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Meigallo

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MEIGALLO

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the figure of the witch as seen in traditional Galician folklore and in relation to female empowerment and traditional representations of women. It follows two women throughout two distinct timelines (1940s and 1980s) in the region of Galicia, northwest of Spain. The narrative also examines the relationship between social and institutional power, as well as the ways in which folklore can shed light on timeless topics such as gender relations and a community's interactions with the supernatural.

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CHAPTER 1

AMALIA

Amalia had been born in the *pazo* during a time when the Castilian language took over schools and newspapers, and Galician was the language one used to mock neighbors or chide children. Among the most vivid memories from her childhood was her mother, Remedios, repeating a string of eight illustrious surnames, none of them her own, which after all didn't stop Amalia's father from getting up every morning before dawn to milk the cows. Amalia's mother never resented her husband, though. She was never tricked by the name or the long lost title. She knew she was marrying a farmer, yet she was still proud of her husband's aristocratic ancestry, of the coat of arms carved over the main door, to which they had no legal right anymore—the right of the bloodline was enough for her.

Amalia wasn't very old when she realized that the only reason the *pazo* hadn't become a ruin was her mother. Every day, Remedios dedicated a few hours of work to a single room, cleaning it in depth and making sure to fix or replace whatever was worn or broken. The wooden stairs were always freshly varnished, and no dust was allowed to accumulate on tapestries or furniture. Where others might have pitied her efforts to keep up the appearances of a distant past, Amalia admired her mother's industriousness. She saw her mother's task as heroic and from a young age she made the decision not to allow herself to hinder her mother's efforts with a childish mess. The actions of putting her toys away after play or cleaning the mud off her shoes before entering the house were her

small contributions to the cause of the family's honor. The *pazo* might not have ruled the valley like it did centuries before, but it was at least kept alive, hibernating and waiting for a future time of renewed greatness.

Amalia couldn't remember a time in which she didn't know her family to be different than those from the other children in the valley. That time must have existed, before words became complex, before games involved stories as well as toys, before parents were more than providers of food and warmth. Every night, Amalia's parents sat by the black iron stove in the living room to read their books. Her mother had a collection of Spanish and French classics that she kept organized by author on a bookshelf in the corner of the room, most of them heavy volumes with brownish pages. She refused to risk reading anything current and disliking it, and found it safer to spend her time on tomes that had earned to have their title printed in gilded letters.

Her father made monthly trips to the provincial library and returned every time with an eclectic selection: romance and historical novels, a treatise on western art history, a single volume from the encyclopedia. He didn't like owning books—he couldn't be bothered to take on the responsibility of selecting which pieces were worth paying for and displaying, which necessarily small selection would define him as a reader and as a man. Most of all, he disliked the obligation of having to re-read them, since he couldn't justify ownership otherwise. He took pleasure in letting the books come and go, free of any other judgment than his own changing interests.

This was rather unusual in the valley. In the homes that could afford it, other parents would often sit by the radio at night, the mothers stitching, knitting, or preparing the next day's work. The sound coming out of the radio would sometimes preside over

the room, with everyone clinging to the words of the host or humming to the music. Other times, it would have to fight myriad closer, more earnest voices, and be finally relegated to background noise. Every night, Amalia's home sunk into a silence punctuated by the crackling of the stove or the fireplace in winter and the furtive sounds of crickets and other living things in summer. When Amalia looked at her parents' faces, serious and solemn, each lost in their own particular world, she couldn't help but feel terribly lonely, almost as if she were the only inhabitant of the big house, and she sometimes would start playing an especially loud game just to make them look up briefly and scowl.

This is how Amalia started her struggle with written words. Day after day, at the school and at home; on her notepads, on the blackboard, on her story books. Her teacher was often exasperated by the ineptitude that Amalia showed with reading and writing. No one could deny that she was the slowest student, the one to make the most mistakes even with the simplest words. Yet, the teacher rarely scolded Amalia; the child's effort to improve was obvious, as was the shame and disappointment in herself that she felt in class. The teacher even admired Amalia: in all her years teaching she had never seen a child persevere like that when the results were so consistently bad.

If Amalia persevered, it wasn't because her love of writing. Since she had been old enough to play away from grownups, Amalia spent hours outside, in the meadows, at the bottom of the valley or in the forest that climbed up the hill not far from the *pazo*. Perhaps Amalia didn't know much about diphthongs and arithmetic, but she knew what could kill a dog or help digestion, how to find water in the forest and how to safely climb a rotting tree. Every afternoon, however, she found her way home way before dinner,

back to her books and her homework. The reason was that every day, while she hunched over the big table until all the symbols melted together in front of her eyes, a loving hand would caress the back of her neck, accompanied by a voice asking, what are you reading? And she could turn and see a patient and interested look in the eyes of one of her parents, willing to listen to her babble about this or that book, to help her with difficult words and praise her efforts.

Amalia was irrationally afraid of the *hórreo* behind the *pazo*. Her parents barely used it to store the sacks of potatoes that their neighbor gifted them once a year in exchange for a few wheels of the sharp cheese Amalia's father made. The archaic, small stone granary, with its rectangular shape and pointy roof, reminded Amalia of a small funerary monument, even more sinister than those at the cemetery down the street, since at least these usually had some kind of marker indicating who lay there, sometimes even why, for how long, and who missed them.

In the days that she knew the kitchen was running out of potatoes, Amalia tried not to be around for her mother to send her to get more. Whenever she wasn't lucky or attentive enough to escape in time, Amalia had to climb the steps up to the entrance of the *hórreo* and open the moldy wooden door with a mix of apprehension and, increasingly as she grew older, shame. She had learned from her father that the world was a place in which everything could ultimately be measured and understood, and although there were terrible things in it, they were in plain sight most of the time. Still, she hesitated before the darkness of the granary and then darted inside moved by panic rather than resolve in a suicidal impulse that made her throw herself into the entrails of what she feared.

Amalia was eleven when she saw the creature in the *hórreo* for the first time. It was an unusual sunny afternoon outside and her mother had started preparing dinner early. Amalia had come into the kitchen breathless and thirsty from running outside, ready to go back again after a glass of cold water, but her mother stopped her before she could step out again.

“I need you to get me some potatoes.” Amalia’s mother had been waiting for her daughter to come into the house for a while. She could have gotten the potatoes herself, but she wanted Amalia to be fearless, as she had once dreamed to be herself. She was sitting at the big square kitchen table, chopping onions in the dark blue apron she used when she cooked. The child’s face dropped when she heard her mother, but she was quick to give her what she thought was a convincing smile.

“I am just in a hurry right now. There is a three-legged frog down by the river that I need to catch.”

“Amalia.” Her mother’s tone was slightly more severe than usual. They both knew where the lines were, and Amalia had become expert in toeing them. She knew there was nothing she could do this time.

The golden light of the heavy afternoon didn’t touch the *hórreo*, which hid from it under the shadow of the big house. She could hear sparrows singing from the top of the big oak not too far from her, yet the sound seemed to come from a different world. The *hórreo* stood in front of her, solid and immovable on top of the six stone pillars that kept it safe from rodents and other animals. It seemed to her that, blind and uncaring, it would still stand long after she was dead. Once in front of the open door, she ran into it as usual, blind in the dark. She grabbed a sack of potatoes without seeing it and turned around to

face the entrance. Before she could drag it back, she saw the creature sitting right by the door. This first time she looked like a little girl, with a soiled red dress and short scruffy hair. The creature looked younger than Amalia herself, and at first Amalia thought that a little girl was all she was. She was sitting on the ground, staring at Amalia with a half-eaten potato in her hands. Her youth made Amalia feel big and strong. Slowly, she started to approach the creature, dragging the sack of potatoes behind her.

“Hi, what’s your name?”

The creature followed Amalia’s movements as she walked back to the entrance of the *hórreo*, her hand extended. When she was close enough, the creature dropped the potato she had been eating to grab Amalia’s hand and smelled it eagerly, then slapped it away in disappointment. The creature then ignored Amalia to go back to her potato, and when she started eating again Amalia could see that all the teeth in her mouth seemed to have the same narrow and sharp shape. The creature was tearing long strips off the potato and chewing them with her open mouth. Amalia ran past the creature and out of the door, hitting her with the sack and almost falling down the steps.

That night, Amalia locked herself in her bedroom to sleep. It was a big, cold room made comfortable by the efforts of her mother. Before going to bed, she peeked out of her window, although the land surrounding the house was dark in the moonless night. She closed the shutters and the thick green drapes over them, and burrowed herself under the blankets of her solid wood bed, preparing to spend the night with her bedside light on. It wasn’t the first time she had done this, since her parents had always been very firm in making her deal with her own fears. She had not been allowed in their bed since she

could remember, and the older she got the least likely it was that they would indulge her fears.

As she got warm under the covers, however, Amalia realized that it wasn't so much fear that she felt, but an indescribable mix of shame and failure. When she went over the events of the afternoon the moment she remembered most vividly was the creature's contemptuous slap. Whatever it was that hid in the dark corners of the *hórreo*, Amalia was not good enough for her. Whenever she fantasized about her fairy tales in her idle evenings, Amalia always saw herself as the overlooked princess, the beauty transformed into a swan that would sooner or later reclaim her place of honor in the world. If there was something magical or extraordinary out there, she felt it ought to recognize her. The rejection of the strange being put her cruelly back among the farmers and shepherds around her.

Amalia barely slept that night and sat up for hours waiting for the sunrise. She opened her window then, letting the cold air in, reveling in the chill around her body. She could now see, beyond her parents' farm, the valley and the hills on the opposite side. Beyond them, she could feel the whole world, waiting for her. She went down into the kitchen barefooted and in her nightgown, owning the sensations of wood and stone and rugs under her feet. She took two eggs, one in each hand, and carried them toward the *hórreo* as the first rays of sun, now shining unobstructed from the east, touched its top.

The creature inside was curled against the sack of potatoes and seemed to sleep. She looked older now, a teenager with long black hair under a white scarf. The creature stirred and waked when Amalia walked in. It looked at her and smiled, welcoming. Amalia nodded and approached her slowly, her head slightly bowed but her eyes still on

the creature, her offering of eggs leading the way. When she was close enough the creature snatched an egg and crushed it between her palms, then licked her fingers with content. She looked up to Amalia again, took the second egg and left it on her skirt spread on the ground, her smile extending beyond her face and her dark green eyes to the whole of her body.

The next day, Amalia visited the *hórreo* shortly after breakfast, when her mother was occupied polishing the silver frame of the big mirror in the living room and her father was tending to the cows. This time, Amalia brought a piece of cake: half of her own breakfast. She had come to the conclusion that empty hands were not welcomed. She climbed the steps of the *hórreo* fighting the familiar apprehension, which she was now determined to overcome. The *hórreo* had become a land to conquer, to make her own through battle. She peered into the dark of the granary, which remained empty no matter how many times she blinked. When her eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, she saw nothing but potato sacks, brown and mundane. Amalia was old enough to doubt her own eyes, and so she walked among them, wondering whether perhaps they could adopt a human shape for a scared child. She found nothing of interest, except for an egg shell cleanly divided in two by a longitudinal cut, empty of its contents. Amalia took it in her hands carefully, wondering whether it was waste or a gift, the significance of that difference. She deposited the piece of cake on the ground, where the eggshell had been, and left.

Amalia went back to her room with the eggshell in her apron, acutely aware of its fragility. It was a test of her ability to take care of something delicate, to prove that she

wasn't just some careless child. She deposited the two halves on the windowsill. The sun would reach it in the afternoon.

Amalia tried again the next day, this time carrying a small bouquet of wild flowers, and again she found the *hórreo* empty. She was disappointed, but she knew the creature wasn't gone; that morning, one small green sprout had emerged from the interior of each of the egg halves. She could even see the hints of diminutive leaves coming from them.

On the third day, Amalia tried to do everything exactly as she had the last time she had seen the creature. She wore the same nightgown and walked into the kitchen before dawn. There weren't any eggs left, so instead she scooped some salt into a bread bag. When she opened the door of the *hórreo*, it was empty once more. She sighed with impatience and searched the dark granary; there was perhaps a clue she had missed somewhere, some message or instructions, maybe another gift. When she was turning to leave in defeat, Amalia saw her again, this time standing directly between her and the door, towering over her. She looked like a distinguished old lady, her grey hair perfectly arranged into a complicated style adorned with a wild flower, her long red dress flattering but modest. She looked annoyed, and when Amalia approached her the creature threw something at her. It was soft and it hit Amalia's face before falling into the ground. Amalia could smell the cake from the day before. "Duly noted," she thought.

After that, the creature didn't look particularly angry at her. Amalia approached her with her bag of salt, hoping to get it right this time. The creature snatched the bag from her, took a pinch between her thumb and her forefinger, and smelled it carefully, with the demeanor of a connoisseur. She dropped the salt back into the bag and smiled,

nodding. Amalia let out the breath she didn't know she was holding. When Amalia went back to her room, she found that the two plants that had sprouted from the eggshell halves had grown to match the size of her hand. They didn't look like any plant she had ever seen.

Amalia continued her visits, always bringing something with her, and she learned a few things. She learned that she was more likely to find the creature at dawn and dusk, the times when the sun was untrustworthy. She learned that the creature preferred found things to created ones. She learned other things, too, since the creature seemed willing to teach when the gifts pleased her. Amalia learned to be very quiet and listen to the warnings of ants. She learned the right way to lick a bug bite to make it disappear. The creature never told Amalia what to do with the eggshell plants, though. Amalia never touched them except to caress them in awe from time to time. They grew to be about a half meter tall and then stopped growing. The plants didn't seem to need anything from her; neither soil or water, and all she could give them was her wonder.

Through the months, Amalia continued to learn all kinds of things. One summer afternoon she learned about death. Not about the fact that everybody dies—she was already well aware of that—but about the things that death could do. It was shortly after lunch and Amalia was floating on her back in a river pool, far upstream from where most other people normally went swimming. She had never been particularly social, but now she rarely spent any time around children her own age. She would float for a few seconds, allowing the gentle current to carry her, and then turn and swim back. Suddenly, she felt something slimy against her hand and instinctively she grabbed it. After meeting the creature, nothing in the forest or the river scared her anymore.

The fish was a trout, small enough to allow her hand to grip it firmly. The trout shook frantically in the water, trying to free itself, but Amalia carried it out of the pool. She was very excited; this was the best offering she had found so far. She put on her shoes and started to walk back to the *pazo*. There were still a few hours before dusk. She could feel the fish moving in her hand for a few minutes as she walked, first trying desperately to escape, or to breathe, then giving up or losing strength and, in the end, she felt the final faint tremor of death. It all took only a couple of minutes, but Amalia felt every second of it. When she made it into her bedroom, she dropped the fish onto the windowsill, between the two plants.

At dusk, Amalia took the fish to the *hórreo*. The creature had never seemed so delighted. She looked round and matronly, and pinched Amalia's cheeks in approval. That evening, Amalia learned that there was no good reason for her to breathe more than once in half an hour.

Amalia had changed since her meeting with the creature, but then all children change, and fast. Her parents were not alarmed, or at least their concern was vague. She still played with other children at school, but she spent her afternoons alone. Her mother remembered her own time at school, when friendships were so intense that they took precedence over family and crushes in terms of loyalty. Amalia's father had never had many friends after his own father had pulled him out of boarding school at age nine. He had a hard time understanding the boys of the valley, their games and their interests, and often even their speech. When he grew up, though, and had to take on the harsh farm work that his father had neglected to prepare him for, he sought the help of his neighbors, who were gracious enough with him, moved perhaps by a combination of regular human

compassion and the satisfaction of instructing the master of the *pazo* on how to shovel cow shit.

On the first anniversary of Amalia's encounter with the creature, her father brought gruesome news to the dinner table. A boy from the valley a few years older than Amalia had died that afternoon. He and some other shepherds had been chasing away a pack of wolves when he had been shot in the back. The shepherds were young, reckless, and drunk on violence. No one knew—or would say—who had shot that particular bullet, and so they had taken the boy's body back to his mother's house, laying his body on his own bed under the woman's empty eyes.

"Be glad that it wasn't you," said Amalia's mother, abruptly. "Always running around with that type." Amalia's father shrugged.

"I drink with grown men. We only shoot what we mean to kill."

Amalia's mother knew that her husband was right, and she was just reacting to the shock of such an absurd death. It annoyed her to admit to exaggerating, so she just moved on.

"The wake is tonight, they are burying him tomorrow."

"Perhaps we should go pay our respects after dinner," Amalia's father said, but no one took him seriously. He sometimes announced obligations as if stating the intention to fulfill them might be enough, with no actual action required. They could all tell by the way he didn't press the subject or talk specifics that this was the case tonight. He was wearing his sheep skin slippers already.

The meal concluded without further mention of the dead boy, but Amalia couldn't stop thinking about him. She thought about the blood leaving his body through the bullet

hole, about his eyes looking desperately around him during those few last seconds. She imagined a friend's hand holding his, and how the dying grip would feel. The sensation should have something in common with that of the trout asphyxiating in her hand, which she could almost feel as if it were yesterday.

Amalia waited in her room, fully dressed under the blankets, until all the noises in the house had ceased, and then a couple of hours more. She left the *pazo* in the dark, the waning moon barely bright enough to illuminate part of the landscape from time to time. She knew where the boy had lived the way everyone in the valley knew where everyone else lived. The house was not in the village itself, but some distance down a dark dirt road. She tripped and fell a few times in the dark, hurting her hands and her knees, and once she got lost, having to feel her way along a stone wall back to the road.

She eventually arrived to the boy's house a few hours past midnight. The door was open, welcoming visitors all through the night. No one feared strangers during a wake. Amalia paused, combed her hair with her hands and wiped her knees with the hem of her dress. Then, she stepped into the light of the mourning home.

The wide hall was lined with chairs on both sides, but only two of them were occupied. Two women wearing black sat leaning against each other, sleeping in that uncomfortable position. The boy's mother was not from the valley, which might have explained the lack of attendance. A few people might have shown up earlier for a couple of hours, but no one else was close enough to stay the whole night. At least not any women; Amalia couldn't see or hear the men.

She walked quietly past the sleeping women and into the only other room she could see with a light on. The boy's bedroom was austere, with a few select toys kept,

probably out of nostalgia on a shelf beside the window. The bed had been moved from what seemed to be its natural place in a corner and was awkwardly positioned in the center of the room, the clean body of the dead boy lying neatly on top of it. The only other person there—a woman sitting by the bed, awake and red-eyed—looked up and nodded. There was no one on duty with the mother, who seemed to be the only sentient person in the house. Amalia felt that allowing the woman to go through the night by herself was a terrible neglect. She murmured a formulaic condolence and the woman nodded again. If she thought it strange to see the twelve-year-old there alone in the middle of the night she didn't say.

Amalia observed the body, so pale and still. If there had been any dirt or blood on it, none remained. At least someone had been compassionate enough to take care of that. She observed the body for a few seconds, considering how she could offer it to the creature. She wished childishly that she could just take the whole thing, drag with her all the way to the *hórreo*. There was no blood left, and Amalia was mad at herself for not thinking of bringing a knife or a pair of scissors to help her take possession of the body in other ways. Finally, she leaned to kiss the boy's forehead, and rubbed the cuff of her shirt through his lips and against his teeth. She hoped she looked like an infatuated girl, but when she looked up the boy's mother was staring into space.

She made it home with a few hours to spare and, after cutting the piece of her shirt that she hoped contained some of the dead boy's spit, she sat on the steps of the *hórreo* to wait. When the time was right, she walked inside, and saw the creature sitting on the ground, reclined against a sack of potatoes. She looked impossibly old, more cadaver than woman. As Amalia approached her bursting with excitement, the creature

merely extended her hand. She took the piece of shirt and licked it with the tip of her grey tongue, then swallowed it whole.

That morning, Amalia learned how to never get lost in the dark.

CHAPTER 2

THE MEN

At twenty-one, Amalia had had time to observe how romance developed among her peers. The pairings seemed based more on convenience and eagerness than that which she read about in her mother's magazines; perhaps marriage meant something else in the city. Preferences rapidly adjusted to opportunity; a smart girl would fall madly in love with the boy that she had caught eyeing her.

Amalia knew she would have sex and breed. She saw the parts of her body become ready for it, the same way her stomach had changed to accept potatoes and beef instead of her mother's milk and her hands had become stronger and calloused to better adapt to the farm work. She had observed the bodies of young men, working, resting and playing, and wanted them. She knew she would marry one of them and bring him home, since her house was bigger and older than all the rest, and she was an only child, to take care of the cows and of the house when her parents died. After her twenty-first birthday, aware of the vulnerability of the family line, she decided she would make her choice soon.

She had grown up around Daniel, since all the children in the valley had no choice but to grow up around each other. He was two years younger than she, yet for the past five years he had been a good deal taller than all the boys her age. Unlike other teenage boys, however, his body was eager to accommodate his stature, and he seemed to Amalia like a creature with human proportions but belonging to a different species. Apart from

that curious fact, he had never seemed especially interesting to her. He went to school and tended to his father's cows, another link in an endless chain of farmers, and would have considered himself rich with a secured supply of food and clothing for a large family. He was what people called "full of life," making himself impossible to ignore, yet not totally exasperating, the kind of person that people only discussed when he was within view, offering nothing to gossip, maliciousness, or admiration otherwise.

She thought she had chosen Daniel because he was good looking and hardworking, but later on she wondered if it wasn't also greed about the excessive nature of him. He seemed to have more life in him than was allotted to most people, to take more space but also to give more in return, and she wanted to own that, in ways that she wasn't sure yet were possible. It never occurred to her that he might not choose her back. She didn't consider herself especially attractive, but she was young and the only child of an old name. Also, the creature had chosen her, so why wouldn't he? In the end, she was right. He did choose her, or rather allowed himself to be chosen. That early summer day, when she had approached him after church and told him to walk her home, he had obliged. A month later they were engaged.

They saw each other almost every day, and some nights. She liked to take him by the hand and guide him into the dark woods, to the point where he wouldn't be able to find his way back in the dark. He trusted her blindly, mostly because she was so confident and seemed to care for him. In the forest, they didn't even look for a clearing, but kissed and whispered against tree-trunks.

"I used to be afraid of you," he said, and she smiled. "You looked at me like I was nothing, then you looked at me like you were hungry."

“I *am* hungry,” she said, pulling him toward her, and he laughed.

Since the dead shepherd, Amalia only had had the chance to offer one more person to the creature. One winter morning she had woken up to the news that one of her old school mates was in labor with her first child. The girl had been universally praised for being up and working until the last possible moment. By sundown she was dead and Amalia could hear the church’s bell, loud and honest, letting the whole valley know. She had been waiting for that sound, a sound that told her: “It’s not his anymore, it’s not hers. Come and take it.” And she did.

The creature had been pleased. A tiny drop of the blood that had both given life and taken it. She hid it somewhere inside her long and complicated grey braid. That day Amalia learned how to guess the exact age of a tree by its taste, but she wasn’t happy. She had never questioned the authority of the creature, always grateful for the knowledge she got in exchange for mostly small offerings. That day, though, she felt unfairly treated for the first time. She had brought her something, something valuable, and the creature had taken it as her right, as if Amalia was a vassal that she rewarded with crumbs. When she protested, the creature replied “You bring me carrion that you find dead and rotting, what else do you expect?”

“Do you want me to kill them myself? How am I going to do that?” She wasn’t sure whether it was a rhetorical question or whether she was asking for practical advice. In any case, the creature answered: “Use one of the leaves,” and then she turned away from Amalia, reclined against a potato sack and seemed to fall asleep.

After Amalia’s fifteenth birthday, her plants had resumed growing and by now had created a frame around her window, staying away from the glass, apparently content

with the amount of sunlight they got, and turning toward the inside of the building instead. Amalia's mother had tried to trim them once without telling her—she still tried to keep some claim to her daughter's space, at least to demand that it was kept in good condition. Over the following day, the plants had grown back to their original size.

Amalia had often wondered about the plants, but never suspected they had a practical use. They were a guarantee of her connection to the creature, their ever-implicit pact. The two plants were a similar color (or rather a similar palette of greens), but their leaves had distinct shapes. The ones from the plant on the left were heart-shaped and smelled like flowers while the ones on the right were oval and smelled like fruits. Did she have to guess which ones were lethal? Amalia assumed that one or both of the plants were poisonous. She found it impossible to guess, and certainly not on appearances. She knew better than that. Amalia considered testing them on some of the farm animals, but it seemed like unnecessary waste. She would try them both, she decided. One of them was bound to succeed, and it would be interesting to learn what the other leaf would do, if its effects were different at all.

It took Amalia a surprisingly long time to realize that what she was planning was murder. She had thought about stealth and deceit, about the inevitable fight between what was alive and wanted to live, and what wanted to kill it. She had assumed her role in it and assessed the complications of the problem, and now she remembered, surprised by her own oversight, that she was supposed to respect the sanctity of human life. She felt something in the space behind her stomach that she wasn't sure was fear, guilt or anticipation. Most likely, it was a mix of those things, and other things that she could not

name. In the end, all that mattered was whether it would push her forward or hold her back.

Deliberately, she made herself find the right reasons. She thought of the cows, peaceful and almost innocent. She had helped raise them, had played with them when they were small, whispering sweet things in their ears as she fed them. She had milked them, cared for them when they were sick, and finally helped her father slaughter them. There was no contradiction in this cycle; all lives were there for the taking, including hers. Having the power and the resolve to do it is what gave her the right. She managed to make it right, and it wasn't as hard as she had imagined. That was, perhaps, the secret, that the line was so scary, so unthinkable to most people because crossing it was not hard at all.

The next step was to find the right offering. It took her a few months, but Amalia's choice was, once more, made before the right reasons came to her to justify a decision that welcomed them. The person had to be older, she decided. It had to be someone whose potential was mostly realized, so she would be stealing as little from it as possible. Solitude was also good, so their loss would affect as few people as possible.

Don Gabriel and his housekeeper, Teresa, presented themselves as the best candidates. They were both older and childless, and there was no one to miss them but each other and the older, lonely people who depended on the tolerant companionship of mostly interchangeable priests. Any of them would only be missed until the next person was designated to take over their roles. That was, in fact, the way it was supposed to be; the priest's only family were his parishioners, and Teresa's life as his housekeeper was similarly dedicated to the church. They were already, to some extent, sacrificial figures,

having made an offering of their lives, and now that they were older their potential diminished, their time of service was already running short.

That Sunday after Mass, Amalia waited for the priest in the church's square.

"Father, I need to talk to you," she said when she saw him come out, having removed his liturgical clothing and wearing, once more, his usual black robe. He looked more human that way.

"Of course. What about?"

"Well, I have some questions about my wedding." Amalia didn't elaborate. She had never been a good liar, since she had trouble conceiving herself as someone she wasn't or had no desire to be. Still, Don Gabriel seemed happy enough to have a young person ask for his guidance, and invited her to visit him in the parish house later than afternoon.

Amalia had only visited Don Gabriel once or twice before with her mother, mostly during her preparation for her First Communion. No one thought Amalia especially pious, but her behavior never raised any eyebrows. The priest was always eager to follow up on the smallest show of interest, firmly convinced that his mission on Earth was to push as many sheep as possible closer to God, yet unwilling to be a nuisance to his neighbors.

That afternoon, the last in the life of either the priest or his housekeeper, was especially bright and sunny. The sunshine didn't bring with it a celebration of life and nature, as it often did in the spring, but instead it revealed mercilessly the misery of the village, often hidden under the cover of rain or fog. As Amalia made her way to the

parish house through the muddy streets, she noticed the poor state of many of the houses, the gaunt animals and children.

Five minutes before the agreed time, Amalia knocked on the parish house door and Teresa opened for her, greeting her with exaggerated effusiveness. She took the plate Amalia was carrying and accompanied her inside with a hand behind her guest's back.

"He'll be with you in a minute," she said before leaving her alone in the sitting room. The room was dusty and cluttered, which Amalia blamed on Teresa's middle-age complacency. A priest was a public figure and he should always expect company. Don Gabriel found her doodling with her finger on the dust on top of the table.

"Please forgive the mess," he said. It sounded like a command more than an apology. She didn't answer. "I know what you're going to tell me," he said, sitting heavily on the armchair in front of her, and Amalia thought she saw a cloud of dust displaced by his weight. "You're going to tell me you want to have Basilio play his guitar during the wedding. Well, let me tell you that the only music I'll allow in my church is a well-played organ, and we don't have one."

"Actually," she said, "I have another question for you. Do you believe in women who can see their way in the dark and make a home for themselves in the forest?" Amalia was genuinely curious. She had never discussed the creature and their agreement with anyone but, sitting in the man's house, she felt that there was now a special kind of intimacy between the both of them, even if the priest was still unaware of it. She hoped he would see it, in the end. Not with rage or hatred, but just the awareness of how close two people can get, to acknowledge the intimacy in killing, as physical as sex or nursing.

“Are you talking about witches? I do believe that there are women who will decide to get naked and dance in the moonlight and then wonder why they can’t find a husband. What does that have to do with your marriage? I hope you haven’t been doing any of that nonsense.” Don Gabriel had been born far south in Extremadura, where the sun over the naked plains scorched any shadow of ghost or goblin. Amalia smiled.

“Don’t worry, I always dance fully clothed.”

Holding a tray, Teresa walked in just in time to hear her and she raised her eyebrows theatrically.

“Do you believe in witches, Teresa?” Don Gabriel asked, humorously. He liked to tease his housekeeper whenever the topic of local folklore came up, since she seemed to him so gullible. In the end, she was a good Christian. Teresa, though, was by now used to that and she rarely gave him anything to use against her. She shrugged.

“Even if I don’t believe in them, they are real,” which was the Galician’s people traditional way of dealing with the question of belief by dismissing it entirely. She left the tray on the table with a pot of coffee, three cups and the two pastries she had brought with her, one with the bright red strawberry preserve, and the other with the golden peach one. Teresa served the coffee; Amalia had hers black.

“Well, as a priest I have to tell you that the Devil does have the power to do what we would call ‘magic.’ You only have to look at possessions. Whether or not there are women who partake in that, I can’t tell you. But you won’t see me spend my money to have my future divined.”

Amalia nodded, but next to her Teresa chuckled.

“What does the Devil have to do with anything?” She mumbled, looking into her coffee. “Anyway, we should share this,” she said moving to take a knife in order to cut the pastries.

“Oh, no.” Amalia intervened. “They are just for you. I’m trying to become a better cook, and I have already filled my mother’s kitchen with these. Please take them.”

Teresa and Don Gabriel seemed pleased at this display of domesticity, and they took one pastry each. Teresa hurried to take the peach, leaving the strawberry to Don Gabriel. The rest of the afternoon, they talked about love, companionship and useful recipes, and Amalia made sure to make the most of the company she realized she actually enjoyed. If both of them could live, she might have wanted to repeat the experience. It was not in her nature to regret missed opportunities, though, and she left satisfied and expectant.

If there was one thing out of place in Don Gabriel’s funeral it was Teresa’s radiance. She didn’t look one day younger than her sixty-two, but that day the wrinkles of her skin made her look queenly rather than worn. The white on her hair looked as bright and smooth as the brown; her back was straight and her eyes shiny with something more than tears. It was late August and the funeral had been planned for the early morning to avoid the heat, if it didn’t rain. Only a few women cried, out of politeness, and also did Teresa, who was the most sincere. Rather than heavy with grief, her tears seemed clear and cleansing like summer rain. Her neighbors surrounded her, solicitous with kind words, and patted her back or tried to dry her tears. They seemed eager to touch her, attracted to her by something other than compassion and not quite lust, and she didn’t lack a shoulder to cry on.

Don Gabriel's only relative was his older brother, who had come all the way from Badajoz. He wore a heavy black suit, probably his only mourning clothes bought for a different weather. He didn't talk to anyone and blew his nose exactly once during the whole morning. Amalia attended too, standing with her parents and holding Daniel's arm, as he had asked her to do. The priest from the next parish over performed the ritual with inscrutable gravity and Amalia wondered what priests thought when they buried each other, and whether they imagined themselves lifeless inside the plain coffin. She had volunteered to help Teresa and the other women—older, who knew what they were doing—take care of Don Gabriel's body. She had adopted a deferent, willing attitude that had earned her their approval and a few hairs obtained while she combed his head.

The creature was pleased with this. It was her biggest offering yet, perhaps because of how much it had cost, or because it had been reaped specially for her. Amalia gave it proudly, spoils rather than offering, but the creature didn't care either way. It never seemed to pay attention to Amalia's moods, as long as she brought her things. After that, Amalia was able to look at bodies and see when they were dying.

The summer was fading and Daniel wanted to get married immediately, but Amalia refused. She wanted to wait until the spring, when the world would be getting ready for things to be awakened and created. She wanted her body to be impregnated then, and to grow with the wheat over the summer, the new life to be delivered before the new winter. In the end he gave up, because that was all he could do. She wasn't stubborn; she was immovable.

The new priest was young, as Amalia had hoped, but his youth was devoid of energy. He looked at the world suspiciously, his words of comfort or goodwill never

sounding quite sincere. The “Don” seemed too big for him, to the point that she felt the impulse of either just calling him by his given name or stressing the title exaggeratedly. She only did this when she spoke to Daniel, because her mother had giving her a look when she tried it with her, even though Remedios herself seemed to have more respect for the robes than for the man.

No one could accuse Don Javier of being lazy. He was up every day before dawn and was punctilious with his duties, but there was something about the way he moved and the way he spoke that made him seem like he would rather be doing something else—whether he was celebrating Mass or playing cards. Perhaps it was the contrast with Teresa, whom he had inherited together with the parish.

The small coven of elderly widows that used to congregate around Don Gabriel with the excuse of spiritual guidance tried him too for a while, but he had little patience for them, or they for him, and eventually they drifted to Teresa instead, who had always been social, but now could not have a moment to herself and didn’t seem to need one. The parish house sitting room was as messy as it had always been, but it was the housekeeper who held audience in it, sharing gossip or giving advice. Don Javier soon learned to retreat to his study, and in the rare moments when he was needed he was surprised by the knocking on his door. In the end, the all missed Don Gabriel, but not enough to think about it much.

Amalia and Daniel got married on a rainy morning in March, and the rugs that Teresa had placed by the door couldn’t keep the church’s floor from getting muddy. The mud soon found Amalia’s white dress—her mother had saved for months to have it done in the city— but she secretly enjoyed the sight of the wet fertile soil on the white fabric.

It was a good omen. Her father cried discreetly and Don Javier yawned twice. Daniel beamed at her and held her hand, his voice earnest when he pronounced the vows. He embodied the ritual whole-heartedly.

They spent their wedding night in Amalia's bedroom. As she had predicted, Daniel agreed to move to the *pazo*. In the dark, Amalia was overwhelmed by the smell of him, and by his taste, which were different now as her husband than they had been as her fiancé.

The summer came and went, and Amalia's body remained as slim as ever.

CHAPTER 3

THE WOMEN

The night he arrived, Javier met Teresa at the door of the parish house. She opened it before he could knock, as if she had heard him or had been waiting by the window.

“Good evening, dear. And welcome!” She said as she hugged him. She smelled of cabbage and lemon.

“Good evening, Madam,” Javier tried to say while Teresa grabbed the suitcase he had dropped on the ground and led the way in. The parish house had probably been neat in a non-distant past, but it now appeared in chaotic disarray. There were papers and notebooks scattered around the table, as well as bundles of embroidery. The resulting impression wasn’t so much one of neglect as of careless and frantic activity. Without waiting for him, Teresa had already taken his suitcase to the room he guessed was his bedroom. This one, at least, was Spartan, which he enjoyed. He washed his face and hands with cold water and then inquired about dinner, hoping to get to know his housekeeper better, but she just pointed toward the kitchen.

“There is omelet and soup, still warm. There is also some cheese and some fruit, if you need dessert.” Her forethought and attentiveness felt somewhat both careless and condescending, as if she had finished her chores early because she had better things to do. Before he could protest—and he knew he should although it felt too soon and unpleasant—she put on a jacket and left.

Javier stood there for a few minutes looking at the door, trying to remember what, exactly, was wrong with the situation. He had—indeed—been abandoned by his hostess on the night of his arrival. She hadn't made sure that the food was to his taste, or his accommodations sufficient. There was, however, something else. Something was wrong with the situation that he couldn't quite explain.

The food was indeed still warm and delicious, and he ate it in the kitchen while reading a book, as was his custom. After eating, he walked straight into his bedroom, closing his door all the way before realizing, annoyed, that he was intimidated by the mess in the common spaces of the small house. It wasn't up to him to clean up, but he didn't have to take refuge away from the mess, either. This was, after all, his new home, and he had to remind himself he had a right to it. The presence of the previous priest had completely been erased from the room, and as he emptied his suitcase it took just a few minutes to make the room completely his. He then walked out deliberately, planning a route of exploration. Javier paused in front of the door of Teresa's bedroom, which was ajar despite having a lock. He peeked inside and saw a small bed with several dresses and sweaters on top of it, and a pile of white, clean underwear. Ashamed, he closed the door and continued to the living room. This room, at least, he had a right to.

He didn't hesitate to go through the things that Teresa had left there. He examined her embroideries, and saw the usual flowers and dogs, but also spiders and other unusual patterns. The handwriting in the notebooks was mostly illegible, very different from the one in the letters they had exchanged. It seemed as if she had scribbled trying to match the speed of her thoughts. What little he could make of the content seemed to refer to fairy tales or legendary events.

The meetings had started when a group of women came together to take care of Don Gabriel's dead body—mostly lonely women, widows and spinsters that had nothing better to do than look after the dead. Teresa had led them around the dead body, assigning jobs to each of them: Aurelia and Amalia would take care of the hair, Eugenia and Rosa helped wash the body. Teresa herself had chosen and ironed an outfit and they all dressed the body in it. Once their job was done, after Don Gabriel's perfectly groomed body was laid down into the soil, the women kept meeting around Teresa. Until the new priest arrived, she had the parish house to herself, and the women took advantage of that. Other women joined them, wives and mothers. Some of them were invited while others just showed up out of curiosity.

The meetings happened late at night, well after clearing up dinner and long before breakfast was to be started. They took place during the time that women had a rightful claim to—the hours in which they were allowed to leave behind home and responsibilities for the fantasies of their dreams, except that now they left their beds, barefoot and bright-eyed, their hair unruly, their faces unmade, their husbands lonely.

Sons and daughters were embarrassed. They pretended it didn't happen, or either they whispered, "yours does? Mine too!" But there was nothing they could do. They might cough during breakfast, ask them about their sleep, but the mothers were not ashamed and they refused to explain themselves. Sooner or later, however, they noticed their newly rosy cheeks, their loud laughter, their now-common kisses on the forehead, and they took occasional breaks on their disapproval to feel happy for them, perhaps a little jealous.

When the women sat around the sitting-room table, their feet toeing the iron brazier, Teresa started with the half-forgotten rhymes that her grandmother had whispered to her, to entertain her in the long snow-covered days. She started singing, half-remembering and half-making up the song as she went. Alejandra joined in, and as they sang, the two women remembered their childhood, the hard wood desks they shared at school, the roasted chestnuts they bought from old, toothless Doña María on cold November days. The chestnuts were cooked directly among the embers and they would lick the salty ash off their fingers, feeling wicked. The song reminded them both of that and more. It reminded them of things they couldn't possibly remember, of women they had never met. They reproduced the timbre of their grandmothers' voices, who in turned had reproduced that of their own grandmothers, as heard by the fireplace.

Alejandra inhabited a clean world, made spotless by her own efforts. It extended beyond her doorstep to the church and the cemetery. Her own person seemed to be constantly scrubbed with soap.

She took care of the pilgrim cemetery. The little patch of land dedicated to those who had died in their pilgrimage was not a cemetery on itself, but a small section at the back of the parish church. There were only a few graves in it; the most recent, with only a date on it, was from 1868. Alejandra ignored the graves of her own ancestors and neighbors, and instead cared for those who had died away from home, those whose families probably had never heard from them again.

Alejandra herself was the mother to a large family. She had attended school for a few brief years until she learned all she needed to raise cows and children. For almost five decades she had cleaned excrement and snot and blood and tears, cooked for an army

and then guests, and for the parish. The morning after the wedding of her youngest daughter, Alejandra woke up at dawn to a spotless house. She took her bucket and her brush and headed out toward the cemetery, where she could now wrestle with centuries of indifference.

Her husband had loved her passionately when they first married. He had loved her small bird-like frame that seemed almost to crackle when he held her, her quiet efficiency and the pragmatic way in which she managed the household. He never thought her pretty, but her thin lips seemed wise to him, and he desired the light in her eyes that he knew was not for him—or any man.

She had first been indifferent to him, then deemed him adequate when he started courting her. He washed often and was deferent to the order she imposed in the house; he brought his dish to the sink after every meal and washed his feet before climbing into bed. As a husband, he fit her life nicely and she was fond of him for that.

He had vaguely dreamed of a time when her obligations would stop, or at least slow down, and they would walk hand in hand at the end of the day. She would finally stop and look at him, once she had the time. When Alejandra took on cleaning the pilgrims' graves, he understood that she would keep on working until her legs refuse to carry her anymore.

Amalia was aware of the meetings, but they didn't concern her. As a child, she had never had much use for close friends, since the friendships she spied often felt treacherous and changing. When she locked the door of her home every night, she knew that its walls contained everyone she loved, and that was reassuring.

Their first year of marriage was a quiet one, mostly peaceful and punctuated with occasional joy or difficulty. Amalia's parents liked Daniel well enough. She had feared that the remnants of her mother's aristocratic aspirations might make her look down on her new son-in-law, but instead they both bonded over their common situation. Married into the family rather than born in it, their claim to the *pazo*'s heritage was stronger, in a way. They had chosen and being chosen themselves. Daniel took over some of the most taxing tasks, relieving Amalia's father, who seemed more grateful than ashamed. Although Amalia's father took pride in his work at the farm, it was mostly a means to put food on the table. If someone else wanted to do it, all the better.

Amalia and Daniel didn't have as much time to themselves as she thought they would. If he felt disappointment about their childlessness, he never showed it, and Amalia found that she missed the anger and frustration he failed to show. Perhaps she had assumed that the way his emotions overtook him extended beyond the positive ones. It wasn't that she wanted his anger, or that she would enjoy an outburst, but she merely wished to know that he was complete, that the fullness of his life didn't have the reservations she was starting to suspect.

Javier didn't know how to react to Teresa's meetings. He scrutinized the little ceremonies that Teresa performed surrounded by other women and the ways they responded to her, trying to find meaning. At first, he would retire to his bedroom or his study, not wanting to intrude, but he found himself resentful for having to hide in a space that, by rights, was his, so one night he decided not to relinquish the room, but to remain seated on his favorite chair as women started to arrive.

He had already met some of them; Mariana, the youngest, who was so eager to help him organize church events, and Alejandra, whose devotion to sacred objects humbled him. Most of the others he had seen at Mass, appearing perfectly devout in the house of the Lord. It wasn't unheard of for devout women to meet and carry out the Lord's works, to help manage the religious life of the community, and yet he felt that he must be the one guiding them. It was wrong of them to exclude him.

The women were polite to him as they arrived, but seemed to forget about him as they sat around the sitting room's tall table, the oldest one at Teresa's right hand and the youngest at her left. One by one, they opened their purses and set small personal objects on the table: a folded handkerchief, a small comb, reading glasses, a rusty coin. The oldest woman at Teresa's right side took the coin she had deposited on the table.

"This was my dowry," she said. "My father was stingy and my husband was in love, so I kept it for myself. Never knew what to spend it on." She passed it over the table to Mariana, who put it in her pocket after thanking her.

The next woman then took the small comb and said, "My mother gave it to my twin brother on his thirteenth birthday." She didn't explain why she had it, and instead gave it to a woman across from the table.

One by one, the women described their objects, then gave them to another woman, sometimes with a clear purpose, sometimes for reasons that were whimsical or mysterious to Javier.

It wasn't only the regular congregating or the absence of a priest that bothered him. After all, women had always had their own small social gatherings, and there were places and situations from which they rightfully shunned men. He observed, however, an

alarming tendency to ritual during these meetings, from which he was excluded, to the point that his presence or absence made no difference either way. These were not the familiar rituals he had observed in the women around him all his life, such as the dance of praise and humility, or the complicated choreography of serving coffee and cake. There was something about them that made him uneasy. Perhaps it was the outlandish nature of their actions, so unfamiliar that they were almost uncanny.

Javier oscillated between feeling perplexed, overwhelmed, offended and, finally, expectant. He wasn't sure how he fit with them, what his role was. He certainly wasn't their shepherd. Those sheep rarely came to him for comfort or advice, except when a decision had to be made about which flowers should decorate the church, or what kind of music should be played. They indulged him enough that he never considered them his enemies. He could have easily had banned them from the church, denounce publicly their silly, superstitious practices, and in short create the kind of feud that made country life entertaining. He knew, however, that hostility would mean alienating them forever, and that it would be motivated by his pride, and not a sincere wish to preserve the spiritual well-being of the town.

The house, he decided, was his. The next few times that the women visited Teresa, Javier once again fought the impulse to hide away, and instead stayed in the room. He made himself ask questions, although no one could quite answer him, and gave his opinion on what he saw. He had hoped to be able to lead the meetings into something more Christian and productive, but instead the women stopped coming altogether. Reclaiming his space was a victory, but he knew that the women kept meeting in the forest, which pushed them even farther away from his church.

The women had not completely abandoned the church or Javier, however. They came and went, alone and in groups. Most of them still attended Mass, seeing no contradiction between the old Catholic ritual and the semi-invented ceremonies they carried in the forest. They were like a tide that sometimes would descend and inundate the temple, taking care of all the preparations for some holiday, and sometimes would desert it completely.

If Javier was to understand the women any better, he had to befriend his housekeeper. She was dutiful to him, preparing his meals on time and cleaning his room, but otherwise she seemed to always have something going on—something from which he was most definitely excluded. Although his experience attracting women was limited, his mother had made sure that he knew how to ingratiate himself with them, back when she hoped that his charm would one day give her grandchildren. A younger Javier had complained about the cooking lessons, as he was supposed to be apprenticing how to be a man, but he now understood their value for a man bound to stay alone, if not a man set on impressing women.

That morning, Javier took possession of the kitchen before Teresa could. The pantry was well stocked and he had everything he needed. When Teresa found him, she tried to protest, making half-hearted attempts to take utensils out of his hands, move ingredients out of his reach. She did all this smiling, though, and Javier pushed her gently out of the room, enjoying the mixture of pleasure and surprise in her face.

He served the meal in the parish house's good china. He had observed that Teresa was a woman who enjoyed herself, which was mostly a good thing as long as she didn't

give into the sensual world too much. Gratefulness for the Lord's worldly gifts was one thing, but too often their enjoyment led to forgetting His kingdom altogether.

She ate the soup voraciously, but looked at him with distrust. She had painted her eyes dark, like a younger woman, and although it didn't make her beautiful, it made her eyes look fierce. She ate like a person who had done strenuous work.

"I'm glad that you like it. I haven't cooked for someone else in ages and I feared it would be a disaster," he said, and he meant the humility in his voice. A man, like a child, didn't need to be a good cook to earn praise. Teresa looked at him, caught with her mouth full, and had to swallow before she could speak.

"You're a good cook. Did your mother teach you?"

He shrugged. "Just a couple of things." In truth, the soup was the only elaborate meal his mother ever taught him. The rest was just toast and fried eggs.

"You were out for a long time last night." He hoped the tone was not too accusatory, yet harsh enough to elicit an explanation. Theresa nodded.

"I met the parish women in the forest." It was not a secret. They didn't have a need for secrecy, as no one seemed willing to make them stop.

"The parish women.' I guess it's appropriate, though you don't meet in the parish anymore."

"We all come to Mass, don't we? We just don't want to keep bothering you. Women are noisy when they get together."

"Is that why you meet in the forest? You are just like witches." He tried to sound amused, as if he was just sharing an innocent joke with an old matron, but he felt his

smile tense, become the grimace that we use when we don't dare not to smile. She laughed at this.

“You're so young. What do you know about witches?” She said, and Javier took it to mean, *You are so foreign. You are so unacquainted with the ways of this place.*

He hated it when the people in the valley were condescending to him, as if having been born in the city made him particularly naïve about the ways of the region. He pushed his glasses against his face.

“Let me inform you that I have had time to do my research on folklore during my short life. I consider the lore that sees witches as devil-worshippers to be extremely misguided.” Fortunately, Teresa seemed to ignore the annoyance in his tone.

“Misguided indeed! Do you think we would go around bowing to some goat at our age? Don't you see all of us in church every week? I make stew with goats, that's what I do.”

Javier felt that he was losing control of the conversation. Perhaps he should just let it go. He sat very still, trying not to shift uneasily on his chair. Teresa was hard to navigate, and he was uncomfortable with her openness, even though it ought to make things easier. She would tell him exactly what she wanted to.

Since Mariana was a child, everyone in the valley was convinced that she would grow up to join a nunnery. She attended daily Mass and strived to be righteous in all things. She never lied, and she almost seemed to delight in owning up to her own sins—impatience, mindlessness, gluttony. She believed in the benefits of confession, in the idea that revealing your flaws took the power away from them. The other children didn't resent her when she was unable to keep their secrets. She wasn't proud or judgmental.

She was always reliable, and the children learned to keep their mischief from her. Instead, being kind to her made them feel good and righteous by association, a feeling that helped balance their moments of selfishness or malice.

Mariana's faith was paired with an intense intellectual curiosity. From a young age, she had insisted on discussing matters of faith with Don Gabriel, who ended up letting her borrow his old books from the seminary in the hope that she would eventually give up and leave him alone. Instead, Mariana devoured the books, but she also understood that Don Gabriel couldn't give her the answers that she was looking for. She continued to attend Mass, and at twenty she was the youngest member of Teresa's church group. She didn't expect revelation from it, but she enjoyed her focus on service and kindness. She had mourned Don Gabriel, mourned the kind man and the wisdom he had never been able to provide for her. The first night she went to the forest, it was cold.

Mariana liked to arrive early to the forest clearing, leaving the village while she could still see around her, walking the last steps in the dark. She built the fire before anyone else arrived. None of the women was ever earlier than her—they waited for the light to guide them, even though they also carried their own. Mariana greeted them and they chatted with each other as they all approached the bonfire, repeating and sharing many of the things they already knew about, and some they didn't. In the forest, petty disagreements and misunderstandings were put aside, sometimes to be revisited under the light of day.

Little by little, the stories took different shapes. They started small and timid—manageable—and grew as the night progressed, inflated with desires and confidence. Many of them were true, or had been true at some point. Those often grew inwards, fed

by memory rather than imagination. The ones that they made up grew outwards, taking as much space as they wanted. The stories often met and joined each other, remaking and recreating the world in ways that pleased them, that allowed them to do what they were supposed to do.

She was the first from the group of women to pay any attention to Amalia. It was after one of their meetings, when Mariana had fallen behind in order to take in the dark forest as its sounds slowly took over the silence left behind by the women. With the fire gone, the smell of the grass, and the leaves, and the moss, and the animals came back to her. No matter their intentions, the women were invaders, after all. They were also new, and the forest wouldn't make permanent room for them just yet. She walked back in the dark, illuminating her way with a feeble kerosene lamp. She had nothing to protect her from people or forest, but she wasn't afraid. After the meetings she always felt that her place in the world was right, that there was nowhere else (and no one else) that she should be.

Before reaching the first few houses of the village, she saw Amalia walking towards her, her eyes wide open to the dark. Amalia must have seen her and her lamp from afar, but the girl said nothing to Mariana when they passed; she just stared at her briefly in the same way she stared into the darkness around them.

Amalia had always been a strange child. At school Mariana had felt bad for her even though she was younger, but there was something about Amalia that kept Mariana away. If she could put it unkindly, Amalia seemed to her like a dog that would bite any hand that tried to feed her. However, she realized that what Amalia needed wasn't charity, but acceptance. Whatever it was that guided her through the forest, Amalia had

plenty to satisfy herself, and perhaps enough even to share. A few nights later, Mariana spoke to Teresa in her sitting room. The woman, always keeping herself busy, was measuring and cutting table-cloths for a young neighbor's trousseau. Mariana helped her.

"We should bring her in," Mariana said. She avoided the word *recruit*. They were working by the light of a small lamp, the rest of the house in dark. Teresa was never wasteful. She was also skeptical.

"For what purpose?" Although Teresa had been happy to welcome all the women, she had never had to ask any of them to join her. The group was not only formed by the women who used to gravitate around Don Gabriel, but now included a number of women who had joined the meetings after his death. Women who had hardly ever spoken to them before called them "sister" and hugged them often. It wasn't just that they had no need to bring more women in—Mariana knew that the idea itself scared Teresa. She feared they would become something quite different.

"She won't come to us because she doesn't realize she needs us," Mariana argued. "And we need her."

Teresa raised her eyebrows but didn't look away from her work, not wanting to ask the unkind question. Mariana answered anyway.

"We need her to be more than what we are. We have barely started down this new path, and it would be foolish and unambitious to think that we have reached the end."

Mariana often felt overwhelmed by the passion and earnestness of the women around her, never doubting their belief and their need for what they did, but she was sometimes guilty of looking at all of them with the eyes of a cynical outsider. It was perhaps the fact that the group of women as it was lacked the ability to completely fulfill

her needs—it had stopped answering her questions. It had pushed her out into the forest, into the starry dark, and now she felt herself propelled forward into a path she had to build herself. Although Teresa didn't share Mariana's need, she understood it.

“What do you want from her, exactly?”

But Mariana didn't know. If she could go about it in detail, half of her problem would be solved.

“Why Amalia?”

Mariana could give her a million reasons, but none of them went beyond the intuitive and the almost imagined. She told Teresa about their meetings, but she could not describe the way in which Amalia's eyes searched inside and around her, the way in which her mouth was impolite in a manner that wasn't rude, but something else.

“Trust me,” Mariana said, unable to plead beyond that. Teresa nodded.

Mariana started watching Amalia as closely as she dared. She observed her at the market, taking note of the fruits she seemed to prefer, of the way she inspected the fish. She watched Amalia's impatience in church, the way she never quite sneered. Amalia seemed to care more about the old stone reliefs than the words of Don Javier. She studied their shapes carefully from her pew, perhaps giving them a meaning different than the pious one they had heard all their lives. Among the familiar faces of saints and apostles, there were strange symbols of obscure meaning. Some said they were older than the Christian church, cut out from their original placement for mysterious reasons.

That church was still a sacred place for Mariana. She was unsatisfied by Don Javier's sermons, which seemed to deviate little from the oversimplified and condescending bits of doctrine expected from a rural priest. While Don Gabriel had made

up for it by relating the teachings to the life in the valley and the everyday dilemmas of his parishioners, Don Javier didn't shy from being obscure without being deep. In any case, Mariana still enjoyed the liturgy, the holiness of which, in her opinion, could hardly be spoiled. She liked how it brought all of them together under the same roof, with the common, ridiculously ambitious goal of finding the divine together. She cherished the ancient Latin words, so full of meaning, and the way they resonated on the stone walls. The fact that they seemed to bore Amalia told her how different they were and solidified her opinion that the women indeed needed her amongst them.

CHAPTER 4

THE WAKE

Amalia's father died during a winter early nightfall. He came home late to his family sitting around the living-room's table; Amalia's mother was reading Dumas with the table's cover up to her chin due to cold or excitement. Daniel had adopted his in-laws habits and now took turns with Amalia's father to go to the library, from where he invariably got himself a Western novel. The first few novels he had read, he had recounted to Amalia in excited detail, but soon he caught on to her unskillfully suppressed disinterest. Amalia had not tried to fake interest in storytelling for his sake, but she had rather honestly tried to force the interest to sprout inside her. She discovered she was only partially successful, that she could manage to care about things that were already of some interest to her that ended up appearing in the books. Daniel was generous about this, too, and selected to share with her the details she might enjoy: exotic landscapes and animals, such as deserts and rattlesnakes, and tales of people who could do the impossible.

When the door opened, Amalia felt the cold draft before she heard her father forcing himself to sound cheerful. She was busy mending socks, and as she worked she pushed with her feet the iron brazier under the table. He looked unusually pale, his mouth unable to sustain a smile.

Remedios found her way out of the blanket, but her husband raised a hand to stop her. "I can warm you some milk, or some soup," she said.

He shook his head. “It’s just the cold.”

“Then sit with us.” Remedios took her husband’s hands, rubbing them as if to warm them, but he kissed hers and let them go.

“I just need to sleep.”

They watched him leave the room and walk into the dark of the ancient hall. It was early in the evening and the cold made them restless.

Two hours later, Amalia’s mother stood up to go to bed, too. She looked worried and tired, and had spent the rest of the evening tracing the gilded letters of the cover of her book to the point that Amalia could swear they were getting duller. Shortly after she disappeared, they heard her call urgently. The body of Amalia’s father was sitting on the top of the stairs, his back against the wall and his eyes and mouth wide open. He was already getting cold.

Between the three of them they brought him to his bed—impeccably made—and laid him on top of the covers. There was nothing to be done. Death took away the urgency of dying—the dead had time. There was no point in alarming anyone at that time of the night, as all the necessary preparations could be carried on parsimoniously the next day. In the morning, they would open their house to their neighbors, but for now, the three of them pulled chairs to the bed and sat facing the body. They had almost eight hours until sunrise.

While she watched the body of her father—as Daniel dozed and her mother prayed—imagining she could smell and even see its slow decay, the decay that she knew was already happening, even if it was still imperceptible, Amalia’s mind was divided between grief and pragmatism. She had loved her father with the love of a child who has

had a happy childhood, and she did cry a few times during that night, but they were tears that had to be shed in the wake of a man who had been loved. She imagined generations of cruel, detested lords mourned with pomp in that very building. She pictured tears offered out of fear and gain, and couldn't let her father be diminished in yet one more way. She cried out of love and duty, rather than grief.

The women arrived shortly before dawn. They crossed the door one by one, kissing both of Amalia's cheeks ceremoniously as they did. Don Javier, too, slipped in behind them like an afterthought. He smiled and nodded at Amalia. The house was not ready to receive them, or to receive any visitors at all. It was unusual for Amalia's mother to sit for hours when there was so much work to do, but that's what she had done, mouthing the words of the familiar prayers until her whispers became so loud for Amalia that it seemed she could hardly hear any other sound. The body was still on the bed with the same clothes it had worn when alive. No one had touched it yet, and it seemed that none of them—wife, daughter, or son-in-law—was willing to take the lead. When they were all inside, the women closed the door behind them and Amalia took them upstairs. She didn't know what to do but take them to see the body they had come to honor.

Teresa seemed to be in charge, ordering the women around the bed and shaking her head when Amalia's mother tried to insist that they sit. They were active, determined, and Amalia's family stood back and let them work. Five of the women took the body in their hands and carried it to the bathroom, where they left it in the big iron tub. Amalia appreciated their deference for the dead body and the way they treated it like a sacred object, and not the man it wasn't anymore. The women stripped the body and made a pile

on the floor with the discarded clothes, which still smelled like sweat and the outside, like the man who had worn them.

While the others were busy with the body, Mariana's duty seemed to be to take care of Amalia. She held Amalia's shoulders and guided her after the women, probing her to move out of the way or stay put by applying slight pressures on Amalia's body.

Although Amalia was aware of the women's strange new behaviors, this was the first time that she actually felt curious about them. She couldn't help but think that they were there for her. It might have been the way in which Mariana's hands touched her, in a loving but commanding way, or her vague smell of jasmine. They had never touched like that. They had never been that close. Mariana had always seemed to her a life on her way to being wasted, a fresh flower ready to be plucked and put in a vase to decorate a dark room. The hands that were holding her shoulders were small and warm. As she watched how the women washed her father's body in cold water, Amalia thought about it. She thought about how intimacy was often offered like that, by touching a body unasked and waiting to be rejected.

While most of the women crowded the bathroom, Alejandra had stayed behind with Amalia's mother and the two of them appeared now, carrying clean clothes. It was Amalia's father's best suit, and she observed that her mother had also brought a change of underwear. It seemed pointless to her, but then why bring clothing at all? Why cover his body with a coffin that could never keep filth and decay out? All that was, of course, for the living—for those who would have to remember that last sight of their loved one as a thing, but also for those who during the course of the funeral rites became briefly aware that there were, after all, things themselves.

The women left no trace of themselves in the bathroom. Even though they had laid down the body of Amalia's father on the ground to dress him up, underwear and all, the tiles were completely dry, and Amalia saw one of them slipping away with his folded clothes. Amalia's mother seemed to accept the presence of these women. She had never been unkind to people she considered to be beneath her social position, but she had always kept her distance, mostly out of the lack of patience to deal with a world in which she saw herself as an outsider. From Amalia's perspective, it seemed as if the women were kindly taking her mother in in her own home.

Javier was still reading in the sitting room when Teresa informed him of the death of Amalia's father. She was getting ready to leave, her makeup impeccable even though she applied it standing by the door, in a hurry. He wasn't sure how she had learned about the death, since no one had come to their door that night, and he wondered why they wanted her, instead of him. Neither Amalia nor her mother took part in the meetings.

He had never met Don Gabriel, and he couldn't guess at what the parish's previous priest had that he lacked. The women didn't respect him the way he heard they had respected the old priest. They didn't respect his education or his calling. For months he had just observed the people around him, trying to understand their impulses, their beliefs. They were passionate and devoted, as converts are when they believe they have discovered a new aspect of the divine. It was his duty to come to them, not to force them to come to him. If a man had died, it was his duty to go to the family, to make sure the appropriate religious matters were taken care of. If he was honest, he feared the women's tendency to heresy, which would be even graver when a poor man's soul was a stake.

“I’m coming with you,” he said picking up his coat. Teresa nodded, but didn’t seem to wait for him. She walked into the chill of the night with an agility that didn’t surprise Javier anymore. He followed her, adrenaline keeping him awake.

Raised in the city, Javier found country nobility impressive in its own way. The *pazo* wasn’t much larger than a big house, yet it seemed that the weight of the old stones resonated all through the valley it had once commanded. It was places like this, and not some ostentatious palace in Madrid, that had made the greatness of the country. Their grandness spoke of true power, rather than vanity. That night, the *pazo* mourned its lord.

Teresa preceded him through the big wooden doors, which were open to the night. Inside, he saw some of the women he recognized, all of them already busy with women’s work. Javier was cautious. He wasn’t invited to help with the body, even though he offered to carry it. Instead, he stayed in the sitting room downstairs with Amalia’s mother and Daniel.

“I’m so grateful you’re here,” Remedios said, holding his arm. “I’m so distracted; I even forgot to call you.” She hadn’t offered him anything to drink or eat, but it was understandable, given the situation. She had had little time to come to terms with being a widow.

“I’ll go where I’m needed,” he said, kindly. “Let’s pray the rosary,” he suggested. Increasingly, he felt that his mission was to bring God in the wake of the women. Amalia’s mother agreed gladly, but Javier spied a grimace in Daniel’s face, which the young man tried to hide. Javier knew that meek spirituality was harder for men. They needed to move, to serve.

When they were done, Javier stood up and asked Daniel to show him the kitchen. “We will bring you some warm milk and something to eat,” he said to Remedios.

When they were alone, Javier let Daniel do most of the work, since he wasn’t familiar with the room. He put some milk in a pan to warm it up while Daniel found some bread and cheese.

“It seems that now you are the only man in the *pazo*,” Javier started. “You know what a responsibility that is.” Daniel nodded, without looking at him. It was Javier’s duty to guide his people, but many were often reluctant. He didn’t need Daniel to look at him, though, only to listen.

“You are very young,” he continued, “and when you married, you probably thought you would only need to take care of your wife. Your father-in-law, after all, seemed strong and healthy. But remember, if God gave us the life we expected, we would all be prophets.” Daniel did look at him now, confused. The young man seemed to be doing his best to follow.

“It is not just your wife and mother-in-law that you have to care for, now. A place like this is always a responsibility, title or not. It might be hard for you to understand, because you were not born here, but you have a responsibility with the valley. Men and women will look at your example, talk about it, and follow it. What do you think of these women?” He gestured around the empty kitchen, pointing to the women invisible beyond its walls

Daniel shrugged. “They don’t really bother me much. It seems that they are doing a lot of work in the *pazo* tonight, which is good, because my mother-in-law works hard enough. It’s good that she has help.”

“And yet, they are taking over your house while you hide in the kitchen,” Javier said, although it was him that had brought them there.

“It’s not my house. It’s Amalia’s house, really. It’s her house even more than her mother’s. I think she likes the women. Listen, I don’t know how to set an example of anything. I like my work, my books, and my family, and we are all quite happy. Well, we’ll just have to wait until all this is over. I don’t think things will change that much.”

The milk was almost boiling, and Javier was mildly exasperated, so he served three glasses and brought them to the sitting room.

He had almost believed that the women would try to perform some kind of magic ritual to the body, that they would desecrate it somehow, and was relieved when it was brought downstairs wearing clean clothes. The man looked ready for a Christian burial.

The women laid the body of Amalia’s father on the big wooden table in the *pazo*’s hall, his head propped on a pillow. They sat Amalia’s mother at the end of the table, on a tall chair so when people walked in their eyes would run up the table, from the dead’s feet all the way up to his face and finally to hers, dominating the room. On her right, Amalia and Daniel sat holding hands. The women positioned themselves in a semicircle behind the family and along the sides of the room. Only then did Amalia realize that they were all wearing black. They were all facing the door, even the dead—whoever walked in would have to face all of them. Through the window, she could see the pale darkness of the sky.

They were quiet for a while, and then Mariana started singing something that sounded like a familiar church hymn, but that Amalia could not place or make sense of. The women joined in, and Amalia wished she could. She envied the intimacy of singing,

so undemanding as long as you could join your voice to others, allowing you, when you could no longer distinguish your voice from the choir, a perfect yet reversible communion.

The first person to arrive was the owner of the inn at the end of the village. He was an old, famously proud man, and his lack of teeth gave his face a sunken appearance. He was badly shaven and, as soon as he entered the room, he rubbed his chin.

“Good morning,” Amalia’s mother said.

It took him a few seconds to respond.

“Good morning,” he answered, looking around the room and not directly at the widow. Then, he caught himself and added, “My condolences.”

Remedios thanked him and gestured him to sit on one of the empty chairs that continued the circle started by the women. He shook his head but didn’t leave. Instead, he looked at Don Javier, who was standing in a corner of the room, leaning on a column. The priest almost shrugged. There was something else.

“Madam,” he said, “Madam, I have something for you.”

He dug into his pocket and fished out a few coins, which he then slammed on the table at the dead man’s feet.

“This is what I owed your husband, from that time I gave him the wrong change.”

Surprised, Amalia’s mother gestured toward the money, but Teresa held her arm. The coins remained on the table. The man crossed himself and sat on the last chair on his left, away from the family and the women.

The next people through the door were a teenage girl and her mother. The girl's insolent expression changed as she approached the table, and she let go of her mother's hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, addressing either the dead man or his widow.

"Thank you," Amalia's mother answered, mechanically.

"No, but I'm sorry. I threw eggs at your house last New Year's Eve."

This raised a murmur among the women, and the girl's mother slapped the back of her head. For the past couple of years someone had been doing that to some houses in the village. It was harmless enough, but they had all sworn to give the kid a good beating. Instead, they just frowned. The girl was lucky that a confession made the sin somewhat smaller, and a confession in front of a dead man made the punishment feel inappropriate. She motioned to sit around the table, too, but her mother grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the house, not bothering to apologize or acknowledge anyone else in any way.

The third and fourth visitors were an old man relying painfully on a cane and his daughter, who held his other side with the authority that health and strength inevitably give children over their parents. They didn't confess to anything, but instead kissed Amalia and her mother on both cheeks and went to sit by the women. They joined this way the silent tribunal that judged the living on behalf of the dead man, that settled his accounts for him. It is known that the dead have to settle their debts upon dying, but people rarely care about what the dead themselves are owed. Without intending to, the women had created a court to judge the living, to give the dead man something to put in his pocket when the moment came for him to pay his debts.

The visitors continued to come and go for a while, some of them leaving or taking something—mostly money—and it never occurred to Amalia or her mother that anyone would take what they weren't owed. By lunch time, when most of the people they knew had paid their respects, they were left with a small pile of coins and bills, a few apologies, and an arrest for a minor crime.

During the week after her father's death, Amalia avoided walking past the *hórreo*. She didn't want to think of the creature and her trades. Now that she had lost him, Amalia turned her attention back to her own life, to her own living, and she wished she could make an offer of the whole body to the creature, and offer of her whole father. It seemed to her that partial offerings were partial in meaning and in power, too. The women had left her father's clothes neatly folded on his bedroom's chair, and Amalia's mother had not touched them. Those were the clothes he often wore to work, imbued with the smell of his labor. They had also captured the cold sweat of his death, and in it the particles of skin he had shed as a living man mixed up with the ones that rubbed off his dead body.

She didn't think, as others might have, of the love with which her mother would have washed and ironed those clothes, washing away as much as she could of the man and the farm, only for them to be worn again. She didn't think of the nostalgia of intimate objects, though she was well aware of that intimacy. In Amalia's world, where dead things were discarded or made useful, that residual intimacy was mostly currency.

Daniel and her mother were not like that. Remedios was content with the meaning she gave to objects. She kept mementos and keepsakes, and enjoyed the moderate emotions they evoked. She understood the limits of remembrance, the reduced amount of

pleasure one could actually get from it. Daniel, on the other hand, was always eager to recover what was lost, and he wouldn't be happy with anything less than the whole.

CHAPTER 5

THE OCAMPO GIRL

Mariana, who spent her life looking for things to be devoted to, gave herself to Amalia easily. She didn't have the reserve Amalia found in other people, the reluctance to see her in her own terms. There was no limit to what she would say or what she could listen to. Amalia talked to her, not about the creature or Don Gabriel—that was still way beyond the scope of their friendship—but about the way she saw the valley and the people in it. They talked about the small river, and how it became tamed when it entered the village, contained by stone walls and conquered by two bridges, only to return to wilderness right after the mill. Mariana talked to her about herself with a freedom that surprised and delighted Amalia. She told her about the women, about how she found something among them that escaped her in church and in solitude.

“In the forest, it's as if they brought the whole world with them—all that matters, at least. It feels as if they were it, in their bodies and in their voices. Sometimes, I think they are what God was supposed to be—at least a little piece each one of them.”

She looked at Amalia eager and amused, failing to make herself understood and yet enjoying the attempt. It was alright. Amalia couldn't quite understand her, nor quite explain her own life to her, yet the common knowledge that there was something just out of reach for both of them brought them together. It was their game to speak past each other, trusting in a wordless sisterhood. Soon Amalia came to love her.

One night a few weeks after the death of Amalia's father, Mariana came for her shortly before dawn. Amalia was outside, on the opposite side of the house, when she heard Mariana knock, and she quickly washed her hands and dried them on her skirt before meeting her. Mariana seemed surprised to see her there, but she didn't ask any questions. Amalia, however, guessed the reason for her friend's visit—it was a formal invitation.

“We are going to tend to the Ocampo child.”

Amalia had heard that the girl had been sick for a while. The doctor didn't believe it was anything serious, but Amalia understood that the child was now dead. That was most of what the women did for the village. After the death of Amalia's father, the women had taken it upon themselves to make sure that all their neighbors were properly cared for after their death. They not only participated in the preparation of the body for those without families large or willing enough to do so, but also took care of all the matters that the dead had left pending. A good death, beyond a quick, painless or honorable one, was a death that left not trouble behind, a death that closed a life neatly and didn't open anything new or leave anything ongoing, with the exception of grief. Sudden death was feared, since it meant messiness, conflict and lack of closure. It was bad for the valley, and the women took it upon themselves to fix it.

“The Ocampo girl was so young,” Amalia said, as she wiped her hands in her skirt. She wasn't wearing an apron. “What can be there to fix? Most children haven't had time to create real lives.”

Mariana shrugged. “They also die rarely, the older ones. They are usually unprepared. Wear something black.”

When they arrived to the house, the child's father welcomed them. He grabbed their hands and thanked them profusely for being there, as if what they could do was no little thing in the face of his loss. He was pale and unshaven, but he smiled and urged them in, then disappeared to bring them some refreshments. The only other people in the house were the father's sister, Juana, and her daughter Margarita, a girl who didn't look much older herself than the dead child but, when asked, proudly declared to be fourteen. Amalia learned that she was the one who had alerted Mariana. Whether she had been sent, or the idea had been her own, Amalia didn't know. They seemed to be welcome, in any case.

Although the girl must have attended wakes for the dead before, her cousin's was probably the first occasion in which she had been asked to participate. By the way she fidgeted and looked around herself, Amalia could tell that she was moved by the situation, but she did what she was told without complaining. Margarita's mother seemed strict, telling her daughter to do the most delicate work: to wash the dead's face and comb her hair; to change her underwear. The girl obeyed with shaky hands, wiping the occasional tear from her resolute face.

In the living room, Mariana and Amalia offered their help and, after perfunctory protesting, Juana gave them each brooms and cleaning rags. If they were going to receive friends and family, the house needed to be presentable. Amalia saw resentment added to Juana's grief as she ironed a clean shirt for her brother.

"Where is the mother?" Mariana asked.

Juana shook her head. "Sleeping. Or looking out of the window. Who knows?"

"Was it very sudden?"

Juana shrugged, as if implying it hardly mattered, but answered. “It was and it wasn’t. She was sick for a while, but the doctor told us it was just a cold. And then it wasn’t, but at that point there was nothing he could do. At least we were all here tonight.”

While she helped brush the dead girl’s hair, Amalia took a few strands and put them discreetly in a pocket of her skirt.

Looking into the child’s room, Mariana saw Don Javier, sitting pensive on a hard chair on the corner. He had pulled away from the dead body as Margarita attended to it, and when she started undressing it without a warning, he looked away, ashamed, and stood up. He mumbled an excuse and hurried towards the door, but stopped right at it when he saw Mariana staring at him.

“Goodnight,” he said. “You have arrived early.” He didn’t say he was surprised to find her there.

“I came when they called me.”

“It’s a very Christian thing to do, accompany a family as they wake for their dead. You are indeed pious women.” He seemed to be trying to make the room crowded by bringing up the women who weren’t there. This amused Mariana. She felt they were indeed pious, but wasn’t quite sure that she and Don Javier meant it the same way.

“An act of God. There was nothing men could have done,” he added.

At this, the dead girl’s aunt scoffed.

“I’ll tell you what men could have done! They could have made sure to get it right. A child who had never been sick in her life, and when we bring the doctor in for once, he’s useless. And we paid, too! Her father did. They could have kept her alive, such a healthy child. A doctor could, at least.”

“I see,” Don Javier answered, accepting the woman’s anger without approving or justifying it. “In any case, that doesn’t matter anymore. She is with God, now. Perhaps we could find some comfort in praying the rosary.”

Mariana had the impression that Juana would have laughed if she had been a less careful woman, and if there wasn’t a dead child in the house.

“No offense, father, but we don’t often pray the rosary in this family,” she said, more softly than Mariana expected. “I have nothing against priests, but you do your thing, and I’ll do mine.”

To Mariana’s surprise, Don Javier nodded. “I will pray for you anyway,” he said, and sat with his rosary by himself.

Mariana felt sorry for Don Javier. She saw in him something of the boy who would close his fist tightly and press his lips into a bloodless line in an effort to keep the fear or the sorrow away. He seemed to be perpetually bracing for an impact that never came—or that hit him all the time.

The girl’s father had called the women, at the mother’s request, but not before he had called the priest. His wife had tried to make him go while the girl was still alive, but the man had refused, either because he feared missing the last moments of his daughter’s death or because he refused to believe that the worst had indeed happened. Javier tried to comfort him, but there was no comfort left to give. He soon realized that the only reason he was there was to protect the family, to make them look like good Christians in a time when impiety was practically illegal. Javier resented to be used like that; it was too close to mockery. On the other hand, he couldn’t bring himself to turn his back on people in need, especially while they mourned a child.

The girl's mother sat in her room, looking out of the window into the black sky, and she refused any company. Javier turned to Mariana. She seemed to be wanted there.

“Are you here to see that her debts are settled? She was barely young enough to owe a piece of candy.”

Mariana shrugged.

“We'll see. She lost her life so soon. That's something big to be owed.”

“You say someone owe her her life, as if her death wasn't an act of God.”

He had tried to participate in the women's meetings that happened in his own home, being served his own coffee and eating out of his own pantry. He learned many things about the women and felt his duty was to defend what he humbly saw as Christ's point of view. The women talked about all kinds of things, many of which ought to be corrected, but many others were actually illuminating. They had a skewed vision of the cosmos in which the natural order of things was subverted or outright negated. Javier could see it came from a good place, an intrinsic love for all things, which any Christian could understand. It was their lack of reverence for the things that he considered sacred that made him wary. Still, he pressed the arguments.

“Well, everything that happens is God's will, isn't it? And yet we humans often play a role. It doesn't exempt us from responsibility,” Mariana responded.

“And you and your friends are the tribunal.”

“You are mistaken. We are merely the public. The judge they bring themselves.”

Javier didn't seem convinced, but he didn't say anything. It was true that a man's conscience was the highest court of justice, but the duty of a man accused by such tribunal was to go to his confessor for guidance.

He was still ruminating on this, trying to phrase an answer, when the girl's father came into the room with a coffee pot and six cups. His sister scoffed at the sight, but allowed him to serve her.

Javier didn't fear Mariana the way he had feared other women, the women who came too close, the women who had power over him. She was earnest in a way that felt safe. She approached him as she approached other women, honestly and amicably. His path in life required many sacrifices, but if he was honest, he had to admit that solitude was not one of them. Romantic relationships had always puzzled him, and when as a teenager he declared his intention to join the seminary, he felt the immediate relief of being excluded from the romantic game. Girls became less coy with him and boys censured their crude jokes. Adults gave up their teasing for the most part.

Three knocks on the door, clearly the product of an impatient fist, startled Mariana and, seemingly, everyone else in the house. When Juana opened the door, the men standing in front of her could have looked ridiculous with their theatrical black hats and green uniforms, but the woman knew enough to fear the Guardia Civil. They were the ultimate guardians of law and order, but they sometimes behaved rather like capricious gods, exerting their power over the lives of mortals in terrifying ways. Sergeant Alcaraz hadn't so far interfered with the women, perhaps because he considered their activities to be of no consequence to his own. That day, however, he seemed to have business in the house, and so he walked in followed by Cabo Soria, no invitation required, and looked around as if judging the honesty of the house's inhabitants by the way in which they arranged their belongings.

“Good evening, madam,” Sergeant Alcaraz said, nodding to the girl’s aunt. “Are you the mother?”

Juana shook her head. “She’s in her bedroom, trying to get some rest.” The sudden sympathy in her appeal to a mother’s grief didn’t surprise Mariana. They had all become tacitly united in the face of the feared authority. The officers seemed to respect that.

“Give her our condolences. Now, where is the body?” Mariana wondered that the Guardia Civil would be so interested in what was so clearly a natural death, but she guessed that the officers didn’t have much to do lately, stuck as they were in a relatively quiet rural area, and had to create work for themselves from time to time. That frightened her.

The dead girl’s aunt showed them to the body, which was now fully dressed in what were going to be her burial clothes.

“I believe the official cause of death was pneumonia?” Sergeant Alcaraz asked, and the others nodded.

“We need to examine the body,” he announced. The girl’s aunt and father, as well as Don Javier, left the room, but Mariana and Amalia stayed, which didn’t seem to bother the officers. They inspected the dead girl’s head first, turning it to each side in order to get a look at her neck and ears, carefully prodding her throat as if they knew what they were doing. Then they moved to her arms and legs, considering the weight of each limb as they let it fall on the bed. Following the instructions of Sergeant Alcaraz, the younger Cabo started to unbutton her shirt, looking either eager or apprehensive.

“Wait,” Mariana couldn’t stop herself from saying, thoughtlessly trying to protect the body of a girl that wasn’t there anymore. The men looked at her annoyed, all of their four hands on the body. Death gave them the right.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and the officers turned reluctantly back to the body, as if to let her know how lucky she was that they were letting that one go. They studied the body as if they knew what they were looking for, as if they hadn’t barely graduated high school. The younger man looked into her mouth and ears, while the older pressed her chest as if trying to assess something.

“It does seem to be pneumonia,” the older man declared, finally. “We need to inspect the house and make sure it’s safe. Drafts and humidity are dangerous things.”

The men proceeded to walk around the house checking corners and windows, but also closets, trunks, and jewelry boxes. They looked everywhere with similar diligence and an air of dutiful authority—everything for the good of the people and the glory of the country. Family and guests followed them anxiously everywhere, aware of the possibility that the sergeant would find something that made the household suddenly suspect, something that would make the officers decide that the dead girl’s family was irremediably on the wrong side of the line that separated ruin and doom from a quiet life.

Apparently disappointed, the sergeant turned to Don Javier.

“What do you think, father? Is there anything to worry about in this house?”

The priest shrugged. “I’m not an architect, but I know them to be good, God-fearing people. No doubt they know how to keep their house in order.”

The officers seemed satisfied with the answer, and so they left shortly, refusing the glass of wine that only now the girl’s aunt had remembered to offer them, repeating

their condolences with affectation and parting with a warning about window insulation. The dead girl's body had been left unbuttoned, its limbs abandoned casually in the position in which they had fallen last. The women hurried to take care of it, avoiding conversation. The tension of the officers' visit would linger for hours—even days.

The other women started to arrive little by little, shortly after the officers had left. Mariana couldn't blame them; the experience had been unnerving for all in the house, even the visitors. They continued to prepare the body and the house for the wake, and it seemed to her that they were all trying to put each other at ease. Don Javier was more talkative than usual, comparing the women's effort to the way things were done in the capital, and finding them superior for the most part. Even Amalia seemed to be enjoying the company. She engaged Don Javier in praising the ways of the country, where everything was better than the city by virtue of being fresher.

When the first neighbors arrived to pay their respects, the house was spotless, the body was dignified, and the girl's parents were calm and presentable. This time, little money was exchanged, and most of the confessions of mischief or obligation came from other children. One girl had pushed the dead girl out of spite and then claimed it was an accident, and two boys had spread a rumor about her smell. The dead girl had committed to tutoring a younger girl in math, and Mariana volunteered to do it instead. She had expected to see the doctor at the wake, for better or worse, but he wasn't there. This made her restless. How could they settle the balance of such a young life without the doctor that had attended to her during her illness? Mariana decided she would pay him a visit that evening. She would make sure that he at least attended the burial the following day.

The doctor's house was big and comfortable for the valley's standards. Although he often saw patients for free, the ones who could afford to pay well did so. The doctor's wife opened the door. She was a practical-looking woman, some fifteen years younger than her husband.

"Are you here for a medical emergency?" she asked, her tone more impatient than usual.

"No, I just need to speak to your husband."

"Well, he's not here."

Mariana tried to look over the woman's shoulder, but the little foyer was empty and in perfect order.

"I'll wait inside, if you don't mind," she said, pushing her way in past the doctor's wife, who was obviously not used to have her authority dismissed in such a way. Mariana walked decisively into what she believed was the living-room. The doctor's wife followed her and, forced into the script of the hostess, offered Mariana a seat. While she waited, Mariana tried to think about what to say and, more importantly, about what would happen to the man. He was a good person, overall, but a girl was dead who perhaps should not have. If he confessed to negligence, they would let the world take care of it. She heard footsteps and a hushed argument, then silence for a few minutes. Finally, the door opened.

"Elena told me you were waiting," he said with a smile. He looked pale, tired and anxious, and Mariana felt that she was sucking his life just by being there. Still, she spoke.

"Yes, thank you for seeing me."

“She said you weren’t ill or hurt. If so, I must ask you to leave. I am very busy at the moment and can’t just sit to chat.”

“Dr. Sangil, I need to talk to you about something more important than my health, or that of a single person. The health of the whole valley suffers if people cannot trust their doctor.”

He looked hurt, but he didn’t protest. Mariana continued.

“We need you to be at the cemetery tomorrow.”

He shook his head without looking at her, still silent.

“If you don’t go, they’ll talk behind your back.”

“If I go, they’ll spit on my face.”

“And they’ll see you wipe it off and look at them in the eye. We all make mistakes, but tomorrow you need to look at them in the eye, or they will never trust you again.”

Dr. Sangil was still looking away, but his expression had softened and Mariana wanted to read resigned defeat on it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” She said, reaching for the hand that he wasn’t offering and squeezing it.

A young person’s funeral is made even more pathetic by the presence of the dead’s peers, shocked by how easily death can take one of them. Mariana looked at young faces, saw them trying on the gravity of death like a mask. They would all soon lose it, she thought; as soon as they left the cemetery and the remains of her friend behind, and life’s distractions would get their attention again. It wasn’t cold-heartedness—just the pace of life.

She was pleased to see that the doctor was there with his wife. She looked at Mariana with a scowl, but the doctor himself looked serene. No one spit on his face, but a few people looked in his direction. When he first saw the doctor arrive, the girl's father seemed to start walking towards him, but his wife held his arm and he stopped, staying by her side instead.

Don Javier performed the rites soberly and deliberately, giving the ceremony the solemnity it deserved, and that made it easier for everyone.

The officers arrived during the rites, while the body was still above ground. They uncovered their heads and waited while Don Javier pretended not to notice and the rest gave them uneasy looks. After their appearance at the girl's house, the people knew the officers weren't there just to pay their respects. They waited until the coffin was in the hole and people started to leave. The mourners glanced back at them nervously as they left with a mixture of curiosity and the desire to stay out of it. The officers didn't have to speak. They stood in front of the doctor with their arms folded, and the doctor couldn't but follow them.

Watching them leave together, the doctor's wife trailing behind, Mariana almost felt guilty. She knew the officers would have found the doctor in his own home, if needed, but this was not the justice she was looking for—it wasn't the justice the man deserved.

After that day, Amalia occasionally accompanied the women when they went out to the forest. She enjoyed their rituals; she enjoyed holding hands in a circle, looking at each of them in the face and seeing their excitement, their joy, and even their fear. She enjoyed the feeling of their bodies growing warmer as the fire died out in front of them

and the night turned darker and colder, as the forest took over the air again and she could smell its warmth over the smell of smoke.

The creature was pleased with the clothes in which Amalia's father had died. She was so pleased that a smile illuminated her face like terrible lightning.

Even after the months of trying, Amalia endured Daniel's daydreams of the children they would have. He had named these potential beings and made plans for them, as if they were already there, as if at least they had been promised. The way he spoke, his future seemed full of joy and warmth, regardless of what the indifferent forces of nature had in store for him. During these conversations he would look at Amalia, begging her to join in, but he never made his own plans for her when she failed to. Amalia wondered whether he understood what she was starting to know, that her body craved the profound changes of motherhood, but taking care of a child beyond breastfeeding wasn't appealing to her at all. Would he hate her for it? Amalia did love Daniel. Perhaps it would be practical that way; once it didn't need her body anymore, the child would belong entirely to her husband.

But the fear of losing Daniel didn't subside. She suspected he loved her the way he loved swimming in the cold waters of the melting snow, the way he loved the three full courses of dinner that Amalia and her mother prepared every evening. Amalia suspected that he could love any other woman with the same strength. It wasn't that she thought he would leave her or seek other women out—he was devoted to her—but she realized that he could have easily been devoted to anyone else. It was his nature.

He had loved her because she had demanded it, and he was eager to give and to take. That's why he was so eager to have a child. Once again, he was presented with an

object of affection he hadn't deserved, but about whom he was greedy anyway. Would he welcome the chance of making the child all his or would he decide something was wrong with her if she couldn't participate?

But all those worries were pointless now, because her body—or his—decided to mock both their hopes and dread, to the point where relief became guilt.

When Alejandra arrived at their meeting point in the forest, there was always light all around her. A big bonfire burned in the center of a small clearing, around which the women congregated to look at each other's faces. There were also a few kerosene lamps burning here and there, and myriad candles. Alejandra enjoyed the ephemeral, voracious richness of light, its physical warmth. Fire was honest, even though it left behind a poor trace that barely reminded of its glory. The remainders of fire could be swept away and thrown into the river with little effort—gone forever. That's why the women regularly burned things in the bonfire. Sometimes they followed an order, each one of them stepping to the fire and explaining what the object was and the purpose its burning should serve. Others, the women just came to the bonfire at any moment they felt like it, throwing something discreetly when everyone else was engaged in a different activity or interrupting some other ceremony as it went on. Most of the women were not bothered by these interruptions, but Alejandra was. They disrupted the order of the night, which otherwise flowed softly on as time passed.

Alejandra herself brought all kinds of things to burn. She brought trash most of the time, and invested each item with specific symbolism of her own devising: old newspapers took the past with them and turned it into ashes. They also propitiated good

news in the future. Old clothes and pieces of fabric were meant to protect her from the cold and sadness of winter. An apple's core would make her hard work fruitful.

CHAPTER 6

GOOD INTENTIONS

Amalia could not understand love but through consumption, or at least could not conceive to satisfy it any other way. Her parents had always been out of her reach, too distant to ever belong to her, even though she had done all she could to belong to them as a child. She had always submitted to her mother's grooming routines, unprotesting. She ate everything her mother cooked and her father killed. For all this she was declared a "good little girl" and forgiven when she failed a test at school yet again or stayed out past her curfew.

With Daniel, however, she thought she had a right to ownership. What little she had known about sex before the wedding—the accurate yet incomplete information her mother had passed on to her in a mix of euphemisms and medical terms—had led her to believe that there was something about it that would allow her to possess her husband. In that respect, sex had been disappointing. It had been pleasurable, and at first strange, but not much different from what the cows or the pigs did, not much more transcendent than her bodily functions. Amalia had to invent other ways to own her husband, none of them quite satisfying.

Often, when she combed his hair with her hands, a dark single hair would be left between her fingers. At first she would just let the wind steal it from her, but she soon followed the impulse to keep it, to greedily tuck it into her pocket. She had a separate

jewelry box for this, and for other things. It wasn't exactly hidden, but it was kept among her private things, which made it safe enough.

She didn't know how to make Daniel hers, but she knew that sex, sleeping in the same bed, eating at the same table, or even the bond of marriage itself didn't help much. She knew that her lies helped even less, that they actually pushed her farther into a world to which he had no access. That's why she decided to tell him after her father died; she was trying to pull him closer for the same reason she took a walk with her mother every afternoon: there was the instinct to fill up the void her father had left by making her other relationships tighter.

Amalia's mother had reacted to her father's death by throwing herself into self-denial. She worked harder than ever on the *pazo* cleaning and restoring with a new-found urgency, as if they were expecting important guests any day. One by one she gave up her pleasures: her French novels accumulated dust as she spent her evenings mending clothes or planning menus; she started making smaller portions of her favorite desserts, only enough to feed Amalia and Daniel, and if they ate less themselves to leave her some, she threw the food away. Amalia knew better than to find comfort in her mother, who couldn't comfort herself.

The closer Javier tried to get to the women, the more they pulled away from him. Teresa herself spent very little time in the parish house anymore, though she always had his meals ready and cleaned his bedroom regularly. Since the wake of the Ocampo girl, he had only seen Mariana at Mass. She sat close to the front and he was aware of her presence behind him while he performed the rites facing the altar. When he gave her

communion, she was too concentrated in the act to really look at him. Other than the exchange that the ritual demanded, they never spoke.

In those weeks, he hadn't participated in any of the wakes presided by the women, either. He was sometimes called to administer last rites, and later he was in charge of the funeral, but he felt unwelcomed in the meantime. On one occasion, he was called in the middle of the night to the side of a dying old woman and arrived in time to hold her hand while she was still alive. He blessed her and absolved her sins, then whispered in her ear as she passed. It was a slow process, and after a while he ran out of things to say, but he felt the reassurance was still needed, so he continued speaking, at times not making much sense, but trying to sound kind and compassionate, whispering the way one would to a frightened animal.

When the woman finally exhaled her last breath, her son all but pulled Javier to his feet and out of the house. He was a tall, middle-aged man, and he looked tired, as if he had strenuously exercised patience for a long time and had little left.

"It was my mother's wish to spend her last minutes listening to a priest's nonsense, but now there is no need for you." His brother, younger and more cautious, put a hand on his arm to try to appease him, but the man shook it off.

"No, let me. Mother is dead and I have been quiet for a long time." He turned to Javier once more, tapping his chest with a finger. "You leeches have her soul and her money. The little money saved by a poor woman after a life of misery and hard work, she left it all to you. Two of her sons were killed, the little she owned, stolen, and yet she never missed a Mass, she never stopped praying. And now she is dead, poor as ever, and you come here to anoint her face and give your blessing. I hope you like what you see."

The man gestured to the room around them which was indeed austere. “You should be on your knees before my mother and people like her. They are worth more than all your saints!”

The man was getting rowdy, tears streaking down his face, and his brother stepped between the two of them, pushing Javier physically out of the house, possibly for his own safety.

Javier walked back to the parish house as the sun rose, and he was shaking all the way back. He wasn't afraid of bodily harm—he was sure he could take a punch or a slap. But the man's hatred of the church saddened and frightened him. He knew how strongly some people felt, either way, how deeply the war had cut, but he had never seen it in front of him. He was angry at the women. They were taking advantage of that, of the feelings of pain and helplessness that only the Lord could heal. They were pushing his people away from him at a time when they needed him more than ever. He didn't blame the man, whose grief he couldn't imagine, but he blamed the women for offering a defective, temporary comfort in place of eternal salvation.

Daniel seemed to understand the peculiar shape of Amalia's grief, and he was willing to give himself to her, but it wasn't enough. He told her about his day, the things he had done when she wasn't there, the things he had thought that he hadn't yet told her, but it wasn't enough. Amalia knew that he could spend hours telling her every minute detail of his soul and it wouldn't be enough. He could uncover and offer to her every part of his skin—as he indeed did—and, still, it wouldn't be enough. It never would.

He asked very little of her, himself. Was it because she was already as generous as she knew how? But that wasn't true. She only shared with him what he claimed, which

was very little, and her own hunger. Perhaps that was the key. Perhaps she could own more of him if she offered more. As much as she could. All.

Before she could tell him, she had to show him—she had to show him something that puzzled him, something that would make him welcome any explanation. On a warm Sunday afternoon, Amalia took her husband’s hand and led him out of the village and into the forest, following the path that children carved during the summer to a half-moon shaped clearing by the river. Daniel was curious, but let her do. He was always willing to follow her, to let her discover wonders for him.

When they reached the clearing, she took off her shoes, entered the water and started wading along the bank, gradually stepping deeper into the water. Daniel seemed unsure of what to do, and when she saw him start taking off his own shoes, she raised her hand to stop him.

Amalia dragged her feet along the bottom of the river, feeling the mud, the running water and the little creatures that touched her legs. She soon found an object, and reached down to retrieve it. It was his penknife, which Daniel had lost while fishing a few months before. A few minutes later, she found a red and blue marble that he remembered owning as a child, but didn’t remember losing. Daniel held the wet objects in his hand as his wife continued wading in the river. An hour later, she had found a rusty watch, a silver ring, twenty-two coins and a key. She had been giving them to Daniel, who held them precariously.

“Are you going to explain to me how you did this?”

She nodded, climbing out of the river, her skirt soaked. She told him most of it, as much as she knew he could accept.

She selected what she told him, navigating the truth like a rocky river. His lips tensed lightly when she told him about the fish she killed in her hand and she decided to leave it there. She had relished the death of that animal out of something that wasn't quite cruelty. Daniel, who barely understood the joy of hunting, would not understand. She was feeling the limits of his empathy and his loyalty as she went, careful to never push too hard. Once she had given him all she could see, relieved, that she had calculated correctly. The new secrets burned in him and made his love readier on his skin. He wasn't completely hers—and she knew he could never be, for that would mean owning his flesh, his organs, and even his blood vessels, one by one, while they continued to be part of the living entity that was him. He would never be completely hers, but she would keep pulling him closer and closer to her, embracing him until, for a moment, she could forget about her own skin.

Sometimes, however, Amalia wasn't sure that telling Daniel had not been a mistake. After learning her secret he seemed to look at her with awe, and although he was as loving with her as he had always been, she could feel the distance between them had grown even wider. He knew her secret, but that had created a new mystery, rather than solving it. In a way, he understood her less now than he'd ever had. He asked her to show him other things she could do, and she obliged. She performed little tricks for his amusement and, as he laughed in delight and surprise, Amalia understood that he didn't quite understand—perhaps he couldn't.

After a summer in which Amalia didn't have the chance to offer anything more appropriate, she decided to give the creature one of her father's cows. Daniel took care of them as well as ever, and the animals were thriving. Cows and cow meat were common

enough, but she hoped that the circumstances of it being part of the family's livelihood and its physical proximity to the *hórreo* would make it acceptable. She wasn't strong enough to hold the cow or stun it, so she fed it one of the heart-shaped leaves before going to sleep and by morning the animal was dead. Amalia went to the stables before sunrise, hoping to give her offering to the creature before the first sunlight touched the *hórreo*. She took one of the knives used for slaughter and plunged it into the chest of the dead animal. She worked for a while, separating bone, muscle, and cartilage as her father had taught her, until she finally liberated the beast's enormous heart.

She was still covered in blood when she came out of the *hórreo*, and she planned to clean herself before going back inside the house, but before she could she saw Daniel looking at her. It was the first time that she had seen in his face anger toward her.

Daniel was used to the brutality of farm life, to the slaughter and dismembering of animals, and all the smelly, dirty processes that made them into things that people could eat and wear. It seemed to Amalia that he understood that what she did wasn't much different. She had never told him about Don Gabriel. As much as she wanted him to see her for what she was, she knew it would scare him away. After seeing what she had done with the cow, Daniel begged her to show him the creature. He wasn't interested in her power—those things were not for him—but he wanted to see her with his own eyes. He said he needed to understand how such a being could exist so close to them, but Amalia refused, and decided to carry the key to the *hórreo*'s padlock with her at all times. She had never needed to, but then no one had had any interest in the moldy granary before.

Javier was only one man, alone against the growing influence of the women in the valley, who were starting to replace law itself. More than once he had seen a thief or an

adulterer go free after confessing their deeds in front of the women, as if their wakes were some kind of legitimate court of law with authority to pardon them. He appreciated their efforts, and liked them individually, but they were disrupting the civil life of his people, not just the religious one, in ways he couldn't tolerate. It wasn't hard for him to convince Sergeant Alcaraz to join him. He was sure that the women must be breaking one law or another. At the very least, they were being blatantly heretical. He didn't know exactly what to expect from the sergeant's intervention, but he knew order had to be restored.

Javier chose a night with a full moon, so they wouldn't have to carry lights that would betray their presence. Sergeant Alcaraz was in a good mood as they climbed the hill into the forest, which irritated Javier. It was one thing to rejoice in keeping the law, but Javier suspected that the man enjoyed the least savory parts of it a bit too much. He reminded Javier of something he had seen in the way some war veterans talked about the things they had done, with a delight that he found deeply distasteful and even alarming.

The moonlight allowed them to see, even under the canopy of the trees, but Javier had hoped that the fire burning in the clearing would guide them. Instead, there were no signs of anyone else in the forest, and he felt Alcaraz's impatience when the sergeant gave up on stealth and started to swear loudly. The clearing, when they finally reached it, was empty except for a figure leaning over the embers of the bonfire who seemed to be making sure that the fire was completely extinguished.

"What are you doing here, old woman?" Asked sergeant Alcaraz loudly, amused at the woman's startled face. Javier recognized Alejandra.

"I was just preparing to leave," she answered. "Just making sure the fire was out."

“I see. It seems to me that you were going to leave some embers burning. Do you know how dangerous that is? There is a law against leaving fires unattended.”

Alejandra didn't answer. Javier realized that Alcaraz was playing with her and she knew it. She was trying to wait the whole thing out.

“I don't think she meant to do that,” Javier tried to defend Alejandra. “I know the woman, and she is careful in everything she does, that's why she stayed behind to clean up.”

Sergeant Alcaraz shook his head. “I'm not so sure about that, myself. I think it will be best to take her to the station, so we can figure this out.”

Javier was furious at the sergeant's pettiness, but felt helpless to oppose him. His position protected him only so much. Alejandra allowed the sergeant to handcuff her, and he pushed her downhill and towards the village, while Javier walked behind them feeling angry and guilty.

Fortunately, by the time they reached the station, Alcaraz was bored with the old woman and he didn't pay her any mind after putting her in a cell. In the morning, he released her with a stern warning, and Javier walked her home in silence. She closed her door on him without saying goodbye.

When Amalia's key to the *hórreo* disappeared, she didn't think it was Daniel. Her husband had never been dishonest with her, had never done anything behind her back. What was more, Amalia didn't believe that it was in his nature. She was convinced she must have lost the key, because any other explanation was unthinkable.

Reluctant to call a locksmith, she bought a new padlock and approached the *hórreo* intending to break the old lock and replace it with the new. When she reached it,

however, the old padlock lay open on the ground, still holding the iron chain. It was still dusk, and the creature might still be there. Amalia stepped in, and in the dark she saw a figure kneeling next to a malevolent-looking teenage girl. The girl was drinking from a bowl and, when she saw Amalia, she put it down and smiled at her, a white residue of fresh milk over her upper lip.

“He has now learned to be a better judge of people,” she said, cheerfully. “He needed it.”

Daniel stood up and looked at her with an expression of anger and repulsion on his face. When he walked past her, Amalia tried to make him look at her. She turned his face with her hand, but he looked at her like he might spit on her face, so she let go.

“I have to leave you,” he said, and she felt incredibly cold. She felt the coldness in his voice, and the coldness of a life without him.

“If you come after me, I will tell the police. I will let everyone know and you will die in a cell.”

He walked away from the *pazo* and into the growing dark, leaving all his things behind. Amalia knew she could live without him, but she couldn't live in a prison, restrained and restricted to a very narrow margin of experience. She couldn't live a life so utterly controlled by others. She would let him go, as much as it pained her, if she could remain free. He wasn't hers anymore, and he would never be again.

After the incident with Alejandra, Javier decided to leave the women alone. He still thought he was right, that their presence was disturbing the peace and the right order of things, but he also felt guilty. Trying to get the officer to help had been a mistake, for he was not committed to enforcing the law, but rather to using it on people weaker than

him. More than ever, Javier felt like a stranger when he walked through the village. He was welcome in fewer homes than ever and often only tolerated out of practicality—after all, he was the only priest in the valley.

He wanted to make amends, but he didn't know how. He could not go to Alejandra's house to apologize, because he wasn't sure exactly what he was guilty of. After all, he had only asked the authorities for assistance, as any good citizen had the right to do, and it was hardly his fault if the authorities misbehaved. On one occasion, he had approached her in the cemetery as she cleaned, but the woman had refused to speak with him. She was angry, but also afraid, which made their friendship even less likely.

Javier had expected a lecture from Teresa, who often seemed to see herself as a mother figure, but it never came. Perhaps she thought there was nothing to say, that there was nothing he could do anymore. Her behavior with him was aloof and she made him feel like an unwanted guest in his own home. Fortunately, she spent most of her time away, while he took refuge indoors from the antipathy of the world.

It was late in the year and the days were becoming darker and colder. He took to lighting a fire in the parish house and reading his books in solitude. However, although he enjoyed the smell and the light of the fire, he realized he could barely stand the heat. Outside, the world became harder, preparing for winter.

The morning after his conversation with the creature, Daniel returned to the *pazo*. He was open and caring with Amalia's mother, as he had always been, but he could not look his wife in the face. He moved his things to an empty bedroom and continued his work as he used to. Nothing in his life seemed to have changed, except his marriage. Amalia realized that he could not abandon his life in the *pazo*—he was too attached to it.

For the next few days, they lived in a precarious balance, and Amalia wondered if he meant to live like that forever. She knew she couldn't, with the threat of exposure over her head, a threat held by a man with no loyalty to her.

Daniel had slept for more than a year surrounded by Amalia's strange plants, but he had never touched them—at least not that Amalia had seen, and the way he behaved around them made her think that he wouldn't. When she'd started sharing her bedroom with him, she contained the plants so they now took only the wall around the window, opposite to the bed. She hadn't quite been afraid of the poisonous nature of half of the leaves around her, but she had considered it. The air in the bedroom, however, was sweet and fresh, even in the mornings, when the window had been shut for hours. The plants were hers to use; they were not meant to harm her.

Amalia studied the green wall, where the two plants met and intertwined into each other, and carefully selected a beautiful, healthy heart-shaped leaf. It was the best she could find, and hopefully the most effective. It was worthy of him.

CHAPTER 7

THE BETRAYAL

For all of Amalia's care and preparation, Daniel didn't die well. He died quietly and painlessly. He died in his sleep, unaware of what was happening to him. He also died utterly unprepared. He had lived by the moment, raindrop to raindrop, too full of life to ever consider anything else. He didn't have a will for the few things he possessed, and his debts remained unpaid.

Of course, there was also the debt of his life, the life she had taken. Amalia didn't feel guilt or regret, but she was acutely aware of the debt in a way that she hadn't been with Don Gabriel. The reason, perhaps, was that Don Gabriel had been a priest, that he had renounced the world and nothing was owed to him.

Amalia found Daniel's body shortly after dawn, and by noon Mariana was at her door. Amalia had spent the morning preparing the body, wary of relying on the women again, and when Mariana hugged her and offered her condolences, then asked to see the body, Amalia felt a pang of dread. She had been forced to kill Daniel, but she knew she would still mourn him once the danger of being discovered wasn't so urgent. Fortunately, Mariana just repeated her condolences, but didn't seem eager to take over the preparations. Instead, she offered to sit with her for a while and, before Amalia could protest, walked into the kitchen to make some coffee.

The three women sat to share a cup of coffee, but Mariana seemed restless. She struggled to follow Amalia's account of the night before and Remedios's recollections of her son-in-law's kindness.

"He wasn't feeling sick?" Mariana asked. It was rather abrupt, but Amalia could tell that something had been on her mind for a while. Remedios, who apparently wasn't bothered by the interruption, answered.

"Not really, he was always strong. Just last night, he ate hungrily the dinner I made for him. He wasn't in a good mood, though. Something was the matter him lately." With this, Remedios looked at her daughter. Amalia's mother wasn't the kind of woman to discuss the intimacy of her home openly, but she was growing increasingly lonely.

Perhaps that's why Amalia wasn't surprised when Don Javier knocked at their door shortly after. Remedios had always relied on the strong presence of men around her and the sudden loss of Daniel, whom he had counted on to survive her, had left her feeling helpless. In any case, the priest had been visiting regularly in the past few weeks, comforting Amalia's mother and praying the rosary with her. Since he stayed mostly out of her way, Amalia hadn't given it a second thought.

Don Javier extended his condolences and accepted the cup of coffee that Remedios offered him before seeing Mariana. His demeanor then became self-conscious, both shy and annoyed, and Amalia thought that he felt trapped in an uncomfortable situation by his own sense of politeness. He put down his cup of coffee without trying it, and pushed his sleeves up to his elbow.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said to Remedios, who protested vehemently.

"We need you now more than ever. That's why I called you."

“Really? I’m surprised that Teresa hasn’t taken charge of everything.”

“I don’t think Teresa and the other women will come today,” Mariana intervened.

“Oh, why not? I thought no one was allowed to die in this valley without their supervision.”

Remedios noticed the hostility and put an end to it.

“In my experience, the kindness of one’s neighbors is always welcome. If you make kindness into a competition, you do it for selfish reasons.”

Don Javier looked down and didn’t answer. Amalia had never heard him being unpleasant before, and was glad that her mother had spoken up. Mariana broke the uncomfortable silence by standing up.

“I’m afraid I have to go. Again, I’m very sorry for your loss,” she repeated. This time, she didn’t hug Amalia but touched her arm before disappearing through the door.

Mariana’s visit to the *pazo* had left her uneasy. During her first visit to take care of the body of Amalia’s father she had felt full of purpose, as if she was answering a righteous calling. Now, she had the impression of being unwelcomed. Not only her friend’s demeanor had been colder than usual, more guarded, but the place itself made her feel unwanted. Don Javier’s presence had only added to the sensation.

She told the women that they could not take care of Daniel’s body, and that they could not supervise the wake.

“Still,” she said, “we need to make his death right.”

The women, as always, took care of it. They went door to door, asking for what he was owed in money and favors. They used both to pay Daniel’s debts. One neighbor’s money paid for his last pair of shoes, and another agreed to milk the *pazo*’s cows for a

week in exchange for the previous summer, when Daniel had helped him harvest his field.

And yet, Daniel's death still wasn't a good one. In fact, Mariana could feel the clamor of it, how it grew stronger every day. She felt the air tremble, injured, when they mentioned his name. Something significant was missing.

"There must be a way to communicate with him," Mariana said. This made some of the women uneasy. They had never tried anything so daring, anything that would have that kind of impact, in case they succeeded, but Mariana knew it was possible.

That night, Mariana tried on her own. She remembered how her grandmother used to keep dry jasmine in a drawer to perfume her handkerchiefs, and every evening she took a dry flower and put it under her pillow. She claimed that the jasmine allowed her to dream of her husband, who had died long before Mariana's birth.

After the death of her grandmother, Mariana had continued to use dry jasmine in her drawers, and that night she put a small flower under her pillow. In her dream, she was walking around the *pazo*, trying to get inside. Daniel held her hand, silently, and guided her around the house over and over. She asked him what he needed, what he wanted, but he never answered, and finally he guided her inside the *hórreo*, where a fat, toothless woman was laughing at her, even before they could see each other.

"These shortcuts are not that common, you know. I guess he really wanted you here," the woman said. "I will teach you something. Only one thing, though. Don't come back! I will teach you to talk to them, those who want to talk. You must be like them first, though, or it won't work. How can you understand what they say if you don't understand what they are?"

Before taking off her clothes, Mariana made a fire. It was small, unlike the ones she built for the women, but it would be enough to warm her body up again when she was done. She had never taken off her clothes outdoors before, and even in the solitude and darkness of the forest she blushed. If anyone were spying her from the shadows, she wouldn't be able to see them. She blushed, but it was also an exhilarating experience. Naked, there was nothing between her and the forest, between her and the cold water of the river. There was no room for shame.

She submerged her body in the water, as the woman in the *hórreo* had instructed, and let her cold, her fear, and her anger all come together and become indistinguishable from each other. She held Daniel's hair comb in her hand and pictured his face—not the one she had known during his life, but the one she saw as he lay dead, bloated and cold. That was the face she saw when she opened her eyes. Daniel was dead, standing next to her, also naked. His eyes were not looking at her—they were not looking at anything. She spoke first.

“How are you?” she asked, feeling silly. The question didn't make sense to what little of Daniel she had in front of her.

“I am here,” he answered, and she felt guilty. Perhaps he shouldn't be, and she was wronging him terribly.

“I am sorry,” she said, and she meant ‘sorry that you died,’ but also ‘sorry that I'm keeping you.’ “Will you speak to me?”

“Yes.”

“How did you die?”

“From my stomach, it went into my blood. It reached my heart. It reached my lungs. It reached my brain. It destroyed my body.”

“Were you poisoned?”

“Yes.”

“Who poisoned you?”

“My wife.” This is what Mariana had come to the river to confirm. She was right and, beyond her sorrow and the cold of her skin, certainty gave her hope.

“Do you want me to make it right?”

She put a hand on his shoulder as she would to comfort the living, but it felt pointless. His skin felt like a scaleless fish, and the only change it made on his body was the impression of her fingers on it. He hadn't moved at all since he had arrived.

“No.”

“Do you want me to let it go, then?” she frowned, wondering if justice ought not to be pursued when the victim didn't want it.

“No,” he said again. Mariana was confused.

“Do you want to have Mass said for you? Do you want to make sure that your mother is taken care of? What do you want?” Mariana couldn't but see the dead wanting desperately, wanting all kinds of things that they couldn't have or do anymore. Daniel, however, just shrugged, the movement awkward and deliberate, as if someone else was moving his limp body, his eyes still vacant.

His body appeared to Mariana even more devoid of life than just a few minutes earlier, as if whatever it was that animated it were getting tired. The mystery of death seemed to her now mundane and not worth knowing, even if she were allowed to know.

“Go,” she said to him, hoping that he’d go to some kind of peace. Daniel submerged his body in the river without another word, and disappeared.

Mariana realized that she had trouble moving her own living body to get out of the river. Most of her was numb, and she had to remember her muscles in order to get herself out of the water and next to the fire that warmed her clothes. The awareness of life returned to her and with it the pain and the instinct to survive. She craved the heat of the fire, and so, she didn’t dress herself immediately, too weak to worry about sleeves and buttons, and instead wrapped herself in the blanket and lied on the ground, letting the heat envelop her, hoping she would eventually feel warm again.

Javier was too uncomfortable to be able to sleep; the room was too hot, even with the window open. The temperature in the house was ridiculous for the season—their wood stoves couldn’t possibly be that powerful. Not understanding what it was all about, he blamed Teresa. She seemed at home with all the strangeness around him, if not the origin of it. The truth was that he was sweating on a winter night as they awaited a snowfall. He forced himself into a sweater, put on his shoes and left the house quietly, leaving Teresa mercifully asleep. He feared the stories about priests who wandered the streets in the middle of the night.

The houses around him, locked shut and silent, seemed to emanate heat. He walked in the middle of the streets, away from the walls, until he reached the bridge.

The coldness from the water seemed to cool him, and he stuck by it, following the banks upstream. He was soon out of the village, but he continued—the cool air soothed his mind. A few minutes into the dark, he saw a light. Someone, like him, had fled the

town that night. He continued walking upstream until he recognized a bonfire, almost extinguished.

Fire was the last thing his body needed, but the figure lying next to it alarmed him. It lacked the restful ease of the sleeping body. Rather, it looked as if it had just been dropped there, wrapped in a blanket. He approached it, ready to uncover a dead body—perhaps a murder or a person who had frozen to death—but the body moved before he could reach it, ever so slightly.

He held the head carefully, brushing Mariana's light brown hair away from her face. Her eyes were open, looking beyond him. Her cheeks were cold and her lips looked purple, but she breathed. Javier found some sticks and small branches and brought the fire back, sweating as he labored over it. Under the renewed light, he saw Mariana's clothes not too far from where they were, and understood that she was naked under the blanket. He didn't want to move her away from the fire, and he didn't want to leave her to fetch the doctor. He would probably just tell him to do what he was doing, anyway.

Javier sat next to Mariana and held her, adding his body heat to that of the fire. She didn't look at him this time, either, but closed her eyes and exhaled. He put his palm under her nose and felt the air escaping her body, regularly and calmly. She was sleeping. He sat like that for hours, holding her for the most part and occasionally getting up to stretch his legs and care for the fire. He was drenched in sweat, and extremely uncomfortable, but he found solace knowing that the heat was keeping her alive. By sunrise, the blood was back in her cheeks and her face was as warm as his own. The light around him made him uncomfortable, perhaps because he was feeling furtive. He put

Mariana carefully on the ground, intending to feed the fire a couple of hours' worth of fuel before he left, but she awoke when he moved.

It occurred to him that he was holding a naked woman in his arms, but it didn't bother him. All that he felt at that moment, all that he did, could be in display and no one who understood him truly could point at him and accuse him. As for the rest, he had always known that the opinion of the world shouldn't matter, but for the first time he was brave enough to believe it.

Later that day, Mariana told the women what she had learned. A few voices argued for turning Amalia in to the Guardia Civil, even though they had no proof, but Mariana was against it. That would not be proper justice, one way or another. She was ready to believe that Amalia could be capable of terrible things, and she didn't doubt what she had heard in the river, but she also believed that Amalia's actions, all of them, were her own choices. Mariana almost despised the people who blamed their misdeeds on temptation or the devil, crying over the results of their actions as if they were just another victim. To Amalia's credit, she had never been like that. She never justified herself, for better or worse. A person who was aware of sinning deliberately had also the potential for deliberate repentance and atonement, and that was the most powerful kind of justice. And although Mariana could not imagine what the reparation for such an atrocity could ever be, she still had faith in her friend. Confession and redemption were still available for them, even now.

Mariana knocked on the *pazo*'s wooden doors. The women stood beside each other, a short distance behind her. Some of them feared Amalia and feared a confrontation with her.

When Amalia opened the door she winced at the light outside, and then looked at Mariana.

“Can you step outside? I would like to talk to you.” Mariana asked, not unkindly.

“No. What’s the matter?” Amalia looked over Mariana’s shoulder to the women behind her, who struggled not to take a step back.

Mariana sighed. “You know we have been collecting what your husband was owed. We settled all the debts, except the biggest one.” She gave Amalia a meaningful look, inviting her to trust her, to let go and confess her crime. It was a look that promised understanding and redemption. Amalia looked away and shrugged.

“I don’t need any money from anyone. His debts are paid, for all I care. Throw the money into the river or bury it with him, if you want.”

“Amalia. He was your husband and he loved you, and I believe you loved him too. He was always kind and generous to you. He died too young and too soon. He died unprepared, and it’s your duty to fix that.”

If Amalia had scoffed at her at that moment, it would have broken Mariana’s heart, but she didn’t. Instead, Amalia tightened her shawl around her arms and looked at her in the eye.

“What do you want?” The distrusting expression on her face made her look older.

“I want you to pay your debt.” Mariana was growing impatient. “I want you to pay your husband what you owe him. Your debt is the last one left to collect, and the biggest one. You have to pay for his life. It’s what he deserves.”

Suddenly, Amalia stepped forward, causing the women to step back. Her face almost touched Mariana, who hadn’t moved.

“If you think I killed my husband, call the police. Otherwise, leave me alone.”

“Fine. We will leave you alone.”

The women could not go to the police and could not commit violence against Amalia. That would have been vengeance, rather than justice. Instead, they repaid the debt the best they could; imperfectly, but sufficiently. After that afternoon, every person in the valley, from the solitary shepherds on the hills to the children running to school, heard what Amalia had done. They heard about Daniel, about his fullness and his warmth. They heard how he had been born and how he had died; about how his soul was split, half of it still roaming their streets. They heard about the debt that was owed to him—the biggest debt. Each and every one of the inhabitants of the valley took upon themselves to repay the debt, in their own little way. From that day on, they shunned Amalia. They still offered their services to her mother, who was innocent, and to Amalia herself, who after all needed to be fed, but she was denied all human warmth and friendship.

It seemed to Amalia that the group of women had dissolved in front of her eyes. None of them seemed to be missing: they were all there, at the market and at church, cleaning the cemetery and dipping their feet into the river. The women themselves were even polite to her, sometimes. They didn't avoid her or look away when they run into each other. They still casually talked to her about the weather and the cattle fair, passing on news and relevant information. But the thread that joined them together seemed gone, now. She didn't see them move together like drops of water inside a wave. Amalia didn't feel excluded, because she was unable to see that there was anything to be excluded from.

CHAPTER 8

MAGDALENA

Magdalena hated her name. In elementary school, she had been a baked treat. In high school, a biblical whore. It was not an uncommon name—there were at least three other Magdalenas in her graduating class—but there was something about her that invited bullying. She wished her mother had made it a bit harder. When the hotel manager said it, stressing the “g” exaggeratedly, she braced herself. He was smiling.

“Come with me, please,” he said, and she followed him into his office. The hotel had been built recently; the chain had decided to prepare as soon as possible for the upcoming universal exhibition, claiming a spot strategically situated between the tourist area downtown and the exhibition grounds, which at that time were little more than barren fields. 1992 was closer than most people realized, and it was going to transform the city. The first high-speed rail in the country would connect Sevilla to Madrid, making it possible to travel to the capital in under three hours. A new highway would surround the city and serve as a modern-day city wall, marking everyone without them as foreign, regardless of official city limits. Magdalena felt the city around her shaking up its stagnancy, looking outside and into the future, for once, and felt energized and proud to be a part of it. This was going to be her time, too.

She had taken the bus half of the way from her neighborhood, and walked the other half so she could look at herself in the window of the stores she passed and hear the sound of her new heels, bought at the discount market the week before. On the passing

reflection, she saw a new face; that was the face she had been working on for the last few days, a face that reflected the person she was now—or wanted to be; it was all the same.

“Welcome, Magdalena. Please take a seat.”

The room smelled new to her. Perhaps it was fresh paint, or new furniture. A real plant in a pot close to her grew exuberant, reminding her that this wasn't just any old boring place—this was a place where life happened. The manager sat behind the desk, a full-wall window to his right. Magdalena chose one of the chairs in front of him—it felt luxuriously comfortable, and she understood it was not meant for her.

“You want to work with us. Very well, very well. Let's take a look at your résumé.” The solitary piece of paper sat on its own on the impeccable desk. The lines on it were spaced and the smile on the accompanying picture was rehearsed to almost TV contestant perfection. It was sparse, but it was the best version of her, for his benefit.

“There is one little thing I see here. You don't have a degree.”

“I do. I have my high school degree.”

“You do, but you never went to college.”

He said it as if he was unwillingly bringing up a taboo topic. She had not been to college, but it wasn't because she was stupid or undisciplined. It was all because of the catalog. A year before she graduated high school, a friend of her father working for a marketing firm had brought her in at the last minute to pose for the summer catalog of a local clothing store. Even back then, she was young but not stupid. She knew she hadn't been discovered as much as accepted with resignation as a passable solution. And yet, the photographer had winked at her and called her beautiful, and her friend's mother had

used her pictures to harass her own daughter. She knew she couldn't say, "I skipped college to pursue a career in modeling", even though that was the truth.

"The ad didn't ask for it."

"It said 'preferably'."

"Exactly. 'Preferably'."

The manager sighed and sat back.

"Look, I'm sure you have many great qualities, but you don't fit the profile we are looking for." He meant her looks, obviously. He had read her résumé before and knew about her lacking education.

"I don't fit the profile," she said, with a stupid stare. She had faced so many rejections in the past few years that she was over making it easy for them. The manager's expression of corporate compassion froze.

"Yeah, well. Not only educationally, but also physically, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean." She was tempted to ask whether he was calling her ugly. She had heard people hinting at it so many times before—pretty, but not *that* pretty. She could make herself pretty enough, but she obviously lacked something fundamental.

"We are looking for someone, maybe, taller."

"Taller, like, how tall?"

"I don't know. Taller than you, obviously!" The manager stood up in a barely civilized invitation for her to leave. Satisfied that the interaction was unpleasant enough

for him, she complied. She hadn't ruined his day, but she hoped she had ruined at least a few hours.

It was the middle of a bright morning and she had nowhere to be. The sensation was strange—she felt like a child on school vacation, but also like an unemployed failure, watching people come and go down the streets, moving between the nodes of their busy lives while only she was allowed to stop. She would have gone shopping if she had had the money, but instead she resigned herself to looking at the windows. Sometimes she would go into the stores to touch and try on the clothes, even those she could never aspire to afford. She would walk in with her head up and an air of mild disinterest that she had perfected in front of the mirror and no one ever made her feel unwelcome. That day, though, she was too aware of herself to pull it off.

As she reluctantly gave up on her modeling career, Magdalena found a new calling in hospitality. She would argue that hospitality was more demanding than modeling, since it wasn't only her looks that were on display, but also her demeanor, and it required her to think on her feet. In that way, it was very much like acting. Plus, there was room for her to grow as she aged out of her looks. By the time her skin was saggy, she would be sitting behind an oak desk, watering her own potted ficus.

Magdalena was unsuccessful in her job hunt. She aimed high, applied in person and found out the interviewers' names before she met them. Still, and although she was invited to a few interviews here and there, the phone never rang with the good news, and bad news was left for her to guess. She knew that she would be successful eventually; she knew that, as she went down the pyramid of her expectations she would find a place that would have her. She would find a home in some second-tier inn or two-star hostel that

would hire anyone who could type and speak. She was not yet ready to give up on the very best, though. That, she feared, would be a way of measuring herself against the world, a way of finding out exactly how much she was worth in relation to others. She studied the faces of her interviewers and those luckier than her who already had her dream job—did they look prettier? More professional? In her lower moments she was convinced that they looked like they were made from higher quality materials, and all she could do was to disguise her poor making with a thick coat of paint.

The following morning she went straight from her bedroom to the bathroom, locking the door to claim the room for herself for as long as she needed it. Her dad might bang on the door growling that he needed to pee, but he knew her routine—it was not her fault that he was getting slow in his old age. She took longer than usual, searching for blemishes and imperfections, correcting the ones she could and strategizing her attack on those she couldn't—she needed to try something new to smooth her hair, for example. Sure, looks were not supposed to matter as long as she looked professional, but she wasn't that naïve. Let naïve girls go drop their CVs with a clean face and freshly ironed clothes.

She took her time undisturbed, and when she came out she saw her father sitting in front of his coffee and toast in the holey yellow shirt and boxers he slept in, his expression somber.

“What?” she asked.

“Ask your mother,” he answered. She wondered what had she done wrong this time, but he didn't look angry. Besides, when she did something wrong he liked to tell her himself in detail, using his fingers to number his points. After she barely graduated

high school her parents had paid a full-year tuition of beauty school, of which she had only attended two months and a half before deciding beauty was not so interesting anymore. She had been ready to defend it to others who saw beauty school as something dumb and superficial, and she insisted on calling it “aesthetic sciences”. It was, indeed, a science. It required familiarity with the human body in all its variety of forms, textures and colors. One had to know how to dry thick hair differently than thin hair, what combination of colors would make skin blemishes go unnoticed. She had pictured herself on her white robe, looking not much different than a doctor. The reality had been disappointing. Her white robe was often stained or covered in hair, and the rigorous knowledge she image seemed too intuitive for her taste. Her instructors taught by pointing to her errors and showing the right way rather than explaining the principle behind it.

After that, she had tried to go to college for journalism but failed the entrance exam—she was not much of a writer anyway—then tried her hand as a bartender, which didn’t suit her either, since the long hours made her tired and she hated being on her feet for long. The idea of working at a hotel as a receptionist had come to her like an epiphany: she was personable and could be very pretty when she tried. She could be pleasant and very helpful when she wanted to—for example, when she was being paid for it.

Magdalena’s mother was in the kitchen, busying herself with some dishes, but clearly upset. She wiped her cheeks with her wrists.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Now she was alarmed.

“Carmen is dead.”

“Carmen...?”

“Carmen Beltrán”

Carmen’s family had lived in the apartment next door all of their childhood and, as the only two children their age in the small apartment building, the two girls had grown up together. They had lost touch when Carmen had gone away to college. She’d returned to Sevilla when she dropped out after a couple of years, then disappeared into the city. She would reemerge periodically and Magdalena’s family would hear yelling and crying through the thin walls. Magdalena didn’t need to ask what Carmen had died of—her old neighbor had long before become a cautionary tale.

Although it had been a long time since she had cared about Carmen, Magdalena understood the shock and fear that her mother was feeling; it could have easily been her own daughter. There was nothing that Magdalena’s mother could pride herself in having done differently, and it seemed to them, at the moment, that death and misery were just a matter of sheer luck. None of them would say it out loud, but Magdalena and her mother had always known that Carmen was the one going places, and the comparison between the two girls had always been implicit, the adults too compassionate to ever speak it. Magdalena’s parents were too aware of the difference to ever use it as incentive—they were aware of the way Carmen shunned cartoons to practice her “word-of-the-day” in the encyclopedic dictionary that had been a gift from her grandfather, how her birthday parties overflowed her parents’ small apartment and had to be contained at the park a block away. Instead, Magdalena’s parents had been the most accepting of her when they were around Carmen, perhaps wounded in their pride a little, finding consolation in the

thought that there was only so much that nurture could do to trump nature. They behaved, it seemed to Magdalena, as if it were pointless and cruel to ask their daughter for more.

“The funeral is tomorrow morning,” her mother said, “do you want to go?” Of course she did.

Magdalena had seen Carmen’s mother here and there, but she hadn’t looked at her in years. She remembered a beautiful, genial woman—beautiful not in the way that men want their lovers to be beautiful, but in the way children want their mothers to be. Carmen’s mother looked older, and she was, but she also looked more real; she looked less like the person Magdalena had dreamed her as when she was a child and more like a woman. Her face was tired and alert, like that of someone who cannot afford to rest for fear that the world will come down crumbling if she ever took her eyes off it. Her hair was dyed the same shade of dark blonde as always, roots invisible.

The room was ample and dark, conceived to guard off the summer heat and the occasional winter chill. The shades on the windows were down, and a few lamps were on, as if sunlight was too vulgar or inappropriate for the occasion. As a result, the old house looked decrepit, rather than stately. Her mother informed her that the house belonged to Carmen’s maternal grandmother, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen, if she was even still alive.

Magdalena expected Carmen’s parents to be an indivisible unit—perhaps because that was how she’d always experienced them. Instead, Carmen’s father came and went between groups of people, greeting here and hugging there, while his wife just sat on her chair in the middle of the room, like a queen granting audiences, talking to whomever walked up to her. Her eyes searched for him from time to time, whether for comfort or to

check on him Magdalena couldn't tell. Carmen's father didn't turn to his wife at all, and in fact someone could have argued that he avoided her. He was a thin man and his black suit didn't fit his shape.

Magdalena herself didn't know what to do, as she couldn't feel like much of an adult among the people who had seen her grow up and was therefore reluctant to initiate any interactions. Other mourners seemed to know how to move around the room, following the tides of greeting and condolence, the center of which seemed to always be Carmen's mother, but she was paralyzed by childish awkwardness. She followed her mother's lead and kissed cheeks here and there, smiling back to the people who talked at her. Her mother had to nudge her to approach Carmen's mother, and she did with a formulaic phrase of condolence that seemed wrong as soon as it came out of her mouth. Carmen's mother didn't seem to care, though, and she kissed Magdalena's cheeks mechanically and politely, thanking her for being there. She could be of no consolation. In a navy blue dress that her mother had bought for her long ago, with no makeup and her hair tied back in a dark ribbon, she felt very young.

"Look at you, you are beautiful!" Carmen's father had finally found them and was now holding both of Magdalena's hands, pushing her arms slightly apart in order to take a look at her body. Magdalena smiled, uncomfortable.

"Thank you," she answered, although that was the last thing she wanted to say to the man who was surveying her body top to bottom. "I'm sorry for your loss."

He nodded.

"It wasn't totally unexpected, but still, one's daughter... You are too young to understand."

Magdalena didn't protest, because he was right. He was still holding her hands, and she wasn't brave or heartless enough to let go of a grieving father. Next to her, her mother shifted nervously and Magdalena realized she was looking at Carmen's mother, who in turn stared at them.

"I'm so glad you're here," he continued, "You know Carmen was so fond of you." That was a familiar line, but it had been many years since she had heard it last. Whenever she was hurt by childish pettiness, whenever Carmen overlooked her for some more interesting friend, that's what Carmen's parents would say to console her—*but she is so fond of you*. At the time, it had worked a little. Magdalena had been both surprised and delighted to hear it, but also a little suspicious. She believed it because she wanted it to be true, but it was hard to reconcile with Carmen's actions and, in the end, she always felt like the default friend of convenience.

"And I of her," she answered, and it was sincere because it had once been true.

"Give me a hug," he said, holding her body against his before she could answer. She wondered whether he was drunk.

"Emilio, I think Blanca needs you," Magdalena's mother interrupted, pushing him gently away from her daughter. He looked around for his wife and saw her leave the room. Magdalena's mother had never spoiled her, but she could count on her to be protective when she needed it.

"Oh, damn her! She knows what she's doing," he said, and the words shook Magdalena. For all his grumpiness, her father had never spoken to her mother like that. It was depressing to think that, sometimes, that was all you could expect from life, that your only daughter could die for no good reason and there could be nothing—no one—left to

hold on to. Despite his words, he ran after his wife, and she was relieved to lose sight of him. Magdalena's mother stood on her toes to kiss her forehead.

"It has nothing to do with you," she said, and even though Magdalena wasn't sure what she was referring to, it was the right thing to say.

When she arrived home, Magdalena realized she felt tired and miserable, but couldn't tell exactly why. Carmen's death had shaken her, and she had thought the funeral would bring her comfort, but instead it had made it all more unpleasant. She had been looking forward to a life she could shape all by herself, a life that would make sense because it would be hers, and had been naïve enough to think that it was just a matter of time.

When she saw others fail and be miserable, she used to think that the fault was theirs, that they didn't actually try. Deep down, she had believed that all it took to be happy was doing things the right way, but now, for the life of her, she couldn't see happiness around her. Her parents had each other, but they seemed merely content, if that. Their apartment always smelled like coffee and detergent, and she admired her mother's willpower to make lunch every day after work and even clean the kitchen before sitting in front of the TV. Sometimes Magdalena called her father out on it, but he just shrugged and mumbled something about her mother being better at it, and his wife smiled and said she did not mind. For them, that's what domestic bliss amounted to. She took the phone to her bedroom and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Manu, this is Magdalena."

"Hi! How are you? I'm looking forward to seeing you later."

“I’m sorry, but I can’t make it today.” She had never cancelled on him before, but for some reason he was the last person she wanted to see that day. He hesitated.

“Is there anything wrong? I could pick you up.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have to go,” she said, and hung up before he could protest. She had been seeing Manu for the last few months because it was fun and he was good looking, but she couldn’t talk to him about what was going on. She couldn’t talk to anyone, in fact, but she could at least hide in a bigger crowd that would not be too demanding on her. She dialed again, and this time her friend Virginia picked up.

“Hey,” Magdalena said to the bright plastic phone, “I’m having a weird day today. Take me out.”

“Hello, how are you?” her friend admonished. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, something with people.”

“I will give you people, and music. You’ll have to bring the alcohol, though. Bring wine.”

“You are, truly, a beautiful person, inside and out.”

“Sure. See you later.”

Magdalena knew the people Virginia was going to invite to her home, mostly her college friends, and she dressed for the occasion. She put on a sober, dark, long skirt and a sweater, and just a bit of makeup. If needed, she could explain that she had skipped college to focus on the study of life itself. She bought two bottles of wine from the store next door and headed to the bus stop.

Virginia lived by herself in a one-bedroom apartment clearly not big enough for a party. Her friend greeted her at the door and gave her a hug.

“How are you?” Virginia asked sincerely.

“You know.” Magdalena shrugged, wanting her friend to keep asking questions until she felt comfortable enough to speak honestly, but Virginia was hosting a party, after all, and she dismissed Magdalena with a kiss on her cheek and a push toward the center of the room. Because Magdalena had known her for longer than most people there, she felt entitled to a spot on the sofa, and for a while she sat by herself, content with drinking from her glass of wine and coke.

The party was dirty in ways she hadn’t suspected or noticed before. Although there were only a few people smoking and the windows were open, cigarette smoke dominated over any other smell. The grease of the food stuck to her fingers and stayed with her, even after she wiped them on a paper napkin. She wandered around the small apartment, trying to join a conversation, but it was hard to follow the words. Even the sounds were polluting, with the music making conversation difficult, and the noise of twenty-odd people talking making it impossible to enjoy the music.

“This is all a lie, you know.” Magdalena turned her head and saw a young man sitting next to her in the crowded room. She didn’t recognize him, but she didn’t introduce herself, either. He appeared to be very drunk, ready to illuminate her with his knowledge of the world.

“This party?” She egged him on, because she was bored.

“Yes this party, but also everything else. Like you. Or me.”

“So am I a lie, then?”

“You tell me,” he said, trying to be flirty and winking at her. His face was flushed.

“I think I am the realest person I know.”

“Well, you’re bound to think that.” He smiled as if he had won something.

“But I do think so; I really do,” she said, meaning it—perhaps she was too drunk. “You know, I try so hard to be real, whatever that means, but it doesn’t matter; even then, no one sees me—how real I am, I mean. Look at you, for example, sitting here and starting a dumb conversation just because you need to speak out loud your stupid drunk thoughts.”

Either shamed or, more likely, confused by her, the man didn’t seem willing to continue the conversation, so he excused himself and turned to face someone else. Magdalena left soon after. At the door, Virginia hugged her once more, then let her go.

Tired, tipsy, and feeling the vague dissatisfaction that not-quite-good parties leave, Magdalena walked out of the broad avenue and the shelter of the bus stop and into the winding streets of her neighborhood. Dry sweat was cooling into a film on her skin and the noise of the party still boomed in her ears. She couldn’t wait to wash it all off, but more than that, she felt she could never be truly clean where she was. The night was foggy and the streets were engulfed in an orange haze. The bright wave of renewal had not reached the area yet, and today she wondered whether it ever would.

CHAPTER 9

THE PAZO

The move didn't make sense. It was the city which pulled people in, which needed to feed on them in order to become what it was supposed to be, in order to awaken and to grow, and even though the people would not be consumed and worn, but rather made into beautiful pieces of the new shiny machinery, Magdalena didn't feel excited about this prospect anymore. In fact, it almost made her feel sick. The idea of the *pazo* appealed to her. The job would be easy enough, and she needed a place to build herself up by doing something simple and doing it right—a place to eat and sleep and perhaps take on running. She got the job as one usually does: a friend with better options than working in a rural Bed and Breakfast in the north of the country passed the offer on to her, and there wasn't much competition.

Magdalena took two busses to get to Galicia, and then one from Santiago to the little village, or parish, rather, where the Bed and Breakfast was. The inhabitants of the region often lived apart from each other, by themselves or in little conglomerations of houses, which made setting the borders of a town proper difficult. Instead, the rural territory was organized into parishes: groups of homes, farms and hamlets that loosely belonged together under a common name. The Lerma parish took over a small valley surrounded by forest, whose inhabitants had been tending to cows since before Roman times.

As the bus pulled away from the city, Magdalena leaned against the window and looked over the landscape she had heard about—the landscape she had imagined, with its winding green hills and grey skies. That day, and presumably many days to come, was cloudy. She had heard the common complaint from fellow southerners who had emigrated north: “you’ll miss the sun,” but Magdalena knew that it wouldn’t be true for a while. Not during the impending summer, when she would finally be able to use blankets at night and enjoy frequent cooling rains. She wouldn’t miss Seville in the summer.

Here and there the road crossed the Camino de Santiago. After learning that the *pazo*’s guests were mostly pilgrims, Magdalena had done some research. The pilgrimage route was first established in the 9th century, when the grave of the apostle James had been allegedly discovered in what was now the city that bore his name: Santiago de Compostela. Since then, pilgrims from all of Europe had made their way to Santiago, some by bike or horseback, but most of them on foot. They carried their belongings with them and slept, for a modest fee, in the hostels run by the Catholic Church or the local government. From the bus, Magdalena watched the pilgrims make their way slowly and with determination. She saw them when el Camino ran parallel to the road or crossed it, which must have been, no doubt, the least scenic parts of it.

Some walked tiredly under the weight of their backpacks. Others seemed to almost skip ahead, their bodies more athletic or their souls more eager. Magdalena didn’t know what to make of the concept of pilgrimage, in general. In the south, *romerías* were a lighthearted affair, a couple of hours’ walk in a bright spring day out of small towns and into the nearby countryside, up to a small rural chapel dedicated to this or that saint, or to the Virgin Mary, followed by a perfunctory Mass and a picnic, and finally a ride back

into town. She never thought much about religion, and had stopped attending Mass as soon as she got out of her Catholic school. The people she saw out of her window were different. They pushed themselves forward as if their effort had a meaning; one that was hard for her to reconcile with the platitudes she used to hear at church. At first, the purity she perceived in them inspired her—it resembled what she was looking for so far away from home—but little by little she got angry. There they were, with their rosy cheeks and strong legs, as if wholesomeness was not only a matter of choice, but a sign of moral superiority. She perceived in them a condemnation of weakness of any kind.

No one was waiting for her at the bus stop. She had hoped for a friendly face to welcome her and carry her suitcase as she struggled with her backpack and purse. She only had an address for the *pazo*, but the village was so small she suspected she could find it just by walking aimlessly through the streets. The air was surprisingly cold and humid, and Magdalena took a few moments to put on a sweater and look around herself. The bus had barely entered the village, but she could see down the street where the village ended. Flanking what seemed to be the town's main artery were rows of one- or two-story houses, cuddling together against a snowfall that would still take almost half a year to arrive. The walls of the buildings were of dark naked stone. Unlike in the south, houses up here didn't need to fend off the summer sun like an enemy. A couple of pilgrims had shared the bus with her and now started down the street and she followed them, encouraged by their purposefulness.

It was late afternoon and she figured the pilgrims would be looking for a place to spend the night, but some of them continued to walk down the street, out of the village and into the fields beyond. A few entered the small convenience store nearby, the only

sign of local life. When she walked in, the man behind the counter looked at her with curiosity. With her oversized suitcase, she clearly wasn't a pilgrim. He was helping a middle-age woman decide between the different models of walking sticks and hiking poles the store had to offer. Wood represented tradition and authenticity, but plastic was more comfortable. At the end of the day, it was up to the woman how much comfort was allowed. The woman examined her options, with care but not burdened with indecision. She looked like a person used to making considered choices. She finally chose the plastic poles, which had ergonomic handles, and although Magdalena had been rooting for the dark, knotty, wooden one with an ornamental water gourd hanging from it, she understood that it wasn't her hands that would blister. Once the woman left, satisfied with her purchase, the shopkeeper turned to Magdalena.

"I'm looking for the *pazo*," Magdalena said, smiling to cause a good impression. She would have to see the man again, perhaps often. She had the address to show him, but the village was so small that he had to know the place. She was looking forward to the start of small-town camaraderie. He might even offer to walk with her and help her with her suitcase.

The man, however, stayed behind the counter and looked at her as if trying to decipher her words. The store was clean and packed with anything a pilgrim could need, from instant soup to travel toothbrushes, but it still looked dusty in a way that had to do more with comfort than cleanliness. Having seen the solicitousness that the man had displayed with the pilgrim, Magdalena felt disappointed. She admired the shopkeeper's hospitality to strangers, but she was about to become a local herself. Apparently, kindness disappeared when there was no money involved.

“I’m Magdalena, the new receptionist.” She felt compelled by his silence to explain herself. Her job title sounded silly, but it was better than saying “the girl who does everything around the *pazo* except for cooking and deep cleaning.”

Since she refused to leave when ignored, the man exhaled loudly through his nose and almost pushed her outside, pointing and growling some directions. It turned out the *pazo* was just at the edge of the village, which was a couple minutes’ walk from the town’s square.

Magdalena arrived to the *pazo* as the sun started to set, dragging her pistachio-green suitcase down the dirt road, with her imitation Louis Vuitton handbag hanging on her shoulder. The old *pazo* was a modest one, compared to the more majestic houses she had seen from the bus and in the guide books she had flicked through during the last few weeks. From the street, the building seemed to emerge from behind a vine-covered wall. Beyond the gate, Magdalena could see the whole of the Bed and Breakfast, a stony, square, robust house with a little turret at the back. The turret was barely one floor taller than the rest of the building, but the mossy battlement on the top made the whole look aristocratic enough. As she stepped into the grounds of the *pazo*, beyond the stone wall and the rusty gate, she felt like quite an adventurer. She had made it from across the country all by herself.

The double wooden doors were open, welcoming the visitors. In the inside, the building looked like a castle out of a very unromantic vision of the Middle Ages, with stone floors and walls, and a few traditional farming tools hanging here and there as decoration. A big hall took the length of the building, with rooms at both sides. Her boss, Doña Amalia, wasn’t waiting for her, and Magdalena had to drop her suitcase against the

wall to go find her. She looked around the hall and told herself that she belonged here, after all. This was going to be her place of residence and work, so she might as well make herself comfortable.

Magdalena looked around the rooms open to the public and finally decided to enter the more ambiguous space of the kitchen. An older woman, whom she supposed was her boss, busied herself over a traditional cooking stove, stirring the contents of a big steel pot. Unlike other women of her generation who wore their hair short and blown up, Doña Amalia had hers pulled back into a low bun. Her overall appearance was practical, as if she didn't have the time for adornments of superfluous things. The smell in the kitchen was of meat and herbs, slightly foreign and yet deeply familiar. Doña Amalia looked up and saw her, then motioned her to come closer.

“I imagine you are the new girl. I'm glad you're here. I have work for you.” The older woman showed Magdalena to her room, but allowed her to stay in it just long enough to leave her things before getting started with work. The room was too close to the kitchen for comfort, as Magdalena would have liked something more private. It was part of her job to be always on call, but at least she had free room and board.

She had time to see a small, cozy bedroom with a twin bed and a window open to the back yard. After hurrying her back into the *pazo*'s hall, Doña Amalia gave Magdalena a tour of the building. On the ground floor were the kitchen, her bedroom, the dining and sitting room, and a series of small pantries and storage rooms. Wooden stairs led to the upper floor, which contained the rooms for the guests and Doña Amalia's own bedroom, whose door remained locked. There were six bedrooms and two bathrooms for the guests

to share, the bedrooms rustic but comfortable, each holding two double-sized beds and a fireplace.

They went outside, where the heat of the afternoon was starting to fade. Doña Amalia kept a few small animals, perhaps to retain a sense of authenticity about the *pazo*.

“You’ll have to clean the chicken pen sometimes. It’s not too hard, but it’s dirty. We use the chicken here, and the guests expect some smell where there are animals, but not so much that it will affect their dinner.”

Magdalena nodded, wondering what exactly the appropriate reach of the stench was. Fortunately, it wasn’t bad enough that day.

Some distance from the house, Magdalena saw a small structure that she recognized from books. It was a small stone granary with wooden walls and a pointy stone roof, raised on stone legs to protect the grain from the humidity of the ground and from the animals. It reminded Magdalena of a mausoleum, and thus its somber presence made the *pazo* look sinister. It was locked shut with a heavy chain and a padlock, and Magdalena guessed it was more to keep away vandals and squatters than to protect the grain from thieves.

For the rest of the evening, Magdalena helped Doña Amalia change the bedding in some empty rooms, feed the chicken, and serve and clear up dinner. Before meeting her boss, Magdalena had hoped for some kind of connection—friendship, even. She imagined sitting around the kitchen table after a long day to compare notes on their work, conspiratorially sharing stories about the guests, but instead Doña Amalia declared that she was done for the day and disappeared into her room, leaving Magdalena alone.

Once in bed, she found her room strangely comforting—or perhaps it was just her tiredness. The distant wood of the ceiling and the unconcealed stone of the walls were very different from the whitewashed brick of her childhood, yet they felt like something she ought to recognize—something ancestral.

The village, with barely a couple dozen stone houses, still survived the migration that had decimated the rural areas in the region. Being located by the pilgrimage route to Santiago had certainly helped keep it alive. Each year, thousands of pilgrims would buy water, soda, sandwiches or umbrellas at the village's only store, or would spend the night in the valley.

Magdalena's duties were to take care of almost anything, besides cleaning. When she was on call for the reception, she was allowed to step out of the reception desk as long as she was within hearing distance of the bell or, at least, where she could be easily found. She preferred sitting by the bell itself, since she hated the idea of being summoned. During her first week she had taken to reading her magazines on the comfortable sofa in the sitting-room, but soon the sounds of the bell had gotten under her skin to the point that she would jump to her feet every few minutes even when no one was calling. Eventually, she put a pillow in the reception chair and resigned herself to it.

Weeks went by, and it didn't take long for Magdalena to get use to the ebb and flow of pilgrims. The first group arrived usually around noon, before the bedrooms were ready. These were the early risers, those who woke up at five in the morning and were on the road before six. They would occupy the sitting room, scattering the contents of their backpacks all over the place and taking off their boots with loud sighs of relief. Another

group or two might show up later in the day, and these would head to the bedrooms and bathrooms immediately, and the focus of the activity in the *pazo* would move upstairs.

Most of the pilgrims were young people for whom the Camino was just another tame adventure. On the weekends, they would also get the occasional older couple in search for a quiet, cozy place away from the city. These more sophisticated guests would order moderately expensive wines with their dinner and drive to nearby attractions on Saturday mornings.

Magdalena liked the pilgrims well enough. It was spring, which meant the pilgrim season was starting. It would climax in late July, in time for St James's day, and then slow down during the fall into the quietness of winter. She wondered whether she would be able to put up with the boredom, but winter was a long way into the future and, by then, she would be an entirely new person.

Her favorite guests were the older ones who treated her a bit like a younger relative—a niece or something. They tipped well, and she enjoyed the money as much as the conspiratorial way in which they gave it to her, as if saying, “Buy yourself some candy.” Sometimes, not often, an older man would get too flirty and ruin it for her—and for them. Don't you understand, she thought, that you are now relegated to the role of creepy uncle? She also liked children, sometimes, when they were well-behaved and easy to impress, when they submitted their behavior to her approval in the hopes of earning a piece of candy themselves as a token of adult acceptance.

She also enjoyed interacting with the foreign older women with whom she could barely communicate. Their bodies were surprisingly strong—they had to be, to reach the *pazo* on foot—and their manners were almost always friendly. They seemed to enjoy the

game of pointing and mismatched words, played always with an apologetic smile. They mostly asked her where to buy supplies in the small village or when would dinner be ready. Younger pilgrims often came in groups and were more likely to keep to themselves. The days were still cold, but on sunny afternoons they would walk around the village or sit outside to look at the view, often sharing a bottle of wine before dinner.

Her boss was an inconsistent apparition. The woman would have dinner ready every day at eight o'clock, yet other than that she was hard to find. During her first week at the *pazo*, Magdalena had tried to run to her whenever she had a question, but Doña Amalia was never anywhere Magdalena looked for her, and she learned to just do the things her way—there was no one to tell her off.

It wasn't that Magdalena didn't see her boss—she did see her, here and there, several times a day, but rarely when she needed her and, if she did, Doña Amalia had not time for her. Doña Amalia's conversation was abrupt, and her habits strange. She seemed to take long naps in the afternoon, and was always up before dawn, though she would often go outside in the morning and disappear for hours. She wasn't what Magdalena had hoped for—the wholesome country wife. That tainted the experience to some extent.

If she had bothered to look over her work, Doña Amalia would have been pleased—or so Magdalena believed. She was good at book-keeping, which gave her a sense of intellectual accomplishment, but she was also good with the guests. Magdalena was able to be whom they needed her to be, and they appreciated that. She was warm and welcoming with those who were looking to find in the *pazo* a new, more exciting home, and became distantly polite and efficient for the guests who wanted to be left alone. On her part, the guests were fine in their own way, once she was able to tell to which group

they belonged. The pilgrims were mostly grateful for a place to sleep and a warm dinner, and were rarely demanding. They wanted her to occasionally participate in their camaraderie, and she obliged. The retired couples often wanted to chat with her and were punctilious about cleanliness. The younger couples on romantic retreats didn't pay much attention to anything.

Once, she made a mistake with one of the pilgrims. It had been understandable, she told herself, but it still bothered her for days, until the busy routine of the *pazo* distracted her. He was a man in his late sixties, athletic and dressed in a gaudy green and yellow tracksuit. He was quiet and unsmiling when he arrived, but after dinner he invited her to sit with him and produced a small bottle of *orujo* from which he poured a finger for each of them in a pair of water glasses. Magdalena decided that it was the rigor of the hike that had made him seem unpleasant and that, once fed and rested, he was open to friendly conversation. She sat with him and accepted the drink, and he smiled. He then started telling her about his reasons to walk to Santiago. It turned out that it was something he did every year since he had retired and, in his opinion, what would keep him alive for a couple of decades.

Magdalena smiled and replied. She explained to him her own ideas about hiking, and how they had changed now that she talked to so many hikers. She told him all she had learned in the *pazo*, and how interacting with so many people was such an enriching experience. The man frowned and continued talking about his Camino routine. Magdalena saw the frown, but didn't pay it any mind. The *orujo* was making her reckless. He told her how he liked to start at exactly seven o'clock each morning, after a light breakfast. The trick was to feed yourself steadily throughout the day, so the blood

sugar levels would never sink too low. Once again, Magdalena tried to bring up her own experience, unrelated as it was, and realized too late that the man was annoyed. He sighed as she quickly finished what she was saying, and by the time she walked away from his table, he was already deep in conversation with a young man from Murcia who knew how to listen.

Doña Amalia seldom interacted with the guests—in fact, Magdalena suspected that that was why she was had been hired—but these rare interactions were a strange thing to behold. The old woman could be charming, but she almost never was. It seemed as if she picked favorites among the guests based on criteria that Magdalena could hardly understand. For example, she took to one little boy who was there for a week with his aunt and uncle, and fed him desserts and big pieces of sharp cheese, telling him stories about the *pazo* and allowing him to play with the chicken.

Other than that, Doña Amalia seemed completely uninterested in children, and Magdalena attributed the exception to the fact that the boy was an orphan, even though Doña Amalia was anything but sentimental. A few guests were persistent even in the face of outright rudeness, and Magdalena liked them for it. They tried to engage their hostess in conversation and didn't seem to resent being rebuffed. Magdalena admired their efforts, but also looked down on them a little. They had, she suspected, a need to be universally liked, which for her was a kind of weakness.

The *pazo*'s only TV was a small black-and-white thing that Dona Amalia kept in her kitchen and that only worked half of the time. Magdalena had never been an avid reader, but once she was done with the pile of magazines in the sitting room, she surprised herself by consuming almost a romance novel a week. Pretty soon—she

thought—she would have to start buying her own. Sometimes her eyes started to hurt and she had to drop the novel altogether. She had left her music player back home, and she would have to save for a while before being able to afford one.

The summer, as she had suspected, was very pleasant. There were some hot days, of course, but the average weather was comfortably warm and occasionally sunny, with enough rain to cool off the valley and give variety to the passing of the days. Most of all, Magdalena relished having to use a blanket at night.

On one sunny July afternoon, a couple of weeks after St. James's day, Magdalena lay on her bed, looking at the ceiling and wondering whether she should just get up and ask her boss for something to do, even on her day off. The ceiling was beautiful, high wooden beams holding the upper floor and keeping her safe, and the golden, heavy sunlight on the wood reminded her of the fall days in which her grandfather took her to the forest to pick chestnuts. Suddenly, her lethargy felt disgusting, and she jumped off the bed on impulse. Feeling dizzy, she looked out of the window and saw the green hills with their small fields falling from their tops down to the river. She was living practically in the middle of the forest and all she could do with her day off was lie on her bed. TV generation indeed. Magdalena reminded herself of the reason she had come north, of her desire to escape the ugly and the polluted, and forced herself to go outside.

The afternoon wasn't as hot as she had feared—she still had to learn that bright light didn't always mean unbearable heat.

She first took the familiar path, down the street toward the store, through the town's square dominated by the Romanesque church. She liked roaming around the oldest part of the village, that with houses in ruins and abandoned orchards. When she

arrived in front of the church, however, she stopped. If the purpose of the walk was exploration, she was going about it the wrong way. There wasn't much to the town anyway, but she had barely seen a portion of it.

At the opposite end of the square, where she would usually continue down the street and up to the store, she turned right, surrounding the church. The village ended abruptly behind the small graveyard, and she could see the valley continue its descent into the wilderness, showing some human presence here and there. While the massive land properties in the south of the country, owned by a handful of families for centuries, had been the ancestral cause of social inequality, up here they had the opposite problem: tiny fields that could barely feed the family that owned them.

“We are all screwed one way or another, aren't we?” She thought, thinking back to her mother, whose eyes sometimes spoke of the half-remembered hunger, to her grandmother, who had given birth to seven children on a dirt floor, and got to raise five.

She wasn't a fan of graveyards, generally, but the afternoon had put her in a mood to look back, even at things that weren't hers to remember. Graveyards in Galicia were peculiar, different from the southern austerity. Here, too, there were a few niches against the graveyard's wall, of course, occupied by the recently deceased, but most of the graves were under the ground and adorned with rather elaborate monuments. In such a small village, too, people cared about appearances even after death.

A little section was separated from the rest by a low fence that Magdalena could have easily walked over. Out of respect, she walked around it and through the unlocked little gate. There were no niches in this section, and the graves were all old, bearing most of them foreign names. Unlike the graves of the locals, the foreign graves were sober and

unadorned, and there was a certain uniformity to them, as if they had all belonged to the same family.

As she walked around the cemetery, reading the names and dates on the stones tested the limits of Magdalena's morbidity, especially when she found something unusual, like a short lifespan or a too descriptive inscription. 1968 to 1977 was only nine years. Carlos Cerdeña had crashed his motorbike only a few Aprils back, at the age of 18. Magdalena was distracted, and the perfectly mundane sound of someone walking on fallen leaves startled her. An older woman was just walking into the cemetery, carrying a bucket with cleaning supplies inside. Her lively eyes looked at her with friendly curiosity, as if she was sure that, whoever Magdalena was, they should become friends.

"Looking for someone specific?" The woman asked, her mocking tone inviting as an extended hand. Magdalena shook her head.

"I was just bored."

The woman chuckled. "What it is to be young and have time to be bored! Are you walking the Camino?" The woman asked, looking at her from head to toe. Magdalena knew she didn't look like a pilgrim with her clean jeans and makeup. It was just a polite way of asking her what she was doing there.

"I work at the *pazo* with Doña Amalia," Magdalena informed her new friend, and saw her lips purse briefly. Everyone must know each other in such a small village, and the lack of a smile of recognition made Magdalena wonder. She was afraid to ask, lest the woman thought she was looking for gossip.

"I hope you enjoy living here," The woman answered. "We don't have much to offer, but people still come in for the views."

“They are beautiful,” Magdalena said, breathing in the fresh air. “There is not much to do, though, once you are done watching.” She thought she would hear an admonition about today’s youth and their lack of appreciation for the simple things, but instead the woman handed her a rag.

“If you’re bored, you might as well help me.”

Magdalena ought to be too tired of cleaning messes at the *pazo* to take on more work on her day off, but she surprised herself by taking the rag with pleasure. It seemed suddenly like a beautiful afternoon to clean graves. She followed the woman into the enclosure with the old graves, which seemed to be the ones that deserved her attention.

“My name is Magdalena, by the way.” Her tone was softly teasing. If you’re going to recruit unpaid labor, at least learn their names. The woman smiled, apologetically.

“I’m Mariana,” she said, before turning to fill the bucket in a tap nearby.

Magdalena started cleaning the dirt off a gravestone. It was one of the oldest ones, the inscription on it barely legible.

“Johannes...”

“Johannes Smet. He’s our oldest resident—1558, if you will believe that. He came all the way from Ghent in order to ask the apostle to save his protestant brother. I wonder if the brother did the same for him. Perhaps they split forces hoping that one of them would get it right and help the other out.”

Her tone amused Magdalena, and she realized that she had assumed she knew the woman just because of her age. Older people didn’t become homogeneous with age, but perhaps they seemed so to the arrogant eyes of the young.

“Is that allowed?” she asked, wanting to encourage the woman and reward her openness.

“Who knows; ask them!” she gestured at the graves with her shoulder, as her hands were busy sweeping a long stone she was careful not to step on. *Claudette Elodie Bernard*, 1865.

“A woman!” Magdalena exclaimed. Doña Mariana nodded.

“She was an old thing, like me. She travelled by herself, too. From Rouen. Heart attack—the hills were made for the young and strong.”

Doña Mariana seemed strong enough, Magdalena thought, seeing her sweep vigorously while her own arms were getting tired.

“How do you know so much about them? Is there some kind of record?”

“There is, for some of them, in the church. At least a list of names and dates—sometimes more. There are also the stories people tell, things they remember. Some of these died unexpectedly; they fell from a cliff or their heart failed; some were even murdered for their money or in a fight. Others had time to die in the village, close to people. They died in a bed and were able to tell their story.”

Magdalena marveled at the woman in front of her, who had been able to conjure for her such a rich past, who had given the sleepy village a new dimension to compete with the image she had in her mind of centuries of cow shit and rain. They continued working for a while, Doña Mariana telling her stories and Magdalena listening as she cleaned.

Finally, Doña Mariana looked around herself, satisfied. Magdalena was satisfied, too. She had worked hard for the benefit of the dusty bones underground or the

occasional curious tourist, and yet it seemed to her that she had made good use of the afternoon. The sun had just set and the evening was starting to grow cold. Soon, the graveyard would turn from melancholic into eerie, and she wanted to leave by then. Doña Mariana patted her back and pushed her softly towards the exit.

“Come with me. Come home for some cake. Teresa will be excited to meet you.”

The promise of a warm room with a soft light and cake to eat was enough to convince her.

“Who is this?” Doña Teresa asked, with the bluntness of the very old and a wary expression on her face born, without a doubt, from the fear that she was someone Doña Teresa should know and had forgotten.

“Teresa, this is Magdalena. She is from the south, and I met her at the graveyard today. She helped me clean the gravestones.”

“She did? Where is Alejandra, then?”

“She died in 1974, remember? We cleaned her house and found the letters from her sister in Argentina.”

“Ah, yes. The letters from Argentina. Have you offered this girl something to eat?”

Now that she had found her place in her own history, as if in a book she had forgotten to bookmark, Doña Teresa seemed more alive.

“I have,” Doña Mariana answered. “I was going to bring some cake. Do you want some?”

Doña Teresa shrugged, a gesture that seemed to have some meaning for Doña Mariana, who then left the room.

“And what was your name, sweetheart?”

“Magdalena.”

“Very pretty, very pretty. We don’t have many Magdalenas around, you know?”

Well, I used to know one a long time ago, when I was younger than you. What do you do here in the village?” Doña Teresa wasn’t so shy about asking.

“I work at the *pazo* with Doña Amalia,” she repeated. She hadn’t had to introduce herself to many people in the village so far, and she had just resigned herself to her one-line identity; Magdalena, who works in the *pazo*. Doña Teresa shook her head.

“A bad place to be, girl. A bad place to work. How is Amalia treating you?”

“I can’t complain,” Magdalena said, though she could. When she didn’t neglect her, Doña Amalia was a strict boss with little patience or flexibility—there was only one way of doing things right. She was cold and unwelcoming, and treated her not much better than a tool. Doña Amalia was always polite, though, which should be enough in a boss, but Magdalena didn’t have anyone else nearby to spare her some kindness. Perhaps that could change.

“What do you think of her, of Doña Amalia?” Magdalena asked. They must have known each other for decades.

“I don’t know. I’m very old, and I get all the people mixed up in my head. After fifty years you forget if it was this or that person who did one thing or another. To tell you the truth, you don’t care that much anymore, either. I’ll tell you this: she’s not someone I would share a roof with, to be honest. I wouldn’t eat at her table, either.”

She gave Magdalena a look as if she was supposed to understand what she was talking about without further explanation. She then became aware of Doña Mariana, who

had arrived with the cake and some warm milk just in time to hear Doña Teresa. Magdalena expected the younger woman to dismiss her warning as an untimely recollection of something that was never quite as the old woman remembered it, but instead, Mariana gave Doña Teresa a look devoid of condescension or pity—an expectant look between equals. The cake was homemade and its sugar crust melted in Magdalena's mouth.

“Doña Teresa is of the opinion that I shouldn't eat at Doña Amalia's table but, to be fair, her table is the best part of her house.”

Doña Mariana smiled.

“I might have given you the opposite impression with my stories about the pilgrims, but I'm not a gossip. I have a rule not to speak ill of the living, if I can help it.”

The implicit condemnation of Doña Amalia didn't escape Magdalena, but she also understood that the topic was exhausted with Doña Mariana. Perhaps one day she could make her talk.

Magdalena came often to visit Doña Mariana and Doña Teresa for coffee and cake. Doña Amalia didn't like her spending much time in the *pazo*'s kitchen, so she resigned herself to bring a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates that she got from the store. Doña Amalia never inquired about Magdalena's private life, but if she had, Magdalena might have felt inclined to lie about visiting her new friends. Whatever the reason for the antipathy between the older women, Magdalena feared that she would be forced to be a casualty in that war and, as much as she liked her visits, her livelihood was at the *pazo*.

Each time she visited, Doña Mariana dug out for her the centuries of history in the village. She knew as much as anyone alive about the things that had happened a long time ago, and also the things that had not. Unless she had first-hand knowledge or documented proof of an event, Doña Mariana always qualified her stories as things that “possibly happened,” or things that were “extremely unlikely, but still worth telling.” The first category included gossip and speculation, such as the reasons why Dorotea had left for Argentina with Eduardo, a young man whom she, supposedly, barely knew. The second category was the one Magdalena enjoyed the most, though she wondered how much of it was made up in the spot for her benefit. Once free of the responsibility of truthfulness, Doña Mariana seemed to relish the storytelling, and the improbable stories became the ones with the richest details.

The second category allowed for the supernatural, which could never be disputed, since it was always true in the way that folklore is true. This included legends and miracles, stories of healed wounds and century-old relics remaining as fresh as when they were first cut out of the saintly corpse. There were stories about the war, too, but mostly humorous or at least light-hearted, such as the tale of the 1938 aurora borealis and how everyone in the village thought they were being bombed. Some of the stories included an accidental mention of Doña Amalia—a younger, kinder version of her. On these occasions, Doña Mariana seemed to catch herself, and she promptly rerouted the story to avoid mentioning Magdalena’s boss without being conspicuous about it. This reluctance only piqued Magdalena’s curiosity.

CHAPTER 10

DOLORES

After meeting Doña Mariana, Doña Amalia suddenly became more interesting. Magdalena had once despised small-town drama, but she now understood why it was such a healthy genre. It was one part boredom, which she had already guessed, but it was mostly something else. In such a small place, surrounded by so few people, every little disruption affected most of them. A family argument rippled through the town's social structure. One neighbor's business felt vital because it was, because there was nowhere to hide from it. There was not such a thing as "minding one's own business," and Magdalena understood that this was more a matter of necessity than gossip—for the most part.

The truth was, Magdalena was curious about Doña Amalia, and that curiosity felt increasingly like self-preservation. By now she was accustomed to her old-woman mannerisms, the way she was cheap where she thought it didn't matter, the way her business was also her home, and the guests' comfort was, to some extent, secondary to her own.

There was something else that bothered Magdalena, something about the way Doña Amalia moved about the building in a manner that was both furtive and proprietary. Perhaps these feelings were just the antipathy that she perceived in Doña Mariana, paired with Doña Amalia's coldness. Sometimes, Magdalena was convinced that her boss was perfectly normal, and she even felt a bit ashamed of her mistrust, which she suspected

was born of the fact that she liked Doña Mariana and was prepared to believe her for no better reason than her cheerful and welcoming behavior. Other times, however, Magdalena was ready to believe almost anything about Doña Amalia. She saw her one night walk out of the trees nearby while surrounded by complete darkness, her steps confident as if it were the middle of the day; and once she saw her face illuminated by candlelight, and she thought she recognized something that couldn't possibly be human.

Then, of course, there was the incident with the snake. It had taken place on the night of June 23rd, weeks before Magdalena's meeting with Doña Mariana, and thus not tainted with the old woman's opinion.

That night, Doña Amalia had once again disappeared, and Magdalena was on duty overseeing the Saint John's Night festivities, making sure that none of the guests got hurt as they played with the bonfire that had been lit behind the *pazo* and drank the cheap red wine bought at the store. Some of the young men had decided to try their luck and jump over the fire, and the encouragement and cheers of the group were loud and joyful. They were so loud that Magdalena didn't hear the girl scream until she saw her running toward them. The child had been left in her room while her parents celebrated the holiday, and now buried her face against her mother's belly, who first was alarmed, and then laughed, teasing the child kindly. She had found a snake in the bathroom and, although snakes were not dangerous in the area, everyone agreed that the shock was understandable.

"I will take care of it," Magdalena offered. In the past few weeks, she had grown more comfortable with everything that living in the country entailed, and she tried not to show fear or hesitancy when dealing with animals. In this case, she didn't know how to catch or kill a snake, but trying should be enough. As she approached the building,

however, she saw Amalia walk towards her. In the dark, Magdalena couldn't tell where she was coming from, but she was carrying a big canvas bag full of plants that she had apparently been picking.

"There is snake in the bathroom," she said, and Amalia nodded.

"Take a broom and make sure it's still there and it doesn't leave."

"Should I kill it?"

"No," Amalia said, "You wouldn't know what to do with it."

Magdalena did what she was told. She found the snake resting under the sink, and she stared at it, trying to catch a move, but the animal remained completely still. A few minutes passed and finally her boss climbed the stairs with a bowl of milk and a bunch of what Magdalena had learned to recognize as dry sage. Doña Amalia walked past her and her broom barricade and set the bowl of the bathroom floor, circling it with the sage. Then, she stepped back, standing at the door, almost as still as the snake.

Little by little, the animal dragged itself forward and in the direction of the bowl. Magdalena wondered whether snakes drank milk at all, since they were not mammals. It seemed that, at least, this one did, for it reached the bowl and started to drink greedily, appearing more active and alive than it had before. With every gulp of milk it took, Magdalena could see its body shake, and it seemed as if the milk was reaching the whole of it, from mouth to tail. She also realized that the snake was growing slightly bigger, or rather that it was bloating.

When the animal was finally done with its meal, Amalia stepped forward and took the empty bowl. The snake recoiled, but it was a laboriously slow move, nothing at all like the quick reflexes Magdalena had learned to expect. Amalia wasn't in a hurry, and

she slowly took a convenient position next to the animal, as it crawled away sluggishly. With a decisive, sudden move, Amalia raised her foot and let it fall on the snake's head, splattering blood on the floor and the tiled wall. She then took the remains on her bare hands, walked downstairs and out into the night, and dropped them into the bonfire, which first roared fiercely and then went out without another sound.

For a couple of seconds, everyone looked at Amalia in disbelief, and then someone murmured something about organic fluids and chemical reactions. In any case, the celebration was over, and they all walked back to the *pazo*, mostly in silence. In the morning, the conversations over breakfast recounted the celebrations of the night before, but no one mentioned the snake.

Magdalena couldn't ignore the strangeness of the *pazo*, but living in a strange place for a long time wasn't the same as leading an exciting life, as she found out. She perceived the uncanniness of the place in waves, sometimes in things she could point to, but it was mostly as intangible as the quality of the light or the smell of the air.

On some lazy afternoons, as she sat at her desk to go over the books or the list of reservations, she had noticed a finger of light that crossed the room from the open window and touched the opposite wall. The sunbeam entered the room by caressing the top left corner of a dusty landscape painting, and descended slowly, illuminating the green hills and tranquil river, finally reaching the lower side of the frame. It didn't happen very often, but once or twice Magdalena would look distractedly at the painting and see that the finger of light was not where it was supposed to be. It seemed to go back and forth as the afternoon progressed, its movement too slow for the eye to follow, yet refusing to draw its accustomed arc all the way down. There was no banging sound, no

voice calling. There was nothing to point to immediate danger or even clear evidence that the life of the *pazo* had been disrupted in any significant way. Magdalena couldn't share her experience with anyone, and she wasn't even sure whether she could believe it herself.

The truth was that she wasn't prepared to make a definitive choice—she wasn't prepared to incorporate the supernatural into her life, with all the uncertainties it brought with it. Doing that would mean opening up the door to all kinds of things, and getting rid of the reliable rules that had guided her so far, if not in the minutia of her own life, at least in her understanding of the universe around her. At school, she had never done well with scientific subjects, but she had always trusted the reassurance of science, and she found solace in the knowledge that someone, somewhere, had things under control, that they could explain things in a satisfactory manner, even if she herself could never understand them.

The other choice, however, also required a kind of faith that she wasn't quite ready to offer. Dismissing the supernatural when faced with it meant trusting the conventional order of the universe more than her own senses. It meant sacrificing her individual perception and accepting only the world that had been deemed possible by others. And yet she couldn't see what could be gained by this sacrifice.

This indecisiveness was not in conflict with boredom and, as the weeks went by, Magdalena found that the quiet, authentic life she had been craving wasn't as fulfilling as it should have. She had found refuge from the harshness of the city, and now she longed for some of it. The truth was that she could still have it if she retraced some of her steps. On her day off, Magdalena took the bus to Santiago with the excuse of doing some

shopping. It felt strange to her to travel so swiftly and comfortably to the goal of the pilgrimage, as if there was something irreverent about it. Once again she saw the pilgrims through the window, this time heading in the same direction as her.

She never thought she would be so happy in a provincial capital, but after living in the village, the modest square, with its dusty bars and antiquated stores seemed to her as good as any metropolis. Magdalena didn't want to be a tourist that day, and she avoided the cathedral—she felt that the proper thing was to reach it on foot. Instead, she decided to renew her reading materials and approached a newsstand, where she bought a stack of celebrity gossip magazines and the day's paper. The newspaper seller was an affable man, and after chatting with her for a couple of minutes, he filled a bag for her with all kinds of back issues. Magdalena wondered whether she would ever be bored enough to learn the top 15 rules of car maintenance, but she was grateful. She completed her shopping by buying herself running shoes and a pink-and-lime tracksuit, with a hood that should be useful to keep away the region's treacherous rain. Exercise should help with the uneasiness she felt at the *pazo*. Satisfied with her commitment so far, she sat at a café and ordered a round of churros and hot chocolate.

She was starved of information from the outside world, and so she went through the magazines that the old man had thrown in; there were a few issues of her favorite celebrity gossip one, *Diez Minutos*, which she wanted to save for the worst moments of boredom, although she allowed herself to read half of one issue. She learned about the struggles of a famous singer after the death of her husband, and about the wedding of two aristocrats, and it gave her a sense of relief to see that life went on elsewhere.

Among the magazines she hadn't asked for, there were a few back issues of a gardening publication that she thought she would enjoy better in the pastoral setting of the *pazo*'s fields, so she reserved those for later. Finally, what caught her attention in the piles were a couple of issues of *Mas Allá*. She flipped through the covers; "Franco's Aliens? The Dictator's Interstellar Allies," read one, showing a picture of the late dictator facing a big-eyed, bald, blue being. She took another, in which a grand, dark house seemed to hide whitish shapes behind its windows; "Spain's 25 Most Haunted Buildings!"

She liked ghost stories, especially the ones that people swore were true. They helped her imagine what the supernatural might actually look like, if it existed. How else could she understand it? She had seen the movies and heard the campfire stories, but what she had seen in the *pazo* didn't quite look like that. It was certainly weird, definitely supernatural, but in which way? The magazines might help. Most of the stuff in them seemed to be entertaining bullshit about secret alien conspiracies or good luck rituals for the summer solstice, but the haunted house issue caught her attention. She did live in a haunted house—a house so old that couldn't but have its own temperament. How many people might have the house seen die? How many acts of betrayal might have it witnessed?

The *pazo* scared and fascinated her. It seemed reluctant to leave its ancestral past and welcome modernity, and the electric lights that must have had illuminated it for decades already seemed to recoil as if the house was putting them in their proper place; they did the job of allowing work and reading, but they never felt quite enough to completely dispel the dark.

One morning, Magdalena woke up before the sun came out, which was unusual for her. Her bed was too soft, probably bad for her back, but it was comfortable and, thanks to the quietness of rural life, she slept more soundly than ever before in her life. That morning, though, something had wakened her and she couldn't tell what it was. It wasn't quite a noise, at least not one that she could perceive with her ears. Perhaps it had been the strange quality of the pale light, bland and watery. It filled her room and, for some reason, made it impossible for her to sleep.

It was cold outside, but Mariana had never seen the sun rise over the valley, and she thought that could be a good chance. Besides, it felt good to start her day early. She put on her workout clothes, half-committing to exercise, and unlocked the big front door slowly, which remained silent as she pushed it.

The dawn was misty around her, and at first she could only see dots of light in distant parts of the valley. The *pazo* itself seemed to disappear as soon as she walked away from it and into the cloud. What little she could see was beautiful—the grey light touched the old building here and there where a persistent sunbeam revealed the stone and turned it pink and gold. Gradually, the fog lifted and the valley revealed itself to her—every little building and pond, every patch of green. And then the morning light took over, pulling her out of the spell of sunrise and into a working mood.

It was a bright, energetic morning, and Magdalena felt energetic herself. She took some corn from the shed nearby and walked toward the chicken pen. She was outside anyway, so she might as well do some outside work. When the animals didn't approach the wire fence hungrily, as they did every morning, she looked closely. All of them were dead, opened up and gutted. The pen's gate was unlocked and ajar. She could not be

blamed, she thought. Doña Amalia was always the last person to lock the pen at night. If an animal had gotten to them, it was on her. Magdalena didn't waste her compassion on the animals—she had learned in her days at the *pazo* that the beasts she cared for were the beasts that fed her.

When she walked around the building to go back inside, she saw Doña Amalia also at the door. Her apron was stained with blood.

“Something happened to the chicken. They are all dead.” Magdalena felt silly saying that, as if she was playing a role at someone else's request. Doña Amalia must have been aware by now.

Doña Amalia looked up suddenly and stared into her eyes for a couple of seconds. Then she looked away again.

“Probably a wolf or a fox. It happens from time to time.” If Doña Amalia didn't want to tell her about the blood—was it chicken blood?—Magdalena didn't feel it was right to ask. However, she couldn't let it go.

“I've never seen anything like that.”

“You'll probably see it again. Better get used to it.” And with that, Doña Amalia walked into the house. Any conversation between them was always on the woman's terms.

Breakfast was busy, and the constant carrying of plates and cups from and to the kitchen almost made Magdalena forget about the chicken, but when she had a moment to herself she couldn't stop wondering about it. A wolf or a fox, yes, but who had left the gate unlocked? It wasn't her, she was sure, and Doña Amalia implied differently. The old woman must have forgotten it herself. And the blood? Did she come to the pen before

Magdalena? If so, she wouldn't have felt the need to justify herself to her employee. It was all strange, but Doña Amalia didn't seem upset, and the chicken were hers, after all.

Magdalena realized that she feared her boss. The fear wasn't specific, but rather a vague feeling of mistrust. Magdalena couldn't quite see the whole of her, and when she thought she knew her, the old woman shifted and changed. On the day of her arrival, Magdalena assumed that the old woman cherished the place that had been her ancestral home, and Doña Amalia's excited account of family history seemed to confirm that impression. However, the woman seemed to neglect any repairs that didn't directly affect her business, and didn't even appear to lament the state of neglect of the turret or how the moss threatened the integrity of the family's coat of arms over the main door.

Dolores and her family arrived to the *pazo* at the end of August. She was tall and strong, moving with what seemed like an endless supply of energy. Magdalena saw her walk through the door one day shortly before lunch, carrying her backpack as if it were weightless and with a smile in her face aimed at the whole world, without playing favorites. Her husband followed her, looking around rather skeptically. Clinging to his arm, a tired-looking eight-year-old boy entertained himself braiding the worn strings of his small Spiderman-themed backpack. The woman introduced herself without giving a last name, and apologized for not having made a reservation.

"It's okay," Magdalena said, "we have a double room available. You will have to share the bathroom, though."

"Ha ha, no problem. We are sharing people!" And with this they followed Magdalena upstairs.

Dolores, her husband and the child came down into the dining room shortly after Magdalena had started serving lunch. The only spots available were at the long communal table where a group of German college students waited patiently for their food. The students, seeing the family hesitate, waved and called over in elemental Spanish. Dolores acknowledged their welcome and, smiling back at them, sat at their table. Her husband followed her reluctantly. During the whole meal, Dolores and the German students kept joking in a utilitarian mix of languages, while her husband tried to convince the child to eat the vegetables in his soup.

At the *pazo*, Magdalena's favorite time of the day was just after lunch. Most guests would either nap or come down to the living room to read or talk quietly. Sometimes, the restless ones would go for a walk around the village, although there wasn't much to see in it, except for the green fields and hills, the grazing cows, and the picturesque cemetery. Magdalena would sit behind the reception desk, where they could find her if they needed her, to read her novels and her magazines. In the city, she felt as if her mind could never stop. She was always on the verge of falling behind. But here, the world outside her window seemed to be always patiently waiting for her, promising to keep its charms intact until she felt like walking outside and claiming them.

That day, too, it was a serene afternoon. The group of German students gathered in the garden behind the *pazo*, enjoying the midday sunshine with a few cold beers bought at the village's store, and their laughter, muffled by the thick stone walls, underscored the calm rather than breaking it.

In the sleepy silence, Magdalena heard Dolores's footsteps on the upper floor, and then coming down the stairs, long before the woman walked to the reception desk.

“May I help you?”

“Actually, yes. Everyone is sleeping, but I can’t make myself lie down. If it was up to me, we would have walked a little longer after lunch. But of course, when you walk with a kid you have to slow down. Anyway, is there anything to see around here? I’m going out for a walk.”

“Not much, really, although the village itself is rather pretty. You could also visit the cemetery. It’s small, but if you’re not from here Galician cemeteries are quite interesting. People usually enjoy the Celtic motifs, and the small chapel was built in the 13th century.”

“We walked by this morning. Actually, I almost walked in with my son, but Luis didn’t like the idea,” Dolores said, smiling. “He thinks the kid is too young to see sad things like that, but I think he should see for himself what it’s like. It’s the adults that make it bad by making a big deal of it, don’t you think? Besides, I used to love that kind of stuff when I was a child. I’ve always liked graveyards; they make me feel invincible. Oh, God, you might think I’m an insensitive jerk.”

“Not at all. I get it. They had their chance, right?” Magdalena gave her a mischievous smile. Although her conversations with the guests were usually very informal, sometimes she was afraid of going too far. Dolores, however, laughed loudly.

“Oh, well, I guess I’ll go by myself. If my husband asks, tell him I won’t be long,” she said, before walking out of the door.

Later that night, Magdalena was already in bed rereading her favorite part of one of her old novels when someone knocked on her door. When she opened, she saw Luis

standing in front of her, wearing a more ragged version of his daytime clothes, mismatched socks, and sandals. He looked tired and worried.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but my wife won’t come out of the bathroom and is not responding when I call. She’s been there for a while now and I’m worried.”

Magdalena put on a robe and took the bundle of keys that Doña Amalia had entrusted her with.

“You’ll see everything is okay. She’s probably just fallen asleep in the bathtub,” Magdalena said, trying to sound optimistic. “We always imagine the worst.”

She climbed up the stairs, followed by Luis. From their bedroom’s door, their child watched them attentively, a solemn expression on his face. Magdalena smiled at him, praying that he would stay away until they knew what was going on. Knowing that it would be pointless, Magdalena tried the doorknob. It didn’t move. Determined, she banged on the door. The noise was extremely rude, but it would undoubtedly alert anyone inside. She put her ear against the door, but she didn’t hear anything.

“I have already tried that! Unlock the door, for God’s sake, you have my permission!” said Luis.

Magdalena obeyed, turning to the child before walking into the room. The boy’s face was tense, on the verge of tears. Was he old enough to understand what was happening or was it just the fear he picked up from the grownups? What would they do if the uncertainty, for once, turned into tragedy? His father didn’t seem to be doing much better and Magdalena understood that she would have to be in charge for now.

“You stay here and I will go in,” she said. The man nodded and Magdalena couldn’t help but judge him for it.

The bathroom was a long room covered with pink tiles. Magdalena saw the woman right away. Her body was lying awkwardly in the tub, her legs apart and only her knees and head coming out of the water. Her blond hair stuck to her face; her honey-colored eyes were wide open and her lips were slightly parted, showing a sliver of her tongue.

Magdalena watched the woman for a while, trying to make sense of the details—the robust unshaven legs, the brown, round nipples on her motionless chest. The two big moles on her face: one on her chin and one on her cheek. The body had become a collection of traits now that life failed to unify them into a whole.

During the time Magdalena spent watching the body, Luis didn't call. He didn't ask or come in to see what was going on. He didn't protest when Magdalena came out of the bathroom and locked the door.

“You go take care of your son. I'll call the Guardia Civil. If you need anything, I'll be in the kitchen.”

By the time the doctor had certified Dolores's death, all the guests were awake and gathered in the kitchen drinking the coffee that Doña Amalia had prepared. She didn't seem to mind the invasion of her private realm and appeared to be as shocked as the rest of them.

Magdalena was in charge of sharing the news with the guests that would ask, and also of directing them to the kitchen to get their cup of coffee or warm milk. No one wanted to be left out and soon the kitchen was loud with whispers and the sound of teaspoons. She was relieved when the Guardia Civil officers arrived, taking care of the situation with the professionalism and kindness of someone who deals with tragedy for a

living. Magdalena relaxed a little when the doctor handed Luis the death certificate, clearly stating that the death was due to natural causes. As hard as it was to believe when she remembered Dolores's unending energy, the cause of death was a heart attack. Although the certificate officially dismissed the need for an investigation, the officers stayed for a while. They checked on Luis and his son, and then made sure everyone else was fine. Magdalena figured that unexpected grief and shock, no matter the cause, created their own set of problems, and the officers were making sure that they wouldn't have to clean up after it later.

The funeral services arrived around five in the morning to take care of the body. All through the night, Dolores had remained immersed in cold water, as no one had wanted to move her. Magdalena didn't want to mess with a dead body and, once the natural death was confirmed, the Guardia Civil officers didn't feel responsible, either. Mourning was a matter of civilian life.

Shortly after the body had left the Bed and Breakfast, Luis packed up, ready to leave. Doña Amalia, finally coming out of the kitchen, offered to make them some early breakfast, but he refused.

"Thank you, but right now I couldn't swallow a thing," he said. He waited for the cab in the sitting room, his coat already on and his and Dolores's backpacks on the sofa beside him. The child, tired of crying loudly for hours, had finally fallen asleep. Doña Amalia shrugged and handed him something wrapped in white napkins. "Some cake. For the boy."

Luis took it and thanked her, then sat in the same position for the next twenty minutes until the cab arrived.

It was finally morning and, as she went back to work, Magdalena thought how strange it was that there were no traces left of Dolores's death. In a few hours, tragedy had arrived and left; corpse, loved ones, and all, and she found herself yawning as she served breakfast to the tired-looking pilgrims. Sure, there was one person less on the world but, for Magdalena, all guests disappeared once they left, and this was not so different. Watching the light change, Magdalena felt the sun was rising just for her. In the kitchen, she cleared the traces of the guests: a dirty loneliness of used cups and cake crumbs. After serving the guests, Magdalena warmed up her cup of coffee and went to her room to take a short nap.

After Dolores's death, the weirdness that Magdalena had noticed in the *pazo* took a different dimension. It wasn't anymore just a vague sensation, almost interchangeable with homesickness or the thrill of exploration, but something more tangible. She had concrete events to show to others, things she could point to that would validate her belief in the supernatural. Magdalena had never been particularly absent-minded, but now she was losing objects that she remembered putting down, only to find them on top of a tree branch outside or hidden under a table. Other times she would turn her back on a recently made bed to pick up something from the floor and found the bed unmade when she looked at it again.

Once she decided to share her experiences, however, she realized that she had no one to go to. She perceived hostility in Doña Amalia, and she feared that her boss would not be an ally if she shared her knowledge, but that the knowledge would somehow work against her. The guests, came and went, and although they might listen to her with interest, they would never remain close to her long enough to help her understand. She

didn't tell Doña Mariana because the woman would never set foot in the *pazo*, and Magdalena couldn't prove it to her otherwise. She would believe her, but it would be the same way that the woman believed her own stories, and not the way Magdalena wanted to be believed. She wanted to be believed like the way people believed in the seasons and in their own ability for goodness.

Her only choice, as she saw it, was to live with it for now. The more she observed, she thought, the more she could understand, and there was plenty to observe. Things continued happening, and she wondered what the patterns were, and whether the events were, in any way, deliberate. That was something that her magazines rarely discussed—whether the things she experienced were the manifestation of some unfeeling force, like gravity or temperature, or whether they were the deliberate choice of an intelligence. If that was the case, was it lashing out against her? Was it communicating in any way? She didn't feel any urgency in these events, but she couldn't help think that they were meant for her, one way or another.

Then, one day, Magdalena found proof that all that was happening was intended for her. She had avoided the upstairs bathroom since Dolores's death, but she still hesitated before stepping into a tub, wherever she was. The pleasant warmth of the water normally calmed her fears, but that morning it wasn't enough to make her warm. The water ran over her body, hot enough to hurt her skin, yet she still shivered in cold. She turned the water off and stepped out of the shower, thinking that she ought to go see a doctor. Her body, however, returned to its normal temperature as she dried it, and when she turned to put on her clothes she saw the key on top of her neatly folded shirt. It was an old iron key, like that of the main door's ancient lock or those of the trunks that

adorned the rooms of the *pazo*. Magdalena knew that the key didn't belong to any of them, though, because she had them all in her bundle. The only lock that was forbidden to her up to that point was that of the *hórreo*.

The padlock that kept the *hórreo*'s door shut looked unnecessarily big, old and rusty, as if its purpose was to make a point as much as to impede the entrance. Magdalena wondered, with some amusement, whether the old woman was afraid of someone stealing her winter wheat. She imagined her fighting off the hungry masses with a club, snow flurries flying around her. In all this time at the *pazo*, Magdalena had never looked inside an *hórreo*—not even the one she saw every day. It was dark inside, and at first all she could see were slivers of the midday light against the floor. The granary seemed to be empty, and she wondered why she had been led there. Then, she saw something strange on the floor, next to the far end. It was something so unfamiliar that her brain refused to make sense of it until she was close enough to touch it. The strange object was a bundle consisting mostly of blond hair mixed with what looked like birch leaves.

Doña Mariana welcomed her warmly, as she did anytime Magdalena visited her and Doña Teresa. There was a book with brown leaves open on the table where she had been sitting, while Doña Teresa laughed at the unsophisticated jokes of some comedy on TV. She joined them around the table, making her way through pleasantries and small talk. Doña Mariana might not believe in ghosts, but she could certainly believe what Magdalena had to say about her boss.

“You have always been reluctant to talk about Doña Amalia,” Magdalena said, finally, her tone less brusque than her words. Doña Mariana nodded. Doña Teresa shifted in her armchair, but didn't look away from the TV or say a word.

“And now you come here to ask us because you have a reason. You will listen to what we tell you, and believe us. What do you think happened?”

Magdalena was relieved that Doña Mariana had spoken first about the unbelievable. The door was now open to speak freely, and she knew that she would be believed, truly so.

“I believe Doña Amalia is a murderer. I don’t understand why, but she killed one of the guests, and the woman is still around.”

“Have you seen her?” Doña Mariana asked.

“No, but I’ve seen the things she does. And I know she’s here. She didn’t leave with her family—she couldn’t.”

Doña Mariana listened to her with a serious expression and Doña Teresa stared at the TV gravely, watching the scenes devolve into hilarious payoff.

“Tonight we’re going out,” Doña Mariana said, finally.

CHAPTER 11

THE WITCHES

Magdalena had seen some of the women in the village or down the valley, but most of them were strangers. She marveled at how many people were hidden from her in the apparently unpopulated area. She was indeed an outsider, but that night felt like some kind of initiation. They met outside of Doña Mariana's house, and the women there seemed to be waiting for her; they seemed to know who she was.

Two women she didn't know carried Doña Teresa uphill into the forest, while Magdalena herself was tasked with carrying a folding chair and a pillow. She liked and trusted the old women, but as she climbed she couldn't help thinking of kidnapping and ritualistic murder—the forest was dark and, for all their friendship and kindness, she was an outsider.

Doña Mariana had walked ahead, with an agility that surprised Magdalena, and disappeared among the trees. They found her again tending to the bonfire she'd just lit, her face illuminated by the eerie light so that each fold of her skin became meaningful. At first, the meeting seemed like a regular social gathering. The women around her came together in small groups and made casual conversation, catching up with each other's news. Suddenly, without any cue that Magdalena could distinguish, a voice rose over the conversation and started singing. The tune and the language of the words were unfamiliar—certainly not Spanish or even Galician, and at times it sounded like gibberish—but a second woman joined in, and then a few more. The singers had

accompaniment too; someone was playing a tambourine and Magdalena could hear the dedicated rhythm of improvised percussion. The singing women approached the fire, and Magdalena could see that they were wearing black woolen shawls over their heads. Their faces, free of makeup, showed their ages, and the light of the bonfire made them look fierce.

After the ritual, Mariana approached Magdalena.

“This is that we do—no secrets. You don’t have to fear us,” the woman said.

“Why do you do it?”

“You think we’re silly,” Mariana said smiling, but Magdalena didn’t think that. There was nothing funny in that song. “We all get different things from it, I guess; a sense of community, of power. A way out of what is expected from us. We even get a little magic, sometimes.”

It seemed to Magdalena that she meant it differently than when people talk about a ‘magical moment,’ or ‘the magic of love,’ and she was ready to believe in magic, too. Why not? She already believed in ghosts, and she needed something on her side. “What kind of magic?”

“The kind that reveals the truth. The kind that makes things right.”

“Amalia was one of you, once,” Magdalena guessed. Mariana hesitated.

“Not quite. She joined us a few times, but she was never quite like us. She was never that interested in the community, but she was able to do things that the rest of us could only imagine. Perhaps she had real talent, the kind that is not the product of cleverness or hard work, but of divine whim. Or perhaps she was just more willing than any of us to pay the price.”

“Like Dolores? Has she done it before?”

Mariana nodded.

“There are some lines that are useful to cross, if you can bring yourself to do it.”

That the woman acknowledged Amalia’s power felt honest to Magdalena, but also alarming. If they started a conversation about the usefulness of cruelty, she wasn’t sure where it would end.

“We could easily just come for her,” she replied, instead. “There are so many women here; many would do what you asked them to, I’m sure.”

“We don’t make things right by attacking people, even if we could. And believe me, it’s not like we cannot be arrested for committing violence. What we need is for her to admit it, to give herself in—to us and to that poor woman and her own poor husband. If we had proof, we could turn her in to the justice, but we don’t, and that wouldn’t be half as good, anyway.”

“I guess you have already asked her before.”

“You can stay with her, be her friend. Who knows, you might be able to influence her.”

“Will I be safe?”

“Is any of us? No, I don’t think so. I don’t think she’ll kill you, either. There is little gain in it.”

Magdalena was appalled at how casually the older woman spoke of her death. For a second, she thought of escaping the valley and leaving the madness behind, but she had nowhere to go. She didn’t want to go back, and she didn’t want to start afresh somewhere else.

Mariana had asked her to become Amalia's friend, but Magdalena didn't think it was possible, and even if it was, it wouldn't help them. Mariana, she thought, was naïve in her old age, holding on to the vain hope that the world would prove to be ultimately kind before she died. It was true that they didn't have any proof that they could take to the authorities—the hair could have belonged to anyone, and anyone could have left it in the *hórreo*. She would stay close to her boss, and perhaps she would discover something that would allow her to call the police.

It occurred to Magdalena that Dolores's body had been carefully inspected and examined. If her death hadn't been natural, there weren't any marks left on it to prove it. Magdalena came to the conclusion that Amalia had poisoned Dolores, and that belief made it hard for her to share the *pazo*'s food. She felt somewhat safe eating the same food as others—Amalia couldn't poison them all—but Dolores had eaten at the communal table, too.

If it was poison what she was looking for, perhaps it was still in the house and, if she found it, perhaps they would find it in Dolores's body, too. It should be enough to put Amalia in jail, to make justice.

The first thing she needed was a small animal, she decided. If she was going to find poison, she would have to test it on something.

Deep into a small storage room she found the humane mouse trap that Amalia refused to use. The woman liked a swift, practical solution to the problem of rodents—a problem that, on the other hand, would never be completely solved until the nearby fields run out of mice themselves. The best place to catch a mouse, Magdalena thought, were the empty stables, which Amalia neglected and the guests rarely visited. The smartest

rodents stayed away from the danger of the house, with its temptations of nuts and vegetables. It took her only two nights to catch a mouse, which she kept in a simple metal cage.

Magdalena decided to be meticulous about the search. She lived in the *pazo* and she had access to all of it—it was a matter of patience. Cleaning products were messy, obvious poisons, and she ruled them out. The kitchen was the place to start, with all its possibilities for brewing, storing and hiding. She started with the apparently innocuous. Amalia's pantry was stocked with jars filled with all kinds of herbs and spices, most of them unknown to Magdalena. The ones she knew—oregano, parsley—smelled right when she opened the jars, but she was committed to thoroughness.

It wasn't an easy thing to do, and thus her approach was careful, almost scientific. She took and catalogued small samples from the jars, then fed them to the mouse by hiding them in small pieces of cheese. She waited for twenty-four hours after each feed and then, when she confirmed that the mouse was as healthy as the day before, she moved on to the next sample.

Several weeks went on this way, and her test subject continued to look at her with curious eyes, eagerly awaiting her return every day, oblivious to the fact that she wanted to poison it. In the meantime, Magdalena watched her boss closely. She also met often with Mariana, who once more avoided talking about Amalia—whether this time she did it for Magdalena's sake or for her own, she couldn't tell.

Amalia's behavior wasn't any different that it had been in the past, although Magdalena couldn't say it was normal. There was nothing normal about the old woman, but Magdalena hadn't been able to pay that much attention to her. She had complained

before that the woman was an absent, yet strict boss, but now she realized that her determination to doing things one way was ritualistic in nature—although, perhaps, the same could be said of all wives and all mothers, who worshipped their own mothers and grandmothers in the altar of “the proper way of doing things.”

Amalia’s rituals, however, went beyond the domestic and reminded Magdalena of something else, something like what she had seen in the forest, but also very different—as different as a thornbush was from ivy. The fresh milk they bought from their neighbors, for example, was to be kept in cast-iron containers, as were the eggs. The first cut to a piece of fruit ought to be always a longitudinal one, not lateral. A sprig of rosemary must be placed in every drawer where fresh bed linen is kept—but only bed linen. Rosemary in the table-cloth drawer was unforgivable.

Day after day, the mouse remained healthy, its black watery eyes staring at her without fear, its little mistrusting nose giving its approval to everything she fed it. Magdalena couldn’t tell whether Amalia suspected what she was doing, and that uncertainty kept her on edge. She tried to play the character of her normal self, but she found the task almost impossible. Did she know her own voice that well? Her own facial expressions and demeanor? In photographs, she always looked like someone else. Amalia didn’t treat her any differently, but Magdalena still looked for clues, and she either couldn’t find any or she found them all.

Since she had started looking for the poison, Dolores seemed to be much quieter. Magdalena was barely aware of her presence now. She had seen her face once in the moonlight, reflected on a bucket of water she was carrying to clean the chicken pen. Dolores was patient, but Magdalena couldn’t be, no matter how hard she tried. She

watched closely everything she ate, having her meals only when she could share the guests' food or Amalia's herself, and buying snacks from the store just before she ate them. These measures gave her a certain sense of safety, of power over the situation, but ultimately she felt powerless in the face of Amalia; she could not completely make sense of her.

Magdalena was soon done with the kitchen herbs, unable to find anything dangerous there. She searched the kitchen thoroughly and was satisfied that Amalia wasn't hiding anything in the room. It took her another couple of weeks to search the rest of the house, meticulously and discreetly. Pantries, storage rooms, trunks, and the back of paintings were all innocent. At that point, the only place that she had dared not search was Amalia's room, which was also the obvious place to start. In the time she had been searching the house, Magdalena had felt terribly invasive, searching places that were not meant for her, as if she was intruding in the privacy of the *pazo* itself as much as in that of Amalia. Unlocking the door of Amalia's room when she wasn't there felt like the ultimate violation; if she was caught, all the cards would be on the table. Even so, she brought a clean change of bed linen with her, as an excuse. It wouldn't fool Amalia, but it would give Magdalena something to say.

The key to Amalia's room was not in the big bundle that had been entrusted to Magdalena, but the master key they used for emergencies worked on the lock, to Magdalena's relief and dread. The room was tidy, but there was a sense of abandonment about it. The quilt on the bed was frayed in one corner, and the bedside lamp lacked a lampshade, as if proud to display the naked bulb. The most remarkable thing in the room, however, was the wall opposite to the bed—the wall around the window. It was covered

by thick foliage that stuck to it like ivy, except it was a completely different kind of plant. When she came closer to it, she saw that they were indeed two different plants intertwined so closely that they looked like one. Their stems were born from what looked like two half-egg-shells resting on the window sill. Magdalena weighed her options. She could take some leaves and go, minimizing her time there, though that might mean that she might have to come back, or she could do a more thorough search right then.

She settled for, at least, looking around a bit, and she opened Amalia's closet, where she found only the sturdy, shapeless clothes her boss wore every day. There were a couple of folded blankets that didn't make the rotation of the *pazo* and a small jewelry box. She opened the box and went through its contents feeling like a thief—they looked mostly like family heirlooms. Before she was done, a noise out of the door startled her as she was holding a delicate gold chain, and she decided to leave.

That night, she fed the mouse an oval-shaped leaf, apologizing to the animal. It occurred to her that she was doing everything in her power to kill it, and yet it still smelled her hands confidently every day. The next morning, the mouse was alive and more than that, it seemed to thrive. Its hair appeared to shine in the sunlight and its eyes seemed more intelligent when they looked at Magdalena. She gave it another day to enjoy its renewed energy, and the following night she fed it a heart-shaped leaf. It was a pity to destroy a living being like that, but it was necessary. After having tried to kill the poor animal for so long, Magdalena realized that she didn't feel guilty anymore. She had made peace with the fact that humans needed to use animals sometimes, no matter how cute they were.

In the morning, she found the stiff little body lying on its back, and she felt a rush of triumph.

She had proof, now, though she wondered if they could be able to prove that Dolores had been poisoned by that plant. She remembered the woman, lying on her back in the tub, much like mouse. That was, perhaps, how Amalia saw her, and the benefits that the old woman got from it were incommensurably bigger than the ability to prove a murder. The gifts that Amalia had been given were extraordinary but, more than that, she had not only gained concrete evidence of the existence of the supernatural, but power over it.

After the morning in which she found the dead mouse, Magdalena kept the leaves hidden in a safe place, but she didn't tell Mariana, nor did she call the police. Instead, she observed Amalia go about her day in the *pazo*, both afraid and fascinated. She didn't see anything extraordinary, but all the small strange things she had observed so far made sense to her now in a way they didn't before. It was as if, all put together, they created an aura of otherworldliness about the old woman, as if no one could fail to notice that she was extraordinary, even though they didn't understand how.

As terrifying as the poison was, Magdalena was intrigued by the other leaf. It had made the mouse look so full of energy—although of course she didn't know how long it would have lasted. She owned—she realized—a small piece of Amalia's magic; her own magic now. She was afraid, knowing that the twin plant could do, but she felt unable to resist the temptation. One night, she cut one of the leaves into small pieces and mixed it with her rice pudding. She ate the dessert eagerly, enjoying the sugar and unable to taste anything unusual. When she went to bed, she felt extremely tired. She didn't have the

strength to change into her pajamas, and instead she just lay on top of the blankets, falling asleep immediately. In the morning, she woke up to Amalia banging on her door—she had overslept.

After that night, it was as if she had the energy of a child again. She slept soundly every night and, in the mornings, her body leapt out of bed effortlessly. Her mind also seemed sharper. She didn't feel any smarter, but she was able to see her own thoughts more clearly, to follow them through for longer. She felt more confident—bolder. It was a taste of a power she couldn't let go.

It must have been her newfound confidence that allowed Magdalena to approach Amalia the way she did. She had her own power, too, and it was the moment to use it.

“Mariana asked me to help her with this—with you.”

Amalia seemed surprised. “After all these years,” she said.

“She didn't want to turn you in to the police, but after Dolores, she was afraid for others.” Amalia shook her head and laughed. Magdalena had never seen her laugh.

“Mariana is always afraid for others. She would put us all, including me, in little glass cages if that would keep us safe. She wants the world to be free of pain.”

Magdalena thought that it was a perfectly reasonable thing to want.

“She doesn't sound so bad,” she said. Amalia shook her head.

“She doesn't understand how that's impossible. She thinks it's a matter of getting everyone to agree to be kind, but it's harder than that. Pain is a vital part of the world, of how it works. The world cannot function without it; something or someone has to suffer to keep it going. The best we can do is to manage it, to make sure we get as little of it as possible ourselves.”

The thought was cynical, but it gave Magdalena some hope. Whenever she felt that life was cruel to her, she had been told to find solace in the certainty of her moral rectitude, in the idea that her suffering would eventually pay off—in another life. She was too impatient for that.

“How do you do it? You don’t seem to suffer much yourself.”

“Mariana might disagree. I do mostly what everyone else does; I live life to my own advantage. Other than that—well, you know, now.”

“That’s the part I can’t get without you,” Magdalena said. “I don’t think you want to kill me. I think it takes a toll on you, one way or another.”

“Are those my options? To kill you or to show you what I do? It would be hard for me to kill you now that you’re on your guard, me being an old woman.”

It sounded like a joke, but it made Magdalena fear her even more.

“Why not?” Amalia continued. “I’ll bring you too see her. You might get something out of it.”

There was a woman inside the *hórreo*, standing with her back to the opposite corner. She looked young, but worn out, her thin lips impossibly red in the dark. She smiled at Magdalena with a mix of exasperation and understanding, as if pleased that she’d finally made it to a long-postponed meeting. Magdalena walked to her and left the basket of eggs on the floor. The creature didn’t take them, but she laughed, and Magdalena took it as a sign of her acceptance. She was terrified.

“I’ll leave you here,” Amalia said. “She’ll teach you.”

After her first meeting with the creature, Magdalena learned how to always keep her body warm, even in the coldest days of the impending winter. It was a useful ability

that allowed her to be more efficient in her work but, more important, it made her feel powerful.

She sometimes wandered around the *pazo* barefoot just to impress the guests, and she liked it especially when the older ones shook their heads in disbelief or disapproval; she was the stand-in for a whole generation of disappointment.

She didn't see Mariana or Teresa for a long time. Magdalena had the decency not to visit them again, and she even avoided the cemetery, although she suspected that Mariana wouldn't be unkind to her. On the contrary—if they met, Magdalena imagined that the old woman would convey her concerns for her, would be understanding, and listen, and in the end would give her advice with Magdalena's best interests at heart. Magdalena, however, couldn't be anyone's child anymore. She couldn't be anyone's protégée. Amalia didn't love her, and the creature was a force of pure selfishness, as hard as she was to understand. Magdalena found this heartening. It was a way to exist in the world, pure and without pretense. She didn't doubt that Mariana's friendship had also been genuine, but the obligation it demanded from Magdalena wasn't.

The things that the creature demanded of her didn't weigh on her conscience—for now, she gave what she was willing to give, as she knew she would always do, she would always be in control of her own actions. Knowing that it would always be her choice made things easier.

The knowledge that Amalia offered Magdalena was unlike any other she had ever had access to. The secrecy excited her, and its mysticism was more appealing than the sacred knowledge offered at church, available to all to some extent, and thus terribly banal. Amalia showed her that the world she knew was much vaster under its tame skin,

and the knowledge was beautiful, but also brutal. It seemed to Magdalena that this was the knowledge of life and death, and something else. It was the knowledge of that one thing she couldn't quite name, and yet had always known existed; it was like that instant when, disoriented, one opens their eyes and sees an impossible shape, minus the moment of recognition in which the shape takes a familiar form again, reassuring one that the illusion was just a game of perception. Magdalena would never let her world turn back to normal.

There was a price to pay, of course. There was a cost, and ultimately the question was whether she thought it was too high—and she didn't. A wondrous gift demanded a wondrous price.

CHAPTER 12

THE END

Amalia was generously rewarded for the death of Dolores. She received, perhaps, one of the most extraordinary gifts she ever had, and perhaps also one of the most terrifying. She learned to taste the life of anything she ate.

She was now aware of the whole life of the cow she was eating—from the stormy day it was born to its favorite place to pasture. She could recognize the soil that had fed the potato and the long journey of the cinnamon stick. Even with the hard, cold salt, Amalia could taste the ocean in which it had swum before. She had enjoyed each and every one of the gifts she'd gotten from the creature so far. They allowed her to be part of the landscape she loved so much in ways that were beyond the reach of mortals. The price had been solitude, but she hadn't chosen it. She had been made to pay, and that was that.

Today, she wasn't so sure it was worth it. The person who seemed the closest to her those days was Magdalena, and she irritated her to the point that Amalia avoided her presence whenever she could. The girl represented the worst of childhood—self-centeredness and impatience, and also a disposition for cruelty that, annoyingly, Amalia recognized in herself, too. The girl was brave in ways similar to Amalia herself, and she pushed for intimacy in ways that Amalia wasn't ready to grant, as if their shared secret ought to make them close. Magdalena relished the power, too, but she did to in a way that Amalia considered, tasteless, shameless. When Amalia saw her flaunting her new

knowledge around the *pazo*, she couldn't help thinking that women like Magdalena were the reason witches had been burned.

The last time Amalia saw the creature it looked like a sickly long-limbed woman of indeterminate age. She was almost bald, completely naked, and her skin was rugged and greyish. At her feet, Amalia deposited the newborn sparrows that she had found on a tree. The climb had not been easy at her age, but the forest still yielded to her.

"I'm getting old," the creature said, and Amalia wasn't sure she understood. What did age mean for the thing before her?

"I'm sorry," she answered, but the creature shook her head.

"We all grow old and die, don't we," she said grinning. "Look at you." But Amalia wasn't afraid of her body—never had been.

"I'll bring you more eggs—they ought to make you feel better. Maybe a mouse?"

The creature shook her head again.

"I'm tired of your eggs and your mice and your chicken. I want you."

As she had many years before, Amalia felt like she was part of some dark folk tale, threatened to be devoured by a witch.

"I don't want your weak bones, silly," the creature laughed, and Amalia was annoyed that she could read her like that, "just that you stay here with me. Just a moment, while I eat, while I sing." Amalia had heard the creature sing before, some morning or some evening as she approached the *pazo*. She had heard a quiet wail, a wail that became strangely tonal and rhythmical, and which would otherwise had sounded like a small creature being tortured. Amalia didn't want to look at the creature while she sang.

"I don't have time. I have guests to worry about."

“Am I not your guest? The oldest one, I say. Stay. I will talk to you about past things, if you are interested. Did they ever tell you what happened to your great-granddaughter Violeta? It’s not what everyone says, no.”

After all these years, Amalia wasn’t afraid of the creature. It had never attacked her, never so much as touched her; and the terrible things Amalia had done—well, she had done them and she had been rewarded. It had always been her choice.

“I can’t stay with you, and I don’t want to. I won’t stay and rot in the dark.”

The creature laughed. “Then go. Go and rot in the sun—and much faster, let me tell you. At least on here I rot slowly.”

Teresa passed away in her sleep at the age of 107. Magdalena refused to attend the funeral, perhaps ashamed of her betrayal. Amalia didn’t ask, and the truth was that she wasn’t interested. She had brought Magdalena to the creature as a matter of practicality, a solution to a problem, but she wasn’t interested in the girl otherwise. Magdalena was vain and greedy, and not interesting enough to make it worth it. Amalia realized she had missed the women all these years. The guests she interacted with came and went, and ultimately only the women who refused to speak to her really knew her; only them, with their fear and contempt.

The contempt of the women didn’t scare her, though. She had treasured the friendship of just a few people during her life, and although Mariana was one of them, she was content to know that the woman didn’t hate her, even though she shunned her. Mariana was, still, trying to save her soul. Amalia decided to go to the funeral. She believed she was, to some extent, responsible for the Teresa’s longevity, although she acknowledged that her intentions hadn’t been so benign. She wondered whether Mariana

would be forced to acknowledge her at least over the grave of the woman that she had cared for as if she would for her own mother.

Amalia had stopped attending Mass when Daniel died. At that point, she felt that she had little to hide anyway—her worst sins were already a matter of public knowledge—and she felt free to drop most pretenses in her life. Her mother hadn't taken it well, at first, and argued with her every Sunday morning for a while. You're putting your soul in danger. What will the people think? What if they accuse us of being Communists? Eventually, Amalia's mother gave up. Perhaps she'd learned the truth or, at the very least, realized that her daughter wasn't part of the community anymore, and the danger of ostracism was already fully realized. If she was ever told what her daughter had done, Amalia never knew. Perhaps the old woman refused to believe, out of loyalty, or perhaps she decided that no crime was bad enough for her to leave her daughter's side. Things were different now, and most of the local youth spent their Sunday mornings sleeping or watching TV. In a funny way, Amalia supplied the church with young blood every week—the earnest pilgrims who, after a day's worth of walking, wanted to feel holy in their soreness, to parade their muddy hiking clothes in front of the locals in their Sunday best.

Amalia didn't recognize the young priest that officiated Teresa's funeral, but she liked his earnestness, the way he tried to change the rhythm of the liturgical phrases so the words would regain some of their meaning, trying not to sound like a schoolboy repeating a poem he's been forced to memorize. It occurred to Amalia that he was out of place in his own church, surrounded by Teresa's friends, who were brought together by ties he could never understand. Even she, the outcast, had a place in their story.

Amalia timed her arrival shortly after the start of the ceremony, so she could sit in the back unnoticed. In the front row, she saw Mariana dressed impeccably in black. She was tempted to go to her, to have Mariana try and save her one more time—perhaps to allow herself to be saved.

Mariana saw her when they all came out of the church after the service, but her eyes moved away after acknowledging Amalia's presence. It was as if Amalia being there was of no consequence to her one way or another.

It was a cold day outside, but the snow hadn't fallen yet. People gathered around the gravesite—not as many as she would have imagined, but enough. Amalia wondered if she could approach Mariana, but the woman was busy in her role of acting daughter of the deceased. It seemed to Amalia that the death of Teresa had broken the spell, broken the circle. After forty years of exile, she might yet be welcomed back. When Teresa's body had been deposited softly on the ground and people started to go home, Amalia caught up with Mariana, who didn't ignore her or try to walk past her.

"It's been a long time," Mariana said, and her reproachful tone gave Amalia hope.

"You were the one who refused to speak to me."

Mariana raised her eyebrows. Amalia hadn't looked at Mariana's face in decades. She had seen it often enough, here and there, but had never quite looked at it like this, like she used to, since the day she came to accuse her. Mariana was wrinkly as she herself must be, but Mariana's were the wrinkles of a face exhausted by a well-lived life. She grabbed Amalia's arms lightly, cordially.

"I never refused you, but I wasn't going to be your accomplice, either. My door has been open all these years, but you could never try it."

Mariana was right, and Amalia wasn't sure she would ever be ready. It would mean much more beyond admitting she was wrong or confessing to her crimes. It would mean surrendering the life she had lived, sacrificing all those years in the altar of their friendship. For better or worse, that life was hers, and she could not label it as meaningless, not even to win back a friend.

"I'm glad to see you are not resentful," she said, finally.

"We are too old for resentment," Mariana said. Amalia thought, *at our age, there is not much else left*. She wanted to take Mariana's arm, like old friends, and walk back to her place, perhaps help her clean up or make food. She knew, however, that she never could, that one of them had to change in a fundamental way to allow that.

If she were younger, if she had more of a life to give a purpose to, things might still be different, but the weight of the choice she had made all those years before was too heavy. Second chances were for the young, who still had time to reshape their lives into something worthwhile. Amalia wasn't one for deathbed conversions.

She realized, with bitterness, that the promise had never been quite fulfilled. She might have made the wrong choice, but it was impossible to know without the ability to live both lives and put them side by side to compare. She had possessed power and knowledge and felt empty-handed at the end of the day.

The creature seemed to her a small, miserable thing. She was what she was, hidden in a forgotten corner of creation, no more likely to open the gates of revelation for her than any of her father's cows. Amalia felt she was shrinking herself, that all the knowledge she had acquired didn't make her any closer to being whole—that her self, in fact, was growing smaller, twisted and hungrier. She was old, and the weight of her dead

was heavier than for most people her age. It almost crushed her, as she grew even older, with the feeling that the shape of her life was becoming more and more unmovable.

To Amalia's surprise, in the days after Teresa's funeral, she started to long for the *hórreo*. She refused to go inside, repulsed as she was lately by the twisted creature that inhabited it, but also understood how soothing and welcoming the dark could be for someone who was uncomfortable in her own home. Magdalena seemed to grow more and more confident in her own skin, and when she moved to take over areas of the house, when she started doing the cooking and reorganizing furniture, Amalia left her. She wanted to tend to the hunger that grew inside her—hunger for food, but also for the light that felt increasingly too bright.

She longed for the *hórreo* and knew that, inside, the creature was waiting for her. After so many years, it was time. She had a decision to make.

One early morning, she left the *pazo* in the pale light of sunrise. The light caressed the old granary, where the creature awaited, but Amalia turned away. In her walking shoes, leaning on a knotty wood cane, she headed west.