

LOS HIGOS

F I G S

The wind blew hard that night and the house moaned and whistled. Instead of dreaming of birthday songs, Esperanza's sleep was filled with nightmares. An enormous bear was chasing her, getting closer and closer and finally folding her in a tight embrace. Its fur caught in her mouth, making it hard to breathe. Someone tried to pull the bear away but couldn't. The bear squeezed harder until it was smothering Esperanza. Then when she thought she would suffocate, the bear grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her head wagged back and forth.

Her eyes opened, then closed again. She realized she was dreaming and for an instant, she felt relieved. But the shaking began again, harder this time.

Someone was calling her.

"Esperanza!"

She opened her eyes.

"Esperanza! Wake up!" screamed Mama. "The house is on fire!"

Smoke drifted into the room.

"Mama, what's happening?"

"Get up, Esperanza! We must get Abuelita!"

Esperanza heard Alfonso's deep voice yelling from somewhere downstairs.

"Señora Ortega! Esperanza!"

"Here! We are here!" called Mama, grabbing a damp rag from the washbowl and handing it to Esperanza to put over her mouth and nose. Esperanza swung around in a circle looking for something, anything, to save. She grabbed the doll. Then she and Mama hurried down the hall toward Abuelita's room, but it was empty.

"Alfonso!" screamed Mama. "Abuelita is not here!"

"We will find her. You must come now. The stairs are beginning to burn. Hurry!"

Esperanza held the towel over her face and looked down the stairs. Curtains flamed up the walls. The house was enveloped in a fog that

thickened toward the ceiling. Mama and Esperanza crouched down the stairs where Alfonso was waiting to lead them out through the kitchen.

In the courtyard, the wooden gates were open. Near the stables, the *vaqueros* were releasing the horses from the corrals. Servants scurried everywhere. Where were they going?

"Where's Abuelita? Abuelita!" cried Mama.

Esperanza felt dizzy. Nothing seemed real. Was she still dreaming? Was this her own imagination gone wild?

Miguel grabbed her. "Where's your mother and Abuelita?"

Esperanza whimpered and looked toward Mama. He left her, stopped at Mama, then ran toward the house.

The wind caught the sparks from the house and carried them to the stables. Esperanza stood in the middle of it all, watching the outline of her home silhouetted in flames against the night sky. Someone wrapped a blanket around her. Was she cold? She did not know.

Miguel ran out of the burning house carrying

Abuelita in his arms. He laid her down and Hortensia screamed. The back of his shirt was on fire. Alfonso tackled him, rolling him over and over on the ground until the fire was out. Miguel stood up and slowly took off the blackened shirt. He wasn't badly burned.

Mama cradled Abuelita in her arms.

"Mama," said Esperanza, "Is she . . . ?"

"No, she is alive, but weak and her ankle . . . I don't think she can walk," said Mama.

Esperanza knelt down.

"Abuelita, where were you?"

Her grandmother held up the cloth bag with her crocheting and after some minutes of coughing, whispered, "We must have something to do while we wait."

The fire's anger could not be contained. It spread to the grapes. The flames ran along the deliberate rows of the vines, like long curved fingers reaching for the horizon, lighting the night sky.

Esperanza stood as if in a trance and watched El Rancho de las Rosas burn.

Mama, Abuelita, and Esperanza slept in the servants' cabins. They really didn't sleep much, but they didn't cry either. They were numb, as if encased in a thick skin that nothing could penetrate. And there was no point in talking about how it happened. They all knew that the uncles had arranged the fire.

At dawn, still in her nightgown, Esperanza went out among the rubble. Avoiding the smoldering piles, she picked through the black wood, hoping to find something to salvage. She sat on an adobe block near what used to be the front door, and looked over at Papa's rose garden. Flowerless stems were covered in soot. Dazed and hugging herself, Esperanza surveyed the surviving victims: the twisted forms of wrought-iron chairs, unharmed cast-iron skillets, and the mortars and pestles from the kitchen that were made from lava rock and refused to burn. Then she saw the remains of the trunk that used to sit at the foot of

her bed, the metal straps still intact. She stood up and hurried toward it, hoping for *un milagro*, a miracle. She looked closely, but all that remained were black cinders.

There was nothing left inside, for someday.

Esperanza saw her uncles approaching on horseback and ran to tell the others. Mama waited on the steps of the cabin with her arms crossed, looking like a fierce statue. Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel stood nearby.

"Ramona," said Tío Marco, remaining on his horse. "Another sadness in so short a time. We are deeply sorry."

"I have come to give you another chance," said Tío Luis. "If you reconsider my proposal, I will build a bigger, more beautiful house and I will replant everything. Of course, if you prefer, you can live here with the servants, as long as another tragedy does not happen to their homes as well. There is no main house or fields where they can

work, so you see that many people's lives and jobs depend upon you. And I am sure you want the best for Esperanza, do you not?"

Mama did not speak for several moments. She looked around at the servants who had gathered. Now, her face did not seem so fierce and her eyes were damp. Esperanza wondered where the servants would go when Mama told Tío Luis no.

Mama looked at Esperanza with eyes that said, "forgive me." Then she dropped her head and stared at the ground. "I will consider your proposal," said Mama.

Tío Luis smiled. "I am delighted! I have no doubt that you will make the right decision. I will be back in a few days for your answer."

"Mama, no!" said Esperanza. She turned to Tío Luis and said, "I hate you!"

Tío Luis ignored her. "And Ramona, if Esperanza is to be my daughter, she must have better manners. In fact, today I will look into boarding schools where they can teach her to act

like a lady." Then he turned his horse, dug his spurs into the animal, and rode away.

Esperanza began to weep. She grabbed Mama's arm and said, "Why? Why did you tell him that?"

But Mama was not listening to her. She was looking up, as if consulting the angels.

Finally, she said, "Alfonso. Hortensia. We must talk with Abuelita. Esperanza and Miguel, come inside, you are old enough to hear the discussions."

"But Mama . . ."

Mama took Esperanza by the shoulders and faced her. "Mija, my daughter, do not worry. I know what I am doing."

They all crowded into Hortensia and Alfonso's tiny bedroom where Abuelita was resting, her swollen ankle propped on pillows. Esperanza sat on Abuelita's bed while Mama and the others stood.

"Alfonso, what are my options?" said Mama.

"If you don't intend to marry him, Señora, you cannot stay here. He would burn down the ser-

vants' quarters next. There will be no income because there are no grapes. You would have to depend on the charity of others, and they would be afraid to help you. You could move to some other part of Mexico, but in poverty. Luis's influence is far-reaching."

The room was quiet. Mama looked out the window and tapped her fingers on the wooden sill.

Hortensia went to Mama's side and touched her arm. "You should know that we have decided to go to the United States. Alfonso's brother has been writing to us about the big farm in California where he works now. He can arrange jobs and a cabin for us, too. We are sending the letter tomorrow."

Mama turned and looked at Abuelita. With no words spoken, Abuelita nodded.

"What if Esperanza and I went with you? To the United States," said Mama.

"Mama, we cannot leave Abuelita!"

Abuelita put her hand on Esperanza's. "I would come later, when I am stronger."

"But my friends and my school. We can't just leave! And Papa, what would he think?"

"What should we do, Esperanza? Do you think Papa would want me to marry Tío Luis and let him send you to a school in another city?"

Esperanza felt confused. Her uncle said he would replace everything as it was. But she could not imagine Mama being married to anyone but Papa. She looked at Mama's face and saw sadness, worry, and pain. Mama would do anything for her. But if Mama married Tío Luis, she knew that everything would not really be as it was. Tío Luis would send her away and she and Mama wouldn't even be together.

"No," she whispered.

"You are sure that you want to go with us?" said Hortensia.

"I am sure," said Mama, her voice stronger. "But crossing the border is more difficult these days. You have your papers but ours were lost in the fire and they forbid anyone to enter without a visa."

"I will arrange it," said Abuelita. "My sisters,

in the convent. They can discreetly get you duplicates."

"No one could know about this, Señora," said Alfonso. "We would all have to keep it a secret if you come. This will be a great insult to Luis. If he finds out, he will prevent you from leaving the territory."

A tiny smile appeared on Mama's tired face. "Yes, it would be a great insult to him, wouldn't it?"

"In California there is only fieldwork," said Miguel.

"I am stronger than you think," said Mama.

"We will help each other." Hortensia put her arm around Mama.

Abuelita squeezed Esperanza's hand. "Do not be afraid to start over. When I was your age, I left Spain with my mother, father, and sisters. A Mexican official had offered my father a job here in Mexico. So we came. We had to take several ships and the journey lasted months. When we arrived, nothing was as promised. There were many hard times. But life was also exciting. And we had each other. Esperanza, do you remember the story

of the phoenix, the lovely young bird that is reborn from its own ashes?"

Esperanza nodded. Abuelita had read it to her many times from a book of myths.

"We are like the phoenix," said Abuelita. "Rising again, with a new life ahead of us."

When she realized she was crying, Esperanza wiped her eyes with her shawl. Yes, she thought. They could have a home in California. A beautiful home. Alfonso and Hortensia and Miguel could take care of them and they'd be rid of the uncles. And Abuelita would join them, as soon as she was well. Still sniffing and caught up in their affection and strength, Esperanza said, "And . . . and I could work, too."

They all looked at her.

And for the first time since Papa died, everyone laughed.

The next day Abuelita's sisters came for her in a wagon. The nuns, dressed in their black and

white habits, gently lifted Abuelita into the back. They pulled a blanket under her chin and Esperanza went to her and held her hand. She remembered the night that Alfonso and Miguel brought Papa home in the wagon. How long ago was that? She knew that it had only been a few weeks, but it seemed like many lifetimes ago.

Esperanza tenderly hugged and kissed Abuelita.

"*Mi nieta*, we won't be able to communicate. The mail is unpredictable and I'm sure your uncles will be watching my correspondence. But I will come, of that you can be certain. While you are waiting, finish this for me." She handed Esperanza the bundle of crocheting. "Look at the zigzag of the blanket. Mountains and valleys. Right now you are in the bottom of the valley and your problems loom big around you. But soon, you will be at the top of a mountain again. After you have lived many mountains and valleys, we will be together."

Through her tears Esperanza said, "Please get well. Please come to us."

"I promise. And you promise to take care of Mama for me."

Next it was Mama's turn. Esperanza could not watch. She buried her head in Hortensia's shoulder until she heard the wagon pulling away. Then she went to Mama and put her arms around her. They watched the wagon disappear down the path until it was a speck in the distance, until even the dust was gone.

That's when Esperanza noticed the old trunk with the leather straps that the nuns had left.

"What is in the trunk?" she asked.

"Our papers to travel. And clothes from the poor box at the convent."

"The poor box?"

"People donate them," said Mama, "for others who cannot afford to buy their own."

"Mama, at a time like this, must we worry about some poor family who needs clothes?"

"Esperanza," said Mama. "We have little money and Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel are no longer our servants. We are indebted to them for

our finances and our future. And that trunk of clothes for the poor? Esperanza, it is for us."

Señor Rodríguez was the only person they could trust. He came after dark for secret meetings, always carrying a basket of figs for the grieving family to disguise his real reason for visiting. Esperanza fell asleep each night on a blanket on the floor, listening to the adults' hushed voices and mysterious plans. And smelling the plentiful piles of white figs that she knew would never be eaten.

At the end of the week Esperanza was sitting on the small step to Hortensia and Alfonso's cabin when Tío Luis rode up. He remained on his horse and sent Alfonso to bring Mama.

In a few moments, Mama walked toward them, drying her hands on her apron. She held her head high and looked beautiful, even dressed in the old clothes from the poor box.

"Luis, I have considered your proposal and in

the interest of the servants and Esperanza, I will marry you, in due time. But you must begin re-planting and rebuilding immediately, as the servants need their jobs."

Esperanza was quiet and stared at the dirt, hiding the smirk on her face.

Tío Luis could not contain his grin. He sat up straighter. "I knew you would come to your senses, Ramona. I will announce the engagement at once."

Mama nodded, almost bowing. "One more thing," she said. "We will need a wagon to visit Abuelita. She is at the convent in La Purisima. I must see to her every few weeks."

"I will send one over this afternoon," said Tío Luis, smiling. "A new one. And those clothes, Ramona! They are not fitting for a woman of your stature, and Esperanza looks like a waif. I will send a dressmaker next week with new fabrics."

In the nicest way possible, Esperanza looked up and said, "Thank you, Tío Luis. I am happy that you will be taking care of us."

"Yes, of course," he said, not even glancing at her.

Esperanza smiled at him anyway, because she knew she would never spend a night in the same house with him and he would never be her step-father. She almost wished she would be able to see his face when he realized that they had escaped. He wouldn't be grinning like a proud rooster, then.

The night before the dressmaker was scheduled to come, Mama woke Esperanza in the middle of the night, and they left with only what they could carry. Esperanza held a valise filled with clothes, a small package of *tamales*, and her doll from Papa. She and Mama and Hortensia were wrapped in dark shawls to blend in with the night.

They could not take a chance of walking on the roads, so Miguel and Alfonso led them through the grape rows, weaving across Papa's land toward the Rodríguez ranch. There was

enough moonlight so that they could see the outlines of the twisted and charred trunks, the burnt-out vines rolling in parallel lines toward the mountains. It looked as if someone had taken a giant comb, dipped it in black paint, and gently swirled it across a huge canvas.

They reached the fig orchard that separated Papa's land from Señor Rodríguez's. Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel walked ahead. But Esperanza held back, and pulled on Mama's hand to keep her there for a moment. They turned to look at what used to be El Rancho de las Rosas in the distance.

Sadness and anger tangled in Esperanza's stomach as she thought of all that she was leaving: her friends and her school, her life as it once was, Abuelita. And Papa. She felt as though she was leaving him, too.

As if reading her mind, Mama said, "Papa's heart will find us wherever we go." Then Mama took a determined breath and headed toward the sprawling trees.

Esperanza followed but hesitated every few

steps, looking back. She hated leaving, but how could she stay?

With each stride, Papa's land became smaller and smaller. She hurried after Mama, knowing that she might never come back to her home again, and her heart filled with venom for Tío Luis. When she turned around one last time, she could see nothing behind her but a trail of splattered figs she had resentfully smashed beneath her feet.