The grapes had to be finished before the first fall rains and had to be picked rápidamente, quickly, so now there were no Saturdays or Sundays in the week, just workdays. The temperature was still over ninety each day, so as soon as Isabel’s bus left for school, Esperanza took the babies back to the cabin. She fixed their bottles of milk and let them play while she made the beds. Then she followed Hortensia’s instructions for starting dinner before turning to the laundry. She was amazed at the hot, dry air. Often, by the time she had filled the clotheslines that were strung between the trees, she had only minutes to rest before the valley sun dried the clothes crisp and they were ready to fold.

Irene and Melina came over after lunch and Esperanza spread a blanket in the shade. Esperanza liked Melina’s company. In some ways, she was a young girl, sometimes playing with Isabel and Silvia, or telling Esperanza gossip as if they were school friends. In other ways, she was grown up, with a nursing baby and a husband, and preferring to crochet with the older women in the evenings.

“Do you crochet?” Melina asked.

“I know a little, but only a few stitches,” said Esperanza, remembering Abuelita’s blanket of zigzag rows that she had been too preoccupied to unpack.

Melina laid her sleeping baby girl on the blanket and picked up her needlework. Irene cut apart a fifty-pound flour sack that was printed with tiny flowers, to use as fabric for dresses.

Esperanza tickled Pepe and Lupe and they laughed.

“They adore you,” said Melina. “They cried yesterday when I watched them for the few minutes it took you to sweep the platform.”

It was true. Both babies smiled when Esperanza walked into the room, always reaching for her, especially Pepe. Lupe was good-natured and less demanding, but Esperanza learned to watch her closely, as she often tried to wander away. If she turned her back for a minute, Esperanza found herself frantically searching for Lupe.

Esperanza rubbed Lupe’s and Pepe’s backs,
hoping they would go to sleep soon, but they were restless and wouldn’t settle even though they had their bottles. The afternoon sky looked peculiar, tinged with yellow, and there was so much static in the air that the babies’ soft hair stuck out.

“Today is the day of the strike,” said Melina. “I heard that they were going to walk out this morning.”

“Everyone was talking about it last night at the table,” said Esperanza. “Alfonso said he is glad that everyone from our camp agreed to continue working. He is proud that we won’t strike.”

Irene continued working on the flour sack and shaking her head. “So many Mexicans have the revolution still in their blood. I am sympathetic to those who are striking, and I am sympathetic to those of us who want to keep working. We all want the same things. To eat and feed our children.”

Esperanza nodded. She had decided that if she and Mama were to get Abuelita here, they could not afford to strike. Not now. Not when they so desperately needed money and a roof over their heads. She worried about what many were saying: If they didn’t work, the people from Oklahoma would happily take their jobs. Then what would they do?

A sudden blast of hot wind took the flour sack from Irene’s hand and carried it to the fields.

The babies sat up, frightened. Another hot blast hit them, but kept on, and when the edges of the blanket blew up, Lupe reached for Esperanza, whimpering.

Irene stood up and pointed to the east. The sky was darkening with amber clouds and several brown tumbleweeds bounced toward them.

A roil of brown loomed over the mountains.

“¡Una tormenta de polvo! Dust storm!” said Irene. “Hurry!”

They picked up the babies and ran inside. Irene closed the door and began shutting the windows.

“What’s happening?” asked Esperanza.

“A dust storm, like nothing you have seen before,” said Melina. “They are awful.”