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Chapter One

For once Evie Gomez finally felt free. Free, not that weak ass sense of freedom she felt when she was done showering and waltzed around her bedroom with only her favorite hot pink terry towel wrapped around her waist, and it certainly wasn't that pseudo sense of liberation she experienced when the call of nature decided to give her a ring when she was surfing and ^{out ~~was~~ in the ocean, waiting for a wave} had no other choice but to relieve herself, right there in ~~the~~ middle of ~~the~~ Pacific Ocean ~~in~~ her wetsuit and all. On this particular Saturday afternoon in mid January, Evie felt free due to the simple metal ring that dangled from her fingers. It wasn't just any ol' ring she carried to Lindsay's, the Gomez's housekeeper, and ten year old ^{car} ~~sedan~~. This ring had the car keys attached and Evie was more than ready for a little joy ride. Not that she ~~actually~~ ^{non descript} stole the car keys. *Please*. If she were truly going for a joy ride, she wouldn't be boosting Lindsay's ~~rickety~~ ^{used later for test} ~~ranfla~~ that's for sure, but Evie was desperate. She was just five weeks away from taking her California State driving test and ~~she had~~ ^{she} yet to master the challenge of three point turns and the ~~ins and outs of~~ ^{shifting gears} parallel parking. Thus, the resilient begging to borrow Lindsay's sedan had ensued just minutes earlier.

"Oh, come on, Lindsay," Evie had begged. With her parents away on an afternoon mission -- the never ending search for the appropriate shade of forest green place mats to match the deck furniture's forest green cushions -- it was the perfect time to indulge in a little practice spin.

"I don't think so, Evelina. ..." Lindsay shook her head as she stepped down into the den. The latest installment of *La Cueva Sucia*, her favorite soap opera, was just starting. "Your mother said you have to be with a driver. A licensed driver."

"I *know*," Evie exhaled impatiently. "But that's only if I'm gonna be out driving on the street and everything, and I'm not. I'm gonna stay on the driveway, just in front of the house. Nothing's gonna happen."

"I dunno..." Lindsay was still hesitant.

"Lindsay," Evie followed her down the two ^{filed} steps that led into the den. "We live on a cul de sac. It's not like cars go speeding by all the time. I'll totally be safe." She leaned her head forward and to the side, fashioned after the infamous tilt learned from her best friend, Dee Dee de LaFuentes, who, usually having let the left side of her head go soft, got her way. "And the more I practice," Evie continued. "I'll ~~be sure to~~ get my license and then I can drive myself anywhere. You won't be having to cart me around anymore. Don't you want a break from being a chauffeur?"

The magic words for any housekeeper. *Don't you want a break?*

"Well, I guess... maybe... it would be okay." Lindsay pushed Meho, Evie's grey tabby, aside and made room for herself on the den's smooth leather sofa. She had now been lured into her habitual trance by *La Cueva's* leading man, Leonardo Phillippe. "Get the spare key," she told Evie. "And promise me that'll you'll stay ~~within the dead end~~.
in front of The house
Do *not* leave Camino del Rio."

"I will, promise!" Evie sprinted as fast as her Havaiana flojos could take her towards the kitchen. She didn't find the spare key, but no worries. She snatched a key ring off the kitchen's metal key holder, grabbed her iTrip, (a boast of over 1100

downloads), her wallet (an even better boast -- a freshly issued drivers permit) and sprinted out of the house.

But once Evie got out to the driveway her honest plans of taking Lindsay's sedan immediately fell to the wayside. There, parked to the left of Lindsay's car was Evie's mother's brand new Mercedes. Actually, not *brand* new, but definitely new to her mother, Vicki Gomez. The Mercedes was a good thirty years old, a classic by anyone's standards especially with its high gloss burgundy paint job, detailing by West Coast *Interiors* ~~Designs~~, original leather interior, glistening chrome, and the cali de la cali, a fuel conversion by LoveCraft's BioFuel in Los Angeles. Yes, the Mercedes had been converted to run on vegetable oil rather than gasoline. Gas was *so* passé and fuel conversions were *the thing* ^{being} done to cars in South Cali. ~~so, of course~~, Vicki Gomez's Benz was the talk of Rio Estates and she just loved, *loved*, the attention.

Evie looked at the gleaming Mercedes and then at Lindsay's nondescript four-door sedan, which suddenly seemed dull and lifeless. Not to be superficial, but Evie wondered, what *kind* of car *was* Lindsay's? Was there even a question of which ride she should choose for ^{her} ~~such a sunny~~ Saturday afternoon drive?

Evie opened the driver's seat of her mother's Mercedes and got in. She inhaled the aroma of the vintage white leather. Her choice had clearly been ^{the right one.} ~~made~~. She pulled out her cell from the front pocket of her Senor Lopez pullover and immediately called her boyfriend, Alex. How grand would that be, she thought as she speed-dialed his number, ^{not only} to swing by his house and, for once, be the one in control of such a cool, luxury ^{behind the wheel, but behind the wheel of a} automobile? But alas, the dreaded voice mail.

Duuude...leave a brief. Not a bio.

She had remembered that Alex had gone to Sea Street with Mondo that morning and felt slightly disappointed. It was almost 1 p.m., and he *still* wasn't back from the beach? Ever since their old clique, the Flojos, which had consisted of herself, Alex,

Mondo, Raquel, and her former boy, Jose, had pretty much disbanded last semester, Alex still surfed at Sea Street and Mondo still tagged along with him, sometimes. While Evie

no longer considered herself *really* a "Flojo", though she still had that chill chica mindset

from time to time, she did wear flojos (aka flip flops) 24/7/365. Flojoism may not have been a way of life for Evie, but flojos were definitely a surviving style statement.

To be honest, Evie sometimes missed the days of Flojo past, the carefree afternoons of pot and plasmas -- before Jose became a two timing jerk, before Raquel started partying too much and before Mondo cared more about his business than friendship. But then again, those were pre- Dee Dee and Alex days and Evie really loved having the double D and Alex, as a boyfriend, in her life.

Evie sighed and decided to leave neither a brief message nor her autobiography, thank you. She hung up and speed dialed her ADA, Raquel Diaz. ADA's were tighter than mere BFFs. The literal translation for ADA was *amiga del alma*, a friend of the soul, a soul sister. As anyone could tell you, a sister was much more *intimo* than a simple friend.

After a few beeps, she was met with Raquel's infamous Bullwinkle yawn on the other end. "What up?" Raquel answered sleepily.

“Not you, obviously.” Evie switched from, her mother’s favorite old school station, Hot 92 Jamz, to Dios (Malos). Nothing like brown boy emo bumping the speakers to calm one’s novice nerves. She was ready to go.

“Hey, I’m coming to pick you up,” she announced to Raquel. “Let’s cruise The Shores.”

Raquel lived next door to Evie, a mere 800 yards away and really didn’t need to be picked up to go anywhere. Raquel could just as easily walk over, but still, the thought of saying “I’m coming to pick you up” made Evie feel mature, ^{confident} ~~adult-like~~. Unlike Raquel and their other ADA, Dee Dee de LaFuentes, Evie didn’t have her own car and had to shotgun it everywhere. From parties in Spanish Hills to surfing at Sea Street, the high school production of Driving Miss Evie was outgrowing its rehearsal space. She needed to expand her wings.

“You ain’t picking me up to go anywhere,” Raquel’s voice was throaty and harsh. “I ain’t even awake.”

“Well, get up,” Evie ordered. “I got my mother’s car.”

“What do you mean, you got your mother’s car?” Raquel asked. “How did you swing the g-ride? Ol’ Vicki Gomez must be out of the country, ‘cause there’s no way you’d risk taking her precious veggie grease mobile out.”

“She’s not out of the country, but it’s the next best thing,” Evie mused. “She’s at the factory outlets with my dad. They’ll be gone all day.”

“And where’s La Lindsay?” Raquel inquired.

“Oh, she’s so far away in novela-vela land.” Evie adjusted the seat closer to the gas pedal and positioned the rearview mirror so she could see all things slow and less

important behind her. She turned the key in the ignition. "Come on, the day's almost over."

Actually, the day was far from being over. It was barely one o'clock in the afternoon, but to a party puta like Raquel, the day was just starting.

"And," Evie explained. "You know I need a licensed driver to really go anywhere."

"Nuh uh," Raquel said quickly. "*No* way. Don't you know that's the number one leading cause of teen fatality? Teaching a newbie to drive? You best find yourself another tutor, Eves. I'm outs."

"Raq, come on," Evie pleaded. "We'll have fun."

"And who says I ain't already having fun?" Raquel laughed, actually a low muffled giggle. Evie suddenly heard another voice in the background. A male voice. She suddenly felt the effects of third party damage.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"I can tell you who it ain't." Raquel laughed softly again. "It's ain't Jose, that's for sure."

Ever since Raquel had caught Jose ^{five members of a fragmented Flojo clique} sneaking around with Alejandra de los Santos last semester, her Buddy List of bad boys was being utilized to the max. It didn't help Raquel's ego that Alejandra de los Santos headed the Sangros, a foursome of *fresas ricas* from Mexico City. There had always been a clash between the Flojos and the Sangros, so of course, Raquel felt completely humiliated and betrayed when she discovered that her boy had cross pollinated and had been with one of *them*. Evie and Dee Dee had actually been foolish enough to become sorta friends with Alejandra last semester. But that was

when they were just ^{naive}fresh sophomores and didn't know better. ^{much}Not only was Alejandra a ^{I + took}*puta*, plain and simple, but she wore the scarlet letter P on her chest proudly.

Jose no longer went to Villanueva Prep, having got kicked out for his poor grades, but he still ran in a similar party circuit as Raquel, and she needed to teach ^{him}him that she could be just as scandalous, if not more, than him. Whereas any cool girl at Villanueva (which Raquel claimed there were only three – she, Evie and, of course, ^{ADA}*la otra, Dee* Dee) would gain cred (say, a hottie shortboarder with major label sponsorship or a member of a local neo-nardcore band) to inspire jealousy in an ex, Raquel was hooking up in the polar region opposite of north. She was dating down, *way* down. Evie had no idea who the owner of the background voice was and she didn't bother asking. If she knew Raquel, the voice and the male attached to ~~it~~ it wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks.

“Where are you?” Evie asked.

“I can tell you where I'm not,” Raquel continued to play coy. “I ain't home, that's for sure.”

As Evie started to back out of the driveway, she looked up towards the Diaz's house. Between the towering cypress trees that divided the properties, she saw that the window shades to Raquel's upstairs bedroom were pulled up, a sign that Raquel was definitely not in her room. She kept her shades closed until she, and only she, decided it was time to finally start her day and make the grand decision to get out of bed and pull the blinds open. Evie wondered where Raquel had gone the night before that led her to still be away from home. Whenever Raquel took off somewhere questionable for the

evening, Evie would get a call to cover for her. However, last night Evie didn't get 'the call.'

"O-~~key~~, Raquel." Evie struggled to shift from reverse to first gear. Damn, couldn't her father have had the car converted ^{manval to automatic?} to drive from stick shift to manual? "I'll let you go do whatever, with whomever. Just call me later."

"Yeah, yeah. Definitely," Raquel said before hanging up and after playfully slapping "*stop it!*" to the mystery boy with her.

Evie looked at the clock on the dashboard of her mother's Benz. *La Cueva Sucia* was a one hour program, which meant she had only 48 minutes to roll. She quickly dialed Dee Dee.

"Hi Evie!" Dee Dee practically chirped on the other end.

Evie smiled to herself. Dee Dee was the ying to Raquel's yang. Little Miss Sunny Delight to Raquel's Little Miss Understood, Dark and... Delight-less. Dee Dee would definitely be up for a drive.

"You sound in a good mood," Evie observed.

"~~Oh~~, I just got off the phone with Rocio," Dee Dee's voice got light and dreamy.

"Oh, Evie, I love him *so* much."

Rocio was Dee Dee's long lost boyfriend she had to leave behind in Mexico City once she and her family returned to Rio Estates. She talked to him every day and every night. *more?*

"Hey, so I've got the Mercedes," Evie bragged as she slowly entered Camino del Rio and cautiously looked both ways down the street. "I thought I could come over and pick you up."

Dee Dee also lived in Rio Estates just a few blocks away on Camino Cortez. *now?*

“Right *now?*” Dee Dee asked. “I can’t. I have a meeting with Eileen Cervantes.”

“Eileen? Who’s that?”

“She’s connected with Las Patronas,” Dee Dee explained. “And I’m meeting with her at four PM.”

“At four?” Evie re-checked the time on the dashboard. “Dee Dee, it’s barely one o’clock.”

“I know. I’m totally running late. I’m just so nervous. I’ve already smoked three Caribbean Chills this morning.”

“No,” Evie started. “I mean, why are you getting ready now?”

“Evie, it’s for *Las Patronas*,” Dee Dee said as if Evie was crazy for even asking. “I have to make the right impression. This is my first meeting with the former director and she’s going to give me some hints. This is the final year before I can be nominated so I can be a Patrona by junior year. And I need to make sure all my duckies are in row.”

Duckies?

Ever since Dee Dee was a little girl she always talked about being a La Patrona debutante. Her mother was one, her grandmother was one and, of course, Dee Dee not only wanted to be one, she *had* to be one. La Patronas was the oldest and most respected debutante society in the county. It was started by the wives of the early Southern Californian landowners, all of them wealthy and many of them Hispanic. Dee Dee’s father didn’t have such regal connections to early Ventura County, but Dee Dee’s mother, the late Margaret de LaFuente, sure did. Her family had owned multiple ranches in the

area long ago, when the area was still Mexico. You couldn't get more regally connected than that.

Between Dee Dee's calculated pursuits to obtain the key to the city, Raquel jonesing for a key to the nearest mini bar, and she, herself, most desirous of the keys to an available automobile, Evie sometimes wondered how all three girls could each be so unique and remain ADAs. But then again, no matter what kind of keys they each longed for, the three of them had once been three little girls in tight *trenzas* with *respado* juice dripping down their chins and, during unfortunate times, had mothers who'd slip off their own flip flops to give them a firm swat on the hiney whenever they did something very bad. It was either nostalgia or ^{mutual} embarrassment that kept their bond strong.

"You really don't need anyone to help you," Dee Dee ^{tried to} flattered Evie. "You're a good driver already. Really."

"If I'm so good," Evie said, ^{ed} ~~not buying it and~~ struggling with the gears, "then why don't you ever let me drive Jumile?" — pg 11

Jumile was the name of Dee Dee's VW Beetle. Sailors christened boats, socialites attached pretenious tags on pet Chihuahuas, but in South Cali, it was in proper order to conjure up a cutesy names for one's car. To own a nameless vehicle? *Unthinkable*.

Jumile was also the name of a particular tree beetle found in the hills of Taxco, Mexico. Dee Dee had informed Evie and Raquel that on the first Monday after *Dia de los Muertos*, it was a tradition to hike into the hills of Taxco and search for the little green beetles so the locals could roast and grind them up to make salsa and celebrate the new season.

“*sta loco, no?*” Dee Dee gloated to Evie and Raquel after she had shared that she had been adventurous enough to partake in the beetle eats, as if to prove, under her salon styled hair and immaculately applied make up, that she could be *loca* in her own way. So when Dee Dee got her lime green VW Beetle, she instantly baptized him Jumile, in honor (or remorse?) of the little green beetles she supposedly gobbled up in Taxco.

But now here was Dee Dee, again. Insisting that it was her father's fault that Evie couldn't drive Jumile.

“Evie,” Dee Dee started. “You know I'd let you drive Jumile if I could, but it's all about my dad. He's so uptight about my insurance and everything. Really.”

“Uh huh. I *love* that story,” Evie said. “Well, I'll be getting my own car soon enough, and then I won't have to count on poor little ‘uninsured for additional drivers’ Jumile.”

Evie was now heading south, down the eucalyptus lined street of Calle Bonita and towards the main gate of Rio Estates. She was ready to gun the engine and make a run for it. A cruise by The Shores ^a was calling.

“Oh, Evie, please, there is *no* way your dad isn't going to get you a Beetle for your birthday,” Dee Dee insisted. “He just *has* to come through. We have to have the complete set.”

It was Dee Dee's plan that Evie and Raquel get VW Beetles just like hers. She believed the three girls were a team, a dynamic trio, and not having similar modes of transportation would be like the three musketeers not having, well, identical moustaches.

The ^{bird vase} ~~flower~~ holder in Jumile held incense sticks, and a large sticker of Dee Dee's favorite band/soap opera's crest, RBD, was on the back window. Raquel's parents had

*absolutely
favorite favorite in the
whole wide world*

just bought her a Beetle a month ago for Christmas. Hers was black and named B.J., as in Beetle Juice, not the *other* thing. B.J.'s ^{bird} flower vase held cigarette butts, ^{bird?} and adhered across the top of B.J.'s front window visor was 'So-Cal' in white, old English script. Both Dee Dee and Raquel, of course, had vanity license plates that clearly stated their Beetles' pet names, JUMILE for Dee Dee and BTLE JCE for Raquel.

Evie wanted her Beetle to be red, cherry bomb red, with a sunroof, Bose speakers, fresh cut hibiscus flowers in the ^{bird vase} flower holder, and the quintessential decal that identified Evie totally--a white outlined pair of flip flops, stuck smack center of her back window. She had already purchased the decal months ago at the ^{Anacapa} Ventura Surf Shop, and now all she needed was a brand new car to attach it to. Simple enough, no? ~~But unlike Jumile and Beetle Juice, the name for Evie's Beetle was going to be fabulously cool and fun. She was going to name her new car Cherry Bomb and it was her fantasy to drive away from her birthday party at Duke's in CHRY BMB.~~ ^{as in}

In about a month and a half, on February 29th to be exact, Evie was going to turn sixteen, and this particular birthday was special for two reasons. One was that there was actually going to be a February 29th on the year's calendar. Being a leap year baby, Evie had to celebrate her birthday either on the 28th of February or the first of March. Not to be all *sentida* about it, but it sorta sucked not to have your birthday party on your actual birth date. And ^{the second reason} ~~two~~, this birthday celebration was going to be extra cool ^{was} because Evie's mother was going to throw her a Sixteenera, more Sweet Sixteen, way less *quinceanera*, which only meant one thing in Southern California -- A Mexican style luau. Evie was planning to have her bash thrown at Duke's in Malibu. Could she *even* keep count of all the *Seventeen* magazine tear-outs lining the inside of the locker door of all her favorite

Laguna Beach and *O.C.* stars lunching and “canoodling” at Duke’s? Duke’s was a super cool restaurant that overlooked the Pacific ^{Ocean} and was named after the OG Hawaiian surfer himself, Duke Kahanumoku. It only made sense that Evie would celebrate her sixteenera in all of Duke’s Polynesian atmospheric glory. Her reputation as a surfer-flojo-wearing chick, depended on it.

As Dee Dee claimed, Evie’s sixteenera party was the talk of Villanueva Prep, and how could it not be? After all, Evie’s father had already secured ^{the whole restaurant for the 200+ guests} DJ Chancla to spin ^{even} nothing but classic surf and power pop. There would be Polynesian dancers and *lechon*, roasted pork, but Hawaiian style with the pig’s head intact and everything. Evie’s mother had planned to make gift bags filled with disks of Mr. Zog’s Sex Wax, Roxy Mariachi flip flops, sunblock, and customized black sun visors with the words, ‘Evening with Evie’, stitched in hot pink on the front. But the main attraction at Evie’s Sweet Sixteenera? She, Raquel, and Dee Dee were going to perform a *hula auana*, a slow Hawaiian dance complete with grass skirts and faux coconut shells that they somehow were going to secure over their chests. For weeks, all three girls had been practicing to learn, in sync, the graceful hand movements and hip swaying by following an instructional video and CD, ^{Hula} *Honolulu Now*. Evie had to admit, the hours of practice did leave her to question her patience and rhythm, but Dee Dee and Raquel’s total dedication and support always made her feel more sure about herself. She had never performed for an audience in her life and now, here she was planning to do so at her birthday party, in front of hundreds of people. But who better to do it with than her two favorite ADAs? “God,” Evie ^{bring it up to me} ~~went on about~~ ^{Sixteenera} her party, “I just hope my party doesn’t turn into some mascara running drama straight outta *My Sweet Sixteen*.”

"Oooh, I hope so or it wouldn't be good party, otherwise," Dee Dee mused. "So, why don't you take Alejandro or Raquel for your drive?"

"Alex is out at Sea Street," Evie said.

"Surfing, again?"

"Uh, huh," Evie turned up Dios (Malos). "I'm gonna hook up with him tomorrow. We might take the boards to Santa Barbara."

"Mmm-hmm," Dee Dee's voice suddenly turned slo mo, leading Evie to believe that she was applying either eyeliner or mascara or channeling Anna Nicole Smith. "No offense," Dee Dee continued slowly, "but don't... you... ever... get tired that... all... you do with Alex is... surf?"

"What do you mean?" Evie asked as she shifted down to bring her mother's car to a stop. The whole thing stalled. Sheeyat. Evie started (the Mercedes (GO*MEZ)) up again.

"Don't get me... wrong. I think .. it's cool that... you... two have something major in... common, but," Dee Dee finally put her vocal cord on the right rpm. "It's just, I mean, in Mexico, boys take girls out, on dates. You get to dress up and have a nice dinner, go dancing."

"Dee Dee," Evie rolled her eyes to the side. "I'm fine with the stuff we do. Alex is q we dont need to go places my bud and Sea Street is our place."

✓ True, Sea Street had pretty much been deemed Evie and Alex's place, at least by Evie. Last semester, Evie would just lazily kick it on the promenade wall with the other flojos ~~Raquel~~, ~~Jose~~, and ~~Mondo~~, while watching Alex surf. Now that she was Alex's official girlfriend and that she officially surfed (not very good, but still) yes, it was safe to say that Sea Street was their place.

“Your *bud*?” Dee Dee asked. “Oh, I thought he was your *boyfriend*.”

✂ Evie could sense Dee Dee’s blonde tinted eyebrows (Michael Kelley Salon, 60 dollars a pair) rise in surprise.

“He is,” Evie felt she had to defend his title. “But he’s also my buddy, my friend. And that’s very important in a relationship.”

“*Claro*, of course, it’s important,” Dee Dee agreed. “I was just asking, that’s all. So, what about Raquel? Did you call her to go driving?”

“I already did, but she’s totally out of it.”

“Out of it or hung over?” Dee Dee asked.

Evie was reluctant to go into the minuscule dish she had on Raquel. While all three girls claimed to love each other unconditionally, and, granted, all of them indulged in ad bevs, and even Dee Dee, herself, lit up flavored smokes whenever she could, Dee Dee was still more judgmental towards Raquel’s recreational behavior. But even Evie had to admit, ever since her break up with Jose, Raquel’s party patterns had been off the chart.

“She was just tired,” Evie lied. “I woke her up.”

“Woke her up?” Dee Dee exclaimed. “It’s after 1 o’clock! *Ay. That girl!*” *dichos*

“Yeah, well...” Evie found herself not in the mood for a dose, not matter how small, of Dee Dee *de me Dee* dichos. “So listen, just stay on the line with me,” she suggested. “You can be, like, my virtual licensed driver. I guess a Mexico City license is better than nothing.”

I was obvious that
“*Mande?*” Dee Dee did not find Evie’s jab funny. She was very protective of Mexico City, her beloved home of four years.

“Nothing,” Evie tried to soft pedal backwards. She knew better than to diss the all mighty D.F. Besides, she was now approaching Calle Aqua Caliente and had to focus.

The transmission of her mother’s Mercedes revved hard as she fumbled into second gear. Damn. Could it be that her father accidentally filled the fuel tank with vinegar instead of vegetable oil? Evie’s efforts made her sound like an amateur barista-in-training, grinding espresso beans to a pulp. She reached the intersection just as a silver sports car pulled up, but she could not remember who had the right away to go first.

“Hey, *maestro*,” Evie started. “I’m at a four-way stop and I forgot, who has the right away?”

“The car on the right,” Dee Dee said matter of factly.

“Uh,” Evie looked over at the sports car. “She’s not moving.”

“So wave her to go,” Dee Dee advised.

“I just did.”

“Then just go, I guess,” Dee Dee said.

A horn behind Evie honked. She looked in her rearview mirror and was completely unaware that there was even a car behind her. She shifted from neutral to first gear and lightly stepped on the gas, but for some reason, her mother’s Mercedes screeched backward. *Sheeyat!* Evie had mistakenly put the Mercedes into reverse and smacked... right... into... the... car... behind her. She felt a solid thud from the back.

“Oh, my God!” Evie screamed as she dropped her phone to her lap. She felt her throat plummet to her gut. Her chest grew numb. She did *not* just hit another car.

“Wha-? --pened?” Dee Dee’s phone connection cut in and out. “What -ong?”

Evie picked up her cell. "Dee Dee!" She yelled into the mouthpiece. "I just hit a car! Oh, my God, what do I do?"

"What? Oh *my* God. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. I..." Evie looked over her shoulder and saw the driver swing open his car door. He looked *humoungous*.

He lifted his thick arms up in a thug-like '*what the?*' confrontation as he *slowly* sauntered over to the front of his car to check for any possible damage. (He was short, but stocky, with a shaved head and wearing a supersized football jersey throwback. He was definitely someone you normally didn't see behind the cloistered gates of Rio Estates.)

"If you weren't so busy yakking on that damn cell phone," he ranted towards Evie.

"Maybe you'd know how to drive. Pay attention, you pinche *idiot!*"

"Oh. My. God." Evie sunk into the leather upholstery of the car seat. She held her head and ~~the~~ *her* "damn phone" down, *far* away from the driver's view, and whispered *to* ~~into her~~ *Dee Dee* cell. "Dee Dee," her voice started to crack. She thought ~~she~~ *she* might cry. "He's *totally* raging at me."

"*Who?*"

"This guy. The guy whose car I hit!" *How* could she have hit a car? If this guy didn't kill her, her mother certainly would.

"Oh, my God!" Dee Dee was *mortified?* horrified. "Where are you?"

"Dee Dee," Evie pleaded. "You gotta come. *Now!*"

The guy was now at the driver's side of her mother's Mercedes. He tapped on the side of the door with the back of his hand and glared at Evie. "Hang up the damn phone,

turn off the friggin' music, and get out here and deal. What, you want me to call the cops?"

The cops? Oh, God, the situation was not getting any better.

"Dee Dee," Evie could still feel her throat in the pit of her stomach. "I... I have to go."

"Wait! Evie, where are--"

But it was too late. Evie had already snapped her phone shut. She somehow managed to **unplug** her iTrip, open the Mercedes' heavy door, and step out.

"I am *so* sorry!" She looked over at the guy's car. It looked like a lowered Honda or Toyota. *or something non classic* "Did I ding it?"

"Uh, yeah," the guy remarked hostilely. "You fucked it up all right."

He walked back to the front of his car and Evie followed him. He crouched down to show her.

"*Mira*," he said. "Right there." He pointed to his bumper.

Evie looked. And looked. And looked. She strained to find something out of the ordinary, something concave or indented, but couldn't detect anything. Then finally she saw it. A small dent, the size of a dime, okay, *maybe* a quarter. "You mean *that*?" She ran her finger over it.

"Yeah, I mean *that*." The guy looked at her in amazement.

Evie looked over his car's bumper and then at mother's Mercedes. The Benz appeared flawless.

This car is a classic -
"I'm gonna need your license," the guy said. "And your insurance info."

"My license?" Evie's heart dropped.

yes
“Yes.” He looked at her as though she was some rookie driver, which, of course, she was. “Your *license*.”

“Um...right,” was all Evie could say. She went back to her mother’s car and stretched across the front seat to get her cell phone off the floor. She speed dialed her home number.

One ring, two ring...

Come on, come on! Evie screamed in her head. Leave it to Lindsay to not answer the phone while she was watching her stupid soap. *Come on, Linds! Answer the phone!*

Three ring, four ring.

“*Bueno?* Gomez residence.”

Finally.

“Lindsay!” Evie sobbed into her cell. “I hit a car! I need help!”

rrr
“*Ay dios mios!*” Evie could hear the heels of Lindsay’s Aerosoles already sprinting across the ceramic tile of the den. “Are you okay? I’m coming out.”

“I’m not in front of the house. I’m—”

“*What?*” *!*

“I’m over here,” Evie said. “On the corner of Calle Agua Caliente and Calle Soccoro.”

“*What?*” Lindsay repeated. “Why are you way over there? I told you —”

“Lindsay, I know, I know. Please, just come now.” She looked back at the driver to make sure he couldn’t hear her. “And, I’m in my mother’s car.”

“*What?!*” *Italics*

“Lindsay, please, just come now. I’ll explain later. Just come. *Now!*”

"Evie, this is not good," Lindsay told Evie something she already knew. "Stay *right* there!"

Evie hung up and slowly got back out of her mother's Mercedes.

"Um," she started to tell the guy. "I forgot my wallet, so my housekeeper's coming to bring it. Right now."

"Right *now*?" ^{The guy} ~~He~~ pulled out his cell phone and checked the time.

"Yeah, right now. She should be here in ^{just a few sec} a few minutes." Evie looked down the street. "We live just a few streets down, on Camino del Rio."

Camino del Rio. Why? Why didn't she just stay on her street like she was supposed to? Why didn't she just practice with Lindsay's car like she said she would.?

Evie looked at the guy who was now rummaging through his glove compartment. What if the cops *did* come? ^{She worried} ~~She~~ ^{stolen} had practically taken a car without asking, didn't have a license ^{she} or insurance. Would ^{Evie} ~~this~~ delay her getting her license? Evie had no idea. She was ^{such} definitely out of her element, in a world full of road rules and, seemingly, road rage.

Evie looked over at the driver, whose eyes were angry and impatient.

She checked the time on her own cell phone. *Oh, Just hurry Lindsay.*

Chapter 2

It seemed like forever for Lindsay to finally show up at the scene of Evie's crime. When she did, she was out of breath, and her dark wispy bangs were stuck to her forehead with perspiration. Evie couldn't understand why she showed up on foot.

"Lindsay," Evie started. "Why didn't you just drive your car?"

"Because," Lindsay huffed between breaths, "You took my main set of keys." She grabbed the key ring from Evie's grasp. "I *told* you to take the spare. I didn't have the keys to my own car!" She took a breath and looked Evie over. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"She slammed right back into me," the guy *crossed his arms* answered for Evie. "Did you bring her license?"

"Her license?" Lindsay looked at Evie.

"I'm also gonna need to get the insurance info," the guy repeated to Lindsay. He had already gotten a pen from his glove compartment and clicked it open. He was ready and waiting.

Of course, Evie neither had a license nor car insurance. But as any Californian driver knows, it's not about sweating fellow fender benders, but rather making sure that said fellow fender benders had good car insurance or, at the very least, a good connection to repair any damage they were liable for. ✓

Lindsay had car insurance, but *decent* ~~of course~~ she wanted her good connection to just make the dent go away without her insurance company knowing. No one wanted his or her insurance rates to be raised due to some teenager's appetite for adventure.

"My brother-in-law works at Williams Automotive," Lindsay informed the guy. *as* She looked over the car's bumper. "He could fix this in a day. I'll call him tonight. I'd rather keep my insurance out of it."

g ~~Of course~~, that was enough for the guy. Everyone in the whole county knows about Williams Automotive. They *worked on* ~~fixed~~ all kinds of cars, "From Model-As to *Orales*."

Orale was Spanish for "cool," but at Williams Automotive, and pretty much in the whole

805, *Orale* meant lowriders, and as Evie had noticed earlier, the guy's car ~~practically~~ swept the street about an inch from the ground. ~~It~~ ^{his classic Honda} definitely fell under Williams' *Orale* category. ^{practically}

Finally, after an exchange of info, the guy and his dime-sized dent were on their way. It couldn't be soon enough for Evie.

"Oh, God," she caught her breath as soon as he was gone. "Lindsay, thank you so much. I thought he was gonna kill me. God, talk about a rage-aholic."

Lindsay pursed her lips and took a walk around ^{Vicki Gomez} the Mercedes to double check that there was no damage. Evie followed suit, and, fortunately, there was nothing. *Nada*.

~~The Vicki Gomez~~' classic veggie mobile was spared.

Lindsay got into the driver's seat. Evie opened the passenger door ^{as} and ~~got in~~ ^{for herself}.

"Evelina," Lindsay started the Benz. "You told me you were taking my car, and you told me that you were going to stay in front of the house and —"

"I know, Lindsay." Evie felt badly and didn't want to hear it. She hated letting Lindsay down. She was often her only ally, and now ^{she} ~~Evie~~ had been purposely dishonest with her. "I'm sorry. I am *so* sorry. I was gonna ask you if I could take my mother's car, but you were watching *La Cueva*, and I didn't want to bother you. Then I ^{started talking} ~~got on the cell~~ with Dee Dee and—."

"You were *talking*?" Lindsay instinctly tapped the brake pedal and glared at Evie.

"On the *phone*? While driving your mother's Mercedes ~~Benz~~?"

Was that steam coming out of Lindsay's nostrils?

"You are lucky you didn't kill yourself!" Lindsay shook her head as she ^{held} ~~steered~~ the leather encased steering wheel with one hand while she made the sign of the cross with the other. "Your parents going to be ^{Evelina} ~~very~~ unhappy about this. *Muy enojado.*"

Evie was afraid of that.

"Lindsay, please," she started. "You *can't* tell my parents. It was an accident. I *was* in the driveway, just like you told me to be and then..." She really didn't have anything else to add to her plea. "Please. They don't need to know, and the dent on that guy's car, I can totally pay for it. ~~I will.~~ All of it. ~~I~~ ^I promise."

"How are you going to pay for his car?" Lindsay shook her head in disbelief. "That dent isn't some little pop out. It could be a lot of money, Evelina. A lot."

"I can use my birthday money," Evie offered quickly.

Lindsay looked over at her again. "You got money for your birthday? Already?"

"Um, no," Evie confessed. "Not yet, really. But you know Grandma Vino always sends a check, and now that it's gonna be my 16th birthday, I'll probably get more money than usual."

Lindsay didn't say anything because she knew it was the truth. Evie's Grandma Vino, her father's mother, always sent Evie and her sister, Sabrina, grand checks with a substantial amount of zeros for their birthdays. Could it be guilt that she was ~~the~~ ^{always} absentee abuela and rarely attended her own ^{Kel} ~~granddaughters~~ birthday parties? That she preferred studying wine making at UC Davis with her fellow grad students or taking trips to Italy than help fill some Bart Simpson shaped pinata or lead the traditional Mexican birthday chant of *Las Mananitas*? Whatever the case, neither Evie nor Sabrina questioned

Grandma Vino's motives or lack of attendance at their birthday parties. They'd been cashing her checks as soon as they had learned what the word endorsement meant.

"I don't like keeping secrets from your parents," Lindsay continued.

"Lindsay, ²please," Evie begged. "It's not like they have to know every single thing that goes on, good or bad, negative or positive. It would just stress them out, and they don't need to be more stressed than they already are. You know how bummed out my dad has been, about the fat free *pan dulce* and everything."

Lindsay didn't say anything as she drove on Camino Pacifico and turned onto Camino del Rio. It was true that Evie's father, who owned four successful *panaderias* in the county, had invested a lot of money and time into his fat free sweet bread idea. He then lost a lot more money when it didn't do so well. Since then, the subject of money had been a sensitive topic in the Gomez household.

Evie looked out the window. She was already on thin ice for breaking her curfew (*again*) with Raquel (*again*) over Christmas vacation, and all she needed was a third strike that could land her in internment (*again*). In California, "the three strikes and you're out" law was harsh, but Vicki Gomez could be just as severe. Would she cancel Evie's sixteenera? Not let her drive once she got her license? Or worse, would Evie's little fender bender keep her from getting Cherry Bomb? Dear precious CHRY BMB with her sun roof, the Bose speakers, and don't forget the single white outlined decal of flip flops on the back window!

When they finally pulled up to the house, Evie was horrified to find her father's Escalade parked in the driveway. What were her parents doing back so early?

"Your mother is going to wonder why we took her car," Lindsay said as she pulled up into ^{the back (garage?)} the circular driveway. Evie noticed that Lindsay sounded just as uneasy about the whole situation.

Evie clenched her jaw. "Hey, Linds..."

"Si?" She parked alongside the Escalade and turned off the Mercedes' engine.

"Nothing," Evie sighed. She knew it was no use. She would have to face the consequences.

As they entered the house, Evie had to adjust her eyes ^{after} ~~from~~ coming in from the outside afternoon sun. Lindsay stepped down into the den where the closing credits of *La Cueva* were rolling down the TV screen. She clicked her tongue, as well as the television ^{plasma} ~~set~~, in annoyance. Obviously, in her haste, she had forgotten to TiVo her *novela favorita*.

"We were wondering where you two were," Evie's father looked up. He was sitting on a stool and going over the morning mail at the kitchen counter. "The front door was wide open and the TV was left on."

^{- 3, 2, 1}
"Why did you take my car?" Evie's mother asked Lindsay as she entered the kitchen. She was sorting through a pile of place mats, all of them in different shades of green, forest green. "Is there something wrong with your car, Linds?"

"We were just..." Evie started, not sure how she was going to finish.

“Molesto got out,” Lindsay quickly interrupted. “And I could not find my spare key. *Ay*, we were driving up and down the street, looking for him.” She clicked her tongue again and ran her fingers through her hair in pseudo exasperation. “*That* dog.”

Evie looked over at her, in surprise.

“Oh, no,” Evie’s mother feigned concern. “Did you find him?”

Vicki Gomez actually despised Molesto, the black Labrador that had once been Sabrina’s. It would be her ultimate dream come true to have him to run away and never return to the Gomez residence. Last summer, Sabrina had been working for *El Mision* and Molesto (then properly named Ernesto) was training to become a seeing-eye guide. Molesto flunked not just a few, but all of his obedience classes, and Sabrina, feeling empathy and concern for what would happen to dear old Ernesto, begged her parents to let her take him. Of course, they conceded, and at the time he was a cute blind school flunkie pup, but now Sabrina was back at Stanford, and Molesto was displaying the true colors of his Spanish nickname— he *was* quite *bothersome*.

“Oh, yes. We found him,” Lindsay lied. “He was just out, chasing the Milne’s cats again.”

Evie looked up at Lindsay and got her eye. *Thank you*. She owed Lindsay big time.

“Well, I don’t want him in my car,” Evie’s mother said. “He’ll scratch up the leather and leave his hair all over. If that ever happens again, which I’m sure it will, just let him go. He’ll eventually come home.”

“*Si, si, claro*,” Lindsay said.

Evie suddenly couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. She didn't want Lindsay to get in trouble with her mother due to her deliberate delinquency. *She would have to make up to Lindsay*

Did her her "Well, once Sabrina comes home," Evie's mother held up two separate place mats to compare them. *She'll make sure he* "Molesto won't be bothering the neighbor's cats so much."

"Si, claro," Lindsay agreed again as she gathered old newspapers off the counter and took them to the recycling container outside. She was smart to make an early exit before General Gomez got too inquisitive.

Evie had forgotten that her sister was due home the following week. Sabrina had *(and previously to Sigma Xi)* decided to take a short break from her studies at Stanford. Evie didn't know the whole story but she knew that Sabrina was really bummed about the break up with her boyfriend, Robert. Evie was apprehensive about *her sister's* ~~Sabrina's~~ return. In a way, she liked being the only child in the household. She got a lot of attention. Okay, sometimes maybe too much? But she definitely didn't like being constantly compared to her over-achieving sister. Suprema, as Evie often called her, was nineteen years old, only four years older than Evie, but they were a world of merit badges apart. Now that Suprema was going to be back home for a while, the difference between the two worlds were going to be painfully apparent.

"When is Sabrina getting here?" Evie pulled up a stool next to her father. *the cousin + Sacara* Considering what had just happened back on Calle Aqua Caliente, she felt more relaxed, at least for the time being. She helped herself to some nuts from the ceramic bowl that Lindsay always kept filled.

"Sometime late next week," her mother said. "She's flying down."

“Flying down?” Evie kept the cashews but put the dreadful Brazilians back in the bowl. “What happened to her car?”

“Nothing,” her mother said. “One of her girlfriends will drive it down later.”

It all seemed very odd to Evie. What was the urgency to have Sabrina home so soon? Was the whole drama of having her car driven down really necessary? Stanford University was only five hours north of Rio Estates, and her sister, as well as the whole family, relished the long scenic drive along the California gold coast. Why wouldn’t her sister just drive home, like she usually did?

“I could drive her car down,” Evie volunteered. Sabrina had a brand new Mini Cooper, silver with a ^{two} black stripe down the roof and hood. It was polished, petite, and always filled with a tank of premium gas. What chica wouldn’t want to cruise a Mini?

“No. You. Can’t,” her father emphasized each word with a slow nod of his head. “It’ll be a while before you can go making trips like that.” He opened another business envelope and started to read the contents. “Evie,” his casual tone suddenly dropped to *seriouso*. “What’s going on here?”

“What?” Evie grabbed more nuts and looked over towards the paperwork he was reading.

“Your quality check,” he said.

Sheeyat! How could Evie be *so* careless? QCs came out every three weeks, more or less. This was her first quality check of the new semester. If only she had checked the mail instead of being in such a rush to go out driving, she could have retrieved the incriminating evidence addressed to “The parents or guardian of Evelina Maria Gomez.” It could have bought her some time.

"Evie," her mother pulled back her long blonde bangs and looked at the paperwork over her husband's shoulder. "You're getting two Cs, one in English." She underlined the two blaring letters with her clear polished fingernail, as if Evie couldn't see them for herself. "How can that be?"

"I have no idea," Evie said. Civics and English were not her favorite classes, but she didn't know she was doing that badly. If anything, she thought she ^{was in the} ~~had a low B in~~ ^{range for} both classes.

"Well, you better get an idea," Her father's tone turned even more serious, a tone Evie did not want to get used to any time soon. "An idea how to change these grades. We don't have you going to Villanueva for nothing. Do you know how much it costs us to send you there?"

Evie didn't say anything, and neither did her mother.

"And you're already a sophomore," her father added. "These grades count. You have to maintain a high GPA if you want to get into a good college. How do you think Sabrina got into Stanford? ^{Supreme!} And you know our agreement," her father said. "No ^{big} birthday party at Dukes if you can't keep your GPA up."

"And," her mother reminded her. "If your average gets below a B, you can't drive, license or no license."

To be honest, ^{forgot} Evie had overlooked that particular clause of the birthday and driving agreement between her and her parents. This semester, she had become so wrapped up in having Alex as a new boyfriend, getting her driver's license, and planning her big sixteener at Duke's in Malibu that she ^{overlooked} ~~had forgotten~~ about the fine print. She didn't think her parents could be ^{that} ~~that~~ serious about possibly canceling the party. Her ^{had skipped his mind}

mother, wanting to look VC style worthy for the 200 or so planned guests, had already started a new diet, and her father had paid the hefty non-refundable deposit for Duke's main banquet room. They seemed to be just as pumped up as if the party was for them and their country club friends.

to rent out all of a source

"I can do it. I can bring the grades up." Evie tried to convince her parents and herself. "It's only Civics and English. Don't worry."

"Oh, we won't worry," her father tossed the paperwork on the kitchen counter. "It's *you* who should be concerned."

"And I'm afraid we are going to need to know that you are improving, in advance of your party," her mother said. "We still need to send out the evites and the formal paper invites."

see the improvement

"What do you mean by 'in advance'?" Evie asked. She put the remaining nuts back in the bowl. She suddenly was no longer hungry.

"Evie, don't do that," her mother frowned. "Either eat them or throw them away. Don't pick." She went on. "What I mean is, your next quality check is in three weeks, the first week of February, so we'll have to see how your next check is."

b for well you are doing then

"*What?*" Evie balked. "You want me to have straight A's in less than three weeks?"

"No, you just need to show us that you are serious about improving," her father

your grades

reiterated said. "Like your mother said, 'in advance'."

Like your mother said. Evie really resented when her parents formed a faux united front.

"But I just started the semester," Evie protested. "How am I going to tell you *beforehand* what my final GPA will be?"

"So, should we go on this?" Her father held up the quality check. "Are you telling us that these are your final grades?"

"No." Evie sulked in her seat.

Her mother rolled the paper work and tapped it her under her chin. She softened her voice. "Don't worry, *mi 'jita*. You can do it. I know how important this party is to you." She reached for some nuts and then stopped herself. Nuts were the forbidden fruit on her new So SoCal diet.

"Of course you can," her father agreed. "I remember one time when Sabrina got her quality check and was so upset when a ~~B+~~ brought her whole average down.

~~Remember that, Vicki?~~

as if it was so simple
Again, with Suprema.

"She was very determined to improve, and she did." Evie's father continued as he looked over the rest of the mail. "That kind of focus is in the Gomez blood." He smiled to himself as if the family bloodline originated from him and only him.

Just then Molesto came prancing up. Evie's mother's Bluetooth, completely covered in dog slop, was stuck halfway out of his mouth.

"Molesto!" ~~Her~~ *Evie's* mother cried out. "Ruben! Call him! He's got my phone!"

Evie's father got up from his stool. "I got it, I got it." He called to Molesto in a sing songy tone. "Mo-les-to, here..." He pretended to hold something in his clenched hand, high above Molesto's head. "Doggie treat. *Mira.*"

Molesto's big dark eyes followed Ruben Gomez's fist. His tail wagged and his two front legs bowed downward. He promptly dropped the ear piece and barked with excitement.

Of course, Evie's father had nothing moist nor meaty in his hand. He quickly grabbed the Bluetooth away from Molesto and gave it ^{back} to his wife. "Ah, sorry, young guy," he offered condolences as he rubbed Molesto's head.

Evie's mother retrieved the saliva saturated Bluetooth delicately with two fingers and ~~went to get~~ ^{got} a paper towel to wipe off the slobber. She shook her head at Molesto. "God, he is *such* a dumb dog!"

Evie looked over her quality check and then placed her elbows on the counter and her chin in the palms of her hands. She ^{glanced over} ~~looked~~ at Molesto, who looked so utterly befuddled that Evie's father had no doggie treat in his hand. She sighed. *The Gomez blood*. Could it be possible she was somehow related only to Molesto?

Chapter 3

As soon as she could pull away from her parents, Evie ran up to her room and immediately texted Dee Dee and Raquel the 'Rio Estates Emergency' distress signal: ER/RE!

Dee Dee texted back right away:

Cn u cme here?

As did Raquel:

Same plce?

Raquel's quick response surprised Evie. Fun time with Rebound Boy must have ended.

The ER/RE! distress signal announced that one of the three ^{ADAS} ~~best friends~~ had to discuss something of dire importance and that they ~~had to~~ get together, immediately. Even as kids, long before the technological revolution of cell phones, texting and IMs, Evie, Dee Dee and Raquel would meet up by the secluded area at the far end of the Rio Estates golf course. It was private and safe, that is, unless a runaway golf ball came whizzing by at 90 miles per hour, which, considering the advanced age of the majority of the members at the club, often occurred.

Because Dee Dee was still fussing over her precious Patronas meeting, the girls didn't meet at the "same place" but rather at Dee Dee's house. Raquel picked up Evie, and they drove over for the ER/RE! meet up.

As soon as they were loaded up with the regulatory Snapple and pita chips, courtesy of the de LaFuente's housekeeper, Evie and Raquel settled in Dee Dee's bedroom upstairs.

"Oh, my God," Dee Dee fussed over Evie as soon as she let her and Raquel in. "You're in one piece! What happened with that guy? You just hung up on me, and I had no idea what to think."

"You won't even believe today," Evie started as she placed her Snapple and chips on the dresser. "Oh. My. God. It was the scariest thing I ever had to deal with in my whole life. I mean, this dude was so right in my face, with his jersey and shaved head, you just know he was some gang banger ready to cap my ass or something."

"Please," Raquel crammed some pita chips into her mouth and smirked at Evie.

"A gang *banger*? In Rio Estates? And if he *was* a gang banger, what kind of jersey did he front?"

Evie looked at Raquel. It was *so* like her to try and act like she held all knowledge of street sense and sensibility.

"Raquel, you were *not* even there," Evie insisted. "You didn't even see this guy. He was all in my face and just ready to throwdown."

Okay, maybe a slight exaggeration, but Evie felt the need to color up her story, at least for the sake of her suburban pride.

"*Myra* Ay, well, I'm just glad it's all over with," Dee Dee checked the heat of her hot rollers on her head. "When I got your text, I didn't know what to do. What happened to the veggie Benz? Anything?"

"Nothing," Evie said. "But I dinged, sorta, the other guy's car, but Lindsay's got this brother-in-law at Williams Automotive, so I think it won't be too much."

"What, you're gonna have to pay for it?" Raquel asked.

"*Yeah* Of course," Evie said. "*grinly* What, you think I'm gonna ask my mother to have her insurance take care of it? No way."

Evie got up from ~~the edge of~~ Dee Dee's bed and paced on the wide loop shag of her bedroom carpet. "But that's not the worst part. I got my quality check today, and my parents are totally freaking out. They told me that I couldn't have my party unless I bring my *grades* average up by the time I get my next quality check. That's in three weeks. There is *no* way I can bring my average up in time."

“How bad was your QC?” Dee Dee asked as she held up two different blouses in front of her vanity mirror. That was the problem when the girls didn’t meet at their regular place on ~~the secluded stretch of~~ the golf course. Evie felt that multi-tasking often led to a lack of focus.

“It was okay,” Evie took a sip of her Kiwi Strawberry and felt a little embarrassed. Among the three friends, Dee Dee was the brain, and without even trying. It often made Evie feel inferior that she studied so much, yet Dee Dee achieved better grades so effortlessly. “I mean, I got two Cs. One in English and the other in civics.”

“How could you get a ‘C’ in English?” Raquel flipped through Dee Dee’s *Elle Girl*. Far from her personal flavor, but she wasn’t about to waste her time with any of the “*moda estylo*” ‘zines in Spanish that Dee Dee subscribed to from Mexico. “Harrison is total kick back. Even I’m doing well in her class.”

Great. Even Raquel was doing better in English. Could Evie feel *mas* substandard?

“Well, I didn’t do so hot,” Evie admitted as confidently as she could. “I hate English. All Harrison does is make us write. ‘Write your feelings,’ ‘write your thoughts,’ ‘write to make the pain go away.’ Ugh. I *hate* writing.”

“I don’t. I love writing,” Dee Dee said. She hung up one of the blouses after choosing a ~~boring~~^{bland} beige one with a conservative neckline.

“Since when?” Evie asked suspiciously. She didn’t remember that Dee Dee *loved* to write so much when they were little kids.

“*Since* I lived in Mexico,” Dee Dee answered defiantly. “That was the best thing about going to school there.” She suddenly got dreamy eyed. “I got to write and read in

Spanish, all the romantic poems and essays by Neruda and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, and of course, love letters from Rocio.”

Raquel threw Evie an exasperated “here we go again” look. She and Evie had both grown weary of the Rocio valentine that ~~stayed~~ ^{was permanently affixed to} pinned on Dee Dee’s heart. If Dee Dee wasn’t texting him *larga distancia*, she was gabbing with him in that show offy big city *espanol* of hers on the cell. Yes, Evie thought, it was one thing to claim the love of your life, but another thing to friggin’ talk about him “venti-cuarto/siete.”

Raquel turned her attention back to Evie. “So why don’t you just do some community service crap or something for ~~extra~~ ^{for} credit in civics? Vasquez loves that kind of stuff.”

“Oh, yeah?” Evie took another sip of her Snapple.

“Uh, yes,” Raquel answered. “How do you think Jose skated through Nueva when he used to go there? All that roadside trash he picked up off Vineyard Avenue wasn’t *always* a court appointed assignment.”

Evie laughed. “*Serio?*”

“Seriously,” Raquel smirked with evil pleasure. “*What* a loser.”

“And,” Dee Dee added. “I’m sure you could volunteer for something like The Surfrider Foundation or Adopt the Beach. Something totally Evie Gomez.”

“Yeah,” Raquel agreed. “That would be way cooler than being stuck after school every day with some boring ass tutor.”

Evie started to rethink her situation. It might be fun to work at local beach events with other ocean minded people like herself. She could definitely get Alex to help her.

She started to imagine romantic walks on the sand with him after spending sunny afternoons serving lemonade at, say, a surf contest or beach clean up.

“Yeah,” Evie felt encouraged. “That might be cool.”

“Look,” Raquel continued. “You could do some community service for civics, and then write a paper about your experiences for English. Make it a paper full of hardship and woe, you know how Harrison loves all that ‘struggling brown people’ stuff.”

“More writing?” Evie gawked. “No thank you.”

“I can write the paper for you,” Dee Dee offered. “You can just basically tell me what to say and I’ll write it up, real good. A+ quality.”

“In English or Spanish?” Evie smirked and Raquel snorted a laugh.

“I could do it in *Francais* if you want.” Dee Dee wasn’t gonna let them get the best of her. “You know I’m already at level III and at the top of my class.”

“Okay, Frenchie,” Evie said. “Just make sure you do a good job. If I don’t get my average up, the Sixteener is off.”

“And we don’t want that,” Raquel took a swig of her Snapple. “It’s been a friggin’ dry spell around here.”

“You’re telling me,” Dee Dee agreed.

Raquel looked over at her. “Since when have you been Miss Party Girl?”

“Since I ate green beetles in Mexico,” Dee Dee claimed with a smug smile. “You know, you *don’t* down them with *milk*, Raquel.”

After Evie left Dee Dee's house with Raquel, she started to feel hopeful. From what Dee Dee and Raquel had said, performing some minor volunteer duties and then having Dee Dee write up a paper was going to be enough to bring her up to sister Suprema status.

As Raquel drove them back to their houses, Evie's cell vibrated and she saw that Alex had just texted her. She hadn't talked to him all day. Wait until he heard what kind of day she had! Knowing the kind of boyfriend Alex was, Evie knew he would drive over as soon as soon as possible to console her. After, of course, picking up a Midnight Forest Ice Blended, her favorite, from the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.

But when Evie opened her message file on her cell, she couldn't believe what she read.

NW Swell @ C st. Cnt make 2morw. Srry!

To imitate Dee Dee, *Mande?* There is a northwest swell at the Sea Street break, and so now he was canceling their plans to go to Santa Barbara? Just so he could go surfing? Again? Argh!

"What's wrong?" Raquel glanced over at Evie's phone. She knew the side effects of text wounds.

"Alex is totally flaking on me," Evie glared at her cell phone's screen. "We had plans to go to Santa Barbara tomorrow, but now he wants to go surfing, *again*."

"That's what happens when you date a man whose first love is following his stoke," Raquel joked.

But Evie didn't laugh. She was about to text Alex back but decided she should talk to him in person, meaning, over the phone. She was overwhelmed with what she had gone through in one day – the car accident, a tongue lashing from a total stranger, her miserable quality check, the possibility that she may not have her birthday party. And Alex, her *boyfriend*, wasn't even around to comfort her during any of the drama. He had been *too* busy surfing at Sea Street, and now their Sunday plans were cancelled because he suddenly wanted to go surfing. And did she mention *again*? And to make matters worse, he didn't even invite her to go along!

Evie re-read his text message again and felt angry, and to be honest, a little sad. She and Alex had only been going out a little over two months. Was he already losing interest in her? She fondled the abalone necklace her had given her just last November. She wore the necklace every day, sometimes even in her sleep. ~~It was a sign of his affection towards her. But now, it seemed his text messages on her cell phone symbolized how he really felt.~~

that and
if dedication
was directed
only to

Chapter 4

420 in the 805

The following Monday at school, Alex apologized for the millionth time to Evie for flaking on her. The first nine hundred and ninety nine thousand times were on their way to school when, as usual, he picked her up so they could share the twenty-minute drive to Villanueva Prep together.

"I'm totally sorry about yesterday," he said again. "I promise, we'll go to Santa Barbara. Soon."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Evie knew she was being a baby about him canceling the day before, but to be honest, she was getting a little tired of Alex's flakiness. This wasn't the first time. There was the time they had plans to go to the new skatepark over on Rose Avenue, and he flaked because Mondo's Maurader (GSPOTTR) was down and he needed a ride to Oakview. Then there was the other time when they were supposed to go to her father's Christmas party for all the employees at his bakery, and, at the last minute, Alex wanted to drive to Santa Barbara for a "super amazing" board sale at Remmies. He wanted to go the night before so he could curb camp and be the first in line for the morning selection. Evie sighed again. Maybe Raquel was right. Could a girlfriend compete with the internal search for stoke that so many surfers were born with?

"No, but really," Alex said again as she opened her locker door. "I am *so* sorry."

One million and one.

"God," Alex said as he looked over her O.C. magazine cut outs, taped to the inside of her ^{locker} door. They were primarily of Seth. "You *like* this guy?"

"And what's wrong with him?" Evie asked.

"Nothing," Alex said. "If you like dorks."

"He is *not* a dork," Evie slugged Alex on the arm. "He's sensitive and sweet."

"I can be sensitive and sweet." Alex put his hand on her back. "Hey, I'll totally do whatever I can to help you with this volunteer thing. I don't like seeing you so bummed out." He leaned in to wrap his arms around her.

i Hola!
~~"Hey!"~~

Dee Dee came up behind them. "*Que pasa*, lovebirds?"

Raquel was in ~~low~~, listening to her ipod with the wheel cranked to the maximum right. *up behind*

"Nothing, *now*," Alex smirked as he pulled away from Evie.

"I'm *totally* starving!" Raquel yelled. "Let's go eat, already!"

"Raq," Alex motioned to her ears. "Calm the wheel!"

"Oops, sorry." Raquel ~~removed~~ *pulled* her iPod earplugs out.

"When you are gonna get a decent headpiece?" Alex frowned at Raquel's white plastic ear plugs. "Those are crap. No wonder you ~~have to~~ *gotta* crank them up."

"Sor-ry," Raquel said. "Not *everyone* has a boyfriend who buys them four *a* hundred dollar Bose ~~headphones~~ *Set*." She glanced into Evie's locker, where such headphones, a gift from Alex, were carefully tucked in their black pouch on top of her books and notepads. "You two are such *i-snobs*."

"And proud of it," Evie ~~said~~ *smiled*. *One thing she had in common.*

"Hey," Alex rubbed his stomach under his T-shirt. "Let's bail for lunch. I'm jonesing for an O-hi Frostie."

"*Claro*," Dee Dee smacked her lips. "Sounds *muy* yummy."

"No," Evie felt irritated all over again. "Remember? I gotta go to the counseling office and get some numbers for volunteering. You guys said you would help."

"Oh, yeah. That's right," Dee Dee said. "I completely forgot."

Evie's mood turned sour as she shut her locker door. How could her own boyfriend and ~~best friend~~ *ADA's* not remember the major dilemma she was still facing? Were they that self-absorbed? She couldn't think of anything else the rest of the weekend.

Gomez

Alex clicked his tongue and put his arm around Evie. “Aah, Eves. Come on,” he smiled. “Let’s go find you some volunteer opportunities that will blow paid ones away.”

When the four of them got to the volunteer board in the counseling center, they discovered, as Evie had guessed, that there were few volunteer options left.

“See!” Evie huffed. “I knew this was gonna happen. I told my parents that there was no way I could get my average up in time. If I don’t get rid of those two Cs, my mom is totally gonna cancel the party.”

“I’m still not buying that your mom might pull the plug on the party,” Raquel said. “Vicki G is all about the hostess with the most mess. She never gives up an opportunity to showcase swank.”

“Yeah, I’m actually sorta surprised, too,” Evie admitted. “She’s already told all our relatives and even started that new So SoCal diet. All she does is eat, like, one avocado a day.”

in confusion
delicate face

“*One* avocado?” Dee Dee’s forehead creased. “But that makes no sense. They’re *Avos* are totally fattening.”

“These are *Rancho Palmillo* avocados,” Evie shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, right,” Dee Dee nodded. As if organic avocados from a ranch in Somis made such a drastic difference in caloric count.

Alex read the listings from the volunteer board out loud. “Here’s some help needed: ‘Working with the elderly, three days a week.’”

“Eew,” Raquel curled her upper lip. “Working with molder folk? Evie, you do *not* want to do that.”

"Yeah, I'd have to agree," Alex nodded. He pointed out another listing. "Check out this one, 'Tutoring Youth at Risk.'" ~~He~~ suddenly smirked. "What youth isn't 'at risk'? I mean, aren't we all 'at risk'?"

"Yeah," Evie laughed. "You're at risk every time you paddle out on that nine hundred dollar ^{Rabbit Kaka} ~~Stewart~~ board of yours." *at a "local only" beach*

"Or you buy some of Mondo's home blend," Raquel complained. "Which, by the way, that dude owes me." She pulled out her cell phone, ready to speed dial a customer complaint. "I gave him a C note on Friday, and I don't smell the scent of freshly cut lawn."

Evie felt a little uncomfortable hearing about Raquel's latest transaction with Mondo. Raquel had upgraded from last semester's dime bags to this semester's

bountiful purchases *and it seemed to be a major pt of focus.*

"No cell phones," Miss Peterson, the office secretary sang as she walked by the four of them to her desk.

"I'm only texting," Raquel explained, not bothering to look up.

"You know the rules," Miss Peterson pointed to the doorway. "Take it outside or it will be confiscated."

^{indented}
Raquel rolled her eyes at Evie as if for permission to be excused. "I'm just gonna find out what's up with Mondo. I'll be right back to help you."

"Yeah, yeah," Evie knew better than to really count on Raquel. Once party supplies entered the picture, Raquel became suddenly camera shy. "Just go."

"I'll be right back," Raquel said. "Promise."

As soon as Raquel was out of earshot, Dee Dee leaned in closer to Alex and Evie.

“So what’s up with Raquel?”

“What do you mean?” Evie asked.

“She’s been going a little off the deep end, don’t you think?” Dee Dee glanced over to where Raquel was in the hallway. “Do you know who she has been going out with? Did she tell you?”

“Nuh, uh,” Evie answered. She didn’t like to admit she didn’t know something so personal about Raquel. For the four years that Dee Dee was away in Mexico City, she and Raquel had become very tight. And now, here was Dee Dee ^{having news} ~~knowing something~~ about Raquel that ^{she} ~~Evie~~ didn’t? It didn’t seem right. All three girls should ~~pretty much~~ ^{pretty much} know the same thing about each at ~~pretty much~~ ^{other} the same ~~exact~~ time.

“Davey *Mitchell*.” Dee Dee lowered her voice and looked over to where Raquel was now making a call in the hallway.

“Davey Mitchell?” Evie repeated the name. “Who’s that?”

“Ronnie Mitchell’s older brother, that’s who,” Dee Dee answered.

Evie knew of Ronnie Mitchell. He was one of the Bard Boys and had been kicked out of nearly every public school ^{in the county} for causing all kinds of chaos. However, she didn’t know too much about his older brother, Davey.

“He’s practically twenty-two years old,” Dee Dee said of Davey. “And he did time at the CYA.”

“Really?” Evie couldn’t believe it. The California Youth Authorities housed inmates between ages thirteen to twenty-four. It wasn’t just a probation agency or juvie. Kids housed at the CYA had done some pretty *bad* things.

"Yes," Dee Dee knowingly raised her eyebrows. "Raquel told me. She was actually bragging about it. She's become such a *leva*."

"Okay, *tias*," Alex put his hand on the backs of both Evie and Dee Dee. "'nough gossiping by the clothesline. Come on, Raquel is your friend."

"We're not gossiping," Dee Dee insisted. "Raquel *is* our friend and we ^{are} just concerned. You should talk to her, Evie. She'll listen to you."

"Listen to me? Say what?" Evie asked. There was no way anyone could dim Raquel shine when it was set on ultra high.

"Anything," Dee Dee insisted. "Just say something."

Evie looked over towards the quad where Raquel had now found Mondo and was talking to him in person. She wondered if Dee Dee was making a bigger deal about Raquel than actually called for. *deserve Raquel*

"You know," Alex started, as if he were reading Evie's thoughts. "We all go through phases. Maybe that's what Raquel is doing. Just give her time. She's a smart girl. She'll figure it out."

"I sure hope so." Evie took a deep breath.

Just then, the door to one of the counselor's office opened. None of them could help but hear the *voice*, that thick Spanish accented voice of Alejandra de los Santos. It monopolized the whole hallway. She was just concluding her session with her counselor, Counselor A through H. There were only three counselors at Villanueva, and each one *was assigned* ^{to} assist students based on the the first letter of their last name. There was Counselor A-H, Counselor I-Q and Counselor R-Z. Because their last names started with G and D,

Evie, Dee Dee and Raquel all had Counselor A-H. Alejandra de los Santos had him as well.

"No," Alejandra informed A ~~through~~ H, "I don't plan on living on campus during my internship. I have to live on campus *here*, and if I'm going to be donating so much of my time at Yale, I want to be able to be completely free when I'm done putting in my hours."

"Alejandra," A ~~through~~ H started. "I hope you think more of your internship as just putting in hours. Thousands of other high school juniors across the country would die for the opportunity to intern at Yale. Don't take it so lightly." A through H was the oldest of all the counselors, and Evie wondered if his noontime impatience had something to do with needing a noontime nap, or if he was just exhausted by Alejandra's arrogance.

"I know," Alejandra said quickly, as if she didn't want some lowly high school counselor telling *she* *....* *her* how to think. "Well, thank you for your time." *gracias por su tiempo*

As she left his office, Alejandra couldn't help but come head to head with Evie, Dee Dee and Alex in the narrow hallway. How could she be so lucky, Evie thought, that Raquel had *just* left? Ever since Raquel had found out that it was Alejandra who had been seeing Jose behind her back, events like the keying of Alejandra's silver Audi (DIVA DF), derogatory spanglish scrawled on her locker door, and more than *a few* accidental 'domino' slams in the hall had occurred. Was Raquel involved with every one of these *maladías?* incidents? Who knew? Evie and Dee Dee didn't condone such behavior, but never once did they question her about it.

Alejandra's almond shaped eyes scanned the three of them, and, perhaps to appear unfazed and possibly to exclude Alex and Evie, she shot off Spanish in rapid fire speed to Dee Dee.

Dee Dee, however, answered in English, slowly and calmly. "Oh, my father loves his new position," she said. "But I *really* don't think *your* father got him his job, Ally. I mean, my father has his own credentials. But it was very nice of your dad to mention the position to him."

Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was Alejandra insinuating that her dad had gotten Dee Dee's father his new position as chancellor at Cal State Channel Islands? She couldn't believe that Alejandra would be so bold, especially when it was just her against the three of them. Her sidekick Sangros, the *Ah*-migas – Natalia, Xiomara, and Fabiola – were nowhere around.

"So," Alex asked Alejandra, "You're gonna do an internship at Yale?"

okay her against the two of them
Evie pressed her foot into the side of his flojos. *Alex, who freaking cares?*

yes si
"Claro," Alejandra smiled deeply into Alex's eyes. "This summer. But I still don't know," she sighed heavily as she pulled on the ~~dark~~ *blonde* strand underneath her ~~prominent mane of brunette~~ *dark hair*. Last year, the Sangros' trademark had been their vivid blonde highlights. But this semester, after Christmas break, ^①they all had returned from Mexico City with ~~completely black~~ *hair* ^{prach callo} *bruja* black. That is, ^②except for a thin solid strand of blonde. The strand was not quite an '80s punk rock rat tail, yet it was prominent and intentional. No one really knew what ^③it meant, but already enough wide eyed freshman girls had followed Sangro suit and ~~did~~ *had* the same thing ~~with~~ *done to* their own hair.

"I might just go back to Mexico and intern at UNAM," Alejandra continued. "I really miss the sophistication of city life." She glanced at the volunteer list in front of them. "Are you doing an internship, *tambien?*" She asked Alex. "*Oye*, maybe we could both do one at UNAM. That would be fun." She looked over at Evie.

"Uh, no," Alex said. "I'm not looking for an internship, but Evie is. ~~Actually~~, she just needs some volunteer credit, or else she can't have her party."

Evie's face burned. Why are boys *so* clueless?

Of course, Alejandra knew about Evie's ~~Sixteenera~~. As Dee Dee had said, everyone at Nueva was talking about it, and that included Alejandra and her fellow ~~Sangros~~. It was 411 of the 805.

Alejandra looked at Evie and then at the volunteer board. "Well, good luck, Evelin-*a*. You know maybe my father can help. He has lots of contacts and is very charitable, to those in need of help." She looked back at Dee Dee.

"Oh, I don't need help," Evie answered quickly. Know-it-all high school ~~seniors~~ were just as bad as lowly high school counselors. "I'm just gonna volunteer a few hours a week."

"I wasn't talking about volunteer work," Alejandra smiled slowly. "I'm talking about 'your party.' What made you decide to have it at Dukes?"

"What wrong with Duke's?" Evie regretted asking as soon as the words came out of her mouth. What did she care what Alejandra thought? She wasn't even on the invite list.

“Well, for one thing,” Alejandra took another deep breath as though she had an extensive list of problems to read off. But then her eyes gazed over Evie’s shoulder and she suddenly announced her departure.

“Ay, never mind,” she patted Evie’s shoulder. “If that’s what you want for your little party. *Naco*.” She slinked away before anyone could say or do anything... *just* as Raquel reappeared. It was obvious that Alejandra had seen Raquel coming towards them.

“Okay, it’s *on!*” Raquel held up her hand to high-five Alex. She ~~was oblivious~~ *had no idea* that her nemesis had been so close by. Couldn’t she smell the residue of “sulfur de Sangro” still wafting in the air? Raquel patted the zippered outside pocket of her backpack. “So, I got the goods from Mondo. You wanna go out to The Tree?” she asked Alex.

Alex looked at Evie. “Uh...”

“Are you serious?” Evie couldn’t believe that he was actually thinking of bailing on her. Again.

“Eves,” Alex tilted his head to the side. “Don’t be like that...”

“Be like what?” she asked. “Upset that you are flaking on me, again? You said you were gonna help me find work.”

“Evie,” Raquel said, “don’t be all uptight. Besides, how many pairs of eyes do you really need? Dee Dee can get you started, and we’ll be back before you know it. I got Rodriquez after lunch, and there is no way I can deal with him without being lit.”

It’s your wife’s 420 time.
“Just go,” Evie waved them both aside. She was now certifiably annoyed.

“Are you sure?” Alex asked. “I mean, if you really, really want me to stay...”

“No...just go already.”

“Cool!” Alex gave Evie a quick peck on the cheek and took off with Raquel before Evie could change her mind.

“Don’t worry, Evie,” Dee Dee squeezed her shoulder after Alex and Raquel left the office. “We’ll find something, ~~something~~, something *muy bueno* for you.”

“Yeah,” Evie looked after Alex and Raquel as they headed towards Juniper’s Tree, the big oak tree at the far end of the quad, for their ~~little~~ smoke-out session. “I could use something, or someone, *muy bueno* in my life, right about now.”

Chapter 4

“And why do you want to work at a horse reserve?” A through H asked Evie as she took a seat in his office.

After she and Dee Dee had picked what seemed the ideal volunteer position for her – caring for rescued horses at the Southern California Horse Reserve -- Evie tapped on A-H’s door. It was still open from his session with Alejandra de los Santos, and Evie asked if he had time to answer a quick question. But she soon found out that quick questions could lead to excruciating long-winded interrogation. A through H now needed to know exactly why Evie wanted to work at the SCHR.

How should she answer him? That the SCHR was the only thing available on the volunteer list that didn’t involve old people or baby thugs? That if she didn’t get some volunteer credit under her belt, like *soon*, she was gonna be celebrating her 16th birthday at the Sizzler? Of course, she had to give him the kind of quick answer that all high school counselors want to hear.

"I really want to give back to my community," Evie stated simply. She looked *directly* into his eyes with as much sincerity as she hoped she could possibly project.

"Your community?" A through H breathed heavy over Evie's file. He had always been a big man, but he had yet to come to terms with his heftier size upon his return from Christmas break. Too many tamales? Evie wondered. His work shirt screamed creases in just about every direction. "I thought you lived in Rio Estates," he said.

"I do," Evie answered. Rio Estates was a high-end gated community with no *mere communities* suitable space to house a horse reserve, but of course, he should know that. "I just want to give back to my equeen community."

"Do you mean equine?" He looked up from Evie's file and smiled.

Yes
"Yes," Evie answered. Isn't that what she had just said? "I was reading that they needed help for horses that have been abused or injured. I want to do that." *I wanna help*

"Well, you do know that it's already three weeks into the semester, and they may not have availability." A through H adjusted his wire-frame glasses and looked at the calendar hanging to the left of him. It was a Villanueva school calendar, the one that all the seniors so enthusiastically sold every year to raise money for their prom, as if any student who attended the ten-g-a-year Nueva really needed more money to showcase *flaunt back.*

pretension. "They may not have room for you."

"But they have a listing on the volunteer board," Evie informed him.

Oh
"Oh, those listings are so outdated." A-H opened his drawer to look for something. "We have an intern who is supposed to keep on top of them, but he's always on the office phone talking or on his cell *phone* texting."

9
"Oh, do you need someone to work in the office?" Evie asked quickly. An office job would be so cool. She ^{major} would have full access to hallway passes and the internet (though most likely with limited viewing blocks), and she could work during class hours and *all* for course credit. *Que* cake. "Because I could do that, too."

"I thought you wanted to work with rescued horses?" A through H pulled a cloth lens cleaner from the drawer and started to clean his glasses. "At the reserve."

"Oh, I do," Evie answered. "I was just asking. I mean, if Villanueva needs help, I totally wanna help."

Nice save?

"It's refreshing to hear such school spirit," A through H smiled as he continued to clean his glasses, going over the lenses with meticulous form. It seemed obvious to Evie that he was on to her. "Well, if we can't get you at the reserve this semester, there is always their summer program."

"Summer program?" Evie was horrified "No, I have, I mean, I'd *like* to work this semester."

"And the urgency is because of your love of horses and has nothing to do with the two Cs on your last quality check?" A through H held up his glasses to the sunlight to inspect them.

"Well," Evie felt her neck flush. "Maybe," she answered sheepishly. "Just a little."

"Don't worry, Evie," A through H smiled, a somewhat calm, reassuring smile. He put his glasses back on. "I'll see what I can do. I'll give the reserve a call and see if

they have any more openings. I think I can pull some strings. By the way, how is your party coming along?"

"My party?" Evie asked.

"Yes, I hear from many of the instructors that it's been quite the talk on campus, and quite the distraction in the classroom. All the students are talking about it."

"Oh," Evie cringed. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry." Should she offer him an invite?

"No worries," A through H took off his glasses again and looked at them. "Just try to focus on matters on hand, Evie. Your grades need improving. You know, I was your sister's counselor when she was a student here. How is she doing at Stanford?"

"Great," Evie answered. When was Suprema not doing great?

"That's no surprise," he answered. "That girl is one focused individual. A real go-getter."

"Uh, huh," was all Evie could think of to say.

Evie soon found out that, A through H was good on his word. The strings he pulled actually yanked a last minute internship for her at the Southern California Horse Reserve. He then drafted a note to Vasquez and Harrison, suggesting they allow Evie to do the extra credit. Counselor A through H held true to his administrative title, A-H, as in *Aaah*...Evie could relax, if only just a little.

But then
Evie's moment of serenity was short-lived. She still had to get final approval from *the* both Vasquez and Harrison to do extra credit.

Like Raquel said, Harrison was a pushover. She liked the idea of Evie wanting to learn more about “ranchero life” (her words) and encouraged her to use as much Spanish as possible in her report.

“No problem,” Evie told her with confidence. And it wouldn’t be, considering that it would be Dee Dee writing the whole thing.

“Give me the mood,” Mrs. Harrison weaved her hands dramatically in the air, a gesture that Evie guessed she wanted her to capture on paper. “I want to hear the complexity of what a *charro* life really is.”

“I don’t know how many cowboys I am going to run into at the reserve,” Evie confessed. “But I will try.” She ~~smiled~~ ^{she left foot tapped fumbled} eagerly as she held out the official paperwork for Harrison’s signature. “So, when I write my essay, what kind of credit will I receive?”

“Depending on the length and quality and if you do well on your other class assignments,” Mrs. Harrison said as she initialed the paper, “you can bring your grade up to half a point. By the end of the semester, you could very well have a B.”

“Wow,” Evie wasn’t expecting a full letter B. “And that will be reflected on my next quality check? In three weeks?”

“It very well could be,” Mrs. Harrison confirmed. ^{“But you’d have to do the paper soon.”}

“Then I’m really going to do a very good job,” Evie assured her.

Yeah, a very good job getting on Dee Dee’s ass to write a damn good paper.

“Oh, I know you will,” Mrs. Harrison patted Evie on the back as she led her to the classroom door. “I know you have been faced with many obstacles in your life, Evie, being a girl, a young girl of color, and I want to do as much as I can to support you. I

want to support my *mujeres!*" She rolled out the 'R' in *mujeres* longer than necessary. "I know if you put your mind to it, you can get anything you want, ~~Evie~~." *Employ*

Vasquez, on the other hand, was harder to convince that Evie was an oppressed upper middle class teen struggling for the Malibu birthday party of her dreams.

"I normally don't allow this type of extra credit after the semester has already started," he stated dryly as he erased the chalkboard. He kept his back towards Evie the whole time. "It's standard procedure to request volunteer work at the commencement of a new semester. You know that. You don't want to get a tutor?" *Employ? you a civics instructor, not a...*

Evie tried to remain calm and diplomatic. There was no way she could lose this opportunity. "I could get a tutor, but I'd really like the experience working at a horse rescue and Mrs. Harrison and my counselor have already okayed it."

"I'm not swayed by other people's decisions." Mr. Vasquez ~~kept~~ *easily* wiping the board. "That's the problem with ~~a lot of~~ *current situation* people nowadays, in this country. They just go for the popular vote, whatever is fashionable. A lot of people don't think for themselves."

"Oh, I totally agree," Evie said. *Please*, just *sign* the paper. "I mean, all my friends were telling me I should work at a hospice, or ~~with~~ *for* Heal the Bay, but I felt I could be more useful volunteering at an animal reserve. It's ~~pretty tragic~~ *so sad* how horses are so neglected in this country. I mean, they were once the symbol of our frontier, right? Now, ~~not enough citizens bother to care about them.~~ *even*"

Citizens. Country. Frontier. Words that are music, *patriotic* music, to a civics instructor's ears.

Employ that!

Mr. Vasquez turned around to face Evie. The bottom of his nose had been accidentally dusted with powder from the white chalk. *Party hearty, Mr. V!*

He squinted his eyes at Evie and slowly nodded his head with approval. “Good for you, Evie,” he said. “It’s good to see that you are thinking for yourself. I remember last semester, when you dyed your hair blonde and started hanging out with a different crowd, Alejandra de los Santos and all her friends, I became a little concerned about you. You’re a bright girl, and now here you are wanting to do your own thing. Good for you.”

Yes, good for me, Evie floated as Vasquez signed her sheet. She was on her way to becoming the most popular sophomore at Nueva, and maybe, just maybe, she could catch up with Sister Suprema’s legacy.

Chapter 56

perfectly frank
To be honest, Evie didn’t know much about horses. Most of what she had related to Vasquez she had paraphrased from the Southern California Horse Reserve’s flyer. She *golden Rod colored* did, however, love when Dee Dee’s mom, Margaret, took her, Dee Dee, and Raquel horseback riding in Oakview. And she did fancy herself a lover of animals. Really, wasn’t she the only one who made sure Meho’s litter box remained semi clump-less, and wasn’t *she* the only one who rewarded Molesto with bona fide doggie treats after her father had so cruelly faked him out with his air nothings?

After all the paperwork had been approved, signed and turned in, Evie was scheduled for her first day of volunteer work at the reserve that following Wednesday

after school. Alex offered to drop her off at the reserve before heading out to Sea Street.

As Evie walked out to the student parking lot to meet him at his truck (SO SURF), she heard someone call out her name.

"Hey, Evie."

She turned around and saw two boys, seniors, coming up behind her.

"Oh, hey," Evie said back.

She recognized them from their photos in the school paper's sport's page, but couldn't remember their names. Normally Evie wouldn't think much of jocks in their numbered jerseys and obnoxiously lifted 4x4's, but these jocks, *hello*, where on the *water polo* team, and while she had never bothered to read the accompanying text to remember their names, Raquel had pointed out the differences between team members, which now helped Evie differentiate the two boys who were now walking next to her.

"So," Fine Ass Speedo came up to the left of her. "You be the talk of the town, Miss Eves. How's the party planning?"

"Yeah," Big Bulge Speedo came up to her right. "You gonna supply customized party hats? For all your guests?"

"Party hats?" Evie asked. How did he know she was going to have visors?

"Yeah," Fine Ass said. "You gots to have party hats, like with your name and birth date and shit like that, printed all over them. So when we use them, we have something special to remember you by."

"Actaully, I am having hats," she told them.

"Coo'." Fine Ass approved. "My cos from SB said your party's all over myspace."

"Myspace?" Evie asked. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," Big Bulge said. "Your party's gonna knock 805 on it's ass!"

"Marco..."

Fine Ass and Evie turned around. It was Alejandr-a de los Santos and her ah-miga, Fabiol-a, walking by.

"Uh, hey," Fine Ass looked over at the two Sangros.

Santa Paula to watch at the skate park
"We're gonna go downtown," Fabiol-a said. "*Quieres contigo?*" She didn't look at Evie. It was clear that the invitation did not extend to her.

"Uh, not right now," Fine Ass said. "I'm talking party talk with Eves, here."

"Yeah, my party," Evie couldn't help but add smugly as she looked directly at Alejandr-a, "at *Duke's*."

Alejandra clicked her tongue -

When Evie and the Speedos reached Alex's truck, Alex had just taken his long board out of Mondo's Marauder and was putting it into his flatbed. On days he wanted to surf right after school, he'd keep his board locked up in Mondo's car and then transfer it to his truck after classes. *Quick from Alex*

"Hey, Marky," Alex raised his eyebrows and chin at Fine Ass.

"Hey," Fine Ass looked over Alex's long board. "You gonna rip Sea Street?"

"Nah," Alex curled his upper lip. "~~Wet Sand predicts~~ flat and glassy. I'm gonna try Rincon." *Fortune¹ says*

"You're going to Rincon?" Evie balked as she opened the passenger door and tossed her backpack behind the seat. "You didn't tell me that."

Evie felt left out. As long as she'd been dating Alex and as long as she'd been surfing, basically the same amount of time, she had never been to Rincon, which was only a mere five more miles north of Sea Street. The waves at Rincon were supposedly as fierce as its local territorialism. Alex pretty much kept her away. Sometimes, Evie felt he patronized her when it came to surfing.

"You didn't ask," Alex teased. "sides, you gotta get from guppie stage before you can swim with the sharks."

Yes, he ~~did~~ patronize her.

Evie felt a twinge of embarrassment. How could he say such a thing in front of Fine Ass and Big Bulge? The two top swimmers of the water polo team?

"You can't swim?" Fine Ass asked Evie.

"Of course, I can swim," Evie wrinkled her face and shook her head. "He's just being stupid."

"Cause I was gonna say, if you need help," Fine Ass started. "I could totally help you."

"You?" Big Bulge smirked. "After your lousy numbers at the last meet? Look, Evie, If you ever wanna enhance your technique, let me know."

Evie could not believe that she was in the middle of two water polo boys, seniors, fighting over her. She couldn't help but glance over at Alex, who appeared to be not paying attention as he made sure his board was strapped in.

"Wow, that's so totally nice of you," was all Evie could say. "I gotta admit, I still get a little tense when I gotta turtle turn, you know, under the waves."

"Oh, you don't wanna be tense when you should be having fun. I can totally help you with that," Fine Ass nodded. "Just let me know."

~~Why~~ So, we gotta get going, **Marky**," Alex told Fine Ass as he came around to the other side of the truck. "Evie's got an internship over at the SCHR."

"Oh, yeah?" Fine Ass asked. "Cool, helping the horsies. ~~Well...~~ ^{Evie} see you guys later."

"Yeah, Evie," Big Bulge added. "Lates,"

"What was that all about?" Alex asked as he started up his truck and pulled out of the parking space.

"What was what?" Evie asked. ^{to talk}

"Flirting like that, in front of me?" Alex said. "So not cool."

"I wasn't flirting," Evie tried to deny it. Was she *really* flirting? Or just being friendly?

~~Of course~~ ^{yeah} you were," Alex made his voice high and overtly girly. "'Oh, I get so scared when I go under the waves! Help me, help me!'"

"I did *not* say that," Evie pinched him on the side.

"In so many words you did."

~~Aw, you're just jealous.~~ ^{Evie softened her voice}

"Not even," Alex tried to shrug it off. "I just know that you wouldn't like that if I did that in front of you."

"You're right," Evie admitted. "But God, it's not like Fine, I mean, Marky talks to me every day. He's like Mr. Big Man of the water polo team."

Alex shook his head in disbelief. "God, Evie. You are so impressionable. He's not *that* great."

"Right," Evie looked over at Alex. "And you're *so* not jealous." *space?*

Alex waited his turn in the student parking lot to make a left on Ventura Avenue. *from Gas to and*
There was no stoplight and the long line of student cars, blasting everything from reggaeton to speed metal, was practically ten autos deep.

"So," Evie started. "Marky said that my party was all over Myspace."

"Yeah," Alex said. "I meant to tell you that."

"*What?* Are you serious? How do you know?"

"I've already gotten two bulletins for it." Alex beeped his horn at a black SUV that completely dwarfed his own fairly large sized truck. "*Go* already," he muttered under his breath.

"Oh, man," Evie sank into her seat. "Now I totally gotta make sure I have a kick-ass party, let alone *a* party. Marky was even saying I should get customized party hats, can you believe it? It's like he already knew *about my usrs.*"

"You do know that party hats *mean* ~~are~~ rubbers, right?"

"What? Are you serious?" Evie held her hand over her mouth and laughed. "Oh, my God, I am *such* the dork!"

"Maybe you should get some," Alex then lowered his voice to *sound like* emulate a radio spokesperson. "Remember, you can't share the love without the glove."

"What if I don't *want* that kind of love?" Evie teased.

"Not even for your birthday?" Alex softened his voice but didn't look at Evie. "I mean, you *will* be turning sixteen."

Evie smiled out of embarrassment. "Alex, you're gonna crash the truck if you keep talking like that."

"Talking like what?" he asked innocently.

Evie didn't say anything.

"Okay, okay..." Alex said. "I don't want the silent treatment."

Evie looked out the window at the enormous eucalyptus and oak trees lining Ventura Avenue. This wasn't the first time Alex had joked about them indulging in more than carpet time. That's what Evie ^gplayfully called their extended play, carpet time. If they dared advance onto a couch or bed, it might get *too* comfortable for the both of them, and who knows what else they would or could do. If they stayed on the carpet, at least the discomfort of the floor or the consequences of rug burns would keep them in check.

To be honest, Evie didn't know if she was quite ready to make the upgrade from carpet time. The first time Alex had made his first move on her was just enough to make her expode. Could she possibly be ready for more? *spenators compustion?*

^{alex's} The first move had happened at Sea Street, of ~~course~~ ^g, right after a twilight surf session. Alex had come up behind her, and she thought that he was going to help her unzip her wetsuit, as he sometimes did. But suddenly he kissed the back of her neck, a short, quick, and gentle peck. Evie had nearly *died*. She was *so* not expecting it. Alex then placed his hands on her shoulders, and even with her wetsuit on, Evie could swear she felt his fingers tremble. She turned around to face him, and suddenly his lips were on her mouth, ^a ~~Evie felt~~ ^{slowly} totally euphoric. *feeling that*

"You're salty," she teased nervously between breaths. *Had she really said that? So not salty.*

"Mmmm" Alex muttered. His lips were cold but soft. "And you're so not..."

The sensation of having Alex's lips on hers was a million more times thrilling than anything she had experienced in her life, a sense of weightless that made her feel as if she were going to die ^{Right on the spot} from excitement. When was the last time she had ever felt such a sensation? The first time she independently kicked away from the curb ^{w/out training wheels} to ride her bike, or the first time she caught a buzz from Vieve Cliquot with Raquel? But even those moments couldn't compare to sweet, blissful Alex-stasy.

"Damn!" This time Alex held his hand on his horn. "What's this dude's problem? Friggin' student driver!"

Evie was instantly yanked from daydream to daytime reality. "Hey," she ~~told~~ ^{reminded} Alex, "I'm a student driver."

"I'm sure you don't suck this hard," Alex finally pulled his fist off the horn. "He's had three chances to go. *No balls.*"

"Hey, Alex..." Evie's ^{started} ~~thoughts were still in Alex-stasy.~~

"Uh, huh?" he answered absent mindedly.

"When do you think we can go to Santa Barbara?" she asked. "Maybe this Sunday?"

"Uh, yeah. Why not?" Alex revved his engine and finally ripped a left onto Ventura Avenue. "Hey, you know Hien Ben?" he asked. "That guy who transferred from Buena High?"

"Yeah, sorta," Evie said. "I mean, I know who he is."

also
“Yeah, so he was talking about going down to Baja. I was thinking we could all go. Cool, right?”

South
“Yeah, totally,” Evie agreed. Baja was just across the Mexican border. A lot of kids went there for simple day trips or for the weekend to surf. It really wasn’t a big deal, but the thought of going to another country with Alex, albeit just south of San Diego, excited her. Carpet time in another country? *SO super* *Muy romantico.*

“I’ll see if he’d wanna come out to S.B. with us, too,” Alex said.

“Who?” Evie’s mind was still south of the border, the border south of the U.S., that is.

“Bien,” Alex said.

“Can’t just you and I go?” Evie asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Alex said. “I just thought that because he was new and he surfed and didn’t know too many people that it might be cool to take him around. You don’t mind, do you? He’s good people.”

“Hence, his tag, *Bien*,” Evie smirked. “But yeah, I don’t mind.” She regretted asking if she could have Sunday alone with Alex. Was she becoming the obnoxious possessive girlfriend that she had read about in Dee Dee’s Mexican magazines? *Posesiva o’ No? Decide Tu.*

Alex slowed down on Ventura Avenue and looked the addresses on the mailboxes. “Where is this place again?”

g should be
“It’s actually just coming up,” Evie looked at her paper with the address. “The lady on the phone said it was a little past Kane Drive.” Evie saw the street sign for Kane and pointed, “There.”

Alex pulled over, and Evie noticed the time on the dashboard. Damn, she so wanted to make a good first impression.

"Well, here ^{I go} goes." She glumly unfastened her seat belt and grabbed her backpack from behind her seat. She was not looking forward to working an afternoon in the Ojai heat when she could be out in the sea breeze with Alex.

"It's ^{I'll} gonna be okay," Alex said. "It's good to work, get the old muscles moving."

"Oh, like you know so much about hard work, other than paddling out."

"Hey, I've worked at my dad's nursery," Alex said. "All during Christmas vacation, and ^{Then I'm gonna again} I'll be there this spring break. Compared to loading up fifty pound palms and bougainvillea, how bad can brushing down a few ponies be?"

"You're right," Evie ~~agreed~~ ^{shut her door}.

"Hey, you need a ride home?" Alex asked. ^{through the open window}

"Nah, Lindsay's gonna come get me. Besides, I don't know how long the whole orientation is gonna last. The lady on the phone said it might be between 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how many questions some of the other volunteers had."

"Who are the other volunteers?" Alex turned up The Rolling Blackouts on his iTrip, a definite sign that he was ready to take off, ^{sin} Evie, for Rincon.

"I dunno," Evie ^{lean on the car's open window ledge} slammed her door. "Just other high school students desperate for extra credit, I guess. I hope there's some cool people."

"I'm sure there will be," Alex said. "Text me later."

"I will," Evie ~~waved~~ ^{pushed away}. "Bye!"

As she followed the handwritten signs directing her to the reserve, Evie's ^{she looked down.} rainbow flojos kicked up dust. No smoking or cell phones were allowed, the signs ^{stated in bold block letters} said, but she only had to worry about the latter. She pulled her cell ~~phone~~ out from the back of her shorts and turned it off. *There.* She already felt as though she was turning over a new leaf. To click off her phone and donate a whole afternoon without ringtones or text messages once would have been unthinkable for Evie Gomez, but now she was a bona fide charity donor.

Slowly, the smell of hay, grain, and manure hit Evie's senses, and she guessed she ^{Having to a student in ojai used to such} must be getting close to the actual reserve. Sure enough, a tall blonde woman in a denim sun hat ^{walking up to the} ~~standing near~~ a chain link gate greeted her.

"Hey, there," the woman called to Evie. She was deeply tanned with ^{deep} ~~gnarly~~ crow's feet extending from the outer corners of her dark eyes. She held a clipboard to her chest. "Are you here for the orientation?"

"Uh, yeah," Evie said. "Yes."

"What's your name?" the woman asked.

"Evelina," she answered. Evie often introduced herself to adults by her formal name. ^{A gesture prompted by her mother.}

"Do you mean Evie?" The woman looked over her clipboard.

"Oh, yeah," Evie answered.

^{- She forget. Ojai - my laid back.}
"And you're from Villanueva," The woman smiled and checked off something on her clipboard. "That's right up the road. Hope the commute wasn't too grueling."

also from her mother

"Yeah," Evie laughed lightly. She had learned, from spending time at her father's bakery, that you sometimes had to grant sympathy chuckles to adults, especially to those in charge. She noticed this whenever she & her mother went to the bakery & the young girls behind the counter.

"Well, you're the last one we were expecting," the woman told Evie. "Why don't you go over and join others? My name's Lynn and I'll be with you in just a bit."

"Sure," Evie smiled back as she made her way over to "join the others." Her position at the reserve was now clear, and her stomach slowly started to turn with first day jitters. She was at the reserve to work. She would be following orders from people she didn't know and would have to do tasks that she didn't necessarily want to do. At fifteen and three quarters, Evie never really had a job. Sure as kids, she, Dee Dee and Raquel had run the prerequisite cute little lemonade stand that all kids had in the summer, and she had often helped her father out at one of his *panaderias*, but both *hand making* "jobs" were just for fun. Now, cuteness wouldn't cut it. She was at the reserve to *work*.

As soon as Evie reached the *group* others, she discovered how dead wrong she was about what she had told Alex. The majority of volunteers were not high school students like herself. They weren't even sophomores, but rather seniors. Not *high school* seniors, but seniors, as in senior citizens, *old* people. There were about eight of them, small, slouching, and fragile looking in baggy, high-waisted jeans and nylon windbreakers. A few of the men even sported small, war veteran pins on their lapels. (World War I? Evie wondered) She could help but feel a bit *slightly* ashamed. The senior citizens were a reminder that there were those in the world who actually liked doing good things for good causes, completely free from an agenda, unlike herself. God, was Evie that lousy of a person?

↓
Evie took a seat
Seat looked for a seat..

To Evie's relief, there was one other person, a girl, who looked about her age. She was thin and extremely pale with black shoulder-length hair and thick heavy bangs. Evie likened her appearance to Emily Strange, the scowling T-shirt icon with the moody sayings she had gotten to know via Raquel. Evie took a seat in the empty fold-up chair next to her.

② Lynn walked over and stood in front of the group. ① Evie shaded her eyes from the late afternoon sun as she ^{she watched} listened to her introduce herself as the owner of the reserve and talk a little bit about the reserve's history. *Yawn.* Evie hoped she'd ^{be there} get credit for this total humdrum part of the orientation.

"I'm not here that often," Lynn explained. "So, you will be trained by Arturo. He has been with the reserve for over a year, and I really trust him. He's my right-hand man. And with that," she looked over at a guy sitting in the front row whom Evie hadn't noticed before, "I'll let ^{Turo} ~~Arturo~~ take over."

Arturo got up from his chair and was greeted with an estatic applause. Evie saw that he was actually younger, maybe even closer to her own age.

Evie heard Emily Strange Girl mutter under her breath when she saw Arturo, "Nice."

Evie looked Arturo over. Yeah, he was nice looking, if you liked that country, rural, kind of look, which she didn't. He was tall, like Alex, but not as ~~has~~ wiry. He had brown hair like Alex's, but his was a lot shorter. His eyes were light, almost green and he was very tan, which Evie did like, but he wore cowboy boots, which Evie definitely didn't like. *Que fugly.*

"My name's Arturo," he introduced himself again. "You can call me Turo if you like, but ^{please} just don't call me last minute to cancel your hours."

The whole group, minus Emily Strange Girl, laughed out loud.

Point proven. Sympathy chuckles (sometimes called kiss ass giggles) *are* granted to adults or those in charge.

"No, but seriously," Arturo continued. "The horses here have already gone through ^{so much abuse that} a lot, so if you aren't truly committed to being here, then you need to think of another option for volunteer work. We, actually, ~~they~~ ^{really} need responsible individuals to ~~help~~ take care of them."

Arturo went on to explain that he was a senior at Thatcher High School and also an officer with the FFA, the Future Farmers of America.

"A lot of people think that the FFA is just a bunch of kids who are into raising livestock, but it's much more than that," he went on to explain in ~~almost~~ ^{somewhat} a smug ^{arrogant} demeanor. "We learn leadership and management skills. I'm the head director for Ventura county, a position that I'm very proud of, and now I'm running for state director, which is ^a ~~position~~ I feel pretty confident I'll earn."

Evie looked around at the group. Was this guy for real? The Emily Strange Girl was working on a blemish under her chin, but everyone else, ^{and didn't seem to be listening} especially Lynn, was so taken by the wonderful magical world of Arturo and his ^{aptitude} ~~passion~~ for taking charge.

^{The volunteers} Arturo told ~~them~~ that they could request their own hours; however, students usually worked afternoon and weekend hours. "We also have horses that are boarded here." He pointed out five stables towards the far back of the reserve. "They're basically our bread and butter. Their owners' rent pays for our feed, our supplies, and our own

rent.” He rubbed the palms together, a gesture that Evie ^{interpreted} ~~took to mean~~ that orientation was nearly over. She ^{eagerly} sat up in her seat. ^{yes!}

“Now,” Arturo said. “Who’s ready to meet our clients?”

^{Evie summed down} ~~No! There's more?~~ Evie was getting impatient.

Of course, all the old people chuckled again and raised their hands in anticipation.

Arturo led the group over to the stables just as Lynn excused herself.

“Have fun and be sure to listen to Arturo,” she said before adjusting her denim sun hat and heading towards her pickup truck. “I’ll be back before you ^{departure is over} ~~all leave.~~”

As everyone followed Arturo, Evie fell into step with the Emily Strange Girl, who glanced over at Evie. ^{her}

“I like your necklace,” she said.

“Oh,” Evie fingered the chips of abalone shells that dangled from the cord. ^{around her neck.}

“Thanks. My boyfriend made it for me.”

“Oh,” Emily made a face like she just had witnessed a kitten mid-yawn. “That is too sweet.”

Okay, maybe the girl emulated Emily, but she obviously had a *sentida* side.

“What school do you go to?” she asked Evie.

“Villanueva,” Evie ~~answered.~~

The girl threw Evie a knowing glance. “Fan-*cee*. You must have money.”

“I don’t,” Evie answered awkwardly. “But my parents do. Or at least my dad does, but he works. A lot.”

“And your mother doesn’t?” She asked.

“No, not really.”

“Oh,” the girl said. “So you *do* have money.”

Evie always felt a bit uncomfortable when seemingly cool kids, like herself, questioned her family’s financial position. Money usually represented yuppie-dumb, i.e. *boring*, and Evie was way more ‘down with brown’ than ‘down with Buffy.’ *Totally*.

“Where do you go?” she asked the Emily Strange Girl.

“I don’t, really,” Emily Strange Girl answered. “I mean, I do independent study at New Path.”

New Path was a C-school, at the north end of the county. Unlike Nueva, in all its majestic Spanish architectural splendor, New Path was ~~just a bunch~~ of white washed quantum huts and ~~non-descript~~ bungalows ^{near the local} at the Camarillo airport. Evie didn’t know anyone, except for Jose, Raquel’s ex boyfriend, who went to New Path.

“Do you know a guy named Jose?” Evie asked. She couldn’t help but feel a little bit Emily Strange herself, hoping to hear that Jose was doing badly. But, he *had* been quite the dick to her, and of course, to Raquel, last semester.

“Jose...” Emily Strange Girl squinted her eyes in thought. “Is he a Mexican guy with wild hair, like a ‘fro?’”

“Yeah,” Evie said.

“Oh, yeah,” Emily Girl smiled slyly. “*Everyone* knows *that* Jose.”

“I’m sure they do,” Evie smirked. “He used to go to my school and –”

“Excuse me, are we interrupting you?”

Evie looked up and realized that Arturo was directing his question right at her. Suddenly, ten pairs of eyes, including Emily’s, were on ~~Evie~~ *her*.

"Uh, no." Evie's face felt hot. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Please," Arturo looked upward in annoyance, "I really don't want to go over this again."

"I know," Evie felt the need to stand up straight. "I'm paying attention."

Arturo glanced down at Evie's feet. "And you can't be wearing flip flops around the stables. We won't be taking these horses down for any stroll on the beach, at least not anytime soon."

All the volunteers, even Emily Strange Girl, chuckled a bit.

"I just came from school," Evie explained. "I didn't know." Her feet suddenly felt over-exposed and naked. She placed one flip flop over the other in a show of compliance.

"You wear flip flops *and* shorts to school?" Arturo directed his question less to Evie and more to his newly acquired audience who were now at the mercy of his desperate jokes. "And do you wear a bathing suit to church?" *Sunday service*

More tittering from the geriatric gallery.

Where was this guy *from*?, Evie wondered. Everyone knew of the lax dress code at Villanueva. *Sunday service! Did he mean mar?*

"What is your name?" Arturo looked ^{*over*} ~~at~~ his clipboard.

"Evie, Evie Gomez."

"Ah, yes," Arturo said. "You were just added, right?" *armed/held right over*

"Uh, yeah." The magnifying glass was definitely on Evie.

"Let me tell you something, Evie," Arturo started. "I know this is a volunteer position, but you need to take your work here seriously. I'm not going to hand out credit just because you show up. You are going to have to work, hard."

"I know," Evie said. Jeez, she thought to herself, Mr. "Friend of the Animals" was really laying it on thick on the two-footed upright mammal that stood before him.

"So, anyway," Arturo continued, ^{tried to but was} still annoyed, "back to the real reason why we are all here, the care and rehabilitation of ^{The} horses."

Arturo then led everyone to ^{every} each stall and introduced each horse by name. Evie noticed that just about everyone took notes, and many of them went so far as to draw out a diagram of the reserve. She glanced over and saw that even Emily Strange Girl was writing something in her ^{composition} notebook. Evie immediately felt inadequate and didn't know what to do with her empty hands. Usually she would ^{fiddle} fiddle with her cell phone, but that was now not an option.

^{Now} "Now, let's go give old Chamuco a visit," Arturo announced after the group had been introduced to the last of at least twenty horses. "Chamuco," ^{he} Arturo explained, "is one of our oldest residents. He used to be a performance horse and ^{was} seized from a ranch in Santa Ynez. When he first came here, he was starving and dehydrated, but he has come a long way." ^{A very long way.}

The whole group followed Arturo to a stall farther away from the other horses. A caramel colored horse came over to the group, lazily chewing on strands of hay. He had big eyes that were oddly clouded, almost pure white. It was clear that Chamuco was blind. A sympathetic collective "Aaaw" was expressed by the whole group.

"Even though his name means devil in Spanish," Arturo got into the stall with him, "Chamuco is one of our sweetest horses." He pulled a carrot out of his side pocket and fed it to Chamuco ^{as} while he started talking baby talk. "Aw, ha-vun't choo Chamuco? You've had a toof time. Poor *bouy*."

Evie glanced over at one of the volunteers, a woman, about four feet tall with dirty grey hair tucked under a silk scarf, ^{designer} who keep fiercely scribbling on her note pad. Evie looked over at the pad. "Chamuco/devil, has come along way, pick up Poly-grip on the way home."

"Who'd like to meet Chamuco?" Arturo asked, more as a challenge than a question, as if no one would dare enter the ^{stall} stable with him.

Suddenly the shared eagerness of the group dimmed. None of the volunteers offered to get in the stable with Chamuco/devil.

Arturo looked over the group, his eyebrows raised in smugness. He then looked at Evie. "What about you, Evie?" he asked. "Why don't you come in and say hi to ol' Chamuco?"

^{placed her hand on her chest suddenly}
"Me?" Evie pointed to herself. The whole group parted, as if they were the Red Sea seperating to allow Evie access to the Promised Land ^{the other side}.

"Sure," Arturo motioned her to step the inside the stable, "come on in."

Evie stepped away from the group and slid between the fence's ^{wooden} slants. Her precious rainbow flojos sunk into the muddy earth, and all the horse flies that had been pestering Chamuco changed course and were now testing her patience as they buzzed around her face and hair. She tried to swat them away.

plaid walking

"You have to be careful with horses like Chamuco," Arturo warned her, as well as the whole group. "They can easily get startled and give you a good, swift kick. Which reminds me," Arturo looked at the group again with a playful smirk on his face, "Did everyone fill out the liability forms?"

Everyone laughed, that is, except Evie. She couldn't help but feel a bit hesitant. She crept cautiously around Chamuco, allowing him enough adequate space so he couldn't possibly feel threatened, but just as she was making her way to the right of him, her cell's ringtone went off, all five bars excruciatingly loud. *The* long continuous scream of Greta, the lead singer of The Black Dolls, blared from the back pocket of Evie's shorts. *The vibration + music* It startled Evie, but not nearly as much as it startled Chamuco. His entire gigantic body jerked sideways (and his neck arched like a two ton cobra ready to strike.)

meanin what kind of shi

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Arturo tried to grab Chamuco's by his **neck**. "Easy does it, boy."

Chamuco swayed his head left to right. He stamped his two front hooves ferociously on the ground, kicking up mud and dirt as Evie cowered to the side of the stable and fumbled to turn off her phone that, somehow, continued wail.

"Get ~~out of the stable!~~" Arturo yelled at Evie as Chamuco picked up a pace around the stable. ~~His ears were pulled back and he started to knock his body against the wooden slants of the fence.~~

fretted
The volunteers watched in horror.

"Turo, ~~Turo~~, should we go get help?" one of them called out to ~~Arturo~~.

"No, no," Arturo insisted. "I got him, I got him."

After what seemed a good long while, Chamuco, unbelievably, calmed down. Arturo stroked his mane, offered him another carrot from his back pocket and softly talked that annoying baby talk to him again. Chamuco, it seemed, ^{became} was finally *relajado*. Arturo, on the other hand, was *enojado*. Big time.

"You *cannot* have your cell phone here!" Arturo spat at Evie from the stable. "Didn't you see the signs before you came in?"

"Yeah," Evie tried her best to defend herself. "I mean, yes, I did." She felt horrible that she was to blame for what just happened. The last thing she wanted was to traumatize some poor, blind, defenseless animal that had already been abused enough in his life. "I thought I had turned it off."

"Why would you even *need* your phone?" Arturo snapped. He then addressed the whole group. "Do *not* bring your cell near the stables. At all. Keep phones in your car or in the supply shed."

One elderly man with thick white hair and wearing a light blue baseball cap raised his hand. "Uh, I have a question," he looked around at the rest of the group in confusion.

"Yes, what is it?" Arturo shook his head in exhausted frustration.

"Uh, none of us have mobile phones," the elderly man started cautiously. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No." Arturo answered, exasperated. "Don't worry about it,"

Emily Strange Girl looked over at Evie. "Boy," she remarked sarcastically. "It looks like you sure made a friend."

By the time Evie got home that evening it was almost seven in the evening. She had spent only a little over three hours at the SCHR, but her body ached as though she had busted her butt driving cattle for three years. She nearly fell asleep in Lindsay's car on the way home from the reserve and Lindsay, seeing how tired Evie was, didn't say anything during the drive. Evie was grateful for that. The car accident and the fee for the damage weighed heavily on her mind.

"How was your first day, *mi'ja*?" her mother asked from the kitchen. She was eating half of an avocado sprinkled with chili powder as ^{she} Evie came into the house with Lindsay.)

← "Ugh," ~~All~~ Evie could do was groan. She went to the fridge and poured herself a glass of ~~some~~ Kern's horchata. Will Lindsay ever find the time and make horchata from scratch, like she used to?

"Alex called," her mother told her. "He said he had been trying you all day on your cell phone but you never answered. He was getting worried."

"We can't use our phones at the reserve," Evie said. ^{between gulps} "It spooks the horses." _{out} She decided to omit the incident that erupted between her and Chamuco/devil. She still couldn't shake off the look of pure fright in his eyes. The pure fright *she* had caused.

"You have to tell us all about it." Her mother was now scraping the worn sides of the avocado hull with a spoon for any possible remaining flesh. "You're father's gonna be home soon. You want something to eat until then?"

"Nuh uh," Evie moaned as she took her glass of horchata upstairs with her. "I just wanna take a long bath." *I need to chill.*

"Evie, wait," her mother called out. "I want to talk to you."

"What?"

"You know your father is really serious about canceling this party," her mother said.

"I know," Evie replied glumly. Hadn't she just bust her butt for the last four hours? Of course, she knew.

"And I really need you to know how serious he is. If you don't bring your GPA up, you will not only lose the party, but *we* will also lose a lot of money. I already had the invitations *designed* ordered, and there are the three non-refundable deposits we made, for Duke's, for the food, and for DJ Chancla."

"I know," Evie repeated. Jeez, could she feel more pressured?

"And your father and I have already asked a lot of our friends from the country club and a lot of family to hold the date for the party," her mother continued. "So, I just hope that you keep that in mind and that you *are* serious about improving your grades."

"Mom, of course I am," Evie told her. "Can't you tell? Look at me, I'm covered *muck* in sweat and mud, and I've been slaving away all afternoon."

"Okay, okay," her mother *tossed the avo skin in the trash* ~~smiled~~. "I just needed you to know."

"Can I go now?" Evie asked.

Her mother smiled. "Yes, of course."

Evie continued up the stairs. God, the *yeah, go ahead as if she was unsure* ~~nerve~~ *serious* of her mother. It was like *her mother* ~~she~~ wanted to make sure the party happened ~~more for her own sake~~, just to save face and money. If she wanted the party so friggin' bad, why didn't she just clock in under Evie's name and muck the horse poop herself?

Evie ^{dragged} ~~slowly~~ made her way to the bathroom of her parent's master bedroom and turned the jacuzzi dial of their over-sized tub to high. After she lit two vanilla scented candles and mixed her favorite lavender oil into the whirling jet streams, she stripped off her stinky clothes and slid into the hot water. She called Alex from her cell phone.

"So how was it?" he asked. "I kept calling you and you never answered. I was worried you got dragged off by a horse or something."

"I feel like I was. I am *so* tired." Evie yawned. "And this was just the orientation. The guy in charge totally had it out for me. He's like, this total kiss ass FFA dork. He made me get in a stall with the most freaked out horse at the reserve and totally went out of his way to make me look like an idiot in front of everyone."

"What an asshole," Alex said.

"Totally," Evie agreed. "I'm thinking maybe I should just find a tutor and forget all this volunteer business."

"Maybe he's just coming on strong at first," Alex guessed. "You know how teachers do that, play the tough guy first and then soften up later."

"We'll see," Evie yawned. ^{again} "But either way, he was a jerk. He put me and this other girl on doodie patrol."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I have to clean up after the horses," Evie said. "All of them."

"Are you serious?" Alex laughed. "How many horses do they have?"

"Twenty *too* many. Thank God I just have to go a few times after school."

"I hope it's just a few times," Alex said. "You really missed some good surf today."

"Thanks," Evie answered sarcastically. She rubbed a pumice stone across the bottom of her foot. She could hear Alex's TV. ^{in the background} "What are you watching?"

"Surf porn," Alex said. "You know, big waves, big music."

"Big boobs," Evie teased.

"Hmmm, I didn't notice..." Alex said. ^g "Oh, Bien's over, too."

^{yeah?} "Oh, ~~really~~?" Evie asked.

"Yeah, he met up with me today and I was telling him about going down to Baja sometime."

Just then Evie's call-waiting double beeped, and she saw that it was Dee Dee on the other line.

"Hey, it's Dee Dee," she told Alex. "You mind if I take her call? I haven't talked to her since school."

"Nah," Alex said. "I'll try you later tonight."

Evie clicked over to Dee Dee.

"*Hola, charra!*" Dee Dee said. "So, how did it go?"

"Don't even ask." Evie was set to uncork her whine all over again. "It sucked. Big time."

"But it's all going to be so worth it," Dee Dee insisted. "As soon as you get your GPA up, you can have your party, and then you'll get Cherry Bomb and your life will be so set."

"I hope so." Evie wasn't feeling as confident as she had a few days earlier. She ^{Alex warned her - soft feet} ran the pumice stone under the bottom of her other foot. "You should have heard my

mother tonight. She was all guilt tripping me about the party and everything. It's like she's throwing the party for herself ~~or~~ something."

"*Serio?*" Dee Dee asked. "Well, at least she's on your side."

"Well, she could be on my side ^{in other} another way. Like she could grab a shovel and help me at the reserve."

Dee Dee laughed. "So, *oye*, I haven't told you the most exciting news."

"What?" Evie asked.

"I talked to Rocio today..." Dee Dee paused in what Evie ^{guessed} believed was hope to create an air of anticipation.

"And?" Evie asked. No such air was created. Dee Dee talked to Rocio everyday. Their conversations were far from being "the most exciting news."

"So guess what?" Dee Dee asked.

"*What* already?!" Evie asked.

"He's thinking of going to college out here," Dee Dee announced. Evie could sense a smile about crack on the other end of the line.

"Wow, really?" Evie asked. "You mean, here in the U.S. or in Cali?"

"Here," Dee Dee said. "In California. *Que chido*, no?"

"Uh, no," Evie answered. "I mean, right, it's cool." She was always unsure how to answer questions that ended in "no." Were you to say "No" as in ^{disa} "I agree with you," Or "Yes, I agree to your no"?

"Is he coming out here because of you?" Evie asked.

"*Claro*, of course," Dee Dee said. "He hasn't had any desire to ever leave *La Condesa*. That is, until he met me."

Fondled her necklace.
“That is so sweet.” Evie ~~said~~. She wondered if Alex would ever do anything like that for her. Making ~~an~~ *in the* abalone shell necklace was one thing, but moving to an entirely different country was another. He did, however, suggest they go to Baja sometime soon, and that was another country, sorta.

“So anyway,” Dee Dee continued. “Rocio’s coming out to research some schools and I asked him if he could stay a longer to make it to your Sixteenera.”

“Really?” Evie asked. “He’s coming that soon?”

“Uh, huh,” Dee Dee said. *and* “He knows all about you. He can’t wait for your party.”

“Wow.” Evie felt flattered. She was getting used to the idea that people whom she had never even met, from Rocio to all her myspace friends (up to 220 friends!), knew all about Evie aka RioChica805. At least about her party, anyway.

“God, Evie, your party is going to be *tan naco*.” Dee Dee continued ~~to make~~ ~~Evie’s head swell~~. “I already know what I’m wearing *and* what I’m going to buy you.”

“Really? What are you getting me?”

“I’m not telling you, *tonta*, but you are going to love them.”

“*Them*? So it’s a plural present?” This would be the first birthday, after four years, that Evie would get to share with Dee Dee. As a kid, Dee Dee, or at least her mother, was known for doing it up with over-the-top, perfectly selected *awesomely cool* gifts. Not that presents were what a birthday celebration was all about, but *still*.

“Oh,” Dee Dee’s voice broke up over another call waiting beep. “That’s Rocio.”

“Of *course*,” Evie said. It was always Rocio calling.

“*Andale pues*,” Dee Dee said.

“Lates,” Evie clicked off.

After Evie hung up with Dee Dee, she realized that the pressure was on. She *had* to bring her GPA up so she could have her Sixteenera. She *had* to. She set the jacuzzi cycle to high. The jets blasted hot water, soothing her muscles. She stank like a horse blanket, her arms ached, and she *also* had yet to practice driving with her father later that evening. She still had to check in with Raquel, but when she finally got out of the bath, she was so tired that she fell asleep shortly before dinner and didn't wake up until early the next morning.

Chapter 7

The rest of the week at the SCHR continued to be ridiculously stressful for Evie. Wednesday through Friday she left directly from school with Alex so he could drop her off at the SCHR to work a four-hour shift, followed by an evening of homework, phone calls, approval of new myspace friend requests, IMs, and *Laguna Beach* before, finally, the final good night texting with Alex before going to bed.

Alex: Nite QT.

Evie: Nite ☺

One afternoon at the reserve, Evie noticed that the palms of her hands were callused. Now that she was in a relationship with Alex, she had become a card-carrying hand holder. Rough, calloused hands would not do.

She rolled the muck bucket towards the supply shed to get a pair of work gloves, but when she entered the structure, she was overpowered by the smell of peppermint. ^{or then} She noticed a girl in the shed, ^{she was} reclining quite casually on the top of three stacked plastic bins with her legs dangling, as if the supply shed were her very own sitting parlor. ^{Many} ~~visitors and volunteers at the reserve often escaped the sharp rays of the winter sun by taking a break in the cool shade of the supply shed, so the girl's presence wasn't that~~ ^{her appearance wasn't a big deal.} alarming to Evie. She glanced over at the girl, who was about her own height but with shorter hair. She wore tight, high-waisted beige riding pants with black leather riding boots that looked like they had just come right out of the box. She also wore a black satin camisole, styled like a corset and fastened with seemingly hundreds of miniature black satin-covered buttons. A single thick gold chain with an amber colored **jeweled pendant** hung around her long brown neck and rested right into her ample cleavage. And Arturo thought that *she* had dressed inappropriately on her first day! ^{or then} ^{Many} ^{Some time people}

"Hey," Evie said as she entered the shed.

The girl offered a slight smile, but nothing else. It was the cigarette, positioned between her thin, delicate fingers, that was causing the ~~strong smell~~ ^{aroma} of peppermint. Arturo would *flip* if he caught this girl smoking on the grounds, especially in the shed. Evie didn't necessarily like playing supply shed monitor, but she figured she'd clue in a new volunteer.

^{she} "Oh, hey," ~~Evie~~ started. "You're not supposed to smoke, especially in here. The guy in charge is a complete control freak and will totally get on your case about it."

The girl looked right into Evie's eyes and took another slow drag from her scented cigarette. "The guy in charge?"

“Yeah,” Evie pulled out a small plastic storage bin from under a pile of wool blankets. She found a pair of suede work gloves and tried them on. Size Sasquatch compared to her small hands, but they would have to do. “Ar-turdo,” she smiled. “That’s what we call him.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” the girl continued with a vacant look on her face.

“Me and the other girl, Ana.” Evie laughed to herself. “You haven’t met him?”

“Me?” The girl took an even slower pull from her cigarette and smirked. “Oh, yes, I’ve met *him*.”

Just then, Arturo entered the shed.

“Josephina,” he said as he took the cigarette from out of the girl’s fingers and held it above her head. “You know better than that. *No smoking*.” He then put his arms around the girl’s ^{sahiny} waist, making sure to keep the cigarette high, away from both of them, as he leaned in to kiss her.

No *Way*. This girl had obviously met Arturo and knew him well, quite well. *Sheeyat*.

“I know,” the girl looked towards Evie. “I was just reprimanded? By this helper?”

Reprimanded? This helper?

The girl ended her sentences with as if each were a question. This was typical San Fernando Valley speak, that somehow had made it down the Conejo Grade and into Ventura County. This girl, named Josephina, had obviously been infected with the inflection.

Arturo looked over towards Evie. He hadn’t noticed that she was crouched down beside the extra saddles and blankets, trying on work gloves.

"What do you need, Evie?" He demanded to know. His ^{arms} ~~embrace~~ around Josephina relaxed as she took back her cigarette.

"Just some gloves." Evie held them up to prove she wasn't just goofing off from work or, worse, trying to snoop on his personal affairs. "I was just on my way to dump the daily load."

The girl's body stiffened as she slithered out of Arturo's embrace. "^{TUVO} ~~Arturo~~, stop it. You're gonna wrinkle my ^{clothes} ~~camis~~?"

Arturo pulled back, and then the girl looked blankly at Evie, prompting him to introduce her.

"This is Evie," he told the girl. "She's one of the volunteers, from Villanueva."

"Villanueva?" Josephina asked.

"Yeah," Evie said ^{smiled smugly}.

~~The girl studied Evie.~~ "I just met a girl? Who goes to Villanueva?"

"Oh, really?" Evie asked. "Who?" Villanueva had about 300 students, including the resident students, and everyone knew just about everyone else, or at least their second-hand *chisme*. "You probably don't know her?" Josephina guessed. "Dela? Dela de LaFuentes?"

"Dela?" Evie ^{asked} ~~said~~. "You mean Dee Dee? She's like my best friend. How do you know her?"

↖
"You're *Dela*'s bestfriend?" The girl's dark eyes widened. "I would never imagined that."

"Uh yeah, we've been best friends since we were little kids. Even when she lived in Mexico City, we were tight." - now why could she imagine
that he friends w/ Dee Dee

Not quite the truth, but Evie felt as though she had to prove to this girl, whom she now deemed snooty and spoke in question marks, that Dee Dee was, indeed, a very, very dear friend, her ADA.

"I just met Dela," ~~she said~~ ^{the girl} as she held out her hand. "I'm Josephina? From Las Patronas Senior Committee?"

Dee Dee had mentioned the Las Patronas Senior committee, which was made up of high school seniors and had a small say-so of who was to be selected as a new Patrona for the incoming year. ^{more}

"Oh, right," Evie nodded and shook Josephina's hand. She had forgotten to remove the oversized work glove and felt like a big, clumsy bear mauling a delicate fawn. She wasn't used to an introduction followed with a handshake, unless it was with adults. She hoped it didn't lose points for Dee Dee.

"Are you a volunteer, too?" Evie asked.

"Hardly?" Josephina frowned. "I keep my horse here?" She lifted her chin in the direction of one of the back stables. "Princesa? She's mine."

"Oh," Evie looked over in the same direction. "I know Princesa, or at least what comes *out* of her." Evie laughed, but Josephina's face didn't crack a crease.

"No, but really Princesa is sweet," Evie felt stupid saying such a thing. Was a pet poop comment just as bad as telling a parent that his or her child was ^{ugly} ugly?

Just then, Ana poked her head in the supply shed.

"*Evie*," she huffed in annoyance. "The wheelbarrow is still out here. You haven't dumped it yet?"

"I was just about to," Evie slid past Arturo and Josephina and walked towards the wheelbarrow.

"Ana," Arturo started. "Why don't both you and Evie do it so we can all get out of here quicker?"

"But Evie was gonna do it," Ana protested.

"Just help her," Arturo said. "It's getting late and I promised to take Josephina to the pier before the sun sets."

Ana took ahold of the wheelbarrow. "Come on, *Evie*."

Evie and Ana headed towards the manure pile.

"Who *was* that?" Ana asked.

"I guess Arturo's girlfriend."

"Oh, I thought it was one of your fancy ass friends from your fancy ass school."

"*None* of my friends look, act, or dress like that," Evie insisted.

"She looks like she was about to go hunting with the hounds...but forgot to change out of her Victoria Secret nightie," Ana laughed. "What's her name?"

"**Josephina,**" Evie said. "**Josephin-a.**"

Chapter 7

Despite an evening fundraiser for the SCHR later that evening, Saturday was Evie's first free day from the reserve in over two weeks. She had worked a total of forty hours at the reserve, and, of course, the inner flojo in her just wanted an afternoon

devoted to complete chill. It was nearly 11 a.m. and she lay in her bed blissfully devoid of duties or obligation. Nothing would get her out of bed, nothing, unless maybe the call of Sea Street. And sure enough, Alex's text beckoned her.

C st?

To which she texted back.

Rdy in 20.

It had been too long since she and Alex had gone surfing at Sea Street, and there was no way she was going to miss out on some choice waves this Saturday. She got out of bed, slipped on her Sanuk flojos, and looked for her bathing suit. No doubt she'd need to wear her full length winter wetsuit as well, but once she was out of the water, she liked to peel her suit down to her waist so she could tan her shoulders and belly. *This is a bikini top was necessary*

"Lindsay," she called out as she dug to the bottom of her wicker hamper. "Have you seen my ~~bikini top~~ ^{bathing suit}? The light blue Roxy?" *necessary*

"I can't hear you when you yell like that!" Lindsay yelled from the kitchen.

"My bathing suit?" Evie called out from her bedroom's doorway. "The blue one. Have you seen it?" *again*

"No, Evie," Lindsay answered back from the kitchen. "Are you going for a swim? Because maybe you should wait. The pool man was here this morning and it's still filtering."

"No, I'm gonna go surfing with Alex!" Evie yelled out again. "He's gonna pick me up in a bit."

"Evie, you can't go to the beach," Lindsay was now coming up the stairs. She was drying her hands with a kitchen towel. "Sabrina is coming home today."

"I know," Evie went back into her room. She gave up on her hamper and looked around her bathroom floor. Where there used to be bikini tops and towels covered with sand, now were jeans and tennis shoes embedded with mud, straw and bits of hay. "But not until later today, right?"

"Si," Lindsay said, "but your mother wanted you to stick around, just in case."

"~~Just~~ in case of what?" Evie didn't want to waste time looking for her blue suit. Alex was on his way. She grabbed her lime green one from the top drawer of her dresser. "I don't know, Evie," Lindsay ^{looked around the messy room.} ~~said~~. "You should ask her."

"Are you serious?" Evie looked at Lindsay in disbelief. "She wants me to stay home *all day*?"

"I think so," Lindsay said. "But you should really ask her."

Which is what Evie did immediately. She marched downstairs and found her mother out on the deck with her father.

"Mom," Evie started. "Lindsay just told me that I have to stick around home today. Is that true?"

Her mother looked up from the deck chair to which she was tying a green seat cushion. "What was all that yelling going on inside the house?" she asked.

"Nothing," Evie said. *Don't try to change the subject.* "So do I have to stay home today?"

"Yes," her mother answered. "I'm going to pick your sister up at the airport, and I need you to be here when we get back. Your father is barbequing."

“Right,” Evie still didn’t see the necessity to stay home *all* day. “So, I’m gonna leave with Alex right now, and I can make sure I’m home by... three? Is that a good time?”

“Evie, no,” her mother started to tie another cushion to the next chair. “I need you to be here. Besides, you won’t be here tonight, right? You have that fundraiser.”

“Yeah, but that’s not until later, like at seven,” Evie pointed out. “I could be here a whole four hours, just for Sabrina.” She looked at her cell phone. T minus 10 minutes until Alex arrived.

“Evie, stop it,” her mother said sternly. “Sabrina isn’t feeling well, and I don’t want her coming home to an empty house. You are her sister. You need to be here.”

Was it just Evie, or was her whole family getting a little too *sentida* over Sabrina’s break up with what’s-his-name?

“Mom,” Evie whined. “I’ve had to work for the last two weeks, and I have to go to the work thing tonight. This is my only day off and I haven’t gone to the beach in, like, forever.”

“Evie,” her father threw her a stern look. “You are not going anywhere today and you shouldn’t be making plans without asking me or your mother. You need to consult us if you plan a whole day at the beach.”

Consult? When did her father start talking like that? He has obviously been spending way too much time with her mother.

“So, you’re basically saying I can’t go with Alex,” Evie started, “even though he’s already on his way over here?”

Evie's mother threw her a deep, hard look that clearly didn't need a vocalized answer.

"Well," Evie grumbled as opened up her cell phone. "I *guess* I better text him. Hopefully he hasn't left yet."

"I have a better idea," her mother suggested. "Why don't you call him? Have you ever tried *that*?"

Evie: Cnt go. Mom OTR. Cll me l8r?

Alex: Bmr. Ttyl.

Evie stomped up to her room, tossed her cell phone on to a pile of dirty horse reserve clothes, and fell onto her bed. Grrr! Sabrina was a family member, not some VIP that deserved a U.N. welcoming committee. She sat up, grabbed her remote from on the nightstand, and pointed it at the stereo. She cranked up Moz and called Raquel.

"*Ee*-yes?" Raquel answered.

"I hate my mother," Evie announced.

"Are you calling me for sympathy or to plot her demise? Because if it's the latter, you best take a number. I still gotta take care of my own mom."

"Don't tempt me," Evie said. "My mom is totally on my case."

"When is she not?"

"I have to stay home all day," Evie complained. "This is like my one free day in, like, forever and now I have to stick around just to wait for Sabrina. I totally wanted to go surfing with Alex."

"If you so badly wanted to go surfing, maybe you should have gotten up earlier," Raquel teased. "Isn't that what real surfers do? What is it, yawn patrol?"

"Dawn patrol," Evie corrected. "And you are *so* not advising me." She clicked off Moz, who was depressing her even more, and switched to Go Betty Go. "If I wasn't working at the reserve all week, it wouldn't be such a big deal."

"Why are you working at that horse place so much?" Raquel asked.

"Vasquez," Evie sighed, referring to her civics teacher. "He wants me to put in at least fifteen hours a week. He says that the monthly amount of volunteerism in the U.S. is usually one weekend a month and that the average American volunteer usually donates half that time and that I, being the 'able bodied teen' should do triple the amount."

"Where the hell does he get those figures?" Raquel asked. "That's ricockulous!"

"Who knows," Evie said. "What's ricockulous?"

"It's like ridiculous, but more hardcore."

Evie laughed. "But seriously, I don't know why everyone is making it so difficult for me to do better. And speaking of ricockulous, that guy, Arturdo, the one I was telling you about? He's still treating me like such a doormat at the reserve. He makes fun of me in front of all the other volunteers and has me do all the dirty work."

l+m+m+m...

"Sounds like sexual tension to me," Raquel mused.

"*Please*, the thought of Turdo in any form of intimacy is just too repulsive." Evie clicked off her stereo. She realized that she was not in the mood for any music. "So do you wanna stop by and say hi to Suprema later?"

"Nah," Raquel said. "I mean I'd like to, but Davey's gonna pick me up."

"Weren't you just with him last night?" Evie asked.

"Si, *tia*," Raquel stretched, "but Los Olvidados are playing the street fair."

"The street fair?" Evie asked. "At Sea Street? I thought that was next weekend."

"Nuh, uh," Raquel said. "It's today. Didn't Alex tell you?"

"No, he didn't ~~tell me~~." Evie instantly felt left out. "Not yet." How could her own boyfriend not tell her that one of her favorite bands was playing a local street fair, a street fair near Sea Street, *their* place?

"Well, when was he gonna tell you?" Raquel asked. "It starts in a couple of hours. In fact, I better get going. Davey's gonna be here any minute, and I've still gotta shower, shampoo, and wax." She yawned. "Oh, man, we totally got lit last night. You know, I think I'm getting my tolerance up. I was able to able to pound a six-pack away last night." *No prob.*

"And that's something to be proud of?" Evie asked.

"Uh, *yeah*," Raquel said as if Evie should know better. "So, how long is Suprema gonna visit?"

"You know, I have no idea," Evie said. "Everyone keeps saying 'for a while' and I have no idea what 'a while' means."

"Well, I hope she's still here by the time you have your party," Raquel said. "She can totally swing us some ad-bevs at Duke's."

“God, Raquel, you have such a one track mind lately,” Evie frowned. “My party is still over a month away, and she’ll be back at school by then. Besides, Sabrina’s nineteen, not twenty-one, and she’s not the party type. You know that.”

“Are you kidding me?” Raquel asked. “All those sorority girls play it off like they’re all these good little school girls, but not even. One time, I was with Jose, and we went to some frat party over at UCSB, and there were all these sorority girls there. They all had fake IDs and oh, my God, they were like the total slutty boozers of the whole party.”

“Are you saying my sister is a boozing slut?”

“No,” Raquel said, “I said she *might* be a slutty *boozer*. Big difference.”

“Evelina!”

It was Lindsay calling down the hall, from Sabrina’s bedroom.

“Hold on.” Evie put her bedroom landline to her chest. “*Que quieres*, Lindsay?”

“Can you help me?” Lindsay called out. “Your mother and sister are coming back soon, and I’m trying to get Sabrina’s room ready.”

“My mother already left?” Evie asked. *Slut*

“Yes, to the airport, to get Sabrina.”

“Then she won’t be back for a few hours,” Evie called back. LAX, the Los Angeles International Airport, was a good three hour roundtrip journey between Rio Estates and Los Angeles.

“No,” Lindsay said. “She’s picking her up at Santa Barbara airport.”

“Santa Barbara?” Evie questioned. It was unusual that Sabrina would fly into Santa Barbara, which was a small commuter airport used primarily by jet setting UCSB students, Silicon Valley businessmen, or maybe Oprah, who evidently had a house in nearby Montecito. Santa Barbara airport was only twenty-five minutes, more or less, away from their home. Her mother would be back soon. (“Why is she picking her up there?”)

“Hel-looo?” Evie could hear Raquel on the other end of the landline.

Evie brought the receiver back to her ear. “Oops, sorry.”

“Did you call to talk to me or to Lindsay?” Raquel asked.

“Hey, I better call you later,” Evie told Raquel. “I gotta go.”

“Uh, I figured that,” Raquel said before clicking off.

Evie got up from her bed to help Lindsay in Sabrina’s room.

“So, how long is Sabrina gonna visit?” she asked as she walked in. Lindsay was airing out the cream colored comforter over Sabrina’s queen-sized bed.

“I don’t know how long,” Lindsay said. “You should probably ask your parents.”

Evie looked around the room. Sabrina kept everything in such tight, impeccable order that you could practically bounce a quarter off the whole room - whereas Evie’s bedroom was constantly under construction. She did, however, pride herself in the orderly fashion she maintained with her flojos. All of them (eleven pairs in all) were lined up on her closet floor based on price, color, or jewels, in that order. *Que Kimora, no?*

Lindsay leaned up from the bed and glanced over at the photos of Sabrina and her now former boyfriend, Robert. They were tacked on Sabrina's gingham cloth bulletin board. "Maybe we should take those down," she suggested.

the boyfriend
formally
known
as a
Robert
boyfriend

"Are you serious?" Evie looked over at the photos. She had just opened Sabrina's vinyl CD carrier case, a relic before iPod nation took over, and winced at her taste in music. From Classical Piano to World Music, how could they possibly be related?

Sissy's

"I think so," Lindsay started to pull out a white plastic thumb tack from the corner of one of the pictures. "Your mother said she was *muy triste*. We don't want to make her more upset." **DICHO**

"I think she'd be way more upset that we are moving things around in her room." Evie closed the CD case. "She doesn't like her things messed with, ~~Neither~~ do I, Lindsay," Evie exaggerated in proper English enunciation to prove her point.

As for

"Maybe you're right," Lindsay sighed. "But don't blame me if she gets sad. I don't want to be the cause of her tears."

"Hey, Linds," Evie started. ?

"Si?" Lindsay tacked the photo of Sabrina and Robert back up on the board.

"I just wanna say I am really sorry about the car accident. I mean, the fender bender. I know you went out of your way to protect me and everything, and I hope I didn't get you in too much trouble..."

"No, no," Lindsay said. "Your mother was okay. But what you did Evelina was very wrong and I am very disappointed in you."

Evie's heart sank.

she continued
“You shouldn’t lie to me or to anyone. And you cannot break the law. I hope these are not habits that you are picking up and thinking of keeping.”

“No, no,” Evie tried to assure her. “I was just being stupid. It won’t happen again.”

“Okay,” Lindsay said. “I want to believe you. Do not make me out to be a fool.”

“I won’t, promise.” Evie *felt that she took the wrong model* badly about the fender bender and *that* she was *corn* eventually going to have to dole out some dough to pay for other driver’s car, but she felt worse that she had let down Lindsay. She lied to Lindsay and that was just plain shameful.

Lindsay put her hands on her hips and looked over Sabrina’s room one more time. The carpet was vacuumed, the stuffed panda bears were propped against the over stuffed pillows, and the TV remote, as well as Sabrina’s silk peach eye mask, was poised politely on the night table – cozy cositas ready to welcome Sabrina when she returned home.

“Well, I think we’re done here,” Lindsay concluded. “Let’s go see if your father needs any help.”

Evie followed her outside to the deck where her father should have been in the midst of barbecuing tri-tip on his new Viking Grange grill.

But when they got to the outside deck, Ruben Gomez had yet to even fire up his new Ultra-Premium. He did, however, look the part of Grill Master Ruben in a Q-tip white chef’s hat, practically two feet in height, and a stiff red and white striped apron.

“You are *so* not wearing that,” Evie looked her father over disapprovingly as Molesto came **trotting** up towards her.

“Why not?” her father frowned and positioned his hat to peak higher.

Is it even possible to explain the **etiquette of cool** to a middle aged parent?

“Because,” Evie leaned over to scratch under Molesto’s collar. “It looks lame.”

“Lame?” Her father asked.

“Silly.”

“I know what lame means.” Her father looked at Molesto. “I think he knows Sabrina is coming back today. He’s had this energy, excitement, all morning.”

At least someone was excited about Sabrina’s return.

Evie watched her father take a wire scrub brush to the encrusted grill of his old One Touch Weber. The legs of the grill were rusty and the grill was tar black, charcoal ghosts of BBQs past.

“Why aren’t you using your new grill, the Grill Grandioso 3000?” she asked sarcastically as she took a seat on a deck chair and helped herself to some tortilla chips.

“The *Ultra Premium*,” her father corrected her. “I wanted to use it, but we don’t have enough propane, and the extension cord doesn’t reach out to the deck. It’s all just a mess.”

*from the
clothes
lined
basket.*

“I can go get some propane, [~]Senor Ruben,” Lindsay offered.

“Nah, it won’t be necessary,” Evie’s father continued to scrub the Weber’s grill.

“It’s been a while since I’ve used this. It should be fun, like old times.” He looked over at Evie. “Like when we used to go camping, remember?”

“Camping?” Evie squinted her eyes at her father. It was now nearly one in the afternoon, but the sun was blazing. How utterly sweet, **Evie** thought bitterly, it would’ve

been to be out with Alex and then watching Los Olvidados play at the Seaside Park street fair. Stupid Sabrina, her little melt down just effed up her whole day.

“Yes,” her father said. “We used this grill when we used to go camping at Leo Cabrillo? How can you not remember?”

“Easily,” Evie joked as she crammed more chips into her mouth. Leo Carillo was a state beach between Malibu and Rio Estates, right off the Pacific Coast Highway. The highway divided the hiking trails of the canyon and the sandy coastline of the beach, making Leo Carillo truly a place in the best of both worlds, depending on what side of the highway you were on. Evie realized it had been years since she had thought of Leo Carrillo.

“Those were some good times,” her father continued. “Remember you and Sabrina would take the boogie boards out and would be in the ocean all day? We couldn’t get you out of the water for nothing. You girls were so waterlogged that you’d look like those Californian raisins when you finally came out.”

“Dad, we didn’t even camp,” Evie **rumpled her lips**. “We slept in the Vacationeer, and half the time mom would get so annoyed with all loud campers and the mosquitoes that she’d drive me and ‘brina back home so we could all sleep in our own beds for the night. I wouldn’t exactly call that camping.”

“But you ^{always} ~~still~~ came back in the morning,” Her father refused to let his positive memories be swept away under Evie’s moodiness. “We’d spend the whole day at the beach together. It was so fun. You and your sister were inseparable.”

Evie looked at her father struggling with the Weber grill. It was not getting any cleaner. “Do you even know what you’re doing?” she asked.

“E-*vie*, ” Lindsay shot her a look as she arranged utensils on the patio table

Evie knew she was sounding bratty, but she couldn’t help it. She was still annoyed that she had to waste a full day at home, and she placed the blame not only on Sabrina, but also on both her parents.

“*Yes*, Evie. I do know what I am doing.” Her father didn’t mind her sass. “It’s pretty simple. I just have to get the coals going, which... might...” He read over the bag. “Take a little bit longer than I thought.”

“So, how long is Sabrina gonna stay?” Evie asked her father. Molesto had now rolled over. He wanted his belly rubbed.

“I’m not quite sure. You might want to ask your mother.” He added more lighter fluid to the coals and then re-read the charcoal bag. “You know, we might be eating a little later than I thought. I hope Sabrina isn’t too hungry when she gets here.” He looked over at Lindsay. “Hey, Linds, did you make your salsa? The verde picante? It’ll go great with the tri-tip.”

“*Si, si.* ” Lindsay brushed some leaves off the chairs with a kitchen towel. “I also made avocado pie, Sabrina’s favorite.”

“You didn’t use any of my mom’s organic Rancho Palmillo avocados, did you?” Evie asked as she scratched Molesto’s belly.

“Of course not,” Lindsay said. “I couldn’t if I wanted to. She has those under lock and key, along with all her winning Bunco money.”

Am calls
her
"Gomez")

Before they knew it, Molesto's ears, as if on cue, pricked up and were followed by the purr of Vicki Gomez's Mercedes pulling into the driveway. Molesto rolled over onto his feet and took off for the front yard.

"They got back quick," Lindsay looked at her watch.

Evie got up from her chair, wiped the tortilla chip crumbs off her shorts, and went to the front yard.

"Tell 'em I'll be right there," Evie's father called out as the flames roared to the height of his chest. "I don't think I can leave this... right now."

Evie came around the house just as her sister was getting out of her mother's car, but as soon as she saw her sister, she was taken aback. Sabrina, how could you say it nicely, looked really bad. For one thing, Sabrina relished sunshine and poo pooed any suntan oil that contained the socially deadly SPF. Now she was pale, almost a sickly white pale, and she was very thin. The dark roots of her blonde hair were an inch deep, exposing a form of laziness that Evie had never known existed within her sister. Evie knew Sabrina would never leave the house, let alone take a trip, looking the way she did. She was one of those girly girls who actually dressed up for travel, in fact, the joke of the household was that Sabrina's accessories practically had to match the interior of the airlines she was flying, which is why she rarely flew Southwest. She looked horrible in red, blue, and gray.

"Hey, Sabrina..." Evie started as she walked towards her sister. She suddenly felt guilty about the earlier resentment she had felt towards her. Sabrina suddenly looked frail and so alone.

tone away a
as her expression
“Hey, Eves,” Sabrina’s face was flat and emotionless. She clung to the strap of her shoulder bag as if it were a life preserver, and she paid no mind to Molesto, who eagerly vied for her attention. ~~near at her~~

had
Evie noticed that their mother didn’t pop open the trunk and that there was no luggage in the backseat of the Mercedes.

cupped
“Where’s all your stuff?” Evie asked as she awkwardly clutched her right elbow with her left hand.

“I only have my carry-on.” Sabrina tugged at her large green suede shoulder bag. “I didn’t pack a lot.”

“Why not?” Evie asked. “How long are you staying?”

“Evie,” Her mother came around the Mercedes. “Enough with the questions.”

Senorita
“Senorita Sabrina!” Lindsay extended her tanned, wrinkled arms to embrace Sabrina. “Oh, look at you!” She gave Sabrina a long, hard embrace. ~~long~~ “Ay, que flaquita! Oh, I’ll take care of that!”

but rather
resembl
voiceless
Sabrina didn’t say anything, pretty much resembling a limp, lifeless rag doll.

“I’m going to make my special *fideo* for you,” Lindsay chatted excitedly as she took Sabrina’s bag and slung it across her own shoulder. “I’ll make it with fresh tomatoes from the garden.”

she scratched
rubbed the side
of her temple.
“It’s really okay,” Sabrina mumbled softly.

“Oh, but it won’t be a bother,” Lindsay said

“But I’m not hungry, Lindsay,” Sabrina replied, this time more curtly.

insisted
“That’s because you haven’t had good food,” Lindsay said. “Up there at school they don’t know everything. But let me —.”

"Lindsay!" Sabrina snapped. She rubbed the right side of her temple, ^{Co}hard, as if she was trying to ^{Sta}put out a fire under her skin. "Stop it!" she ~~snapped again~~ "Just stop it!" ^{hard}

And indeed everything just stopped. Everything and everyone. ^{Even Molesto}

"Oh," Lindsay pulled back from Sabrina. "*Lo siento...*" She turned to Evie's mother for guidance. "I didn't, I..."

Evie looked over at her mother, who immediately went to Lindsay's aid. ^{to + Sabrina}

"Oh, it's okay," Vicki Gomez tried to assure Lindsay that she was not the cause of Sabrina's upset, but she appeared to still be shaken. "No worries," she ~~said as she went over to Sabrina.~~

It was unsettling to say the least. Sabrina's disposition was always as sunny as, well, her name, and Evie couldn't recall when ^{her sister}she had ever raised her voice to anyone at all, and especially not to Lindsay.

Sabrina bowed her head onto her mother's chest. Her mouth creased downward at the sides, and small tears percolated from the corners of her eyes. Her whole body began to tremble.

"Oh, oh..." Evie's mother said, but she seemed at a loss as what to do. "Lindsay, here," she quickly handed over her own handbag and car keys to her. "I'm going to take Sabrina up to her room." ^{she}Evie's mother put her arm around Sabrina and led her up to the stone steps and into the house.

"*Si, claro,*" Lindsay took Vicki Gomez's ^{ne}purse and keys. As she watched after Vicki and Sabrina, ^{remained a}her face was combination of worry, fear, and confusion. ^{kind?}

"What happened?" Evie asked Lindsay as soon as they were inside. "What's wrong with Sabrina?"

"*Yo no se*," Lindsay confessed. "I never want to make Sabrina upset or make her cry. I would rather die than cause either one of you girls pain."

At that moment, Evie's father, still in his apron and mile high chef's hat, came from around the side of the house.

"Hey," he looked around and found the driveway void of a heart-warming family reunion. "What happened to my little girl?"

Both Lindsay and Evie were too stunned to answer.

Chapter 8

"So what do you think happened to her?" Dee Dee asked Evie.

The three girls, Evie, Dee Dee, and Raquel had gathered late^(all) that afternoon for another impromptu ER/RE! meeting and, again, at Evie's urgency.

As soon as her mother had taken Sabrina upstairs, the barbeque was, of course, off, and the house became oppressively quiet. Lindsay put the food away, and Ruben Gomez's enthusiasm, and chef's hat, came down. Evie took the opportunity to ^{escape} sneak out towards the far west end of the Rio Estates country club golf course, the regular **place** for their ER/RE! meet ups. ^{It was a much needed escape. The Sabrina situation was stressful} All three lay flat on their backs, on the meticulously maintained lawn where any passing member might guess them to be just three young girls casually counting clouds or working on their mid-winter tans. Oh, if only life in the Estates was just that simple.

“Like I said,” Evie repeated. “As far as I know, she and Robert broke up and she’s all upset by it.”

“But why?” ^{asked as} Dee Dee exhaled smoke from her flavored Californian Dream. “I mean, who broke up with who?”

“It’s not who broke up with who,” Raquel held her cell phone inches above her face with both hands as she texted. “It’s who broke up with *whom*.”

Evie ignored Raquel. “*She* broke up with him.”

Dee Dee rolled over on her side to face Evie. “That makes no sense. Then why is she the one who is all sad and crying?”

“I have no idea,” Evie waved Dee Dee’s cigarette smoke away from her face.

“He probably cheated on her,” Raquel said. “And then she broke up with him after she found out.”

“How could you say that?” Evie looked over at Raquel. “You’ve never even met Robert, and why would anyone ever cheat on Suprema? She’s like perfect.” Evie was surprised that she would even be cheering for Team Suprema, someone who definitely didn’t need anymore PR work.

“Look, they’d been going out for almost two years.” Raquel thumbs were on fire as she ^{continued} typing rapid text. “He was probably bored. Big time.”

“Could you *stop*?” Evie looked over at her ^{Raquel} fingers and cell phone.

“I’m just giving it to Davey,” Raquel explained. “We were supposed to hook up today, ‘member? But *now* he’s saying it’ll be later tonight.”

“You know,” Dee Dee started. “I agree with Raquel. I think there is more to the story. Maybe Sabrina was, like, caught in a tragic love affair with one of her professors or

something.” She sat up. “Ooh, and then the wife confronted Sabrina at her sorority house, in front of all her sisters. Oh. My. God.”

“You,” Evie looked at Dee Dee, “read too many of those **Mexican soap periodicals**.”

“Well, I just don’t get it.” Dee Dee lay back down on the grass. “How could Sabrina leave Stanford and break up with her boyfriend just like that? I mean, Sabrina is, like, my role model, and, *yo no se*, I’m just surprised, I guess.”

“I don’t believe you guys.” Evie felt annoyed with Dee Dee and Raquel. She expected better advice from her two ADAs.

“Hey,” Raquel said. “We only know what you tell us, and you’re the one who sent the emergency text. You wanted our opinion on what we think is going on with Sabrina. It’s not our fault you don’t agree with what we think.” She got a new text and sat up quickly. “*Shit!*”

“*Que pasa?*” Dee Dee looked over at her.

“Friggin’ Davey.” Raquel fumed at her cell phone. “He’s *such* an a-hole. First he flaked on me today, and now he’s bailing on me tonight.”

Evie couldn’t help but feel slightly relieved. One less night with Davey Mitchell was one more night of safety for Raquel. Evie had finally seen who Davey Mitchell was. He had picked up Raquel from school one day in his huge white four-by-four truck (LOCO LFE). The words, *In Loving Memory*, in Old English script, were adhered across the truck’s back tinted window. Directly below *In Loving Memory* were the names of three of Davey’s friends who had died in who knows what kind of way. When Evie had asked Raquel about it, she simply shrugged her shoulders and said the three friends had

been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Evie couldn't imagine dating anyone who had an abridged obituary on his truck, and God forbid if Raquel's name got added to Davey's rear window list by merely being was even at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Hey," Evie suddenly remembered her ~~own~~ evening duties with the reserve.
"What time is it?"

Raquel checked her cell. "Almost six, why?"

"Ah man, I gotta go." Evie stood up and slipped on her Trovata flojos. She had to meet Ana in less than an hour.

"And where you going, Miss Thang?" Raquel inquired with a suspicious tone. It was she, not Evie, who usually had to take off for somewhere on a Saturday night.

"No~~where~~ exciting," Evie cracked her knuckles as she stood up. "I'm on volunteer duty."

"Ew," Dee Dee wrinkled her nose at the sound of Evie's popped fingers. "I *hate* when you do that." She put out her cigarette in patch of dirt. "You're going to work on a Saturday night? I thought you had the whole day free."

"I did," Evie said. "*The day*. But tonight I gotta go to some charro rodeo."

"You mean a *charreada*?" A smile spread across Dee Dee's face.

"Yes, exactly." Evie said. "How do you say it, again?"

"A *charreada*," Dee Dee repeated. "You're going to one? Tonight? *Que chido!*"

"What is it?" Raquel asked. She was on a fervent texting roll, composing scorned woman payback to Davey.

"It's a rodeo," Dee Dee started to explain. "But a Mexican rodeo, with more synchronized competition, and everyone is dressed in traditional Mexican clothing. It's

really festive and colorful. Rocio and I used to go there when we visited his cousins in Jalisco." She suddenly got that "woe is yo" look. "But wait, how does going to a *charreada* work into your volunteer credit?"

"You got me," Evie shrugged her shoulders. "But I ain't asking. As long as I don't have to clean up at the reserve, it's fine with me. It's a fundraiser, and Arturo said if any of the volunteers wanted to buy a ticket and go, we could still get credit."

"Ah," Raquel smirked. "The virtues of capital gain in an altruistic society."

"And this girl, Ana, who I volunteer with, is gonna pick me up," Evie went on to explain. "We're gonna go together."

Mami "If I didn't have to write my essay for Las Patronas, I would definitely invite myself," Dee Dee said. "Charreadas are *so* much fun. They have ~~live~~ *bands* mariachi ~~music~~ and lots of food. You aren't taking Alejandro?"

"I would," Evie started. "But he's *ended up* ~~decided to drive down~~ *in* San Diego tonight. He and Bien, that guy from Buena, are gonna stay the night in *San Diego* ~~S.D.~~ so they can go surfing in Baja tomorrow morning. Dawn patrol."

As soon as she spoke, Evie could already sense Dee Dee feeling sorry for her. *He's going away. Again. Without you. Porbecita.*

"I was actually gonna go with him," Evie *looked away* ~~lied~~ "He wanted to do this whole day thing with me, down in Baja, but I had to work at the reserve."

"Plus," Raquel added. "I really can't see your mom letting you cross into Mexico with Alex. No way would Vicki G stand for that."

"Right," Evie raised her eyebrows and nodded. Although Raquel's observation validated her little fib, she resented it slightly. Why did Raquel *always* have to point out

just how strict her mother was? Just because Kitty, Raquel's mother, was too busy with her software business, her La Madrinas mentoring network, and hosting her over-produced Bunco parties to never notice the craziness Raquel was up to, it didn't make Evie's mother a complete tyrant.

"But Baja isn't Mexico," Dee Dee felt the need to point out. "Everyone thinks it is, but it isn't. It's really just an extension of California."

"Oh, yeah?" Raquel asked. "If it's just an extension, why do *I* get sweated at the border when my Cabo tan and I are just trying to make our way back into Cali?"

"Maybe it's not your dark tan," Dee Dee mused, "but maybe your dark, moody attitude."

"Yeah," Evie laughed. "Or, maybe it's the fact that you're always trying to smuggle tequila in your handbag or pot in your panties."

"Excuse me," Raquel informed Evie. "I *do not* drink tequila. That crap is nasty."

"*And*," Evie looked at her. "You don't wear panties."

"You know," Raquel threw Evie a sideways glance. "I *was* thinking of tagging along with you to your little rodeo, but now I just changed my mind, thank you." She went back to texting.

"Oh, yeah, thanks for the offer," Evie smirked. "Now that Davey's ditched you."

"And Alex hasn't ditched you?" Raquel asked.

"*Not twice*" Evie said.

"Not twice *in the same day*, maybe," Raquel bit back.

“Chicas, chicas,” Dee Dee interrupted with an authoritative, almost bored tone. “How much longer is this juvenile sparring going to continue? If we’re done here, I need to get back home and work on my essay.”

“No, but really,” Raquel said to Evie. “I’ll go with you to this charreada. I could be into getting my mariachi on.” She extended her elbows and flapped them around a bit.

“*Serio?*” Evie asked.

“Why not?” Raquel asked. “Can I catch a ride with you and your horse friend?”

Ana, Evie remembered, was also a classmate of Jose’s, and she could only imagine an evening of severe grilling a` la Raquel. She made a mental note to warn Ana - - ‘Ixnay on the Jose’. But other than that, Evie thought it would be fun to have Raquel to herself for the evening. Since she had been going out with Davey, it seemed like forever since they had any QT together on a weekend.

“Of course,” Evie said. “You should totally come with us.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee pouted as she put out her cigarette. “**I am so jealous.** You are going to have *un* blast. *Charro* boys are so fine.”

“That’s enough for me,” Raquel slammed her cell phone shut in defiance. “I’m *so* over Davey.”

Chapter 9 Charro, *Claro*

When
Evie, Raquel, and Ana arrived at the *charreada* just as it was starting. Just about every seat in the small arena was taken up by large Mexican families, rowdy teenagers or single glassy eyed men, already drunk on Corona. The ~~walls~~ ^{concrete} of the arena were lined with *banderas* in red, white and green, the national colors of the Mexican flag and just about everyone in the bleachers furiously waved ^{multiple} additional flags that represented their individual home states of Mexico.

Raquel scanned the bleachers. "Damn, I thought we were going to a rodeo, not some freakin' *futbol* game. We ain't never gonna find a seat."

✓ "Hey, there some space over there," (Ana tilted her chin towards the lower left end of the bottom bleachers.) "I'm sure we can fit our asses in."

Evie followed Ana and Raquel, each of them lugging clear plastic bags of kettle corn and *churritos*, as well as *elotes* slathered in mayonnaise and super sized sodas ^{Evie was in charge} to ^{bought to} wash everything down with. ^{ensure}

As soon as she sat down, Raquel looked around and discreetly pulled out a small glass bottle of Jack Daniel's. She poured some into her soda.

Ana eyed the bottle and smiled. "Woman, I like your style."

"~~You~~ want some?" Raquel asked.

"You bet," Ana answered. ^{held out her cup}

Raquel passed the bottle to her and Evie couldn't help but notice that Ana poured even more J.D. into her own coke.

"Want some Evie?" ^{Raquel} Ana waved the bottle seductively.

"Uh, no, thanks," Evie winced with disapproval. "Whiskey gives me the runs."

“Ah, poor Evie,” Raquel feigned sympathy as she took a sip of her drink. “*Lo Sient*. I forgot to purchase some of that fancy Vieve for you.”

The first bull rider was released into the ring and the whole crowd jumped up from their seats to cheer him on.

“This is Jessie G from Fontana!” The announcer yelled into the mic. “And if Jessie can stay on Thunder ‘til the whistle blows, well, Jessie G. is gonna be going home with his own bottle of tequila! What do you say, *hombres*?!”

Hombres? Where did they find this MC?

“Give *me* the tequila!” Raquel ~~roared~~ yelled from her seat. She held her Styrofoam cup out towards the arena, as ~~is she was~~ saluting. “I’m running out!”

The crowd sitting closest to the three girls turned to look at Raquel and laughed.

“I thought you didn’t drink tequila,” Evie reminded Raquel curtly. She knew she was being a buzz kill, but WTF, she didn’t have a buzz and she definitely didn’t want to get popped by security just for being with others trying to get one.

Evie checked the time on her ~~her~~ cell phone. It seems like it was gonna be a long ~~time~~ *night* and she figured they’d have to stay at the *charreada* at least for an hour to get credit.

“Man,” Raquel ~~practically~~ *seemed to* inhaled her drink through her straw. “Check out the *hombres* ‘round here! *Que* fine, right Evie?”

Evie looked around and had to admit that Raquel was right. *Charro* boys, in their snug *charro* suits were *muy*, how do you say ‘FAF’ *en espanol*? Plus, there were just tons of other ~~men~~ *guys* milling about in their own mariachi inspired duds — bolero jackets and tight fitting pencil pants with silver conchas stitched along the side seams.

“Damn,” Raquel nudged Evie and whistled. “Look at *that* piece of ass!”

Both

Evie and Ana looked over. Ana laughed covering her mouth, but Evie was beside herself. The so-called piece of ass belonged to no one other than the biggest *nalgón* himself, Arturo.

(Evie almost didn't recognize him at first because he was so out of context.) She was used to seeing Arturo at the reserve, ^{him} cranky and sweaty and wearing a Pendleton and Wranglers and, of course, *those* boots. But tonight he was sorta dressed up in black jeans, a black dress shirt and a cowboy hat. - CMA What? Show

"You've gotta be kidding!" Evie laughed at Raquel. "That's, like, my boss at the reserve."

"What, are you serious?" Raquel got a better look. "Damn, hook a sister up with some volunteer opportunities. I'm suddenly feeling in a very *giving* kind of mood." She lowered her voice and ribbed Evie in the side. "Ooh, he's looking this way." She took a larger swig of her Jack Daniel and Coke. ^{learned only Evie to}

Evie regretted that she had brought Raquel. Not only was she already getting loud and obnoxious, she was gonna make a fool of herself in front of Evie's "like, boss" from work. She was also getting Ana drunk. Who was gonna drive them home? With all the chaos and confusion that going on with Sabrina, Evie didn't want to call her mother or father and ^{here} ask them to pick her up at the rodeo. ^{the last thing here} What *had* happened to Sabrina? Evie wondered. ~~Maybe it would be good if she got back home as soon as possible.~~

Evie turned her head down and away, hoping Arturo wouldn't notice her or Ana.

~~However~~, he did see them and waved to over. They both ^{obligatory} waved back and Evie hoped that would be it. Eye contact made, credit issued. ^{Arturo} He ~~had told the volunteers~~ that they didn't have to spend time together as a group, but he ~~less~~ time with *el jefe*, the

volunteers

better. But instead Arturo, in his black clothing badness, made his way directly towards to them.

"Hey, you two made it," he actually smiled. "Nice." He balanced one leg on the ^{richly} bleacher seat ^{well} above them and leaned his whole body onto it.

Nice? When was Arturo every happy to see them, let alone Evie?

"My name's Raquel," Raquel held her hand out, poised and dainty, as if she were actually expecting him to kiss it or something. "I'm Evie's best friend."

Arturo took Raquel's hand, ~~but~~ merely shook it. "Oh, you're the one who's been living in Mexico City."

Evie was surprised that he remembered.

"Uh, *no*," Raquel shot Evie a look. "I'm the *other* best friend." She looked back at Arturo and ^{signed her drink} ~~smiled~~ suggestively. "The *pretty* one, *La Bonita*."

Arturo looked at her ~~drink~~ and laughed. "You mean the drunk one, *La Boracha*?" ^{arg}

That, Evie had to admit, made her LOL. ✓

"Well it's better than being named Ar-turdo," Raquel ^{smiled} ~~said~~ under her breath.

Oh my God. Evie and Ana tried hard contain their giggles. He could *not* hear have that. ~~It would mean a scheduling and work~~

"What did you say?" Arturo asked.

It was then that Evie, Raquel and Ana fought hard to contain their laughter to ^{uh} themselves.

^{this} "Well, anyway, thanks for asking us to the ~~charreda~~," Evie said. She was hoping he would get the hint and just leave. "It's pretty fun."

~~Liar!~~

"Thanks for buying a ticket," Arturdo said. "It all goes to a good cause. A ~~small~~ ^{large} percentage helps rehabilitate injured performance horses. If they don't heal, they eventually get euthenized."

"What?" Evie looked over at him, alarmed. "Are you serious? They get killed?"

"Oh, yeah," Arturdo ~~said~~ ^{looked back at Evie}. "Their owners don't think they're ~~as~~ ^{get better} useful if they aren't ~~out~~ performing and making money."

"Wow," Evie ~~said~~ ^{looked towards the arena - he used} **solemnly**. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah," Arturo said. "Like that horse down there," he pointed to dark carmel colored horse (that a young girl dressed in a cream colored Victorian style dress, rode to the center of the ring.) "That's how ~~he~~ ^{Chamuco} used to be, performing for the **charreadas**, but now he's old and blind. I don't know what's going to happen to him. He ~~is~~ ^{is} always passed over during our adoption clinics."

Evie took a deep breath. It was all a bit too much for her. She looked over at the young girl on a ~~dark~~ ^{girl} carmel colored horse. She had no idea. Her heart just about broke. Sure, Chamuco ^{was more scaredy cat, than the boy} got frightened easily, and yeah, he was old, but he didn't deserve to be killed. Evie felt horrible, and a knot twisted in her stomach.

Just then, Josephina, of all people, walked up to them. "Turo?"

"Ah, Josephina," he turned to face her. He was caught off guard. "You're back already?"

"~~Yes,~~ ^{He immediately took his foot off the bleacher. Relaxed from rigid} Josephina ~~huffed~~. "Am I interrupting something?" She eyed Evie, Raquel, and Ana coolly.

"Oh," Arturo ^{more} suddenly seemed awkward. "You remember Evie and Ana, and this is their friend..."

~~Oh~~, Turo just gave me a pet name, *La Boracha*," Raquel teased.

Josephina looked at Raquel's ^{cup} drink. "Are you drinking?"

"Yeah, ~~you~~ want some?" Raquel held out her cup towards Josephina.

"Uh, no?" Josephina wrinkled her nose. "There are already enough drunks here." She turned to Arturo. "Turo, I *have* to use a bathroom? I am not about to use these outhouses they have here. Can't you take me somewhere?" *she adjusted her belt*

"Somewhere?" Arturo asked. "We'd have to drive into Moorpark or Camarillo."

"Well, let's go then, anywhere ~~other~~ ^{at Raquel + there} than here," Josephina looked around and then ~~at~~ Raquel. "There's nothing but *borachos* here." She looked over at Raquel and Ana.

^{checked} "Pero querida," Arturo looked ~~at~~ his watch. "We'll miss the *escaramuzas*."

^{but} Josephina looked back at him, her eyes ^{g. mouth} demanding. ^{pouting}

Arturo looked around and softened his tone. ^{but} "I don't want you to be uncomfortable. I guess I can take you into Camarillo. We'll find somewhere ~~for you~~."

~~"So you gonna leave?" Evie asked.~~

~~"It looks like it,"~~ Arturo said as he put his arm around Josephina. "We'll be back. Maybe we'll see you later."

As soon as Arturo and Josaphina left the bleachers, Raquel dove in.

"Oh. My. God," Raquel ^{she slammed Evie's shoulder} smirked. "That girl talks like a total val and what's her name again? Horsa-phina? She's a dog!" *what a c*

Ana almost choked, laughing. "Arturdo and Horsa-phina! Perfect! A match made in manure. I can't stand either one of them."

"And how whipped is that Turdo?" Raquel observed. "My mack is dry, ay, ay."

"Blah," Ana waved her hand aside. "He just doesn't wanna argue with her. She can be pretty high maintenance."

"Or maybe," Evie suggested. "He ~~tries~~ ^{wants} to be, like, 'My Super Sweet Boyfriend.'"

"Please," Raquel said. "No guy is *that* sweet."

Evie didn't have to think for a second. "Alex is."

"Oh, yeah?" Raquel looked at her. "And where is Prince Charming now? ~~He's~~ ^{what Raquel said} in San Diego probably partying with some surf honeys as we speak." ^{Has he even called or texted you?}

Evie didn't even bother to respond. She knew ~~that~~ ^{what Raquel said} was far from the truth. She watched Arturdo and Josephina walk from the grandstand arena towards the exit. ~~She~~ ^{he took} watched him ~~take~~ ^{ed} off his suede jacket and cover Josephina's **bare shoulders** with it. ~~He~~ ^{she} rubbed her back slightly. Even though Arturdo was one of her least favorite people, Evie couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy. She couldn't remember the last time Alex had been so chivalrous with her or the last time they had actually gone on a date. Yeah, they surfed all the time, or at least they used to, and sometimes they'd split pancakes at Pete's Breakfast House or a burrito at La Gloria downtown, but those weren't really dates. Now with her volunteer duties, she wasn't even able to do those simple things with him and wasn't like he was making any effort to keep up with the romance he used to initiate.

"Vamos a ir, hombres," Raquel imitated the announcer.

"I *heard* that," ~~Raquel~~ ^{Ana} echoed ~~Evie's~~ ^{Raquel's} sentiment. "Just lemme just finish my drink."

“Hey, Eves, you got your learner’s permit on you?” Ana ~~tapped~~ the remaining ice from her cup into her mouth. “Maybe you should drive.”

“~~Totally~~, I’ll drive,” Evie offered. Normally, she would have been excited to practice her driving, but her mood ~~had~~ dampened.

Raquel sounded ~~bored~~ as she swirled the ice in her cup. “Okay, I’m ready to go.”

“Wait,” Evie said. “I wanna see more of this horse. He reminds me of this one at the reserve.”

Evie looked out to the arena and watched the horse trot out to the center of ring. His rider, the young girl, tapped the side of him with a leather riding crop. He instantly lowered his head as his front legs bowed in a courtesy. This, of course, garnered a tremendous applause from the adoring crowd. They were encantada with him.

“Aw,” Ana clicked her tongue. “He is *so* cute! Wouldn’t you love to have a pony like that, Evie?”

“Yeah,” Evie answered. And just like the crowd around her, she was completely, totally *encantada* with the carmel colored horse.

Chapter 10

“Brina?” Evie ~~tapped~~ softly on her sister’s bedroom door, but she didn’t answer.

She ~~tapped~~ again on the door, but when she heard nothing, not even the hum of the TV or the computer, Evie walked to the end of the hall and into her parents’ bedroom.

↓
"Que te molesta, mi 'ja?" her mother asked. (She was sitting on the edge of the bed, drying her hair ^{with a towel} from her morning swim.)

^{took a seat}
Evie sat on the linen chest at the foot of the bed.

"What's wrong with Sabrina?" she asked her mother. "I knocked on her door, but she's not answering. And it was the same thing last night, when I came back from the rodeo."

^{leaned forward to get the back of her hair}
"She's probably still sleeping," her mother ~~said~~. "It's still early."

^{Evie looked at her parents Mean Machine}
"Early? It's already 9 a.m." It was unusual that Evie would question someone else's sleeping habits. Until Sabrina arrived, she was the sole snoozer of La Familia

Gomez.

Go-mas

"She's going through a tough time," her mother sighed as she ~~put a plastic bag over her hair and read the instructions on the box.~~ ^{have to} "It's something we all go through.

Heartbreak ... loss." She looked at Evie and smiled. "But your sister is going to be fine.

She has so much love around her, how could she not get better? And all she really needs

is some good old fashioned Pilates. I'm going to take her with me tonight. Hey, why

don't you come?"

"Nuh, uh. *No way,*" Evie said. ("The only way I'm *ever* gonna stretch like they do in Pilates is after a hearty nap.")

you know what? Sometimes some exercise + fresh air
why don't you use the hair dryer? since he dyed it blonde...

"Evelina!" It was Lindsay calling out.

"God, does there have to be so much yelling in this house?" Evie's mother remarked as she looked up towards the ceiling.

on.
"You better get down there," her mother said. "It's Lindsay's day off, but she came in ~~this morning~~ ^{just} to help you with ~~you~~ your driving. She came just (as a favor for you, Evie.)"
Evie."

"I know," Evie got up slowly.

"Listen," her mother could sense sadness still clinging to Evie. "Why don't you practice in my car? Would you like that?"

"Uh," Evie hesitated. Her mother's Mercedes? She was *not* about to go there again. "No, it's okay. I'm sorta used to Lindsay's car, already. I mean, it's the only car I've been using, besides when I'm with dad and using his."

Her mother frowned as if she didn't understand. How could anyone turn down her classic burgundy Benz? "Oh," she replied. "Well, okay."

Evie went downstairs to meet Lindsay in the kitchen.

Etas listas?
"Are you ~~ready~~?" Lindsay asked as she took her car keys out of her purse and handed them to Evie.

I'm ready. *Rio Estates*
"Yeah," Evie took the keys from her. (She realized that the last time she had been behind the wheel was that fateful day in her mother's Mercedes when she had gotten in that (que to lower voice) *accidente*. But today should be different, she hoped. She had Lindsay with her, and she wasn't going to be distracted by a phone conversation with Dee Dee. Also, it was a Sunday, and according to Lindsay, Jesus and his "protective light" was around a bit more.

to her
"Now," Lindsay fastened her seat belt after she got in ~~the~~ car with Evie. "What's the first thing you do?"

CD player Serious
Evie reached for the radio dial. "Make sure I got some tasty tunes?"

Lindsay tapped her hand.

"I know, I know," Evie teased as she checked the rearview mirror and side mirror.

"I make sure all my mirrors are adjusted correctly to my height and for my vision."

~~Anderson~~ ^{Anderson} ~~Lucas~~ ^{Lucas}
"Correcto," Lindsay pulled down the visor and put on her sunglasses.

Evie slowly backed out of the driveway and onto Camino ~~Real~~ ^{del Rio}. She felt a little shaky. The memory of that ill-fated Saturday was like damaged *de ja vue*. She just had to relax.

"So, Lindsay," Evie started. "Have you ever been to a *charro* rodeo?"

"A *charreada*?" Lindsay asked. "*Claro*. We have them all the time in Mexico. My cousins were *escaramuzas*."

"Really? What's that?" Evie turned to ask her.

Lindsay put her hand on the steering wheel. "Keep your eyes on the road, Evie."

"*Escaramuzas* are team riders, women. A *charrita* is actually a cowgirl."

^{So,}
"Oh," Evie said. "I went to one last night and it was *so* cool. They did these tricks-."

¹
"Suertes," Lindsay interrupted. "They ~~are~~ called *suertes*."

"Oh, right," Evie said. "~~So, hey,~~ how come you've never taken me to a *charreada*?"

"Evie, how would I know what might interest you?" Lindsay said. "You are so finicky. One day it's surfing, and now it's suddenly horses? What are you going to do now? Trade in your flip flops for *botas*?"

"I've *always* been into horses," Evie claimed. She looked down at her Rainbow flojos. She wasn't about to trade them in for cowboy boots just yet.

"For today, let's ^{just} concentrate on the driving," Lindsay said. "It's ~~my day off, but I promised I'd come in this morning to help~~ you. The sooner you learn to drive, the sooner --" She stopped herself.

^{looked over}
"The sooner what?" Evie asked.

"The sooner you get to drive," Lindsay replied.

^{insisted}
"No, you were gonna say something else," Evie said. "Is it about my car? Are my parents gonna get me my Beetle for my birthday? They are, right?"

"Turn here," Lindsay ignored Evie's question and pointed to Calle Boca.
"Evelina, remember to use your signal *every* time you need to make a turn or get into another lane. Give the other driver enough time to know what you plan to do."

"Why?" Evie asked. "So they can speed up and block me?"

The sedan suddenly jumped forward.

"And you don't need to hit the brake all the time," Lindsay said. "Keep *both* hands on the steering wheel.

"Oh, I'm *never* gonna get this!" Evie groaned. "I'm not good enough to get a ^{my} ~~driver's~~ license by my birthday."

"You can get your license anytime," Lindsay said. "You don't have to get it by your birthday."

"If I wanna drive away from my birthday party in Cherry Bomb, I do," Evie said.

"*Cherry Bomb??*" Lindsay looked at her.

"That's what I'm gonna name my car," Evie said.

"Where are you getting this idea that you're getting a car for your birthday?"

"Oh, don't tell me you don't know anything about it," Evie smiled slyly at Lindsay. "But between me and you, Linds —."

"Mi'ja, don't..." Lindsay said. The car stalled.

"Oh, man," Evie had shifted too slowly. "I'll never get it."

"You really are doing better," Lindsay said. "Much better than when Sabrina was learning."

Evie suddenly sat up in her seat.

"Really?" she asked. "You taught Sabrina to drive, and she sucked?"

"I did *not* say *that*," Lindsay frowned. "She was just very nervous and timid. You are more of a go-getter."

"Really?" Evie suddenly felt gleeful.

put Lindsay shook her head and looked out the window. "Ay, I don't know what's going to happen to Sabrina. *sighed* She is still so sad."

"My mom said it's just a matter of time," Evie said. "She's just depressed."

"I don't know, Evelina. I think your sister is sick. She doesn't eat, and she just sleeps all the time." Lindsay looked at Evie. "It's a sensitive time, and you should try to be extra nice and helpful. Just be a good person."

"I *am* a good person," Evie *frowned* at Lindsay. Why was everyone thinking she wasn't?

"Okay," Lindsay leaned over and held the steering wheel again. "You are nice and help, but for now, please, just nicely focus on keeping your eyes on the road."

Chapter 11

The following week at school, Evie couldn't think of anything but the charreada.

"You should have been there, Alex," Evie went on as he drove her to the reserve.

"It was amazing. The horses were so beautiful. They really are these incredible animals.

Did you know that **(she tells Alex a FACT)**

"Uh, huh," Alex said. "You told me. So, I don't get why you skipped Baja just to be out drinking it up with the girls."

"I wasn't drinking it up," Evie said. "That was Raquel and Ana's deal. And you know I had to go, ^{just} to get the credit. It just turned out to be really cool."

"Well, I'm glad it turned out okay for you," Alex looked at her and smiled. "It just would have been cool if you had come. We made a bonfire and grilled corn ^{and --} on the cob." ^{still a bit unsure to believe her.}

"We had corn on the cob, at the charreada," Evie said. "Actually, *elotes*," she clarified, "with mayonnaise and chili powder. Now *those* were good." ^{interpret}

^{when} Alex pulled up at the reserve, Evie felt slightly more enthused about ^{her work day} being there.

She wanted to find out more about the charreada from Arturo. ~~How she would ask?~~ But when she reached the stables, Ana had beaten her to the punch with follow up *charro* chit-chat.

"So, did you and Josephina have fun at the charreada?" Ana was in the middle of asking Arturo, as Evie walked over to pull out separate flakes of alfalfa and oat hay.

"Oh, yes," Arturdo cracked an uncharacteristical smile. "I love *charreadas*. They have them all the time in Pico Rivera, but I rarely get a chance to get out there. My father is a charro. So are my brothers."

"And they do all those tricks?" Ana asked.

"They aren't called tricks," Evie joined in. "They're called *suertes*."

"Right," Arturdo looked at Evie, slightly surprised. "You know, the Mexican charro was the first cowboy. Not that many people know that."

"Really?" Ana continued to show interest, and Evie ^{it made} was a little suspicious. It wasn't like ^{Ana} her to be so conversational with Arturdo. ^{but she continued} "That is so cool," ~~Ana~~ continued.

"How come you aren't ^{a charro?} one? I mean, you totally could be one. You know so much about horses. ^{stuff.}

^{the 'and stuff} "It's not really my thing," Arturdo confessed. "I didn't follow that tradition.

Besides, my whole family is still back in Colorado and they all practice and perform together."

"You came out to California by yourself?" Ana asked.

"Yeah," Arturdo answered. ^{came out here he came} "I really wanted to go to Thatcher."

"And you left behind your whole family? And all your friends?" Ana asked.

"Whoa," Arturdo laughed and up held his hand, faking protest. "I didn't know I was the subject of ^{some} an in-depth interview. Is this part of your extra credit?"

[↓] "No, I was just wondering," Ana said.

Evie couldn't help but feel a bit curious too. Arturdo was a senior at Thatcher and only a few years older than her and Ana. She couldn't believe that someone would move

halfway across the country (at such a young age by himself.) She loved to surf, but she couldn't imagine moving to, say, Hawaii, just to be closer to some choice waves.

"But come on," Ana tilted her head and smirked at Arturo (Evie wondered, was she actually flirting?) "Don't they have horses in Denver?"

"Of course," Arturo furrowed his brow at what seemed such a silly question ~~to~~ — ~~Evie. Was she flirting?~~ "But Thatcher is one of the best equine schools in the country and if I want to get into UC Davis, and study in their school of veterinary medicine, I'm going need a high school that can give me the best transfer."

"My Grandma Vino goes to UC Davis!" Evie said. "Wow, you might see her there."

"What is she studying?" Arturo asked

"Viticulture," Evie said. "Wine making."

Arturo smiled. "Yeah, I know what viticulture is."
as he

"Ar-turrrro!"

It was Josephina calling out for Arturo. Evie was surprised they hadn't heard her SUV (PRNCESS) pull up.

"We're over here," Arturo called out over his shoulder. "In Blackie's stall."

Josephina stood at the doorway in a form-fitting plum colored satin halter dress, beige fishnets that stood out against her tanned legs, and knee-high black leather boots. Her hands on her hips matched the attitude she was about to unleash.

"You're not done yet?" she asked Arturo. Her annoyed tone was less Valley-esque and more demanding. "I thought you made the reservations? At seven?"

“Uh, *hello?*” Arturo teased as he dropped medicine pills into the selected buckets.

“Arturo,” Josephina checked her wristwatch. “It’s time to *go*.” She ground her boot heel into the gravel. “I don’t want to be late. If we don’t get ther on time, we might as well not go at all.”

“Josephina,” Arturo exhaled. “We’ll make it. I’m the one who made the reservations, remember? And we’re only 25 minutes away.”

Evie wondered if Ana felt as much of a third wheel as she did being in the middle of this lover’s disagreement. She stayed silent as Arturdo and Horsaphina debated whether they would leave on time.

“I guess Evie and Ana can take over,” Arturo suggested as he looked at Evie. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Uh, no,” Evie said. “I don’t mind.”

What could she really say? He was the boss, sorta.

Arturo turned back to Josephina. “I’ve got my shirt in my truck. I’ll go change really quick.”

“Okay, okay,” Josephina checked the time again. “But do it quick.”

Did all things bitchy have first names that ended in ‘A’? What a minute, Evie thought, her given name was Evelina. Never mind.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt you guys,” Josephina looked at Ana and Evie as Arturo went out to his truck.

“Huh?” Evie asked. “What do you mean?”

“When I walked up,” Josephina started. “It’s like you guys were in a middle of a conversation? It seems like every time I see you two with Arturo, I am barging in on something.”

“No, we were just being silly,” Evie felt awkward. The last thing she wanted was Horsaphina *hating* and then complaining to Arturo about it. She looked over Horsaphina and assessed damage control. “You look really pretty.”

“Oh, yeah,” Horsaphina agreed as she smoothed out her dress and adjusted the silver square shaped bracelet on her other wrist. “Arturo’s taking me to Koi.”

“Koi?” Evie asked. She had no idea what Koi was. Was it a club? A lingerie boutique as in *Coy*? Maybe it was a mispronounced Native American name for another horse reserve?

“The Teppan Grill?” Josephina smiled when she noticed Evie’s confused expression. “They seat you in groups of twelve, and if we’re late? We have to sit at another table and get a regular chef. I like Mayru. He’s the owner?”

“Oh, right,” Evie nodded.

“I can’t believe you’ve never been there,” Josephina said.

Neither Evie nor Ana said anything.

Josephina looked around with an air of disapproval. “Don’t you guys ever get tired of working here?”

“Nuh uh,” Evie said. “Not really.” It seemed odd.

“Me neither,” Ana echoed Evie.

“Well, I would,” Horsaphina stated. “I don’t get it. Arturo spends so much time here. But then again, you two *have* to be here? Right?”

“Not really. We’re volunteers,” Evie pointed out. “I mean, I could have picked any organization for work.”

“Hmm - mmm,” Josephina wasn’t convinced. “That’s not what Arturo told me.”

“What are you talking about?” Evie asked.

“He said that your school counselor called to ask if the reserve still had room for you? And they didn’t? Arturo had already made out the whole schedule for the year and he’s very organized that way. But when he told them no, your counselor went over his head and went to Lynn, the owner. And she okay’d it.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Evie said.

No wonder Arturo had been tough on her, Evie thought.

When Arturo re-appeared, Wow. What a difference a nag makes. He had changed from his blue and green Pendleton work shirt to a **grey** button up shirt. His hair was slightly combed back, and Evie noticed the slightest hint of cologne, (**eucalyptus and woody**). Did he always wear cologne? Evie hadn’t noticed before. She did remember that Alex used to wear cologne (**seabreezy and fresh**), at least, for the evenings when the Flojos would all go fancy party crashing or something. Evie sighed to herself. But that was all *so* last semester, in a seemingly distant galaxy so far, far away.

“Arturo,” Josephina scowled at his boots. “You *cannot* wear those to Koi. They have a dress code?”

“*Josephina*,” Arturo started. She was working his last nerve. “There is nothing wrong with my boots.” He looked at the ones she was wearing. “You’re wearing boots.”

“Yes, but mine were, like, four hundred dollars? They’re not work boots from Will’s Western Wear.”

“Josephina, if you want me to change, it’s only going to make us even more late. Is that what you want?”

But Josephina just looked up at the sky and surrendered. “What *ever*?”

As soon as they left, Ana spoke up. “So, that was real smart of us, huh?” Ana smiled smugly to herself.

“Smart of us, what?” Evie asked.

“Kissing Arturo’s ass like that, pretending we were all into the rodeo and working here and stuff,” Ana said. “That part about your Grandma Vino just about killed me.”

“But I *did* like the charreada,” Evie insisted. “And my Grandma Vino does go to UCDavis.”

“Oh,” Ana went back to work.

Evie watched after Arturo and Horsaphina as they headed for his truck. He held the door open as he waited for her to get in the passenger seat, and then went around the front of this truck and got in.

When Arturo’s truck finally drove off and were out of sight, Evie excused herself from Ana.

“Man, you better be right back,” Ana warned her. “I ain’t gonna do all this alone, like last time.”

“No, I just gotta make a call,” Evie said as she went to get her backpack from the supply shed. She pulled out her cell phone and speed dialed Alex’s number. While she waited she thought of Arturo. He wasn’t such a bad guy. So he did come on a little strong at first, just like Alex had figured, but it was pretty cool, no *very* cool that he cared so much about what he did at the reserve. She realized it might be time to take the ‘d’ out of Arturo’s name.

She got Alex’s voice mail.

“Hey, Alex. It’s me,” Evie started. “Hey, I’m wondering... this coming weekend. Do you think we can go out? Like not surfing, but go out, *out*? Okay...” she didn’t know what else to add. “Just let me know.”

Chapter 12 Eves-dropping

The following Saturday evening couldn’t come fast enough for Evie. She had spent the whole week looking forward to going *out* with Alex. He had responded to her phone message with a text:

Sat. Nite. Cool. Smthin diff.

“So, no surfing this weekend?” he double checked one last time with Evie on Friday afternoon as he was taking her to the reserve. “You sure ‘bout that?”

“I have to work all day tomorrow and then again on Sunday,” she reminded him.

“I really have only Saturday evening free. I also have to practice my hula dance with Dee Dee and Raquel.”

“Now that, I’m very excited to see,” Alex said. “You know, traditional hula dancers go topless.”

Evie slugged him.

“You know, you sure hit me a lot,” Alex rubbed his arm. “I could report you for domestic battery.”

“And I could report you for perversion.”

Alex laughed. “Okay, but listen, so no on surfing, right? Because we *could* do a twilight set. After you’re done with your shift at the reserve we can head out to Sea Street. There’s supposed to be a south swell.”

“*Alex*,” Evie said. “This is California. There will *always* be a south swell coming from somewhere. I wanna go out, *out*, remember? Do something different. You said it was no problem.”

“You’re right,” Alex smiled. “Whatever you say, cutie.”

But the following Saturday Evie felt far from quite the cutie as she and Dee Dee rehearsed their moves for the Hula Lua.

“Your hips still look stiff,” Dee Dee observed as Evie followed the music from her *Honolulu Now* CD in front of their bedroom mirrors.

“I don’t have hips,” Evie looked down at her straight, narrow boyish figure.

“Unfortunately.”

“Well, you better get some,” Dee Dee said. “The Hula is *all* about hips.” She looked at the CD’s cover. “*Mira*, look at this girl. *These hips don’t lie*.” She pressed play on the CD player. “So is Raquel showing up or not?”

“Not,” Evie said. “I even called her land line but her mom said she was still sleeping.”

“She’s still doing to do the dance with us, no?” Dee Dee asked.

“Not,” Evie answered. “I even called her landline, but her mom said she was still sleeping.”

“She better practice on her own then and not mess us up,” Dee Dee frowned. “Remember when we were in 4-H and had to do that demonstration with lemons? She didn’t rehearse, and she us both off. She lost major points because of her.”

“Well,” Evie closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on making her hips more fluid. “There will be no points given the night of my sixteenera. It’s gonna be all about fun.”

Dee Dee got up and practiced alongside Evie. “So, where is Alejandro taking you tonight?”

“I have no idea where he made reservations,” Evie said. “But afterwards, we’ll probably take a walk around downtown or on the pier to watch the sunset.” Evie watched Dee Dee. How was it that Dee Dee could do everything so effortlessly? Even with her pale skin and blonde hair, she looked like an authentic Polynesian dancer.

“*How romantico*,” Dee Dee sighed enviously, as her hips fell into the perfect rhythm of the CD’s ukele. “I can’t wait for Rocio to get here, and then we can start doing things like that again.”

“When does he come?”

“In about a week,” Dee Dee said. “And then he’ll be here for two weeks, but he’s staying a few days longer for your party. *Mira*,” Dee Dee’s tone changed. “You should have Alejandro take you to that new seafood place in the Channel Islands harbor. I went there with my dad and Graciela, and it was sheer swank. The shrimp scampi was so good. I haven’t had scampi like that since I was in Veracruz with Rocio.”

“Actually,” Evie hoped to sound nonchalant. “We might go to Koi.”

“Koi?” Dee Dee sounded surprised. “*Really?*”

“Yeah,” “Why wouldn’t we go to Koi?”

“I don’t know,” Dee Dee said. “It’s just sorta pricey, that’s all.”

“Alex has money,” Evie couldn’t help but feel a little defensive. Dee Dee always went on and on about how well to do Rocio and his family were and how he was able to buy her this *chucheria* or take her to that *restaurante*. It was beginning to bug, big time.

“Well,” Dee Dee said. “You’ll have to tell me all about their sushi. I’m sure it’s awesome.”

“I’m sure it is,” Evie said.

By the evening, Evie had decided on her favorite halter, the satin one with a pattern of green and yellow swirls, and a three-tiered satiny skirt she had bought at Tilly’s. She even made the bold decision against wearing flojos (*gasp*) and slipped on some borrowed espadrilles (*sorta* satiny) from Dee Dee. But as she laced the straps around her ankles, she was horrified to discover that by wearing her flojos every day,

they had created a tan line on her feet, two conspicuous streaks between her big toe and middle toe that created a ‘V’ fanning out to the sides. It looked like she was wearing light beige flip flops, or worse, had tattooed white ink on the tops of her feet.

Evie looked through her bathroom cabinet for a tube of foundation. She knew she could easily touch up and even out the color of her feet, but when she finally found some cover-up, she discovered what she was afraid of. The foundation, called Sunburst, was too dark. Thanks to all the long hours at the reserve, Evie was losing her tan. She put the tube back in the cabinet. She needed a lighter foundation, a foundation for light skin, light for someone like... Sabrina. *Yes.*

Evie went down the hall to Sabrina’s room, but, like always, found the bedroom door closed. Since her return home from Stanford, Sabrina’s door was always shut.

But just as Evie was about to knock, she heard Sabrina on the other side of the door. She was crying. To someone, on the phone. Evie caught her clenched fist just in time, before it hit the bedroom door.

“But it’s *not* getting better,” Sabrina sobbed. “My family is driving me crazy. I should have just stayed back at Stanford. At least my sisters would know what to do, what to say. Here, I’m surrounded by *idiots.*”

Evie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *What? Her sisters? Who?*

“No,” Sabrina struggled to catch her breath. “She’s my only sister, but she’s such a little spoiled brat that I might as well not have a sister at all.”

Whoa. Evie pulled back from the door. Was she hearing right? How could Sabrina say, even *think* such a thing? She didn’t want her as a sister? No. She *didn’t* hear right. She leaned in closer to the bedroom door and strained to hear more.

“Evelina!”

Evie looked up and found Lindsay, in the middle of the hallway, holding a small box of tile samples.

“You do *not* sneak around, trying to listen in on other people’s conversations,” Lindsay spat under her breath, “You are being very rude.”

“But she’s talking about me, us,” Evie lowered her voice in protest.

“Evie,” Lindsay insisted. “Leave her alone.”

Evie reluctantly moved away from Sabrina’s door.

“I have to come into your room.” Lindsay heaved the box of tiles to her left hip. “Your mother wants to see which tiles she needs to order for your bathroom.”

“Now?” Evie asked.

She didn’t mind Lindsay being in her room while she was getting ready to go out, but this particular night, Evie had been looking forward to just blasting Los Abandoned, dabbling with make up and pin-up dos, and hogging the closet mirrors all to herself. At least that’s what she *had* been looking forward to. She was stunned from what she had overheard Sabrina say.

Lindsay adjusted the box again. “Your mother wants to place the order first thing in the morning, and I’m going to be leaving soon. We have to do it now.”

“Okay...” Evie started back down the hall to her bedroom. There was no way she was going to argue with Lindsay. And God forbid, she didn’t want to come across as a *spoiled brat*.

Oh, *hurtful*.

As she entered her room with Lindsay, the bedroom's landline rang. Evie grabbed the receiver off the carpet floor.

"Hullo?" she asked.

"*Finally.*" It was Raquel. "*What up, girl?* I called your cell and it went right to voice mail, and you didn't answer my text."

"My cell's charging." Evie walked into her bathroom and past Lindsay who was lining up the tile samples on the counter. Evie grabbed her make-up bag and moved out of Lindsay's way.

"And then I've been calling the landline," Raquel said. "And it just rings and rings. I didn't even get the voicemail."

"Sabrina's been on the phone." Evie was half listening as she sat on the edge of her bed and squirted a glob of foundation on the tops of both her feet. She was going to have to settle for the Sunburst foundation.

"What's wrong?" Raquel could sense the deflated tone in Evie's voice.

"Nothing," Evie tried to shake off the feeling. Sabrina's words stung something fierce.

"You're mad 'cause I couldn't make Hula dance practice, huh?" Raquel asked.

"Yeah." Evie smoothed the cream evenly along the tan line on top of each foot.

"I'm sorry about," Raquel went on. "I just could not get out of bed today. I was so tired."

"Raquel," Evie started. "Do you think I'm spoiled?"

"What?" she asked. "Who said that? Alex?"

“No. Nobody.” Evie lowered her voice again and looked over at Lindsay, who was now standing back and looking over the tile samples. She frowned and shook her head in typical Lindsay disapproval. “Actually,” Evie went on. “I just overheard Sabrina on the phone and she told someone, I think one of her sorority sisters, that I was spoiled. A spoiled *brat*, to be precise.”

“She *said* that?” Raquel asked. “I don’t know. I mean, I guess someone might think you were spoiled, because you *do* get a lot of stuff that you want.”

“*Me?*” Evie was thrown off by Raquel’s blunt reply. “That is so far from the truth. Who’s the one schlepping horse crap around? Who’s the one who may not have her own birthday party? On the year that there *is* actually going to be a February 29th?”

“It’s really how you look at it,” Raquel **observed**. “I mean, of course, you should get the things you want. You are totally worth it. Some people might think you are spoiled, but I’m surprised it would be Sabrina saying that. I mean, doesn’t she usually get her way?”

“And more,” Evie agreed. “That girl gets the grades she wants, the car she wanted, and accepted into the school she wanted. She gets everything her way. Like even now, with her being home and everything, I totally have to walk on eggshells around her.”

“Ugh, I could *not* deal,” Raquel groaned. “That’s why I am *so* glad that I’m an only child.”

“You and Dee Dee, both,” Evie said as she held her feet up to observe her work. Both feet looked a little on the dark side, but Alex would never notice in the candlelight at Koi.

“But anyway,” Raquel said. “Don’t worry about Sabrina. From what you tell me, she’s just upset over that Robert dude.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Evie said. “It’s been a complete bummer of day. Lindsay just told me about the car bill, from, you know.”

“How much is it?” Raquel asked.

“Eleven hundred bucks,” Evie said.

“Eleven hundred? Are you shitting me? I thought you said he had some crap little car?”

“He did,” Evie said. “But now he’s gonna have one fine ass bumper. I don’t know how I’m gonna pay for it. My Grandma Vino better come through.”

“Well, I’d ask for an invoice *and* a receipt,” Raquel said. “He’s probably just gonna keep the money and never have his car worked on.”

Evie got up from her bed and stood with her back towards the closet mirrors. She quickly looked over her shoulder, a` la red carpet *Teen People* pose. She had to do the check list. No VPL, *check*. No sightly roll of back fat, *check*. No bac-...wait. She peered closer into the closet mirrors and found a small, but still noticeable, blemish. It was right below her left shoulder. Argh! The curse of mid-winter bacne! Evie squeezed more Sunburst goop onto her finger and dabbed the offending violator. She re-checked, but the foundation looked blotchy and uneven. She decided to pull off her whole halter and give herself a thorough application of Sunburst, but just as she pulled her halter off, her mother walked in to her bedroom.

“*Mom*, do you mind?” Evie held the phone between her chin and shoulder and covered her chest with her arms. “I’m changing.”

“Sorry, Evie.” Her mother could have cared less. “The door was open and I already knew that Lindsay was in here.” She brushed right past Evie. “I need to take a look at these tiles.”

Evie was less concerned about modesty and more worried about the incriminating ‘RxE’ inked near her left breast. Last semester, she, Dee Dee and Raquel were the recipients of the fine artistry from **La Ley Cee**, who eschews the ‘over 18’ requirement and will ink anyone with an idea and enough cash. She now regretted getting the permanent ink job, but at the time, it was a bonding moment for the three girls. If Vicki Gomez ever saw that her youngest daughter had a tattoo, *anywhere* on her body, there would only be one kind of party for Evie... a good-bye party.

“So, I’m really sorry that I didn’t make today’s Hula practice. I promise, I’ll work on the moves tonight.

“Okay, but I really hope you do,” Evie said. “I want us to look really good at my party.”

“Of course,” Raquel said. “Hey, did you get your fancy manicure for your date with Alex?”

“Oh yeah,” Evie looked at her fingernails, painted the sheerest hint of pink. “I got a hand job by Jonathon, just like Dee Dee recommended. Oh man, he was great.”

“*Evie*, ” Her mother, as well as Lindsay, looked over from the bathroom. “*Who* are you talking to?”

“Raquel,” Evie said calmly. “And I’m talking about the *manicure* I got at Michael Kelley. They call them hand jobs, just in case you and Linds were eavesdropping and misunderstood me, *mother*.”

“We weren’t eavesdropping,” her mother said as she glanced over at Evie’s nails. “But very nice.”

“Evie!” It was now her father calling. “Alex is here.”

“Hey,” Evie said to Raquel as she gave herself a third and final bronze dusting.

“Romeo is here, gotta go.”

“Hey, Evie,” Raquel started.

“Yeah?”

“If you need to borrow money, you know, for that guy’s car, I can totally lend it to you, and you wouldn’t have to worry about paying me back for a while. Really?”

“Wow, really?” Evie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, thanks Raq.” Evie was so touched by her offer. “But hopefully Grandma Vino will come through and I won’t have to put the *mordida* on you.”

“Okay,” Raquel said. “Well, just let me know.”

“Thanks,” Evie got up. “Okay, I better go.”

“Lates,” Raquel said. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Isn’t it a little cold for a halter and a skirt?” her mother asked as Evie grabbed for her handbag.

True, it was the end of January, but with the weather still balmy, Evie felt she could afford to flash a little skin. Besides, Alex had called her cutie, and tonight she wanted to certify it.

“No, I’m fine.” Evie turned around slowly and modeled her outfit for her mother and Lindsay. “How do I look?”

“Uh,” Her mother looked her over. “Very *tan*. ”

“Good,” Evie answered smugly as she applied gloss to her lips. There was no way her mother’s lack of style sense was going to sober up her buzz. Evie felt cute; therefore, she *was* cute.

As she headed downstairs, she felt fortunate (*not* spoiled) that she lived in a two-story home. There is nothing more *O.C.* than descending down a staircase to the arms of a waiting surfer boy.

But the minute Evie saw Alex at the bottom of the stairs, her fantasy went from *The O.C.* to *O. U. Gotta to be Shittin’ Me*. Yes, Alex was waiting for her in the foyer, but not looking anything remotely **like a Saturday Night Hottie**. He was in his usual tattered camouflage cut-offs, the ones cut a little below his knees, and he was wearing his plastic flip flops, the ‘bin specials’ that Evie knew all too well. He had obviously not taken the planning of their date as seriously as she had. He had sand around his ankles and he still stank from the leftover medicinal sun block he must have lathered on earlier. Evie guessed that he must’ve still gone to Sea Street to catch that “oh so important” late afternoon swell.

“Hey,” Alex looked over Evie with a puzzled look on his face. “You’re all dressed up.”

“Yeah,” Evie couldn’t help but keep a straight face. He hadn’t said she looked nice, just dressed up. Was that supposed to be a compliment? And why did he look so puzzled?

“Yeah, Evie,” her father looked at Evie, as well. “And you got some color on you. Were you out in the sun today?”

Okay, maybe “dressed up” and “color” was male speak for cute?

“So, where are you two going?” her father asked Alex.

“I dunno,” Alex answered in a tone that was a little too laid-back for Evie. “I’ve been at the beach all day. I’m pretty wiped out.” He stretched his head side to side to prove his point. “I think we’ll just take it easy.” He looked at Evie. “Right, Eves?”

Evie managed a weak smile, but said nothing. He could *not* be serious.

“Well, have fun you two,” Evie’s father walked them to the front door. “And Evie, don’t forget your curfew.”

“Do you think,” Evie started. “That just tonight –”

“*No*,” her father said. “You *have* to be home by 12:30.”

As Evie walked alongside Alex towards his truck, she saw his longboard in the flatbed – evidence that he *had* just come from the beach. She felt her chest fill up with heavy disappointment. She looked over at Alex.

“What?” he looked back at her and smiled.

“Nothing.” Evie looked away and felt slightly conflicted. Sometimes Alex would look at her, and his dark eyes would just penetrate hers, making her feel the way she had felt at Sea Street, the morning he had given her the abalone necklace. She suddenly felt

guilty. Alex really *was* a sweet boyfriend and maybe she *was* a spoiled brat. Just because he was dressed down didn't mean he hadn't put any thought into arranging a little something special. The evening was just beginning. Maybe he played it off with her dad, you know, one guy trying to be cool with another type of thing? What, was he actually going to go into detail with her father about what he really wanted to do with Evie?

"Well, first, Mr. Gomez, I'm going to take Evie out to a very romantic, very expensive restaurant, where I will request the most secluded table in the whole house, just for the two of us. Then I am going to drive her out to The Shores, where we will stroll out to the most secluded area in the sand dunes, and I will spread out a blanket just for the two of us. Then Evie will cuddle up next to me as I crack open a bottle of Vieve (her favorite) and pour it into two glass flutes that I brought with me because I had been planning this evening for a whole week. Then I will make a toast to our evening right before I pull out a book of poems that I have carefully chosen for Evie, but, I have to confess, the minute I look into her dark brown eyes, I'll--"

A long, slow whistle interrupted the satiny halter ripping scene in Evie's head. The whistle came from the front of Alex's truck. She squinted her eyes in the darkness and slowly made out the glow of a cigarette in the passenger seat of the cab. *No*. But yes. It was Mondo. She could *not* believe what she was seeing.

"Why is *Mondo* with you?" Evie struggled to keep her voice down to a whisper

"You wanted to do something different," Alex answered earnestly. "And it's just been a while since we all hung out together, and you were saying that --."

"*What?*" Evie forced herself to maintain her composure. "Are you serious?"

“Uh, yeah,” Alex sounded confused. “Why?”

“I *said*,” Evie started. “That it had been a while since you and I hung out, spent time *together*. I wanted to go out, *out*, remember?”

“Evie,” Alex sounded even more confused. “What exactly does going ‘out, *out*’ mean?”

“Just *forget* it.” Evie was quickly losing her patience with Alex.

Mondo got out of the front cab just as they got to the truck

“Hey, G,” he looked Evie over, making her feel slightly Sangro slutty. “Look at you all gussied up.” He pulled the passenger seat forward so he could get in the back of the truck’s cab. “So you ready to give the horse gig a break and just chill with Alex and me tonight?”

Alex and me? Grrrr. Evie couldn’t help but feel hot with anger. What *was* Alex thinking, bringing Mondo along at their date?

“So, check it out,” he took off the white cap he was wearing. “Chop job. I bit your style, from last semester.”

Last year, Evie had cut and dyed her own hair herself. She was now gratefully relieved that it was growing back to a length she was comfortable with. Mondo’s hair, however, was newly buzzed and dyed a Tweety Bird blond.

“Check out the back,” Mondo turned his head to show off a separate dye job, a large question mark in deep jet black, smack center on the back of his head.

Evie couldn’t keep from laughing. “Why would you have a question mark on the back of your head?” She asked. “What, are you trying to create some new Batman character?”

“What? *No*. It stands for ‘Whaddya need?’” Mondo ran his hand over a freshly shorn scalp. “Check it out, my cousin just got back from Amsterdam and he told me that, like, all the cafes have little areas with designated question mark signs. Like, you can get *anything* you want there. You know what I mean? Cool, huh?”

“Yeah,” Evie fastened her seat belt. “I guess. In Amsterdam.”

“So,” Alex rubbed his hands together. “What’s up for this evening?”

Evie decided to stick to her guns. She was going to get her fancy dinner at Koi whether it killed her, or, more appropriately, killed Mondo’s date with Alex.

Evie feigned a smile. “I was thinking we’d go get sushi.”

“Sushi?” Mondo smirked. “Uh, no thanks,” He held his nose and dropped the sides of his mouth. “I had sushi last night, if you know what I mean.” He looked at Alex. The look in his eyes said everything.

You have got to be kidding.

“*Mondo*,” Alex reprimanded him as he started his truck. “Come on, there’s a lady present.”

“Yeah,” Mondo looked at Alex in the rearview mirror. “That’s what *I* thought. Last night.”

Alex started to pull out of the driveway. “So, you want sushi, Evie?”

Not after Mondo’s inexcuseable one-liner.

“You know,” Mondo chimed in as he flicked his cigarette butt out the window. “I could actually go for some seafood. We should go to Otani’s. They got kick ass tempura.”

“*Actually*,” Evie tried to lure Alex from siding with Mondo. “I was thinking of Koi.”

“Koi?” Mondo frowned as he leaned forward, between Evie and Alex. “You mean that fancy ass place that took over where the E Bar used to be?”

“Yeah,” Evie said.

“Nah,” Mondo said. “We don’t wanna do Koi. It’s all SUV scum. We gotta go to Otani’s.” He leaned back in his seat and looked at Alex in the rearview mirror again. “Dude, they have a waitress with a rack *this* big.” He made a gesture over his chest as though he was balancing two imaginary cannon balls.

Alex couldn’t help but chuckle as he drove down Camino del Rio.

Evie shot him a look. “*Alex*. ”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sweetie.” Alex straightened his smile and rubbed her arm. “Look, we’ll go to Koi. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever *she* wants?” Mondo looked at Alex and then at Evie. “Talk about spoiled milk.”

Evie crossed her arms over her chest. *Spoiled?*

Was Evie just being *sentida*, or was Mondo truly saying the most inappropriate things so early in the evening?

The wait list at Koi was over an hour.

“We can’t seat you any sooner without a reservation,” the host told the three of them. “And,” he looked over Alex and Mondo’s feet. “We have a dress code. No flip flops.”

“You gotta be kidding,” Mondo protested. “Dude, this is friggin’ South Cali, everyone wears flip flops.”

“Not during dinner hours,” the host held his ground.

Evie looked around the restaurant. A stone brick fireplace stood outside in the patio, and water trickled from decorative bamboo chutes into a kidney-shaped pond filled with bright orange and yellow koi fish. She also noticed the full moon, large with hues of soft yellow, pink, and beige. Evie couldn’t stop thinking how much more romantic it would be to snuggle with Alex on one of the wicker love seats and just inhale the beauty.

“Why don’t we just wait?” Evie suggested. “We can get some appetizers or something. An hour will go by fast.”

“Dude,” Mondo pulled Alex aside. “That monkey totally dissed us. I ain’t gonna shoot my wad here.” He seemed to have already made the decision for the three of them as he started back towards the front doors with his fists deep in the pockets of his baggy cords. He killed all notions of romance Evie had fantasized about.

“Sushi is sushi,” Alex apologetically shrugged his shoulders to Evie. “We can come here another time, Eves. Promise.”

At Otani’s, Alex sat between Evie and Mondo at the counter. It was a short counter with yellowed, chipped Formica and a sloppy pile of stained, plastic menus at the far end. The diners were far from SUV scum and were made up more of aging surf *veteranos* and leathered skin longshoremen. Both group, Evie noticed wore tattooed sleeves depicting their life with the Pacific Ocean.

Otani's was cheap eating, and you could fill up if you had a little cash. Some cash, that is. Otani's did not take credit cards, and Alex had forgotten his wallet and only had three bucks on him. The three of them shared one (*1*) tempura shrimp boat with a complimentary order of sticky white rice, and it actually turned out to be a good thing that Mondo did tag along. It allowed Evie to order a diet soda.

As they were finishing up their meal, Mondo looked past Alex and eyed Evie's shoulders as if he were seeing them for the first time.

"What's up with your skin, Eves?" he asked.

Evie rubbed her shoulders. "I always get goose bumps when it gets a little cold."

"No," Mondo looked her over. "It looks like you got dirt or something smudged on them." He reached over, across Alex, to brush off whatever he thought was on Evie's skin.

"It's not dirt, Mondo," she pulled away from him. "It's bronzer."

"Bronzer?" Mondo looked confused. "For what? It's getting all over your shirt."

"Never mind, *Mondo*," Evie hugged her arms across her chest and placed her hands on opposite shoulders. It was cold in Otani's, and she remembered seeing a jacket in Alex's truck.

"Alex," she started. "Don't you have a jacket in your truck? I thought I saw one."

"Uh, huh," Alex played with the ice in his styrofoam cup with his straw. "I thought I'd need it, but I'm okay."

"Do you mind if I wear it?" Evie asked.

"Nuh uh," he said as put his hand in his pants' pocket and pulled out his car keys.

"But try not to get all that make up on it."

“Oh,” Evie didn’t take the keys. “Never mind.”

“Dude,” Mondo nudged Alex to look over at the group of women who had just entered Otani’s. “We’re talking boulders at 3 o’clock. *Your* 3 o’clock.”

“*Mondo*,” Alex threw him a sideways glance, but before doing so, Evie noticed that Alex did look over towards the women.

“Hey,” Mondo suddenly said to Evie. “You ate more than your fair share.”

“Huh?” Evie saw that he was now looking over her paper plate.

“Look,” Mondo counted the shrimp tails on her plate with the end of his wooden chop stick. “Alex and I only have three tails each, but you’ve got, like, five.”

“Mondo,” Evie couldn’t believe what he was implying. She looked down on her plate. “It’s just batter.”

“No, it ain’t.” Mondo pressed down on the tails with his chopstick.

“What, you want me to burp them back up?” Evie asked. Could the tension between her and Mondo get any fiercer? She pushed her paper plate away from him. “*Stop* it.”

“So,” Alex stretched back, oblivious to how annoying Mondo was to Evie.

“What’s up for the rest of the evening?”

Evie hoped that she didn’t hear him correctly. Hadn’t he planned *anything*?

“Check it out,” Mondo started after he finally had stopped counting shrimp tails.

“A buddy of mine was telling me about a party over on Hemlock. Should be pretty K.B.”

“What about my board?” Alex rubbed the space between his eyes and yawned. “I don’t wanna leave it out at some party.”

“Yeah, I’m not really in the mood for a party, either,” Evie said as her stomach growled. “But maybe, if you really want to go, we could drop you off.” She looked over at Alex’s Nixon. It was only 10 p.m.. She still had a good two and a half hours before she had to be home. She and Alex could still have *some* time to themselves.

“*We?*” Mondo looked at Evie. “When did you start sharing Alex’s pink slip? You don’t even drive.”

“I know,” Evie said. “I’m just saying that we might do something else.”

“But Eves, if you don’t wanna go to a party,” Alex asked her. “What do you wanna do?”

“I don’t know,” Evie hated being put in the position of activities director, and *why* was Alex not backing her up? “I thought we could go to the pier, walk around. There’s a full moon tonight.”

“Whoa,” Mondo pressed two fingers on the side of his neck. “I hope my pacemaker can keep up with this excitement.” He looked at Alex. “Dude, come on, let’s go check out the party. Hey, you know who’s gonna be there?”

“Who?” Alex asked.

“Our boy, Jose.”

The minute Evie heard the name, Jose, her stomach went from empty to numb.

“I haven’t seen that clown in weeks,” Alex chewed lazily on the end of his plastic straw. “What’s he been up to?”

“Maintaining,” Mondo casually pulled out a cigarette. “So he says.”

“Alex,” Evie leaned her head to the left and looked up at him. “Can’t we just go for a walk tonight? Like on the pier? It’s so nice out.”

There was no way she wanted to see Jose, even at some mellow, kick back party. Not only had Jose cheated on Raquel, but he had also practically molested Evie at a Sangro party and almost decked her in the school's parking lot. Why would Alex, her own boyfriend, even want to be in the same room with Jose?

Both Evie and Mondo waited for an answer from Alex as he continued chewing on the end of his straw.

"Dude," Mondo stretched his arm around the back of his stool. "You know, I'll do whatever you want. I'm easy."

At about half past 11PM, Evie returned home. Her so called date with Alex was officially over, and Evie was dropped off one full hour before her 12:30 a.m. curfew. No such thing had ever, ever, happened in the history of Evie Gomez's so-called best years of her life.

"The whole evening sounds completely wretched," Dee Dee sympathized. She called Evie as soon as she got her text. "And Alejandro? Did *nada*?"

"Nothing," Evie was embarrassed to admit. She knew that Dee Dee was already comparing Alex unfavorably to Rocio. "Once he was with Mondo, it was like I didn't even exist. They were too busy yucking it up and checking out girls."

"That is so disgusting," Dee Dee said. "What the hell is wrong with Alejandro?"

"I have no idea." Evie was already in bed, nibbling on pan dulce, a flakey hornito, that her father had brought home. "So, what are you doing home on a Saturday night?" she asked. "No Patrona Pow wow?"

“I actually have a brunch tomorrow,” Dee Dee said. “With some of the other Patrona candidates. I should be in bed already, but I’ve got this avocado mask on and I wanted to give it another 20 minutes.”

“*Another* brunch?” Evie asked.

“No, this is the first one,” Dee Dee said. “The last Patrona get-together was an informal “meet and greet” and after that, the second get-together was more of mixer.” Dee Dee took a breath. “*Oye*, have you seen Josephina? Has she said anything about me?”

Ever since Evie had told Dee Dee that she had met Josephina, Arturo’s girlfriend and senior Patrona member, Dee Dee was always trying to dig up bits and pieces about her possible future as a Patrona debutante.

“No, *Dee Dee*,” Evie said. “I told you, she never talks about *anything*. She just *asks* things. The girl talks in question marks. So, have you talked to Raquel?” she asked. “I texted her, but didn’t hear back.”

“I talked to her a few hours ago,” Dee Dee said. “She was on her way to some house party. A house *arrest* party.”

“Huh?”

“Exactly,” Dee Dee said. “One of Davey Mitchell’s little friends got in trouble for breaking his probation, so he’s tied to his house, with his mother and an ankle bracelet. All the Bard Boys took a party to him,”

“Are you serious?” Evie laughed.

“Yeah, he isn’t allowed to go anywhere over 500 feet without checking in with his P.O.”

It was funny to hear Dee Dee talk so T.V. cop shop. “So where was this party?” Evie asked.

“Some place on Hemlock,” Dee Dee said.

“On Hemlock?” Evie repeated.

“Yeah,” Dee Dee said. “Why?”

Evie suddenly felt empty. “No reason.”



Chapter 13

Cool prty @ Hemlck. Srry u mssd it.

She was still tender from her Saturday date fiasco with Alex, and to make matters worse, he didn't even apologize. Unless you counted the text message she received the next morning on Sunday, which was less of an apology and more of an observation. It was like Alex was so unaware of what had happened. So he went to a 'cool party' and he was 'sorry she missed it', BFD.

“Evie,” Alex threw her a sideways glance as they drove to school. She had remained silent for pretty much the whole drive. “How long you gonna beef with me?”

“I'm not beefing,” Evie tried to answer casually, but it was no use. It was obvious she was still upset with him. She kept her arms crossed over her chest and didn't add anything to their conversation except a low energy “uh, huh” to any topic he introduced.

“Saturday night was so not my fault,” Alex guessed at what might have made her so quiet. “I can’t control Mondo.”

“But you can control whether or not he comes with us on a date” Evie refused to look at Alex and on the fascinating scenery of oil derricks and lemon groves that lined Highway 33 into Ojai.

“How was I supposed to know we were on a *date*?” Alex was perplexed. “You told me that you wanted to go out, *out*, and that you wanted to do something “different.” To me, hanging out with you and Mondo is different. You’re my two favorite buds.”

“That’s just it, Alex,” Evie pointed out. “I’m not your bud. I’m your girlfriend.”

“But you’re also my bud,” Alex said. “I don’t get it. Why do things have to be so different now that we are boyfriend and girlfriend? You’re not trying to change me are you? Like mold me into a little version of what you think is ideal?”

When Alex explained his concerns, it sorta made sense to Evie. Of course, she didn’t want him to change. She liked him for who he was and what he was about. And that was the reason why she even wanted him as a boyfriend, her boyfriend.

“I don’t get it, Evie,” he said. “And sometimes I don’t get you.”

Evie looked over at Alex, who now seemed intent to use on focusing on the highway. He was really handsome, Evie thought to herself. How could she not have noticed it before, when they were just Flojo friends? Looking at his profile, one would never guess that he had broken his nose. When Evie had started Villanueva and had been introduced to Alex, he had a wide medical bandage across the bridge of his nose and cotton splints stuffed up his nostrils. Evie had judged him to be just like some of the other **vanity plates** at Villanueva and figured he had gotten a nose job, as well. It wasn’t until

later that she learned that the bandages were from a surfing accident caused by some newbie's foamboard that had flung up right into his face, shattering his nose and cheekbones. Upon hearing, at the last minute, that some **south westerly swell** was coming in, Alex yanked the splints out himself after school, just so he could go surfing. Since then, Evie had thought that Alex was just about the coolest guy she had ever met.

"I'm sorry Alex," she tugged on his elbow. "I just wish, sometimes, we could do things more, I dunno, romantic. You know what I mean?"

But Alex didn't say anything back except "uh, huh" as he turned up the volume on his iTrip.

The news of Rocio's arrival to use at Rio Estates changed Evie's **train of thought** when she arrived at school. Dee Dee was **so excited** about having Rocio in Rio Estates and wanted to do a girl's only lunch, off campus. She needed to tell Evie and Raquel all about him.

Evie figured it would be a good breather from Alex, and she texted him by second period.

Goin to O-hi Frstie w/ the grls

To which he responded:

No prob

Of course she read more into his two-word text. *Much* more. 'No prob' as in 'No problem. I really don't care what the fuck you do?' Any textlator could translate Alex's simple six characters (seven, if you included the space) to mean that he was annoyed with

Evie. It took everything in Evie's power not to follow up with a second text. She kept reading and re-reading his two words every chance she got in civics class.

"Hey," she finally leaned over and showed Alex's message to **September Valdez**, who sat next her. "What do you think this means?"

"Who sent it?" September asked as she propped up her civics book, away from Vasquez. She held Evie's cell phone behind it and studied the text.

"Alex sent it," Evie whispered from the side of her mouth as she kept her eyes and attention on Vasquez. The last thing she wanted was for her phone to be taken away. Not at this crucial time in her life.

"Alex, as in your boyfriend Alex?" September asked.

"Uh, huh," Evie said.

"No smiley face or heart," September observed. "Hmmm...it doesn't look good."

That just about killed Evie. September Diaz knew what she was talking about. She was a junior and had had many boyfriends during her reign at Villanueva. **She was also assistant editor of the school's newspaper, so she knew how to read between the lines.**

Evie took her cell phone back from September and immediately turned it off. She would definitely have to drown her doubt, misery, and insecurity in cheese fries and a Frostie with Dee Dee and Raquel at lunchtime.

"So, he got in last night," Dee Dee went on about Rocio as she, Evie, and Raquel headed out of the student parking lot in Jumile. "He's staying in our guest room and *ay*, it was *so* hard to leave him this morning."

“He slept at your house?” Evie asked.

“Yes, and it was *unbearable*,” Dee Dee said. “I haven’t seen him in over four months, and I just wanted to sneak in the guest room and just be with him the whole night.” She pulled out on to Ventura Avenue and made a left, towards O-hi Frostie.

“So why didn’t you?” Raquel, who sat shotgun, asked as she moved the rearview mirror towards her face and picked at a scab on her chin. “If I had some fine ass *papi chulo*, as you claim he is, under my roof, that I hadn’t seen for months, you best know I’d be giving him a big ol’ grand welcome, *Americana* style.”

“Raquel, you’re scandalous!” Dee Dee laughed. “I can’t sleep in the same bed with Rocio! My parents would freak, seeing us come out of the same bedroom in the morning.”

“What you gotta do is set an alarm clock in his room,” Raquel began. “Like, set it for an hour earlier, before your parents wake up. But you gotta make *sure* you wake up and get out of the room. Also, make sure you don’t go in the room wearing any perfume or that hair stuff of yours that’s gonna leave behind girl stink.”

“You’ve obviously done this before,” Evie noted from the back seat. Maybe it was good she was going off campus for lunch. Dee Dee and Raquel, especially Raquel, would keep her mind off Alex and his **subliminal Mex text**.

“You could say that,” Raquel claimed proudly. She re-positioned Jumile’s rearview mirror back for Dee Dee.

“Is Rocio gonna stay at your house the whole time he’s here?” Evie asked Dee Dee.

“Pretty much,” Dee Dee lit up a Midnight Berry at the first stop light they came to. “He’s gonna look at schools in San Diego and then in the Bay Area.”

“Ooh, is he gonna look at Stanford?” Evie asked.

“Yeah, in fact, he should talk with Sabrina,” Dee Dee said. “She would be the perfect person to talk with.”

“Not right now,” Evie looked out the window. “She not the best person for anything.”

Evie still hadn’t talked to Sabrina about what she had overheard her say on the phone that afternoon, and it still stung whenever she thought of her sister’s harsh words.

“Sabrina is still depressed?” Dee Dee asked. “I can’t believe it.”

“I know,” Raquel said to Dee Dee. “And she’s like your idol”

“I wouldn’t say she’s *my idol*, but, well, yeah, she’s up there. Sabrina’s the best.”

Dee Dee looked at Evie in the rearview mirror. “I was actually, sorta, hoping that she could write me a recommendation letter, for Las Patronas.”

“*No way*, Evie said. It bothered her how much Dee Dee looked up to her sister. She didn’t understand how Dee Dee thought that Sabrina was “the best.” “Now is not a good time to ask Sabrina for anything.”

“So,” Raquel changed the subject. “How’s Rocio gonna get around? Is he gonna rent a car?”

“No, you have to be, like, 25 or something to rent one,” Dee Dee said. “My dad’s going to lend him one of ours, or he’s gonna use Jumile.” She patted Jumile’s dashboard.

“Oh *really*?” Evie caught Dee Dee’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “So Rocio must have *good* insurance, right?” She couldn’t help but rib Dee Dee. She still didn’t believe

that her father supposedly wouldn't let *her* take Jumile out for quick fun spin once in a while because of the car insurance.

"Yes, *Evie*," Dee Dee threw her a look. "He's going to get good insurance. *International* insurance."

"So when do we all get to meet him?" Raquel **asked**. "Rocio's all we've been hearing about, like, "veinte-cuarto/siete."

"Definitely at Evie's party." Dee Dee pulled into O-hi Frostie where the wooden picnic tables were already taken over by backpacks, skateboards, and an overflow of Del Mar public high school students.

"Ew," Dee Dee looked them over. "*Del Mar*."

"Wait, Evie's *party*?" Raquel balked as she got out of the car. "We gotta wait until *then*? What, you ashamed of us or something?"

"*Por fa*'," Dee Dee furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Don't be so *pinga*. It's just that he is going to be so busy researching colleges and universities that I'm barely going to see him myself."

The three of them got in line at Oh-hi Frostie. Two boys, **both dressed in low rise super tight black jeans and scrappy skater T's**, approached Evie.

Raquel covered her mouth with her hand and muttered under her breath to Evie, "Wassup, rockers?"

"Are you Evie Gomez?" The one boy with eyeliner asked.

"Uh, yeah," Evie answered cautiously. She looked over at Dee Dee and Raquel.

"Why?"

"We wanna know if your party's open," the other kid said.

“Open?” Evie asked.

“In fact,” Raquel suddenly leaned over Evie and took over. “It is. You can buy an invite. Fifty bucks each. *Cash*.”

“Fifty bucks?” The kid with eyeliner asked and looked back at his three other friends, similiarly garbed skaters boys, who were sitting on the picnic table.

“Yeah, we ain’t talking entry to a skatepark,” Raquel said. “This is the party of the year.”

“No, I just gotta just tell my other friends.” The kid with eyeliner went back over to the picnic table.

The other kid stayed with Evie and Raquel and Dee Dee. He crossed his arms and looked over Dee Dee, who seemed to pretend not to notice. It never failed. No matter what set a boy was with, Dee Dee was *always* looked over. “So, there’s gonna gonna be booze, right?” he asked.

“Of course, there’s gonna be booze,” Raquel frowned. “What, we’re gonna charge fifty bucks for Hawaiian punch?”

“Raquel,” Evie giggled and grabbed her arm. “*Stop* it!”

“Okay,” Eyeliner Boy came back with a wad of twenties. “How about one twenty-five for all four of us?”

Evie looked at Raquel and Raquel looked back at her.

“Sold!” Raquel grabbed the money from the boy’s hands.

“Hey, do we get a receipt or something?” he asked.

“You wanna a receipt?” Raquel looked at them. She pulled out a slip of small paper from her wallet and wrote “Good for Five Entries.” She then blotted her lips on the paper, leaving a deep, dark red smack print. “How’s that?”

“Cool,” the kid took the paper, not terribly impressed. Both boys went back to the picnic table.

Dee Dee pulled Evie aside and looked over to where the boys were sitting. “Evie, you do *not* want those guys coming to your birthday party. And now they’re going to expect something for all that money?”

“Oh, they’re harmless,” Raquel said as she counted the twenty dollar bills. She glanced over at the boys. “And the one with eyeliner is *fine*.”

“Yeah,” Evie started hesistantly. “Maybe Dee Dee is right. What if they show up and get all pissed that we’re not serving liquor or anything?”

“Oh, *please*,” Raquel said. “They’ll probably show up so lit, that is, if they show up at all, that they won’t even remember any of this business transaction.”

Raquel shook her head and smiled as she looked up at the menu board. “Lunch is on you, Eves.”

Later that evening, Dee Dee called Evie on the phone.

“I need you to keep something on the DL,” she told Evie.

“Sure,” Evie lowered her voice. She loved playing the confidante. “What’s up?”

“Well,” Dee Dee started. “You know how Rocio is here and his parents are coming out in a few days, right?”

“Right.”

“And this is all a big deal for him, to find a school out here,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, he’s basically doing this for me, for us to be together.”

“Uh, huh,” Evie answered. Could it also be that California had some of the best schools to offer, than say, Mexico?

“So anyway,” Dee Dee continued. “My dad and Graciela want to have a little dinner party for Rocio and his parents and,” she paused, “I really want to invite you and Alejandro.”

“Oh,” Evie was taken off guard. She was expecting some big grand announcement. Like, maybe they were engaged and were going to run off together, or maybe Dee Dee wanted her to make crepe paper flowers for their getaway car. But it was just dinner, a dinner party, at the de LaFuentes. Cool enough. Very adult-like and, by bringing Alex along, very date-ish. “We’ll definitely come,” Evie said. “I can’t wait.”

“But one thing,” Dee Dee added. “You can’t tell Raquel.”

“Why?” Evie asked.

“It’s not like I’m keeping something from her, to be mean. I just...” Dee Dee searched for the right words. “I just don’t want to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. You know how Raquel can be coarse and make a scene. I can’t have anything go wrong at this get together.”

“But can’t you just tell Raquel that?” Evie felt awkward. “Can’t you just make it clear to her that she had to be on her best behavior?”

“I wish it was that easy,” Dee Dee sighed. “But you know Raquel. You know how she can be, and now that she’s all with Davey Mitchell, I don’t know what to expect from her anymore.”

It was true. Davey Mitchell had passed Raquel's two-week mark. They had been going out for a full month, and neither Dee Dee nor Evie had even been introduced to him. *That* was very telling.

"You know," Dee Dee said. "I wasn't gonna say anything, but Raquel called our house, drunk, twice last week."

"Are you serious?" Evie asked.

"Uh, huh," Dee Dee said. "And I'm not taking about d-dialing my cell. She called on the land line, like at three in the morning, and woke up my father and everything. In fact, he was the one who said it might be better if Raquel didn't come to the get together."

"Are you effing with me?" Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Dee Dee's father was the most accepting of Raquel, more so than Evie's own father, who she had thought was very forgiving of Raquel's antics. Evie, herself, had received the drunk dials and tipsy texts from Raquel, but they had all been very amorous chatter, consisting of Raquel going on and on about how much she loved Evie and how Evie was her "bestest, bestest friend in the whole wide world." But thank God she never d-dialed the Gomez's land line. Her mother would shit *stone*.

"So, you won't tell her, right?" Dee Dee asked Evie in a hopeful tone.

"I guess not," Evie answered, feeling a bit deceitful. "I mean, I won't."

"Thanks Evie," Dee Dee exhaled. "You're truly are my *ADA*."

"I'm your *fairy*?" Evie asked, confused.

"No," Dee Dee laughed. "My amiga de alma," Dee Dee said. "It's much more meaningful than a BFF. You're like my soul sister."

Dee Dee, however, forgot to mention keeping dinner plans on the D.L. might become quite a chore when all parties involved lived within the residential tract of a gated community.

“I still don’t understand,” Evie’s mother started on Evie as she waited for Alex to pick her on Saturday night. “Why wouldn’t Frank or Graciela invite your father and me to their party?”

“Mom, it’s not a party,” Evie tried to explain for the umpteenth time. Her mother had been on her case all week once she had mentioned the dinner to her. “It’s just a little get together for Rocio and his parents.”

“But I would think that after the brunch that I threw for them that Frank would want to return the gesture,” her mother said. “Something like this would never have happened if Margaret were still alive.”

Evie could not believe her mother was comparing Margaret, Dee Dee’s dear belated mother, to Frank de LaFuentes new wife, Graciela. The cattiness belonged less in the Gomez’s great room and more near **Alejandra de los Santos’** scratching post.

“Mom,” Evie checked for wrinkles on her skirt in the mirror. It was the second time in less than two weeks that she was wearing a skirt for a night out with Alex. She hoped he noticed this time. “It’s not even about or for the parents. I’m just going for support. For Dee Dee.”

“You know, Evie,” her mother started to ask in a tone that indicated she had an idea, usually a lousy one. “Why don’t you take Sabrina with you?”

Bingo.

“What?” Evie looked over at her mother. The last think she wanted was mopey ol’ Sabrina barging in on her date. “Why would I take her?”

“Because it would be a nice thing to do,” her mother said. “Dee Dee and Sabrina have so much in common. Sabrina was a Patrona and now Dee Dee is going to be one, too.”

“We don’t know that yet,” Evie found herself getting territorial. Sabrina was a pain in the butt, but still, she was *her* pain in the butt. “Dee Dee still has to be nominated.”

“Oh, Dee Dee’s a doll,” Vicki Gomez waved her hand aside. “Of course, she’ll be nominated. Also, didn’t you say that Rocia will be attending Stanford?”

“It’s *Rocio*,” Evie **corrected her mother**. “And I didn’t say he was *attending* Stanford, I said he was looking into their departments. Checking out a school is much different than attending one.”

“Well,” Evie’s mother said. “I just thought you’d want to help get your sister get out of her rut. But speaking of school...”

Uh oh. Here it comes.

“How is your volunteer work coming along? Is your GPA going to be up before the next quality check? Your father asked me about it the other day, and I’m feeling a lot of pressure Evie.”

She’s feeling pressure?

“Mom, I’ve got it under control,” Evie peeked out the great room’s window. Where was Alex when she needed him? Her mother was getting under her skin.

“I hope so Evie,” Vicki Gomez said. “It would be a shame if we didn’t get to have your party. But if we do have it,” she raised her eyebrow, “I just *hope* I don’t forget to send Frank and Graciela an invite.”

When Alex came to pick Evie up for the dinner, she liked that he was in brown cords and a cream colored dress shirt. She looked down and saw that he wasn’t even wearing flojos. He actually had on shoes, black canvas Winos. *Too* cute.

Yes, it was apparent that a dinner party at the de LaFuentes was perfect in terms of mending the friction between Evie and Alex. Granted, it wasn’t a night out at a super swanky Japanese restaurant, or a super romantic poetry reading at the beach, but still it was dinner, a dinner date, and he had dressed up. The night seemed to be a precious maybe.

“You look really nice,” Alex said as he walked Evie to his truck. “You look cute in dresses.”

“Oh, thanks.” Evie smiled as Alex held the door open for her.

So far, so good, Evie thought as she got into his truck. She put the arm rest up and snuggled as close to him as she could.

“You know, I haven’t been to Dee Dee’s since last semester,” Alex said as he lowered the volume on his iTrip and pulled out of the driveway. “Remember? When I went over to give her swimming lessons last semester and Alejandra de los Santos and her little pack of *fresitas* were there?”

Evie grimaced. “Ugh. How could I forget that? I showed up thinking it would be just you, me, and Dee Dee and you’re, like, in the swimming pool, drooling all over Xiamor-a.”

“I really don’t remember that,” Alex smiled jokingly.

“Well, I do.”

“But I *do* remember,” Alex started. “That the de LaFuentes had a pretty posh pad. They’re probably gonna have some good grub tonight.”

“Totally,” Evie agreed. “But I can tell you one thing they aren’t going to have.”

“What?” Alex asked.

“They aren’t going to have *sushi*.” Evie playfully pinched his side.

“Evie,” Alex frowned over at her. “Let it go, will you?”

“I was just messin’.” Evie cuddled up closer to him.

“No, you weren’t,” he shrugged a little. “You keep making these little jabs, like you’re trying to make me feel guilty or something.”

“No, I’m not.” Evie could feel his arm tense up. She looked up at him. “Seriously, I was just joking.”

Alex sighed. “You *keep* blaming me for that night. You know, maybe you were just expecting too much.”

“Expecting too much?” Evie asked. “What, that I want to go out, alone, with my own boyfriend once in a while?”

“I dunno,” Alex said. “It’s like I feel like all this pressure that you want me to act a certain way.”

Evie let go of Alex’s arm and sat up in the seat.

“Alex,” she started. “If I’m your girlfriend, sometimes I wanna be treated like one.”

“So, what, I treat you like crap or something?” Alex asked. He was now turning onto Camino Pacifico and was a few blocks from Camino Cortez, Dee Dee’s street.

“I didn’t say that,” Evie said. “It’s just seems that you treated me with more chivalry when I was just a friend.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“I mean, you were more of gentleman –”

“I know what chivalry means,” Alex snapped.

“Look,” Evie started. “All I’m saying is when you were trying to get my attention, you were all nice and everything, but now that I’m your girlfriend you, like, totally take me for granted.”

“For granted?” Alex asked. “Like what? When?”

“Jeez, where do I begin?” Evie shook her head in bewilderment. How could he possibly be so **clueless**? “Like you flake on me, *a lot*, and –”

“I don’t flake,” Alex interrupted. He leaned over and turned up his iTrip. “Maybe I change my mind or my plans change, but I never just not just show up. I never leave you hanging.”

“So you think you didn’t leave me hanging that night at Otani’s?” Evie raised her voice, if only to talk over the music that Alex had so rudely turned up.

“Uh, *no*,” Alex looked at her, puzzled. “We asked you to go to the party with us. You were invited, but you *chose* not to go.”

“Oh, so let me get this straight,” Evie started. “You and Mondo were kind enough to invite to the party with the both of you. *You two* invited *me*. Wow, gee, Alex, I hope I didn’t intrude on your date with Mondo.”

“You know,” Alex said. “You’re acting like a nag. Like how Raquel would always be with Jose.”

“A *nag*?” Evie snapped at him, her eyebrows practically rising off her forehead. “Well, *you’re* beginning to act like Jose. When you’re not dribbling over big chested waitresses, you’re a flakey flojo. And who knows, maybe you’re seeing Alejandra de los Santos behind my back.”

“Hey,” Alex pulled up in front of the de LaFuentes. He did not turn off the engine. “I’m not the one who made out with my best friend’s *significant other* in a photo booth, behind her back.”

Evie was now legally livid. “Alex, how the *hell* could you say something like that! You know what happened that night. Jose attacked *me*! You know that’s what happened, and now for you to use it against me is complete shit. God, Alex,” Evie leaned to the far side of the seat. She crossed her arms and shook her head. “I thought I knew you. I thought I really, really knew you, but I guess I don’t.”

“That makes two of us,” Alex bit back.

Evie could not believe what was happening. Tonight was supposed to be such a special night, a make up for the Saturday evening before. She looked up at Dee Dee’s house. Their Malibu lights showcased the three tier stone fountain on the front lawn. With its water cascading down to each each tier, Evie was reminded of the back patio at Koi, where water trickled from the decorative bamboo chutes into the koi-filled kidney-

shaped pond. And now, here was *another* night that was going to be ruined because Alex was being so insensitive.

Evie closed her eyes and took a breath. She reached around her neck and unhooked the clasp of her abalone necklace. “Here,” her hand was shaking as she gave the necklace to Alex. “Just take it.”

Alex looked at the necklace, then at her. “Evie...” he started.

“No, just take it.” She didn’t look him the eyes, but rather at the necklace. The knots that held the pieces of abalone shell in place were hand twisted and looked like a third grade attempt at high fashion. How could she have *worn* something so hideous?

“Obviously, it’s too hard for you to say or do nice things for me anymore,” she told Alex. “Obviously, it’s too much of a challenge. Here,” she held out the cord. “Just take it.”

Alex took the necklace. “So what is this supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” Evie said. “Maybe we should just take a break.”

“A *break*?” Alex asked

“Yeah,” Evie said curtly. “Time off.”

“Okay,” Alex looked out his side window. “Then why don’t you just give me back the the headphones? I gave those to you, too.”

“Fine.” Evie’s heart sank. The Bose headphones? Ouch. “I *will*”

“Whatever,” Alex leaned over and stuffed the necklace into his glove compartment. It suddenly looked so oddly insignificant crammed between his empty CD jewel cases, misfolded maps, and miscellaneous paper trash. “If that’s what you want...time off.”

“Yes,” Evie got out of his truck and slammed the door. “It’s *exactly* what I want”

When Evie showed up at Dee Dee’s room, she was puffy eyed and bare necked.

“Hey,” Dee Dee’s face dropped when she saw Evie at her doorway. “*Que paso?* What’s wrong? Where’s Alex?”

Before Evie knew it, she was crying all over again. “We got in a fight. He just dropped me off and then took off!”

“What? *Serio?*” Dee Dee led Evie to the edge of her bed. “Here, sit down.” She grabbed a box of blue Kleenex from the shelf under her night table. “What happened? Tell me.”

Evie went into the horrid details about her argument with Alex. She left out nothing as she recounted how Alex accused her of being a bitch, a nag, and a two-timing best friend. That’s all she pretty much remembered of the whole conversation.

“And what did you say to all that?” Dee Dee asked.

“Nothing,” Evie said. “I said nothing. I just gave him back his stupid necklace.”

“You gave him back his necklace?”

“And the headphones,” Evie blew her nose. “I mean, I’m gonna give those back to him when I get them.”

“*Hijole,*” Dee Dee looked around her room, in shock. “I’m really, really surprised, especially the part about Alejandro saying all that stuff about you and Jose. Alejandro has always seemed like such a gentleman.”

“He is, or was, I guess.” Evie said. “I mean, he’s not horrible, but he just acts so flaky and sometimes he treats me like just a dude. And sometimes, I just burn out. Is that so wrong?”

“Of course not,” Dee Dee handed her more tissue. “You are the cutest girl, and you deserve a guy who is going to treat you like a princessa.”

Princesa.

“You know, Josephina?” Evie wiped her nose. “At the reserve? The senior Patrona?”

“Uh, huh, claro.” Dee Dee moved in closer to Evie, perhaps hoping that she had a inner scoop about her potential Patrona-ship?

“Well, Arturo is totally sweet to her,” Evie said. “I mean, he just dotes on her, and I just don’t understand why *I* can’t have a boyfriend like that.” She wiped the corners of her eyes.

“Arturo?” Dee Dee frowned in confusion. “That’s hard to believe. I thought you said that he was a jerk, like a total control freak.”

“Not to her, he isn’t.” Evie said. “Arturo is totally sweet and romantic to her.”

“Evie,” Dee Dee said. “You were totally going off on him, like just a month ago, and now you’re saying that he’s the ideal boyfriend?”

“I didn’t say he was *the* ideal.”

“In so many words you did,” Dee Dee said. “And when did you start calling him Arturo? I thought he was *Ar-turdo*.”

“Huh?” Evie didn’t know what Dee Dee was getting at. “No, everyone calls him Arturo.”

“Everyone, but you,” Dee Dee said.

“Dela,” Marcela interrupted Evie and Dee Dee as she tapped on Dee Dee’s bedroom door. “*La familia Fontes estan aqui.*”

“Oh,” Dee Dee jumped up from her bed. “*Ay wey!* They’re already here!”

For a moment, Evie was so drowned in her own sorrows that she had forgotten the whole reason why she was at Dee Dee’s. She sighed to herself. She was now going to have to fake pleasantries the whole evening, *sin* Alex.

Dee Dee waved her fingers in the air like she was trying to make wet polish dry on her fingernails. “I am *so* nervous.” She twirled around for Evie. “Do I look okay?”

Evie looked up at Dee Dee. She hadn’t noticed how truly adorable she looked. She was wearing a soft pink knee-length dress with a cream-colored tulle edge. Her blonde hair had been to maintain their shape into perfectly styled ringlets.

“*Yes*,” Evie managed to smile. “You look beautiful. No, better than beautiful. You look just like... Anahi.”

“*Anahi?*” Dee Dee’s face lit up. “Oh, my God.” She looked at herself in the bedroom mirror, placed her hand on her hip, and drew down her face, a total Anahi pose. “Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“No,” Evie promised. “And yes, *really*.”

Anahi from RBD was Dee Dee’s favorite, favorite singer/actress/chica *rubia* in the whole wide world of Telemundo, actually, Telivisa, the *other* Spanish station if you wanted to get technical about it, but the whole wide *mundo* if you wanted to understand how much Dee Dee idolized Anahi and RBD.

Evie watched Dee Dee continue to fuss in front of the mirror, and then she caught a look at herself. Her face was red, puffy, and tearstained. All three coats of mascara that she had applied had collected in the outer corners of her eyes. There was no way she wanted to meet Rocio and his family looking all *la llorona*.

“Dee Dee,” Evie got up from the bed and wiped her cheeks with the edge of her palms. “Can I borrow some concealer? For my eyes?”

“*Claro*, of course,” Dee Dee went over to her bathroom and brought out a professional-looking black leather make-up case that showcased every item that Covergirl and Mac could possibly carry.

“Sit,” Dee Dee patted the cushioned stool in front of her vanity table and mirror. As Evie sat down, Dee Dee laid out a line of small tubes, pencil sticks, and concealer airbrushes in a neat row on her vanity table. It reminded Evie of being at Dr. Mizrahi’s, where he lined up every shiny, important looking instrument on the dental tray, ready to tackle any problem.

Dee Dee looked Evie’s face over. “Ooh, you’ve lost a lot of your tan. We’ll definitely have to go with something *mas blanca*.”

Evie tried to relax and just let Dee Dee take over. Once she did, it felt soothing, almost therapeutic, to have her softly rub creams and lotion under her tired eyes.

“Drama should never drain the diva,” Dee Dee smiled proudly as she stepped back to admire her work. “*Bien. Mira*, now you look more like Maria Dulce to my Anahi.”

Evie looked in the mirror. She thought, if anything with her dark hair, she resembled RBD's Maite more than Maria Dulce. But either way, she would rather look like a Sweet Maria than a Weepy Evie.

When Evie and Dee Dee finally felt camera ready, they hurried down the stairs, where they were met by Rocio, who was waiting in the foyer. He *was* quite cute, Evie thought when she first saw him. He looked just like the pictures she had seen of him with Dee Dee in Mexico City. He had a slight build and seemingly newly cut hair. His eyes were very dark and topped with thick, bushy eyebrows, almost like Dee Dee's father. And he was wearing a casual dark blue dinner jacket that made him appear mature and somewhat cosmopolitan. Evie had seen boys dress similarly, but they were the male models, posing on motor scooters or the steps of some historic looking building in the fashion magazines that Dee Dee had laying around her room. Evie had never seen a boy in a dinner jacket in person.

"Dela," Rocio smiled as he took her hand and helped her with the last step. "*Te ves muy hermosa.*"

"Oh," Dee Dee covered her embarrassed smile with her hand. "*Really?*"

"Yes," Rocio's eye's widened as if she were crazy to question him. "Really."

"*Oh*, Rocio, I—" Dee Dee stopped herself and looked over at Evie. "Oh, I am so sorry! This is Evie." She placed her hand on Evie's shoulder. "*Recuerdas? Mi amiga del Alma?*"

"*Si, si,*" Rocio took Evie's hand and actually kissed it. "*Estoy encantado.* You are even lovelier in person."

Lovelier? Evie couldn't ever remember being called lovely. Did people, boys, even talk like that? She guessed in Mexico City they did. And they kissed hands too? She could get used to this. She glanced down at her hands, relieved that she still had the manicured remnants of her hand job from Michael Kelley.

"*Muchas Gracias*, Rocio," Evie smiled. "I've heard so much about you."

"Good things, I hope," he smiled. "Or at least, not *too* scandalous."

Dee Dee looked over Rocio's shoulder. "Where are your parents?"

"Listen, they're already out in the backyard," A large grin continued to expand across Rocio's face. "There was immediate respect. I felt it, first thing."

"Really? Oh, Rocio," Dee Dee linked arms with him. "I am so happy you are here." She linked her other arm with Evie's. "I couldn't be *mas feliz*. My two favorite people *en el todo mundo!*"

As the three of them headed outside, Evie couldn't help but wonder where Raquel fit in between Dee Dee's 'two favorite people in the whole world.' Also, would she have been invited to the special dinner if she still had the stripped blue hair from last semester?

Dee Dee's parents, Frank and Graciela, were out in the backyard, under the large palapa lounging area with another couple who were obviously Rocio's parents.

"Dela!" the woman stood up and held her hands out to Dee Dee. "Long time no see, *mi 'ja*. We miss you in D.F."

Rocio's mother wore a sleeveless black linen dress accented by a dramatic red silk *rebozo* that Evie recognized from Studio Tres Rios. Her wavy dark hair was pulled back into an elegant bun and secured by a large simple silver barrette.

Dee Dee went over to hug Rocio's mother.

"Oh, I miss you too, Herminia. I miss D. F. in general. How are Fred and Ofelia? Oh, and what about Café Blanca? Have you been there lately?" Dee Dee stopped herself and covered her face, again, in bashfulness. "*Lo siento*," she apologized. "I sometimes go on and on about Mexico."

Sometimes?

"It's just that I have such an affinity for D.F.," Dee Dee explained anxiously. "I really miss the night life. The U.S is nothing like Mexico, and California can be, *come se dice*, stifling, if you know what I mean. No theatre, no culture..."

No culture? Hadn't Evie just taken her to Skate Punk to look at their new line of knitted skull bags? Where was all this coming from? Evie wondered. And why hadn't she been introduced to Rocio's parents yet? She felt awkward just standing there.

Dee Dee finally glanced over at Evie. "Oh, *lo siento*," She said as if she had just read Evie's thoughts. "I forgot. This is my dear friend, *mi amiga mejor*, Evelina."

"Hello," Evie nodded towards Mr. and Mrs. Fontes and followed Rocio's cue with his Spanish. "*Estoy Encantada*."

"*Estamos encantados*," Rocio's parents nodded and smiled back.

That was pretty much the exchange between them and Evie for the rest of the evening.

Dee Dee sat down next to Rocio on one of the rattan benches and Evie followed. She was the solo act among three sets of couples, and she soon felt lonely and a bit out of place. It didn't help that her eyes still felt like two enormous soggy tea bags. Evie hoped she could keep up with an evening that already seemed filled with memories, social

etiquette, and proper Spanish. When she began to notice how Rocio practically finished Dee Dee's sentences and how Dee Dee advised Marcela what to keep out of Rocio's pasta (no peppers, no pine-nuts), it seemed so apparent to Evie that Dee Dee and Rocio were truly meant for each other. It was like they were already mini adults in the making, and it made Evie anxious. She was going to be sixteen years old. Would she *ever* meet the perfect guy for her?

"So, have you gotten used to the time change?" Dee Dee father asked Rocio's father.

"We are getting along okay. Thank you," *Senor* Fontes replied.

Senor Fontes had a slight build, like Rocio, and he also wore a sports jacket. Evie noticed, he had on impeccably shined leather shoes. She looked over at Senora Fontes. She had on pricey looking leather shoes too. Thank God, Evie did not wear her flojos to dinner.

"We're getting used to the time change much better than we're getting used to this American tequila," Rocio's father playfully held up his drink. "I was expecting, since you are such the big *chingon* out here in California, you'd be serving up Tequila Oro or something."

"This is actually *Temequila*," Frank held up his own glass. "I couldn't resist seeing how it compared to the real stuff, or, should I say, tequila manufactured in Mexico."

"Oh, really?" Rocio's father looked at his drink again and nodded his head with a newfound interest. "So it *was* distilled here. *Que Interesante*. But you know, you can't mess with tradition."

Graciela suddenly chuckled to herself.

“What is it?” Rocio’s father looked over at her.

Graciela looked down in embarrassment as she tried to cover her smile with the edge of her own *rebozo*. “Oh, nothing,” she said. “I don’t want to be mean.”

“Now you *have* to tell us,” Rocio’s mother nudged with encouragement.

“It just reminds me,” Graciela looked over at Evie. “And I hope I don’t upset you, Evelina.”

“Me? Why would I get upset?” She had no idea what Graciela could be talking about.

“I was just thinking about your father and when we had brunch at your parent’s house, remember that?”

“Oh, yeah,” Evie said. “I mean, yes.”

As Evie’s mother had said, she had hosted a small, intimate brunch to welcome the de LaFuentes back from Mexico. It was last October and the morning after the big party that Raquel’s mother had thrown them.

“And your father,” Graciela started to chuckle again as she turned away from Evie and looked at Rocio’s parents. “Evelina’s father owns a *panaderia* and he makes or *did* make pan, pan dulce *sin manteca*.”

The eyebrows of Dos Fontes rose together, and soon enough both parents joined Graciela in laughter.

“*Sin manteca?*” Rocio’s mother looked at Evie. “Without lard? *Figate?*”

But it was Graciela who answered. “*Si, si.*” She started to laugh so hearty that a cough erupted, and she quickly covered her mouth with a cloth napkin. Evie secretly hoped she would keep it there.

“Now, Graciela. *Stop* it,” Frank de LaFuente put his plate down on the glass table and came to Evie’s aid. “*Mira*, we never know anything until we take chances. Right, Evie?”

“Right,” Evie smiled meekly. Could she feel even more the ugly, hegemonic American?

“*Right,*” Dee Dee shook her head with a pronounced nod. “And *I* liked it. I couldn’t even tell the difference, that much.”

As the dinner plates were cleared and the three couples continued to reminisce about the fabulously wonderful city life in D.F., Evie found comfort by retreating to the kitchen. She figured she could hang, at least for a little while, with Marcela and the helper that the de LaFuentes had hired to help her prepare and serve food. Evie pulled out a kitchen stool and sat down to check her phone messages. There were none.

“*Que te pasa?*” Marcela questioned Evie. It was apparent that she was hiding out. Why would a guest, after all, be in a stuffy kitchen when she could be outside enjoying another balmy evening in California, helping herself to quince paste and manchengo cheese?

“Nothing,” Evie lied. Ever since she had been spending more time with Dee Dee, Evie had gotten to know Marcela better. Marcela was a lot younger than Lindsay, almost thirty years to Lindsay’s sixty, and Evie sometimes felt she had more contemporary chica

insight than, say, the matronly madre judgement of Lindsay. “It’s just my boyfriend and I—”

Marcela’s cell phone suddenly vibrated from her hip. “*Ay, lo siento*, Evelina,” she apologized as she unclipped it. She read the text. “Oh, it’s my baby’s papa. I have to call him.”

“No worries,” Evie said. “Go ahead, make your call.”

As soon as Marcela turned her back and got on the phone, Evie found a cheese knife and cut herself the tiniest sliver of the Spanish membrillo from the a slab on a serving tray. She looked over at Marcela, who now held her cell super close to her ear. She had a big smile on her face. God, did *everyone* have *someone* in his or her friggin’ life? Evie cut herself another piece of membrillo, this time with cheese.

“*E-vie*,” Dee Dee came into the kitchen. “I wondered where you were. Come on,” she took Evie’s hand and pulled her off the stool. “We’re about to have dessert. Why are you being so antisocial?”

Evie had no choice but to quickly swallow the quince and cheese she had crammed in her mouth and follow Dee Dee out to the backyard. The glass hurricane lamps on the main patio table had been lit, and now both Graciela and Rocio’s mother were fully draped in their *rebozos*. Surely for show, Evie guessed, as it was such a warm night and no cover-ups were really needed.

Marcela’s helper soon came out with the tray of quincepaste and cheese. Evie looked the tray over, and each slab looked perfectly intact. *Whew*. She had done a good job with the cutting. No one would suspect her earlier therapeutic snacking.

“Oh, *this is just wonderful*,” Rocio’s mother raved as the helper set the tray down. “The whole dinner **was *excelente***. ” She put her hand over Graciela’s. “And the *bolillos* you served? *Muy blandito!*”

“Gracias, Herminia,” Graciela smiled as she poured hot water from a teapot into delicate teacups.

“So, tell us, Rocio,” Frank de LaFuentes started. “How has it been looking at schools? You know, I have to say,” he ribbed playfully. “I’m a little offended you haven’t looked into Channel Islands.”

“No, no, sir,” Rocio placed his fork on his dessert plate as though a long explanation on his part was going to commence. “It’s nothing against CI. I would love to attend Channel Islands. The campus is so beautiful, and I’d be closer to Dela.” He looked at Dee Dee and squeezed her hand. “But I need to get my MBA from a university that has the best department available. I can’t waste time if I want to start a business and a family by the time I’m in my mid-twenties.” This time, he did not look at Dee Dee, but Evie noticed he squeezed her fingers again.

“Well, that’s very admirable,” Frank said in a tone you’d expect to be followed by a pat on the back and a use the lighting of a cigar. “Very admirable. I can respect that.”

Evie couldn’t help but feel that Rocio was so mature and just, well, *capable*. He was barely eighteen years old and already thinking of a future with Dee Dee? In a way, he sorta reminded Evie a little bit of Arturo, even to the point that he was also moving away from his family and home to follow a dream, whatever dream that might be -- to attend an American business school or to be with an American blonde?

Evie opened her evening bag, discreetly checked her cell phone, and sighed. No new text or messages.

Chapter 15

The first thing Evie did on Monday morning at school was return her **beloved** Bose headphones to Alex. She decided to leave them in his locker with no note, no explanation, no *nada*.

"I can't *believe* he wants your headphones back." Raquel leaned against the wall of lockers and fumed. "What an asshole. Weren't they like a gift?"

"Yeah," Evie placed the headphones under his Senor Lopez pullover. She looked at the pullover and felt sightly sad. They both used to wear their pullovers together on chilly mornings at Sea Street. "He's just being a jerk," Evie remarked. "He asked for them back as soon as I gave him back my necklace."

Raquel peered over Evie and into Alex's locker. "You know, we could do some serious damage here. I could plant some lawn and then call the school, anonymously."

"Raquel, *no*." Evie slammed the locker door shut. "He's not that big of a jerk. Besides, he has the combination to my locker."

"Yeah, I guess he ain't worth it anyway," Raquel reluctantly agreed. "It's a good thing you don't have any classes with him. That would be a major drag. I remember with Jose, I still had to see his ugly mug in Spanish and his skinny white ass legs in P.E. That's why I now *refuse* to date anyone who goes to the same school."

"Or someone who even *went* to school," Evie found herself teasing.

“Excuse me?” Raquel cocked one eyebrow. “You know, if I wasn’t such a caring friend, I *could* say something but I won’t. You’re ‘La Sad Girl’ now, so I’m just gonna be all nice and supportive.” She put her arm around Evie and they started down the hall. “But check it out, now you and I can be a team, *the* team. Forget last semester and all that Flojo crap. We’re *Solas Patrollas*.”

“But you still have Davey,” Evie pointed out. “And I won’t give up wearing my flip flops.”

“I know, neither can I,” Raquel looked down at her own Rainbow flip flops. “And about Davey? We just hang out. I mean, it’s nothing *serio*. We’re just having fun.”

“But don’t forget about Dee Dee,” Evie reminded her.

“Dee Dee,” Raquel pulled down her Utopia Cop Out sunglasses. “Is in a team, a league, of all her own.”

Evie’s first days at school Alex-less were **unbearable**. She constantly checked her cell phone throughout her classes, every hour, every half hour. During lunch, she scanned the cafeteria for signs of him but found not one hint of his dark hair, **his camouflage cut offs**, or even of him flaunting the Bose headphones he had taken back from her. It was eery. How could Alex just possibly disappear from sight?

As she made her way to the salad bar, she saw the two Vons. The Vons were twin brother and sister, Evon and Yvonne. Because Yvonne was born 52 two seconds older than brother and didn’t let him or anyone forget it, Evie and Raquel often referred to her as Y-von 52.

“Have you seen Alex?” Evie casually asked Y-von 52 as she took a salad tray after her. Alex had biology with Yvonne, just before lunch.

“You mean Alex, *Alex*? Your boyfriend?” Yvonne 52 asked.

“Yeah,” Evie said. “Was he in class?”

“What, you don’t know if your own boyfriend is at school?” Evon asked.

“Of course, I do,” Evie fibbed. “It’s just that I left my cell at home and I haven’t seen him since this morning. That’s all.”

Yvonne looked over at her younger brother with a questioning look.

“So, Evie,” Evon started.

“Yeah?”

“So there’s been talk that you may not have your party,” he said.

“Who said that?” Evie’s frowned. Her body turned numb.

“Alejandra de los Santos,” Yvonne-52 said. “She’s been telling everyone. Something about you having to work at the horse reserve and that they aren’t going to give you the night off. That you have to clean stables or something.”

“What?” Evie said. “Yvonne, that’s *so* not true. That is a lie. Do you really think I wouldn’t have my party because I have to work? I’m totally having my party. It’s on.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Yvon-52 said as she scooped some seafood salad onto her plate. “It did seem a little crazy. Anyway, my aunt Anita is getting married in Mammoth that Friday, the Friday of your birthday weekend, and I was wondering if I should just stay up there the whole weekend and go skiing, or if I should fly back down for your party. But now I’ll come back for your party.”

“Yes, you have to.” Evie wasn’t even planning on inviting Yvon-52 or her brother to her party, but now she felt she had to, just to spite Alejandra de los Santos. Also, she figured that two more guests on the guest list wouldn’t break the bank. “You definitely have to come back for my party.”

Evie stuffed two mini Swedish meatballs into the two taco shells on her plate. Then she added more meatballs. All the hard work at having the coolest Sixteenera was stressing her out.

After three days, Alex still hadn’t called or texted Evie, and she wasn’t about to phone or text him either. After all, he had left her hanging at the de LaFuentes dinner party and she, if anyone, deserved an apology. Since they were in the middle of a beef, it was Beetle Juice honking for Evie every school morning. On the fourth day, it was Jumile.

“You are so much better without him,” Raquel insisted from the front seat of Jumile as Dee Dee drove. “He’s such a punk ass. I told you how he was at that party, right? The one on Hemlock?”

“Yeah, you did, Raquel.” Evie didn’t want to hear about that night all over again,

“So, there I was on the couch at Lil’ G’s mom’s house,” Raquel started. “Just kicking back, blazing some one hitters with some new friends, and here comes Jose, with Mondo and Alex. All three of them come in as if they owned the place or something. They don’t even know any of the Bard Boys. I mean, *I* know the Bard crew, but they were acting as if they were part of the g-unit or something.”

“I really don’t think Alex thinks *that*,” Evie said. Sure she was mad at Alex, but he didn’t deserve to be sorely misrepresented.

“Well, he comes in acting like it,” Raquel claimed. “You weren’t there, Evie. So, anyway, I’m looking around for Davey, because the last thing I want is Jose getting all up in my face without Davey around. I mean, we know how Jose can be. Remember Evie? Remember how he almost decked you in the parking lot last semester?”

“I remember,” Evie looked out Jumile’s window into space. She was so over this video log of her life, but Raquel insisted on rewinding it over and over again.

“But Jose knows better,” Raquel said. “He just walked by, like he totally didn’t say anything to me, as if I didn’t exist.”

“But that’s what you do want,” Dee Dee steered Jumile’s onto the highway, towards school. “You don’t want Jose stalking you.”

“Of course not,” Raquel said quickly. “I’m just saying that he doesn’t have to act like I never existed, like he’s better than me or something. And I’m, like, on terms with Mondo and Alex, but Alex didn’t say jack to me. Nothing. Mondo, at least lifted his chin up to me, but Alex, punk ass, was probably too afraid to acknowledge me in front of Jose. That just shows you, Evie, he is so whipped. There is no way he can ever be a man. You need a man, Evie. A *real* man. You know what? I’m gonna hook you up with one of Davey’s friends. He’s got lots of cool friends.”

“I am *not* going out with some Bard Boy,” Evie said. “There is *no* way in hell.”

“Oh, *my*.” Raquel tilted down her sunglasses and looked back at Evie. She put on a southern accent as well as her hand on her chest. “Well, ess-cuse *me*...Little Muss Goodship.”

“Evie needs a gentleman, a *caballero*.” Dee Dee looked at Evie from the rearview mirror. “**Right**, Evie? You know, as soon as Rocio moves out here, I’m sure he’ll make lots of new acquaintances who will be dying to date someone as cute as you.”

“Why do I have to date anyone at all?” Evie exhaled in exaggeration. She felt like pulling her hair out. Dee Dee and Raquel were talking like grand tias, deciding between themselves what was best for her, and she didn’t want any of it. “It’s like the both of you think that all I *need* is some boy to make things all better. Look at Sabrina. She was with Robert for, like, two years, and look what happened to her.”

“You know, I just thought of something,” Dee Dee said. “If you’re not talking to Alex, who’s going to take you to your party?”

“Dee Dee,” Raquel looked over at her in amazement. “Didn’t you just hear Evie? It’s not like she’s having some backwards friggin’ quinceanera and she has to have some boy escort her.”

“*Right*,” Evie said. At least Raquel was getting it.

“I know,” Dee Dee agreed. “But she can’t be at her own party all by herself.”

“She’s not *going* to be by herself,” Raquel said. “We’ll be there. The three of us and Jumile and Beetle Juice and, who else, Evie?”

“*Cherry Bomb*,” Evie smiled weakly. She was losing more and more confidence about having her party and getting her car, but it was comforting when Raquel took her side and supported her.

“Besides, you guys are acting like I’m never going to talk to Alex again,” Evie added. “I mean, it’s not like we broke up.” It helped her to say that, out loud. She and

Alex did *not* break up. They were just on a time out. Big difference. “My party is still, like, three weeks away. Who knows what will happen between now and then.”

“Right,” Raquel agreed. “And we don’t even know if your parents are gonna let you have the party.”

“Right,” Evie’s mood dropped again. Well, Raquel *was* on a short roll there, for a while.

“When is your drivng test?” Raquel asked.

“Next week,” Evie answered.

“And you’re all ready?” Dee Dee asked. “Right?”

“I think so,” Evie said confidently, again if only to convince herself. “I’ve been practicing with my dad and Lindsay for, like, the last month.”

“And then you just gotta finish your horse credit. Speaking of which, how is that whipped ass Arturo doing?” Raquel asked.

“Has Josephina said anything about me?” Dee Dee asked.

“You mean, Horsa-phina?” Raquel took a drag of Dee Dee’s Midnight Berry. “She’s such a Sangro in horse clothing. I penned that one the minute I met her.”

“No,” Evie answered Dee Dee. “She hasn’t said anything, yet. But Arturo, he’s tolerable. I mean, as far as bosses go.”

Arturo *had* become more than just tolerable. Evie was beginning to like him. Not in a romantic sense, far from it, but he seemed a genuinely good person, a *buena persona* as Lindsay would say. And, okay, she had to admit, he was easy on the eyes.

“What happened to your necklace?” Arturo asked when she showed up Wednesday to put in more hours at the reserve.

“My necklace?” Evie asked. She didn’t think Arturo would notice something she wore.

“Yeah, the shell one,” Arturo said.

“My boyfriend made it for me,” Evie said. “And...I gave it back to him.”

“Did you break up with him?” he asked.

Just a tad privado, don’t you think, Turo?

“No, not really.” Evie didn’t feel like going into the details, especially with Arturo, who was in a solid steady relationship and wouldn’t understand the gloominess she was feeling. It had been about four days since her argument with Alex and she missed him. She missed his good-night texts, and she missed the little conversations they’d have on their way to school. She kept rethinking over and over again what had gone wrong the night they were going to the de LaFuentes. Had she kept giving him annoying jabs? Was she trying to make him feel guilty? God, maybe she *was* a nag.

“Not *really*?” Arturo asked. “You don’t know if you two are broken up? Poor guy. I can relate.”

“What do you mean, *poor* guy?” Evie asked. “You don’t even know him.”

“But I know all about the jeweled yo-yo.”

“Huh?” Evie asked.

“When Josephina and I first started dating,” Arturo started to explain. “I gave her a bracelet. It was a complete symbol of our exclusivity. Wasn’t your necklace like that?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Evie said. “I mean, yeah, it was.”

“Exactly,” Arturo said. “But every time Josephina would get mad at me, she would break up with me, which was like every other week, and then she would take the bracelet off and give it back. At first it used to piss me off, but then it all became so routine. We’d have a fight and she’d take off the bracelet. So, yes, I actually *can* relate to your boyfriend, or whatever you are calling him now.”

“Well, I don’t plan on asking for the necklace back,” Evie **insisted**. “And I didn’t break up with him, officially.”

“Does he know that?” Arturo asked.

“I’m sure he does,” Evie said. “I mean, I didn’t say, ‘Here’s your necklace back, I never want to see you again’.”

“Good,” Arturo nodded. “There is nothing worse than a yo-yo relationship.”

“I know that,” Evie agreed. Although she had never really been in any other relationship, yo-yo or not.

When Evie got home from the reserve, she just wanted to give herself a break from typical INGing: myspac-ing, text-ing and IM-ing. She got some juice from the fridge and went into the den to chill and watch TV. But wouldn’t you know it, Dee Dee called on the landline. Dee Dee hadn’t gone to school, and Evie hadn’t talked to her all day. Okay, a little catch-ING up would be in order.

“So, how are you feeling?” Evie asked. “When Raquel picked me up today, she said Graciela had called her mom and said you were sick.”

“I’m not sick,” Dee Dee said. “But I can see her saying that. God forbid anyone knows that she and my father allowed me to take a day off from school and go with Rocio to Cal State San Luis Obispo.”

“Really?” Evie was surprised. Dee Dee would never miss school just to go on a trip. Even when she was a little girl and had been truly ill, Dee Dee would show up to school with a mini package of tissue and Vic’s Mentholated stinking something awful on her chest. “So you went to San Louie? To check out Cal Poly?”

“Speaking of Rocio,” Dee Dee said. “That’s the reason I called. I have to tell you something.”

What, another dinner party?

“We talked on the drive back from San Louie,” Dee Dee said. “And it looks like he doesn’t want to go to college out here.”

“Oh, no. Are you serious?” Evie asked. She knew Dee Dee must be bumming hard. She so wanted Rocio to be with her in California. She was surprised that Dee Dee hadn’t requested an ER/RE! meeting.

“He doesn’t want to leave D.F.,” Dee Dee explained. “And I don’t blame him, either. So,” she cleared her throat. “I’m thinking I’ll move back to Mexico... so I could be closer to him.”

“*What?*” Evie laughed. “Dee Dee, you are *so* not moving back to Mexico City. You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m not,” Dee Dee asserted. “I already talked to Graciela about it. She said I could stay with her family in Coyacan. That’s where Frida used to live, with Diego.

“Yeah, I *know* that, Dee Dee.” Evie felt irritated. “But wait, I don’t understand. How can you just move back to D.F.? You just started at Villanueva. What about Las Patronas?”

“I know,” Dee Dee sighed. “I feel really bad about that.”

“Feel *bad* about it?” Evie asked. It now seemed apparent that Dee Dee was serious. “Dee Dee, are you saying you don’t want to be a Patrona anymore? I can’t believe this.”

“No, I’m not saying that. I definitely want to be a Patrona, I’m just saying that I don’t think I can be one at this time. I’m going to have —”

“*At this time?*” Evie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “So when do you think you can *become* one? When you’re like thirty years old or something?”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Dee Dee interjected. “Evie, I need to make a decision, and right now my decision is that I want to be closer to Rocio.”

“But Las Patronas is all you’ve been talking about forever. What about the first dance, with your dad? And your mom? She *wanted* you to be a Patrona.”

“Evie,” Dee Dee. “I don’t know what to tell you except that it’s really my own decision, and for you to bring up my mom like that...” Dee Dee’s voice got soft. “I, I just don’t want to get into it right now.”

Dee Dee practically hung up on Evie, who was left with her mouth hanging open. She couldn’t believe how things were so rapidly changing in her life. She called Dee Dee back, but her call went straight to voice mail. Evie then texted Raquel with the emergency code of ER/RE! but, as usual, she didn’t hear back from her all night.

Chapter 17

“Hello?” Arturo waved his hand in front of Evie’s face. “Anyone there?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Evie looked up. She was at the reserve, absentmindedly watering down the ground to keep dust from kicking up. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

It was the next day, and Evie had no idea that Arturo was talking to her.

“So, do you want to?” Arturo asked.

“Want to what?” Evie asked.

Arturo tilted his head in confusion. “Take the horses out. We’re pretty much done here and I know your housekeeper doesn’t come for another hour, so I was thinking we could take them out.”

“You mean to *ride*?” Evie asked.

“No,” Arturo smirked. “Take them out of their stalls so they can stand around and we can look at them.”

Evie laughed. Actually what Arturo had said wasn’t that funny, but somehow his mild sense of humor was rubbing off on her. “I totally want to go riding. But wait, I thought volunteers weren’t allowed to ride the horses.”

“They can’t unless they have seniority. Seniority in *experience*, not age,” he smiled. “And I know from your file that you used to spend time with horses up here, when you were a kid, right?”

“Uh, right,” Evie told Arturo. She wasn’t about to admit that she had basically gone horseback riding one time, and one time only, when she was, like, ten years old.

“Cool,” Arturo said. “We can take Sprinkles and Panchito out for a quick spin. They could use the exercise.”

“You can take Sprinkles. He’s just about the most gentle horse we have.”

“Let me go get my pullover,” Evie said as she turned off the hose.

“Hurry up,” Arturo prompted her. “I’ll get the horses ready.”

Evie sprinted to the supply shed. Just as she grabbed her Senor Lopez pullover from her backpack, she noticed the light on her cell phone was blinking. She couldn't resist. She opened up her phone and yes, it was a text from Alex.

Can we talk?

Evie’s heart dropped. *Oh*. She wanted to text him back, right away.

“Evie!!” Arturo called out. “Come on, we’re losing the sunset. There’s this great ridge to see it.”

Sunset? Arturo hadn’t said anything about a sunset.

Evie looked over Alex’s text. What to do, what to do? She closed her phone and tossed it back into her backpack. She would text Alex as *soon* as she returned from her ride on Sprinkles.

Evie couldn’t help but feel slightly flattered by Arturo’s invitation. Like he said, only volunteers with equine experience were allowed to ride or take out the horses. Arturo was really an okay kind of guy.

When Evie came out of the shed, she was a bit taken aback by Arturo's appearance. He was already saddled up on Panchito and ready to go. He looked great, so in control.

Evie, on the other hand, felt a little clumsy as she hoisted herself up onto Sprinkles. While she didn't have the most delicate approach, she did manage to get on top of him and not fall over his other side.

Arturo looked her over and nodded. "You look good. He agrees with you."

"Come on!" Evie nudged Sprinkles with the inside of her sneaker. He did not move.

"I wanted a gentle horse," Evie told Arturo. "Not a *dead* one."

Arturo smiled. "Give him a stronger nudge on his side."

"I don't want to hurt him," Evie said.

"He can take it," Arturo said. "You're foot is gonna feel just like a little pat to him."

Evie nudged Sprinkles a bit harder, and he suddenly got himself (and Evie) into gear.

"Whoa!" Evie wasn't quite prepared for his *geddy up* to just get up and go so quickly. But fifteen minutes later, the four of them, Evie, Arturo, Sprinkles, and Panchito, were already deep in the chapparral of the riverbank, among flora and fauna that Evie, shamefully, had never known existed.

"Wow, this is so beautiful," Evie marveled over all the towering yucca plants, cacti, and jack rabbits scurrying across the dirt path. "I can't believe I've lived so close to the river all my life, and I've never come up here. Not once."

“Yeah,” Arturo nodded and took it all in himself. “A lot of people forget what’s in their own backyard. Especially,” he looked at Evie and smirked. “If you live in *Higher Gates*.”

“Hey,” Evie teased back. “I can’t help where my parents buy a house.

“No,” Arturo looked around “I think because I’m not from around here, I make it a point to explore more than the average person. Sometimes, after my shift, I come up here on Princesa and take a sunset ride.”

“Princesa?” Evie asked. “And who does Josephina ride?”

“Oh, Josephina won’t go horseback riding. She’s never been out here.”

“What?” Evie asked. “You are not serious.”

“Yeah, I am,” Arturo said casually. “I’m the one who takes Princesa out for exercise. Sometimes Josephina’s father or brother will come and take her out, but that’s about it. She got Princesa for her sixteenth birthday, but it’s been years since she’s even worked out with her.” Arturo sighed. “That’s the problem with some people. They think that horses are really cool, that they make cute pets. They don’t realized how much work they are.” He looked away and then pointed out a grassy field they were just coming upon. “Hey, see where it’s all matted down over there, in the middle of the field?”

“Uh huh,” Evie looked over.

“That’s where coyotes sleep. From the size of the impression, you can tell it’s a large pack of them.”

“*What?*” Evie looked around nervously. “Coyotes? You’re kidding, right?” There was nothing on the SCHR flyer about wild packs of river coyotes. “Man, something is *always* out to get you!”

“What do you mean?” Arturo asked.

“I mean, when I’m surfing, I have to worry about sharks, and now that I’m horseback riding, I have to worry about coyotes!”

“You don’t have to worry,” Arturo laughed. “They only come out at night. We have a *little* bit of time before we’d have to worry, and besides, I’ll protect you.”

“I can protect myself thank you,” Evie teased proudly.

“So,” Arturo reined to the left, leading Panchito, as well as Evie and Sprinkles, down a smaller trail. “I didn’t know you surfed.”

“Uh huh,” Evie said. “Well, I haven’t actually for a while. I used to surf a lot with my boyfriend. I mean, the boyfriend I’m taking a break from. That’s something we both love to do.”

“That’s cool,” Arturo said. “I wish Josephina and I had shared something like that. Sometimes I wonder if we’re really the right people for each other. We just don’t share the same passion for things.”

“Uh, huh.” Evie didn’t really know what to say. She and Alex shared the same passion, surfing, but now it seemed that it was surfing that was pulling them apart. He was always following their passion, without her.

“Josephina and I just aren’t on the same level sometimes,” Arturo continued. “I mean, I really care about her and everything, but she can be a really insecure person. Sometimes it can be so suffocating.”

“Suffocating?” Evie asked. “In what way?”

“You know,” Arturo caught himself. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be going into this with you. I shouldn’t be disrespectful, to you or to Josephina.”

“Oh no, that’s okay,” Evie said. She couldn’t help but feel the little *Evil* in her coming out in her. She would have loved some dish on Horsaphina.

“It’s just she just gave me back her bracelet,” Arturo said. “Again.”

I thought you didn’t want to go on about it.

“Oh, no,” Evie said. “I’m sorry.”

“And you know what? If she asks for it back, I’m not going to give it back to her. I’m fed up. I’m over it.”

After that, neither Evie nor Arturo said anything. There was a short silence between them as the sound of crickets and blue jays composed what seemed the idyllic soundtrack for their ride.

“Are you liking the ride?” Arturo asked.

“Oh, yeah, I love this. This has been one of the best days I’ve had in a long time. So,” Evie started. “What’s gonna happen to Chamuco?”

“Well, we got one more adoption day coming up. Hopefully someone will take him.”

“Why isn’t someone buying him? Is he that expensive?”

“Oh, no. The adoption fees for our horses are pretty low end. But people always want younger, healthier horses. Chamuco has already passed his prime.”

Evie felt discouraged. “Really? I didn’t know that. Wow, too bad I can’t take care of him.”

“Yeah,” but you’d have to know a little bit more about horsemanship.”

“What?” Evie defended herself. “I do!”

Arturo looked over at Sprinkles and smiled. “One of the most basic things is to know how to ride a horse properly.”

“Right.” Evie didn’t understand his point. “That’s a given.”

“Yeah, for one thing,” Arturo said. “You can’t have your feet dangling like that. You need to keep them *in* the saddle’s stirrups.”

Half an hour later Evie and Arturo returned to the reserve.

“Do you have to get going?” Arturo asked as he took the reins for both horses.

“Yeah,” Evie suddenly felt regretful. “My housekeeper is probably already on her way.” She was having fun with Arturo. He had been so sweet and friendly during their ride. Plus, it didn’t hurt that he *was* fine, or had she mentioned that before?

“‘Cause I was thinking,” he started. “That maybe we can go get coffee or something, and if you want, I can give you a ride home.”

“Oh, all the way back to *Higher Gates*?” Evie teased.

“I was just messing with you,” Arturo ribbed her with his elbow.

“No worries,” Evie said. “I get stuff like that all the time.”

Arturo looked at her and smiled, an almost shy smile. “You’re really cute.”

“Yeah, for someone from *Higher Gates*,” Evie joked. She felt the oddest sensation in her stomach. *No, this could not be happening.*

“I’m going to be direct...” Arturo started.

God, why did Evie’s stomach feel so weird?

“Would someone like me even have a chance with you?”

“What? What are you even talking about?” Evie tried to play it off and kept her head down. She was feeling so nervous, but to be honest, she died upon hearing Arturo ask such a direct question. Unlike Alex, who had shyly come up from behind her to offer affection, Arturo was front and center.

“You know what I mean.” Arturo placed his fingers under her chin.

Now it wasn’t just her stomach. Evie’s whole body tingled. Her mouth was dry.

“I don’t know Arturo,” she said softly. She tried hard not to look into his eyes for fear that could read what she was thinking. “I guess you’d have to find out.”

Did she really just say that?

“Oh, I do, do I?” Arturo pursed his lips and then smiled. “Is that a challenge? Well, I *live* for challenges.” Before Evie knew it, he had lifted her chin towards his mouth and was kissing her on the lips.

Evie couldn’t resist. She placed her hands on Arturo’s shoulders and reached up for more. Arturo’s kisses were deep and long, different than Alex, who gave short, but gentle kisses. Evie instantly felt that vaguely familiar light-headed feeling. As soon as she felt it, she realized it had been a while since she had experienced the sensation.

“Evie?”

Both Evie and Arturo looked up.

It was Alex. He was at the entrance of Panchito’s stall.

“Alex,” Evie immediately pulled back from Arturo. She wiped her mouth.

“I... you didn’t answer my text, so I just came by,” Alex started. “Lindsay said you were still here, and I thought you’d need a ride home.” He was speaking to Evie, but his eyes were on Arturo.

“Oh, yeah.” Evie nervously pulled her hair forward and started towards him.

“No, *don’t*.” Alex held his palms out towards Evie, making it very clear that he didn’t want to be touched.

“Alex, wait,” Evie started.

But it was too late. He was already heading back to his truck. He got in and drove away.

Chapter 18: Text Mex and Other Southwest Catastrophes

Nvr Mnd

Excuse me? Had Evie read Alex’s text correctly? It was nearly 1 AM, and maybe her eyelids were heavy. She read and re-read his text on her cell’s screen. Never Mind? What did it mean? She went through the complete log of message history between her and Alex. How did their relationship shift from “Nite, QT” to “Never Mind” in just a matter of days? Of course, she knew. One word. Arturo.

After she had been picked up from the reserve, Evie asked Lindsay to drive her by Alex's house but found that his truck wasn't parked in the driveway. Later that evening, he didn't return any of her phone calls or texts, and his cell phone went straight to voice mail. It was clear to Evie, very clear, that he didn't want to talk to her.

Evie was already in bed but wide awake when she got his text message. Her mind had been racing with worry, fear, and concern, in that order, on Alex, Arturo, and her driving test, also in that order. She tucked her cell phone under her pillow and turned over. She closed her eyes in determination. She *had* to sleep. Her driving test was in less than six hours.

Get to sleep. Sleep! Don't think about him or Arturo. Your driving test is the most important thing right now. The first thing you do is check your mirrors. No, you put on your seat belt. Stop it! You need rest. Fall asleep already!

Arturo, Alex... Arturo. *Argh!*

Evie turned on her other side and hugged her pillow when she heard what sounded like Davey Mitchell's truck. She pulled out her cell phone. Could it really be Davey rumbling down Camino del Rio at 1:15 in the morning? She pushed away the sheets and got up from her bed. Yes, she saw through her bedroom shutters that it was Davey. He was bringing Raquel home from God knows where. Evie watched as Raquel stepped down from the passenger seat of his high, lifted truck and snuck around the side of her house.

Evie immediately texted her:

Cn I cme ovr?

To which Raquel replied:

Now?

Evie:

ER

Raquel:

K. Ktch dr. Shh!

Evie threw on some sweat pants, a hoodie, and her Juicy Couture flojos. She crept downstairs and went through the side door of the kitchen and cut across to the Diaz's backyard. When she entered the Diaz's kitchen door, she found Raquel tearing through the refrigerator's freezer.

"I totally have the munchies," Raquel announced, as if it wasn't already obvious. She pulled out two Trader Joe's Southwestern green chili and cheese tamales and popped them in the microwave.

"Raquel," Evie moaned as she pulled up a stool. "You won't believe it. Alex just texted me. I think he broke up with me."

"I thought you guys had already broken up," Raquel said nonchalantly. She timed her tamales for five minutes.

"Not officially," Evie said. **Her eyes started to water up. Her body felt numb.**

"But I thought you gave him back his necklace," Raquel said. She took a soda from the fridge. "Want one?"

"No," Evie shook her head and wiped her eyes. Was Raquel not listening? "I mean, we never really talked about it. We just said we were going to take a break."

Raquel sipped her soda and frowned. “But what was there to talk about? You gave him back the necklace. Isn’t that how people ‘going steady’ do it?” Her fingers gestured quotation marks to emphasize “going steady.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Evie asked.

“I mean, you get into all these rules and regulations, the ‘decorum’ of relationships, and please, why can’t people just do whatever the hell they want?”

The microwave’s timer went off, and Raquel pulled out her tamales.

“Raquel, are you even listening to me?” Evie asked. “It’s like you’re more interested in your food.”

“*Sorry*, Evie.” Raquel unwrapped the corn husks from her tamales and slid them onto a salad plate. “But I’m starving. Do you mind if I eat? It *is* my house.”

Evie hated that she was being so *sentida*. Raquel wasn’t known for being the most compassionate type, but tonight she was being downright in-*sentida*.

“Raquel, why are you being so mean to me? I’m telling you that Alex just broke up with me, and it’s like you don’t even care.”

“Evie, I’m *not* being mean. And of course, I care. I’m just hungry. Go on, please. I’m listening.”

Evie exhaled. “So, I was at the reserve and Alex caught me-.”

“Caught you?” Raquel asked. “Caught you doing what?”

“I was with Arturo,” Evie started. “And Alex came by and caught us-.”

“Doing *what*?”

Evie pulled her stool closer to the counter. The jack cheese oozing out of the corn *masa* looked good, but she was far from hungry. “Nothing really. I mean, we were just kissing, sorta.”

“*Just* kissing?” Raquel’s mouth dropped. Evie could see the mouthful of corn masa spread across her teeth and tongue. “Did he have his hands down your pants?”

“No! We were just—”

“Up your shirt?”

“Raquel, *no!* Quit interrupting!”

“But you *were* making out with him?” Raquel took another bite of her tamale. “Shit!” She spat under her breath as she opened her mouth and let a wad of *masa* drop unto her plate. “It’s fucking *hot!*” She took a quick swig of soda and **waved** her hand over her opened mouth.

“Are you alright?” Evie asked.

“*No,*” Raquel complained. “I friggin’ burned my tongue. *Sheeyat*, that was hot. But whatever, go on.”

“We had *just* started to kiss,” Evie said. “It didn’t seem like we were making out. It was more of a first kiss that got some, I dunno, extended play.”

“*Wow.*” Raquel cut a small piece from one of the tamales with a fork. This time she blew on it softly before putting it into her mouth. “When did this happen?”

“Today, I mean, at the end of my shift at the reserve. I’ve been texting you all night, but you never texted me back,” Evie complained. “I even texted the emergency code.”

“Evie,” Raquel rolled her eyes to the side. “Lately all your texts are so-called emergencies. And besides, I was with Davey. It’s not like I was just gonna take off and have him drive me all the way back to Rio Estates.”

“Where were you?”

“We were kicking it, at the Hamilton.”

“The Hamilton Hotel?”

“Uh, yeah. Do you know another?”

The Hamilton Hotel was a downtown hotel known for its high transitory turnover. It was a weekly hotel on the poorer stretch of downtown’s Main Street. The Hamilton’s guest list was a mix of druggies, hookers, ex-cons and, now, apparently, Raquel.

Evie looked at Raquel as she scarfed down the rest of her tamales, and it was then that Evie noticed how bad she looked. Not “It’s one AM in the morning and I’ve been partying all night” bad, but rather a “It’s one AM in the morning and I’ve been partying hard for the last four semesters” bad. Raquel’s skin was flakey, and she had two small scabs on the right side of her face. She looked oddly puffy, her face and her fingers. Not necessarily fat, just bloated.

“Raquel,” Evie started. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” Raquel drank more soda. She didn’t look Evie in the eyes.

“I don’t know,” Evie didn’t know how to say that she thought Raquel looked bad without sounding insulting. “You just look, I don’t know, tired.”

“Well, it’s almost two in the morning, Evie. And to be honest, so do you. You don’t look so hot, either,” Raquel bit back.

“That’s because I haven’t slept,” Evie got up from her stool. “And I have this driving test tomorrow, I mean, today, and I just know I’m gonna fail. Everthing is turning to crap.”

“Well, things can’t always go the way we want them to in life.”

“God, Raquel,” Evie raised her voice. “Why do you have to be so negative all the time?”

“I’m not negative,” Raquel insisted. “I’m just being honest. If you ask me, people should be more honest.” She got up to shut the kitchen door. “And *you* need to keep your voice down. You’re gonna wake up my mom.”

“Okay,” Evie crossed her arms. “I’ll be honest.” She somehow found the courage to say what had been on her mind for some time. “I think you have a problem. I think you party too much, and to be honest, you’re not looking really good.”

“*Excuse* me?” Raquel looked at Evie, almost amused.

“And I’m not the only one who thinks that,” Evie started. “Dee Dee and I think you drink too much, way too much.”

“Dee Dee and *you*?” Raquel repeated in a sarcastic tone. “Oh, and when did you guys get together and decide this? That’s a pretty bold observation coming from the two of you.”

“It’s a *realistic* observation, Raquel,” Evie said. “An observation that’s making me worried.”

“You know, Evie,” Raquel crossed her arms. “Maybe *you* should have a drink once in awhile. You run around worrying about everyone, trying to get them to be or act a certain way, and maybe you should just let people be. Quit being so judgmental.”

“Judgmental?” Evie snapped. “I’m not judgmental. I’m just concerned, Raquel. Excuse me if I get concerned about people I care about.”

“Yeah, you sure showed concern with Alex.” Raquel scraped the remaining melted jack cheese from her plate and **crammed** it into her mouth. “Okay, you want to be so honest?” she asked, her mouth full. “All things in the clear? Well, I wanna know something, the honest truth.”

“What?” Evie asked.

“What *really* happened between you and Jose in the photo booth, at that Sangro party?”

“*What?*” Evie balked. “You gotta be kidding me!”

“Well, I’m not. Do you have a problem with me asking that?”

“Yeah,” Evie said. “I have a problem with that because you know what happened. I told you.”

“But why *exactly* were you even in the booth with him?”

“I *told* you,” Evie’s voice rose again. “I saw his flojos and then I saw Alejandra’s flojos and I thought they belonged to you. I thought it was the both of you, but it wasn’t, and when Jose saw me, he pulled me in.”

“Pulled you in, huh?” Raquel asked suspiciously. “And you just couldn’t say no?”

“I didn’t have *time* to say no! He just pulled me in, and like, grabbed me!” She couldn’t believe what Raquel was insinuating!

“The thing is,” Raquel remarked calmly, “that Alejandra de los Santos doesn’t wear flojos.”

“I *know* she doesn’t,” Evie said. “But that night she...I mean, Jose had bought her some. These red Roxys and —”

“*He* bought her flojos?” Raquel asked.

The kitchen light went on.

“What *is* going on here?!” It was Raquel’s mother. She was in a terry robe and her eye mask was pushed up to her forehead. She was *mad*. “Evie, what are you doing here? At this hour?!”

“I was just...” Evie started. She hadn’t seen Kitty look so angry in such a long time. Maybe as far back as when she discovered that Raquel had forged her name on a check, but that was some time ago.

“Raquel!” Kitty Diaz looked over at Raquel and sniffed. “You stink like booze! What the hell is going on?!”

Raquel propped her hand against the kitchen counter and leaned back. She looked at Evie and said dryly, “Thanks a fucking lot, *Evie*.”

Chapter 19

The next afternoon, Evie was given her walking papers. Literally.

“I’m sorry,” her driving instructor wrote a big fat 72 in blue ink on the score sheet. “You need to be in the **ninetieth** percentile in order to get your license. Your biggest problem was parallel parking, gear shifting and speed. You need to work on those.”

Evie didn't say anything as she took the paperwork from the instructor and headed back into the DMV, where her mother and Lindsay were waiting. She swung open the glass door and they both stood up from their plastic chairs, smiling, as if they were anticipating good news. But once they saw Evie's face, they both *knew*.

"How did it go, *mi'ja*?" her mother asked anyway.

"I didn't pass," Evie held out her score sheet. She felt on the verge of tears.

She looked around the DMV and realized that there was no happy medium in the entire place. People were either slouched over the counters, complaining about the high cost of registration fees, or slouched over the counter and pulling their hair out as they struggled with the written part of a driving test. Yes. The DMV was an evil, ugly place.

"Blah," her mother took the score sheet, looked it over and clicked her tongue.

"So you'll take it again. No problem."

"Well, you did you're best, Evelina." Lindsay pulled out her car keys to drive them home. Evie couldn't help but look down at the key ring. Did Lindsay *have* to flaunt them *so* soon after her failure?

They left the DMV building and went around the side to Lindsay's car.

Evie took a seat in the back and looked out the window. How could she have flunked her test? Her parents had paid the California Driving School to teach her the basics rules of the road, and then she practiced with her father and Lindsay. She must have failed simply because she had had only two hours of sleep, having left Raquel's house at nearly two a.m. and not falling asleep until nearly five. Of course, she was in a

daze from sleep deprivation. How could anyone have expected her to pass a driving test in her condition?

As Lindsay drove downtown, every car on the road seemed to be bragging. They were all just whizzing along, a procession of independence. Evie wondered if she would ever be allowed to participate in such a grand parade. Now she would have to go to school and be comforted, not Raquel, who was definitely still pissed off at her. No Dee Dee, who probably wasn't even in school, but rather off with Rocio, picking out China patterns. And Alex? Yeah, right. Mr. Never Mind. Evie's eyes started to well up.

"Mom," she asked from the back seat. "Do you think I could just go home?"

"You want to skip school?" her mother turned around to face her.

"I don't feel good," Evie held her side and leaned into the upholstery.

"Evie, you can't miss school just because you didn't pass your driving test."

"It's not just that," Evie's eyes watered up. "I just really, really don't feel good. I didn't sleep all night, and I feel ill."

"Oh, I don't know," her mother looked at Lindsay. "What do you think, Linds?"

When they pulled into the driveway, Lindsay kept her sedan running as Evie got out.

"We already had lunch plans with your father," her mother said. "And it's better if he doesn't know that I'm letting you skip school."

"I know," Evie said. "Are you gonna tell him I flunked my test?"

"I'm going to have to," her mother replied. "Are you going to be okay?"

“Yeah,” Evie yawned. “I really just need to sleep.”

“Okay, *mi'ja*.” Her mother looked worried. “I have my cell, and you know your sister is home if you need anything.”

Suprema? Yeah, right. She would be the last person Evie would go to for anything.

When Evie got inside the house, her plan was to go to the den, grab the warm, afghan, a` la Lindsay, and snuggle in front of the television. Maybe People’s Court was on. Yeah, that would be great. The way Judge Milian lashed out Cuban dichos and costly rulings to poorly prepared defendants always made Evie feel better about her own predicaments in life.

But when she got to the den, Evie was surprised to find Sabrina there, spread out on the den’s brown leather couch *and* covered with Lindsay’s homemade afghan.

“What are you doing here?” Evie asked.

She didn’t mean to come across as accusatory as she might have sounded. It was just that Sabrina *never* left her room. Also, Evie still held a grudge over what she had overheard Sabrina say about her on the phone.

“Last I checked,” Sabrina didn’t bother to look up. “This *was* my house, too.”

“No, I mean, you’re usually in your room.” Evie flopped down on the matching leather loveseat and kicked her feet up on the coffee table. The den’s furniture was expensive, mid-century California Mission that their mother insisted no ‘flopping’ or ‘kicking up’ was allowed on them, but their mother wasn’t around.

Sabrina kept her eyes on the television. She was watching a soap opera, a *Korean* soap opera with no subtitles. Suddenly Sabrina laughed along with the laugh track.

Evie looked around for the remote. “Where the remote?” she asked. “I wanna watch *People’s Court*.”

“Evie, don’t,” Sabrina reached for the channel changer on the coffee table. “I’m watching this.”

“Like you can really understand what’s going on,” Evie said.

“Of course I can understand, or else I wouldn’t be watching it,” Sabrina replied.

“Oh, that’s right. You’re president of the Korean Language Club, right?”

“Evie, just let me be. I’ve been in my room all morning, and I just wanted to take advantage of no one being home today. Or I *thought* no one was gonna be home. Why aren’t you in school?”

“I’m sick,” Evie said. She cleared her throat for effect.

“You don’t seem sick,” Sabrina finally looked over at Evie. “And if you are, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“Well, you don’t seem sick either,” Evie snapped back. “Shouldn’t *you* be back at Stanford? So you don’t have to be here? Surrounded by idiots?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Sabrina asked.

“You know what I mean,” Evie said. “I heard you.”

“Heard me, what?” Sabrina asked.

“I heard you, last week,” Evie continued. “You were on the phone basically talking smack about me, how much you hate being here and that I was a spoiled brat.”

Sabrina turned from Evie and looked back at the T.V. She said nothing.

One thousand, two thousand...

“Evie,” Sabrina sighed. “You just wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, and that’s because I’m such an *idiot*?”

“No. Evie. It’s just,” her sister started. “I’ve been having a really, really hard time and...”

“And what?” Evie wasn’t so convinced that Suprema could ever have such a hard time at anything.

“Evie, I don’t want to get into it,” her sister started. “For the last month, I’ve had to have an answer for everything and everyone. *Why* was I breaking up with Robert? *Why* was I going back home? *When* was I going back to school? It’s like everyone wanted a tidy little answer in a perfect little bow, and you know what? I don’t *have* the answers. I’m tired. I just want to, I don’t know...chill!”

Chill? Was such a word actually coming out of Sabrina’s mouth?

“You don’t know, maybe you don’t understand. I mean, you’ve always been the baby of the family, the favorite.”

“The *favorite*?” Evie gawked. How could Sabrina even think that? “*Me?*”

“You’re the one everyone just idolizes. Mom, Dad, Lindsay, Dee Dee’s dad... A through H.”

“A through H?” Sabrina cracked a slow smile. “I haven’t heard that name in years. He’s still at Nueva? You call him that too?”

“Yeah,” Evie said. It had been a long time since she’d seen her sister smile. “I mean, everyone does.”

“Does he still clean his glasses, over and over again? Like obsessive compulsive?”

Evie laughed. “Oh, my God. Yeah. I don’t think he ever pays attention to what I’m saying.”

“Oh, he’s paying attention all right, but in a different way. He’s the biggest perv.”

“*What?*” Evie balked. “A Through H? Gross! That is *so* not true! He’s like three hundred pounds and three hundred years old.”

“It is true!” Sabrina slapped her hands together and laughed. “We used to say that A through H stood for Ass and Hiney. That was his specialty.”

Sabrina had a high pitched laugh, almost like a seal gasping for air. If you had to name the most unattractive thing about Sabrina, which could be hard, considering she *was* suprema, Evie guessed it would be her laugh. As a kid, Evie was always embarrassed by her big sister’s laugh. She could remember some of her grade school classmates making fun of it, but now it sound okay.

“Oh, my God,” Sabrina turned down the sound on the TV. “Those were some fun times, back at Nueva. I wish I was back there, when life was much more simple.”

“Simple?” Evie asked. “Are you sure we went to the same school?”

“Well, you just have a different circle of friends than I had,” Sabrina said. “I was always with the square kids. The future CPAs of the world. I don’t know, I think maybe because I am the oldest, mom and dad were tougher on me. Mom was so strict with me when I was at Villanueva. I wasn’t allowed to date, or hang out at Sea Street or with someone like Raquel when I was fifteen.

“Fifteen and three quarters,” Evie corrected her.

“Almost sixteen,” her sister added. “Evie, I’m sorry what you heard that day on the phone. I’ve just been out of my mind. I don’t like being here, but it really doesn’t have anything to do with you. Mom and Dad are really getting on my case. Mom especially. She can be so stifling.”

“Tell me about it.” Evie was surprised that her sister shared the same sentiment. She had always thought that the two “Go-mez Girls” consisted of her mother and Sabrina and that she was the odd one out.

“I just feel like I am letting everyone down. I don’t need to be reminded how much Stanford is costing mom and dad, or how I didn’t support Robert enough.”

“Is that why you broke up?” Evie asked.

“It was a big part of it,” Sabrina sighed and curled her legs onto the couch. “He was going to start grad school this spring, in Massachusetts, and he wanted me to transfer schools so I could be closer to him. But it was just consuming me. I was losing a part, a big part, of myself. And before I knew it, I couldn’t find myself. I wasn’t Sabrina Gomez anymore. I was Robert Ramirez’s girlfriend.

“I can’t believe he wanted you to leave Stanford,” Evie said. Sabrina had always wanted to go Stanford. She had memorized Sanford’s school song when most kids were learning the pledge of allegiance.

“Yeah, and I was like, no way,” Sabrina shook her head. “I wasn’t about to leave my sorority sisters, my friends, my family... California.”

“In that order, right?” Evie smirked.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. But God, Evie, he was was insulted, and he would go on and on, as if I didn’t love him enough or something. I grew up wanting to be a Stanford sorority girl, not somebody’s girlfriend in friggin’ freezing Massachusetts.”

“Right,” Evie nodded. It made sense to her.

“So anyway, I really just want to rest,” Sabrina pulled the aghan up to her chin.

“At least for one quarter, and then maybe I’ll go back to school. I want a fresh start. Fresh starts are always good.”

“Yeah,” Evie agreed. “Everybody needs a fresh start once in a while.”

Sabrina reached over and gave Evie the remote. “So what do you wanna watch?”

“Uh, I don’t care, really.”

“Are you sure?” Sabrina asked.

“Yeah,” Evie said.

Without realizing it, Evie and Sabrina were, in fact, sharing a fresh start themselves.

Chapter 20

When their mother and Lindsay got back, Evie and Sabrina were still in the den. They had created a feast of bean dip and bagel chips and were engrossed by TiVo’d episodes of Laguna Beach.

“One of my sisters went out with Jason,” Sabrina told Evie. “Just one date, but she said he was really cheap.”

“No way,” Evie dunked her chip into the bean dip. “*Serio?*”

“*Yes,*” Sabrina said. “He practically wanted her to order from the kid’s menu, and *then* he asked for a doggie bag for their bread.”

Oh. My. God,” Evie laughed. “No class.”

“*No* pass,” Sabrina laughed with her.

“It is *so* nice to see you out of your room, Sabrina, and to see you two together,” their mother joined them in the den. “You know, I’ll call your father. Maybe we could barbeque tonight.”

“It’s okay, mom,” Sabrina patted her belly. “I’m already full.”

“Me too,” Evie said. It was cool to see that her sister was eating again.

“Oh, I think we should, we could barbeque some tri-tip.”

Sabrina looked at Evie and held her neck with her hand, in a choking position.

“But what about your So SoCal diet?” she asked their mother.

Vicki Gomez waved her hand aside. “Oh, I’m not concerned with that anymore.”

Evie felt worried. Not a good sign that her mother was off her diet. She had started the diet because of the Sixteenera. Was her mother losing her enthusiasm?

Just then the phone rang, and Vicki Gomez got up from the couch to get the cordless from the kitchen counter.

“Hi, Kitty!” their mother sang into the receiver. “You know, I was going to call you, I was at –”

Evie sank into the loveseat. Uh, oh. She was wondering when Kitty was going to call to complain about her being over at the Diazes so late, or rather, so early, in the morning.

“*What?*” Vicki Gomez looked over at Evie in complete astonishment. “Kitty, *no*. I am so sorry.”

Evie figured she should get up from the den and make a run for her bedroom...window? Her mother was obviously hearing about last night’s activities.

“Kitty, no, of course, not,” Vicki Gomez continued. “I won’t say a word. You have my promise. No, she’s right here.” She looked over at Evie again, just as she was getting up.

Evie was confused. What was going on? What *was* Kitty telling her?

After a few more “oh nos” and “of course, nots” Vicki Gomez hung up the phone.

“What happened?” Evie asked her mother. “What did Kitty say?”

Sabrina looked up.

“Raquel hasn’t been feeling well,” her mother said slowly. “So, Kitty’s going,” she paused, “Kitty’s going to check her into Isla del Mar.”

“*Isla del Mar?*” Evie was taken aback.

Sabrina looked up. “What? Why?”

Isla del Mar was on the northeast hills of the county, a Spanish style building that one might confuse with an early California Mission or, like Villanueva, a five-star hotel. But in reality, Isla was a center that treated people for addiction or depression. On the outside, Isla was a beautiful, serene place with lots of oak and palm trees. Sometimes, the Flojos, she, Raquel, Mondo, Alex, and Jose would cram into Mondo’s Maurader and

make their way up the winding road to Isla's faculty parking lot, just to hang out and chill. It had the perfect panoramic view of the city, and if you went at night, which they often did, you could take in the offshore oil rigs twinkling in the distance. But Evie never dreamed that one of *their own* would be an in-patient at Isla.

"Kitty said Raquel got another MIP and –."

"What's an MIP?" Evie interrupted.

"She was drunk in public, again. And because she's underage, and because it's not her first time, she could very well do jail time."

"What? You are *not* serious." Evie didn't quite believe her mother. "*Jail* time? Isn't that a little severe?"

"Evie," her mother said sternly, "she could end up at the CYA, so it's better she get help. Raquel is in some serious trouble. Kitty and Charlie want to curb it before it gets out of control, but frankly, I think they should have curbed it a lot earlier."

"Mom, how could you say that?" Sabrina asked. "You just said that Raquel's in serious trouble, and now all you can be is all judgemental towards her and Kitty and Charlie?"

"I'm just saying it might be too late," their mother tried to explain. "Raquel has had problems long before this, and you'd think, with Kitty being the head of Las Madrinas and everything, that she would have been a little more pro-active."

"What's gonna happen to her?" Evie asked.

"Kitty is going to take her tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Evie asked. "Already?"

“Yes, they wanted to take her in today, but they needed to get some things in order first.”

“Well, I’m going over then,” Evie got up and started for the kitchen door.

“Evie, don’t.” Her mother blocked her with her arm. “You need to leave her alone.”

“What?” Evie balked. “My best friend is going away and you’re telling me I can’t see her before she leaves?”

“Evie,” her mother said. “You can’t go over now. Give this time to Kitty and Charlie. That’s all I’m saying.”

Evie went up to her room and was about to text Dee Dee but decided against it. What would Dee Dee even say anyway? How could she even help the situation?

“E-vie!” Her mother called out from downstairs. “You have a visitor!”

Visitor? Her mother sounded happy, almost singing out the announcement. It must be . . . Raquel!

Evie rushed downstairs, but instead, to her shock, she didn’t find Raquel in the foyer. It was Arturo.

“Hey, Evie,” Arturo started nervously as she came into the foyer.

“Oh, hey, Arturo,” Evie said. “Um, how did you know where I lived?”

Hello, Stalker.

“Your address was on the file card,” Arturo explained. “I’m sorry to just drop by, but you forgot your backpack.” He lifted Evie’s suede blue bag off the foyer’s wooden bench. “You took off so fast yesterday.”

“Oh,yeah. Sorry about that.” Evie took her backpack from him. Okay, so he wasn’t a stalker, just a conscientious student. “I hadn’t even noticed it was missing.”

Arturo laughed. “Oh, so I can see why you need extra credit for school.”

“No,” Evie felt embarrassed. “It’s just been a rough two days.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Arturo looked awkward. “I didn’t want to make things complicated. I hope I wasn’t disrespectful, you know, about...”

“No, it was okay,” Evie said.

“Just *okay*?” Arturo winced jokingly.

“No, I mean, it was nice.” Evie lowered her voice and looked down the hall. She didn’t want her mother overhearing.

“I meant all those things I said,” Arturo told her. “I don’t want you think that you were some kind of rebound or anything. I have always been intrigued by you.”

“By *me*?” Evie couldn’t quite believe him.

“Yeah, why not?” he asked “From that first day I met you, I thought you were really cute, but I didn’t know what to do. I was still with Josephina and I knew you were with someone.”

“How did you know I was with someone?” Evie asked. “I don’t think I ever mentioned it.”

“I could tell by that shell necklace you were always wearing,” he said.

“My necklace?” Evie asked.

“Yeah, I don’t know. It looked homemade and seemed sorta special to you. Girls usually don’t wear the same necklace, every day.”

Evie smiled. “Sure they do, that is if the necklace *is* special.”

“Are you gonna be at the reserve on Wednesday?” Arturo asked.

“I don’t know,” Evie said. “I mean, I’ve already got my most of my hours and –”

“So it *was* just about the hours,” Arturo interrupted. “I thought you had this newfound love for horses and –”

“No,” Evie tried to explain. “I’m just saying that I have to focus putting together my essay about working at the reserve and then, I don’t know, my bestfriend is going away –.”

“Back to Mexico?”

“No. I mean, yes. Dee Dee might be going away too. I don’t know Arturo. I’ve just got a lot of things on my mind and my birthday is coming up and I don’t think I’m gonna be getting the party I wanted. Everything is just a mess.”

“Your birthday?” he asked. “When is your birthday?”

Was Arturo the only person in Ventura County who didn’t know about Evie’s birthday and possible party at Dukes?

“In about a week and a half,” she said. “But I don’t know if it’s even gonna happen. I have so much work to do, and I haven’t started any of it.”

“Well, if you’re not gonna be at this reserve this week, can I at least get your cell number?” He pulled out his cell from his front pocket. “I mean, at the very least let me take you out for your birthday.”

“Okay,” Evie took his phone and punched in her number. “That would be nice. You can text me,”

“I don’t do text,” he said. “ Besides, I’d rather hear your voice.”

After Arturo left, Evie's mother joined her in the great room.

"Is that your boss? From the reserve?" her mother asked. "He's very handsome. I like his cowboy boots!"

"He's not really my boss," Evie said. "He's just in charge of things."

Unlike Alex, Evie thought. With all that had been going on, she suddenly missed him more. He was great when it came to listening to her problems. She didn't need great, super planned evening out on the town, but rather just a good shoulder to lean on.

Chapter 21

The next morning, a little before 7 a.m., Dee Dee showed up at Evie's house.

Evie had reached Dee Dee later that night. Dee Dee couldn't believe the news about Raquel. Of course, they agreed to see Raquel first thing the next morning.

"*Lo siento*, girls," Kitty told them at the front door. "Raquel's still sleeping."

"What time is she leaving for Isla?" Evie asked

"We're going to leave around ten," Kitty said. She looked tired. Her eyes were puffy with dark circles.

"Could we wait until she gets up?" Evie asked. "Or could you wake her up and tell her that we're here?"

"No, Evie, I can't," Kitty said. "You girls go to school. You'll be able to see Raquel soon enough."

Raquel's father came to the door.

“Ay, Kitty,” Charlie Diaz said. “Let the girls see Raquel. These are her best friends, her **amuegitas**.”

“But Charlie...” Kitty looked up at him.

“Just let them see her,” Charlie Diaz widened the door. “Come in girls. Go see Raquel.”

When Evie and Dee Dee got to Raquel’s bedroom, her door was slightly open. The window shades were pulled down and the entire room was dark.

“Raquel?” Evie whispered.

Dee Dee pushed open the door and both girls peered in. Raquel lay on her side in bed.

“She’s asleep,” Dee Dee whispered to Evie. “We should just go.”

“Wait,” Raquel turned under the blankets. “Don’t go.”

Evie and Dee Dee went into the room towards Raquel.

“Hey, Raquel,” Evie said softly as she sat down on the foot of the bed. “How you doing?”

“My parents are trying to get rid of me,” Raquel answered.

Evie looked at Dee Dee, not sure what to say.

“No, they aren’t,” Dee Dee said. “They just want you to get better. We all want you to get better.”

“And the best place to do that is at a hospital? Why don’t they just send me to Hawaii for a few months?”

“Raquel...” Evie started.

“Evie, I’m sorry I can’t be a part of the Hula Auana. I was thinking we could do it for your next birthday. I know it won’t be on the 29th, but we can still do something, right?”

“Right,” Evie said. “Of course.”

“I know I haven’t been the greatest friend lately,”

“No,” Evie said. “That’s not true.”

Okay, she had to admit, there were times when Raquel could have been a better friend.

“I guess I have been in my own zone,” Raquel confessed. “I didn’t think I was drinking that much, and the lady I was talking to at Isla said that I should stop making boys the priority in my life.”

“You know,” Evie said. “That’s the same thing Sabrina was telling me.”

“Suprema?” Raquel sat up slowly and leaned against her pillows. “She’s talking now?”

“Yeah,” Evie said. “I didn’t know that Robert had wanted her to move to **Michigan** with him. He was going to go to grad school there.”

“Really?” Dee Dee looked over at Evie.

“Yeah, but she didn’t want go with him and he got all mad at her. And now she’s just taking a break from everything. She says she needs to focus on who she is and what she wants.

Raquel, “Yeah, I couldn’t see Sabrina living somewhere other than Cali. Ew.”

“Yeah,” Evie agreed. “She said there was no way she was gonna move across the country for some boy. It’s funny,” Evie said to Raquel. “I never thought you and Suprema would have something in common, you two taking a break from boys.”

“Yeah,” Raquel said, “and I’d never thought you and I would change roles.”

“What do you mean?” Evie asked.

“You have two dudes and I have none.”

Evie laughed. “I wouldn’t say I have two guys. Alex isn’t talking to me and I don’t know where I stand with Arturo. He said he might take me out to dinner for my birthday.

“Will you guys come visit me?” Raquel asked.

“Of course,” Dee Dee smiled. “We’ll bake you a cake with a file in it!”

Raquel’s mother came in the room. “Girls, you better get going.”

Dee Dee and Evie reluctantly left.

“I hope Raquel is going to be okay,” Dee Dee said. “She seems okay to me, I mean, making little jokes y *mas*.”

“Yeah,” Evie said. “I have no idea.”

“So why wouldn’t your sister move with Robert?” Dee Dee asked. “I thought she loved him? I just always imagined they were, like, the college sweethearts that would get married.”

“Well, Sabrina said it wasn’t in her heart. She told me when she’d wake up in the morning and fall asleep at night that Robert wasn’t the first thing she thought of. She thought about other things she wanted to do, for herself.”

“Hmm...interesting,” Dee Dee replied as she shifted gears.

As Dee Dee and Evie drove past the gates of Rio Estates, the morning mail truck entered. Evie looked after it and wondered if this would be the Monday she would receive her quality check. She hadn't even started her essay or turned in her hours to Vasquez. She calculated the calendar days in her head. Yes, if all was on schedule, and if the inept student intern in the ad building would be on top of things, today she would be getting her quality check. There would be no change documented on it.

Evie was almost tempted to ask Dee Dee to wait for the mail truck to get to her house, so she could get her QC, but decided against it. She was just too sad to really care.

Chapter 21

Evie had had only three birthday parties, her fourth, eighth and twelfth, that celebrated on her actual birth date, February 29th. Her 16th birthday party would have been the fourth time that the calendar lined up in her favor. Thanks to Grandma Vino, Evie was allowed not to just have a party, her Sweet Sixteenera.

Leave it to Grandma Vino to insist with a strong hand, a hand that basically lit some fire under Evie's father's ass, that he would really, *really* have regrets if he didn't give his baby daughter the Sweet Sixteenera that she so rightfully deserved. It didn't hurt that Grandma Vino reminded Ruben Gomez of his own academic troubles while he was a struggling business school student, and look how well he turned out. Yes, Grandma Vino agreed with her son that it was in the Gomez blood to succeed in life, but at each Gomez's own pace.

So, at the 11th hour, Evie, her mother and Dee Dee got the go ahead from Senor Ruben Gomez. The sixteennera was *on*. It was a mad dash to send out evites and make last minute calls, but they did it. Evie and Dee Dee crossed their fingers as they checked and re-checked the RSVP list every day and just about every hour. As the number of the guest list rose higher, so did Evie's spirits. It truly looked like she was going to have her party and a *ton* of guests. One person, regrettably, who didn't reply to Evie's invitation, was Alex. Evie had sent him an evite, as well as a personal text, but he responded to neither. It hurt something awful to accept that fact that it was truly over between them.

Also, during the 11th hour, Dee Dee announced that Rocio had to return back to Mexico City for a family emergency. She didn't go into details, but merely said that she and Evie would be each other's dance partners at the party.

On Saturday, February 29th as Evie walked through the grand wooden doors of Duke's with Dee Dee, she had yet to understand just how incredibly special her night was going to be.

The walls of Duke's were practically shaking from the fast, loud surf music DJ Chancla was already bumping, and Evie had to scream over the music to greet her guests. So many guests! She felt like a princess as she made her way down a receiving line of blurred, smiling faces sweaty and pink faced from the heat and excitement. She couldn't keep count of the throngs of friends, family, and even Mr. A through H (Ew, how did he get in?), all wanting to hug or wish Evie happy birthdy. Dee Dee actually had to push their way through the crowd to get to Evie through.

Did she say Princess? How about rock star?

“Move aside, move aside!” Dee Dee ordered. “Birthday girl coming through!”

“Happy Birthday Eves!”

“Mahalo!”

“*Cool* party, Evie!”

“Feliz Cumpleanos!”

“*Nice* party hats!

Huh?

“Happy Birthday, *mi 'ja!*”

Evie looked over and couldn’t believe it when she saw the tiny white-haired lady in a pantsuit among a mob of Hawaiian print shirts and dresses.

“Grandma Vi-, Lourdes?” Evie was caught off guard. She was surprised that Grandma Vino would take a break from college lectures and her *quintana* lifestyle just to attend a mere birthday party. “What are *you* doing here?!”

Grandma Vino frowned. “That is no way to greet your *abuelita!*” She pushed past Big Bulge and Eyeliner Boy to give Evie a tight hug. “I’m so relieved those parents of yours listened to me. There was no way that my dear granddaughter wasn’t going to have the quinceanera of her dreams.”

“Uh, Grandma Vino,” Evie suddenly felt worried. Did her grandmother really think she was turning 15, and that’s why she had made the special trip from Davis? “This isn’t my quinceanera. I never had one, remember? I’m turning sixteen. This is my Sixteenera.”

“*What? You’re sixteen?*” Grandma Vino looked around Duke’s. “Then how old does that make me?” She glanced over at Eyeliner Boy. “Not *that* old.”

“Oh, Grandma Vino,” Evie leaned in to hug her grandmother tighter. She knew she was joking.

Dee Dee made a loud, distinct cough. “Uh, hem!”

“Oh, Grandma Lourdes, this is my best friend, Dee Dee,” Evie introduced them to each other.

“*Estoy encantada,*” Dee Dee almost curtsied.

“*Oh,*” Grandma Vino looked at Evie with approval. “*Very* nice. You have some very nice friends, Evelina and both of you girls look absolutely glamorous!”

Evie felt glamorous. She was wearing a form fitting vintage halter gown, soft chocolate brown with a print of pink hibiscus flowers that she had found at Decades on Melrose. Underneath? A hot pink toe job from Michael Kelley and hot pink jeweled flojos from Barney’s. *No* bronzer.

Evie felt a nudge and noticed that her grandmother had slipped a small, white envelope into her hand.

“Grandma Lourdes...” Evie started. She knew what was in the envelope

“Take it,” her grandmother insisted. “But do something *good* with it. You’re sixteen now. You should learn how to make the right decisions.”

The rest of the evening, Evie couldn’t catch her breath as she was pulled from one friend to another and then from side of the polished wood dance floor to the other side.

She couldn’t remember having laughed, danced and eaten so much. The buffet was a mad

fusion of *lechon*, Huli Huli chicken, Mango BBQ pork ribs, and pineapples filled with Mexican rice. The line of sexy Polynesian dancers that shook the stage made Evie instantly regret that she and Dee Dee had agreed to still perform their Hula Auana. *Why* had they planned to perform after such rhythmic greatness?

While the party staff worked on getting the custom surfboard shaped piñata hoisted from the restaurant's rafters, Evie stepped onto the wooden balcony that overlooked the Pacific. She needed to get some air. She was already exhausted from excitement and her party was far from over. She still had to take the first whack at the piñata, cut the two feet high mango and whipped cream birthday cake (from her father's bakery!), unwrap a multitude of presents and, of course, perform the Hula Auana with Dee Dee.

Evie noticed she wasn't the only one on the balcony. She looked over and saw that Y-von 52 was at the other end and in an intimate embrace with her boyfriend, Gabriel. Evie's chest felt heavy. Alex wasn't at her party with her, and it was hitting her hard. When she had decided to have her sixteener at Duke's, she imagined being on the balcony with him, just like Y-von 52 was with Gabriel. Now Alex was nowhere near the balcony, and she was nowhere near his heart. What had gone so terribly wrong? He had never returned her calls and perhaps he never would. The idea of not speaking to Alex ever again just about killed her.

She looked back at her party through the glass doors. Everyone was dancing and laughing. How could Raquel also not be with her on her most special night? Raquel was the last person to ever miss a good party and this was most definitely a good party. Evie turned back to look out to the water and leaned against the balcony's ledge. She folded

her hands and rested her head in them. She took a deep breath. It was great, *awesome*, to have the sixteeners of her dreams, but in a way, the party had two big, gaping holes.

All of a sudden, Evie heard a long, slow whistle. Of course, she *knew* that whistle. *Ugh*, Mondo. She was so not in the mood for him at the moment. She pretended not to hear him and didn't turn around.

He whistled again.

Evie finally pushed up from the ledge. She was ready to throw him a smirk and a smart remark, but when she turned around, she couldn't believe who was standing in front of her. It was *Alex*. Evie's stomach flipped. And then it flopped.

"Hey, Evie," Alex smiled, hesitantly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I haven't returned your calls and texts and everything." He looked around the balcony.

"No, no," Evie started. "*I'm* sorry!" She wanted to reach out and embrace him but wasn't sure if she should. He just stood there and she just stood there, as if they both really didn't know what to do. "Please, Alex," she continued. "You have to know that it was nothing with Arturo. I know that sounds cliché, but really, I was just stupid and maybe I was a little mad about that night with Mondo and the night-."

Alex held up his hand. "I know, I know. I haven't been the best boyfriend. Really. And *I'm* sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry," Evie practically cried.

"Okay," Alex laughed. "We're *both* sorry."

Alex reached for Evie and put his arms around her shoulders. He held her tight and Evie was overwhelmed with how good he felt. His hair was slightly damp from a

fresh shower and she smelled the tiniest hint of cologne (fresh and sea breezy!). He wearing a sports jacket and dark slacks. *Que* Seth!

“Oh, Evie,” he whispered into her ear. “I was so afraid I was gonna mess up your birthday by showing up here. I had no idea what to expect. I didn’t know if that other guy was gonna be here or what. I was going crazy trying to find out if you were with him or not.”

“Not,” Evie insisted. “I am *not* with him. I’m technically not with anyone, *yet*.”

Was that too desperate?

Alex pulled away.

Oh no, it *was* too desperate.

Alex, however, reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. His neck turned pink. Evie knew that shade of nervous pink. “I think this would *really* go with your outfit.” He looked Evie over. “Wow, you look *so* beautiful.”

Evie smiled. Alex had never called her beautiful. He had called her cute and sexy, that one time, but never beautiful. She loved hearing it. She looked down at the box as he placed it in her hands. When she opened it, she couldn’t believe what she found -- placed on a blue velvet backing was a charm - two miniature gold flip flops, one slightly over the other, and each topped with a small pearl where the gold ‘straps’ connected. The flip flops were attached to a thin gold chain.

“Oh, my God, Alex,” Evie’s mouth dropped open. “This is *so* beautiful. I can’t believe it. I’ve *never* seen anything like this.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said proudly. “I ordered a while ago. That time I went to San Diego with Bien? That’s when I finally picked it up in L.A.”

“Are you serious?” Evie felt like such a loser. She had gotten on him for not postponing that trip so he could take her.

“I wanna be your boyfriend again,” Alex told her as he removed the necklace from the box. “And I want to be the boyfriend you deserve. You’re totally worth it.”

“I would like that,” Evie smiled at him. “No, I would *love* that.” She looked at the charm. “Will you put it on me?”

“Of course.” Alex moved behind Evie and fastened chain around her neck.

“Evie?”

Dee Dee was peering out from the balcony’s sliding glass door. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” She smiled as soon as she saw Alex.

“No, not anymore,” Evie look up at Alex. “Look!” She held out the flip flop necklace for Dee Dee to see. “Look what Alex gave me!”

“I know,” Dee Dee looked at the charm. “Que cute, huh?”

“What do you mean, you know?” Evie asked.

“I know because he kept asking me if he should get you the flojo earrings or the flojo necklace or the flojo bracelet. He drove me *crazy*.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I even asked Raquel, and she had told me to get you a flip flop navel ring, but they didn’t have one.”

Raquel!

“Dee Dee, what time is it?” Evie asked.

“That’s why I came out,” Dee Dee said. “I wanted to remind you of the time. We should get going if we’re gonna make in back in time to do our Hula Auana.”

“Where are you going?” Alex asked. “You’re gonna leave your own party?”

“We gotta go to Isla del Mar,” Evie told him. “Raquel’s there.”

“What?” Alex’s face dropped. “Are you serious? Since when?”

“Since last week,” Evie said somberly. “We’re gonna go visit her. I *have* to see her, tonight.”

“Um, can I go with you?” he asked.

Evie looked at Dee Dee.

“Well, I don’t know,” Evie said. “It’s sorta just a girl thing.”

“Come on, Evie,” Alex asked. “She’s my friend too. We were all Flojos together.”

Evie looked at him and then at Dee Dee again.

“I don’t know, Alex...” Evie started.

“Why doesn’t he just come with us?” Dee Dee asked. “I think it would make Raquel happy. Everyone likes visitors when they’re feeling down, no?”

“No,” Evie said. “No, I mean, yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

“We better hurry,” Dee Dee looked at the time on her cell phone. “We have just about an hour.”

“We are *so* not gonna make it,” Alex shook his head.

“Yes, we will,” Evie took his hand. “We gotta at least try.”

Evie, Dee Dee, and Alex sped north in Jumile on Pacific Coast Highway and towards Isla del Mar.

“God, I hope we make it.” Dee Dee said.

“We will, we will,” Evie asserted.

“So, are you bummed that you didn’t get Cherry Bomb?” Dee Dee asked.

“Yeah, sorta,” Evie confessed. “But it’s not like I could drive her anyway. I still gotta re-take my test.”

“I feel sorta stupid with the surf racks I bought you,” Dee Dee said. “I thought for sure you were gonna get a car.”

“Oh, she’s gonna get Cherry Bomb,” Alex said. “*And* she’s definitely gonna put those surf racks to use, right, Eves?”

“Right,” Evie smiled. She *hoped* he was right.

“Speaking of presents,” Dee Dee started. “So what’s the grand total from Grandma Vino UC Davis?”

Oh, you know, I didn’t even check.” Evie opened her macramé bag and ripped open the envelope. She counted out sixteen hundred dollars.

“Wow, *pretty* nice!” She held up a fan of one hundred dollar bills. “Sixteen hundred buckaroos.

“That’s a lot of *lana*,” Alex said. “What are you gonna do with it?”

“I gotta pay Lindsay back, like right away, and then,” Evie paused. “I guess, I’m gonna save the rest so I can visit Dee Dee in Mexico.”

“Mexico?” Alex asked. “You’re moving back to D.F., Dee Dee?”

“Well,” Dee Dee started. “I’ve really been thinking about it, but now...I don’t know.”

“What?” Evie practically got whiplash from twisting her head to face Dee Dee.

“What are you talking about?”

“Yo no se,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, after you told me about Sabrina and her boyfriend, I started thinking about myself and Rocio. And then I started thinking more about myself. I don’t know, since I was a little kid Sabrina has been my idol and I guess she made me re-think moving back to Mexico City. I really, really want to be a Patrona.”

“Oh my God!” Evie was overwhelmed. “I am *so* happy. I mean, I’m happy that you’re gonna be a Patrona, and I’m sure you’ll be nominated to be one, and I’m happy that you aren’t moving away! This is the *best* birthday present ever!”

“Better than my present,” Alex teased from the back seat.

“Well,” Evie smiled at him. “Just as good.”

“So now what are you gonna do with the extra Grandma Vino money?” Alex asked. “Down payment for private driving lessons?”

“No,” Evie laughed. “Actually, I’m gonna do what I had originally wanted to do with any extra money for my birthday. I’m gonna donate it to the reserve.”

“*What?*” Alex exclaimed. “You gotta be kidding! The reserve? I thought you hated that place?”

“No, not really,” Evie answered slowly. “I mean, I hate that there *have* to be places like horse rescues and stuff because there are people who don’t know how to care about animals, but there is this one horse, Chamuco, that I know five hundred dollars could really help him out.”

“You are gonna give five hundred dollars to a *horse*?” Dee Dee asked.

“Yeah,” Evie looked at Dee Dee. “I mean, *claro*.”

“Well, that’s a pretty nice gift ...” Alex observed.

“Yes, it sure is,” Evie agreed. No one was going to change her mind.

“Oh, I can’t believe I forgot to tell you!” Dee Dee suddenly exclaimed.

“What?” Evie asked.

“Alejandra de Los Santos tried to get into the party!”

“*What?*” Dee Dee was right. Evie couldn’t believe it. “When?”

“I don’t know where you were,” Dee Dee said, “maybe dancing or something. But she showed up with her three little *a*-migas and, of course, she was denied access. In front of everyone and was she so embarrassed!”

“Ha!” Evie laughed. “Okay, okay, now *that*’s the best birthday present ever!”

Evie couldn’t feel more content about the evening. She looked out the window at all the ‘Beach Access’ signs lining Pacific Coast Highway.

“Hey, Alex,” She turned to faced him from the front seat. “Do you think we can go surfing out here sometime? You know, just for a change?”

“I dunno, Eves,” he looked out toward the ocean. “It gets pretty territorial the farther south you get and-.” He stopped himself. “No, you know what? If you wanna try another beach, why not?”

Evie smiled at him, and he winked back.

Evie read another sign for a different beach. “Hey, Dee Dee,” she started. “Can you stop? Up ahead?”

“*What?*” Dee Dee looked at her. “Uh, *no*. We gotta get to Raquel.”

“I’m serious,” Evie said. “Pull over at this next exit.”

“Evie, there’s nothing out here, and we’re gonna be late.”

“Yeah, Eves,” Alex said. “What’s the big deal?”

“Dee Dee, come on,” Evie asked. “Pull over at the next exit. *Please!*”

Dee Dee looked at Alex in the rearview mirror and shook her head. He shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, okay." She reluctantly pulled off the highway and onto a sandy shoulder that led to the exit. "What, you gotta take a leak?"

"This is Leo Carrillo," Evie said as Dee Dee drove Jumile onto the narrow two lane road. "Do you know I used to come here as a kid? My family used to go camping here."

"O-*kay*," Dee Dee wasn't sure what Evie was getting at.

"Drive over there," Evie pointed to a kiosk that was already closed for the evening. "To where the road goes under the highway towards the campgrounds."

"*The campgrounds?*" Dee Dee asked. "Evie, we don't have time for a little memory trip."

"Yeah, we're gonna be late," Alex agreed.

"It'll just take a second." Evie assured them.

Dee Dee drove Jumile under the highway and towards the campgrounds. Once she pulled over, Evie got out of the car.

"Where are you going?" Dee Dee rolled down her window and called after her. "What are you doing?"

"Just wait," Evie called back.

Evie sprinted to where two wooden posts were put up on the opposite sides of the dirt road. Each post was about four feet high and had a row of circular, yellow reflective lights attached to one side. Evie checked one of the posts and saw that the bottom two lights were cracked. The same wooden post also had a small gash on the side.

The cracked lights and the gash had been created by Sabrina years ago, when she and Evie were still kids. Evie remembered sneaking out with Sabrina, who was all of fifteen, and she was eleven. Sabrina so desperately wanted to take their parents' car for a little spin around the campground and had convinced Evie to go with her. Just like Lindsay had said, Sabrina was a horrible driver, nervous and timid. They hadn't driven more than a few campsites away from their own, before Sabrina hit the post. She was horrified. She had placed her head on the steering wheel and cried. It took Evie's urging to finally get her to wipe her tears, get the car in gear, and get it back to their own campsite, before their parents found out. Fortunately, nothing had happened to the car, and their parents never found out.

Evie looked at the post and couldn't help but smile. She had promised never to tell anyone about her sister's accident, and she never did.

Dee Dee honked Jumile's horn.

"Evie, come on!" she called out. "We gotta go!"

"I'm coming!" Evie called out.

Evie chipped off a piece of the yellow reflective light. Never mind that she struggled at the reserve, or was the best horseback ride. So she wasn't suprema like her sister. It wasn't that big of a deal that didn't pass her driving test or that she took her mother's car out without asking. Evie *was* a *good* person. She was a good friend and a good sister *and* a good daughter. At times, she could even be a good student and good girlfriend. Sure she had slip ups, but who didn't? At the very least, she had it *in* her to be good and sometimes that counted for a lot. Now on the night of her sixteenth birthday,