

reins and Miguel the lantern. When the wagon stopped, Esperanza could see a body in back, completely covered with a blanket.

"Where's Papa?" she cried.

Miguel hung his head. Alfonso didn't say a word but the tears running down his round cheeks confirmed the worst.

Mama fainted.

Abuelita and Hortensia ran to her side.

Esperanza felt her heart drop. A noise came from her mouth and slowly, her first breath of grief grew into a tormented cry. She fell to her knees and sank into a dark hole of despair and disbelief.

LAS PAPAYAS

P A P A Y A S

"Estas son las mañanitas que cantaba el Rey David a las muchachas bonitas; se las cantamos aquí.

These are the morning songs which King David used to sing to all the pretty girls; we sing them here to you."

Esperanza heard Papa and the others singing. They were outside her window and their voices were clear and melodic. Before she was aware, she smiled because her first thought was that today was her birthday. *I should get up and wave kisses to Papa.* But when she opened her eyes, she realized she was in her parents' bed, on Papa's side that still smelled like him, and the song had been in her dreams. Why hadn't she slept in her own room? Then the events of last night wrenched her mind into reality. Her smile faded, her chest tightened, and a heavy blanket of anguish smothered her smallest joy.

Papa and his *vaqueros* had been ambushed and killed while mending a fence on the farthest reaches of the ranch. The bandits stole their boots, saddles, and horses. And they even took the beef jerky that Papa had hidden in his pockets for Esperanza.

Esperanza got out of bed and wrapped *un chal* around her shoulders. The shawl felt heavier than usual. Was it the yarn? Or was her heart weighing her down? She went downstairs and stood in *la sala*, the large entry hall. The house was empty and silent. Where was everyone? Then she remembered that Abuelita and Alfonso were taking Mama to see the priest this morning. Before she could call for Hortensia, there was a knocking at the front door.

"Who is there?" called Esperanza through the door.

"It is Señor Rodríguez. I have the papayas."

Esperanza opened the door. Marisol's father stood before her, his hat in his hand. Beside him was a big box of papayas.

"Your father ordered these from me for the *fiesta*

today. I tried to deliver them to the kitchen but no one answered."

She stared at the man who had known Papa since he was a boy. Then she looked at the green papayas ripening to yellow. She knew why Papa had ordered them. Papaya, coconut, and lime salad was Esperanza's favorite and Hortensia made it every year on her birthday.

Her face crumbled. "Señor," she said, choking back tears. "Have you not heard? My . . . my papa is dead."

Señor Rodríguez stared blankly, then said, "*¿Qué pasó, niña?* What happened?"

She took a quivery breath. As she told the story, she watched the grief twist Señor Rodríguez's face and overtake him as he sat down on the patio bench, shaking his head. She felt as if she were in someone else's body, watching a sad scene but unable to help.

Hortensia walked out and put her arm around Esperanza. She nodded to Señor Rodríguez, then guided Esperanza back up the stairs to the bedroom.

"He ordered the pa . . . papayas," sobbed Esperanza.

"I know," whispered Hortensia, sitting next to her on the bed and rocking her back and forth. "I know."

The rosaries, masses, and funeral lasted three days. People whom Esperanza had never seen before came to the ranch to pay their respects. They brought enough food to feed ten families every day, and so many flowers that the overwhelming fragrance gave them all headaches and Hortensia finally put the bouquets outside.

Marisol came with Señor and Señora Rodríguez several times. In front of the adults, Esperanza modeled Mama's refined manners, accepting Marisol's condolences. But as soon as they could, the two girls excused themselves and went to Esperanza's room where they sat on her bed, held hands, and wept as one.

The house was full of visitors and their polite murmurings during the day. Mama was cordial

and attentive to everyone, as if entertaining them gave her a purpose. At night, though, the house emptied. The rooms seemed too big without Papa's voice to fill them, and the echoes of their footsteps deepened their sadness. Abuelita sat by Mama's bed every night and stroked her head until she slept; then she would come around to the other side and do the same for Esperanza. But soon after, Esperanza often woke to Mama's soft crying. Or Mama woke to hers. And then they held each other, without letting go, until morning.

Esperanza avoided opening her birthday gifts. Every time she looked at the packages, they reminded her of the happy *fiesta* she was supposed to have. One morning, Mama finally insisted, saying, "Papa would have wanted it."

Abuelita handed Esperanza each gift and Esperanza methodically opened them and laid them back on the table. A white purse for Sundays, with a rosary inside from Marisol. A rope of blue beads from Chita. The book, *Don Quijote*, from Abuelita. A beautiful embroidered dresser scarf

from Mama, for someday. Finally, she opened the box she knew was the doll. She couldn't help thinking that it was the last thing Papa would ever give her.

Hands trembling, she lifted the lid and looked inside the box. The doll wore a fine white batiste dress and a white lace *mantilla* over her black hair. Her porcelain face looked wistfully at Esperanza with enormous eyes.

"Oh, she looks like an angel," said Abuelita, taking her handkerchief from her sleeve and blotting her eyes. Mama said nothing but reached out and touched the doll's face.

Esperanza couldn't talk. Her heart felt so big and hurt so much that it crowded out her voice. She hugged the doll to her chest and walked out of the room, leaving all the other gifts behind.

Tío Luis and Tío Marco came every day and went into Papa's study to "take care of the family business." At first, they stayed only a few hours, but soon they became like *la calabaza*, the squash plant

in Alfonso's garden, whose giant leaves spread out, encroaching upon anything smaller. The uncles eventually stayed each day until dark, taking all their meals at the ranch as well. Esperanza could tell that Mama was uneasy with their constant presence.

Finally, the lawyer came to settle the estate. Mama, Esperanza, and Abuelita sat properly in their black dresses as the uncles walked into the study.

A little too loudly, Tío Luis said, "Ramona, grieving does not suit you. I hope you will not wear black all year!"

Mama did not answer but maintained her composure.

They nodded to Abuelita but, as usual, said nothing to Esperanza.

The talk began about bank loans and investments. It all seemed so complicated to Esperanza and her mind wandered. She had not been in this room since Papa died. She looked around at Papa's desk and books, Mama's basket of crocheting with the silver crochet hooks that Papa had bought her

in Guadalajara, the table near the door that held Papa's rose clippers and beyond the double doors, his garden. Her uncles' papers were strewn across the desk. Papa never kept his desk that way. Tío Luis sat in Papa's chair as if it were his own. And then Esperanza noticed the belt buckle. Papa's belt buckle on Tío Luis's belt. It was wrong. Everything was wrong. Tío Luis should not be sitting in Papa's chair. He should not be wearing Papa's belt buckle with the brand of the ranch on it! For the thousandth time, she wiped the tears that slipped down her face, but this time they were angry tears. A look of indignation passed between Mama and Abuelita. Were they feeling the same?

"Ramona," said the lawyer. "Your husband, Sixto Ortega, left this house and all of its contents to you and your daughter. You will also receive the yearly income from the grapes. As you know, it is not customary to leave land to women and since Luis was the banker on the loan, Sixto left the land to him."

"Which makes things rather awkward," said Tío Luis. "I am the bank president and would like to live accordingly. Now that I own this beautiful land, I would like to purchase the house from you for this amount." He handed Mama a piece of paper.

Mama looked at it and said, "This is our home. My husband meant for us to live here. And the house . . . it is worth twenty times this much! So no, I will not sell. Besides, where would we live?"

"I predicted you would say no, Ramona," said Tío Luis. "And I have a solution to your living arrangements. A proposal actually. One of marriage."

Who is he talking about? thought Esperanza. Who would marry him?

He cleared his throat. "Of course, we would wait the appropriate amount of time out of respect for my brother. One year is customary, is it not? Even you can see that with your beauty and reputation and my position at the bank, we could be a very powerful couple. Did you know that I, too,

have been thinking of entering politics? I am going to campaign for governor. And what woman would not want to be the governor's wife?"

Esperanza could not believe what she heard. Mama marry Tío Luis? Marry a goat? She looked wide-eyed at him, then at Mama.

Mama's face looked as if it were in terrible pain. She stood up and spoke slowly and deliberately. "I have no desire to marry you, Luis, now or ever. Frankly, your offer offends me."

Tío Luis's face hardened like a rock and the muscles twitched in his narrow neck.

"You will regret your decision, Ramona. You must keep in mind that this house and those grapes are on my property. I can make things difficult for you. Very difficult. I will let you sleep on the decision, for it is more than generous."

Tío Luis and Tío Marco put on their hats and left.

The lawyer looked uncomfortable and began gathering documents.

"Vultures!" said Abuelita.

"Can he do this?" asked Mama.

"Yes," said the lawyer. "Technically, he is now your landlord."

"But he could build another house, bigger and more pretentious anywhere on the property," said Mama.

"It is not the house that he wants," said Abuelita. "It is your influence he wants. People in this territory loved Sixto and respect you. With you as his wife, Luis could win any election."

Mama stiffened. She looked at the lawyer and said, "Please officially relay this message to Luis. I will never, ever, change my mind."

"I will do that, Ramona," said the lawyer. "But be careful. He is a devious, dangerous man."

The lawyer left and Mama collapsed into a chair, put her head in her hands and began to cry.

Esperanza ran to her. "Don't cry, Mama. Everything will be all right." But she didn't sound convincing, even to herself. Because all she could think about was what Tío Luis had said, that Mama would regret her decision.

That evening, Hortensia and Alfonso sat with Mama and Abuelita discussing the problem. Esperanza paced and Miguel quietly looked on.

"Will the income from the grapes be enough to support the house and the servants?" said Mama.

"Maybe," said Alfonso.

"Then I will stay in my home," said Mama.

"Do you have any other money?" asked Alfonso.

"I have money in the bank," announced Abuelita. And then more quietly she added, "Luis's bank."

"He would prevent you from taking it out," said Hortensia.

"If we need help, we could borrow money from our friends. From Señor Rodríguez," said Esperanza.

"Your uncles are very powerful and corrupt," said Alfonso. "They can make things difficult for anyone who tries to help you. Remember, they are the banker and the mayor."

The conversation continued to go in circles. Esperanza finally excused herself. She walked out to Papa's garden and sat on a stone bench. Many of the roses had dropped their petals, leaving the

stem and the rosehip, the green, grapelike fruit of the rose. Abuelita said the rosehip contained the memories of the roses and that when you drank tea made from it, you took in all the beauty that the plant had known. These roses have known Papa, she thought. She would ask Hortensia to make rosehip tea tomorrow.

Miguel found her in the garden and sat beside her. Since Papa died, he had been polite but still had not talked to her.

"Anza," he said, using her childhood name. "Which rose is yours?" In recent years, his voice had become a deep throttle. She hadn't realized how much she missed hearing it. The sound brought tears to her eyes but she quickly blinked them away. She pointed to the miniature pink blooms with delicate stems that climbed up the trellises.

"And where is mine?" asked Miguel, nudging her like he did when they were younger and told each other everything.

Esperanza smiled and pointed to the orange sunburst next to it. They had been young children the day Papa had planted one for each of them.

"What does it all mean, Miguel?"

"There are rumors in town that Luis intends to take over the ranch, one way or another. Now that it seems true, we will probably leave for the United States to work."

Esperanza shook her head as if to say no. She could not imagine living without Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel.

"My father and I have lost faith in our country. We were born servants here and no matter how hard we work we will always be servants. Your father was a good man. He gave us a small piece of land and a cabin. But your uncles . . . you know their reputation. They would take it all away and treat us like animals. We will not work for them. The work is hard in the United States but at least there we have a chance to be more than servants."

"But Mama and Abuelita . . . they need . . . we need you."

"My father says we won't leave until it is necessary." He reached over and took her hand. "I'm sorry about your papa."

His touch was warm and Esperanza's heart

skipped. She looked at her hand in his and felt the color rushing to her face. Surprised at her own blush, she pulled away from him. She stood and stared at the roses.

An awkward silence built a wall between them. She glanced quickly at him.

He was still looking at her, with eyes full of hurt. Before Miguel left her there, he said softly, "You were right, Esperanza. In Mexico we stand on different sides of the river."

Esperanza went up to her room, thinking that nothing seemed right. She walked slowly around her bed, running her hand over the finely carved posts. She counted the dolls lined up on her dresser: thirteen, one for each birthday. When Papa was alive, everything was in order, like the dolls lined up in a row.

She put on a long cotton nightgown with hand-sewn lace, picked up the new doll and walked to the open window. Looking out over the valley, she wondered where they would go if they

had to live somewhere else. They had no other family except Abuelita's sisters and they were nuns in a convent. "I won't ever leave here," she whispered.

A sudden breeze carried a familiar, pungent smell. She looked down into the courtyard and saw the wooden box still sitting on the patio. It held the papayas from Señor Rodríguez, the ones that Papa had ordered, that should have been served on her birthday. Their overripe sweetness now pervaded the air with each breath of wind.

She crawled into bed beneath the linens edged with lace. Hugging the doll, she tried to sleep but her thoughts kept returning to Tío Luis. She felt sick at the thought of Mama marrying him. Of course she had told him no! She took a deep breath, still smelling the papayas and Papa's sweet intentions.

Why did Papa have to die? Why did he leave me and Mama?

She closed her eyes tight and did what she tried to do each night. She tried to find the dream, the one where Papa was singing the birthday song.