

LAS CEBOLLAS

ONIONS

“We’re here,” said Isabel, as the truck turned into camp and slowed to a crawl. Esperanza stood up and looked over the cab.

They were in a large clearing, surrounded by grape fields. Row upon row of white wooden cabins formed long lines, connected like bunkhouses. Each cabin had one small window and two wooden steps that led to the door. She couldn’t help but think that they weren’t even as nice as the servants’ cabins in Aguascalientes. They reminded Esperanza more of the horse stalls on the ranch than of a place for people to live. A big mountain loomed in the east, framing one side of the valley.

Marta jumped out and ran toward some girls standing together near the cabins. Esperanza could hear them talking in English, the words hard and clipped, as if they were speaking with

sticks in their mouths. They all looked at her and laughed. She turned away, thinking that if Isabel could learn English, then maybe someday she could learn it, too.

A line of flatbed trucks pulled into a clearing and *campesinos* hopped down, home from the fields. People called to one another. Children ran to their fathers yelling, “Papi! Papi!” Esperanza felt a deep pang. She watched and wondered how she would fit into this world.

Isabel pointed to a wooden building off to the side. “That’s where they have all the toilets.”

Esperanza cringed as she tried to imagine having no privacy.

“We’re lucky,” said Isabel solemnly. “In some camps, we had to go in ditches.”

Esperanza looked down at her, swallowed, and nodded, suddenly thankful for something.

A foreman came over and shook hands with Juan and Alfonso and pointed to the cabin in front of the truck. The women got out, took the babies, and helped Miguel with the bags.

Mama and Esperanza walked into the cabin. It

had two small rooms. One half of the front room was the kitchen with a stove, sink, and counter, and a table and chairs. A pile of wood waited near the stove. Across the room was a mattress on the floor. The back room had another mattress big enough for two people and a tiny cot. In between sat a wooden fruit crate, to be used as a night table, its sides touching each bed. Above was another small window.

Mama looked around and then gave Esperanza a weak smile.

"Is this our cabin or Hortensia's and Alfonso's?" asked Esperanza, hoping that hers and Mama's might be better.

"We are all together in this cabin," said Mama.

"Mama, we can't possibly all fit!"

"Esperanza, they will only give one cabin for each man with a family. There is no housing for single women. This is a family camp so we must have a male head of household to live and work here. And that is Alfonso." Mama sank to the bed. Her voice sounded tired. "He has told them we are his cousins and if anyone asks us, we must say it's

true. Otherwise we cannot stay. We are next door to Juan and Josefina so we can adjust the sleeping arrangements. Miguel will sleep next door with them and the babies. And Isabel will sleep here with Alfonso, Hortensia, and us."

Miguel came in and set down their valises, then left. Esperanza could hear Alfonso and Hortensia in the next room, talking about the camp office.

Mama got up to unpack and began to sing.

Esperanza felt anger crawling up her throat. "Mama, we are living like horses! How can you sing? How can you be happy? We don't even have a room to call our own."

The talking suddenly stopped in the other room.

Mama gave Esperanza a long, hard look. She calmly walked over and shut the door to the small room.

"Sit down," she said.

Esperanza sat on the tiny cot, its springs screeching.

Mama sat on the bed opposite her, their knees

almost touching. "Esperanza, if we had stayed in Mexico and I had married Tío Luis, we would have had one choice. To be apart and miserable. Here, we have two choices. To be together and miserable or to be together and happy. Mija, we have each other and Abuelita will come. How would she want you to behave? I choose to be happy. So which will you choose?"

She knew what Mama wanted to hear. "Happy," she said quietly.

"Do you know how lucky we are, Esperanza? Many people come to this valley and wait months for a job. Juan went to a lot of trouble to make sure we had this cabin waiting for us when we got here. Please be grateful for the favors bestowed upon us." Mama bent over and kissed her, then left the room.

Esperanza laid down on the cot.

A few minutes later, Isabel came in and sat on the bed. "Will you tell me what it was like to be so very rich?"

She looked at Isabel, her eyes anticipating some wonderful story.

Esperanza was quiet for a moment, clinging to one possible thought.

Then she said, "I am still rich, Isabel. We will only be here until Abuelita is well enough to travel. Then she will come with her money and we will buy a big house. A house that Papa would have been proud for us to live in. Maybe we will buy two houses so that Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel can live in one and work for us again. And you can visit us, Isabel. You see, this is only temporary. We will not be here for long."

"¿De veras?" asked Isabel.

"Yes, it is the truth," said Esperanza, staring at the ceiling that someone had covered with newspaper and cardboard. "My papa would never have wanted us to live in a place like this." She closed her eyes and heard Isabel tiptoe out of the room and shut the door.

The weariness from the days of travel flooded over her, and her mind wandered from people peering in ditches, to Marta's rudeness, to the horse stalls at El Rancho de las Rosas.

How could she be happy or grateful when she had never been more miserable in her life?

When Esperanza opened her eyes again, it was almost light and she heard Mama, Hortensia, and Alfonso talking in the next room. She had slept through dinner and the entire night. She smelled *café* and *chorizo*. The coffee and sausage made her stomach growl and she tried to remember when she had last eaten. Isabel was still asleep in the bed next to hers so Esperanza quietly pulled on a long wrinkled skirt and white blouse. She brushed her hair and went into the other room.

"Good morning," said Mama. "Sit down and eat something. You must be starved."

At the table, Hortensia patted her hand. "You missed going to the foreman's office last night. We signed the papers to live here. We already have work today."

Mama put a plate of *tortillas*, eggs, and sausage in front of her.

"Where did all the food come from?" asked Esperanza.

"Josefina," said Hortensia. "She brought some groceries until we can go to the store this weekend."

"Esperanza," said Mama, "you and Isabel will be watching the babies while the rest of us work. Alfonso and Juan will be picking grapes and Hortensia, Josefina, and I will be packing grapes in the sheds."

"But I want to work with you and Hortensia and Josefina!"

"You're not old enough to work in the sheds," said Mama. "And Isabel is not old enough to watch the babies by herself. If you watch the babies, then Josefina can work and that is one more paying job between us. We must all do our part. You will have a camp job, too, sweeping the wooden platform every afternoon, for which they will deduct a little from our rent each month. Isabel can show you what to do later."

"What's the platform?" Esperanza asked.

"It's the big wooden floor, outside, in the middle of the camp. Juan said they use it for meetings and dances," said Mama.

Esperanza stared at her food. She did not want to be stuck in camp with the children.

"Where's Miguel?" she said.

"He already left for Bakersfield with some other men to look for work at the railroad," said Alfonso.

Isabel came out of the bedroom rubbing her eyes.

"Mi sobrina, my niece," said Hortensia, hugging Isabel. "Go say good morning to your mother and father before we all leave for work."

Isabel hugged her and ran next door.

Esperanza studied Mama as she made *un burrito de frijoles* for lunch and wrapped the soft *tortilla* filled with pinto beans in paper. She looked different. Was it the long cotton dress and the big flowered apron tied at her waist? No, it was more than that.

"Mama," said Esperanza. "Your hair!"

Mama's hair ran down her back in a single long

braid, almost touching her waist. Esperanza had never seen Mama wear her hair that way. It was always done up in her beautiful plaited bun, or when she was ready for bed, brushed out and flowing. Mama looked shorter and, somehow, not herself. Esperanza didn't like it.

Mama reached up and stroked the back of her head. She seemed embarrassed. "I . . . I figured out that I can't wear a hat with my hair on top of my head. And this makes more sense, does it not? After all, I am going to work today, not to a *fiesta*." Then she hugged Esperanza. "We must go now. The trucks leave at 6:30 to take us to the sheds. Take good care of the babies and stay with Isabel. She knows the camp."

As the three of them walked out, Esperanza noticed Mama reaching up, hesitantly touching her hair again.

When Esperanza finished eating, she went outside and stood on the front step. Instead of facing another row of cabins, their cabin was in the last row facing the fields. Straight ahead, across a dirt road, were several chinaberry trees and a

mulberry tree that provided deep shade over a wooden table. Beyond the row of trees were grape fields, still lush. To the right, across a grassy field, was the main road. A truck piled high with produce drove by, losing a cloud of debris.

After it passed, the sharp smell told her they were onions, the dry outer skins being shredded by the wind. Another truck followed. Again the smell bit into her senses.

It was still early so the air was cool, but the sun was bright and she knew it would be hot soon. The hens pecked and poked around the front steps. They must have been happy to be off the train. Esperanza shooed them out of her way as she turned and walked next door.

The babies were still in their pajamas. Isabel was struggling to feed Lupe her oatmeal while Pepe crawled on the floor. Splotches of his cereal still stuck to his cheeks. As soon as he saw Esperanza, he reached up for her.

"Let's clean them up," said Isabel. "And then I'll show you the camp."

First, Isabel took Esperanza to the platform she

was to sweep and showed her where the brooms were stored. Then they walked through the rows of cabins, each with a baby on her hip. As they passed open doors, Esperanza could already smell the beans and onions that someone had started simmering for dinner. Women were dragging big metal washtubs beneath the shade trees. A group of young boys kicked a ball up and down the dirt road, stirring up dust. A little girl, wearing a man's undershirt as a dress, ran up to Isabel and took her hand.

"This is Silvia. She is my best friend. Next week, we will go to school together."

Silvia switched around and grabbed Esperanza's free hand.

Esperanza looked down at Silvia's dirty hands. Silvia grinned up at her and Esperanza's first thought was to pull her hand away and wash it as soon as possible. Then she remembered Mama's kindness to the peasant girl on the train — and her disappointment in Esperanza. She didn't want Silvia to start crying if she were to pull away. She looked around at the dusty camp and thought that

it must be hard to stay clean in such a place. She squeezed Silvia's hand and said, "I have a best friend, too. Her name is Marisol and she lives in Aguascalientes."

Isabel introduced Esperanza to Irene and Melina, two women who were hanging clothes to dry on a long line stretched between the cabins and a tree. Irene had long gray hair tied in a tail. Melina didn't look much older than Miguel and she already had a baby of her own.

"We heard the story of how you came from Aguascalientes," said Melina. "My husband is from there. He used to work for Señor Rodríguez."

Esperanza's face lit up at this news. "He knew my father since he was a boy. Do you think your husband knew Marisol, Señor Rodríguez's daughter?"

Melina laughed. "No, no. I'm sure he didn't. He was *un campesino*, a field servant. He would not know the family."

Esperanza felt awkward and didn't mean to make Melina admit that her husband was a servant. But Melina didn't seem bothered and began

recalling other farms her husband had worked on in Aguascalientes.

Isabel pulled on Esperanza's arm. "We need to change the babies."

As they walked back to the cabin, she said, "They are mother and daughter. They come over to talk and crochet with my mother all the time."

"How do they know all about us already?"

Isabel raised her hand and made her fingers tap up and down on her thumb as if a mouth was talking. "Everyone in camp knows each other's business."

"Do you know how to change a diaper?" asked Esperanza when they got back to the cabin.

"Certainly," said Isabel. "I will change them and you can rinse out the diapers. We need to do some laundry, too."

Esperanza watched as the young girl laid the babies down one at a time, unpinned their diapers, wiped their bottoms clean, and pinned on fresh diapers.

Isabel handed Esperanza the smelly bundles and said, "Take them to the toilets and dump them and I'll fill the washtub."

Esperanza held them at arm's length and almost ran to the toilets. Several more onion trucks passed by, their smell accosting her eyes and nose as much as the diapers. By the time she got back, Isabel had already filled two washtubs with water from an outside pipe and was swirling soap around in one of them. A washboard was propped inside.

Esperanza went to the washtub and hesitated, staring into the water. Bits of onion skins floated on the surface of the soapy water. She held a corner of one of the diapers, lightly dipping it in and out of the water, her hand never getting wet. After a few seconds, she gingerly lifted the diaper from the water. "Now what?" she said.

"Esperanza! You must scrub them! Like this." Isabel walked over, took the diapers, and plunged them into the water up to her elbows. The water quickly became murky. She rubbed the diapers with soap, vigorously scrubbed them back and forth on the washboard, and wrung them out.

Then she transferred them to the next tub, rinsing and wringing again. Isabel shook out the clean diapers and hung them on the line stretched between the chinaberry and mulberry trees. Then she started on the clothes. Esperanza was amazed. She had never washed anything in her life and Isabel, who was only eight years old, made it look so easy.

Puzzled, Isabel looked at Esperanza. "Don't you know how to wash clothes?"

"Well, Hortensia took everything out to the laundry quarters. And the servants, they always . . ." She looked at Isabel and shook her head no.

Isabel's eyes got bigger and she looked worried. "Esperanza, when I go to school next week, you will be here alone with the babies and will have to do the laundry."

Esperanza took a deep breath and said weakly, "I can learn."

"And later today, you must sweep the platform. You . . . you do know how to sweep?"

"Of course," said Esperanza. She had seen

people sweep many times. Many, many times, she assured herself. Besides, she was already too embarrassed about the washing to admit anything else to Isabel.

Isabel sat with the babies while Esperanza went to sweep the platform. The camp was quiet and even though it was late in the day, the sun was unrelenting. She retrieved the broom and stepped onto the wooden floor. Dried and brittle onion skins were everywhere.

In her entire life, Esperanza had never held a broom in her hand. But she had seen Hortensia sweep and she tried to visualize the memory. It couldn't possibly be that hard. She put both hands near the middle of the broomstick and moved it back and forth. It swung wildly. The motion seemed awkward and the fine dirt on the wooden planks lifted into a cloud. Onion jackets flew into the air instead of gathering together in a neat pile like Hortensia's. Esperanza's elbows did

not know what to do. Neither did her arms. She felt streams of perspiration sliding down her neck. She stopped for a moment and stared at the broom, as if willing it to behave. Determined, she tried again. She hadn't noticed that several trucks were already unloading workers nearby. Then she heard it. First a small tittering and then louder. She turned around. A group of women were laughing at her. And in the middle of the group was Marta, pointing.

"*¡La Cenicienta! Cinderella!*" she laughed.

Burning with humiliation, Esperanza dropped the broom and ran back to the cabin.

In her room, she sat on the edge of the cot. Her face flushed again at the thought of the ridicule. She was still sitting there, staring at the wall, when Isabel found her.

"I said I could work. I told Mama I could help. But I cannot even wash clothes or sweep a floor. Does the whole camp know?"

Isabel sat down on the bed next to her and patted her back. "Yes."

Esperanza groaned. "I will never be able to show my face." She put her head in her hands until she heard someone else come into the room.

Esperanza looked up to see Miguel, holding a broom and a dustpan. But he wasn't laughing. She looked down and bit her lip so she wouldn't cry in front of him.

He shut the door, then stood in front of her and said, "How would you know how to sweep a floor? The only thing that you ever learned was how to give orders. That is not your fault. Anza, look at me."

She looked up.

"Pay attention," he said, his face serious. "You hold the broom like this. One hand here and the other here."

Esperanza watched.

"Then you push like this. Or pull it toward you like this. Here, you try," he said, holding out the broom.

Slowly, Esperanza got up and took the broom from him. He positioned her hands on the handle.

She tried to copy him but her movements were too big.

"Smaller strokes," said Miguel, coaching. "And sweep all in one direction."

She did as he said.

"Now, when you get all the dirt into a pile, you hold the broom down here, near the bottom, and push the dirt into the pan."

Esperanza collected the dirt.

"See, you can do it." Miguel raised his thick eyebrows and smiled. "Someday, you just might make a very good servant."

Isabel giggled.

Esperanza could not yet find humor in the situation. Somberly she said, "Thank you, Miguel."

He grinned and bowed. "At your service, *mi reina*." But this time, his voice was kind.

She remembered that he had gone to look for work at the railroad. "Did you get a job?"

His smile faded. He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders. "It is frustrating. I

can fix any engine. But they will only hire Mexicans to lay track and dig ditches, not as mechanics. I've decided to work in the fields until I can convince someone to give me a chance."

Esperanza nodded.

After he left the room, Isabel said, "He calls you *mi reina!* Will you tell me about your life as a queen?"

Esperanza sat on the mattress and patted the spot next to her. Isabel sat down.

"Isabel, I will tell you all about how I used to live. About parties and private school and beautiful dresses. I will even show you the beautiful doll my papa bought me, if you will teach me how to pin diapers, how to wash, and . . ."

Isabel interrupted her. "But that is so easy!"

Esperanza stood up and carefully practiced with the broom. "It is not easy for me."

LAS ALMENDRAS

ALMONDS

"My neck hurts," said Mama as she massaged the back of her head with her hand. "It is not my neck. It's my arms that are sore," said Hortensia.

"It is the same for everyone," said Josefina. "When you first start in the sheds, the body refuses to bend, but in time, you will get used to the work."

Everyone had come home that night tired and with various aches and pains. They gathered in one cabin for dinner, so it was crowded and noisy. Josefina warmed a pot of beans and Hortensia made fresh *tortillas*. Juan and Alfonso talked about the fields while Miguel and Isabel played with the babies, making them squeal with laughter. Mama cooked *arroz*, and Esperanza was surprised that Mama knew just how to brown it first in oil with onions and peppers. Esperanza chopped *tomates* for a salad and hoped no one would mention

the sweeping. She was glad this day was over. Her bruises had been to her pride.

Isabel took a fresh *tortilla*, sprinkled it with salt, rolled it up like a cigar and waved it at Miguel. "How come you and Tío Alfonso won't let me go behind the cabin with you?"

"Shhh," he said. "It's a surprise."

"Why are you so full of secrets?" asked Esperanza.

But neither Alfonso nor Miguel answered. They simply smiled while they prepared their plates.

They ate dinner, but before they could slice a cantaloupe for dessert, Alfonso and Miguel disappeared, with instructions not to follow them.

"What are they doing?" demanded Isabel.

Hortensia shrugged as if she knew nothing.

Miguel came back just before sunset. "Señora and Esperanza, we have something to show you."

Esperanza looked at Mama. It was obvious Mama was as confused as she was. They all followed Miguel to where Alfonso was waiting.

Behind the cabin was an old oval washtub

with one end cut off. It had been set on its side, forming a little shrine around a plastic statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Someone had built a grotto of rocks around the base of the tub. Around it, a large plot of earth had been fenced in by sticks and rope and planted with thorny stems, each with only a few branches.

Isabel gasped. "It's beautiful. Is that our statue?"

Josefina nodded. "But the roses come from far away."

Esperanza searched Miguel's face, her eyes hopeful. "Papa's?"

"Yes, these are your papa's roses," said Miguel, smiling at her.

Alfonso had dug circles of earth around each plant, *casitas*, little houses, that made moats for deep watering. Just like he had done in Aguascalientes.

"But how?" Esperanza remembered the rose garden as a blackened graveyard.

"After the fire, my father and I dug down to the roots. Many were still healthy. We carried the

cuttings from Aguascalientes. And that's why we had to keep them wet. We think they will grow. In time, we will see how many bloom."

Esperanza bent closer to look at the stems rooted in mulch. They were leafless and stubby, but lovingly planted. She remembered the night before the fire, when she had last seen the roses and had wanted to ask Hortensia to make rosehip tea. But she'd never had the chance. Now, if they bloomed she could drink the memories of the roses that had known Papa. She looked at Miguel, blinking back tears. "Which one is yours?"

Miguel pointed to one.

"Which one is mine?"

He smiled and pointed to the one that was closest to the cabin wall and already had a makeshift trellis propped against it. "So you can climb," he said.

Mama walked up and down, carefully touching each cutting. She took Alfonso's hands in her own and kissed him on each cheek. Then she went to Miguel and did the same. "*Muchas gracias*," she said.

Mama looked at Esperanza. "Didn't I tell you that Papa's heart would find us wherever we go?"

The next morning, Hortensia put a piece of fabric over the window and sent Alfonso next door with Miguel, Juan, and the babies. Hortensia, Mama, and Josefina brought in the big washtubs and filled them half full with cold water. Then they heated pots of water on the stove and warmed the baths. Esperanza was excited at the idea of getting into a tub. All they had done since they arrived was wash their faces and arms with cold water in the sink. She hadn't had a real bath since she left Aguascalientes. But it was Saturday and tonight was the *jamaica*, so the entire camp was getting cleaned up. Baths were being taken, shirts ironed, and hair washed and crimped.

Hortensia had given Esperanza her baths since she was a baby and they had an established routine. Esperanza stood near the tub with her arms outstretched while Hortensia undressed her. Then

she got in the tub and tried not to wiggle while Hortensia washed her. She'd tilt her head back, keeping her eyes closed, while Hortensia rinsed her hair. Finally, she stood up and nodded, which was Hortensia's signal to wrap the towel around her.

Esperanza went to one of the washtubs, put her hands out to her sides, and waited. Josefina looked at Hortensia and raised her eyebrows.

Isabel said, "Esperanza, what are you doing?"

Mama walked over to Esperanza and said softly, "I've been thinking that you are old enough to bathe yourself, don't you think?"

Esperanza quickly dropped her arms and remembered Marta's taunting voice saying, "No one will be waiting on you here."

"Yes, Mama," she said, and for the second time in two days, she felt her face burning as everyone stared at her.

Hortensia came over, put her arm around Esperanza and said, "We are accustomed to doing things a certain way, aren't we, Esperanza? But I guess I am not too old to change. We will help

each other. I will unbutton the buttons you cannot reach and you will help Isabel, yes? Josefina, we need more hot water in these tubs. *Andale, hurry.*"

As Hortensia helped her with her blouse, Esperanza whispered, "Thank you."

Isabel and Esperanza went first, bathing in the tubs, then bending their heads over to wash their hair. Mama and Josefina poured cups of water over them to rinse off the soap. The women took turns going back and forth to the stove for hot water. Esperanza liked being with all of them in the tiny room, talking and laughing, and rinsing each other's hair. Josefina and Hortensia talked about all the gossip in the camp. Mama sat in her slip and combed out Isabel's tangles. The women took their turns and when Hortensia needed hot water, Esperanza rushed to get it for her before anyone else could.

Clean and dressed, with still-wet hair, Esperanza and Isabel went outside to the wooden table under the trees. Josefina had given them a burlap bag of almonds that she wanted shelled.

Isabel bent over and brushed her hair in the dry air. "Are you coming to the *jamaica* tonight?" she asked.

Esperanza didn't answer at first. She had not left the cabin since she had made a fool of herself yesterday. "I don't know. Maybe."

"My mama said it is best to get it over with and face people. And that if they tease you, you should just laugh," said Isabel.

"I know," said Esperanza, fluffing her own hair that was already almost dry. She dumped the nuts onto the table and picked up an almond still in its flattened pod. The soft and fuzzy outside hull looked like two hands pressed together, protecting something inside. Esperanza popped it open and found the almond shell. She snapped the edge of the shell and pried it apart, then pulled the meat from its defenses and ate it. "I suppose Marta will be there tonight?"

"Probably," said Isabel. "And all of her friends, too."

"How does she know English?"

"She was born here and her mother, too. They

are citizens," said Isabel, helping shell the almonds. "Her father came from Sonora during the revolution. They have never even been to Mexico. There's lots of kids who live in our camp who have never been to Mexico. My father doesn't like it when Marta comes to our *jamaicas*, though, because she is always talking to people about striking. There was almost a strike during almonds but not enough people agreed to stop working. My mama says that if there had been a strike, we would have had to go into the orchard and shake the trees ourselves for these almonds."

"Then we're lucky. What is your mother making with these nuts?"

"*Flan de almendra*," said Isabel. "She will sell slices at the *jamaica* tonight."

Esperanza's mouth watered. Almond flan was one of her favorite sweets. "Then I've made my decision. I will come."

The platform was lit up with big lights. Men from the camp, in starched and pressed shirts and

cowboy hats, sat in chairs tuning their guitars and violins. Long rows of tables were covered in bright tablecloths where women sold *tamales*, desserts, and the specialty, *Agua de Jamaica*, Hibiscus Flower Water punch made with the red Mexican *jamaica* bloom. There was bingo on wooden tables and a long line of chairs circling the dance area for those who wanted to watch. That's where Mama and Hortensia sat, talking to other women. Esperanza stayed close to them, watching the growing crowd.

"Where do all the people come from?" she asked. The other night, she had heard Juan say that about two hundred people lived in their camp, but there were many more than that now.

"These *fiestas* are popular. People come from other camps," said Josefina. "And from Bakersfield, too."

When the music started, everyone crowded around the platform, clapping and singing. People started dancing in the area around the stage. Children ran everywhere, chasing and hiding. Men held young boys on their shoulders, and women

swaddled their infants, all of them swaying to the sounds of the small band.

After a while, Esperanza left Mama and the others and wandered through the noisy crowd, thinking how strange it was that she could be in the middle of so many people and still feel so alone. She saw a group of girls who seemed about her age but they were huddled together. More than anything, she wished Marisol were here.

Isabel found her and pulled on her hand. "Esperanza, come and see."

Esperanza let herself be led through the crowd. Someone from town had brought a litter of kittens. A group of girls were crowded next to the cardboard box, cooing and cradling them. It was clear that Isabel desperately wanted one.

Esperanza whispered to her, "I will go ask your mother." She wove back through the crowd to find Josefina, and when she agreed, Esperanza practically ran back to the spot to tell Isabel. But when she got there, a bigger crowd had gathered and something else was going on.

Marta and some of her friends stood in the bed

of a truck that was parked nearby, each of them holding up one of the tiny kittens.

"This is what we are!" she yelled. "Small, meek animals. And that is how they treat us because we don't speak up. If we don't ask for what is rightfully ours, we will never get it! Is this how we want to live?" She held the kitten by the back of the neck, waving it high in the air. It hung limp in front of the crowd. "With no decent home and at the mercy of those bigger than us, richer than us?"

Isabel trembled, her eyes in a panic. "Will she drop it?"

A man called out, "Maybe all that cat wants to do is feed its family. Maybe it doesn't care what all the other cats are doing."

"Señor, does it not bother you that some of your *compadres* live better than others?" yelled one of Marta's friends. "We are going to strike in two weeks. At the peak of the cotton. For higher wages and better housing!"

"We don't pick cotton on this farm!" yelled another man from their camp.

"What does it matter?" yelled Marta. "If we all

stop working, if all the Mexicans are *juntos*, together . . ." She made a fist and held it in the air, ". . . then maybe it will help us all!"

He yelled back, "That is a chance we cannot take. We just want to work. That's why we came here. Get out of our camp!"

A cheer rose up around him. People started shoving and Esperanza grabbed Isabel's hand and pulled her aside.

A young man jumped into the truck and started the engine. Marta and the others tossed the kittens into the field. Then they pulled some of their supporters into the back of the truck with them and raised their arms, chanting, "¡Huelga! ¡Huelga! Strike! Strike!"

"Why is she so angry?" asked Esperanza, as she walked back to the cabin a few hours later with Josefina, Isabel, and the babies, leaving the others to stay later. Isabel carried the soft, mewling orange kitten in her arms.

"She and her mother move around to find

work, sometimes all over the state," said Josefina. "They work wherever there is something to be harvested. Those camps, the migrant camps, are the worst."

"Like when we were in El Centro?" said Isabel.

"Worse," said Josefina. "Our camp is a company camp and people who work here don't leave. Some live here for many years. That is why we came to this country. To work. To take care of our families. To become citizens. We are lucky because our camp is better than most. There are many of us who don't want to get involved in the strike because we can't afford to lose our jobs, and we are accustomed to how things are in our little community."

"They want to strike for better houses?" asked Esperanza.

"That and more money for those who pick cotton," said Josefina. "They only get seven cents a pound for picking cotton. They want ten cents a pound. It seems like such a small price to pay, but in the past, the growers said no. And now, more

people are coming to the valley to look for work, especially from places like Oklahoma, where there is little work, little rain, and little hope. If the Mexicans strike, the big farms will simply hire others. Then what would we do?"

Esperanza wondered what would happen if Mama did not have a job. Would they have to go back to Mexico?

Josefina put the babies to bed. Then she kissed Isabel and Esperanza on their foreheads and sent them next door.

Isabel and Esperanza lay in their beds listening to the music and the bursts of laughter in the background. The kitten, after drinking a bowl of milk, curled up in Isabel's arms. Esperanza tried to imagine conditions that were more shabby than this room that was covered in newspaper to keep out the wind. Could things possibly be worse?

Sleepily, Isabel said, "Did you have parties in Mexico?"

"Yes," whispered Esperanza, keeping her promise to tell Isabel about her old life. "Big parties. Once, my mama hosted a party for one

hundred people. The table was set with lace tablecloths, crystal and china, and silver candelabras. The servants cooked for a week . . .” Esperanza continued, reliving the extravagant moments, but was relieved when she knew that Isabel was asleep. For some reason, after hearing about Marta and her family, she felt guilty talking about the richness of her life in Aguascalientes.

Esperanza was still awake when Mama came to bed later. A stream of light from the other room allowed just enough brightness for her to watch Mama unraid her hair and brush it out.

“Did you like the party?” Mama whispered.

“I miss my friends,” said Esperanza.

“I know it is hard. Do you know what I miss? I miss my dresses.”

“Mama!” Esperanza said, laughing that Mama would admit such a thing to her.

“Shhh,” said Mama. “You will wake Isabel.”

“I miss my dresses, too, but we don’t seem to need them here.”

“That is true. Esperanza, do you know that I am so proud of you? For all that you are learning.”

Esperanza snuggled close to her.

Mama continued. “Tomorrow we are going to a church in Bakersfield. After church, we are going to *una tienda*, called Cholita’s. Josefina said she sells every type of sweet roll. And Mexican candies.”

They were quiet, listening to Isabel’s breathing.

“In church, what will you pray for, Esperanza?” asked Mama.

Esperanza smiled. She and Mama had done this many times before they went to sleep.

“I will light a candle for Papa’s memory,” she said. “I will pray that Miguel will find a job at the railroad. I will ask Our Lady to help me take care of Lupe and Pepe while Isabel is at school. And I will pray for some white coconut candy with a red stripe on the top.”

Mama laughed softly.

“But most of all, I will pray that Abuelita will get well. And that she will be able to get her money from Tío Luis’s bank. And that she will come soon.”

Mama stroked Esperanza's hair.

"What will you pray for, Mama?"

"I will pray for all the things you said, Esperanza, and one more thing besides."

"What's that?"

Mama hugged her. "I will pray for you, Esperanza. That you can be strong. No matter what happens."