

The Forgotten

PINCA



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BY CHRISTINE VON HAGEN

The Forgotten
FINCA

The title 'The Forgotten FINCA' is rendered in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'The Forgotten' is in a smaller, cursive-like font, while 'FINCA' is in large, bold, block letters with a grey fill and black outline. Below the text is a decorative graphic consisting of a central inverted triangle with vertical lines inside, flanked by two sets of diagonal hatching lines that suggest a landscape or ground.

Written by Christine Von Hagen

Illustrated by Nedda Walker



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This unabridged version has updated grammar and spelling.

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Glossary

adiós: goodbye

Americano: a person from America; an American

amigos: friends

bajareque: a light, drizzling rain

balboas: a Panamanian paper dollar

barbacóa: a low bench made of forked sticks set into the ground and topped by small branches, usually set over a barbeque or fire pit for cooking

biombo: a slingshot (in Panamanian Spanish) made using a sturdy, forked stick

buenas noches: good night

bueno: good

buenos días: good morning; good day

caballero: a gentleman or man of high rank

caramba: a slang expression for shock or surprise

chicharrones: a seasoned and fried pig skin treat

el Pacífico: the Pacific Ocean

Espíritu Santo: the Holy Spirit

finca: a farm, ranch, or plantation

gracias a Dios: thanks be to God; Praise the Lord

gringos: a foreigner or non-Hispanic person

hasta luego: another expression for “see you later” or “see you soon”

hija: daughter

hola: hello

jilguero: a goldfinch

llanos: a grassy lowland

loca: crazy

los Estados Unidos: the United States

mamita: a term of endearment for mother; mommy

milpa: a cornfield or other cleared parcel of land used for farming

muy bien: very well; very good

nada: nothing

niña: a young girl

niñito: a term of endearment for a young boy or toddler

norteños: a kind of hawk

novio: boyfriend or sweetheart (masculine)

olla: a cooking pot or pan

paseo: a walk or leisurely stroll

perro: dog

poncho: an outer garment common in Central and South America designed to keep one warm and/or dry

por favor: please

pulpadora: a machine that cracks open coffee berries and extracts the coffee beans from inside

qué bueno: very good; how wonderful

qué lástima: what a pity; how sad

qué loco: that's crazy; that's unbelievable

quién sabe: who knows

sala: the living room or sitting room of a house

sí: yes

suto: a white-nosed coati (in the racoon family) found in South American jungles

tigre: tiger

Table of Contents

Glossary	iii
1. The Mountain of the Forked Stick	1
2. My House Is Your House	16
3. The Old Finca	36
4. Sweep Clean the House	48
5. Within the Forest	66
6. The Secret Plan.	81
7. The Planting Begins	93
8. Trouble Begins.	105
9. The Holy Ghost Orchid	120
10. The Day of Rest	139
11. The Secret Is Out	155
12. The Coffee Is Picked	168
13. The Fiesta	180
14. The Clouds Gather	191
15. The Storm Breaks	206
16. The Sun Shines on the Forgotten Finca	214



The Mountain of the Forked Stick

“El-vi-a?”

The forest was silent.

“EL-VI-A?”

Mamita's soft voice rose anxiously. There was no answer. She pulled the old white horse to a stop, and, shifting the baby carefully to one arm, turned in the wooden saddle and looked behind her.

“Where is she, Ernesto?”

The tall, thin man behind her on the narrow trail stopped. He lifted his head and looked around. One hand swung his machete back and forth as he peered up and down the winding path. “She was behind me a moment ago,” he answered helplessly.

Mamita shook her head and started her long pigtail swinging.

“Behind you? No. With my own eyes, I saw her running ahead. But where is she now?”

The man gave the horse a slap with his machete and started it plodding up the trail. He fell into step behind it before he answered, “Well, have no fear then, *Mamita*. We shall catch up with her soon.”

Mamita held the rope reins firmly and moved the baby to her other arm. It opened its eyes for a second, gave a weak cry, and then drifted back to sleep. A little frown gathered between *Mamita’s* full, dark eyes as she looked down at him.

The trail climbed a knife-like ridge between tall, windswept trees. High above them, a thick mist began to blow down from the top of *Cerro Horqueta* with its two peaks standing up like the points of a forked stick. The only sounds were the muffled thump of the horse’s hoofs and two sleepy birds chattering in the underbrush. The night was coming.

Every few feet the old horse stopped to rest, blowing his breath in and out with mighty heaves of his chest. Ernesto paused, too, and whistled to force the air out of his lungs.

“Ernesto?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure this is the right way?” *Mamita* asked worriedly. “Did not the man in the village say it was only two hours?”

“Yes, that is true,” Ernesto answered.

He frowned and looked around at the close-packed, green forest, then said anxiously, “We have been traveling for four hours, at the very least. I do not understand it. We should have come to Don Fernando’s *finca* long ago. But the man said nothing about this forest.”

“Ernesto!” *Mamita* glanced around her with timid eyes. “Ernesto, are we lost? Could we have taken the wrong trail?”

“It is possible, *Mamita*. Still, this trail must lead somewhere. Never fear.”

“But suppose it doesn’t?” She looked down at the pale little face of the baby. “Olmedo is not well. We must find a place to sleep.”

The evening mist had fallen as low as the treetops. The forest was as silent as if it were wrapped in a layer



of cotton. The wind had gone down, and the birds were quiet.

Mamita looked around her at the strange forest. Her worry burst into voice in a frantic cry: “El-vi-a, El-vi-a!”

There was no reply.

“Where is that child? What has happened to her since we came into the mountains? She is like a wild thing, running about alone through the forest. She was not like that in the lowlands,” the woman said.

The trail dipped into a little hollow and passed around a large tree trunk, green with a thousand mosses and parasites. A bit of sunlight lingered in an open place. On the ground, hugging her knees and staring up into the treetops, was a girl. Her round face with its pointed chin was shining with joy. Her chubby hands were pressed tightly against her knees as if to hold herself quiet.

Mamita saw her and started to call again, angry with relief, but the girl turned her head quickly when she heard the horse. In a flash she was up. With sparkling eyes, she ran back toward her family.

“*Mamita, Mamita*, I have seen it. Just now. I really saw it!”

“Saw what? Where have you been? I have been so worried about you,” the mother scolded.

“But I saw the quetzal!” Elvia paused as though that explained everything. Her mother stared at her.

“It was just as Father has told me,” Elvia went on excitedly. “I was walking quietly along the trail when suddenly there was a flash of color, then a sharp cry. I looked up—and there was the quetzal. Its green feathers were almost blue in the sunlight. Its great tail streamed behind it. Oh, Papa,” she turned toward the silent man, “Papa, it was just as you said it was in the forest near our old home.”

The mother’s face grew sad. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at her husband. A look of discouragement came into his blue eyes and deepened the lines around his mouth. He gazed around him at the thick, jungle-like woods.

“Yes, this is like the forest near our old home,” he said. “But, of course, you don’t remember that, Elvia. Yes, this is very like it,” he mused.

Mamita suddenly held the baby tightly to her and stared around with frightened eyes.

“We must be lost,” she cried. “Where there are quetzals, it is high in the mountains. Soon we shall be above where coffee is grown. We have lost our way, for certain.”

Elvia’s dancing feet became still. She looked at her father and then at her mother’s anxious face.

“Is this not the place we are looking for, Papa?”

“I think not, *niña*. I am afraid we have lost our way.”

“Oh, Papa.” Elvia turned her face, with its full, brown eyes, up to her father. “I had hoped we would live here, Papa. It is just as you have always told me about the mountains. Perhaps the *jilguero*, with its sweet song, lives here, and the howling monkey.” She clasped her hands in front of her as if to plead with her parents to stay.

Mamita flicked the rope reins impatiently. The horse began to move.

“Elvia, you are mad. Have you no fear? The night is coming. We have no place to sleep, and yet you waste time with such nonsense. What has come over you since you left the lowlands?”

Elvia’s eyelids drooped over her eyes. How could she explain what she felt? How could she tell *Mamita*

that she had never known such a feeling before? Ever since they had left the flat, burned-out plains below and ridden into the mountains, she had felt light and free. Her feet would not walk slowly; they skipped and jumped. Her head seemed to float in the thin, cool air. And why? Because the farther she went up into the mountains, the more she felt that this was her home. She belonged in the hills. She knew she did.

The narrow trail climbed on. The trees seemed to move closer together and intertwine their branches to meet the coming night. Slowly, slowly, the mist, white and damp but soft as a cloud, seeped down through the leaves. Only once in a while now, a beam of sunlight broke through as if sorry to leave the green forest to the fog.

Elvia walked on ahead, but more slowly now. Her smooth, brown head with its long braid was bent to watch her feet as they patted along the path. She had caught some of *Mamita's* worry, and it held her quiet. For three days now, they had travelled. Poor baby Olmedo was so tired he hardly ever even cried anymore. They must find a place to rest where he could have good food.

Suddenly, from the leaves along the trail came a rustling sound. Elvia stopped. Her hand flew up to her throat. Nervously, she peered into the shadows. At first she saw nothing; then, as she stared she saw two beady black eyes watching her. Her mouth opened slowly. A scream forced its way up through her throat. Slowly, slowly, the eyes moved nearer, but the scream never left Elvia's mouth.

Out of the underbrush ambled a small, furry, gray shape, like a little bear except that it had a long, pointed nose and a ringed tail. Elvia could not be frightened of such a little bundle of fur, but she watched it warily. Who knew what kind of an animal this was?

The small creature waddled crookedly toward her. It lifted its black-tipped snout and sniffed at her hand. Elvia held herself quiet. What kind of forest was this, where wild animals, as tame as house cats, wandered up to one? The creature pushed itself up on its hind legs and gently clutched her hand with its two little paws. She could see long black nails, but they were held back into the fur. This was not a wild animal! This was somebody's pet!

From close behind her sounded the “thump” of the horse’s hoofs.

“Papa! Look!”

The man hurried forward on his tired feet. In amazement, he looked at the little ball of fur that clutched at his daughter’s hand.

“It is a *suto*,” he cried. “Look, *Mamita*, it is a long time since you have seen *Señor Suto*.”

The *suto* dropped down on four feet and started up the path, turning its head to look back out of shoe-button black eyes.

Elvia jumped a little excitedly.

“Papa, it’s tame. It came right up to me,” she exclaimed.

“Tame!” *Mamita* cried. “Then surely someone lives near here?”

“Yes, *Mamita*. And look, the *suto* is waiting for us.”

They glanced down the shadow-sprayed trail where the animal had paused, its head turned to one side, its ringed tail waving impatiently, as if to say, “Well, why do you wait? Come along.”

Laughing a little at the comical way the *suto* waddled

on its short legs, Elvia trotted along behind it. She could hear Papa's voice as he hurried up the old horse.

After a few minutes, the *suto* stopped. He looked back. Then, suddenly, he turned and disappeared amidst the trees. Elvia went forward slowly. When she reached the place where the *suto* had turned, she saw a narrow path leading off the main trail and down the side of the ridge. If she had not been watching for something, she would have missed it in the gathering darkness.

"Here is a trail, *Mamita*," she called.

The horse, almost glowing in the evening light, came up behind her.

"Shall we follow it?" the girl asked. "This is the way the *suto* went."

"It must lead to a house," said Papa.

"Yes, yes." *Mamita* sounded happier now. "Ernesto, it is too steep to ride down. You carry Olmedo, and I shall walk. This old animal will break our backs going downhill."

Papa grumbled under his breath. They would be disgraced if she arrived at a stranger's house on foot.

They would think he was the kind of a man who made his wife walk while he rode the horse.

“All right, all right, old man. I will mount before we come in sight of the house,” *Mamita* soothed him. “Perhaps, too, there will be a stream down there, and I can make myself more respectable.”

Slowly, they started down the steep, slippery path. The farther they went down, the darker it grew. Ahead of her Elvia could see the horse swaying and slipping. But there was no sign of any other life.

Just as they were all discouraged, Elvia rounded a turn in the path and disappeared. In a moment she was running back again.

“Papa, come, see.”

They followed her around the turn. There, on the right-hand side of the trail and following the steep hillside, was a coffee *finca*. In the dusk the dark green leaves and red coffee berries glowed like rich jewels.

“Well, now, *Mamita*,” said the father, “you see that we are not lost, after all. Where there is coffee, there are people.”

“Thanks be to God,” she answered tiredly.

In a few minutes, they came to a small, swift stream at the bottom of the canyon. On each side of them rose the coffee plants. They knew they could be only a few minutes from a house. Quickly, they washed their faces and hands and arms and smoothed their shiny hair. *Mamita* mounted the horse again and settled Olmedo in her arms. With quickened step, they followed the trail up out of the canyon to a small hill, the top of which was hidden by full-leafed trees.

The silence of the forest held until they had reached the top of the hill. Then, suddenly, a dog barked excitedly. A fat pig scrambled up out of the trail and plunged, grunting, into the bushes. Somewhere a cock crowed. The little family knew they had arrived at someone's house.

So anxious had they all been to find a place to rest that they had not thought of how strange they must look arriving with the night. What kind of people lived here? What would they think of this family who asked strangers to shelter them? Elvia hung back timidly.

A tall man came to the doorway of the wooden house that perched on the hilltop. He peered out to see what

caused the excitement among his animals. The dog barked angrily. For a moment the little group huddled together, silent; then Papa stepped forward.

“*Buenas noches*, señor,” he called.

“Who is it?”

“We are strangers, señor, from David.”

There was no answer to this. The man just stood there, staring at them suspiciously.

Elvia looked up at her *mamita*, whose lower lip had begun to quiver. Olmedo gave a thin cry of weariness.

A woman’s gray head appeared behind the man’s arm. She peered out of sharp, black eyes, first at Elvia in her thin cotton dress and then at the slender woman holding the bundle that cried.

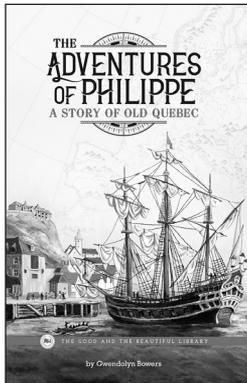
“Enrique!” she exclaimed. “What is the matter with you? Where are your manners? Would you let the poor woman sit there all night?”

The man came to life with his wife’s scolding. Quickly, he stepped out of the doorway and hurried up to the horse.

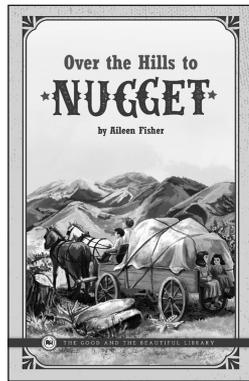
“*Perro—go away*,” he shouted at his dog. “Good evening, señor.” He shook hands with Papa. “Señora,

a thousand pardons. It is only that visitors here on the Mountain of the Forked Stick are so rare. Dismount, dismount, and enter my house. It is poor, but all that is in it is at your disposal.”

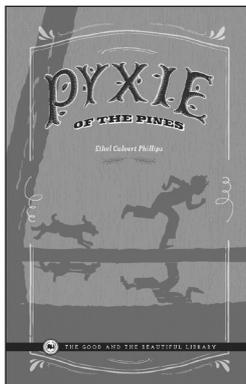
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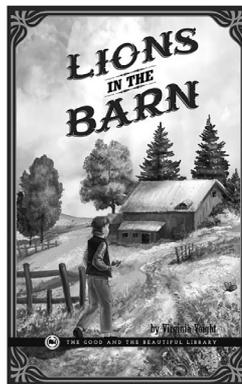
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The Forgotten FINCA

Elvía and her family have roamed the jungles of Panama seeking shelter since the landslide that destroyed their home. Their aimless wandering leaves the family feeling hopeless and downcast, that is, until they find an abandoned and seemingly forgotten coffee plantation in a jungle clearing. The forgotten finca has the potential to change the family's life and make Elvía's parents happy again, as long as the real owner doesn't return to reclaim what is rightfully his.

