

change
Fabby to
Fabiola

No
accent on
Rio!

Evie Gomez woke up on Saturday morning with two things on her mind. The first was that her best friend, Raquel Diaz, was definitely no longer just that, a best friend. Raquel had proven herself to be, as of 10:32 a.m. that late September morning, a 100 percent *pinche beyachee*. And why? Because after two weeks of no phone, no friends, basically no life, Evie wasn't under her mother's house arrest anymore for coming home a piddly-ass twenty (okay, maybe it *was* forty) minutes past her curfew. Her ankle bracelet had been officially clipped off, but did her girl Raquel bother to call so they could celebrate Evie's first night of freedom? *No*. Raquel hadn't even had the decency to return any of Evie's phone calls, text messages, or the desperate IMs Evie had sent to SexyMexy08. Raquel was no Sexy Mexy, Evie decided, but she was *definitely* a bitch.

The second thing Evie realized was how light her head felt. She ran her hand from the back of her neck and, yup, her long, dark brown hair was gone. All of it. She pushed up from her pillows and got a look at herself in her closet mirrors—her hair was now short, chopped in haphazard fashion with streaks of uneven blue. Cancún Blue No. 32 to be exact. But it should have been called Granny Grey Blue No. 80. It had come out the same exact tint you see, well, on grannies.

What had she done? She yanked down at the sides but they barely ~~covered the~~ ^{reached her} ~~tops of her ears~~ ^{shoulders}. Who the hell cuts their own hair? Is this what happened to prisoners in solitary confinement? After being isolated from their peers for too long, did they eventually go mad and commit self-inflicted acts of hair cruelty with Ginghar craft scissors, too? Evie looked hideous and she had no one to blame but . . . yes, Raquel. It was her fault that Evie had gotten grounded in the first place. Raquel had insisted they go

to Tracy Tankerson's party two weeks ago. It was the first party on the first Friday of the new school year and Raquel promised she'd have Evie home by her curfew. But, as Evie should have known, by the time Evie knew it was time to leave, Raquel was just getting her drink on. There was no way she was gonna get Evie home by her curfew, and she didn't.

Evie glowered at the sight of her reflection. Why, why hadn't Raquel just called her back last night? She *owed* it to her. By the time nine o'clock rolled around, it had become painfully obvious to Evie that she was going to spend another long night at home alone. And after clicking from one reality makeover show to the next, she realized it was she, not another midwestern housewife, who needed a change. She wanted something that demanded attention, respect. She wanted . . . hair the color of the Cancún ocean! And that's how *The Reinvention of Evie Gomez, Mex-treme Makeover, Friday Night Home Edition* came to be.

But as of now, Saturday morning, it was sadly evident that she had truly lost her senses the night before. Her rookie dye job screamed beauty-school flunk-out. The bleach she'd used to strip her brown wasn't dispersed as evenly as it should have been and now her head looked like a patchwork collage of beige, white, and blue, the national colors of . . . whatever county's flag was beige, white, and blue. She looked like crap.

"What do you think, P?" she toed her male tabby, nestled at the foot of her bed. "Punk rock or goth-metal dork?" But P.Kitty couldn't care less about her state of blue disrepair. He lifted up his hind leg and started to lick behind it.

"Cla-see," Evie smirked as she gave him a slight tap with the rest of her foot.

She heard Lindsay, the Gomez's housekeeper, turn up the volume of *El Mercadito* on the kitchen radio downstairs. Other than that, the house was quiet. She was sure her father, Ruben Gomez, had left hours ago for one of his several *panaderías* and her mother, Vicki, was probably in the pool doing her obligatory fifty laps.

Evie pulled her Dean Miller sheets up to her chin and looked blankly up at the ceiling. From her sister, Sabrina, who took eighteen credits a semester while maintaining presidency of the most prestigious Latina sorority at Stanford University to big ol' dopey Molesto (real name: Ernesto)—the Gomez's black labrador, who demanded his pre-poop walk around the perimeter of the block every morning at 6 a.m.—the Gomezes were a very focused, ambitious family. They accentuated the *Go* in Gomez, all of them, that is except for Evie, who felt more of a personal connection to the lagging z as in Gomezzzzzzzz. . . . She yawned, lifted her Roxy tee, and scratched her belly. It was now 10:45 a.m. Yeah, she could sleep a little bit more and deal with *las dilemmas* later.

Just then the buddy alert on her computer dinged, signaling to Evie that one of her online buddies was available to chat. Raquel . . . *finally*. ^{Hola?}

Evie pushed off her blankets and went over to her desk. But it wasn't Raquel. It was Shaggy who had already instant messengered her.

ShaggyMA: Hey, U up?

RíoChica: Yup. U just wake up, too?

ShaggyMA: No. Just got in from surfing. Did Dawn Patrol this morning.

Crazy. Surfer magazine was there and took photos of us.

Evie felt jealous. Did everyone have a more exciting life than she did? During her period of home internment, she had met Shaggy via a chat room for MASA. *No*, not *masa*, as in dough, but MASA as in the Mexican-American Surfing Association. Evie hadn't even known such a thing existed, but ever since she'd caught *Blue Crush* on cable with Raquel over the summer, she had become a mad active surfer. On the Internet, anyway. Raquel wasn't so hot on independent study after seeing the film, so Evie researched all things surf ^{*Solo*} ~~alone~~. How could she live in California and not surf? All those years as a kid at the beach and not once paddle out on a board? As a fourth generation Cali girl she at least looked the part, from her sixty dollar Hollister tees to her hibiscus-print board shorts. Evie had even gone so far to buy a surfboard, a nine-foot, five-fin white custom long board, especially shaped for her by Max. ^{*of S.H.*} But truth was, Evie had yet to even get ^{*pricey*} the thing wet and, to be dreadfully direct, she could barely even manage a boogie board in waist-high whitewater. *Qué scandalous*, no?

RíoChica ^{*Q*} What do you think of the color blue?

ShaggyMA ^{*Q*} One of my shorties is blue.

RíoChica ^{*Q*} Cool enough.

ShaggyMA ^{*Q*} Hey, gotta go.

RíoChica ^{*Q*} Sure, lates.

Sigh. Evie was alone, and bored, again.

^{*download of Mos*}
Suddenly the latest ~~Black Eyed Peas~~ song blared from her cell phone. Evie got up from her desk and grabbed the phone off her nightstand. She saw Raquel's face on the

screen, her long hair pulled over in front of her shoulders and her chin drawn down. *Ugh*. Evie reluctantly flipped her phone open.

“Hello?”

“*Heeey*,” drawled Raquel’s gravelly voice. Apparently Raquel had gone out the night before. Without Evie. What the fuh?

“Oh, hey,” Evie said trying to sound just as casual.

“So . . . ,” Raquel started. Evie could sense Raquel starting to smile on the other end. “You got your phone back.”

“Uh, yeah,” Evie said. “I actually got it back yesterday, as of five p.m.”

“Oh, yeah.” Raquel paused. “That’s right.”

“So what happened?” Evie asked. “You said we were gonna do something, go out. I left you like a gazillion messages.”

“Yeah.” Raquel let out a moose-sized yawn. “Sorry about that. I completely spaced. My parents went out and then Jose came over with a six-pack. We ended up kicking it, watching Fuel all night. *Boring*.” The moose yawned again.

“Oh.” Evie tried to sound calm, but she was burning up inside. “That’s cool. Did Alex or Mondo go out?”

“Nah,” Raquel said. “Nobody did nothing.”

Evie relaxed. At least she hadn’t missed anything, but that didn’t really surprise her. The five Flojos—herself, Alex, Mondo, Raquel, and her boy Jose—shared one thing in common and that one thing was the absolute, all-consuming, unending desire to . . . do nothing. Was it the cliché teenage rebellion against their workaholic fathers? Too many spins (and lyric interpretations) of Cypress Hill on Mondo’s Technics turntable?

Wherever they were, be it poolside or oceanside, and whatever you called it, trifling or chilling, the Flojos did nothing together. Never mind Generation Y. The Flojos were in a generation of their own—Generation ~~Why~~ Bother?

Coincidentally, *flojo* (correct Spanish pronunciation: *flow-ho*) means lazy in English, but it's also what you call flip-flops (correct South Cali pronunciation: *flow-joe*) and as everybody knows, flip-flops are a pretty lazy excuse for a shoe and usually reserved only for summer, even in Southern California. But the Flojos were hard core when it came to their flip-flops and wore them 24/7/365. From high-end Havaianas (\$118) to low-end plastic bin specials from Savon (*true* flojos, Alex claimed), nothing came between Flojos and their flojos.

But it wasn't just attitude or a common footwear philosophy that had brought the Flojos together. Evie and Raquel had been friends since growing up in ~~Los~~ Estates and last year when they were freshmen, Raquel hooked up with Jose. He was a tall, lanky sophomore with the Mars Volta 'fro and black titanium chin labret piercing that gave him a devious look that Raquel fell for hard. Once they started dating, his sidekicks Mondo (he who had a ^{''}delivery job) and Alex (he who actually did some surfing) came automatically included in the package. Of course, it was pure prestige points for Evie and Raquel to hang with upperclassmen. Besides, few students at Villanueva Preparatory High School were like them—rich kids whose family crests, that is, if they had crests, contained the letters *x*, *y*, or *z* (read: *Latino*).

Evie's family had a crest, sorta ~~/~~ If you counted the small, peach-tinted seashell logo for her father's successful business, Conchita's Bread. Years ago her father started Conchita's and thanks to his hard work (along with Evie's great-grandma Conchita's

secret *pan dulce* recipes), the Gomezes had arrived at their current locale: a big ol' Spanish-style house with a swimming pool in the back and her father's Escalade in the front. Not quite ransomworthy rich, but the Gomezes, like a lot of the families in Río Estates, were pretty well off.

"So," Evie continued. She took a deep breath. "I chopped off my hair."

"What?" Raquel said.

"My hair," Evie repeated. "It's gone."

"What do you mean?"

"I hacked it off. All of it and . . ." Evie paused for dramatic flair. "I dyed it blue, sorta." Evie felt proud and a bit smug. She liked the idea that she'd done something so radical, on her own, and without consulting Raquel. It was so unlike her.

"Yeah." Raquel yawned. "I dyed my hair blue one time."

"Really?" It was *so Raquel* of Raquel to try and outdo Evie. And Evie wasn't sure she was buying it. "When?"

"One time when I was up in the Bay Area, like two summers ago. It totally clashed with my complexion. Brownies can't be sporting blue. I changed it back the next day."

"You never told me that," Evie said, still suspicious.

"Cause it was really no big deal."

Evie felt herself getting annoyed. "So," she said, changing the subject. "What's the plan for tonight?"

"Um." Raquel yawned again. "Jose heard about some party out near Hard. You in?"

“Definitely,” Evie said. Actually, she hoped they would drive down to L.A., do something covert, crazy. Río Estates was just sixty miles north of Los, but it was still suburbia and, of course, painfully uneventful. Even though she was a Flojo, Evie had always felt the slight tug of wanting something more, to *do* something outside of the 805.

But Raquel did say that the night’s party was “out near Bard,” so that could mean anything.

“As long as I’m home by twelve-thirty.” Evie reminded Raquel. “I mean, not even twelve-thirty-two in the driveway. My mom will freak if I’m late again.”

“Yeah, and we don’t wanna freak out ol’ Vicki,” Raquel said in a tone meant to show she was so *over* mothers and curfews. “She must have crapped bricks when she saw your hair, huh?”

“Not really,” Evie lied. “Like you said, it’s really no big deal.”

But Evie was starting to worry. What *would* her mother say about her hair? Vicki Gomez was known for possessing the legendary Gomez fury, unleashed when something didn’t go her way.

Just then, someone knocked on Evie’s bedroom door. She sank into her bed and quickly pulled the sheet over her head. Well, at least she wouldn’t have to wait any longer—she was about to find out how her mother felt about having a Smurf for a daughter.

“Evelina?”

Whew. It was only Lindsay. “Are you awake?” Lindsay asked from the hallway.

“*Sí, sí,* Lindsay,” Evie called out, making sure to keep her head covered. “Come in.” She told Raquel she had to hang up.

g

"Yeah? Oh, hey . . ." Raquel started. "One last thing."

"Yeah?" Evie asked.

"Did you dye your pubes too? 'Cause if you'd done your shrub, now, that woulda been *real* crazy ass."

"*Goodbye*, Raquel." Evie rolled her eyes and flipped her cell phone shut before tossing it onto the floor. Yup. No doubt about it. Raquel was definitely a bitch.

* * *

"Oh," Lindsay said as she came into Evie's room and saw her in bed. "You're still sleeping."

"No, I'm awake," Evie answered, peeking out from under the covers. "I'm just laying here."

Lindsay looked around Evie's room and sighed. "Ay, Evelina. This is not good. Let me clean in here today. It would make your mother so happy."

"Lindsay, I really don't *care* what makes my mother happy." Lindsay had wanted to do what was best for the household for as long as Evie could remember. "So," Evie started. "Did you buy anything off of *El Mercadito*?"

"Ay, no," Lindsay took a seat at the edge of Evie's bed. "There was a foot, ¿*como se llama*?" Her wrinkled hands made a rubbing motion across her Soft Soles slip-ons. "A massager? But the lady wanted too much for it. No way." She turned around and looked above Evie's bed. "Why is all that scribble around that boy?"

Lindsay was referring to Paul Rodriguez, Jr.. Evie had Sharpied elaborate red hearts on a poster of him skateboarding. So, he didn't surf, as far as she knew, but he did

skateboard and he did have a z in his name. Oh come on, who was she kidding? P. Rod was *fine*. *FAF – Fine as Fuck*

“Oh, that’s—” Evie started to explain as she turned to look up at the poster. But when she did, the sheet slipped down, exposing her head.

“Ay!” Lindsay stood up, her fingertips covering her open mouth. “Evelina, what did you do? Your hair!”

“Oh, I cut it.” Evie nervously pulled at the sides, but it was no use. The sides remained short and stringy.

“Yes, I see that.” Lindsay’s face remained shocked. “But the colors. It’s . . . does your mother know?”

“Well.” Evie tousled her hair nervously. “She’s always going on about money. So she should be happy that I saved her a hundred bucks to do my own hair.”

Lindsay’s eyes widened. “You pay a *hundred dollars* to have your hair done?”

Evie immediately felt embarrassed and tried to explain. “It’s not just for a cut. I mean, I get it washed, and they give it a blow-dry and style. Plus I sometimes get a one-on-one consultation, a lot of times with Viggo—he’s the salon owner.” But the more she said, the more Evie knew how shamelessly VH1 Diva it all sounded.

“Ay, Dios.” Lindsay shook her head. “I just can’t imagine what your mother will think.”

“Think about what?” Vicki Gomez asked as she entered Evie’s bedroom. Just out of the pool, Evie’s mother looked effortlessly stylish in her magenta one-piece with a plush beige towel wrapped around her wet hair. There was no time to duck and cover.

“Oh my God!” Vicki Gomez clasped her hand over her mouth. “Evie! What the hell did you do to your hair? You’ve got to be out of your mind! Did you forget that school photos are next week? Do you expect your father and me to fork over four hundred dollars to document *this*?” She towered over Evie and picked over her hair, like a grade-school nurse searching for head lice

Evie shamefully looked over at Lindsay. *Yes, Lindsay, we also drop a few hundred for some measly school photos. Oh, but that does include wallet size!*

“What the *hell* were you thinking?” Vicki Gomez was furious. “I have a good mind to ground you for a month for this stunt!”

“*What?*” Evie pulled away from her mother. “Why? Just because *I* wanted to do something different to *my* hair?”

“No, because you don’t think. That’s the problem, Evie. You don’t think about how your actions affect other people.” She looked at Evie’s bed and pulled the pillow out from under her. “Great. You stained the pillow, too. Did you even think to rinse out your hair or put down a towel?” Vicki Gomez looked around. “Oh God . . . look at this.”

Evie looked beside her bed. Sure enough, a trail of small blue blotches stretched across the cream-colored carpet from her bathroom to her pillow. There was even dye on her precious Dean Miller plastic-grass bed skirt she had begged her mother to buy her for her last birthday.

“Don’t worry, Senora Vicki,” Lindsay said, wiping the spots on the sheet as if they would magically go away. “I can get the stains out.”

“Your father is going to be pissed!” Vicki Gomez continued to rant. “Do *not* make any plans this evening until he gets home and we can discuss this.”

“You mean *tonight*?” Evie was horrified.

“Yes, *tonight*.” Evie’s mother knelt down and rubbed the stained carpet with her fingers.

“But Dad usually stays late on Saturdays and I told you I was going out with—”

“You’ll just have to wait.” Vicki Gomez stood back up and gave Lindsay the pillow. After telling her in Spanish to work on it immediately, she stalked out of Evie’s room. Lindsay followed silently.

No. There was no *way* that Evie planned to endure another night in the Gomez Penitentiary. She leaned over her bed, grabbed her cell, and speed-dialed her father.

He’ll listen, she thought. Her father was a reasonable man, definitely much more reasonable than her mother. Evie knew she wouldn’t survive another night of lockdown. *I’ll go crazy, and who knows what I’ll do?* she thought. *Maybe I really will dye my pubes blue.*

2

In seconds, Evie was on the phone with her father. She pointed out that there were house rules and regulations for her recreational interests—how much time she could spend at Sea Street, the number of hours she was allowed to spend watching MTV2, how much alcohol she was allowed to drink (none!) —but no mention of cutting her hair and dying it blue. No rule, no violation, so no punishment, right? Surprisingly, her father agreed.

“Ay, Vicki.” Evie handed her mother the phone, but she could hear her father talking to her mother through the receiver. “The color’s not permanent and the hair will

grow back. What teenager doesn't experiment with change? Remember when we were dating and you wanted to look like Teena Marie?"

And so Evie was sprung. She would have clicked her heels with joy (if only she'd known how) as she waited in the front driveway for Mondo. She'd finally slipped out of Warden Vicki's tightfisted control and was soon to be far, far away from the suffocating security gates of Río Estates.

But eight turned to eight-thirty, and eight-thirty turned into nine. Evie grew impatient and then angry as she paced back and forth across the circular driveway. Where the hell was that Mondo? Finally, at nine-thirty, his black Mercury Marauder slowly eased up the Gomez's driveway. Evie was ready to pop a fuse.

"What's the deal?" she snapped as she walked toward his car. "I've got a curfew, remember?"

"Oh, you know Mondo," Jose started to explain as he got out of the front seat and took over the back with Raquel and Alex. "He ain't called FedMex for nothing."

"That's right." Mondo smiled unapologetically into the rearview mirror. "When you absolutely, positively gotta be there on time, don't be calling me. Besides, beggars can't be—" He looked at Evie as she got into the front seat. "Whoa, what did you do to your hair?"

Jose actually snorted. "Hey, yeah. Blue's Clues!"

"More like Blue's Clueless." Mondo laughed. "Why'd you mangle your mane? It looked good before."

"You guys, shut up already," Raquel said from the backseat. She looked shocked at the first sight of Evie's hair. "You can't help it you fucked up your hair." She leaned

over and stroked Evie's bangs. "Don't listen to them. We'll take you to Viggo and he'll fix you up."

"Hey," Mondo motioned to her safety belt. "Click it or ticket,"

"Oh, like you are *so* concerned about breaking the law." Evie said as she fastened her seat belt and crossed her arms. These were the so-called friends she was just dying to be with? She looked back at Alex and glared. "Don't even say anything," she warned him.

"Evie." Alex sighed. "I really don't care *what* you do with your hair."

* * *

When they pulled up to Bard Road, Mondo killed his Marauder's ignition and announced, "Okay, just 'cause I drove does *not* make me the designated driver. Fulby should already be here and you guys can get a lift back from him if you need to."

"Dude, we can't all go with Fulby," Alex complained from the backseat. "He's got a truck."

"Yeah, a truck with a nice, wide, flatbed." Mondo reached under his feet and lifted the floor mat to retrieve a rolled-up baggie.

The party was at Pacifica Abalone Farm, out at Bard Beach, one of the local beaches just west of Río Estates. Bard was a part of town known for hard living, where dime bags and Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil were the two most important accessories. This was perfect for Evie. She felt quite the escandalosa spending her first night out at Bard.

"Okay, okay, already." Evie was getting more impatient. "I'll take the friggin' bus back home if I have to." She pulled her corduroy jacket from under her. "Let's just go!"

“Whoa, slow down, Blue’s Clues,” Mondo said. “There’s no rush. We got our own party supplies here.” He dangled the baggie in front of her. “And lemme tell you, this mota is *mean*.”

“Yeah, just kick back, Evie.” Raquel leaned into Jose and draped her arm over his shoulders. “We got all night to party.”

“No.” Evie opened the car door. “I *don’t* have all night, and you know I don’t smoke that shit. Just forget it. I’ll just meet up with you guys later.”

“You’re gonna go by yourself?” Raquel’s question sounded more like a challenge than a concern.

“Yeah,” Evie said. “What’s the problem?”

The problem was that the last thing Evie wanted to do was enter some Bard Beach party by herself, scrappy blue hair and all. But of course, she wasn’t going to admit it.

“No,” Alex reluctantly sat up in the backseat. “You can’t be walking around alone, especially out here. You’ve got Río Estates written all over you. I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t look all R.E.” Evie snapped defensively. She resented that Alex, who was also from Río Estates, would say such a thing. Since when was he so “down?”

“You know what?” Raquel suddenly announced. “I’ll go too. I gotta take a piss.”

“*What?*” Jose looked at her. “But *you* were the one nagging for the new green.”

“Well,” Raquel said matter-of-factly. “When you gotta go, you gotta go.”

* * *

Evie followed Raquel and Alex headed down the sandy path toward the party. It was a typical fall evening in Southern California. The Santa Ana winds were already

kicking in, but the residue of summer was still in the air. Evie suddenly felt less irritated and more excited. *Yes*, she thought. *Tonight, the switch is ON!*

“I think everyone’s at the other end of the farm, past these tanks,” Alex guessed.

“I can hear the band.”

Evie stooped over one of the low concrete tanks. “What’s in these things?” In the moonlight, she could barely make out what seemed to be thousands of brown, rough-looking, quarter-sized organisms clinging to the tank’s walls.

“Abalone spawn!” Alex deepened his voice. “Very dangerous stuff.”

Raquel put her hand into the tank. “Man, this water’s cold—oh my God!”

Suddenly her whole arm was pulled into the bubbling seawater. Her expression changed from curiosity to sheer terror. “Oh my God! My hand!”

“Raquel!” Evie shrieked. “Alex! Oh my God! Help her!” She went up behind Raquel to pull her arm out.

But Raquel just started laughing and then calmly pulled her hand out. Both she and Alex busted up.

“Man, you’re such a sucker!” Raquel laughed harder and slapped her wet fingers on Evie’s shoulder. “That was a good one!”

“You guys are such jerks.” Evie tried to wipe her shoulder.

“It’s just baby abalone,” Alex said. “Look.” He stooped over and picked something off the sand. It was a shell, small, but iridescent and perfectly intact. “Cool, right?”

Evie took the shell in her hand and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Let me polish it up for you,” Alex offered. “It’ll look nice on a cord or something.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Evie said.

“No problema. Think of it as a peace offering. Plus it would look good on you.” He took the shell back from Evie.

“Yeah,” Alex went on. “These tanks are just like a little nursery for the abalone. Check it out—it takes like five years just to get one abalone full size.”

“Five years?” Raquel said, looking over the tanks. “Damn, they must crank some bank here! If we got Mondo to cultivate this instead, we’d all be kickin’ it, pimp style.”

* * *

Alex was overreacting about Evie and Raquel needing an escort to the party, but that was Alex, always the overprotective gentleman. He wasn’t as fine or tall as Jose, and he wasn’t as funny as Mondo, but amid all the Flojos, Evie guessed she needed someone like Alex around.

The crowd was sketchy but far from threatening. The Bard Boys and their crew were more AA than A-list, really just a bunch of tanned homeboys who liked to party. All had done their prerequisite time in either County, rehab, or endless days hustling on the beach. People might picture a California beach party as a bunch of fit, golden-tanned teenagers gathered around a bonfire, but no such postcard existed from Bard.

The three of them filled up at the nearest keg and Evie quickly took a gulp from her plastic cup. She didn’t really like beer, and keg kind was the worst. Still, she felt she had some catching up to do.

“Hey, Evie.”

She looked up. “Mikey?” At first Evie didn’t recognize Mikey Regalado. Evie hadn’t seen him since they were both in grade school.

“Yeah, Mike.” He pumped the keg and directed the spout into a waiting cup. “How are you doing?” He looked Evie over. “Check out your crazy-ass hair and shit.”

“Oh, yeah.” She felt slightly embarrassed. “I sorta messed it up.”

Mikey’s own head was now shaved. Was he part of the Bard Boys? Evie wondered.

“Nah, it’s looks good,” he told Evie. “You’ve always been so crazy.”

“Really?” She was sorta surprised by his comment. She didn’t exactly feel exciting enough to ever be considered “crazy.”

“Well, look at *your* hair!” She smiled as she took drink from her cup. “Or should I say, lack of. Hey, remember—”

“E-*vie*,” Raquel interrupted. “I still gotta pee.” She grabbed her arm. “Come on, let’s go find the little girls’ room.”

“Well, looks like I gotta go.” Evie shifted her eyes toward Raquel to show Mikey her annoyance. “See you later, right?” ✓

“Why not?” Mikey lifted his chin up towards her as he continued to pump the keg.

* * *

As Evie and Raquel left to look for an outhouse, Alex went to watch the band. Just moments later, Raquel finally found the Porta Potti. She rattled the white plastic door. “Dude!” she called out. “Come on, already! You got a line out here!”

After a few moments the door unlocked and opened. When Evie looked up, she couldn't believe who stepped out: Alejandra de los Santos.

While the Flojos were one of many “social groups” at Villanueva, there was actually another group that, at least, *seemed* similar to the Flojos. That group was the Sangros. The Sangros, (short for *sangrona*, Spanish for full-blown bitch) were four girls from Mexico City. They were *born* in Distrito Federal, meaning they were *Mexican* Mexican, unlike the Flojos, who were born in California and were ~~Mexican~~ ⁹⁻ ~~American~~. While the Flojos were known for their flip-flops, the Sangros were known for their ~~stripes~~ ^{stripes}, as in their perfectly calculated ~~highlights~~ ^{stripes}, blonde highlights. Not blended or woven, but rather straight stripes the width of a straw that made for a severe contrast to their dark layered hair (Evie and Raquel had always thought the Sangros had the tackiest hair imaginable.)

Alejandra de los Santos and her friends Fabby ~~Torres~~, Natalia ~~Ramirez~~ and Charlene ~~Ruiz~~, were resident students at Villanueva. It took some hearty bank to be a resident student at Villanueva, but the Sangros had fathers who pulled powerful punches down in the distrito, so in addition to their green cards, the Sangros also flashed gold. ^o Between their ~~papás~~ ^o piggybanks and the Flojos's ATM cards, it was the typical struggle between the haves and have *más*.

Even in the doorway of an outhouse (and even with those horrid stripes), Evie thought that Alejandra looked glamorous, a lighter shade of Beyonce, ready to give a Grammy acceptance speech. She sported the typical femmy Sangro look— leather knee-high boots, a low-cut frilly blouse and, of course, *the hair*. In her Sanuk flojos and a tank ^{Camisole}

top that she didn't quite fill out, Evie suddenly felt, *¿cómo se dice? Sencilla? Mierda?* *okay,*
Bland.

"What are *you* doing here?" Raquel was already up in her face. "Shouldn't you be home watching *Sabado Gigante* or something?"

"What am *I* doing here?" Alejandra carefully stepped down from the outhouse. "Raquel, my second cousin Gabriel owns this farm. He *is* Pacifica Abalone. Shouldn't you be reading *Let's Go Mexico* and actually *go*?" She took her last high heel step onto the sand. "~~Raquel~~, I've been coming to his parties for years." She ran her white-tipped nails through her blonde-stripped hair. "I've never seen *you* here before."

Suddenly Evie felt nervous. Truth was, none of the Flojos were officially invited to the Bard party. Jose had snagged the info from a friend which, like so many of the evites he'd lifted for *pachangas*, led the Flojos to Bard Beach.

"Well, I gotta take a shit," Raquel gave Evie her beer to hold and pushed by Alejandra. "*Excuse me.*"

She stepped up to the outhouse and shut the door behind her. Evie was now stuck alone with Alejandra. This was a first. Usually it was Raquel sister-necking a Sangro while Evie stood sidekick.

"What did you do to your hair?" Alejandra asked. Her almond-shaped eyes were topped with a glittery green eye shadow. She looked straight at Evie. *into,*

"Nothing really." Evie smoothed down the front of bangs. "It's no big deal."

"I guess not." Alejandra snapped her gum before spitting it into a piece of paper she got out from her pocket. "So, how's the doughnut shop?"

"Excuse me?" Evie tried to sound as fearless as Alejandra seemed.

“Doesn’t your dad sell doughnuts or something?” Alejandra pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her suede bag.

“No, my dad *owns* a company,” Evie said, surprised that she was actually bragging about her father’s business. “His chain, all four stores, sells *pan dulce*, not doughnuts.”

“*Pan dulce?*” Alejandra laughed as she lit ^a~~her~~ cigarette. “You gotta be kidding.”

“No,” Evie said. “Why would I be?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know anything about fast food,” Alejandra took her first pull off her cigarette. “My family’s more scholarly, I guess. My father’s VP at U.N.A.M. in Mexico.” Alejandra smiled smugly. “La Universidad Nacional –“

“I know what U.N.A.M. means.” Evie’s pride abruptly cut her off.

“Okay,” Alejandra pursed her lips. “So, as I was *saying*, I’m going to be doing an internship at Cal State Channel Islands this semester.”

“Good for you, Alejandra,” Evie answered, looking up at the outhouse. What was taking Raquel so long? *

“Yeah,” Alejandra blew smoke upward. “They’re getting a new chancellor soon, Dr. Frank de LaFuente.”

“*Frank* de LaFuente?” Evie asked.

“*Claro*. I might be working with him directly. Then I’m gonna apply for a internship at Yale next summer and—”

But Evie wasn’t listening anymore. When she heard the name Frank de LaFuente, she felt her stomach drop *hard*. Frank de LaFuente was Dee Dee’s father. Dee Dee had been Evie and Raquel’s best friend when they were little girls growing up in Río Estates.

Raquel was Evie's official best friend now, but Dee Dee was actually the closest friend Evie ever had. Evie had practically lived at the de LaFuentes'. Evie hated to admit it, but when they were little, Evie had always wished Dee Dee's mother were her own. Margaret de LaFuente didn't put on airs like Evie's mom, and Margaret was always home, always around to talk instead of chasing department store sales. But when Dee Dee was twelve, Margaret got sick, like, really sick, and died. Then Dee Dee and her father moved out of California and Evie hadn't heard from her in the last four years. Dee Dee never answered Evie's e-mails or returned her calls. Evie still didn't understand exactly what happened. Just hearing Dee Dee's name gave Evie a stomach ache.

Suddenly the Porta Potti door opened and Raquel stepped out, zipping up her jeans.

"What," she said to Alejandra. "You still here?"

"You know what?" Alejandra bent her elbow to her side and held her cigarette out. "I think Gabriel would just *love* to meet some gate-crashers. Why don't you and your little blue baya stay put here by the toilets and I'll go get him?" She pushed by both of them.

As soon as Alejandra took off, Evie snapped at Raquel, "Why did you do that? You're gonna get us kicked out!"

"Nah." Raquel drank her beer calmly. "If it's the Gabriel I'm thinking of, and I'm sure it is, he won't kick us out. I've partied before with some older dude named Gabriel who said he had a fish farm out this way—it must be the same guy. Besides, a first-rate dope buddy is definitely more important than some second-rate second cousin."

“Did you hear what Alejandra said?” Evie asked as they walked away from the Porta Potti. “About Dee Dee’s dad, like, being at Channel Islands?”

“Yeah, I heard,” Raquel said. “How come you didn’t know?”

Evie shrugged. She felt foolish. “Doesn’t your dad keep in touch with Dee Dee’s?”

“We get Christmas cards,” Raquel admitted. “Some family photo with a pre-printed signature that you just know was sent by some assistant.”

Evie’s heart sank. Her family had received the same type of card for the past few years. She always looked for a handwritten note from Dee Dee but never found one. She brought her cup to her lips and tapped the last trail of foam into her mouth. This was not the kind of evening she had expected.

“Yeah, and I thought you were, like, best friends,” Raquel continued.

“We were,” Evie said. “I mean, all three of us were.”

“No.” Raquel shook her head. “You and Dee were always tighter. I would’ve thought she’d call you right away.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So . . .” Raquel drank more beer. “You wanna go check out the band?”

Evie threw her cup on the ground. “Nah, not really.” She crossed her arms. She suddenly felt cold. “You wanna go get more beer?”

Raquel made a face. “Nah, not feeling it.”

Evie looked around. She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to leave the party, but she sure as hell didn’t want to stand around talking with Raquel. She was making her feel worse. Evie looked at her watch: 11 p.m. She still had an hour and a half.

Really, an hour when you counted how long it would take to gather everyone up and make the drive back to Río Estates.

“You know what?” Evie said. “Let’s go back to Mondo’s car.”

“Mondo’s *car*?” Raquel raised one eyebrow. “*You* wanna go back with Mondo and Jose? You know, they aren’t just ‘hanging out.’”

“Of course I know that,” Evie snapped. “I’m not an idiot, Raquel.”

“I’m not saying you are. It’s just—”

“You know what?” Evie interrupted. “This night wouldn’t be such a big deal if I hadn’t just been grounded for two weeks and that was your fault. If I hadn’t listened to you at Tracy Tankerson’s party, I would’ve been home on time. And *then* you didn’t even have the decency to call the first night I get to go out. Why is it such a problem that I want to have a really good time tonight?” Evie couldn’t believe how emotional she was getting in front of Raquel.

Now both of Raquel’s eyebrows were raised. “There’s no problem,” she answered coolly. “I just didn’t realize you were having such a lousy time, that’s all.”

“Well, I am. It’s my first night out in weeks and I was all looking forward to being out with my friends and then I gotta find out all this about Dee Dee from Alejandra—” Evie stopped herself. She was on the verge of tears. “Let’s just go back to the damn car.”

“I ain’t stopping you.” Raquel inhaled uncomfortably.

“Okay,” Evie said. “So, let’s just go already.”

And for once, it was Evie who grabbed Raquel by the arm and took the lead.

The next morning, Evie awoke to her mother bursting into her bedroom.

“E-vie!” she said. “Get up. It’s late.” She opened Evie’s white wooden shutters, *and* ^{ed} flinching when her ~~plastic~~ glove-covered fingers came away covered in dust. “Ewww!”
Evie, this is disgusting.”

“Mom.” Evie rolled over on her side and covered her eyes with her sheet. Her head was throbbing, and her mother’s loud voice was making it worse. “Why do you have to break out the negativity so early?”

“Early?” Evie’s mother crossed the now sun-drenched room. She was carrying some kind of carpet cleaner. “It’s already past eleven, and I’ve got to get in here to clean.”

“Mom, *no*,” Evie whined. “I don’t want you rummaging through all my stuff. I can clean my own room.”

“No, you can’t.” Evie’s mother walked into Evie’s bathroom and pulled a bottle of bleach from under the sink. “You know that Lindsay’s off today and somebody’s gotta work on these carpet stains.” She came out of the bathroom and then spied something on the carpet, crouched down, and pulled up a ball of ~~surf~~ wax that had been embedded in the carpet. The wax had collected Molesto’s long, thick black hairs and God knew what else. “Evie, what *is* this?”

✓ “Sex wax,” Evie rubbed her eyes.

“Sex *what*?” her mother immediately dropped it.

“No,” Evie couldn’t help but laugh. “Mr. Zogs. It’s wax for my surfboard.”

"Oh." Her mother didn't bother to pick it up again. "The board your father paid almost a thousand for and you have yet to use?" She wiped her fingers on her pants. ✓

Fortunately for Evie, her cell phone started ringing. *Mos on the cell*

"Evie," her mother began as Evie leaned over to get her phone from the pile of last night's clothes. "I told you I don't want your friends calling your cell when you're home. When you start paying—"

"Mom." Evie found her *cell* phone and saw Raquel was calling. "I have free weekend minutes and—" She flipped open the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Evie," her mother said one last time as she dropped the ball of wax into the bamboo-covered trash basket and finally headed out of the room. "Get up so I can get in here and clean."

* * *

"So I asked my dad about Dee Dee this morning," Raquel told Evie.

It took Evie a split second to remember what Raquel was talking about. "You did?"

"Uh-huh," she said. "And he confirmed it."

"Confirmed what, exactly?" Evie asked.

"That the de LaFuentes are definitely moving back to Río Estates."

"And he knew?" Evie asked. "Why didn't he say anything? Why didn't he tell you?" Evie had cotton mouth and her head was pounding like a mofo.

"Oh, you know how ol' Charlie Diaz is." Raquel yawned. "*With his money on his mind and his mind on . . .* nothing else. He isn't concerned with long-lost family friends."

In fact, he's actually known for weeks—he got an e-mail from Dee Dee's dad. And now my mom wants to have a little welcome-back party for them. She says ^{only} it's the proper thing to do, especially to introduce Dee Dee's new mom to everybody."

"New mom?" Evie repeated. The Gomezes had received an announcement of Mr. de laFuente's sudden second marriage but knew nothing about his second wife.

"New madre?" Raquel asked. "Does that sound better?"

"I'm really not in the mood for semantics right now." Evie turned to her other side and hugged her Hawaiian-print Mogu.

"So," Raquel said. "How are you feeling?"

"Totally dissed," Evie said.

"No, I mean after last night, with Mondo and Jose."

"Oh. Uh, okay, I guess," Evie told her. "I'm just really tired. Like exhausted, and my head is killing me."

"That'll wear off," Raquel said. "Just drink lots of water. You want me to bring you some *menudo*?"

"No."

"But *ay, mi'ja*," Raquel exaggerated her voice to sound slow and rickety, like a Mexican *vieja*, complete with a heavy Spanish accent. "*Pero, you need menudo. Mira, I bring you a steaming hot bowl of menudo now, sí? I make it myself for you, fresh tripas and all.*"

Evie laughed. "No thank you ^{ti} Raquel."

"No, but seriously," Raquel changed her voice back. "You don't need anything? More of the *perro* that bit you?"

perrito

“Ugh, no way.” Evie moaned. “I just wanna sleep more but my mom came in like a Room Raider at the crack of dawn and now she’s preparing to invade. I’m gonna have to take a nap in the friggin’ pool house.”

“Oh, yeah, that reminds me. My mom’s gonna be calling your mom about the welcome-back gig,” Raquel said.

“When’s it gonna be?” Evie asked.

“Next Saturday,” ~~she said~~

“You mean *this* Saturday?” Evie asked.

“I thought it was too early for semantics,” Raquel said. “But yeah, this coming Saturday.”

“What kind of party?”

“Not really a *party* party,” Raquel said. “It’ll probably be just my parents, your parents, and some other Callaway-swinging golf goons from the SCC.” She yawned again. “Just a little something.”

When Evie finally hung up, she had a knot in her stomach. Dee Dee was coming back. They were going to be neighbors again and most likely classmates, but would they be friends again too? All three of them—she, Raquel, and Dee Dee? It’d been over four years since Evie had heard from Dee Dee and, Evie thought as she looked at herself in the closet mirrors, people do change.

Evie

RíoChica: Little party tonight. Should be fun.

ShaggyMA: Have a beer for me!

RíoChica: What kind?

ShaggyMA: Anything but Coors.

The following Saturday evening, when Evie arrived with her parents at the Diazes' home, it was clear that the "little something" Kitty Diaz had scheduled was going to be a full-blown soiree. Evie saw two valet parking attendants setting up a station near the Diazes' mailbox, and several caterers in crisp white *guayaberas* were lugging an oversized cast iron *comal*.

"Oh, look, Vic," Ruben Gomez nudged his wife. "They're gonna have *tortillas de maíz*. Handmade."

"Kitty's going all out." Evie's ^{envy} mother rolled her eyes. "Again!"

Yeah." Evie's father suddenly frowned. "I wonder why she didn't order any of my *pan*."

As he rang the front doorbell, Evie's mother looked Evie over. "Oh, Evie," she said. "I wish you would take care of that hair. This is bad."

"Bad for who?" Evie asked. And actually, she *had* taken care of her hair, thank you very much. As Raquel had promised, she took Evie to see Viggo, who stripped all of the brown out and then dyed her whole head a nice shade of vivid blue. When Raquel suggested he also fix her cut, maybe add some extensions to fill in the thinned-out parts, Evie tallied the total bill in her head and declined. But Raquel pushed for the correction. "I can't have my best friend going around looking like a mauling victim," Raquel joked as she graciously paid the extra price with her credit card. "I have a rep, you know."

* * *

Evie's mother went on. "You could at least have put on some dress shoes."

“Dress shoes?” Evie asked. Did anyone even use that term anymore? “When have I ever worn *dress* shoes?”

“Well, you could have at least *dressed* appropriately.”

Evie felt she was definitely dressed appropriately. ^{Sure was wearing but} Tonight she wore flojos, her fancy crystal Havaianas, and a secondhand blouse that she had found at a *segunda* downtown, cream-colored and lacy. It looked perfect with her vintage straight legs, and she had even put on the pearl stud earrings that her tía Isabel gave her for her eighth-grade graduation. She knew Dee Dee would approve, especially of the blouse. As kids, they often went with Lindsay to the thrift stores downtown and loved trying on all the used bridal veils and *quinceañera* gloves.

“Vicki.” Evie’s father came to her rescue just as Kitty Diaz opened the front door. “Evie looks fine. Just drop it.”

Vicki Gomez started to scowl, but rearranged her face into a pleasant smile as soon as Kitty opened the door.

“Ruben, Vicki!” Kitty welcomed Evie’s parents into her house. “How are you? Thank you so much for coming early.”

“Sure, Kitty,” Evie’s father said. “We are at your disposal.”

“Hello, Evie.” Mrs. Diaz smiled at Evie. “Oh, look at you. Raquel mentioned you colored your hair. You’re a bluenette! *Very* creative.”

“Thanks.” Evie looked up at her mother and gave her a smug little grin.

Kitty Diaz resembled Evie’s mother in appearance and style. Both wore minimal makeup and had no-nonsense hair cuts intended to convey a career woman image, but the similarities ended there. Kitty Diaz was chapter president of Madrinas, the National

Latina Leadership Network and she had also co-founded Hi Tech Aztec, the software company, with her husband. Evie's mother, on the other hand, rarely lifted a finger except to point to which Isabella Fiore bag or Via Spigas she wanted the salesclerk to ring up.

As soon as Evie and her parents entered the Diazes' foyer, Raquel called down from upstairs, "Hey, Evie! Come on up. We can hang out before the serious alkies arrive."

"Raquel!" Mrs. Diaz looked up and threw her a stern look. "Act right! Remember, this isn't just some party for you and your friends."

"I know, I know," Raquel said. "I was just messin'."

Mrs. Diaz led the Gomezes into the kitchen. "You are *not* going to believe how much this caterer is charging me for the last-minute job," she said. "The cake-cutting fee *alone* . . ."

Evie started up the stairs to Raquel's room. "My mom said your mom might need help. Maybe I should offer to cut the cake? At a discount?"

"What you could offer is to give her an elephant tranquilizer and . . ." Raquel spoke from the side of her mouth. "I'm sure she has one somewhere in that panic drawer of hers." Raquel let out an exaggerated sigh. "I don't know why my mother always insists on throwing these parties. They always make her so stressed out and bitchy." She looked Evie up and down. "By the way, 'scuse me, Miss Teen Vogue."

"What?" Evie asked.

"Nothing." Raquel brushed it off. "You actually look nice."

"*Actually?* What is that supposed to mean?"

“Nothing.”

But Evie wasn’t convinced.

“Evie, I’m serious. You look cute. Dang, you’re so ~~sentida~~.” *Sentida*

When they got to her room, Raquel shut the door and held up a bottle of champagne. “Check it out. Veuve Clicquot. Kitty Diaz is sparing no expense on *La familia* de LaFuente.” Raquel started to uncork the bottle. “Oh, when I was sneaking it out, I forgot to get glasses. Looks like we’ll have to take swigs. Not very sophisticated, huh?”

Evie sat on Raquel’s vanity stool and took the first swig of champagne.

“Whoa, slow down,” Rachel said. “There’s plenty more where this came from.”

Evie took a smaller sip before giving Raquel back the bottle. “I just wanna loosen up.” She got up and flopped on her stomach on Raquel’s canopied bed. She flipped through the *Kerrang!* magazine [?] that was lying on it. “It’s so *wrong* that Dee Dee’s, like, back in Río Estates and still hasn’t called.”

“Have you called her?” Raquel asked.

“No. Have you?” Evie suddenly felt awkward and found a loose cuticle that needed attention.

“I don’t have her number,” Raquel answered.

“Well, she has mine,” Evie said. “I mean, at least my parents’. They haven’t changed their number in years. She has no excuse for not calling.”

“Ahhh.” Raquel took a swig of champagne and looked up toward the ceiling with a dreamy expression on her face. “And so the novella between the wayward friend and the forgotten woman left behind continues. *Dos mujeres, dos caminos* . . .”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, really,” Raquel said. “I just think you’re obsessing too much about Dee Dee.”

“Obsessing?”

“Well, maybe not obsessing.” Raquel took another swig from the bottle and passed it back to Evie. “But I mean, come on. What’s the big deal about Dee Dee? Even when we were little kids, you always had to be around Dee Dee. You were like Mary-Kate to her fucking Ashley.”

“That’s not true,” Evie pretended to be absorbed in reading the magazine,

“Don’t take this wrong, Evie,” Raquel said, putting on her authoritative voice, the one Evie knew all too well. “But maybe you just need a man.” She pulled a bunch of her hair forward and carelessly checked for split ends. “I was talking to Jose and—”

“You were talking about *me* to Jose?” Evie looked up at Raquel. “I can’t believe you discussed my love life with him!”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you *had* a love life.” Raquel teased. “When did that start?”

Evie took a bigger swig from the bottle. “Raquel, do not talk about me to Jose. I know he’s, like, the ‘love of your life’ and everything, but there’s gotta be some boundaries.”

“He *is* the love of my life.” Raquel frowned.

“Well, you’d never know it,” Evie said. “The way you two fight all the time.”

“We don’t fight,” Raquel snapped. “Sometimes we disagree on things, sometimes our disagreements get heated, but we aren’t fighting. That’s what you call passion, Evie. Besides, you sure aren’t one to judge a relationship. You’ve never even had one.”

The room grew quiet, and Evie felt uncomfortable. The last thing she wanted was to fight with Raquel, but it was always like this with her. It was always Raquel's way or the *calle*. She was never open for discussion, debate, or compromise. Even when they were ~~little kids~~. Evie hated it when Raquel acted like such a know-it-all. But they'd been friends long before the Grand Papa Clause, meaning Raquel plain got away with certain behavior just due to their history together. And you just can't mess with history.

Raquel stepped into her bathroom to switch on her flattening iron.

"So . . ." Evie continue to flip through *Kerrang!* and tried to change the subject. That seemed the only way she knew how to keep peace. "I wonder what Dee Dee looks like now."

"Yeah, I wonder," Raquel answered halfheartedly.

"Um," Evie scanned Raquel's room hoping to find something, anything, for 7. inspiration. She saw one of Raquel's fancy glass bottles filled with multi-color layers of sand. This one was in the shape of a genie's lamp.

"Remember when her mother had that Aladdin birthday party and insisted we all dress up?" Evie asked.

"Oh, yeah."

"Yeah," Evie continued. "She had just seen *Aladdin on Ice* or something like that, right?"

"Something like that." Raquel came back into the bedroom. "That party was the worst."

"I thought it was fun," Evie said. "You had on that really cute outfit, the harem pants and that halter."

"Hmm . . ." Raquel started warming up. "I guess at the time it was okay."

"Dee Dee's mom was so cool," Evie said. "She always threw the best parties."

"My mom throws good parties." Raquel frowned.

* * *

"Hey, Raq!" Jose was tapping on Raquel's bedroom door.

"Come in," Raquel called. "It's open."

Jose strutted into the room with an exaggerated pimp limp. Alex followed close behind. Both of them had on stiff baggy cords. Jose was in his usual Trunk Ltd vintage tee. But Alex wore a button-up shirt. And when Evie hugged him hello, she detected the distinct odor of cologne. Something woodsy and kinda spicy. Cute.

"Hey, hey, hey," Jose said. "So this is where the pre-party action is, huh?" He looked and when he saw the Veuve Clicquot he instantly balked. "What, no Cristal? Girl, you going bourgie on me?"

"Messi-can, *puh*-lease." Raquel gloated as she went over to lock her bedroom door. "This is just the beginning. Once everyone gets bombed, we'll have the run of the place. Where's Mondo?"

"Mondo," Jose said slyly, "had a *very* important drop-off in the valley. He might be by later."

"Oh, he'll definitely be by later." Alex said. "He never turns down a party."

Jose looked Raquel up and down. "Damn, Rocky." He whistled slow, eyeing Raquel's low-cut black camisole. "You sure know how to rock a fella!"

"You likes?" She twirled around, the sheerness of her tiered cami exposing maybe more than she wanted.

“What do you think?” Jose gestured below his belt. “Check out the Miracle-Gro!”

“Jose!” Raquel snapped. “Why do you always have to ruin it?” She went to the bathroom and got her flattening iron. “I swear!”

“What?” Jose looked at her, then at Alex and Evie, perplexed. “That’s a compliment. You want me to say you look ugly?”

“Just act right,” Raquel reprimanded. She leaned against the bathroom doorway while she straightened her long, wavy hair.

Jose cowered a bit before taking over the window seat in Raquel’s room. He looked out across the Diazes’ backyard and whistled again. “Check out the fancy spread downtown.”

“Didn’t my mother just go crazy?” Raquel asked.

“Yeah.” Alex sat on the edge of the bed, near Evie. “We saw some dude laying out flowers and some of those floating candles in the pool.”

“Ooh.” Evie went over to the window. “Lemme see.”

Jose was right. The Diazes’ backyard was pure swank. Their pool glowed in candlelight, and multicolored papeles picados hung across the yard from the Diazes’ fancy wrought iron and brick wall to their jacaranda trees.

“Are the cutouts custom?” Evie asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Raquel said. “Each *papel* has, like, a little scene from when the de LaFuentes lived here. There’s some of their first house here in Río Estates, some from the summers we all stayed in Cabo, and oh, that one of the Christmas we spent at Lake Tahoe. ’Member?”

“Hey, can I smoke out a little?” Jose interrupted, obviously bored.

“Jose.” Raquel pursed her lips and gave him a look. “Quit acting stupid.”

“What?” He pulled out some rolling papers from his back pocket. “I’m stupid just ‘cause I asked a question? Remember what Mr. Mercer said? There is no such thing as a stupid question, only stupid—”

“Boyfriends?” Raquel finished his sentence. “And don’t even get me busted by lighting up. If you wanna be high all night, you can just go home now. This is an important night—we don’t want any drama. Right, Evie?”

“Right,” Evie confirmed with an exaggerated single firm nod. She got back on Raquel’s bed. She lay on her side and propped her head up with her hand.

“Well.” Jose opened the window and looked out again. “Maybe I’ll get one of the bartenders to give me a lift home. Say, like maybe that sweet redhead setting up the bar?”

“What redhead?” Alex walked to the window and looked out.

“Ugh!” Raquel put her flattening iron on the bathroom counter and went over to Jose. She dropped her body onto his lap. “Over my dead body.”

Jose wrapped his arms around her waist. “Hey, I got nothing against necrophilia if you don’t.”

“My,” Raquel dug her face into his neck. “Such a big word for a little boy.”

“Dudes, get a room already.” Alex rolled his eyes. “Oh, wait, we *are* in a room already.”

Evie handed Alex the Veuve and he held it up to eye level. “This is dwindling,” he said. “We’re gonna have to get more.” He took a short swig and handed the bottle to Evie. “But don’t drink too much. Don’t forget we’re on DP tomorrow.”

To Evie, getting up at dawn on a non-school day was entirely out of the question. But Evie learned that DP, Dawn Patrol, was the time of day any serious surfer got to the beach. You staked out your territory long before the lineup got flooded with aggro locals (which they, living in Río Estates, were ^{sorta} definitely not—locals that is) and you nabbed hours of free parking, way before the meters inflated to weekend rates.

Alex was the only Flojo who surfed and he not only helped Evie pick out her long board but he had also promised to take her on DP with him. And as she'd served out her mother's sentence, Evie had actually begun to look forward to DP.

"Oh, no worries," Evie insisted. "I'm down for dawn."

"Yeah, that's what you *always* say," Alex said as he handed Evie the bottle. "But you have yet to go."

^{defensive}
"Alex, I've been grounded."

"Yeah, yeah," Alex said. "So how long did Dee Dee live in Mexico?"

"Almost four years." Evie took one last sip from the bottle. She was already feeling buzzed, and the memory of last weekend's hangover reminded her of a place she didn't want to visit again. "Dee Dee moved there when we were all twelve."

"Man, I'd love to live in Mexico." Alex softened his eyes and suddenly looked dreamy. "Like down south, Puerto Escondido way." ^{get my stake on}

"Well, Dee Dee didn't live in southern Mexico," Evie said. "She lived in, like, the Polanco District, right in Mexico City."

"Yeah, and you know she had to hate it," Raquel looked up from Jose's neck.
"Dee Dee's a total country mouse."

“Raquel!” It was her mother in the hallway. She jiggled the locked doorknob and spoke sternly. “Come out and join the rest of the party. We have guests. You are a hostess, and you are being rude.”

“Oh, *shit*.” Raquel bolted up from Jose’s lap. “I better get out there.” She called to her mother. “Sorry, Mom! Evie’s just helping me pin my bra straps down. I’ll be right out.” Then she turned toward Jose and Alex. “You guys wait awhile and then come out and meet us. And remember, be as tolerant of Dee Dee as possible. She can be freaky shy. And you”—she looked at Jose—“stay away from that redhead.”

* * *

Evie recognized many of party guests from the SCC, the Saticoy Country Club. Others were colleagues of the Diazes, fellow Hi Tech Aztecs who’d also made their money through computers or some kind of software technology. A lot of men, robust in stature and liberal with the cologne, had families and homes in Río Estates but held positions and, as Raquel claimed, *sanchas* up north, in their luxury Silicon Valley condos. Evie wondered, did that hefty new rock on Mrs. Coulhan-Reyes’s finger have anything to do with some hefty new guilt weighing down on Mr. Reyes’s conscience?

After they made the obligatory rounds of the party, the Flojos pretty much stayed to themselves. Evie anxiously watched the front door, Alex worked on sneaking more booze, and Jose tapped about every platter that came his way.

“What’s with your mom serving all this Mexican food?” Jose asked Raquel as he took a quesadilla triangle off a passing tray.

“What do you mean?” Raquel asked. “What should she be serving?”

"I dunno, but didn't the de LaFuentes just come in from Mexico? Don't you think they've had their fill?"

"You are so *not* bagging on my mom," Raquel insisted.

"No, I'm bagging on her choice of food." Jose took a bite and immediately made a face. "Ugh. What is this?"

"Jose, don't be a jerk. It's a goat cheese quesadilla. Obviously too refined for your Taco Bell palate."

"Hey," he warned. "Don't *you* bag on the Bell."

Evie couldn't stop glancing at Alex's Nixon. It was already seven-forty. The de LaFuentes were over half an hour late. Didn't anyone notice? Evie saw her mother with Mrs. Estes, admiring Kitty's new original Arturo, a sculpted metal art piece over the doorway. *Hmmm*, Evie thought, *maybe I'm the only one tripping over the de LaFuentes' rudeness?*

By eight o'clock, the appetizers of mini-chalupas and the aforementioned quesadillas were almost gone and everyone was toasty from an hour's worth of free booze. Charlie Diaz made an announcement to the crowd. "Okay, everybody, I just got a call from Frank." He was pink-faced from the heat and excitement. "They're on their way. They just turned on Camino Coral. They'll be here any second."

"What, did Frank forgot how to get around his old neighborhood?" someone called out, and everyone laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world.

A few minutes later, the de LaFuentes' car finally pulled into the Diazes' circular driveway, followed by a series of car honks to announce their arrival. The crowd let out shouts and cheers.

“Ah, man,” Evie overhead José tell Raquel. “~~That~~^{i Qve}’s so barri~~d~~^{droll}.”

Evie’s face started to grow hot. She quickly went to the bathroom to do a final check on her appearance and discovered that her anxiety was visible—there was a small sweat ring under each of her arms. *Crap*. That was the problem with vintage pieces—they were always made from some polyester blend that generated sweat and, worse, a mad stink. Evie grabbed one of the monogrammed guest towels hanging from the chrome towel bar and reached under her blouse, patting each armpit dry. She looked for deodorant in the Diazes’ bathroom cabinet and discovered that Kitty, just like Evie’s mother, bought the Trader Joe’s natural stuff, which *naturally* didn’t do jack. Evie heard more shouts and greetings. She quickly rubbed on the deodorant anyway and raced back to join the party.

When Evie returned, Frank de LaFuente, Dee Dee’s father, was already standing in the Diazes’ foyer. Next to him was a short, smartly dressed woman. Evie’s and Raquel’s parents were cooing over both of them. Frank de LaFuente looked a lot like Evie remembered: the same broad smile and thick, bushy eyebrows that were now a bit grayer. He still wore a three-piece suit and silk tie, his standard classic uniform.

“¡*Bienvenidos!* Welcome!” Evie’s father exclaimed. “Frank, it’s been too long!”

“Yes, yes!” Frank de LaFuente agreed excitedly. “It’s so wonderful to be back! To be home.”

“Look.” Evie’s father pushed her forward as if she were a prop of something. “Here’s Evie!”

“Oh, Evie!” Frank de LaFuente took her hands in his, stood back, and beamed. “*Mi’ja*, let me look at you! Such a beautiful young lady you’ve become! Look at this hair.

It's like the ocean!" He looked over at Raquel, who was standing next to her. "And Raquel, *¡tú también! ¡Qué bonita! Mira*, I want you both to meet my wife, Graciela."

Graciela was a stout, fair-skinned woman with dark eyes and dark hair cut in a short bob. Two large, ornate earrings swayed like ship lanterns from her ears.

What Dee Dee's father offered in warmth, Graciela definitely cooled down with her own ice. Her *brrr* factor was cranked high as she offered a lukewarm hello, surveyed the Diazes' home, and asked Kitty Díaz, "Is our Lexus going to be safe with those men outside?"

"Oh, yes, of course." Kitty put her arm around Graciela's shoulders. "We've used this company for years."

"*Buenas noches*, Graciela," Evie said with her best Spanish accent. "Soy Evie. Dee Dee and I have been best friends since we were little kids."

"Yeah," Raquel added. "We've all been friends since we were, like, seven years old."

"Really?" Graciela looked them over. Evie suddenly felt like a piece of silver-plated jewelry Graciela wouldn't even bother to try on. "What did you say your names were again?"

"Uh, I'm Evie," Evie started awkwardly. "And this is—"

"Evie?" Graciela asked. "What kind of name is that?"

"Well, my real name is—"

"Where's Dee Dee?" Raquel interrupted, looking around Graciela.

"You know how you girls are," Frank de LaFuente said as he reached over and took his wife's black sequined wrap. "We couldn't get her off her cell phone—she has been on that thing since we arrived. She's going to drive over herself in a little while."

"Oh?" Evie's mother looked over at Kitty Diaz disapprovingly. "Well, I do hope she arrives soon. Kitty ordered a *tres leches* especially for—"

"We're just excited to see our little Dee Dee," Evie's father said quickly. "Especially Evie."

"Dee Dee has her own car?" Evie directed the question to Mr. de LaFuente, but looked at her mother.

"Of course." Frank de LaFuente put his arm around her. "We got it for her the first week here. *Pero*, no worries, *mi'ja*. She'll be here soon."

Evie felt confused. Why hadn't Dee Dee just come with her parents? Why didn't Graciela know who she or Raquel were? But most important, she wondered as she discreetly sniffed to the left and then to the right, why hadn't she put on more deodorant?

* * *

By 9:30, Dee Dee still hadn't arrived and the party was dying down. The singer from the band from *un trío* that Charlie Diaz hired had shaken her maraca one last time and the caterers were gathering up the dessert dishes and what was left over from the *tres leches* cake.

"This is very rude of Dee Dee," she overhead her mother say to Evie's father. Her arms were crossed and her cheeks and neck were flushed pink. "Very inconsiderate."

Evie was surprised to find herself in full agreement with her mother. She couldn't believe that Dee Dee was being so thoughtless on this night of all nights. Evie felt Dee

Dee wasn't just blowing off the party, she was blowing off *her*. Evie's eyes started to burn with anger.

She walked around the party again and was relieved to finally spot Jose and Alex in the Diazes' great room. They'd get her mind off Dee Dee's absence and she immediately went over to join them. They were chatting it up with some older female guest and a server. Both women were laughing and speaking Spanish.

As the server left to gather more plates from other ~~guests~~, the ~~guest~~ switched to Spanglish. "But *ay*, no," she insisted to Alex. "Aren't you ever afraid? What about sharks? And those waves are so big. *Tan grande!*"

Her bangs were blown up high and her neckline was low. She had on a black (was that Lycra?) minidress and, in bold contrast, wore light blue, almost white, contacts.

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm a *big wave* surfer," Alex said, not noticing Evie had just joined them. "I mean, I'm no Laird Hamilton, but—"

"¿*Quién?*" the woman asked.

"Oh." Alex waved a hand dismissively. "He's just some surfer."

Some surfer? What was Alex saying? Laird Hamilton was, like, Alex's idol.

"Yeah." Jose smiled. "We should take you out with us sometime."

"*We?*" Alex ribbed Jose. "Dude, you can't even float." ~~He~~ turned his attention back to the woman. "I'll take you out and you'll be totally safe. I work at the pool. At the country club."

Yeah, Evie thought, *leading water aerobics*. *

"But I don't even know how to swim." The woman gave a helpless giggle and tugged on her tight mini, which was riding up her thighs.

That's he came in so muscular.

“Oh, I can help you.” Alex shook the ice around in his glass. “I’ll have you doing a few basics strokes in no time.”

“Yeah.” Jose grinned. “I’m *sure* he will.”

“You”—the woman playfully slapped Jose on his chest—“are gonna give me problems. I can see that already.”

Evie was being blatantly ignored and her patience was wearing thin. She finally offered her hand to the woman. “Hello, I’m Evie.”

“Evie?” The woman’s piercing white eyes penetrated hers. “Evie Gomez?”

“Uh, yeah . . .”

“Ay! Evie!” The woman set her dessert plate on a chair and wrapped her arms around Evie. She was suffocated by flesh, hair, and perfume. A lot of perfume. “Evie!” the woman exclaimed. “I’ve been asking everyone where you’ve been!”

“Excuse me.” Evie felt lost. “But have we met?”

“Evie! It’s me! Dela!”

“Dela?”

“Oh.” The woman threw an embarrassed sideways glance over at Jose and Alex.

“Okay . . . Dee Dee?”

“Dee Dee?” Evie couldn’t believe what she was seeing. This . . . this was Dee Dee?

“Oh my God, Evie,” the woman went on. “Look at you! Oh my God. Your hair! You are so crazy with your *pelo azul*!”

She put her arm around Evie and turned to Jose and Alex. "This little girl is the friend I was telling you about. Right here, little Evie Gomez. *Ay*, Evie, you are *so* cute. You never got any taller, did you?" She actually patted Evie on the head.

"Um." Evie's voice came out like a squeak. "Dee Dee, uh . . ."

"Oh, *mi'ja*," she said. "I'm so sorry I'm late. Don't be mad. I just could *not* get off the phone with *mi novio* back in D.F. He hates that I am here and he gets so possessive. *Ay*, I mean, *posesivo*. I hope American boys aren't that way." She gave Jose and Alex a coy smile.

"Nah." Alex smirked. "We let our women go as far as our leashes lets them."

"*jAy!*" Dee Dee gave him a sideways glance. "Now you too?"

"Um, Dee Dee . . ." Evie tried again.

"No, no." She put one finger over Evie's mouth. "*No one* calls me Dee Dee. *Por favor*." She frowned knowingly at Jose and Alex.

"So Dela." Alex was still all smiles. "I bet you've got some funny stories from when you and Evie were kids."

"Oh, yes, I—" Dela snapped her fingers to get a server's attention. "Over here," she called, holding up her glass. "I'm done here." She turned her attention back to Alex. "Let me tell you, she was my best, best friend. We did everything together and—oh, wait, I want you to meet Graciela, my stepmother. '*Ama!*'" she called. "'*Ama*, here's the friend I was telling you about. This is Evie."

"Oh, yes." Graciela looked Evie over again. "I met her earlier this evening. Very nice." She turned to Dee Dee. "Listen, *mi'ja*. Your father and I are getting tired. We are going to head home."

*you said
- Evelina*

“Already, *'Ama?*”

“Yes, yes. I’m still not used to the time change and the food.” She put a palm over her abdomen. “It’s not sitting too well with my stomach.”

“Ah.” Jose smiled. “The goat cheese quesadilla? Am I right?”

“*Mande?*” Graciela looked at him, confused.

“Oh, *'Ama,*” Dee Dee said. “These are my two new friends. This is . . .” She looked at Alex. “I’m sorry, what is your name again?”

“Uh, Alex,” he said, looking embarrassed.

“Alejandro?” Graciela asked.

“No. Just Alex.”

“You mean Alexander?” Graciela asked again.

“No, Alex.” He repeated, uncomfortably. “*Just* Alex.”

“Okay, *'Ama,*” Dee Dee interrupted as she gave her stepmother quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you later tonight.”

As Graciela ~~de~~ LaFuente started to leave, Evie saw Raquel slowly swagger up to them. Oh, man, where had she been this last hour or so? Somewhere, obviously, that granted her an all-access pass to a steady flow of liquor. She looked trashed.

“Uh, Raquel,” Evie started to warn her.

“Raquel?” Dee Dee smiled widely. “*Ay, Pansita!* Look at you!”

“*Pansita?*” Jose laughed. “Oh, my God. You used to be called *Pansita?*” He looked Raquel over. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Raquel looked at Jose, then hard at Dee Dee. “Who the *hell* are you?”

“It’s Dee,” Evie tried to inform her. “I mean Dela. Dee Dee.”

“Yes, it’s me, Dela!” Dee Dee held her arms up and wiggled her body.

Raquel squinted. “Whoa, what the fuck happened to your eyes?”

“What?” Dee Dee asked. The wiggling stopped.

“Your eyes,” Raquel said again. “Oh, shee-yat!” She covered her mouth and looked at Jose. “I feel like I’m talking to a wolf! No, no, one of those huskies. A Siberian husky!”

“Excuse me?” Dee Dee fumed.

“Oh God.” Raquel suddenly put her hand on her forehead. “I feel sick. Whoa, whoa . . . I feel really sick.”

“Raquel,” Evie said. “Why don’t you come with me to the bathroom?”

“It’s okay.” Jose put his arm around Raquel. “I’ll take her.”

“But I don’t wanna go . . . we gotta wait for Dee Dee,” Raquel whined. “Evie’s dear little Dee Dee. Right, Evie? Your best friend?”

“Oh, shit.” Alex looked away. “Here it comes.”

“¿*Qué es su problema?*” Dee Dee demanded.

“Nothing,” Jose said. “She’s just had too much to drink. Sorry ‘bout this . . .”

“Sorry?” Raquel pulled away from Jose. “Why you telling *her* sorry?”

“Well,” Dee Dee started. “We *were* having a nice conversation before you—”

“Oh,” Raquel said slowly. “Did *I* interrupt you? You macking on *my* boy? You were always this way, Dee Dee. Even back in Mr. Harrison’s class when you knew I liked . . .” Raquel covered her mouth and groaned again. “Ooh, I’m really gonna be sick. Oh, Jose, don’t let me get sick.”

“Well, baby, you’re gonna have to be sick before you can get better.” Jose led her toward the downstairs bathroom.

“What, so she’s like an alcoholic now?” Dee Dee asked.

“No, it’s just been a long night,” Alex said.

“Yeah.” Evie came to Raquel’s defense. “It’s been a long night and we’ve been waiting . . . all night.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault she’s all *borracha*?” Dee Dee asked.

“No, I’m just saying that we’ve all been excited to see you, and it’s been years, and we hadn’t even heard from you and now—”

“Wait, don’t put it all on me that your friend has a drinking problem.”

“*My friend?*” Evie raised her voice. “Dee Dee, I thought Raquel was *our* friend.”

“You know, Evie,” Dee Dee said angrily, “it’s obvious you’re having a bad night, and I’m not gonna let you ruin my party.”

“Ruin it?” Evie snapped. “Dee . . . Dela, this party’s been over for hours.”

Dee Dee looked over at Alex. “Alejandro, can you take me home?”

Evie also looked at Alex. *No, no, no.*

“Uh, yeah,” Alex said hesitantly. “But I thought you drove here.”

“I did,” Dee Dee said firmly. “But I just don’t feel like driving right now. Isn’t there somewhere we can go? Like for a drink or something?”

“Well, it’s not like Mexico,” Alex said slowly. “You gotta be twenty-one to drink here.”

“So, let’s just go somewhere. Take me to that beach you were talking about.”

“Sea Street?” Alex asked.

"Yes, Sea Street." Dee Dee pulled out a silver compact from her purse. Evie noticed the initials D.D. on it. *Oh brother.*

She flipped the compact open and checked herself in the mirror, patting the corners of her eyes with light beige powder. "I'm going to say good-bye to my father, and then I'll be waiting . . . outside." Dee Dee snapped her compact shut and turned to leave. She made sure her eyes didn't meet Evie's.

"Well," Alex said uncomfortably. "I guess I better take her, huh?"

"What?" Evie balked. "Are you out of your mind? You are *not* taking her to Sea Street."

"Well, where should I take her?"

Where should he take her? Evie thought. *God, Alex, are you totally tonto?*

"I mean," Alex said awkwardly. "I feel like it's sorta my obligation. She is a guest."

"So then just go, *Alejandro*." Evie dismissed Alex with a wave of her hand. "I didn't *realize* you were the goodwill ambassador for Mexico."

* * *

But as soon as Evie watched Alex go out the front door to meet Dee Dee, she didn't feel quite so tough and dismissive. She felt horribly betrayed. She felt like . . . nothing

piece
"Would you like a *slice*?" It was the same server that Evie had seen earlier with Dee Dee. She had a *slice* of *tres leches* on her platter and was now offering it to her.

"Uh, no. No, thank you," Evie said. "I shouldn't."

"Your friend." The server smiled playfully. "*¿Qué mala, no?*"

"Uh, which one?" Evie asked.

“*La sangrona*.” She laughed lightly as she looked after Dee Dee and Alex.

“The *sangrona*?” Evie repeated. “No, she’s not *that* bad.” But who am I kidding? Evie thought. Dee Dee seemed to have become a Sangro which, according to Evie, was *mala*. *Muy, muy mala*.

“You know what?” Evie told the server. “I will take that piece.”

After Evie took the slice, she took a deep bite. The sweet, milky moistness flooded her mouth, but she still couldn’t shake off the bitterness that seared her whole body. What had happened to Dee Dee? When had she turned into this . . . stranger? Was there anything of the old Dee Dee deep down? Or was she all fake contacts and tight clothes down to the very core? She took another bite and tallied up the score. Sangros: one, Flojos: zero. And Evie? More than anything, she didn’t want to be in the game.

5

Like most Californians, Evie knew that shake and bakes (Ca-lingo for the earthquakes that happen during ^{the} hot weather) are most likely to occur early in the morning. So the next day when Evie woke up to her glass-top nightstand rattling, she started to panic, only to discover it was her cell phone. She had left it on vibrate.

When Evie reached over and saw Alex’s face on the screen, she was surprised. This was big of him, she thought, to actually call after being such the a-hole the night before.

She also saw on her cell that it was already 11:03 a.m. The operative word here was *already*. When he’d left the party with Dee Dee, Evie knew that Dawn Patrol was definitely off. Besides, she thought as she looked at her vibrating cell, dawn had cracked

almost five hours ago. So why was he even calling? But as soon as the vibrating stopped, Evie couldn't help but feel a pang of regret. Maybe she should've answered it. Maybe Alex wanted to apologize, beg for her forgiveness, and admit he'd been a lousy friend at the party last night. Maybe—but then Evie stopped herself—who was she kidding? It was *already* three minutes after 11 a.m. If he was so sorry, he would have called earlier.

She tossed her phone on the covers and curled onto her side.

She looked at her Max surfboard in the corner of her room. How could Alex have taken Dee Dee to Sea Street? What even happened to Dee Dee anyway? The big mountain of excitement Evie had felt about seeing Dee Dee after so many years crumbled into one tremendous Malibu landslide. For one thing, Dee Dee didn't look even remotely like the best friend Evie remembered. No more long brown hair, freckles, or the skinny chicken legs that had gotten her the nickname, *Popotitos*. But suddenly Dee Dee, Sangro look and all, was back in Río Estates and, most likely, would be going to Villanueva. How was Evie going to deal with this, this . . . Dee-lema? She looked at her cell. It was much too early to call Raquel, who would undoubtedly be snoring off a hangover.

Just then Evie heard the doors of the linen closet in the hallway swing open, followed by the heavy sigh she knew so well. She got up and went over to the doorway to her bedroom.

"Hey, Linds," Evie said. "What are *you* doing here?" She peered out from behind her door, in her cotton cami and cheeky hipsters. Lindsay had seen her in various states of undress hundreds of times, but she was feeling oddly modest for some reason. Maybe because it was a Sunday, Lindsay's day off?

“Oh.” Lindsay turned away from the closet. “*Good morning*, Lindsay. How are *you* this morning, *Lindsay*.”

Evie upped her playful challenge and said, as quickly and confidently as she could, “*Buenos días*, Lindsay. ¿*Como estás?* ¿*Por qué estás aquí?*”

Lindsay smiled, but turned back to the closet. “Your mother called me early this morning and asked me to come in, for the brunch.”

“The brunch?” Evie wiped the sleep from her eyes. “What brunch?”

“The ^{*small*}one for the de LaFuentes.” Lindsay looked at her watch. “In about an hour.”

“*What?*” Evie felt her forehead crease involuntarily. For all the times her face had gone into shock over the last forty-eight hours, she figured she’d need some major Botox ^{*in 3 years,*} by her eighteenth birthday. “The de LaFuentes are coming *here?*”

“Uh huh,” Lindsay answered. “You should go ask and see if you mother needs anything. She still has a lot to do.”

“Is Dee Dee coming too?”

“I don’t know, Evie.” Lindsay answered halfheartedly. Her only concern at the moment was choosing the right color of soap for the guest bathroom.

Evie slipped on some sweat-shorts, her favorite pair of flojos and headed downstairs. Hadn’t last night’s welcome-back party been enough? As a kid, Evie has always watched her mother trying to keep up with, well, not the Joneses, but the Diazes and the de LaFuentes. Sure Vicki Gomez’s husband owned a few bakeries, but she could host a get-together just as good as the wife of a scholar (e.g. Frank de La Fuente) or the CEO/owner of a software company (e.g. Charlie Diaz) and she always felt like she needed to prove it. Was her mother back to that?

When Evie entered the dining room, she had her answer. For one thing, the dining table was free from clutter. Ordinarily their California mission style table was littered with paperwork; Ojai spa bills, Santa Clara Church donation requests, catalogues from PawPrints, the *only* guide for high-end pet accessories. This morning, everything had been cleared away, and positioned dead center was an oversized clay vase filled with eucalyptus leaves and birds of paradise. A definite sign of impending company, or as Evie feared, an oncoming collision. What would she say to Dee Dee when she showed up?

Evie went into the kitchen and found her mother slicing and juicing oranges. Her short hair was wound in small hot rollers and she had a strip of Jolene cream applied above her top lip. Just how intimate was this brunch gonna be?

“What’s going on?” Evie picked up P.Kitty, who was rubbing against her shins.

Her mother looked up. “Maybe I should be asking you that.”

“What do you mean?” Evie immediately felt her guard go up.

“I mean, what went on last night? With Raquel?”

“What do mean, Raquel?” Evie scratched her cat behind his ears.

“Evie, *quit* answering my question with a question.” Her mother brushed her forehead with her arm to wipe away nonexistent perspiration.

Oh, please, Evie rolled her eyes, the AC was more like FF—friggin’ freezing—and how hard is it to place half an orange on a juicer?

“Raquel was throwing up all night,” her mother continued. “Kitty was worried sick wondering if she had alcohol poisoning and—”

“Alcohol poisoning? Mom, come *on* . . .”

“Do *not* interrupt me, Evie. How did Raquel even get the liquor? I better not find out that you were drinking.”

“Me? No. And who even says it was alcohol?” She struggled to protect Raquel, as well as herself. “Maybe the milk in the *tres leches* was bad or—”

“Evie! Stop it. When your father gets back I’m going to have him talk to you.” She pulled a paper towel from the roll hanging under the cabinet and wiped the Jolene off ^{from} her upper lip. She went back to juicing, shaking her head. “I don’t know, Evie,” her tone softened. “Your best friend is back and I would think you would have wanted to make a better impression. Granted she was rude, late to her own party, but we could be the more gracious ones. Dee Dee has gone through a lot, Evie. Losing her mother, moving to another country . . . and that Graciela’s no consolation.”

Evie took over one of the red-painted stools at the kitchen counter. She knew her mother was *partially* right, but she wasn’t about to admit it. Yeah, she, Dee Dee, and Raquel had once been the golden trio of Camino del Río. The set-up of their three homes, side by side at the end of the cul de sac, made it almost inevitable that the three girls would be friends. But when Dee Dee moved away, only Raquel and Evie remained close. And after last night, Evie had come to realize that Dee Dee had changed a lot, and not for the better. She had become the type of girl Raquel and Evie despised—the helpless giggling blonde, with the too-tight “hot” clothing. And those colored contact lenses!

Lindsay came in from the backyard through the French doors, carrying a plastic bowl filled with more oranges. “Okay, *Senora*,” she told Evie’s mother. “I got the last of them. I even checked around the trees, on the ground.”

“Oh, thank you, Lindsay. I think this’ll be enough,” Evie’s mother took the bowl and placed it in the sink. “Kitty doesn’t really drink mimosas anyway.”

As soon as Evie heard Raquel’s mother’s name mentioned, she stiffened.

“*The Diazes* are coming too?” she asked. “You said just the de LaFuentes.”

“I didn’t say that,” her mother said calmly. “Everyone is coming . . . maybe not Raquel. We all didn’t get much time together at the party last night and I just thought a more intimate brunch would be nice. I didn’t think of it until this morning, but fortunately everyone can make it.”

“Except,” Evie tilted her head, “maybe not Raquel.”

But before her mother could say anything, the front door opened and Evie’s father came in from the front room with Molesto clumsily trotting behind him. *Great. Now, here comes the lecture: “The Importance of Teen Sobriety” by Ruben Amilcar de Miguel Gomez.*

But Evie’s father had other things on his mind.

“I got ’em!” he announced excitedly as he threw his car keys on the kitchen counter and placed the large flat box on the dining table. “I was beginning to worry this whole morning was gonna be a bust.”

The box had come from one of the Gomezes’ panaderías. Evie had grown up with the white bakery boxes, each one with the image of a shell stamped on top. Evie went over to the table and lifted the box’s lid. She inhaled the aroma of fresh bread, but the *pan* looked no different from the sweet bread her father brought home practically every night.

“You got what?” she asked. “More *pan*?”

“No lard.” Her father corrected.

“Huh?”

He took a crispy *oreja* from the box and broke a piece off. “None of these have *manteca*. Taste it.”

Evie took a bite. The pan was still warm, but tasted bland, like the Jenny Craig dietary loaves the whole family had to tolerate during her mother’s occasional no-carb phases.

“What do you think?” her father asked eagerly.

“I think it’s good . . . for someone who needs to lose weight.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?” He frowned.

“I dunno,” Evie confessed. “It tastes weird.”

“Ah, you *don’t* know.” Her father waved her aside. “Lindsay will tell me. She’ll be honest.”

Yeah, as honest as her yearly bonus allows her to be.

“Come here, Linds,” he called over to Lindsay. “Try this.”

Lindsay stopped slicing oranges to take a bite into the same flat, flaky *oreja*. She immediately smiled. “*Ay*, Senor Gomez,” she gushed. “This is good. Really. I can’t even tell the difference.”

And of course, Ruben Gomez just beamed, which made Evie wonder: when was the last time *she* had done or said something that made her father’s face light up like that? It was always someone else who made her father glow. Like Sabrina, with all her achievements at Stanford; Molesto, chewing up all the Gomezes’ unwanted junk mail;

P.Kitty, who purred on command; and now Lindsay, with her little *cumplimiento* *insincero*. Blah. Evie rumped her lips.

"Hey, Vicki." Evie's father carried the box over to the counter. "Do we have a nice plate or something to put these on?"

"I am already one step ahead of you," Evie's mother sang as she pulled down a wicker basket from the top cabinet.

"Oh, that's nice. Real traditional. Hey, Linds," Evie's father started, "you need some coffee with your *pan*? Sit down. I'll get it for you."

"Oh, thank you, Ruben." Lindsay pulled up one side of her skirt and ~~checked~~ apron and took a seat at the kitchen counter. She looked over at Evie and smiled.

"Can I do anything?" Evie found herself asking meekly.

"Actually, yes," her mother said. "Go out and look over the lawn. Make sure Molesto didn't leave anything behind."

"Wouldn't Arnie have done that yesterday?" Evie asked, referring to the Gomezes' gardener. He was meticulous about maintaining their Marathon sod lawn and the last thing she wanted was to go outside and scoop Molesto's torpedo-sized turds.

"Evie." Her mother raised an eyebrow and motioned Evie to the backyard. "Just do it."

"Come on, Evie," her father chimed. "Just do the doo!"

"Yeah," her mother added. "It's the call of doodie!"

And of course they both laughed. As they did *every* time they repeated the same corny jokes about Molesto's overly productive intestinal tract. Times like this made Evie wish they had gotten that aquarium like her mother had wanted.

So while the comedic duo collaborated over how to showcase an array of sweet bread while a happy housekeeper got a mandatory impromptu coffee break on her day off, Evie pulled the pooper-scooper out from the kitchen utility closet and headed for the backyard. Little did any of them know that no matter how much she cleaned up after Molesto, it wouldn't matter. Now with the Diazes coming, a real shitstorm was on its way.

* * *

By noon, the Gomezes' foyer was taken over by Spanish, Spanglish, and what Evie called "*Ay Qué!*"

"*¡Ay, quuué guapo!*" Evie's mother exclaimed when she saw Frank de LaFuente in a stylish white Cuenca Panama hat. Seconds later, Kitty Diaz followed with a reprimand to her own husband. "*¡Ay, quuué malo!*" She playfully slapped his back when he said that the only reason Frank de LaFuente wore such a hat was to cover his bald spot.

A slightly jaundiced-looking Raquel was with her parents, but Dee Dee was not. Evie was partly relieved, but also concerned. Just how pissed off could Dee Dee be? And why did Evie even care so much? If anything, it was Dee Dee who owed *her* an apology, or at the very least, an explanation. It was Dee Dee who hadn't kept in touch while she lived in Mexico. It was Dee Dee who hadn't even bothered to call when she arrived to Río Estates and it was Dee Dee, who took her sweet-ass time arriving to her own party, and when she finally showed, humiliated both Evie and Raquel. Yeah, it was Dee Dee who had some explaining to do. Definitely.

As Evie's mother led the adults outside to the Gomezes' deck, Evie pulled Raquel aside. "So, did you know about this?" she asked.

“Nuh-uh,” Raquel said. “My mom just yanked me out of bed and insisted that I come. Like I had to make up for my so-called inappropriate behavior from last night.” She rubbed her temples in annoyance. “I am so *not* in the mood for idle chitchat and greasy chorizo.”

“We’re actually having eggs benedict,” Evie told her.

“Did your mom or Lindsay make them?” Raquel asked.

“My mom.”

“Well, I guess the chitchat won’t be so bad,” Raquel half-smiled.

* * *

The parents sat down on the back deck and sipped mimosas while playfully arguing over who could offer the de LaFuentes better floor seats to the Lakers. Evie hung back in the kitchen while Raquel tried to recuperate. If she knew her mother, it would be at least half an hour before Lindsay served brunch.

Evie filled one of her mother’s red-and-white kitchen towels with ice cubes and poured a can of warm ginger ale into a glass. She placed both of them on the counter in front of Raquel.

“You need aspirin?” Evie asked.

“Nah.” Raquel took the towel and held it to her forehead. “I’ll see how I feel in the next hour. I don’t like overdoing it.”

“Yeah.” Evie pulled up a stool to sit next to Raquel (at the counter) “You proved that last night.”

The morning marine layer of smog that often plagued coastal towns like Río Estates had burned off, making the afternoon, and the kitchen, sunny, warm, and bright.

"Ugh . . ." Raquel groaned as she pulled her Aviators over her eyes and placed her head down on her crossed arms on the kitchen counter. The sun's rays bounced off the counter's white tile. "What's with your mother's opposition to some simple kitchen blinds?"

"It's more like an opposition to, like, discretion or something," Evie said, referring to the large ornate bay-like windows that overlooked the Gomezes' lush lawn, bountiful citrus trees, and tiled swimming pool. "My mother likes to see what she's thought up and put together."

Raquel looked out onto the deck. "Look at them. Just like back in da day, minus the OG Sangro," she said, referring to Graciela.

"Speaking of Sangros . . ." Evie lowered her voice. She had been dying to bring it up just as soon as the parents were out of earshot. "What did you make of Dee Dee?"

"What did I make of her?" Raquel grimaced. "She's such a friggin' FOTB Sangro, that's what I make of her."

Evie knew very well, of course, that the de LaFuentes, fresh or not, hadn't taken a boat to travel back to California. Did Raquel really think Dee Dee had become a Sangro? Well, as much as Evie didn't want to admit it, if it giggles like a Sangro, squeals like a Sangro, wraps tight lycra 'cross the ass like a Sangro . . . it was, definitely, a Sangro.

"Do you know that Alex took her to Sea Street?" Evie asked.

"Sea Street?" Raquel looked up. "When?"

"Last night. After the party. She practically ordered him."

"Stupid Alex." Raquel shook her head in disgust. "That dude be dense. It's a good thing she didn't tell Jose to do anything. I'd have beat her ass." Raquel put her head back

If anything . . .

Sea Street is Flajo zone

on her folded arms. “We gotta steer clear of her. I mean it, Evie. She’s not the same friend we thought we knew.”

“It seems that way,” Evie reluctantly agreed.

“*Seems?*” Raquel lifted her head up again. “As if there was any suspicion she wasn’t? Evie, you have to realize that she *was* a friend, *used* to be a friend, but times, obviously, have changed. We gotta have each other’s backs.”

“I *know*, Raquel.”

Fortunately, just then, Evie’s mother announced that brunch was ready. Evie welcomed the interruption and got up to go outside with Raquel.

~~Evie and Raquel~~ took seats at the smaller patio table that was pushed up against the end of the main table, where all the parents sat. Evie noticed that Lindsay had set an additional place setting for Dee Dee.

Evie started to put some melon salsa on her plate.

benedict “What do you even need ol’ Dee Dee for?” Raquel continued as she poured some orange juice for herself. “Hey,”—she flashed a goony larger than life smile—“you got me.” Evie knew, in Raquel’s condition, it must have just killed her head. “Look,” Raquel went on. “I’ll even remove all this little nasty avo for you.” She started to pick out the cubes of avocado from Evie’s plate.

“Hey,” Evie playfully pushed her fingers away. “Get your grubby *paws* outta my food!”

As soon as Lindsay placed individually prepared servings of eggs benedict in front of everyone, the brunch officially started. Evie’s father welcomed the de LaFuentes

back to Río Estates for the umpteenth time and then Evie's mother got on her own pedestal.

"I'll have you know," her mother proudly pointed out with a champagne glass in her hand, "that just about everything on the table came from our own backyard—the tomatoes, the *aguacate*, and oh, even the orange juice. We squeezed it this morning."

"¡Ay!" Charlie Diaz feigned pain and pretended to spit an orange seed into a napkin. "And these *semillas*, *también*? I think I broke a crown!"

Everyone laughed, ~~minus Graciela, who just smiled.~~

"So," Frank de LaFuente asked as he passed the carafe of orange juice. "How's Sabrina? How is she doing at Stanford?"

"Oh, just great," Evie's father said, cutting into his eggs. "She made the dean's list and was just elected president of her sorority."

"See," Frank de LaFuente knowingly addressed both tables, using his fork to make his point. "That girl was always a go-getter. She did things right, stayed on a path. There are Mexi-can'ts and Mexi-cans. And she's definitely a Mexi-can."

The adults laughed, ~~except Graciela, who looked confused.~~

"What," Charlie Diaz asked Frank de Lafuente, "you writing for George Lopez now?"

Comedy Compadre

Raquel nudged Evie and rolled her eyes. "*This* Mexi-can *can't* take this cornball crap so early in the afternoon."

* * *

While Sabrina's accomplishments impressed everyone, the debut of Ruben Gomez's *pan dulce* garnered the most attention.

“Ay, no,” Graciela de LaFuente winced after her first bite into a fluffy *banderilla*.

“With all respect, Senor Gomez—”

“Grace, please,” Evie’s father interrupted. “We’re like family. Call me Ruben.”

“Oh, well . . .” Graciela looked at her husband uncomfortably. “My family calls me Graciela. Anyhow, as I was trying to say, I understand your intent, but . . . I don’t know how to say this, but *no lo mete*.”

“¿Mande?” Evie’s father looked genuinely confused.

“Let me say it this way,” Graciela continued. “The heart, *la corazón* of *pan dulce* is the *manteca*. It’s what holds the pan together, literally and figuratively. In Mexico, a *panadero* would never dream of playing with tradition.”

“Can you believe she’s calling your dad out in his own house?” Raquel whispered over to Evie. “Nerve.”

Evie sat up in her patio chair. Raquel was right. Her father would *definitely* have something to say about this.

But before Ruben Gomez could defend his beloved bread, a voice called out from the Gomez’s kitchen.

“Dad? Graciela?”

Raquel sat up in her chair. Not nervously, but aggressively. Ready for combat.

“¡Ay, mi’ja!” Frank de LaFuente directed his attention, and thankfully everyone else’s, away from the *pan dulce* to Dee Dee, who was coming out from the kitchen.

“¡Aquí!” He called out. “We’re out here!”

Dee Dee, in huge, green-tinted sunglasses and her blouse tied high, exposing ~~a~~ ^{her} tanned stomach, came out onto the Gomezes' deck. She wore her blonde hair pulled into a pony tail and carried a large paper bag.

"Oh, Vicki." She went over to Evie's mother and gave her a hug. "I am *so* sorry I'm late. I overslept and it was *such* a long night last night."

Raquel nudged Evie, "And an even earlier morning . . . with Alex, I'm sure."

"Plus," Dee Dee gathered a fake yawn together, "I'm still so jet-lagged. It always takes me so long to get over it when I travel. But look, look." She held up her bag of Noah's Bagels. "I brought some bagels."

"Oh, Dee Dee." Evie's mother stood up and took the bag. "How thoughtful. You didn't have to do that." She passed them on to Lindsay without saying anything, which meant that the bagels would remain in the kitchen for the rest of the morning.

"Um," Dee Dee looked over the two tables uncomfortably. "Where should I sit?"

"Sit wherever you want, *mi 'ja*," Evie's mother said. "But I think Lindsay already made a place for you." She gestured to the only available seat, across from Evie and Raquel. Dee Dee pulled out a patio chair and reluctantly sat down.

"So, what did I miss?" She kept her sunglasses on and focused her attention on the adults. She didn't look at Evie and Raquel.

"Here," Evie's father passed the basket of *pan* over to her side of the table. "Try some of my new bread from the *panadería*. It's fat free."

"Fat free?" Dee Dee looked appropriately surprised. "Are you serious? Wow." She eyed the last *hornito* in the basket.

But Raquel, seeing Dee Dee's interest, waited until the parents went back to discussing Ruben Gomez's new business venture, grabbed the remaining piece of *pan* and tore a bite off with her mouth. She crossed her arms and looked defiantly at Dee Dee. *Not* Raquel's most mature move.

"Ay, *qué* glutona," Dee Dee put her hand on her chest. "It's a good thing it's fat free, Pansita, 'cause the last thing you need is any more fat."

Evie looked over at her parents but they were clueless to what was starting up, or actually, what was continuing from last night. She sank into her deck chair and said nothing, and neither did Raquel. Actually, how could she? What with her mouthful of soggy, semi-devoured *hornito* mush. mush

"I'd rather . . . be . . . a glutton," Raquel finally responded, cramming the last bits of the pan in her mouth, "than some . . . *pinche puta* . . . right, Evie?"

Evie picked at her melon salsa.

"¿Putá?" Dee Dee narrowed her eyes at Raquel.

"Yeah," Raquel continued, shifting her attention between Dee Dee and the parents. "Ordering Alex to take you to Sea Street, you being all up on Jose at the party. Evie and I were just talking about you, before you showed up late, *again*. Right Evie?"

"Oh, really?" Dee Dee looked at Evie wide eyed. "Is that what you were you saying, Evelina?"

The earnest way Dee Dee asked Evie made her feel guilty. It was one thing to agree with Raquel in private, but quite another to do it right in front of Dee Dee. Besides, Dee Dee seemed so defenseless. Was it the lack of her alien-looking colored contacts that

made her suddenly seem more vulnerable, more human? Dee Dee's brown eyes patiently waited for Evie's answer.

"Well," Evie tried to find her voice. "Last night was bad. I mean, it was late and everyone was tired. And you were just saying yourself that you get jet-lagged and—"

"*What?*" Raquel spat under her breath. She looked over at the parents, but they were not paying attention. "Evie, how can you rucking say that?"

"I'm not saying anything," Evie tried to backpedal. "I'm just agreeing that last night was craziness and that—"

But Raquel wasn't listening. She pushed her chair back and stood up. "Mom, I gotta get home." She looked down, towards Dee Dee. "I feel nauseous."

"Nauseous?" Evie's father was immediately concerned. "From what?" The last thing he wanted was the suggestion that Raquel's nausea was linked to his forward-thinking, progressive *pan dulce*.

"Raquel." Kitty Diaz looked at Raquel firmly. "Sit down. You are being rude. We came together, we are leaving together."

"What?" Raquel challenged. "You mean we need to *cross the street* together?"

"Raquel . . .," Her father started.

"Oh, Kitty," Evie's mother interrupted. "If Raquel still isn't feeling well, she's more than welcome to leave. I won't be offended." But Evie knew that her mother didn't want the notoriously moody Raquel around in the first place. God forbid she got all asco on the teak furniture.

"You heard her, Mom," Raquel said. "Vicki doesn't mind." She got up and tossed her crumpled napkin on her plate. But before she left she made sure to lean over and give Evie a minor earful. "I knew you'd be weak. Thanks a fucking lot, *Evelina*."

* * *

"Oh, I am so sorry," Kitty Diaz started to apologize as Raquel left. "She's never been a morning person."

"Or afternoon or evening. . . ." Charlie Diaz looked upward in exasperation.

"And who isn't a little tired the morning after such a wonderful celebration?" Frank de LaFuente said as he tried to smooth over the situation. He looked at Kitty Diaz and winked. "*¡Y qué fiesta!* We can't thank you enough."

"Oh, you are so welcome, Frank." Kitty smiled before looking at her watch. "Oh, but you know, that reminds me." She looked over at Evie's mother. "I hate to do this to you, Vicki, but we should ^{*really*} get going. We have the rental company coming over to pick up all the tables and chairs from last night."

"On a Sunday?" Evie's mother ^{*seemed*} sounded suspicious.

"Well, if they don't come today, we'll be charged an extra day."

"We should get going, too." Frank de LaFuente pushed away from the table. "We still have a lot of unpacking to do."

"But it's still early." Vicki struggled to keep her brunch alive. "Why don't we at least take our drinks down by the pool? It's so nice out."

"Oh, it is," Charlie Diaz looked about. "But, *ay*, Vicki, it's gonna have to be another time Kitty's right. We should get home to meet Party Rents."

"Actually," Frank de LaFuente started, "Graciela wanted to see that *talavera* in your bathroom. It's similar to the tile we want for ours. Could we take a look at it?"

“Oh, of course,” Kitty Díaz smiled. “Come on over.”

“And we still have some tres leches.” Charlie looked over at Evie’s father playfully. “Some nice, sweet, fattening tres leches. No more pan dull-ce, eh, Ruben?”

As Evie watched the Diazes and the de LaFuentes cross Camino del Río, she actually felt sorry for her parents. She could see the dejected looks on their faces. Their only consolation seemed to be that Dee Dee, strangely enough, stayed behind.

“I’m not leaving Vicki,” Dee Dee said sweetly, still seated at the patio table scooping up melon salsa with hollandaise sauce. “Do you need any help? Cleaning up?”

“Oh no, Dee Dee,” Evie’s mother smiled weakly. “That’s so nice of you. But it’s not necessary. I’ve got Lindsay today.”

“And I really want to try the pan dulce,” Dee Dee assured Evie’s father. “I used to love going to the bakery, especially the original one on Colonia Road. Your pan is even better than what I had in Mexico.”

Great. Evie thought. *Add one more to the list of Ruben Gomez’s culo kissers.*

“Nah . . .” Evie’s father shook his head, but then, “*Really?*”

“Yes, really,” Dee Dee smiled, assuringly.

And with that, Ruben Gomez practically tripped over himself as he rushed to the kitchen phone. He wanted to make arrangements for someone from his bakery to deliver more pan dulce, sin manteca.

“That is so sweet of you to say,” Evie’s mother told Dee Dee during her husband’s phone call. “Ruben really needed to hear that.”

“But I didn’t just say it,” Dee Dee insisted. “I meant it. I guess growing up in California, in Río Estates, I just thought that’s how all Mexican things should be. Does that make sense? Even if it’s not considered *auténtica*?”

“It makes perfect sense.” Evie’s mother laughed as she took a seat next to Dee Dee. “Who’s to say what is authentic or not? Even in Mexico, you not gonna find a fish taco in Oaxaca that tastes like one in Ensenada, right?”

Dee Dee wrinkled her nose. “Uh, I don’t really know. I don’t like fish tacos.”

“Oh, uh,” Evie’s mother didn’t know what to say. “So, you must have had some fun experiences, adventures in Mexico City. I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Oh, you have to!” Dee Dee gushed. “People always talk about Paris or some other European place being so great and cultured and all, but nothing compares to D.F. You’ve never been?”

“No,” Evie’s mother admitted. “Before we had the girls, Ruben and I would always take trips down to Baja and then, as you know, we all went to Cabo . . . when your mother was alive,” Evie mother suddenly got a glassy look in her eyes. “We always had so much fun.”

“Yeah, we did,” Dee Dee said. (And she smiled a sweet, wistful smile. Her face softened) and for a brief moment Evie saw past the blonde hair and mascara-laden lashes and caught a glimpse of the Dee Dee she remembered from when they were kids. Evie’s father was right, the de LaFuentes *were* like family and Dee Dee *had* been like a sister to her. Dee Dee made for a better *Placida Dominga* than the *Sabado* ^{*Sangre*} ~~*Bitchgale*~~ from the night before. Dee Dee and Evie’s mother let out a laugh and Evie felt her heart squeeze in her chest. The way her mother acted toward Dee Dee—so calm and caring and

attentive—reminded Evie of a side of her mother she hadn't seen in a long time. Why, Evie wondered, was it always other people who brought out the best in her parents?

"Well," Evie's mother patted Dee Dee's arm as she got up from the table, "I better go help Lindsay in the kitchen. It's her day off and I know she'll want to get out of here as soon as possible."

"Are you sure you don't need my help?" Dee Dee looked up.

"Oh, no, *mi'ja*. It was just so nice to catch up with you. I knew it would be good to have this brunch, right Evie?"

"Uh . . ." Evie was caught off guard. "Right."

When her mother left to join Lindsay in the kitchen, Evie realized she no longer had a buffer. It was she and Dee Dee, one on one.

"So." Dee Dee pulled out her cell phone and checked to see if she had messages. "It's nice to see Lindsay. Remember we used to have a crush on her son, Alfredo? He must be, like, married by now, huh?"

Who was Dee Dee trying to fool, acting all casual like last night never even happened?

"So," Evie crossed her arms firmly. "What happened at Raquel's? At the party?"

"Yeah." Dee Dee still didn't bother to look at Evie. She was using her thumbnails to type out a text message. "That *Pansita* has always been so bossy and aggressive, especially to you, Evie. I don't know why she attacked me the way she did."

"Well, for one thing, you were macking on her boy."

"I was what?"

"You were flirting with her boyfriend."

“Her boyfriend?” Dee Dee looked up from her cell phone. Her eyes widened.

“¿Quién?”

“Jose,” Evie said matter-of-factly. “You know, the guy with Alex.”

“I didn’t know that was her boyfriend. He actually came up to me and started saying all those silly things first.” Dee Dee paused for a beat. “Is . . . is Alejandro *your* boyfriend?”

“Alex? No. We’re just friends. All of us, me, Raquel . . . there’s another guy, too. Mondo. And,” Evie added, “Raquel doesn’t like being called Pansita.” *-she was not at exactly fat*

True, Raquel had been chubby as a child, and four years later, well, what could you say? *Real Women Have ~~Second Helpings~~ Curves?*

“Oh,” Dee Dee waved her hand aside, “I was only teasing. In Mexico, a little name like that would be taken as an endearment.”

“Dee . . .” Evie almost corrected herself, but then continued. “We’re not in Mexico. And you know what? I’m already tired of hearing about Mexico. Was Mexico ~~being~~ so great the reason you never called? Or answered my e-mails? I mean, the whole universe doesn’t revolve around Mexico. You never cared about Mexico when we were kids, growing up. Now it’s all Mexico this and Mexico that.”

“Well,” Dee Dee went back to fidgeting with her phone. “I’ve *had* to care. I had no choice. And you know, it was actually nice to get away.”

“Get *away*?”

“Evie,” Dee Dee continued, “I hate Río Estates. When my dad told me we were coming back, you don’t know how horrible I felt. To leave my school, my friends . . .”

“Well,” Evie could feel herself getting more agitated, “I am so *sorry* Río Estates doesn’t compare with the cosmopolitan life you had in D.F.”

“Evie, no.” Dee Dee voice softened and she finally put her phone down. “It’s just being back here, in Río Estates, in this neighborhood. It’s hard. It reminds me of . . . my mom.”

Evie immediately felt horrible. “Oh, Dee Dee, I’m sorry. I wasn’t even thinking. I didn’t mean it that way . . .”

“I know you didn’t it, it’s just . . .” Dee Dee’s voice started to crack. “You know, I don’t want to get into it, but maybe I did come on too strong last night. But I *was* excited to see you, Evie. Really.” Dee Dee tried to regain her composure. “When I heard about the party I thought about of all the ways I could surprise you and Raquel. I didn’t know that right before the party I was going to get into a big fight with Rocio, my *novio*, and—”

“*Novio*? You’re engaged?” Evie interrupted.

“Huh? Oh, no. In Mexico,” Dee Dee stopped herself, realizing she’d referenced Mexico again. “I mean, *novio* can also mean boyfriend.” She suddenly laughed to herself. “I couldn’t be engaged! My father would kill me. Remember that time I had a slumber party and Pete Galindo and all his friends came over to crash it? My dad was ready to pound them with a golf club!”

Evie laughed.

“Oh, Evie,” Dee Dee said. “I’m so sorry we got off on the wrong foot. You will always be my best friend. Even in Mexico, I always, always, talked about *mi amiga mejor* in California. Really.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that to get Gomez points?”

“Really,” Dee Dee laughed. “You are *not* your father.”

Evie laughed again and then she and Dee Dee got up from their chairs and hugged. And unlike the hug from last night’s party, this was one *auténtica*.

7

Monday morning, Evie decided to ride to school with Dee Dee. Raquel hadn’t answered any of Evie’s phone calls or text messages on Sunday evening and she wasn’t feeling exactly thrilled about sharing a ride to school with her in Mondo’s ~~car~~ ^{Murad} Villanueva was a good thirty minutes northeast of Río Estates. Which would be worse? The silent treatment or a tongue-lashing from Raquel? Either one would be long and excruciating.

But as soon as Dee Dee beeped the horn of her VW Beetle and Evie ran out of the house to meet her, she immediately regretted her decision. Dee Dee’s iTrip blasted reggaeton from the speakers. If that wasn’t bad enough, the overwhelming stink of a highly fragrant rose sachet, hanging from the rearview mirror, took over the front seat. What was this? An FDS commercial?

“Hey, chica!” Dee Dee gave Evie’s shoulder a squeeze. “Qué cute you look! Your skirt matches your hair.”

“Oh, thanks,” Evie said. She didn’t think that she was wearing anything especially cute, just her favorite silver metallic Havaianas and a batik skirt she’d found at Tilly’s in the Esplanade, but she would take an early morning compliment just as quickly as the next sophomore girl who questioned her cute quotient.

"I was so worried." Dee Dee held a lit cigarette out the driver's window. "When my dad and Graciela told me I'd be going to Villanueva I thought that I'd have to wear a uniform or something. In Mexico, you have to wear one if you go to a private school. But we can wear anything at Villanueva, huh?"

"Yeah," Evie looked over Dee Dee disapprovingly. "Anything."

From her too-tight designer denim to the super-sized hoops that practically pulled her poor earlobes past her shoulders, could Dee Dee be any more Sangro? Evie caught a look of herself in the side mirror. *Could you be anymore judgmental?* What if all the students at Villanueva did have to wear uniforms? They'd be sporting black and red, the school colors (Raquel always joked that the school colors, midnight black and hootchie ~~red~~ *puta pink*, looked like they belonged on a garter belt). With a school dress code, even the Flojos would have to wear shoes every day (gross) and how long would it take for any of them to figure out who was worth each other's time or not? Would someone like, say, Mondo, truly be Evie's friend?

"So, what are the people like at Villy?" Dee Dee took a pull from her cigarette. "Lots of cute boys, like Alejandro?"

"Uh, not really." *Alex cute?* Evie guessed some girls might think he was. No, Evie took that back. Alex *was* a cute boy, but then again, he was *Alex*.

"He was never your boyfriend?" Dee Dee asked. "He seems to really like you."

"Oh, that's just how Alex is. He's just a friend."

Dee Dee laughed and tapped the tip of her cigarette in the car's ashtray. "In Mexico, I didn't have any male friends. As soon as I met Rocio he didn't want me hanging around other boys."

“Are you serious?” Evie asked. “I wouldn’t stand for that.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Why?”

“Cause, *Evelina*,” Dee Dee bowed her head sideways at Evie. “You don’t even have a man!”

Evie playfully punched her and grinned.

“Man,” Evie looked over the dashboard and backseat of Dee Dee’s Beetle.

“You’re so lucky you got your own car. I’m really hoping when I turn sixteen and get my license that I get a car.”

“Yeah, it was pretty easy for me,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, I just cried and cried about leaving Rocio, and my friends, and about moving, so what could my father really do?”

Evie continued to look around Dee Dee’s car and noticed that vase on the Beetle’s dashboard held a bunch of unlit incense sticks.

Evie ran her finger over the tips of incense. “You’ve always liked the girly scented things.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Dee Dee nonchalantly took another drag from her cigarette. “But it’s also so my parents don’t suspect. They would kill me if they knew I smoked. So would Rocio.”

“When did you start?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe when I first moved to D.F.? I don’t smoke too much. Really, just socially.”

“When you *first* moved?” Evie asked. “Dee Dee, you were still, like, twelve!”

“Was I?” Dee Dee teased.

As Dee Dee’s VW Beetle exited the 101 Freeway and entered onto Highway 33, reality finally bit Evie hard . . . right in the ass. And a disturbing image popped into her head. *Raquel’s face, contorting in anger, getting ready to shout at Evie.* Evie was going to *school* with *Dee Dee*. What could she be thinking? This was so not gonna fly with Raquel, a card-carrying grudge holder. Right between her fake ID and jambacard, you could actually see a laminate that logged long, hard residual resentment. The last thing Evie wanted was a personalized spot on Raquel’s shit list.

“So,” Dee Dee started as though she had just started to read Evie’s mind, “have you talked to Raquel since yesterday?”

“Nuh-uh,” Evie admitted. “I called her twice and sent her a text message, but I haven’t heard back from her . . . yet.”

“Yet?”

Evie looked out toward the lemon groves that lined Highway 33. She definitely was not ready to make a grand entrance at Villanueva with Dee Dee. Maybe she could fake sick and ask Dee Dee to drive her back home. Suggest they both ditch and head out for a day at Sea Street? *Hmmm*. That was something Raquel would be down with, but with Dee Dee? She wasn’t so sure. Could she ask Dee Dee to drop her off on the edge of Ventura Road so she could walk up to school by herself?

Highway 33 soon turned into Ventura Road, a two lane highway lined with hand-painted signs advertising local produce and homemade apple cider/“Wow,” Dee Dee observed as they drove though Ventura Road. “Nothing here has changed. It’s like the same when we came up here as little kids.” *toward Ohi*

"Yeah," Evie said. "I think Whole Foods comes here just to buy their supplies."

"Remember, when my mom took us horseback riding?" ^{up here?} Dee Dee asked.

"Oh yeah," Evie said. "That was always so fun. Oh my God, remember that horse, the white one you always got? What was his name?"

"*Her* name was Blanca."

"Oh, right. *Duh*. She was so sweet," Evie said. "Ooh, except when she bucked Raquel off? Ew, remember that?"

"Ooh," Dee Dee scrunched her face. "Yeah, that was bad. But she was *my* horse. Raquel should have known that, but she insisted on riding her that day."

"Yeah," Evie went on. "Raquel's hated horses or anything outdoorsy like that since then. You know, I think that was the only time I remember I ever saw Raquel cry."

"Really?" Dee Dee took another long, slow pull off her cigarette and looked over at Evie. "That was the only time?"

"Yeah," Evie said. "I think it was."

"Hmmm . . ."

"What?" Evie asked.

"Nothing."

Evie realized they were already driving up the main road to Villanueva.

Dee Dee put out her cigarette in the car's ashtray. "Wow," she looked ahead. "I almost forgot how beautiful Villanueva was."

"Beautiful?" Evie spent most of her waking hours stuck at Villanueva. To her, Sea Street was beautiful, her cozy bed on a Sunday morning was beautiful, even the

cheap looking, white-plastic dome that capped the Pacific View Mall was beautiful. Any place was more beautiful to her than school.

"Yeah," Dee Dee said. "In D.F. you don't get all this scenery, the fields, the oak trees y *más*. Everything is so cramped and on top of itself. When my mom used to bring us up here to the stables, we'd always pass Villanueva. Who knew we'd actually be going to school here together?"

"Not me," Evie admitted. "With my GPA, I'd have been lucky to get into ^a✓C school."

"So how did you get into Villy?"

"Let's just say," Evie confessed, "my father donated a *lot* of dough."

"I'm guessing not the same kind he uses for his *pan dulce*," Dee Dee smiled.

"*Exactly.*"

"Ay!" Dee Dee suddenly cried out. "*Día de los Muertos?*"

"Huh?" Evie asked. "What are you talking about?"

"There." Dee Dee's pointed her chin toward the front of the school.

Evie looked up and recognized two seniors from student council. Amelia Cleary and Laura Simon. They were on the ledge of the school's main marquee, straightening out the large, black block letters that announced Villanueva's upcoming annual Day of the Dead celebration and dance.

"Oh, yeah," Evie didn't see what Dee Dee's alarm was about. "We have it every year."

"I can't believe you're going to have a dance for *Día de los Muertos*," Dee Dee laughed to herself. "*¿Qué chiste!*"

"Why is that so funny?" Evie asked.

"In Mexico we wouldn't have a school *dance* for *Día de los Muertos*. It's sorta weird."

"Why is it so weird?" Evie felt defensive. "We know tradition, but that doesn't mean we don't know how to have fun."

Sure, Villanueva had its own spin of *Día de los Muertos*, and maybe it wasn't the same way *Día de los Muertos* was celebrated in Mexico. Students were encouraged to dress as their favorite dearly departed, which could be a beloved great granduncle ~~Gilbert~~ who died from heartbreak or a famous playwright who committed suicide after a career-killing review. But nobody at Villanueva was ever that romantic. Everyone just went as either Kurt Cobain or Marilyn Monroe.

"Of course," Dee Dee tried to explain, "it's just that in Mexico, we have church ceremonies, processions . . . to *really* reflect on the holiday. By November second, the streets are flooded with *cempasuchitl*."

"Zempa-what?" Evie asked.

"Marigolds." Dee Dee smiled as she pulled into the student parking lot. "Ay Dios, Dee Dee said as she drove through the rows and rows of parked cars. "We are never going to find a space."

"Welcome to California," Evie smirked. "Or should I say, welcome *back*."

Only a small percentage of Villanueva's student body had resident status; the rest were day students, like Evie and Dee Dee. So nearly every student who owned a car wanted the opportunity to flaunt their customized ride, even if it was just their mother's Honda sedan decorated with an anarchy bumper sticker.

identify
taped to the back window

Dee Dee finally found an empty spot and pulled in. But when Evie looked over, she saw that Dee Dee had parked her Beetle just four cars away from Mondo's Marauder and Alex's truck.

Mondo's car was parked across two spaces, as usual. Mondo, Jose, and Alex were leaning lazily against Alex's truck, talking. Evie immediately regretted that she hadn't returned Alex's calls. She could use an ally right about now. He had called two more times on Sunday. He sounded so concerned in his message, but her pride wouldn't allow her to phone him back. Saturday night's fight was the first official argument they ever had and she wondered if it had bothered him as much as it did her.

Evie got out of Dee Dee's car and couldn't help but notice Raquel. She was stretched out in the front seat of Mondo's car, casually twirling strands of her hair with her fingers and reading something. Was it *Kerrang!*, her favorite magazine? Or a DIY manual on how to snuff out a former friend?

Evie kept her head down as she grabbed her backpack from the backseat. Her plan was to pull Dee Dee the opposite way, around the other row of cars, to avoid meeting up with Raquel and the other Flojos. But as soon Dee Dee got out of her Beetle, she started walking *right* towards Mondo's car.

"Hey," Evie quickly tugged at her arm. "Let me take you the scenic route."

But it was too late. Dee Dee had already seen Alex.

"Alejandro!" She called out. "Hey!"

What could Evie do but follow? Alex looked over and seemed genuinely confused to see Evie with Dee Dee. *Yeah, I know*, Evie felt sheepish. *I gave you hell at the welcome-back party and now look who called the tortilla flat.*

“Hey, Alex,” Evie said, apprehensively.

“Hey, Blue’s.” Alex smiled. So maybe Saturday night’s war of the words had not been on his mind.

“Heeey.” Mondo gave Dee Dee the once over. “Who’s the new crema fresca?”

“Oh, Mondo, *please*,” Evie struggled to get her backpack on her back. “This is my old friend, Dee, I mean, Dela. She just moved back from Mexico City.” She then looked over at Raquel and lowered her voice. “She’s Raquel’s friend too.”

Raquel heard her name and popped her head up to look over Mondo’s dashboard. She squinted her eyes and when she saw Dee Dee and Evie, she immediately got out of the Marauder.

“Yeah.” Raquel slammed the car door with her hip. “She’s old, but she ain’t my friend.”

“Raquel,” Dee Dee tilted her head innocently. “What have I ever done to you?”

“Oh,” Raquel said slowly. “So now my name is Raquel?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jose laughed. “Mondo, check it out. Raquel used to be called Pansita!” He pinched Raquel’s side. She slapped his hand away. ✓

“Yeah,” Mondo looked Raquel over with a half smile. “I can see that.”

“Dude,” Jose laughed even harder, “that exactly what *I* said!”

“Shut up you two. You’re such idiots.” (She) turned her attention back to Dee Dee. “Dee Dee, don’t you have a nail to file?”

“Raquel—” Evie started.

“Don’t you have one to pull out of your ass?” Dee Dee shot back.

“Oooh, ” Mondo said. “These kitties have claws.”

“Yeah,” Jose rubbed his palms together. “Maybe they’ll kiss when they make up!”

“That must have been some party Saturday night,” Mondo looked over Dee Dee, again. “Sorry I missed it.”

“You didn’t miss nothing,” Raquel put her arm around Jose protectively. “And there’s nothing to see here. Just another sloppy Sang-ho.”

“A *what*?” Dee Dee raised her eyebrows.

“Raquel,” Evie finally stepped in. “Come on. Please. We used to all be friends.”

“‘Used to’ is the key word,” Raquel bit back.

“That’s actually two words,” Jose put in.

“How about these two words?” Dee Dee looked at Raquel. “Fuck *you*!”

“Fuck *me*?” Raquel spat. “Hey, you’re the one waltzing in with your blondie locks and fake lenses pretending to be a friend. But you know what? We didn’t miss you, Dee Dee, and you definitely don’t need you.”

“Well.” Dee Dee didn’t say anything for a moment. She finally looked. “Well, thanks for the welcome wagon. I can’t say you didn’t try.” She looked at Alex and then huffed away.

“Dela,” Alex called after her. “Wait!”

“Oh, don’t try and be all Mr. Boy Scout,” Raquel said. “What, you got a complimentary BJ when you took her out to Sea Street after the party?”

Mondo looked at Alex with a wide grin on his face. “Dude, you took *her* to Sea Street? After the party?” He held up his hand for a high five, but Alex didn’t reciprocate.

“Can you be any uncooler?” Alex looked at Raquel.

“Actually, yeah. I can,” Raquel smiled. “You want to see?”

“You guys, stop it!” Evie yelled. “God! Why are you acting so lame?” She glared at Raquel and then looked after Dee Dee.

“Dela,” She called out. “Wait up!”

“Yeah, Evie,” Raquel smirked. “Go after your little best friend.”

Evie looked at Raquel. She started to open her mouth, but didn’t bother when she realized she had no clue what to say. Evie held the straps of her backpack and sprinted after Dee Dee, past the final three rows of parked cars and up the stone steps of Del Norte Hall. By the time she had pushed by all the other students and reached Dee Dee at the top, she was out of breath. “Dela,” she huffed. “Wait. Please!”

Dee Dee turned around. Her face and neck were flushed with stress.

“What?” Dee Dee snapped.

“Well, for one thing,”—puffs of air came out from Evie’s nostrils—“you’re going the wrong way. Unless your first class is boys P.E.”

“What?” Dee Dee looked around Del Norte Hall. She looked flustered and confused.

“Dee Dee,” Evie started. “Look, try not to trip. Raquel’s just being a bitch. You know it, I know it, *everybody* knows it.” Evie was surprised how rational she sounded when inside her stomach was churning. “It’s just . . . look, let me just take you to the ad building. It’s way on the other side, but I can help you get set up and we’ll get you an official class schedule.”

“Is there any way I can officially not have Pansita in any of my classes?” Dee Dee exhaled. “In my life?”

"Dela, you gotta stop calling her that. ~~You~~ are only making it worse."

They walked down Del Norte Hall, the main hall of Villanueva, among all the other students. It was already October, the second month of a new school year, but everyone's clothing still exuded that freshly cut tag smell. Most of the students were marching along, talking to friends or listening to their iPods. When the first bell rang, everyone scattered. Soon it was just Dee Dee and Evie walking down the empty hall. The *tap tap tap* of Dee Dee's high-heel boots and the flip-flopping flop of Evie's flojos reverberated from the tile and off the walls. Neither of them said anything to each other.

Evie glanced over at Dee Dee. Under all the make up, Dee Dee looked tired and scared. ✓

Maybe it would be good if Villanueva had a dress code, Evie thought. Something involving sets of steel armor. That would be perfect because it was obvious that Raquel had already declared war.

Red
white

8

Dee Dee was right. Villanueva *was* a nice looking campus. If anything, it looked more like a Spanish style five-star resort hotel than a mere high school. Small classes were held in charming stucco bungalows with red brick tile roofs and just about every window had a panoramic view of the Topa Topa mountain range. Villanueva also boasted an Olympic-sized swimming pool (a three-million-dollar renovation since the big earthquake of (972)) and beautiful, beautiful guests (er, students) checked in from all over the world. Headmaster Covarrubias took pride in a school that reflected "a well rounded

and diverse student body that didn't tolerate intolerance." At least, that's what the catalog claimed.

During lunch time students were free to come and go as they pleased, but since Villanueva sat tucked so deep in the east hills of the county with only one road that led to one town that led to one Wendy's, most students just remained on campus. The thirty minute trip took too long for a forty minute lunch period. And really, how many square-shaped burgers can one person eat in a school year?

Evie calculated that between her first class, Spanish II, and fifth period lunch, she had exactly 238 minutes to organize and strategize. How could she continue to be friendly with Dee Dee while not causing more of a rift with Raquel? Dee Dee, her past, had caught up with Raquel, her present. Could they all have a future together? She looked up at the classroom's clock. She now had roughly 235 minutes. Evie yanked harder at her blue locks.

"Hey, Evie." Tracy Milne, another sophomore who sat next to Evie in Spanish. "You fixed your hair."

"Oh, yeah," Evie replied. Tracy didn't say it looked good, just that it was "fixed."

"Who was the blonde girl I saw you with this morning?" Tracy started to open her book. "Is she new?"

"Oh, her name's Dee—" Evie stopped herself. "I mean, Dela."

"Oh, is she, like, an exchange student? She looks like she's from Sweden or something."

“Exchange student?” Evie frowned. “No, she’s from Mexico. I mean, she’s from here. She used to be my neighbor, but she’s been living in Mexico City for the last four years. We used to be best friends.”

“Oh, she’s really pretty.”

“Uh-huh,” Evie said. “That’s what *everyone* thinks.”

Everyone, Evie thought, but especially Mondo. Evie would have to put him in his place before things got out of hand. She kept an eye on Mr. Galvan as she pulled out her cell to text Mondo.

U r a perv. B Nce!

But Mondo didn’t text back once the whole rest of the morning.

* * *

By lunch time, Evie didn’t have any big ideas or well-thought-out plans on how to make peace between Raquel and Dee Dee. She slowly trudged down to Veranda Hall, where the majority of lockers were assigned to sophomores. This fall semester, Evie didn’t have any classes with Raquel, but they always met Alex, Jose, and Mondo for lunch under Juniper’s Tree. Juniper’s Tree was a humongous oak with a commemorative plaque that claimed that Father Juniper Serra himself, along with local Chumash Indians, had actually planted the tree back in 1782/ right around the time he was building Mission San Buenaventura. It was the same plaque that Jose put out his cigarette butts on and what Mondo used to crack open his Snapples, even though they were twist-offs. So much for historical preservation and *respeto*.

But after the morning’s parking lot incident, Evie was sure she wouldn’t be so welcome at Juniper’s Tree. Besides, would she even want to go?

why?

She found Dee Dee and Alex waiting for her at her locker. She was relieved to see that Dee Dee didn't seem as upset as she had earlier. She was chatting enthusiastically to Alex, who was propped against the lockers. He had one thumb hooked inside the front pocket of his jeans. He held his books in the other hand. He leaned toward Dee Dee and seemed to be listening intently with a big smile on his face. And it hit Evie: *Wow, he is into her.* Of course, Alex was into girls, and when he was with Mondo and Jose, he could mack like crazy. But as long as she had known Alex—well, all of last school year and over the summer—he had never had a girlfriend. But now, seeing the way he was with Dee Dee, Evie thought maybe that was going to change. She really didn't know how she felt about that. But she felt her cheeks grow hot at the sight of them.

"Hey Blue's." Alex straightened up as soon as Evie appeared. "We were just waiting for you. I still gotta drop my books off, but I'll see you two at the tree, yeah?"

"Claro, ¿por qué no?" It was Dee Dee who answered, as she squeezed his arm. "Thank you again, Alejandro, for all your help."

As Alex had walked away, Evie thought, *At the tree?* Was he kidding? Had he been asleep that morning in the parking lot? God, Raquel was right. Dudes can be dense.

"So," Evie said as she turned the lock on her locker. "How's everything working out?"

"Everything is going great!" Dee Dee held her spiral notebook to her chest. Evie could see the names and numbers of a few students already scrawled across the back. When Evie first started Villanueva she felt incredibly lucky when Raquel teamed up with Jose. It gave her three more names to add to her cell directory—Jose, Mondo, and Alex, an instant doubling of her social contacts.

"I have Alejandro in two of my classes," Dee Dee continued. "He is *so* sweet, really helpful. And one of my teachers," she looked over her course sheet, "a Mr. Guereca, actually lived in the Polenco District, my old neighborhood. *Qué chido, ¿no?*"

"Yeah, cool." But Evie couldn't really pay attention. All she could think about was lunch and how that was going to pan out. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. "Since it's so nice out," she started, "I was thinking we could grab some grub and head out to the Art Den." ~~It~~ It was the only secluded area of campus she could think of, occupied only with horrible student renditions of Che Guevera and the Ventura coastline.

"The Art Den?" Dee Dee asked. "We're not going to meet Alex at the tree?"

"Nah, the tree is so played out." Evie crammed her books in her locker. It was only the second month of school, but already it was cluttered with issues of *SG*, *Kerrang!* and useless accessories from her former long hair days. "It'll be basically him and Mondo gabbing gears."

"Gabbing *what?*"

"Talking cars," Evie said. "The Art Den's our student art garden. It's really peaceful. You'll love it."

"Yeah." Dee Dee put her forearm next to Evie's as they walked towards the cafeteria together. "I want to work on my tan. I am so pale! That's one thing I missed in D.F., going to the beach. Remember we went so much as kids?"

"Oh, yeah. ^{Evie} And Raquel had that amazing beach umbrella? The orange one that her father got in Rosarito Beach?"

Dee Dee didn't respond, instead she focused on looking around the quad at the other students, taking it all in. More than a handful of interested guys looked Dee Dee

over while, Evie noticed, more than a handful of annoyed girlfriends tapped the back of their heads for realignment.

“Hey Evie.” Robert Karimi was walking towards them, but his eyes were on Dee Dee. Rob was a senior and rarely talked to Evie, but this afternoon he had all the time in the world.

“Is this your friend from Mexico?” he asked as he adjusted his square frame glasses. “Alex mentioned her to me.”

“Yeah, Dee— Dela,” Evie started. “But she’s actually from here. She just lived in Mexico.” She introduced him to Dee Dee. “This is Robert Karimi. He runs the student TV show.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee smiled and shook his hand. “*Mucho gusto*. You have your own show?”

“Just a small one.” Rob tried to play it down, but Evie could tell he was just bursting with pride. “It’s local, but it’s been the number one student-run show in the tri-counties for the last two years. You should come on some time.” Rob looked at Evie, uncomfortably. “You know, so, we could, uh, get her perspective on what it’s like being a student from Mexico, that uh, used to live here.”

You are so stretching.

So,” Rob smirked. “Your name’s Deedela?”

“No,” Dee Dee laughed. “My name’s Dela. Dela de Lafuente.” Dee Dee looked over at Evie. “Evie just gets sloppy.”

“Yeah, well let me know if you need any help with anything, like a tour guide or something.”

“Oh!” Dee Dee squeezed his arm. “You are *too* sweet.”

Evie didn’t remember anyone being so willing and helpful when she was a freshman, navigating the overwhelmingly large campus, which at the time appeared totally overwhelming. She quickly checked herself. *Don’t* hate!

As soon as they left Rob and walked into the cafeteria, they were hit with central air and G-rated hip hop. Evie surveyed the scene. She didn’t see any of the other Flojos around and because it was a nice day (*duh*, California), most of the students were outside. That is except for one group—the Sangros. They were at their usual table, at the far end of the cafeteria, in the corner. Alejandra, as usual, was the ring leader of storytelling. She sat up on the cafeteria bench, while the other Sangros, Natalia, Fabby, and Charlene, sat listening to her. Last year Raquel had nicknamed their table “the Stable.” “They sit around like a bunch of horses, preening and combing their manes,” Raquel had said. “And doesn’t that Fabby have kind of a horsey look about her?” ✓

“Oh God,” Evie lowered her voice to Dee Dee as they started to pass the Sangro Stable. “You have to watch these girls. They—”

“¡Ay Dios mío!” Dee Dee suddenly cried out. “Alejandra?”

Huh?

Alejandra looked over at Dee Dee and actually squealed. “¡Ay, *chica!*” Then all seeming six feet of her, rose from the Stable. “¡¿Qué onda, mujer?!”

She gave Dee Dee a double air-kiss as she hugged her. “I thought you said you didn’t know which school you’d be attending?” She slapped Dee Dee’s arm. “Why didn’t you shoot me a thread, *puta?*”

“Don’t be mad,” Dee Dee pleaded playfully. “*I* didn’t even know what was going on. Seriously. But I’m here now. Right? *Mira*.” Dee Dee put her arm around Evie. “You must know Evie.”

Evie wondered if there was any way she could morph herself into the cafeteria’s linoleum? Anything so she wouldn’t have to be a part of this *chica rica* reunion.

“Yeah.” Alejandra looked over Evie and then back to the other Sangros, who smirked in unison, tilted heads and all. “We know Evie.” Alejandra leaned over and ran her hand quickly through the top of Evie’s hair. “*La Loca* with the blue hair. Where your friends, *Loca*? *¿Dónde están los otros Flojos?*”

“The who?” Dee Dee asked as Evie jerked away from Alejandra.

“*Los Flojos*,” Alejandra repeated.

“The Lazies?” Dee Dee asked Evie. “What is she talking about?”

“Oh,” Evie started slowly. “She just means me and Raquel and, you know, Jose and—”

“But why are you called the Lazies?” Dee Dee covered her mouth and laughed. “What are you, like, a gang?”

“No,” Evie tried to explain. “Flojos ’ cause of our flip-flops. Remember when we were kids, we called them flow-joes?” She lifted her foot and waggled her silver metallic Havaianas in front of Dee Dee. “Remember?” But as she explained, it suddenly seemed all so juvenile to her.

“*Ay, ¡qué naco!*” Dee Dee clapped her hands and laughed. “That’s right!”

“So.” Evie tried to sound calm and composed. “How do you know Alejandra?”

Dee Dee linked arms with Alejandra. “From Mexico. Her father is VP of

U.N.A.M.” She looked up at Alejandra and grinned. “He helped my dad get the position at Channel Islands. She’s the reason I’m here!” Dee Dee playfully squeezed her arm.

“*Thank* you, Alejandra!”

Of course. Alejandra did say she might be interning with Dee Dee’s dad at Channel Islands. How could Evie be so *tonta*?

“So, Dela,” Alejandra turned her full attention back to Dee Dee. “You must sit with us.” She patted the cafeteria bench. “You have to meet my friends. *Otras chicas de D.F.*”

“*¡Claro que sí!*” Dee Dee looked at the girls and quickly took a seat at the table. “You don’t mind, do you Evie?”

“But I thought you wanted to work on your tan?” Evie asked.

“Blah!” She waved her hand in the air. “*Ay, no quiero trabajar hoy. Ni siquiera en mi bronceado.*”

The Sangros all laughed out loud, throwing their heads back in synchronized precision and then immediately smoothing their hair back into place. Evie didn’t understand the joke or the translation. Dee Dee didn’t want to work today? Not even on her tan? What was so enormously funny about that? And since when did she decide to break out with the Spanish Five? Yes, it was the perfect time to bail on El Stable, or should she [?] say, *El Establo*.

“Hey.” Evie didn’t take a seat, but rather looked around and placed her hand flat on her belly. “So, I’m gonna go get something to eat. I’m starving.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dee Dee answered distractedly. “Go get some *comida*. I’ll be there in a bit.”

“Yeah,” Natalia said. “Why don’t you get us something too, while you’re up? Do they sell your dad’s pan dulce in the vending machine?”

- yeah all six stores
mocking her

More laughter.

As Evie left, her face burned with embarrassment. Who did the Sangros think they were, making fun of her? And how could be Dee Dee be so flippant and naïve? Raquel would *never* allow them to talk to her that way.

Evie escaped to the salad bar. At least a meal of minimeatballs and shredded cheese stuffed in taco shells, her favorite, would be comforting. She got a plate and picked two shells from the steel metal tray.

“Nice friends you got there.”

Evie looked up and saw Raquel. She was on the other side of the salad bar, picking croutons directly from the bar with her fingers and popping them into her mouth. She didn’t look at Evie, but just glared over at the Stable.

“Raquel—” Evie started.

“I’ve been watching the whole thing.” Raquel spoke slowly between bites. “It’s so obvious that you used me just as a fill-in for Dee Dee. As soon as she moved away, I was ‘suddenly’ your new best friend.” She used her fingers to mimic quotes when she said *suddenly*.

“*What?*” Evie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “That’s so not true.”

“Even Jose agreed with me.”

“Raquel . . .” Evie was losing her patience. “Why do you always have to have Jose validate things about me? About us? What, like he’s some expert on, like, human behavior?”

“What are you saying?” Raquel finally looked at Evie. “That he’s stupid?”

“No, I’m just saying—”

“You know what, Evie?” Raquel clutched the strap of her shoulder bag tightly, distressing the distressed leather even more. She finally faced Evie. “It doesn’t even matter what you say because you’ve been *showing* what a lousy friend you really are . . . at the party, at your mother’s little brunch, and now today. You show up to school with *her*? How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Raquel, she asked me if I needed a ride. What was I supposed to say? It’s her first day of school and the way you just took off yesterday, I didn’t think I had a ride with you and Mondo. You never called me back. I called you twice last night.”

“Why should I have called you back?” Raquel huffed. “You know, Evie, yesterday we agreed, *agreed*, that we would have each other’s back. You said that she was not the friend we used to know. But as soon as she showed up at your house, batting her plastic blues, you fell for it. Just like always.”

“Fell for *what* exactly?”

“Evie, she’s been this way since we were little kids. She always had to get her way, she always had to have your attention. I was always the odd one out and you never cared.”

“Oh my God, Raquel, what are you even saying? And even if that was true, we were just little kids. And if you wanna talk about the odd man out, I mean, what am *I*? It’s always you and Jose, or Jose and you. *Or*, it’s you, Jose, and Mondo and I’m just tagging along. Besides, you haven’t even gotten to know Dee Dee.”

“Why should I?” Raquel clenched her bag strap still tighter, her fingers revealing

more tension and strain. “Evie, people don’t change. But you know what? I don’t know why I even care if you prefer Dee Dee over me.”

“Who said I prefer Dee Dee over you?” Evie asked. “Who? Jose?”

But Raquel wasn’t listening. She turned sharply away from Evie and stormed off, almost shoulder-slamming Alex, who was approaching.

“Man.” Alex looked after Raquel as she pushed by him to leave. “Looks like you’re up to your elbows in suds.”

“It seems that way,” Evie sadly agreed. It *was* all becoming a soap opera. She was tempted to call out after Raquel, but what was the use?

“You know how Raquel can be,” Alex said comfortingly. “You want me to wait for you?”

“Nah,” Evie half-smiled. “I’m not that hungry.” She dumped her empty taco shells in the nearby trash and nervously scratched the side of her neck. “I gotta study for a test anyway. I’m gonna hit the library.”

“The library?” Alex looked out the cafeteria’s windows. “On a day like this?”

Evie looked up at him. “Alex, I have my whole life to work, even on my tan.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Evie patted him on his shoulder. “Just go out to the tree. I’ll meet up with you later.” Of course, she had no intention of doing so.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Totally.” She tried to brush it off. “No *problema*.”

But it was a *problema*. It was her big *problema*. She could tell Raquel was angry, but that didn’t give her an excuse to act like such an outright c-bag. What was Raquel

thinking? She and Evie had been best friends for years; just because Dee Dee ^{was} in the picture didn't take away from that. Besides, if she remembered right, it was *Raquel* who started it all, by making fun of Dee Dee's contacts at the party.

Evie looked over at Dee Dee, who was now laughing it up with Alejandra and the other Sangros, as if *they* were the old best friends finally reunited. She definitely didn't want to go back and intrude on that little *comadreanda*. She looked around the cafeteria once more. *Nadie*. Nobody she really wanted to hang with for the remaining thirty minutes of lunch.

Maybe she really would go to the library, she thought, and maybe she would get a book on Mexico and see for herself just what was so great about all things south of the border. But then again, she thought, looking over at the Sangros, maybe she wouldn't.

9

Evie tried to remember how the battle between the Sangros and Flojos even started. As a freshman, Raquel had heard that Alejandra had been with Jose at some Sangro party, just a month before she, herself, hooked up with him. Jose had completely denied the whole thing, claiming it was just a stupid rumor that Alejandra had started. But according to Jose, Alejandra was hot for him; always throwing looks his way, leaning her body over his desk to ask a simple question in class, seductively nibbling the end of her pencil while her eyes burned a hole into the zipper of his pants. These candid reports from Jose drove Raquel crazy of course. She immediately issued a threat to Jose, Evie, and all the Flojos: if any of them ever associated with Alejandra, or any of her fellow slutty Sangros, there would consequences. And Evie, being a wide-eyed freshman—but

more important, Raquel's best friend—agreed.

* * *

After their episode in the cafeteria, Raquel continued to ignore Evie's calls and text messages. On Wednesday, Evie decided to call Raquel at home, on the land line, one last time. But she was curtly told by the Diazes' housekeeper, Vanessa, that Raquel was "*ocupada*."

Evie didn't believe her. She could hear the Hidden Hand blasting in the background. Since when did Vanessa do her housecleaning to political heavy metal?

Evie also soon discovered that Raquel must have enforced a talk-block on Jose and Mondo. Whenever Evie text-messaged either, C St 2day?, her messages went unanswered. Suddenly Evie felt like she couldn't even go to Sea Street anymore. Sea Street was the Flojo hang ^{zone} out and after a few hours of surf lessons, she'd only have to paddle ashore to deal with Raquel and her newly appointed velvet rope henchmen—Mondo and Jose. "*You can glance at Ms. Diaz, but do not speak, touch, or look her directly in the eyes Keep your eyes drawn down at all times.*" Mucho bummer.

Alex was not fazed by the Raquel-induced drama. He was, however, concerned that Evie was going to give up her interest in learning how to surf.

"How are you ever gonna learn?" he asked on the phone one night that week. "You gonna be like everyone else in California, with the old-school Señor Lopez pullover and that texturing surf paste in your hair."

"I don't wear surf paste!"

Evie touched her hair. Was it that noticable!

"You might as well," Alex clicked his tongue.

"Why can't we go somewhere else?" Evie asked.

"We can try somewhere else if you want," Alex suggested, halfheartedly. "But

Sea Street has the best break and baby sets for beginners like you. But if you are so afraid of Raquel . . .”

“I’m not afraid of Raquel,” Evie insisted, if only to hear herself say it.

Yes, Evie was, in a way, afraid of Raquel. But thankfully Alex didn’t bring it up again. And so the opportunity for a surf lesson fell by the wayside and her expensive long board, shaped by the one and only Max, gathered dust in the corner of her room.

* * *

dust bunnies

Days passed and Evie and Raquel continued to avoid each other. And, of course, Jose and Mondo, followed suit.

Evie started to wait for Dee Dee after school to get a ride back to Río Estates and as they walked out to the student parking lot, she would always try to make it look as though they were engaged in super-heavy conversation. But out of the corner of her eye, she couldn’t help but watch the Flojos prepping for Sea Street, remembering a time when she’d been right there with them. Alex would remove his long board from Mondo’s car, where he had it locked up during the day, and place it in the back of his truck. Raquel would be tying up her long hair and applying Hawaiian Tropic to her face and arms. And then they would all drive off as if it had always been that way, as if they were forgetting nothing or no one. Each time she saw them pull away, she felt her stomach sink. She was losing her friends, and she was losing access to the one thing she had actually begun to feel motivated about—surfing. Would she *ever* step into *líquido*?

* * *

But as Evie soon found out, she wasn’t the only one jonesing to get all up in water.

“I *have* to learn to swim,” Dee Dee insisted as they were leaving Villanueva after

school one Friday. “You won’t *believe* what happened today in swim class.”

“I didn’t know you were taking swimming,” Evie said.

“I didn’t know either.” Dee Dee pointed her car’s remote to her Beetle and clicked the alarm off. She and Evie got in. “I got transferred in and guess who was there? In my class?”

“Who?”

“*Pansita*.”

“Oh, yeah?” Evie tried to sound nonchalant, but her heart was pounding hard. She remembered what Alex had said about her being in the middle of a soap opera and she didn’t want to make things any worse. “Hey,” She unzipped the side pocket of her backpack. “You mind if I hook up my iPod?”

“You don’t like *reggaetron*?” Dee Dee frowned.

“No, it’s just I’m sorta in the mood for something else.”

“Okay. I guess.” But Dee Dee didn’t sound too happy as Evie unplugged her *iTrip* from the radio deck. “So, yeah,” she continued, “Miss Riley brings me in and tells me to stay on the steps, until she can work with me and there’s *Pansita*, *also* on the shallow end.”

“Yeah,” Evie smiled. “I’m sure she was crying cramps.” She knew Raquel’s gym excuses all too well.

“Exactly,” Dee Dee nodded. “All whining of cramps *y más* and then when I come in, she suddenly feels better. Enough to tell me, in front of everyone, that I look like a prostitute in my bathing suit!”

“A prostitute? She actually called you a prostitute?”

“Well, she said, ‘So where’s your pole and plastic heels?’ In front of *everyone*.”

Evie couldn’t help but laugh, but immediately stopped when Dee Dee threw her a look.

“It wasn’t funny, Evie,” Dee Dee said. “Everyone laughed at me. Then I told her that she could only dream of wearing a bikini like mine and then—”

“Wait, you wore a *bikini* to swim class?”

“Well, it was more of just a two piece. Why? Miss Riley said our suits only had to be a solid color. She didn’t say one piece or two.”

“Nothing,” Evie looked out the window so Dee Dee wouldn’t see her smirking.

“Go on.”

“So, I told her, ‘Poo Pansita Americans have such a problem with their weight. Maybe that’s why your man is always eyeing me.’”

“You said that?” She clicked her iPod wheel till she found Priestess and cranked up the volume. *Nice*.

“Yeah, ’ cause it’s true, Evie. That Jose es un fiera. Mondo too.” Dee Dee pulled out onto Ventura Road and talked louder over the music. “Did you know that they are *both* always hitting on me?”

“Who, Jose?”

“Yes, *Jose*. Eyeew, with that ugly spike in his chin. *Qué cochino*. ”

“Oh, he’s just stupid,” Evie said. “You just gotta just ignore him.”

“Well, Pansita’s gonna find out sooner or later,” Dee Dee predicted. “So anyway, before I know it, she just starts slamming water at me. I mean, not just splashing, like when we were kids playing Marco Polo or something. She was totally out of control.

Thank God Miss Riley came over and made her get out of the pool. That *Pansita* *está loca.*”

“Slamming water into you? Are you sure you aren’t exaggerating?”

“No, ask anyone. She totally freaked out.”

“I dunno, Dee Dee. Even for Raquel that sounds a little bit crazy.”

It was all Evie wanted to say. She didn’t want to get into it with Dee Dee.

“I am not exaggerating,” Dee Dee insisted. “And I cannot bear another day sharing the kiddie end with her. I *have* to learn how to swim.” She checked her side mirror and sped up on Highway 33. “*What* are we listening to? It sounds like Marilyn Manson on crack.”

“It’s Priestess,” Evie said. “They’re from *el otro lado.*”

“Oh,” Dee Dee suddenly looked interested. “*de* D.F.?”

at his own joke Christo
“No,” Evie smiled. “Canada, the *other otro lado.*”

Dee Dee shook her head and rolled her eyes. “So, anyway, I asked Alejandro over tonight. He is so sweet. He’s going to teach me to swim.”

“You asked Alex over? To your house?” *She* hadn’t even been to Dee Dee’s house yet.

“Yeah, around seven,” Dee Dee said. “You should come over too. My parents are going to the opening of the Hispanic Heritage Museum in Santa Barbara, so we’ll have the whole house to ourselves.”

When did *she* and Alex get so chummy? Sure, he had offered to teach Dee Dee to swim at the welcome-back party, but *she* didn’t think he was really serious. She felt a little left out. Dee Dee had already asked Alex, knowing they would have “the whole

house” to themselves. Evie was just an afterthought.

Evie couldn't help but feel suddenly possessive. The Flojos were *her* pals, or at least, a quarter of them still *was*. They weren't just some fast food friends that anyone could just drive up and order.

“So, Dee Dee,” Evie twirled the click wheel on her iPod, not really looking for anything in particular, asked, “how are things with you and Rocio?”

“Rocio?” Dee Dee looked over. “Bien. Why?”

“Just wondering. You haven't really mentioned him, lately.”

“Well, I've just been busy,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, it has been my first week of school, but I still talk to him every night and—” She looked over at Evie suspiciously.

“Wait, what is this all about? Do you think I like Alejandro?”

“No, not at all.” Evie felt caught. “I was just asking.”

“Evie, I *have* a boyfriend, back in D.F. Sounds like someone is a little *posesiva*, no?”

Evie shook her head quickly, “Me? With Alex? Please!”

“Evie,” Dee Dee started cautiously. “Don't take this wrong . . .”

Uh-oh. Here we go again.

“But have you had a boyfriend yet?”

“I've had boyfriends,” Evie got more defensive.

“I'm not talking Dean Paulger in Miss Temple's class. I'm talking like a real boyfriend who you actually go out with.”

“No,” Evie said. “I know what you mean. I actually met a guy, just this summer and—”

“What guy?”

“Well, if you let me finish.” Evie tried to think. What was ShaggyMA’s real name? What *did* the MA stand for? For all she knew he could be Shaggy Married Already or Shaggy Mal Adjusted. Or worse, Shaggy mammoth Monkey Ass. *Eew.*

“His name is Sean,” Evie lied. “And he lives in Santa Cruz.” There. Did that sound convincing?

“Santa Cruz?” Dee Dee’s face turned sour. “Evie, that’s, like, five hours north of here. How can he even be a real boyfriend?”

“Dela,” Evie said. “You’re one to talk. Rocio lives in friggin’ D.F.”

“Yes, but we were going to the same school long before I moved. We’re totally devoted to one another and we’ve been intimate and we’ve already scheduled all our school vacations so we can be together. Have you even *been* with this *Sean*?” She threw Evie a quick glance.

“*None* of your business,” Evie said.

“When we were kids, you and Raquel always tagged me as *la inocente*, guess I proved you two wrong,” Dee Dee smiled smugly.

“Okay, Dee Dee. You’ve proven your point.”

“You know Evie,” Dee Dee continued. “I was talking to Alejandra about you ~~r~~ —
—and—”

“*What?*” As soon as she heard Alejandra’s name, Evie became livid. “You were talking to her about *me*? Dee Dee, *don’t*. You shouldn’t be talking about me to anyone.”

“Okay, okay . . .” Dee Dee heard Evie loud and clear. “You don’t have to get your *chones* in a bunch!”

* * *

Just to prove she wasn't so *posesiva*, Evie passed on Dee Dee's invitation to go swimming at her house.

"Are you sure you can't come?" Dee Dee asked again later on the phone. "I was thinking you could sleep over and we could make elephant eyes for breakfast. Like we used to do as kids."

"No, I can't." Evie lied. She didn't want Dee Dee thinking it mattered to her what she or Alex did. Especially since she was so confused herself as to why she *did* care. "I'm really tired. Besides, I owe some e-mails."

"Oh, to Sean?" Dee Dee teased.

* * *

When Friday evening came around, Evie logged on to her computer to check her MySpace account just to reassure herself that she did have people in her life. "RíoChica has 120 friends." *Yeah, right. So where are they now?* As she looked over the photos in her "friends" network, what did it really matter? She was, after all, home on a Friday night and she wasn't even grounded.

But Evie's mood lifted once she went into to her favorite surf chat room. Shaggy was in the same chat. So she didn't have a man in her life, but a little male attention never hurt anyone. Shaggy was innocent enough. He lived far away and seemed only interested in early morning surf reports.

ShaggyMA: Hey chica, long time no hear. Sup?

RíoChica: School, drama, the usual. Hows surf in Norcal?

“Evie?” It was her mother, bringing in folded clothes. P.Kitty was at her heels.

“You’re not going out tonight?”

“Nuh-uh.” Evie didn’t look up from her screen. “Dee Dee asked me to sleep over, but I’m just gonna stay in.” She anxiously waited for ShaggyMA’s response.

ShaggyMA: 4 ft. Cold as balls.

Okay, so his webtiquette could use some work.

“How is she getting along at Villanueva?” Her mother put the clothes on the edge of the bed where she sat, uninvited.

“Who?” Evie asked.

“Dee Dee,” her mother said.

“Oh, just fine.” Evie answered.

Dee Dee *was* getting on divinely at Villanueva. She had a renewed friendship with Evie, her stable of Sangros, Alex’s attention, and she didn’t even seem to give a rat’s ass about Raquel or the inner turmoil she was causing Evie because of it. Yeah, *qué* fine.

Evie looked at her *comp* screen. Someone named LadyLeche had just entered the chat. *Ugh*. Evie was a hater of sexed-up screen names. Milk Lady? What was *that* supposed to mean?

LadyLeche: I got something to warm you up!

ShaggyMA: I bit u do

LadyLeche: U wanna bite me? Where?

“We should really have her over again,” Evie’s mother continued. “She’s grown into one very lovely young woman.”

“Uh-huh,” Evie said absentmindedly. She tried to regain Shaggy’s attention.

RíoChica: You should come to Sea St. You’d love it.

“You know . . .” Evie’s mother got up. “Sabrina called for you again. You should call her.”

Evie rolled her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was phone her sister and hear all about her super-sized social life—her dozens of sorority sisters, all the frat boys who were totally in love with her, and how she was oh-so-terrified that her precious GPA was dipping to a 3.96. She waited for Shaggy’s response.

“I’ll send her an e-mail,” Evie said.

“Evie.” Her mother’s voice lowered. “An e-mail’s not the same as a phone call. You should call your sister. She sounded a bit homesick.”

Well, I’m homesick too. Sick of this home!

But ShaggyMA was already in the throes of LadyLeche’s flirty language. They both simultaneously logged off, indicating to Evie that they probably both took their conversation and libidos to a private chat room. *Ew.*

She felt deflated. She couldn’t even attract the attention of an anonymous online male. Was her font style or size not alluring enough? Should she upgrade from Times

New Roman to something with more cleavage and curves?

“Okay.” Evie turned around to face her mother. “I’ll give Sabrina a call.”

“She’d like that.” Her mother smiled as she finally left the room.

But just as Evie was about to log off, she heard her buddy list alert go off again. Shaggy? No. Evie was surprised to see it was SexyMexy08. What was Raquel doing on her computer on a Friday night at—Evie looked at the screen’s clock—9:13 p.m.? She was always, *always*, with Jose on Fridays. It had been a full week of school and neither one of them had spoken to each other except for their little exchange at the salad bar. Evie was sure that Raquel knew that she was on line. They were on each other’s buddy lists. She waited. Maybe Raquel would send her a message? Most likely in angry all CAPS.

Evie waited and waited, but no message from SexyMexy08. Evie finally figured she would have to be the one to say hello.

RíoChica: Hi

Too *cas*? She deleted the message and started over.

RíoChica: Hello Raquel

Too formal. Maybe something more upbeat and silly? That’d be more Raquel’s style. And after their argument on Monday, it might be a better icebreaker. She deleted and started over.

RíoChica: Oh-lah, chica! Que onda?

Oh my God! What was she thinking? Super Sangro! She quickly deleted the whole thing. Sweet and sentimental was the way to go.

RíoChica: Hey, Rocky, I miss you.

Remember the time--

But it was too late. Raquel logged off. *Shit!* Evie had taken too much time thinking for the perfect message. What was the quote Mrs. Mattis had used in lit class? “He who hesitates is . . . ?” Well, something about how wasting time was not good.

Evie turned off her computer and grabbed P.Kitty off the ground.

“It’s just you and me tonight, precious P.” Evie snuggled her face into his fluffy gray fur. “Let’s go get us a snack.”

She carried P.Kitty and headed downstairs to find something to eat when she noticed Lindsay in the den. She was folding more laundry and watching her favorite TV show, *La Tormenta*.

“Hey, Lindsay,” Evie started. “You’re here late,” She looked at the TV. “What’s happening now?” Not that she was so interested, but when you’re barging in on someone else’s *novela*, it’s just the polite thing to do.

“I’m taking tomorrow off and I want to get this done.” Lindsay didn’t take her eyes off the den’s TV screen. “Oh, wait. Shhhhh—tell you at commercial.”

Evie moved some laundry to the side and stretched out on the couch. Great, even Lindsay had her own Friday night gig going.

“You’re not going out with your friends?” Lindsay finally asked when a commercial came on starring Esai Morales with “an important announcement regarding home insurance.” She turned down the volume with the remote.

“Nah.” Evie dangled a sock in front of P.Kitty. “Raquel’s mad at me.”

“*Imagínate*,” Lindsay clicked her tongue sarcastically. “That’s nothing new.”

“Yeah, she’s in hater mode.”

“*Mande?*”

“She’s all mad ’cause I’m friends with Dee Dee. She’s a playa hater.”

“*Playa?* Why does she hate the beach?”

“No.” Evie laughed. “Playa, like player, like . . . a popular person.”

“Oh.” Lindsay still seemed not to understand. “*¿Y Dee Dee?*”

“She’s hanging out with Alex,” Evie said as she finally clued in on P.Kitty’s disinterest. He was not interested in exerting energy over some average gym sock.)

“Oh, on a date?”

Lind

“No,” Evie said. “They’re just hanging out.”

“But it’s a Friday evening,” Lindsay pressed.

Maybe it was better to leave Lindsay alone, engrossed in her soap.

“Lindsay . . .” Evie was getting irritated. “Just because a guy and girl spend time together, doesn’t mean they’re on a date. It’s not like that here. Nowadays.”

“Hmmp.” Lindsay said before turning the volume up. *La Tormenta* was back on “Oh-kay.”

But Evie suddenly felt it wasn't simply okay. Was there something she didn't see and Lindsay did? And what did she care if Alex and Dee Dee were becoming more than friends? She should be happy for them. She was happy for Raquel when she hooked up with Jose, right? Even if she did feel like the third wheel at times.

Evie gave up on P.Kitty's finicky mood and before she knew it, she herself was caught up in the torment of *La Tormenta*.

The night's episode was about a beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted brunette who had consistently ignored the advances of a dapper banker. He was the owner of pinstriped suits and a thick, furry moustache. He had offered her his unconditional love, sparkling jewels, and even a house by the sea, but the beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted brunette wasn't interest in any of it or him. One night the dapper banker was alone, drinking sherry in front of the grand fireplace of his mansion. He was distraught that he would never win the love from the beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted brunette, but then, all of a sudden there was a tap at his door. What was this? Was it she, the beautiful big-breasted, wasp-waisted brunette? No, it was a new neighbor who had just moved in down the road. She was a beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted blonde and she needed help. His help. She couldn't light her pilot light on her new stove. "*Puede usted ayudarme con el fuego?*" she asked in husky Español. By the end of the episode, the dapper banker with the moustache and the pinstriped suits had fallen head over heels in love with the beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted blonde. And the beautiful, big-breasted, wasp-waisted brunette? She was forever alone . . . to lead the life of an old maid, with her mean, inattentive cat.

"Ay," Lindsay sobbed. "*La tormenta . . .*"

Evie looked up at Lindsay, then down at P.Kitty

“Mom!” she cried out in a panic. “Can you drop me off at Dee Dee’s?”

* * *

When they were all kids, the de LaFuentes’ house was on the end of Camino del Río, right between the Gomezes and the Diazes. But now, four years later, the de LaFuentes’ new home was on Calle Cortez, a somewhat more posh street in Río Estates. In Calle Cortez, the houses addresses were actually hand-painted on oval ceramic plates. Two large royal palms at the street entrance made for a grand introduction to the tree-lined cul de sac.

Evie’s mother pulled up to the de LaFuentes’ house. A number of shiny late model cars were already parked in the driveway.

“Well.” Her mother looked up in surprised envy. “I know Frank had done well in D.F., but *this* well?”

She was right. The de LaFuentes’ new home was large, with two prestigious columns on each side of a custom hand-carved front door. In the middle of their circular brick driveway, spotlights lit a three-tiered fountain. The de LaFuente’s old house, like the Diazes and Gomezes, had been painted adobe beige, but their new home was a light peach stucco, fresh and different than all the other houses. There was also enough foliage on the front lawn to re-create an entire native Mexican desert. From five-gallon agaves and sago palms to beaucarneas and Mexican grass trees still packed in wooden shipping crates, the plans for a future landscaping extravaganza were definitely in the works.

“This must all be Graciela’s doing,” Evie’s mother suggested with a slight air of disapproval. “Margaret was never so showoffy with appearances. All this desert stuff . . .

didn't Frank say she was from the North?"

"I dunno," Evie answered.

Because there wasn't any room in the driveway to park her Saab, Evie's mother ending up parking down the slope on Calle Cortez. She looked up at the de LaFuentes' home again and turned off the engine. "Maybe I should go in and say hello," she thought out loud. "I haven't really talked to Frank since my brunch."

"Mom, *no*," Evie pleaded. She knew her mother just wanted to check out their new digs. Besides, she didn't want her to know that Dee Dee's parents were out for the evening. "I'm already late. Please, can't I just have some time with Dee Dee? By myself?"

"Okay, Evie." Her mother put her key back in the ignition. "Okay."

Evie grabbed her overnight bag and sprinted up to the house as quick as her Havaianas could take her, before her mother could change her mind.

* * *

The de LaFuentes' doorbell announced Evie's arrival with the somber sound of churchlike chimes. Moments later, a young woman in jeans and a Garfield sweatshirt opened the door. She was in her mid-twenties and Evie assumed she was the de LaFuentes' housekeeper.

"Hi," Evie greeted. "I'm here to see Dee Dee?"

"¿Quién?" The woman's eyebrows creased downward.

"Oh," Evie corrected herself. "Dela."

"Oh, *sí*," the young woman nodded as she let Evie in. "*Soy Marcela*."

Evie soon learned that Marcela didn't speak much English. But she didn't really need to vocalize her feelings. Her face conveyed annoyance as she led Evie though the de

LaFuentes' home. Hundreds of cardboard boxes of every size covered the newly waxed wooden floors and the stairway. The only piece of furniture in the great room was an oversized white leather sofa still covered in plastic. A large framed portrait of a younger Graciela, with heavily lined eyelids à la the '60s had yet to be hung and was propped against a wall which, like all the other walls in the great room, were dotted with spackle, waiting for paint. Evie also noticed a lot of indoor foliage in terra cotta planters and containers, large and expensive looking. Graciela *must* have a green thumb, Evie thought, if not from planting things herself, then from counting out all the green to pay for interior plant maintenance.

As Evie followed Marcela through the kitchen, she noticed puddles of water on the beige tile floor, evidence that Dee Dee and Alex must have been roughhousing earlier in the evening. No wonder Marcela seemed aggravated. What housekeeper wants to work a Friday night, mopping up after some careless kids? Evie found herself a bit annoyed. Jealous, maybe?

When they reached the back door, they both heard a scream. Evie jumped back. Marcela, however, just looked up in more annoyance. The scream was quickly followed by muffled laughter and Evie realized that Dee Dee and Alex weren't the only ones out in the backyard. Perhaps Dee Dee's parents decided to stay in? But when Marcela pulled the blinds to one side and slid the sliding glass door open, Evie gasped. The backyard was full of tall, boobs-pushed-up, striped-haired . . . *Sangros*. All four of them, there, in Dee Dee's backyard. Fabby, Charlene, Natalia, and Alejand-rra.

Evie felt her jaw drop to the concrete. Her first instinct was to sneak back into the house, call her mother, and make her drive back and pick her up as fast as her

speedometer allowed.

But it was too late. Dee Dee had already seen her.

“Evie!” She called out. “You came! Come join the party!”

“Well, I just came by to—” Evie started. But it was no use. She couldn’t think of a reasonable excuse quick enough. Marcela had already shut the sliding door behind Evie and pulled the blinds back into place.

Dee Dee sauntered over. Like all the other Sangros, she was wearing a micro bikini (hers hot pink) and large, gold hoop earrings. The suit was *so* small, practically child size, and for a minute Evie thought that maybe it was the same Garanimals bathing suit that Dee Dee had worn as a kid.

“*Mira*, ” Dee Dee held up a bottle in a paper bag and smiled slyly. “Natalia brought some Silver Patron. You want a shot?”

“Uh, not really.” Evie could detect a tinge of liquor on Dee Dee’s breath. “I really can’t stay long.”

Dee Dee looked over at Evie’s weekender bag and tugged on the canvas strap. “But what’s all this for? Aren’t you staying over?”

“Well . . .” What could she say? Her mother had already left.

“I thought Alex was here?” Evie scratched the side of her neck nervously and looked around.

“He is. There, with Charlene,” Dee Dee motioned with her chin. “She can’t swim either.” Alex was in the shallow end of the pool with Charlene, who wore a metallic gold bikini. Metallic gold? It looked like it belonged in a Mystikal video. Charlene flailed about in the water as Alex desperately tried to balance her with his arms under her back.

Evie did a double take. *Wow, Charlene's C-cups overfloweth.* And Alex? His neck was bright pink. That's one thing that Evie knew about Alex—when he got nervous, his neck turned the color of a Barbie convertible.

“Nice suit, Flojo,” Alejandra approached Evie and Dee Dee. She was swirling the ice in her styrofoam cup.

Evie instantly felt dwarfed between the towering, platform-heeled Dee Dee and Alejandra. Evie glanced down and wished she had put on her nicer flojos. Her green Fur Real ~~Sanuks~~ were comfy, but totally did not fit in with the swim lesson cum pool party cum beauty pageant. She also noticed that the blue nail polish on her toes was flaking off. Maybe she was truly a Flojo—too lazy to even touch up her toes. Flojo. Sigh. She could only imagine how Raquel would react in the same situation.

“Now you be nice,” Dee Dee reprimanded Alejandra with a sideways glance. “This is my house and my friend.” She threw her arm around Evie. The half dozen or so thin gold bracelets clinked on her wrist. “I told you that Evie's been my best friend since we were little kids. My very, *werry* best friend,” Dee Dee cooed in baby voice. She pressed her cheek against Evie's. Was it the Patron that was making Dee Dee lay it on so thick? All Evie could do was smile uncomfortably.

“Yeah, yeah,” Alejandra clicked her tongue. “You know I was only teasing.”

“Ay,” Dee Dee peered into the bottle of Patron and saw that it was empty. “*No más*, Evie.” She made an exaggerated sad face. “*Lo siento, mi 'ja*.” She then turned to Alejandra. “Ally, be a *chula* and go get Evie some Patron.”

Alejandra gave Dee Dee a look.

“Oh, it's okay,” Evie reassured Dee Dee. “It's no problem,” She didn't need no

Sangro doing her any favors.

“Al-leeeee,” Dee Dee cried. “Just gooooo. Be nice.”

“Okay, okay.” Alejandra grabbed Evie’s arm. “Come on, *chica*.”

She took Evie to the poolhouse where another bottle of Patron was stashed, out of the tattletale eyes of Marcela.

As Alejandra started to twist off the cap she looked sharply at Evie. “No offense, Flojo but . . .” she started.

Uh oh. Evie thought. Here it comes.

“But just out of curiosity,” Alejandra continued. “Why do you always dress like a boy?”

“A *boy*?” Evie was offended. “You think I dress like a boy?” Sure she had on baggy board shorts, but she often wore skirts to school. And she did shave her legs. She wasn’t, like, *NorCal*

“I *told* you not to take offense,” Alejandra said. “It’s not like you’re ugly or anything.” She took a swig from the bottle and winced. “Between Raquel and you, you are definitely the prettier one and I don’t know why—”

“Alejandra, Raquel is my friend.”

“Oh, really?” She raised her already arched eyebrows. “I don’t see you two hanging out as much anymore.”

“Well, she *is* my friend.” Evie held up her cup. *Can I just get what you dragged me here for?* “If anything, I’m just a board girl.”

“¿*Qué*?” Alejandra poured a small amount soda into Evie’s cup before adding the Patron. “¿*Aburrida*? With what?”

“No, not *bored*,” Evie half smiled. “Board, b-o-a-r-d, as in surfboard, skateboard, snow . . .”

Was she really explaining herself to Alejandra de los Santos?

“Aaah,” Alejandra laughed. “Sí. I know. You like all that stuff.” She poured more Patron into her own cup. “Have you ever been to Puerto Escondido?”

“Nuh-uh.” Evie admitted. “My family, we usually go to Cabo.”

“Cabo?” Alejandra laughed. “Are you serious? *¡Qué naco!* My family has a house in Puerto. It’s supposed to be the best place for surfers.”

“So I’ve heard.” Yeah, someday she would actually ride a board and go. Maybe a surf trip with Alex. He had mentioned Puerto Escondido. Evie took a sip of her drink. *Yikes*. No wonder Dee Dee was loopy. The Sangros were concocting a lethal syrup with the soda and Patron. Evie took another drink, already beginning to feel warm and toasty inside. “So,” she hesitated slightly, “you really think I’m prettier than Raquel?”

“*¡Ay!*” Alejandra put the cap back on the Patron and laughed. “Dee Dee is right!”

“Right about what?”

“You’re funny.”

“Oh, thanks.” It was all Evie could say. So far she’d been called “funny” and “pretty” in the course of one night. That was sometimes more than she ever heard over the course of one year from Raquel, who had supposedly been her best friend.

“Hey.” Dee Dee came over with Alex to join Evie and Alejandra. “Alejandro’s leaving.”

“What? Aleady?” Evie hadn’t even said as much as hello to Alex.

“Already?” Alex said. “What are you talking about? I’ve been here since, like,

seven.”

“Yeah, but I just got here.” Evie took a sip of her Patron. She didn’t like the idea of spending the rest of evening with the entire Sangro posse with not one fellow Flojo around.

“Yeah, well, I wanna get up early, to head out to Sea Street.” Alex looked at Evie. “You wanna go, Eves? You can finally try out that board of yours.”

“Tomorrow?” Evie got excited. There was no way Raquel would be at Sea Street so early on a weekend morning. “Uh, yeah, should I leave with you now?”

“Evie!” Dee Dee cried. “*No*. You promised. You said you were staying over. I have everything planned.”

“Everything planned?” Evie looked at her. “You didn’t even know I was coming over until I showed up.”

“Yeah, but, you’re here now, and now you are going to leave because you have better plans? That is *so* rude.”

“Yeah, but Dela,” Evie tried to explain. “I really wanna go to Sea Street. I haven’t been in, like, forever.”

“Evie,” Dee Dee insisted. “You can go to the beach anytime. This is my first slumber party in my new house and now you are just going to just leave?”

“Slumber party?” Evie asked. “You didn’t say you were having a slumber party.”

“Yes, I did. All the girls are staying. Right, Alejandra?”

“*Claro*,” Alejandra agreed. She took a drink from her cup.

“Oh,” Alex grinned suggestively. “Maybe I should stay too.”

Dee Dee smirked. “No. Sorry, Alejandro. Girls only. You’re already being bad

Influence
enough, trying to lure away my best friend.”

Dee Dee was sure playing up the best friend angle. But Evie had to admit, it sorta made her feel, how would you say, *muy especial*?

Evie took a large gulp of her Patron. “Yeah, okay,” she said slowly. “I guess there will be plenty of other times to get to Sea Street.”

“Good!” Dee Dee smiled. “It will be just like the old days.”

“So, you’re not coming?” Alex asked.

“No,” Evie said reluctantly. “I guess not.”

Dee Dee was right. It was Dee Dee’s first slumber party in her new home and she should be there. Unlike the Diazes’ welcome-back party, this was a party for Dee Dee and Evie needed to position herself as Dee Dee’s “very, *werry*” best friend and to make sure the Sangros didn’t try to bite “the old days” away from her.

* * *

Evie couldn’t believe that she was spending an entire Friday night, alone, with the Sangros. Friday night was usually a night set aside for her and her fellow Flojos, time to just kick back in front of the plasma screen or by someone’s pool.

But after a while (and a bit more Patron), Evie started to actually have fun. Girls, no matter what kind of bathing suits they wore, were girls. Soon enough they were all yelling and laughing, filling up Ziploc baggies with water from the kitchen sink or the garden hose and slamming them at one another. Evie showed them her famous belly-flop dive, and they all shouted and cheered. Dee Dee blasted some of her awful reggaeton on the outdoor speakers and they all danced in the water.

They compared tattoos, navel rings, and, as two of the Sangros peeled off their

-Wiskey

bikini tops, fearlessness. Yes, just typical girls, Evie thought, as a topless Alejandra and Natalia grabbed hands, and all five of them jumped screaming into the pool.

10

The next afternoon, all the girls were laying around in Dee Dee's room having a typical lazy Saturday. Nobody awoke until noon and nobody got out of bed until after one. By three, everyone was still lounging in their matching cotton camisoles and boy bottoms, enjoying the music of Maldita (iPod), the saga of *Laguna Beach* (TiVo) and the satisfaction of elephant eyes (DiVoured).

"I can't believe I ate three eyes." Evie put her fist to her chest and let out a long, low, eggy belch. It was less out of necessity and more to shock the room.

Dee Dee crinkled her nose and waved her hand in front of her face. "Evie, gross! How can I work under these polluted conditions?"

"Polluted?" Evie asked. "You're the one who lived in D.F. You should be used to dirty air."

"And L.A. isn't polluted?" Alejandra took offense at Evie's comment.

"We don't *live* in L.A.," Evie reminded her. "This is Río Estates."

"Yes," Alejandra said with an air of city arrogance. "Unfortunately."

* * *

Amid spiral notebooks, loose papers, and a few school books, Dee Dee lay across her chenille bedspread, redoing Evie's Spanish homework. That was one of the perks of having Dee Dee back from Mexico. Not only did Evie get another best friend, but she got

a best friend who had similar enough handwriting to hers and superior conjugation skills to whip through her Spanish II homework.

“Hey,” Dee Dee asked Natalia who was sitting on the carpet painting her toe nails. “Would I use *por* or *para* in this sentence?” She read the sentence out loud.

“*Por*,” Natalia answered off the top of her head, no pause, no guessing, no nada.

While Dee Dee conjugated verbs, Evie was looking over all the single framed photos of Dee Dee and Rocio on the bedroom dresser. One photo, in particular, caught Evie’s interest. It showed Dee Dee in a black knee-length skirt. She was wearing pointed heels. Rocio was in a sport coat and had binoculars and a program in his hands. They were posed, arms around each other, on the steps of a fancy building with the blur of other people rushing about behind them. Evie picked up the framed photo and studied it.

“Where was this picture taken?” she asked Dee Dee.

“Which one?” Dee Dee looked up.

Evie held the picture up to show Dee Dee.

“Oh, that was at Bellas Artes,” Dee Dee said. “We had just seen a ballet. I can’t remember the name of it.”

“If it was Bellas Artes, it was probably *El Flor de Xochimitlco*,” Alejandra was going through Dee Dee’s lipstick supply. “That’s *always* there.”

“So,” Evie put the photo back on the dresser. “How did you and Rocio hook up?”

“What do you mean by hook up?” Dee Dee didn’t look up from Evie’s homework. She kept conjugating.

Best friend and yes, a diligent cheater, too!

“She means,” Charlene said, flipping through a magazine, “when did you first

fuck him.”

“Oh, *that*,” Dee Dee looked ^{up} and smiled coyly. “It was right away and then, after that, all the time. I think we even did it that night, at Bellas Artes.”

“If I know you,” Natalia said smiling, “you did with him in the bathroom, right in the men’s stall.”

If I know you? How well did Natalia *think* she knew Dee Dee? Evie was the established long-time friend and this was all news to her—Dee Dee’s crazy sexual exploits.

“Natalia!” Dee Dee wrinkled her nose again. “Gross! I did not!” She sat up from her bed, stretched her shoulders and looked at the photo. “No, but really, it was love right away with me and Rocio. That’s how you know it’s real. We practically ~~finish each~~ other’s ~~sentences~~. Also, he comes from a great family.”

*read
each
other's
thoughts.*

“That seems really important, huh? In Mexico, I mean,” Evie asked. “Family.”

“It is to me.” Fabby interrupted. “I don’t want to be dating some *Indio pata rajada*.”

Barefooted Indian? What did *that* mean? Evie wondered. No wonder the Sangros looked down on Evie. In her flojos, she *was* practically barefoot.

“You know,” Evie thought out loud. “I don’t even think Raquel’s even met Jose’s parents and they’ve been going out for over a year.”

“Well, I’d keep her hidden.” Alejandra smirked. She had just outlined her ^{thin} lips with a dark pink pencil. She then pressed her lips together and rubbed them in front of Dee Dee’s large oval bedroom mirror. “Jose’s too good for her. I don’t know why he’s so into her.”

Evie suddenly felt awkward. *Why* did she say that about Raquel? She didn't want to start capping on her in front of the Sangros. That just wasn't right.

"So, Evie," Dee Dee interrupted. She had a tone that suggested she had something else on her mind. "Have you thought about a touch up?"

Evie looked down at her exposed toes. She was hoping no one had noticed. The chips of blue paint from last night were now specks. God, what had she left floating in Dee Dee's pool? "Yeah, I guess I am in need of a paint job."

"No," Natalia laughed when she saw Evie looking at her feet. "She means your hair."

"My hair?" Evie touched the side her head as she looked at herself in Dee Dee's mirror. Her hair had been blue for a few weeks and she had a good amount of black roots showing. She turned her head to one side. "I hadn't really noticed."

"Well, it's *very* noticeable." ~~Alejandra~~ ^{Dee Dee} looked at her through the mirror. "Your hair grows really fast it looks like. How about not just a touch up but something completely cool and *en la moda*?"

"*En la moda*?" Evie asked. She didn't like the sound of that. "I can tell you right off I am *not* getting braid extensions."

"No," Alejandra said. "We're are not talking those cheap *trenzas* that *touristas* get in Acapulco." She fluffed the top of Evie's hair. "But what if you went with a different color. Right, Dela?"

"Like *what*?" Evie became more suspicious.

"Some highlights?" Dee Dee offered cheerfully.

"No." Evie pulled her head away from both Alejandra and Dee Dee. "No way."

At Villanueva, highlights were the bona fide mark of a Sangro. It was one thing getting to know the Sangros, accepting the Sangros, but to look like one of them? No way. She had her own style, her own fashion sense. Besides, Raquel would have a fit and really never speak to Evie again. “I’m *not* going blonde. You gotta be kidding.”

“Not really blonde,” Dee Dee assured her. “We could dye your hair back to brown, a light brown, and then give you some highlights, just like a half crown, and overall, it would look—”

“Blonde,” Evie said matter of factly.

“But not just blonde,” Alejandra tried to persuade her, “like those bland *blanquitas* at the Pacific View mall, but *más* exciting. You’re a surfer, right? Don’t you want to be blonde?”

“Like blonde supposedly defines a surfer?” Evie said. “Alejandra, OG wave riders were brunettes. Besides, blonde stands for everything Raquel and I—”

“Who?” Dee Dee interrupted.

“No one. Just me,” Evie finished. “Blonde stands for everything *I’m* against.”

“Oh?” Dee Dee raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “And blue stands for everything you are *for*?”

Just then, Graciela tapped at the side of Dee Dee’s bedroom doorway. “Dela,” she asked. “¿*Están ocupadas*?”

“No, ‘*ama*,” Dee Dee called out. “*Entra*.”

Graciela walked in. She was dressed in a narrow dark skirt and sweater with three-quarter sleeves. A short strand of pearls completed her very polished look. Evie wondered where she was off to in the middle of the afternoon dressed like that.

"*Hola, Señora de LaFuente,*" Alejandra moved away from the mirror. She gave Graciela a quick peck on the cheek. It was obvious that she had been spending time at Dee Dee's and had gotten to know Graciela better than Evie had. "Ay." Alejandra looked at her pearls. "I love your *perlas.*"

"*Gracias, mi'ja,*" Graciela touched her strand and smiled at Alejandra. She looked around the room. "Are you girls having fun?"

"Oh, *sí,*" Fabby answered for everyone. "Lots of fun. Thanks for having us over."

"*Sí,* anytime. It's nice to see Dee Dee happy, with her friends," Graciela looked at Dee Dee. "I'm leaving on errands, *mi'ja.* *¿Necesitas algo?*"

Errands? Evie was surprised as she looked at Graciela. When her own mother ran errands she wore a simple sweat suit and T-shirt. *-Divey Couture*

"Are you going to Longs?" Dee Dee asked.

"Longs?" Graciela opened her black leather handbag and shuffled things in it.

"What do you need from Longs?"

Dee Dee nonchalantly patted her stomach. "Oh, just a First Response ~~X~~ You know, *un* pregnancy kit."

"*¿Mande?!*" Graciela looked up from her handbag, her eyes and mouth stretched wide in horror.

"Ha!" Dee Dee laughed. "Just messing, Gracie!"

"Ay." Graciela playfully slapped Dee Dee's arm. "*¿Qué mala!*"

The whole room giggled. Evie couldn't quite believe that Dee Dee talked that way with Graciela. She used to be playful with Margaret, her mother, but Graciela didn't seem the type to take such jokes lightly.

What kind?

"No," Dee Dee threw her arm around Graciela's shoulders. "We just need hair color. She looked at Evie defiantly. "Right, Evie?"

"Dela . . ." Evie started.

"Come on, Evie," Alejandra joined in. "You'll look great . . . *¡un taco de ojo!*"

"A taco *de what?*"

"Ay." Graciela clicked her tongue and looked over Evie's scrappy blue mop.

"*¿Por qué no?*"

"See?" Dee Dee chimed. "Gracie knows. She used to work in television and knew all the top stylists and hair dressers, right, Gracie?"

"Graciela," she corrected Dee Dee as if she's had to a million times before.

"You are *not* coloring my hair," Evie said as if *she* had to correct Dee Dee a million times.

"Yeah," Dee Dee said. "I guess Raquel wouldn't like it."

"It has nothing to do with Raquel," Evie insisted. "This is *my* hair."

"Okay, okay," Dee Dee didn't sound convinced. "I'll drop it. Never mind '*ama*,'" she told Graciela. "We don't need anything."

As Graciela left the room, Dee Dee looked Evie over one more time. "I really wish you'd rethink it, Evie."

"Well, I won't, thank you." Evie was adamant. She joined Charlene on the carpet and started to go through Dee Dee's supply of nail polish. The least she could do is cover up her tacky toes. Dee Dee had dozens of bottles, at least eight of them were a different shade of pink. Evie finally decided on the lightest shade, cleverly labeled "Lightest Pink."

Dee Dee walked over Evie and Charlene and reached down under her bed. "Hey, I

have something for you.”

“For me?” Evie looked up.

“Yeah.”

“Dela, you ain’t gonna bribe me.”

“No, *tonta*,” Dee Dee said. “I was gonna give this to you next month, for your birthday, but I want you to have it now.” She pulled out a small flat package.

“Hey.” Fabby looked at the gift. “What about me?” she teased. “I’m the one with the birthday next week.”

“Oooh,” Evie eyed the package. “Seriously, I can open it now?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee handed it to her. “You know it’s not like you haven’t been blonde before.”

“Huh?” Evie was confused.

The Sangros huddled around Evie as she started to unwrap the foil paper. The gift was a picture frame. When Evie flipped it over, she saw the photo.

“Is that you?” Natalia asked.

Evie immediately covered her mouth. “Oh my God!” She laughed. “This is so funny. I totally remember this day!”

The photo was of her and Dee Dee, both nine-year-olds in costume for the Marina Park Beauty Contest. Just about every girl, including the two of them, dressed as the Coppertone girl. They all sported blonde wigs pulled into pigtails and tied with blue ribbons. Dee Dee and Evie each wore a two-piece blue bathing suit.

“I still don’t understand why we didn’t win.” Dee Dee smirked as she looked at the picture. “I mean, our tans were for real and they gave first place to a *gabacha*!”

Evie laughed. She actually looked cute in the blonde wig. She looked at Dee Dee, who had gone back to her bed and started in on doing Evie's homework. Dee Dee *was* a really good friend, she thought. A very good friend. She then looked her own hair in Dee Dee's mirror. Blonde? *Nah*. Then she looked at herself again. Oh, what's a few highlights really gonna do anyway? They *could* be done to look natural, as if she had spent a few days at the beach. They might even look cool. Raquel would *freak*, that's for sure.

Besides, Evie thought, wasn't it every girl's dream to be a *taco de ojo*?

11

The next morning, Monday, when Evie got up from her bed and went to the bathroom, she startled herself in her mirror. She had forgotten about what she had committed the night before. Treason. Her hair was now blonde.

She groggily leaned over the bathroom sink and squinted. Oh God, who *was* that squinting back at her? What had she let herself get talked into? She was . . . *blonde*.

"Aaah," Alejandra had raved when Dee Dee and Charlene were finalizing the blown dried touches on Evie's hair the night before. "I wish I done my *pelo* this shade. *Qué cool!*"

Honey
Blonde

But now, the morning after, neither Dee Dee, Charlene, nor Alejandra was around to fluff her hair or ego. Evie looked herself over and wondered if she truly looked *qué cool*. She tilted her head from side to side and grimaced. Never mind Sangro stripes, she was blonde, all blonde, 100 percent Honey Blonde *chica*. Maybe it was too early in the morning and too early in the process to embrace such change? In the back of her mind, a little thought was nagging at her: *What will Raquel think?*

When Evie came out of her bathroom, she could hear that Monday morning life was going on as usual for the rest of the Gomez household. *El Mercadito* was on the kitchen radio and she could hear her mother downstairs, talking to Lindsay. This was going to be her mother's first chance to see Evie's new look. Last night, after Dee Dee had dropped her off at home, she went straight to her room. Thankfully her mother and father were catching up on their TiVo in the den. But that was last night. What would her mother say this morning?

"Well," she yawned as she pulled on some draw string pants, her silver Havaianas, and headed down to the kitchen. "Here goes nada."

Lindsay, pulling *pan dulce* out from the toaster oven, was the first to see Evie. "Evelina!"

"Hey, Linds," Evie tried to sound confident as she could as took over one of the stools at the counter.

Evie's mother was still in her pool robe, her hair wet from her morning swim. She looked over at Evie. "Evie!"

Here it comes—the Gomez *furioso*.

But to Evie's surprise, her mother smiled. "When did you fix your hair?"

"Oh." Evie timidly played with the sides with her fingertips. "Last night at Dee Dee's." Then quickly added, "It was her idea."

"I like it." Her mother sipped coffee from an oversized mug she held with both hands. "Dee Dee did it? I'm impressed."

Which were the golden words? Evie wondered. "Dee Dee did it" or "It was Dee Dee's idea?" She would definitely make a note of that. *But Dee Dee thought it would be*

okay to take your Saab to Tijuana so we could go nightclubbing, and then when we met those men, they were just so nice that we decided to share a hotel room with them. Don't worry, it was Dee Dee's idea!

"You know," Evie's mother smoothed her own damp hair, "I used to be blonde."

"I remember Dad saying something like that." Evie yawned again. "I don't think I've seen any pictures of you with blonde hair."

"Evie." Her mother tapped under Evie's chin. "Cover your mouth when you yawn." She went on. "It was during my Teena Marie phase, just for a short time. God, maybe I should go back to blonde. What do you think, Linds?" She looked at her reflection from the kitchen cupboard's glass door.

"Oh, *sí, Señora*," Lindsay agreed as she brought Evie a small glass of orange juice. "You would look even *más linda*."

Evie threw Lindsay a look. *God, can you be any more más falsa? ¿Habladora hipócrita?*

But Lindsay just smiled back innocently. Apparently she could be.

* * *

With her mother's enthusiastic nod of approval, Evie felt even more unsure about her new hair color. The last thing you wanted was your own mother lifting your style. What if her mother *did* dye her hair blonde? What was next? Competing in the Mother and Daughter lookalike contest at the county fair?

As Evie went through her closet in search of clothes to match her new look, she started thinking of Raquel again. At Villanueva, Evie had always been known as Raquel's little shadow or, as of late, the freaky Flojo with the blue hair. But today she was introducing an entirely new look. She couldn't help but be a little excited. After all,

she wasn't bland blonde, *blanquita* blonde (like at the Pacific View mall, or just blonde blonde like Dee Dee and the Sangros, she was *Honey Blonde*.

Alex was the first Flojo to see Evie. She and Dee Dee walked up behind him while he was at his locker and Dee Dee covered his eyes with her hands.

"Can you guess what's behind Door Number One?"

"Hey . . ." Alex slowly turned around.

Dee Dee uncovered his eyes and Alex paused for a moment when he looked at Evie. His face crinkled in disapproval. "What did you do to your hair?"

Not the reaction she had hoped for.

"¿*Qué guapa, no?*" Dee Dee put one hand on her hip like a game show model and used the other to display Evie, as if she was a brand new Chrysler up for grabs.

"I dunno," Alex continued to look Evie over. "But if that was the look you were trying for . . ."

Trying for? As if Evie was attempting to do something but didn't quite accomplish it?

"It was the look I was trying for," Evie snapped. "And the one I achieved."

"Don't trip, Eves." Alex frowned. "Dee Dee just asked me a question."

"And I just gave you an answer." Evie was embarrassed, but didn't want to show it.

"What's up with all the changes?" Alex looked at Evie's ears. Sure, she had last minute thrown on some hoop earrings, but they weren't *that* big.

"You know, Alex, you can be so dense. What, am I supposed to look the same every day? Every year? Forever?" Evie linked arms with Dee Dee. "Come on Dela. He's

obviously not *en la moda*.”

Dee Dee giggled. “Sorry you don’t approve, Alejandro.” She tapped the left side of his head. “But call us if you ever wanna do something with that crazy cowlick.”

* * *

Evie vowed to herself that Alex’s opinion wasn’t going to ruin her morning, but, in reality, it did. His comments clung to her as she walked to first period. Why was she was so concerned about what *he* thought? What did he know about fashion or style? She never saw *Cargo* floating around in his ^{Calvin} truck. Him, in the same ol’ rubber flojos he’s worn since last year. His feet must surely stink awful.

“Oh, what do we have here?” Mr. Galvan, Evie’s Spanish II teacher, smiled widely as she entered class. “I almost didn’t recognize you. *Very nice*.”

“Oh, yeah,” Evie suddenly felt on the spot. Was she now truly a *taco de ojo* and he was suddenly hungry? *Not* the kind of attention she was thinking of. Mr. Galvan was, like, fifty years old. That’s one hundred in teenage years. “I went under the bottle,” she joked.

“¿*En español?*” he asked.

“Uh, *dormí con mi botella*.”

A couple of students, two football players Evie knew only by the numbers of their jerseys (that they *always* wore) entered the class. They both overheard Evie and laughed.

“Dude,” Number Forty-eight informed her. “You said, ‘I slept with my bottle.’”

“What, your *baby* bottle?” Number Nine quipped after him. ^{sex}

“Maybe her *beer* bottle,” Number ^{Forty}eight added.

“Yeah, her ^{forty}” Number Nine laughed at his own joke.

What, Evie wondered, *are they the jock version of Mondo and Jose?*

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Mr. Galvan directed both Numbers to their desks. "Just take your seats so we can start class." He turned back to Evie. "Actually, you wouldn't have a direct translation. You would say, 'I colored my hair.'"

"Right." Evie nodded. "I colored my hair."

"No," Mr. Galva smiled. "*En español, por favor.*"

Evie repeated it slowly in Spanish. "*Me pinté el cabeza.*"

"Well," Mr. Galvan sighed. "You're *getting* there. You know, for a moment I thought you were your friend."

"My friend?"

"Sí, *Dela de LaFuente.*"

So much for individualism, Evie thought as she took her seat.

* * *

After fourth period, Evie was finally free to have time to worry about her hair and Alex's fashion-backward opinion of it. She welcomed lunch time and headed toward the cafeteria to meet up with Dee Dee and the Sangros for lunch. She hadn't seen Raquel all morning, and for her, that was a good thing. Two negative comments from two Flojos might be a little too much for her to handle.

But as she walked by the boys' PE building, she was a bit startled by a long, slow whistle coming from behind her. She turned around and was surprised to find Jose and Mondo.

It seemed like forever since any of them had exchanged words.

But there they were now, just the three of them, in front of the boy's gym.

"Hey, look at you," Mondo half-smiled as he pulled up his shades for a better look.

"Oh, hey," Evie answered timidly. Was Raquel around? She didn't know if she was ready to face her just yet.

"Nice hair." Mondo's admiration continued.

"Alright . . ." Mondo was never this nice. She waited for a cutting remark, Mondo style. "Go ahead and say it."

"No, I mean it." He got closer and looked her over like he'd never looked her over before. "You look hot."

Hot?

"Oh, thanks," was all Evie could say. She looked around. Raquel wasn't anywhere near.

Jose came up on the other side and stretched his arm out against the wall, blocking her path. She was caught between the two, Mondo behind her and Jose in the front. As Flojos they'd shared tight spaces together, in the front seat of Mondo's car, the mosh pit of the last KaKooey show at the fairgrounds, but this was definitely different. The energy felt, well, *too* frisky for friendship.

"So," Jose lowered his head and moved closer into Evie. "Have you found out?"

"Found out what?" Evie asked. Jeez, was he trying to *sniff* her?

"If blondes have more fun?"

"Jose, stop it!" She pushed his arm away. "Quit being stupid." She wanted to sound tough, but deep down she felt awkward. What had she told Dee Dee? To just ignore him? "So," Evie looked down the hall. "Where's Raquel?" What she meant to convey was: where is your girlfriend?

"Dunno." Jose's arm dropped and he shrugged his shoulders casually. "My hip

ain't tied to hers."

"No, but your dick is," Mondo quipped.

Evie let out an unexpected chuckle.

"Hey," Jose looked at Evie. "At least I'm not the one dumping my best friend for some Sangro slut."

"Dee Dee's not a slut." Evie snapped. "Is that what you think or is that what Raquel programmed you to think?"

But before he could answer, Raquel was already coming towards all three of them.

"Hey, Jose!" she called out. "I've been *waiting* at the tree. Where have—" Raquel's mouth was wide open in disbelief.

"You have *got* to be kidding!" She came up to Jose and nudged him in the ribs. "Can you believe this?" She looked over Evie's hair. "What are you? Some pseudo Sangro now?"

"Yeah," Jose half smiled. "We were just saying that."

Actually, Evie thought, *you were not "just saying" that.*

"Oh *my* God, Evie," Raquel went on. "You have *totally* lost it. Totally." She actually circled Evie. "Who do you think you are trying to be?"

"I'm not trying to be anyone." Evie brushed back the side of her hair with her hand. "I just changed the color. It's no big deal, Raquel."

"What, was this Dee Dee's idea?" Raquel asked.

"No, not at all," Evie answered.

"Yeah, I'm sure it was. She's always had you wrapped around her little finger.

Even when we were kids.”

Evie clenched her jaw.

more
anger

“I think she looks hot,” Mondo squinted his eyes and caressed his chin. He continued looking at Evie. “I definitely approve.”

“Hot?” Raquel questioned.

“What, you jealous, Rocky?” Mondo asked. “Maybe you should think about lightening up. In more ways than one.”

“Oh, shut up.” Raquel pushed her hands into Mondo’s chest. “Come on, Jose.” She put her arm around his waist. “There ain’t nothing to see here.”

And with her hand tucked in the back pocket of Jose’s cords, Raquel led Jose from Evie and Mondo followed. But as they walked away, Jose looked back and over his shoulder winked at Evie. Was it just more flirtation? Morse code to signal that he was still her friend? Either way, Evie couldn’t help but feel a bit triumphant. She finally had a little something over Raquel.

* * *

Evie was still feeling a tightness in her chest when she reached the lunchroom, but it lifted slightly when she saw all the Sangros smiling and waving her over with such enthusiasm.

“¡Ay!” Alejandra twirled Evie around in a salsa-inspired dance move. Twirls did not come easy for Evie in her flip-flops and she stumbled. “Now that your hair’s fixed, we just have to do something about your *chancas*!”

Evie looked down at her flojos and pursed her lips. *Hmmm, not likely*. Blonde hair was one thing, but her beloved flojos? They defined her, reminded her who and what she

was. Asking her to give up her flojos would be like asking Dorothy to give up her ruby slippers!

"No," Alejandra's eyes lit up like a light bulb had just been clicked on inside her head. "I know." She looked at the other Sangros and Dee Dee with a mischievous expression on her face. "We *have* to celebrate. To initiate her, big time."

"Basilio?" Natalia smiled.

"*Basilio.*" Alejandra affirmed.

Alejandra looked at Evie. "Do *not* make any plans this Friday, *chica*. *Vamos a divertirnos.* I'll see Basilio today after school and plan everything."

12

Evie's week passed fast, and went well. More than well, actually. Raquel seemed to be the only student at Villanueva who *didn't* love Evie's new hair. She was getting compliments left and right, and all of the sudden she was noticing guys checking her out, when up until now she'd felt pretty much invisible. Maybe it was the hair, maybe it was the hoops, but whatever it was, she had to admit, it felt really good.

By Friday night, she had her weekender bag packed and was all ready for, as Alejandra had said, "fun." The other Sangros had been talking about Basilio all week, but wouldn't let Evie in on their surprise plans. Who was he and how was he connected to Evie celebrating a new hair color? Dee Dee knew nothing of him. Or maybe she was just keeping hush-hush? Was Basilio, Evie feared, some male stripper with ^{a chest} his back waxed? Were the Sangros planning a little dorm party and Basilio was gonna pop out of some cake-shaped piñata and gyrate around in a g-string to reggaetron? Ew.

Dee Dee, of course, was running late that evening and, of course, it bothered Evie. It was now *Evie's* big night and here Dee Dee didn't even have the decency to be on time.

Evie paced around her bedroom, stopping only to brush and rebrush her hair in front of her closet mirrors. Thank God it had grown since that fateful night with the Ginghar scissors. It now almost reached her shoulders.

Her cell rang and she went over to pull it out from her bag.

Yeah, yeah, Dee Dee, I know. You are running late.

But it was Alex.

"Hey, you wanna head out to Sea Street tomorrow?" he asked. "It would just be you and me."

"Oh, *tomorrow*?" Evie looked over at her long board in the corner of her room. She had owned it a full four months and still had yet to even take it out of the house. "I can't."

"We don't have to do DP," Alex suggested. "We can go later in the day. I actually gotta help my dad in the afternoon."

Evie hesitated. Alejandra had said to keep Friday night and most of Saturday afternoon free. She didn't want to bail early and let all the girls down. She was the guest of honor. Besides, she was very intrigued to meet this Basilio. Maybe he was a surfer too?

"Mmm," Evie clicked her tongue. "I really can't, Alex. I'm busy. Sorry."

"So," Alex started. "I thought you wanted to surf."

"I do."

"But every time I ask you, you can never go, or you don't wanna go. What's going on?"

"Nothing." Evie looked at herself in her closet mirrors. "Nothing's going on and I *do* wanna surf. It's just, it's not a priority right now."

"Oh." Alex's enthusiasm dropped a notch. "Not a priority. O-*kay*."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Evie asked.

"Nothing." Alex said. "I'm just agreeing with you. You know, Evie, surfing takes a lot discipline. It's a lot of work. It's not like you are gonna have one lesson and be shooting the tube."

Evie could tell he was annoyed. What was he not understanding? She continued to look at herself in her closet mirrors. She *did* look good. "You know what, Alex?"

"What?" he asked.

"Can you call me by my proper name? From now on?"

"Your *proper* name?" Evie could sense a smirk forming on Alex's face.

"Yes," Evie said curtly. "Evelina."

Alex got quiet on the other end.

"Alex," she asked. "You still there?"

"Yeah," he let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm still here. O-*kay*, Evelina. I'll talk to you *later*."

And he hung up before Evie could even say good-bye.

Evie looked at her phone. What the hell was that about? He hung up on her? She flipped her phone shut and looked at herself again in the mirrors. Why was he PMSing all

low dosage
midol?

of a sudden? Besides, didn't he know that sand and sea water were a lethal combo for chemically treated hair?

"E-vie!" Her mother called from downstairs, announcing that Dee Dee had finally arrived.

Evie didn't want to give Alex's guilt-tripping another thought. She tossed her cell back in her bag, slipped on her Havaianas, grabbed her weekender and went to meet Dee Dee downstairs.

"*Hola, Vicki,*" Dee Dee hugged Evie's mother as she entered the Gomezes' foyer. Dee Dee looked up at Evie who was coming down the stairs. "*Ay, lo siento, Evelina!* Rocio kept me on the phone and I couldn't switch over to my cell—"

"Yeah, yeah." Evie stopped her before she could go on.

"How are you, *mi'ja*?" Evie's mother kissed Dee Dee's cheek and rubbed her arm. "Evie tells me you're doing just great at school."

"*Mom,*" Evie tilted her head in annoyance. "She wants to be called Dela. I've *told* you that."

"Oh." Her mother cringed, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Dela."

"It's no big deal, not with you anyway, Vicki." Dee Dee put her arm around Evie. "But, *yes*. Evie's been a big help at school and I've already made a ton of new friends, *otras chicas* from Mexico, too."

"Oh, how wonderful." Evie's mother smiled. "Is that who you're watching videos with tonight?"

"Uh-huh," Dee Dee said. "But it's gonna be an early night, because we all have to study tomorrow. Plus, they live on campus and they have to be back at school by nine

Oh, Oh Oh Hi

Dee Dee's Beetle was soon on Ventura Road, the main highway leading into the sleepy town of Ojai, but as they got near Villanueva, Dee drove right by.

"Wait, where are we going?" Evie looked over her shoulder as they passed by their school. With the orange sunset dissolving behind the red tiled roofs, their school looked inviting, almost desirable. "I thought we were staying at Alejandra's dorm?"

7-8pm
fall

"Evie . . ." Dee Dee glanced over at her as she turned off Ventura and drove onto a residential road. "You are naïve as your mother."

The residential road was lined with eucalyptus trees, and large painted stones to mark the addresses of the single-story ranch style homes. Evie knew the road. It led right to the Ojai Valley Inn, her mother's favorite place to get, as she said, her "skin and soul rejuvenated." Before Evie knew it, Dee Dee stopped her Beetle in front of the Inn.

"Why are we stopping here?" Evie looked up toward the Inn's main entrance.

"Because," Dee Dee said, "we're staying here."

"We're staying *here*?"

"Yup." Dee Dee smiled as she got her shoulder bag from the back seat.

The Ojai Valley Inn was one of the ritziest hotels and spas in the whole county, maybe the whole state. Presidents, dignitaries from all over the world had stayed at the Inn.

A Ken doll-looking guy came up to Dee Dee's car. "Good evening, ladies," he greeted on cue. "Welcome to the Ojai Valley Inn." He gave Dee Dee a ticket and took the keys to her Beetle. "Will you be needing any help with your luggage?"

"Oh, no," Dee Dee told him. "We're still waiting for more in our party."

"Dee Dee. . ." Evie felt like an adolescent eyesore with her weekender and

Dee Dee

Havaianas among all the adult Vuitton and Prada. "This place," she looked around, "is for high rollers."

"Yeah, it *is* pricey," Dee Dee agreed casually. "Specially the Presidential Suite."

"The *Presidential Suite*?"

"Yeah, it's over ~~five~~ grand."

"*What?*" Evie balked. "How do you know that?"

"Because that's where we are staying."

"Wait, who's paying for this?"

But Evie soon got her answer.

"*Hola, chicas!*" Alejandra came up to both of them. She was with the other Sangros and kissed Dee Dee and Evie on their cheeks. "We just got here, *también*."

"Yeah," Natalia said. "Basilio went to get another golf cart for us."

"Golf cart?" Evie laughed. "What, we gonna do a nine-hole or something?"

But no one paid attention to the supposed guest of honor.

"Oh, there he is!" Alejandra looked over the parked Jaguars and Lexuses and called out. "*Hola Basilio! ¿Qué onda, chulo?*"

Chulo?

Basilio was an old man. Make that, a very old man. Small, wrinkled, and missing a row of front teeth as well as a row of acrylic hair from the obvious piece he wore on his head. He pulled up in a beige golf cart, the same color of his uniform. He was followed by another cart, driven by another man, seemingly in his early thirties and with, seemingly, all his own teeth and hair.

"*Bueno, bueno,*" Basilio rubbed his hands together in excited nervousness as he

stepped out of the cart.

“You have the room for us?” Alejandra asked.

“*Sí, sí.*” He wiped his forehead and looked over at the blonde team of valet parkers. “~~Pero~~ we can’t have any problems. Not like last time.”

“Now, Basilio,” Alejandra gave him a sideways glance and put her arm around him. His perspiring face came up to her breasts. “What have I told you? That was *not* my fault and I told you my father would pay for it and didn’t he? Didn’t he pay for the entire hot tub?”

“*Sí, sí*, I know. Pero, *mis jefes.*” He looked over again at the main entrance of the Inn. “I can’t have any problems.”

“Oh, Basilio,” Alejandra smoothed the few strands of his hair that lay across his furrowed brow and looked right at him. “Am I a troublemaker? Do I cause problems? Should we all just go home now?”

Basilio looked alarmed. “Ay, no. No, Alejandra. Here, follow me. I have your room ready.”

“*El Suite Presidente?*” Alejandra asked.

“*Sí,*” he nodded. “*Claro.*” *que sí*

Basilio got in his golf cart and Alejandra and Natalia and Fabby got in with him.

“Come on,” Charlene said to Dee Dee and Evie as she got ~~on~~ *in* the second cart.

Both carts putted slowly down the narrow strip of asphalt, the private employees’ road. They passed Sueños, the main restaurant, one of the Inn’s Olympic-sized swimming pools, the tennis courts and the Inn’s renowned Chumash Indian sweat lodge. They finally reached the last building, separate from the rest of the Inn. It was a two-story,

hacienda style bungalow, painted off white with green shutters on the outside of every window.

“Oh.” Dee Dee opened her mouth in awe. “It is so cute! Oh my god, *cómo Guanajato!*”

“Yeah,” Natalia boasted. “It *may* look all cute on the outside, but inside it’s *laid down*.”

Evie felt like she was in a strange, bizarre dream. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of all of this, but she knew one thing for certain: none of this would *ever* have happened if she were still hanging out with the Flojos.

Basilio got off of his golf cart and walked up brick stairs to the suite. The girls followed.

“*Mira*,” Basilio handed Alejandra a set of plastic cards. “Here are the keys. Two extra for your sisters.” He looked over at Fabby and Charlene.

“Oh, you are a doll,” Alejandra cooed. “Too *dulce* for *palabras*. *Oye, mi ’jo*, one last thing . . .”

“*¿Sí?*” Basilio asked.

“This time, can you make *sure* you keep the buckets of champagne coming? Last time we had to wait.”

“Oh, *sí. Claro*.”

“And a late checkout,” Charlene added as she took one of the cards and let herself into the suite. “We don’t wanna be rushed out of here tomorrow.”

As soon as Basilio left, Alejandra immediately took charge of the luxurious multiroom suite. Hand-woven Indian blankets, textiles hung on the walls, and deep red

pottery accented rooms that were painted in cobalt blue and earthy beige tones. Alejandra pulled the cord of the overhead fan and drew back the heavy plush drapes of the main French doors that led out into a private terrace encased with blooming dark red bougainvillea.

“Ooh.” Evie stepped out to the terrace behind Alejandra. Below them was a spectacular view of rural Ojai Valley and above, a blanket of twinkling stars spread out across the jet black sky.

“How did you get this amazing hookup?” Evie asked.

been dying to ask.

But Alejandra didn’t answer. She inhaled deeply and stretched her arms out. “I might just sleep out here with the *naturaleza*. Anyone want to join me?”

“Not me.” Fabby flopped herself and her overnight bag on one of the over-stuffed white minisofas. “I’m gonna sleep in the meditation loft.”

“If anything,” Natalia said, “Evelina should sleep up there.”

“Up where?” Evie walked back into the main suite.

“There.” Natalia pointed to an alcove, above the living room. A Native American ladder, the kind used in kivas, led up to the private sleeping area. A dozen or so candles ready to be lit and pillows the color of California poppies were carefully arranged to convey that carelessly arranged look. It looked wonderfully calm and relaxing.

Fabby picked up the cordless phone. “I’m going to order an in-room massage.” She grabbed the service list off the glass coffee table. “With a Pixie Tangerine body scrub. Does anyone else want one?”

“We’re already in October.” Natalia went behind a mahogany wood bar and opened up the fully stocked liquor cabinet. She pulled out a bottle of Maker’s Mark and

opened it as if it was all routine. “They won’t have Pixie Tangerine.”

“So, what will they have?” Fabby looked over the in room service list.

“Melon Pumpkin.” Alejandra came in from the terrace. She answered as though having to be the one to know all the Inn’s information had become tiresome. “Hey.” she looked at Evie and Dee Dee. “Do you guys wanna see the master bathroom? It’s got a sunken bathtub and a snail-shell shower that you won’t believe.”

“Wait, wait.” Evie was feeling overwhelmed. “How did you get all this? With Basilio?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee admitted. “I’m curious as well.”

“Oh,” Alejandra gave a deceptive grin. “~~That~~ Let’s just say I’ve got my ways . . .”

“No,” Evie pressed. “Really.”

“You *really* wanna know?” Alejandra asked.

“Yes, ” Evie insisted. “I *think* I wanna know. We’re not doing anything illegal, are we?”

“Illegal?” Alejandra looked at Evie. “Not *really*. Basilio’s been working here for years. He’s the head building and maintenance supervisor. He can, at anytime, say that a room is being worked on and that it’s off limits for a while. No one’s gonna check up on him, really.”

“But that’s not all,” Natalia started. “Alejandra has just led poor Basilio to believe that she is the one and only favorite niece of the one and only favorite sister of the one and only *Vicente*.”

“And,” Charlene continued, “if dear Basilio ever, ever, needed anything, anything at all, Alejandra would do everything she possibly could to get it for him.”

“Vicente?” Evie had to think for a moment. “As in Fox? The *President* of Mexico?”

“What?” Dee Dee covered her mouth and laughed. “You gonna get dual citizenship for him and his whole family?”

“No, *tontas*.” Alejandra laughed. “Vicente *Fernandez*, the president of Rancheras!”

“Ally!” Dee Dee cried. “You told him you were related to Vicente Fernandez, the musician? You’re horrible!”

“Yeah,” Alejandra fell back into a love seat, pleased with herself. “At Vicente’s, or should I say, *Uncle* Vicente’s, next *concierto* at El Estadio Azteca. Front row, center seats and backstage passes are Basilio’s.”

“That’s if,” Dee Dee reminded Alejandra, “you actually *knew* Vicente Fernandez.”

“Hey, what can I say?” Alejandra took an apple from the overfilled fruit bowl and took a large bite. She tossed the remaining apple back in the bowl. “I’ll just tell my father I need him to get the tickets and then I’ll cry or something and he’ll figure out a way. He always does!”

“You are so bad,” Evie shook her head.

“It works all the time,” Alejandra said matter-of-factly.

She got up and opened the suite’s ~~doors~~. She looked down the stairs and across the courtyard. “Where the fuck *is* that slow-ass Basilio?” she complained to no one in particular. “I want the champagne already.”

* * *

Fortunately for Evie, none of them had Vicente Fernandez on their iPods. “Uncle Vicente’s” ranchera music made Evie sad. Not in the “*Ay, qué triste*, my forlorn heart” kind of sad, but sad knowing that when his music took over the Gomez household it meant that Lindsay was in a sad mood and she cleaned a lot slower. A *lot* slower. Which of course, upset Evie’s mother. Not in the “our slow-ass housekeeper” kind of way, but rather, “*Ay*, poor Lindsay. She misses her family in Mexico. We should help her.” Which meant Evie had to give up her weekend to pitch in and clean their two-story house. *Qué* sad all right.

After Charlene and Fabby got their in-room/three-hundred-dollar authentic Chumash mud body wraps/and facials, the night began to wind down.

Evie drank champagne on the couch, her body feeling tingly and refreshed from her own pumpkin melon body facial. Her mother claimed that a visit to the Inn’s spa made her feel years younger. Evie wondered, should she be feeling nine or ten years old?

Natalia opened her metallic gold fanny pack and all the girls gathered in a semi circle around her as if they all knew what was to come next.

“All *right*,” Fabby smiled as she eyed Natalia’s bag. “You saw Mondo?”

Evie looked over. Had she heard right?

“Your friend, Mondo, has the best *mota*, no?” Alejandra asked Evie as she pulled out rolling papers.

“Mondo?” Evie asked. She had heard right. “You got this from Mondo?”

“Yeah.” Charlene looked at Evie as though she was crazy. “Everybody does.”

Evie wondered if Raquel knew that Mondo dealt dope with the Sangros. Well, she guessed, business is business, and dealers don’t discriminate.

Dee Dee looked up at the clock above the gigantic rock fireplace. "Go ahead, start without me." She got up and went to one of the bedrooms to get her bag. She pulled out her cell phone and stood in the doorway, checking for messages.

"*Dela*," Alejandra looked after her. "*Qué rude!* You are here, *with us*. Aren't you going to party?"

"Yeah, it's just, you know, I talk to Rocio every Friday," Dee Dee stood away from the group, listening at her messages. "And I don't want to miss his call."

"Dee Dee," Alejandra started to roll herself a joint. "You gotta get yourself a side kick."

"Why?" Dee Dee scrunched her forehead. "I like my phone."

"No, a *side kick*," Alejandra said. "*Un sancho*. This 'Dude *en D.F.*' is *seco* already."

"But I love Rocio," Dee Dee said in a rehearsed tone. She continued to listen to her messages. "Is it my fault that he is so far away?"

"It's nobody's fault," Fabby agreed. "But come on, be realistic."

"It's not about love, *Dela*," Natalia agreed. "You don't think he's getting action back there while you're out here?"

"*What?*" Dee was horrified at the thought.

"Pu-leeze," Alejandra rolled her eyes.

Dee Dee looked around the suite, then up at the loft. "Evie, do you mind if I go up to the mediation loft? I think I should call him."

"Oh, brother!" Alejandra rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, sure," Evie took a sip from her champagne. "I don't care. Just move my

Get help from Ariel
↓

bags and stuff to the side.”

“You are losing it, chica.” Alejandra told Dee Dee as she took a puff from her joint.

Dee Dee ignored her and climbed up the kiva ladder into the loft.

Fabby took a hit off of Alejandra’s joint. “That chica needs some help,” she told Evie. — “want some?” — ~~Fab~~ She declined.

“Yeah,” Natalia said. “She’s letting herself getting carried away.”

“Rule number one, Evie . . .” Alejandra looked at Evie. Her eyes were already small, squinty and red from her first hit. “Do not get carried away over some boy.”

“Rule number two,” Fabby said. “Get it where you can. Anywhere you can.”

“Uh . . .” Evie wasn’t sure what “it” meant. “Get what?”

Alejandra tilted her head. “Evie, you know. *It*.”

“Oh, right.” Evie took another sip of her champagne. What exactly was *it*?

“You know, Evie,” Natalia leaned over and put her arm around Evie. “I really, really love your hair.”

“Oh, thanks. Me too.”

“No, really. You are a really, really pretty girl.” Alejandra’s words got muddled and soothing. “Right?” She looked at the other girls.

“Oh, *claro que sí*,” they all said in a slo-mo chorus.

Evie took another sip of her champagne and suddenly felt incredibly happy. There was no other place she would rather be in the world than in the Presidential Suite with her wonderful, wonderful new friends. She looked around the room. They had hooked everything up, the plans, the arrangements with Basilio, all for her. It was almost like a

birthday party and nobody—her mother, Raquel, none of the Flojos, that's for sure—had ever planned anything as extravagant as this solely for her. And was this something she had she craved?

Claro que sí. Porque, No ?

* * *

It was 3 a.m. by the time the lights in the suite were turned off and all the girls had headed to their own rooms to crash. Evie grabbed her weekender and trudged up the kiva ladder to her meditative loft. She was suddenly *so* tired. She saw Dee Dee passed out on the luxury egg-foam sleeping pad. She was still in her clothes and *still* holding on to the phone. She *was* getting carried away.

Evie went through her bag looking for her camisole to change into when she noticed the red light on her cell phone was blinking. God, she hoped it wasn't her mother. What a buzzkill if she had to call her back. Evie flipped open her phone and saw it was Alex. He had sent her a text message just a few minutes earlier. What was Alex doing up at 3 a.m.? He faithfully went to sleep early the night before doing DP. She flipped open her phone to read his text.

U up?

She wrote back:

Ys.

A few minutes later, he texted back:

I cant sleep

Srry abot 2nte. U mad?

She responded:

No, nt really.

He texted back quickly:

Can i make it up 2 u?

Evie was confused.

?

Alex wrote again:

i wnt 2 make it up 2 u

She texted back:

No worries. No problema.

She tossed her phone on the sleeping pad and started to change. She was surprised to see the cell's red light blinking again.

Yr not mad at me?

Why was Alex so concerned? She was feeling sleepy and just wanted to go to bed, but before she could text him back, he sent her another message:

Cnt sleep Whr r u?

Where *was* she? What, was he gonna come over? What was up with Alex? She didn't know if she should tell him that she was with the Sangros. Ever since he had asked her what was up with her "changes," she wasn't so sure she wanted to tell him all the different things she had been doing. All the seemingly "un-Evie" things. She typed back.

Jst chillin. Whr r u?

He texted back:

In bed

In bed? This surprised Evie. What was Alex doing, texting her while he is in bed? Like, under the covers *in bed*? And if so, what was he wearing? Was he naked? Evie didn't know what to write back. Alex was her friend, a friend she had gotten to know somewhat over the last year, but it seemed like . . . Was he was flirting with her? Jose and Mondo were always silly with her, but Alex was different. She felt strange, somewhat strangely excited. Besides, it's so hard to tell with text messaging. But she knew one thing: he was in bed and he was thinking of her. Whereas if Mondo had texted this it would have seemed crass or icky but . . . well, with Alex it just seemed, . . . *nice*.

He texted again:

U still there?

She wanted to write something back. All she could think of was a simple:

Ys

A few seconds later:

Thght u fell aslp

She wrote back:

No.

No? God, couldn't she be a little bit more creative?

Alex:

I dn't like fightin w/ u

Evie:

Me 2.

Alex:

Wsh u wre goin 2morw

2mro 2mro tmro

Evie:

Me 2, sriry

Evie's chest suddenly felt warm. It tingled. He wished he could *be with her*. He wants to be with her . . . tomorrow. Wait, was she reading too much into his texts? Had he ever been this way with her before? She tried to think. Alex has always been super nice and sweet to her, but he was that way with everyone. He was that way, big time, with Dee. Sigh. She felt a bit dizzy. Maybe she was reading too much into his words?

Alex:

Ill cll aftr DP

Evie:

K

Alex:

Sleep sweet . . . Evelina

Sleep sweet? Alex had never, *ever*, said (or in this case, *texted*) anything like that to her. And he called her Evelina. Was he just hiding behind the security of text messaging? Behind the safety of numbers, symbols, and letters from his cell phone?

Evie's head felt light and her mouth was dry. Alex? *Alex*? She started to think about him. All the sweet little things he'd done for her, walking with her into the Bard party, finding the shell and (at first) wanting give it to her. He was always so nice to her parents, and when her grandma Sally came to visit last summer, he tried so hard to impress her with his Spanish. She really liked the way he never let other people's issues get in the way of what he thought was right. That's one of the reasons she was confident enough to let him teach her surf. Even with the Sea Street lineup of aggro short boarders,

who were notorious for icing girls who got in the way of their waves, she knew she'd be okay with Alex around.

Wow, Evie thought to herself, Alex *was* really great! How could she not have seen it before? She felt like her whole face was going to crack with excitement.

She turned to her other side and held her cell phone in her hands, the back screen lit up, creating a red glow in the darkness against the—what did the Inn's pamphlet say—four hundred-, five hundred-thread-count sheets? She went through their message history, reading and re-reading what he had typed to her.

Wsh u wr gng 2morw

I wnt 2 mk it up 2 u,

In bed.

Bed. She wasn't imagining it. She reread his last text.

Sleep sweet.

No text short hand with that. He was clear and direct. He wanted her to sleep sweet. She snapped her phone shut and turn to her side. She held her phone close her chest and closed her eyes. She would sleep sweet. Alex *was* into her and maybe, yes, she could be into him too.

* * *

It was already late in the afternoon, right after Dee Dee had dropped off Evie after their night at the Ojai Inn, when he finally called. Her cell blared out Maldita as she walked across the drive way to her house. Yes, she had changed her ringtone since she'd started hanging with the Sangros.

"Hey," she said, holding her phone between her left cheek and shoulder. She was

latest
she
down
loaded.

juggling her suede shoulder bag, her weekender, and all the things she'd brought back with her from the Ojai Valley Inn gift shop: Body salts with lavender and vanilla (\$58), Oiled scented candles with blown glass holder (\$95). The wonderful feeling that Alex may possibly be into her? (*Priceless!*)

"Hello?" Alex asked. Just his voice alone excited her. How did *this* happen? He used to be "just Alex"; now he was *Alex*.

"Hey . . .," Evie breathed eagerly into the phone. She was still on a high from his texting from the night before. She'd reread the text history between them about a million more times before she'd finally fallen asleep.

"I can't . . . you," Alex spoke choppily. "You keep fading . . . and out."

"What?"

"I . . . you. Fading in . . . out."

Great. After checking and rechecking her phone all morning and afternoon, he finally called and they couldn't hear each other.

"Let me call you from the house line," she told him as she started to unlock her front door. "I'll call you right back."

"What?" he asked.

"I'll call you right back."

"What . . . say?"

Grrrrr!

"I'll call back, NOW!"

She went inside her house and ran upstairs to her room. She shut the door behind her.

“Evie, are you home?” It was her mother, calling from her bedroom.

“Yeah,” she called out as she threw her weekender and all the bags on the carpet.

Her phone was missing from its cradle. “I’ll be out in a sec.”

“Did you have fun?” Her mother was now coming down the hall.

“Uh-huh,” Evie answered. She looked around for her cordless.

“Evie.” Her mother stood on the other side of the closed door. “Why are you being so evasive? Did you color your hair again?”

“No,” Evie called out. “You can come in. I’m just looking for my phone.”

Her mother opened the door and came in. She immediately noticed the bag from the Ojai Inn. “What is all this?”

Shit

“Oh,” Evie tried to sound nonchalant. “Dee Dee gave it to me.”

“Dee Dee?” Her mother opened the bag and went through the items.

“Yeah,” Evie went on. “She went with Graciela and . . . it was just a lot that she didn’t want.” / Where was her phone?

“Wow,” her mother held up the jar and read the label. “That was very generous of her. You know this mud is from the Dead Sea, from Israel. It’s very expensive.”

“Uh-huh. I guess.”

“You know,” her mother said, “I think it’s really great you are making new friends.”

“Yeah, me too.” Evie continued to search for the cordless.

“Not that I have any problem with Raquel.” Her mother opened a tube of organic carrot cream and tried it on her hands. “And you know I just adore Alex.”

Yeah, me too Mom. Now help me find the phone so I can adore him some more!

“Do you know where my cordless is?” Evie asked.

“How would I know where your phone is?” She put the tube back in the bag and looked around. “How would you know where anything is in this room?”

“Mom, *please*,” Evie begged. “I have to make a major important call.”

“A major important call? Evie, you’ve been with all your girlfriends all night. Who could you possibly need to call so urgently?”

“Mom . . .” Evie was on the verge of an emotional breakdown. She could not find the landline and Alex was waiting. “Where is my cordless?!”

Evie went into the bathroom and looked around. She yanked up her vintage Señor Lopez from the floor, scaring poor P.Kitty, who was napping under it. He yowled and ran away in terror.

“Ooh.” Evie looked after him. “Sorry, P.!”

“Oh,” her mother started as though she just remembered something. “It’s Lindsay’s birthday tomorrow. Did you know that?”

“Nuh-uh.” Evie came out of the bathroom. *Where* was her phone?

“Your dad and I want to take her dinner tonight,” her mother went on. “You need to come.”

“Okay,” Evie rummaged through the piles of clothes strewn about her bedroom floor. “I’ll be there.” She lifted her Hawaiian fabric pillows and Baja Road Trip blanket. Still no phone.

Dean Miller

Her mother finally chipped in and lifted up some spiral notebooks. And yes, the cordless phone was under one of them.

"Of course." Her mother held the receiver out to Evie. "It would be here, under your notebooks. You never touch *them*."

"Okay, mom," Evie grabbed the phone eagerly. "I have to make a call."

"Okay, okay, Evie." Her mother held her hands up, feigning surrender.

"Remember, no plans tonight. Lindsay's husband and sister are coming also."

"Okay, okay." Evie held the phone to her side and walked her mother out. As soon as she was out of her bedroom, she shut the door behind her.

Evie grabbed the pillows off the floor and slipped off her flojos. *Finally!* She propped the pillows against her headboard and leaned back against them. She wanted everything to be perfect when she returned Alex's call. It was going to be their first conversation since their sexy texty from the night before, since Alex had maybe sort of kind of confessed his true feelings for her. Or, more appropriately, cnfssd hs tru feelins 4 hr.

She dialed his number. But now his line was busy. *Busy?* On a cell? Maybe Alex was calling her?

When she clicked off, she saw he had just left her a message. She immediately called him back, but got his voice mail. And cells were supposed to *assist* with communication? Normally, not reaching Alex wouldn't be such a big deal. Evie would just catch up with him at school on Monday, but now she just *had* to hear his voice. She had to know what all that texting meant.

She listened to his message.

"Hey, Eves, I thought . . . call . . . right back. Anywa,. . .- leave with . . . dad. So . . . I guess . . . I try . . . later."

Later? Evie cringed. She replayed the message. “I try . . . later?” It was so hard to make out what he was saying. What was up with his phone? Did he mean later as in later *that* night? But she had to go to dinner with her family . . . she would miss his call! Maybe he meant later, as in *later* over the weekend? Or maybe he meant much later? As in Monday at school?

She tossed her cell phone on her bed and turned to her side. She felt dizzy with agony. She desperately wanted to talk with Alex, but she didn’t want to call him *again*. She refused to appear so needy. It was just like the Sangros had said the night before: do *not* get carried away over some boy.

Alex, unfortunately, didn’t call back the whole rest of the afternoon. And then, double unfortunately, Evie had to leave with her family to celebrate Lindsay’s birthday. As she and her parents drove to the Elephant Bar to meet Lindsay, her husband Jack, and her sister Eileen, Evie sat in the backseat checking and rechecking her phone. What, Evie wondered, had people done before cell phones? Wait at home?

Evie had a hard time being in a celebratory mood at the Elephant Bar, even though Lindsay was in great spirits, especially for someone turning sixty-three years old

“*Una vieja!*” Lindsay pretended to cry on Jack’s shoulder.

“*Mi’ja.*” Jack looked at Evie. “Lindsay tells me your *amiguita*, Dee Dee, is back. How nice for you. I bet you missed her.”

“Oh, yeah” was all Evie could say.

“I remember when all you were little girls—you, Dee Dee, and Raquel. You were the best of friends. You had the biggest crush on Alfredo. Remember that?”

“Yeah.”

“But now you must have so many boyfriends.”

“Well, not really.” Evie looked around. Seeing the other couples with their hands intertwined, exchanging romantic glances, made Evie’s chest ache. She looked at her phone. Alex *still* hadn’t called. She let her mind wander for a second, wondering what would happen if they did get together. Would ~~they~~ they would have one of those cute combined names like celebrity couples always got? What would they be? Alevie? Evex? Sounded like a decongestant.

“Evie.” Her mother firmly tapped Evie’s shin under the table. “Put your phone away. You are being rude.”

Rude? And kicking someone in public wasn’t?

Nonetheless, Evie reluctantly put her phone down, but didn’t put it away. She simply put it on vibrate and discreetly placed it between her legs. Sangro rule number two: Get it where you can. Anywhere you can. ✓

* * *

The next afternoon, Sunday, Evie and the Sangros went over to Dee Dee’s to lay out by the pool. Saturday’s weather had been disappointingly overcast and they were all anxious to make up for lost tanning time. The end of each chaise lounge (six in total) was pointed directly toward the sun, as if such strategic positioning would help obtain a tan faster.

“What did you do last night?” Dee Dee asked Evie. The straps of her white Fendi bikini top were untied and dangling at her sides.

“It was Lindsay’s birthday,” Evie told her. She kept her eyes closed under her sunglasses. “We all went to the Elephant Bar.”

She couldn't stop thinking about Alex. He still hadn't called her back. Had he changed his mind about calling? Or was he waiting? Was *he* trying not to appear too eager? Or was he busy doing something else and not even thinking about her? Maybe "later" meant "later," as in *after* the weekend? She was going crazy interpreting his cryptic messages. Why couldn't he just be more direct? "I will call you at 9:15 tonight." And then he would have done so and that would have been that.

"Who's Lindsay?" Charlene asked. She was on the opposite side of Evie. She didn't have her bikini straps untied. She was completely topless. (A hearty dab of white sunblock topped each breast, making them look like two mini Matterhorns or, in that Sangro's case, two mini Mount Popocoatles.)

"She's our housekeeper." Evie picked up her cell and checked to see if it had somehow magically turned itself off. Nope, still on.

"You went out with your *maid*?" Alejandra leaned up and looked over Charlene and Natalia's oiled bodies to face Evie. "On a Saturday night?"

"Yeah, why not?"

Alejandra lifted her sunglasses and looked at Evie.

"I wouldn't be caught dead with my *criada* in public," she said. "Maybe if she had to pick me up, like from shopping or something."

"Or if you needed her to pick you up from the free health clinic, to sign papers," Fabby smirked. "*Again*."

"Lindsay's actually not a maid," Evie asserted. "She doesn't even live with us. Besides, you don't even have a maid, Alejandra. You live in the dorms."

"Yeah, I do," Alejandra checked the tan line from her bikini bottom before

turning over to her side. “Back home, in Mexico. But they always ~~screw up~~ my mother’s clothes and then she is always firing them and we have to get new ones. When I go home for vacation, I know never which two new *Indios desgracios* I’m gonna have to meet.”

“*Ally*,” Dee Dee looked over at Alejandra. “You don’t have to be so harsh.”

“Well, it’s true.” Alejandra let out an exaggerated exhale. “Am I lying, Fabby?”

“No,” Fabby agreed. “Your mom is a total *perra* when it comes to her clothes.”

“That’s because she has nice ones.” Alejandra leaned over and grabbed her diet orange soda. “Not like the standard stuff you find here in malls. In Mexico City,”—she looked over at Evie—“we have boutiques with customized tailored clothing. Oh!” Her eyes suddenly lit up. “You should see what my mother’s sending me for *Día de los Muertos*.”

“You mean for the dance?” Evie had almost forgotten about it.

“Yeah.” Alejandra took a sip from her soda. “And this year, it better be good. I don’t want my costume flown in from Mexico for nothing.”

“Your costume’s from Mexico?” Dee Dee asked. Evie could sense a competitive tone in her voice. “Who are you going as?”

“Maria Felix,” Alejandra sang with an air of superiority.

“Ooh, *qué* sexy!” Natalia raved. “You are gonna look *caliente*. Only you could pull Maria Felix off.”

“Yeah, only you,” Dee Dee echoed the sentiment, sounding a little reluctant.

Despite the larger-than-life announcement on Villanueva’s main marquee, Evie had forgotten about the dance. It was now just a week away, the first Saturday of November.

"But wait," Evie said suddenly. "Isn't the dance the same night as Fabby's birthday party?"

"Nuh-uh," said Charlene. "Her party's the night before, on Friday."

"Yeah, and don't be all *coda* and not bring a present." Fabby held her right elbow up and hit it with her left hand a couple of times. The girls all laughed, except Natalia.

"Hey," Natalia frowned. "My family's from Monterrey and we are *not* cheap!"

Evie leaned up from her chaise and checked her cell.

"What's with you?" Dee Dee shaded her eyes as she looked over at Evie. "You've been checking your phone all day."

"Maybe she's waiting for Lindsay to call her," Charlene ribbed.

"Yeah," Natalia said dryly. "They're gonna hit the night clubs later tonight."

"Hey," Alejandra said, "at least she'll be able to buy you liquor. Make her good for *something*."

"Yeah, I'll have her get us more Patron!" Evie laughed. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of shame as they laughed with her. She cared a lot about Lindsay. She was like family. But as soon as she saw that she had no new messages on her cell, her spirits just fell even more. ✓

* * *

After the afternoon sun slowly withered below the Pacific Ocean, or more appropriately, the stucco walls of Rio Estates, shade enveloped the de LaFuentes' backyard. The impromptu tanning party at Dee Dee's came to an end and after comparing tan lines, the Sangros gathered up their things and headed back to their dorms.

"Ay" Dee Dee clicked her tongue at Alejandra. "You got too dark, Ally. Maria Felix was *más guera*!"

Conver. b/c
Conver. b/c

"It doesn't really matter," Alejandra said calmly as she pulled the car keys to her Beemer from her bag. "My costume is so amazing, no one is even going to bother with my tan."

"O-kay." Dee Dee wanted to make sure Alejandra knew she wasn't so convinced.

After all the Sangros had gone, Evie mentioned to Dee Dee that she didn't plan on going to the dance.

"What?" Dee Dee looked at her. "Why?"

"It's just not my thing." Evie started picking up the glasses, soda cans, and chip bowls from around the pool.

"Oh, just leave those," Dee Dee told her. "Marcela will come out and clean up.

"But why don't you wanna go to the dance?"

"We never go to school dances."

"Who's 'we'?" Dee Dee asked.

"Okay, I never go ~~the~~ school stuff," Evie said. "It's sorta dorky."

"Oh, and sitting around doing nothing is so cool?" She gathered her magazines off the chaise.

"Hey," Evie said. "I'm not the one who planned a whole afternoon of sunbathing around my pool."

"Evie," Dee Dee ignored her last comment. "You *have* to go to the dance. I already have our outfits!"

"Our outfits?" Evie raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah," Dee Dee continued. "Ally's not the only one with such *fabulous* connections. Gracie has all this great stuff from Mexico, all these fancy embroidered

clothes, crinolines, hats, some jewelry. She used to be an actress in the Mexican soaps.”

“Really?” Evie wondered if Lindsay would know of her. “Which one?”

“Oh, just about all the telenovelas,” Dee Dee bragged. “But you know how the stories just run for a limited time, and she just had minor roles. She was always the amante and I guess she was good, because she was given a *lot* of the leftover costumes, and that doesn’t always happen for actresses with bit parts.”

Graciela, a seductress? *Imagínate*. Wait until Evie told her mother.

“Anyway,” Dee Dee continued as she opened the sliding glass door to her house. “You, Alejandro, and I *have* to go to the dance together. I have it all planned.”

“Alex?” Evie asked. “When did you talk to Alex?” Her stomach suddenly felt jumpy. When did he talk to Dee Dee? And why hadn’t he called her?

“I haven’t talked to him . . . yet,” Dee Dee admitted. “But he’ll do it.”

Evie couldn’t help but feel unnerved by Dee Dee’s statement. *Yeah, like you got him dancing in the palm of your hand.*

“I got it all figured out,” Dee Dee went on. “You’ll be Frida Kahlo, Alex can be Diego Rivera, and I’ll be Cristina, Frida’s sister. *Qué* cute, no?”

“What?” Evie balked. “Uh, *no*. Dela, I’m not gonna be Frida Kahlo.”

She caught her reflection in the sliding glass doors and tousled her blonde bangs.

“Evie, *yes*,” Dee Dee walked into the kitchen. “You *have* to, to make it work.”

“Dela . . .” Evie followed her. “Frida is so played out. Everyone goes as Frida.”

“How do you know?” Dee Dee asked. “You said you never go to school stuff.”

“I mean, she’s played out everywhere. Even my *mother* is over Frida.”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee put her *Teen People* on the counter. “But I bet nobody here

knows how to do her right. You should see the stuff that Gracie has. You won't believe it. We'll be different than anyone at the dance. Even Alejandra."

"No, *you*'ll be different. Nobody ever dresses as Cristina. What did she even look like?"

"Oh," Dee Dee pulled her hair out of her pony tail and said very knowingly. "She was very beautiful."

Great. So Dee Dee was gonna be the sexy one and Evie was gonna be stuck with an ugly unibrow and manly moustache. In front of Alex? No *way*.

"Uh, no thanks," Evie said. "I mean, thanks for offering the costume and everything."

"Evie . . ." Dee Dee opened the fridge and looked through it. She kept her back to Evie. "You *have* to go as Frida. Nobody will know I'm Cristina unless there's a Frida and a Diego."

"Dela, nobody is gonna know anyway," Evie said. "It's not that kind of dance, or school, for that matter."

Dee Dee suddenly got quiet. She got a soda from the refrigerator and popped it open. She looked away from Evie and said nothing.

"Dela, why don't you dress as Frida and I'll go as Cristina?"

There, a compromise.

"I already had the outfit for Cristina tailored to fit me," Dee Dee said softly. "The dance is a week away and I thought for sure you would want to go with me. Remember how much fun we had, dressing up for the Marina Park Beauty Pageant? Remember when we were kids?"

"Yeah." Evie sighed. She hated to let Dee Dee down. "Okay, I'll try to think about it. We'll figure something out."

"Well, I hope you do. I still have to tell Alejandro." She started to smile. "So, you want something to drink?"

But really, Evie wondered, why was Dee Dee so eager to always have Alex in the picture? He had been practically her personal escort at school, her potential private swim instructor and now her date for the *Día de los Muertos* dance? Why even *have* Evie along? She drank her Snapple. Then she remembered: Didn't Diego have an affair with Fridas's sister, Cristina?

14

ShaggyMA: Plans tonight?

RioChica: Party, again.

ShaggyMA: You are the butterfly!

Spanish
surf slange?

It was Friday night, the evening of Fabby's birthday party. The whole week at school had been a blur for Evie. When she'd finally gotten to speak with Alex, it was already Monday before lunch.

"Hey, sorry, I couldn't call you back," he said when he came by her locker. "I went out to Santa Rosa with my dad."

"Oh, that's okay," Evie lied. He didn't have cell coverage in Santa Rosa? Wasn't that the point of having a cell phone? So you could call anyone, from anywhere?

“Yeah,” Alex seemed nervous, like he had to explain more. “My cell line was shaky. I don’t know what’s up with my phone lately. I gotta get it checked out.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Eve shut her locker. “So, thanks for the text messages the other night,” She started. Why was *she* the one to bring it up? “They were sweet.”

“Sweet?” Alex smiled uncomfortably. His neck turned a light pink. “Sweet in what way?”

“I mean . . .” Evie stumbled over her words. “Just nice.”

Why did she feel so awkward? He was still “just Alex,” right? And why was he just looking at her, waiting? Say something, already!

“So,” Alex started slowly. “What are you doing tonight? You wanna hang out?”

“Hang out?” Evie asked. What exactly did that mean? “Hang out?” Hanging out pre-sexy texty meant to simply “hang out,” but now, *post*-sexy texty, did hanging out mean a date?

“Yeah, I can hang out,” Evie said. Then she suddenly remembered. “Oh, wait. It’s Fabby’s birthday. I can’t.” She gripped her backpack tightly. “Uh, do you wanna come with? It’s gonna be at La Pantera Negra. I sorta have to go.”

“Nah,” Alex said. “I mean, no offense, she’s nice and everything, but those girls, I don’t know, they ain’t my tribe. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I guess.” *Tribe?* And what tribe did the Flojos belong to? They-who-do-nada Nation?

“Besides,” Alex said, “I’m gonna do DP tomorrow. I gotta get to bed early.”

Why didn’t he ask her to go? Maybe he was already losing interest in her?

* * *

Later that evening, Alex text messaged her:

Hve fun 2 nite

Evie:

Thx

Whre r u?

She waited and waited for him to text something back, but he didn't. She finally closed her phone. That was it? "Have fun tonight?" No "sleep sweet?" No "I wish I could see you tomorrow?" What had happened between her and Alex?

Evie had to get Alex out of her mind. She decided the best thing she could do was just relax and concentrate on Fabby's birthday party. She went over Dee Dee's to get ready.

"Clip or no clips?" she asked Dee Dee a little while later as they elbowed each other for mirror space in Dee Dee's bathroom.

"Either." Dee Dee didn't even look over at her.

Evie held up two different barrettes. "Velvet or rhinestone?"

"Neither."

"You're a lot of help," Evie complained sarcastically. She tossed the barrettes back in Dee Dee's rattan bin. "I thought short hair was easier."

"Beauty is never easy." Dee Dee sighed as looked over her profile and sucked in her stomach. She had removed her navel ring for the evening and clasped a thin gold belly chain around her waist. She had also put on her blue contacts. Something, Evie noticed, that Dee Dee did only for special occasions.

As soon as Evie figured out what to do with her hair (more Garnier surf paste, no clips), she had a new problem to tackle. She sat on top of the toilet seat and looked down at the silver two-inch sandals that Dee Dee strongly suggested she wear. They were already pinching painfully into the sides of her feet.

"I still don't know about these," Evie said, referring to the borrowed slinky-slinks. "Don't you think they're a bit too much?"

"Of course they are!" Dee Dee agreed as she sprayed more Curious in the air and walked through it. "Remember when we were kids? You always talked about wanting to wear your sister's heels. I don't understand what the problem is now."

"The problem is I think they *are* my sister's heels." Evie crossed one foot over her thigh and inspected the semispike heel. "You don't think they're little dated?"

"*Dated?*" Dee Dee was surprised "Evie, they're retro. You of all people should know that. I got them in L.A. Besides, and don't take this wrong, but have you ever thought of dressing up a bit more? I mean, you look so pretty with your new hair and, I don't know, I'd think you'd want to spice it up a bit."

"Spice it up? What am I? A buffalo wing?"

Dee Dee threw her an exasperated look. "Never mind. Wear what you feel comfortable in." She held a cord up to the front of her neck and turned her back toward Evie. "Here, can you help me with this?"

Evie stood up and clasped the black silk cord around Dee Dee's neck.

Dee Dee then turned around to show the pendant off to Evie. "Cute, huh?"

But when Evie looked, she saw that it was no mere pendant. It was a small shell. A small iridescent abalone shell, just like the one Alex had found at Bard Beach. Evie's

heart dropped. How could he have given her shell to Dee Dee? What *was* going on between them?

“What’s wrong?” Dee Dee held the pendant out and looked down at it. “You don’t like it?”

“Oh, no,” Evie looked away. She wasn’t about to admit jealously and she definitely couldn’t go into feelings she hadn’t even sorted out yet. “It’s just these sandals.” She brought her foot up. “They really hurt and I don’t wanna get blisters. I think I’m gonna change back into my flojos.”

“Evie, *no*.” Dee Dee looked down at Evie’s feet. “They look so sexy on you. Here,” She opened up the bathroom cabinet and pulled out some Band-Aids. “I’ll bring supplies, just in case.”

As Evie wobbled what seemed like a long journey from Dee Dee’s bedroom to her car in the driveway, she still couldn’t take her mind off the necklace. When Alex had found the shell at Bard Beach, he had promised—*promised!*—to “polish it up real good” for Evie and, at the time, she thought it was a sweet gesture. She didn’t even wear necklaces, but now, more than anything, she wanted to be the one wearing the shell. How, *how* could Alex have given the shell to Dee Dee? Sure, late night text messages were nice and all, but he gave Dee Dee a *necklace*. And surely that must mean something? This was going to be a long night.

As they approached Río Estates’ downtown area in Dee Dee’s car, Evie was still surprised to learn that Fabby was actually serious about celebrating her sixteenth birthday at La Pantera Negra, a Mexican restaurant and lounge on the main boulevard. It was in the heart of the “historic” downtown district, so named, her father joked, because the city

didn't want to pay for an architectural or beautification upgrade. La Pantera boasted a bar with a kidney-shaped counter, a mirrored splash back, and red leather tuck-and-roll booths topped with ancient Mexican coins and protective glass. On every wall hung ornate gold-framed black velvet paintings of sleek-looking panthers perching on ledges, poised and ready to pounce. It had been years since Evie had even set foot in La Pantera and, according to her father and mother, it wasn't the place it used to be. It was now just a dive where *cholos* (gasp!) hung out and the cheese was no longer the white crumbling *fresca* from Mexico, but rather the standard orange kind from Costco (double gasp!).

When she and Dee Dee finally arrived at La Pantera, it was already close to ten p.m. and as Evie got out of the Beetle, she braced herself for a long painful journey from the car to the front entrance of the restaurant. Is this what Dee Dee used to get Alex's attention? Incredibly painful shoes? Is this how she got him to give her the necklace that was rightfully Evie's? Well, then she'd just have to grin (or rather, wince) and bear it.

"God, when's the last time you been here?" Dee Dee asked, as they walked up to La Pantera.

"Not since I was a kid." Evie wasn't in the mood to chitchat with Dee Dee. As soon as they got into the restaurant, she planned to bail on her.

"When I was younger," Dee Dee started as she opened the door and let Evie go in ahead of her, "I thought La Pantera Negra was the most glamorous place in the world. I even fantasized about someday having my wedding reception there. ¿*Qué chiste*, huh?"

Evie said nothing. She just wanted the night to be over as soon as possible. As she followed Dee Dee to the back area, she pulled out her cell phone. No new message from Alex.

The lounge of La Pantera was already packed with people but Evie and Dee Dee immediately found Fabby at the head of a long banquet table. She was surrounded by all the Sangros, some other friends Evie didn't recognize, and a mountain of wrapped gifts. Everyone was dressed to the *nuevas*: silky camisoles and short skirts on the girls, sport coats and polo shirts for the guys. The air contained a mix of flowery perfume and woodsy cologne. Maybe it was a good thing that Evie had worn the slinky-slinks.

"*Feliz cumpleaños,*" Evie kissed Fabby on the cheek.

"Thank you, *chica!*" Fabby seemed high from all the attention. She wore a pearl-studded tiara, a smashed purple bow was taped to the side of her head, and her face was covered in red and pink lipstick kissy marks. "You know I'm having my real birthday party in Mexico. A big bash at my parent's ranch, near Lake Chapala!"

"Oh, really?" Evie smiled.

"Yeah, we're all flying back for a three-day weekend. You should come!"

"When?" Evie asked. But Fabby was pulled in another direction before she could answer.

Dee Dee turned to Evie. "So, do you want anything to drink?"

"Uh . . ." Evie looked at the drink menu above bar. "What do they have?"

Her feet and her heart were aching. What, was she gonna drown her misery in a Diet Coke?

"Oh, we can get anything!" Dee Dee started swaying to the music. "You know how La Pantera is with their drinking policy."

Dee Dee headed toward the bar without waiting for Evie and she soon disappeared into the thick of the party. Evie suddenly found herself feeling uncomfortably alone. She looked for Dee Dee, but soon lost sight of her. Hey, wasn't *she* the one who was going to skip out on Dee Dee?

As the minutes clicked by, more people who Evie didn't recognize arrived. Everyone was dressed up fancy and seemed to be in a party mood. With all their additional body heat, it soon felt as if the entire oxygen supply from La Pantera were being sucked out. Soon, everyone was fanning themselves with the plastic dinner menus and wiping their foreheads with the delicate cream-colored cocktail napkins.

Evie began to feel even more out of place. None of the guests made attempts to meet her and all the Sangros—Fabby, Natalia, Charlene—appeared to be engaged in exclusive conversations. Alejandra was now nowhere to be seen.

Evie finally saw Dee Dee again, laughing and looking like she was having a grand old time, wedged tight between two unknown revelers in a small red leather booth. Evie was about to make her way toward her when she saw the abalone shell, dangling precariously from the thin cord around her neck. She swallowed hard. She would definitely rather be alone than be with Dee Dee, that's for sure. What was that saying that Lindsay had told her? *Vale más estar sola que mal acompañada*? It's better to be alone than with bad company? Yeah, something like that.

Evie continued to walk around the dimly lit lounge, trying to not look *so* aimless.

"Hey, Evie!" It was Fabby calling out to her.

"Yeah?" Evie asked eagerly.

“Have some *pastel*!” Fabby handed Evie a small plate with a slice of chocolate cake on it. However she didn’t, Evie noticed, ask ^{her} Evie to come and eat the cake with her. ✓
“And please,” Fabby looked at her. “Try not to look *tan seriosa*. This *is* a celebration, *chica*!”

Evie took her slice of Fabby’s birthday cake and walked away, trying hard to look less *seriosa*. She figured, as long as she looked like she was enjoying the birthday cake, she *was* part of the celebration, whether or not anyone talked to her. However, when she was finally scraping the side of her dessert plate with her fork, she knew it was time to find a new focus for the evening. Fortunately, that’s when she saw it—the old jukebox in the far back corner of the lounge. It looked like the same grand, gaudy jukebox she remembered as a kid. A bit smaller, of course, but that’s what happens when you grow up—things shrink up on you.

Evie went over to the jukebox and flipped through choices that ranged from Los Tigres del Norte to Green Day. The old juke had been updated with CDs rather than the vinyl 45s that once slid out onto a turntable. She finally found something she wanted to hear. She put in two coins and pressed down on two separate buttons, G and 4.

“What did you pick?”

Evie looked up and found a guy looking over her shoulder. He looked down at the selections with her and she quickly glanced over at him. She didn’t want to blatantly check him out. He was tall with short dark hair, dark eyes, thick eyebrows, and had a small mole on the left side of his chin. Okay, maybe it was obvious she was looking him over.

“G4.”

“Ah yes,” He smiled. “G4. I just downloaded them.”

“No,” she laughed. “I mean Audioslave.”

He smiled wider. “What’s your name?”

“Ev— Evelina.”

“Do you want anything to drink?”

“Me? Oh . . .” She then noticed that he was wearing a black *quayabera* and a pair of Ben Davis work pants. “Oh,” she laughed to herself. “I’m sorry. I totally thought you were a guest.”

“What?” The boy seemed confused.

“Yeah, can I get , um, some champagne?”

“What do you mean, you thought I was a guest?”

“Wait, what do you mean?” she asked.

“I don’t work here,” he said.

“Oh!” Evie covered her mouth. “I’m sorry, I just thought—”

“The way that I’m dressed, that I look like I work in the kitchen or something?”

“No, it’s just . . .” Evie felt stupid.

“What,” he said sarcastically. “I’m too *rasquache* for your *Chilanga* taste?”

“*Chilanga*?” Evie frowned. “I’m not from Mexico City.”

“You could have fooled me. I guess you’re like all my cousin Fabby’s friends.”

“You’re Fabby’s cousin?”

“Yeah, I’m from D.F. too, La Zona Rosa, but I don’t go around flaunting it like all these fools.” He looked around.

“No,” Evie started. “I mean, yeah, I totally know what you mean. My parents,

they also have money but—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No, nothing.”

He looked around. “Yeah, well, need to get going anyway. See you around Evelina . . .”

“No, wait . . .”

But it was too late. He’d already gone back into the crowd. Her eyes followed him and saw him hug Fabby tightly before heading for the front exit.

Evie felt horrible. This guy was misjudging her for misjudging him! She didn’t care how he dressed. She was alone again. Could this Sangro party get any worse?

Evie made her way back through the crowd as the slinky-slinks pinched the top of her feet more. She had thought that she and Dee Dee wore the same size, but it didn’t *feel* that way. Does a size seven Mexican translate to a size seven American super narrow? Because Evie needed something wider. Yes, *wider*. That’s the problem with wearing flojos all the time. The feet, they expand mucho.

Even through the dim lighting of the lounge she could see a large blister beginning to form on her right foot. She remembered the Band-Aids that Dee Dee had brought, but now she was nowhere to be seen. Evie decided to head to the restroom where she could at least get some toilet paper to cushion the throbbing. But on her way, she passed by La Pantera’s retro photo booth. She was surprised it was still there, in seemingly working condition. When they were kids, she and Raquel used to beg their fathers for quarters so they could get their picture taken. Raquel would always make funny faces inside the booth, trying to get Evie to laugh right before the flash went off.

The pain on her right foot was becoming unbearable, so Evie bent down to loosen her sandal strap and when she did, she gasped. There, on the other side of the photo booth's curtain, were two pairs of flojos. A pair of faded suede Sanuks and a pair of brand new red Roxys. She *knew* those flojos. At least, the Sanuks. They belonged to Jose. Evie could barely believe it. What was *he* doing at La Pantera? She looked closer and, yup, the feet were definitely Jose's. Who else had a beaver's tail tattooed on the outside of his ankle? And Raquel's feet? Evie couldn't help but notice how uncharacteristically pale they looked.

Evie immediately felt relieved. Jose and Raquel were her friends, really. Sure, they hadn't been speaking, but they were outnumbered this evening and probably feeling it. After all, why else would they be holed up in a photo booth? Waiting to make a clear escape from the Sangro convention? ✓

Without giving it another thought, Evie pulled the curtain open, and all but toppled right into Jose. Damn those slinky-slinks!

"Whoa, whoa, Blondie." Jose looked up in surprise. He leaned over from the booth's stool and helped Evie up. "Someone's had a little too much to drink?"

Evie helped herself up, "No, no, I just—" She felt her face grow red with embarrassment. She looked up, thinking that maybe she and Raquel could share a laugh ✓ about it, her falling over in her ridiculous shoes. But to her horror, she discovered that the girl enveloped around Jose was not Raquel. It was Alejandra de los Santos.

"Evie!" Alejandra exclaimed. "Ay! You scared me! Hey, take a photo with us!" She scooted over on Jose's lap to make more room.

"Yeah," Jose patted his free knee, indicating Evie should sit on it. "I'm down for a

ménage à trois.”

Both of them looked disheveled; Alejandra’s always straightened hair was tousled and the top buttons of her blouse were undone. Jose’s Trunk Ltd T-shirt was pulled up and out of his cords.

“Evie!” Alejandra continued to gush. “Come on, let’s take a photo together!”

Evie looked behind her at the crowd. Was everyone totally oblivious to the fact that Jose and Alejandra were practically having sex in the photo booth? Didn’t any of the other Sangros see that Jose, who they all knew was Raquel’s boyfriend, was with Alejandra? Is this how guys were? How the Sangros were? She looked over at the booth where Dee Dee was sitting, still laughing with two strangers she had yet to introduce Evie to. Did she even notice that Evie was gone? It seemed as though everyone went after what they each wanted. Maybe it was time she did too. ✓

Sangro rule number one: Don’t get carried away over some boy and rule number two: Get it where you Can. Anywhere you can. That was good enough for her.

Evie stepped back into the booth.

“Yeah,” Jose smiled and patted his left knee again. “Sit down and tell Santy what you want for Christmas.”

Evie positioned herself on his thigh as best she could and Alejandra took over the right side of his lap. It was a tight fit for all three of them crammed in the small, narrow booth.

Alejandra lifted her feet up to show off her flojos. “Look, look what Josito bought me! *Muy chiste, no?* And it’s not even *my* birthday!”

“Yeah, cool,” Evie looked down at Alejandra’s feet.

“Let’s take the picture!” Alejandra pulled out her wallet from her handbag.

“Yeah.” Jose looked over at Evie. “Let’s capture the moment, right Blondie?”

“Right.” Evie smiled back at Jose. If Alex wasn’t gonna own up to his text messaging or give her the attention she deserved, well, why not have some harmless cutesy time with Jose? She tapped the labret on his chin. “So, does this ever hurt?”

“Depends on how much pain your inner thighs can take.”

Evie laughed and squeezed his arm. “You are *so* bad!”

Jose winked at her. He *was* cute!

“Okay.” Alejandra was not paying attention to them. She positioned a quarter near the machine’s slot. “I’m gonna put the money in and then it’s gonna be fast, so get ready.”

Jose had his arm around Evie. She could feel his hand inch under her arm and closer to the outer wire of her bra. She moved, but just a little.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.” ✓

The timer for the first photo started flashing.

“Okay,” Alejandra squealed as she tilted her head down and brushed her hair forward. “Smile, sexy like!”

The camera flash went off quickly, before Evie could even think of a pose.

“Here comes the next one!” Alejandra announced.

“Let’s do something goofy,” Evie quickly suggested.

“Yeah, let’s.” Alejandra laughed and pulled out the inside of her cheeks with her fingers.

Evie crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

“My . . .” Jose looked over at Evie. “What a long tongue you have, Grandma.”

Evie laughed. The camera flash went off.

Alejandra pounded Jose’s shoulder and pouted. “Jose! You didn’t make a goofy face!”

“Okay, okay.” Jose looked straight at the camera. “Now the last one I want you ladies to throw Papa a kiss, right here on each cheek.” He tilted his head up.

Alejandra put her arms around Jose and puckered up. She was getting ready for the timer, but when the camera flash went off, Jose turned his entire head towards Evie and pressed his face into hers. He slid his tongue deep into her mouth and at the same time, moved his hand higher, around her chest, and rubbed his hand slowly across her breast.

Evie felt a dangerous bolt of electricity across her body.

“Jose!” She jerked away.

“Oh, Evie.” He leaned back into Alejandra and just laughed. “Don’t be such a prude.”

“I’m not a prude.” Evie wiped her mouth. “You’re an asshole!”

“Hey,” Alejandra pouted. “What’s going on?!” She obviously hadn’t seen exactly what Jose had just done.

Evie started to get up from the booth’s seat.

“Where you going?” Jose held on to her hand.

“Out of here.” Evie crossed her arms, covering her chest.

“What’s wrong, Evelina?” Alejandra asked. “Camera *shy*?”

“Yeah.” Evie glared at her. “*Exactly*.” She looked behind her, at the party. “I gotta go to the bathroom.”

Alejandra put her skinny arms around Jose again. “Okay, come back, yeah?”

Evie didn’t answer. She stepped out and Alejandra wasted no time closing the booth’s curtain.

“Hey, Evie.” Jose poked his head out from the curtain.

Evie looked back. “Yeah?”

“You be a good girl.” He looked at her firmly. “Okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

~~And unfortunately, she did. She wasn’t to say anything to Raquel.~~

Evie left the grinding, slobbery couple to themselves and made her way to the back exit of La Pantera. She needed fresh air and a lot of it. She couldn’t believe what had just happened. She could taste the cigarette smoke from Jose’s mouth inside hers. And Jose with Alejandra de los Santos? How long had *that* been going on? Did Dee Dee know about them? Did Raquel know, or even suspect? No, there was no way Raquel would put up with such crap. *No way*.

She felt so disgusted. How could she let Jose get up all over her? God, how could she do that to Raquel? To herself? She deserved much better for her first big-time kiss. She looked at her phone. Why hadn’t Alex returned her text message?

Evie paced the back parking lot. It was already close to midnight and most of the shops and taco bars on the main drag were shutting down, making the whole downtown

area feel like a ghost town. Evie felt totally, completely alone, like there was a big hole inside her. She crossed her arms tightly across her chest. She wasn't used to hanging around the downtown area alone. She wanted to be home, in her bed, immediately. But how would she get back? Her mother always told Evie that if there was ever an emergency, any type of emergency, she could always call home and her mother would come and pick her up, no questions asked. Did this count as an emergency? Probably not.

Evie flipped open her phone and dialed 411.

"Can you connect me with a taxi service?" she asked the operator. ✓

Living in a three-auto household and having friends with cars, Evie'd never had the opportunity to use a taxi in Río Estates. The only time she'd used a cab was when the whole family visited Sabrina at Stanford and they all made shopping trips into San Francisco. Her mother, always overwhelmed by the one-way, vertical streets, would always spring for a taxi.

"I'm sorry." The operator didn't sound so sorry. "We can't recommend a business. You have to give us a name."

"Okay, um," Evie thought out loud. "How about Yellow . . . Yellow Checkered Cab? Service?" That sounded like something a taxi service might be called. And there had to be at least one listed in all of Ventura County, right?

"Do you have a street address?" The operator asked impatiently.

"Uh, do you have anything downtown?"

"I'm sorry, but I need an address."

Evie clicked off. She looked at her cell. She was losing time. Should she just call her mother? She walked back in La Pantera and peered into the back lounge area. Guests

were still dancing and waiters were still taking orders. The party was far from ending. She checked the time on her cell phone. It was nearly midnight. She had thirty minutes to get home.

She went back outside and realized that if she wanted to get home right away there was only one person she could rely on: Alex. Despite the fact that he hadn't texted her back, and he'd given her necklace to Dee Dee and probably didn't like her as anything more than a friend, he was still good old trustworthy Alex.

She dialed his number with her speed dial.

"Hullo?" His voice sounded groggy when he answered. She had clearly woken him up.

"Alex, it's me, Evelina." Evie felt embarrassed. "I hate to bother you. But do you think you can you come get me? I'm stuck downtown."

"Evie," his voice already sounded apologetic. "I've already crashed. I'm doing dawn tomorrow."

"Please?" Evie begged. "I don't have a ride and I, I just . . ."

"You just what?" he asked.

"Just please, Alex . . ."

"Evie," Alex sounded more awake. "Are you okay?"

"No," Evie's voice started to crack.

"Okay, Evie," Alex said quickly. "I'll be there."

* * *

Evie waited in the front of La Pantera for Alex and as she walked back and forth on the sidewalk she felt even more embarrassed that she had called him. Who did she think she was expecting him to come and get her in the middle of the night? That's the

sort of thing a girl could ask of her boyfriend maybe. But *not* something Evie should have been asking Alex. Maybe Dee Dee could have asked him, since he did give her the necklace and everything. Oh why, why, why did he give it to Dee Dee?

} ✓

When Alex finally pulled up, Evie got in the cab of his truck and couldn't bear to look at him. It's almost as though she was afraid he could read her thoughts if she looked into his eyes. She felt horribly ashamed what had just happened between her and Jose.

She flipped open her cell and looked at the time. It was 12:13 a.m.

"Alex," she tried to focus on something else. "I only have fifteen minutes to get home."

Alex looked over at her. "Are you kidding me? Don't I even get a thank you?"

"Oh, right. Of course." ~~Couldn't~~ "Couldn't she do anything right? "Thanks, Alex. I mean it. I'll make this up to you." She leaned over and started to unbuckle the slinky-slinks.

"Don't worry about it," he told her.

"No, really," Evie insisted, feeling like a huge idiot. "Let me take you out or something. Like the Coastal Creamery or something."

Alex frowned. "What would I get at the Coastal Creamery? You know I'm lactose intolerant."

"Oh, yeah. That's right." Evie looked out the window. *Tonta! — Dios Malas*

Alex yawned as soon as they were at a red light at the intersection. "So, what's this all about?"

Evie tilted her head into her hand. All of a sudden she felt reluctant to mention how the whole night had gone, especially the part about Jose. God, what if Jose told him? "It's just been a bad night."

*is playing
"you've
got me
all
wrong"*

“That’s *all*?” Alex was exasperated. “First you cancel on me—twice—you don’t answer my texts, and then you drag me out of bed ’ cause you’re having a bad night?”

“No, it’s just . . .” Evie trailed off. “Wait, what texts?”

“I send you two text messages tonight. You never replied.”

“What? Alex, I didn’t get any messages. She pulled out her phone from her bag and checked her text history. “No,” she told him. “Nothing.”

“Well, I sent them.”

“What did they say?”

“Nothing.” Alex looked straight ahead, at the road. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Alex . . .” Evie looked out his truck’s window. “I’m having a really tough time here. It’s like I just don’t know who my friends are any more.”

Alex was quiet for a long time before he spoke up. “Maybe they don’t know who you are.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I dunno, Evie. You tell me.”

“I have *no* idea what you are talking about.”

“Okay, well, first you try to be a badass,” Alex started. “With your blue hair and everything. Then you hook up with Dee Dee and Alejandra and that crew and then you try to be like them.”

“I’m not trying to be like them!”

“Oh, really?” He looked at her sandals and then at her hair. “You could have fooled me.”

“Alex,” she pulled on the side of her blonde hair. “*This was my* decision.”

“It would be cool if it really was, but I don’t think it was. Like I’ve said before, I don’t care what you do with your hair, but I don’t get it. You’re smart and one of the coolest girls I know and I don’t know why you are letting everyone lead you around.”

Evie sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. Why was Alex lecturing her? Who gave him the authority to issue reality checks? Look what he did with the abalone shell he had promised to give her. Yeah, nice friend. She looked out the window and could feel her eyes begin to well up. Do not cry. Do. Not. Cry.

“I mean, when’s the last time you even hung out at Sea Street?” Alex continued. “Have you even tried out the new board I helped you pick out? You were going on and on about how you wanted to surf and I took all this time to help you pick out—”

“Oh, sorry if I wasted your time, *Alex*. ”

“No, it’s not that. I’m just saying that I spent the time helping you because I was actually looking forward to doing something with someone, with you.” He shook his head. “Maybe you need to take a long good hard look at herself in the mirror.”

“I need to take a good look at myself? What about you, Alex?”

“Me? Evie, just remember who is driving you home. Just remember who *you* woke up in the middle of the night and who *you* called to get up and come out and drive *you* home. I really like you Evie, but sometimes you can be so self-absorbed.”

“Self-absorbed? You know what, Alex?” She unsnapped her seat belt. “Don’t do me any favors.” She motioned to a Pollo Loco up ahead on the boulevard. “Just drop me off here.”

“Oh, Evie, come on. I’m not gonna leave you here. Don’t be silly.”

"No, I mean it." Evie was near her breaking point. "I don't need a ~~fucking~~ lift from you. You call yourself a friend? Giving things you promise to me to someone else!"

"What?" Alex looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Alex! Let me out . . . *now!*" Evie yelled.

"Evie . . ." Alex was perplexed. "Come on . . ."

"Alex!" She yelled louder. "Let me out!"

"Okay, okay." He finally slowed down and pulled into the parking lot. ("Have it your way.")

He parked his truck and looked around the lot. The interior lights were on in Pollo Loco, but the eating area looked vacant. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Like you really care." She grabbed the sandals and slammed the car door.

Alex let his truck idle a bit as he waited for Evie to change her mind and get back into his car, but she didn't. She stormed, barefoot, to the other side of building to get out of his sight.

But when Evie got to the side entrance, she discovered that Pollo Loco was closed. Only its twenty-four hour drive-thru service was open, but by the time she realized this, Alex had already driven away. *Crap*. She sat grimly on the concrete curb near the poorly lit, unattended order window.

"'Scuse me," a voice crackled over the loud speaker. "But this is for car drive-through only."

Evie whipped around and glared at the attendant. "*I know!*"

She looked down at her feet and saw that she had at least three throbbing blisters, large, pink, and full of liquid. How could this night have gone so wrong? Why did it seem that, lately, every night went badly?

She flipped open her phone. The time was 12:23 a.m. She would never make it home in time for her curfew. She punched in her home phone number.

“Mom,” she said as soon as the other end picked up. “Can you come get me?”

13

The next morning, Evie couldn't shake off her funk from the night before. She brushed her teeth and gargled with mouthwash as soon as she got home, all to get the residue of Jose out of her mouth. Her eyes were swollen from an entire night of crying and she wondered if her parents, whose room was just down the hall, had heard her. She was exhausted.

It was all a blur after she'd gotten out of Alex's truck. Her mother had picked her up at El Pollo Loco and, thankfully, stuck to her “No questions asked” promise. She didn't even point out that it was almost one a.m. by the time she picked up Evie. Evie hoped the “No questions asked” rule applied to the morning after.

Evie's cell vibrated.

Alex?

But she saw it was Dee Dee. Evie looked at her cell. None of this—her getting attacked by Jose, her yelling at Alex—would have happened if Dee Dee hadn't bailed on

her last night. And Evie wouldn't have even wanted to be bailed on by Dee Dee if Dee Dee hadn't accepted the shell necklace from Alex. It looked like all the blame fell back on Dee Dee. Raquel was right. Dee Dee was definitely not the sweet girl they used to know and trust.

She let her cell go unanswered, but seconds later it started vibrating again. And again. And again. She knew once Dee Dee had decided to go crazy with the redial button, she would not give up. Evie finally flipped her phone open.

"Hey, chica" Dee Dee was munching on something crispy. Pita Chips? *need. dinner*
Chicharrones? Dee Dee had been crazy about pork rinds as a kid. "¿Qué pasó? You just took off last night without saying goodbye. I was so worried."

So worried? How could she even eat when she was supposedly "so worried"? It annoyed Evie even more.

"I told Natalia I was leaving," Evie lied. "I had to get home for my curfew and I didn't wanna bug you. She didn't tell you?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Well, to be honest," Evie started, "I didn't even know where you were. You sorta just took off as soon as we got to the party."

"What?" Dee Dee asked between chomping. "No, I (chomp, crunch!) was there. I was just talking to some friends of Fabby's from San Diego. Evie, I'm sorry. You're (chomp, crunch!) not mad are you?"

"No, no really." She was far more upset about what happened between her and Jose. *Alex*

"Hey, so what's up with Alejandra? *win* Doesn't she have a boyfriend?"

“Alejandra?” Dee Dee asked. “She has a lot of boyfriends. Why?”

“Nothing . . .”

“What? Is there something I’m missing?”

“No,” Evie said. “I was just wondering.”

“Okay. So anyways,” —the chomping continued as Dee Dee switched gears, —
“I’m calling about tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, *tonight*. The *Día de los Muertos* dance.”

Evie groaned. “Dee Dee, I *am* dead.”

“Good, ~~then~~ you’ll fit right in at the dance,” Dee Dee laughed.

“No, I mean, I’m way tired. I think I’m gonna call in granny and stay home.”

“*What?*” Dee Dee finally stopped her annoying eating “Evie, you promised. I have the costumes and everything. Graciela even made adjustments and took the Frida skirt in just to fit you. Alejandro flaked on me and now you?”

“Alex isn’t going?” Evie wondered exactly when Alex had called Dee Dee.

“No,” Dee Dee said. “So you have to come!”

“Oh,” Evie put her fist to her forehead. “Lemme think about it.” But that was another lie. She just wanted to get off the phone. There was no way she was going to a dance. She had too many issues to deal with, and besides, her feet and eyes were swollen to the size of Goodyear blimps.

But Dee Dee didn’t give up. “Why don’t I come over now and we can—”

“Dee Dee,” Evie interrupted. “My phone is about to die.” This was, fortunately, true. Evie could see the low battery warning flash.

“Then call me from the land line,” Dee Dee suggested.

“I can’t. My dad’s on.” Lie number two. “With business.”

“Argh! You are make things so difficult.” Dee Dee went back to chomping.

“Okay, call me back as *soon* as your phone is on. We are *not* done (chomp, crunch!) discussing this.”

When Evie hung up, she felt like her head was going to explode. Faces kept popping into her head: Dee Dee, Alex . . . and worse, Jose. She turned to her side and petted ~~P.~~ Kitty, but even his affectionate purring didn’t make her feel better. She couldn’t believe she let herself get so out of control in front of Alex. What was worse? Yelling at Alex or making out with Jose? Well, they didn’t technically make out, but she *did* have his tongue in her mouth. Evie curled into a ball. How did that even happen? Why did she even go into the photo booth? Why was she even *at the party*? How would she even begin to tell Raquel that she was in a photo booth with both Alejandra and Jose?

Evie definitely owed it to Raquel to tell her about what happened between her and Jose. She leaned over and grabbed her cordless. She started to punch Raquel’s number. It seemed strange. Had it been that long since she had called Raquel? Unlike her cell, her cordless didn’t have Raquel’s number on speed dial and Evie actually had to pause and remember the digits. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of rings, Raquel answered

“What?” It was clear from her tone Raquel had caller ID for both lines and knew it was Evie.

“Hey.” Evie instantly regretted dialing her number. “It’s me.”

“Yeah, I know,” Raquel said. “What do you want?”

Evie took a deep breath. "So, I went out last night."

"Did you call to share that with me?"

"No, I'm trying to say that I went out last night and I . . ." Evie bit her lower lip.

She didn't want to continue, but she knew she had to. "I saw Jose."

Raquel was silent.

"Raquel . . ." Evie's left leg was twitching like crazy. "I don't wanna be the bearer of bad news, but you gotta listen. Jose was with Alejandra."

"Alejandra who?" Raquel's voice sounded less harsh, quieter.

"De los Santos. They were at La Pantera Negra, in the photo booth."

Raquel let out a long drawn out sigh. "God, Evie, is this what it has come to? You making up stories just to get back at me?"

"Back at you? Why would I wanna get back at you? You're the one who's been mean to me."

~~Me?~~ Evie, I have loyalty to my friends. Dee Dee was a bitch to me from day one. And what do you do? Nothing. You do nothing the next day at your mother's brunch, and then you show up Monday at school with her? What the hell is that?"

"Raquel," Evie started, "yeah, I agree. Dee Dee was a bitch that first night, but really, she's been our friend since we were kids and everything just started off wrong. I mean, listen to me."

"You know what? I don't have to listen to you and you know what? *I* was with Jose last night."

"What? When?" Evie asked.

"It doesn't even matter."

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Evie said. “I *saw* him, last night. I talked to him and he was all grabby, even to me. I was just thinking we were having fun but then he got all gross and. Raquel, he is *so* not cool.”

“He was grabbing at *you*?” Raquel laughed sarcastically. “Exactly what do you have that he could grab at? You know what, Evie? I got another call.”

“Wait, Raquel.”

“Bye, Evie.”

And with that, Raquel hung up.

Evie was stunned. She was too shocked to even get upset. Raquel didn’t believe her. She thought she was lying! Since when had Evie *ever* lied to her? How could she think that? Raquel was acting as if Evie were an entirely different person. She looked over at herself in the closet mirrors. Was Alex right? *Did* she need to take a look at herself?

The phone rang again, startling Evie. She quickly picked it up, but it wasn’t Raquel phoning back, as she had hoped.

“Evelina?” the voice on the other end asked.

“Oh. Hi.” Evie was taken off guard. It was her sister, Sabrina

“*Oh. Hi,*” Sabrina mimicked Evie’s disappointed tone. “Sorry to let you down.”

“No, I just thought you were someone else.”

Sabrina sighed. “Yeah, this morning, I wish I was someone else.” She sighed again. This time heavier. “Did mom tell you I called?”

“Uh, yeah,” Evie suddenly felt bad. Her sister sounded uncharacteristically down. “I’ve just been busy. Did you know that Dee Dee is back? Did mom mention that?”

“Yeah, she did. That must be nice for you. So, is she around?”

“Who?”

“*Mom*,” Sabrina said.

“Oh, sorry. Um, I don’t know. I just woke up. Let me check.” Evie held the phone to her side and called out. Sure enough her mother was outside on the deck. She waited until her mother picked up the cordless and just as Evie was hanging up, she could hear her mother sooth through the receiver. “*Ay*, what’s the problem, *mi ’ja*?” Her mother cooed softly. “What’s wrong, precious?”

After she hung up the upstairs line, Evie could still hear, through her opened bedroom window, the compassion in her mother’s voice from the deck outside. Her mother and Sabrina talked for a long time. Evie wondered ~~was~~ [✓] wrong. Why hadn’t her sister just told her? Finally, after it sounded like her mother was finally off the phone, Evie went outside to join her on the deck.

“How’s Sabrina?” Evie slid onto a canvas chair. The fabric was warm and felt nice on the back of her legs.

“Oh, she’s not doing too good.” Her mother was gluing plastic yellow daises to a terra cotta planter that she had painted orange. It had been her latest interest, buying inexpensive pots from Green Thumb, painting them in bold, vivid colors and then lining the rim with plastic do-dads from Michaels arts and crafts. If she knew of the grand [✓] planters Graciela had in her home, her mother would die from shame.

“What happened?” Evie hoped her sister wasn’t sick or anything.

“She just had a breakup. Remember Robert?”

“Nuh-uh.” Her sister went on about so many guys that Evie had lost count.

"She ~~had been~~ dating him for the last year," her mother said.

The last *year*? How could Evie's sister have been hanging out with someone for a whole year and Evie not even know? God, was Alex right? Was she that self-absorbed?

"Anyway," her mother continued. "He broke up with her and Sabrina's pretty upset about it. She's coming home next weekend."

"She's coming home?" This was really unlike her sister, who claimed to be so involved with so many projects and school activities that she could never leave the Bay Area.

"Yes." Her mother looked at her. "But how are you doing this morning, Evelina. Feeling any better?"

"I'm okay." Evie picked at her toe polish. She wasn't ready to have her mother's attention all on her. "But Sabrina's all pretty and popular," she said matter-of-factly. "She'll be over him soon enough. And what's the use? Boyfriends cheat on you anyway."

"Evie," her mother frowned. "How can you be so callous? She just lost a really good friend."

"I thought you said he was her boyfriend."

"A boyfriend is a friend."

"No, a friend is a friend," she asserted. "I'm not gonna be making out with my friends."

"Evie, there's more to a romantic relationship than just 'making out.'"

Oh, no. Her mother wasn't gonna start talking about her own relationship with her father was she? *Eyew.*

"Okay," Evie said abruptly. "Is that today's paper?" She looked at the newspaper her mother had spread out on the patio table. "I wanna look up movie times."

Her mother looked at her for a moment. "No, it's yesterday's."

Evie knew it was rude to cut her mother off like that. Why couldn't she just talk to her mother like Sabrina could? Or how Dee Dee did? Was she bad with talking to people?

"So," Evie tried slowly. "Were you and dad friends before you started dating?"

Please, just the facts. No details.

"Oh, yeah," her mother replied. Evie watched her measure out the plastic daises, making sure each one was a similar distance from the others around the rim of the planter ✓
"We were very good friends."

"Yeah," Evie started. "It seems like all my so-called good friends are mad at me or vice-versa."

"Why?" Her mother asked. "What happened?"

Before she knew it, Evie was telling her mother all that had been going on for the past month. Her own version, of course. She left out all the references of liquor, pot, the Ojai Valley Inn, the four letter words, and topless Sangros.

"And then, last night," Evie continued, not taking a breath, "I was just with Alex last night. I mean, at first I was with Dee Dee. Remember we were going to the birthday party? But then Dee Dee really did something uncool, and then I saw Jose at the birthday party with another girl, and he's supposed to be all loyal to Raquel and everything, and then he tries to be cute with me and then I got all mad at Alex and . . . I dunno. You know what I mean?"

“I think so.” Evie’s mother looked like her head was spinning. TMI? “So why did you get upset with Alex?”

“He made a promise to me and he broke it.”

“Did he have a good reason for breaking it?”

“I dunno,” Evie said.

“He didn’t explain?” Her mother seemed confused.

“I never asked him, but he never said anything. He sorta doesn’t know that I know that he broke his promise. I’m not talking to him.”

“Evie,” her mother started. “That’s the first thing about being a good friend. Communication. Only a coward hides behind a veil of silence. You have to give someone a chance to explain. Besides, sometimes we put our friends on pedestals and we expect too much from them. We have to remember that they’re just people. We have to allow them space to make mistakes. We have to allow ourselves to make mistakes too.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Evie felt sorta foolish. It sounded so obvious when her mother said it. *Had* she been too harsh on some of her friends?

“But I know you’ll figure this out. You’re smart that way. That’s something you’re good at, questioning people and their actions.”

“Good at?” Evie never thought she was so “good at” anything. At least, nothing her parents recognized.

“Yes,” her mother said. “You’re a bit more of a fighter. I wish I was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I’ve just had so many arguments with your *tías*, my sisters,” her mother said as she dipped her paintbrush in crimson paint. “They would have all lasted so much

longer if one of us hadn't had the courage to take the first step. Like just like last weekend I had an argument with your Aunt Connie."

"And you apologized?" Evie asked. "You took the first step?"

"Uh, not yet." Her mother looked sheepish and went back to gluing the plastic daisies on the planter. "But who do you think I'm making this for?"

* * *

Evie was surprised by the talk she had with her mother. It was the first talk they'd had in a very long time that wasn't about cleaning her room or about curfew or her hair. It was the first talk that felt like it was about something *real*.

She started thinking about what her mother said about friendship and relationships. Her mind instantly jumped to Alex and a knot formed in her stomach. She did not want to lose Alex. She had to call him. What had she done lately, besides push him away, over and over again? And why? For what?

She grabbed her cell, but then stopped. Oh God, what would she say? So many times they talked on the phone, in his truck, during lunch near Juniper's Tree, but none of those talks had been as important as this one was about to be. She wanted to make sure she said the absolute right thing.

She took a deep breath and dialed. But her call went straight to voicemail.

"Hey, you've reached Alex. You know what to do at the sound of the beep."

Evie's confidence plummeted. She hoped he really was at Sea Street and not just ignoring her call. Should she just hang up or leave a message? She hung up.

Coward.

She called him again.

His line was busy, most likely his voice mail processing her hang up. *Argh!* She waited a few seconds and redialed.

“Uh, hi Alex it’s me,” she started as soon as she heard the beep. “Uh, I guess I didn’t know what to do at the sound of the beep, hee-hee.” *Stupid!* “Anyway, that was me who just called a second ago. *Stupid, again! Of cours, he would know it was her. She had only programmed her number in his cell herself.* “Um, I’m sorry about last night. Really, that I woke you up and everything. It was so nice of you to pick me up.”

Nice? Guys don’t like to be called “nice.” What should she have said? That it was so muscular and strong of you to pick me up? “Well, anyway, I’m just calling because I’m sorry about last night. *Duh! She already said that!* “And I’m hoping you’ll call me back and I—” Beep.

She was cut off! Too much and too long. Should she call again?

No, she didn’t wanna come off as a stalker. She’d just have to wait until he called her back.

Sigh. She went over to her bedroom bookshelf and got her yearbook from last year. She looked up Alex’s photo. He *was* cute, she concluded. Not that she ever thought he was ugly. Then she went to the back cover and found what he’d written.

To the coolest girl I know,

Looking forward to getting to know you better this summer!

He thought she was cool! How had she overlooked that? And he had even said that again last night.

God, Evie thought, Alex *would* make for a really great boyfriend, but now he wasn't even talking to her.

The cordless rang back. *Yes!* She picked it up, right away.

But it was Dee Dee.

"Hey," Dee Dee asked. "Is your dad finished on the phone?"

"Yeah," Evie felt defeated. "He's all done." It was no use hiding, or even getting a temporary break, from her. Dee Dee was on a roll.

"Good. Okay, now about tonight . . ."

And before Evie knew it, she agreed to go to the Day of the Dead Dance. Maybe her mother was right and she was putting people on pedestals and expecting too much. She had to give people room to make mistakes. And staying mad at Dee Dee wasn't worth it. Besides, she was running out of friends. If anything, it would be better just to get out of the house rather than sulk around. She could ask Dee Dee about the shell necklace because that's what you had to with friends—talk things out. That's what true friendship was all about—communication and a hand-painted terra cotta planter.

14

Later that night, Evie walked into the Villanueva's gym with Dee Dee and was immediately blown away by all the elaborate decorations for the dance. It was a sensory overload of multicolored *papeles picados*, sugar skulls, burning incense, and bright orange *cempazulti* (correct Evie pronunciation: marigolds) were scattered around the floor.

“Wow, I am impressed.” Dee Dee looked the gym over. “Look,” she nudged Evie. “They even have an altar. A bit *rasquache*, but still.”

The makeshift altar was actually a pyramid of cafeteria tables, two on the bottom and one on top and draped in dark velour fabric, sitting directly under the gym’s scoreboard. The altar was covered in dozens of votive candles, black-and-white photos, colored photo cubes, as well as piles of things the dearly departed used to enjoy: bowls of dry food and plates of cooked food—everything from SpagettiOs to Greek *domas*. There was even an old fishing pole laid out across everything.

Evie had brought a few things to place on the altar. A miniature Dalmatian figurine, in honor of her great-grandpa Rudy, who was once a fire captain in Rio Estates, and for her great-grandma, Conchita, a piece of pan dulce from her father’s bakery. *Not* the fat-free kind, of course. Great-grandma Conchita wouldn’t be merely rolling over in her grave at such a thing, she’d be doing double-twisted rotating backflips.

Evie wondered if Dee Dee had brought anything to offer for her mother. Since she’s been back to Rio Estates, neither her nor Dee Dee had brought up the subject of her mother’s death. Maybe, Evie figured, it was just something Dee Dee didn’t want to talk about. She knew she sure wouldn’t and so she decided not to push it with Dee Dee.

Evie looked around the gym and sighed to herself. She knew Alex was going to be a no-show, but she was still hoping to hear from him. Hadn’t he gotten her message? She pulled her cell out of the little black velvet purse Dee Dee had loaned her and checked her cell phone. Is this how Dee Dee felt? Waiting and waiting for Rocio to call? Is this what is like to have a boyfriend? She put the cell back in her purse and snapped it shut. *Do not check again!*

Dee Dee was right. The clothes Graciela had brought back from Mexico were incredible. Even with a lightly penciled moustache and unbrow, Evie felt a bit glamorous. Her full skirt had a hand-embroidered flower motif stitched with sequins. She wore a frilly off-the-shoulder blouse, lots of vintage glass beads around her neck, and a pair of small, gold hoop earrings. Who even knows if Frida Kahlo actually dressed that way? Maybe she would have, if she had her own telenovela on Univision.

Dee Dee's costume was somewhat similar to Evie's, minus the unbrow and penciled-in moustache. And while Evie's hair was pinned under a thick, dark wig with two braids woven on top, Dee Dee's long blonde hair was loose and flowing. *Sexy*. Of course, her whole costume was tight in some parts and showy in others. Would Frida's sister actually have worn red fishnets, a push-up bra and so much red lipstick? To Evie, Dee Dee looked more can-can than Coyoacan.

"I wonder where Alejandra is." Dee surveyed the gym. "And that great costume of hers."

"Yeah," Evie said. Where *was* she? In a dark photo booth with Jose?

"Well," Dee Dee said, "let's go get some *pan muerto*."

Evie agreed. Anything was better than standing around, wondering where Alejandra was or waiting for Alex's call. She followed Dee Dee toward the refreshment table.

"You know," Evie started, looking over the breads. "All the *pan* came from my dad's bakery."

"Oh, yeah?" Dee Dee nodded. "Hey, check out your dad!"

“What?” Evie followed her eyes. *Oh my God.* Was that really her father? Dressed as a pirate and arranging dead bread with Ernie and Bobby from the bakery? She discreetly moved toward him.

“Dad!” Evie whispered sternly to her father. “What are *you* doing here? Dressed like that?”

“What am I doing here? What are you talking about? I always bring the *pan muerto* to the dance. What are *you* doing here? You never come to the dances.”

“Dad, *please*. When are you leaving?”

“*Yargh!*” Her father adjusted his eye patch and drawled in a pirate voice. “Don’t you be a worry, Miss Evie. Me mates and I are just abandoning ship!”

“Dad!” Evie was horrified.

“Evie . . .” he was used to her melodrama. “*Cálmate*. Joe called in sick and we had to get all this bread here. Plus, I thought it might be fun to get into the spirit.”

“Dad, *please*.” Evie looked around the gym in a panic. “Does anyone know you’re my dad?”

“Hi, Mr. Gomez!” Dee Dee came up from behind. Two other classmates of Evie’s, Steve Cuevas and Sammy Zoabi, looked over at Evie’s father, then at Evie.

“Well, they do now.” He raised his eyebrows as if to say, “Oops!” He looked at Dee Dee. “Hey there, Dee Dee. Oh, you sure look cute. Who are you supposed to be?”

“Dad,” Evie pleaded. “It’s *not* important. *Please*.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez,” he said. “I remember the times you *wanted* me to stay at school with you. Remember that, Dee Dee? When you two started kindergarten at Rio

Real and Evie was crying and crying because she was so scared? Remember she didn't want me to leave?"

"Oh, yeah," Dee Dee puckered her lips and made an exaggerated sad face. She looked over at Evie. "*Poor* Evie!"

"Dad, stop it!" Evie checked to see if any of her classmates were hearing such gory details. "Please, just leave!"

"Okay, okay." Her father gathered his aluminum trays and finally said goodbye to the girls. Evie finally exhaled.

"You're too harsh on your dad," Dee Dee said thoughtfully. "I think it's cute the way he wants to help at the dance. I wish my father was more involved with stuff I was into."

"No, you don't." Evie insisted. "Trust me. Besides, it's not so much about being involved with me. *Día de los Muertos* is one of his busiest times of year. He supplies all the dead bread for just about all the celebrations in the area."

Dee Dee reached out and took a piece of the bread. She put a bit in her mouth and chewed and swallowed. Then she smacked her tongue on her front teeth. "Well, let's see if they have some *champurrado* or something." She gave Evie a wide grin. "No offense, but this bread's *dead*."

"I'll make *sure* I tell my dad that," Evie said sarcastically.

Dee Dee took Evie's arm and they both crossed the gym to look for *champurrado* "or something." That's exactly what they found, *something*.

"Nasty," Dee Dee made a face when she took a sip from her styrofoam cup.

"What is this?"

“The senior class version of *champurrado*,” Evie quipped dryly. It was a watery gruel of corn and chocolate.

Just then, Fabby and her date, Arnie, came up to the table. She was dressed as Marilyn Monroe and he was James Dean.

“Oh, you two look *so* cute!” Fabby cried.

“What are you, two?” Arnie looked over Dee Dee and Evie. “A couple of Mexican lesbians?”

“*What?*” Evie said.

“No, *tonto!*” Dee Dee replied, indignant. “Evie’s Frida and I’m her sister, Cristina.” Dee Dee tilted her head sideways and threw out her hip in a sexy pose. “Can’t you tell?”

“Not really,” Arnie said. “But hey, didn’t Frida hook up with her sister?”

“*No*,” Fabby slapped his arm. “Quit being stupid.”

“But I saw the movie,” Arnie protested.

“Arnie, *no*.” Fabby’s eyes looked upward. “Cristina slept with Frida’s *husband*, Diego Rivera. You know who *he* is, right?”

“We had a Diego, but he flaked on us.” Dee Dee said with a frown. “So,” she looked around the gym casually. “Have you guys seen Alejandra? She’s supposed to be Maria Felix or something like that.”

As Dee Dee talked with Fabby and Arnie, Evie looked over and was surprised to see Mondo. He walked by, not even recognizing her. The last time she had spoken to him was that day he and Jose practically cornered her by the boys’ PE building.

“Hey, Mondo,” Evie called out.

He turned around. "Oh, hey, Evie." He looked at her and frowned. "What happened to your hair?"

"Oh!" She had forgotten she was wearing a wig. "It's a wig." He was wearing a standard Trunk Ltd. ~~tee~~ and baggy cords. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"Who am I suppose to be?" Mondo rolled his eyes. "I'm *supposed to be* making a delivery, but Jose dragged ~~me by here~~ and now he just took off. I gotta get to the west side."

"Jose?" Evie looked around. She suddenly felt frightened. What was *he* doing at the dance? He and Raquel *never* came to school functions. Was Raquel with him?

"Yeah," Mondo looked around, annoyed. "He's around somewhere."

"So," Evie asked cautiously. "Have you talked to Alex?"

"Nah," Mondo crumpled his ~~punch cup~~ and tossed it on the floor. The school dance was so definitely not his scene.

"Well," Evie said. "I hope you find him."

"Who?"

"Jose."

"Oh, right." Mondo looked past Evie and his eyes lit up. "Ah, there he is. Later, Evie." He brushed by her.

Evie turned around and looked in the direction that Mondo was heading. Then she saw Jose. He was in the hallway, near the back of the gym's bleachers. Of course, he wasn't in costume, but Alejandra de los Santos, aka Mexican film star Maria Felix, definitely was. She had on a 1940s-style gown, a dark green strapless silk number that defined every curve. Her 1940s vintage platforms made her even taller, and her hair was

colored dark with perfectly salon-styled waves. Jose had his hands clenched around her hips and ~~his head~~ was pressed into the side of her ~~head~~.

Evie watched Mondo talk to Jose for a moment and then leave, without Jose, who went back to sucking the life out of Alejandra's face.

"How long has that been going on?" Evie nudged Dee Dee and looked toward Jose and Alejandra. Fabby and Arnie had danced away into the crowd.

Dee Dee looked over. "What, them talking?"

Jose had just pulled away and it now looked like they were just merely having a conversation.

"No, them being together." E

"What are you talking about?" Dee Dee bobbed her head to the DJ Buick's mix and picked at her dead bread. "Alejandra has a boyfriend, actually *two* of them, in Mexico. You know that. They're just talking."

"Dela," Evie said. "Are you blind? No, look, watch them."

"Evie, I'm not gonna watch them all night, hoping to *catch* them doing something. But look at her dress," Dee Dee sniffed. "It's not all that *especial* I don't see what the big deal was. Gracie's things are a lot better. *Oops.*" She wiped the crumbs off her blouse.

"¡Ay! ¡Qué chiste!" Natalia came up behind Dee Dee and squeezed the sides of her waist. "You make a *great* Cristina! Don't be stealing any husbands tonight!"

"Only if they look like frogs," Dee Dee mused in reference to Diego Rivera's so-called amphibian-like features.

"Are you going to Charlene's dorm?" Natalia asked. "After the dance?"

“Oh, *sí. Claro*, right Evie?” Dee Dee asked.

But Evie didn’t answer. All she could do was look at Jose and Alejandra. She was so angry, she couldn’t even see straight. Raquel thought she was a liar, Dee Dee thought she was imagining things, and Jose was getting away with his lying ass intact.

* * *

Despite her heart being focused on Alex, her anger on Jose, and her humiliation about her embarrassing father (should she go on?), Evie actually managed to have a decent time at the dance.

People thought her costume was really cute and cool. But, *ay*, poor Dee Dee. All night she had to explain who she was supposed to be. And then she’d go drag Evie over and still no one quite got it.

Finally, before Evie knew it, DJ Buick announced the last songs for the evening. And that was fine with Evie. She sat on the chair and rubbed her feet.

Allen Lau, a friend from math class who Evie had been dancing with for the last couple songs, came up to her. “You not gonna skip the last song, are you?”

“My feet are killing me,” Evie told him.

“Wow.” he lifted his glasses and looked down, squinting. Even though they’d been dancing together, somehow he hadn’t noticed her feet. “Whoa. I’ve never seen you in shoes before. Weird.”

Dee Dee came up to both of them. “So Evie, you wanna get going to Charlene’s dorm? You should come too, Allen. She’s having an after-party.”

“How?” Evie asked. Villanueva had a strict policy against get-togethers in student housing. No guests after nine p.m., and absolutely no guests of the opposite sex.

“It’s on the DL,” Dee Dee said knowingly. She tucked some hair behind her left ear. “Oh, no.” She touched her left ear lobe. “I lost an earring. Gracie will kill me. I gotta go back in and look for it.”

“Are you serious?” Evie asked.

“Yeah, they are the ones from *El Cuerpo de Fuego*.”

“What kind of store is that?” Allen asked, confused.

“Let me go with you,” Evie offered. “I’ll help you look.”

“No, it’s okay,” Dee Dee said. “I think it might be in the bathroom. On the counter.” She gave Evie her car keys. “Here, wait in the car, if you want. Then we can walk over to Charlene’s dorm.”

Evie took the keys and headed out to Dee Dee’s car. Some of the other students were already out there turning the parking lot into one big tailgate party. But, this being Villanueva, most of the rides were worth upwards of sixty grand.

“Evie?”

She looked up. It was Raquel.

“Raquel?” Evie couldn’t believe it. What was Raquel doing at the dance? She was walking up from the side of her mother’s Beemer convertible in faded jeans and a gray sweatshirt. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot and she looked completely out of place in a parking lot full of laughter and colorful costumes.

Evie had no time to think. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“No,” Raquel admitted. “I’m not okay.”

She reached into the inside of her fleece jacket and she pulled out a strip of paper, the pictures from the photo booth at Fabby’s birthday party.

Evie's heart dropped.

"You were right," Raquel looked at the photos.

"Raquel . . ."

"He is such an asshole, Evie."

Evie looked at the photo strip. There was Jose sandwiched between her and Alejandra de los Santos. Even in the photo you could see the awkwardness in Evie face. The third and final photo, Jose's face was jammed up against Evie, whose features were contorted in disgust.

"I found it in his wallet," Raquel said.

"His wallet?"

"Yeah, what an idiot." Raquel took a drag from her cigarette. "He knows we have total access to each other's flow and he leaves *this* in his wallet? I'm sure he gets a kick showing it off to his friends."

Had he shown Alex? Oh God, Evie hoped not. Maybe that's why he hadn't called her.

"When Jose told me he couldn't hang out tonight," Raquel continued, "I knew something was going on. Mondo had a pick-up from his cousin out on the west side. His cousin is visiting from Humboldt State. You know what I mean?"

"Uh huh." Everybody knew that Humboldt was known for its hearty harvest of weed.

"And we were all gonna hang out tonight. Me, Mondo, and Jose and then Jose just suddenly turned *that* down."

"Yeah." Evie sighed.

“He’s just been doing that a lot lately. Flaking on me last minute and then when you called me—” She didn’t finish. She looked over Evie’s shoulder.

Evie turned around and saw Jose and Alejandra coming out of the gym. Jose had his arm around Alejandra’s bare shoulders and Alejandra’s body was turned into Jose’s as she walked slowly across the parking lot and toward the dorms. Her fingers played with his dyed black hair.

“Hey,” Raquel called out. “Hey, Jose!”

Jose looked up. He immediately yanked his arm off of Alejandra.

“So, what’s going on?” she asked calmly.

What’s going on?

“Whoa, whoa baby.” Jose went toward Raquel. “It’s not what you think.”

“What would I be thinking?”

“Uh, I dunno. I just swung by, with Mondo. Have you seen him?”

“Nuh-uh.”

This was so unlike Raquel, to be so relaxed in the middle of a situation like this.

Raquel looked at Alejandra and then at Jose. “Aren’t you supposed to be in costume?” She asked as though nothing at all was wrong.

Jose looked confused and a little scared.

“Yeah,” he laughed uncomfortably. “I forgot.”

“No, you got it right,” she looked at him up and down. “What are you supposed to be, some trust-fund kid? In your eighty-dollar vintage rock tee?”

“Huh?”

“Or are you dressed as the pussyfooting liar, can’t even be direct with his girlfriend so he can sneak out to a school dance so he could get a couple of cheap feels from a Sang-ho?”

“*Excuse me?*” Alejandra finally said something.

“No, no. Wait.” Raquel paced in front of Jose and squeezed the side of her forehead. “Or maybe you’re dressed as a moocher who has to rely on his best friend to drive him around, like his mommy or something, because he didn’t pass his driving test for the third time?”

“You told me you had a car, but that you couldn’t drive it because of your grades,” Alejandra said to Jose.

“Oh, and speaking of grades,” Raquel continued, “let me give you a grade in the sex department, Jose.”

“Raquel . . .” Jose’s face was bright red.

Oh, this was gonna be good.

“No, no.” Raquel put her palm out to quiet him. “Let me finish and then you can go back to your date. Let’s see, an *E* for effort, an *S* for sloppy, and *T* as in *too* soon. *Always* too soon. You better be careful, Alejandra, the way he gets overly excited, he might just dirty that little pretty dress of yours without any warning.”

“*What?*” Alejandra looked horrified.

Raquel tapped the side of Jose’s chin.

“See you around, Jose. And you know what? Don’t worry about the money you owe me. You can use it,” she tugged on his belt buckle. “For that little medical problem of yours.”

Raquel threw her cigarette down and put it out with her flojo.

Bravo! Well done!

As Raquel walked away into the darkness, she left Evie, Alejandra, and Jose pretty much speechless until Jose looked over at Evie.

“You little bitch,” he started in on her. “You had to go and open your hole, didn’t you?”

“Me?” Evie protested. “I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to.”

“Yeah, right.” Jose narrowed his eyes and came right into Evie. She leaned back, as far as she could, into the door of parked car. Wasn’t there anyone around to help her? Alejandra was doing jack besides standing there, fuming over Raquel’s words.

Jose moved closer to Evie. She could feel the anger oozing from his eyes and nostrils. Soon his belt buckle was actually pressing against her.

“What. The. Fuck. Evie?”

“What?” She faced him back, directly. She tried to sound tough. But inside she was dying.

“You know, somebody’s gotta teach you a lesson?”

Evie closed her eyes and braced herself. *Be strong.*

Just then, her ringtone rang out, cutting through the tension. *Biddy Biddy Bom Bom!*

DIOS MALOS

Jose backed up, a bit thrown off.

The music rang again. *Biddy Biddy Bom Bom!*

“It’s my dad,” Evie lied. “He and my uncle Louie are picking me up.”

At the same time, Dee Dee came out of the gym. She saw Jose's tight grip on Evie's blouse and immediately knew something was not right.

"Jose!" She called out firmly. She sprinted over with amazing grace for someone in three-inch heels. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," He finally backed off. "Nothing. She ain't worth it."

"Worth *what*?" Dee Dee demanded to know. "What's the hell's going on?"

Jose looked over at Alejandra. "Come on."

She was standing off to the side holding her phone to her ear. "Uh, sorry Josito," she said covering the mouthpiece of her phone with her hand. "But I'm on a long distance call. I'll find you later."

"What the—?" He waved his hand aside. "I do not need this hen party." He rubbed his hair with both his hands and turned to leave.

"Good riddance."

"What happened?" Dee Dee asked.

"Jose's pissed 'cause Raquel found out about him and Alejandra," Evie told her. "She was just here."

"Raquel?" Dee Dee asked. "Was here?"

"Yeah," Evie got her breath. "Just a minute ago. She just took off."

"What?" Dee Dee looked over at Alejandra who just got off her call. "Alejandra, is that true? How could you be after someone else's boyfriend? Don't you get enough attention?"

"Dela, I do not *chase* men," Alejandra sniffed and she patted her hair in place. "I don't *need* to."

“How could you not do anything to help Evie?”

“Oh, Dela, you’re overreacting. He wasn’t going to do anything to Evie. He was just mad.”

“He could have fooled me.” Evie finally exhaled. Her body was still shaking.

Alejandra rolled her eyes. “Come on, this boring dance is over.” She took hold of Dee Dee’s arm. “Let’s go to Charlene’s dorm.”

“Not me.” Dee Dee pulled away.

“What?” Alejandra laughed uncomfortably. “You gonna go looking for *La Llorona*?”

“I’d rather be with a weeping woman than a cheating one.”

Alejandra put her hands on her hips. “Well, do what you want, Dela.”

“Thank you,” Dee Dee said. “I will.”

“You are so fake, anyway. You think because you lived in D.F. for a few years that you’re my *paisana*? *Mira, mi’ja*, you got a *long* way to go.” She turned to leave.

“Alejandra!” Dee Dee called after her. “Wait.”

She actually stopped and turned around.

“Your dress is so ugly!”

Dee Dee and Evie stood together, watching Alejandra walk away. “I guess you were right about her and Jose,” Dee Dee told Evie after she was gone. “I thought they were just talking. That’s what it looked like to me.”

“In a dark corner, behind the bleachers?” Evie asked.

“I dunno. I mean, how would anyone know, right?”

“I might not have, but I saw them last night.”

“Last night?” Dee Dee asked. “¿*Dónde?*”

“At Fabby’s party,” Evie said. “In the old photo booth.”

“At La Pantera? Are you serious? Why didn’t you say something last night?”

“I was just too upset. And actually,” Evie thought it was probably just best to bring it up and get it over with. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” Dee Dee asked.

“Your shell necklace, the one you wore last night,” Evie started. “Who gave it to you?”

“My necklace?” Dee asked. “Nobody. I got it in Veracruz.”

Evie felt relief flood her body. “In Veracruz? Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee said. “Why would I lie?”

“It’s just that it looks exactly like the abalone shell Alex had found for me at Bard Beach. We were at a party there a while ago.”

“At Bard Beach?” Dee Dee raised her eyebrows. “You were at Bard Beach?”

“Yeah, at the abalone farm.”

“Well, no, Alex didn’t give me any necklace. I got mine in Veracruz. They sell them all over the streets. But, I’ll have you know,” Dee Dee said, feigning snobbery, “it’s *not* abalone. It’s mother of pearl and I chose the necklace over the mother of pearl paperweight with the wiggly eyes glued on.”

Evie laughed.

“But what’s the big deal with the necklace?”

“Oh . . . nothing.”

“Nothing?” Dee Dee was not convinced, but didn’t press. “So . . .” she looked

around the parking lot. “Where do you think Raquel went?”

Evie saw Kitty Diaz’s car still parked in the lot. “I think I know where she is. I should go get her.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Dee Dee asked.

“Actually,” Evie said. “Yeah.”

They started to cross the parking lot and headed toward the quad area. It was the same parking lot where Raquel had made Dee Dee huff away just over a month earlier and now here they were again. But this time Dee Dee was skipping a party to go find Raquel.

“By the way, that was pretty ballsy of you,” Evie told Dee Dee. “Confronting Jose and all.”

“Ballsy of me?” Dee Dee said. “What about you? Going to parties out on Bard Beach? Now *that* takes huevos!”

She suddenly remembered her cell phone. Someone had called and she knew it wasn’t her father. She pulled it out of her purse and saw she had one new voice mail. She clicked on call history, and yes! It was Alex. Finally! But she wouldn’t call him back just yet. Because she and Dee Dee, well, they had more important matters to attend to.

* * *

Sure enough, Raquel was right where Evie thought she’d be: at Juniper’s Tree. She was sitting at the foot of the old oak with her legs bent at the knees. Her face was buried in between them. Her body was trembling and she was moaning in anguish. Evie had never seen her like this.

“Hey Raquel,” Evie started towards her. “Are you okay?”

Stupid question.

“No, Evie,” Raquel sobbed. “I’m *not* okay. He made me look like a fucking fool in front of everyone.”

“Raquel,” Evie said. “You are so not a fool.”

“Yes I am!” She sobbed.

“For what?” Evie asked. “Trusting him? Trusting someone you love? He’s the fool, he’s the idiot.”

“But in front of everyone?”

“Everyone? Who? Alejandra? Who is she? Right Dee Dee?”

Raquel looked up. “What is *she* doing here? Shouldn’t you be with Alejandrerrrra?”

“Raquel,” Dee Dee started. “I didn’t know anything about that. I knew nothing about Alejandra being with Jose.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Raquel,” Evie started. “She’s being serious. She just told off Alejandra so she could be here with you.”

“Yeah, like you really would have told Alejandra off.”

“Raquel, she did!” Evie said. “And Jose too.”

“It wasn’t so hard,” Dee Dee confessed. “I’ve been burning out on Ally for a while now.”

Raquel put her head back between her knees. “I’m such an idiot!”

“He’s an asshole, Raquel. You are rid of him.”

“But he was *my* asshole!”

Quiet.

“But Raquel,” Evie asked. “Do you really *need* two assholes?”

Raquel laughed, they all did, but then Raquel started crying again. “Don’t, don’t try to make me laugh in my misery. I *really* loved him!”

“Oh, Raquel,” Evie started. “But you know, a real friend wouldn’t have done that to you.”

“But he wasn’t my friend,” Raquel said. “He was my boyfriend.

“Yeah,” Evie went on. “But he wasn’t even *a friend*. You gotta have that respect and trust that you would get from a friend, right?”

Raquel looked up. Her face was smeared with tears and snot. “What the hell are you talking about.”

“It’s gonna suck now,” Dee Dee said. “But it’s really for the better. Really. You know, Raquel . . .” Dee Dee continued.

“Dee Dee.” Raquel looked at her. “Why are you still here?”

“Raquel,” Evie started. “Dee Dee came because she was worried about you.”

“Oh brother.”

Evie was losing her patience.

“Listen Raquel, neither one of us has to be here—we want to be here. And if you’re gonna put on a tough little show, the grand one you just did for Jose, okay, go ahead. But I think we deserve better than that. And if you want to be just left alone . . . go ahead. I’m tired of trying to figure you out and trying to make right by you!”

“What does she care?” Raquel asked Evie, as though Dee Dee wasn’t even there.

“She gets everything she wants. What does *she* know about losing someone?”

And the minute Raquel said that, Evie could just see the look in her face, a look of horror and regret when she realized what she'd just said.

"Uh . . ." Raquel mouth was as wide as her eyes. "I mean . . ."

"Raquel, you don't think I know what it's like to lose someone?" Dee Dee crossed her arms and said sarcastically. "Jeez, Rocky, I wish it was *me* who lost a boyfriend. Man, how lucky can you get?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Evie could feel everything spiralling further out of control.

"Dee Dee," Raquel suddenly pleaded. "No, I'm sorry. Really. I'm just . . . I'm just so . . ." And she started crying again, silently into her arms.

And suddenly everything was quiet. So quiet you could have heard the Pacific Northwest spotted owl hooting the background, that is, if the Pacific Northwest spotted owl had ever made it to Southern California.

"Raquel." Dee Dee took a breath. "You know this is the second time in my life that I've ever seen you cry."

"The second time?" Raquel asked.

"The first time I saw you . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Was at my mother's funeral."

"It was?" Raquel said. "Your mom's funeral?"

"Yeah," Dee Dee voice got softer. "I remember, at Santa Clara Cemetery. I was sitting with my family and I tried *so* hard not to cry. So hard. I really wanted to be strong for my dad, but when I looked over and saw you, sitting next to your mother and you

were all crying and everything, I almost lost it. It really took a lot for me not to cry. I didn't want to get emotional in front of everyone."

"Emotional?" Evie cut in. "Dee Dee, she was your *mother*." She remembered Margaret de LaFuente's funeral. The crowded mass at the Santa Clara church, followed by the long stream of cars in the procession to the cemetery. She herself sobbed as much as her mother and sister had, but she now remembered how much Raquel just bawled.

"I know," Dee Dee said. "But my dad, I didn't want to worry him. You really don't know how he can be. He gets lonely so easily. I think that's why he married Graciela so quickly, and she's not my mother of course, but I actually like Gracie. I love her, to be honest. We get along great."

"Dee Dee," Raquel said. "I don't know if I ever told you this, but I really, really liked your mother. I mean, she was so cool. Really ahead of her times, you know? Like, I never felt judged, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Dee Dee said. "I know."

So did Evie. She herself knew that her own mother could be harsh on Raquel.

"But you know," Dee Dee said, "I don't like talking about it. I'd rather not think about my mother. I just wanna think happy thoughts."

"But you can still think happy thoughts . . . about your mother," Evie said. "It doesn't have to be one or the other."

"I guess . . ."

"You can guess all you want, but I *know*," Evie said. "In Mexico, all the times you celebrated *Día de los Muertos*, didn't you honor your mother?"

“No,” Dee Dee said. “Not really. I really don’t want to think about it. I just went to all the ceremonies and stuff. I mean, they’re so beautiful and everything.”

Raquel started to wipe her tears. “Hey, I have an idea. But you totally have to trust me.”

Evie didn’t like the “trust” part, especially coming from Raquel. She knew her antics all too well. But what could she say, after she had just given Raquel her little speech about friends and trust and respect? It was a relief just to see Raquel stop crying.

“It’ll be cool,” Raquel got up and wiped her jeans off. “We can all go in my mother’s car.”

* * *

Raquel pulled up the main gates of Santa Clara cemetery. “When’s the last time you were here?” she asked Dee Dee.

“Oh my God, it was when I still lived here,” Dee Dee said. “I came out once, after the funeral, but then we moved away. I really didn’t get a chance to come back, to say good-bye. I guess,” she slowly admitted, “that I really didn’t want to.”

“Well, we don’t have to go in,” Evie said. ‘Actually, she didn’t want to go in. A cemetery near midnight. ¿HOLA? Hadn’t anyone seen *Night of the Living Dead*?

“Actually,” Dee Dee said, looking at the entrance, “we can’t. It’s already closed.”
Whew.

“You guys.” Raquel unbuckled her seat belt and got out of the car. “I got a flashlight.”

“A flashlight?” Evie eye’s followed her. “For what?” She and Dee Dee got out of the car.

Raquel opened the trunk of her mother's car and pulled out a heavy duty flashlight. She turned it on and directed it toward the cemetery's main black wrought iron gates. "We can jump that," she looked it over. "No problem."

"*No problem?*" Evie said.

"Come on," Raquel insisted. "What's the big deal?" She bent her legs and clasped her hands together. "Come on, Dee Dee, I'll give you a lift."

"Raquel, are you crazy?" Evie cried. "We can't go busting in on some cemetery! Specially on Halloween," She looked through the gates. "I'm sure they have extra security tonight for pranks and stuff."

"It's not Halloween," Raquel reminded Evie. "It's *Día de los Muertos*."

"Right," Dee Dee nodded. "It's *El Día de los Muertos*, a time to honor the dead." She lifted up sequined skirt and put her foot in the cup of Raquel's folded hands.

"Dee Dee, what are you doing?" Evie looked down the road. "You're gonna tear your costume."

With Raquel's help, Dee Dee hoisted herself to the top of the fence.

"Whoa." Dee Dee wobbled on the top of the gate. "It's a little higher than I thought."

"Come on," Raquel said to Evie. "You're next."

Dee Dee carefully made her way down the other side.

Raquel looked at Evie. "Do you want help or not?"

"I can get over myself, thank you." Evie said proudly.

Both Evie and Raquel climbed the main gate and met Dee Dee on the other side.

Evie rubbed the sides of her arms and looked around the cemetery grounds. She was so not comfortable. Couldn't they honor Dee Dee's mother through a scrap book over a nice, well-lit kitchen table?

"In Mexico," Dee Dee started, "the cemetery is just filled with people. I mean, just flooded with families, on *Día de los Muertos*."

"That's what I've heard," Evie said as she glanced over at the children's section. One of the markers read, *Nuestro niño*.

"Oh, I couldn't imagine losing my baby," Evie said.

"Yeah," Raquel agreed sadly. "Me either."

"Where," Evie asked. "Where is your mom?"

"I think over there, by that tree, that first one," Dee Dee pointed ahead. "Right across from the mausoleum."

The three girls walked on the paved road that circled the inner part of the grounds.

"I think her marker is right around here," Dee Dee said, but she was wrong.

"Maybe it's over here?" Raquel asked. "Near that faucet?"

"No," Dee Dee said. "I really remember a tree."

"Yeah," Evie said. "Me too."

"What color is it?" Raquel asked.

"What?" Dee Dee asked. "The tree?"

"No, her . . ." Raquel said, "uh, marker."

"Uh, rock color?" Dee Dee guessed.

"Well, *that* says a lot."

"*Raquel*." Evie threw her a look.

The girls decided to separate. Raquel checked on the other side other mausoleum and Evie went to the far side of the trees. After a good thirty minutes, Evie was getting colder and she was still spooked. Looking for a tombstone in the middle of the night?

Suddenly Dee Dee shrieked.

Oh my God!

Evie and Raquel both ran to her.

“I found it!” Dee Dee exclaimed.

Dee Dee knelt and wiped the marker. “It is so dirty. I can’t, I can’t believe it.” Her voice started to crack. “I can’t believe I let my mom’s marker get so dirty.”

“Dee Dee,” Evie started. “You didn’t let it get dirty . . .”

“Oh, I feel so bad,” Dee Dee went on.

“What’s it supposed to say?” Raquel asked. It was hard to read the inscription. It was caked with dirt and oxidation.

“The inscription should read: “Daughter, Sister, Mother, Wife, Friend,” but with all this stuff caked on . . .” Dee Dee tried to chip off the hard dirt.

Dee Dee sat down beside the marker. “I remember picking out the inscription. It’s so weird. I remembered going to Reardon Mortuary and they were throwing out numbers at us, telling us things, like the extra cushioning is nice and stuff. But that’s the last thing you can think about.”

Evie felt horribly uncomfortable. Maybe she and Raquel should leave Dee Dee alone?

“Hey,” Dee Dee looked over at Evie. “This is the first time tonight I’ve seen you not checking your phone.”

“Oh, yeah.” Evie felt embarrassed.

“What’s that all that about?” Raquel asked.

“I don’t know,” Evie confessed. “I’ve been beefing with Alex. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on,” Dee Dee said “He’s in love with you.”

“In love with me?”

“It’s so obvious. That night after the welcome-back party, we went to Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.”

“You didn’t go to Sea Street?” Evie asked.

“Nuh-uh,” Dee Dee said. “He wouldn’t take me. We just went to get blendeds and he was so worried he really hurt you. After I hung up with Rocio, he kept going on and on that you were so angry with him and he didn’t know what to do. To be honest,” she laughed. “It got sorta annoying after awhile.”

“Well,” Raquel smiled slowly. “I have better proof than that.”

“What?” Evie asked.

“Jose told me . . . Nah, it might be too much for you!”

“Tell me!” Evie grabbed Raquel’s shoulders and playfully shook them.

“Okay, okay,” Raquel started. “He told me that Alex has always had a crush on you.”

“What?” Evie couldn’t believe it. “And you never told me?”

“Why? You never seemed interested. Besides, I swore to Jose that I would never tell you. But, please, I have no loyalty to him now, that’s for sure.”

“Are you serious?” Evie asked. She was getting jumpy inside.

“Yeah,” Raquel smiled. “*No* loyalty at all!”

“So what are you gonna do about it *chica*?”

Evie tugged at her blonde-striped hair under her braided Frida wig and realized it wasn’t just time to return Alex’s call, but to really talk to him. “Well, I guess I’m gonna call him soon and . . . figure this out.”

“Right on,” Raquel said. She looked over at a faucet, nearby. “Hey, why do they have so many faucets?”

“For the flowers.”

“Or to clean up markers. There’s some rags and stuff in my mom’s car. We can get them and clean your mom’s marker.”

“Yes!” Dee Dee exclaimed. “Cool.”

“Over the fence, again?” Evie moaned.

“*I’ll* go get them,” Raquel said. “God, you are so lazy. . . .”

As Evie watched Raquel walk back to the cemetery gate in the dark, she suddenly realized that maybe it was *Día de los Muertos*, but it was definitely a night of new life for the three friends.

15

RioChica: Tommorrow I’m doing DP!

ShaggyMA: I just looked at Surfline. Should be a nice south swell
in your neck of the state. Have fun!

RioChica: Thank you. I will!

It seemed like ages since Evie had been to the beach at Sea Street. Actually, it had only been a few months, but in California, that's a lifetime.

She had taken Alex's advice and put on a full wetsuit. Her brand new Heat 3Q Zip by O'Neill. Her father balked at the price, but here it was Sunday morning and her father looked mighty pleased as they both left the house at five a.m.

"So you finally taking the board out, eh?" he had said to Evie as he got in his car to head to work.

"Yeah," Evie told him while she waited in the driveway for Dee Dee and Raquel to pick her up. "I'm putting your money to good use!"

"Should I get a wetsuit for your school books?" Her father teased.

* * *

But now she was on the beach, at Sea Street. The ocean was choppy and full of whitecaps. The waves were supposed to be so-called beginner waves, baby three-footers. That's what Alex told her earlier that morning on the phone after listening to the surf report. But being there right in front of them, they didn't look like baby waves to Evie. They looked threatening and scary

Evie's new wetsuit fit like a girdle, making her feel like an awkward walrus. Alex had assured her that she'd appreciate the blubber warmth once she was out in the ocean. Yeah, it was south Cali, but it was also November.

"Raquel?" Evie asked as she struggled to get the rest of the suit pulled up past her waist and zippered. "Can you help me with this?"

Raquel got up from her beach chair. Dee Dee was sitting nearby. Both were bundled up, head to toe, in multiple layers of clothing. Raquel yanked at Evie's pullover.

“You need to take this raggedly Mexican blanket off first.”

“It’s not a blanket,” Evie smirked. “It’s a Señor Lopez, *vintage*.”

“What?” Dee Dee looked over. “J.Lo’s father has a clothing line too?”

“Well, whatever you wanna call it,” Raquel started matter of factly. “You gotta take it off to put on the rest of your suit.”

“But I’m freezing!” Evie chattered her teeth to emphasize her discomfort. She reluctantly pulled off her Señor Lopez, revealing a metallic gold bikini top.

Chica - “What is *this*?” Dee Dee laughed as she eyed Evie.

Okay, so maybe she picked up a little bit from the Sangros. Was that so wrong?

“Oh,” Evie got sheepish. “I sorta had borrowed it from Charlene and I sorta haven’t returned it.”

“Yeah.” Raquel pulled at the bikini top’s sides. “And it’s just sorta a little baggy.”

“Is it *that* bad?” Evie puffed out her chest and tugged at the suit.

“Nah,” Raquel said. “Don’t worry about it. Besides, doesn’t cold water cause shrinkage?”

Evie and Dee Dee laughed.

Evie then, as quickly as possible, pulled up the rest of her wetsuit and Raquel zipped up the back.

“I don’t know *why* you want to do this.” Raquel rubbed the sides of her arms. “It’s so friggin’ early in the morning.”

“You’re right, I don’t *have* to do this.” Evie looked out toward the Pacific.

“*Good!*” Raquel zipped her black hoodie all the way up to her chin. “Let’s go home. I got a nice warm comforter with my name on it.”

“No,” Evie said. “I mean, I *want* to do this. All the times we went to the beach as kids and I rarely went in past my waist.”

“Yeah,” Raquel said. “And what’s so wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Evie started to say. “It’s just—”

“Hey,” Dee Dee looked over toward the parking lot above them. “Alejandro is here.”

Evie looked up and saw Alex coming down the rocks with his board. Her stomach did flip-flops. This was the first time she was seeing him since their Talk, which hadn’t gone exactly as she planned. She hadn’t gone into details or asked as many questions as she thought she would. He laughed at her awkward phone message and apologized for his jacked-up phone. And then they’d made plans to go surfing and that had been it.

“So you *did* come early.” He met the three of them on the cold sand. “I’m impressed. You’ve walked your talk.”

“Uh, yeah,” Evie smirked. “We’ve been here for, like, an hour.”

“Yeah, right,” He then looked at Evie. “Hey, your hair.”

“Oh, yeah.” She tried to be nonchalant. Who knew how he would react this time?

“It looks good.” He tilted his head and smiled slowly. “It reminds me of . . .”

“What?” Evie asked.

“Nothing.”

“No,” She said. “*Don’t* do that!”

“I was gonna say,” Alex started. “It reminds me of when I first met you. Last year.”

“Is that a good thing?” Evie asked.

“Yeah.” Alex smiled, his eyes directly in hers. “A very good thing.”

Clue: Time for Dee Dee and Raquel to disappear.

And as if they were reading Evie’s mind, they did.

“Come on.” Alex led Evie closer to the ocean. “Did you already do your stretches?”

“Uh, yeah,” Evie lied.

“And your pop-ups?”

“*Sí, sí.*” Another lie. It was just too cold to be practicing.

When they got to the water, the white foam hit Evie’s feet and it felt like ice.

Damn, she should have bought booties! *describe*

Alex opened his wetsuit’s key pocket on the sleeve. “Hey, I got a little something
^^^
for you. For your first DP.”

“Huh?”

He pulled out a rubber cord. Bits of abalone shell dangled from it.

Evie couldn’t believe it. “Is this the shell from that night at Bard?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Alex held up the necklace. “Cool, right?”

Her heart was beating fast.

“I was such an idiot and dropped it. That’s why it’s in all in these little pieces. I
didn’t know what to do with it and I had promised to give it to you.”

He kept his promise.

“So you likes?”

“Yeah,” Evie looked at it. *Please offer to put it on me.*

“Lemme put it on for you . . .”

“Oh, okay.”

Alex went behind Evie and put his arms around shoulder. Being that close to him, she felt lightheaded.

He tied the cord around Evie’s neck and the pieces of broken shell dug into her skin. *Ow. Not* the most comfortable necklace in the world, but it was the one she’d been waiting for.

She turned around. “How does it look?”

“Good.” He smiled and his neck turned bright pink. He looked over at Dee Dee and Raquel from the distance. “So, how’s Rocky doing?”

“She’s sad,” Evie said. “But at least she knows the truth.”

“Yeah, that goes for the two of us,” Alex said. “Jose never said anything to me. I had no idea. I’m sure Mondo knew. So *not* cool. Now I know why you were all upset that night I picked you up that night at La Pantera.”

“Yeah,” Evie wasn’t ready to go into so much detail just yet. “I was partly upset because I thought you had given the shell necklace to Dee Dee.”

“Dee Dee? Why would I give it to Dee Dee?”

“I dunno,” Evie felt foolish. “I mean, for a while there it seemed as though you were into her.”

“Into Dee Dee?” Alex frowned. “Uh, no. I mean, I wanted to be extra nice to her, if anything because I knew what a good friend she was to you. I mean, I like her and all, but I don’t know, she sorta talks a lot. You’re more kick back.”

“As in Flojo?” Evie teased.

“*Exactly.*”

"Yeah," Alex started. "To be honest, I wasn't into the blue hair or that blonde look. I mean, I think you look good anyway. You don't need anything extra. Except for a wetsuit. Now *that* looks good on you."

"You gotta be kidding."

"You're right, I am."

"*What?*"

"Just messing."

Evie looked out at the ocean. There was already a line-up of short boarders and Evie immediately felt intimidated. Her own board started to slip from under her left arm. It was heavier than she remembered when she had picked it up from Max. ^{is - shop} Maybe that's because Alex had held on to one end while they'd carried it out to his truck? After Evie tied her leash to her ankle, she thought of all the things Alex had told her once she got her board out: paddle hard, cup your hands, long strong strokes, keep your legs together.

Alex hopped on his board and started to paddle out. "Don't worry, I'll go slow."

Evie was a few feet behind him, then she was suddenly yards behind him. Her back and upper arms were beginning to ache. Alex was right. Surfing was hard work. She tried to keep her balance on the board, but it was virtually impossible. The darn thing just kept tipping from side to side. Alex had said to expect that with a new board, but this was ridiculous. She could not keep the thing balanced. She was going to slip. She peered ahead. How much farther did she have to paddle?

Alex looked over his shoulder and saw Evie struggling against the white water. He slowed down and, after what seemed eternity, Evie finally caught up to him.

"How are you doing?"

“Uh, okay.” Her pride wouldn’t let her admit the pain she felt across her back and that she was nearly out of breath already.

“Here, let me help you.” He firmly placed the top of his foot on the nose of her board. He then paddled harder, pulling her and her board behind him. Evie was about to protest, but the plain truth was, she was too tired.

“Alex,” she finally called out, “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Yes, you can! But if you’re you afraid, we can skip it.”

Afraid of what? The incoming waves or stepping into a potential relationship with him? She was sure he meant the former.

Evie looked ahead. “The waves look big.”

“They really aren’t,” he called back to her. “But if you’re worried, we can go back in. But I promise, I won’t let anything happen to you. Remember! I work at the country club!”

Evie couldn’t help but laugh to herself.

She paddled harder.

“See!” Alex looked over his shoulder and smiled. “You’re getting it!”

She felt like an idiot, but he was right. She was falling into a rhythm. It was getting a little bit easier.

“How are you doing?” he called out to her. “Blue Crush?”

“*Hello?*” Evie yelled back. “I am *not* blue!”

“Oh, *that’s* right!”

And she was right. She wasn’t blue, she was very happy. And she wasn’t blonde, she was brown. Born Brown, as it said on the package when she recolored her hair.