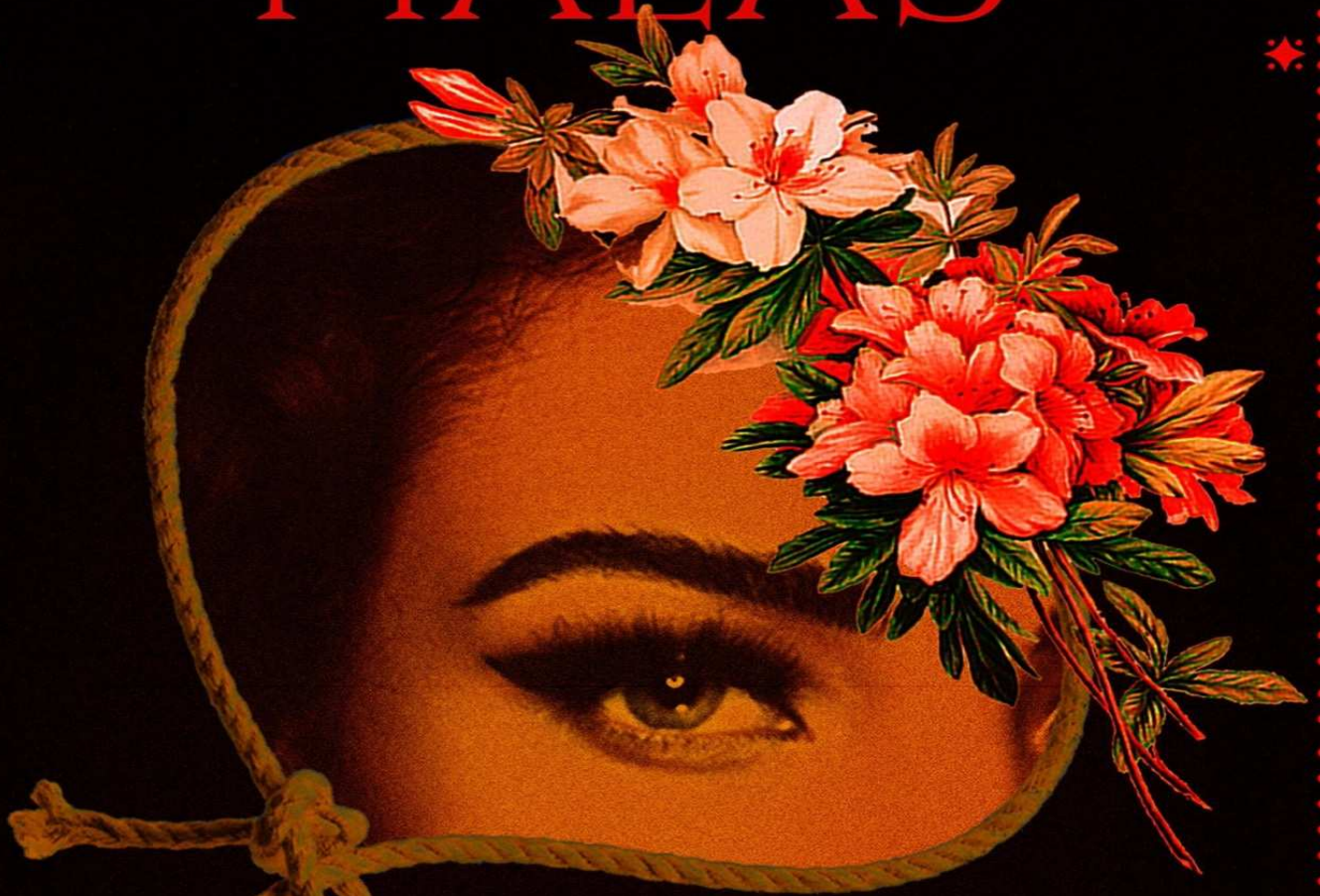


MALAS



A NOVEL

MARCELA
FUENTES

Malas



Marcela Fuentes

VIKING

VIKING

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Contents

Dedication

el paso de la muerte

Chapter One: A Happy Time

Chapter Two: La Muertita

my name

Chapter Three: Witch Luck

Chapter Four: The Funeral

Chapter Five: La Llorona In Levis

Chapter Six: Amachada

Chapter Seven: El Último Hijo

Chapter Eight: Skip-Outs

Chapter Nine: Jangly Guitar Rock

Chapter Ten: Young Coyotes

Chapter Eleven: Vandals

down by the river

Chapter Twelve: Black Cats

Chapter Thirteen: Gritonazo

Chapter Fourteen: Gato Negro

Chapter Fifteen: Fallaste Corazón

Chapter Sixteen: Selena Forever

Chapter Seventeen: Mala Yerba Nunca Muere

Acknowledgments

About the Author

147192869

*For Roberto and Lety
and
For my grandmothers*

el paso de la muerte



After children, you can never be whole again. Después de dar a luz, your body comes back incomplete. You're alone inside yourself, like you never were before your man took you, made you a mother.

Once there was a girl, just fifteen. A girl at a charreada, a rodeo in another place and time. A girl standing on a metal staircase, a glass of lemonade sweating in her hand. She lost her heart to a young charro. Oh, he made the dust fly for her.

Invisible girl, snatching at her father's affection. She was a quince, but a secret, *pecadillo de Papá*, her birthday this clandestine weekend away. *You know you're my favorite*, Papá said, bought her a slew of pretty dresses, a dawn mariachi serenade, tickets for the two of them to the charreada. Let her wander among the vendors and peddlers in the stockyard, said, *Buy anything you want*.

La quince was buying the lemonade when the charro crossed her path.

The charro was not like her papá. Not of the landed class. Young and swarthy, he was a horseman, a vaquero, born and raised on the range, campfires in his blood, his whole life the lariat and saddle, wind and open sky. He wore no charro short jacket, just a white shirt with modest stitching. His leather chaps were oiled but scarred. He was bareheaded and the afternoon light made his black hair glow.

She felt him beside her, quiet as the warm sun. He wanted her to look at him. She kept her eyes down; she was a good girl. When the vendor turned

away to make change, the charro leaned in and whispered, “The next suerte is for you.”

La quince pulled away, but he was gone, already weaving his way through the crowd.

She stopped at the top of the staircase on her way back to her seat. There was the charro, standing in the arena, the reins of an unsaddled bay in his hand. She could not see his face beneath his sombrero, only the brief glint of his teeth. She didn’t smile back. She was a good girl. But she stayed. She watched. His ride was for her.

The charro held up his hand, three fingers spread, at the spectators in the grandstand, at the other competitors sitting on the chutes. Three broncs charged through the stock gate, into the arena.

The young charro sprang onto his horse from the ground. It was a light movement, as though someone had tossed him up. His thighs against the horse’s hide were lean and hard. The girl stood, rooted to the landing, the glass of lemonade cold in her hand.

He pulled his mount alongside the broncs, setting his horse at pace with the lead mare. The other charros drove the animals hard, round and round the arena, lifting thunderheads of dust. Hooves rumbled against the earth, riatas hissed, the charros called low and fierce, driving them faster. The young charro rode past, one leg cocked beneath him, ready to spring.

She felt the rush of air as he galloped by. His horse’s harsh breath flecked the hem of her new dress with spittle. Her heart flew away quick as quick, a golondrina startled from its nest, never to return.

The young charro leaped bare back to bare back, body half-curved, shadowy in the dusty air. And then he was across, fists full of sorrel mane, fighting to keep his seat as the wild horse twisted beneath him. His sombrero tumbled off, swept away beneath the onslaught of hooves. He rode the bronco the circuit twice through.

His teammates lifted their voices in triumphant gritos—“A-ha-haaaaayyy! José Alfredo!”

He was a proud one. But she was prouder. Didn’t they see what he’d done for her? Didn’t they know?

• • •

Looking for that girl is like looking backward through a telescope. She's far away and so tiny I can cover her with the tip of my finger, like blotting out the sun. I can still feel her radiating. But I don't know where she has gone.

Chapter One



A Happy Time

PILAR AGUIRRE, 1951

Swollen feet, Pilar decided as she set hers into the bucket of cool water, were the most ridiculous indignity of pregnancy. Worse than acid reflux or the spasmodic belly twitches of a baby hiccuping in the womb. Worse than a flare of acne or even sudden flatulence attacks, which at least she could repress through sheer force of will. Fat feet and fat ankles. They were the worst.

La de la mala suerte siempre soy yo, she thought. Of course this would happen now. José Alfredo had invited her to the quinceañera of Dulce Ramirez. He was not given to socializing and the girl was not a relation. As such, the invitation was a great concession. An overture, really. He had asked Pilar as a peace offering after months of her unspoken grievances. That suited her very well. Everyone in the Caimanes neighborhood would see that, though Pilar was eight months pregnant with their second child, her husband yet treated her as a lover.

Only, the quince was the third Saturday in August. Pilar woke the morning of the dance with feet gone puffy as fresh biscuits.

Now, she sat on the front steps of her comadre Romi Muñoz's house, pouring Epsom salt into the bucket while her five-year-old son Joselito

zinged pecans into the street. Half the neighborhood was probably watching her, but what could she do? Romi was cooking beans for the evening festivities, so the house was like a sauna.

“Leave them in for at least thirty minutes,” Romi said from behind the kitchen screen door. “If it doesn’t work, I’ll lend you a pair of mine.”

“All right,” Pilar agreed, a little queasy from the heavy pork fat scent of the simmering beans. “But get out of the kitchen or I’ll have to do your hair all over again.”

“Ya mero.” Romi disappeared into the kitchen again.

Pilar rolled her eyes. It wouldn’t be a minute, she knew. She’d arranged Romi’s hair in pin curls, carefully wrapped the hairdo in a kerchief, but it would be flat by the time the party started. Romi, so clever at organizing and problem-solving, siempre era descuidada about her appearance. Romi simply didn’t care about how she looked. True, she was forty-seven, two decades older than Pilar. Maybe you stopped caring in middle age. Maybe it happened along with a thickening waist and canas. Still, Pilar couldn’t imagine not caring about her looks at *any* age.

Pilar flexed her toes in the water, willing them back to normal size. Romi’s shoes were likely serviceable rather than elegant, but what else was there? None of Pilar’s own shoes fit, except her battered old guaraches. The idea of wearing them to the dance appalled her. She’d put together a smart outfit for tonight: a dark blouse patterned with tiny yellow daisies and an oversized gold collar bow. A pair of trim black cotton trousers. She’d sewn an elastic panel into the waist just for this party. She’d wear her hair loose, parted in the middle, with rosette curls at each side of her forehead, just like María Félix.

Joselito darted her way, plunging a handful of pecans between her puffy feet. Water splashed them both in the face. He chortled, hair plastered to his forehead, a damp stain across the front of his shirt like a bib.

“No, no, mijo,” she scolded, but without conviction. Her head was tender in the oppressive heat, and her own voice sharpened the pain. Joselito grabbed a fold of her cotton dress and punched the water again.

“Joselito,” she murmured, trying to pull his fingers loose. “Be good for Mami.”

She should stay home tonight. She was that tired already. Why would anyone want to have a celebration in the full zenith of la canícula, the scorched-earth misery of the hottest weeks of the year? Every day so wretched that the neighborhood dogs crept beneath houses to pant out their misery. The sky so eye-wateringly brilliant it wasn't even blue, but a fierce yellow white. No, she must go or José Alfredo would not invite her again. He would say, *I asked. You said no.*

Hay que contentarme, she thought, though she was far from contented. She grabbed at Joselito's wrists, trying to push him away. Joselito didn't budge. He knew she could not defeat him. He was quick and she was so slow, so heavy. So hot.

It was to be an outdoor gathering, but the night would not make it bearable. After sundown the ground emitted its collected heat, so that it clung to the air, even at midnight. There was no relief.

If it had only been the heat, she could have told José Alfredo. He would have, well, not understood—what man could understand pregnancy?—but he would have sympathized with her, sympathized precisely because it was some feminine mystery beyond him. And, because her suffering was a compliment for himself. After all, she bore this discomfort because of him. Yes, she thought, he was proud of it. Probably proud of her, her love for him, bearing these things for his sake.

Yes, he would have been sympathetic. He would have. Except that José Alfredo had bought a house on Loma Negra, the hill at the end of Romi's street. Pilar hated the house.

The new house, Pilar's silently blooming resentment. She missed the apartment they had rented in Barrio Caimanes. It was small, but clean and well maintained by their landlords, Chuy and Romi Muñoz. She had liked that it was set behind the Muñoz home, away from the street. She had liked living near Romi.

When she'd told José Alfredo about the new baby, he said he was tired of renting. The family was growing. They must have their own home. A few

weeks later, he purchased a small house on a parcel of uncultivated land at the edge of the neighborhood. Loma Negra was a very low hill, a knoll really, overlooking Barrio Caimanes. Pilar herself had been enthusiastic, until she saw the house.

There was no way around the fact that their new home was distinctly something more like the shacks in las colonias—the shantytowns outside the city limits. It was a wood-slatted shotgun house, narrow as the path of a bullet. If you stood in the front doorway, you could see out the back door. Two bedrooms, true, and José Alfredo liked the wraparound porch and the big pecan trees in the yard. Pilar pointed out that it had no running water. There was a well and a pump, and an outhouse.

“But it’s ours,” José Alfredo had said. “I’ll put in the plumbing. I’ll be done before the baby comes.”

Pilar could not argue that this was unreasonable, and he had finished most of the plumbing, but still. It was a fifteen-minute walk down to the neighborhood. Not far, but far enough. In Caimanes, there were real streets with streetlights. Playmates for Joselito. Other wives with whom she exchanged news, lent and borrowed. Had her own share in the collective vigilance of the Caimanes mothers over their children as they wandered the neighborhood.

There was no one near this lonesome spot. There was not even a good road, other than the one José Alfredo had cleared for his truck. Many nights she would awaken to the wailing of coyotes in the dark. José Alfredo, used to ranch life, hardly stirred. For him, the new home was a respite from el hormiguero, he called it. The ant colony of the neighborhood. While he slept, Pilar would sit at the bedroom window and peer out at the darkness, listening to the rustle of the uncleared brush, not knowing whether it was the wind or something else. The moonlight, spectral and remote. The low whistles of hunting owls frightened her most.

She could not say this to him. He had purchased a home for her. He would finish it. He would make it comfortable. And he was doing that—working in the evenings and every weekend on the house. He was working all the time,

she reminded herself. It had not gone well when she had asked him to put up a fence in front of the house to keep Joselito from straying out of the yard.

“I’m afraid of the coyotes,” she had said. “Joselito always wants to be outside.”

She didn’t mention owls. José Alfredo thought her fear of them absurd. He’d been a vaquero all his life, spent nights sleeping in the open during the corridas when they drove the cattle down from the sierra. Owls were just birds.

“Coyotes won’t come during the day,” José Alfredo scoffed. “I’ll get a fence up, be patient. I’m doing it by myself.”

“I do what I can too,” she had said. She had not said, *Maybe you should have waited to buy a house. Maybe you should have chosen a different one.*

She had not said those things. Her words lingered, hot and still as the summer air, unsaid in her mouth. No, she had not said anything to him. But her silence was enough.

Finishing the house was taking longer than he’d thought it would. He knew he had made a wrong decision. He had not said he was sorry. But a week ago, he had come home with their mail, still delivered at their post office box on Main Street, with the invitation in his hand. Would she like to go to the quinceañera? He would like to take her. This was his apology. He knew very well what would bend her to forgiveness.

Pilar relished neighborhood celebrations with the avidity of one denied the flourishes of debutante and bride. Six years before, the train had fetched her north, from the clustered ranchitos of San Carlos in the Mexican state of Coahuila to the town of La Cienega, just across the border in Texas.

She had carried José Alfredo’s engagement gift, a pair of gold filigree arracada earrings, sewn into the lining of her rosary pouch, in her lap all the way to the border. Her train had arrived on a Friday, at three in the afternoon. By quarter to four she had married José Alfredo Aguirre, married him in her traveling dress, but with the earrings brushing her neck. She’d been all of nineteen years old.

They had spent the wedding night on the Mexican side of the border, in Ciudad Bravo, at the Hotel Paradiso. They ate dinner in the fancy dining

room, waited upon by servers in trim jackets, danced to the in-house band, boleros and American standards. Pilar felt the earrings, the weight of them, swaying with her movements. She had felt beautiful. But it had not been a celebration. It had not been a gala.

I'll wear the arracadas tonight, Pilar thought as she shifted on the front steps, trying to stay shaded under the wide green leaves of the banana tree. Behind that thought was another, one she certainly would not have owned, though it was an annoyance that crept traitorously to vanity: the quinceañera could have waited for October. Everyone said so. Pilar herself would have been over her confinement, her body her own again, and she, ready to dance.

Behind the house, she could hear Yolanda, Romi's daughter, singing as she shelled pecans on the back porch. She had a sweet voice. She sang unabashedly, in the manner of small children who believe they are alone when they cannot see anyone around them. Pilar sighed. She wished Joselito would help Yolanda with the pecan shelling, but he would not settle to the task. Oh well, when Romi finished with the beans, maybe they would take the children for a walk, swollen feet or no.

"Is this the home of José Alfredo Aguirre?"

An old woman stood in the middle of the street in front of the house. She wore a dark high-collared dress and a black lace mantilla over her hair, which was white and pinned in a low bun. She carried a tattered pocketbook tucked in the crook of her arm. She was small, brittle in the way of slight women in their twilight years. Pilar guessed her to be in her seventies.

"Excuse me," Pilar said, tugging down her dress. Joselito laughed and clutched her knee.

"Is this the home of José Alfredo Aguirre?" the woman repeated. She spoke with the strong lilt of a ranch peasant. In spite of her age, she stood erect, considering Pilar and, more lingeringly, Joselito.

"No," said Pilar, not liking the woman's tone. There was something peculiar here, despite her neat appearance.

The woman cocked her head at Pilar. "You are lying."

"I'm not," said Pilar. "This is not his house." More than ever, Pilar was glad that she had made the trek down the hillside to Romi's house this

morning. She would not have wanted to face this woman so far away from other people.

“You know him,” persisted the old woman. “Don’t deny it. You know him.”

“I don’t deny it,” said Pilar. “Who are you?”

The woman snapped her left arm up like an artillery salute. There was a gold cigar label on her ring finger. “I am his wife.”

Pilar almost laughed, but the woman was clearly furious. Her face was vinegary as a puckered apple.

“I’m sorry, my husband—” Pilar stopped herself from saying *is only thirty*. “My husband isn’t here, but believe me, you’re mistaken.”

“No,” said the woman. Her lips trembled as though she might cry. She aimed a crooked finger at Joselito. “I see his face right there.”

The old woman sprang in tiny quick steps, right up to the edge of the lawn, still pointing her gnarled old finger. Pilar thrust herself to her feet, knocking over the tub and drenching Joselito. He coughed and began to wail.

“Don’t point at my son!” She felt Joselito sobbing against the back of her calf. “Get away from here!”

There was a brief ripple in her belly, low and deep. The small of her back seized in little fingerlets of agony, but she set herself between Joselito and the old woman. She held her ground. There was a beat of silence. Yolanda had stopped singing.

“Señora Aguirre,” the old woman scoffed. “This is everything that belongs to you.”

The woman crouched and swept her fingers through the dust at her feet. With one easy twist, she flung the handful of dirt at Pilar. The spray hit Pilar full in the face. She wiped frantically at her eyes, felt them burn. Felt dirt inside her dress.

The old woman’s grace was terrifying. In the next instant, she would charge across the lawn and snatch Joselito up in those horrible, strong fingers. She would snatch him up and she would run. Pilar tried to grip Joselito more firmly, but he was slippery in her hands. The small of her back seized again. *If she takes him, I won’t catch her. Oh, I won’t catch her!*

The screen door banged open and Romi came out on the steps, a broom in her hands. “What’s happening out here?”

The neighborhood twitched awake at the sound of Romi’s voice: Two teenage boys walking a bicycle through the intersection turned to look. Across the street one of the Zunigas peered out of the living room window.

“Tell me who this house belongs to,” the old woman said.

“Jesús Muñoz,” Romi said. She was tall and broad, and in possession of an unflappable confidence. There were not many in the neighborhood who could stand her down. “I am Señora Muñoz. What do you want?”

The old woman smoothed down the front of her dress with a prim, girlish gesture. Little particles of dirt slipped off her fingers. Her paper ring scratched against the dark material. She smiled at Pilar. The teeth she exposed were badly discolored. “This is not the place I am looking for.”

The old woman walked toward the intersection, the edge of her lace mantilla fluttering at her narrow shoulders. Pilar watched the old woman cross the street and turn west. There were only three or so more residential streets in that direction. Beyond those streets, five miles of dirt road to the ferries on the Rio Grande. The old woman, Pilar thought, was entirely capable of making such a trek.

“Who was that?” asked Romi.

“I—I don’t know.” Her dress was wet and her lower back throbbed steadily. Joselito’s wails had become a full-blown tantrum.

Romi scooped up Joselito, cradling him and patting his back with one large, capable hand. “Ya, ya, mijo. It’s okay.”

“She said José Alfredo is her husband.”

Romi snorted. “That vieja could be his grandmother.”

“She must know him,” said Pilar, rubbing her eyes with the side of her hand. They still burned, but not as much. “She recognized Joselito.”

“Ay, Pili. She probably saw him somewhere and asked around for who he was. It’s not that hard to find out.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“Who knows? Those viejitos. They can’t remember their own names, but something flies into their heads and nothing will pry it loose.” Romi sighed.

“Well, we’re all going that way.”

Pilar gave her a pointed look. It was different for those from *el otro lado*. Men came from Mexico in whatever way they could: smuggled in or swimming the river, the most fortunate with the government guest worker program. Sometimes these men left their families back home and started fresh new lives. And sometimes wives came looking for lost husbands. What would Romi know about it? She and her husband were both Tejanos, born and raised in Texas, in this very town, their family lines neatly mapped out, transparent.

José Alfredo had come to Texas as a *bracero* in the government program that took so many young men. He had been in the United States three full years before he sent for her. Pilar did not know how he had managed it. *I made my own luck*, he’d said. Now she wondered how he’d made that luck.

This was all absurd, she told herself. The woman was so old. Besides, she and José Alfredo had been married and living in Texas for years. Why would a woman wait so long to find a wayward husband?

“He doesn’t have a secret wife,” Romi said, reading Pilar’s thoughts. “We knew him a year before he brought you.”

Joselito pressed the top of his head beneath Romi’s chin, but he fixed his eyes on Pilar. He had resented for some time Pilar’s inability to pick him up. Guilt flashed through her. She could not even comfort him properly.

“Oh, I’m a mess,” she said, glancing away from her son.

“Never mind, it’s all right now,” said Romi. But she frowned, looking at Pilar’s feet. “I don’t think the swelling is going to come down. Come inside.”

Pilar followed Romi into the kitchen. Inside, the air was moist with the steam of boiling beans. Pilar went straight to the sink, scrubbed her face and hair, her arms all the way to her elbows. Little Yolanda was sitting at the table eating a cookie, eyes round and solemn, taking in Pilar’s drenched body.

“Who was that, Mami?” Yolanda asked.

“Nobody,” said Romi. “Go dust the living room and your bedroom.”

“Yes, Mami,” Yolanda said. She left and Pilar sat down in the vacant chair, at the narrow table beside the icebox.

The room was small, but neat, and decorated with artificial fruit: yellow-painted wood carvings of lemons, plastic purple grapes, a ceramic watermelon half-moon in the middle of the table. Even the beige tablecloth was printed with dim clusters of cherries. Romi shifted Joselito to one hip and took a napkin out of the drawer beneath the countertop. She handed it to Joselito and set him on the chair next to Pilar.

“Okay,” she said. Romi put her fingers into the seed indentations in the watermelon’s lid and lifted it. It was full of Nilla wafers. “Let me hear you count three.”

Joselito counted three wafers out of the cookie jar with the seriousness of a banker tallying a withdrawal. Pilar helped him spread his napkin flat. He liked to put his cookies in a row before he ate them.

“Sure you don’t want any?” asked Romi. “There’s lemonade too.”

Pilar shook her head. She could still taste dust. “I need to go home and bathe.”

“Wait a minute. Try the shoes my sister sent me. Son muy chachas, but too small for me.” Romi shook her head. “And not my style.”

Pilar nodded. The hallway floorboards creaked as Romi retreated to her bedroom. She watched Joselito bite into his second cookie.

“Mami, can I go play with Yoli?” Small beads of sweat sprouted on the end of his nose. He had forgotten his fright, but she had not.

“Yes, go on.” He scrambled out of his chair, cookies clutched in his hand. She shut her eyes and pressed her fingers against her eyelids. She could still smell the dirt on herself.

Pilar said, loud, so that Romi would hear her, “You think I should tell José Alfredo?”

“It’s up to you,” Romi called back. “But what is there to tell? She was wearing a cigar band as a wedding ring. She was crazy.”

“That’s true,” Pilar said, but it was not a comforting thought. Next time, the woman might find Pilar alone at the house on Loma Negra.

Romi returned with a light-blue shoe box in her hands. She sat down at the table and put the shoe box in front of Pilar, gesturing for her to open it, but Pilar did not. Romi gripped her folded hands with one of her own.

“Your husband comes home to you every day. He has given you this boy and another child is coming. It’s easy to feel bad right now—when you’re so tired and nothing fits—but remember, it’s a happy time too.”

Romi’s hand was large and firm. The ring on her middle finger was fitted with two paste stones, the birthstones of each of her children. The opal was for Miguel, her oldest, who had been killed in the Philippines during the war. It happened a few years before Pilar came to Texas. *It’s easy to talk with you*, Romi had remarked, early in their friendship. *You never knew him*. She meant Pilar didn’t ask questions about him. Pilar had taken to Romi for much the same reasons—she never pressed Pilar about family back in Mexico. Their histories were their own business.

“Yes, of course, I’m very fortunate,” said Pilar, ashamed. Miguel had been Romi’s only son.

“Ándale.” Romi drummed her fingers on the box. “Open it.”

Pilar caught her breath, dark thoughts receding like shadows before the sun. Nestled in white tissue paper were a pair of gold peep-toe sandals. She lifted the right shoe out of the tissue. Three wide bands of satiny fabric, each cunningly knotted at the top of the foot. An elegant, arched sole. The ankle strap was set with a gauzy golden ribbon that flared at the clasp. The heel was sturdy and square, probably four inches.

“I didn’t remember they were so high,” Romi said. “Maybe I have something else.”

“No, it’s fine,” Pilar said. She slipped on the sandal. For the first time that day, something felt right. The sandal was a half size larger than she normally wore, and that, or perhaps the banded style, meant it had more give to it. Whatever the reason, her foot looked normal. Almost.

“Are you going to be able to buckle it?” Romi demanded. “You can’t even see your own feet.”

“Claro,” Pilar sniffed. She twisted her leg up behind her and deftly buckled the strap. She stuck her foot out. She’d been right about the ribbon. It distracted from her thick ankle.

Pilar put on the other sandal and stood up. She hadn’t worn any kind of heel since she’d started to show. She walked around the kitchen. The clack-