

ALVAREZ

BY Gae Rusk

Prologue

Chihuahua, Mexico, 1853

Esteban Alvarez stands in the open patio of his family's hacienda, a ramble of adobe burnished by late light. Looking west, Esteban does not see the setting sun. He does not notice the Alamo Huecos surge from navy to purple when gold explodes across the sky. Bathed in this glory, Esteban instead is focused on the landscape of Mexico City far to the south, where a dire and fate filled bargain is being made - without his presence and without his permission.

He swings from disbelief to outrage that something so heinous could occur. Esteban's anxiety sticks in his throat like a lump of uranium. He can swallow nothing, not even a drop of sweet well water, but, surely, by tomorrow his oldest son will arrive from Hidalgo de Parral carrying real news instead of endless speculation. Or, his sister Constanza in El Paso will send carrier pigeons with the freshest news penned on strips of

paper wrapped tight around their legs – surely, one of those birds will survive the hazardous flight to the cote behind the milk barn.

Either way, Esteban will have to continue waiting to find out the extent of Santa Anna's worst crime yet, this time against the citizens of North Chihuahua. Knowing better than to expect reason or logic from Santa Anna, knowing Santa Anna too well to believe sanity will prevail because it never has before, Esteban allows himself only one thin slice of hope while waiting for news he knows will destroy him.

What makes this crime this time so much worse is the greedy bastard found a powerful friend in James Gadsden, official American liar and thief, who spoke so eloquently to the hacendados of North Chihuahua about the possibility of a railroad coming through, a railroad for them! A railroad for everyone, Gadsden claimed, but in reality a railroad only for the flood of Americans suddenly arriving in Chihuahua and claiming it as theirs.

Esteban clenches in contempt at the thought of James Gadsden and Santa Anna conniving together. Selling north Chihuahua for some paltry sum? And then stealing his and his neighbors' citizenship, their very nationality as patriotic Mexicans? Esteban trembles from a corona of rage flaring from his heart. Treason! Traitors! How dare that testicle of a Presidente sell off even one square foot of Mexico.

Too agitated to stand still, Esteban crosses a vine-wrapped, fountain-filled patio paved with tiles carried north up the Camino Real five generations ago. Halted in his rush by massive doors, Esteban fumbles with an iron latch, shoves both doors so hard they bang wide open against adobe walls. Ignoring the damage likely caused by this, Esteban breathes deeply, trying without success to calm himself. He turns his back to the

open doors, eyes casting about desperately for somewhere to land, somewhere to settle. At the sight of a carved and curved garden table tucked into one corner of the patio, he is distracted by thoughts of his wife of forty years who worked at that table every day of their marriage. Esteban whirls back to the open doors and crosses himself against a flashflood of grief that cuts right across his rage.

Esteban cannot allow that devastating emotion. It would dilute his fury at Santa Anna and James Gadsden and all of Mexico's corruption. It would sabotage his hatred of these Northerners with their careless manners and ignorant disregard for the Alvarez family's history of three centuries in Mexico.

And now? Santa Anna wants to trade him, Esteban Diego Alfonso Alvarez de Onate, like a chess piece, just so James Gadsden can build his cursed railroad, which is senseless! Without logic or reason! Santa Anna's willful disposal of this vast and remarkable stretch of Mexico causes Esteban to feel he is roasting alive.

A roar of frustration and grief blasts from Esteban Alvarez, who has never before in his life made such a sound. The force of his enormous cry almost turns him inside out. He falls limply to the earth while this profound sound rolls outward through his compound, spooking the horses in the corrals and setting off the dogs.

Taking on a life separate from Esteban Alvarez, this echoing, thundering mass gathers speed and volume and whips through a herd of cattle, causing panic and several days of roundup, before it falls finally to earth, scattering across the desert, fragments of nineteenth century debris settling on Alvarez ground, mineralizing into the soil and calcifying in the water table when summer monsoon arrives.

Rain percolating through this sediment fortifies the bones and teeth, convictions,

ambitions and beliefs of succeeding Alvarez generations, who continue thriving and failing on this irradiated landscape, which eventually becomes Hidalgo County, the bootheel of the great State of New Mexico, still sitting a mile high and far, far away.

Alvarez

Hidalgo County, New Mexico, 1959

Eliza Maria Constanza Ash de Alvarez shoves the screen door so hard it flies open and slams into the adobe wall. Leaping off the top step, she hits the ground running.

“Eliza Maria!”

Well on her way across their half-acre backyard, Eliza reluctantly slows.

“Eliza Maria Constanza!”

Cheeks puffed, eyes crossed, she turns, trailing back up the steps, rescuing the screen door. It sags from its top hinge.

“You will soon kill the door.”

“Yes, Tia,” sighs Eliza.

“And what do you bring me, Eliza?”

As if she can't remember. If she forgets sometimes, it doesn't mean she always forgets.

“Bread, Tia.”

“Return yourself in two hours, Elizita.”

“I promise.”

Eliza vows this as she shoots out the door for the second time, the screen once again striking adobe and knocking off another piece of the house. Midair, Eliza hears Elena yelling all her names at once, and she lands hard on her heels. Jeez! How is she going to get away if she keeps having to close the dang door?

“Forgive me, Tia.”

“What do I do with you?”

“I won't do it again, I promise! I just forgot.”

Eliza gently closes the screen door. She backs down the steps, stating, “Bread. I won't forget the bread. I promise!”

Before turning back to her chores, Elena watches her employer's daughter skid through the gap in the fence, turn right and head east down the alley, disappearing behind the garage. Vigilant, Elena always waits until Eliza reappears.

Half way down the alley, Eliza slows a few steps to catch her breath, then dares herself to hop on one foot the length of the vacant lot, which is scudding with tumbleweeds and seething with anthills. She hops the distance easily in her oldest boots with rundown heels, her favorites. Bending to grab a stick, she rattles it along the slats of Mr. Cawley's fence, but partway down the fence line a sharp, loud voice at knee-level startles her still.

“Eliza Ash! Stop that!”

“Jeez-Louise!” Eliza grips a splinter into the palm of her hand. She flings the stick to the ground behind her.

“How many times need I tell you, girl!”

“Sorry, Mr. Cawley. Really! I forgot.”

Mr. Cawley kneels in his garden, nursing along onions shoots and pinto beans. He shoves back an old hunting hat to get a better look at Eliza. He sighs. It is hopeless with this kid, just like her grandpa. Mr. Cawley remembers old Mr. Alvarez with mixed feelings, heard all his life about the Alvarez family’s wild streak, although this girl’s mother Maria Alvarez was sweet as pecan pie.

“Well, don’t forget again, girl.”

“I promise!”

Eliza walks carefully along the white pickets that Mr. Cawley planted as a barrier against sand and tumble weeds, straying dogs and neighbors’ children. At a slow trot, Eliza passes the Lopez’s front yard, where a toddler staggers around crooning to a baby doll. Eliza grins: messy but cute. Feeling buoyant, she snaps her fingers against the rhythm of her steps and picks up speed.

When a dog growls deep and hostile right behind her, Eliza jumps a foot. She whirls and glares down at Mutt, Mrs. Estrada’s old bulldog, who is trying to force his way through the fence. Jeeez! Why Mrs. Estrada keeps such an ugly, obese hound – Eliza jumps back three feet when Mutt lunges straight at the flimsy weave of wire, and she scoops up the closest rock just in case Mutt bursts through to the alley.

A curtain twitches in Mrs. Estrada’s window. Eliza glimpses an angry, pinched mouth outlined by starched lace and knows Mrs. Estrada would love to catch her throwing a rock at Mutt. Then the old sourpuss could raise all hell with Hudson, oh yes, Mrs. Estrada would just love to have a reason to yell at long-time Alvarez Mayor Hudson

Ash, old grievances gnawing at her and fueling her hatred of almost everyone in town and Hudson in particular, for some reason he will never discuss.

Eliza tosses the stone up, catches it, tosses it, catches it. She ambles a few steps with Mutt following, contorted, drooling along his side of the fence. When she reaches the corner of Mrs. Estrada's backyard, Eliza glances back over her shoulder to see if that curtain is still cornered up. It is. So be it. Eliza turns on Mutt, spreads her arms and arches toward him, baring teeth as she growls deep in her throat.

Mutt's eyes dilate. Mutt foams. He throws himself into the wire, bending it outward, his barking frenzy-frantic. Eliza turns and runs full speed down the alley, while Mrs. Estrada wrenches open her back door and huffs out onto her porch, screaming, “Mutt! Mutt!”

The dog grows hoarse with canine calamity and pees on himself. Mrs. Estrada stomps up the fence line after Eliza.

“Eliza Ash! You get your ass back here! You hear me!”

Mrs. Estrada's voice pursues Eliza like a sonic force, but she is at the end of the alley by this time. When Eliza negotiates the corner on one boot heel and heads south toward downtown and the Border, Mrs. Estrada climbs over Mutt to get a last glimpse of the girl.

“I'll get you for this, Eliza Ash! I will! I swear it on your goddamn dead mother's grave!” shrieks Mrs. Estrada.

Eliza is gone, but Mr. Cawley stands up in his garden two yards away, protesting, “Hey now, Rachel. There's no need to talk like that.”

“You stick it, Herman!”

“Pipe down your mouth, it's worse than that damn dog's!”

Mutt's howling turns to gasping, then whimpering, when he realizes he is completely tangled into the fence. He whines pathetically, but Mrs. Estrada is slow to notice.

Eliza, now a block away, feels a touch of regret for tormenting Mutt and Mrs. Estrada. She slows and looks down at the sidewalk: regret she might catch hell for it tonight. She can hear Dadda now: He can't abide Mutt, and he doesn't like Mrs. Estrada much better, but he doesn't go instigating trouble. Yep, she can hear him loud and clear. Oh well, too late, but maybe she can come up with something else to distract Dadda, the day is just half done.

Eliza is crossing Second Street when she hears organ music piping out from the church on the corner. Lifting her chin toward the music, she identifies the halting play of George O'Reilly, and she heads to the double doors. It is their church, the one she and Dadda go to at Christmas and Easter and occasionally in between. Almost everyone else in town is Catholic or Mormon, and Hudson used to be Mormon but no more, which is a story Eliza has yet to hear. She believes they've always attended this particular church partly because it sits so close to home and partly because no one is ever smug or all-knowing about stupid things, which has always suited Hudson just fine, and her too.

George O'Reilly, US Customs Patrol Officer, sits bent over the keys. Light filters down from stained glass, rainbowing the top of his shiny head, while he picks out the notes of a new hymn, which he does every Saturday morning to prepare for Sunday service. Watching him struggle with some unrecognizable dirge, Eliza thinks he's looking different lately. He's acting peculiar too, and his wife wears a pinched look

everywhere she goes. Eliza recalls observing this out loud the last time she saw the O'Reilly family in Dadda's café, and Dadda told her to hush up. Eliza snorts at that memory: yet another example of grownups' need to keep the truth secret from their selves.

Eliza creeps closer, not noticing a vacuum cleaner cord stretched across the aisle like a trip wire. Eliza's boot hooks on this cord and pulls the standup Hoover to the floor with an echoing crash. George rises, his hand moving to where his holster would have been had he been on duty, but he grips air. Eliza looks up guiltily at his pale face looming above the organ.

"Eliza Ash!" His voice is shrill. She uprights the vacuum. George continues, "How many times do I got to tell you not to sneak up on me."

She wonders why George's face is so moist. The church is chilly inside, but George O'Reilly's expression is, well, wet. Eliza drops her eyes uneasily, thinking George O'Reilly looks like he's been crying from his hairline.

Eliza Ash used to like George. In fact, on her tenth birthday he gave her a silver dollar and didn't pat her head like everyone else, but three years later Eliza cannot like US Customs Patrol Officer O'Reilly, and she feels pity for his poor wife who has to actually touch him. Eliza backs up quickly as George steps around the organ, exclaiming, "On my way to town! Gotta go, bye!" and Eliza bolts out of the church and into the burning clean dryness of a November day.

Catty-cornering Hidalgo Street, Eliza angles toward the high school. She slows to more of a stroll, shoving her hands into her back pockets, whistling as she passes south between school buildings. To her left, classrooms form a u-shape, high school on one

side, junior high on the other. To her right sits the town Library, which shares a building with the town's elementary school. Catholic priests set up their own private school two centuries ago for children of the devout, and lots of her Alvarez ancestors right here in the Bootheel went to that school, or they went south to be with family down in Parral and earn a Mexican diploma, which is what Maria did, but because Hudson is mayor of Alvarez, Eliza is going through twelve years of Alvarez's public schools, which suits her just fine. She likes operating on the bigger playground, without prayer time to slow things down.

She is relieved that she'll be entering high school next year, because everything should get more interesting, and Eliza does like interesting. She likes seeking the heart and heat of interesting, which sometimes gets her in trouble. Dadda has pointed this out a lot, but Eliza decided long ago she likely won't change. Her ways work so well and so often, it'd be a shame to change them.

Spotting the varsity cheerleaders practicing routines on a meager patch of grass between buildings, Eliza slows down. The five Junior and Senior girls move in precision, copying their captain, Laura Montoya, head cheerleader and most popular girl in school since her first day of first grade. Laura wears Bobby Blankenboat's class ring on a chain around her neck; the ring and a tiny silver megaphone dangle from a heavy silver chain snaking down Laura's cleavage.

Laura spies Eliza and waves, and Eliza quickly raises her hand, eager to respond, but Laura has already turned away. Eliza stoops to pry a rock from her bootheel, listening to the other cheerleaders complain, the whole squad vehement that they've practiced enough, yet Laura coaxes them into repeating the same routine, twice. In

admiration, Eliza vows she will someday have her own engraved megaphone hanging from her own silver chain snaking down her own cleavage.

She frowns, considers the idea of wearing some boy's ring, then discards the idea as unnecessary and possibly stupid. Brow clearing, she decides he can be the one wearing her ring.

“Eliza! Eliza, come here!”

Turning, looking for the source of the voice, she spots Bitsy Waco hanging upside down from the merry-go-round, while Tammy Rodriguez flings it around. Bitsy calls again, but Eliza raises a hand and points to town, shaking her head, shrugging her shoulders. Bitsy shouts louder that it's really important, so Eliza reluctantly crosses the expanse of playground, not wanting to spend even one minute with these two classmates.

“What?”

“We gotta tell you this! We gotta, we gotta, we gotta!”

Righting herself, Bitsy gives the babbling Tammy a disgusted look. Tammy shuts up. Bitsy turns back to Eliza and beams at her, which makes Eliza immediately suspicious. She's seen that look of cheerful malevolence too many times over the years to think Bitsy is being friendly.

“It's about Katy Blumm”.

Ah, Katy Blumm, of course. Always some problem with her, thinks Eliza, so what's it about this time? This year Katy is mad about something Eliza did or said, Eliza doesn't know just what, but she thinks it began that first day of school three months ago when she wore her new champion rodeo buckle, which was huge, and new boots she'd bought in El Paso with the prize money. Arriving for first day of eighth grade in her own

new outfit – a dress, for Pete’s sake! - Katy took one look at Eliza and that was the beginning of her worst mood yet.

Eliza frowns, “Yeah? What about Katy Blumm?”

The two girls met as soon as they could walk. Now Eliza never sees Katy outside of school, never, and even at school they don’t talk unless they have to. It seems so mysterious to Eliza, who likes her problems to be about real things that get settled and done with.

“Hey, if you’re done here, I’m leaving,” repeats Eliza, impatient with these two since the first grade.

Tammy nudges Bitsy, who announces, “Katy Blumm says you bled on her sheets when you stayed all night there last Saturday.”

Tammy squeals, “She said you did it! She said you did it!”

“Shut up, Tammy,” Bitsy orders this over her shoulder, not taking her attention off Eliza, who blanches, then suffuses a deep scarlet that bleaches slowly back to pale. Eliza’s eyes are glittery slits, her voice thin, asking, “She said what?”

Tammy squeaks, “We saw the sheet, it's still on her bed. She said her mom was so mad, she made Katy sleep on it, and Katy says she's going to show it to everyone.”

Eliza strangles out, “She’s a goddamn liar!”

Eliza turns and stalks away. She never looks back at Bitsy and Tammy, now arguing about whether or not to warn Katy Blumm.

Eliza can barely see, because she has been decapitated by betrayal. She is crippled by rage, yet finds herself ambulatory. If fury is rhythmic, her heart is the crazed pounding of a wounded warrior. If hate has an odor, she is her own spewing cloud. If

she gives voice to this livid surge instead of choking on it, Eliza knows she will roar like those secret tests up past White Sands, enormous noises billowing across high blank desert, heard and felt for hundreds of miles.

Eliza is so consumed by Katy Blumm's heinous lie that she strides right by Joey Olson without acknowledging him, then past Tony Saucedo, Eddy Ware and Bilbo Gutierrez. Together, these four make up the core of ninth grade boys over whom the eighth grade girls swoon and giggle. Eliza does neither, although she has had her eye on Joey Olson for a long time, and Eliza's steely eyes usually zero in on what she mostly gets, but, right now, the boys are invisible to Eliza Maria Constanza Ash de Alvarez, who is seeing the world like an x-ray.

Joey is surprised when Eliza Ash zooms right by without even a hello. His pleased "Howdy!" drops through dust in her wake. Joey Olson studies Eliza's Levis as she turns left onto Main Street and heads east. He tongues his gum from his left to his right cheek before turning and joining the other boys, who are closing in on the cheerleaders.

Luckily, Eliza knows this town as well as her Dadda's face - straight ahead begins Alvarez's downtown; to her right runs the Border between Alvarez, New Mexico, and Alvarez, Chihuahua – because the thirteen year old New Mexican is blinded by rage. She knows when she is passing the cafe on the corner, because the familiar aroma of hot meat grease mixed with masa and chilis wafts to her now. She and Katy Blumm used to sneak away at lunch recess for tacos there until they both got dysentery so bad they missed a week of school. She snorts in disgust, thinking of Katy, seeing little else.

That cow corpse maggot! That bucket of horse piss! Blood on her sheets? The

next place Katy Blumm is going to see blood is on Eliza's fist after she breaks Katy Blumm's nose for being such a low down stinking liar!

Eliza spies some of Dadda's cronies standing outside the hardware store. One of them waves, but she is too disturbed to even lift her hand in response. He laughs and says something to the man next to him, and Eliza quickens her stride, embarrassed that they laughed at her and angrier than ever.

She comes to the alley running behind the old Alvarez General Store, which is now the newspaper office. She owns the entire building and the one next to it, too, both part of her inheritance, a piece of information that usually gives her deep satisfaction but provides no comfort today. Farther down the alley, in a building she does not own, a stairway climbs above the back door of Alvarez's oldest bar to a still operating cat house, or so Tia Elena claims.

The thought of Tia, wonderful, solid Tia Elena, slows her steps. Eliza glances across the plaza to the Border Patrol office and slows even more and breathes closer to normal. She nods to one of Dadda's colleagues passing her going the other way. Eliza stops and stares at the Cathedral sitting on the north side of the plaza, its arcane private school one block north.

Walking back toward the bandstand at the heart of the plaza, Eliza looks south toward the Police Department's new headquarters. Its square shape, natural colored adobe and thick vigas look strong and official. Just west, a new parking lot in between, stands another of the buildings Eliza owns, more of her Alvarez inheritance. Vacant and boarded up, it backs right onto the Border. Still has old warehouse entrances opening north and south, although the one on the Border side hasn't been used in years, and the

whole building looks ready to be knocked down, but everyone knows it serves as housing for hobos always traveling through town. Crazy Carl stays there a lot. Eliza has heard Crazy Carl even has a permanent nest located somewhere inside the sprawling old structure, and she imagines he must have a whole floor full of all the trash he's picked up and carted off over the years. When people complain about Crazy Carl, Hudson always points out the public service Carl provides with litter control and that he is obviously harmless, besides which he's living right next door to the Police Department, for Pete's sake.

At the east curb of the plaza Eliza stops, unsure about where she is going next but still full of the need to move. Her heart beat is normal for the first time since that conversation on the playground. Being surrounded by familiar buildings, several of which she owns, has helped calm her. Being in the old plaza built by a distant ancestor has created a peaceful place. Her eyes sweep east across the end of the Border Patrol building, across the US Customs' low doorway next to the Border crossing, and suddenly Eliza does a double take and blinks.

Leaning against Mexico, his arms crossed, his hair as black as his trousers, is her cousin Enrico Alvarez. Her second or third cousin, she isn't sure exactly, but she's known him her whole life.

Enrico's father, Perfecto Alvarez, was Maria's favorite relative, which makes Perfecto a sort of uncle-cousin to Eliza. He and Evita and their six children, including fourteen year old Enrico, were all born in Alvarez, Chihuahua, so Eliza and her cousins are growing up in one family in separate nations in the same town, just like Perfecto and Maria did, and just like four generations before them - all the way back to the betrayal of

Chihuahua by Santa Anna and James Gadsden in 1853. That was the year El Presidente sold a slice of north Mexico to the United States so a railroad could cross US land from coast to coast on a southern route. The redrawn Border split Alvarez right down the middle.

The new Border did more than divide a town: it separated families and split properties and stole birthrights all over the territory. Eliza sneers at the thought of the Gadsden Purchase. She think of Hudson's old friend in Chihuahua City, Luz Corral de Villa, Pancho's widow, who has told Eliza several times that Pancho was born pissed off about the Gadsden Purchase.

Still, despite the damage done by the new Border, the family was much closer in the more recent past, Eliza knows this for a fact. It was when Maria died in childbirth after less than two years of marriage that the family became polarized with grief and resentment, mostly because her widower Hudson Ash gained control of all Maria's Alvarez properties and holdings in New Mexico, plus a big piece of the Parral mines and properties in south Chihuahua, through their newborn and colicky daughter, Eliza Maria Constanza Ash de Alvarez.

Relatives still whisper to Eliza that Perfecto took Maria's death harder than anyone. Even though Perfecto was years older than Maria and already wed to Evita and father of several children, part of Perfecto died when Maria did. Sadly, even though her dear dead mother might have loved Perfecto Alvarez, Eliza herself despises him.

Dadda's response to Eliza's vehement dislike?

"Oh, Perfecto's not so bad, but his boy Enrico? You watch out for him. You listening to me?"

Since Eliza likes cousin Enrico lots better than cousin Perfecto, she never actually agrees to this, but Dadda hasn't noticed yet. Truth is, Eliza feels uneasy around Perfecto Alvarez. He looks at her so strangely, like he thinks she knows something she isn't telling, and Enrico has never acted like that, not once. Now spying her cousin standing in Mexico, Eliza decides he is just the diversion she needs.

“Hey, Enrico. Howdy.”

“Hola, primacita, what passes today?”

Eliza ambles south through the gate. The Mexican Border guard looks up from his book and nods from a bench set flat against adobe and just under the narrow eave.

Eliza inspects her cousin, observing, “Your mama forgot to button your shirt.”

He pushes away from the wall, a silver cross swinging against the crisp white fabric, sleeves rolled to his elbows. When he smiles, Eliza stumbles: father and son, their good looks blister the senses.

Enrico's scowl, on the other hand, makes no friends. Reassuming that expression, he slouches toward her. When they are face to face, Enrico straightens, suddenly realizing that his year-younger cousin is as tall as he is. His voice is hostile.

“You were to come eat, you know, on Sunday.”

Eliza stares at him blankly, “I was?”

Enrico nods, “It was my mother's birthday, number fifty, remember? Everyone came, and my sisters, they cooked all week.”

Eliza exclaims, “Hell's bells!” She'd forgotten all about it, and Tia Elena left last Saturday without reminding her.

“Dang. I guess I have to apologize to your mom?”

Eliza does not relish the task of apologizing to anyone and hopes Enrico will say no need to do so, but Enrico nods, advising, “It would be wise.”

“Oh. Well, Ok. Better get it over with.”

The cousins walk south. Old Alvarez, Chihuahua, runs just a few blocks wide along the Border, while newer neighborhoods grew up south of Mexico’s Highway 2A, making Alvarez a lonely junction half way east to west between Nogales and Juarez. Another paved road spurring south from town meets up with Highway 2 running straight down to Chihuahua City.

In old Alvarez, centuries-old adobes still form seamless walls lining narrow streets, some still cobblestoned from colonial days. The adobes share interior walls, so it is a stretch of white wash or paint that separates one home from any other, or divides the façade of a pharmacy from a liquor store from a hardware store. In places, plaster has crumbled, leaving the clay bricks unprotected but still effective shelter from the extremes of high dry weather, although in danger of melting away in a rough July rainy season. It happens once in a blue monsoon.

The cousins reach Alvarez’s plaza where a stone fountain gurgles up mineral-hardened spring water from the Alvarez aquifer. Hulking cottonwoods spread wide shade over the plaza and over Lagrimas de Oro Mission, squat and solid and forming the south side of the square. Usually chants tendrils out and a haze of incense hangs under the cottonwoods shading the plaza, but on this Saturday afternoon the church naps with the neighborhood. No big trucks roll through town hooting and wailing, neither laughter nor arguments spill from the cantina on the corner. Alvarez, Chihuahua, sleeps the siesta.

Across the plaza from the Mission is the original home of all Alvarezes in both

Alvarezes and the very first home built under the cottonwoods. Several doors of the casa open right onto the road as the home stretches along four streets and around four corners, taking up an entire block and encircling an extra large interior patio famed for its colonial authenticity. Admiring the lines of this perfectly maintained adobe masterpiece, Eliza scuffs at a loose cobblestone.

“Where's you Papa?”

“He sleeps the siesta. We wait, OK?”

Eliza nods in complete agreement. She knows better than to disturb Perfecto's Saturday nap.

“So where's your mom?”

“Working,” says Enrico. “The store is open on Saturdays, always.”

Eliza's jaw clenches. It clearly does not bother Enrico that Perfecto naps all afternoon while his mama works every hour of every day, her few spare moments spent on her knees in that rock-floored Mission. Probably praying for rescue, thinks Eliza.

They take their bad moods across to the tienda run by Evita and her daughters. Eliza envies Enrico his five sisters, all older, who have always treated her more like a niece than a distant cousin. Eliza knows they drive Enrico crazy, but she loves to see them together in their controlled chaos, and rare Alvarez family get-togethers are the only times Eliza thinks Perfecto is likeable.

Cool and dark after bright afternoon, narrow aisles fill the tienda, goods stacked almost to the stamped tin ceiling. Evita Calderon Alvarez sits on a high stool working on accounts. Always she wears black. Her collars cut so tight and high they brush her earlobes, and her gold cross always hangs polished and perfect. One could mistake her

for a grieving widow, claims Hudson. Both she and Dadda think Evita a saint for putting up with Perfecto, and when Hudson calls the old mission Lagrimas de Evita, he is only half-joking.

“Evita! Evita!”

The calls come from farther inside the Alvarez compound. Evita carefully marks and closes her accounts book, stands, wipes her palms down her apron, nods to daughter number four doing homework by the cash register, then her silhouette is brief and sharp in the narrow doorway leading to a sun washed patio.

Eliza whispers, “She's so thin!”

Outraged, Enrico snaps, “Mind your own business, puta!”

Eliza recoils. She's been called puta before, but never by family. Bristling, they glare at each other.

“Eliza, Enrico ¡Venga aqui!”

Ignoring his father, Enrico hisses that Eliza should just walk back to America and sit on its flagpole and never return to his country again, certainly no one will miss her. Another of Perfecto's commands penetrates thick walls, and this time he sounds peeved.

Careful to maintain distance between their selves, the cousins hurry to the door. Eliza slides through ahead of Enrico, and both quickly cross the historic patio. When a litter of puppies scurry and wiggle in his way, Enrico lashes out, booting one hard against a fountain surround, leaving it whimpering on painted tiles.

“Eliza, come in, come in, let me see you. One kiss! One kiss for Perfecto!”

Eliza just barely keeps from wiping off his kiss. It is the sight of Evita standing to one side that makes her hold her hand down and unbend her lips around a few polite

phrases.

Perfecto seems hypnotized by her snapped-tight western shirt. He reaches out a hand and for a moment Eliza thinks he is going to touch her right there. She holds her breath so tight she feels she might get sick on her boots, but Perfecto merely grasps her shoulder. He asks about her admirable father, his sister-city Mayor and his cousin-by-marriage.

“Dadda’s just fine,” she replies through clenched teeth. He shakes her shoulder a little, Eliza rocking back on her heels under his heavy hand.

“Good, good! And why does he not come for a visit too, daughter of Maria?”

Eliza glances at Evita, who stands blank and serene. Impetuous words squeeze back down her throat.

“Dadda's working at the café, because all the ranchers come in on Saturday.” She licks dry lips as she strives to be pleasant without seeming fake, emphasizing the word ‘work’ for Enrico’s sake. Perfecto squeezes her shoulder a bit harder.

Eliza swallows and continues, “And I just took a notion to come visit, that's all.”

Perfecto nods, pleased. His grip tightens, “But you missed our fiesta, muñeca. You missed Evita's party. You forgot it?”

Eliza can only nod and apologize, standing small and hostile, then Perfecto smiles for real, stunning Eliza, yet again, with his disturbing beauty. He lets Eliza go after one final shoulder squeeze and asks her, “Did Hudson send me a message, Elizita?”

Eliza frowns at his question. A message? Why would Dadda send Perfecto a message? Sure, the one phone line hardly works and the nosy old operator listens to everyone’s private business, but Dadda could walk over himself in a minute flat, or he

could send that warty old desk clerk Howard from the hotel if he needed to. Eliza almost asks why for Pete's sake would Dadda send a message with her, but then she remembers something from the last time she wandered over to this side of Alvarez.

It was in July, because she'd almost got caught in a lightening storm before reaching her cousins' casa, where she'd found Hudson and Perfecto drinking beer together in the dining room with their heads bent over some papers. She stood frozen in the doorway at the sight of those two together like that, the last person she expected to see sharing a beer with Perfecto was her father. She's heard them argue too many times over the years. She's heard too many complaints from each about the other, and not just Alvarez family problems, but some real doozies between the two as mayors of both Alvarezes since forever.

Eliza's eyes narrow on Perfecto's guileless inquiry when she recalls how they both jumped when she exclaimed, "Dadda!" Eliza remembers that Hudson looked dismayed to see her, while Perfecto gathered the papers together and shoved them inside his shirt before turning to his little cousin with that charming, disarming smile, exclaiming how grand to have everyone together for once, they must have a little something to nibble - Evita! Evita! Bring food! As all this took place that day, Eliza remembers thinking how weird it was watching Hudson sit there trying to join in the mood Perfecto forced upon them all.

Eliza feels suspicion curl about inside her belly looking for a more comfortable position. She starts to ask what message, but the way Perfecto is watching her makes Eliza swallow and shake her head no.

"Ahh, well. Of no importance."

Perfecto slaps Eliza on the shoulder in fun but almost knocks her over.

“And now you must eat something. So skinny you are, is not Elena feeding you?”

Evita and a kitchen maid bring out plate after plate of steaming food to the patio table, and it is all absolutely delicious: a chicken broth with a toasted pine nut base, simply sabrosa, and fresh gorditas stuffed with Mennonite cheese and fiery red chiles roasted that minute.

Eliza slowly relaxes, seduced by the meal and the tiled, plant-filled, sun-drenched, fountain-gurgling patio. She loves this old home, she thinks while slurping broth. She adores the ornate antiques hauled north three centuries ago, and she loves knowing her dead mother touched each and every item in this house. It would be such a perfect place to live, if only it wasn't filled with Perfecto.

Enrico grows animated over some futbol match going on somewhere, Eliza couldn't care less, she's too busy spooning thick cream and local honey into Evita's sopapillas and absorbing them into every corner of her mouth. While she is absorbed in this, Perfecto reaches over and pinches her cheek and runs his hand down her neck, causing the sopapilla to turn into flannel that she chews and chews and it still won't go away. Perfecto's gesture also dries up Enrico's fount of chitchat, and Evita veers immediately into her own thoughts, her eyes as blind as if in prayer. It seems hours after that before Eliza and Enrico can escape.

They pass from the coolness of the Alvarez's adobe compound out into a perfectly sunlit afternoon. Squinting in the glare, Enrico issues a string of curses and spits at a mangy cat. Eliza listens carefully, impressed, realizing she can hurl them at Katy Blumm when she locates her.

At this thought, Eliza realizes, instead of calming down as the day passes, her ire has actually grown, and it now includes cousins Perfecto and Enrico Alvarez and something that is not quite anger but close to it with Hudson. She will get to the bottom of this message question, yes, indeed. She always does.

Enrico and Eliza stalk east toward Juarez. Striding by the last bit of Alvarez, they are quickly into open desert where an extra large sun illuminates the dome of sky. Eliza ferociously kicks a tumble weed ahead of her, Enrico marching along with his hands clasped against the small of his back in unconscious imitation of the stern Padre running his Catholic school. Both cousins are furious and fuming at their fathers, but they are also loin-deep angry at each other, feeling and thinking things they can't say out loud, which has ruined everything and is fodder for the pile of resentments ready to explode like a rotting methane tank and consume them whole, swallow them like two bitter pills.

With all this turmoil torturing him, when Enrico spies a horned toad baking in the sun, he unhesitatingly lifts one tooled and pointed boot and stomps down on the drowsy reptile's back.

Eliza screams, "No!"

Enrico turns to find her heading for him, fists clenched, and he lifts himself in the air and comes down again on the decimated lizard, squashing it inside out.

"StopItStopItStopItStopIt!" Eliza leaps on Enrico and knocks him to the ground and jumps on him and punches him twice in the face. Enrico's eye swells shut immediately, the cheek below it splits open, his jaw shifts sideways, and he is all in all knocked out.

On the second punch, Eliza's fist cracks like a gunshot. She howls with enraged

agony. Falling back, Eliza grabs her hand and cradles it against her belly.

Grit raised in their brief scuffle settles about them. Eliza struggles to her feet, still holding her fist to her chest. She looks up at the huge sky, then down at her hand pulsing against her heart. She closes her eyes tight, opens them and sees Enrico still lying on the ground. They are alone on this desert.

When she focuses on her cousin, Eliza realizes she has made a royal mess of Enrico's handsome face. Upon opening his one operable eye and focusing on his cousin's dismay, Enrico cautiously explores his injuries. He shudders and croaks, "Chingate!" or at least he tries to, but his jaw isn't working so well.

Eliza nods. She agrees. She holds her hand carefully. It hurts like hell in a fry pan, but, for the first time in hours, she feels purged of all the wildness tumbling her through the afternoon, which makes her response, "Try and you'll sing soprano for life!" sound weak even to her own ears.

Enrico groans with frustration. No doubt this cousin will be his death. He unwisely shakes his head, immediately regretting such movement. Enrico sits for a while there in the road with his hands holding his head on his neck before struggling to his feet. The two stare down at the syrupy remains of the horned toad, then turn together and stagger back to Alvarez.

Nearing the plaza, Enrico cups his eye, and Eliza holds her wrist hard and tight so her hand won't move. Their steps slow, falter, stop. Without a word, Enrico slips into his mom's tienda, seeking aid from an older sister, leaving Eliza to make her way alone back to New Mexico.

Her hand aching abominably, Eliza hastens north to Dadda. As Eliza passes in

front of the Mexican guardhouse, she stumbles, jarring her hand and sending a flame up through her arm that surges out her eyes. She looks down in awe at fingers now like red and blue chorizos. Never before having broken a bone in all the years of barrel racing and calf roping and, well, Eliza knows she's paying now for her past good luck.

What is she going to tell Dadda? This is not something she can hide, and the last time she was in a fight he grounded her for a month. After she missed two rodeos and was as miserable as a newly neutered steer, Dadda said he knew she hadn't started it, but fighting always leads to more fighting, so he was ending her career right then and there. This time it isn't all her fault, though Dadda might not see it that way. Still, there's no hiding it, and Perfecto will surely force Enrico to rat on her, she'll bet on that.

Distress and pain blend while she stands astride the Border. Hearing someone come out the door of the US Customs office, Eliza forces herself to step north into New Mexico. Moving restarts her brain to thinking, and she decides she'll do best to go and face Dadda right away. Maybe after he gets done yelling he'll give her a shot of whisky to make this obscene pain go away.

George O'Reilly watches Eliza from the porch of the US Customs headquarters, where he is working the afternoon shift. His stare follows her as she crosses the plaza and heads west up Main Street. George watches her till she disappears, and then he keeps staring at her dust trail until a noise from inside the office startles him. He grips air again, flushing and mottling in the revealing light.

Eliza keeps walking west in a stupor, rigid and focused and so consumed by the sensations engulfing her right hand she wouldn't even notice Katy Blumm. She never knows she missed George back at the Border. She does not see neighbors reacting to her

blind passage, and she doesn't observe all the pickups and WWII jeeps nosed up to the curb on the street running past Dadda's hotel. She also misses seeing the crowd visible through all the windows of Dadda's café.

Eliza pushes backwards through the doors into the nineteenth century lobby of the Gadsden Hotel. As always, she is dwarfed by its massive eighteenth century front desk, shipped north from Chihuahua City with all the other antiques Hudson found in central Mexico. He did that even before he bought the derelict old Gadsden Hotel, like he knew he was going to be furnishing a palace someday.

Ornate double doors stand wide open to the Gadsden Cafe, a muted roar spilling out. When Eliza crosses the lobby's waxed oak floor to these open doors, she is stunned by the crowd before she remembers it is Saturday. Confounded, Eliza stands at the doorway: Dadda is most likely in the middle of everyone, he usually is, and the last thing Eliza can do right now is push through a crowd to find him. In fact, it's all she can do to keep from sinking to the floor and howling. Sweat breaks out on her forehead and beads her upper lip, and she realizes she might just vomit.

In desperation Eliza turns to Howard, the desk clerk, asking in a shaking voice, "Where's Hudson? Where's Dadda?"

Howard eyes Eliza with dislike and snubs her, returning to his bookkeeping. She thinks Howard's head looks extra tiny up behind the expanse of carved wood. Eliza suppresses a whimper, straightens her back and studies the large room, finally spotting her Dadda.

Hudson Ash stands at the heart of a late lunch crowd which has gathered every Saturday afternoon since he opened the kitchen in 1947, when Eliza was a year old. He

is a sight to behold, her Dadda is, Eliza thinks, watching him bend toward a woman wearing Levis just a bit too snug and a shirt closed one snap too low and is standing one step too close to Hudson, who laughs and slings his arm over the lady's shoulder and eyes her with pleasure. Hovering behind them is the woman's husband, who blinks, his posture changing abruptly, suddenly wary of Hudson Ash.

Eliza glares at the cowgirl: Damn that witch, why did she go and flirt with Dadda like that. Everyone knows women are his great weakness so he can't control that part of his self. And with her husband, the worm, standing right there.

There is raucous laughter nearby. Glancing over, Eliza catches sight of a waitress removing a cowboy's hand from her bohumpus. Eliza sees she is a new hire and already in a bad mood, so no help there, but finally she spies Celia Gomez.

Celia is the waitress who has been with Dadda all the years since he bought the abandoned hotel and its rundown café. Celia is the one who helped Dadda remodel and staff it in the beginning, and Hudson claims she is his number one employee, he could not have succeeded without her. At this moment on this hectic Saturday, Celia is trying to take an order from a table of ranch hands who don't get to town often enough.

One cowboy asks another, "What was it? Chile verde burrito? Or was it that chile rojo one?"

Celia scribbles furiously amid the tumult, taking orders, finally reading them back, "That's two chile verdes, one no frijoles. One taco combo with extra rice, two enchilada combos, one with carnitas, one tamale platter special. And you, one chile rojo, yes?"

The cowboys pay no attention. One nudges the next as they spot someone across

the room. Another downs his coffee as if it is a mirage soon to disappear. The others are staring at her chest, so Celia gives up, tucks her pencil into her bun and stalks off to the kitchen. She veers around Hudson and the silly lady with the angry husband. Celia eyes her boss with disapproval.

Time passes, the noisy, happy chaos continuing to roll from the room over Hudson's daughter, who is about to faint in the doorway. Her hand now looks like a baseball mitt. She stares solemnly at the mess, whispering, "This ain't good."

When Eliza looks up, the café swims before her. After she steadies herself and swallows a surge of bile, Dadda is not where he was. Eliza looks around in rising panic, gasping with relief when she finally locates him now sitting at that stupid lady's table, the castrated weenie of a husband glowering, the fool, while Dadda leans into the wife.

The scene goes all shifty, fractures, customers' faces distort and drift and Eliza leans against the open door for support. She watches Celia float back across the room carrying steaming plates up both arms. Celia executes a neat sidestep and full circle as a customer tips back his chair right in her way. Celia comes around him smoothly with half a lifetime's practice and announces, "Chile verde burrito, no frijoles?"

Everyone ignores her. Used to this, she raises her voice, calling out, "Who said chile verde burrito?"

Someone asks, "Jonah, you order that?"

Jonah drools with joy at the sight of the steaming food. Celia sets one hot plate down, clicking her tongue impatiently when the ranch hand touches it and yelps.

"Taco combo?" No one answers, all laughing lewdly at something someone mutters. Celia repeats, "Shredded beef taco combo? Who orders this?"

No one claims it. Exasperated, Celia shifts the hot plates. She goes on, “OK, OK. So who says one chile rojo?”

Again, no one claims it. Celia suddenly remembers. “You. You say one chile rojo.”

The weather beaten ranch hand focuses his bleary eyes when Celia places lunch in front of him. She distributes other plates when cowboys realize food has arrived, but still she has one chile verde left. A frown knits her brow as she checks her order pad, then clears when she remembers who ordered the second burrito platter. Twisting through stretched legs to his place, Celia announces, “You.”

The cowboy raises his hands as if to protect himself and protests. Celia is by now annoyed. She raises her voice, “You all tell me two chile verdes, one chile rojo, one taco combo, one tamale platter, two enchilada combos, one with carnitas, all gone, so here! You ordered it. One chile verde burrito.”

The man resents her attitude. He shifts on his chair. He glances at his interested companions before speaking, “Listen here, lady, I didn't order no chile verde burrito, I was just telling my friend here that's what he ordered last time. I don't want no chile verde burrito.” He points his finger at the table and snarls, “I want me some goddamn chicken enchiladas!”

The irate cowboy half-rises from his chair, and Celia sees she has an incident going on that's getting nothing but worse, but at that moment a thin voice commands, “Just take it, mister.”

Celia whirls around, her skirt whacking the closest cowboy, to find Eliza swaying behind her with eyes all glassy and lips bleached of color.

“Now listen here, little girl, no one is going to me – What!”

A friend elbows the argumentative ranch hand hard and mutters something in his ear. Eliza, hand forgotten, snarls, “Take it!”

The cowboy is thinking it’s no matter this girl is Hudson Ash’s kid, he’s a man, dammit, so he’s about to get downright harsh with the bothersome brat, but then he hesitates. Later, he confesses it was seeing that same look Hudson Ash gets when he thinks he’s been crossed, the look no one likes to see coming their way, no sirree, and there was Hudson’s brat of a girl, for Pete’s sake, looking at him exactly that way.

The men at the table shift uncomfortably. One of them clears his throat and claims, “I’m feeling downright starved, Celia honey. You must have read my mind.”

Everybody relaxes. Celia slams down the last plate. Glaring at these customers, she states, “In this café, you order, you eat, you pay. You hear me?” They all nod.

Then Celia reaches for Eliza and pushes her out into the lobby and straight to a high-backed arm chair. Eliza collapses between its wings. She wonders if she will ever get up again.

“Eliza! ¡Madre de Dios! What happened? No, not important, just do not move.” Celia speeds back into the Café and shoves her way across it to the far booth.

“Hudson!”

Hudson raises his hand, silencing his favorite employee while the pretty lady finishes her sentence. Then both turn and stare at Celia, who cries out, “La niña! Elizita!”

All else is forgotten. Hudson springs up with panic clutching his gut. The pretty lady snorts disgustedly: it is famous in these parts, Hudson's love for his Alvarez brat.

No grown woman stands a chance.

Mayor Hudson Ash is observed striding through his lucrative Café to the lobby of his successful hotel, Celia running right behind him. After they exit through the double wide doorway, eyes return to their plates, to their newspapers, to each other. The hubbub that diminished when Hudson stood regains its volume, unaided by one peeved cowgirl avoiding eye contact with her apoplectic husband.

When Hudson reaches Eliza, he goes down on one knee, too appalled by the site of Eliza's hand to hide his dismay. He croaks, "Howard!"

The desk clerk raises his head, arranges his features and smiles. "Yes, Mr. Ash?"

"Get Doc Elliot over here!"

"Dr. Elliot, sir?" Howard finally observes Eliza sprawled in the chair, her face strangely waxy against its dark green leather.

"Now, Howard."

Howard pulls the phone to him and dials Dr. Elliot's number. It rings and rings. Howard puts the phone down, announcing, "Dr. Elliot is out of his office."

The silence that ensues as Hudson turns to look at him has Howard ready to pee about six pints right there.

"You better find him, Howard."

Howard almost levitates in his effort to leave the lobby. He hopes very much that Dr. Elliot is sitting in front of the hardware store, where he usually spends each Saturday afternoon after closing his clinic. Standing in the hotel doorway, squinting anxiously down the street, Howard spies the doctor there on that bench, taking notes while listening to two old timers gossip about people dead forty years. Dr. Elliott is well known for his

interest in Hidalgo County history, and Howard is vastly relieved to spy the good doctor at his usual post. Howard scurries down the street, hops up the steps to the raised boardwalk, bends next to Dr. Elliot and murmurs Hudson's summons. The Doctor abruptly leaves his friends still debating some long ago rancher's obscure fate.

Dr. Elliot finds Hudson wiping Eliza's forehead with a wet bandana, his silent appeal to Doctor Elliot saying it all. Shoving Hudson aside, Dr. Elliot takes his place at Eliza's knees. Hudson grips Celia's hand. People pass through the lobby behind them, but Hudson's broad back shields Eliza from curiosity, until Doc stands, ordering, "Better get her to my clinic."

Hudson scoops up his little girl and they hurry out, Celia too, turning left up Hotel Street, left onto First Street, and left again onto School Street at the corner feed store, where the clinic next door to it stands closed for the weekend. Afternoon sun beams red spots inside Eliza's eyelids. The jostling of Hudson's stride sends bolts of pain all the way out her boot heels, but, within moments of a morphine injection, Eliza feels comfort ooze in and shove out all that pain to south of Laredo.

She begins to experience sensory information in a new way, like, Whoa! metal tables are really slick and almost wet, almost like jelly, like silver jelly, which makes her laugh and laugh. And, she feels taller lying down, yes she does, and she is completely intrigued by layer upon layer of plastered gauze, which feels icy, making her arm more alert than the rest of her. She sighs and blows in from a far away place, blinks at Celia and Hudson in surprised recognition, which makes Hudson realize Celia is still with them. He stares at the waitress.

"Someone take your job, Celia?"

“What? Oh Dios, bye!”

Hudson smiles for real for the first time since that pretty lady strolled into his cafe, the sight of Celia Gomez flying out the clinic door striking him funny as hell for no good reason. He turns back to Eliza lying on the table and is instantly sobered. Hudson studies Eliza from hair to boots. His daughter fidgets under this scrutiny, while Dr. Elliot continues perfecting the cast.

“You ready to talk about it?”

She considers not answering her father, but Hudson stands there, arms crossed, kind of like that blonde god the Aztecs were so in love with before Cortez arrived, and maybe even like Thor, except with less hair and more clothes, or ... Eliza drifts back to consciousness, offering the sketchiest of explanations, “I had a fight.”

“A fight? I see. And with whom did you have this fight?”

Eliza scratches several places before answering. She sees no alternative. Better to tell Dadda herself than wait for Perfecto to tell his version.

“With Enrico Alvarez. My cousin.”

The last bit is Eliza’s ploy that it was her fight with her cousin, which excludes anyone who is not actually related by Alvarez blood, which includes Hudson. Hudson loses some of his sympathy for Eliza.

“And how did this happen?” indicating her broken hand.

“Well, I slugged him.”

The way she says it, with her chin up and an exaggerated wink and nod, has Hudson quivering, making him recover before he can ask in a normal voice, “You slugged him. OK. Why?”

After some thought on this, Eliza finally admits, “I forget exactly.”

She scratches at her neck, her lips, rubs her eyes, the opiate making her itchy and feel kind of separated from her boots. Dr. Elliot continues working on the cast, all ears, discretely entertained by this rare moment with Hudson and his daughter .

“So? Did Enrico survive?”

Eliza grimaces, “Yeah, kind of.” She adds, “Mostly,” and peeks up at her Dadda, uncertain about his mood.

Studying his daughter, Hudson admits that he has wanted to slug Enrico for a long, long time, Eliza doesn't know half of what that boy gets away with on both sides of the Border. But all Hudson does is raise one eyebrow, commenting, “I imagine I'll hear about it if he doesn't.”

“All right, Eliza, time to sit up and rejoin the realm of the living,” Dr. Elliot announces encouragingly.

Father and daughter stare at the unwieldy cast on Eliza's right hand ending just below her elbow. Fingers peek out, swollen stubs startlingly colorful against the white plaster. Six weeks of wearing this thing before her hand can heal, and only if it heals right will it be off before Christmas. Eliza sighs in regret: she should have considered possible damage to herself before slugging Enrico.

Dr. Elliot's instructions about the care and maintenance of her cast is background noise while Hudson lifts her off the table and steadies her till she finds her legs, which seem attached to someone else. She feels like an itchy, scratchy balloon. Her head definitely feels like it's driving a new pickup in a different direction, and her eyebrows are crawling all over her forehead. Eliza tries to catch one while Dr. Elliot gives Hudson

an envelope of pills for the next few days. Hudson peels cash off his money clip and pays the good doctor, Eliza thanks him dreamily, and the Ashes exit straight into the glare of late afternoon.

Esa is blinded by light, but she's getting used to navigating Alvarez without being able to see. In fact, she feels lucky her eyes didn't explode out of her face today, what with all the pressure of outrage after outrage. As she and her Dadda squint north on School Street, Hudson inquires, "Did you hit him with your fist?"

Eliza nods and weaves to the left. Hudson puts an arm around her shoulders, holding her straight, asking, "Where did you hit him?"

Eliza replies happily, "East of town. North of the Juarez highway."

At the corner they turn west onto First. When Hudson can talk again, he gasps, "I meant where on him," and wipes his eyes with the heel of his free hand.

"Oh? He has a black eye." She continues thoughtfully, "His face looked kind of funny. Crooked," she giggles and hiccups, "he looks crooked."

Hudson curses under his breath. He can tell there will be words with Perfecto over this, but he needs to talk with Maria's blasted cousin anyway, talk business, and he hopes to hell their kids won't be causing problems between them.

When they turn and head north up Hidalgo, Eliza remembers the furor she raised earlier with Mutt and Mrs. Estrada. She glances uneasily ahead toward the alley entrance just a block away and now kind of moving around, relocating, which makes no – ok, there it is. Still too close for comfort.

Suddenly, briefly, her teeth feel so huge, she thinks she might trip on them. They also seem to be able to hear things, invisible things, inexplicable things. Panicking at this

creepy problem, and nervous about their proximity to the alley, because if there's something Dadda doesn't like it is Mrs. Estrada yelling at him, Eliza is panting by time they turn west onto Second Street. Concerned, Hudson slows his step. While trudging the endless length of the block, Eliza realizes the real danger: they are visible across the vacant lot almost the whole way. If anyone wants to shout at them, someone like Mrs. Estrada, they are walking targets.

Eliza feels lightheaded for a lot of reasons by time she and Hudson reach their own yard. He holds open the front gate, but before she passes through he stops her, makes sure she's listening, .

"I want you to remember, Eliza. Are you listening? It's not like in the movies, understand? If it knuckles to bone, knuckles are going to lose every time."

When Eliza cocks her head, considering this, it pitches her sideways. Hudson steadies his daughter, catching her when she begins to tip right over backward.

"Only punch soft parts with your fist, Eliza-girl. Fleshy parts like the belly. Or a man's privates, if you have to." Hudson winces while imparting this bit of wisdom. "But if all you can reach is his face, just slap him good and hard."

"Slap him? Won't that start a duel?" She is so serious her eyes cross.

"Well, hm, not with Enrico, it won't. You just go ahead and slap him as hard as you want, then tell him to see me."

Eliza frowns and Hudson laughs.

"I know it won't do the same damage," he ruffles her hair, "at least to you it won't. But, Eliza, if you're going to fight, if you really have to fight, then go in low. Trying to punch out some cowboy could hurt you more than him. You go in hard and low and end

it fast.”

She considers this. She nods, staggers, vowing to remember his advice while the screen door slams behind them.

They encounter Elena entering the wide hallway, carrying a pile of folded laundry on its way to chests of drawers located throughout the house, her last chore of the day before leaving until Monday morning. At the sight of the Ashes standing there with light filtering into a corona behind them, Elena stumbles, musing the tidy piles of clean clothes, which makes her grumpy.

“Eliza! Where have you been? Where is the bread?”

Eliza raises her cast to her mouth, hitting her lip so hard it hurts like heck even through the morphine. She swears, “Santo Diablo!”

Elena crosses herself while balancing the laundry, and Hudson growls, “Eliza,” in warning, then can’t believe what he’s seeing is blood pouring down Eliza’s chin. He and Elena stare at the girl, a bit stupefied by the latest twist in life with Eliza, while Eliza scratches her itchy face, scratches her itchy belly, scratches her swelling, bleeding mouth.

Surprised by the amount of blood streaming out her lips, Eliza stares at dripping fingers. Hudson grabs a towel from the stack Elena holds and shoves it against Eliza’s mouth. His daughter tips backward, wrenches back upright. Trying to maintain her balance with her Dadda in her face, and she swears again, “Dag-blasted-nabbit!”

She pushes Hudson away, adding peevishly, “It’s just bread, why the fuss?”

She nods with emphasis at Hudson and Tia Elena, scratches the nape of her long and loopy neck, scratches her itching, twitching nose, scratches inside her elbows, blood soaking down inside the fresh, still wet cast.

Refocusing on their disapproval or anger or whatever it is that is wrong with them, Eliza can't exactly recall what she's done this time to make their faces go all scrunched up, but it must be bad. Thinking she better cover her boot tracks by addressing a spectrum of complaints they could be upset about, Eliza exclaims, "For Pete's sake, I just stinking forgot, OK!"

And she falls asleep standing up.