



CURUPIRA

The three vans were parked in a line close to the edge of the rainforest, not far from Saturnino's house. Many of the villagers crowded noisily around the convoy, while the rest sat on their porches and watched in grim silence. Jessica spotted Renata at the back of the crowd and joined her. They watched a team of people lift equipment from the vans and add it to growing piles on the ground.

‘What’s going on?’ Jessica asked.

Renata shrugged. ‘They won’t say much. Research, apparently, but we’ve never had scientists turn up with one of those before.’

She nodded towards the lead vehicle, where a man in black body armour stood with an assault rifle held across his chest. A surly face surveyed the crowd from beneath the peak of his cap. There was another guard at the back of the rear vehicle, and one in the cab of

the middle van. Jessica had never seen a research party with an armed escort either, and she said as much.

‘They must be looking for something valuable,’ Renata said. ‘Maybe it’s treasure! There are caves of jewels and cities of gold hidden in the rainforest, if you believe the legends. Which I do.’

She seemed to say it almost as a challenge. It was like a gauntlet being thrown to the ground at Jessica’s feet. Jessica smiled – for the first time that morning – and said that she believed them too.

‘But treasure isn’t the only thing worth a lot of money in there,’ Jessica said. ‘There’s oil too.’

Renata nodded. ‘Black gold.’

‘The trees as well. For timber.’

Renata’s expression hardened. The armed guard stationed by the lead vehicle caught it and suddenly didn’t seem quite so sure of his ferocity.

‘We know all about loggers here,’ she said. ‘But they don’t look like loggers. They look like scientists.’

Jessica, well acquainted with the scientific community, was tempted to agree. She watched a group of them consult a map, collect a pile of equipment and head into the trees. The villagers’ demands to know what they were searching for went up a notch.

‘Maybe they’re here to study the land,’ Jessica said. ‘You know, for cattle ranchers. There’s a lot of money in that too.’

‘If they think they can turn my forest into a field for cows so that someone in Texas can eat a steak, they are going to need more than three men with guns to stop me.’

Jessica believed her. And she liked the way Renata thought of it as *her* forest. Coming from her, it didn’t sound like ownership; instead, it felt fiercely protective, like a parent stepping between their baby and a bear.

‘Besides,’ Renata went on, ‘they’ll have to get past *Curupira* too.’

There was a slight dip in volume, and a few of the villagers glanced in Renata’s direction before resuming their interest in the convoy.

‘*Curupira*?’ Jessica said quietly. ‘What’s that?’

‘One of the legends,’ Renata said. She paused. It seemed to Jessica that Renata was deciding whether she was the right kind of person. After a moment, she gave a small, satisfied nod. ‘*Curupira* is the guardian of the forest; he stops people from taking things.’

‘What does he look like?’

‘He’s a small man – taller than me but shorter than

you. He has orange hair. Oh, and his feet point backwards.'

'Backwards?'

Renata nodded. 'It confuses hunters who try to follow his tracks.'

Jessica wasn't entirely sure how serious Renata was being about the existence of *Curupira*. One of the things she loved about visiting new places was discovering the local legends and folklore, but when everywhere seemed to have its own mysterious sprite or demon or talisman, it became a bit harder to buy into it.

'Biscuit?' Jessica asked, changing the subject. She had taken off her backpack and stood with the packet of digestives held out towards Renata, who prised one out expertly.

'Thank you.'

They watched as another group of scientists gathered their kit and struck off into the rainforest at a different angle. Again, the noise around them intensified.

There was only one pile of equipment left, and just as the final group of scientists looked ready to embark on their journey into the forest the guard in the middle van climbed down. He was followed by someone else: a girl who had been concealed the whole time by his

armoured bulk. She was around Jessica's age, and she looked vaguely familiar as she stepped through the red mud that had been churned up by the convoy; there was something about her reluctant trudge towards the assembled scientists that reminded Jessica of someone she knew very well. It wasn't until the girl reached the pile of equipment and looked down at it disdainfully that Jessica realised the person this stranger resembled was herself.

So that's what I look like whenever I'm dragged along on yet another field trip.

She swelled with a kind of proud kinship. In all her life she had never met someone her age who truly understood what it was like to be the daughter of people who were essentially globetrotting swab collectors. She encountered some who went months without seeing a parent who had gone on a research trip alone, and others who had done few enough that they still seemed like holidays. But she had never met anyone who lived out of a suitcase eleven months out of twelve.

'Who is that?' Renata asked.

Jessica very nearly said, 'Me.' She caught herself just in time and replied, 'She must be the daughter of one of the scientists.'

Jessica tried to identify the girl's parents from her body language, but she seemed annoyed with everyone equally. She angled herself away from the assembled scientists receiving their brief. She folded her arms with exaggerated defiance. She looked up at the gathering clouds overhead and seemed to dare them to ruin her day further by raining. She pouted. She was so wrapped up in her own plight that she didn't even seem aware of the restless crowd gathered a few yards away. Everything, including the lazy way she fanned herself with her sun hat, communicated her disdain for this endeavour. Her clothes, a kind of khaki safari-chic ensemble, were pristine; the red lips of mud along the soles of her boots were the only imperfections. It looked as though the outfit had never been worn before.

Jessica looked down at her own outfit, plain and ordinary and well worn – washed many times but probably not as many as would have been hygienically optimal – and realised that she should really start asking for greater compensation from her parents for the nomadic lifestyle they forced on her.

Jessica looked up. The girl took some kind of sweet out of her pocket, neatly untwisted the wrapper and popped the candy in her mouth. She chewed with tired

contempt for the whole silly enterprise. To Jessica's delight, she blew a bright-pink bubble that obscured her bored face. The bubble popped, and the girl gathered in the gum with an accomplished swirl of her tongue. She rolled her eyes at the dithering scientists and blew another bubble.

The girl was fantastic, and Jessica was determined to make her acquaintance. She turned to Renata.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' she said.

Renata's face was set in a frown. 'Maybe. Are you thinking that girl over there just dropped her candy wrapper?'

Jessica turned back. A crumpled square of pink plastic rested on the ground beside the girl's boot. She didn't seem to have noticed.

'I'm sure it was an accident,' Jessica said.

Renata cocked an eyebrow. 'I'm not.'

'I think we should say hello,' Jessica said. 'We can pick the wrapper up when we reach her.'

'I'm not sure the gorilla with the gun would be too happy about that.'

It was Jessica's turn to raise a sceptical eyebrow. 'I'm pretty sure those guys are here to protect whatever the scientists bring out of the rainforest.'

Renata smiled mischievously. ‘I would certainly like to find out what they’re planning to take.’

‘Trust me. If I know anything about these kinds of trips, the thing they’re probably looking for is data. Not jewels or gold or lost cities. Besides, all of this is now protected land. You saw Anura Hegarty’s pledge on TV yesterday. These researchers are probably doing a butterfly count.’

‘With armed guards?’

Jessica blew a strand of hair out of her face. ‘You said yourself that there were poachers around. And I’m sure not everyone is happy that this land is now protected.’

She nodded towards Saturnino’s house, where the scowling, skinny youth watched the convoy from his porch.

‘I’d still like to know what they’re looking for,’ Renata said. The mischievous smile grew a little wider. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

A small buzz, like the first crackle of a distant lightning storm, began to thrum inside Jessica’s chest.

‘Do you think they would tell us?’ she said.

She hoped that they would almost as much as she hoped that they wouldn’t. If they would, she could avoid a whole heap of trouble. But if they wouldn’t . . . Well, this trip might just become a bit more interesting.

Renata shook her head. ‘What do you think all these people are asking?’ An impish sparkle twinkled in her dark eyes. ‘And the only reason for not saying is that they’ve got something to hide.’

Jessica hated to be a party pooper, but she had spent too long around scientists to accept the first available explanation.

‘Or they don’t understand Portuguese. Or they’re rude. Or there’s something secret about their work.’

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ Renata said. ‘And I want to know what that secret is.’

Jessica looked at the final group of scientists as they distributed the pile of kit. The girl with the bubblegum didn’t offer to carry anything aside from the small, thin-strapped bag that already rested against her back. Jessica’s desire to find out what the scientists were there for was eclipsed by her compulsion to befriend that girl: a girl who would understand; a girl who, instead of marvelling at the number of places Jessica had been to, would say, ‘Isn’t it the *worst*?’

A smile tugged at the corners of Jessica’s lips. ‘What did you have in mind?’ she asked.

‘Give me a minute.’

Renata turned and squeezed between the villagers

blocking her way. She ran across the red earth to her house. Jessica watched the researchers slip into the forest, striking off at a different angle to the previous groups. The girl tagged on to the back of the line, followed by the armed guard. Large leaves swung back into place, and within seconds the whole party was swallowed by the foliage. The disturbed branches returned to stillness, closing over the people inside like water.

Renata came back panting. She wore a thin raincoat over her T-shirt and a backpack dangled from one shoulder. Her flip-flops had been replaced by boots and Jessica glimpsed, with a small bolt of exhilaration, the handle of a knife protruding from the top of one.

‘Which way did they go?’ Renata asked.

Jessica pointed.

‘Okay,’ Renata said. ‘Follow me.’

They walked around the back of the crowd, which had now fallen quiet. The villagers watched the rainforest intently, as though they expected the explorers to be ejected at any moment. A couple of armed guards remained by the vans, sullen and silent.

Renata led Jessica along the road that passed Saturnino’s house, half swallowed by foliage, but its owner was nowhere to be seen. They kept going, and quite soon

they reached the end of the road. There was nothing there, unless you counted the thousand miles of rainforest that stretched away to distant mountains – which you probably should.

‘What now?’ Jessica said. She could feel her heart beating in her neck.

‘Now,’ Renata said, peering between the trees, ‘we find out what they’re looking for.’

Jessica felt almost dizzy at the prospect of entering the rainforest – with excitement and with fear. She was so accustomed to following her parents’ orders – following *them* – that she automatically opened her mouth to parrot the rules that had been set out for her. The rules she had agreed to abide by. She paused, remembering what they were.

The first was to make no unaccompanied trips into the rainforest. Well, this trip wouldn’t be unaccompanied: Renata would be with her – someone who knew the rainforest as well as anybody. She had a fairly strong inkling that her parents had meant accompanied by *them*, but she brushed that unspoken condition aside. It was small print, and plenty of people ignored that.

The second rule was to be back by nightfall. Well, it was first thing in the morning, and she had absolutely

no intention of spending ten hours spying on a bunch of scientists as they gathered fungi or tree sap or soil samples, or whatever it was they'd come to collect. They'd venture in, learn what all the secrecy was about, say hi to the girl who had been dragged in there with them and emerge as a chummy trio in time for a home-cooked lunch at Renata's house. If the scientists were anything like her parents, they'd be glad of someone to entertain the tagalong while they got on with their work. And if the girl was anything like Jessica, she'd be eternally grateful for the company of someone who didn't own a microscope. A *collection* of microscopes. More and more, Jessica began to see the whole thing as a rescue mission.

And then there was the final rule – to make friends. Well, if she went into the rainforest with Renata, she might emerge with two friends. If she refused, she may well end up going back to the research station with none. And what would she do then? Pore over that strange book on her own? She felt the corner of it poke into her back, in the soft muscle between her shoulder blades, as though it was impatient to be read again. Or as though, perhaps, the adventurous spirit trapped within its pages was prodding Jessica to step forward.

She was about to commit to the adventure when

something Tom said came back to her, like an echo bouncing off a distant rock face. It was the cheery saying that the locals – people like Renata – had about the rainforest.

There are a thousand ways to die in the forest, but old age is not one of them.

She thought of asking Renata whether that was true, or whether Tom had invented it to bolster her parents' efforts to enforce law and order, but she changed her mind at the last second. She had no intention of dying in the rainforest. It didn't matter how many dishes were on that particular menu; she wasn't hungry.

And then she remembered what Mum had said that very morning.

We never saw this as dragging you along – we wanted you to join us on the adventure.

Well, if this wasn't adventure extending its grubby, calloused palm towards her, she didn't know what would be. She lifted her chin and stared down her nose at the wall of greenery before her.

'Let's go,' Jessica said.