

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 week-end."

"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 *in burrito de frijoles* for lunch and wrapped the soft *torquilla* 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

A L M O N D S

"A y, 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 tomatoes for a salad and hoped no one would mention