

The door had never been locked before. Becca wasn't sure there was even a lock mechanism installed, but locked or not, it wasn't opening. Break-ins weren't generally a problem in the Amazon Rainforest. Like the concrete jungle, it had its fair share of thieves, but they were more interested in old growth mahogany and oil deposits than wallets and flat-screen T.V.s. Becca guessed that the sort of criminals who frequented the Amazon would be quite shocked to find the little house nestled in the canopy of a *Tabebuia* tree.

Becca had just careened up seventy feet using the cage and pulley system to find her mother, father, and little brother Henry clustered at the front door. The family was just returning from the nearest post office, where they had picked up their extra luggage.

"Tom," Becca's mother began at the onset of renewed battle between her father and the door, "let's just wait for Jacob; he'll know what to do."

It was after her family had stumbled through customs that Becca had first seen Jacob. Exhausted by the flight from Duluth to Rio de Janeiro, she had been mindlessly following her parents. Her eyes felt prickly from lack of sleep, and she was already sweating from the heat. Vaguely, Becca noticed her father pointing to a group of people holding up signs behind a barrier.

"Look for a blonde woman with green eyes. I'm *sure* Millie remembered we were coming." Her father anxiously peered at the crowd.

Becca sorted through the people best she could. She detected no women, and definitely no green eyes or blonde hair. But then she glimpsed a boy, almost crushed by the many large

men, searching frantically for something. He was compact, with a thatch of blonde curls and wide, worried eyes the color of the sea.

“Dad! What about him?”

“Excuse me, but are you Mr. and Mrs. Sweeny?” The boy had somehow shoved his way over to Becca and her family, all traces of alarm wiped from his face. In one hand he held a cardboard sign with *Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Sweeny* written in careful Sharpie.

“Dr. Amoria apologizes for not being here to meet you. She has left her residence to study an unusual gathering of the *Dendrobates azureus*.” The boy smiled at Becca. “Poison dart frogs.”

“I know what *Dendrobates azureus* are.” Becca muttered.

“I have instructions to take you to the Gingerbread House, a prime location for studying *Tillandsia cyanea*. I will be your host until my mother gets back.”

“You’re—“ Becca’s father began, startled.

“Yep, I’m her son, Jacob Amoria. Nice to meet you.”

Her parents had expecting the famed biologist Dr. Millie Amoria and not her fifteen year-old son, but Becca was thrilled. She had prepared herself for three months of isolation while her biologist parents studied a new kind of bromeliad, but maybe this boy would be some company.

On the subsequent taxi ride, bus ride, boat ride, and hike, Jacob had proved to be polite, friendly, and extremely knowledgeable about the Amazon. She should have been impressed like

her parents, but instead was irritated. Sometimes it was fun to listen to Jacob because he spoke with such passion, but usually he made her feel unintelligent, which Becca hated.

Becca's parents were the two most prominent biologists of the Great Lakes region. Although she was only fifteen, her parents had enrolled her in college-level science courses to supplement the high school curriculum she already knew inside out. It was partly genetics, partly scientific submersion at a young age, and partly her advanced classes that had convinced Becca that she was quite the biologist. But Jacob, it seemed, was determined to prove otherwise. When Becca attempted to offer up some comment, Jacob could always point out what she had said wrong. He was much too polite to interrupt her, but he came close on several occasions in eagerness to show his superior knowledge.

Jacob, the last one to come up, leapt lithely onto the platform. "What's up?"

"I can't seem to get this door open." Becca's father was scholarly perplexed.

"The doorframe was built to accommodate some swelling due to humidity, but the rains have caused it to expand more than usual." Jacob took a firm hold on the doorknob and slammed his shoulder into the door. It popped open almost immediately and Henry gazed in awe. He worshiped Jacob, which also annoyed Becca.

The day had left Becca feeling like a steamed lobster and looking just as red. After three days living in rainforest gloom, the post office hadn't a stick of shade to offer as she waited. She had developed a pounding headache on the way back. As soon as the door had opened, Becca collapsed on a window seat, resting her head on the sill.

"Becca?" Her mother called.

“Hmm?” Becca raised her head, pushing black waves of hair out of her eyes.

“Your father and I are going out to study *Tillandsia cyanea*. I know it’s been a long day, sweetie, but could you handle Henry for an hour or two?”

“Sure, mom.” Becca replied reluctantly.

“Becca, play with me!” Henry demanded a few minutes later. “Commander Newt needs an enemy!” Becca didn’t feel up for any sort of skirmish, but she knew how insistent her brother could be.

Eventually Henry lost himself in his own made-up world and Becca was free to listlessly gaze out the window. Her brother’s and Jacob’s voices melded with the lonely wind and howls of nighttime animals, creating one soothing song. A sweet fragrance mingled with the breeze, wild, yet comfortingly familiar. She was about to close her eyes as a bright flash sliced the indigo evening and Jacob’s hand clamped over her mouth.

“They’re illegal loggers.” His voice seared with whispered disgust. Becca saw it clearly now: three burly figures tramping through the forest carrying a small light and a saw. “I’m going down.”

“Are you insane?” Becca hissed.

“Someone has to call the authorities. There’s no cell reception in the Gingerbread House. I’m not going to fight them. I’m not *stupid*, Becca. I thought I made that clear a long time ago.” Jacob crossed his arms, his green eyes burning hotly into her dark blue ones.

Becca gritted her teeth and stalked to her bedroom before she punched Jacob in the jaw. She collapsed onto her bed, angry tears already streaming down her face. Becca knew she was overreacting, but she was so sick of how Jacob treated her.

By the time true night had fallen, common sense overcame emotion and Becca went to check on Henry and see if Jacob had returned. The main room was dark and deserted. Worry began to gnaw at her, even as she told herself the boys were probably asleep. She started walking quickly towards their room, trying to reassure herself that her brother, at least, was safe.

Their beds were empty. Becca scrambled down the hall to her parents' room, praying they had returned, that Henry had decided to sleep there. It was as unoccupied as the last room had been. Becca continued to search frantically, but was eventually forced to assume the worst: her brother was gone. Henry must have followed when Jacob had gone to look for cell reception, and Becca hadn't been there to stop him.

Becca started stuffing essential items into a backpack, determined to find Henry. Finally, she went to the closet where she had glimpsed the tranquilizer gun. Jacob had been looking for Scrabble and pointed it out to her, *just in case*. It was gone, dust outlining its place on the shelf. In one respect, she was glad; Jacob had the means to protect himself, and Henry also, if the little boy was with him. But *she* would be completely vulnerable. Becca scrawled a quick note to her parents and slammed the door behind her.

She would search close to the tree house first; it was likely the seven-year-old had gotten scared and curled up to wait out the night. Stars and moon were blotted out by the canopy, creating a darkness only broken by the beam of Becca's flashlight. Working in circles

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underneath the tree house, Becca systematically scoured the forest. Eventually her purposeful searching turned to wandering as Becca became disoriented by the forest at night.

Becca listened to the howls of unknown animals rampant in the blackness. It didn't help that she started going through every predator that might show a gastronomical interest in a slight fifteen-year-old girl. She knew that many wouldn't attack unless she provoked them to, but the night belonged to the hunters and she was in their territory. Fear had almost overcome her determination when she heard the voices.

Becca crept out of the clearing and followed the sound. Through a veil of vines and flowers, she saw three men jeering and laughing in the light of a camping lantern. Their Portuguese was slurred and empty bottles and an assortment of wicked looking saws covered the forest floor. Becca realized that these were the same men she had seen from the tree house, and they were all drunk.

Something moved at the edge of the camp. It took Becca a moment to make out a small girl tied to the base of a tree. She appeared to be native, probably from one of the uncontacted tribes. The girl was about nine, barely clothed, with cuts covering her brown skin. Her black hair was matted with blood, and she was crying silently as the men advanced on her.

Sharp words suddenly cut through the thick night air. He was speaking a different language, but Becca recognized the voice all the same.

*Jacob.*

She suddenly saw the tranquilizer gun on the forest floor. Her eyes darted around, finally resting on a limp figure at the edge of the clearing. One man walked over and kicked him. As Jacob groaned, the man flicked open a lighter and turned to the native girl.

Becca was frozen. The men were about to do something awful, but she was helpless to stop it. Suddenly there was a splash as water doused the lighter. The men looked up just in time to get another downpour in the face, and Becca smelled something like Christmas baking: sharp and sweet.

Then Becca glimpsed an outline dancing from branch to branch above the girl. The figure made a sudden motion and again the men were drenched.

Becca heard a burst of laughter underneath loggers' cursing. She knew instinctively it belonged to the acrobat swinging from the branches, and it gave her courage. Almost without thinking, Becca took a step forward, then another. Before she knew it, she ran into the clearing and scooped up the tranquilizer gun. The men were still distracted and getting quite a soaking.

Becca looked down at the gun in her hand and suddenly felt petrified. She had never shot anything except a squirt gun. She glanced over to Jacob, who was lying on the ground, looking completely stunned at the sight of her. She grinned in spite of herself. Then she gritted her teeth and aimed.

Expecting them to fall instantly to the ground, she took three quick shots, but the men turned in a flash and started towards her. Even with all of Becca's scientific reading, she had never come across the information that it takes a few minutes for tranquilizers to kick in. At that moment, Becca didn't realize how lucky she was. As one pulled out a real weapon and attempted

to take aim, all three collapsed as the alcohol and knock-out drugs combined in their systems to create an almost deadly mixture.

Quickly, Becca took one of the men's knives and cut Jacob's bindings. The outline Becca had seen in the tree leapt down and slashed the girl's ropes. Now Becca could see that the tree acrobat looked like an older version of the young native girl. As the sisters embraced, Jacob staggered over.

"That was surprising." He smiled painfully, holding his ribs.

Becca caught sight of the lacing of blood on his T-shirt. "You okay?"

"Fine." Jacob gasped. He sat back down gingerly and Becca flopped down beside him.

"What happened?"

"I didn't go looking for trouble, if that's what you thought. I called the authorities from a hilltop and ran into them on the way back." He nodded at the unconscious loggers. "It wasn't much of a fight. They took the gun in an instant."

"They were logging on protected land and didn't want witnesses." Becca guessed.

"Partly. And I had seen the girl. The men were talking about how she was going to be an *example*. This part of the forest is protected because of the uncontacted tribes. Many loggers want the tribes off the land so they can use it. They were going to intimidate the tribes by burning her alive." Jacob sounded angry, but he looked at the little girl with sadness. The look pierced Becca to the core. Jacob *cared* so much.



Becca felt a tap on her shoulder. The older girl was behind her, tilting her head and looking at Becca intently. Then a smile lit up her face and she bounded off into the trees like a deer.

“Becca,” Jacob’s voice was dead serious. “We have to leave. The girls are from an uncontacted tribe. We should respect their lifestyle and have as little contact as possible. The authorities are on their way.”

“But we can’t leave her.” Becca pointed to the younger girl, who was looking at them with curious eyes.

Jacob sighed. “Alright, we’ll wait.”

The scent that she had smelled earlier wafted past. “Jacob, do you smell gingerbread?”

“Yes.” Jacob grinned.

“Well, what *is it*?”

“I thought you of all people would know. *Tillandsia cyanea* smells like cloves.”

Becca had an epiphany. “*That’s* why the tree house is called the Gingerbread House. Because it’s close to so many *Tillandsia cyanea*. Are we near some now?”

“Of course.” Jacob sounded exasperated. “It’s a bromeliad, so it stores water. The older girl dumped that water on the loggers and the scent was released.”

Before Becca could say another word, the older girl slipped from the undergrowth and was practically beaming. She moved aside to reveal a boy with jet black hair like Becca’s.

“Becca, you mad?” Henry’s brown eyes started tearing up.

“No, Henry, I’m not.” She hugged him hard, trying not to cry. Over Henry’s shoulder, she saw the older girl kneeling with her hands on her sister’s shoulders, saying something in a low voice. Then she leaned forward and kissed the little girl’s forehead. The little girl closed her eyes and smiled.

The older girl got up and glanced at Becca. With strides as graceful as a panther, the girl closed the distance between them and embraced her. After a moment, the girl stepped away, took her little sister’s hand, and melted into the forest, leaving only the scent of cloves behind.