

## Chapter 8

# 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

the sweeping. She was glad this day was over. Her bruises had been to her pride.

Isabel took a fresh *tortilla*, sprinkled it with salt, rolled it up like a cigar and waved it at Miguel. "How come you and Tío Alfonso won't let me go behind the cabin with you?"

"Shhh," he said. "It's a surprise."

"Why are you so full of secrets?" asked Esperanza.

But neither Alfonso nor Miguel answered. They simply smiled while they prepared their plates.

They ate dinner, but before they could slice a cantaloupe for dessert, Alfonso and Miguel disappeared, with instructions not to follow them.

"What are they doing?" demanded Isabel.

Hortensia shrugged as if she knew nothing.

Miguel came back just before sunset. "Señora and Esperanza, we have something to show you."

Esperanza looked at Mama. It was obvious Mama was as confused as she was. They all followed Miguel to where Alfonso was waiting.

Behind the cabin was an old oval washtub

with one end cut off. It had been set on its side, forming a little shrine around a plastic statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Someone had built a grotto of rocks around the base of the tub. Around it, a large plot of earth had been fenced in by sticks and rope and planted with thorny stems, each with only a few branches.

Isabel gasped. "It's beautiful. Is that our statue?"

Josefina nodded. "But the roses come from far away."

Esperanza searched Miguel's face, her eyes hopeful. "Papa's?"

"Yes, these are your papa's roses," said Miguel, smiling at her.

Alfonso had dug circles of earth around each plant, *casitas*, little houses, that made moats for deep watering. Just like he had done in Aguascalientes.

"But how?" Esperanza remembered the rose garden as a blackened graveyard.

"After the fire, my father and I dug down to the roots. Many were still healthy. We carried the

Chp 9  
Chp 10  
Chp 11  
Chp 12  
Chp 13  
Chp 14  
Notes

cuttings from Aguascalientes. And that's why we had to keep them wet. We think they will grow. In time, we will see how many bloom."

Esperanza bent closer to look at the stems rooted in mulch. They were leafless and stubby, but lovingly planted. She remembered the night before the fire, when she had last seen the roses and had wanted to ask Hortensia to make rosehip tea. But she'd never had the chance. Now, if they bloomed she could drink the memories of the roses that had known Papa. She looked at Miguel, blinking back tears. "Which one is yours?"

Miguel pointed to one.

"Which one is mine?"

He smiled and pointed to the one that was closest to the cabin wall and already had a makeshift trellis propped against it. "So you can climb," he said.

Mama walked up and down, carefully touching each cutting. She took Alfonso's hands in her own and kissed him on each cheek. Then she went to Miguel and did the same. "*Muchas gracias*," she said.

Mama looked at Esperanza. "Didn't I tell you that Papa's heart would find us wherever we go?"

The next morning, Hortensia put a piece of fabric over the window and sent Alfonso next door with Miguel, Juan, and the babies. Hortensia, Mama, and Josefina brought in the big washtubs and filled them half full with cold water. Then they heated pots of water on the stove and warmed the baths. Esperanza was excited at the idea of getting into a tub. All they had done since they arrived was wash their faces and arms with cold water in the sink. She hadn't had a real bath since she left Aguascalientes. But it was Saturday and tonight was the *jamaica*, so the entire camp was getting cleaned up. Baths were being taken, shirts ironed, and hair washed and crimped.

Hortensia had given Esperanza her baths since she was a baby and they had an established routine. Esperanza stood near the tub with her arms outstretched while Hortensia undressed her. Then

she got in the tub and tried not to wiggle while Hortensia washed her. She'd tilt her head back, keeping her eyes closed, while Hortensia rinsed her hair. Finally, she stood up and nodded, which was Hortensia's signal to wrap the towel around her.

Esperanza went to one of the washtubs, put her hands out to her sides, and waited. Josefina looked at Hortensia and raised her eyebrows.

Isabel said, "Esperanza, what are you doing?" Mama walked over to Esperanza and said softly, "I've been thinking that you are old enough to bathe yourself, don't you think?"

Esperanza quickly dropped her arms and remembered Marta's taunting voice saying, "No one will be waiting on you here."

"Yes, Mama," she said, and for the second time in two days, she felt her face burning as everyone stared at her.

Hortensia came over, put her arm around Esperanza and said, "We are accustomed to doing things a certain way, aren't we, Esperanza? But I guess I am not too old to change. We will help

each other. I will unbutton the buttons you cannot reach and you will help Isabel, yes? Josefina, we need more hot water in these tubs. *Andale, hurry.*"

As Hortensia helped her with her blouse, Esperanza whispered, "Thank you."

Isabel and Esperanza went first, bathing in the tubs, then bending their heads over to wash their hair. Mama and Josefina poured cups of water over them to rinse off the soap. The women took turns going back and forth to the stove for hot water. Esperanza liked being with all of them in the tiny room, talking and laughing, and rinsing each other's hair. Josefina and Hortensia talked about all the gossip in the camp. Mama sat in her slip and combed out Isabel's tangles. The women took their turns and when Hortensia needed hot water, Esperanza rushed to get it for her before anyone else could.

Clean and dressed, with still-wet hair, Esperanza and Isabel went outside to the wooden table under the trees. Josefina had given them a burlap bag of almonds that she wanted shelled.

Chp 9  
Chp 10  
Chp 11  
Chp 12  
Chp 13  
Chp 14  
NOTE

Isabel bent over and brushed her hair in the dry air. "Are you coming to the *jamaica* tonight?" she asked.

Esperanza didn't answer at first. She had not left the cabin since she had made a fool of herself yesterday. "I don't know. Maybe."

"My mama said it is best to get it over with and face people. And that if they tease you, you should just laugh," said Isabel.

"I know," said Esperanza, fluffing her own hair that was already almost dry. She dumped the nuts onto the table and picked up an almond still in its flattened pod. The soft and fuzzy outside hull looked like two hands pressed together, protecting something inside. Esperanza popped it open and found the almond shell. She snapped the edge of the shell and pried it apart, then pulled the meat from its defenses and ate it. "I suppose Marta will be there tonight?"

"Probably," said Isabel. "And all of her friends, too."

"How does she know English?"

"She was born here and her mother, too. They

are citizens," said Isabel, helping shell the almonds. "Her father came from Sonora during the revolution. They have never even been to Mexico. There's lots of kids who live in our camp who have never been to Mexico. My father doesn't like it when Marta comes to our *jamaicas*, though, because she is always talking to people about striking. There was almost a strike during almonds but not enough people agreed to stop working. My mama says that if there had been a strike, we would have had to go into the orchard and shake the trees ourselves for these almonds."

"Then we're lucky. What is your mother making with these nuts?"

"Flan de almendra," said Isabel. "She will sell slices at the *jamaica* tonight."

Esperanza's mouth watered. Almond flan was one of her favorite sweets. "Then I've made my decision. I will come."

The platform was lit up with big lights. Men from the camp, in starched and pressed shirts and

cowboy hats, sat in chairs tuning their guitars and violins. Long rows of tables were covered in bright tablecloths where women sold *tamales*, desserts, and the specialty, *Agua de Jamaica*, Hibiscus Flower Water punch made with the red Mexican *jamaica* bloom. There was bingo on wooden tables and a long line of chairs circling the dance area for those who wanted to watch. That's where Mama and Hortensia sat, talking to other women. Esperanza stayed close to them, watching the growing crowd.

"Where do all the people come from?" she asked. The other night, she had heard Juan say that about two hundred people lived in their camp, but there were many more than that now.

"These *fiestas* are popular. People come from other camps," said Josefina. "And from Bakersfield, too."

When the music started, everyone crowded around the platform, clapping and singing. People started dancing in the area around the stage. Children ran everywhere, chasing and hiding. Men held young boys on their shoulders, and women

swaddled their infants, all of them swaying to the sounds of the small band.

After a while, Esperanza left Mama and the others and wandered through the noisy crowd, thinking how strange it was that she could be in the middle of so many people and still feel so alone. She saw a group of girls who seemed about her age but they were huddled together. More than anything, she wished Marisol were here.

Isabel found her and pulled on her hand. "Esperanza, come and see."

Esperanza let herself be led through the crowd. Someone from town had brought a litter of kittens. A group of girls were crowded next to the cardboard box, cooing and cradling them. It was clear that Isabel desperately wanted one.

Esperanza whispered to her, "I will go ask your mother." She wove back through the crowd to find Josefina, and when she agreed, Esperanza practically ran back to the spot to tell Isabel. But when she got there, a bigger crowd had gathered and something else was going on.

Marta and some of her friends stood in the bed

of a truck that was parked nearby, each of them holding up one of the tiny kittens.

"This is what we are!" she yelled. "Small, meek animals. And that is how they treat us because we don't speak up. If we don't ask for what is right—fully ours, we will never get it! Is this how we want to live?" She held the kitten by the back of the neck, waving it high in the air. It hung limp in front of the crowd. "With no decent home and at the mercy of those bigger than us, richer than us?"

Isabel trembled, her eyes in a panic. "Will she drop it?"

A man called out, "Maybe all that cat wants to do is feed its family. Maybe it doesn't care what all the other cats are doing."

"Señor, does it not bother you that some of your *compadres* live better than others?" yelled one of Marta's friends. "We are going to strike in two weeks. At the peak of the cotton. For higher wages and better housing!"

"We don't pick cotton on this farm!" yelled another man from their camp.

"What does it matter?" yelled Marta. "If we all

stop working, if all the Mexicans are *juntos*, together . . ." She made a fist and held it in the air, " . . . then maybe it will help us all!"

He yelled back, "That is a chance we cannot take. We just want to work. That's why we came here. Get out of our camp!"

A cheer rose up around him. People started shoving and Esperanza grabbed Isabel's hand and pulled her aside.

A young man jumped into the truck and started the engine. Marta and the others tossed the kittens into the field. Then they pulled some of their supporters into the back of the truck with them and raised their arms, chanting, "¡Huelga! ¡Huelga! Strike! Strike!"

"Why is she so angry?" asked Esperanza, as she walked back to the cabin a few hours later with Josefina, Isabel, and the babies, leaving the others to stay later. Isabel carried the soft, mewling orange kitten in her arms.

"She and her mother move around to find

work, sometimes all over the state," said Josefina. "They work wherever there is something to be harvested. Those camps, the migrant camps, are the worst."

"Like when we were in El Centro?" said Isabel.

"Worse," said Josefina. "Our camp is a company camp and people who work here don't leave. Some live here for many years. That is why we came to this country. To work. To take care of our families. To become citizens. We are lucky because our camp is better than most. There are many of us who don't want to get involved in the strike because we can't afford to lose our jobs, and we are accustomed to how things are in our little community."

"They want to strike for better houses?" asked Esperanza.

"That and more money for those who pick cotton," said Josefina. "They only get seven cents a pound for picking cotton. They want ten cents a pound. It seems like such a small price to pay, but in the past, the growers said no. And now, more

people are coming to the valley to look for work, especially from places like Oklahoma, where there is little work, little rain, and little hope. If the Mexicans strike, the big farms will simply hire others. Then what would we do?"

Esperanza wondered what would happen if Mama did not have a job. Would they have to go back to Mexico?

Josefina put the babies to bed. Then she kissed Isabel and Esperanza on their foreheads and sent them next door.

Isabel and Esperanza lay in their beds listening to the music and the bursts of laughter in the back-ground. The kitten, after drinking a bowl of milk, curled up in Isabel's arms. Esperanza tried to imagine conditions that were more shabby than this room that was covered in newspaper to keep out the wind. Could things possibly be worse?

Sleepily, Isabel said, "Did you have parties in Mexico?"

"Yes," whispered Esperanza, keeping her promise to tell Isabel about her old life. "Big parties. Once, my mama hosted a party for one



hundred people. The table was set with lace tablecloths, crystal and china, and silver candelabras. The servants cooked for a week . . . .” Esperanza continued, reliving the extravagant moments, but was relieved when she knew that Isabel was asleep. For some reason, after hearing about Marta and her family, she felt guilty talking about the richness of her life in Aguascalientes.

Esperanza was still awake when Mama came to bed later. A stream of light from the other room allowed just enough brightness for her to watch Mama unbraid her hair and brush it out.

“Did you like the party?” Mama whispered.

“I miss my friends,” said Esperanza.

“I know it is hard. Do you know what I miss? I miss my dresses.”

“Mama!” Esperanza said, laughing that Mama would admit such a thing to her.

“Shhh,” said Mama. “You will wake Isabel.”

“I miss my dresses, too, but we don’t seem to need them here.”

“That is true. Esperanza, do you know that I am so proud of you? For all that you are learning.”

Esperanza snuggled close to her.

Mama continued. “Tomorrow we are going to a church in Bakersfield. After church, we are going to *una tienda*, called Cholita’s. Josefina said she sells every type of sweet roll. And Mexican candies.”

They were quiet, listening to Isabel’s breathing.

“In church, what will you pray for, Esperanza?” asked Mama.

Esperanza smiled. She and Mama had done this many times before they went to sleep.

“I will light a candle for Papa’s memory,” she said. “I will pray that Miguel will find a job at the railroad. I will ask Our Lady to help me take care of Lupe and Pepe while Isabel is at school. And I will pray for some white coconut candy with a red stripe on the top.”

Mama laughed softly.

“But most of all, I will pray that Abuelita will get well. And that she will be able to get her money from Tío Luis’s bank. And that she will come soon.”

Mama stroked Esperanza's hair.

"What will you pray for, Mama?"

"I will pray for all the things you said, Esperanza, and one more thing besides."

"What's that?"

Mama hugged her. "I will pray for you, Esperanza. That you can be strong. No matter what happens."