

With each passing day Elly was becoming wearier. Even inside the dense forest the heat and humidity were draining. And she felt a tension between her and Mitchell that hadn't been there before. When he remarked on her silence and asked her if something was the matter she brushed it aside, telling him it was only the heat and the strain of the search.

Today seemed hotter than ever and the protective long pants and shirt sleeves she wore seemed to stick closer than ever to her body, and she could feel the sweat trickling down her back. Regularly mopping it from her face irritated her skin, and she thought longingly of plunging into the fresh, cool water of the lagoon at the end of the day. That kept her going. That and the memory of her father, and her determination to find the *stripling*.

Mitchell's call for the lunch break came a little earlier than usual, and when she joined him in a small clearing beside a dry creek bed she found he'd taken off his backpack and was reaching his hand inside his shirt, trying, unsuccessfully, to reach his back to scratch it.

'Thank God you're here,' he said. 'Will you check my back for me? There's something there driving me mad.'

He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off, holding it as he turned his bare back to Elly.

'Ticks,' she exclaimed as she saw several of the black parasites buried in his skin. She peered more closely. 'Yes, I can see the legs on this one. There're four of them.'

'Ah shit! They must've dropped off one of the trees when I pushed past. I've got one of those little tick removal things in my pack. Do you think you can get them out?'

'I'll give it a go. Here, give me your shirt while you get it.'

After handing her his shirt Mitchell picked up his pack and opened it. Removing the first aid kit, he took out the small metal implement, forked at one end, and handed it to Elly.

'Have you done this before?' he asked her.

'No, but I've seen Mum use it when Ben picked up a tick, and I know you have to be careful not to leave the head in.' She handed him back his shirt. 'Turn around.'

Choosing the tick with the largest amount of body protruding from the skin, she carefully slid the prongs each side of it and carefully but firmly lifted until it came cleanly out of his back.

'Got it! Now for the rest.' She repeated the process until she successfully removed all four ticks. 'There, all done.'

'Elly, you're a marvel.' Mitchell grinned at her as he replaced his shirt and buttoned it up.

'You'll need to put some antiseptic on them after you have your dip tonight,' she told him. 'They can become infected.'

'Yes, I know, and I will. Now for some lunch, and then,' he sighed, 'on with the search.'

Elly came out of her tent, refreshed after a long session in the water and clad only in shorts and a cool top, to find Mitchell waiting for her with a tube of antiseptic in his hand and no shirt on.

'Do you mind doing this for me?' he asked, holding it out to her. 'I can't reach them.'

'Of course not.' She took the tube and squeezed a little out, dabbing some on each of the bites in turn. She couldn't help admiring his back as she worked. He really had a great

physique, broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. She felt the steel in his muscles as she worked and the smoothness of his tanned skin. Well, there was no harm in looking.

‘There, all done.’ She handed the tube back to him.

‘Thanks, Nurse Cooper,’ he joked as he took it from her before turning and going into his tent, to re-emerge seconds later pulling on a tee shirt.

The incident seemed to break the ice between them and, after their meal, which they took in turns each night to prepare, she didn’t retreat to her tent to read by the light of a hurricane lantern as usual, but stayed seated at the small folding table and accepted the beer he offered her.

After all, she was probably reading too much into that kiss. It had only been a friendly act on his part, and she needed to be mature enough to accept the fact, and not act like a thwarted teenager.

‘So, no reading tonight?’ he asked her.

‘No, it’s much more pleasant out here than in the tent.’

‘What sort of books do you like reading? Have you been honing up on your science?’

Elly laughed. ‘No, nothing so studious. I’ve always been a reader, and I love a good mystery.’

‘Really?’ His brows lifted slightly as he smiled. ‘Me too. Who’s your favourite author?’

‘Probably Peter Robinson. I enjoy DCI Banks.’

‘Yes, me too. I also like some of the historical mysteries. You know, set in England in the 1800s. Policing was different in those days. No technology to help—all sheer hard work and deduction. Have you read any of those?’

‘No. But they sound interesting. I must try one. Who do you recommend?’

Mitchell rattled off some names, and they spent the rest of the night discussing books and authors.

From then on Elly found she was much more relaxed in Mitchell’s company, and she found herself looking forward to the evenings when they sat talking companionably. Now she’d gotten over her silly idea that he might be interested in her, she believed she could accept him as a friend.

At the end of the first week they went into Cooktown for supplies, and it was as they came out of the supermarket that Mitchell’s phone rang. When he listened to what was being said his face tightened and he ended the call with ‘I’m on my way’ before ringing off.

‘My father’s had a stroke,’ he told Elly with a worried frown. ‘He’s been taken to hospital and they’re not sure how serious it is. My mother would like me at home, at least until they find out how bad it is. So it looks like we’ll have to pack up and leave for a while. I’m sorry, Elly.’

‘Of course you must go, Mitchell. But there’s no need for me to come. I’ll stay here and continue on.’

Mitchell looked shocked. ‘On your own? There’s no way you can camp out there on your own. It wouldn’t be safe. I couldn’t even consider leaving you behind.’

Elly’s mind raced. She didn’t want to give up now, but she didn’t fancy camping in such a remote spot without him. Besides she knew he wouldn’t agree to it. ‘I’ll tell you what,’ she told him. ‘I’ll book into a hotel and rent a car until you know what you’re doing. I can travel back and forth as I want, and I’ll be quite safe.’

‘But you don’t want to go into the forest on your own.’

'I've been in the Daintree further down south on my own heaps of times. What's so different about up here?'

Mitchell didn't look convinced.

'You can come with me while I pick up a rental car. And even see me safely into a pub, if you insist, and then you can head off, pack up the camp on your way, we wouldn't want to leave it there while you're away, and you can still be home later tonight.'

'I don't know ...'

'Look, even if I only do a few hours a day, think how much further ahead we'll be.' She looked up at the lowering sky. 'And we don't know when the weather's going to break, and then we're finished for who knows how long. I can't do any more at home now and I don't want to waste the time.'

'But you don't have anything with you. You can't—'

Again she cut him off. 'My pack's in the Cruiser, and I can pick up a change of clothes here in town. Come on, we're wasting time.'

Still he hesitated. 'Well, I'm not sure ...'

'I am,' she told him firmly, and headed for the car.

Mitchell followed with the bag of groceries and tossed them into the back.

He drove to a car hire depot and came in with Elly while she picked up a rental car, then he followed her as she drove to the Sovereign Hotel in Charlotte Street. He waited while she went inside and booked a room, and not until she came out and told him she had the key to her room, and was now going down the street to buy a change of clothes, did he agree to drive off and leave her.

Had he stayed longer he would have seen Elly walk back towards the hotel with her purchases and come face to face with a startled Jackson Lee.