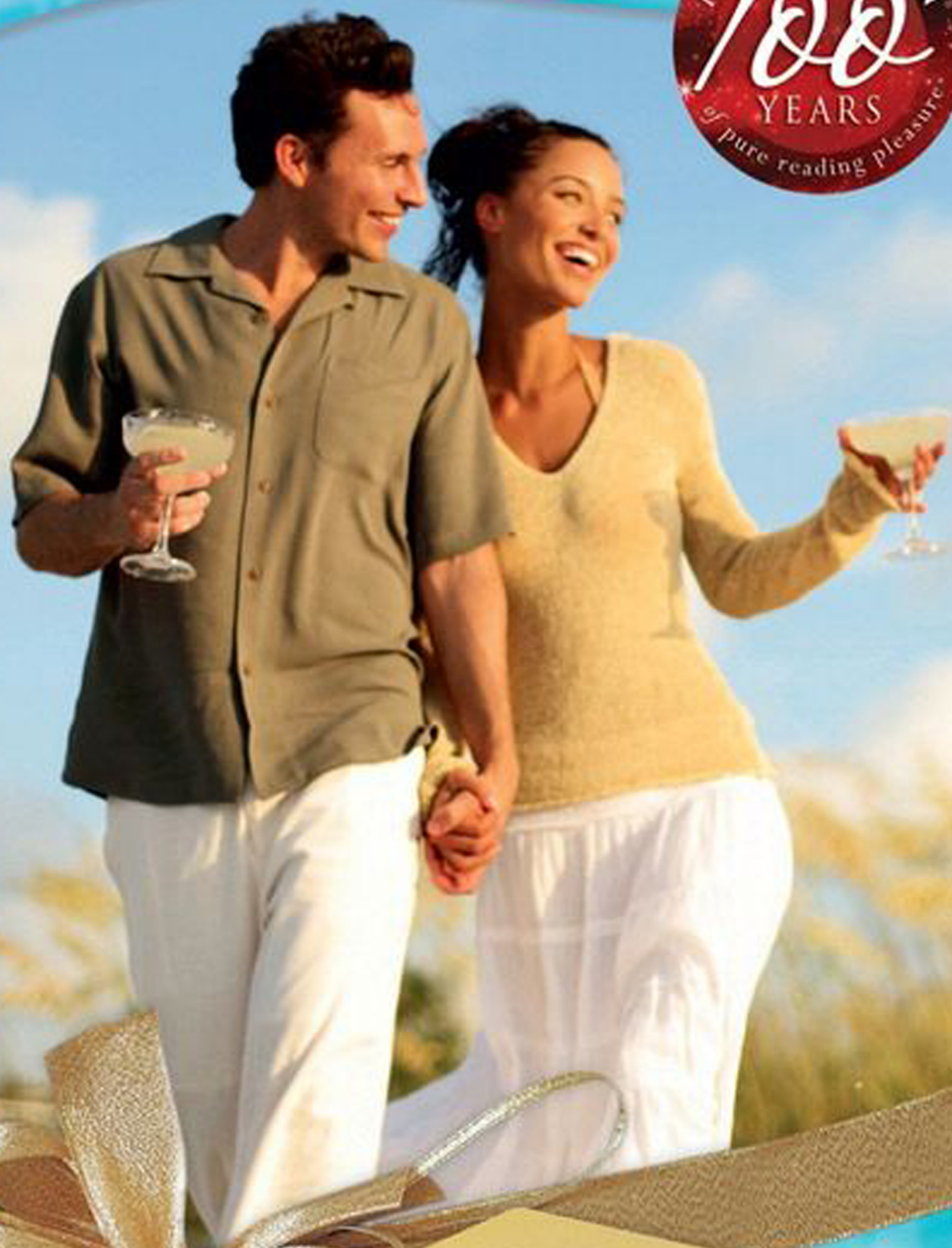


CHILDREN'S DOCTOR, MEANT-TO-BE WIFE
Meredith Webber



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Children's Doctor, Meant-to-be Wife

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‘Angus.’

She breathed his name against his lips and felt hers whispered back. Just as they had always made love—silently, nothing but their names confirming their identities, as if in kissing, touching, loving, they might lose themselves and need to know again just who they were.

His arms engulfed her, wrapping her in the security of his body, holding her close so all her doubts and fears and uncertainties were kept at bay. This, too, had always been the way. Safe in Angus’s arms she’d lost the insecurities that had plagued her all her life, living for the moment, living eventually for him, and then for Bobby—

His lips were tracing kisses down her neck, then up again, resting where her pulse beat—wildly and erratically, she was sure. They found her mouth again and claimed it, in a kiss so deep it drew all air from her lungs and left her gasping, clinging, wanting more than kisses.

Meredith Webber says of herself, ‘Some ten years ago, I read an article which suggested that Mills and Boon were looking for new medical authors. I had one of those “I can do that” moments, and gave it a try. What began as a challenge has become an obsession—though I do temper the “butt on seat” career of writing with dirty but healthy outdoor pursuits, fossicking through the Australian Outback in search of gold or opals. Having had some success in all of these endeavours, I now consider I’ve found the perfect lifestyle.’

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CHILDREN'S DOCTOR, MEANT-TO-BE WIFE

BY
MEREDITH WEBBER



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS, Beth decided as she helped other camp volunteers assemble the children for the night spotlighting tour in the rainforest, the best of all possible jobs. True, she was missing out on the gala evening that followed the official opening of the newly rebuilt and extended Wallaby Island Medical Centre, but to share the joy of a night drive in the rainforest with these kids meant so much more to her than dressing up and dancing.

With the extension of the Wallaby Island Medical Centre and the appointment of a permanent doctor—her very own self—to staff it, Crocodile Creek Kids' Camp had also been expanded, so now they could take up to twenty children at a time, providing a fun holiday with tons of different experiences for children who couldn't normally enjoy camp life. This week, the camp was playing host to children with respiratory problems and to a group of children in remission from cancer.

'No, Sam, I'll drive today with Ally in the front. You take care of Danny in the back. Remember he's not feeling very well so don't tease him.'

She settled the three children she was responsible for this evening into one of the little electric carts that were the only mode of transport on the island, and guided the cart into line behind the slightly larger one that Pat, the ranger, would be driving. He had seven children on board with another volunteer, and he also had the spotlight.

Pat checked his passengers then wandered back to Beth's cart.

'You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?' he said. 'Someone was telling me you'd just come off duty and you're volunteering for this job. Should be at the party, shouldn't you?'

He was just making conversation, Beth knew, but he was a nice guy and deserved an honest answer.

'I'm far happier out playing with the kids than partying,' she told him. 'And remember, this is an adventure for me, too. I haven't been in the rainforest at night.'

'Got your light?'

Beth held up the big torch he'd given her earlier.

'Now, your job is to shine it on the animal, so the kids see all of it. My light will hold the eyes and keep it still.'

'I think I can manage that,' Beth told him, although Sam was already asking if he could hold the torch and she knew they'd have a battle of wills about torch-holding before the evening finished. Sam might be slight for his eight years, but he had the fighting qualities of a wild tiger.

Pat returned to his cart and they drove off into the rainforest, taking the track that led to the resort on the other end of the island for about five minutes, before turning off towards the rugged mountain that stood sentinel over the rainforest.

The little carts rolled quietly along, the whirr of their wheels the only sounds, then Pat stopped and doused his headlights, Beth pulling up behind him.

'Now, remember we have to be very quiet or the animals will run away,' Beth whispered to her charges as Pat turned on the big light and began to play it among the palms and ferns that crowded the side of the track.

'There,' he said quietly, and the children 'oohed' as the light picked up wide-open, yellow-green eyes. Beth shone her torch to the side of the eyes and nearly dropped the light. They were looking at a snake. A beautiful snake admittedly but still a snake.

Diamond patterns marked its skin, and though it was coiled around a tree branch, Beth guessed it had to be at least eight feet long.

She wasn't very good with snakes, so the torch shook in her hands while her feet lifted involuntarily off the floor of the cart. Ally, perhaps feeling the same atavistic fear, slid onto her knee.

Fortunately Pat's light moved on, finding now, fortunately on the other side of the track, a tiny sugar glider, its huge eyes wide in the light, its furry body still.

There followed a chorus of 'Ahh!' and 'Look!'

How could children keep quiet at the wonder of it, especially when the little animal suddenly moved its legs so the wing-like membrane between them spread and it glided like a bird from one branch to another?

Next the light was low, catching an earthbound animal, sitting up on its haunches as it chewed a nut.

'A white-tailed marsupial rat,' Pat said quietly, while Beth's torch picked out the animal's body and then the white tail.

The children's hushed voices startled the little animal, sending him scuttling into the undergrowth, so Pat changed lights, holding up another torch and shining ultraviolet light around until it picked up a huge, saucer-shaped fungus, the light making it glow with a ghostly phosphorescence so the children 'oohed' and 'ahhed' again in the wonder of it.

They moved on, Sam listing on his fingers how many animals he'd seen, soon needing Danny's fingers as well.

'You'll be onto toes before long,' Beth said to him, when Pat showed them the emerald-green eyes of a spider in his web.

'This is so exciting,' Sam whispered back. 'Isn't it, Danny?'

But Danny, Beth realised, was tiring quickly and, with a couple of children already in the hospital with some mystery illness, she decided she'd take him back to camp. Ally, too, had probably had enough.

'What if you go into Pat's cart and I take Ally and Danny back to camp?' she suggested to Sam.

'No, I'm Danny's friend so I'll stay with him.'

'I'll go with Pat,' Ally said, surprising Beth, although she knew she shouldn't be surprised by anything children did.

She shifted Ally into the bigger cart, found somewhere to turn her cart, then headed back, stopping when she heard any rustling in the bushes, letting Sam sit in the front so he could shine the torch around and spotlight the animal.

'Over there! I can hear a noise over there. Shine the torch, Sam,' Danny whispered, when they were close to the junction of the main track.

Beth eased her foot off the accelerator and Sam turned on the torch, finding not an animal or reptile but a human being.

A very tall human being.

A very familiar human being!

'A-A-Angus?'

His name came out as a stuttered question, and she stared at where he'd been but the torchlight had gone. Sam had taken one look at the figure, given a loud scream, flung the torch down into the well of the cart and darted away, heading along the track as fast as his little legs would carry him.

Danny began to cry, Beth yelled at Sam to stop, to wait, but it was Angus who responded first, taking off after the startled child, calling to him that it was all right.

Beth took Danny on her knee, assuring him everything was okay, driving awkwardly with the child between her and the wheel, hoping Sam would stay on the path, not head into the bushes.

'He got a fright,' she said to Danny, 'that's all. We'll find him soon.'

Fortunately, because Danny was becoming increasingly distressed, they did find him soon, sitting atop Angus's shoulders, shining Angus's torch.

'He's not a Yowie after all,' Sam announced, as the little cart stopped in front of the pair. 'I thought he was a Yowie for sure, didn't you, Danny?'

Danny agreed that he, too, had thought Angus was the mythical Australian bush creature, although Beth was willing to bet this was the first time Danny had heard the word.

As far as Beth was concerned, she'd been more afraid Angus was a ghost—some figment of her imagination conjured up in the darkness of the rainforest.

Yowies, she was sure, were ugly creatures, not tall, strong and undeniably handsome...

A ghost for sure, except that ghosts didn't chase and catch small boys.

Which reminded her...

'You shouldn't have run like that, Sam,' she chided gently as Angus lifted the child from his shoulders and settled him in the cart where he snuggled up against Beth and Danny. 'You could have been lost in the forest.'

'Nuh-uh,' Sam said, shaking his head vigorously. 'I stayed on the path—I wasn't going in the bushes. There are snakes in there.'

'And Yowies,' Danny offered, but he sounded so tired Beth knew she had to get him back to camp.

And she'd have to say something to Angus.

But what?

Not knowing—feeling jittery, her composure totally shaken—she let anger take control.

'I've no idea what you were doing, looming up out of the bushes like that,' she said crossly. 'You scared us all half to death.'

'Beth? Is that really you, Beth?'

He was bent over, peering past Sam towards her, and he sounded as flabbergasted as she felt.

'Who *is* that man?' Sam demanded, before she could assure Angus that it was her. 'And what was he doing in the bushes?'

Exactly what I'd like to know myself, Beth thought, but her lips weren't working too well, or she couldn't get enough air through her larynx to speak, or something.

Fortunately Angus wasn't having any problems forming his speech.

'I'm Angus and I'm staying at the resort. Right now, I'm doing the same thing you're doing, looking at the animals at night. That's why I have my torch.'

He lifted it up, showing it again to Sam who took it and immediately turned it on and shone the light on Danny and Beth.

'Turn it off,' Beth said, finding her voice, mainly because the light had shown how pale Danny was. 'We've got to get back to camp.'

She wasn't sure who she'd said it to, the kids or Angus, but she knew she had to get away, not only because of her own fractured mental state but because Danny needed his bed.

She nodded at Angus—it seemed the least you could do with an ex-husband you found wandering in the rainforest at night—and put her foot on the accelerator.

They shot backwards along the track, Sam laughing uproariously, even Danny giggling.

'Little devil,' Beth muttered at Sam, turning the key he'd touched while they'd stopped to forward instead of reverse.

She accelerated again and this time moved decorously forward, passing Angus who was still standing by the track.

If the shock he was feeling was anything like the shock in her body, he might still be there in the morning.

Back at the camp, she left the two children with their carers, explained that Ally had stayed with the larger group, then made her way to the medical centre.

Was she going there to avoid thinking about Angus?

She tried to consider it rationally, wanting to answer her silent question honestly.

Decided, in the end, she honestly wasn't. Little Robbie Henderson had been asleep when she'd come off duty and although Grace Blake was an excellent nurse and would page Beth if there was any change, she wanted to see for herself that he was resting peacefully.

And check on the other patients, of course.

And it *would* help her not think about Angus!

She parked the cart outside the medical centre, frowning at a dark shadow on the ground just off the edge of the parking area. A shearwater going into its burrow? She watched for a minute but the bird didn't move.

Hadn't Lily picked up a dead bird the other day?

And Ben, one of the rangers who was sick, had also been collecting dead birds.

'I was just going to page you.' Grace greeted Beth with this information as she walked into the hospital section of the medical centre. 'He slept quite well for an hour, then woke up agitated. Actually, I'm not sure he's even fully awake. Luke's here, but he's with Mr Woods, the man you admitted this afternoon with a suspect MI.'

Luke Bresciano was a doctor with the Crocodile Creek hospital and rescue service and, like all the Crocodile Creek staff, he did rostered duty at the medical centre. Officially he was the doctor on duty tonight, but Beth had admitted Robbie, talking to him about his family back home as she'd examined him, and the little boy had relaxed in her presence. If he was distressed, he might react better to her than to the other staff.

She went into the room where he tossed and turned feverishly on the bed, a small figure, his left leg and arm distorted by the cerebral palsy that had also affected his lungs, so even a mild infection could result in respiratory problems.

'Hey, Robbie!' she said quietly, sitting by the bed and taking his hand in hers, smoothing back his floppy dark hair from his forehead, talking quietly to him.

He opened his eyes and looked at her but she knew he wasn't seeing her, lost as he was in some strange world his illness had conjured up.

'Go to sleep,' she told him, gently smoothing his eyes shut with the palm of his hand. 'I'll stay with you, little man. I'll look after you.'

And holding his hand, she began to sing, very softly, a funny little song she remembered someone singing when she'd been very young, about an echo.

Had the song sprung from her subconscious as a result of seeing Angus—as a result of that echo from the past?

Surely not, but seeing Angus had unsettled her so she sang to calm herself as well as Robbie, changing to other songs, silly songs, singing quietly until the panicky feeling in her chest subsided and the peace she'd found on this island haven returned.

So what if Angus was here? She was over Angus. Well, if not over him, at least she'd managed to tuck him away into some far corner of her mind—like mementos tucked away in an attic. Could memories gather enough cobwebs to become invisible?

To be forgotten?

Not when they still caused pain in her heart.

'Bother Angus!' she muttered, then hurriedly checked that her words hadn't disturbed Robbie.

They hadn't, but what made her really angry was that the peace she'd found in this place—even in so short a time—could be so fragile that seeing Angus had disturbed it.

Here, working in a medical centre with a kids' camp attached, she'd thought she'd found the perfect job. Caring for the children, playing with them, sharing their experiences, she was finally getting over the loss of her own child—her and Angus's child. In the three years since Bobby had died and she and Angus had parted, this was the closest she'd come to finding happiness again. Ongoing happiness, not just moments or days of it.

At first she'd wondered how she'd cope with the kids, especially with the fact that many of the children at the camp had cerebral palsy, the condition Bobby had suffered from. But from the day of their arrival she'd known that didn't matter. Just as Bobby, young though he'd been, only three when he'd died, had fought against the limitations of his condition—severe paralysis—so these kids, whether asthmatics, diabetics, in remission from cancer or with CP, got on with their lives with cheerful determination, relishing every fun-filled moment of camp life, and drawing staff and volunteers into the joy with them.

Yes, it was the perfect job, in a perfect place—a tropical island paradise. What more could a woman want?

The L-word sneaked into her mind.

Pathetic, that's what she was!

Had it been seeing Angus that had prompted such a thought?

Of course it must be. Seeing Angus had raised all kinds of spectres, weird spectres considering Angus had never loved her—she'd known that from the start—although back then she *had* allowed herself to dream...

Not any more!

She pushed her thoughts back into the cobwebby attic. So what if he was on the island? He was at the resort at the other end, nowhere near the camp or medical centre, so there was no reason for them to meet again.

None!

Except that the island was no longer a haven, she admitted to herself in the early hours of the morning when Robbie slept but her own fears came to the fore, tiredness magnifying them.

She'd tried to tell herself she was unsettled because of the Angus incident—because of his escape from the attic of her mind—but, in fact, it was a combination of things that had her so uptight.

So desperately worried!

Seeing Angus had brought back memories of Bobby's death. Bobby had died of a massive chest infection they'd at first thought was simply flu.

With vulnerable children was there ever 'simple' flu?

And then there were the birds...

Her island paradise had become a place of sick children and dead birds!

The combination of words played again and again—like an echo—in Beth's head as day dawned, grey and wary, outside the window. Now, tired though she was, she tried to put aside emotion and just list the facts.

The celebration of the opening the previous day had been dampened by the fact that the ten-bed hospital attached to the medical centre was half-full. Sick adults were bad enough, but the sick children?

Lily, Jack and Robbie hospitalised here in the medical centre, Danny not well last night. For these children a simple cold was a big concern—flu was even worse.

Bird flu!

Not a fact but an inescapable thought...

The feared words hadn't yet been spoken but Beth imagined she could hear them murmuring on the soft tropical wind that blew across the island and whispering at her from the palm fronds. The worrying thing, as far as Beth could see, was that no one was doing anything to find out if this might be the flash point of a pandemic.

Charles Wetherby, head of Crocodile Creek Hospital and the prime mover in expanding the medical presence on Wallaby Island, would normally have taken charge, but he'd been distracted by the official events and the dignitaries attending them, to say nothing of the fact that his ward, Lily, was one of the sick children.

Distracted generally, it seemed to Beth, although she didn't know him well enough to be sure distracted wasn't part of his usual personality.

As far as the mystery illness was concerned, blood samples *had* been sent to the mainland for testing—that was a fact—but there were so many different strains of flu, would an ordinary pathology lab on the mainland think to consider bird flu or even have the facility to test for it?

In the pale dawn light Beth sighed, knowing she had to go through with a decision she'd made some time around midnight as she'd sat beside Robbie's bed, looking at the child but seeing a much smaller and younger child—not Robbie, but Bobby. *Later we'll call him Bob*, Angus had said, *it's more manly than Rob*.

But Bobby had never grown to be a man, and Angus?

She sighed again.

Angus was a short electric cart ride away, in the luxury resort on the southern end of the island.

Angus was a pathologist who specialised in epidemiology.

Angus would know about bird flu.

She had to go there.

She had to ask him.

Before another child got sick...

Before another child died...

Beth left the small electric cart in the parking lot at the edge of the resort.

'Stay!' she said firmly to Garf, the camp's goofy, golden, curly labradoodle, who considered riding in the carts the best fun in the world and had hurred himself in beside her before she'd left the clinic.

Garf smiled his goofy smile and lay down across the seat.

Not that he'd guard the cart for her—he'd be more likely to encourage someone to steal it so he could have another ride.

Smiling at remembered antics of the dog she'd grown so fond of, she walked along the path through the lush tropical greenery that screened the small cart park from the resort itself, and found herself by the pool. It looked a million miles long and she realised it had been designed to seem as if it was at one with the surrounding sea. At this end, there were chairs set around tables that sheltered under wide umbrellas, and closer to the pool low-slung loungers, where a few people were already soaking up the very early rays of the rising sun.

To her right, the resort hotel rose in terraced steps so in a way it repeated the shape of the rugged mountain beneath which it sheltered.

'Wow!'

The word escaped her, although she'd been determined not to be impressed by the magnificence of the newly rebuilt resort.

And possibly because she was so nervous over approaching Angus that she'd been concentrating on the setting to exclude Angus-thoughts from her mind, and talking to herself helped.

Then she remembered Robbie Henderson—and Jack and Lily and the other patients—and why she was there. With steady steps and a thundering heart, she made her way towards the building.

'You are not the wimpy twenty-five-year-old who fell for the first hazel-eyed specialist who looked your way—awed by someone in his position taking notice of a first-year resident,' she reminded herself, muttering under her breath to emphasise her thoughts. 'You're a mature, experienced woman now, a qualified ER doctor and head of the Wallaby Island Medical Centre. All you're doing is what any sensible medico would do—seeking advice from an expert.'

Who happened to be the love of your life, an inner voice reminded her.

'Past tense!' she muttered at the voice, but it had been enough to slow her footsteps and she needed further verbal assurances to get her into the resort.

'What's more, he won't bite you. He'll want to help. In fact, it's probably only because he hasn't heard about the kids being sick that he hasn't already offered. And he's kind, he's always been kind—work-obsessed but, once distracted from his work, very kind...'

She'd been telling herself these things all night, repeating them over and over again to Garf on the fifteen-minute drive through the rainforest that separated the camp and clinic area from the hotel, but the repetition wasn't doing much to calm her inner agitation, which churned and twisted in her stomach until she felt physically sick.

'He's not answering the phone in his room, but if you go through to the Rainforest Retreat, he could be having breakfast there.'

The polite receptionist, having listened to Beth's explanation of who she was and whom she wanted, now pointed her in the direction of the Rainforest Retreat, a wide conservatory nestled into the rainforest at the back of the hotel building, huge potted palms and ferns making it hard to tell where the real forest ended and the man-made one began.

Beth paused on the threshold, at first in amazement at the spacious beauty of it and then to look around, peering between the palms, her eyes seeking a tall, dark-haired man whose sole focus, she knew from the past, would be his breakfast.

Whatever Angus did, he did with total concentration—yep, there he was, cutting his half-grapefruit into segments, carefully lifting the flesh, a segment at a time, to his mouth, chewing it while he attacked the next segment.

'The kitchens in hotels never get it cut right through,' he'd complained during their weekend honeymoon in a hotel in the city, and from then on it had been her mission in life—or one of them—to ensure his grapefruit segments were cut right through.

Although Angus's morning grapefruit hadn't been her concern for three years now—three long years...

She was trying to figure out if that made her sad or simply relieved when she saw his concentration falter—his forkful of grapefruit flesh hesitating between the bowl and his mouth. Which was when she realised he had company at the table—company that had been hidden from Beth's view by a palm frond but was now revealed to be a very attractive woman with long blond hair that swung like a curtain as she turned her head, hiding her perfect features for a moment before swinging back to reveal them again.

Reveal also a certain intimacy with the man who'd returned his concentration to his grapefruit.

Beth's courage failed and she stood rooted to the spot, wishing there was a palm frond in front of her so no one would see her, or guess at her inability to move.

But she was no longer an anxious first-year resident overawed in the presence of a specialist—she was a competent medical practitioner, and Robbie and the other children needed help.

Now!

Legs aching with reluctance, she forced herself forward, moving like a robot until she reached the table.

The blonde looked up first—way past attractive! Stunning!

If Beth's heart could have sunk further than her sandals, it would have.

'I'm sorry to interrupt,' she said quietly, finally detaching Angus's attention from his grapefruit, pleased to see he looked as surprised as she felt nervous.

'Beth?'

The word croaked out, though what emotion caused the hoarseness she couldn't guess.

'I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you properly last night but Danny, the little boy in the back, he wasn't well and I wanted to get him to bed. How are you, Angus?' she managed, blurting out the words while clutching her hands tightly in front of her so he wouldn't see them shaking.

He stared at her and she wondered if he'd written off her presence in the rainforest the previous evening as a bad dream.

His silent regard tightened her tension and she forgot about maturity and experience and bumbled into speech again.

'I really am sorry to interrupt, but we've a crisis at the medical centre and I—'

She saw from his blank expression that he didn't understand, just seconds before he echoed, 'Medical centre?'

'I thought you'd have heard—there was an official opening yesterday, a gala evening last night here at the hotel. The medical centre's at the other end of the island—an outpost of Crocodile Creek Hospital on the mainland. There's always been a small centre here on the island but it was extended because after Cyclone Willie the Crocodile Creek Kids' Camp was rebuilt and expanded, and with the extensions to the resort it seemed sensible to have an efficient and permanent medical presence on the island.'

The words rattled off her tongue, her apprehension firing them at him like bullets from a gun.

'Crocodile Creek—that's Charles Wetherby's set-up—has a rescue service attached—yes, perhaps I did hear something,' Angus said, not needing to add, to Beth anyway, that if whatever he'd heard didn't directly concern him or his work then he'd have filed it away under miscellaneous and tucked it into a far corner of his brain.

But now he was frowning at her, the finely drawn dark brows above hazel eyes encroaching on each other, indenting a single frown line above his long, straight nose.

'And what has this to do with you?'

The question was too sharp and for the first time it occurred to Beth she should have phoned her ex-husband, not run here like a desperate kid, seeking his help. For a desperate kid was what she felt like now, not mature at all, standing in front of Angus like a child in front of the headmaster in his office at school.

Had this thought communicated itself to Angus that he suddenly stood up, pulled out another chair, and told Beth to sit?

In a very headmasterly voice!

But her knees were becoming so unreliable, what with the lack of sleep last night and the strain of seeing—and talking to—Angus again, that she obeyed without question.

At least now she could hide her hands in her lap and he wouldn't see them shaking.

Angus sat down again, pushed his nearly finished grapefruit half away and turned his attention to Beth. Most of his attention, that was. Part of it was focussed on pushing back memories and totally unnecessary observations like how tired she looked and the fact that she always looked smaller when she was tired, and she'd lost weight as well, he was willing to bet, and why, after three years, did his hands still want to touch her, to feel the silky softness of her skin, to peel her clothes off and—?

'Start with why you're here,' he began, hoping practicalities would help him regain control, not only of the situation but of his mind and body. 'Not here in this room right now, but on this island—connected to this medical centre.'

'I work there. I'm the permanent doctor at the centre. I saw the job advertised and thought it would be wonderful, just what I needed, something different.'

Far too much information! Admittedly she was flustered—wasn't he?—but...

He shuffled through his mental miscellaneous file—the Crocodile Creek Kids' Camp was for children with ongoing health problems or disabilities. Had she chosen to work in a place where she'd be seeing these children because of Bobby?

Of course that would be a factor, though it went deeper than that. On a resort island people—especially these kids—came and went. She wouldn't have to become too involved with any of them, and if she wasn't involved she wouldn't get hurt—Beth's self-protective instincts coming into full play—the same self-protective instincts that had made her adamant about not having another child...

Although maybe he'd suggested that too early—too soon after Bobby's death...

'Angus?'

The woman's voice—not Beth's, Sally's—made him wonder if he'd lingered too long in his thoughts. He was usually better than this—quick on the uptake, fast in decision-making, focussed...

He turned to his companion—tall, elegant, beautiful, clever Sally. She was relatively new on his staff, but they'd been dating occasionally and he'd suggested she attend the conference with him thinking...

He glanced towards Beth, weirdly ashamed at what he'd been thinking then furious with himself for the momentary guilt.

'Sorry, Sally, this is Beth, my ex-wife.'

'I'll leave you to catch up,' Sally said, in a voice that suggested any chance of them getting to know each other better over the weekend had faded fast.

But though he knew she wanted him to tell her to stay—to touch her on the arm as he said it—he made no move to stop her as she stood up with her coffee and raisin toast and moved through the room to another table on the far side, where other conference attendees were enjoying a far noisier breakfast.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset anyone,' Beth said. 'I'll explain quickly, then you can explain to...Sally? I'm sure she'll understand.'

The words made no sense at all to Angus, who failed to see why Beth should be concerned about Sally. Although Beth did have a habit of being concerned about everyone—even in little ways. He'd remembered that, with a twinge of regret, as he'd wrestled with his grapefruit.

'There's a bug going around on our side of the island that presents with flu-like symptoms but three of the children, Jack and Robbie from the kids' camp and Lily, Charles Wetherby's ward, are quite seriously sick, very high temperatures that we're having trouble controlling with drugs, and on top of that are the birds. There are dead birds, shearwaters I think they're called, all around the island.'

She glanced around and added, 'Probably not here—the groundspeople would clear them away—but over on our side. Lily picked one up and gave it to Charles, thinking he could cure it. We've vulnerable children in the camp, Angus, and although no one's saying anything, I'm sure in their heads they're whispering it might be bird flu.'

Her wide-set blue eyes looked pleadingly into his, asking the question she hadn't put into words. Would he help?

As if she needed to ask—to plead! He felt a stab of annoyance at her, then remembered that Beth, who'd had so little, would never take anything for granted. And certainly not where he was concerned. Hadn't he accepted her decision that they should divorce and walked away without another word, burying himself in work, using his ability to focus totally on the problems it presented to blot out the pain, only realising later—too late—that he should have stayed, have argued, have—

But that was in the past and right now she needed help.

'Do you have transport?'

'Electric cart parked out the back.'

'Then let's go.'

He stood up and reached out to take her hand to help her stand—an automatic action until he saw her flinch away as if his touch might burn her. Pain he thought he'd conquered long ago washed through him.

How had they come to this, he and Beth?

CHAPTER TWO

SKIN prickling with awareness of Angus by her side, Beth led the way back to the cart, then sighed with relief when she saw Garf.

He could sit between them, they could talk about the dog and she wouldn't have to think of things to say.

'Good grief, what's that?'

Beth had to smile. Garf looked more like a tall sheep or a curly goat than a dog.

'That's Garf, he loves a ride. Move over, dog!'

Garf had sat up and yapped a welcoming hello. He was now regarding Angus with interest.

Was this a man who knew the exact place to scratch behind a dog's ear?

'He's a labradoodle, a non-allergenic kind of dog,' Beth replied. 'The kids love him and when they're all up and about he's usually with them. His other great love is riding in carts and it's impossible to tell him he's not wanted—he just leaps in.'

To her surprise, Angus and Garf took to each other like old friends, although Angus was firm about not wanting a thirty-odd-kilo dog sitting on his knee.

'He likes to hang his head out,' Beth explained apologetically, but Angus had already worked that, easing the dog to the outside of the seat and sliding across so his body was pressed against Beth's.

'I could make him run back—it's not far,' she said, thoroughly unnerved by the closeness.

'No, he's fine,' Angus said, so airily, she realised with regret, that he wasn't feeling any of the physical upheaval that was plucking at her nerves and raising goose-bumps on her skin. He might just as well have been sitting next to a statue.

A statue that kept thinking about a blonde called Sally.

'I'm sorry I interrupted your breakfast,' Beth said, and although she knew it was none of her business, she plunged on. 'You and Sally? You're a couple? That's good. I'm glad. I'm—'

'If you say I'm happy for you I'll probably get out and walk back to the resort!' Angus growled. 'For your information, Sally and I are work colleagues, nothing more. We're here for a conference. I'm giving a paper on Tuesday.'

'Oh!'

The relief she felt was so totally inappropriate she blustered on.

'But you're well. Busy as ever, I suppose?'

Angus turned and gave her a strange look then began to talk about the tiny finches that darted between the fronds of the tree ferns.

So, his personal life was off-limits as far as conversation went—Beth felt a momentary pang of sympathy for Sally who probably was quite interested in her boss and didn't realise just how detached from emotion Angus was. And personal issues like health and work had just been squashed; what did that leave?

Beth joined the bird conversation!

'The bird life's wonderful here,' she managed, her voice hoarse with the effort of keeping up what was very limp and totally meaningless chat.

'The night life's pretty surprising as well,' he said, ice cool, although he did offer a sardonic smile in case she hadn't caught his meaning.

'Well, it *was* last night,' she admitted with a laugh, remembering how strange she'd found it, in the past, that Angus, who was usually so serious, could always make her laugh. And with that memory—and the laugh—she relaxed.

Just a little.

'I nearly died to see a person standing there, then to find it was you.' She shook her head. 'Unbelievable.'

'But very handy, apparently,' he said, and she had to look at him again, to see if he was teasing her.

But this time his face was serious.

'Very handy,' she confirmed, although it wasn't handy for her heart, which was behaving very badly, bumping around in her chest as if it had come away from its moorings.

'How long have you been on the island?'

She glanced his way again and her chest ached at the familiarity of his profile—high forehead, strong straight nose, lips defined by a little raised edge that tempted fingers to run over it, and a chin that wasn't jutting exactly but definitely there. The kind of chin you'd choose not to argue with—that had been her first thought on seeing it.

Forget his chin and answer the question!

'Only a couple of weeks. I spent some time at the Crocodile Creek Hospital on the mainland, getting to know the staff there, as they—the doctors and the nurses—do rostered shifts at the clinic and, of course, the helicopter rescue and retrieval services the hospital runs are closely connected with the island.'

'Why here?' he asked, and she glanced towards him. Big mistake, for he'd turned in her direction and she met the same question in his dark-lashed eyes. Although that might have been her imagination! He had beautiful eyes, but if eyes were the windows of the soul, then she'd never been able to read Angus's soul, or his emotions, in them.

Except when he'd looked at Bobby. Then she'd seen the love—and the pain...

'It was somewhere different, a chance to see a new place, experience different medicine, meet new people.'

'Always high on your priority list,' Angus said dryly, but this time she refused to glance at him, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the track in front of her.

'I've always liked meeting people,' she said quietly. 'I might not be the life and soul of a party, or need to be constantly surrounded by friends, but I enjoy the company of colleagues and patients—you know that, Angus.'

Did she sound hurt? Angus replayed her words—and the intonation—in his head and didn't think so. She was simply making a statement—putting him down, in fact, though she hadn't needed to do it because he'd regretted the words the instant they'd been out of his mouth.

For all her shyness, or perhaps because of it, she *was* good with people, knowing instinctively how to approach them, intuitively understanding their pain or weaknesses, easing her way into their confidence.

'And are you enjoying it? The island? The people?'

They were on a straight stretch of track, coming out of the thick rainforest into a more open but still treed area, and he could see cabins and huts nestled in private spaces between the trees.

Apparently more sure of the path now, she turned towards him before she answered, and her clear blue eyes—Bobby's eyes—met his.

'Oh, yes!' she said—no hesitation at all. 'Yes, I am.'

Then her brow creased and she sighed.

'Or I was until the kids starting getting sick. What shall we do, Angus, if it *is* bird flu?'

'Let's wait and see,' he said, touching her arm to reassure her.

Or possibly to see if her skin was really as soft as he remembered it...

He shook his head, disturbed that the strength of the attraction he felt towards Beth hadn't lessened in their years apart. Perhaps it was a good thing she had a problem at the medical centre—something he could get stuck into to divert his mind from memories of the past.

Although sick children were more than just a diversion—they were a real concern.

She pulled up in front of a new-looking building, the ramp at the front of it still trailing tattered streamers and limp balloons. The dog leapt out and began biting at the fluttering streamers, trying to tackle them into submission.

Was this the medical centre and these the remnants of the official opening celebrations? The building was certainly new, and built to merge into its surroundings—tropical architecture, with wide overhangs and floor-to-ceiling aluminium shutters to direct any stray breeze inside. Beautiful, in fact.

‘Around the back,’ Beth said, leading him down a path beside the building. ‘The front part is Administration and a first-aid verging on ER room. The hospital section is behind it, here.’

They walked up another ramp and had barely reached the deck, when a woman with tousled curls and a freckled nose came out through a door, greeting Beth with obvious relief.

‘Thank heavens you’re back,’ she said. ‘I’ve called Charles, but you’re the only one who can calm Robbie. He’s babbling—hallucinating, I think—just when we thought he might have turned the corner.’

‘I’ll go right through,’ Beth said, then, apparently remembering she’d brought him to this place, turned to Angus.

‘Grace, this is Angus. Angus, Grace. He’s the doctor I told you about, Grace. Could you take him around so he can see the other patients, introduce him to Emily if she’s here and Charles when he arrives?’

The ‘doctor’ not ‘ex-husband’, Angus thought, feeling annoyed about the wording for no fathomable reason, though he did manage to greet the distracted nurse politely.

Beth hurried back to Robbie’s room. The virus that had struck the camp had started off with drowsiness, and the children seemed almost to lapse into unconsciousness in between bouts of agitation. Right now Robbie was agitated, tossing and turning in his bed, muttering incoherently, his movements more violent than they’d been during the night.

Beth checked the drip running into his arm, then felt his forehead. Not feverish, she guessed, then picked up his chart to confirm it. The paracetamol she’d given him earlier must be working.

‘Hush, love, it’s all right, I’m here,’ she whispered to the fretful little boy, holding his hands in one of hers and smoothing his dark hair back from his forehead with the other.

But even as he stilled at the sound of her voice, fear whispered in her heart. They were treating the symptoms the patients had without any idea if this was an aggressive cold or something far more sinister. Alex Vavunis, a paediatric neurosurgeon who was a guest on the island, had taken samples of spinal fluid from the sickest patients the previous day, but it was too early to expect results.

Beth knew her assurances could easily be empty—that everything might not be all right for Robbie.

‘We’ve three children not feeling well, still in the camp, but Robbie and Jack are the most severely affected. My ward, Lily, was admitted yesterday and she’s a little better today.’

Beth heard Charles’s voice before she saw him, and turned to see he’d guided his wheelchair silently into the room, Angus seeming taller than ever as he stood beside the chair.

‘How is he, Beth?’

Charles wheeled closer as he asked the question.

Beth shook her head.

‘Agitated,’ she said, ‘although there is some good news. Jack seems a little better this morning. Lily?’

She heard Charles’s sigh and knew the little girl must still be unstable.

‘Jill has been with her most of the night. And Grace tells me you’ve been here all night. You should go home and rest.’

‘I dozed between checking on the others,’ Beth assured him. ‘Emily’s on duty today, but I’ll stay now in case Angus needs some help with tests or information.’

She glanced towards the man who had moved to the chair beside Robbie's bed and was reading through the notes on his chart.

'You've how many sick?' Angus asked, looking at Charles who nodded to Beth to reply.

'We have the adult from the resort, one of the rangers and three children, making a total of five. There are another three children at the camp showing symptoms. We've moved those three to a cabin and the staff and volunteers there are entertaining them, keeping them as quiet as possible and making sure they take in plenty of fluids. Among the staff, the rangers, even people at the resort, there could be more who are simply not feeling well, people feeling the "beginning of flu" symptoms but who haven't said anything.'

'And you're how far off the mainland?'

This time Charles fielded Angus's question himself. 'A half-hour flight by helicopter—less by seaplane.'

'You've got to close the island, Charles,' Angus said. 'You must have had similar thoughts yourself, given the number of dead birds you say have been found. We have to quarantine the whole place—resort, national park, the camp and eco-resort—at least until we know more. It's a thousand to one chance it's anything sinister, but even that's too big a chance to take.'

Beth stared at him, sure her jaw had dropped in disbelief.

'You're serious? You think it *could* be bird flu?'

She looked at the little boy still twitching restlessly on the bed and pain washed through her.

'*No!*' she whispered, but she doubted whether the men heard her, Charles asking questions, Angus answering, Charles talking practicalities—how to enforce a quarantine, important people here for the opening who wouldn't like it, Health Department and Australian Quarantine Service concerns

—

'It has to be complete and it has to start now!' Angus said in a voice Beth recognised as brooking no opposition. This was the focus Angus always brought to his work. 'It would be criminal of us to allow even one person who could be carrying a deadly virus to leave the island. And we'll have to get the police and health authorities to trace anyone who has left in the past week and to isolate those people as well.'

'That won't be hard. Most people here this week stayed on for the opening of the medical centre, and resort guests are usually here for a week, Sunday to Sunday. There'll be guests due to go today but not until later in the day. The helicopter pilots who do the passenger runs each day—they come and go more than anyone but rarely get out of their machines. Their manifests will tell us who's left so we'll have a list to give the authorities on the mainland.'

The two men had turned away, intent on putting their quarantine order in place, as well they might be. It was going to be a complicated task, and more than a few people were going to be very annoyed about it.

Beth smiled to herself. Alex Vavunis, the self-important paediatric neurosurgeon, for one. He'd made life uncomfortable for several people, simply because he'd been upset to find his daughter, Stella, was growing up. Although being forced to stay longer might give him more time to spend with his daughter and to accept the new Stella—so good could come from bad.

And Nick Devlin, who'd stayed on longer than he'd intended already because his little boy, Josh, was enjoying the camp so much. But Josh was a brittle asthmatic and a lung infection of any kind could have serious consequences. Beth shivered at the thought of Josh picking up the infection, then felt a momentary pang of sympathy for Angus. He was the epidemiologist—he'd be the one coping with the fallout of the announcement.

Although Angus could handle that—work-related problems would never faze Angus. Only emotions could do that...

'We're definitely closing the island. Charles has been on to the quarantine people and the head of the state health department and she agrees it's the way to go in the short term but she doesn't want

to go public with it and start a panic about a pandemic. Containing everyone on the island might help to keep the news off the front pages.'

Angus returned to Robbie's room alone, explaining this to her while standing in the doorway, his eyes taking in the small ward, and the child now lying quietly, seeming even smaller than he probably was because of the big hospital beds.

'In this day of e-mails and mobile phones, do you really think the news can be contained?' Beth asked. 'Besides, there were reporters and photographers here for the opening and though some went back on the last boat last night, I'm sure the local gossip columnist stayed on. Apparently she loves mixing with the rich and famous and the opportunity to spend time at the resort was too much for her to resist.'

Angus studied her for a moment and Beth could almost hear his brain working.

'Perhaps if we don't mention birds, just talk about a virus of unknown origin that has spread quickly, it might attract less interest from the press.'

'It won't work,' Beth told him. 'Most of the people on this side of the island know about the dead birds. And on top of that, you'll have to tell people to stay away from dead birds—maybe all birds—and the moment you say that, then the words "bird flu" will ricochet through everyone's mind.'

'You're right. We'll just have to ask them to keep quiet about it—maybe someone will have to speak directly to the local columnist. Explain we don't want to start a nationwide panic.'

'Or maybe we'll get lucky and some film star or other celebrity will do something dreadful that grabs the headlines and the quarantine of the island will go unnoticed,' Beth suggested, and Angus shrugged.

'Could we be that lucky?' he said, then he smiled and Beth felt a surge of emotion in her chest—a too-familiar reaction to an Angus smile. And just when she'd been doing so well—playing the part of the mature professional to perfection, though being in the vicinity of Angus was reminding her nerve endings of how good things had once been.

Physically...

'Charles tells me you're off duty, but he wants all available hospital staff, as well as hotel personnel, park rangers and eco-lodge management people, at a meeting in the lecture theatre at the convention centre at the hotel. Can you drive me back there?'

Beth hesitated, desperately seeking an excuse to say no. Even before the surge she'd known that the less time she spent with Angus the better off she'd be. But she'd asked for his help...

He'd come right into the room now, and stood beside her, looking down at Robbie, who was sleeping more peacefully now.

'You go, I'll keep a special eye on him.'

Grace must have followed Angus in, for there she was, flapping her hands at Beth as if shooing chooks.

She had no choice, standing up slowly, careful not to look at Angus, though every cell in her body was aware of his presence.

'Do you think it *is* bird flu?' she asked, and didn't need to hear Angus sigh to know what a stupid question it had been. 'Of course you don't know,' she answered for him. 'It's just that it's been in the forefront of my mind all night. H5N1, a seemingly innocuous grouping of letters and numbers, yet with the ability to make anyone who understands them very anxious.'

'From doctors up to heads of governments,' Angus confirmed, his voice deep with the gravity of the situation. 'But what we can't do is panic—or even become overly dramatic about it. There's a set routine for any disease outbreak—identify its existence, which we do by seeing how many people are affected—'

'Five in hospital, three segregated in the camp, and who knows how many who haven't sought medical attention.'

'Enough to cause concern in a relatively small population,' Angus agreed as they reached the cart Beth had used earlier. 'The next step is to verify the diagnosis.'

He sounded worried and she looked at him and saw the frown between his eyebrows once again. 'Problems with that?'

'Of course,' he said, climbing into the driving seat without consultation, but this was hardly the time to be arguing over who should drive. 'There is now a fast and definitive test for H5N1, a gene chip known as the MChip, but it's only been used in laboratories in the US. Out here we still use the FluChip, which is based on three influenza genes. It provides information about the type of virus but the lab then needs to run more tests to get the virus subtype—to identify H5N1, for example.'

'Clear as mud!' Beth muttered, although in the past she'd always enjoyed the way Angus had discussed his thoughts and explained things to her.

Or was it because of that past enjoyment—and the risk of enjoying it now—that she was feeling so narky?

'I'm saying tests take time,' Angus added, turning towards her so she saw his frown had deepened.

'I know,' she admitted. 'I must be more tired than I realised. Have you and Charles talked further than quarantine?'

Was she interested or just making conversation? Angus wondered.

Once, he'd have known—once, he'd have been sure it was interest, because that was Beth, always keen to learn.

Or had she been?

Had her interest been feigned because she'd known how much he'd enjoyed talking over his work with her? Discussing her work, too, until she'd taken maternity leave, then, with Bobby's diagnosis of cerebral palsy, hadn't worked after that, staying home to care for their fragile, crippled little son.

While he had lost himself in work, trying to dispel the fear love brought with it by focussing on genetic mutations of the flu virus—or had it been HIV at that stage? He could no longer remember, just knew he'd used work to escape the pain of seeing Bobby fight for every breath he'd taken.

Not all the time, not when Bobby had been well, and laughing with glee at silly things—but often enough, when things had got too tough...

He pushed the memories away—though not too far away—and turned to Beth.

'Was it hard, getting back into the swing of things at work?'

The question followed so closely on his thoughts he was surprised when she looked startled.

And puzzled.

'I was back at work before we parted, Angus,' she reminded him, and he had to smile, though it wasn't a joyous expression.

'You were putting on sensible working clothes and going to the hospital, and no doubt doing a very efficient job, but it was something to do, somewhere to go, somewhere to escape the emptiness—not something to enjoy or feel involved in.'

He stopped the cart and was about to get out, when he realised she hadn't answered him—not only hadn't answered, but was sitting staring at him as if he'd suddenly morphed into an alien.

'How do you know that?' she demanded, so obviously puzzled he felt pain shaft through him—pain that they could have lived such separate lives, that they had lost each other so completely in the thick emotional fog that had descended after Bobby's death.

Anger rescued him, blazing along the path the pain had seared.

'Do you think I didn't do the same? Didn't feel pushed so far off track by Bobby's loss that I wondered if I'd ever find my way back again?'

His anger eased as he watched the colour fade from her face and saw her ashen lips move.

'You never said,' she whispered. 'You never said...'

‘We never talked it through, did we?’ He spoke more gently now, shocked that she’d lost colour so easily. ‘Not about the things that mattered. I don’t suppose that’s surprising, given we were two people who had grown up not talking about emotions.’

He reached out and touched her cheek.

‘That made it very hard.’

He walked away before she could respond. Beth’s eyes were on his broad back as she followed him towards the hotel building. He was there for a conference, he would know where the convention area was, and the lecture theatre.

But her thoughts were far from the upcoming meeting.

How could she not have known how he’d felt?

He’d loved Bobby—she’d known that much—and had grieved after his death, but that Angus had been as lost as she had been, *that* was the revelation.

‘*You never said,*’ she whispered again, this time to herself, but even as she said it, she realised how stupid it was to be surprised. Angus was right. They had *never* talked about their emotions. After meeting Angus’s father, the only family he had, she had understood why he couldn’t. His father was an academic and conversation in the Stuart family ranged over many and varied topics—scientific, political, even religious, but never, ever emotional.

In fact, going to visit had always been an ordeal for Beth as the cool—no, cold—atmosphere of the house and her detached, unemotional father-in-law had intimidated her to such an extent she’d rarely said a word, while taking Bobby for a visit had always made her feel inadequate. Dr Stuart Senior had produced one perfect child, Angus, while Beth had produced one small boy, who through an accidental loss of oxygen to his brain during his birth, had been, in the eyes of those who hadn’t known and loved him, less than perfect.

Angus had stopped by the steps leading into the hotel and she caught up with him, looking up into his face, wanting to apologise, though for exactly what—not knowing how he’d felt, Bobby’s birth trauma, getting pregnant in the first place—she wasn’t certain.

Not that she could have apologised anyway. The look on his face was enough to freeze any words she might have said—freeze them on her tongue.

‘This way.’

Her heart ached at his remoteness, which was stupid considering they’d been apart for three long years. Why wouldn’t he be remote?

And wasn’t remote part of Angus anyway? He might have been one of the best-looking men in the hospital—not to mention one of the sexiest—but one look from his eyes, one tilt of his head, and even the most desperate of women would back away.

Which, of course, had been part of his allure to every single woman on the staff, and probably a lot of the married ones as well...

Angus led the way through the lobby towards the wing that housed the convention area. He and Beth had been together less than an hour and already he—or they—had managed to put up impenetrable barriers between them.

Yet seeing her had thawed parts of him he’d thought frozen for all time...

Seeing her had heated other parts of him—parts the beautiful Sally had barely stirred...

How could it be? He looked down at the shiny hair capping Beth’s head, feeling a certain contentment just to be near her, yet not understanding why he should feel that way.

Familiarity, that’s all it was, he tried to tell himself, but he didn’t believe it for a minute.

No, there was chemistry between himself and Beth he’d never understood, no matter how hard or how often, in the past, he’d tried to analyse it. And it was probably, if he was honest, his inability to analyse it—to dissect it, understand it and so rationalise it—that had led to him allowing Beth to push him away when Bobby had died.

He'd told himself she was like a drug that wasn't good for him—that was the closest he could come to an explanation. And though he'd craved the drug, he'd gone, separated from her, telling himself it was for the best, pretending to himself he was doing it for Beth because she wanted it that way, losing himself and his grief in work...

'The lecture theatre's through here,' he said, touching her arm to guide her through a door at the end of the passage, touching her skin, Beth's skin...

Charles beckoned them forward, indicating seats at the front of the hall, taking his place behind a lectern, waiting for latecomers to find somewhere to sit, waiting for silence before telling all those assembled that the island was now in quarantine.

CHAPTER THREE

BETH watched Angus as he spoke, introduced by Charles as an epidemiology expert, explaining the necessity for quarantine until the source of the virus had been isolated.

Someone at the back immediately asked if it was connected to the dead birds, and Angus gave Beth a slight nod as if in confirmation of her words earlier.

'It is highly unlikely to be bird flu,' he said. 'But because it is similar to a flu virus, we believe flu vaccine might stave off infection in people not already infected. A number of you are hospital staff or are in related medical fields so have already had flu shots for this year, but we are flying in more stocks and will vaccinate everyone on the island who isn't already covered. This will be a big task but, like any task, it can be broken down into sizeable chunks.'

Hands shot up in the air as people wanted to question Angus, but Charles broke in to ask those with questions to wait until Angus had finished speaking, then, if he hadn't covered all aspects, to ask questions then.

He waved his hand to indicate Angus could again take the floor.

'So, vaccination programmes will begin, testing is ongoing and we should get results within forty-eight hours, but in the meantime we must act as if bird flu is a possibility, however remote. We know that more than ninety-nine per cent of bird-flu cases have come from direct contact with infected birds. So it is imperative we warn guests and staff to keep away from all birds, whether alive or dead. We have already ordered full body suits with rebreathing masks to be flown to the island. As soon as they arrive, the rangers will all be rostered on duty to collect and dispose of any dead birds safely.'

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