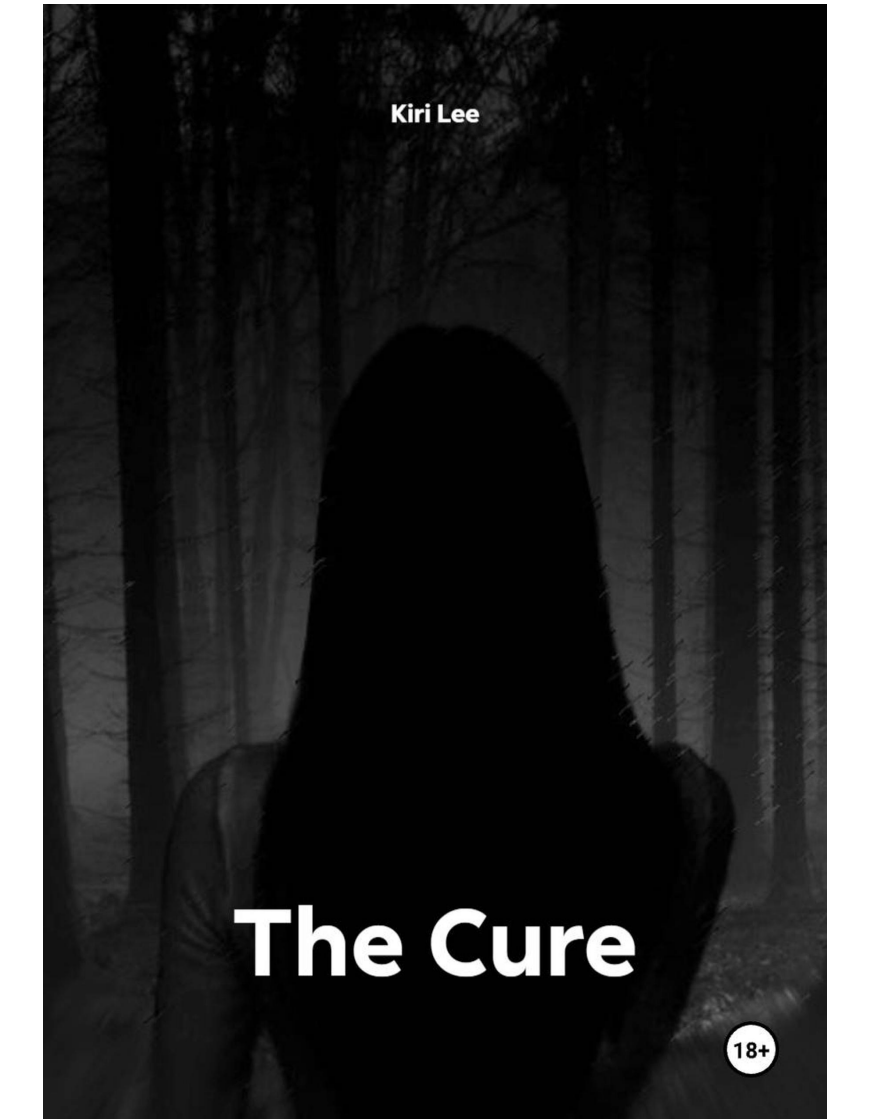




Kiri Lee

The Cure

18+

Kiri Lee

The Cure

<https://litres.ru/74229507>

SelfPub; 2026

Аннотация

What could be worse than being stuck in a small town in a foreign country for an entire year?

A sixteen-year-old girl is sent to spend the entire school year with her grandmother in a remote town in Louisiana. At first glance, the town seems ordinary, but its true history turns out to be as dark as the forest surrounding it. Is this history connected to the recent disappearance of teenagers in the town? Its something the girl will have to find out, whether she wants to or not.

Содержание

Глава 1	4
Глава 2	17

Kiri Lee

The Cure

Глава 1

Chapter 1.

Vita mutatur, non tollitur

“Dude, I think I’m going to shit myself.”

The frail sound of dry leaves breaking beneath the sole, had already been resounding in the impenetrable gloom for some time. There were two sources of noise - one of them exuded confidence. it walked without even seeming to notice where it was going. The other, like a timid little rabbit, seemed startled by every rustle it made.

The tall, majestic crowns of trees stretched toward the night sky, extending their branches toward one another. One of the men stopped and looked upward. The trees had blocked the view of the sky with their dense foliage. When he realized that the deeper into the forest they went, the farther they became from the outside world, the man began to shift uneasily from foot to foot.

“Let’s go back.” - He flinched at the sound of his own voice, which rang so unnaturally in the suffocating silence. The second one stopped his heavy footsteps and turned around. “No.

We keep going.” - The speech was clear, contrasting with the condition of its owner. The first young man tightened his grip on the camera, which he had been holding since the beginning of their journey.

Seeing fear in his companion, one of them decided to speak up again in hopes of calming the situation. –

“We need to stop this, when...”

...He was interrupted by a strange sound that echoed sharply in the darkened forest behind the tree trunks.

“Did you hear that?”

The sound started to take shape, first into human footsteps and then transitioning into a wild animal’s run. A series of loud thuds made it seem as though someone was pushing off the ground and running in circles around them. Suddenly, there was a catastrophic lack of air - an agonizing urge to slice open the chest and rip the lungs out.

One of the young men carrying a dark bag, that blended into the night, pulled a silver dagger from it. “C’mon!” – He cried out in terror, holding it like a weapon against who knew what. At the sound of the scream, a flock of ravens rose somewhere start cawing mournfully and beating their wings to fly away.

The sound of running died down, as did the other noises later. The silence that followed created a tension that was much more acute than the previous ruckus. It was as if someone was waiting for something. Or *something* was waiting.

The man with the camera reached out to stop recording but

froze when the other one shook his head. He placed a finger on his pursed lips, listening at the same time: the murmur of the river, the rustling of leaves, his own uneven breathing but nothing more. Staring into the black darkness that had enveloped every part of him, he finally exhaled.

“We should...”

Something that jumped out from under the bushes with inhuman speed and fell into the blind zone of one of the boys.

“Et..”

His friend’s voice trailed off as he watched the guy disappear along with whatever had taken him. His legs felt like jelly as he took off, knocking into everything in his path. Primal fear pumped adrenaline into his bloodstream, forcing his numb body to move faster. The branches he crashed into at high speed cut his face and left abrasions but they couldn’t stop him. Even when he ran out of breath, he continued to run, hearing it chasing after him.

Whether he turned off the recording on the brand-new, but already broken camera, he never found out.

The black SUV stopped by a modest structure with a cut-off “For Sale” sign at the edge of the road. The tiny house made of dark boards and with a hole-ridden roof, was shrouded in thick fog that had settled over the area, stretching all the way to the neighboring streets. It perfectly matched the absence of life on this land - the empty highway rushed straight into a

wall of dense white matter. From the visible side of the road, there was a sudden creak and then a heavy impact of tires on the curb. The car crashed into a stone overhang on its way and immediately stopped. Two claps coming from the car doors signaled the arrival of passengers. However, in their minds, they were prisoners who were sent to penal servitude as punishment for their deeds.

Two teenagers, burdened with their sparse belongings consisting a backpack and one travel bag, stepped into the destination without unnecessary enthusiasm.

“Damn. What a dump.” - it was the first thing these streets had heard all morning. The young man grimaced in disgust when he noticed that he had stepped into a puddle of mud.

“Oh, look. A dead pigeon.” - His companion noted, glancing to the side at the stray dog that was dragging a bird. While they were realizing what kind of place they had ended up, curses in English mixed with Spanish could be heard behind them: these sounds were made by the driver, who was annoyed by the sight of his car's bumper.

As he was about to back up, the man was stopped by a loud scream.

“Get away from my curb!”- A scream was belongs to a peculiar old woman was walking away from a secluded house that stood apart from the rest.

A round-faced woman, despite her advanced age, looked quite remarkable: her dusky face was adorned with restrained yet

noticeable makeup, which appeared rather careless due to the abundance of folds and age wrinkles. Her curly chestnut-colored hair was hidden beneath a fabric head covering. Despite the cold after the rain, the woman came out wearing only a robe of a purple shade. Her neck was covered with various necklaces with enormous gemstones that shimmered under the sun. Limping awkwardly along the stone alley, she was already at her guests moments later. Understand who stood next to her, she greeted them warmly:

“Aw, Look at you! Esperanza, Rodrigo..”

The woman’s bony fingers, covered in giant rings, stretched toward the children. Looking at each other in confusion the two people stepped back.

“That’s not our na..”

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes!” - Having lost interest in the teenagers, she immediately made her way toward the man who had brought them here. He was her distant relative and lived with his family in a neighboring town, also in Louisiana. “The car is damaged and needs to be repaired. So, give me the money for that and for taking the offspring”

The woman looked at the almost intact bumper, which had only suffered a small dent.

Only a few of the old woman’s relatives kept in touch with the old woman.

Even if someone maintained a connection with her, it was not out of great affection.

“Cállate, cabrón. Isn't it shameful to take the last of an old woman's resources?”

The old lady lowered her gaze, placing her hands on her hips.

“Family must be helped selflessly, not like you do! A great sin.”

The man, knowing he would never see a penny and unwilling to drag the conversation out any longer, wore his displeasure plainly across his coarse features. Turning away, he headed back inside.

Just before disappearing through the car door, he tossed over his shoulder – “It's not for you to talk about sins, witch!”

The furious woman raised her fist in the air.

“Get the hell out of here!”

She was ready to slam her fist against the car before it drove away and disappeared into the thick raw fog.

The two teenagers watched the scene unfold in silence, having no intention of interrupting it.

They hadn't seen their own grandmother in many years, so in a way, this was their first impression of her. When the woman had let off the last of her steam, she walked back over to them. Before she could say anything, the girl cut her off.

“Esperanza is our little sister. And Rodrigo is..”

“Our dog,” - The boy said with a sarcastic smirk that perfectly reflected how he felt being here.

The elderly woman became flustered, placing her hand on the back of her head. –It's your mother. She got me confused. Those

are the only names I've heard her mention lately.

To the two of them, it looked as though their mother had forgotten they even existed. Or perhaps the old woman's undisclosed illness was to blame. However, she quickly corrected herself:

"Arameo and Araceli. Of course."

"Call me Sola." – Araceli said in a reproachful tone.

"So what are we standing there for? Come on in." - She gestured toward the house, inviting them to come inside.

There was little notion of coziness in the secluded corners - the abundance of antiques left hardly any free space. On the heavy oak shelves gleamed various trinkets, resembling oversized versions of the stones that hung around the homeowner's chest. Above their heads hung Nazar amulets and small pouches with glossy skulls, bumping against the heads of anyone entering. Complete chaos reigned on the coffee table. All the space was occupied by a scattered deck of illustrated cards as well as a stained candlestick, and a handful of garlic. The rest of the room was filled by figurines, pots with exotic flowers and ornate lamps. Instead of normal windows, the living room featured two mosaic-patterned windows.

But what stood out the most was a large bird skull, resting at the center of one of the shelves.

Arameo whistled, whispering to his sister:

"Do you think she sleeps in a coffin?"

Sola wasn't listening to him. She was too busy, trying not to

step on something in this mess...

“Jeez!”

The young man jerked sharply, almost hitting the bookcase standing behind him. A growl came from beneath his feet.

“Bruma! stupid cat!”

From beneath the scattered clutter emerged a plump, hissing ball of fur, as black as the night. With its nose held high, the cat crossed the man’s path and disappeared into another pile of junk.

Just then, one of the books on the shelf came crashing down onto Arameo. While he winced and rubbed the sore spot on the back of his head, Sola managed to glance at the pages that had fallen open. It was a yellowed book, which written in Latin, the girl noticed that something had been slipped between the pages. The old woman, noticing the fallen book, turned pale and snatched it up, returning it to its place in a single swift motion.

“While I make breakfast, you two can unpack your things in your rooms,” — the old woman told them as she slowly limping away. Instead of a door, the room’s entrance was covered by a purple curtain, above which hung a crucifix.

“Sola’s room is on the right side of the hall, and Rodrigo’s is in the attic.”

Arameo gave a haughty snort as he looked for the fold-down stairs leading to his new room. — Poor Rodrigo.

As she made her way down the narrow hallway, Sola’s indifferent gaze drifted over every crack in the walls, the warped floorboards beneath her feet, and the framed photographs

hanging from the shabby walls. One of them caught her attention – or rather a familiar face. Captured in the photograph was the smiling face of her late grandfather, dressed in a neatly tailored business suit. Such an elegant outfit seemed completely at odds with his mischievous nature, which showed through in his cocky grin and the sparkle in his eyes, as though they had been frozen in time.

Just below it hung Grandma's wedding photograph.

"Gabriella and Javier Santana. 1964. New Orleans."

In Sola's memory, her grandmother looked far more like the woman in the picture than the one she had seen just a few minutes earlier. Brief memories from that time flashed through her mind. But as they all inevitably led back to the same thing, the one place she didn't want to return to, Sola decided to leave the beige frame behind and move on.

Reaching her new prison cell, Sola reluctantly pushed the creaking door open.

The first thing that came into view was the gray wallpaper, which peeling at the edges and stained with dampness. A single bed looked pitiful, cramped into the corner of the room. The room itself felt too empty — a dusty dresser and a mirror covered in cobweb were all that filled it. Sola collapsed onto the bed, whose mattress turned out to be much harder than the seats in the car.

"Cute."

A quick knock sounded against the doorframe, heralding the

arrival of an unwelcome guest – her brother.. Boldly stepping inside, he looked into every corner of the uncanny bedroom with wide eyes.

“Someone’s definitely dead here.” - Arameo closed the door behind him and approached.

“What are you gonna do?”

“What? For now, I will quietly do my time.”

The young man crossed his arms over his chest, clearly not expecting such a response.

“Seriously? Gonna play the good girl?”

Sola shrugged indifferently. It was difficult for others to guess what exactly she was feeling or thinking, the same unbothered expression always adorned her face. Even her brother found it unbearably irritating at times.

“Oh, so why are we stuck here for the entire school year?”

“Before you start throwing accusations around, you’d better keep an eye on yourself. You still smell like alcohol.”

Arameo stepped back to leave. Instead of his usual taunts or favorite insults, he merely rolled his eyes in disappointment

“Throwing accusations around? Remember that we were sent here because of *that* incident.”

The ticking sound of the wall clock in the kitchen made the melancholy even deeper, although just recently it had seemed impossible. The entire space was packed with heaps of miscellaneous junk, making it seem like a personal hell for perfectionists and the squeamish. The cabinets here were so

overflowing with dishes that they could barely close. Gabriella Santana stood in the middle of the room, filling it not so much with herself as with her presence. The woman hurriedly stirred the liquid texture in the bowl, wanting either to feed the children, who had come to live with her, or to poison them. Sola stared at the clock absentmindedly, trying not to look in her grandmother's direction, so as not to accidentally find out what exactly she was adding to her fritters.

Although a couple of days had passed since she had been told they would be moving away for an entire year, it was only now that Sola realized she wasn't troubled by it. Unlike her brother, who could disappear for weeks with his questionable friends and spend his time in dangerous places, she neither argued with her mother nor resented her. She didn't attend school and had no friends, so there was no one to make her want to stay. Among the few people she knew, Mrs. Sanchez stood out the most - a kind elderly woman, who lived next door and had always treated her to freshly made lemonade when she was kid. Mrs. Sanchez had struggled with her memory for as long as Sola could remember, so she kept a diary in which she carefully recorded every emotion she experienced each day. Sola loved reading it, as her neighbor had led quite an eventful youth filled with fascinating stories.

Before they left, Mrs. Sanchez had encouraged her to do the same - to keep a diary where she could freely write down the thoughts and feelings she never voiced aloud. But now Sola realized it would become the dullest manuscript in human

history, not worth a single page of her neighbor's diary.

The snap of wrinkled fingers in front of her face instantly pulled the girl out of her thoughts.

“Dear, give me the eggs.”

Sola, without getting up, reached toward the nearest kitchen cabinet. Opening the door, she found what she would have liked to see after eating the meal.

“Ah, devil. The cream is gone.”

The woman grumbled in annoyance, but Sola no longer heard her, transfixed by her discovery.

Slowly closing the door, the girl returned to her previous position. She definitely didn't want to know what her grandmother made the food with.

Because there was...

“Go and buy it.”

Gabriella Santana immediately took out a stack of decent-looking money, placing one of the crumpled bills into her granddaughter's palm.

As soon as she opened her mouth to object, she simply shrugged instead.

“Okay.”

The prospect of going outside rather than languishing all day in a witches' gathering seemed quite appealing to her. Sola stood up abruptly in order to head to the store. The packet of salt standing on the edge of the table swayed because of her movement and fell to the floor.

“That’s bad. That’s a bad omen.” - Whispered Mrs Santana under her breath, rushing to clean up the spilled salt. –“And also. Don’t stay out alone for a long time. Never go into the woods. Get the higher-fat cream and take the coupons from the pocket of my robe.”

Sola nodded, as if she had not just ignored all of her instructions.

“One more thing, sweetie.”

Her face grew more serious.

“Don’t trust anyone.”

Глава 2

Chapter 2

Ex silva

A small carton of whipping cream sat on the checkout counter, while Sola looked around the only store in their neighborhood from the inside. The otherwise empty space was filled by a single sparse golden ray of sunlight and the flicker of a broken lightbulb. Unlike the local store back in her hometown, where the air was always alive with the drone of a television or the booming voice of the customers, this place was drowned in an oppressive silence.

It was the closest store to her grandmother's house, but Sola wasn't coming back here again. The deciding factor had mostly been the stench of rot drifting from the produce section. Though there had been plenty of other off-putting things as well—starting with the appearance of the cashier standing across from her. Ever since she had set the carton down and emptied a stack of discount coupons onto the counter, he hadn't so much as twitched, staring at the girl.

“What?”— she desperately wanted to say aloud, feeling the weight of his piercing gaze. Half of the man's face looked as though it had been burned; sores and ulcers spread across the dry skin, stretching from the corner of his mouth to the sharp line of his cheekbone.

“With that coupon, you can take any discounted item from the display to your right.”

“Oh. You could’ve just said that instead of staring at me like a mannequin.”

The cashier blinked.

Without looking at the display, Sola grabbed the first thing her hand landed on. She tossed a bill onto the counter and hurried to get out of the store.

Halfway home, she realized she’d used the coupons to buy expired smoked sausages.

“Delicious.”

She stopped, wondering what to do with her useless purchase. Right then, a pitiful whine sounded beside her.

“Oh. It’s you.”

A mutt sat on the damp asphalt, its tail wagging happily at the sight of her. She had already seen the dog when she and her brother first arrived.

Now she noticed just how emaciated it was – so much so that even from a fair distance, its ribs stood out beneath its skin. Without another thought, Sola hooked a fingernail beneath the wrapper.

“Fine then. I’ll spoil you a little.”

With one swift motion, Sola tore open the package and emptied its contents onto the ground, right by the starving animal’s hind legs. The impatient dog gave the food only

the briefest sniff before greedily devouring it without another second's hesitation.

Sola loved dogs. She had found her own on a junkyard, scavenging for scraps. Before long, that trash-dog had become her irreplaceable friend, one who understood her far better than people ever did.

Pleased with the result, she emptied out the rest of the food and turned to leave. She paused for only a second, looking back once more at the harmless animal eagerly stuffing itself full.

“Now that’s an appetite. Reminds me of my Labrador.”

Without realizing it, Sola took a step closer. This turned out to be a horrible mistake.

In an instant, the dog turned wild, baring its sharp fangs. A vicious growl pierced her ears, and a gaping red maw flashed before her eyes. Catching sight of the empty food wrapper still in the hand of the person who had fed it, the dog lunged at her, desperate for another meal.

Sola didn’t even have time to scream. She was knocked onto her back at once, the back of her head striking the smooth pavement. The growling mutt threw its weight onto her, its ragged breaths hitting her square in the face. Foam dripped from its jaws as it barked relentlessly. Twitching, the animal thrust its muzzle forward, jaws opening for the next bite.

“Hell...”

As if delirious, she started throwing punches at anything she could reach, barely aware of what she was doing. Somehow, she

managed to shove the animal's entire weight off herself with her elbow. In the next instant, Sola was back on her feet, sprinting as fast as she could away from the crazed beast.

Breathing in quick, ragged bursts, she felt the pounding of her pulse reverberating through her blocked ears, while the tremor in her limbs drove her heart to hammer even harder. The girl couldn't see where her own body was carrying her because her eyes desperately searching for the dog.

When it finally disappeared from sight, she at last came to a stop. Doubling over, she steadied her breathing. Sola slapped herself across the cheeks, forcing herself back into focus.

All around her stood nothing but trees and shrubs, fragrant with fresh foliage in the end of summer. A heavy gloom still lingered in the forest, covered everything ahead behind a pale veil of fog. Sola glanced back and caught sight of a stretch of highway and a blurred streetlamp. She couldn't have run far from the store, which meant the unpredictable beast could easily catch up to her. Out here, no one was likely to hear her if something attacked.

So she had no choice but to head straight into the depths of the forest, hoping to make her way to her grandmother's house. Preferably without being eaten along the way.

With the fallen leaves rustling beneath her feet, she walked into the embrace of the fog, blanketing the surrounding vegetation like a shroud.

"Anyone who ends up here after sunset is out of luck," – the

girl mused aloud.

From somewhere in the distance came the murmur of a slow-moving current, accompanied by the faint, almost imperceptible stench of marsh gas.

She had lost all sense of time among the countless treetops, which resembled a labyrinth. Before long, her brisk pace was interrupted by an obstacle she stumbled over. Catching her balance, Sola immediately looked beneath her sneaker, knowing she would find nothing more than an ordinary rock beneath its sole. Instead, a dark object was protruding from the sticky soil. Crouching down, the girl pulled it out of the muddy puddle and carelessly wiped it against the fabric of her pants.

"And whoever lost this is out of luck."

The new digital camera looked battered, but still gave hope that it could be repaired. Sola immediately slipped her find into the pocket of her hoodie, deciding to make sure to deal with it later.

After half an hour of wandering through the forest, the girl noticed changes in the surroundings. Faint yellow dots began to appear in the distance. The faster she walked, the closer they became. Having walked about two miles from the store, Sola finally came across something other than trees.

It was a series of tall security fences made up of fences about three feet high. Unlike the camera, they had been standing here for a long time – the rusted steel wire made that clear. She could go around the fence and continue deeper into the forest, but she's

not allowed to. A large sign depicting a person crossed out with a red line bore two words:

NO ENTRY.

Sola, who had been about to obey the warning and turn away, unexpectedly stopped. She quickly ran around the fence, heading into the area marked “NO ENTRY”. Before her lay the forbidden part of the forest, where the damp cold was even more tangible.

The girl’s attention was drawn to an inconspicuous stone structure. It resembled a makeshift gravestone. Similar ones were usually used to bury household pets. It stood beneath one of the trees that stood out among the oak grove. Its bent trunk split into two around the middle before rising upward again. Split trunk and bark were broken, and its leaves had fallen long before the beginning of autumn. However, what made it remarkable was not its outward ugliness, but the unnatural pattern covering its surface, resembling the mark of a scratch. Running her palm across it, Sola felt it catch on something sharp. Pulling her hand away, she found not the splinter she had expected, but something else. In the dried bark was a small pale triangle that resembled a broken-off fang or claw.

...Sola lifted her head when she heard a rustling sound in the distance. Instinctively, she froze, still clutching the object she had found between her fingers. She decided that the sound she had heard was caused either by a gust of wind or a fallen branch. But that assumption immediately vanished as soon as a muffled whisper began to come from the northern side of the forest. At

once, what was happening began to seem more like reality rather than the play of an agitated imagination, stirred by the recent attack.

“He...” — a comprehensible sound was heard among the unclear murmuring and humming, which sounded very much like a human voice.

Sola looked toward the place where the source of the faint voice could potentially be. To her, it seemed as though someone was trying to call out for rescue. It seemed that someone, like her, had wandered in there and found something that was the reason this place had been closed off.

And the girl... ran in the opposite direction.

“Screw that!”

Cursing under her breath and jumping over obstacles in her path, Sola instantly went around the fence and now ran toward the road visible in the distance.

"Lord, bless this food. Amen."

Gabriella Santana pressed her palms together, bringing them against her sweaty forehead. As the owner of this house, the elderly woman sat in the middle of the dining table, which was so long it occupied almost the entire room. Sola sat at the side, in the last chair closest to the door. Today, for the first time in many years, she took part in a prayer before a meal. Awkwardly copying her grandmother's movements, she hoped she would survive the morning feast.

The table was set decently — different sauces were served with the fresh pancakes and burnt toast. The recently laid tablecloth was covered in stains, and the plates placed on it were streaked with dirty marks. For herself, the old woman had prepared instant porridge, throwing pieces of butter into it. Sola did not share the woman's appetite as she chewed through her breakfast. She shoved her hands deeper into her pockets and lowered her gaze.

"Sweetpie, is something wrong?"

Gabriella stopped eating, watching the other person's empty plate with a stern, almost supervisory gaze. Sola tried to explain herself using the first thing that came to mind:

"I ate food on the way here."

She was saved from any further questions by her sibling entering the dining room. Arameo crossed the room with a lazy stride, looking at the food on the table as if it were scraps from a trash bin. Snorting, he glanced at the old woman with a smug expression.

"I found a couple of dead rats in the attic. I'm not going to sleep in this pigsty. I'm leaving tomorrow." — And casually throwing in one more remark, he added: "And I won't touch this food. Even if you turn out to be a maniac and force me to."

With his chin raised, he turned around to leave the room. After thinking for a moment, Sola followed her brother's example and also said what was on her head:

"By the way, whose limbs are lying in the kitchen cabinet?"

Arameo stopped without reaching the end of the room. Turning toward his sister first, he realized that she was serious. The two of them watched Grandma's reaction, but not a single muscle on her face moved. However, something had changed — not in her, but rather in the atmosphere. The shadow that briefly fell across her wrinkled face made it look harsher than before. In one hand, she gripped a fork, while in the other, a knife trembled, its blade flashing in the direction of the four curious eyes.

“So, what was it you said last?” — Sola was teasing.

Arameo silently dropped into the place assigned to him, shoving his former arrogance deeper down his throat. His sister remained silent as well.

It was unclear whether it was the unknown that frightened them, or the same knife with which the old woman was now spreading tomato paste across the soft inside of the bread.

“Rodrigo, boy, you didn't wash your hands.” — she said with her mouth full.

Shooting a sharp glance from beneath his scattered locks, Arameo slipped out of the kitchen in an one moment. After looking over the offered food for the second time, Sola decided that it would be better to die here from an upset stomach than from the rabies passed on to her by the stray dog. And dipping one of the toasts into the sweet sauce, she caught herself thinking that it was actually edible after all.

Seeing that her efforts had finally been touched, Gabriella melted into a kind smile.

“Eat, sweetheart”

When she spoke with her granddaughter, the tension in her voice that had slipped into the conversation with Arameo disappeared.

“Abuela, are there rats in my room? I’ll put them in our little princess’ room at night.”

Mrs. Santana waved her hand.

“I’ll turn him into a man myself this year. He’ll learn how to be rude to such a sweet girl like me.” — Gabriella winked, having lost the harshness that had belonged to her just a few seconds earlier. The changes in this woman moved as quickly as the winds on the cliffs.

Sola decided to keep silent about the dog’s attack so as not to worry her grandmother. Besides, Sola was used to keeping such situations to herself.

“Oh, right.” A strange smirk flashed across the woman’s face as she leaned closer.

“Abu made taxidermy pieces to order. They’re in the closet, his unfinished work.”

Now the secret had been revealed. That didn’t make her like this place—or this house—any more than before. And although Sola still had a mountain of questions, she decided to stay on this topic.

“Why don’t you throw them away?”

“That old bastard... may he rest in peace... was quite the cheapskate. I know how much money he made from those

taxidermy pieces, but he never gave me a single penny. I keep thinking, they'll come in handy someday. A woman has to live off something, after all."

Sola remembered little about her grandparents' relationship.

"He didn't leave me a single dime even after his death. And died in the stupidest way. Got drunk and choked on a chicken bone."

"But I thought he died of a heart attack?"

The woman smiled sadly.

"That's the version for our relatives and neighbors. No one took your grandfather seriously anyway, and if they found out he died while trying to shove a huge bone into himself on a dare, they would have laughed at him. Around here, everyone knows everything. Everyone is always talking about everyone else."

"And how do you make a living?"

Gabriella Santana didn't have time to answer — a terrifying scream coming from the hallway.

There was no need to ask what had happened, because it was immediately followed by:

"Holy shit! Is this some kind of rat graveyard?!"

When twilight had already begun to thicken across the sky, Sola settled into her new room. Her only entertainment became unpacking her travel bag while listening to music of different genres. Every evening was brightened by a player turned on with songs of different moods, which she chose solely by how they sounded. The main part of her luggage consisted of a

couple of sets of clothes packed carelessly. Most of the girl's wardrobe consisted of basketball shirts with numbers on them and loose jeans, with the only difference being the color palette. She dressed in the same kind of clothes, so she did not spend much time putting her things away on the shelves.

She had ruined her only crop top long ago when she climbed over a fence while running away from the street thugs, as they called, *Turro*. That day, she had been playing ball with the neighborhood boys — they came from poor districts. Kids like them had surrounded her throughout her entire life. To the little girls, Sola seemed like a local idol, while with the boys she ran with them around the yard on weekends.

Those who got lost and accidentally wandered into their neighborhood saw these children as dangerous ones who would attack innocent people. To Sola, however, these curly-haired little kids, with brains the size of an apple, were just ordinary children. Although some of them really had been forced to steal at a young age.

A couple of years ago, a few of them followed a girl, who was walking around selling oranges in the afternoon. She was doing it without a municipal permit and far away from her home, so she did not want any unnecessary company. However, the boldest ones still followed her despite all the warnings, and later ran into obvious trouble.

One of the little boys tried to snatch a protruding bill from the pocket of a bystander. After that, all of them got dragged

into it: Sola had to run through several alleyways because she was being chased by an entire group of men. While running away, she regretted not the fate of her little minions, but the abandoned oranges.

But the most embarrassing part for her was receiving a scolding from her mother, who had bought that top for her daughter with her last money.

Throwing all of her unpacked luggage onto the dresser, Sola lay down on the bed. Her legs were still hurts from the recent run, reminding her of the situation that had happened many years ago. But at the same time, the difference was still great.

Here, in America, everything was unfamiliar and new to her. Starting from sensations and ending with her surroundings. Usually, in the mornings, she was greeted by the scorching sun and children's laughter coming from the yard. But never by thick clouds hanging over gloomy townspeople all day long; or the smell of pine needles unpleasantly striking her nose. The unbearable humidity here dominated at night, but, as if on purpose, there was not a single fan to be found in the house. Sinking into the bed, Sola boredly ran her fingers through her wired earphones.

And the sudden spark of inspiration in the form of a spontaneous idea managed to stir her. Moving her bag aside and feeling a leather spine inside the inner compartment, she pulled out an empty notebook from it. Placing it on her knees, Sola picked up a pen as well.

To keep herself from completely losing her mind, she decided she would at least make easy daily notes, though she refused to consider it keeping a diary. Her fingers tightened around the pen, guiding it across the soft surface of the page and leaving behind the first strokes of ink...

“August fifteenth. 2010.”

Here, she hesitated, wondering whether it had been right to begin with today’s date.

“I arrived in Boundville.

It sucks.”

Stopping, she realized that she had no idea what to write about. In Sola’s opinion, it was either because of her limited vocabulary or the remarkable lack of events worth writing down. But obviously, Mrs. Sanchez’s suggestion is ridiculous – Sola could never find the right words.

Throwing all the supplies aside, she returned to her previous position, only to remember something else. Digging through the pocket of her sweater, she placed her two newfound treasures onto the mattress: the camera and the claw. The first object became the center of her attention, since it surely belonged to someone. But in the best-case scenario, Sola could sell her find for a good price. In that, she and her grandmother turned out to be kindred spirits

– in their search for financial gain.

“How am I supposed to fix you...”

She muttered under her breath, turning the brand-new model

over in her hands. And she knew nothing about such things, and there was no one she could ask to help her turn the camera on.

For now, however, all she wanted was to get rid of the headache that had started after a sleepless night on the road, accompanied by her brother's mockery. Whenever the young girl realized that she had to live through all of this until next summer, she felt even worse. And on top of that, an entire year was supposed to pass without any incidents. Easy enough in a place like this.

She was not even going to try to adapt, since she was only here for a limited time.

Sola was not worried about a lack of company—she was a stranger to attachments. And tomorrow, her first day at her new school, would finally determine her place here.

With a sigh, the girl got up to turn off the light before returning to the inviting pillow. She first walked over to the mirror to tuck away the unruly strands of her hair. Naturally curly, she persistently straightened it because straight hair required less care. Her olive skin had never been touched by makeup, only by a pair of tweezers that had shaped her thick eyebrows. Looking more closely into the mirror, Sola noticed the bags beneath her eyes, formed by prolonged lack of sleep. The eyes her mother had always called “expressive” looked dull and exhausted.

Stepping away from the mirror, the girl headed toward the light switch, noting that it would not hurt to open the window for some fresh air. A plaid curtain tightly covered the bedroom's only

window, which was also shut with shutters. Pulling them aside, Sola cracked the window open, finally letting more air inside. She was just about to return to bed when she froze in place.

The view from her room overlooked the forest, which grew denser at night beneath the dark haze. There was something mesmerizing about it, something that intoxicated the gaze. But the chill that ran down her spine was not caused by the astonishing beauty of the flora and fauna. It was caused by the figure hiding among the shadows of the trees. A pair of dots, resembling eyeballs, fixed themselves on the girl before disappearing into the darkness.

The mirror she had just been looking into suddenly fell to the floor, shattering into countless small pieces.