

Fall in Love with an Orange Tree or a Book

Chapter 1

Balancing on her ladder, seventeen-year-old Elena Hernandez clipped the stem of another orange and dropped it into the canvas bag slung across her body. Stopping to rest, she glanced past the orange grove to a cotton field and beyond to a grape vineyard bordered by valley oaks and eucalyptus trees. The merciless California sun beat down at midday, making her hot and uncomfortable.

A radio blared with Mexican music, and Elena added her voice to the song, pretending she was at a fiesta and not in a hot, dusty field. Hearing the roar of vans at the edge of the grove, she turned to see what was happening.

Suddenly, men in green uniforms from the border patrol swarmed through the orange grove, scattering field workers like frightened mice.

“Elena,” her mother screamed as she scrambled down from a ladder against a nearby tree. “*La Migra!* Hide!”

Elena quickly hit the ground. She jerked off the heavy canvas bag, not caring that the oranges tumbled out.

“*Dios Mío,*” her father shouted. He flew off his ladder and ran.

“Don’t run, Elena,” her mother cried. “There’s no time. Hide.”

Crouching under a tree with low branches, Elena ripped off her yellow-cloth hat to be less visible and stuffed it into the pocket of her jacket. She kept her mouth and nose covered with her blue bandana to protect them from the dust and chemicals in the grove. Her long-sleeved jacket and shirt were heavy and hot. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of her neck. She hugged her knees, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. She couldn’t see anything. She heard shouted commands in Spanish.

“Get in the van!”

Other voices pleaded. “I don’t got no family in Mexico. Don’t send me back!”

“Let me tell my kids goodbye before you take me!”

“*Virgen Maria*, help me.”

Elena covered her ears with her hands to shut out the swearing and useless pleading.

A black widow spider crept across Elena’s heavy brown boot. As it inched closer to the top of her boot, she shuddered. She couldn’t let it bite her, but if she made a noise she might be discovered. She had to act fast. Taking off one of her canvas gloves, Elena smashed the spider against her boot. She sat still, her heart pounding, waiting to see if anyone heard.

A shadow fell near her. Making the sign of the cross, she silently prayed. *Virgen María, save my parents.*

Rustling leaves caught her attention. She stopped praying. *Don’t let them catch you, Mami.*

The shadow changed direction. Someone called out in Spanish, “Come out.”

Elena’s heart raced. She heard branches bending, a hard slap, someone being kicked. Her mother cried out, “Please, don’t hurt me.”

A man’s harsh voice ordered, “Come! Now!”

Elena heard a scuffle and her mother’s voice. “I’ll be back.”

Elena clasped her hands over her mouth to keep from calling to her mother.

Shivering with fright, she stayed hidden under the tree.