

MEXICAN

GOTHIC

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Author of Gods of Jade and Shadow

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ALSO BY SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA

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Para mi madre.

MEXICAN GOTHIC

The parties at the Tuñóns' house always ended unquestionably late, and since the hosts enjoyed costume parties in particular, it was not unusual to see Chinas Poblanas with their folkloric skirts and ribbons in their hair arrive in the company of a harlequin or a cowboy. Their chauffeurs, rather than waiting outside the Tuñóns' house in vain, had systematized the nights. They would head off to eat tacos at a street stand or even visit a maid who worked in one of the nearby homes, a courtship as delicate as a Victorian melodrama. Some of the chauffeurs would cluster together, sharing cigarettes and stories. A couple took naps. After all, they knew full well that no one was going to abandon that party until after one A.M.

So the couple stepping out of the party at ten P.M. therefore broke convention. What's worse, the man's driver had left to fetch himself dinner and could not be found. The young man looked distressed, trying to determine how to proceed. He had worn a papier-mâché horse's head, a choice that now came back to haunt him as they'd have to make the journey through the city with this

cumbersome prop. Noemí had warned him she wanted to win the costume contest, placing ahead of Laura Quezada and her beau, and thus he'd made an effort that now seemed misplaced, since his companion did not dress as she had said she would.

Noemí Taboada had promised she'd rent a jockey outfit, complete with a riding crop. It was supposed to be a clever and slightly scandalous choice, since she'd heard Laura was going to attend as Eve, with a snake wrapped around her neck. In the end, Noemí changed her mind. The jockey costume was ugly and scratched her skin. So instead she wore a green gown with white appliqué flowers and didn't bother to tell her date about the switch.

"What now?"

"Three blocks from here there's a big avenue. We can find a taxi there," she told Hugo. "Say, do you have a cigarette?"

"Cigarette? I don't even know where I put my wallet," Hugo replied, palming his jacket with one hand. "Besides, don't you always carry cigarettes in your purse? I would think you're cheap and can't buy your own if I didn't know any better."

"It's so much more fun when a gentleman offers a lady a cigarette."

"I can't even offer you a mint tonight. Do you think I might have left my wallet back at the house?"

She did not reply. Hugo was having a difficult time carrying the horse's head under his arm. He almost dropped it when they reached the avenue. Noemí raised a slender arm and hailed a taxi. Once they were inside the car, Hugo was able to put the horse's head down on the seat.

"You could have told me I didn't have to bring this thing after all," he muttered, noticing the smile on the driver's face and assuming he was having fun at his expense.

"You look adorable when you're irritated," she replied, opening her handbag and finding her cigarettes.

Hugo also looked like a younger Pedro Infante, which was a great deal of his appeal. As for the rest—personality, social status, and intelligence—Noemí had not paused to think too much about all of that. When she wanted something she simply wanted

it, and lately she had wanted Hugo, though now that his attention had been procured she was likely to dismiss him.

When they arrived at her house, Hugo reached out to her, grasping her hand.

“Give me a kiss good night.”

“I’ve got to run, but you can still have a bit of my lipstick,” she replied, taking her cigarette and putting it in his mouth.

Hugo leaned out the window and frowned while Noemí hurried into her home, crossing the inner courtyard and going directly to her father’s office. Like the rest of the house, his office was decorated in a modern style, which seemed to echo the newness of the occupants’ money. Noemí’s father had never been poor, but he had turned a small chemical dye business into a fortune. He knew what he liked and he wasn’t afraid to show it: bold colors and clean lines. His chairs were upholstered in a vibrant red, and luxuriant plants added splashes of green to every room.

The door to the office was open, and Noemí did not bother knocking, breezily walking in, her high heels clacking on the hardwood floor. She brushed one of the orchids in her hair with her fingertips and sat down in the chair in front of her father’s desk with a loud sigh, tossing her little handbag on the floor. She also knew what *she* liked, and she did not like being summoned home early.

Her father had waved her in—those high heels of hers were loud, signaling her arrival as surely as any greeting—but had not looked at her, as he was too busy examining a document.

“I cannot believe you telephoned me at the Tuñóns’,” she said, tugging at her white gloves. “I know you weren’t exactly happy that Hugo—”

“This is not about Hugo,” her father replied, cutting her short.

Noemí frowned. She held one of the gloves in her right hand. “It’s not?”

She had asked for permission to attend the party, but she had not specified she’d go with Hugo Duarte, and she knew how her father felt about him. Father was concerned that Hugo might pro-

pose marriage and she'd accept. Noemí did not intend to marry Hugo and had told her parents so, but Father did not believe her.

Noemí, like any good socialite, shopped at the Palacio de Hierro, painted her lips with Elizabeth Arden lipstick, owned a couple of very fine furs, spoke English with remarkable ease, courtesy of the nuns at the Monserrat—a private school, of course—and was expected to devote her time to the twin pursuits of leisure and husband hunting. Therefore, to her father, any pleasant activity must also involve the acquisition of a spouse. That is, she should never have fun for the sake of having fun, but only as a way to obtain a husband. Which would have been fine and well if Father had actually liked Hugo, but Hugo was a mere junior architect, and Noemí was expected to aspire higher.

“No, although we'll have a talk about that later,” he said, leaving Noemí confused.

She had been slow dancing when a servant had tapped her on the shoulder and asked if she'd take a call from Mr. Taboada in the studio, disrupting her entire evening. She had assumed Father had found out she was out with Hugo and meant to rip him from her arms and deliver an admonishment. If that was not his intent, then what was all the fuss about?

“It's nothing bad, is it?” she asked, her tone changing. When she was cross, her voice was higher-pitched, more girlish, rather than the modulated tone she had in recent years perfected.

“I don't know. You can't repeat what I'm about to tell you. Not to your mother, not to your brother, not to any friends, understood?” her father said, staring at her until Noemí nodded.

He leaned back in his chair, pressing his hands together in front of his face, and nodded back.

“A few weeks ago I received a letter from your cousin Catalina. In it she made wild statements about her husband. I wrote to Virgil in an attempt to get to the root of the matter.

“Virgil wrote to say that Catalina had been behaving in odd and distressing ways, but he believed she was improving. We wrote back and forth, me insisting that if Catalina was indeed as *distressed* as she seemed to be, it might be best to bring her to

Mexico City to speak to a professional. He countered that it was not necessary.”

Noemí took off her other glove and set it on her lap.

“We were at an impasse. I did not think he would budge, but tonight I received a telegram. Here, you can read it.”

Her father grabbed the slip of paper on his desk and handed it to Noemí. It was an invitation for her to visit Catalina. The train didn’t run every day through their town, but it did run on Mondays, and a driver would be sent to the station at a certain time to pick her up.

“I want you to go, Noemí. Virgil says she’s been asking for you. Besides, I think this is a matter that may be best handled by a woman. It might turn out that this is nothing but exaggerations and marital trouble. It’s not as if your cousin hasn’t had a tendency toward the melodramatic. It might be a ploy for attention.”

“In that case, why would Catalina’s marital troubles or her melodrama concern us?” she asked, though she didn’t think it was fair that her father label Catalina as melodramatic. She’d lost both of her parents at a young age. One could expect a certain amount of turmoil after that.

“Catalina’s letter was very odd. She claimed her husband was poisoning her, she wrote that she’d had visions. I am not saying I am a medical expert, but it was enough to get me asking about good psychiatrists around town.”

“Do you have the letter?”

“Yes, here it is.”

Noemí had a hard time reading the words, much less making sense of the sentences. The handwriting seemed unsteady, sloppy.

... he is trying to poison me. This house is sick with rot, stinks of decay, brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment. I have tried to hold on to my wits, to keep this foulness away but I cannot and I find myself losing track of time and thoughts. Please. Please. They are cruel and unkind and they will not let me go. I bar my door but still they come, they whisper at nights and I am so afraid of

these restless dead, these ghosts, fleshless things. The snake eating its tail, the foul ground beneath our feet, the false faces and false tongues, the web upon which the spider walks making the strings vibrate. I am Catalina Catalina Taboada. CATALINA. Cata, Cata come out to play. I miss Noemí. I pray I'll see you again. You must come for me, Noemí. You have to save me. I cannot save myself as much as I wish to, I am bound, threads like iron through my mind and my skin and it's there. In the walls. It does not release its hold on me so I must ask you to spring me free, cut it from me, stop them now. For God's sake . . .

*Hurry,
Catalina*

In the margins of the letter her cousin had scribbled more words, numbers, she'd drawn circles. It was disconcerting.

When was the last time Noemí had spoken to Catalina? It must have been months ago, maybe close to a year. The couple had honeymooned in Pachuca, and Catalina had phoned and sent her a couple of postcards, but after that there had been little else, although telegrams had still arrived wishing happy birthdays to the members of the family at the appropriate times of the year. There must have also been a Christmas letter, because there had been Christmas presents. Or was it Virgil who had written the Christmas letter? It had, in any case, been a bland missive.

They'd all assumed Catalina was enjoying her time as a newlywed and didn't have the inclination to write much. There had also been something about her new home lacking a phone, not exactly unusual in the countryside, and Catalina didn't like to write anyway. Noemí, busy with her social obligations and with school, simply assumed Catalina and her husband would eventually travel to Mexico City for a visit.

The letter she was holding was therefore uncharacteristic in every way she could think of. It was handwritten, though Cata-

lina preferred the typewriter; it was rambling, when Catalina was succinct on paper.

“It is very odd,” Noemí admitted. She had been primed to declare her father was exaggerating or using this incident as a handy excuse to distract her from Duarte, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“To say the least. Looking at it, you can probably see why I wrote back to Virgil and asked him to explain himself. And why I was so taken aback when he immediately accused me of being a nuisance.”

“What exactly did you write to him?” she asked, fearing her father had seemed uncivil. He was a serious man and could rub people the wrong way with his unintended brusqueness.

“You must understand I would take no pleasure in putting a niece of mine in a place like La Castañeda—”

“Is that what you said? That you’d take her to the asylum?”

“I mentioned it as a possibility,” her father replied, holding out his hand. Noemí returned the letter to him. “It’s not the only place, but I know people there. She might need professional care, care that she will not find in the countryside. And I fear we are the ones capable of ensuring her best interests are served.”

“You don’t trust Virgil.”

Her father let out a dry chuckle. “Your cousin married quickly, Noemí, and, one might say, thoughtlessly. Now, I’ll be the first to admit Virgil Doyle seemed charming, but who knows if he is reliable.”

He had a point. Catalina’s engagement had been almost scandalously short, and they’d had scant chance to speak to the groom. Noemí wasn’t even sure how the couple met, only that within a few weeks Catalina was issuing wedding invitations. Up until that point Noemí hadn’t even known her cousin had a sweetheart. If she hadn’t been invited to serve as one of the witnesses before the civil judge, Noemí doubted she’d have known Catalina had married at all.

Such secrecy and haste did not go down well with Noemí’s

father. He had thrown a wedding breakfast for the couple, but Noemí knew he was offended by Catalina's behavior. That was another reason why Noemí hadn't been concerned about Catalina's scant communication with the family. Their relationship was, for the moment, chilly. She'd assumed it would thaw in a few months, that come November Catalina might arrive in Mexico City with plans for Christmas shopping and everyone would be merry. Time, it was merely a question of time.

"You must believe she is saying the truth and he is mistreating her," she concluded, trying to remember her impression of the groom. *Handsome* and *polite* were the two words that came to mind, but then they'd hardly exchanged more than a few sentences.

"She claims, in that letter, that he is not only poisoning her but ghosts walk through walls. Tell me, does that sound like a reliable account?"

Her father stood up and went to the window, looking outside and crossing his arms. The office had a view of her mother's precious bougainvillea trees, a burst of color now shrouded in darkness.

"She is not well, that is what I know. I also know that if Virgil and Catalina were divorced, he'd have no money. It was pretty clear when they married that his family's funds have run dry. But as long as they are married, he has access to her bank account. It would be beneficial for him to keep Catalina home, even if she'd be best off in the city or with us."

"You think he is that mercenary? That he'd put his finances before the welfare of his wife?"

"I don't know him, Noemí. None of us do. That is the problem. He is a stranger. He says she has good care and is improving, but for all I know Catalina is tied to her bed right now and fed gruel."

"And she is the melodramatic one?" Noemí asked, examining her orchid corsage and sighing.

"I know what an ill relative can be like. My own mother had a stroke and was confined to her bed for years. I also know a family does not handle such matters well at times."

“What would you have me do, then?” she asked, daintily placing her hands on her lap.

“Assess the situation. Determine if she should indeed be moved to the city, and attempt to convince him this is the best option if that is the case.”

“How would I manage such a thing?”

Her father smirked. In the smirk and the clever, dark eyes, child and parent greatly resembled each other. “You are flighty. Always changing your mind about everything and anything. First you wanted to study history, then theater, now it’s anthropology. You’ve cycled through every sport imaginable and stuck to none. You date a boy twice then at the third date do not phone him back.”

“That has nothing to do with my question.”

“I’m getting to it. You are flighty, but you are stubborn about all the *wrong* things. Well, it’s time to use that stubbornness and energy to accomplish a useful task. There’s nothing you’ve ever committed to except for the piano lessons.”

“And the English ones,” Noemí countered, but she didn’t bother denying the rest of the accusations because she did indeed cycle through admirers on a regular basis and was quite capable of wearing four outfits in a single day.

But it isn’t like you should have to make up your mind about everything at twenty-two, she thought. There was no point in telling her father that. He’d taken over the family business at nineteen. By his standards, she was on a slow course to nowhere. Noemí’s father gave her a pointed look, and she sighed. “Well, I would be happy to make a visit in a few weeks—”

“Monday, Noemí. That is why I cut your party short. We need to make the arrangements so you’re on the first train to El Triunfo Monday morning.”

“But there’s that recital coming up,” she replied.

It was a weak excuse and they both knew it. She’d been taking piano lessons since she was seven, and twice a year she performed in a small recital. It was no longer absolutely necessary for socialites to play an instrument, as it had been in the days of Noemí’s

mother, but it was one of those nice little hobbies that were appreciated among her social circle. Besides, she liked the piano.

“The recital. More likely you made plans with Hugo Duarte to attend it together, and you don’t want him taking another woman as his date or having to give up the chance of wearing a new dress. Too bad; this is more important.”

“I’ll have you know I hadn’t even bought a new dress. I was going to wear the skirt I wore to Greta’s cocktail party,” Noemí said, which was half the truth because she had indeed made plans to go there with Hugo. “Look, the truth is the recital is not my main concern. I have to start classes in a few days. I can’t take off like that. They’ll fail me,” she added.

“Then let them fail you. You’ll take the classes again.”

She was about to protest such a blithe statement when her father turned around and stared at her.

“Noemí, you’ve been going on and on about the National University. If you do this, I’ll give you permission to enroll.”

Noemí’s parents allowed her to attend the Feminine University of Mexico, but they had balked when she declared she’d like to continue her studies upon graduation. She wanted to pursue a master’s degree in anthropology. This would require her to enroll at the National. Her father thought this was both a waste of time and unsuitable with all those young men roaming the hallways and filling ladies’ heads with silly and lewd thoughts.

Noemí’s mother was equally unimpressed by these modern notions of hers. Girls were supposed to follow a simple life cycle, from debutante to wife. To study further would mean to delay this cycle, to remain a chrysalis inside a cocoon. They’d clashed over the matter a half dozen times, and her mother had cunningly stated it was up to Noemí’s father to hand down a decree, while her father never seemed poised to do so.

Her father’s statement therefore shocked her and presented an unexpected opportunity. “You mean it?” Noemí asked cautiously.

“Yes. It’s a serious matter. I don’t want a divorce splashed in

the newspaper, but I also can't allow someone to take advantage of the family. And this is Catalina we are talking about," her father said, softening his tone. "She's had her share of misfortunes and might dearly need a friendly face. That might be, in the end, all she needs."

Catalina had been struck by calamity on several occasions. First the death of her father, followed by her mother's remarriage to a stepfather who often had her in tears. Catalina's mother had passed away a couple of years later and the girl had moved into Noemí's household: the stepfather had already left by then. Despite the warm embrace of the Taboadas, these deaths had deeply affected her. Later, as a young woman, there had been her broken engagement, which caused much strife and hurt feelings.

There had also been a rather goofy young man who courted Catalina for many months and whom she seemed to like very much. But Noemí's father had chased him away, unimpressed by the fellow. After that aborted romance, Catalina must have learned her lesson, for her relationship with Virgil Doyle had been a paragon of discretion. Or maybe it had been Virgil who had been more wily and urged Catalina to keep mum about them until it was too late to disrupt any wedding.

"I suppose I could give notice that I'll be away for a few days," she said.

"Good. We'll telegraph Virgil back and let them know you are on your way. Discretion and smarts, that's what I need. He is her husband and has a right to make decisions on her behalf, but we cannot be idle if he is reckless."

"I should make you put it in writing, the bit about the university."

Her father sat down behind his desk again. "As if I'd break my word. Now go get those flowers out of your hair and start packing your clothes. I know it'll take you forever to decide what to wear. Who are you supposed to be, incidentally?" her father asked, clearly dissatisfied with the cut of her dress and her bare shoulders.

“I’m dressed as Spring,” she replied.

“It’s cold there. If you intend to parade around in anything similar to that, you better take a sweater,” he said dryly.

Though normally she would have come up with a clever rejoinder, she remained unusually quiet. It occurred to Noemí, after having agreed to the venture, that she knew very little of the place where she was going and the people she would meet. This was no cruise or pleasure trip. But she quickly assured herself that Father had picked her for this mission, and accomplish it she would. Flighty? Bah. She’d show Father the dedication he wanted from her. Perhaps he’d come to see her, after her success—for she could never picture herself failing—as more deserving and mature.

When Noemí was a little girl and Catalina read fairy tales to her, she used to mention “the forest,” that place where Hansel and Gretel tossed their breadcrumbs or Little Red Riding Hood met a wolf. Growing up in a large city, it did not occur to Noemí until much later that forests were real places, which could be found in an atlas. Her family vacationed in Veracruz, in her grandmother’s house by the sea, with no tall trees in sight. Even after she grew up, the forest remained in her mind a picture glimpsed in a story-book by a child, with charcoal outlines and bright splashes of color in the middle.

It took her a while, therefore, to realize that she was headed *into* a forest, for El Triunfo was perched on the side of a steep mountain carpeted with colorful wildflowers and covered thickly with pines and oaks. Noemí sighted sheep milling around and goats braving sheer rock walls. Silver had given the region its riches, but tallow from these animals had helped illuminate the mines, and they were plentiful. It was all very pretty.

The higher the train moved and the closer it got to El Triunfo,

though, the more the bucolic landscape changed and Noemí reassessed her idea of it. Deep ravines cut the land, and rugged ridges loomed outside the window. What had been charming rivulets turned into strong, gushing rivers, which spelled doom should anyone be dragged by their currents. At the bottom of the mountains farmers tended groves and fields of alfalfa, but there were no such crops here, just the goats climbing up and down rocks. The land kept its riches in the dark, sprouting no trees with fruit.

The air grew thin as the train struggled up the mountain until it stuttered and stopped.

Noemí grabbed her suitcases. She'd brought two of them and had been tempted to also pack her favorite trunk, though in the end she had judged it too cumbersome. Despite this concession, the suitcases were large and heavy.

The train station was not busy and was barely a station at all, just a lonesome square-shaped building with a half-asleep woman behind the ticket counter. Three little boys were chasing one another around the station, playing tag, and she offered them some coins if they helped her lug her suitcases outside. They did, gladly. They looked underfed, and she wondered how the town's inhabitants got by now the mine was closed and only the goats provided the opportunity for a bit of commerce.

Noemí was prepared for the chill of the mountain. The unexpected element was therefore the thin fog that greeted her that afternoon. She looked at it curiously as she adjusted her teal calotte hat with the long yellow feather and peered onto the street looking at her ride, for there could hardly be any mistaking it. It was the single automobile parked in front of the station, a preposterously large vehicle that made her think of swanky silent film stars of two or three decades earlier—the kind of automobile her father might have driven in his youth to flaunt his wealth.

But the vehicle in front of her was dated, dirty, and it needed a paint job. Therefore it was not truly the kind of automobile a movie star would drive these days, but seemed to be a relic that had been haphazardly dusted off and dragged onto the street.

She thought the driver might match the car and expected to find an elderly man behind the wheel, but a young fellow of about her age in a corduroy jacket stepped out. He was fair-haired and pale—she didn't realize anyone could be *that* pale; goodness, did he ever wander into the sun?—his eyes uncertain, his mouth straining to form a smile or a greeting.

Noemí paid the boys who had helped bring her luggage out, then marched forward and extended her hand.

"I am Noemí Taboada. Has Mr. Doyle sent you?" she asked.

"Yes, Uncle Howard said to pick you up," he replied, shaking her hand weakly. "I'm Francis. I hope the ride was pleasant? Those are all your things, Miss Taboada? Can I help you with them?" he asked in quick succession, as if he preferred to end all sentences with question marks rather than commit to definite statements.

"You can call me Noemí. Miss Taboada sounds so fussy. That's the sum of my luggage, and yes, I'd love some assistance."

He grabbed her two suitcases and placed them in the trunk, then went around the car and opened the door for her. The town, as she saw it from her window, was peppered with winding streets, colorful houses with flower pots at their windows, sturdy wooden doors, long stairways, a church, and all the usual details that any guidebook would call "quaint."

Despite this, it was clear El Triunfo was not in any guidebooks. It had the musty air of a place that had withered away. The houses were colorful, yes, but the color was peeling from most of the walls, some of the doors had been defaced, half of the flowers in the pots were wilting, and the town showed few signs of activity.

It was not that unusual. Many formerly thriving mining sites that had extracted silver and gold during the Colonia interrupted their operations once the War of Independence broke out. Later on, the English and the French were welcomed during the tranquil Porfiriato, their pockets growing fat with mineral riches. But the Revolution had ended this second boom. There were many hamlets like El Triunfo where one could peek at fine chapels built

when money and people were plentiful; places where the earth would never again spill wealth from its womb.

Yet the Doyles lingered in this land, when many others had long gone. Perhaps, she thought, they'd learned to love it, though she was not much impressed by it, for it was a steep and abrupt landscape. It didn't look at all like the mountains from her childhood storybooks, where the trees appeared lovely and flowers grew by the road; it didn't resemble the enchanting place Catalina had said she would live in. Like the old car that had picked Noemí up, the town clung to the dregs of splendor.

Francis drove up a narrow road that climbed deeper into the mountains, the air growing rawer, the mist intensifying. She rubbed her hands together.

"Is it very far?" she asked.

Again he looked uncertain. "Not that far," Francis said slowly, as if they were discussing a matter that had to be considered with much care. "The road is bad or I'd go faster. It used to be, a long time ago, when the mine was open, that the roads around here were all in good shape, even near High Place."

"High Place?"

"That's what we call it, our home. And behind it, the English cemetery."

"Is it really very English?" she said, smiling.

"Yes," he said, gripping the wheel with both hands with a strength she would not have imagined from his limp handshake.

"Oh?" she said, waiting for more.

"You'll see it. It's all very English. Um, that's what Uncle Howard wanted, a little piece of England. He even brought European earth here."

"Do you think he had an extreme case of nostalgia?"

"Indeed. I might as well tell you, we don't speak Spanish at High Place. My great uncle doesn't know a word of it, Virgil fares poorly, and my mother wouldn't ever attempt to stitch a sentence together. Is . . . is your English any good?"

"Lessons every day since I was six," she said, switching from Spanish to English. "I'm sure I'll have no trouble."

The trees grew closer together, and it was dark under their branches. She was not one for nature, not the real thing. The last time she had been anywhere near a forest had been on that excursion to El Desierto de los Leones when they went riding and then her brother and her friends decided to do some practice shooting with tin cans. That had been two, maybe even three years before. This place didn't compare to that. It was wilder here.

She found herself warily assessing the height of the trees and the depths of the ravines. Both were considerable. The mist thickened, making her wince, fearing they'd wind up halfway down the mountain if they took a wrong turn. How many eager miners hunting for silver had fallen off a cliff? The mountains offered mineral riches and a quick death. But Francis seemed secure in his driving even if his words faltered. She didn't generally like shy men—they got on her nerves—but who cared. It was not as if she'd come to see him or any other members of his family.

"Who are you, anyway?" she asked, to distract herself from the thought of ravines and cars crashing against unseen trees.

"Francis."

"Well, yes, but are you Virgil's little cousin? Long-lost uncle? Another black sheep I must be informed about?"

She spoke in that droll way she liked, the one she used at cocktail parties, and that always seemed to get her very far with people, and he replied as she expected, smiling a little.

"First cousin, once removed. He's a bit older than me."

"I've never understood that. Once, twice, thrice removed. Who keeps track of such a thing? I always figure if they come to my birthday party we are related and that's it, no need to pull out the genealogy chart."

"It certainly simplifies things," he said. The smile was real now.

"Are you a good cousin? I hated my boy cousins when I was little. They'd always push my head against the cake at my party even though I didn't want to do the whole mordida thing."

"Mordida?"

“Yes. You’re supposed to take a bite of the cake before it is cut, but someone always shoves your head into it. I guess you didn’t have to endure that at High Place.”

“There aren’t many parties at High Place.”

“The name must be a literal description,” she mused, because they kept going up. Did the road have no end? The wheels of the car crunched over a fallen tree branch, then another.

“Yes.”

“I’ve never been in a house with a name. Who does that these days?”

“We’re old-fashioned,” he mumbled.

Noemí eyed the young man skeptically. Her mother would have said he needed iron in his diet and a good cut of meat. By the looks of those thin fingers he sustained himself on dewdrops and honey, and his tone tended toward whispers. Virgil had seemed to her much more physical than this lad, much more present. Older, too, as Francis had indicated. Virgil was thirty-something; she forgot his exact age.

They hit a rock or some bump in the road. Noemí let out an irritated “ouch.”

“Sorry about that,” Francis said.

“I don’t think it’s your fault. Does it always look like this?” she asked. “It’s like driving in a bowl of milk.”

“This is nothing,” he said with a chuckle. Well. At least he was relaxing.

Then, all of a sudden, they were there, emerging into a clearing, and the house seemed to leap out of the mist to greet them with eager arms. It was so odd! It looked absolutely Victorian in construction, with its broken shingles, elaborate ornamentation, and dirty bay windows. She’d never seen anything like it in real life; it was terribly different from her family’s modern house, the apartments of her friends, or the colonial houses with façades of red tezontle.

The house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle. It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted places, if it had not seemed so tired, slats missing from a

couple of shutters, the ebony porch groaning as they made their way up the steps to the door, which came complete with a silver knocker shaped like a fist dangling from a circle.

It's the abandoned shell of a snail, she told herself, and the thought of snails brought her back to her childhood, playing in the courtyard of their house, moving aside the potted plants and seeing the roly-polies scuttle about as they tried to hide again. Or feeding sugar cubes to the ants, despite her mother's admonishments. Also the kind tabby, which slept under the bougainvillea and let itself be petted endlessly by the children. She did not imagine they had a cat in this house, nor canaries chirping merrily in their cages that she might feed in the mornings.

Francis took out a key and opened the heavy door. Noemí walked into the entrance hall, which gave them an immediate view of a grand staircase of mahogany and oak with a round, stained-glass window on the second landing. The window threw shades of reds and blues and yellows upon a faded green carpet, and two carvings of nymphs—one at the bottom of the stairs by the newel post, another by the window—stood as silent guardians of the house. By the entrance there had been a painting or a mirror on a wall, and its oval outline was visible against the wallpaper, like a lonesome fingerprint at the scene of a crime. Above their heads there hung a nine-arm chandelier, its crystal cloudy with age.

A woman was coming down the stairs, her left hand sliding down the banister. She was not an old woman although she had streaks of silver in her hair, her body too straight and nimble to belong to a senior citizen. But her severe gray dress and the hardness in her eyes added years that were not embedded in the flesh of her frame.

“Mother, this is Noemí Taboada,” Francis said as he began the climb up with Noemí's suitcases.

Noemí followed him, smiling, and offered her hand to the woman, who looked at it as if she was holding up a piece of week-old fish. Instead of shaking her hand, the woman turned around and began walking up the stairs.

“A pleasure to meet you,” the woman said with her back to Noemí. “I am Florence, Mr. Doyle’s niece.”

Noemí felt like scoffing but bit her tongue and simply slid next to Florence, walking at her pace.

“Thank you.”

“I run High Place, and therefore, if you need anything, you should come to me. We do things a certain way around here, and we expect you to follow the rules.”

“What are the rules?” she asked.

They passed next to the stained-glass window, which Noemí noted featured a bright, stylized flower. Cobalt oxide had been used to create the blue of the petals. She knew such things. The paint business, as her father put it, had provided her with an endless array of chemical facts, which she mostly ignored and which, nevertheless, stuck in her head like an annoying song.

“The most important rule is that we are a quiet and private lot,” Florence was saying. “My uncle, Mr. Howard Doyle, is very old and spends most of his time in his room. You are not to bother him. Second of all, I am in charge of nursing your cousin. She is to get plenty of rest, so you must not bother her unnecessarily either. Do not wander away from the house on your own; it is easy to get lost and the region is puckered with ravines.”

“Anything else?”

“We do not go to town often. If you have business there, you must ask me, and I’ll have Charles drive you.”

“Who is he?”

“One of our staff members. It’s a rather small staff these days: three people. They’ve served the family for many years.”

They went down a carpeted hallway, oval and oblong oil portraits on the walls serving as decoration. The faces of long-dead Doyles stared at Noemí from across time, women in bonnets and heavy dresses, men in top hats wearing gloves and dour expressions. The kind of people who might lay claim to a family crest. Pale, fair-haired, like Francis and his mother. One face blended into another. She would not have been able to tell them apart even if she’d looked closely.

“This will be your room,” said Florence once they reached a door with a decorative crystal knob. “I should warn you there is no smoking in this house, in case you partake in that particular vice,” she added, eyeing Noemí’s chic handbag, as if she could see through it and into her pack of cigarettes.

Vice, Noemí thought and was reminded of the nuns who had overseen her education. She’d learned rebellion while muttering the rosary.

Noemí stepped inside the bedroom and regarded the ancient four-poster bed, which looked like something out of a Gothic tale; it even had curtains you could close around it, cocooning yourself from the world. Francis set the suitcases by a narrow window—this window was colorless; the extravagant stained-glass panes did not extend to the private quarters—while Florence pointed out the armoire with its stash of extra blankets.

“We are high up the mountain. It gets very cold here,” she said. “I hope you brought a sweater.”

“I have a rebozo.”

The woman opened a chest at the foot of the bed and took out a few candles and one of the ugliest candelabra Noemí had ever seen, all silver, a cherub holding up the base. Then she closed the chest, leaving these findings on top of it.

“Electrical lighting was installed in 1909. Right before the revolution. But there have been few improvements in the four decades since then. We have a generator, and it can produce enough power for the refrigerator or to light a few bulbs. But it’s far from suitable lighting for this whole house. Accordingly, we rely on candles and oil lamps.”

“I wouldn’t even know how you use an oil lamp,” Noemí said with a chuckle. “I’ve never even been camping properly.”

“Even a simpleton can understand the basic principles,” Florence said, and then continued talking, giving Noemí no chance to reply. “The boiler is finicky at times and at any rate young people shouldn’t have very hot showers; a mild bath will do for you. There is no fireplace in this room, but a great large one downstairs. Have I forgotten anything, Francis? No, very well.”

The woman looked at her son, but did not give him any time to reply either. Noemí doubted many people got a chance to utter a word with her around.

“I’d like to speak to Catalina,” Noemí said.

Florence, who must have thought this was the end of their conversation, already had a hand on the doorknob.

“Today?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s almost time for her medication. She won’t stay awake after she takes it.”

“I want a few minutes with her.”

“Mother, she’s come so far,” Francis said.

His interjection seemed to have caught the woman off guard. Florence raised an eyebrow at the young man and clasped her hands together.

“Well, I suppose in the city you have a different sense of time, running to and fro,” she said. “If you must meet her forthwith, then you better come with me. Francis, why don’t you go see if Uncle Howard will be joining us for dinner tonight? I don’t want surprises.”

Florence guided Noemí down another long hallway and into a room with another four-poster bed, an ornate dressing table with a three-winged mirror, and an armoire large enough to hold a small army. The wallpaper in here was a diluted blue with a floral pattern. Little landscape paintings decorated the walls, coastal images of great cliffs and lonely beaches, but these were not local views. This was England, most likely, preserved in oils and silver frames.

A chair had been set by a window. Catalina sat in it. She was looking outside and did not stir when the women walked into the room. Her auburn hair was gathered at her nape. Noemí had steeled herself to greet a stranger ravaged by disease, but Catalina did not seem much different from when she’d lived in Mexico City. Her dreamy quality was perhaps amplified by the décor, but this was the sum of the change.

“She is supposed to have her medication in five minutes,” Florence said, consulting her wristwatch.

“Then I’ll take those five minutes.”

The older woman did not seem happy, but she left. Noemí approached her cousin. The younger woman had not glanced at her; she was oddly still.

“Catalina? It’s me, Noemí.”

She placed a hand gently on her cousin’s shoulder, and only then did Catalina look at Noemí. She smiled slowly.

“Noemí, you’ve come.”

She stood in front of Catalina nodding. “Yes. Father has sent me to check up on you. How are you feeling? What’s wrong?”

“I feel awful. I had a fever, Noemí. I’m sick with tuberculosis, but I’m feeling better.”

“You wrote a letter to us, do you remember? You said odd things in it.”

“I don’t quite remember everything I wrote,” Catalina said. “I had such a high temperature.”

Catalina was five years older than Noemí. Not a great age gap, but enough that when they were children, Catalina had taken on a motherly role. Noemí remembered many an afternoon spent with Catalina making crafts, cutting dresses for paper dolls, going to the movies, listening to her spin fairy tales. It felt strange to see her like this, listless, dependent on others when they had all once depended on her. She did not like it at all.

“It made my father awfully nervous,” Noemí said.

“I’m so sorry, darling. I shouldn’t have written. You probably had many things to do in the city. Your friends, your classes, and now you are here because I scribbled nonsense on a piece of paper.”

“Don’t worry about it. I wanted to come and see you. We haven’t seen each other in ages. I had thought you would have come visit us by now, to be frank.”

“Yes,” Catalina said. “Yes, I thought so too. But it’s impossible to get out of this house.”

Catalina was pensive. Her eyes, hazel pools of stagnant water, grew duller, and her mouth opened, as if she were getting ready to speak, except she did not. She drew her breath in instead, held it there, then turned her head and coughed.

“Catalina?”

“Time for your medicine,” Florence said, marching into the room, a glass bottle and a spoon in hand. “Come now.”

Catalina obediently had a spoon of the medication, then Florence helped her into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

“Let’s go,” Florence said. “She needs her rest. You can talk tomorrow.”

Catalina nodded. Florence walked Noemí back to her room, giving her a brief sketch of the house—the kitchen was in that direction, the library in this other one—and told her they’d fetch her for dinner at seven. Noemí unpacked, placed her clothes in the armoire, and went to the bathroom to freshen up. There was an ancient bathtub there, a bathroom cabinet, and traces of mold on the ceiling. Many tiles around the tub were cracked, but fresh towels had been set atop a three-legged stool, and the robe hanging from a hook looked clean.

She tested the light switch on the wall, but the light fixture in the bathroom did not work. In her room, Noemí could not locate a single lamp with a light bulb, though there was one electrical outlet. She supposed Florence had not been joking about relying on candles and oil lamps.

She opened her purse and riffled through it until she found her cigarettes. A tiny cup decorated with half-naked cupids on the night table served as an impromptu ashtray. After taking a couple of puffs, she wandered to the window, lest Florence complain about the stench. But the window would not budge.

She stood, looking outside at the mist.