

that the color from the blanket would slowly seep into Mama's cheeks.

She put the stone on the night table and kissed Mama good-bye.

"Don't worry. I will take care of everything. I will be *la patrona* for the family now."

LOS AGUACATES

AVOCADOS

Esperanza's breath made smoky vapors in front of her face as she waited for the truck to take her to tie grapevines. She shifted from foot to foot and clapped her gloved hands together and wondered what was so new about the New Year. It already seemed old, with the same routines. She worked during the week. She helped Hortensia cook dinner in the late afternoons. In the evenings she helped Josefina with the babies and Isabel with her homework. She went to see Mama on Saturdays and Sundays.

She huddled in the field near a smudge pot to keep warm and mentally counted the money she would need to bring Abuelita here. Every other week, with the small amounts she saved, she bought a money order from the market and put it in her valise. She figured that if she kept working until peaches, she would have enough for

Abuelita's travel. Her problem then would be how to reach Abuelita.

The men went down the rows first, pruning the thick grapevines and leaving a few long branches or "canes" on each trunk. She followed, along with others, and tied the canes on the taut wire that was stretched post to post. She ached from the cold and had to keep moving all day long to stay warm.

That night, as she soaked her hands in warm water, she realized that she no longer recognized them as her own. Cut and scarred, swollen and stiff, they looked like the hands of a very old man.

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Esperanza, as she watched Hortensia cut a ripe avocado in half.

"Of course," said Hortensia, removing the big pit and leaving a hole in the heart of the fruit. She scooped out the pulp, mashed it on a plate, and added some glycerine. "You have seen me make this for your mother many times. We are lucky to have the avocados this time of year. Some friends of Josefina brought them from Los Angeles."

Hortensia rubbed the avocado mixture into Esperanza's hands. "You must keep it on for twenty minutes so your hands will soak up the oils."

Esperanza looked at her hands covered in the greasy green lotion and remembered when Mama used to sit like this, after a long day of gardening or after horseback rides with Papa through the dry mesquite grasslands. When she was a little girl, she had laughed at Mama's hands covered in what looked like *guacamole*. But she had loved for her to rinse them because afterward, Esperanza would take Mama's hands and put the palms on her own face so she could feel their suppleness and breathe in the fresh smell.

Esperanza was surprised at the simple things she missed about Mama. She missed her way of walking into a room, graceful and regal. She missed watching her hands crocheting, her fingers moving nimbly. And most of all, she longed for the sound of Mama's strong and assured laughter.

She put her hands under the faucet, rinsed off the avocado, and patted them dry. They felt

better, but still looked red and weathered. She took another avocado, cut it in half, swung the knife into the pit and pulled it from the flesh. She repeated Hortensia's recipe and as she sat for the second time with her hands smothered, she realized that it wouldn't matter how much avocado and glycerine she put on them, they would never look like the hands of a wealthy woman from El Rancho de las Rosas. Because they were the hands of a poor *campesina*.

It was at the end of grape-tying when the doctor stopped Esperanza and Miguel in the hallway of the hospital before they could reach Mama's room.

"I asked the nurses to alert me when they saw you coming. I'm sorry to tell you that your mother has pneumonia."

"How can that be?" said Esperanza, her hands beginning to shake as she stared at the doctor. "I thought she was getting better."

"This disease, Valley Fever, makes the body

tired and susceptible to other infections. We are treating her with medications. She is weak. I know this is hard for you, but we'd like to ask that she have no visitors for at least a month, maybe longer. We can't take a chance that she will contract another infection from any outside germs that might be brought into the hospital."

"Can I see her, just for a few moments?"

The doctor hesitated, then nodded, and walked away.

Esperanza hurried to Mama's bed and Miguel followed. Esperanza couldn't imagine not seeing her for so many weeks.

"Mama," said Esperanza.

Mama slowly opened her eyes and gave Esperanza the smallest smile. She was thin and frail. Her hair was strewn and bedraggled. And her face was so white that it seemed to fade into the sheets, as if she would sink into the bed and disappear forever. Mama looked like a ghost of herself.

"The doctor said I can't come to visit for a while."

Mama nodded, her eyelids slowly falling back down, as if it had been a burden to keep them up.

Esperanza felt Miguel's hand on her shoulder. "Anza, we should go," he said.

But Esperanza would not move. She wanted to do something for Mama to help make her better. She noticed the brush and hairpins on the bedside table.

She carefully rolled Mama on her side and gathered all of her hair together. She brushed it and plaited it into a long braid. Wrapping it around Mama's head, she gently pinned it into place. Then she helped Mama lie on her back, her hair now framing her face against the white linens, like a braided halo. Like she used to wear it, in Aguascalientes.

Esperanza bent down close to Mama's ear. "Don't worry, Mama. Remember, I will take care of everything. I am working and I can pay the bills. I love you."

Mama said softly, "I love you, too." And as Esperanza turned to leave, she heard Mama whisper, "No matter what happens."

"You need to get away from the camp, Esperanza," said Hortensia as she handed her the grocery list and asked her to go to the market with Miguel. "It is the first of spring and it's beautiful outside."

"I thought you and Josefina always looked forward to marketing on Saturday," said Esperanza.

"We do, but today we are helping Melina and Irene make *enchiladas*. Could you go for us?"

Esperanza knew they were trying to keep her occupied. Mama had been in the hospital for three months and Esperanza hadn't been allowed to visit for several weeks. Since then, Esperanza hadn't been acting like herself. She went through the motions of living. She was polite enough, answering everyone's questions with the simplest answers, but she was tormented by Mama's absence. Papa, Abuelita, Mama. Who would be next?

She crawled into bed as early as possible each night, curled her body into a tight ball, and didn't move until morning.

She knew Josefina and Hortensia were worried about her. She nodded to Hortensia, took the list, and went to find Miguel.

"Be sure you tell Miguel to go to Mr. Yakota's market!" Hortensia called after her.

Hortensia had been right about the weather. The fog and grayness had gone. The valley air was crisp and clean from recent rains. They drove along fields of tall, feathery asparagus plants that she would soon be packing. Citrus groves displayed their leftover fruit like decorations on Christmas trees. And even though it was still cool, there was an expectancy that Esperanza could smell, a rich loamy odor that promised spring.

"Miguel, why must we always drive so far to shop at the Japanese market when there are other stores closer to Arvin?"

"Some of the other market owners aren't as kind to Mexicans as Mr. Yakota," said Miguel. "He stocks many of the things we need and he treats us like people."

"What do you mean?"

"Esperanza, people here think that all Mexicans are alike. They think that we are all uneducated, dirty, poor, and unskilled. It does not occur to them that many have been trained in professions in Mexico."

Esperanza looked down at her clothes. She wore a shirtwaist dress that used to be Mama's and before that, someone else's. Over the dress was a man's sweater with several buttons missing, which was also too big. She leaned up and looked in the mirror. Her face was tanned from the weeks in the fields, and she had taken to wearing her hair in a long braid like Hortensia's because Mama had been right — it was more practical that way. "Miguel, how could anyone look at me and think I was uneducated?"

He smiled at her joke. "The fact remains, Esperanza, that you, for instance, have a better education than most people's children in this country. But no one is likely to recognize that or take the time to learn it. Americans see us as one big, brown group who are good for only manual labor. At this market, no one stares at us or treats us like

outsiders or calls us 'dirty greasers.' My father says that Mr. Yakota is a very smart businessman. He is getting rich on other people's bad manners."

Miguel's explanation was familiar. Esperanza's contact with Americans outside the camp had been limited to the doctor and the nurses at the hospital, but she had heard stories from others about how they were treated. There were special sections at the movie theater for Negroes and Mexicans. In town, parents did not want their children going to the same schools with Mexicans. Living away from town in the company camp had its advantages, she decided. The children all went to school together: white, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino. It didn't seem to matter to anyone because they were all poor. Sometimes she felt as if she lived in a cocoon, protected from much of the indignation.

Miguel pulled the truck into the parking lot at the market. "I'll meet you. I'm going to talk about railroad jobs with those men gathered on the corner."

Esperanza went inside. Mr. Yakota was from

Tokyo and the store had all sorts of Japanese cooking ingredients like seaweed and ginger, and a fresh fish counter with fish that still had their heads. But there were Mexican products, too, like *masa de harina* for *tamales*, *chiles* for *salsa*, and big bags of dried beans for *frijoles*. There was even cow's intestine in the meat case for *menudo*. And other specialties, like *chorizo* and pigs' feet. Esperanza's favorite part of the store was the ceiling that was crowded with a peculiar combination of Japanese paper lanterns and *piñatas* shaped like stars and donkeys.

There was a small tissue donkey that Esperanza had not noticed before. It was like the one Mama had bought her a few years ago. Esperanza had thought it so cute that she had refused to break it, even though it had been filled with sweets. Instead, she had hung it in her room above her bed.

A clerk walked by and impulsively, she pointed to the miniature *piñata*. "*Por favor*," she said. "Please."

She bought the other things she needed, including another money order. That was one more

benefit of Mr. Yakota's market: She could buy money orders there.

She was waiting in the truck when Miguel came back.

"Another money order? What do you do with them all?" asked Miguel.

"I save them in my valise. They are for such small amounts but together, they'll be enough to someday bring Abuelita here."

"And the *piñata*? It's not anyone's birthday."

"I bought it for Mama. I'm going to ask the nurses to put it near her bed, so she'll know that I'm thinking of her. We can stop by the hospital on the way back. Will you cut a hole in the top for me so I can put the caramels inside? The nurses can eat them."

He took out his pocket knife and made an opening in the *piñata*. While Miguel drove, Esperanza began feeding in the caramels.

Not far down the main road, they approached an almond grove, the trees flush with gray-green leaves and white blossoms. Esperanza noticed a girl and a woman walking hand in hand, each

with a grocery bag in her other arm. She couldn't help but think what a nice scene it made, with the two women framed against so many spring blossoms.

Esperanza recognized one of them. "I think that is Marta."

Miguel stopped the truck, then slowly backed up. "We should give her a ride."

Esperanza reluctantly nodded, remembering the last time they'd given her a lift, but she opened the door.

"Esperanza and Miguel, *que buena suerte*. What good luck," said Marta. "This is my mother, Ada. Thanks for the ride."

Marta's mother had the same short, curly black hair but hers was sprinkled with gray.

Miguel got out and put all the groceries in the truck bed so they could sit in the front.

Ada said, "I heard about your mother and I've been praying for her."

Esperanza was surprised and touched. "Thank you, I'm grateful."

"Are you coming to our camp?" asked Miguel.

"No," said Marta. "As you probably know, I'm not welcome there. We're going a mile or so up the road to the strikers' farm. We were tossed out of the migrant workers' camp and were told either to go back to work or leave. So we left. We aren't going to work under those disgusting conditions and for those pitiful wages."

Ada was quiet and nodded when Marta talked about the strike. Esperanza felt a twinge of envy when she noticed that Marta never let go of her mother's hand.

"There are hundreds of us together at this farm, but thousands around the county and more people join our cause each day. You are new here, but in time, you'll understand what we're trying to change. Turn left," she said, pointing to a dirt road rutted with tire marks.

Miguel turned down the path bordered in cotton fields. Finally, they reached several acres of land surrounded by chain-link fencing and barbed wire, its single opening guarded by several men wearing armbands.

"Aquí. Right here," said Ada.

"What are the guards for?" asked Esperanza.

"They're for protection," said Marta. "The farmer who owns the land is sympathetic to us but a lot of people don't like the strikers causing trouble. We've had threats. The men take turns at the entrance."

Miguel pulled the truck to the side of the road and stopped.

There were only ten wooden toilet stalls for hundreds of people and Esperanza could smell the effects from the truck. Some people lived in tents but others had only burlap bags stretched between poles. Some were living in their cars or old trucks. Mattresses were on the ground, where people and dogs rested. A goat was tied to a tree. There was a long pipe that lay on top of the ground and a line of water spigots sticking up from it. Near each spigot were pots and pans and campfire rings, the makings of outdoor kitchens. In an irrigation ditch, women were washing clothes, and children were bathing at the same time. Clotheslines ran everywhere. It was a great jumble of humanity and confusion.

Esperanza could not stop looking. She felt hypnotized by the squalor but Marta and her mother didn't seem the least bit embarrassed.

"Home, sweet home," said Marta.

They all climbed out of the truck, but before Marta and Ada could retrieve their groceries, a *campesino* family coming from the opposite direction approached them. The children were dirty and skinny and the mother held an infant, who was crying.

"Do you have food so that I can feed my family?" said the father. "We were thrown out of our camp because I was striking. My family has not eaten in two days. There are too many people coming into the valley each day who will work for pennies. Yesterday I worked all day and made less than fifty cents and I cannot buy food for one day with that. I was hoping that here, with others who have been through the same . . ."

"You are welcome here," said Ada.

Esperanza reached into the truck bed and opened the large bag of beans. "Hand me your hat, Señor."

The man handed over his large sun hat and she filled it with the dried beans, then gave it back to him.

"*Gracias, gracias*," he said.

Esperanza looked at the two older children, their eyes watery and vacant. She lifted the *piñata* and held it out to them. They said nothing but hurried toward her, took it, and ran back to their family.

Marta looked at her. "Are you sure you aren't already on our side?"

Esperanza shook her head. "They were hungry, that's all. Even if I believed in what you are doing, I must take care of my mother."

Ada put her hand on Esperanza's arm and smiled. "We all do what we have to do. Your mother would be proud of you."

Miguel handed them their bags, and they walked toward the farmer's field. Before they reached the gate, Marta suddenly turned and said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but the strikers are more organized than they appear. In a few weeks, during asparagus, things are going to happen all

over the county. We're going to shut down everything, the fields, the sheds, the railroad. If you have not joined us by then, be very careful." Then she hurried to catch up with her mother.

As Miguel and Esperanza rode back to Arvin, neither of them said a word for many miles. Marta's threat and the guilt of having a job weighed heavily on Esperanza's mind. "Do you think they are right?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Miguel. "What the man said is true. I have heard that there will be ten times the people here looking for jobs in the next few months, from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and other places, too. And that they are poor people like us, who need to feed their families, too. If so many come and are willing to work for pennies, what will happen to us? But until then, with so many joining the strikes, I might be able to get a job at the railroad."

Esperanza's mind wrestled with Miguel's words. For him, the strike was an opportunity to work at the job he loved and to make it in this

country, but for her, it was a threat to her finances, Abuelita's arrival, and Mama's recuperation. Then there was the matter of her own safety. She thought of Mama and Abuelita, and she knew there was only one thing for her to do.

Esperanza studied her hands a few nights later as she walked toward the cabin and hoped Hortensia had a few more avocados. It was later than usual. She had been weeding asparagus in a far field so she had been on the last truck. When she arrived at the cabin, everyone was crowded around the small table. There were fresh *tortillas* on a plate and Hortensia was stirring a pan of *machaca*, scrambled eggs with shredded meat, onions, and peppers. It was Miguel's favorite but they usually ate it for breakfast.

"What is the occasion?" asked Esperanza.

"I got a job in the machine shop at the railroad."

"Oh, Miguel! That's good news!"

"So many railroad workers have joined the strikers. I know it might be temporary but if I do a good job, maybe they will keep me."

"That is right," said Alfonso. "You do good work. They will see it. They will keep you."

Esperanza sat down and listened to Miguel tell the others about the job, but she wasn't hearing his words. She was seeing his eyes, dancing like Papa's when he used to talk about the land. She watched Miguel's animated face, thinking that at last, his dream was coming true.

LOS ESPÁRRAGOS

A S P A R A G U S

Marta was right. The strikers were more organized than ever. They handed out flyers in front of every store. They painted the sides of old barns with their slogans and held big meetings at the farm. For those who continued to work, there were still jobs, but Esperanza could hear the tightness and worry in her neighbors' voices. She worried, too, about what would happen if she didn't have a job.

Asparagus would be a long season, sometimes up to ten weeks. But it had to be picked before the high temperatures touched the valley in June. The strikers knew that if they could slow down the workers, it would affect the growers, so when the tender stalks were ready, the strikers were ready, too.

Esperanza got on the flatbed truck with Hortensia and Josefina for the first day of packing. The company had sent a man with a gun to ride

on the truck with them, for protection they said, but the gun frightened Esperanza.

When they arrived at the sheds, a crowd of women erupted into shouting and booing. They carried signs that said, "¡Huelga! Strike!" Among them were Marta and her friends. And they were yelling.

"Help us feed our children!"

"We must all join together if we are all to eat!"

"Save your countrymen from starving!"

When Esperanza saw their menacing faces, she wanted to run back to the safety of the camp, do laundry, clean diapers, anything but this. She wanted to tell them that her mother was sick. That she had to pay the bills. She wanted to explain to them about Abuelita and how she had to find a way to get some money to her so she could travel. Then maybe they'd understand why she needed her job. She wanted to tell them that she did not want anyone's children to starve. But she knew it would not matter. The strikers only listened if you agreed with them.

She reached for Hortensia's hand and pulled

her close. Josefina marched toward the shed, looking straight ahead. Hortensia and Esperanza stayed close behind, never letting go of each other.

One of the women from their camp called out, "We make less money packing asparagus than you do when you pick cotton. Leave us alone. Our children are hungry, too."

When the guard wasn't looking, one of the strikers picked up a rock and threw it at the woman, barely missing her head, and the workers all hurried toward the shed.

The strikers stayed near the road, but Esperanza's heart was still beating wildly as she and the women took their places to pack the asparagus. All day, as she sorted and bundled the delicate spears, she heard their chanting and their threats.

That night at dinner Alfonso and Juan told how they had the same problems in the fields. Strikers waited for them and they had to cross picket lines to get to work. Once in the fields, they were safe, protected by guards the company had sent. But the lugs of asparagus that were sent

back to the sheds had to be taken across the picket lines and the strikers often slipped surprises beneath the harvest.

The strike continued for days. One afternoon, as Josefina took a handful of asparagus from a crate, a large rat jumped out at her. A few days later, Esperanza heard a terrible scream from one of the women and several writhing gopher snakes slithered out of a crate. They found razor blades and shards of glass in the field bins and the women, usually efficient and quick to unpack the asparagus, slowed down and were hesitant to grab the vegetables from their boxes. When several of them heard a rattling from beneath a pile of stalks, the supervisors took the entire crate out to the yard, dumped it, and found an angry rattlesnake inside.

"It was a miracle that no one was bitten by that snake," said Hortensia that night at dinner. They were all gathered in one cabin, eating *caldo de albóndigas*, meatball soup.

"Did you see it?" asked Isabel.

"Yes," said Esperanza. "We all saw it. It was

frightening but the supervisor cut its head off with the hoe."

Isabel cringed.

"Can't they do anything to the strikers?" asked Hortensia.

"It's a free country," said Miguel. "Besides, the strikers are careful. As long as they stay near the road and the guards don't actually see them do anything aggressive, then no, there's not much anyone can do. It's the same at the railroad. I pass the picket lines every day, and listen to the yelling and the insults."

"It's the yelling all day long that bothers me," said Hortensia.

"Remember, do not respond to them," said Alfonso. "Things will get better."

"Papa," said Miguel. "Things will get worse. Have you seen the cars and trucks coming through the pass in the mountains? Every day, more and more people. Some of them say they will pick cotton for five and six cents a pound, and will pick produce for less. People cannot survive on such low wages."

"Where will it end?" said Josefina. "Everyone will starve if people work for less and less money."

"That is the strikers' point," said Esperanza.

No one said anything. Forks clinked on the plates. Pepe, who was sitting in Esperanza's lap, dropped a meatball on the floor.

"Are we going to starve?" asked Isabel.

"No, *mija*," said Josefina. "How could anyone starve here with so much food around us?"

Esperanza had grown so accustomed to the strikers' chanting while she packed asparagus that the moment it stopped, she looked up from her work as if something was wrong.

"Hortensia, do you hear that?"

"What?"

"The silence. There is no more yelling."

The other women on the line looked at each other. They couldn't see the street from where they stood so they moved to the other end of the shed, cautiously looking out to where the strikers usually stood.

In the distance, a caravan of gray buses and police cars headed fast toward the shed, dust flying in their wakes.

"Immigration!" said Josefina. "It is a sweep."

The picket signs lay on the ground, discarded, and like a mass of marbles that had already been hit, the strikers scattered into the fields and toward the boxcars on the tracks, anywhere they could hide. The buses and cars screeched to a stop and immigration officials and police carrying clubs jumped out and ran after them.

The women in the packing shed huddled together, protected by the company's guard.

"What about us?" said Esperanza, her eyes riveted on the guards who caught the strikers and shoved them back toward the buses. They would surely come into the shed next with so many Mexicans working here. Her fingers desperately clenched Hortensia's arm. "I cannot leave Mama."

Hortensia heard the panic in her voice. "No, no, Esperanza. They are not here for us. The growers need the workers. That is why the company guards us."

Several immigration officials accompanied by police began searching the platform, turning over boxes and dumping out field bins. Hortensia was right. They ignored the workers in their stained aprons, their hands still holding the green asparagus. Finding no strikers on the dock, they jumped back down and hurried to where a crowd was being loaded onto the buses.

"¡Americana! ¡Americana!" yelled one woman and she began to unfold some papers. One of the officials took the papers from her hand and tore them into pieces. "Get on the bus," he ordered.

"What will they do with them?" asked Esperanza.

"They will take them to Los Angeles, and put them on the train to El Paso, Texas, and then to Mexico," said Josefina.

"But some of them are citizens," said Esperanza.

"It doesn't matter. They are causing problems for the government. They are talking about forming a farm workers' union and the government and the growers don't like that."

"What about their families? How will they know?"

"Word gets out. It is sad. They leave the buses parked at the station until late at night with those they captured on board. Families don't want to be separated from their loved ones and usually go with them. That is the idea. They call it a voluntary deportation. But it is not much of a choice."

Two immigration officials positioned themselves in front of the shed. The others left on the buses. Esperanza and the other women watched the despondent faces in the windows disappear.

Slowly, the women reassembled on the line and began to pack again. It had all lasted only a few minutes.

"What happens now?" asked Esperanza.

"La Migra will keep their eyes open for any strikers that might be back," said Josefina, nodding toward the two men stationed nearby. "And we go back to work and feel thankful it is not us on that bus."

Esperanza took a deep breath and went back to her spot. She was relieved, but still imagined the

anguish of the strikers. Troubled thoughts stayed in her mind. Something seemed very wrong about sending people away from their own "free country" because they had spoken their minds.

She noticed she needed more bands to wrap around the asparagus bundles and walked to the back of the dock to get them. Within a maze of tall crates, she searched for the thick rubber bands. Some of the boxes had been tossed over by the immigration officials and as she bent down to set one straight, she sucked in her breath, startled by what was in front of her.

Marta was huddled in a corner, holding her finger to her lips, her eyes begging for help. She whispered, "Please, Esperanza. Don't tell. I can't get caught. I must take care of my mother."

Esperanza stood frozen for a moment, remembering Marta's meanness that first day in the truck. If she helped her and someone found out, Esperanza would be on the next bus herself. She couldn't risk it and started to say no. But then she thought about Marta and her mother holding hands, and couldn't imagine them being separated from each other. And

besides, they were both citizens. They had every right to be here.

She turned around and headed back to where the others were working. No one paid any attention to her. They were all busy talking about the sweep. She picked up a bundle of asparagus, several burlap sacks from a stack, and a dirty apron that someone had left on a hook. She quietly wandered back to Marta's hiding place. "*La Migra* is still out front," she said in a hushed voice. "They will probably leave in an hour when the shed closes." She handed the apron and the asparagus to Marta. "When you leave, put on the apron and carry the asparagus so you'll look like a worker, just in case anyone stops you."

"*Gracias*," whispered Marta. "I'm sorry I misjudged you."

"Shhh," said Esperanza, repositioning the crates and draping the burlap sacks across their tops so Marta couldn't be seen.

"Esperanza," called Josefina, "where are you? We need the rubber bands."

Esperanza stuck her head around the corner and

saw Josefina with her hands on her hips, waiting. "Coming," she called. She grabbed a bundle of bands and went back to work as if nothing had happened.

Esperanza lay in bed that night and listened to the others in the front room talk about the sweeps and the deportations.

"They went to every major grower and put hundreds of strikers on the buses," said Juan.

"Some say they did it to create more jobs for those coming from the east," said Josefina. "We are lucky the company needs us right now. If they didn't, we could be next."

"We have been loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to us!" said Alfonso.

"I'm just glad it's over," said Hortensia.

"It is not over," said Miguel. "In time, they will be back, especially if they have families here. They will reorganize and they will be stronger. There will come a time when we will have to decide all over again whether to join them or not."

Esperanza tried to go to sleep but the day spun in her mind. She was glad she had kept working and thankful that her camp had voted not to strike, but she knew that under different circumstances, it could have been her on that bus. And then what would Mama have done? Her thoughts jumped back and forth. Some of those people did not deserve their fate today. How was it that the United States could send people to Mexico who had never even lived there?

She couldn't stop thinking about Marta. It didn't matter if Esperanza agreed with her cause or not. No one should have to be separated from her family. Had Marta made her way back to the strikers' farm without getting caught? Had she found her mother?

For some reason, Esperanza had to know.

The next morning, she begged Miguel to drive by the farm.

The field was still surrounded by the chain-link fence, but no one was protecting the entrance

this time. All the evidence of people she had seen before was there, but not one person was to be seen. Laundry waved on the clothesline. Plates with rice and beans sat on crates and swarmed with busy flies. Shoes were lined up in front of tents, as if waiting for someone to step into them. The breeze picked up loose newspapers and floated them across the field. It was quiet and desolate, except for the goat still tied to the tree, bleating for freedom.

"Immigration has been here, too," said Miguel. He got out of the truck, walked over to the tree, and untied the goat.

Esperanza looked out over the field that used to be crawling with people who thought they could change things — who were trying to get the attention of the growers and the government to make conditions better for themselves and for her, too.

More than anything, Esperanza hoped that Marta and her mother were together, but now there would be no way for her to find out. Maybe Marta's aunt would hear, eventually.

Something colorful caught her eye. Dangling from a tree branch were the remnants of the little donkey *piñata* that she had given the children, its tissue streamers fluttering in the breeze. It had been beaten with a stick, its insides torn out.