked hard, he'd give them that, but the majority played just as hard. He had given up on trying to find a woman who interested him years ago.

Before he knew it, a tall girl came in and swooped up the fleece just as the last bit touched the floor. She whisked it away before the other two rousies could get their butts into gear. He smirked at the look of disappointment on their faces, and followed the tall girl with his eyes. What was her name . . . CJ? When he'd shaken her hand it had felt as rough as one of the shearers'. He was impressed by her rock-hard physique – she was like a female version of the statue of David. And her face was smooth and fresh – no make-up, just her natural beauty. He would have liked to see her eyes but she kept them hidden behind long lashes.

He could tell she was upset by the way she threw herself into her work. It was hard and fast. Lindsay was very similar. When his dad would get angry with him for wanting to leave the farm to do some shearing or a show or competition, he always found he carried his anger into his shearing. Sometimes the bigger the fight, the faster he shored – but it wasn't always clean.

Towards the end of the run he heard her voice as she began to gather his next fleece. It was soft and direct. She made sure he knew it was a compliment.

'You shear nice and clean. Good job.' And then she was gone again, as quick as that, leaving him to ponder her words. It brought a smile to his face. Lindsay realised it was the first time he'd had a rousie notice his work. He was thrilled and for the rest of the

day he was in a better mood. Maybe this change was a good thing for him after all.

# *Heart of Gold*

Fiona Palmer lives in the tiny rural town of Pingaring in Western Australia, three and a half hours south-east of Perth. She discovered Danielle Steele at the age of eleven, and has now written her own brand of rural romance. She has attended romance writers' groups and received an Australian Society of Authors mentorship for her first novel, *The Family Farm*. She has extensive farming experience, does the local mail run, and was a speedway-racing driver for seven years. She currently works two days a week at the local shop in between writing her next book and looking after her two small children.

For shearing information, pictures and videos, please head to Fiona's website: [fionapalmer.com](http://fionapalmer.com)





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CJ Wishart is a hardworking country girl with a heart of gold but a life that can be tough. Her job as a wool classer is back-breaking, her family life is a disaster and, after a string of dating debacles, she's put men in the too-hard basket.

When strong, handsome Lindsay arrives on the scene as their new shearer, CJ can't help but take notice. They have an undeniable spark, but can she handle the complications and potential heart-break of falling in love?

With help from her best friend and an endearing old farmer, CJ learns that when you stay true to yourself and open your heart, anything is possible.

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