

Extreme Action Series

THE PACKAGE



By Frances Croft

The Package

Part One

"Are you ready, Greg? We've a long day ahead of us," Alan said as he hitched his pack over his shoulders and adjusted his hard hat. He always enjoyed caving and today would be no exception. "We'll meet you at Plummer's Point about five o'clock, Sam. If we're out early, I'll ring you on the mobile. Thanks for bringing us here." He waved to his friend and watched the four-wheel drive climb the steep track onto the country road.

Three weeks ago he'd led a party of visiting tourists through the Jellico Caves. Lisa and Tom had come as well. Today they'd take the same route. He cast a quick, but critical eye over the group. The three of them were experienced cavers, which just left Greg Burnley, who was a journalist. The editor of the magazine he worked for wanted an article on caving and thought first-hand experience was the answer. At first Alan had been a bit reluctant to take the young journalist. There was always an added risk taking someone with no experience, but the editor had been persistent and Alan had finally agreed. "I'll adjust the straps of your pack, Greg. There, that's better. You'll be right. We've done this trip quite a few times now," Alan said quietly.

"It's not difficult, Greg," Tom smiled from where he was sitting on a large boulder. "Alan and I were down here a few weeks ago."

"I don't like going underground," Greg muttered. He watched Lisa checking her pack. She looked confident enough, but Greg was still uneasy. He didn't like small, dark spaces.

"I remember my first time," Tom said thoughtfully to no-one in particular. He stood up and swung his pack over his slim shoulders. "There's nothing like the real thing."

"Let's go," Alan called. "Tom, you lead, then Lisa. Greg and I'll follow."

"I'm on my way," Tom answered. He walked quickly along the short track towards the entrance to the cave, which was hidden behind thick bush.

"Once we're inside the cave the walking's easy." Alan paused and again glanced at the tall, young man. "Kirkman's cave is huge. I never get used to the size. I always feel so tiny and insignificant."

"I wish we could take the sun with us," Greg said as he stood still and tried to absorb the light.

"We'll be back out before you know it. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing changes down there. The rock is solid. My father used to go caving here. Tom will wait for us at the end of Kirkman's cave. We have to descend a narrow shaft to reach the pool called 'Full Moon'. Come on." He strode purposely towards the entrance.

"Yes?"

"Greg can have sips of water to keep his mouth moist. It'll be hours before the rescue party arrives. He'll have to have the leg set when he gets out and he may have to have an anaesthetic," Lisa explained.

"OK," he said.

"Are you all right, Alan?" Lisa continued, thoughtfully.

"Yes thanks. Lisa, take my mobile." Alan leaned forward unaware that his face was lined with concern. "Go out the east route."

"It'll take longer."

"Yes, but it's not so difficult. Tom will be waiting for you at the top of the shaft."

"Here's my thermos and there are some chocolates in the container." Lisa leant over and grasped Greg's shoulder. "We'll be back as soon as we can." She walked quickly towards the partly blocked shaft.

"Bye, Alan. Make sure you keep warm, Greg." With one last look at him she hurried away.

"Alan, I'm up," Lisa's faint voice filtered through the air a short time later. "Tom and I are on our way, see you."



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Part Four

The next morning, Alan opened the door of the clubrooms and walked in. He was early. His pack was still in the cupboard where he'd left it. It was strange there was no mention of Peter. Nothing more had been seen or heard of him. Perhaps he'd got out another way. They'd been too tired to do anything else but leave their gear in the clubhouse after they'd been rescued. Greg's broken leg had been set and he would be out of hospital in a few days.

"Alan, great to see you," Lisa smiled as she entered the room and walked to the front table. "Have you got all your gear?"

"Just getting it now," he said.

"I've got some more things to put away. I'll put them in the storeroom before the storm breaks. Won't be long."

Alan found it hard to believe that so much had happened. A flash of lightning lit the room and thunder rolled round the hills. The door swung open and a figure stood in the doorway.

"Peter," Alan called. "Come in. It's good to see you."

"What did you do with the box you picked up, Alan?" Peter asked stepping back into the shadow of the doorway.

"Oh, it's still in my pack."

"Please get it and open it," Peter requested.

"Why?"

"Please do as I ask," repeated Peter.

As Alan walked towards the cupboard and took the box out of his pack there was another flash of lightning and thunder crashed overhead. He turned and smiled. "Here it is, Peter."

"Thank you," came the soft voice from outside the door. "Open the box, please."

Slowly, Alan did as he was asked. There was something hard, wrapped in an old cloth. Carefully, he unwrapped the cloth. Inside was a diamond ring. "There's a note," Alan cried unfolding a piece of faded paper. He read:

'This is the diamond ring I stole many years ago. This ring belongs to the Burnley family!'

"This belongs to Greg and his family!" Alan muttered in surprise.