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An extract from

Manatee Baby

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Chapter Three

It was dusk when they got to San Larenzo. Yellow dots of lamplight showed at the doors of the houses, reflecting on the floodwater that had crept up between them. The forest behind was one vast shadow and the floating raft, where boats tied up, was almost invisible against the dark water. Everything seemed asleep, but the village looked to the river and there was always a pair of eyes somewhere watching. When Silvio yelled out for help as they got close, Uncle Luis and his two sons, Jorge and Gonzaga, came out in their boat with the motor and towed them in.

Luis slapped Silvio on the back and there was a lot of laughing.

"Who needs nets to make money, eh?" Silvio teased.

Luis's nickname in the village was Take-it-easy, so he ignored his brother's teasing. "You just got lucky, Silvio," he said. "It doesn't mean I'm going to

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stop using nets any time soon."

Jorge's fine loud voice called out across the water, "Manatee! Manatee!"

By the time they got to shore, half the village had gathered to take a look.

Silvio was exhausted from paddling the heavily loaded canoe, but he stood up on the prow and raised his paddle in triumph over his head. This was the moment Manuela had dreamed of – returning home with a manatee that she had helped to hunt and kill. But something inside her had changed. It was as if a switch had been flicked. So when Silvio turned to her and said, "Only the most skilful catch the manatee, Frog, and that's us!" she couldn't return his smile and only whispered to the calf telling him again not to die.

There were plenty of hands to help get the dead manatee out of the boat. Everyone was excited about eating something that wasn't fish for the first time in weeks and from the moment it was hauled out, people began bargaining.

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"How about a new propeller for that clapped-out old outboard of yours, Silvio?"

"I have two bags of *farina** to trade..."

"How many kilos of meat for half a drum of petrol, Silvio?"

For the time being, Manuela and the baby were forgotten.

A dog pushed its way through the crowd and looked down at Manuela from the edge of the jetty. It woofed a greeting and danced into the canoe, its tiny claws chittering on the wood. It sniffed at the manatee's tail and growled.

"No, *Tintico**!" Manuela scolded. "Be nice! Where's your mistress?"

There was a thud of feet and Libia, Manuela's cousin and her best friend, landed in the canoe.

"Right here!" Libia announced.

Libia was tiny, like her miniature pet. She was stunted and wizened, with one leg shorter than the other because of an illness she'd had as a baby. On land she walked awkwardly, but in a canoe she was

***farina** cassava, a starchy root that is cooked and ground up to a coarse meal. It is added to almost everything and also eaten alone.

***tintico** Colombian Spanish slang for a small dark cup of coffee.

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as quick as a fish. Her mind darted like a fish too and was full of crazy ideas. Other kids were wary of her, which made her Manuela's natural ally – another girl who didn't behave the way little girls were supposed to.

Libia crouched beside Manuela and put her skinny hand lightly on the calf's side. "How can something that feels like a rubber mat be so cute?" she exclaimed.



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Manuela smiled. It was true. The manatee was a bit like a big rubbery slug, yet there was something irresistibly lovable about it.

"I've named him Airuwe," Manuela said, "and I'm going to take care of him and put him back in the river when he's grown."

Libia raised her eyebrows.

"I thought you wanted to hunt manatees, not be their mamma!"

"I did," Manuela said sadly, "but not any more."

"What does your dad think?" Libia asked.

"Papa wants to sell him to Gomez."

"I see," said Libia. "Then we may just have to do some manatee kidnapping!"

Silvio was calling loudly for Manuela and there was no more time to talk.

"Where is my daughter, the great hunter?" he cried.

Many hands picked Manuela and the calf out of the canoe and put them on the jetty. People patted Manuela on the back and cooed over the calf.

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"This is our big day, Frog!" Silvio beamed. "We caught a manatee and its calf."

Silvio was so pleased and proud. Manuela didn't want to go against him but now her promise to Airuwe seemed more important than pleasing her father.

Chink-Chink came puffing down the jetty towards them and Manuela's heart fell as her father tried to take the calf from her arms. She held on tight.

"Papa, don't sell the manatee to Mr Gomez, please."

Silvio's smile disappeared. He looked astonished, as if wondering why his daughter was behaving like this. She was always so practical. They always agreed on everything!

"But, Frog… He'll give us a good price," Silvio said, bewildered. "Come on, give it to me!"

Manuela shook her head.

"Do what your father tells you!" Gomez barked. "Hand it over!"

"But look, he's wounded!" Manuela showed

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Mr Gomez the cut on the calf's back, but he just shrugged.

"It's only got to survive as long as it takes to get it to Puerto Dorado tomorrow. Once I've sold it, it can die as much as it likes." Gomez laughed.

Manuela saw how much Silvio disliked what Gomez said. *There's still a chance,* she thought.

"Please Papa, please let me keep him, I'll take care of him, I promise."

But Silvio wouldn't meet her eyes. "No, you can't keep it!" he said coldly. "Gomez is giving us good money for it."

Manuela had never heard such a chill in her father's voice. She felt as if she had been slapped, but the hurt made her even more determined.

"This is not an *it*!" she shouted. "It's a *baby* and you shouldn't buy and sell babies!"

"You see," Gomez told Silvio, "this is what comes of teaching a girl to fish and hunt!"

Into this angry space, Libia suddenly appeared with Tintico in her arms.

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"Come on, Frog," she said gently. "Just give the *cria* to Mr Gomez, eh?"

Manuela glared at her, harsh words about betrayal springing to her lips, but there was a glint in Libia's eyes that said, *I've got a plan.*

"Well," Manuela said, "only if you take really good care of it."

Silvio snatched off his cap in relief. "Good girl!" he sighed. "Thanks, Libia."

Reluctantly Manuela put Airuwe into Mr Gomez's arms. The calf wriggled and made a plaintive little sound that pinched her heart. She hoped Libia's plan was a good one.

Mr Gomez wore a nasty, triumphant smile on his face as he carried the manatee away. Silvio glanced guiltily towards Manuela, but she was already halfway up the path towards Libia's house, with Tintico dancing in front of them in the torchlight.

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Chapter Four

Libia's house was always full of people. That was why Manuela liked it so much; her own home had just herself and her father in it. Manuela's mother, Fernanda, had died soon after she was born, and Silvio had never found another woman he liked as much as the beautiful girl he'd brought home from his wanderings in Brazil. He had concluded that he would never have another child, which was why he took Manuela out in his boat.

"If I can't teach a *son* to fish, then I'll teach a *daughter*," he always said.

It made people tut and roll their eyes, but everyone knew that Silvio Castello was a bit *loco*.

There was always someone fighting, cooking, sleeping, sewing, singing or dancing and very often all of those things together at Libia's house. Tonight, several big brothers were sitting outside mending nets and telling jokes with Libia's dad, Abel. There were medium-sized sisters doing each others' hair,

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while a gaggle of small children were having a complicated game of chase. Libia's mother, Angelina, was crooning a song to her newest baby and dancing round the room with him in her arms. Like her big brother Silvio, Angelina was considered a little eccentric by the village, but Manuela liked the way she sailed through the muddle of her home and the way she let Libia run as wild as she pleased.

"*Hola*, Manuela!" Angelina called dreamily as the two girls came through the door.

"*Hola*, Aunty Angelina!" Manuela called back.

No one else took the slightest notice of them, so Libia, Manuela and Tintico went through the house and out the other side to the quiet corner of veranda where Libia slept.

Libia lit a candle in a jar and sat cross-legged on the floor, with Tintico on her feet. She pointed to a thin pole, stuck in the water at the bottom of the veranda steps. Along its length were stripes of different coloured material. There was something a bit mad about it that was typical of Libia.

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"That," Libia said proudly, "is a colour-coded flood map of San Larenzo!" She grinned. "It tells me exactly which bits of the village are flooded and which bits I can get to in a canoe, depending on which colour stripe the water reaches. After the rain last night, it got to the red stripe."

Libia paused as if Manuela was supposed to know what that meant.

"Which *means,*" Libia went on, "the water reaches all the way to Gomez's place, so we can paddle a canoe from this veranda to the back of his house!"

Manuela suddenly felt a lot more awake. "So when everyone's asleep, we take your canoe and steal the manatee back!"

"Exactly!"

All over the village, the smell of cooking manatee began to rise into the evening air. Manuela hoped the little calf couldn't smell it too, or if he could, didn't understand what it meant.

* * *

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Manuela often stayed over at Libia's, so no one asked any questions about the two girls whispering together out on the veranda. When at last the net-mending, hair-braiding, chasing, dancing, singing and baby cooing had died down and the house fell silent, it was easy for Manuela and Libia to steal down the veranda steps to Libia's canoe, which floated on the flood waters at the back of the house. Tintico came too, tiptoeing down the wooden treads as if he understood the need for secrecy.

The thick, rainy-season clouds had gathered all day and now blocked out the stars. Manuela and Libia were used to paddling around the village in daylight, but finding their way in utter darkness was not so easy. Manuela was glad the constant plinking and churring of frogs and insects covered the sounds of them bumping into submerged trees and other people's boats. A journey that would have taken twenty minutes in daylight took them more than an hour. At last, a little break in the clouds gave them some light. The blazing tropical stars showed

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a plastic tank, the bottom half of a rainwater butt, on the last bit of dry ground behind Gomez's house.

The canoe scraped against the shore. Manuela got out and scuttled to the tank. She could hear the little manatee buffeting itself against the walls of its plastic prison. At least he was still alive.

She reached into the tank, but it wasn't so easy to catch hold of him. Airuwe wriggled and splashed and the noise reached the ears of Gomez's dogs. They began to bark, more and more loudly. Any second now, lights would flash on – Gomez had a generator and electric light for his house – and that would be that.

With one last desperate effort, Manuela plunged her arms into the tank and managed to catch hold of the manatee. She pulled him out and made for the canoe, half-running, half-stumbling. The baby was heavier than she remembered and she was glad to lay it down on the two pillows they had put in the bottom of the dugout and cover it with a wet sheet to keep it comfortable.

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"Let's go!" she hissed to Libia and they pushed the canoe out into deeper water.

Behind them, the dogs barked madly and Gomez shouted at them to shut up.

For a few minutes the girls just paddled, relieved and delighted to have got away with the manatee. Then Manuela suddenly realized that this was as far as Libia's plan had gone and neither of them had thought of where they might take a kidnapped manatee calf in the dead of night.

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"We could run away to Peru?" said Libia.

Manuela sighed. Sometimes Libia was just crazy. But there was one place they *could* go. "We'll go to Granny Raffy's," she said. "Who else is going to help us?"

Although Granny Raffy's house, which everyone knew as Riverbend, was not really part of San Larenzo, it was downstream and easy to find. Even without paddling, the girls knew that they would probably get there, as the river always seemed to wash things up at the little inlet where Granny had made her home. All the same, it was scary. Neither of them had ever been out on the river without an adult, even in daylight. They clung to the bank, afraid of the power of the river further out and watching fearfully for the glint of caiman* eyes in the starlight. Then the clouds closed over and the fierce stars were gone. Rain pelted down, leaving them groping along in the dark, poked by overhanging branches, and afraid.

***caiman** a kind of alligator. Most caiman are less than 2.5m long.

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Just when Manuela was sure they must have gone too far and were lost, the sound of music played on an old wind-up gramaphone came to them through the falling rain, like an orchestra playing under the river. They *were* in the right place and Granny Raffy was still up!

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