



FIONA LOWE
A Woman to
Belong To



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Mills & Boon Medical

Fiona Lowe

A Woman To Belong To

«HarperCollins»

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Proposal under the Eastern sun... To Dr. Tom Bracken, working in the Far East is about more than setting up a healthcare agency. He's come to cleanse his heart by dedicating himself to his patients. When nurse Bec Monahan arrives on his doorstep, he thinks she's just another nurse. But something about her beautiful violet eyes and the secrets they hide intrigues him. Gradually, as they work together amongst the lush valleys, high mountains and stunning lagoons, Tom realises that Bec holds the key to his guarded heart. Might he have finally found a woman to belong to?

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‘Thank you for rescuing me, Tom.’

Bec spoke softly, the sound evaporating so quickly it was almost as if the words had not been said. But the echo of the message resonated loud and clear, vibrating in his chest.

Tilting her head forward, she pressed her lips gently against his cheek.

The touch was brief, a light caress. But the softness and warmth of her lips sent a riot of sensation ricocheting through him, making every part of him vibrate with suppressed longing.

She trusts me. The warning sounded faintly in the recesses of his mind.

She wants me.

Six weeks of concealed emotions exploded inside him, pushing every rational thought from his head. He couldn’t hold back any longer. He needed her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, her lips against his own. He needed her now like he needed air.

Dear Reader

Have you ever watched a movie and come away from it saying, 'I am going to visit that place'? I have. The memory of the jade waters of Halong Bay in the film *Indochine* stayed with me long after the credits had faded. A couple of years later, when a friend came home raving about Vietnam, I booked a holiday.

Vietnam sends you into sensory overload. The sound of horns, the smell of fish sauce and lemongrass, the chaos of people continuously on the move, the spectacular scenery and the friendliness of the people—all of it sucks you into its welcoming vortex.

This got me thinking about a romance set in this beautiful country... Bec, an Australian nurse, comes to Vietnam determined to help the children of the country and escape the memory of her own troubled childhood. She has decided that it's safest not to love, and is creating an independent life for herself. But she meets Tom, a dedicated doctor. He is Eurasian. Born in Vietnam, raised in Australia, and feeling as if he does not belong in either country, he is working in Vietnam and trying to trace his birth mother. He feels his life is on hold until he knows more about himself. Together they challenge each other's beliefs about themselves as they travel around Vietnam dealing with medical emergencies.

Just as Halong Bay wove its magic over me, it weaves a special magic over Tom and Bec. But is magic enough to keep them together? I hope you enjoy travelling through Vietnam, and perhaps you might book yourself a holiday there as well. Let me know!

Love

Fiona x

A Woman To Belong To

Fiona Lowe



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Always an avid reader, FIONA LOWE decided to combine her love of romance with her interest in all things medical, so writing Medical™ Romance was an obvious choice! She lives in a seaside town in southern Australia, where she juggles writing, reading, working and raising two gorgeous sons, with the support of her own real-life hero!

You can visit Fiona's website at www.fionalowe.com

To Caroline, Deb, Gayle, Karen and Mon.

Thanks for the laughs, the company and the great tennis.

And to Gayle for her wonderful travel tales and inspiring our visit to Vietnam.

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CHAPTER ONE

RAIN TUMBLED FROM the sky, a wall of pure water—the response of humidity finally reaching breaking point. Bec Monahan tilted her head back, enjoying the refreshing coolness on her face. A moment later she sighed.

Hanoi traffic, chaotic under perfect conditions, would now be at gridlock. No point getting a taxi. She glanced around. No cyclos either—all the drivers had retreated to shelter. Damn.

Pulling her non la forward she smiled at the varied uses of the traditional Vietnamese conical hat. Just an hour ago she'd been using it as a fan and a much-needed sunshade. Now it doubled as an umbrella. It also screamed tourist or country hick in the emerging cosmopolitan city.

She didn't care. Two days after arriving and immediately sweating in tight Western clothing, she'd adopted the local dress of light cotton trousers and a long-sleeved blouse. The outfit was practical, comfortable and plain. She stood out enough just by being Australian, and this way she drew less attention. She'd learned from an early age it was safer to fade into the background.

She peered at the scrawled address as the rain blurred the blue ink, making it run across the page. She bit her lip and sent up a hopeful plea that this time the address was correct. Tracking down Dr Thông had turned into a marathon.

Weaving her way around the impromptu food stalls and parked motorcycles, she turned into a street clearly marked by an enamelled street sign, a legacy from the French occupation. She stopped abruptly. A shiver raced across her skin as a wave of goose-bumps rose in warning.

A dead-end narrow lane. Always have an escape route.

Life with her father had taught her that. Never let yourself be cornered. She breathed in deeply. This was a leafy suburb of Hanoi. But you know what leafy suburbs can hide.

'Madame?'

Bec started and turned.

A young man with an umbrella came toward her, concern crossing his face.

'Bác sĩ. Doctor.' Bec repeated the oft-said phrase wondering how bad her accent sounded to the locals.

The young man grinned a trade-mark wide Vietnamese smile and pointed to the gate in the high wall at the end of the lane. 'He is there.'

Bec smiled, nodding her head in thanks, and ran the last few metres to the gate. Her heart hammered against her ribs in anticipation. Finally, after two days of searching, she was making progress. Since arriving in Vietnam on holiday, she'd had an increasing sense of needing to contribute to this glorious country. To do something for the children of Vietnam. At night she lay in bed and tried to work out the best way to help. One week ago she'd decided that a clinic which combined health and education was the best way to go.

Healthy children had a greater capacity to learn and children who had access to education had a greater chance to improve their lives. Education opened up options even if it was just the option to flee an unsafe situation.

She'd used that option.

Now she wanted to give other kids the same chance. Australia had a lot of established services for children and Vietnam didn't. She hoped to use the ties Australia had with this nation to her advantage.

But trying to work out how to start the process of working with the Vietnamese health department and education department had almost defeated her. Each bureaucrat fobbed her off with, 'Talk to Dr Thông.' She had no idea who this doctor was but she was pinning her hopes on him. He must hold the key to her plan.

The heavy gate closed behind her. Suddenly she was in a tranquil courtyard; the noise and hustle of Hanoi receded to barely a buzz. Only the sound of heavy rain on the ground broke the peaceful serenity of this haven.

A French villa stood before her, its green shutters closed against the rain. Bec swore she could hear whispered stories of a life of decadent elegance before years of turmoil. She shook her head against a feeling of light-headedness. The heat and humidity must be getting to her.

Soaked to the skin, she tugged on the old door pull and a bell sounded in the distance.

She waited. The bell rang out. Silence descended.

Her stomach growled—hunger gnawing at nothing as anticipatory acid burned her stomach. She'd given away her breakfast of rice soup to a homeless child. She'd planned to grab something else but had got sidetracked with her search.

The world tilted slightly and she realised it was now mid-afternoon. Stupid. She needed to be on top of things when she met Dr Thông.

She pulled the bell again, her hand gripping the pulley tightly for support.

The bell chimed loud and long. Footsteps sounded.

Bec bowed her head and breathed in a calming breath. This is it.

The door creaked open and stilted Vietnamese swirled around her, the accent clumsy and unfamiliar.

She looked up quickly, her practised greeting dying on her lips.

She'd been expecting a short Vietnamese doctor. Instead, a tall, broad-shouldered man with designer tousled black hair filled the doorway, a backpack slung casually over one shoulder. He wore a well-known surfing-brand T-shirt, the spun cotton clinging like a second skin to a toned chest and muscular arms. A shadow of dark stubble highlighted a strong jaw and a firm mouth.

An unexpected quiver spread through her, racing down to her toes. She shook her head. She really needed some food. Blinking, she took another look at him through the rain. A sigh of dismay escaped her lips as her heart sank. This golden-skinned man belonged on a beach. He had tourist written all over him. He couldn't possibly be Dr Thông.

Large oval eyes, the colour of dark chocolate, studied her intently. 'Can I help you?'

The Australian accent stunned her and she searched for her voice. 'I'm sorry, I think I've been directed to the wrong place. I'm looking for Dr Thông.'

An ironic smile passed over high cheekbones. 'That's me. I'm Tom. It's written Thông, but pronounced Tom. Tom Bracken.' He hitched his backpack further up his shoulder. 'I'm also just leaving so you'd be better off trying the French hospital.'

Her brain stalled at his smile, driving away the confused thoughts of why he sounded and looked so Australian. She forced herself to focus. 'No, I'm not sick.'

'Glad to hear it. I'll be back in a few weeks so make an appointment with my housekeeper.'

Panic simmered in her belly. Don't let him leave. 'I need to talk to you about the orphans.'

He stiffened. 'Are you a journalist?'

She shook her head, confused, her mind racing to find a succinct sentence to make an impression on him and to stop him leaving right away. 'I'm a nurse.'

'Great. Again, try the French hospital.' He moved forward, towering over her meagre five feet and two inches.

She clenched her fists against the surge of unwanted fear that twisted inside her as she looked up at him. 'You don't understand. I'm not looking for a job.'

'So, you're not sick, you're not looking for a job and you're not a journalist.' His black eyebrows rose in perfect arches. 'Why do you need to see me?'

She swallowed hard, knowing what she said next would either delay him or see him marching through the gate. 'I have a mission and I need your help.'

Don't stop, you'll miss your plane. Tom's grip on the doorhandle instinctively lessened as an irrational need to listen to this woman's story clashed with his desire to leave immediately.

Something in her voice made him pause. Energy and vitality rolled off her in waves, matched with a steely determination. Her chin jutted slightly as she stood her ground. He recognised that stance. He'd seen photos of himself doing the same thing.

When he'd opened the door and seen a petite woman in plain Vietnamese dress, with her head bowed against the rain, he'd immediately assumed she was a patient who'd been given the wrong address. Then she'd raised her face. The rush of heat that had whipped through him when her violet-blue eyes had caught his gaze still simmered inside him.

He'd never seen eyes that colour before. They reminded him of his mother's spring irises, the purple-blue flowers she insisted on growing despite the heat of the Australian bush.

And yet shadows lurked in the sparkle of vibrant colour. For a brief moment he had a crazy desire to chase those shadows away.

You don't have time for this, the pilot has a timetable. Ever since he'd been interviewed on local television, people had started approaching him, requesting his time for his perspective on health and his support for their own projects. And the local government officers referred to him anyone who asked about starting health programmes. He'd tried to convince them not to, but to no avail. He was flat out keeping up with his own patients and clinics, let alone taking on other people's work. His patients came first every time.

Thank goodness Jason, the PR person for Health For Life, was due back from his extended leave next week. He couldn't wait to hand over all the admin stuff and get back to focusing completely on medicine. His review of the rural outreach programme was overdue. He'd been jealously watching the other staff heading out around the country. Although he enjoyed the Hanoi hospital work, he'd missed his outreach work and the chance to assess new projects.

Water trickled down his neck, the droplets jerking him back to the present. For the first time since opening the front door he realised it was raining. Remember the plane. Dragging his gaze away from his visitor's mesmerising eyes, he countered the nagging voice inside his head. Five minutes is all this will take.

'Ms...?'

'Monahan. Rebecca Monahan, but please call me Bec.'

He smiled. 'You'd better come in out of the rain, Bec.'

'Thank you. I thought you'd never ask.' She took off her hat and long chestnut hair streaked with sun-kissed blonde cascaded down around her shoulders.

He stood stock-still, staring at her, completely captivated.

With a flick of her head, water bounced off her hair, spraying him. She giggled then smiled broadly, her face creasing in delicious laughter lines. 'Sorry, the monsoon and I are still adjusting to each other.'

She stepped forward, stopping abruptly when he didn't move, leaving a wide space between them. A flash of something lit her eyes and faded as fast as it had appeared.

He tried to catch it and read it, but it had vanished.

She tilted her head and raised her brows, her mouth pursing slightly. 'May I come in?'

Concentrate, Tom. 'Of course. Sorry.' He moved back, dropping his pack to the floor.

She walked into the entrance foyer, slightly favouring her left leg.

Tien, his housekeeper, used to people arriving at all times of the day and night, silently appeared holding a towel which she handed to Bec.

'Oh, dear, I'm dripping all over your floor.'

His country hospitality, drummed into him by his mother, came to the fore. 'Don't worry, that's why we have tiled floors. Would you like some lemon juice and water or tea? Something to eat?'

‘Yes, please, I’m completely starving.’ The moment she’d spoken she clapped her hands over her mouth like a child who believed she’d said the wrong thing. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t want to put you out.’

‘Not at all. In Vietnam it’s mandatory to overfeed all guests.’ He grinned. ‘Tien will be thrilled she has a willing recipient.’ Will you listen to yourself? Find out what she wants, and send her on her way.

He ushered her into the sitting room. ‘So, tell me about your mission.’

Her eyes sparkled like a child’s, all innocence and wonder. ‘I want to start a clinic and kindergarten for children.’

He suppressed a groan. He’d just given in to a crazy moment of attraction and let his guard down. Fool. Normally he was attuned to all the signs but somehow he’d let a naïve do-gooder into his house. He’d met plenty of people like this. They thought they could arrive from the West and change the world overnight. ‘Why? Why do you want to start a clinic and a kinder?’

She started, disbelief creasing her brow. ‘I thought that would be obvious.’

He folded his arms across his chest. ‘How so?’

She threw her arms out in front of her in a dramatic gesture. ‘There are kids here living in dire poverty, suffering from malnutrition and a host of childhood illnesses.’

His job was to play devil’s advocate. He’d been burned before with bright ideas and no follow-through. ‘Sure. Just like in many other parts of the world. So why here?’

She bit her lip and suddenly looked uncomfortable. ‘You’ll probably laugh.’

‘Try me.’

She took in a deep breath, her breasts rising against her damp shirt.

A shock of unexpected lust rocked him and he forced his gaze to slide away. But an image of a curvaceous woman hidden under the baggy clothes had seared itself to his brain.

‘I had a dream. Well, I had it more than once and now it’s become a part of me—you know, a fire that won’t be put out, an ache that won’t be ignored.’ Wide eyes implored him to understand.

Hell. He did. He knew that ache, that need that took hold and haunted you until you did something about it.

Even so, he didn’t have time to get involved with a half-baked idea. He’d seen that happen over and over and his people didn’t need to have their expectations raised, only to be dashed when the going got tough or homesickness hauled the do-gooder home.

‘Why not make a donation to Health For Life? We’re a nationwide agency and your money would be put to good use across the country. Then you’ve done your bit, helped out, eased your conscience.’ He couldn’t quite hide the condescension in his tone.

Her smiling mouth flattened into a firm line as her eyes flashed. ‘My conscience isn’t in question here. I have a vision for this project and I will be involved in a hands-on capacity.’

He grudgingly admired her determination but it was time to give her a reality check. ‘And where did you think you would set up this clinic and kinder?’

‘Here.’

‘In Hanoi?’

She nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Hanoi does have street kids, there’s no disputing that. But what about the poverty-stricken areas in remote, rural Vietnam? The places where only one crop a year can be grown? Don’t you think those children deserve your help?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘And how will you do that if you’re working in Hanoi?’

She opened her mouth to speak but then closed it, wrinkling her nose in concentration.

Gotcha! He’d catch his plane to Lai Chau after all. ‘Health For Life has the power behind it to work in many areas. Why reinvent the wheel? If you really want to help children then donating to us is probably the best way to go.’

You've got your projects to review and a plane to catch. Let Jason handle this. He rummaged through the bureau and found a business card. 'Here. Jason will be back next week and you can ring him then or contact the office in Australia when you get back from your holiday. Health For Life runs all sorts of programmes and you can choose one to donate to, or even work for one if you want to become involved.' He extended the card toward her.

She folded her arms across her chest, her eyes firing daggers in his direction. 'Why are you doing this?'

He ignored the edge of unease that hovered around his conscience and smiled. 'I'm happy to help where I can.'

Bec made a snorting sound. 'Help? You're fobbing me off big-time, Tom. It seems some people have the right to a vision while others of us don't.' She glared at him.

'Look, people come here on holiday and are confronted by what they see and they want to help. But life here wears most people down and they leave. Why start something you won't finish? I'm just trying to save you frustration and time.'

She started to pace. 'You're amazing. You know nothing about me and yet you've leapt to myriad conclusions. What gives you that right?'

Her words niggled, their grain of truth butting up against his self-righteous stance. 'I've seen too many people trying to save Vietnam. It doesn't need saving. It needs long-term commitment.'

She spun back to face him, staring him down. 'And you've made that commitment?'

He thought of his parents, both known and unknown. Of the pain and loss so many had endured. 'Yes, I have.'

'But you'll deny me that same opportunity.'

He shrugged, his discomfort about this conversation increasing by the minute. He was not going to tell a stranger his life story. 'My situation is completely different to yours.'

Her eyes flashed. 'How would you know? I don't know why you even asked me in from the rain. You should have just walked straight past me, rather than inviting me in with a closed mind.'

The barb hit, stinging in its accuracy. He'd let a pair of dancing eyes get under his guard and in the process had caused more disappointment than was necessary. Guilt seeped in.

She walked toward the door but stopped as Tien walked in with a steaming bowl of pho. The room immediately filled with the pungent aroma of coriander.

I'm completely starving. Her words slugged him. He couldn't let her leave on an empty stomach. 'Please, stay and eat your noodle soup.'

Emotions warred on her face and she almost seemed to slump, as if the fight had completely gone out of her.

A streak of self-righteousness curled inside him, tucked up neatly next to his guilt. He'd been on the money. Vietnam wasn't for the fainthearted. If she couldn't survive an argument with him then she didn't have the gumption to face the challenges of working here.

She sat down with a smile of thanks for Tien, picked up the soup spoon and fork, and started to eat.

He watched her from the other side of the room, not wanting to but unable to stop himself. What the hell was wrong with him today? He met women all the time and didn't usually see past their job description to see the person. There was no point. His life was far too messy and complicated to be considering a relationship.

Inviting her in had been a bad idea. Well, he'd end it right. 'I'll call for a driver to take you back to your hotel as soon as you've finished your soup.'

'That would be the least you could do.' She shot him a derisive look. 'Tell me, Tom, you believe I have no idea about the real health needs of this country?'

He breathed deeply, not wanting to get into an argument. 'I don't think you have a full understanding of the big picture, no.'

She dextrously manoeuvred the noodles and pork into her mouth, her gaze fixed firmly on him, never wavering.

‘And if I did my research, discovered the big picture, became familiar with the specific health needs of this country and developed a thorough plan of action...’

‘Yes.’ He nodded. ‘That is exactly what you need to do.’ Finally, she was realising what was really involved.

She nibbled on some coriander.

An image of her lips nibbling his flashed through his brain, completely unnerving him.

She had to go.

He had to catch a plane.

She smiled at him as she emptied the bowl. ‘Sorry, I won’t hold you up any longer. You were on your way somewhere when I arrived?’

‘I’m heading to the Lai Chau district.’

‘The hill-tribe region, right?’ A friendly tone had replaced the chill of a moment ago.

He gave an internal sigh of relief. She was seeing reason. ‘That’s right. I look after a clinic in a remote village there and I visit once a month. Local health workers staff it the rest of the time. I’ll be doing some “train the trainer”, as well as seeing patients. Right now we have a focus on maternal and child health.’

She reached for her hat and stood up. ‘So is Lai Chau Province the sort of place I should visit to get a real feel for the country?’

‘Sure. It would be a start.’ He walked toward the door to usher her out.

‘Excellent. My hotel is on the way to the airport and I can quickly grab my stuff.’

Her words ricocheted around his brain, trying to take purchase. ‘Hang on a minute—you’re not coming with me.’

She tilted her head slightly and focused her clear unflinching gaze straight at him. ‘Why not? You said I needed to do my research and what better way than with a doctor who is completely familiar with the health needs?’

Indignation spluttered through him. ‘I’m a doctor, not a tour guide!’

Her mouth took on the increasingly familiar firm line. ‘And I’m a nurse, not a tourist. I’ll pay my way and earn my keep. I have midwifery and maternal and child health qualifications, some emergency experience and a master’s degree in public health. I’ll be an asset, not a hindrance. Are you in the position of knocking back free professional help?’

Hell! She’d completely turned the tables on him. Somehow she’d seized control of the conversation without him realising.

He didn’t want her travelling with him, with her sparkling eyes and wondrous smile. Part vixen, part ingénue, he hated the way his body reacted to her. He had to keep his focus firmly on his reasons for being in Vietnam. Between medicine and trying to trace his family, he had no time for anything else.

But how could he knock back an extra pair of medical hands? He didn’t have the right when so many people had so little access to health care. A few weeks in the remote regions of the country would prove if she had the mettle to follow her dream.

He picked up his pack. ‘It’s hot and exhausting out there.’

A laugh quickly chased away her grimace. ‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

He had to regain some equilibrium, set some ground rules. ‘You acknowledge I’m the doctor in charge?’

She nodded, her face serious, but a hint of a smile hovered about her mouth. ‘Absolutely.’

So why didn’t that ready agreement make him feel any more in control?

CHAPTER TWO

BEC LEANED AGAINST the supporting stilts of the thatched hut, which doubled as a clinic. She watched the scrawny bronze-coloured chickens pecking at the sun-baked earth, ever hopeful of finding some seed. Fanning herself with her hat, she was taking a five-minute breather from unpacking the medical supplies Tom had brought with them.

The bone-shaking four-wheel-drive journey to get to this small village, snuggled deep into the valley between towering rugged mountains, had taken five hours. The flight in the tiny plane to Lai Chau yesterday had been luxurious in comparison.

Her hand still ached from gripping the grab-handle above the window of the vehicle, trying to avoid being thrown against Tom or into his lap. Terror lanced her at the secret knowledge that it might not have been an awful experience if she had landed there.

But it would have been bad. Really bad. She couldn't trust her instincts when it came to men. She got it so wrong every time. First her father and then Nick. Both of them had only given pain, not love. She rubbed the ache in her leg. She carried the legacy of her time spent with both of them every day.

She avoided men as much as she could, both professionally and personally. Keep a safe distance. That had been her mode of operation since she was twenty. Anxiety-generated sweat broke out on her brow as the reality of what she'd done—was doing—hit her.

For the first time in forever she'd broken her own rule.

First she'd travelled alone with an unknown man. Now she was in a village where she didn't speak the dialect and her only back-up was Tom. A man she knew little about other than that he was a respected doctor.

She'd used all her street smarts to coerce him to bring her here, her need to do something for the children of Vietnam overriding the safety net she always cast about herself.

She hated the fact he'd correctly challenged her. She'd let her enthusiasm cloud her vision. How could she really help unless she truly understood the country? As much as she considered her inheritance 'tainted' money, she wanted to put it to good use. By the end of this trip she'd have a much clearer direction.

Since they'd left Hanoi, Tom had been polite, considerate and aloof. He'd arranged a lovely room for her when they'd overnighted in Lai Chau. Granted, it had been as far away from his as possible with a grove of trees between them, but that had suited her perfectly. Even at that distance he'd managed to feature in her dreams.

That morning Tom had introduced her to their interpreter, Hin, and with an appropriate professional manner and much bowing he'd made sure she'd been welcomed by the local health care worker.

She knew Tom really didn't want her here and merely tolerated her presence. Perhaps she'd allowed for a safety net after all.

'Drink?' Tom appeared behind her, offering her a bottle of water.

She turned and smiled, surprise snaking through her at his unexpected thoughtfulness. 'Thanks.' She twisted off the blue cap. 'Now, this sort of heat I can cope with. The humidity of the lowlands is almost too much for a girl from Perth.'

'At least you grew up in heat. Growing up on a dairy farm in the rainbelt of southern Victoria was no preparation at all.' He tipped his head back and gulped his drink down.

She tried to look away but her gaze was transfixed on the movement of his Adam's apple against his corded, muscular neck.

'That view's pretty amazing isn't it?'

She coughed, choking on her water while her cheeks flared with heat. Had he seen her blatant staring?

He swept his arm out at the panorama of green and grey mountains that ringed the village, their lower aspects carved and defined by terraces of emerald-green rice paddies. 'It looks so stunning and yet it makes life so damn hard for the locals.'

'Floods?' She'd seen debris, evidence that the Song Da River had in the past broken its banks.

'Floods and mudslides are one problem. The narrow valley means the river becomes a raging torrent and there's little room to escape. Add in the remoteness of the area, not being on a trade route and the government rightly cracking down on the opium-growing and it all means money is tight and so are ways to earn it.'

'What about tourism?' A thirst for knowledge gripped her.

'That's helped Lai Chau but it's only the really intrepid tourists that come out here.' He sighed. 'We even have trouble attracting local health workers. Sung, who you met when we arrived, could earn a lot more further south.'

'But she's here because she loves the place.'

His gaze intensified, as if he was really looking at her for the first time. 'How did you work that out so quickly?'

She shrugged, feeling slightly uncomfortable at his scrutiny and yet energised. This was the first sign he'd shown that he didn't think she was as flaky as his snap judgement had deemed her to be. 'You don't have to speak the language to understand. Observation is a telling tool.'

'True.' He recapped his water bottle.

'So what brought you here?' She'd wanted to ask that question since they'd met, but as he'd spent most of their travelling time listening to his MP3 player or avoiding her at the hotel, the opportunity hadn't arisen.

'Work.' The single word snapped out quickly. 'Are you ready for work?'

His abruptness startled her. 'Absolutely.'

He raised his brows. 'That's a favourite word of yours.'

'Is it? Have I used it before?'

He laughed, a deep, melodious sound that wrapped around her like a blanket on a cold night, comforting and secure.

Scaring her down to her core.

No man had ever meant security in her world—only tyranny and fear. She created her own security. Keeping a distance from people meant keeping safe. She had no intention of changing.

His face became more serious. 'We're starting with a mother and baby clinic. You're on weighing and measuring babies. Then Sung can take you gardening. I hope you've got a green thumb. The home garden is one of the keys in battling child malnutrition.' He grinned, a wide smile, his almond-shaped eyes crinkling around the edges.

For the first time she caught a glimpse of Asia in his face, around his eyes and cheeks. Nah, you're imagining that. Surely people called him Dr *Thông* because that name was as close to Tom as the language allowed. A farm boy from Victoria, Dr Tom Bracken was as Aussie as they came.

He walked in front of her, his strong brown legs striding quickly over the short distance to the clinic. She suddenly realised he'd neatly steered the conversation away from himself. He hadn't answered her question at all.

A line of women dressed in colourful clothing snaked around the thatched clinic, their heads covered in fabric that looked strikingly similar to Scottish tartan. Long dresses of green, red, blue and black were covered in intricate embroidered patterns—a collage of colour. Babies almost rigid from being overdressed, sat upright in their papooses, nestled against their mothers' backs.

The first time Tom had come to this region he'd thought he'd left Vietnam. The hill tribe minorities were very different from the coastal people and not much was familiar.

He glanced over at Bec, observing her reaction. Her tanned oval face was flushed with heat and loose strands of hair clung to her temples, glued there by sweat. But curiosity danced on her face, melding with respect as she bowed to the mothers, cooed to the babies and gently coaxed the toddlers away from their mothers' legs. And she achieved it all with hand signals and smiles.

She's done this before. Grudging admiration surfaced, which he quickly tempered. It's early days. 'Remember to use Hin.'

'Yes, Doctor.' Her eyes twinkled for an instant, their animation suddenly fading to match her almost blank expression. As if it was wrong to enjoy some light-hearted banter.

He couldn't work her out. For a woman who'd been so determined to come with him on this trip she'd been extremely tense around him. She was far more relaxed with the patients.

But he didn't have time to think about that. They were there to work. 'Any child who falls into the red zone when you put the mid upper arm circumference bracelet on them is cause for concern.'

She nodded, her face now serious, all traces of teasing gone. 'Right, I give them a swing in the weigh sling and I measure them on this.' She rolled out a bamboo mat and placed the measuring stick next to it. 'Any children needing supplemental feeding I'll keep here with their mothers. Between Hin, Sung and me, we'll have it sorted.' She washed her hands with quick-dry antibacterial solution. 'You'd better skedaddle and see the men.'

She'd just dismissed him. He tried to suppress the rising indignation sweeping through him. He should be pleased she was competent and he could get on with what he needed to do. Hell, he wasn't there to hold her hand.

He shook off the mantle of reluctance to leave her and headed over to greet the men.

Three hours later, drenched in sweat, and fighting visions of sliding into a clear, cool stream and lying under a waterfall, Bec examined her fiftieth child. She knew the stats about child malnutrition in Vietnam, and this village unfortunately skewed the average upwards.

And yet some children thrived. Were the families better off? Or did they just do things differently? She scribbled a note to herself. This was the sort of stuff she had to find out. She planned to question Sung closely when they went on their village vegetable garden tour. She had to maximise every moment of working there.

Her snap decision to come to the village was turning out to be the right thing after all. She hugged the knowledge to herself. It wasn't like she and Tom were spending any real time together anyway.

Tom had happily left her alone to run this clinic while he did his work. A plan rolled out in her head. They'd spend their days here involved in their own projects. She could work and learn, and still stick to her rule of keeping a safe distance. It was a win-win situation.

She glanced up to the next person in line. A woman stepped forward, her face impassive, carrying a toddler who lay limp and listless in her arms.

Dehydration. Bec's radar kicked in the moment she saw the sunken eyes in the child's small face. 'Hin, I need you. Can you, please, ask this mother how long her child has been sick and what the symptoms are?'

The interpreter, an easygoing young man in his twenties, spoke rapidly to the mother who responded and looked beseechingly at Bec as she sank to the ground, laying the child on the mat.

Bec knew why. This little girl was desperately ill. And she'd stake a bet the mother was pretty sick, too.

'She says the child has water coming from her bottom and she has been vomiting,' Hin succinctly translated.

'Has anyone else in the family been sick?'

More rapid-fire dialect spun around Bec. She desperately wished she could understand the words. But she could understand the emotions behind the words.

'This woman has been sick today. She has been vomiting and has had pains in her legs.'

‘Tell her we can help.’ Diarrhoea and vomiting were pretty common out here but Bec was worried by the complaint about pains in the legs.

Hin relayed Bec’s words and then listened. ‘She says many are sick. Some are here in the line, others are too sick to walk.’

Bec closed her eyes for a moment and breathed out a long, slow breath. She touched the woman’s shoulder reassuringly while her mind raced. ‘Right. Hin, you go with Sung and talk to everyone who’s waiting. Find out who has these symptoms and put those people together in another line.’

‘Ask if they have relatives who are sick as well. Draw a mud map of the village and mark on it every household that is sick. I’ll be back in a minute.’ She grabbed her hat and ran out of the hut toward the men’s clinic. So much for working on her own.

‘Tom!’ She stood outside the hut and called, not wanting to barge into the clinic and undo the trust he’d built up.

He appeared almost immediately, smiling when he saw her. ‘Finished already?’

She shook her head, ignoring the feeling in her gut his smile created. ‘No, I think I’m just starting. I need your help.’

He raised his brows. ‘Really? How so?’

She took no notice of the gentle jibe—she knew her independence and distance could sometimes grate in a team situation. ‘I have a woman and child with severe dehydration.’

‘That’s pretty common, Bec. You’ll need to mix up the oral rehydration solution.’ A perplexed look crossed his face. ‘I’m pretty sure I unpacked those boxes and stacked them in the women’s hut when we arrived. Do you want me to look?’

Again, his thoughtfulness surprised her. She wasn’t used to men acting like this. Not toward her, anyway. ‘Thanks, but I know where the sachets are. My real concern is that this woman is complaining of diarrhoea, vomiting and leg cramps.’

His head snapped up, his dark eyes meeting hers. ‘Does anyone else have the symptoms?’

She nodded slowly, knowing exactly where his mind was going. To the same conclusion she’d drawn. ‘I’ve got Hin and Sung questioning the villagers. It sounds like cholera, doesn’t it?’

‘Damn it!’ He ran his hands through his hair. ‘Cholera’s so contagious. It races through a community like wildfire. We need to set up a separate clinic, isolate all the affected people, start treatment and find the source.’

‘As I have the first few patients in my hut, I guess we make that the isolation ward.’ All thoughts of barrier nursing came pouring back into her head. ‘Do we have chlorine to kill the bacterium?’

Worry lines scored his forehead. ‘We do, but we also need it to wash their clothes. A laundry will have to be set up... I need to speak with the village elders.’

‘Sung and I will get started on the makeshift quarantine area. I need to get the electrolyte solution into that child. I’ll see you the moment you’re back from meeting with the elders.’ Please, don’t be too long.

‘Good plan. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

Did he read minds? ‘Great.’ She turned to go.

‘Bec.’ One syllable and yet it held both caution and concern.

She spun back to see his face filled with a mixture of authoritative control and unease.

‘Only drink the bottled water from our supply and only eat the food that Sung has prepared. I don’t need you getting sick.’

A rush of emotion swirled inside her, battering the protective guard she’d erected long ago, frightening her.

Keep a safe distance.

She took in a deep breath and reinforced her guard. His caring tone, the worried look on his face didn't indicate concern for her. It was concern for the village. He needed all the help he could get to deal with this epidemic.

She tossed her head and flashed him her best 'don't boss me' look, similar to the one she'd used in Hanoi. The one that hid her true feelings. 'The same goes for you, too, Tom. I don't want to waste rehydration solution on someone who should have known better.'

She ran back to the clinic, thankful that the huge job in front of her wouldn't allow any time to think about a broad-shouldered, dark-haired doctor with deep worry lines between his chocolate-brown eyes. Lines she longed to smooth out.

'Tom, I'm sorry, but I think we need another IV.'

He glanced up from examining a woman whose eerie calm worried him intensely. She clung to life by a thread. In three days they hadn't lost a patient and he didn't want this woman to be their first.

Bec stood next to him, petite and exhausted from days of almost non-stop work. She should have been prostrate with fatigue but her strength and implacable determination kept her going.

She'd organised a remarkable clinic in a short space of time and with limited resources. Everyone who entered the isolation ward washed their hands and feet at the chlorine station beside the door.

Patients lay on bamboo mats with one member of their family to care for them. Bec had organised the healthy men into a team to dig a new latrine and the area around the clinic had been quarantined with a fence. Fires burned continuously outside, boiling water to make it potable. Further away, women boiled the clothes of the sick.

'We've got plenty of oral solution but intravenous packs are getting low.' She worried at her bottom lip with her top teeth.

His blood surged.

Fury at himself immediately followed. What the hell was wrong with him? Vomiting patients surrounded him, he was cloaked in heat, operating in the most basic of medical facilities, and now his body was reacting like a hormone-fuelled teenager's.

Bec was a nurse, a much-needed colleague, nothing more.

Make that your mantra. 'If we have a patient who needs an IV, we insert it. And we hope the new supplies arrive before we run out.' He rose slowly, weariness vibrating through him.

'Can you insert the IV now, please? Then you need to take a break.' Clear, violet-blue eyes bored through him.

Indignation bristled. 'You should talk. You've been going for longer than me. I get to sit down when I do my daily briefings with the elders. So I'll insert the IV, you do another oral rehydration round and then we'll both take a break.'

She held his gaze, her mouth firm. Suddenly, the corners twitched upwards and she smiled. 'Fair enough. But only because the local health worker from the next village has arrived to help.'

Her smile took away the tension that seemed to dog her.

He couldn't help grinning back. 'Deal.'

Hin explained to the mother of the child about inserting the IV and Bec held both the mother's and the child's hands. Tom continued to be amazed at how she seemed to channel supportive care and understanding to these women and children.

Somehow he managed to slide the cannula into the almost collapsed veins of the dehydrated child. As he reached to release the tourniquet, Bec moved forward to tape the needle securely to the skin.

Their hands collided, his palm gently skating over her fingers.

She flinched, her hand suddenly rigid, hovering over the child's arm. Tension vibrated up her arm and through her body. A moment stretched out, her hand suspended, fingers taut.

He glanced at her as he released the tourniquet. Her colour, usually tanned and healthy, had faded to ivory. Her skin stretched tightly across her high cheekbones.

She moved jerkily, her fingers flexing before she quickly taped the drip in place. 'I can't believe how effective the oral rehydration solution is. I would have thought antibiotics would have been required.' The words had rushed out, tumbling over each other.

Her reaction to an accidental touch mystified him completely. But an inexplicable need to protect her surged inside him. He matched her conversation, hoping to put her at ease. 'It's amazing what some salt water, sugar, potassium, magnesium and other electrolytes can do.'

He ran his hand through his hair. 'Although it's the glucose that does the trick. It means the sodium moves into the gut, taking the electrolytes and fluid with it, and that's the key to rehydration. Simple yet so effective and life saving.'

'Talking simple but effective, I can smell the rice soup Sung's made for us.' Bec stood up, her usual 'in-control' demeanour back in place. 'Let's go.' She waited for him to start walking, as if she didn't trust he would follow her.

'We need a complete break so how about we eat outside?' He led the way, hearing her gentle, uneven footsteps behind him, her slight limp more audible than noticeable.

They sat under the shade of a tree, clutching their bowls of rice soup as reverently as if they were highly coveted and rare French truffles.

Bec had chosen a position that left a good metre between them. He noticed she did that a lot. In the truck coming up she'd sat so close to the door that if she'd been any closer she would have been outside the vehicle. And the flinching thing when they'd inserted the drip. What had that been about?

If she feared him, why had she insisted on coming here with him? A guarded reserve and general aloofness toward him seemed to clash at times with real care and concern. But with the women and children she lost that tenseness. He couldn't work her out.

She put her bowl down. 'So we're winning, right? Today we've only had five new cases?'

'We have. This time. But until we can find out a way to truly make a change in a tradition, this sort of outbreak will continue.'

'What do you mean?' Her eyes sparked with genuine interest. He could almost see her brain ticking over.

'Human excreta fertiliser.'

'Really?'

He smiled at her dumbfounded look. 'The government is making headway by using the local area health workers, but it's a long, slow haul, especially in remote communities like this. This practice dates back centuries and the beliefs about it bringing good crops are well entrenched.'

'And they only get one crop a year...'

Her voice trailed away. She understood. A warm glow burned inside him. 'That's right. Plus we're close to the border with China here and sometimes cholera comes in that way. But no outbreaks have been reported up there so I think this outbreak must have been started with unwashed vegetables and then it was propelled and promoted by a lack of hand-washing and food-preparation skills.'

Bec pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket and smoothed it on her knee. 'This is a copy of the mud map of the village. Most of the cases came from this area.' She pointed with her finger.

His gaze fixed on her fine, tapered fingers as he moved toward her to study the diagram.

A line of tension ran through her but she didn't move away. 'Why did this section of the village get sick and the other areas didn't?'

'We could surmise that they used the fertiliser.'

'True, but this is also the area where there is the most malnutrition.' She turned toward him, almost vibrating with excitement. 'Families all live together or very close to each other so we could

conclude that what some extended families do in their daily life can seem to guard them against illness, whereas the practices of other families lead to illness and malnutrition for their children.'

Her energy encased him. 'So what are you saying?'

Enthusiasm glowed on her face. 'What if we get the women in the village to identify which women and children are not malnourished? If they can make the connection that some families are eating well and are not often sick then surely they will want to find out how.'

Exhilaration swept through him at her insight. 'So instead of us teaching a new way of doing things, the villagers discover it and change the way they have been doing things, based on a positive role model.'

She tilted her head. 'Yes and no. We foster the change by setting up opportunities like your gardens. We use positive role models and the health care workers.' She wrinkled her nose in thought. 'Perhaps cooking classes but they gather the food first... I don't know, I'm making it up as I go along.'

He gazed at her, stunned at what she'd just come up with.

'I think I owe you an apology.'

Lines scored her brow. 'Why?'

'When I met you in Hanoi and you seemed so vague about what you wanted to do, how you wanted to help, I thought...'

'You thought I was flaky.'

Her matter-of-fact tone slugged him. 'Sorry.'

She shrugged. 'You had a valid point. I was vague. I do want to fix it all. You've forced me to focus. I wanted to rush in and now I see that I need to take my time and work out what I want to do, how I can best help.'

He shot her a glance. 'Or how you're going to generate funds to do it.'

She sipped her tea. 'Oh, I've got the money, that isn't the problem.'

Her naïvety both entranced and frustrated him. 'It's going to take more than a few thousand dollars to start up a clinic.'

'Will two hundred and fifty thousand dollars do it?'

He choked on his tea. 'You have a quarter of a million dollars at your disposal?'

She grimaced, her expression unexpectedly hard. 'I do.'

Her expression worried him. 'Are you certain you want to use all of it in aid? I mean, I assume you've allowed enough for your own needs.'

'I won't have anything to do with that money.' The words, almost menacing, rolled out on a low growl. 'It needs to work off its origins and do some good in the world. Every child deserves a childhood so they can grow up to be a productive adult. This money will help them achieve that.'

She stood up abruptly. 'We need to get back.'

Before he could start to ask even one of the numerous questions that had slammed into his mind, she'd turned and marched off toward the clinic, her hair tumbling out of its restrictive band, softening the rigid line of her shoulders.

Part of him wanted to go to her and let his fingers caress the tension from her shoulders, entwine with the softness of her hair...

Stop it. It was official—sleep deprivation had finally got to him. Massaging her shoulders—it was an insane thought. Besides, she'd hate it. Hell, she'd shuddered when his hand had accidentally touched hers.

Getting involved with a woman wasn't an option. He'd made that decision after two failed relationships. Both women had demanded his full attention. He couldn't offer anyone that until he'd sorted out his own life. Filled in the missing gaps. So why was he wasting time, thinking like this?

Because she intrigues you like no one else ever has.

He tried to push the voice away, empty his thoughts but Bec's voice whooshed in. I won't have anything to do with that money.

That statement generated more questions than answers.

He sighed. He hadn't wanted her to come on this trip but instead of carrying her, as he'd expected he'd have to, she'd proved her worth in a thousand ways.

But the more time he spent with her the more he needed to know about her. She was a bundle of contradictions. What lay behind her determination to work here? He'd stake his life it wasn't just a philanthropic desire.

Tom understood that well. For years he'd ignored the call of Vietnam. He was Australian. And yet he was Vietnamese. He had Australian parents who loved him. But their DNA wasn't part of him. And Vietnam continued to call to that empty space inside him that craved answers.

He pushed himself to his feet. He was working with the best nurse he'd ever met. That was all he needed to know about her. Nothing else mattered. Everyone had their own journey and he needed to focus on his. He didn't need to get involved in hers.

They were colleagues—pure and simple.

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