

Chapter 12

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 rattle-snake 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.

"*iAmericana! iAmericana!*" 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.