

THE WOMAN OF
LA MANCHA

by
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. . . for no one can possibly foresee or even imagine
the way the world turns . . .

—Don Quixote, *The Ingenious Hidalgo*
Don Quixote de la Mancha

PROLOGUE



CHRISTOPHER,” MY MOTHER whispered in the dim light of morning of February 14, in the year 1572. “She is born.”

I sat up in bed. “What will they call her?”

“Luscinda.”

“To me, she will be Cinda.”

My mother patted my head and pulled up my covers, as if she thought I would go back to sleep. But I was six then, and there was a new baby, and I knew, though I did not understand, she and I were betrothed, and it was important news for our families. King Philip had agreed to it.

Three days later, I stood with my two brothers and her two brothers—the five of us like a hand, me the tallest, with Estevan the thumb and shortest; Fernando, the little finger; and my brothers, nearly as tall as I on either side of me.

Before us was the sleeping baby, held by her duchess mother, Doña Isabella. The baby had dark, dark hair, a good bit of it. Her mouth puckered rhythmically in her sleep. I held out my hand towards her and let it hover there. My hand would engulf hers were I to pick it up.

In my pocket was the gift my mother and father had given me to give Cinda. I handed the pouch to Doña Isabella. “For her, my Cinda.” I liked knowing that I would be important to this baby and she would be important to me. She was the first girl in either of our families, the families of neighboring duchies in Andalusia in the south of Spain.

Out of the pouch came the tiny silver bells, tinkling their way toward Cinda. They were on a knotted cord ready to tie to her wrist. My mother leaned over and tied the bracelet so Doña Isabella did not have to jiggle the new baby. Cinda would wear them every day until she was two.

“Boys, do you want to hold her?” Doña Isabella asked softly in her mellow voice, her auburn hair wisped around her face.

Fashioning a wave from our finger-like arrangement, our heads nodded in unison, and “yes” popped from some of our mouths.

My mother lined us up on a bench like stair steps and cradled her arms so we would mimic her, ready for the baby. Starting with Estevan, only two, Doña Isabella held the baby in his arms for a long moment and just so with each successive boy. She never let go of the baby, never trusted those toddling boys solo with her baby.

As she paused at each station of open-jawed boy, she announced each of their names. “Luscinda, this is Estevan . . . Fernando . . . Miguel . . . Juan.” They only stared, as if mute, at the sleeping baby.

Now it was my turn. I held out my cradled arms ready for the weight of the warm bundle, so wanting to hold her on my own, not with aid as the others had, and then I was. Doña Isabella stood up, her arms at her side, slightly flexed.

Staring at her round baby face, I pulled Cinda close and willed her to open her eyes. And she did! Blinking them. Blue. Now she moved and stretched, and I saw Doña Isabella shift as if ready to take the baby, but I held on and watched.

She waved her arm, the tiny silver bells pinging like crystal.

“Cinda.” I said, not softly, but in a normal voice. She turned her head and looked at me. Her bells tinkled, and she opened her mouth and cooed, a little baby coo, her first song to me.

I came every day to see her, if only for a moment, even after the other boys grew bored. I wanted to be near, and her sturdy baby arm waved and chimed the bells: our futures tied together like the ends of the bracelet.



Eleven years later, she went missing. I thought my eyes would melt from the heat of my tears, the heat of my anger. Oh! and the fear! I cursed our Holy Mother Mary for not keeping my betrothed safe then fell to my knees, begging Mary to protect a bewildered girl, gone from her home, with safety and shelter. Surely the blessed Virgin was used to imperfect and changeable men and could forgive my initial rancorous outbursts.

Within the hour, I was on Beleza, my sturdy horse, pounding the rutted road from Alcala to Madrid, feeling assured I would find my missing Cinda.

CHAPTER 1

in which her memory is jounced out

November 3, 1583



AWOKE WITH STRAW in my mouth. I had been dreaming, dreaming that black storks were pricking me with talons and beaks. Or was it devils sticking me in my legs, arms, neck, and face? But awake, I saw it was only the straw and the jostling cart.

My body had a lightness about it that was unfamiliar. Everything was unfamiliar. The jouncing of the cart during the miles it had traveled had quite simply, it seems to me in writing about it years later, bounced my memories right out. At the time, I could not have described it; I would not have had the words. My past was wiped clean, like a new babe who has no existence but the moment of birth. I did not know that it was not my normal state because I did not know anything or much of anything.

My mind began to work. First rustling in my head, then down my body searching for information. *Fear* was not what I found, but *curiosity*.

I was in a *cart* filled with straw, and when I turned around, I discovered a red-haired *man*, the driver, his shoulders curved as he slouched on the *seat*. It was rather *dark*, but I could see the *sun* coming up.

In between foggy impressions, these sparse words jumped into my head. Like walking through pudding, my thoughts were sluggish, and every word and the concept of everything did not float immediately into my brain. I picked up my arm and saw my . . . *hand*, and when I wriggled my fingers, it took me a moment to remember *fingers*.

My cloak was *soft*. It was black fur, lined with white velvet, and flowed around me. I felt lumps under my skirt. Lifting it, I found a bag and unhooked it. It was bountifully embroidered with *flowers*. In it I found two hair *combs*, inlaid with rubies; a *shell*; and some *rocks*. The rocks were nut-sized and different colors—one pink, one gray-white, one milky green, and one red. I set these items in my lap.

The cart rolled in an uneven rhythm, and in front of the cart moved the gray

haunches of an ox. The man driving the cart hummed aimlessly in a deep, gravelly voice.

I took a locket from my neck and, in it, found two miniatures. A man and a boy of about twelve. I touched the rough painted surface over the man's face. He was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and handsome with a high forehead and a hooked nose, a noble beak. The boy had silver gray eyes and a dimple in his chin. He appeared gentle and good-humored.

I did not know who they were, nor did it seem as if I should. With my fingernail I flicked the miniatures out of the locket. One of them, the boy's, had *Tophet* written on the back. I pressed the picture backward in the locket and stared at the word. Nothing came to me. I returned the other picture to the locket, also backward. I closed the locket and saw *T-in-t-o-r-e-t-t-o* etched on the back. Another word I didn't recognize. I put the locket and the other objects in the bag.

When I hooked it under my skirt, I discovered pockets,* where I found a handkerchief, soft and white and edged in a scalloped and delicate lace. A worn wooden thimble, which I put on my finger—though I did not *know* that was the right place for it. A shiny oval of metal—a mirror—smaller than my palm. As it moved, it caught the morning sun, spilling streams of light across the straw. Instantly I turned over the mirror and dropped it. My palms grew warm, and my breath caught in my throat: I put the mirror away.

I found two biscuits wrapped in a plain cloth. I ate them. They crumbled in my mouth and became pasty. I wished I had a *drink*.

The last item from the pockets was a *rosary* made of carved blue beads. The rosary, unlike my dream, did not tell of demons, but of mysteries, of which I had some inexpressible sense. I replaced the rosary and other things in the pockets, and I pulled my cloak and hood completely around me and lay back in the cart, sheltered from the dewy morning chill and light. I slept.

The cart stopped. Nearby a man yelped, his cry joined by another's. Though at the time I did not understand their startled country words, I heard, many times, the story of what was said.

"What is this!" Lorenzo thundered in his rumbly voice.

"Who is it?" Sancho sang out.

"Is it dead?" Lorenzo asked.

I peered through a slit in my hood—two men were staring at me; the red-haired man was tall, and the other one was short and rather stout. To them, I was a long black-furred lump on the straw—seemingly a body, but at first it was not clear if I were animal or demon. Their eyes, round like a fish's, were dark in fear-blanch

* Pockets were separate from the garment on a sort of belt that tied around the waist.

faces. Each man had one hand poised in the air, as if to touch me, but something stopped them from reaching out.

Slowly I sat up, presenting a moving black shape—my head still covered—quite a grim figure, unexpected and unknown. As if connected, the men slapped their arms to their sides and jumped back.

I pulled the hood from my head. The cart, no longer on the open road, sat in front of a store. I looked at the still-as-statue men.

In a moment, Lorenzo clapped his calloused hand to his mouth. “God in heaven! What have we here?” His bushy eyebrows rose high on his forehead.

“A girl,” Sancho, the shorter one, said matter-of-factly. He had dark hair and a short beard.

“Sancho Panza!” Lorenzo cried in his rumbling voice. “I can see that! But who is she?” Though his red hair was thinning on top, he had a full red beard.

“Where did she come from?” Sancho asked. His voice rich and musical.

Lorenzo rubbed his broad, flat nose and shrugged. His skin was freckled, weathered, scorched from the sun. “She wasn’t there when I unloaded in Madrid,” Lorenzo said flatly. He took a deep breath and said, “Aldonza will not believe this!”

“Where else did you stop?” Sancho asked.

“Once on the road near Sondia and also in Magdelona. Quick stops for Aldonza.”

“She climbed in . . . somewhere.”

Cautiously Sancho fingered the soft *chele** trim of my cloak. His smile was simple and sweet. The men seemed good-hearted.

Lorenzo touched my hand.

I smiled at him. I saw there was a scar on his temple. It was deep and curved to just below his right eye.

“When did you get in the cart?” Lorenzo said. “Aldonza will ask me.”

The words were familiar, yet not. I said nothing.

“Are you a mute then? Oh, what will Aldonza say!”

“Can you talk?” Sancho was eager now to find some answers.

“What *will* Aldonza think?” Lorenzo scratched his head. “Did you crawl in when I stopped? What is your name?” He stared at my mouth.

I did not understand the question, but I mouthed the word he kept repeating: “Al-don-za.” The slightest sound came from my lips, as if I did not know how to push air through my dry throat to make full sounds. “Al-don-za.” The word seemed a bit familiar. I was sure I had heard it. It was pretty, I thought.

“Aldonza!” he exclaimed. “But that’s my wife’s own name.”

Name! Was Aldonza my name?

* *Chele* comes from a marten’s throat.

“Do you think that’s it?” Sancho asked excitedly.

“And a pretty child you are,” Lorenzo declared staunchly. “Like my Aldonza.”

Child! A child was a young person. Why would a child be alone in a cart with a man she did not know? Where would the child have come from? And why would she be here?

Vaguely I knew I was the *child*. My head hurt.

Lorenzo motioned me to come to him; his eyes were kind and soft. Unafraid, I rolled over the straw, and he helped me from the cart. I was as tall as his shoulder, a bit taller than Sancho.

Lorenzo clumsily brushed straw from my cloak. He smelled of fresh air and evergreen. Patting my arm, he said, “Aldonza will know what to do.”

I did not know what to do.

Sancho said, “I will go to the churches and tell the priests. They may hear of a missing girl.”

“We don’t know how long she’s been missing,” Lorenzo mused.

“No,” Sancho agreed. “Perhaps a priest will already know of her.”

Through the window I saw a man staring at me. He retreated to the side as if to watch in secret. He was tall and thin and had a gray *pickdevant*.^{*} A plain young woman with straight brown hair came up to him. He turned to her and held up his hand in which he carried two books. Together they walked away from the window.

Lorenzo entered the shop; he nearly ran into the old man, who was the *hidalgo*[†] Alonso Quesano, who would later become Don Quixote with Sancho as his squire.

The shopkeeper (Ricardo González, a man short of stature but long on decency) helped Lorenzo with boxes and bags of goods. As the shopkeeper glanced at me, he said, “I have not seen her in Toboso. I will keep my ears open.”

Toboso was in La Mancha. *Why did I know that?*

Lorenzo loaded the cart. A bag of nails clattered noisily as it flattened away from him. A gray cloud rose from a bag of flour as it settled in the cart. When Lorenzo found a brown tapestry satchel, he gave it to me, as though it was mine, but I did not recognize it. When I opened it, the odor of *chocolate* and *cherries* came to me. On top were an ivory comb and brush, bejeweled with blue topaz and garnets. I set them aside and looked at the other contents. A full black velvet dress, another soft and yellow, items embroidered and white, some beaded and some lacy. I closed the bag, but I put the ivory comb and brush in my pocket.

When Lorenzo finished loading the supplies, he got back in the cart, but Sancho did not return, and Lorenzo motioned that I was to sit in the seat beside him. I pointed to him, for I had not yet heard his name, and he said, “Lorenzo.”

* Similar to a goatee

† Gentlemen of the lowest rank of nobility

I smiled.

He motioned to me and said, "Aldonza."

I pointed to me and then to him.

He laughed and said, "Hello, Aldonza Lorenzo."

He named me, and I did not have to speak, and I did not—for more than a year.

He snapped the reins at the ox, unsettling a patch of flies that had settled on its back. The cart rolled through a countryside that seemed strange, though I was not sure what it should look like—more hills? Perhaps orchards. I wanted more green, though it was late autumn and the trees had lost most of their leaves. The narrow road was dry and had deep ruts that Lorenzo carefully guided the ox around. In the distance we saw herds of sheep grazing on flatlands. Lorenzo talked, but his voice was only the rhythmical sound of kindness, not words I yet comprehended.

Taking some bread out of a bag, he tore off a piece for me. It was dry and hard, though the texture was good. I ripped off small pieces and moistened each in my mouth until I could chew it. The flavor was strange—a bread of spelt and millet, I found out later.

My eyes ate up everything there was to see. We passed a few small, thatched-roofed houses. If people were outside in their yard or a field, they sometimes hailed us. Lorenzo waved but never slowed the ox.

Now in the distance I could see two big hills, which broke the evenness of the pattern of little farm after little farm. While passing through a village with both a green and a small mud church, Lorenzo said, "Parado," and waved his hand at the little town: some houses, a few little shops, and a store, much smaller than Señor González's in Toboso. The road now ran beside a pleasant stream that we were following back toward its source in the hills. Water tumbled over the rocks, and in places a fish or two swam lazily, the midmorning sun glinting off their backs.

Soon after we passed through the village, the road went up a little rise, blocking our view of everything but the hills, which were quite close now. The stream was still below us on the right, but as we crested the rise, the water flowed under the road. Now in front of us, nestled at the foot of the two hills, was Lorenzo's farm. Above the thatched-roofed home and a few small outbuildings, including a creek-stone windmill, the two hills rose like breasts (pardon my metaphor, but it's true!), as if put there in the flat country to nurture this peasant family.

Lorenzo's farm had a bit of everything—a few goats, sheep, pigs, a couple of cows, a mule, and the ox that pulled the cart. He grew grains—now harvested—and there was a large garden that had the remnants of a summer full of vegetables and rich-colored flowers. The stream we had been following flowed from the two hills, pooled at the foot into a neat pond near the house, and provided water for the garden and bathing.

Two white ducks stood, slow and gawking, in the wide welcoming pathway that led to the door of the house. Along the path were the year's leftovers of flowing roses, some still in bloom. As if we were expected, the door stood open. Smoke wavered from the chimney. Clothes, hanging from a line, snapped in a brisk breeze, and a black dog, rather scruffy, with patches of gray, ran to greet us.

"Lobo," Lorenzo said to me, pointing to the dog. "Lo-bo."

I nodded and smiled. Lorenzo seemed pleased. I liked this man, and I liked that I had pleased him. As he stopped the cart outside the front door of the little house, the dog and the dusty ox touched noses. Lorenzo helped me from the cart. Before we could begin down the path, four people burst through the open doorway. One of them, Carlota, I soon discovered, nearly tripped and fell into her sister—Fredrica. Carlota was my height, though she seemed smaller as she was narrow and gangly with a long neck.

The other two women were Meta, the oldest daughter, and Aldonza, who smiled easily and was small-boned, though tall. Her hair was dark and pulled back into a small tan cap.

They were talking and talking and talking. Most of the words were a mystery. Aldonza held her hand, a graceful hand with long and welcoming fingers, at the top of my head, showing I was the same height as Carlota, who was thirteen. Fredrica was nearly as tall; she was twelve. Because I was exactly Carlota's height, I was pronounced thirteen; though in looking back, I was eleven and younger than both of them.

Carlota looked at me with openness. Fredrica glanced at me from the corner of her eyes, and if she saw me looking at her, she looked at the ground.

Lorenzo told them he believed I was mute. "She's not said a word," he declared. "She mouthed her name: It's Aldonza."

"No!" the original Aldonza cried, her hand, fingers outspread, touched her chest. "I have never known another Aldonza!" She sounded pleased.

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I knew not what else to do. Sometimes I nodded. The clamor of our homecoming—my appearance quite unexpected—was confusing, yet merry.

Aldonza touched my blue silk dress. Carlota gently touched my hair, which she held up, and I noticed it was wavy and black, nearly to my waist. Fredrica, who had straight and lustrous russet hair, was interested in my blue satin hair ribbons, which I willingly gave to her. I was just as fascinated with Meta's hair. It was intricately plaited; the braids, I soon learned, tamed a mass of disobedient curls.

Lorenzo showed them the tapestry traveling bag, and the articles of clothing—shifts, dresses, and nightclothes—were touched and *ahh-ed* over. Carefully putting everything back in the bag, Aldonza carried it. She kept the satchel in her room,

and we did not use these things from my former life except from time to time to make use of the fabric.

I walked along the path to the house between Aldonza and Carlota, who cheerfully held my hand, and as we, one by one, stepped over the threshold of the house, this family melded into a new shape: six instead of five.

The main room of the house was large with space for cooking, eating, and working. In the front corner were stools for sitting, a spinning wheel, a butter churn, and reed baskets holding various handiwork. In the center was a table which was used for all manner of tasks and for eating.

To the left side of the large room was an alcove—Meta's small room—separated from the main room by a curtain. Aldonza and Lorenzo's room, in front of Meta's, also opened off the main room. A ladder led to a low-ceilinged loft above Meta's room, where I would share a straw tick with Carlota and Fredrica and Carlota's cat, Piccolo.

A strange upright fixture on the back wall near a basin caught my eye. I went to it. Lorenzo came and moved the handle. Water whooshed out! It was a pump—in the house! I would soon discover Lorenzo was an innovator of sorts and handy in many ways. Their outside well was operated by the windmill, which doubled as a small mill.

Lorenzo motioned for me to wash my face and hands. Aldonza handed me a coarse towel. After I finished, Lorenzo washed.

Also on the back wall was the fireplace in which a fire blazed under a cookpot, which emitted a tantalizing odor—not because the fare was exotic, merely a rabbit stew, but because I was quite hungry! So was Lorenzo, and shortly we were all sitting at the table with a helping of stew in front of us, served in a bread bowl.

Before we ate, Lorenzo led the family in a prayer, which I recognized and thought along with them. I knew the appropriate gestures to make. I saw Aldonza nod to Lorenzo as if this assured them I was from a Christian family.

As we ate, I studied these people who would soon no longer be strangers to me. I already loved the kind and mild-mannered, red-haired Lorenzo and the gentle and confident Aldonza. With a swoop of her long fingers, she had added a stool to the table for me and pulled me to it to sit. I sat beside the already familiar Lorenzo, who was on the end, with Meta on the other side of me. Carlota was across the table. She scarcely ate her stew and did most of the talking in her thin, breathy voice. She had grayish circles beneath her round dark eyes, and her cheeks were hollow. With each breath she took came a little wheeze, and often her breath seemed to catch in her nose with a little click, which caused her hand to fly to her mouth, perhaps in hopes of easing her breathing.

During the meal, the black cat Piccolo with an irregular white patch on its neck jumped to Carlota's lap. She let it drink from her cup. Only Meta seemed bothered by this. "Momma!" she yelled and pointed. But neither Aldonza, nor Lorenzo, responded, and shortly the little cat jumped from Carlota's lap, and under the table it began to rub against my legs. When I put my hand down to pet it, I felt its tiny rough tongue against my finger.

Her braids bouncing around her shoulders, Meta still complained about "Piccolo." Meta was a hardy, wholesome girl. She was clear-skinned with her mother's straight nose.

Fredrica rose to get more stew from the pot. She moved with grace and had a strong, supple body. She was comely, though her nose was unfortunate—a bit too long, slightly crooked. Her eyes were black and narrow, but her long lashes, just as black, gave them a beguiling look which helped hide their shiftiness. Still, she did not meet my eyes, though I thought she was curious about me. When she smiled, dimples bloomed in her cheeks, but I sensed from the beginning her fetching smile could mislead one to think she was convivial and easygoing. Her voice, when she spoke, was inviting. Even with Fredrica's beauty, I knew I would like Carlota better.

Within a day or two of my arrival I understood most of what was said. I found silence easy; I made no attempt to talk. I learned that if I did not know something, I was eventually told. Now I know that I was healing from my life that was and resting in the peace of this farm family, where there seemed—at least in the beginning—little time for betrayal and secrets.

The first few days on the farm were strange not only because I was in a new place, but also because I was a stranger to myself. Everyone called me Donza.

When I saw my reflection in the old mirror, which hung in Aldonza and Lorenzo's room, I was startled, for I had not given a thought to my looks. Dimples greeted me, and I had wide blue eyes rimmed with thick dark lashes. Laughing, I saw I had perfect teeth, like Aldonza's. My skin was creamy, and it looked as if I had brushed rose petals against my cheeks. My lips were full; I traced the line around them with my finger: heart-shaped. Wavy dark hair framed my face. I saw that I was pretty, but at that time it was merely information—I did not yet know the power of beauty.

The words that had come so slowly when I awakened in the cart began to tumble back to me in a jumble from which I could barely make sense. I would look at an object, a door, maybe, and I would have to sort through a string of words before I could settle on what it was called—*puerta, deur, porta, door, la porte*. As I listened to my new family talk, the words settled into their words. The cacophony in my mind stopped, and I embraced this life.

When the sun glinted through our little loft window in the morning, I was ready to see what new things the day held. Rising from our mattress on the floor, I quickly dressed in the dowlas blouse and burragon* skirt provided by Aldonza and descended to the large room ready for a new day.

Quite early on my first Saturday morning, I was sitting in the corner mending a tear in one of Fredrica's skirts. (It had not taken long for me to find ways to help in my new family—and to use the thimble I had found in my pocket.) Aldonza was making quince jam.

A woman came to the door and with an energetic step entered the house.

"Ana!" Aldonza cried happily. "Come in!" Wiping her hands on her apron, she went to greet her friend.

"Greetings!" the woman said. "I've come to see if I can get some fenugreek and peppermint. Maybe some blessed thistle?" This last was a question. Aldonza had shown me her collection of herbs, which she gave out as medicines and cures to help with this or that complaint from constipation to chilblains, heart palpitations to headaches.

Ana spied me. "And who is this?" Her words were measured, her voice soothing. I smiled at her.

She was a tiny, vibrant woman. Her dark hair, which was bundled in a cap, had a single white streak at her temple and forehead. Another time she told me the streak had appeared overnight after she been caught, but unharmed, in a stampede on the *meseta*.†

I was told Ana Alonso was a midwife and often came to get herbs which helped in pregnancy and childbirth. Aldonza explained to Ana how I happened to be there and that I could not speak. She brought out the tapestry satchel and showed Ana the contents. With her delicate hands, Ana timidly fingered the embroidered nightgown and a yellow brocade skirt.

"But what of her family?" Ana asked. "Would they be noble?" She now held the bodice to the yellow skirt. It was trimmed with flat shiny beads. "I have never seen such fine things."

"Nor I," Aldonza said. "Noble or maybe merchants," she ventured. "Or tax collectors."

Ana grimaced.

Carlota came in from hanging clothes on the line and said, "She's a . . . mysterious princess. Her family was cruel, and she . . . wants to live with us!" She was out of breath.

* Plain and coarse fabric

† A plain for grazing, usually sheep

I smiled and nodded at her sentiments. Then I jumped up to give Carlota my stool. The circles under her eyes were darker than usual. I reminded myself to help her more. She could mend; I could hang the clothes.

Aldonza shook her head. Little wisps of hair that had escaped from her cap curled around her face. "Alas, she cannot tell us."

Ana moved closer to me. "Where are you from?"

I thought for a moment. I lifted my hands and shoulders and shook my head to show I did not know.

"We have asked every question." Aldonza sighed. "At first she did not seem to understand, but now she does." As if to demonstrate, she folded her hands in front of her and said, "Donza, please get Ana a drink."

Eager to do as I was asked, I went to the indoor pump and caught the splashing fresh water in a cup. I handed it to Ana, who took it, and said, "Thank you."

"I think she has no memory," Aldonza said. "Have you heard of that?"

Ana pursed her lips and in a moment, she said, "I knew of a man in Pronto Real who lost his memory for several months."

"And it came back?"

Ana nodded. "Be patient. Your visitor may yet be able to tell you where she belongs."

My heart lurched: I knew I wanted to belong *here*. I remembered no other life.

Aldonza put her hand on my shoulder. "Already she is more than a visitor."

I smiled up at her and then smiled at Ana. I liked the petite, cheerful woman.

"Rosemary," Ana suggested. "It is said to help memory." She laughed, a melodious and rich laugh. "But I don't have to tell you that."

Aldonza patted her arm. "I am always happy to hear your opinions." The women were good friends—each having a skill that helped others.

The two women—one tall and one short—stood and watched me. I was glad when Fredrica brought in a few eggs and their attention went elsewhere. "Hello, Ana," Fredrica said with a cheery, dimpled smile and put the eggs in a basket by the basin.

Ana said, "Julio asked for you to meet him this afternoon." Julio was Ana's son and Fredrica often fished with him.

Fredrica's cheeks grew pink, and she ducked her head, glancing at Ana through long lashes. To Aldonza, she said, "Momma, we will have fish for supper." Fredrica turned to Ana. "And so will your family." Fredrica left the house, humming.

In a moment Lorenzo entered, and Aldonza excused herself to go to her shed for the herbs Ana requested.

"What do you think of our new addition?" Lorenzo asked in his rumbly voice while he patted me on the back. "Here is the way to get one! Already mending and

helping out. Not like the ones you bring in the world who spit up and wet their cloths.”

Ana laughed. “Yes, much simpler!”

“She’s smart too,” Carlota said. Her hand went to her mouth and she made that little click in her nose. “She can bake bread and make tarts.”

“Apple tarts,” Lorenzo said and picked up the platter from the table. “Try one.”

Ana took one and bit off a piece. “Mmm.” She looked at me. “The crust is tender. How do you know how to do this?”

Aldonza came in with three small fabric bags. “It is a puzzle, isn’t it?” She handed the bags to Ana. “A lady wearing fine fur and silk would not know how to bake.” She said this with so much conviction that I thought it must be true. Though here was a contradiction: I had velvet and silk, and I *did* know how to bake and cook and mend and sew.

Those first few days I had tried to remember something from before waking up in the cart, but though I felt my brain reaching for information, no memory appeared out of the blankness. Soon I stopped searching as already it seemed to me that there could be no better place on earth than Lorenzo’s, where laughter and singing were a part of every day.

But I soon saw a dark side to their family. Lorenzo had asked me to put out hay for the cows. The black dog Lobo came with me to the large shed, wagging his tail alongside me. When he saw Fredrica, he ran off. She was skinning an otter. I walked into the shed. She set down her knife and followed me.

She pushed at my chest with both hands, forcefully enough to knock me down, flat down. She put her foot firmly on my shoulder and pushed my head to the dirt floor. “Don’t cross me, pretty girl,” she said, her bottomless black eyes looking down her long unfortunate nose, not at my face, but at her foot. “You will be sorry!” She, here in privacy, was telling me her view—quite different, it seemed, from Aldonza’s. No trace of Fredrica’s dimples now.

Fredrica reached over and picked up a stick from the floor. Leaning over me, she snapped the stick in two. The end flicked against my face and stung my cheek right below my eye. I remembered the knife she had left outside the door next to the entrails of the otter.

Pushing her foot from my shoulder, I rolled over and knocked her off balance; she fell to the floor. Quickly I got up and put my foot on her shoulder and grinned, as if I thought it were a game.

I backed away from her, my arms open, my palms out, and stood there, waiting. She stood, her cheeks red, her russet hair a cloud around her shoulders. She turned and left. *A truce.*

But, no, I was mistaken. She returned with the knife, cocked, ready to fling it, and *pphhfft* it flew by me, not so near, yet not so far, and thunked into an upright beam behind me. The flash of fear I'd felt at the sight of the knife was gone and red anger took its place.

I strode to the knife and tugged it, not easily, from the beam. I walked toward her, unsure at first what I would do. She stood her ground, her fists rising to chest level. When I had nearly reached her, I turned and threw the knife. It followed her previous trajectory to the same beam, to nearly the same spot, and thudded into the wood.

I turned from her and, with the hay-lift fork, began tossing hay outside, over the open wall of the shed. I felt my insides begin to calm as the rhythm of my arms collected my anger and tossed it out with the hay.

She retrieved the knife. "How did you do that!" she cried. "Girls don't."

I stared at her: Was she right? *She* did it. But was it something Carlota and Meta could not do, did not do? I felt uncertainty, confusion. I wanted to belong here, and I knew I wanted to be more like Carlota or Meta than Fredrica.

Fredrica left and I felt relieved. I resolved to avoid her and to be good and helpful so they would all like me—for *here* was all I knew.



The priest, Father Jude, for the village of Parado only came every three weeks. On that Sunday, we walked to the village, not quite a mile away, to the little church, a rude, mud building on the village green.

"Holloa!" Sancho Panza, the man who was Lorenzo's companion that first day in the cart, sang out in his rich, musical voice. He told us how he had spread the word about my surprising presence in Lorenzo's cart. Several people came over to hear his story and to see me. Sancho said, "I've already asked in Ciudad Real and the towns between here and there." Having a flair for the dramatic, he paused, then said, "No luck!" But he did not say it sadly, and he added, "I'm going to Sondia next week—I'll ask everyone I see."

I heard Sancho's wife, Teresa, say to Aldonza, "He's hoping there is a reward." Teresa cleared her throat. "Of course he wants to help her." Teresa, a sturdy woman with broad hands, blushed.

Sancho said, "When I was a child, I always heard the adults say anyone who didn't know how to grab good luck, when it came calling, had no business complaining if it passed him by." Sancho patted my arm. "If helping Donza find her family benefits us, then so be it and good for her, too."

Slowly Aldonza said, "I wish you good luck, of course, but what if she's better off

here?” Aldonza’s eyes glittered with concern and hope. She took my hand. *Could luck be good and bad at the same time?* Nothing—no feeling of eagerness or sorrow—no memory—made me think I should seek my previous life, and I sensed Aldonza agreed.

Other neighbors asked questions and gave opinions. “Take her to the bishop.” Another man suggested. “She’s a runaway.”

“Runaway from whom then?” an old lady asked. Her name was Isadora Prínchez; she was a seamstress. “You must tell Father Jude about her.”

“Yes,” Aldonza said. “Just what we thought to do.”

“Or Master Nicolás,” another suggested. Master Nicolás was the barber-surgeon of Toboso and the surrounding villages.

“Or Alonso Quesano,” said Pedro, Ana’s husband. Señor Quesano was an *hidalgo*, but he was not the highest ranking nobleman in the surrounding area. Salvatore Rodríguez of Toboso, baron of Quartos, was the local don. Someone else suggested Lorenzo take me to him.

Father Jude—no one had noticed him approach—overheard our conversation. “Do not bother the baron.” His voice was a thin tenor with a sharpness to it. “A missing girl is not worth his time.” Glancing at me, he walked on.

Lorenzo walked behind him. “Should we not try to find her family?”

Sighing, the priest turned back. His disdain was worn like his frock. “Where does she say she is from?”

“She cannot speak,” Aldonza replied, though Father Jude did not turn to look at her.

“A half-wit,” he said. “Her family is probably glad to have the girl gone.” He removed a coarse handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. “Send her to the orphanage in Pronto Real. The place for orphans and idiots.”

Idiot? My cheeks burned; I wanted to hit him. Instead I looked down and toed the dirt. Aldonza shuddered and Ana, who was nearby, came and put her arm around me.

Lorenzo said, “I would not send a sow there.”

Father Jude shrugged and led everyone into the church. Mass began and all talk of my origins ceased. It was not unusual for families to acquire new members—an orphaned cousin, an immigrant looking for a home, a homeless child to help on the farm—so even as I was folded into the family, I was accepted by the neighbors and townspeople.

Never once did I consider that my previous family was relentlessly searching for me. Even King Philip’s men . . .