

Gathering the Indigo Maidens: A Novel

Cecilia Velastegui

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Surrounded by works of Spanish Colonial art, rare books, and manuscripts, Ecuador-born art collector and philanthropist Paloma Zubiondo has created a perfect world for herself in her Laguna Beach, California, home. But the reclusive fifty-four-year-old widow's peaceful and orderly life is suddenly disrupted by a phone call from a terrified girl who claims that she is being held as a sex slave. According to the girl, her freedom rests upon the return of a prized painting, which she declares to be a stolen artwork that belongs to her, a descendant of its painter, Isabel Santiago.

Paloma is chilled to the core. The girl's voice is exactly like that of the young nanny who had cared for Paloma when she was a child in Ecuador. Although she had left her native land at the age of five, memories of how her parents had forced her nanny to be married to a much older and abusive man surface, leaving Paloma confused and afraid. Having always been careful of the provenance of her paintings, Paloma suspects a con, but the girl on the phone is privy to information that no one should know. Paloma confides in her childhood friend, Jen, a psychologist and social activist who had been an art history student with her in Paris, and the two women use their skills to trace the painting's history, seeking clues to the girl's identity in an effort to discredit her story. In following the symbols used in indigenous Andean religious paintings of the Spanish Colonial period, they encounter the magnitude of Latin American art theft, the sordid reality of young Latina girls who are deceived, or sold, into sexual slavery, and the historical injustices perpetrated against women throughout the Americas.

The lives of the two women, and of all those who help them, are at risk. A murderous sociopath holds the key to the mystery, which will not be fully resolved until Paloma makes peace with her own past.

Author Cecilia Velástegui, who was born in Ecuador, raised in California and France, and holds a graduate degree from the University of Southern California, has crafted a compelling psychological thriller similar to those of Dan Brown in its use of religious and historical symbols. She has capably integrated some of the most pressing issues of our time into her story, and her voice—as she touches upon injustice toward women and the fate of trafficked girls and undocumented workers—is strong and compassionate.

Velástegui has handled first-person narrative quite well, giving her protagonist a penetrating and detail-oriented mind and shifting viewpoints when necessary to carry the plot. Her characters, especially Jen and Montserrat, are strong and believable. While most of the scene changes and time shifts are smooth, the disconcerting time lapse in the tenth chapter deprives readers of the satisfaction of being present when the villain is captured. Further editing and proofreading are recommended, as is the translation of any foreign words when their meaning is not immediately obvious.

Velástegui's emphasis on symbolism is beautifully carried out at the close of the tale, as Paloma (mind), Jen (heart), and Annette (body), solve the case, making for a satisfying conclusion to this woman-centered tale.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July 6, 2011)

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