

Amazon Ambush

Chapter Twelve

Dilbert

I'm ready. I'm pumped. Filled with jungle frenzy. Bubbling with Hope Diamond craze. So look out, you lurking jaguars, you and your rip-and-slice claws. I'm a fiendish detective able to spin you into a tail chase. And beware, you jump-ready tarantulas, you and your legs stretching the width of a dinner plate. I'm a mad, ravenous dog ready for dinner. No fork or knife needed. Jungle mania slithers through my veins. Its savage-wild pricks at my bones and claws at my heart.

Still—I may be fiendish; I may be savage, but I am not crazy. I tuck myself into the thick of the rainforest and take a few notes before venturing through the wilds of the jungle. Besides, that diamond thief could be anywhere. I hold my breath and listen.

Guuuuuuurrrrgleguuuuuuurrrrgle... "Rainforest Note #1," I whisper into my tie-tucked recording device, "gushing waterfall in the distance."

Bbbaarraabbaarrbbaarrbb... "Note #2: warbling insects nearby." My voice is as hushed as a ghost is invisible.

Eeeeeek—Eeeeeek..ook...hooo...Eeeeeek... "Note #3: monkeys overhead."

Ppppffffttttt... "Oops, please ignore that one."

And then, I nearly miss it. But of course I don't; my long, silky ears scoop up the next sound and mail it to my brain. Somewhere behind me there's a soft, light, *tap* and *crinkle*. A sound similar to the click of my tape recorder and like the sound of my whiskers when they straighten to radar the air. A nearly-not-there sound. I almost don't bother, but then I narrow my eyes to peer through the tropical steam swimming the air and stare between the moisture-coated leaves. I target the source of the sound—*Uh-oh*.

Nope. Don't talk.... Yeah, you—I'm talking to you... Pretend I'm not here..... Shhhh!... No, you don't get it. I'm serious. Over there... look over there. See that twitchy, black river? They'll be here soon. Best leave...

Now!.....

...But why? Why are you still here?... OK, too late now... Don't move. I mean it. Eyes closed! Pull your nose inside your mouth! And plug your earholes! In fact—PLUG ANY HOLES YOU GOT—'CAUSE HERE THEY COME... Aawhoooooooooop.

Crinkle, crinkle, snap, crinkle, tickle, flick, tap, tap, tap, crinkle, tap, snap, crinkle, tap, tap, tap.....

.....
.....
.....Huuuuuuuuuuuuuh.

Ok. You can breathe now too. They're gone. All's good. And yet...uhhhh...if you'd be so kind—I've one last, minor thing to do. Sit tight. I just need to scrape the creepies from my skin! Somebody find me a scrub brush! *EEEEEEEEERRGGGGG...*

Bluuuuuuuuurrrrr. Itchyitchyitchyitchy, in places that aren't supposed to itchyitchyitchyitch. *Hauhuhauhau—Huuuuuuuh. Ahem.* All better.

I see by the twist in your face I've completely lost you. That, my friend, was a living demonstration of the word "antsy." Best memorize it. Unless you'd like a go at it

again...on your own...I'm never going to sniff the trail of Amazonian warrior ants again. It is quite unpleasant to be covered in antsy. Or an ant sea. A sea of flesh-eating ants that can make you more past tense than a present future-telling ant can see.

Actually, warrior ants don't see much of anything; they sense you. More importantly, they sense me. One move, one quiver of a whisker and I would have been a statue of skeletal leftovers. Warrior ants or not, I've got a jungle to explore. And a diamond I hope to find.

I pull my hat low over my forehead roll, take a deep breath of determination, and...cough...the air is less like air and more like wet, wooly swimwear. It's hot, thick, and sticky. But I press on. I begin climbing through the thick of it. And thick it is. It's like I'm jellofied, stuck in the middle of Mrs. Fieldjoy's lime-green Jello mold. Green life swarms every square inch of this jungle; it's under, around, and all above. And alive, everything's alive here. I mean everything, even the air seems to breathe. It's like there's a buzz as it exhales. Of course, that could be the giant Amazonian beetles flying this way. Massive beetles with monstrous antennae, prong-clampers so huge they can crush a Coke can.

Need my Beetlebuzzap-ionizer 200, I realize. That thing'll zap the beetle's buzz to a net electrical charge of minus zero, I tell myself, just for the fun of saying it.

Because, you know, how can my brain tell myself anything? Because then, there would have to be two me's. And which one is me: my brain that says it or myself that hears it? Anyway, what I mean is I enjoy hearing the words echo in my mental cavern. But about that beetle-buzz: I dip my paw into the shelving unit behind my left ear to fetch my Beetlebuzzapper. Suddenly, I'm zapped myself.

"Ouch! What the crow-squawk's going on?!"

Instantly, my fire-stinging paw jumps out of my ear pocket and rockets toward my mouth. I'm aiming to suck the pain out of my stinging paw when I notice a monstrous insect dangling from my throbbing toe. Its long, scissoring pinchers, each equipped with a pair of jaws, are clothes-pinned to my skin. The rude-thing actually looks me in the eye. One large, bulbous eyeball stares back at me. I can't tell if it's pleased with itself or angry with me. And while I'm deciding, it hooks its crook deeper into my toe. Guess it's angry. At me! Why is the flyswatter mad at me? I didn't invite it to hop on board. I'd bite it back if it weren't so creepy looking, part scum-chomping cockroach, part tail-whipping scorpion.

"GET OFF ME, GET OFF ME, GET OFF ME!"

Apparently, this dipsy-donk dangler is hard of hearing. The more I yell, the more it clamps down on my toe. So, I start dancing. I fling my paw in rapid, whirling, tornado-like motions. And I sing. I belt the tippy-top point of the highest note within the soprano solo in the *La Boheme* opus: "GET OFF ME!"

Coordination is key when you're a detective.

Yet, this monster insect shows no appreciation for the arts. It remains stiff, unmoving, and without any signs of rhythm. Not the best dance partner, to say the least.

As a final measure, I add a drum beat to my song and dance; I solidly thump-whack my paw against the ground a number of times.

"GET OFF!" Thwack. "GET OFF!" Thwack.

Apparently, the creepy insect likes this because it finally starts dancing—away from me, which is the key move in this operatic performance of mine.

Hauhuhauhau—Huuuuuuuh. All better. Almost, I kiss my red, throbbing toe.

Buzzers and biters and pinchers and zappers—I know they're all around me, somewhere in this jungle, somewhere hiding, lurking between the leaves and perched within plant petals. Like I said before, the air is alive and buzzing. Or.... Maybe it's not a buzz I hear. Maybe that's a hiss.

I peer over my shoulder and then up into the trees. I swear I see something moving up there. Could it be the diamond thief?! Immediately, my whiskers *boing* straight, my ears stiffen and surfboard the wet air, my fists pump the sky.

"Come and get me, you Diamond Donk! You Slithering Snake! You—" Suddenly, the tree leaves part, and the beast slimes into view. That's when I realize: that's no diamond thief; that's a 150 lb., 17 ft. sleuth-eating anaconda SNAAAAAKE! Time to run—

I'm pumping and paddling, hurtling and hightailing it through the jungle at high speeds. As I bolt through the brush, my long, ear flops whirl like egg beaters, chopping the leafy plants into bits of green confetti. Until finally, I break from the forest's clutch and onto the sunny river bank. I'm at the river, the slurpy, plant-and-protein-rich Amazon River.

And just as planned, a canoe waits for me on the shore. Don't ask who put it there for me--I have my secret sources.

I'm a brave soul; few detectives would be willing to canoe on the Amazon River like this. Hungry piranhas long to gobble my flesh. Electric eels lie in wait, ready to shoot a deadly current of electricity through my body. My shaky fingers trace the large capital *D* that Mrs. Fieldjoy sewed to my shirt. I cannot forget who I am; I am the **shrewd** Detective Dilbert. I sniff out danger, track it down, and wipe it out. I must not give up; I must **persevere**; I must find the Hope Diamond.

Suddenly, I **detect** a ticklish sensation on my back. My eyes grow wide. What's on me?... There it is again... Something's crawling on my back! AAAAAAAHHHHHH! I flail my arms wildly, trying to get it off. I'm crazed—out of my mind with fear. I HATE TARANTULAS! And then I realize what's happening. It's just the curved end of my paddle. It's an extra ritzy paddle with a fancy handle that curls at the end and looks like a lion's paw. The stupid thing's brushing against my back as I row. Sheesh. What a relief.

This creepy, monster-infested region; it makes my eyeballs swim. OK, OK. I know that's the wrong perspective for a **shrewd** detective like myself to have. Gotta be brave. I mean to say: this **mesmerizing**, exotic paradise. My heart calms its beat. I take a sip from my water bottle to soothe my desert-dry throat. There, that's better. I should look on the good side of things. Huh, let's see... It's easier to catch the flies between my teeth like I like to do at home—'cause they're three times the size here. There, caught one. Ah, love to squish it down and hear it pop.

Splash. YIKES! What was that?! I jerk around to look behind me. I think... there's a boat... Someone's out there. Can't quite see... Have to strain... Can't tell... So dark. Some large, shadowy character... Darn these trees... They're so entwined, they form a canopy, blocking the sun. The twisty, interlocking branches remind me of how Isie interlocks her fingers:

"Here's the church; here's the steeple. Open the door;
Where's all the people?"

Bluuuuurrrrr... I shake and rattle my head, trying to remove Isie's singsongy voice. Right now, I do not care where all the people are—right now, my main care is with the suspicious person in the distant boat behind me. Is he following me?

This part of the Amazon is dark and spooky, even during the day. Don't worry about me, though. I don't need to see to track the stranger—got this bionic sniffer of mine. Lifting my nose, I catch a whiff. My whiskers begin rotating, and soon a readout prints across my eyeballs: *dust... cologne... hay... apple...* **Peculiar** combination. I tug at my hat's brim, hiding all but a fleck of one eyeball. Then, pretending to reach for something behind me in the boat, I stretch my neck counterclockwise and secretly peer at the suspect in pursuit. And if you think the shadowy suspect is pursuing me, turn your brainknob the other way around. The devious suspect may be behind me, but I am, in fact, the one doing the pursuing. That's a rule I invented: when following someone, pretend to be the one followed. Seconds later, I'm in the process of giving the suspect a scary look at my fangs when suddenly, a ray of light peeks through the branches, and I **decipher** the image.

It's that guy on the airplane! I'm sure it's him. Don't you remember that guy? The one with the stupid fake mustache and a frumpy overcoat? I push my hat up higher, uncovering my eyes. The suspect lowers his hat. I open my eyes as wide as they'll get. The suspect closes his. I telescope my neck out as far as it will go, straining to see each detail. The suspect tucks himself deeper into his wrinkly trench coat. Can't make out anything now. If I could get, just for half a second, an eyeball-to-eyeball lock on the dude, I bet I could scare him into telling me where the diamond is hidden. With all this flabby skin of mine, I can make a pretty scary expression. But, as luck would have it, all I see of his face is that stupid fake mustache that's poking out over his coat's collar. Rotating my whiskers while gritting my fangs, I send the suspect a mental message that is sure to wring his bladder dry.

Unfortunately, the suspect's fake mustache seems to block my brain wave's warning. Dumb, cheap mustache; I'll chew the thing to shreds if I ever—wait a minute. Fake mustache?! What a crock! This guy must be a **novice**. I know a cheap disguise when I see one; I have a zillion mustaches like that back at home. None are as good as what I'm wearing now. But yeah, that mustache of his is totally plastic. So stupid.

So, why's the scoundrel following me? I'm thinking...thinking... And then, just like that, like the flash of Isie's crystal, I realize. The diamond thief! This must be the diamond snatcher! I whip my gun out of my pocket just in case—*drip...drip...drip*. OK, OK, gotta keep cool... keep rowing... act like I don't know he's there. Yeah, that's a good strategy... let the thief think he's following me. Little does he know; I'm the one who's following him.

Thester—Back at the Farm

Why can't Isie pick some other poor old sap to play dress up with? This rumpled coat is pretty hot. Smells like the dusty thrift shop that she bought it at. Guess it's better than that tutu or the muumuu she forced me to wear last summer. But the day's not over yet. She'll soon get bored with this outfit and stuff me into some other torturous getup.

I wiggle my rubbery horse lips, trying to free the itchy mustache that she stuck on my face. Man, Lullabell could come by for a visit and see me like this. How embarrassing. The barn animals can laugh at me all they want; I don't care anymore.

But Lullabell—I'd be mortified if she saw me. Lullabell's my friend from down the road. She's got long legs that prance lightly along the road. She's so light on her feet—reminds me of when Mrs. Fieldjoy uses that whisk **device** to whip up her egg whites until they're light and frothy. Mrs. Fieldjoy does this when she's **concocting** that **mesmerizing** coconut cake of hers. Mmmm... Hope she doesn't **detect** that chunk I took. Couldn't help myself; the cake was begging me to take a bite.

Anyway, back to Lullabell. She's got long eyelashes and sparkling eyes... We like to race across the pasture to the apple trees and shake the trunks until apples fall. Then, we gobble to our delight. Gobbled an apple today by myself, just wasn't the same without Lullabell. The barn animals like to tease me and say that we're on a date. But they don't know anything. She's my good friend.

Puweee. I get slammed in the nose again with that disgusting cologne Isie poured all over me when she stuffed me into this disguise. Disgusting! Ever since that Hope Diamond was found missing, Isie has been playing what she calls "The Secret Agent Game." We're **pursuing** thieves in race cars. What a crock! Know what her race car is? That stupid old jalopy that's been dumped in Tractor Cemetery. Remember? I told you about that place. She's making me follow her as we **trek** through the brush, following Dilbert's tracks—the ones he left when he took off for Iceland. We're collecting **data**, mostly fingerprints and hoof prints. She's **equipped** me with a gun. It's not fair; she's got really good aim. She can blast me with a stream of water right between the eyes. My hooves can't quite work the trigger—a little difficult for a horse to do. But I'm planning to get her soon. I'm trying to **decipher** a way to use my teeth to pull the trigger and blow her away with a jet stream.

Keeping Isie entertained is a **daunting** job, but I guess it's up to me to do it. But I'm not having fun. You might see me smiling or laughing, but I'm not really happy. I SWEAR—I'm not. You can say I am all you want, but I'll never admit it. Not in a million years! I'm just faking it.

Now, Isie wants us to go take an airplane ride on her pretend airplane in the pasture. Remember? The one Mr. Fieldjoy made for her. Geez, this coat and mustache are really starting to make me itch. Can't wait to roll in some scratchy straw to take this itch away.

Detective Dilbert & Electric Eels

I hope the moron that's following me knows that this is a high voltage area. Beware, you fertilizer fool; you road apple **analyzer**, you cow pie pursuer... Wait, he's pursuing me. Well, everyone knows I'm not the one who's a cow pie. Well, anyway, he must know that I'm a top, number one, **adept**, **shrewd** detective—or that toilet-licking traveler (yeah, that's a good one) wouldn't be following me.

Hmmm... That makes me think—toilet—freshly-flushed water—think I'm thirsty again. I take a glug from my water bottle. The water doesn't taste quite the same as a freshly-flushed Fieldjoy bowl—kind of flat. Toilet water has a more complex finish. *Ugh*. This is **rigorous** work—watching the guy who's behind me while **navigating** my way through the **dodgy** water ahead. I am now venturing into a hazardous **region** where electric eels will lunge at their prey—me and that dinglebat behind me. Each zap can send 500 volts of electricity through my burly body. And these eels don't tire easily; they can continue to zap their prey for an hour without needing a **respite**. Although I'm a

perseverant pooch, a **dogged** detective, I'm not sure I'm **equipped** to **navigate** the boat and **observe** the thief behind me at the same time. I gotta be a topnotch traveler and be prepared before the eels attack. I sure could use some help.