

A woman with long dark hair and a red dress is shown from the chest up, looking slightly to the right. The background is a wooden wall with horizontal planks. The entire image has a warm, reddish-orange tint.

SECRETS OF THE CASA ROSADA

Alex
Temblador

SECRETS OF THE CASA ROSADA



Alex Temblador



PIÑATA BOOKS
ARTE PÚBLICO PRESS
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Secrets of the Casa Rosada is funded in part by a grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts. We are grateful for their support.

Piñata Books are full of surprises!
An Imprint of Piñata Books

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design and photograph by Victoria Castillo

Names: Temblador, Alex, author.

Title: *Secrets of the Casa Rosada* / by Alex Temblador.

Description: Houston, TX : Piñata Books, an imprint of Arte Público Press, [2018] | Summary: Sixteen-year-old Martha's life is transformed when her mother leaves her in Laredo, Texas, in 1990 with a grandmother she never knew, who is a revered curandera.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018029355 (print) | LCCN 2018036171 (ebook) | ISBN 9781518505492 (epub) | ISBN 9781518505508 (kindle) | ISBN 9781518505515 (pdf) | ISBN 9781558858701 (alk. paper)

Subjects: | CYAC: Grandmothers—Fiction. | Healers—Fiction. | Mexican Americans—Fiction. | Secrets—Fiction. | Blessing and cursing—Fiction. | Family life—Texas—Fiction. | Texas—History—20th century—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T444 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.1.T444 Sec 2018 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018029355>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Copyright © 2018 by Alex Temblador

Printed in the United States of America
September 2018–October 2018
Versa Press, Inc., East Peoria, IL

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Uno	1
Dos	19
Tres	42
Cuatro	60
Cinco	81
Seis	105
Siete	130
Ocho	152
Nueve	160
Diez	171
Once	184
Doce	194
Trece	203
Catorce	210
Quince	218
Dieciséis	223
Diecisiete	228

Acknowledgements

While writing this book, I worked through a lot of emotions and thoughts surrounding my identity, and though it was a personal journey, it would not have been possible without the help of quite a few individuals. I want to offer a special thanks to the following people:

Rilla Askew, for her mentorship and guidance throughout the writing, editing and pitching process and reminding me that this story needs to be told and heard. Connie Squires whose excitement for my novel never waned after she read my book for the first time; thank you for believing in my novel and telling me it deserved to be published.

Angela Morris and Amy Little, my best pen pals and writing partners. I highly regarded your edits and critiques, as you always had my best interest at heart. I wouldn't have made it here without you, and I hope we continue to support each other.

My cousin, Steven "Severo" Gonzalez for sharing his experiences with a *curandera* with me, which helped me craft the *curanderismo* practice portrayed in the book.

My Laredo family for welcoming me with open arms, my cousin Richie for showing me around the city, and to the city of Laredo for providing a wonderful place to set my novel.

Uncle Andy for printing out my books and stories over the years, so I could have something to touch and edit. To hold your book in your hands is to hold hope.

To the countless readers over the years who provided feedback, suggestions and edits—I took every praise, every critique, every suggestion to heart. Thank you.

My grandma for being the inspiration for the character of Abuela and my Meme for inspiring the character of Gloria. I love and miss you both.

My dad for reading every single chapter and offering wonderful feedback, my mother for sharing my book news with all, my sister for being my confidante, hero and inspiration, and my brother for always believing and loving me.

With love, I thank you all.

To my family, for being my support, readers and inspiration.

Uno

WHEN I ARRIVED IN LAREDO, TEXAS, during a late August afternoon in 1990, the houses were painted in shades of mustard yellow, baby blue, dark red, light green, dingy brown or a white color that had yellowed around the edges. I remember it well because it reminded me of a bad Andy Warhol painting. I had looked over Warhol's work in the Memphis library only weeks before and, there I was, a sixteen-year-old girl driving through a shabby version of one his creations.

The ridiculously colored dwellings were caged in with wrought-iron fences spread between squared cinder block or brick posts. My mother and I drove through a sea of yellow grass, brown, scraggly bushes, palm trees, large, spiky plants and cacti. The scorched lawns of the houses came all the way to the street, leaving no room for sidewalks in the neighborhood.

Paint peeled down the sides of many houses in long, jagged strips. Bent chain-link fences hung orange and brown with rust. Basketball rims with wooden headboards from the '50s stood in the street without their nets alongside broken-down cars with missing hubcaps. We drove past a cemetery with hundreds of tombstones, each one covered in elaborate displays of floral arrangements and ribbons.

At the age of sixteen I wasn't very impressed with Laredo, especially not with the neighborhood where my grandmother lived. As my mother and I drove on the rocky asphalt roads in our maroon Pinto, the pit in my stomach widened. We drove from the real world—what I knew as America—into another country, one that did not fit with my notion of what a U.S. city looked like.

Commercial businesses were being built along the main highway, but they were tire stores, local restaurants and clothing stores with names that I didn't recognize—many had Spanish names.

My mother and I had never lived in a house. Our "homes" consisted of cheap, moldy, one-bedroom apartments on the run-down side of town . . . if we were lucky. The times we weren't lucky, we stayed in carpet-stained, moth-eaten-sheets kind of hotels with drug deals going down in the rooms next to us. Our neighbors had been mostly black or white with a few Hispanics from Puerto Rico or Cuba mixed in.

Despite this—or maybe even because of it—I had a grand idea of what houses should look and feel like. They were in magazines, on television and in movies: houses were supposed to be made out of rusty red to light tan bricks, complete with tan, white or gray siding, and lush, green evenly mowed lawns. You could practically smell the fresh paint job, and the sidewalks that ran in front of the houses were being used by neighbors walking their dogs or kids riding their bicycles.

But that was not Laredo in 1990.

Little children played on the lifeless lawns while their brown mothers seemed to melt in the heat on plastic green and white lawn chairs. Men stood in groups, some with their shirts off, displaying black hairy chests

tattooed with symbols and words that made my heart beat faster in fear. Others wore bandanas, and even the older men with salt-and-pepper hair stood on porches or on the lawns with beer bellies and hard eyes, watching our car as we passed.

We were a few blocks from my grandmother's house when we halted at a stop sign that had black symbols spray-painted on it, none of which meant anything to me. Four men stood at the corner talking among themselves, but all at once they stopped to look at our Pinto. Their eyes stared through our cracked windshield, glaring at us, as if they knew we were not from Laredo . . . at least not me. They stood closest to *my* door, the one that never locked. I reached out slowly and held onto the handle, a naïve action, because if they rushed the car, I didn't stand a chance.

Everything about the men put me on edge: their slicked-back black hair complimented their black mustaches and goatees, three wore stained wife-beaters with jeans and had tattoos up and down their arms. The oldest of the bunch—by some forty years—wore a gray work shirt that he left unbuttoned to expose an oil-stained T-shirt. The one closest to my door smiled mischievously and took a step forward. At that same time my mother's foot finally found the gas and we left the men behind.

When the men were a block behind us, I turned to my mother and asked, "Is this safe?"

She laughed. "Is what safe, darling?"

"Is this . . . this area safe to be in?"

"Of course it is, Martha. You always ask this." Her voice rose in a mocking manner: "Is Memphis safe?" "Is Orlando safe?" She huffed. "You really need to calm down. Your grandmother wouldn't live somewhere

unsafe." Black sunglasses with silver rims hid her eyes as she smiled in a reassuring way. I wanted to barf.

Whatever. I leaned forward and adjusted the air-conditioning vent so that the cool air hit my sweaty face. I missed Memphis and its 97-degree weather. Memphis was like an igloo compared to Laredo's 112-degree heat wave. I peeled my sweat-soaked shirt off my chest so that some air could make its way through the cotton and to my burning skin.

"I can't believe you grew up here," I said.

"What was that, honey?"

"Nothing."

My mother shrugged, leaned forward and turned the music up. It was the only station that she could find that played some pop crap and not Mexican music. I slouched back in my seat and stared at the dashboard, trying not to look around at the next crappy city where we were going to live.

It was difficult to imagine my mother living in a place so . . . Mexican. With her Family Dollar-dyed blonde hair, her light skin and her inch-thick layer of make-up, she had worked hard to look as white as possible. She even refused to walk in direct sunlight for fear her skin would darken.

That day, my mother wore a tight red spaghetti-strap top that stopped just above her navel. Her boobs bounced up and down, ready to fall out of her tight top as she danced to a Madonna song. Her jean shorts were shorter than mine and hugged her butt tighter than a child could hug its mother. Below, her feet were encased in bright red heels. Someone had a funny sense of humor placing me with this woman.

"How much farther?" I asked.

"Just down the street. You're going to love meeting your grandmother."

A week earlier, my mother had come into our kitchen while I was drawing hands for my art class and announced that we were going on a "vacation." We were going to visit my grandmother, whom I had never met before. She made it sound like a fairy tale, and I was Little Freaking Red Riding Hood. She started chatting on and on about how much fun it would be and how I would *love* Laredo. I knew it was her way of keeping me from asking questions: *Have we been evicted again? What do you mean I have a grandmother?* After a few minutes, I stopped listening.

We never stayed longer than two years in one place, moving from city to city. I had five spiral notebooks with drawings and scribbles chronicling the places we had stayed. My mother wanted to be rich, so we moved to any city where she thought she could do that: Atlanta, Boston, Memphis. . . . I'm sure we had moved a lot more in the years after I had been born, I just couldn't remember. My youth consisted of moving from school to school, and friends were far and wide. I never owned more than could fit in my one large suitcase, which always sat next to my bed filled to the brim with all my clothes.

We definitely weren't visiting my grandmother because my mother thought she could become rich in Laredo. I was sure we'd been evicted from our apartment in Memphis and didn't have the money to go anywhere else. Memphis hadn't been as successful for my mother as she had hoped. Waitressing part-time at a local diner never helped much financially barely paid for bills, and her boyfriends—musicians mostly—didn't either. We had slept in our car in parks and campsites, on the way here;

we had changed and washed up in gas stations that had rusty rings around the sinks, stained floors and blackened toilet bowls. I didn't smell good, and my hair looked greasy from a lack of wash, which was only made worse from the dirty water I had to run through it at the last gas station.

My mother continued chatting. I tuned in halfway to something she said: " . . . she's a very sweet woman. Although she can't speak English, she can underst—"

"Who can't speak English?"

"Your grandmother, but she can understand you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she doesn't speak English," she repeated.

"So how the hell am I supposed to understand her? I can't speak Spanish."

She flipped her wrist in a backhanded manner, which made me grit my teeth in annoyance. That movement could be translated to many things: "Don't worry" or "You're crazy" or "No big deal" or "Oh, stop!" I wanted to slap her hand every time she did it.

"It's so easy, and you're so smart. You'll pick it up in no time." She thought flattery would make me feel better about anything. She used it so much that it had lost its power long ago, just like that damn smile she gave me.

My mother had this smile—the "Big Fake." It annoyed the hell out of me. She did it when I was little, and for a while it worked, but as I got older I saw it for what it was, a lie. The Big Fake consisted of her lips rising as far as they could, making her cheeks pop out like a chipmunk's full of nuts. Her shiny, white teeth would sparkle in contrast to her dark lipstick, and each time I had to hold back a gag. She used it on everyone, not just me. Each time she did, I saw the quiver at the edge of

her lips, shaking more and more. She hated the Big Fake more than I did.

We turned onto Garfield Street. A few minutes later the car slowed down. We parked behind a gold Cadillac. I sat up in my seat and looked out the window.

"She lives here?"

My mother didn't smile, but only stared at the house before giving a slight nod.

"You're kidding me, right? My grandmother lives in a Pepto-Bismol-colored house?"

She nodded again.

God, it explained so much—like my mother's preference for outrageously bright colors for clothes.

The pink paint, even chipped and faded, made the house stand out bright and loud next to the blue and brown houses on either side of it. Despite its humorous coloring, it called for attention and respect. Even the houses next to it seemed to be leaning ever so slightly towards its wooden frame. I looked up and down the street. None of the houses, as far as I could see, were pink like the one in front of us. Why would someone voluntarily paint their house that color?

My mother stepped out of the car, not waiting for me to get over my astonishment. After she shut her door, she stretched, pushing her breasts and butt out at the same time. You would have thought she did it for an audience, but the only people I saw around were two old ladies sitting on a porch on the opposite side of the street.

I slipped on my sandals and followed her. The intensity of the sun and heat slammed into me as soon as I stepped out of the car. It was 5 p.m. and still broiling? My mother had already moved to the trunk and begun

pulling out my suitcase. I prayed to God that the person I found inside would not be an older version of the person I had been stuck with for the last sixteen years.

I reached into the trunk to grab one of mother's suitcases when she batted my hand away.

"We'll come back for mine later. I want you to meet your grandmother now."

"But . . ."

She ignored me and shut the trunk. "I'll get it later, honey. We're wasting time."

Behind us, a door slammed. We both turned to my grandmother's house. A girl around my age, maybe sixteen, or seventeen, wearing an oversized white T-shirt and blue jeans, made her way down the porch steps. Who was she? My mother stopped moving beside me.

The girl finally noticed us, stopped and stared. Her body stiffened. Her hands, which were at her sides, curled into fists. Her eyes darkened until it appeared that only black filled the white spaces. She was breathing heavily, boiling with anger. She looked over her shoulder at the house, then back at me full of malice. I flinched. She noticed, and it made her smile—a small upturn of the corners of her lips. After a moment, she stomped through the open gate and down the street, leaving me with an uneasy feeling.

My mother and I continued to watch the girl in silence. When the girl turned the corner and we weren't able to see her anymore, the spell broke and I was able to move.

"Who was that?" I didn't even know the girl, and yet the hate that had emanated from her eyes had turned me cold in the sweltering heat.

"I don't know." For once, her voice didn't sound fake. Her forehead wrinkled in confusion as she continued looking at the place where the girl had disappeared.

I waved my hand in front of her face. "Hello?"

She blinked out of her trance and turned to me with the Big Fake. There was my mother.

"C'mon, let's get out of this sun. I can feel my skin turning brown."

As we walked up the steps to the cement porch, cramps assaulted my stomach. My mother had never spoken a word about her family before the day she told me we were going to visit my grandmother. For so long, I thought my mother and I were alone.

Questions ran through my mind. *What would my grandmother look like? Would I look like her? Would she like me? Would we be welcomed or left on the porch homeless? Did she even know about me?* But I didn't have time to think about what was about to occur because my mother sat my suitcase down on the porch, opened the screen door and knocked. I stood behind her, a bit toward her right. I pulled one of the short pieces of hair that had fallen in my face behind my ear, even though I never put my hair behind my ears.

The porch was relatively small and felt crowded with all the potted plants on it. How had they not withered and died in the excruciating heat? Then again, I had seen an orange tree in the small courtyard, and it didn't look dead. The plants bloomed in varying shades of green and yellow, and some even sported small clusters of flowers.

During my overview of the plants, I noticed a glass bowl with water sitting next to the door. Three limes floated on the surface.

"What's with the limes?" I asked my mother.

She looked down to where I pointed and pursed her lips. "That's not good."

"What's not good?"

The knob on the front door turned and I forgot about the heat, the plants, the limes. The door opened a few inches, an old woman's head appeared behind the screen. I peered around my mother to get a better look, but the screen door obscured the woman's face. She muttered something in Spanish that I didn't understand.

"Mamá!" My mother said before she released a rampant flow of foreign words.

The woman opened the door a little more and peered around my mother. She nodded toward me with her head and then turned to my mother and said something in Spanish. My mother replied with more alien words, but somewhere in the flow I caught my name. The woman shook her head back and forth and turned slowly away. She left the door wide open as she walked into the house. My mother opened the screen door, picked up my suitcase and entered. She turned to see if I followed.

"Goodness, Martha, stop standing there. Get inside."

"Since when do you speak Spanish?"

I had never heard my mother utter one word in Spanish my whole life, not even to the Puerto Rican and Cuban staff she used to work with at diners. And here she was, speaking as if it had been a daily practice. How could she have kept this secret from me? Instead of answering, she ignored me and disappeared into the house. I caught the screen door before it closed, released a huff of anger and followed her in.