

ALICIA GASPAR DE ALBA

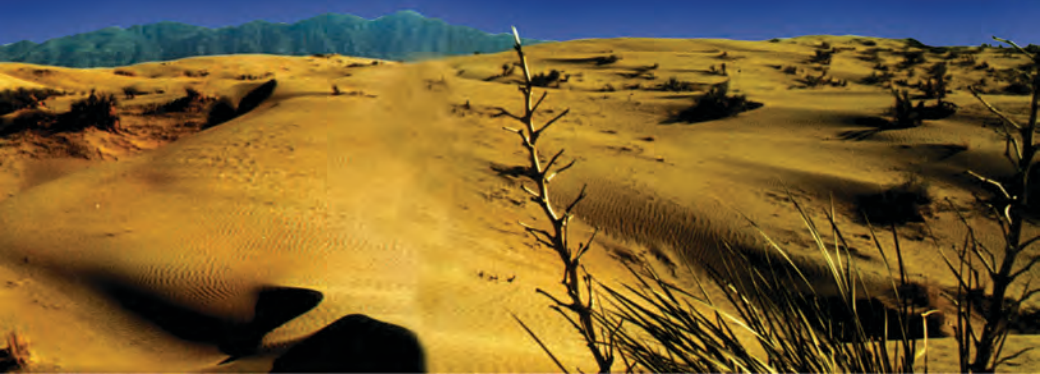
Winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Mystery

DESERT BLOOD

The Juárez Murders

"Gaspar de Alba brings a scholar's mind, a fine writer's sensitivity and the open heart of her heritage . . . a novel that takes your breath away, page after page, and grabs your heart."

—James Crumley, author of *The Last Good Kiss*



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Alicia Gaspar de Alba



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*A las “muchachas del sur”
—con respeto.*

**To the “girls from the south”
—with respect.**

Hay muertas que no hacen ruido, Llorona
Y es más grande su penar . . .
“La Llorona”

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the
Third World grates against the First and bleeds.

Gloria Anzaldúa,
Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987)

It is in pornography that the basic meanings of sex crime are
distilled—the female body fetishized, displayed, sacralized,
only so that she can be hated, possessed, profaned, sacrificed.

Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime* (1997)

Life, after all, is not a Hollywood mystery. There is no resolu-
tion, no evil madman to blame it all on. The perfect murder is,
it turns out, unusually easy to commit, especially when the vic-
tim is no one “important,” an anonymous figure—and Juárez
has plenty of those.

Sam Quiñones, “The Maquiladora Murders,”
Ms. (May/June 1998)

Disclaimer

The serial sex crimes, or femicides, which are the subject of this novel, are true. An epidemic of murdered women has plagued the Juárez-El Paso border since 1993. All of the main characters in this story, however, are fictional. Any similarities to living or dead people are purely coincidental. Some of the suspects and public figures that appear in this book are taken from periodical and television reports. Their names have been changed, but identity markers remain, such as a character's national origin or nickname. The victims are a composite of real-life victims. Some readers who are familiar with the "maquiladora murders" may recognize certain details about a given crime and find that they don't match "what really happened." Because this is a fictionalized account of true events, I have taken liberties with chronologies and facts. I have also added a metaphorical dimension to the story, using the image of American coins, particularly pennies, to signify the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy. Let me stress that, to my knowledge, none of the bodies of the actual victims was ever found to have had American pennies inside them.

Also, because there is, as yet, no solution to the murders, only theories and speculations, the line of investigation offered in this book is based on four years of research into the crimes and a lifetime of personal experience in the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure of the U.S.-Mexico border that makes it possible for such crimes to take place with impunity.

The press has described these crimes as “Jack-the-Ripper style serial killings.” The bodies of the victims were immolated, mutilated, dismembered, or beaten beyond recognition. At least ninety of those murdered women were also raped. Tragically, as of this writing, ten years after the epidemic started, and over 350 bodies later, the crimes remain unsolved. More tragic still, the killings continue. In 2003, for example, twenty-two more female bodies were found raped and murdered in Juárez, among them that of a six-year-old girl who’d been stabbed multiple times and had her eyes removed.

It is not my intention in this story to sensationalize the crimes or capitalize on the losses of so many families, but to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public, and to offer some conjecture, based on research, based on what I know about that place on the map, some plausible explanation for the silence that has surrounded the murders.

I am from El Paso, a native of that border, I join the ranks of those who believe silence=death. *Madres*, protect us. *C/S*

Los Angeles, California, 2003

THE ROPE TIGHTENED AROUND HER NECK, and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound on her breast pricked by sagebrush. She was numb below the waist, and her face ached from the beating. One of them had given her an injection, but she could still move her arms and wedge the tips of her fingers under the noose. They'd stuffed her bra into her mouth, and the hooks in it hurt her tongue. When the car stopped, her head slammed into something hard. The pain stunned her, and she was crying again, but suddenly, she felt nothing in her arms. The numbness spread quickly up her spine. Her jaw, her belly—everything felt dead.

They shut off the car lights and let her lie there in the dark, inhaling the fumes coming out of the tailpipes. Her tongue tasted of metal. All she could do was blink her eyes. The stars looked like the city lights, and for a moment she felt like she was hanging upside-down, all the blood rushing to her ears, making her face hot.

She remembered the ride at the fair. The Hammer, it was called, and the other girls had warned her not to get on, said she would throw up, but she didn't. She'd fainted, instead, and woke up in the back of this car with a man hitting her face and another one she recognized from the factory pushing a syringe into her stomach.

For a second her eyes were seared by a sharp light, and then she saw their faces, like large silver coins, so bright she didn't see what was glinting in their fists until they were on top of her.

The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water. She could not feel the blades slicing into her belly. She saw

blood splashing, heard the tearing sound, like the time she'd had a tooth pulled at the dentist's office, something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug. Felt a current of night air deep inside her, belly hanging open. She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones—that's all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones.

They were laughing, but she could hear someone singing, a woman's voice singing, *sana, sana, colita de rana, si no muere hoy, que se muera mañana*. Heal, little frog's tail, heal; if you don't die today, may you die tomorrow. It sounded like her own voice.

2

IVON CLOSED THE MAGAZINE and leaned back against the leather headrest, feeling queasy. Reading on airplanes didn't bother her usually, but that article on the murdered women of Juárez had unsettled her. "The Maquiladora Murders," it was called, by a male freelance writer, which she found surprising for a piece in *Ms.* She opened the magazine again and stared at the picture: a close-up of a woman's legs half-buried in the sand, skin the color of bruises, white sandals still on her feet. A dead woman's body. 106 dead brown women. She couldn't figure out what upset her most: the crimes themselves or the fact that, as a native of that very border, she didn't know a thing about them until just now.

"The temperature in El Paso is a cool 98° this evening . . ." the captain joked about the weather. "We're going to begin our descent soon . . . may experience a few bumps. . . ."

The plane lurched into a patch of rough air. Her stomach muscles tightened. The nausea had gripped her hard. Maybe it wasn't the article. Maybe it was returning to El Paso after two years away, and knowing that her mom was not going to approve of the crazy plan that Ivon had concocted with her cousin, Ximena. The inevitable confrontation with Ma. Or maybe it was just claustrophobia from sitting in the back row of a crowded airplane next to a chatty cowboy.

At LAX she had gotten the last window seat, and no one had sat beside her the first leg of the trip, but then a tall guy in a camel-colored cowboy hat boarded in Las Vegas, walked all the way to the back of the plane, and decided he wanted the middle seat next to her.

“Mind if I take that seat?” he smiled, showing a chipped front tooth. His Texas twang surprised her. In his striped polo shirt, he looked more like a rich kid from Beverly Hills or Palm Springs. More like a golfer than a cowboy, or maybe a surfer on steroids.

Ivon shrugged. “Whatever.” She lifted the magazine to her face and pretended to read. Plenty of other middle seats he could have chosen, but no, he had to take up some of her space. Right away she felt her chest close up, and she had to concentrate on taking deep breaths and letting go of her annoyance. The business-suited woman in the aisle seat stood up to let him through, curling her lip at him behind his back.

He settled in and buckled up, then placed his hat on his lap, coddling it as though it were made of glass. His arms and elbows claimed instant ownership of both armrests.

Ivon couldn't help noticing the bush of white-blond hair on his forearms or the watch he wore on his right wrist: a gold Patek Phillippe chronograph with three dials. Ivon collected watches. She knew the price of a piece like that. Ten grand, at least. The five-hundred-dollar titanium Tissot that Brigit had given her for their fifth anniversary seemed cheap in comparison.

“You live in El Paso?”

“Not anymore,” she mumbled, not looking up from the page she was reading.

“Going home to visit?”

She glared at him. Bloodshot eyes, blond stubble on his tanned face, blond hair shaggy around his face. He smelled of rank whiskey.

“I guess you could say that.”

She turned her attention back to the article, reading about a certain Egyptian chemist who'd been arrested in 1995 for allegedly killing at least one of the women himself and masterminding the murders of seven of the others through a gang of accomplices called Los Rebeldes. *Many of the young women had been raped, several were mutilated, and a large number had been dumped like worn-out machine parts in some isolated spot.*

Ivon jotted that sentence in her dissertation journal. The dead women of Juárez had nothing to do with the topic of her research,

but she was beginning to think this issue would have made a much better project for the dissertation.

“Don’t mean to be skimming over your shoulder,” he interrupted again, “but are you reading about all those girls getting killed across the border?”

“Trying to,” she said.

“Sure is a damn shame they still haven’t caught the killers after all these years.”

Yeah, and I’m ashamed I’m just now finding out about it, by reading this article, she wanted to say, but it would have been too embarrassing to admit that kind of ignorance to a complete stranger.

When the flight attendants came around with drinks, Ivon asked for a Diet Coke. He ordered a double Jack Daniels.

“Mind holding my hat so I can take out my money?” he said.

Ivon held the hat by the crown, not sure why he didn’t just put the thing on his head and stop fussing with it. The straw was glazed hard, and the hatband was a miniature leather belt tooled with turquoise studs and silver conchas. The initials JW were worked in gold in the tiny buckle. Inside the rim it said Lone Star Hat Company and gave off a heavy odor of sweat and cigarette smoke.

“Fifteen-star hat,” he said, handing a twenty-dollar bill to the attendant. “Cost me a pretty penny, and it itches like hell.”

“Mm-hm,” she stared at her magazine. When was this guy going to get the hint that she wasn’t interested in conversation?

“Care to join me?” He offered her one of the little bottles of whiskey.

“I don’t drink,” she lied, digging into her bag of peanuts.

He took the hat from her, put it on his head, finally, and poured both bottles of Jack into his plastic cup of ice.

“J.W.,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Hi,” she shook his fingertips. She didn’t usually shake hands like that, but she didn’t want to encourage the guy. She raised the magazine to her face again.

“Sorry,” he smiled, “I know you’re trying to read. I just get nervous on airplanes.”

“It would be nice if I could finish this article before we land,”

she said.

"I'll shut up," he said, and sat back, sipping his cocktail. Ten seconds later he was looking in her direction again.

"Ivon Villa," he read the address label off the cover of the magazine. "8930 Palms Ave., Los Angeles. Is that near the airport?"

"Excuse you," she said, scowling at him over the magazine.

"You don't look Mexican." His blue eyes looked bleary. "I didn't mean that as an insult. Sorry. It's just that you don't have an accent, or anything."

The plane dipped and bounced and the flight attendants rushed through the cabin picking up half-empty cups and other trash. He left her alone and chugged what was left of his drink before the flight attendant took his glass.

"Bet you fifty cents I can guess what you do for a living," he said.

She ignored him. He was just some racist white man on the make.

"You're a model, right? Or in the movie business."

What was it about straight guys who liked to pick up on butch women? She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You lose. Not enough roles for lesbians in the business."

That snapped his attention span. "That was a mistake," he said, his cheeks and neck coloring a bright pink. The whiskey had already glazed his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," she shrugged. "I'm going back to my reading, now."

"Can't you see the lady wants to be left alone?" the woman in the aisle seat told him.

"I sure as hell apologize, ma'am." He took his hat off and coddled it in his lap, again, staring straight ahead.

Ivon ran her finger over the text she was reading: *Life, after all, is not a Hollywood mystery. There is no resolution, no evil madman to blame it all on. The perfect murder is, it turns out, unusually easy to commit . . .*

"Flight attendants, please secure the cabin for arrival."

He fished for something in a front pocket. It slipped out of his hand, landing between his jeans and her chinos. She retrieved it and gave it back to him. A roll of pennies.

“Almost forgot your winnings,” he said, and a little whistle of air escaped through the gap in his tooth. “Fifty cents.”

“It’s okay. You keep it.”

“It’s yours,” he insisted. “We had a bet.”

“Really, I don’t want it. I wasn’t taking your bet seriously.” Ivon stowed her journal and the magazine, zipped up her backpack, and buckled up again.

The plane plowed through the usual gauntlet of air pockets on the landing. Settling back with a clenched belly, she raised the plastic screen on the window and looked out at her hometown, the lights of the valley glowing under the huge pearl of a full moon.

Unless it’s twilight, the only thing you see when you fly into El Paso is the desert—the brown, pachydermal, sagebrush-stubbed skin of the desert. But at twilight what you notice right away is the sky, the green veil of sky that stretches between Mount Franklin and the Guadalupe Mountains. From the plane you can’t see the boundary line, the cement riverbed that separates El Paso from Juárez. The borderland is just one big valley of lights.

You can’t see the chain-link fencing of the Tortilla Curtain, or the entrepreneurs in rubber inner tubes transporting workers back and forth across the Rio Grande, or the long lines of headlights snaking over the Córdoba Bridge—one of the three international bridges that keep the twin cities umbilically connected. For the locals on each side of the river, the border is nothing more than a way to get home. For those nameless women in the sand, those tortured bodies she’d just been reading about in the *Ms.* article, the border had become a deathbed. For Ivon Villa, it was the place where she was born. The plane landed with a jolt.

She had to wait for J.W. to fix his hat just right over the bald spot at the crown of his head before she could get out of the seat. He stepped aside to let her go first.

“Catch ya later, alligator,” he said, winking at her and tapping the brim of his hat.

Ivon nodded but didn’t speak to him. She was feeling nauseous again, like she had a swarm of butterflies hatching in her belly. For a few seconds, the thought of backing out of this crazy plan occupied some real estate in her brain.

3

“IVON! IVON! OVER HERE!”

It was her little sister, Irene, showing off her swimmer’s body in a midriff and cutoff shorts, bright yellow earphones wrapped around her neck like a choker. She was standing next to her cousin, Ximena—both of them waiting for her at the gate. Irene was holding a helium balloon that said “Congratulations on the New Arrival.”

“Hi, Lucha!” Ivon gave her sister a tight hug. Ivon called her “Lucha,” for the popular Mexican *ranchera* singer, Lucha Villa; Irene called Ivon “Pancho,” for their revolutionary ancestor. Their mother hated those nicknames, especially Ivon’s.

“I can’t believe you spilled the *frijoles*,” Ivon said to Ximena. “I thought I told you it was a secret. Sure you didn’t put it in the family newsletter?”

“Hey, don’t give me any ideas,” Ximena said. “Besides, I didn’t tell *them*, I just told her. What’s the fun of secrets if you can’t share with at least one family member?”

Ivon narrowed her eyes at her cousin. Ximena gave her a bear hug. She was the oldest of Ivon’s cousins, over the hill and then some, she liked to say. She stood nearly six feet tall and at least two hundred pounds thick. She tousled Ivon’s hair. “Little Ivon is gonna be a momma,” she said, crowing out a big laugh. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

Irene kissed Ivon on the cheek and offered her the balloon. Ivon didn’t take it. All she needed was to run into people she knew and have them think she’d had a baby.

“Can you hold it for me while I get my bag and stuff?”

Irene shrugged and pouted all the way to the baggage claim. “Where’s Brigit?”

“She’ll come out later, once we get this thing squared away.”

“Yay! I get to be an aunt, finally,” Irene said, linking her arm in Ivon’s. Her brown-black eyes sparkled. Ivon was taken aback by how beautiful her sister had grown in the last two years.

“But this isn’t gonna change anything, is it? I’m still coming to live with you guys, right, if I get in to Saint Ignatius?”

“Maybe,” said Ivon, pinching her sister’s cheek, “people shouldn’t count their ducklings before they hatch. How’s Ma?”

“I didn’t tell her you were coming, if that’s what you want to know.”

“You better not, or you’ll be sorry, *ésa*,” Ivon poked her sister in the belly, grabbing a thin fold of skin between her fingers.

“Ouch! Don’t pinch my *lonjas*,” Irene cried out, laughing. She held out her right hand so that Ivon could see her graduation ring. “Like it? I got my zodiac stone on it, see? Ma wanted me to get the school color, but I wanted turquoise.” Irene tilted her head as she admired her ring. “Looks nice with the gold, don’t you think? I’ve been working for Ximena since March so I could help Ma pay for it.”

“Working for Ximena? Doing what? Paying her bills on time?”

“That’s right,” said Ximena. “She’s my personal assistant. Keeps me on track.”

“Uh-huh,” said Ivon, grabbing her sister’s hand, “let me see that ring again.” Irene’s hands had lost their adolescent pudginess, and her long fingernails were painted a dark red with little gold stars appliquéd to the tips.

“I hope you’re still graduating in December,” Ivon said. “No boyfriends distracting you, I hope.”

“¡Ay, sí!” said Irene. “You know I’m gonna be valedictorian, and I made captain of the swim team, too. Someone had to change the reputation of the Villa name at Loretto Academy.”

Ivon had been kicked out of Loretto in the eighth grade. She’d been caught one day at lunchtime smoking pot in the bell tower of the convent.

When they stepped outside the airport, the blast of heat near-

ly choked her. Just like walking into a sauna. The rubber soles on her Doc Martens felt gummy on the scorched pavement. The sky had changed to indigo in the time it had taken them to come downstairs and collect her suitcase.

“Here we are,” said Ximena, as they approached a white Chrysler van she had parked in what Ivon called a “chaired position.” A handicap permit hung off her rearview mirror.

“How’d you manage that?” asked Ivon, pointing at the permit.

“Just lucky, I guess. Sorry about all the junk,” she said, stacking newspapers and file folders to make room for Ivon’s luggage. “This is my home away from home.”

Ivon lifted her bags into the back, on top of a row of battered banker’s boxes, then piled into the front passenger’s seat and strapped on her seat belt. Even Ximena’s perpetual patchouli scent couldn’t mask the smell of cigarette smoke and old bananas that emanated out of the hot upholstery. From the crumpled-up paper bags all over the floor, Ivon could tell Ximena spent a lot of time in that van.

“Let me guess,” said Ximena, cigarette already dangling from her lips as she headed for the parking lot exit. “You need a place to stay, right? Your mom’s place isn’t an option?”

“That’s a good guess,” said Ivon.

“How come?” whined Irene. “I wanted you to stay with us.”

“Maybe later in the week, Lucha. I need to get my bearings. This is all kind of crazy, and I just cannot deal with Ma right now.”

Ximena reached for the lighter and lit her smoke. “Hey, you want one?”

Ivon shook her head. “Brigit made me quit.”

“Good for her,” said Ximena, sidling up to the airport cashier to pay for parking. “Here’s the thing. Grandma Maggie’s house is available until a week from Friday. As you may or may not know, since you never respond to my e-mails, we’re having our big family reunion next weekend to coincide with Father’s Day.”

Ivon cut her eyes at Ximena.

“Don’t worry,” Ximena continued, “I’m not going to point a gun to your head and make you go, even if you haven’t been to a reunion since Grandma Maggie’s funeral, but . . . if you’re around,

and stuff, and you might be . . . who knows how long all these arrangements will take . . . it's Father's Day, you know? I mean, think about it. Some of our old geezers, hell, your own grandpa, might not be around much longer."

"Don't guilt-trip me, okay? I don't need both you and Ma doing that," said Ivon.

"There she goes," Ximena said, looking into the rearview mirror at Irene. "What did I tell you? Two minutes, max, and Ms. Thing here is gonna be sitting on the Pity Pot. Get off it, *prima*. Your poor mom's doing the best she can."

Ivon winced at Ximena's rebuke.

"So, like I was saying, Grandma Maggie's house is free right now. All I use it for is my office and to hang out sometimes, so you'd have the place to yourself for a few days. We can figure out what to do after that, if it ends up taking longer than a week or two, I mean."

"A week or two?"

"Who knows? I mean, this girl could give birth tomorrow, but we'd still have to arrange a court date for the adoption, and even my friend, the judge, can't tell me how long that might take. You're here for a while, girlfriend. That's why I'm saying, might as well hang out for the reunion. The XYZ Club could, you know, get high and watch *Xena*. I've got killer weed."

"Drama!" said Irene. "What's the XYZ Club?"

Ivon reached over and smacked her cousin's leg. "Shut up! You're worse than a soap opera." She changed the subject. "So what's this girl's name? Is she okay?"

"Cecilia. She's had some . . ." she stopped suddenly and pounded the horn. "Hey, move over, fuck-face," she yelled out at the low-riding Impala in front of her. "Fucking *cholo*, get a motor or get off the street! Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah, Cecilia's had some complications, but everything's okay. I took her to the clinic and she checked out fine."

"What kind of complications?"

"The girl's been wearing a girdle, you know, so they can't tell she's pregnant or else she'll get fired. She stands up all day at the factory, and it's made the baby ride too low, or something like that.

But like I said, the baby's fine, Cecilia's fine, it's all good."

"She'll get fired if she's pregnant?"

Ximena turned to look at Ivon. "Well, yeah, the factory would have to pay maternity leave. That would cut into its profits. Take your birth control if you want to keep your job."

"Are you shitting me?" Ivon took mental note of this detail for her dissertation.

"Company logic is there's plenty of girls lining up for your job," said Ximena. "More supply than demand, you know. They don't need to hang on to anybody who's pregnant and can't fulfill her quota."

"That is so fucked up."

"So how 'bout it, Sir Ivanhoe? Grandma Maggie's Deluxe Resort?"

Ivon hadn't heard that nickname since they were children. "That's cool. That's perfect, actually. And when do I get to meet Cecilia?"

"Tonight," said Ximena. "We're going to pick her up outside her factory after her shift." Ximena checked her left wrist. She never wore a watch, but was always checking the time anyway. "Let's see. She's got the second shift, so she punches out at midnight."

"Midnight?" said Irene. "Dude, that's late. Can't y'all wait till the morning?"

"Up to you," Ximena said to Ivon, "but she is expecting us to pick her up, so she'll probably miss her bus. Poor thing lives out by Puerto Anapra. I guess I could go over there by myself and drive her home."

"What are you talking about? I'm dying to meet her."

"Can I come?" said Irene.

"No," Ivon and Ximena said in unison.

"You guuuys."

"Not tonight, sweetie," Ximena said, looking into the rear-view mirror. "Let's let your sister meet the biological mother of her baby by herself, okay?"

Mother of her baby . . . the words made Ivon feel suddenly suffocated by the heat and the smoke inside the van. Even the open

window didn't help. She picked up a file folder from the dashboard and started to fan herself.

"You guys decide on a name yet?" Irene asked.

"Either Dierdre or Samuel Santiago."

"Dierdre?" Irene and Ximena echoed.

"Don't ask me. That's Brigit's New Age stuff." Ivon reached over to turn on the radio, not surprised to find it already tuned to an oldies station playing "Suavecito." All El Paso stations played oldies.

"I never met a girl like you in my life . . ."

It never failed. Whenever she was in El Paso, something always reminded her of Raquel, the woman who'd snapped Ivon's heart in four pieces, one piece for each year they'd been together. She tried to think of something else, but the song brought her back, like an MTV video digitally connected to Raquel—her black eyes and full red lips, the *suavecito* movement of her hips on the checkered dance floor of the Memories bar.

"Hey, Ivon," Irene interrupted. "While you're here, maybe we could go to the fair in Juárez. Ma won't let me go with any of my friends, and I've never been. It just opened last weekend. Will you take me?"

One thing about Irene: she sure was an obedient child.

"We should all go," said Ximena, "as part of the extracurricular activities for the reunion, I mean. Good idea. Hold on." She swerved into the parking lot of Pepe's Tamales in Chelmont and brought the van to a sudden stop. "Be right back. Can't have tequila without tamales."

"Tequila?" said Ivon. "I thought we were going over to Juárez."

Ximena checked her wrist again. "We've got a couple of hours. I'm starving. You still a vegetarian? Oh, sorry, that's someone else. Be right back."

"Aren't you scared?" Irene asked when they were alone. "About the baby, I mean?"

"I don't know." It embarrassed Ivon to admit her yearning was stronger than her fear. "It'll be nice to have someone to clean out the litter box and unload the dishwasher when Brigit and I get too old to bend over."

Irene laughed. “Goofball,” she said. Then, as an afterthought, “Ma’s gonna flip, you know? I mean, dude, she’s really gonna flip.”

“Tell me about it.” Ivon was realizing she hadn’t eaten all day, and her stomach was starting to growl in anticipation of the tamales.

“What’re you gonna tell her? You *are* planning on telling her, right?”

“I was thinking of bringing the baby over, you know, all wrapped up with a little cap on his head, and saying, ‘Guess what, Ma, meet your first grandkid. Brigit and I adopted him from some *maquiladora* worker in Juárez.’ Can you just see the size of cow Ma’s gonna have when she hears that?”

“I’m serious,” said Irene. “Ma’s had so many cows with you, I feel like I live on a farm. Ximena told me about the time you hitchhiked all the way from here to that women’s music festival in Michigan right after I was born.”

Ivon yawned. “No biggie. Everyone used to hitchhike back then.”

“Ma says you were jealous I came along. Says you were running away.”

“That’s bullshit. Anyway, I think it was the tattoo that really messed her up.”

Ivon had gotten a labrys tattooed on the back of her neck her first year of grad school at Iowa. It had supposedly depressed her father so much, he had taken up drinking again after fifteen years of being sober. It had also, somehow, caused his death. That’s what Ma said.

“You wanna see something really cool?” asked Irene. “Check me out.”

Ivon turned around to look at her sister. She didn’t see anything at first, but in the yellow light of the Pepe’s Tamales sign she saw that Irene was sticking out her tongue and there was something shiny in it.

“Don’t tell me you got pierced?”

Irene put her tongue back in her mouth. “Cool, huh?”

“Oh, God,” Ivon said, snapping a hand over her eyes. Her students in L.A. didn’t pierce their tongues just to look cool. There

was a sexual reason behind it, a same-sex sexual reason that Ivon did not want to know about right now.

“Well, what do you think?”

“What does Ma think?”

“She hasn’t seen it, yet. Just had it done a couple of weeks ago.”

“Eagle-eyes Ma hasn’t seen it?”

“I think I’ll show it to her while you’re here.”

“Oh, great. That’ll be another thing she’ll blame on me, you watch.”

“I know,” said Irene, giggling. “So, what’s the XYZ Club?”

“Oh, just a stupid little club we formed when we were kids that only those of us whose names began with an X, a Y, or a Z could join.”

“But your name begins with an I, like mine.”

“That’s before I changed it, officially, from Y-V-O-N-N-E to I-V-O-N.”

“Bet Ma loved that.”

The driver’s side door opened, and Ximena thrust two bags of tamales into Ivon’s lap. For a second, the aroma of moist cornmeal drowned out the stench of bananas. Ivon’s mouth started to water.

“Okay, we’re all set,” said Ximena. “Half a dozen red, half a dozen green chile and cheese. I hope y’all didn’t want any.”

She backed out of the parking lot and peeled rubber.

“Shall we drop off the kid now or give her some dinner, first?” Ximena asked.

“You guys are so mean.”

“She’s a growing kid, probably needs to eat first. You can go and drop her off by yourself, later, while I unpack. I’m not going anywhere near Ma’s house. She can sense me within a two-town radius.”

“Loud and clear,” said Ximena. “Okay, so here’s the deal. My friend—he’s a priest—is going to go with us tomorrow, so he can be there when you meet Cecilia’s folks. She lives with an aunt and the grandmother. It’s always a good idea to have a priest present, makes folks feel less awkward, less like they’re committing a sin. You got the goods?”

“I got the goods.”

“Cash?”

“I know who I’m dealing with, okay? D’you think I’d offer them a check?”

“Just checking. Anyway, you’re gonna have to give some of that to this priest.”

“Oh, he gets a cut, too?”

“I thought you said you knew who you were dealing with? Of course, he gets a cut. Doesn’t the church always get a cut?”

“How much?”

“Two, three hundred, at most. And don’t forget the *mordida*. Just in case someone tips off the police and you get stopped on the way out of the clinic, you got to have some bribe fare, no more than fifty or sixty bucks, probably.”

“Shit, Ximena. You should’ve told me this before. All I brought is exactly 3K for the girl. Now I’m going to have to go to the bank tomorrow.”

“Look, that’s the way things work over there. I don’t make the *pinche* rules.”

“Right. Sorry.”

They passed the veil-shaped chapel at Loretto Academy, where she had gone to grade school. Ivon had kissed a dead body in that chapel. The old nun who used to be her fourth-grade homeroom teacher, Sister Ann Patrick, keeled over one day in the cafeteria, and everyone at the school was forced to attend her funeral. The kids in her homeroom were supposed to go up to her casket and give her a kiss on the forehead.

“Oh, and another thing,” Ximena was still talking. “Get another fifty for the nurse who’s gonna fill out the birth certificate. The priest knows someone at the maternity ward at Fort Bliss.”

“Dude, this sounds like so sleazy,” Irene said.

“Welcome to the real world of the border, baby girl,” said Ximena, driving toward the huge lighted star on Mount Franklin, an El Paso trademark signifying hope.