

Chapter 1

"I don't know, Evelina. ..." Lindsay, the Gomez's housekeeper, shook her head as she stepped down into the den. "Your mother said you have to be with a driver. A licensed driver."

Evie ~~Gomez~~ was just five weeks away from taking her driving test but she had yet to master the challenge of three-point turns, confront the perils of parallel parking, and how the hell, she wondered, could she check her blind spot if it was *blind*? In short, ~~Evie~~ ^{she} was desperate. ~~She had a ways to go before the state of California would ever issue her a driver's license and had no choice but to ask, okay beg, Lindsay to borrow her car. With no Sirius, dvd player, or heated seats, the ten-year old sedan was far from a g-ride, but lowly beggar's can't be big time players, right?~~

"Come on, Linds," Evie exhaled impatiently. "I'm just gonna be practicing on the street, in front of the house. Nothing's gonna happen. And it's Saturday, everyone's washing their cars in their driveways, not out driving them in the street. It's, like, the best time for me to practice."

Actually, what really made it the best time for a practice session was mainly ^{in afternoon} because Evie's parents were away on a mission -- the never-ending search for the perfect shade of green place mats to match the deck furniture's green cushions. Adults could be ~~so~~ controlling and Evie's parents were no exception. Whenever she practiced driving with them they spent the entire time pointing out everything that she was doing wrong. Wasn't

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the whole idea of ^{being in driver's seat} ~~ruling~~ the wheel to savor the taste of freedom and independent thinking?

"I don't think so..." Lindsay shook her head slowly. The latest installment of *La Cueva Sucia*, her favorite soap opera, was just starting and she was *not* going to miss it.

She clicked on the Gomez's Plasma.

"Lindsay," Evie followed her down the two steps that led into the den. As any questioning teen knows, an adult's reluctant "I don't think so" is as good as a semi soft "maybe" ^{italics} which could easily progress into a firm yes "We live on a cul de sac. It's not like cars go speeding by all the time. It'll be totally safe. And the more I practice," she continued, "the better I'll be for my test. Then you won't be having to cart me around anymore. Don't you want a break from being a chauffeur?"

She cocked her head forward and to the right, a gesture copied from her best friend, Dee Dee de LaFuentes, who probably lifted it from Gwen Stefani in an old No Doubt video. Whenever Dee Dee let the right side of her head tip to the side, she got her way. Sure, Dee Dee had angelic long died blonde hair, delicate features, and those hypnotizing blue contact lenses, but couldn't a brunette with medium length hair and brown eyes get the same outcome?

"Well," Lindsay looked at Evie. "I guess...maybe... it would be okay."

Yes!

"Get the spare keys," she told Evie as she pushed Meho, Evie's grey tabby, aside and made room for herself on the den's smooth leather sofa. She had already been lured into her habitual trance by *La Cueva's* ^{handsome} tall, dark and hammy leading man, Ronald Joseph Vega. "And stay in front of the house. Do *not* leave Camino del Rio."

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Deleted: "I know," Evie exhaled impatiently. "But that's only if I'm gonna be 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." ¶ But this afternoon, her parents were away on a mission -- the never-ending search for the perfect shade of green place mats to match the deck furniture's green cushions. It was the perfect time for her to rule the wheel. ¶ But in order to do so, she needed a wheel to rule, which meant she had to ask, okay beg. Lindsay to borrow her cara ten-year old sedan with no Sirius, dvd player, or heated-seats. Okay, so it was far from a g-ride, but beggar's can't be choosers, right? ¶

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^{will,}
“I promise!” Evie sprinted as fast as her metallic gold Havaiana flojos could carry her towards the kitchen. When she saw the keys hanging from the key rack, she didn’t know which were the spare keys Lindsay had been talking about, but no worries. She snatched both rings off the kitchen’s metal key holder, grabbed her iPod (over 1100 downloads), her wallet (a freshly issued driver’s permit), and skipped out of the house.

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But once ^{she} Evie got out to the driveway, ^{Evie's} her honest to goodness 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 and with it’s high gloss burgundy paint job and supreme detailing by West Coast Designs that kept its original leather interior soft and its chrome glistening, the Benz was stunning beyond words. But thee 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 done to cars in So Cal. The Benz, of course, was the talk of Rio Estates, and Vicki Gomez just loved, *loved*, the attention.

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Evie looked at the gleaming Mercedes and then at Lindsay’s nondescript four-door sedan, which suddenly seemed dull and lifeless. Was there really a question of which ride she should choose for her practice spin?

^{she} Evie opened the driver’s side door of the Mercedes and got in. ^{Evie} She inhaled the aroma of the vintage white leather and looked at herself in the side mirror. She had clearly made the right choice. She took out her cell from the front pocket of her gray and red Senor Lopez pullover and immediately called her boyfriend, Alex Perez. How cool

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would it be to swing by his house and, for once, offer to drive *him* somewhere? Evie speed-dialed his number But, alas, the dreaded voice mail.

Duuude... Make it brief. Not a bio.

Evie 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? At the end of last semester the Flojos, which had consisted of herself, Alex, Mondo, Raquel, and Raquel's former boy, Jose, had pretty much disbanded. But Alex still surfed at Sea Street, and Mondo still tagged along with him. While they all still wore flojos (flip flops), Evie didn't so much have the same flojo (lazy) mindset as she had the semester before. Now she went surfing and was learning how to drive. This semester, she was less Gomezzzzzz and more Go-mas.

Evie decided to leave neither a brief message nor her autobiography *for Alex's* brusque sounding voice mail, thank you. She hung up and speed dialed her ADA, Raquel Diaz. The literal Spanish translation for ADA was *amiga del alma*, a friend of the soul, a soul sister, really. ADA's were tighter than mere BFFs and as everyone who was anyone knew, a *sister* was much more *intimo* than a simple *friend*.

After a few rings, Evie was met with she heard 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. The melodic undertones quickly relaxed Evie.

brusque sounding voice mail
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“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. But still, just saying “I’m coming to pick you up” made her feel mature, adult-like. Unlike Raquel and their other ADA, ~~Dee Dee~~, 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 showcase her driving talent to a wider audience.

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“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. “Ol’ Vicki Gomez must be out of the country, ‘cause you know there’s no way you’d risk taking her precious veggie grease mobile out if she was even near the 805.”

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

“And La Lindsay?” Raquel inquired.

“Oh, she’s far away in novela-vela land.” Evie adjusted the seat so it was 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.”

The day was actually 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 ~~started to explain~~. "You know I need a licensed driver to really go anywhere."

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"Nuh uh," Raquel said quickly. "No ~~friggin~~ way. ~~Don't~~ you know the leading cause of ~~teen fatality is teaching~~ a newbie to drive? You best find yourself another tutor, Eves. I'm outs."

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"Raq, come on," Evie pleaded. "It'll be fun."

"And who says I ain't already having fun?" Raquel let out a low muffled laugh. Evie 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 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 whose big designer boots and even bigger attitudes clashed with the Flojo's designer flip flops and laid back outlook. Of course, Raquel felt completely humiliated and betrayed when she discovered that her boy had cross pollinated 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 fresh off the boat freshmen and didn't know ~~any~~ better. Not only was Alejandra a ~~jota~~, plain and simple, but she ~~pimped~~ the scarlet letter ~~J~~, proudly on her chest.

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"Where are you?" Evie asked Raquel. She 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 wouldn't last more than a couple of weeks

"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 her driveway, she looked up towards the Diaz's house. Between the Eucalyptus trees that divided the properties, she could see that the shades in Raquel's upstairs bedroom were pulled up, a sign that she was definitely not in her room. Raquel kept her shades closed until she, and only she, decided it was time to finally start her day and make the grand decision to roll 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, the night before, no such call came.

"O-*kay*, Raquel." Evie struggled to shift from reverse to first gear. "I'll let you go do whatever, with whomever. Just call me later."

"Yeah, yeah," Raquel said before hanging up.

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

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"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're in a good mood," Evie said.

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"I just got off the phone with Rocio," Dee Dee's voice got dreamy. "Oh, Evie, I love him *so* much."

Rocio was Dee Dee's long lost boyfriend she had to leave behind in Mexico City when she and her family returned to California. Dee Dee had moved to Mexico with her father four years earlier soon after her mother died. Their new home, ^{in Rio Estato} which included a bigger pool, maids quarters, pool and a new stepmother, Graciela Rodriguez Von Simon, a former soap opera actress, was on Camino Cortez just a few blocks away from Evie's and Raquel's houses.

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

"Right *now*?" Dee Dee asked. "I can't. I have a meeting with Eileen Cervantes."

"Eileen? Who's that?"

"She's connected with Las Hermanas," 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 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 Hermanas*,” Dee Dee said as if Evie was crazy for asking. “I have to make the right impression. Eileen is the first cousin of the former director’s wife and she’s going to give me some hints that are going to help me.”

“Oh,” Evie said sarcastically. “I didn’t realize what a *great* contact you had.”

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“Evie, don’t make fun. ^{Dee Dee pouted} This is the final year before I can be nominated so I can be a Hermana by junior year. You know that Las Hermanas has been my dream since, like, forever.”

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It was true. Ever since Dee Dee was a little girl, she had always talked about being a La Hermana debutante. Her mother was one, her grandmother was one, so, of course, Dee Dee not only wanted to be one, she *had* to be one. La Hermanas was the oldest and most respected debutante society in the county. It was started by the wives of the early Southern Californian landowners, many of them Hispanic and all of them wealthy. Dee Dee’s father didn’t have such regal connections with 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 a part of Mexico. You couldn’t get more regally connected than that.

Between Dee Dee’s calculated attempts 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 any 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 a friend history that you just don’t find in myspace. As little girls growing up in flip flops and braids with *respado* juice dripping down their chins. Evie, Dee Dee and Raquel became tight quickly. Now, Dee Dee would never be caught

dead in flip flops ("Sloppy, give no shape to the calf," she claimed) and Raquel doesn't feel braids ("That is, unless some boy wanted to yank on them for fun," she's mused.) But all three girls did like a good raspberry and banana snow cone, now and then.

"Of course, I know how important Las Hermanas is to you," Evie told Dee Dee as she struggled with the gears. ^{car's} "I just need someone to help me with my driving..

"Por fa," Dee Dee answered. "You don't need anyone to help you drive, you're already good. Really."

"If I'm such a good driver," Evie was not buying Dee Dee's flattery. "Then why don't you ever let me drive Jumile?"

Sailors christened boats, socialites attached pretentious tags on pet Chihuahuas, but in So Cal, it was in proper order to conjure up a cutesy name for one's car. To own a nameless vehicle? *Unthinkable*. Jumile was Dee Dee's lime green VW Beetle and she was very protective of him. She never let anyone, including Evie, drive him, not even once.

The bud vase in Jumile held incense sticks, and on the back window was a large decal of Dee Dee's favorite band/soap opera's crest. RBD and, of course, ^{she} had a vanity license plate JUMILE.

Dee Dee had gotten the name Jumile from the particular tree beetles found in the hills of Taxco, Mexico. Every year, the first Monday after *El Dia de los Muertos*, the locals would hike into the hills of Taxco and gather up the little green beetles, otherwise known as Jumiles. Later the locals would roast and grind up the bugs, celebrating the new seasonal harvest with *salsa insecto*. "sta loco, no?" Dee Dee had smugly stated, after she'd bragged about the fact that she had been adventurous enough to partake in the

Deleted: Evie, Dee Dee and Raquel had been little girls together, in flip flops, their hair in braids with *respado* juice dripping down their chins. Now, Dee Dee would never be caught dead in flip flops ("Sloppy, give no shape to the calf," she claimed) and none of the three girls would be caught dead in braids. But they did like a good raspberry and banana snow cone, now and then.

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beetle eats as if to prove that under her pricey Michael Kelley styled hair and made up MAC face, she could be loca in her own right.

Raquel's parents had just bought her a Beetle a month ago for Christmas, of course. Evie wanted a Beetle too. She wanted hers to be red, cherry red with the customized license plate CHRY BMB as in Cherry Bomb, the name for her Beetle. She also wanted a sunroof, Bose speakers, fresh cut hibiscus flowers in the bud vase, and the quintessential decal that identified Evie to the hilt -- a pair of white, outlined flip flops, stuck smack center of her back window. She had already purchased the decal months ago at the Walden Surf Shop, and now all she needed was a brand new car to attach it to.

Simple enough, no?

"Well," Evie started as she headed south, down the eucalyptus lined street of Calle Bonita 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 was calling. "I guess I just take a drive by myself."

"Why don't you take Alejandro or Raquel?" Dee Dee asked.

"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. No offense," Dee Dee started slowly as though she was applying mascara. "But don't... you...ever... get tired that... all... you do with Alex is... surf?"

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Deleted: Evie was now heading south, down the eucalyptus lined street of Calle Bonita 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 was calling.

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The bud vase in Jumile held incense sticks, and on the back window was a large decal of Dee Dee's favorite band/soap opera's crest, RBD. Raquel's Beetle was black and named B.J., as in Beetle Juice, not the other thing. B.J.'s bud vase held cigarette butts and gunn wrappers. Stuck across the top of B.J.'s front window was 'So-Cal' in white, old English script. Both Dee Dee and Raquel, of course, had vanity license plates: JUMILE for Dee Dee and BTLE JCE for Raquel.

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Deleted: She was going to name her new car Cherry Bomb, and it was her fantasy to drive away from her 16th birthday party in CHRY BMB.¶
In about a month and a half, on February 29th to be exact, Evie was going to turn sixteen, and this particular birthday was uniquely 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 no choice but 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. The second reason that this birthday was going to be extra cool was because ... [1]

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Evie was reluctant to go into the minuscule dish she had on Raquel. All three girls loved each other unconditionally, of course, and granted, all of them indulged in ad bevs, but Dee Dee tended to judge Raquel's recreational ^{drinking} behavior more critically. Not that Evie could blame Dee Dee -- ever since ever since her break up with Jose, Raquel's party patterns had been a bit off the chart.

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"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!"

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"Yeah, well..." Evie wasn't in the mood to talk smack, "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."

"*Mande?*" Dee Dee did not find Evie's jab funny. She was very protective of Mexico City, her former beloved home of four years.

"Nothing," Evie tried to soft pedal backwards. She knew better than to diss the all mighty Mexico. 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 had 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 to go first.

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"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."

"Then just go, I guess," Dee Dee said.

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

"Oh, my God!" Evie screamed as she dropped her cell phone unto her lap. She felt her throat plummet to the bottom of her stomach. 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 checked the rearview mirror. The driver swung open his car door and Evie could see that he was a young guy, short and stocky with a shaved head. He was wearing a super-sized football jersey throwback with the sleeves cut off and he lifted his thick arms up in a thug-like challenging "what the?" stance as he went swaggard over to the front of his car. He was definitely someone you normally didn't see behind the cloistered wrought iron 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!*"

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“Oh. My. God.” Evie sunk into the leather upholstery of her seat. She held her head and the “damn phone” down, away from his view. “Dee Dee,” she whispered as her voice started to crack. “He’s *totally* raging at me.”

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“Who?”

“This guy. The guy whose car I hit.” *How* could she have hit a car? And with her mother’s precious Mercedes! If this guy didn’t kill her, her mother certainly would.

“Dee Dee,” Evie pleaded. “You gotta come. *Now!*”

“Oh, my God!” Dee Dee was horrified. “Where are you?”

The guy was now on the other side of the driver’s door. He tapped on the side of the window 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 iPod, open the Mercedes’ heavy door, and step out.

“I am *so* sorry!” She looked over at the guy’s car. It was a lowered Honda or Toyota or something like that. “Did I ding it?”

“Uh, *yeah*,” the guy remarked hostilely. “You jacked 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, deep nick, 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 as though she was crazy.

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

"I'm gonna need your license," the guy said. "And all your insurance info and

~~shit.~~"

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"My license?" Evie's heart dropped.

"Yes." He looked at her as though she was some rookie student 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 rings...

Come on, come on! Evie cried in her head. *Come on, Linds! Answer the phone!*

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Three rings, four rings.

"*Bueno?* Gomez residence."

Finally.

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

"*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. "I'm on the corner of Calle Agua Caliente and Calle Socorro."

"*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," she hesitated. "And I'm in my mother's car."

"*What?!*"

"Lindsay, please, just come now. I'll explain later. Just come. *Now!*"

"Stay *right* there!" Lindsay told Evie.

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."

"~~Like, right~~ now?" He pulled out his cell phone and checked the time.

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

Camino del Rio. Why? Why hadn't she just stayed on her street like she was supposed to? Why hadn't she just practiced with Lindsay's car like she said she would?

Evie looked at the guy who was ~~now leaning against the front of his car~~. What if the cops *did* come? She had practically stolen her mother's car, and she didn't have

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insurance or even a license! Evie glanced over at the driver, his eyes were angry and impatient.

Evie looked up at the street signs of the intersection – Agua Caliente and Socorro. Yes, she was definitely in ‘hot water’ and needed ‘help.’ Badly.

Chapter 2

It seemed like forever before Lindsay finally showed up. When she did, she was out of breath, her dark wispy bangs were stuck to her forehead with perspiration ~~and she was on foot.~~

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“Lindsay,” Evie started. “Why didn’t you just drive your car?”

“Because,” Lindsay huffed between breaths, “You took both set of keys.” She grabbed the key ring from Evie’s grasp. “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. That’s what happened,” the guy answered for Evie. “Did you bring her license?”

“Her license?” Lindsay looked at Evie.

“I’m also gonna need insurance info,” the guy repeated to Lindsay. He had already gotten a pen from his glove compartment and clicked it. 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 wanted her good connection to take care of the problem. No one wanted his or her insurance rates to be raised due to some teenager’s appetite for adventure.

Lindsay looked over the driver's bumper and squinted, just like Evie had before,
but didn't say anything. "My brother-in-law works at Williams Automotive," she
informed the guy. "I'll call him tonight. I'd rather not have my insurance billed for this."

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"He could fix this in a day."

Of course, that was enough for the guy. He didn't even care if Evie had a license or not. Everyone in the whole county knew about Williams Automotive. They 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. As Evie had noticed earlier, the guy's car swept the street, barely an inch from the ground which
definitely put it in the lowrider category.

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After an exchange of info, the guy and his dime-sized dent finally went on their
way.

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"Oh, God," Evie 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 the Mercedes to double check that there was no damage. Evie followed, and, fortunately, there was nothing. *Nada*. Vicki Gomez' classic grease mobile had been spared.

Lindsay got into the Benz's driver's seat. Evie opened the passenger door and also got in.

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

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"I know, Lindsay." Evie felt badly. She hated letting Lindsay down. She was often her only ally, and now she had been purposely dishonest with her. "I'm sorry. I am
so sorry. I was in front of the house, but then I got on the cell with Dee Dee and—."

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“You were *talking*?” Lindsay tapped the brake pedal and glared at Evie. “On the *phone*? While driving your mother’s Mercedes?”

Was that steam coming out of Lindsay’s nostrils?

“You are lucky you didn’t kill yourself!” Lindsay shook her head as she held the leather encased steering wheel with one hand while making the sign of the cross with the other. “Your parents are going to be *very* unhappy about this. *Muy enojado*. ”

“Lindsay, please,” Evie 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 promise.”

“How are you going to pay for his car?” Lindsay shook her head in disbelief. “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 Chablis 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 Chablis , her father’s mother, always sent her grandchildren checks with a substantial amount of zeros for their birthdays. Could it be guilt that she was the absentee abuela and rarely attended her own grandkid’s birthday parties? That she preferred teaching wine making at UC Davis or taking last minute trips to Italy than help fill some Dora the Explorer shaped pinata or lead the traditional Mexican birthday chant of *Las Mananitas*?

Whatever the case, neither Evie nor Sabrina questioned Grandma Chablis'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, please," Evie begged. "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 805, had invested a lot of money and time into his fat free sweet bread idea. Not only was the pan dulce a big joke at a brunch Evie's mother had thrown for Dee Dee's parents last year, but the idea of pan dulce, ^{his fat free} ~~in large~~ lost a lot more money when it didn't do so well. Money had become a very sore subject in the Gomez household.

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a few months back

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, you're out" law was harsh, but Vicki Gomez could be just as severe. Would she cancel Evie's ~~sixteeners~~? Not let her drive once she got her license? Or, would Evie's little fender bender keep her from getting Cherry Bomb? Oh, 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!

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

"Your parents are home," Lindsay looked at her wrist watch as though Evie couldn't see for herself that they were indeed home. "And your mother is going to wonder why we took her car," ~~She~~ pulled up into the circular driveway ~~and to Evie,~~ Lindsay seemed just as uneasy about the whole situation.

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

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

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

They entered the house and, after being in the bright afternoon sun, Evie needed a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the darkness inside. Lindsay stepped down into the den, where the closing credits of *La Cueva* were rolling down the TV screen. With annoyance, ~~she~~ clicked both her tongue and the remote's power button to off. Obviously, in her haste, she had forgotten to TiVo her favorite novela.

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

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"Where did you take my car?" Evie's mother asked Lindsay from the dining room table. She was sorting through a pile of place mats, all of them in different shades of green. "Is there something wrong with your car, Linds?"

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

"Yes, something is wrong," Lindsay quickly interrupted as she entered the dining area. "I don't know what, but we thought that Molesto had gotten out and when my car wouldn't start, I hope you don't mind, but we used yours and started driving up and down the street, looking for him." She clicked her tongue again and ran her fingers through her hair in pseudo exasperation. "But the whole time I guess he was just next door, chasing the Milne's cats or something. He must have got back into the yard under the fence, where he's been digging. **that hole.**"

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Evie looked over at her, in surprise.

"Oh, no," Evie's mother feigned concern. "We'll have to get that hole fixed. We wouldn't want dear ol' Molesto getting out."

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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 dog. 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*.

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Evie looked up at Lindsay and caught her eye. *Thank you, she*, mouthed when her mother wasn't looking. She owed Lindsay big time.

"Linds, if there is an emergency and you can't use your car, you can absolutely take mine, but I don't ever want Molesto in my car," Evie's mother said. "He'll scratch up the leather and leave his hair all over."

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"*Si, si, claro*," Lindsay agreed.

"And I'll take a look at your car in a bit, Linds," Evie's father continued to look over the mail. "I hope it isn't anything too serious." He shook his head. "The last thing anyone needs is more bills."

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"Oh, no, no," Lindsay said awkwardly. "I don't think it is." She gathered old newspapers off the counter and took them to the recycling container outside. She was smart to make an early exit before Generals Vicki and Ruben Gomez got too inquisitive.

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Along with Evie's relief she felt another wave of guilt. She didn't want Lindsay to get in trouble with her parents due to her own deliberate delinquency.

"Well, once Sabrina comes home," Evie's mother held up two separate, but obviously similar, place mats to compare them. "Molesto won't be bothering the neighbor's cats so much."

Evie had forgotten that her sister was due home the following week. Sabrina had decided to take a short break from her studies at Stanford University. Evie didn't know the whole story, but she knew that her sister was really bummed about the break up with her boyfriend, Robert and just needed some time off. Evie was really apprehensive about 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 as soon as Suprema, as Evie often

Lindsay was the family but then again she was on the payroll. And after her father's comment, who knows.

called her, was in the picture, all attention went to her. Suprema was nineteen years old, three and three quarters older than Evie, and like the whole rest Gomez family, she was an over-achiever. Now that Suprema was going to be back visiting home for a while, the differences between the two girls were going to be painfully apparent

“When is Sabrina getting here?” Evie pulled up a stool next to her father. She helped herself to some nuts from the ceramic bowl on the kitchen counter.

“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 Mini?” (^{Vaulty}License plate: 4 BRINA)

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“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 the whole family (including Sabrina), relished the scenic drive along the California gold coast between their home and the university. Why wouldn’t her sister just drive home, like she usually did?

“I could drive her car down,” Evie volunteered. Sabrina’s Mini Cooper was brand new, silver with two black stripes down the hood. It was polished, petite, and ^{just plain}~~just plain~~ purred. What chica wouldn’t want to cruise a Mini?

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“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 serious. “What’s going on here?”

“What’s going on where?” Evie grabbed more nuts and looked over towards the paperwork he was reading.

“Your quality check,” he said.

Sheeyat! How could Evie have been *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 rushing to go out driving, she could have retrieved the incriminating evidence addressed to “The parents or guardian of Evelina Maria Gomez.”

This would have bought her some time to think of...something.

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“Evie,” her mother pulled back her blonde hair and looked at the paperwork over her husband’s shoulder. “You’re getting two Cs, one in English.” She pointed to the two letters, as if Evie needed help seeing them. “How can that be?”

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“I have no idea,” Evie said. Civics and English were not her favorite classes, but she didn’t know she was doing *that* badly.

“Well, you better get an idea. An idea of 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? And you know our agreement,” her father said. “No birthday party at Dukes if you can’t keep your GPA up.”

Evie had sorta forgotten that particular clause of her birthday agreement. This semester, she had become so wrapped up in having Alex as a new boyfriend and learning

how to drive that she had forgotten about the fine print. But Evie could tell her father was really serious just from his tone.

In about a month and a half, on February 29th to be exact, Evie was going to turn sixteen, and this particular birthday was uniquely 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 no choice but 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. The second reason that this birthday was going to be extra cool was because Evie's parents was going to throw her a sixteenera, more Sweet Sixteen, way less *quinceanera*, which only meant one thing -- A Mexican style luau -- at Duke's in Malibu. Duke's was a super cool restaurant that overlooked the Pacific Ocean and was named after the OG Hawaiian surfer himself, Duke Kahanumoku. All of Evie's favorite *Laguna Beach* and *O.C.* stars lunched and "canoodled" at Duke's and her sixteenera party had already become the talk of Villanueva Prep. How could it not be? After all, her father had already secured DJ Chancla to spin nothing but classic surf and power pop ^{HVS} and there would be Polynesian dancers and a full buffet featuring Hawaiian style *lechon*, with the pig's head intact and everything. Evie's mother had also planned to make gift bags filled with Mr. Zog's Sex Wax, original Flojo brand flip flops, a fifty dollar gift certificate for Walden surf shop as well as customized sun visors with the words, "Evening with Evie" stitched in hot pink on the front. But the main attraction at Evie's Sweet Sixteenera? Raquel's connection. Raquel knew this guy, Dario Regalado, who had a cousin, Petey. When Petey wasn't getting all goo goo eyed whenever he was in the presence of Raquel, he was bartending at Duke's. When he

~~heard about Raquel's ADA having her Sweet Sixteener at his work place, he instantly raised his hand and offered to fire up the Lava Flows and Tropical Itches for all of Evie's guests. He told Raquel that all she had to do was supply the booze, which was no problem because, of course, Raquel had *another* hook up at the Liquor Warehouse. Friggin' Raquel... was she the bestest ADA or what? There was to be no frat boy red plastic cups full of watered down keg beer at Evie's party. Her ad bevs were going to be classy, lethal and free. Could a party be *mas* epic?~~

“I can do it. I can bring the grades up.” Evie said, trying to convince her parents and herself. ~~There was *no* way she could not have her sixteener.~~ “It’s only civics and English. No problemo.”

“Oh, it shouldn’t have even *been* a problemo,” her father tossed the paperwork onto the kitchen counter. “But *you* 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. ~~You’re the one who wanted the~~ *Customized invites w/ Hilarious tones*

“What do you mean by ‘in advance’?” Evie asked. She put the nuts she’d been holding back in the bowl. Suddenly she was no longer hungry.

“Evie, don’t do that,” her mother frowned. “Either eat them or throw them away.” 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 QC is.”

“*What?*” Evie balked. “You want me to have straight A’s in three weeks?”

“Of course, not,” her father said. “You just need to show us that you are serious about improving. Like your mother said, ‘in advance’.”

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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 paperwork and tapped Evie under her chin. She softened her voice. “Don’t worry ~~Evie~~, I know how important this party is to you. You can do it.” She reached for some nuts and then stopped herself. Nuts were on her new South Cal diet.

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“Of course you can,” her father said. “I remember one time when Sabrina got her quality check and was so upset when a B_v brought her whole average down.

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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 proudly as if the family’s ^{ambitious} ~~successfully~~ bloodline originated from him and only him.

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

“Molesto!” Her 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.” “Mo-les-to, here...” he called in a sing-songy voice. 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 in anticipation.

Of course, Evie's father had nothing moist and meaty in his hand. He quickly grabbed the Bluetooth away from Molesto and gave it 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 a paper towel to wipe off the slobber. She shook her head at Molesto. "God, he is *such* a dumb dog!"

Evie stared at her quality ~~check, where the two blaring Cs taunted her~~. She placed her elbows on the counter and her chin in the palms of her hands. She looked at Molesto, who looked so utterly befuddled that Evie's father had no treat in his hand. She sighed. *The Gomez blood*. Could it be possible she was somehow related only to Molesto?

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Chapter 3

As soon as she could pull away from her parents, Evie ran up to her room and 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 best friends had to discuss something of dire importance and that they *had* to get together immediately. Even as little kids, before they were introduced to the technical world of text messages and IMs, Evie, Dee Dee, and Raquel would always meet up by the secluded area at the far end of the Rio Estates golf course. It was private and safe, well, 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, actually happened pretty often.

Because Dee Dee was still fussing over her ”muy importante” Hermanas meeting, the girls decided to meet at Dee Dee’s house instead of the usual “same plce”. Raquel picked Evie up, and they drove over for their ER/RE! meet up.

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↓
in her own
black beetle.

Raquel's Beetle was black, lowered and named B.J., as in Beetle Juice, not the other thing and had the vanity plates to prove it, BTLE JCE. B.J.'s bud vase was a receptacle for cigarette butts and gum wrappers and stuck across the top of B.J.'s front window was 'So-Cal' in white, old English script.

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

"Oh, my God," Dee Dee said as soon as she opened her bedroom door. "You're in one piece!" She reached out and hugged Evie. "What happened with that guy? You just hung up on me, and I kept calling and calling you. I had no idea what to think."

"You won't even believe today," Evie shook her head. "Oh. My. God. The Fear Factor was cranked to high. 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."

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"Please," Raquel grabbed a handful of pita chips from the bag 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 blankly. It was *so* like Raquel to try and act like she held all knowledge of street sense and sensibility. Ever since ^{she} Raquel had broken up with Jose, it was like she was on a quest to prove she was still just, if not more, as scandalous as when she was when she dated him. Whereas any cool girl at Villanueva (which Raquel claimed there were only three – she, Evie and, of course, *la otra* ADA, Dee Dee) would gain cred to inspire jealousy in an ex (with, say, a hottie shortboarder with major label

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sponsorship or a member of a local neo-Nardcore band) Raquel was hooking up in the polar region opposite of north. As in, she was dating down, *way* down.

“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.

“Ay, well, I’m just glad it’s all over with,” Dee Dee checked the heat of the 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 the other guy’s car. Luckily Lindsay’s got this brother-in-law or something at Williams Automotive, so it shouldn’t cost too much.”

“What, you’re gonna have to pay for it?” Raquel asked.

~~“What?” Evie asked. “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 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 average up by the time I get my next quality check. That’s in about three and a half weeks. There is *no* way I can bring my average up in time.”

“How bad was your QC?” Dee Dee held up two different blouses in front of her vanity mirror. She tilted her head back and forth with indecision.

Evie couldn’t help but feel slightly annoyed that Dee Dee was choosing between necklines and fabric while they were discussing her crisis. That was the problem when

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the girls didn't have their ER/ER! meeting at the golf course, multi-tasking led to multi-
thoughts...that had *nothing* to do with the issue at hand.

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"It was okay," Evie took a sip of her Kiwi Strawberry. Dee Dee was the brain of
the three of them, without even trying. Sometimes it made Evie feel ^{inferior} badly that no matter
how much she studied, it was always Dee Dee who got better grades, so effortlessly. "I
mean, I got two Cs," Evie looked down at her Snapple. "One in English and the other in
civics."

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"How could you be getting a 'C' in English?" Raquel flipped through Dee Dee's
Elle Girl. Far from her personal flavor, but it's not like she was about to waste her time
with any of the "*moda estylo*" 'zines that Dee Dee got direct from Mexico. "Harrison is
total kick back. Even I'm doing good in her class."

Great. Even Raquel was "doing good" in English. Could Evie feel ^{doubtful} *mas* inferior?

"Well, I'm not doing so hot," Evie said as confidently as she could. "I hate
English. All Harrison does is make us write. "Write your feelings," "write your
thoughts," "write what you know." Sheesh, I'm barely sixteen; what am I supposed to
know?"

"Uh, maybe how to properly shift a gear into drive?" Raquel teased.

Evie threw her ^{a look} the finger.

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"Ugh. I *hate* writing," Evie lamented again.

"I don't. I love writing," Dee Dee said. She hung up the reject blouse after settling
on the boring beige one with the conservative neckline.

"Since when?" Evie asked suspiciously. Dee Dee hadn't *loved* to write so much
when they were younger.

"Since I lived in Mexico," Dee Dee claimed. That was the best thing about going to school there." She suddenly got dreamy eyed. "I got to write and read in Spanish, the romance language all the stuff by Neruda and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, and of course, love letters from Rocio."

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Raquel threw Evie an exasperated "here we go again" look. Evie and Raquel had both grown weary of the Rocio valentine eternally pinned on Dee Dee's heart. If she wasn't texting him *larga distancia*, she was gabbing with him in that show offy big city *espanol* of hers on her cell. It was one thing to say a boy was the love of your life, Evie thought, but another thing to friggin' talk about him "venti-cuarto/siete."

"So why don't you just do some community service crap or something for extra credit in civics?" Raquel grabbed some more pita chips from the bag and turned her attention back to Evie. "Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon 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? Picking up roadside trash off Vineyard Avenue wasn't *always* a court appointed assignment."

Evie laughed. "*Serio?*" Jose had always bragged of his little run-ins with the law, but he never bragged about the consequences that followed.

"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 in S.S.I.T."

"No," Evie said. "There is *no* way I'm gonna get tutored in Successful Student in Training."

Sabrina used to be a tutor with SSIT and Evie remembered her coming home from school complaining about all the students that didn't "get it" as quickly as they "should."

To Evie, SSIT stood more for Snooty Students in Transistion.

Evie tipped her head in thought. 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. Then they could go on romantic beach walks together 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. A+ quality."

"In English or the romance language?" Evie smirked and Raquel's laugh came out as a snort.

"I could do it in *Francais* if you want." Dee Dee smiled back smugly.

"Okay, Frenchie," Evie finished the rest of her Snapple. "Just make sure you do a good job. If I don't get my average up, the Sixteenera is off."

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"And we don't want that," Raquel helped herself to more pita chips. "It's been a friggin' dry spell around here."

"You're telling me," Dee Dee unrolled her hot curlers.

Raquel looked over at her. ^{How do know,} "Since when have you been Miss Party Thang?"

"Since I ate green beetles in Mexico," Dee Dee said. "You know, you *don't* down them with *milk*," Raquel. [↑]

By the time Evie and Raquel left Dee Dee's house, Evie was feeling much more hopeful. ⁱⁿ Evie's cell vibrated on the drive home—a text from Alex. She hadn't talked to him yet that day. Wait until he heard what kind of day she had! But when ^{she} Evie opened her cell, ^{for} she couldn't believe what she read.

SW Swell @ C st / Cnt make 2morw. / Srry!

As Dee Dee would ^{ask} ~~say~~, Mande? There is a southwest 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.

Evie re-read his text message again and felt the pit of her stomach quiver. He hadn't even invited her to go along! She and Alex had only been going out a little over two months. Could it be that he was already losing interest?

“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.

Chapter 4

“I’m totally sorry about yesterday,” Alex said, apologizing for the millionth time. The first nine hundred and ninety nine thousand sorry’s had come that morning in the car as he drove them both to Villanueva Prep. “I promise we’ll go to Santa Barbara. Soon.”

Evie was putting her books away in her locker for lunch-time. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” She knew she was acting like a baby, but she was getting a little tired of Alex’s flakiness. This seemed to be happening a lot lately: There was the time they had plans to go to the skate park on Rose Avenue, and then he flaked because

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Alex stared deep into her eyes.

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the head gasket on Mondo's Maurader (SRF PNK) had blown and he needed a ride to Oakview. Then there was the time when they were supposed to go up to the Cross to watch the sunrise together and then, at the last minute, Alex wanted to pre-dawn curb camp so he could be the first in line for a "totally epic" board sale at Anacapa Surf Shop. Evie sighed. Maybe Raquel was right. Could a girlfriend compete with the search for stoke that so many surfer boyfriends were born with?

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"No, but really," Alex said again as Evie rearranged her books and folders so everything would fit in her locker. "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 door. They were primarily of Seth. *Seth*. Sigh. "You *like* this guy?" *he asked.*

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"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 arm around her shoulders. "Come on, you know that I'll totally do whatever I can to help you with this volunteer thing. I don't like seeing you so bummed out."

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

Raquel was behind Dee Dee with her iPod cranked to high.

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

"Hey you guys!" Raquel yelled at Evie and Alex.

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

"Oops, sorry." Raquel removed her iPod plugs.

“When are you gonna get a decent headpiece?” Alex frowned at her white plastic earplugs. “Those suck. No wonder you have to crank it up.”

“Sor-ry,” Raquel said. “Not *everyone* has a boyfriend who buys her four hundred dollar Bose headphones.” She glanced into Evie’s locker, where such headphones, a Christmas 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 loved that she and Alex shared another thing in common other than their love for the ocean; their arrogant attitude towards music and tech equipment.

“Hey,” Alex rubbed his stomach under his T-shirt. “Let’s bail for lunch. I’m jonesing for a guac dog.”

Tampien.

Dee Dee smacked her lips.

“No,” Evie felt irritated. “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 frowned. “I completely *spaced*.”

Evie’s mood turned back to sour as she shut her locker door. How could her own boyfriend and best friend not remember the major dilemma she was still facing? She hadn’t thought of anything else the entire weekend.

“Aah, Gomez. Come on,” Alex clicked his tongue and put his arm around her. “You know we’re here for you. Always.”

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

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“See!” she 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 dad’s totally gonna cancel the party.”

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

“No,” Evie said. “She is *very* serious. Both of them are.”

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 twelve hundred dollar Aviso board of yours.”

“Or when 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 text a customer complaint to him. “I gave him three C notes on Friday, and I don’t smell the scent of freshly cut lawn.”

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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 O.Z.’s.

“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.”

Raquel rolled her eyes at Evie as if it wasn’t her fault she was being shooed away. “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, she became suddenly unavailable to honor any duties she may have committed to earlier. “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?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Evie asked.

“She’s been going a little off the deep end, don’t you think?” Dee Dee glanced towards the hallway where Raquel was standing. “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 knowing something about Raquel that Evie didn’t? It didn’t seem right!

“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," Alex answered.

Evie knew of Ronnie Mitchell. He was one of the Bard Boys and had been kicked out of nearly every public school 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. "And he did time at the CYA."

"Really?" The California Youth Authority 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 *questionable* things.

"Yes," Dee Dee knowingly raised her eyebrows. "Raquel was actually bragging about it. I'm a little worried about her. She's becoming such a *leva*."

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

"We're *not* gossiping," Dee Dee shook her head. "Raquel *is* our friend and we're 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's shine ^{Wattage} ~~when it was set on ultra high.~~ ^e

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"Anything," Dee Dee said. "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 was called for.

“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’s opened. None of them could help but hear the *voice*, the thick Spanish accented whine of Alejandra de los Santos. It took over the whole hallway. She was just concluding her session with her counselor, A through H.

There were only three counselors for the entire student population at Villanueva and each one was assigned to students based on 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 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 already ~~sounded annoyed and slightly~~ tired. “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 maybe he was just exhausted by Alejandra’s all the time arrogance.[?]

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"I know," Alejandra said quickly, as if she didn't want some know it all high school counselor telling *her* how to think. "Pues, thank you for your time."

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As she left his office, Alejandra couldn't help but come head to head with Evie, Dee Dee, and Alex in the counseling office's narrow hallway. How lucky was Alejandra that Raquel had just left? ^{Alejandra} Raquel ^{hated her} ~~hated her~~. ^{she} Soon after Raquel found out that Alejandra ^{AS AS} had been seeing Jose ^{Vandy Phalts} ~~secretly~~ behind her back, things started to *happen* to Alejandra. Her silver Audi (DF DIVA) had been keyed, derogatory Spanglish had been scrawled on her locker door, and accidental "domino" slams in the hall occasionally led to Alejandra falling flat on her ass. Were all these *incidentes* initiated by Raquel? Hmm...perhaps.

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

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"So," Alex asked Alejandra earnestly. "You're doing an internship at Yale?"

Evie pressed her foot into the side of his flojo. *Alex, who freaking cares?*

"Claro," Alejandra smiled, staring deeply into Alex's eyes. "This summer. But I still don't know," she sighed heavily as she tugged on the blonde strand underneath her prominent mane of dark hair. Last year, the Sangros' trademark had been their vivid blonde highlights. But this semester they all had returned from Mexico City after Christmas break with a new look. Except for a thin solid strand of blonde, the Sangros had dyed their hair black. Not brown or dark brown, but black, practically *bruja* black. Which was actually a fitting choice since they all were all *brujas*, and then some.

"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 together. That would be fun." She glanced 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. Could Alex be more *tonto*?

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

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." She glanced back at Dee Dee.

"Oh, I don't need help," Evie answered quickly. Know-it-all high school juniors were just as bad as know-it-all 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 little party. What made you decide to have it at Duke's?"

"What wrong with Duke's?" As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Evie regretted asking. What did she care what Alejandra thought? She wasn't even anywhere where near the guest 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.

"Ay, never mind," she patted Evie's shoulder. "If that's what you want for your little party. *Naco*." Then she clicked away in her high leather boots...*just* as Raquel reappeared. *Coincidence?*

^{bW.}
"Yeah!" Raquel held up her hand to high-five Alex. She 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. 420 in the 805...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.

"Gomez," Alex tilted his head to the side. "Don't be like that..."

"Be like what?" she asked. He was so *not* fronting a Dee Dee pose with that little head tilt of his. "Upset that you are flaking on me, again? You said you were gonna help me find work."

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“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-White after lunch, and there is no way I can deal with her without being lit.”

“Just go,” Evie waved them both away. 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 peck on the cheek and took off with Raquel.

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

“Yeah,” Evie looked after Alex and Raquel as they headed towards Juniper’s Tree, the big oak 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 5

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

Dee Dee had picked what seemed an ideal volunteer position for Evie – caring for horses at the Southern California Horse Reserve.

“You’ll get be outside and it’s close to school,” Dee Dee had pointed out. “And horses are *so* sweet. Everyone likes horses, no?”

“Uh, no,” Evie had said. “I mean, yes.” She was always unsure how to answer questions that ended in ‘no.’ Were you to say “No” as in “I agree with you,” Or “Yes, I agree to your no”?

Everyone does like them."

Simple enough, Evie thought. But now A through H needed to know exactly why she wanted to work at the SCHR. How should she answer him? That the SCHR was the only option available on the volunteer list that didn't involve old people or thugs in training? That if she didn't get some volunteer credit under her belt, like *soon*, she was gonna be celebrating her 16th birthday at the banquet room at the Sizzler? Of course, she had to give him the kind of answer that all high school counselors want to hear.

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

"Your community?" A through H breathed heavy as he looked over Evie's file. A through H had always been a big man, but returned from Christmas break even heftier. Too many tamales? Evie wondered. "I thought you lived in Rio Estates," he said.

"I do," Evie answered. Rio Estates was a high-end gated community with no suitable space to board a horse but of course, he knew 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," Evie answered. Isn't that what she had just said? "I was reading on their flyer that they needed help caring for horses. I want to do that."

"Well, you do know that it's already three weeks into the semester," A through H adjusted his wire framed glasses and looked over the dates on the calendar hanging to the left of him.

The calendar was a Villanueva school calendar, twelve months with twelve full color pictures that depicted the "best of" at Nueva. Two years ago, Sabrina had been

featured for April in her tennis outfit. When the calendar had come out, their father had purchased almost ~~ten thousand~~ copies and handed them out at the country club and at his panaderia. Normally, ~~Mexican~~ bakeries gave away religious calendars, and only during the Christmas holidays. But the year that Sabrina was featured on the Villanueva calendar, Evie's father had skipped La Virgen de Guadalupe and ~~had his employees hand~~ out La Suprema, Our Lady of Eternal Achievement.

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"And you know you're supposed to clear ~~any interest in volunteer work~~ with your instructors from the very beginning," A through H continued. "The reserve may not even have an opening."

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

"Oh, those listings are so outdated." A through H opened his desk drawer and shuffled around in it. "We have an intern who is supposed to keep on top of them, but he's always talking on the office phone or texting on that cell phone of his." ~~He sighed again.~~

"Do you need someone to work in the office?" Evie's words practically sprang out of her mouth. An office job would be *so* cool. She would have full access to hall way passes, student files (wouldn't Raquel *love* to get a hold of Alejandra de los Santos' folder!), and the internet (though most likely with limited viewing blocks). Plus, she'd get to work during class hours, and *all* for course credit. *Que* cake. "Because I could do that, too."

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"I thought you wanted to work with horses?" A through H smiled ~~frowned~~ as he pulled a cloth 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 to himself as he continued to clean his glasses, wiping the lenses meticulously. "Well, if we can't get you at the reserve this semester, there's always their summer program."

"*Summer* program?" Evie was appalled at the thought. "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?" He held up his glasses to the sunlight to inspect them

Deleted: A through H

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

"Don't worry, Evie. I'll see what I can do," A through H smiled again, this time a calm, somewhat reassuring smile. He put his glasses back on. "I'll give the reserve a call and see if they have any more openings. I think I can pull some strings. But you still have to get the okay from your instructors."

"I will," Evie answered.

"By the way, how is your party coming along?"

"My party?" Evie asked

"Yes," A through H answered "I hear from many of the instructors that it's been quite the talk on campus, and quite the distraction in the classroom"

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"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 over the thick lenses. "Just try to focus on matters at 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."

Evie stared glumly over at the school's calendar.

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

* * * * *

As Evie soon found out, A through H was good on his word. He pulled enough strings to yank out a last minute internship for her at the Southern California Horse Reserve. Then he sent an email to both Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon and Harrison and encouraged them, to allow Evie to do the extra credit even though the semester had started. Counselor A through H held true to his administrative title, A-H, as in *Aaaah*...Evie could relax, if only just a little.

But her moment of serenity was short-lived. Encouraging email from a counselor or not, A through H reminded her that she still had to get final approval from both Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon and Harrison. Since Raquel had said that Harrison was a pushover, Evie decided to ask her first.

"Oh, this sounds wonderful," Mrs. Harrison said as Evie eagerly held out the official paperwork for her to sign. "I like that you want to learn more about ranchero life. You should use as much Spanish as possible in your essay."

"No problemo," Evie told her with confidence. And it wouldn't be a problemo, considering that it would be Dee Dee writing the whole thing

"It's actually *nunca problema*," Harrison corrected her.

"Huh?" Evie asked. ~~Then~~ Harrison start~~d~~ teaching Spanish and no one ~~had~~ ~~informed~~ her?

no hay problema

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"The proper translation is *nunca problema*," Mrs. Harrison said.

"Oh, sorry," Evie apologized.

"No prob," Mrs. Harrison answered. "So, when you write the paper, give me the mood," she wove her hands dramatically in the air, a gesture that Evie guessed she wanted her to capture on paper. "Let me feel the complexity that is *charro* life."

"I don't know how many cowboys I am going to run into at the reserve," Evie confessed. "But I'll try. 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

²/_{half} ^S a point. By the end of the semester, you could very well have a ^B"

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"Wow," Evie wasn't expecting a full letter ^B "And that will be reflected on my next quality check? In three weeks?"

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"It very well could be," Mrs. Harrison confirmed.

"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."

Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon, 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.

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"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. If you want to improve your grades, why don't you join SSIT?"

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

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"I'm not swayed by other people's decisions," Mr. Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon kept wiping the board. "That's the problem with a lot of 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, please, just sign the paper. "I mean, all my friends were telling me I should work at a hospice, or with Adopt a Beach, but I felt I

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Chapter 6

To be perfectly frank, Evie didn't know much about horses. Most of what she had related to Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon had been paraphrased from the Southern California Horse Reserve's flyer. She did, however, love when Dee Dee's mom, Margaret, had taken her, Dee Dee, and Raquel horseback riding in Oakview, and she did fancy herself a lover of animals. 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?

Evie was scheduled for her first day of volunteer work the following Wednesday. Alex offered to drop her off at the reserve after school and 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."

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

"Oh, hey," Evie said back.

She recognized the boys 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 with their obnoxiously lifted 4 x 4's, but these jocks, *hola*, were on the *water polo* team. She had never bothered to read the accompanying text to remember their names, but Raquel had pointed out the differences between team members, which helped Evie differentiate the two boys who were now walking next to her.

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"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 ~~with customized stitching?~~

"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. Especially with all the booze that's gonna be at your party, shit could get out of hand It's best to play it safe."

Play it safe?

"Actually, 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 its ass!"

"Mar-co..."

Fine Ass and Evie turned around. It was Alejandra de los Santos and her *ah-miga*, Fabiola, walking by. In their super spiky stiletto boots, they practically cast shadows over Evie and the two Speedos. Last year, the Sangros wore super chunky platform boots, but this semester their heels had been trimmed down to sharpened points. *mine*

"Uh, hey," Fine Ass looked over at Alejandra and Fabiola

"We're gonna go swimming," Fabiola said "At the Aquatic Center."

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"The Aquatic center?" Big Bulge asked. ~~"It isn't open now. It's closed between 2-5."~~

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"Not for me," Alejandra looked him alluringly. "I've got connections. ~~My cousin~~ ~~Rabby's ex-girlfriend's roommate is a life guard there.~~ *Quieres contigo?*" She didn't look at Evie, and it was clear that the invitation did not extend to her. Evie immediately opened her cell phone and checked for messages that she knew were not there. *Look busy, popular.*

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The Aquatic Center was at the far east end of the county, but worth the drive with its palm tree lined Olympic-sized swimming pool. Besides, the Sangros were known for their topless sunbathing and ~~sometimes their bikini~~ *bottom*-less swimming. If they were going to the Aquatic Center during closed hours, who knows what could happen? How could two boys, water polo boys, turn down such an enticing offer?

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"Uh, no can do," Fine Ass answered, to Evie's major surprise. "I'm talking party talk with Eves, here."

Evie could *not* believe what she was hearing. Had she died and gone to Flojo heaven?

"Yeah," Evie said smugly as she looked directly at Alejandr-a. She couldn't help but feel a bit more confident. "Party talk, about my *little* party. At Duke's."

~~Alejandra shrugged her shoulders. "Pues, your decision," she said before walking off.~~

Evie and the Speedos continued walking through the parking lot, when they reached Alex's truck, Alex had just taken his short board out of Mondo's Marauder and

was putting it into his flatbed. When he wanted to surf after school, he'd keep his board locked up in Mondo's car and then transfer it to his truck after classes.

"Hey, Mark," Alex raised his chin at Fine Ass.

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

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

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

She instantly 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 two freeway exits north of Sea Street. The waves at Rincon were supposedly as fierce as its local territorialism, and Alex pretty much kept Evie away from both. She sometimes felt annoyed that Alex babied her when it came to ^{when} ^{surf} ~~regulations (in terms of weather and subculture) of surfing~~.

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"You didn't ask where I was going," Alex teased. "'sides, you gotta get from tadpole stage before you can swim with the sharks."

Evie felt a twinge of embarrassment and glanced over at Fine Ass and Big Bulge. How could Alex say such a thing in front of *them*, the two top swimmers of the water polo team? Okay, maybe he didn't treat her like a baby, but a friggin' tadpole for sure.

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

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

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

"You?" Big Bulge smirked. "After your lousy numbers at the last meet? Look, Evie," he put his arm around her shoulders, "If you ever wanna enhance your techniques," he patted his chest. "Let *me* know."

Evie could not believe that Fine Ass and Big Bulge, *water polo* boys and *seniors*, were fighting over her. She couldn't help but glance over at Alex, who appeared to be totally consumed with making sure his board was secured in the back of his truck.

"Wow, that's so totally nice of you," Evie smiled. "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."

"So, Mark, we gotta get going," Alex abruptly said as he came around to the other side of his truck. "Evie's got an internship over at the SCHR."

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"Oh, yeah?" Fine Ass looked at Evie and smiled with approval. "Cool, helping the horsies. Very cool. 'Kay, catch you guys later."

"Yeah, Alex," Big Bulge held up his hand to high-five him. "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

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

"Yeah, I've already gotten two bulletins about it." Alex tapped his horn at the black SUV in front of him that completely dwarfed his own mid-sized truck. "*Go* already!" he muttered under his breath.

"Oh, man," Evie sank into her seat. "Now I totally gotta make sure that I have a kick-ass party, let alone *a* party. Mark was even saying that I should get customized party hats, can you believe it? It's like he already knew about the visors I'm putting in the swag bags."

"I don't think he was talking about your visors," Alex said. "You do know that party hats 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 some PSA on MTV. "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 and looked at Evie with exaggerated pleading puppy dog eyes. "I mean, you *will* be turning sixteen."

Evie smiled out of embarrassment. "Alex, you're gonna crash if you don't watch the road."

"I'd rather watch you," he continued to look at her.

Evie didn't say anything, but she could feel Alex's eyes burning right through her. She loved when he got flirty and cute, but sometimes, she had to admit, she just didn't know how to respond.

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"Okay, okay..." Alex said. "I don't wanna get the silent treatment." He turned to face the brake lights in front of his truck.

Evie looked out the window at the towering, leafy eucalyptus and aged 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 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 of either's den or living room, at least the discomfort of the floor or the consequences of rug burns would keep them in check.

Besides, Evie didn't even know if she was quite ready to make the upgrade from carpet time to the big dealio. When Alex had made his first move on her, that move alone just gave her the crazy tingles. Could she possibly be ready for more?

It happened at Sea Street, of course, right after a twilight surf session. Alex had come up behind her and Evie had thought that he was just going to help her unzip her wetsuit, as he sometimes did. But when he had gotten her zipper a quarter of the way down, he placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed the back of her neck, a soft gentle peck. Evie had nearly *died*. She was *so* not expecting it. When she had turned around to face Alex, suddenly his lips were on her lips. Then the mad crazy tingles that had erupted in her belly took over her whole body.

"You're salty," she had teased nervously between breaths.

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

The sensation of having Alex's lips on hers was a million times more thrilling than anything she had ever experienced in her life, a sense of weightless that made her

feel as if she were going to die from excitement. When was the last time she had ever felt such a sensation? At age six, when she had ~~finally found the nerve to kick~~ away from the curb to peddle her ~~Schwinn Daisy Solita~~? Or the first time she caught a buzz from Veuve Clicquot with Raquel? But even those moments couldn't compare to the feeling of sweet, blissful Alex-stasy.

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"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 ~~reminded~~ Alex, "I'm a student driver."

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"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 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 ripped a left onto Ventura Avenue. "Hey, you know Gorby?" he asked. "That guy who transferred from Buena High?"

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

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

"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, even if it was another country just south of San Diego, excited her. Carpet time in another country? *Que 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.

"Gorby," Alex said.

"Can't just you and I go?" Evie asked

"Uh, yeah," Alex said slowly. "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."

"Oh, yeah. Of course, Evie smirked. "I don't mind." She regretted asking if she could have Sunday alone with Alex. She remembered reading an article, in another one of Dee Dee's magazines, about obnoxious girlfriend types. *Posesiva o' No? Decide Tu.*

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"Yeah, I'll have to make sure he ~~gets an invite~~ to my party," Evie said.

"Totally."

"So," Evie started to ask Alex, "What do you think you're gonna wear?"

"Wear for what?"

"Alex," ~~Evie looked at him,~~ "For my party."

"Oh, I have no idea," ~~he~~ *you know* confessed. "I ~~don't plan~~ *G.* that far in advance."

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"Maybe we could go shopping together," Evie suggested

"Shopping?" Alex looked over at her and winced.

"I mean, we could just go looking at some stuff," Evie tried to clarify. "There's this balcony at Duke's and it overlooks the ocean and the view is so beautiful. I was *Cool*

thinking we could have our picture taken on it, with the sunset or something in the background. If we had on outfits that matched, it would be so cool."

"You want to wear *matching* outfits?" Alex covered his mouth and laughed "Oh, *sheeyat*."

"No," Evie felt embarrassed. "I'm just saying we could have outfits that, at least, look good together, *like coordinated*. I want to wear something really fancy, glamorous."

"Glamorous?" *Alex asked* "I thought this was a Mexican Luau *thing*. Won't everyone be in, like, Hawaiian *dresses or, like, guayaberas?*" *or something*

"Maybe," Evie said "But it's *at night* ~~an evening party~~ and it's at Duke's. I'm sure people are gonna dress up. I know I am."

"Uh, huh," *Alex said* "Well, okay. Whatever you want."

But He didn't sound very enthused ~~to Evie~~ *Evie said*, and it bummed her out. She looked out the truck's window. How could Alex not understand how important her *sixteenera* was to her? Sabrina never had such a party and neither did Dee Dee or Raquel. Her *sixteenera* would really set her apart -- from everyone. Years later, when people looked at her picture in the yearbook, she wouldn't be remembered as a chillin' flojo girl or as the chica who had honey blonde highlights one semester. She might not even be remembered as Alex Perez' girlfriend. She was going to be remembered as Evie Gomez, the girl who had the super coolest Sweet Sixteenera that, like Big Bulge had said, *knocked* the 805 *right* on it's ass. How could Alex not understand that?

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Chapter 7

Evie's Rainbow flojos kicked up dust as she followed the handwritten signs directing her to the BOHE horse stable. The signs also made very clear, in large black capital letters, that no smoking or cell phones were allowed on the reserve. But Evie only had to worry about the latter. She turned off her cell and stuck it in the back pocket of her cotton walking shorts. *There*. She already felt proud that she was turning over a new charitable leaf. To donate a whole afternoon without text messages would have once been inconceivable for Evie Gomez.

But as soon as she saw the other volunteers, seated in fold up chairs formed in a semicircle, Evie's stomach slowly turned with first day jitters. She remembered she was at the reserve *to work*. Well, duh. She would be following orders and would have to do tasks that she didn't necessarily want to do. At fifteen and three quarters, Evie had never really had a job. Sure as kids, she, Dee Dee, and Raquel had a cute little lemonade stand like all kids had in the summer, and she had often helped her father out at one of his

panaderias, but both “jobs” were just for fun. Now, cuteness wouldn’t cut it. Her stomach turned again.

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She looked around the group the majority of volunteers were not high school sophomores, like herself, but rather seniors. Not *high school* seniors, but seniors, as in senior *citizens*, *old* people. There were 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 (World War I?) on the lapels of their polo shirts.

To Evie’s relief, there was one other volunteer, a girl, who looked about her age. She was slim and extremely pale with black shoulder-length hair and thick heavy bangs. The girl looked like Emily Strange, the scowling anti-hero with the crossed arm attitude she had gotten to know via Raquel’s tight baby Ts. Evie took a seat in the empty fold-up chair next to her.

A woman in a denim sunhat walked over and stood in front of the volunteers. Evie shaded her eyes from the late afternoon sun and listened to the woman introduce herself as Lynn, the owner of the reserve and talk a little bit about its history. *Yawn*. Evie looked around. She’d *better* get credit for this humdrum part of the orientation. She was just about to pull out her cell phone and text Alex, but then she remembered cell phone usage was a no-no.

“I’m not here that often,” *Lynn* explained to all the volunteers. “So, you will be trained by Arturo. He has been with the reserve for over a year, and I really trust him.

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He’s a *my right-hand man* ~~person~~. And with that,” she looked over at a guy sitting in the front row that Evie hadn’t noticed before, “I’ll let Arturo take over.”

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Arturo got up from his chair and was greeted with overly enthusiastic applause.

Evie heard the Emily Strange girl mutter under her breath when she saw Arturo,
“Nice.”

Evie looked at Arturo. 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 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 just don't call me last minute to cancel your hours.”

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

Evie looked over the group. Arturo's comment was so not LOL worthy. But she had come to learn, again through Raquel, that sympathy chuckles (sometimes called kiss-ass giggles) could go a long way when directed towards those in charge. “I swear I passed Social Studies.” Raquel had claimed “only because I was the only one in the whole friggin' class that laughed at Mercer's stupid little one liners.”

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“No, but seriously,” Arturo continued as he clapped his hands together. “The horses here have already gone through 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 was also an officer with the FFA, the Future Farmers of America

That just about killed Evie. The FFA? What, he was a sheepherder, too?

"A lot of people think the FFA is just an organization that focuses solely on raising livestock, but the FFA is much more than that," he continued explaining, sounding almost smug. "We learn leadership and management skills. I'm the head director for Ventura County, a position that I'm *very* proud of. Now I'm running for state director, which is I position I feel pretty confident I'll win."

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Evie looked around at the group again. Was this guy for real? The Emily Strange girl was working on a blemish under her chin, but everyone else, especially *Lynn*, was so taken by Arturo and his *self-proclaimed* credentials with the Future Farmers of America FFA? *BFD*.

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Arturo went on. "We also have horses that are boarded here." He pointed to 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 *part of* our own rent." He rubbed his palms together and paused. Evie took the gesture to mean that the orientation was nearly over. She sat up anxiously in her seat and waited for those three magical words – "*So, in conclusion.*"

"So, in keeping with that," Arturo said. "Who's ready to meet our clients?"

No. There's *more*? Evie slumped back down in her metal chair. All the older volunteers chuckled again at Arturo's *reference to the horses being clients* and *they* raised their hands in anticipation. As everyone got up to follow him to the stables, Lynn excused herself from the group.

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"Have fun and be sure to listen to Arturo," she said before adjusting her denim sun hat and heading towards her pickup truck. "I need to get a new delivery of feed, but I'll be back before you leave."

As Arturo took the group to see the horses, Evie fell into step with the Emily Strange girl, who glanced over at her.

"I like your necklace," she said.

"Oh," Evie fingered the chips of abalone shells dangling from the cord. "Thanks. My boyfriend made it for me."

"Oh," Emily made a face like she just had caught 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 other cool kids questioned her family's financial position. Money usually represented ~~family money~~, i.e. *boring*, and Evie was so not *that*.

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"Where do you go?" she asked Emily Strange.

"I don't, really," Emily Strange answered. "I mean, I do independent study at New Path."

New Path was a continuation school at the north end of the county. Unlike Nueva, in all its majestic Spanish architectural splendor, New Path was just a bunch of whitewashed quantum huts and non-descript bungalows. Evie only knew one other person who went to New Path -- Jose, Raquel's ex boyfriend

"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~~

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"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 staring right at her. Suddenly, ten pairs of eyes were on Evie.

"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, chuckled.

"I just came from school," Evie explained. "I didn't know." Her feet suddenly felt naked. She placed one flip flop over the other.

"You wear flip flops *and* shorts to school?" Arturo directed his question less to Evie and more to his newly acquired audience that was now at the mercy of his desperate jokes. "And did you used to wear a bathing suit to catechism?"

More tittering from the geriatric gallery.

Where was this guy *from*? Evie wondered. Everyone knew of the lax dress code at Villanueva. And *hello*, that was just a *little* presumptuous of him to assume that she was Catholic and have even attended catechism -- which she was and did, *thank* you

"What is your name?" Arturo looked ~~over~~ his clipboard.

"Evie, Evie Gomez."

"Ah, yes," Arturo said. "You were just added, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

The magnifying glass was definitely being held steady and stern over 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're going to have to work hard."

"I know," Evie said. Jeez, Mr. "Friend of the Animals" was really coming down hard on the two-footed upright mammal that stood before him.

"So, anyway," Arturo continued, still annoyed, "back to the real reason why we're all here, the care and rehabilitation of our horses."

Arturo then led everyone to each stall and introduced each horse by name. Evie noticed that just about everyone took notes, and many went so far as to draw out a

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Arturo looked over the group. "What about you, Evie?" he asked. "Why don't you come in and say hi to ol' Chamuco?"

"Me?" Evie pointed to herself. The whole group parted like the Red Sea, as though they were allowing Evie to pass and complete a very important mission. "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 slats. Her precious Rainbow flojos sank into the muddy earth, and all the horse flies that had been pestering Chamuco buzzed around her face and hair. She tried to swat them away.

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

Everyone laughed except Evie. She crept cautiously around Chamuco, allowing him adequate space so he couldn't possibly feel threatened, but just as she was making her way to the right of him, her cell started ringing. ^{The} A wailing cry of Moz blared from the back pocket of her walking shorts. 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.

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

Chamuco swayed his head from 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.

"Get *out* of the stable!" Arturo yelled at Evie as Chamuco picked up his pace around the stable. His ears were pulled back, and he was starting to knock his body against the wooden slats of the fence.

The volunteers watched in horror.

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

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

After what seemed a good long while, Chamuco, finally calmed down. Arturo stroked his mane, offered him another carrot from his back pocket, and talked softly in annoying baby talk. Chamuco, it seemed, 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 had just happened. The last thing she wanted was to traumatize some poor, blind, defenseless animal that had already been through so much. "I thought I had turned it off."

"Why would you even *need* your phone?" Arturo snapped. He then addressed all the volunteers. "Do *not* bring your cells near the stables. *At all*. Keep cell 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, Turdo, I have a question," he looked around at the rest of the group in confusion.

"It's *Turo*." Arturo shook his head in exhausted frustration.

"Oh, um, sorry," the elderly man started cautiously. "Um, none of us have mobile phones. 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 whispered. "It looks like you sure made a friend."