

Chapter 1 *In the jungle*

Jennifer

At eleven o'clock this morning, I was standing at the edge of a rain forest with my eyes closed. The smell of the warm, wet leaves was so strong it was quite delicious and the sounds were magical; hundreds of different birds were singing unfamiliar songs in the treetops all around me. Somewhere, out in the heart of the jungle, wild animals were hunting for food. Belize is so mysterious and exciting – a place where anything could happen. And I, Jennifer Wilson, am here, a part of it all.

Unfortunately, so is Lisa. There we were today in this magical place and Lisa started her usual complaining.

'How could I be so stupid as to pick a tour with only one other single person on it?'

'What?' I turned unwillingly to look at her, not wanting to lose the magic of the ancient forest.

Lisa was looking at me moodily. 'Of all the tours in all the holiday brochures in all the world, I had to pick this one,' she complained. 'Six happy couples and you and me. It isn't fair; you should be a man.'

I had heard this statement at least three times before, so I closed my eyes to see if the magic would return. 'I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment to you.'

I heard Lisa sigh heavily. 'Oh, it isn't your fault, I suppose,' she said generously. 'I blame the holiday

company. I mean, they should have arranged it better. Everybody knows a single person doesn't book onto a trip like this just to see the sights.'

I opened my eyes again, giving up on magic for a while.

'A single person on holiday alone is looking for a partner,' Lisa continued. 'It's obvious.'

'Well, I'm not,' I said, but Lisa didn't seem to believe me.

'Don't be silly,' she said. 'Of course you are.'

I knew there wasn't any point in trying to argue with her, so I shut up. Which is exactly what I wish Lisa would do from time to time. She loves talking, you see. About everything and everyone, but especially about herself. In the two weeks we've been travelling together, I've heard about: her family – her mum and a brother; her job – a manager in a London restaurant; and her flat – living room, kitchen, large bathroom and two bedrooms. I also know every tiny detail of every other holiday she's ever been on and about most of her ex-boyfriends. It's only too clear that Lisa *needs* to talk.

'Look,' I said, trying to escape, 'I'll see you later on, OK? I want to look for hummingbirds.'

But as usual Lisa didn't seem to want to be on her own. 'No, it's alright,' she said. 'I'll come with you. Although I don't understand why you're so interested in hummingbirds.'

'We don't get hummingbirds in England,' I reminded her.

'Well, you certainly do here in Central America!' she said. 'Thousands of them. Millions of them! There are six pages of them in Mary's bird book.' Mary's our tour leader,

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-75084-4 - Jungle Love
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a girl of about our own age. She was born here in Belize and she's really nice.

'Speaking of Mary,' Lisa said, 'I think she's trying to get our attention. Hey, Mary! We're over here!' As Lisa shouted – very loudly – I watched every bird, including all the hummingbirds, fly away into the forest.

'You girls are going to miss what Sam has to tell you about the Mayan people!' Mary shouted back.

'Looks as if your hummingbirds will have to wait,' Lisa said.

I looked at her, doing my best to keep my feelings from my face. 'They've gone now anyway,' I pointed out.

'Oh well,' said Lisa with a little laugh, 'that's all right then, isn't it?'

* * *

'The ancient Mayans believed that everything in the jungle had power,' Sam, the guide, told us when we were all gathered together. 'Every animal, every tree, even the smallest insects on the ground, everything had power. They were all gods. And these gods could choose whether to be kind or angry to the people of the forest. Of course the Mayans wanted the gods to be kind to them so they gave them gifts to make them happy.'

'What sort of gifts?' someone asked.

'They gave the gods the gift of their lives,' Sam said, looking round at us all. 'Thousands of people have died right here to keep the gods happy.'

'How horrible!' someone else said.

I thought it was horrible too, but I also thought it was really interesting. I work as an illustrator, painting pictures

for children's books, and as I listened to what Sam was telling us, I was almost painting pictures in my mind.

'To the Mayan Indians, it was an honour to be chosen for this sacrifice,' Sam continued. 'They did not fear it, as you or I would do. And sometimes they did not need to die. Sometimes the people were only asked to wound themselves to provide blood for the gods. Even the kings did this. Imagine it ladies and gentlemen; imagine thousands of people standing here where you are standing now, as the king climbed to the very top of this hill. Everyone watched the king as he slowly took a knife from his pocket,' Sam continued, using his hands to demonstrate the actions he was describing, 'a knife made from the spine or backbone of a fish, the stingray. This bone was sharp, ladies and gentlemen; very, very sharp. The king held the knife high above his head, and then he opened his clothes and quickly brought it down to make a wound in his body.'

'Was it always a king?' Lisa wanted to know now. 'Or were there queens in the days of the Mayans?'

'Yes,' Sam told her, 'sometimes there were queens, and yes, sometimes they had to make a sacrifice of their blood. They did this by using the spine of the stingray to make a wound in their tongue.'

'Oh no! How awful!' Lisa said, and, watching her, I couldn't help smiling.

Ian, one of the men in our group, was smiling too. 'No, Lisa,' he said, 'that wouldn't suit you at all, would it?'

Then Mary started to laugh. 'You're right, Ian. Lisa wouldn't be able to talk all the time!'

And suddenly everyone was laughing at Lisa.

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‘You’re all horrible!’ she complained, but I knew Lisa didn’t mind. In fact, she was delighted. She was exactly where she loved to be most, at the centre of everyone’s attention.

Sam began to speak again, telling us about an ancient game of football the Mayans had played; a bloody way of making peace between fighting villages, where the winners were killed as sacrifices to the gods, and suddenly I felt I’d had enough of blood and death. *And* Lisa’s childish play-acting. Deciding to go and see if the hummingbirds had returned, I walked quietly away from the group and headed back towards the edge of the forest.

As I stood there under the trees, Sam’s voice was a soft sound in the distance and I closed my eyes to listen to the birds. I was listening so hard that it came as quite a shock when there was a sudden noise behind me.

My heart started beating fast. ‘Who’s there?’ I asked, opening my eyes and half expecting to see some wild cat or other dangerous animal.

But it was a man, not a wild cat. It was Ian.

‘Sorry,’ he said, standing there looking at me. ‘Did I scare you? It’s all right; I haven’t got a stingray spine with me!’

I smiled, my heart slowing down again. ‘I think Sam’s stories have made me feel a bit nervous,’ I said.

Ian grinned. ‘I’m not surprised. He’s talking about people’s heads being cut off now. Horrible! I’m not very good with blood.’

‘It’s all very interesting, but I’m more keen on nature than history,’ I said. ‘Birds and animals. All these wonderful trees and flowers.’