

LAS GUAYABAS

G U A V A S

They emerged from the fig orchard and continued through a pear grove. When they came into a clearing, they saw Señor Rodríguez waiting with a lantern by the barn doors. They hurried inside. Pigeons fluttered in the rafters. Their wagon was waiting, surrounded by crates of green guavas.

"Did Marisol come?" asked Esperanza, her eyes searching the barn.

"I could tell no one about your departure," said Señor Rodríguez. "When the time is right, I will tell her that you looked for her and said good-bye. Now we must hurry. You need the protection of darkness."

Alfonso, Miguel, and Señor Rodríguez had built another floor in the wagon, higher than the real one and open at the back, with barely enough room between for Mama, Esperanza, and Hortensia to lie down. Hortensia lined it with blankets.

Esperanza had known about the plan, but now she hesitated when she saw the small space.

"Please, can I sit with Alfonso and Miguel?"

"Mija, it is necessary," said Mama.

"There are too many bandits," said Alfonso. "It is not safe for women to be on the roads at night. Besides, your uncles have many spies. Remember? That is why we must take the wagon to Zacatecas and catch the train there, instead of from Aguascalientes."

Luis has bragged about the engagement to everyone," said Hortensia. "Think how angry he will be when he discovers you have gone. We cannot take the chance of you being seen."

Mama and Hortensia said grateful good-byes to Señor Rodríguez, then slid between the floors of the wagon.

Esperanza reluctantly scooted on her back between them. "When can we get out?"

"Every few hours, we will stop and stretch," said Mama.

Esperanza stared at the wood planks just a few inches from her face. She could hear Alfonso,

Miguel, and Señor Rodríguez dumping crate after crate of guavas onto the floor above them, the almost-ripe fruit rolling and tumbling as it was piled on. The guavas smelled fresh and sweet, like pears and oranges all in one. Then she felt the guavas roll in around her feet as Alfonso and Miguel covered the opening. If anyone saw the wagon on the road, it would look like a farmer and his son, taking a load of fruit to market.

"How are you?" Alfonso asked, sounding far away.

"We are fine," called Hortensia.

The wagon pulled out of the barn and the guavas shifted, then settled. It was dark inside and it felt like someone was rocking them in a bumpy cradle, sometimes side to side and sometimes back and forth. Esperanza began to feel frightened. She knew that with a few kicks of her feet she could get out, but still she felt trapped. Suddenly, she thought she couldn't breathe.

"Mama!" she said, gasping for air.

"Right here, Esperanza. Everything is fine."

"Do you remember," said Hortensia, taking her hand, "when you were only five years old and we hid from the thieves? You were so brave for such a little girl. Your parents and Alfonso and the other servants had gone to town. It was just you and me and Miguel in the house. We were in your bedroom and I was pinning the hem of your beautiful blue silk dress. Do you remember that dress? You wanted it pinned higher so your new shoes would show."

Esperanza's eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness and to the pitch and roll of the wagon. "Miguel ran into the house because he had seen bandits," said Esperanza, exhaling. She remembered standing on a chair with her arms outstretched like a bird ready for flight while Hortensia fitted the sides of the dress. And she remembered the new shoes, shiny and black.

"Yes," said Hortensia. "I looked out the window to see six men, their faces covered with handkerchiefs, and they all held rifles. They were renegades who thought they had permission to

steal from the rich and give to the poor. But they didn't always give to the poor and they sometimes killed innocent people."

"We hid under the bed," said Esperanza. "And we pulled down the bedcovers so they couldn't see us." She remembered staring straight up at the bed boards. Much like the boards enclosing them in the wagon now. She took another long breath.

"What we didn't know was that Miguel had a big field mouse in his pocket," said Hortensia.

"Yes. He was going to scare me with it," said Esperanza.

The wagon creaked and swayed. They could hear Alfonso and Miguel murmuring above them. The persistent smell of the guavas filled their noses. Esperanza relaxed a little.

Hortensia continued. "The men came into the house and we could hear them opening cupboards and stealing the silver. Then we heard them climb the stairs. Two men came into the bedroom and we saw their big boots through a crack in the bedcover. But we didn't say a word."

"Until a pin poked me and I moved my leg and made a noise."

"I was so frightened they would find us," said Hortensia.

"But Miguel pushed the mouse out from under the bed and it ran around the room. The men were startled but started laughing. And then one of them said, 'It is just a *ratón*. We've got plenty. Let's go,' and they left," said Esperanza.

Mama said, "They took almost all of the silver, but Papa and I only cared that all of you were safe. Do you remember how Papa said that Miguel was very smart and brave and asked him what he wanted for protecting you, his most prized possession?"

Esperanza remembered. "Miguel wanted to go on a train ride."

Hortensia started to hum softly and Mama held Esperanza's hand.

Miguel's reward, that day-long train ride to Zacatecas, seemed like yesterday. Miguel had been eight and Esperanza five. She wore the beautiful

blue silk dress and could still see Miguel standing at the station, wearing a bow tie and practically shining, as if Hortensia had cleaned and starched his entire body. Even his hair was slicked down smooth and his eyes gleamed with excitement. He was mesmerized by the locomotive, watching it slowly pull in. Esperanza had been excited, too.

When the train arrived, all sputtering and blustery, porters had hurried to escort them, showing them the way to their car. Papa took her hand and Miguel's and they boarded, waving good-bye to Alfonso and Hortensia. The compartment had seats of soft leather, and she and Miguel had bounced happily upon them. Later, they ate in the dining car at little tables covered in white linens and set with silver and crystal. When the waiter came and asked if there was anything he could bring them, Esperanza said, "Yes, please bring lunch, now." The men and women dressed in their hats and fancy clothes smiled and chuckled at what must have looked like a doting father and two privileged children. When they arrived in Zacatecas, a woman wrapped in a colorful

rebozo, a blanket shawl, boarded the train selling mangoes on a stick. The mangoes were peeled and carved to look like exotic flowers. Papa bought one for each of them. On the return ride, she and Miguel, with their noses pressed against the window, and their hands still sticky from the fresh mango, had waved to every person they saw.

The wagon jostled them now as it hit a hole in the road. Esperanza wished she could get to Zacatecas as fast as she had that day on the train instead of traveling on back roads, hidden in a slow wagon. But this time, she was buried beneath a mountain of guavas and could not wave to anyone. There was no comfort. And there was no Papa.

Esperanza stood at the station in Zacatecas, tugging at the second-hand dress. It didn't fit properly and was the most awful yellow. And even though they had been out of the wagon for some hours, she still smelled like guavas.

It had taken them two days to arrive in

Zacatecas, but finally, that morning, they left the wagon hidden in a thicket of shrubs and trees and walked into town. After the discomfort of the wagon, she was looking forward to the train.

The locomotive arrived pulling a line of cars and hissing and spewing steam. But they did not board the fancy car with the compartments and leather seats or the dining car with the white linens. Instead, Alfonso led them to a car with rows of wooden benches, like church pews facing each other, already crowded with peasants. Trash littered the floor and it reeked of rotting fruit and urine. A man with a small goat on his lap grinned at Esperanza, revealing no teeth. Three barefoot children, two boys and a girl, crowded near their mother. Their legs were chalky with dust, their clothes were in tatters, and their hair was grimy. An old, frail beggar woman pushed by them to the back of the car, clutching a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her hand was outstretched for alms.

Esperanza had never been so close to so many peasants before. When she went to school, all of her friends were like her. When she went to

town, she was escorted and hurried around any beggars. And the peasants always kept their distance. That was simply the way it was. She couldn't help but wonder if they would steal her things.

"Mama," said Esperanza, stopping in the doorway. "We cannot travel in this car. It . . . it is not clean. And the people do not look trustworthy."

Esperanza saw Miguel frown as he edged around her to sit down.

Mama took her hand and guided her to an empty bench where Esperanza slid over next to the window. "Papa would never have had us sit here and Abuelita wouldn't approve," she said, stubbornly.

"Mija, it is all we can afford," said Mama. "We must make do. It is not easy for me either. But remember, we are going to a place that will be better than living with Tío Luis, and at least we will be together."

The train pulled out and settled into a steady motion. Hortensia and Mama took out their crocheting. Mama was using a small hook and white

cotton thread to make *carpetas*, lace doilies, to put under a lamp or a vase. She held up her work to Esperanza and smiled. "Would you like to learn?"

Esperanza shook her head. Why did Mama bother crocheting lace? They had no vases or *lámparas* to put on top of them. Esperanza leaned her head against the window. She knew she did not belong here. She was Esperanza Ortega from El Rancho de las Rosas. She crossed her arms tight and stared out the window.

For hours, Esperanza watched the undulating land pass in front of her. Everything seemed to remind her of what she had left behind: the *nopales* reminded her of Abuelita who loved to eat the prickly pear cactus sliced and soaked in vinegar and oil; the dogs from small villages that barked and ran after the train reminded her of Marisol, whose dog, Capitán, chased after trains the same way. And every time Esperanza saw a shrine decorated with crosses, flowers, and miniature statues of saints next to the rails, she couldn't help but wonder if it had been someone's father who

had died on the tracks and if somewhere there was another girl who missed him, too.

Esperanza opened her valise to check on the doll, lifting it out and straightening her clothes. The barefoot peasant girl ran over.

"*Moma*," she said, and reached up to touch the doll. Esperanza quickly jerked it away and put it back in the valise, covering it with the old clothes.

"*¡Moma! ¡Moma!*" said the little girl, running back to her mother. And then she began to cry.

Mama and Hortensia both stopped their needles and stared at Esperanza.

Mama looked across at the girl's mother. "I am sorry for my daughter's bad manners."

Esperanza looked at Mama in surprise. Why was she apologizing to these people? She and Mama shouldn't even be sitting in this car.

Hortensia looked from one to the other and excused herself. "I think I will find Alfonso and Miguel and see if they bought *tortillas* at the station."

Mama looked at Esperanza. "I don't think it would have hurt to let her hold it for a few moments."

"Mama, she is poor and dirty . . ." said Esperanza.

But Mama interrupted. "When you scorn these people, you scorn Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso. And you embarrass me and yourself. As difficult as it is to accept, our lives are different now."

The child kept crying. Her face was so dirty that her tears washed clean streaks down her cheeks. Esperanza suddenly felt ashamed and the color rose in her face, but she still pushed the valise farther under the seat with her feet and turned her body away from Mama.

Esperanza tried not to look back at the little girl but she couldn't help it. She wished she could tell the little girl's mother that she had always given her old toys to the orphanage, but that this doll was special. Besides, the child would have soiled it with her hands.

Mama reached in her bag and pulled out a ball of blanket yarn. "Esperanza, hold out your hands

for me." She raised her eyebrows and nodded toward the girl. Esperanza knew exactly what Mama intended to do. They had done it many times before.

Mama wrapped the yarn around Esperanza's outstretched hands about fifty times until they were almost covered. Then she slipped a string of yarn through the middle of the loops and tied a tight knot before Esperanza removed her hands. A few inches below the knot, Mama tied another snug knot around all the yarn, forming a head. Then she cut the bottom loops, separated the strands into sections, and braided each section into what looked like arms and legs. She held the yarn doll up, offering it to the little girl. She ran to Mama, smiling, took the doll, and ran back to her own mother's side.

The mother whispered into the girl's ear.

Shyly, she said, "Gracias. Thank you."

"*De nada*. You're welcome," said Mama.

The woman and the children got off the train at the next stop. Esperanza watched the little girl stop in front of their window, wave to Mama, and