

The Wild Part

from Chapter 1

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“Maybe,” I said, speaking Spanish and talking right into Rosita’s ear so she could hear over the roar of the broken muffler, “we could jump out of the truck?”

We stood in the doorway at the back of the candy man’s truck and watched the wheels stir up dust. It rolled across the savannah like dust devils. “We might break bones if we jumped,” Rosita said. “We must wait until the candy man stops. Then we get out, tell him about how we sneaked into the truck, and hope he can take us home soon.”

All we had wanted was to catch a ride to a neighboring village so we could go to a shop we heard about that sold bones of *Indios* and a shrunken head. The head supposedly hung from the ceiling by its lips. Neither of us had ever seen human bones, and I had never before heard of shrunken heads. But after we hid in the truck, Mr. Noraye, the one we called the candy man, had headed west, out into the wild savannah instead of going east to the next village. He pushed hard and fast over the dirt road, no doubt heading for the interior of Venezuela, toward isolated villages where the natives would buy his candy because no one else brought such treats to isolated places.

Rosita closed the door to the *casita*, the little house bolted on the back of the candy man’s flat-bed truck, and we settled down as best we could in the crowded place between the Gott can of water and the stacks of cans containing the candy. I had shoved my machete among the cans to get it out of our way.

Rosita shifted the nubby pillow the candy man kept on the floor of the *casita*. “Soon it will be night.”

I sighed. “We won’t get home today.” Mom and Dad would worry about me, would send my brother to search for me, and Dad would walk around the village calling my name. My sister would cry when they didn’t find me, and I felt a knot in my stomach.

For a moment Rosita grew still, and I thought maybe she was crying. Then she said, “We’ve done something dangerous, Don, and we’ll pay for it when we return. But there’s something exciting about the danger, don’t you think? You and I will go with the candy maker into regions of the interior where few people have seen someone as white as the candy maker, and none have seen a person with white hair like yours. We’ll go into the gold country, into the country of

diamonds and bandits and *Indios* who wear blue skirts, even the men, and we'll see giant iguanas and rivers too big to swim across."

The energy in her voice gave me a surge of excitement. I wanted to see all of the things she mentioned. "Maybe. The candy maker might soon need to stop to get a drink, and he'll find us here and drive us home, maybe tonight, maybe in the morning."

"If he does, I'll be glad. If he does not, I'll not be disappointed. It'll be better than going to the shop in El Tigre, better than seeing the bones of the dead. Better even than seeing the tiny head of the *negrito*. We'll help the candy man sell his candy, and we'll get to see wonderful things in the wild part of my country." She sighed. "My only real regret is that this is supposed to be a holy day, my grandmother said, because Eva Perón died today, and holy days are not good ones for starting fun adventures."

"Who is Eva Perón?"

"A saint, grandmother said."

As day faded into night and the light leaking into the *casita* around the edges of the door dimmed into darkness, we drifted off to sleep.

The stopping of the truck awakened us. The candy man killed the engine, stopping the roar beneath us, but my head was still full of the sound of the truck. "*Noche*," I said. Nighttime. Perhaps we had slept for hours. As we stood, stiff from the cramped space, we heard the slam of the truck door and some voices too muffled by the walls for us to make out what was said. One voice was that of a woman.

Rosita got to the door first, opened it, and turned to me. "I need to find a bathroom fast, but there are lights out there and strange men. Come with me, Don."

I took the machete from between the cans of candy and joined her outside, feeling wobbly and almost dizzy as if still bracing against the movement and noise of the truck. Cool night air felt good on my face. Kerosene lanterns hung from stubby trees beside a single building from which we heard guitar music and singing. The walls of the building looked too low and thatching on the roof stood thick and black in the thin light from the lanterns. "I think the candy man went in there," I pointed, realizing as I did so that the gesture was lost in the shadows of the truck.

"Hurry." Rosita danced around beside me. "I need a bath-room." She grabbed my hand and we ran toward some dark shapes beyond the house.

“I need to find the candy man,” I protested.

“Yes. But first I need to go. And you will stand guard to make sure no one sees me.” In the shadows of a small tree, she stopped and began pulling up her skirt. “You turn that way and make sure no one comes.”

I turned, looking toward the building. Three lamps hung on the side of the house closest to us, and they looked to have damaged mantles or else were in need of being pumped up, for their light was feeble. Two men had emerged from the house to look at the candy man’s truck. Perhaps one of them was the candy man, but it was too shadowy to tell. I heard footsteps behind us.

“Someone comes,” Rosita said.

I turned in time to see a man take Rosita’s arm and pull her to her feet. “What is this?” he said.

“Let go of me.”

“Oho. A girl. A pretty girl. Do you work here? Come, give me a kiss.” He tried to pull her to him, but she twisted away. He grabbed her hair. “A wild girl. Good. Good. I’m a wild man. Do you like wild men?”

The candy maker’s truck roared. I glanced at it and saw it lurch into motion, then I stepped toward the man who had Rosita by her hair, and I held the machete out to give him a whack. But it wasn’t necessary. Rosita did something and the man released her and bent over with a sharp cry.

“The truck,” Rosita said. “We must stop the truck.”

As we ran, the truck rumbled into the night, picking up speed and throwing a cloud of dust behind it. We ran into the dust, both calling out for the candy maker to stop. But he couldn’t hear us over the roar of the engine and the damaged muffler, nor could he see us in his mirror because of the dark.

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